

**THE SOCIETY FOR THE DESTRUCTION
OF UNWRITTEN LITERATURE**

ANNE BOYER

WAGES FOR TENDERNESS

KANSAS CITY

DECEMBER 31, 2013

HOW TO WRITE POETRY

First, you start playing around with words. Maybe you haven't written ever or in a long time, so you have to sit down and think "What words could I put together that I've never seen together before?" and "What words can I put together than I've seen together but to make of them a slight variation?" and "What words have I seen together that are interesting and deserve to be better known?"

You think "What would happen if I put all these different types of words together?" You think "What would they look like together?" and you say "I bet they'd be something." You put them together, and this is a lot of fun. You make yourself laugh with putting down words this way. You are laughing at your own cleverness and the cleverness of words and marveling at what a waste the world is that it hadn't yet bothered to put words together in the way you are discovering it can be done.

You play around with letters, too, leaving some off, adding some, adding punctuation and spacing and line breaking that is new, trying things like repetition or isolation or whatever seems a little novel, novel enough to make you delighted or to disorient you slightly as you play, like "What if I just made a lot of white space?" or "What if I made my lines so long they overfilled the page?" or "What if I made this very minor?" or "What if this was beige and casual?" and "What if this is unrecognizable as such?"

You play around with sound, too. You remember Dickinson's "emphatic thumb." You think you want to play around with sound like Emily Dickinson, the way you can make expectations build and fulfill or thwart them like in sex, too.

You start hearing songs pretty quickly.

You are now just really into playing in language, its looks and its sounds, what you know of it and what you didn't know yet, so now all of language starts to come to you.

You think outside of just the words and sounds and letters and punctuation. You start thinking outside even of the song you are always hearing. You start thinking about language outside of just words and their assistants but in its other systems that are like forms,

like the forms of poems but also other forms of literature and non-literatures.

You think of the forms of poems as other poets have made them, each one a little different if they are worth something, and you add to the small play of the word the slightly larger play of the form as you receive it.

You think “What can I do with this form, exactly? Like what happens if I put these songs, put these sounds, put these letters, put these unexpected words I’ve found also in an unexpected or expected form I’ve found or am making?” For example, you think of the way a sestina ends and that this is a thing you can use even when you are not writing a sestina; you can make everything you do the way a sestina ends if you try.

You have already been hearing the songs, now you start getting visions in forms, whole forms which just arrive to you driving to work or trying to buy some salad or trying to flirt. You think about other forms like chats and like lists and like directions, forms like box-store shelves, forms like drones, forms like emails, forms like fire brigades, forms like gravity, forms like single gear bikes, and you play around with these, too, like “What can I make that doesn’t even look like a poem?” and “what can I make that looks the most like a poem?”

You are thinking then of words, then of letters and punctuation and spacing, then of sound, then of forms of poems, then of forms of other things. You are hearing songs and having visions. But it gets better: you start thinking of ideas, which are rather naturally like forms themselves, and you think “What could I do to make one idea, a very simple idea, a very simple sentiment, profoundly, basically, urgently clear?” You think, “How do I make a poem, a very small poem, which makes a sentiment urgently clear but also urgently compelling?”

You think about how to write a small idea in a small poem which could make someone cry, have sex, riot, hate you, say hi. You think of expansive and complicated ideas and how to put these ideas in expansive and complicated forms that could make someone cry, have sex, riot, hate you, say hi. You do not neglect even your

medium ideas and their potential for causing people to cry, have sex, riot, hate you, say hi.

You are having visions and hearing songs and thinking of large and small and medium ideas, then you realize you have become competent. You must undermine this so you can keep playing. You try to remember all the rules you heard once, like the one about abstractions. You say, “How do I make a poem only out of the biggest most abstract words possible, the words which no well-trained poet should dare to use ever? What if I am the person who uses them and doesn't even act afraid?”

You think “I am no coward / I am writing poetry.”

