

# A NEW POETRY ANEW

by Bob Grumman

balloon

Hold on tight to your !

This poem by Adam Gamble is a delightful and accessible example of a kind of literature that has become a primary interest of mine over the years. I have dubbed such writing “burstnorm poetry,” to distinguish it from the two other major categories I

BOB GRUMMAN is a widely published visual poet. His most recent poetic experiments have resulted in two collections of mathematical poetry, *Mathemaku 1–5* and *Mathemaku 6–12*, both published by Tel-let (1818 Phillips Pl., Charleston, IL 61920). Also a literary critic and columnist, Grumman lives in Port Charlotte, Florida.

divide lyrical poetry into, “plaintext” (for its resistance to ornamentation) and “songmode poetry” (for its musicality).

Not all burstnorm poetry is as easy to like as Gamble’s poem, or the following amusing one-word poem by Crag Hill:

cant’

For some people, it would be difficult to sit still as poet John Bennett spends several minutes reading his poem consisting of nothing but repetitions of the words *the shirt* and *the sheet*, or to follow the text of “Pool,” another of Bennett’s poems:

Where’s rain spatters past’s hairy-end-gape,  
lying on’s teeth, where a breath-cloud circles  
'n slopes’head like a cheek. . . . Ah where’s  
ack-hacked speechclatters, like rocks on’s feet  
and he up-yelps stands’ (Holding her salty . . .  
hand on’s chest’s flowing wall’s she’s, under  
the mountain where the cool bottoms sway, ’n  
spread . . . ) In that boily mud’s his center’s  
stayed risen in the milk he speaks! Ah that

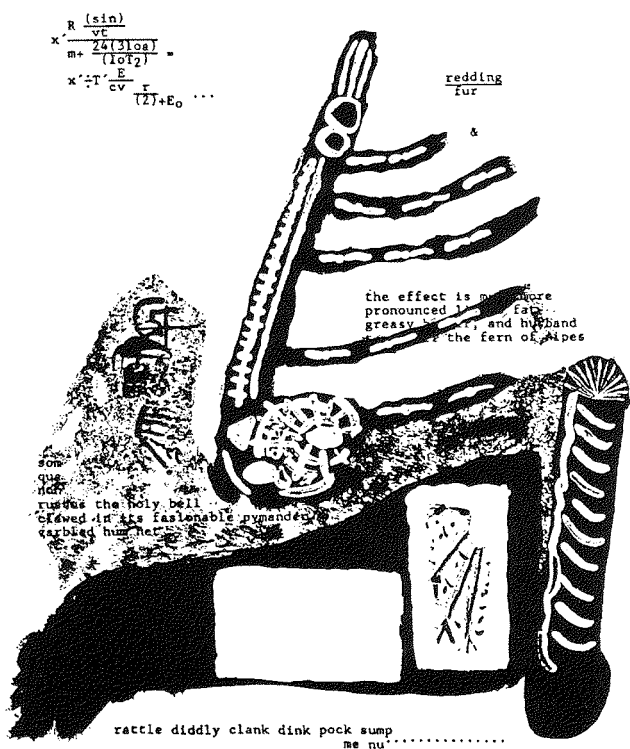
## IN THIS ISSUE

- 1** A New Poetry Anew  
by Bob Grumman
- 10** Read It New  
by Ron Padgett

bag's dragged "home" where he briefly breathes; and's she! (Whence's foraged eruptions sing; and's "free"!)

Then there are oddities like the two pieces below, by Guy Beining and Jake Berry, respectively:

M



Poems like these have not gotten much attention. There are many reasons for this. One is that when burstnorm poetry is simple, it can appear to be no more than an amusing puzzle. When it is complex, it can seem intentionally and perversely undecipherable. Moreover, its tendency to mix genres, and even arts, makes it too interdisciplinary to be taught much, and thus popularized, academically. It's no freak of nature, though, but the result of poetry's evolution in the West since the 19th century.

For several hundred years before that it was assumed that poetry ought to do more for the ear than prose does, that it ought, in fact, to rhyme, or have a regular beat (be metrical, that is) or both—songmode poetry. Some poets, such as Milton, dropped rhyme and sometimes strayed from rhythmic regularity.

Among English-language poets, Blake, Whitman, and Hopkins came close to what is now called free verse. In late 19th-century France, full-scale free verse (or *vers libre*) was born, eventually to be taken up by such American masters as Eliot, Pound, and Williams. The immediate result was a shedding of devices, forms, and phrasing that had once been moving but did not seem appropriate in the modern world.

By the 1950s, free verse was an increasingly dominant form of serious poetry in America, and probably throughout the West. While there were still a few notable traditional poets, such as Robert Frost, and while even an avant-garde poet such as E. E. Cummings continued to write occasional sonnets and other varieties of songmode poetry, verse that rhymed or was metrically regular had become a minority form of modern poetry.

Needless to say, the very popularity of free verse set some poets of the fifties against it in one way or another. It was also a fact that sometimes it tended to be too much like prose to work as poetry—that is, as an art form that transformed ordinary reality. A number of poets took up traditional verse (and have had a modicum of success). The most creative new poets, though, pushed for more, rather than less, freedom from literary customs and rules. Conventional free verse being about as far outside the rules of versification as any kind of poetry could be, it was the basic rules of prose and of narrative—and even of printing—that these new poets began to overturn.

