On hijacking language



Poet Andrew Weatherhead discusses the origins of his collage technique for writing poems, why sometimes it can take years for a piece of writing to come together, and why MFA programs aren't always great.

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As told to Willis Plummer, 2433 words.

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Your collection *Todd* is a mix of poetry, collage, and "collage-poems." When did you start making collages? Did you always take it seriously as an artistic practice, or did that develop more gradually?

I was messing around with visual collages as early as high school (2001-2005), but in 2011 or 2012 a certain style became apparent to me and I've worked on them pretty consistently since then.

In workshops sometimes teachers will encourage poets to do erasures or flarf-style assemblages of found language as a writing exercise. Is that what brought you to the medium? Has your work with visual collage impacted your approach to writing?

I came to collaging poems on my own and sort of by necessity because I often didn't have anything new when it was my turn to workshop poems in my graduate program. I enjoy writing "original poems," but they're so mysterious and rare to me that writing 4-6 of them a month that would be worth discussing was just out of the question. So I had to hijack language from elsewhere, like our assigned reading or the professor's emails. I got a kick out of how the collage form short circuited the workshop experience in that I could counter any critique with "well, it's a collage…"

As I learned and made more, I found other authors who worked in similar modes to use as guideposts or to retrofit as influences. These would include David Markson, Mary Ruefle, Ted Berrigan, Lewis Warsh, Heather Christle, Srikanth Reddy, Miyung Mi Kim, and Solmaz Sharif, among others.

Has another poet's work ever thrown off your own writing practice? I found when reading John Giorno I was overwhelmed by his style and it took me months to get back to writing my own stuff. I could imagine that when you're using found language and collage that could be a real challenge.

There was a time in grad school when everything I read threw me like that. I was all over the place and freaking out because I wanted to be a writer so bad but had nothing to say and no concept of what I wanted to do. I don't think my MFA program was a very conducive environment for me because of how artificial all the assignments and deadlines felt. After I graduated, I was able to settle down and trust my own instincts, and I found my work to be much more satisfying and original.

It sounds like you weren't a fan of workshops. Beyond the expectation of producing work so quickly, did you have other gripes with them? Were there any parts of the MFA process that helped you?

I could talk shit about workshops all day. I had one really good one my senior year of undergrad at NYU, led by

Matthew Rohrer, where everyone was really smart and engaged, and I assumed that's what an MFA program would be like, so I decided to get an MFA. But my MFA program was not like that at all. People just mailed it in, constantly.

I remember in our first class back after winter break, which was a month long, the professor asked us something like "what did you write over break?" and everyone responded with some variation of "I didn't write anything" or "I wish I would have written more." I couldn't believe it. You're spending $60,000+ and two years of your life pursuing a creative practice that's not going to make you any money in return and you can't even be bothered to care about it on your own time? It was clear to me I was surrounded by people who weren't as motivated as me, and I never felt like I was especially motivated or anything… I just love writing and assumed I'd be around others who did, too.

So I guess my gripe with my MFA program was the other students? I liked the teachers and I was exposed to a ton of writing I wouldn't have encountered otherwise. I was also heavily involved with the school's literary journal, *LIT*, which was an invaluable experience in seeing how poems live and die in the real world. It was run by some alumni that I learned a lot from and respected a bunch, people like Jeff Johnson, Eli Nadeau, Jackie Clark, Jaclyn Lovell, and Ben Mirov, who wrote a kick-ass book called *Ghost Machine* that I recommend.

I'm interested in what you said a minute ago about settling down and trusting your instincts. I think a lot of people struggle with anxiety about not having anything to say or not having a concept of what they want to do. Did it just come with time?

Kinda paradoxically, I think throwing a lot of shit at the wall and seeing what sticks is one way to get past that anxiety—by accepting failure and realizing how quickly it's forgotten.

It's like anything, really. When you're a beginner everything feels so significant, but the more "reps" you put in the better you can contextualize successes and failures and the more you can settle into a style and belief in your work.

I've always admired that your books feel like cohesive works rather than a bunch of stand-alone poems. How do you approach putting together a collection? Do you start with a lot of work and cut? What guides the decisions about which poems to include?

I think if I have any natural ability or talent in poetry, it's in putting collections together. It's easily my favorite part of the book-making process.

I actually like to start with a small amount of work and add. There'll usually be a few core pieces I know will anchor the book, then I'll find stuff to work around them. It's so fucking fun because a lot of times a weird, throwaway poem that's years old will make its way out of the woodwork and suddenly make sense in a larger collection of work. There are two two-line poems in my first book, *Cats and Dogs*, that had never made sense on their own, but now I feel like that whole book exists to give those two poems context.

I've often found that older poems are easily lost or dispersed across documents and notebooks. How do you collect your work over time?

I sort of plan on losing poems across folders, emails, notebooks, etc. That's part of the fun of putting collections together—going back through all the various creative infrastructures you set up for yourself and rediscovering things. I've definitely lost some poems for good this way, but keeping things unstructured feels more true to the creative process—if it gets too formalized, it starts to feel like work.

Do you continue to edit poems within the collection as part of the process of compiling them?