Of course, they had predecessors, some of them from as far back as the birth of free verse itself. Stéphane Mallarmé, for example, had at that time begun using varied typographical fonts and arrangements, showing concern with the shape and placement of a poem's "negative space." Around the First World War, Guillaume Apollinaire built on Mallarmé's innovations, helping to invent modern visual poetry. Italian and Russian futurism also advocated a new look for the poetic page. At about the same time, Tristan Tzara and André Breton brought dada into the picture, with its rejection of *all* logic in the arts. From them and other dadaists came the idea of chance-generated art, collaged writing, found art, cut-up texts, and sundry other techniques.

Shortly after the birth of dada, Breton helped invent surrealism, which blended dream-logic and waking rationality. James Joyce and Gertrude Stein carried out assaults on prose conventions that have traditionalists still shaking their heads.

Out of all this came two important strands of poetry: projective verse (the brainchild of Charles Olson) and concrete poetry. Concrete poetry, whose principal place of origin was Brazil, was a main source of contemporary visual poetry (to which projective verse also made a contribution). Projective verse and concrete poetry were the first of the many kinds of burstnorm poetry now extant.

Burstnorm poetry seems to me an attempt to get some new pizzazz into poetry. The ways current poets are trying to do this are dizzyingly various, so much so that I have divided the field into three subclasses (all, alas, with bulky names): "surrealistic poetry," "pluraesthetic poetry," and "language poetry."

### Surrealistic Poetry

Surrealistic poetry is primarily a poetry of mixing elements that don't seem to go together. Thus the norm burst in this category is contextuality. When successful, surrealistic poems (and similar works in painting) put images into new and provocative relationships. Hence, in the first stanza of "Day-break," a surrealistic poem by Bert Meyers, "Birds drip from the trees. / The moon's a little goat / over there on the hill; / dawn, as blue as her milk, / fills the sky's tin pail." The lines are normal in grammar and vocabulary, but their "wrong" subject matter turns the poem into an arresting fairy-liquid dream.

### Pluraesthetic Poetry

Collage is also important in pluraesthetic poetry, but here the juxtaposition is not of poetic elements, but of other art forms. Thus, visual poems like the ones above by Berry, Gamble, and Beining add graphic images to poetic texts, or treat texts like graphic images; in mathematical poetry, symbols from arithmetic, geometry, or calculus coexist with words; in performance poetry, elements of dance, vaudeville, and even stand-up comedy enter the poem; and in sound poetry, sounds become expressive in a non-musical way, as when Bennett rasps, groans, and gurgles "the shirt, the sheet" so long that one begins hearing things like "the work, the sleep." Thus a pluraesthetic poem, when it works, works *plurally*, achieving more than just verbal effects.

### Language Poetry

Language poetry is the third of the burstnorm poetries. It has been dominated for 20 years or more by a strain I call "altered-syntax poetry." Its subject matter tends to be "logical," and portrayed more or less representationally; but its syntax is screwy, as in the following excerpt from "Wintry," a poem by Robert Grenier:

rocks  
rocks of  
getting dark

In what way can rocks be comprised of an action such as "getting dark"? Or are we witnessing an attempt to describe exactly what the rocks are, which is cut off by the coming of dusk? Whatever is going on, confusion allows time for *rocks* to become a verb, too, and meanings multiply out of this small number of normal, congruous words. Syntactical normality is toppled for the sake of increased expressiveness.

Another type of language poetry is known as "jump-cut poetry," from the cinematic practice of jumping abruptly from one scene to a very different one. Its best-known practitioner is John Ashbery, but a forerunner was T. S. Eliot. Jump-cut poetry doesn't so much collage elements as leave out transitions between them. Thus, in "The Waste-land," Eliot jumps abruptly from Marie's childhood sledride to "I read, much of the night, and go south in winter." Later, without warning, the first-person female narrator changes sex. The non sequitur rules.

There is one other, more recent form of language poetry: infra-verbal poetry. It is to syntax poetry what syntax poetry is to plaintext poetry, for just as syntax poetry breaks sentence structure, infra-verbal poetry breaks word-structure. It is, in fact, intentionally misspelled. In it, sometimes words are spelled fissionally, as in Leroy Gorman's

t rain s top spar row

Not only does this slow our scanning of the poem and thus give us time to fill up with the sensual feel of what is being said, but it allows a few words to say what would otherwise require many words, and to say them dynamically! In Gorman's poem, for example, he is speaking of 1) a trainstop sparrow; 2) a train's top sparrow; 3) t(he) rain's top sparrow; and 4) the train as a sailing vessel with a spar. All these images happen at once—fragmentally, just as an observer might have experienced them in real life.

Other infra-verbal poems combine words, as in the “string” by Richard Kostelanetz that begins, “ideafencerebrumble . . .” and, less methodically, in G. Huth's one-word poem

myrrhmyrrh

and Jonathan Brannen's

splace

With my mania for taxonomy, I call such works “fusional” poems. By squeezing words together, poets—again—can say more per inch than they otherwise could, as well as entertain their readers. The most important product, though, is the creation of implicit metaphors, such as that of myrrh as a kind of gentle, spreading murmur in Huth's poem, and of space's becoming a place in Brannen's; and of an idea as something deafening, that leads to fencing, and a “cerebrum rumble” in the Kostelanetz string.

Fusional poems are perhaps the most popular kind of burstnorm poetry. Even the first-rate but fairly conventional magazine, *Modern Haiku*, occasionally contains poems such as the following, by Emily Romano, a fine composer of traditional haiku:

ouzelfinesse

What better way to capture an ouzel's dexterity—as a concrete extension of the bird rather than

as some separable abstract quality of it. And once *elfin* pops out of its text, the poem expands significantly from the bird's picturesqueness into a feeling for the kind of folk miracle of secret hidden words that all of nature can at times be.

An example of a different kind of fusional poetry is Lewis Carroll's “Jabberwocky,” which begins:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogroves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Humpty-Dumpty, a character in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the book in which this poem first appeared in 1872, explains that *brillig* has to do with the time of day a person would start broiling things for dinner. This interpretation makes sense, since the word combines *twilight* with *broiling*, but it ignores the dream-forest tone of the poem. I prefer to read the word as a combination of *brilliant* and *twilight*. Be that as it may, *brillig* and the other invented words in the stanza are examples of what Carroll terms “portmanteau words,” a portmanteau being a kind of suitcase that, like such a word, would hold more than one sort of article.

At their best, such poems are remarkably suggestive. What, for instance, could be more innocently frolicsome than gyring and gimbaling in the wabe—or more flowerfully delicate (flimsily), whimsical, and small than the borogroves Carroll describes? And what term could better sum up such verse than *jabberwocky*?

It took some seventy years after their invention by Carroll for portmanteau words to be used for serious effects. Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) speaks, for instance, of “the quitewhite villagettes . . . so gigglesomes minxt the follyages, the prettilees!” Note particularly how cutesiness is averted by such strangenesses as the reduction of *midst*, *mixt*, and *minx* to *minxt*, and such pretentiousness as “youth is the age of folly” is re-hued with the charm of fluttering foliage.

Few other writers bothered much with such words until the 1960s, when Aram Saroyan wrote the first one-word infra-verbal poems. One of them, from his book, *Pages* (published, amazingly, by Random House), is a wonderfully fusional poem (and which deserves a good deal of space—ideally a full page—for full impact):

priit

The two main words combined are *print* and *spirit*—to make the poem a virtual synonym for poetry. Gradually others followed Saroyan in the field of minimalistic portmanteau poetry, three of the best being Jonathan Brannen, Richard Kostelanetz, and G. Huth. It was Huth who coined a word for all one-word poems: *pwoermds*.

Among my favorites of Jonathan Brannen’s portmanteau poems is the following, from his book, *Sirloin Clouds*:

ocean

Here the change of a single letter puts readers not over-flustered by “misspelling” instantly into the two hugenesses that the ocean and an eon are—as well as into the idea of time as something with tides and depths and currents, and the idea of the sea as a grand constant.

A similar sort of highly charged moment comes about in another of Brannen’s fusional poems:

hearhearheart

Many poets have had fun with the fact that the word *heart* contains *hear*, *ear*, and *art*, and can be extended through *hearth*, *earth*, and *the*, but seldom has anyone worked it to so simple and perfect an effect as Brannen has here. Just listen to its hearty thump of repeating good health. Then watch the subtle but enormous differences that shiver out of its apparent sameness—the line, “hear the art, heart” for instance.

Like many of Joyce’s coinages, Richard Kostelanetz’s “Spanglish Interweavings” combine English and another language:

ndooogsael                      tneitpiplllea

At first I didn’t think much of these or the other apparent nonsense words in the selection that appeared in the experimental magazine, *Lost & Found Times*. But then—from *gcaatto*, whose Spanish *gato* I recognized (in spite of being monolingual)—I saw that each of the interweavings spelled one Spanish or English word with its odd-numbered letters, and the synonym of that word in the other language with its even-numbered letters. Result: a sort of broken-prism multiple image of what each pair of words denotes. At once *ndooogsael* began to stretch more sinisterly

through my mind. And my favorite interweaving,

lviifdea

trembled from a live-leaf jumble (with *idea* emerging from it) into a fascinatingly parallel concern with the inexorable pace of *life/vida* toward *death*.

G. Huth’s fusional poems appeared in his book *Wreadings*, which includes such specimens as *frightened*, *windters*, and *readear*. But Huth reaches his most sophisticated level in this domain with a “book” called *leevs* that consists of leaves from five different trees, each with a *pwoermd* on it, and inserted for protection in a book of about 40 blank . . . leaves. Part of *the scentnses*, an ongoing collection of items from nature such as pebbles and shells to which Huth has affixed one-word poetic labels, *Leevs* seems as highly successful as its predecessors in synthesizing scent, sense, and sentenceness. One example should be enough to indicate the level of lyrical compression it achieves: a maple leaf that has been labeled *mapleaf* not only to evoke leaf as map, but also to convey in a visual image what a maple leaf is, alone and contracted, as a specimen in a book.