When compiling a manuscript, I'll only edit poems if absolutely necessary. I really try to avoid it.

I was surprised that "The Origin of the World," which anchors your latest collection, *Todd,* was written six years before the book was published. In my experience, the older writing gets, the more foreign or aesthetically disparate it can feel.

The source material for "The Origin of the World" was gathered in 2012, but the poem itself wasn't finished until late 2016. I'd worked on it off and on between 2012 and 2014, unsure if the concept would work, then some things clicked and it started coming together in 2015-2016. So it feels like a "new" poem to me, even though it took forever to write.

I know what you mean about old stuff feeling foreign, though, and I guess I try to embrace that. I don't think it's uncommon to feel alienated or embarrassed even by old writing, but a lot of times that's just a subjective prejudice. I'll try to sit with that embarrassment and let it pass, or try to understand it or just dissociate and see if the writing really is as disparate as I initially thought. Most of the time it is, but sometimes you find gems. A lot of the weird, throwaway fragment stuff I mentioned earlier will turn up that way.

When you write poems that you're happy with, do you feel a responsibility to find homes for them?

I don't think I feel a "responsibility" for finding homes for poems—it's more like the icing on the cake. The validation is nice and getting something to the point where you can share it with the world is always kind of the goal, but the real fun is in the creating. I totally have poems that I'm proud of that may never end up in print or online anywhere.

I didn't realize that "The Origin of the World" took four years for you to write. Would you mind articulating the concept of the poem for readers who might not be familiar with it?

It's a poem collaged from blurbs that were on books in my bedroom on February 2, 2012. On that date, I went around my room and copied down the most interesting blurb from each book. (I realized quickly that copying every blurb from every book was going to be unmanageable—some books have whole chapters of blurbs and praise.) The original idea was to thread disparate blurb sentences together to form a kind of prose poem or short story, but that didn't work because every blurb says pretty much the same thing so there was no momentum or tension. Realizing this, I gave up on the project for close to a year. Then I returned to it during my thesis semester at The New School (winter/spring 2013), allowing myself to break up the sentences and enjamb the lines. I shared the project with my thesis group and they all said it was either dumb or impossible, and they were right at that time. I shelved it again for two years after a few months of work. Then in the spring of 2015 something clicked and I worked on it steadily until it was published in *The Fanzine* in the fall of 2016.

I only allowed myself to change verb conjugations. I tried to keep sentences intact as much as possible, but there are a lot of fragments that are only single words. In one case I had to splice a word together out of two different words (footnotes 118 and 119 in the poem), and that felt like cheating.

I'm curious how the idea for the poem came to you?

Blurbs are hilarious to me. Even modest and prudent writers suddenly become the most fiery and flowery spokespeople when asked to write a blurb. It's amazing. It's this whole register of language people would never use otherwise, part self-help and part advertising—*you need this book, this book will help you live*—written by "writers" who are all trying to outdo themselves. So it seemed like perfect source material for a poem.

What was it like writing a poem over such a long period of time?

I had the opening line established pretty early and just tried to build on it from there. I would run through the list of blurbs and pull out sentences, phrases, or words that could work as a next line and test them out. It was like building one of those stacking puzzles. Once I had a line in place, it usually stayed put, though there were a few times when a line would send me down a dead end and I'd have to undo a few lines' worth of work. There was never a full teardown. Progressive drafts of the poem would show it getting longer. I can't explain why, but I

knew it had to be five pages long, so that was the goal.

Was there a specific moment or breakthrough when you realized that the concept would work?

I always knew the concept would work eventually, it was just a matter of having the time and space to get it there. When I mentioned that something clicked in 2015, that was probably due to personal circumstances as much as anything else. I had just started a new job and had a lot of down time in that awkward on-boarding period. So I was able to build up enough momentum on the project to feel like I knew what I needed to do and had the time and space to do it over the next year.

A lot of artists describe the feeling of losing perspective about whether changes are making a work better or worse after looking at it for too long. What did you do to keep it feeling fresh?

Yes, I overthink everything so over-editing is always a concern for me. It's something I struggled with a lot as a younger writer, but the older I've gotten the more patient I've allowed myself to be with my process. I'm better at recognizing when it's time to step away from something if it's not working and more generous in giving myself space to forget about a project until I feel I have something new to add or enough distance to view it more objectively. Working on multiple projects at the same time is liberating in this regard, in that I can jump between them to keep the work interesting and fun, and avoid feeling like I have all of my eggs in one basket creatively.

At some point you have to buckle down and do some hard shit on any given project, but there's a specific anxiety when you're editing the same line or sentence over and over and you just know the thing is not getting better. That anxiety is my cue to stop and work on something different.

Do you think you'll rework or repeat this conceptual approach to writing a poem in the future?

I'm not working on anything like that currently, but there's a logic to working with a concept that I'm drawn to, and I'm always on the lookout for source material or other constraints. I was thinking it might be fun to try to collage a poem from all the example sentences in Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, but I'm kind of waiting for that idea to feel unavoidable before I do anything with it.

5 Lance Stephenson GIFs:











Name

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Vocation

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