Needless to say, most burstnorm poets do not use techniques from only one of the subclasses, or even major classes, of burstnorm poetry. Most of them mix devices from all the kinds of poetries discussed—and even occasionally include such traditional devices as rhyme. Indeed, even before the current explosion of inventiveness in poetry, Cummings composed this remarkable compound burstnorm poem:

(fea  
therr  
ain  
  
::dreamin  
g field o  
ver forest &;  
  
wh  
o could  
be  
  
so  
!f!  
te  
  
r?n  
oo  
ne)

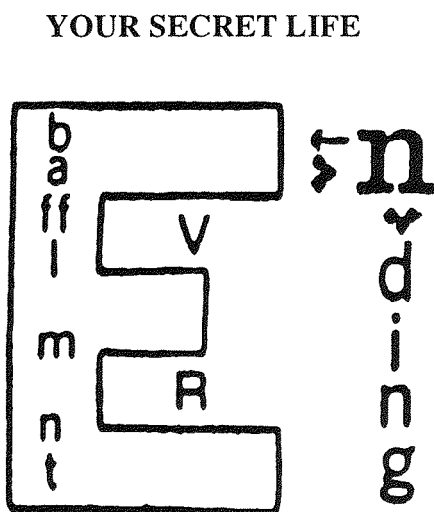
Note what results from the poem's mid-syllabic line-breaks: an image of a field arrested idyllically in a *go*—under a dream-in—as well as such small but charming visual rhymes as *ain / min*, *therr / ver*, and *be / te / ne*. Particularly effective is the way Cummings's visual rhymes bring hugely different sounds together—the *ne* of *one*, for example, with the *te* of *softer* and the *be* of *be*. Trivial? But aren't such small statements of a single color in different shapes one of the chief ornaments of non-representational painting? And as central to music as anything?

Note too the infra-verbal rightness of Cummings's use of parentheses to put his rain inside the louder world of hard reality. The visual-poetic parallel between very slowly falling rain and the fall of the poem is worth noting, as are the two eyes in *n oo ne*.

Better, though, is the doubly exclamated *f*, to infra-verbally introduce the idea of a rain as soft as the pronunciation of an *f*—as well as to hearken back to the feather that begins the poem (with one extra letter's worth of a slowed presence). Then, finally, there is the return of "rain" as *r?n* (or something so soft it is hardly identifiable) to bring the poem to its peak.

### Disconcealment

Kathy Ernst is a more recent master of compound burstnorm poetry. One of her favorite devices is what I call "disconcealment," or the typographical modification of words or phrases so as to reveal other words or phrases concealed within them, as in:

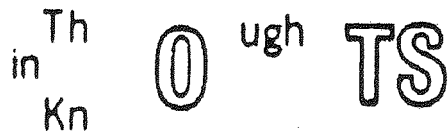


This poem uses a disconcealment I call "arrowence." Arrowence is the use of some extra typographical symbol or form such as an arrow, parentheses, underlining, dashes, and italics, in order to direct readers to something within a text that they might otherwise overlook. In "Your Secret Life," for example, arrows work a large *e* into two different words: follow the pointers and you will find the word *Ending*. Go back to the *n* in the upper right and follow the more normal-looking arrow and you will find *never*. Add *bafflement* and the poem will spell "never-ending bafflement," a neat characterization of the subject, one's secret life. The words *nERVE* and *verve* are available, too. Thus does the disconcealment jiggle ordinary words beyond their first meanings.

Although it is not emphatically metaphoric, "Your Secret Life" has touches of the figurative, too. One is the way most of the letters of *bafflement* shrink down and hide in the capital *e*, thus suggesting secrecy. At the same time, the visual arrangement of the words is in itself a sort of metaphor for the perplexity the poem, at least initially, will cause most readers.

In Ernst's "Philosophy," the main form of disconcealment is crosswording, which consists of the sharing of one or more letters between two or more words (or phrases)—as, in fact, in the poem just examined. It allows "Philosophy" to say "ThOughTS in KnOTS"—which, presumably, is what philosophy consists of.

### PHILOSOPHY



The piece also makes use of the most common kind of disconcealment, verbal fission. In "Philosophy," fission produces such extra meanings as the *ugh* that philosophical exertion in part is, and *Thin* and *Think'n*, which are minor but add appropriate atmospheric effects to the poem. The arrangement of letters is a visual onomatopoeia for knots, too—that is, it looks like what it denotes.

Perhaps my favorite of Ernst's poems is "Proserpina" (see figure 1). This poem depends chiefly on disconcealment by crosswording: the

## PROSERPINA

I HAV E  
COM E

Wh E E is  
my C L E B R A  
tion

Figure 1

words *have* and *come* are linked by a shared *e*, and *I* crosswords the result into “I come” and “I have.” Two *e*’s lower on the page fuse the words *where* and *celebration*. The text thus reads: “I have come. Where is my celebration?”—once the reader supplies the necessary punctuation, that is.

There is much more to the poem than this paraphrase, however. For one thing, the two side-by-side *e*’s almost crush the little *r* between them, in the process disconcealing the *whee* that is a part of *where*. They also tower so inordinately out of the first three syllables of *celebration* that *C•L•BRA* is disconcealed and, for me, turned into a suggestion of “candelabra,” an appropriate accessory to a celebration.

Also disconcealed is a sexual motif, in the disconcealed *bra* and the orgasmic overtone of “I have come,” which in a manner of speaking Proserpina does ever spring.

Incidentally, the poem’s first few words could read, “I have. I come,” as well as, “I have come.” Set up nicely by the absence of any punctuation that would have cancelled one or the other, each reading is valid. The first reading makes sense because it says that Proserpina has something—she has gathered a sufficiency of materials for beginning the year, and therefore she comes.

That she doesn’t find the celebration she expected suggests that her appearance has to do with more than the simple return of a season: it also involves the ritual and festivity of spring, the season as the Ancient Greeks knew it at its mythic profoundest and pagan cheerfullest.

One last comment: the inconspicuous *i* and *e* at the beginning are also subjected to disconcealment, giving us “i.e.,” or “that is,” which lends additional mythic resonance to the scene—that scene is *that which is*.

Assisted by its various disconcealments, this poem boosts its readers into a more than one-zone idea of spring: it breaks them into a full-minded, full-bodied spring with ancient pagan roots. It does what only the best lyric poetry does: it makes us happy to be alive.

### Exercises in Visual Poetry

Students would benefit from learning what is going on in the least law-abiding provinces of poetry, and they would enjoy the exercise burstnorm poetry gives their verbal imaginations. A good way to get one’s feet wet as a visual poet is to create visual onomatopoeia, that is, words or phrases that look like what they mean (the way such specimens of ordinary onomatopoeia as “buzz” and “crash” *sound* like what they mean). A simple example would be the word *huge* printed in huge letters. Below is a list of words that lend themselves to the process, with a few extra-challenging ones mixed in. See if you can make them look like what they mean, then try words of your own choosing.

disunity  
mountain  
wounded  
scattering  
fusion  
fast  
explosion  
non-conformity  
poverty  
wealth  
snowflake  
April  
goldfish  
nervous  
freedom  
music  
thought  
happiness

Try out as many ideas as you can come up with. Never be satisfied with first thoughts, however effective they seem. For instance, when I worked on the first word in the list above, I quickly disunified it by putting a space between its *s* and its *u*. Should I have stopped there? After some

thought, I decided no, and printed *unity* backwards to make it not only disunited from *dis* but actively opposing it. Lots of other tactics are possible.

Among the important questions to consider is what typeface (or combination of typefaces) to use. Should you use a common one, like those available on typewriters? Or Gothic or Headline? Many type styles are available from art supply stores in the form of rub-off letters (transfer type). Most word processors come with a variety of typefaces. Another possibility is simple cursive, or hand printing. Even a childish scrawl can be expressive. How about stenciling? What effect would that have on your composition? How would joining or not joining the separate elements of each letter you stenciled affect your composition? What can an outlined letter say that a letter composed of solids can't, and vice versa? What might drawing a letter in 3-D do to the word it's in?

Next, you might try to make your words look like something *other* than what they mean. For example, you could draw the word *music* as a flower, or *thought* as a war scene. Another idea is to combine individual word-pictures into larger multi-worded compositions.

Something like this, in fact, is what Crag Hill has done in his *Transforms*, which I consider an ideal second kind of visual poetry to use as a learning exercise. The idea here is to change a word, in steps, into a second word. Antonyms (and other words of opposition) usually work best. In the example below, I used "land" and "sky."

LAND  
 LAND  
 LAND  
 LAND  
 SKY  
 SKY  
 SKY  
 SKY

Note my use of both solid and outlined letters and my not worrying much about drawing something that looks like land or sky. Note also the last line with the barely perceptible moon in it. I couldn't resist sneaking in one extra idea.

Here are some more pairs of words (some of them quite challenging) for use in transforms:

autumn/winter, acorn/oak, fast/slow, woman/ghost, love/hate, winter/spring, noise/silence, optimism/pessimism, puzzle/solution, alcohol/elephant.

Come up with your own pairs. That's more than half the fun of the form.

How would one's compositional tactics change if one were to go from the concluding word to the first, as I did in my variation on the piece by Crag Hill to its left?

Place	Page
Place	Page
Pdce	Pgce
Pake	Pjace
Pade	Pjace
Paqe	Pjace
Page	Place

Should the material in one line of a transform ever overlap material in another? How could color enhance or detract from such poetry? What other kinds of trickery could you use in the form? Where, in other words, might *you* take a transform?

### An Exercise in Composing Fissional Poems

To get some idea of the potential for getting multiple meanings out of words through fissional poetry, students might try the following exercise. Find a poem, such as the one below by Keats, and from it extract words that contain smaller words; then use a group of such words to compose a fissional poem.

When I have fears that I may cease to be  
 Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,  
 Before high-piled books, in charactery,  
 Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain:  
 When I behold, upon the night's starred face,



Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,  
 And think that I may never live to trace  
 Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;  
 And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
 That I shall never look upon thee more,  
 Never have relish in the faery power  
 Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore  
 Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
 Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

Among this poem's many fissionable words are *fears*, *t hat*, *g leaned*, *b rain*, *char act ery*, *h old*, *ri pen*, *g rain*, *nigh t*, *s tar red*, *c loud y*, *thin k*, *n ever*, *t race*, *f eel*, *f air*, *h our*, *s hall*, *p owe r*, *sh ore*, *s tan d*, *t ill*, and *s in k*. From these I got several clusters of words:

nigh t s tarred char act ery

h old f eel thin k

ri pen g rain

Improvising a little, I composed the following from the raw material I'd gathered:

nigh t s tar red ripening

ash ore

Adding an *a* to *shore* was clever; having it permit *ash* was lucky. But luck is inevitable in fissional poetry if you play around with it long enough.

Once you get a feel for working with fissional techniques, finding places for them in your own poems, and turning up words of high fissional potential to construct new poems around, these processes will become second nature.

## A Brief Bibliography

- Beining, G. *M-Factor*. Runaway Spoon Press, Box 3621, Port Charlotte, FL 33949.  
 Berry, J. *Brambu Drezi*. Runaway Spoon Press (address above).  
 Ernst, K. S. *Sequencing*. Xeroxial Endarchy, Rt. 1, Box 131, LaFarge, WI 54639.  
 Germain, E., ed. *English and American Surrealist Poetry*. Penguin Books, NY.  
 Gorman, L. *Heavyn*. Runaway Spoon Press (address above).  
 Hill, C. *American Standard*. Runaway Spoon Press (address above).  
 Huth, G. *Wreadings*. Runaway Spoon Press (address above).  
 Saroyan, A. *Pages*. Random House, NY.  
 Silliman, R., ed. *In the American Tree*. The National Poetry Foundation, Orono, ME.

## Periodical Sources of Burstnorm Poetry and Criticism

- Abacus*, 181 Edgemont Ave., Elmwood, CT 06110.  
*Central Park*, Box 1446, New York, NY 10023.  
*Generator*, 8139 Midland Rd., Mentor, OH 44060.  
*Kaldron*, Box 7164, Halcyon, CA 93420.  
*Meat Epoch*, 3055 Decatur Ave., #2D, Bronx, NY 10467.  
*Poetic Briefs*, 31 Parkwood St., #3, Albany, NY 12208.  
*Poetry USA*, 2569 Maxwell Ave., Oakland, CA 94601.  
*Score*, 812 SW Citywide, Pullman, WA 99163.  
*Taproot Reviews*, Box 585, Lakewood, OH 44107.



## PLUGS

The best articles from *Teachers & Writers* magazine over the past 17 years now have been gathered into *Educating the Imagination*, a new two-volume set with practical essays and writing ideas by 70 creative writers on teaching poetry writing; fiction writing; playwriting; writing about history, folklore, and science; writing parodies; creative reading; primal and funny experiences with words; making books; translation and bilingualism; and much more. Each volume is priced at \$15.95, but the special reduced price for the set is \$27.95.

Order from Teachers & Writers, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003. For VISA or MasterCard orders, call (212) 691-6590.

Want to have your story, song, or poem broadcast on the radio? T&W is now producing two radio series on WNYE-FM (91.5) every Tuesday and Thursday, 9:15–9:30 A.M., under two rubrics: Project Reach (on the theme of solving problems without drugs or violence) and Poetry in the Morning (reading your poems or talking about a favorite poet). For information, contact Irwin Gonshak, T&W Radio Producer, at the above address and phone number.

# READ IT NEW

by Ron Padgett

The two exercises that follow offer some ways to read anything creatively. Underlying both of them are three fundamental ideas: 1) We perceive something better by knowing what it isn't. (Sometimes when you aren't quite sure how to spell a word, don't you write out its incorrect spellings, just to confirm the correct one?) 2) We make surprising discoveries by using surprising methods. Or, as Blake said, "If the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise" and "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." 3) All words have magical properties that under ordinary circumstances remain hidden.

## Page Skips

This is one of the easier creative reading methods. All you have to do is read a page, flip at random to another page, read it, flip to another, and so on. It's not that hard because it leaves large chunks (whole pages) of syntax intact. Fiction lends itself particularly well to page skipping. You can turn just about any novel into what might be loosely called a cubist version of itself. By page skipping back and forth at random you abolish the novel's chronology: its events no longer go from point A forward to point Z. Flashbacks and flashforwards take on the same weight as the present because past, present, and future are abolished and then united in a sort of eternal present. Likewise, the novel's characters are glimpsed in fragments, then combined by the memory to form mental sketches or portraits.

You can buy such novels ready-made. Unwittingly, the authors of the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew stories have created cubistic narratives in their series of "branching" novels. A branching

novel is one that starts normally, then comes to a point in the story at which the reader has the option of several lines of narrative development. For example, in *The Secret of the Knight's Sword* by Carolyn Keene and Franklin W. Dixon, the first of their "Be a Detective" Mystery Stories, a legend has it that if anything happens to the "Silver Knight," a suit of armor that stands in the Bromley Hall ancestral mansion, the family will be cursed. The Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew accompany Nancy's father, Carson Drew, to Bromley Hall, where he has been summoned.

In chapter 1, on their way to Bromley Hall, they notice a mysterious green car speeding past them, and as they enter the Bromley Hall driveway, they pass a Rolls-Royce whose driver looks nervous. Once inside the mansion, they learn that the Silver Knight's sword has been stolen! At the bottom of page 5, the reader has three options: 1) To have Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys stay at Bromley Hall and investigate. If so, turn to page 6 and continue. 2) Have them follow the trail of the green car. If so, turn to page 10 and continue. 3) Have them investigate the driver of the Rolls-Royce. If so, turn to page 12 and continue. The entire book has eighteen of these branching points and seventeen different endings. So if you follow instructions, you can get seventeen different narratives from this one book.

But if you read the book straight through, you'll find even more interesting things happening. Early on, young Elizabeth Bromley walks in and asks what's going on. A statue falls from the top of the stairway and narrowly misses her. She is so shaken that she's taken off to her room. Immediately she walks in the door again and asks what's going on. The Hardy Boys and Nancy tell her the sword's been stolen, they discuss the green car, investigate, and head toward London. Elizabeth Bromley walks in the door and asks what's going on. The Hardy Boys and Nancy explain that the sword's been stolen and tell her about the driver of the Rolls-Royce. The three young detectives follow its trail to Kent. But the next moment they are still at Bromley Hall, investigating the garden. And so on.

---

RON PADGETT's *New and Selected Poems* will be published this spring by David R. Godine. He is the publications director of T&W.

---

Branching novels might be seen as a 20th-century descendant of serial novels. Wolfgang Iser says that “readers in the 19th century . . . often found a novel read in installments to be better than the very same novel in book form.” He explains that the difference arises out of the cutting technique used in the serial story. It generally breaks off just at a point of suspense where one would like to know the outcome of a meeting, a situation, etc. The interruption and consequent prolongation of tension is the basic function of the cut. The result is that we try to imagine how the story will unfold, and in this way we heighten our own participation in the course of events. Dickens was a master of the technique; his readers became his “co-authors.” Branching novels invite the reader to participate, too, but reading them from cover to cover involves the reader in an even more imaginative way.

Some of us tend to “branch-read” the dictionary. We read the definition of one word, and something in the definition suggests another word, so we look it up, and so on. Or, in looking up one word, we happen to notice another, which may lead to the one next to it, and so on—a leisurely, pleasant, seemingly haphazard banging around in the dictionary. The skipping method can be used with larger chunks, such as episodes or chapters. It can also be made to follow a pattern of first, last, second, next-to-last, third, third-to-last, and so on, whether applied to whole pages, episodes, or chapters. For instance, you could read a novel’s first chapter, its last, its second, its next-to-last, and so on, until you end—in the middle of the book.

When I was little, my parents and I used to go to the movies sometimes without knowing the show times. We’d arrive in the middle of a movie, see it to the end, stay for the intermission, then watch it from the beginning, until that magic moment of recognition when one of us would say, “This is where we came in.” It was only when I got older and became interested in movies as “art” that I insisted on seeing movies from the opening credits to The End, and although at this point I was bringing a lot more conscious attention to my movie viewing, I don’t think I was enjoying the movies any more than before.

In 1962 French novelist Marc Sappora published his *Composition #1*, an unusual novel. It came in a book-sized box, with the pages inside, unbound and unnumbered. The reader was in-

structed to shuffle the pages and read them in random order. Then, of course, shuffle them again. *Composition #1* might have been inspired by Raymond Queneau’s 1961 collection, *Cent mille milliards de poemes (One Thousand Trillion Poems)*. Queneau’s book consists of ten sonnets, which he calls “generator sonnets.” Queneau’s book is designed so that the reader can turn not a page at a time, but a line at a time. To get an idea of what it looks like, imagine a book of matches opened and turned sideways, with the heads on the right-hand side. If you want to see a match below, you simply bend back the one above it. The same for the lines in Queneau’s poems. The possible permutations of the 140 lines of the generator sonnets would allow for the creation of 1,000,000,000,000,000 poems!

### Reading the Blank Page

Many writers who feel anxiety at facing the blank sheet of paper also say that once they get started writing, the anxiety vanishes and the act of writing can become pleasurable and exciting. By learning to *read* the blank page, readers can obtain a similar pleasure and excitement.

The method is simple. Get a bound volume with blank pages, available in various sizes from stationers, art stores, and card shops. For a preliminary experiment, you could simply use a printed book that has blank pages at the end. Look at the top center of the first blank page, as if a title were there, and use as the title whatever pops into your head. Immediately move your eyes down and to the left, to where the text would start on a printed page, and move them from left to right, just as you would if you were reading, but all the time allowing that inner voice—the one that said the title to you—to keep talking. Allow it to say anything it wants. Continue to move your eyes at your normal reading pace, until you get to the bottom of the page. Then go on to the next page. What you’re doing is a sophisticated variation on the play-reading of young children.

The first time I tried this method, I was surprised by how easy it was. I was sitting in my car in the parking lot of a supermarket at night, waiting for my wife. I lost interest in watching people get in and out of their cars, so I picked up the book on the seat next to me, a novel by Muriel Spark called

*A Far Cry from Kensington*, and I read the first page, in which the main character, Mrs. Hawkins, says:

You can set your mind to anything most of the time. You can sit peacefully in front of a blank television set, just watching nothing; and sooner or later you can make your own programme much better than the mass product. It's fun, you should try it sometime.

This suggestion seemed perfectly reasonable to me, but I stopped reading because the parking lot light was too dim. I flipped idly through the book until I got to the blank pages at the end, which reminded me of a blank television set. I immediately applied Mrs. Hawkins's suggestion to the blank page and I heard words inside my head.

The words stopped or became garbled when I tried to move my eyes in anything other than the

normal pattern of reading (left to right and top to bottom), but when I resumed the normal pattern, the words flowed inside me again. This initial experiment resulted in something akin to stream of consciousness, but the more I practice the method, the more control I have over the material, provided that I stick with the normal reading eye movement patterns.

Later I thought of a book by the poet Aram Saroyan, published around 1970. The book consists of a ream of mimeograph paper with the author's name and copyright notice modestly rubber-stamped on the wrapping. That was it. No one knew how to read it. Until now.



---

**Teachers & Writers Collaborative Staff:** Nancy Larson Shapiro, Director; Ron Padgett, Publications Director; Gary Lenhart, Associate Director; Simon Kilmurry, Associate Director; Jill Jackson, Program Coordinator; Christopher Edgar, Editor; Jordan Davis, Distribution Manager; Susan Straub, Director, Read to Me; Jessica Sager and Alicia Benitez, Assistants. **Writers & Artists in Residencies:** Viki Akiwumi, Kent Alexander, Josefina Baez, June Ballinger, Catherine Barnett, Cathy Bowman, Laynie Browne, Celeste Bullock, Jack Collom, Carol Conroy, Carol Dixon, Mariela Dreyfus, Michael Drinkard, Jill Eisenstadt, Larry Fagin, Katherine Finkelstein, India Hixon, Melanie Hope, Ian James, Kaylie Jones, Nancy Kricorian, Kurt Lamkin, Janice Lowe, Regina McBride, Christian McEwen, Susie Mee, Charlotte Meehan, David Mills, Michael Morse, Sheryl Noethe, Himilce Novas, Stephen O'Connor, Abiodun Oyewole, Julie Patton, Juana Ponce de Leon, Tom Riordan, Cynthia Shor, Daniel Sklar, Mark Statman, Samuel Swope, David Unger, Nicholas Valinotti, Monica Volonteri, Fai Walker-Davis, Ping Wang, Mark Warren, Susan Willerman, Brenda Williams, Meredith Sue Willis, Dale Worsley, Bill Zavatsky, and Alan Ziegler. **Board of Directors:** Wesley Brown, Norm Fruchter, Colin Greer, Herbert Kohl, Phillip Lopate, Walter Dean Myers, David Rogers, Marly Rusoff, Steven Schrader, Robert Silvers, and Carmen Valle.

Copyright © 1994 by Teachers & Writers Collaborative, Inc. *Teachers & Writers* magazine is published five times per year by Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003-3306. Telephone: (212) 691-6590. Fax (for purchase orders only): (212) 675-0171. Domestic subscription rates: one year, \$16; two years, \$28; three years, \$40. Foreign subscriptions: add \$3 per year.

The work of Teachers & Writers Collaborative is made possible in part by grants from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Teachers & Writers Collaborative is particularly grateful for support from the following foundations and corporations: American Stock Exchange, Bertelsman USA, The Bingham Trust, The Bydale Foundation, The Witter Bynner Foundation for Poetry, Chemical Bank, Consolidated Edison, Aaron Diamond Foundation, New York Times Company Foundation, Henry Nias Foundation, NYNEX Corporation, Helena Rubinstein Foundation, The Scherman Foundation, and the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

Our program also receives funding from Districts 1, 2, 3, and 5, IS 44, IS 54, PS 75, the Crossroads School, Hunter College Elementary School, the Lower Lab School, and the Ramaz School, Manhattan; Districts 7 and 8, PS 75, PS 152, Bronx; Districts 13, 15, 16, and 19, PS 58, PS 282, Brooklyn; Districts 24 and 27, PS 62, Queens; the Dinkelmeyer School; Jacob Gunther Elementary School; Park Avenue School; Saw Mill School; Nassau County BOCES; the Beecher Road School; the Deerfield School; Isabella Geriatric Center; ArtsConnection-Arts Exposure; the Arts & Cultural Education Network; the Arts Partners Program; the Girl Scouts of Greater New York; and The Fund for NYC Public Education.

Editor: Ron Padgett. Associate editor: Christopher Edgar. Printer: Philmark Lithographics, New York, N.Y.

ISSN 0739-0084.

This publication is available on microfilm from University Microfilms International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106.

Teachers & Writers Collaborative is a Partner of the Library of Congress.



**Teachers & Writers Collaborative**

5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003-3306

Address Correction Requested  
Return Postage Guaranteed

NON-PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
NEW YORK, NY  
Permit No. 9369