It isn't even enough that you play around with language and form, that you have visions and hear songs, that you break rules and think of large, medium, and small ideas. You have to involve your friends or make new friends to involve. You think you need to show some of this that you are doing to your friends, then they send you some of what they are doing back, too, or they say things that make you keep going, things you fold into poems.

You want to write more things not just because of the magnitude of the astonishingly possible, but because you like your friends, and it is good to have an excuse to talk to them. Sometimes people want to kiss you for your poems, so you better keep writing them.

It keeps going like that and then your work is not just about words letters punctuation spaces poetic and non-poetic forms ideas large and simple but also a lot of basic reasons to keep existing.

All things become full of feeling and thinking and the world and language and then poetry's hardly just something to do. It's a lot of stakes, of ideas and feeling and friendship you are opened up to the tragic social material aesthetic political cognitive aural visual erotic potential of language.

Then you think “How did I ever not write poetry? What was that for and why?”

HOW I BECAME A POET

I begin with something about first starting out writing what I think of as lyric poems that employed all the customs of the day that I could discern in the lyric, maybe just a hope to be sophisticated and artful, maybe just trying to find a way to fit experience inside of poetry after having believed I was a poet and then giving it up for seven very bad years full of many types of life-diminishment, which meant I hadn't started there, but earlier, from the ages of ten to twenty-three, in my first apprenticeship, which I will not discuss here, before I had my life-diminishment, which I will not discuss here.

I went from learning to write the lyric in the manner of the day which had its function of constructing me as a “poet” to joining the Flarf collective, a place where in the oughts twenty to thirty poets wrote avant-garde literature made primarily of search engine results, a place where I begin to abandon myself and abandon any elegance and hopefully all traces of competency, to learn to write quickly and socially and politically and ugly and aggressively and to include in my poetry the previously forbidden to me materials of a electronic vernacular.

At the same time I was getting my education in how to be a contemporary poet though Flarf, other works developed, lyric poems infused more and more with speed and the vernacular and the social, sets of amusing instructions or other "forbidden" or innocent and common materials like dreams: I thought what can I do that is also wrong? I thought I could account for the gossip of the midnight brain, or issue the impossible, already thinking of two questions (the answers possibly contradictory) that would later obsess me:

- 1) Could poetry be innocent?
- 2) In what ways could poetry be a source from which action could spring?

In what became the end of my Flarf, a novel happened made entirely of the internet but borrowing its structure from the 18th century early novel, the novel to be the universal story of private life, I thought, the grand epic anti-epic of our era, the anti-literary literary, I thought, the end of one subjectivity through extreme

performance and ingathering of the subjective, I thought, which would bookend this nightmare-we-can't-contemplate called capital and this nightmare-we-must-contemplate-called-gender and bring an end to the novel, I told myself, and so almost starved us to get through it so convinced of the work, which is called JOAN, which every time it is supposed to be published ends up not as has been the case now for many years.

After I finished the novel, JOAN, the novel of private life written to end all novels, I thought I had let myself become dangerously permeable. I would weep at the words I found and used; I had inside of me a set of competing languages; I had become the strangest oracle of a world in which I myself almost in myself not existing or myself cordoned off to some impossible place and shaking the bars, always, of the cage, and thought I would write a farewell to poetry in general, having freshly endured what I believed was a really awful set of events. I thought I would record the vision that came from pain, and this would be the history of the future in advance of itself in which all things were accounted for then I could quit. I was watching some British riots on YouTube, and I was thinking of the meltdown to come, and I was not thinking of my own pain, and I was trying to work poetry out of me to prepare for how we would end.

I began the process of quitting poetry again. After that farewell I wrote for the future called The 2000s, I was very bad at quitting poetry and the future, but finally I had almost entirely quit them after one summer in which I began to sew. I said "never again" because to be a poet and a poor person who is a single mother created a negative economy. It hurt everyone. It took food from our mouths. No one I loved needed me to do it. I thought I could refuse as I had skillfully refused a lot of things, refused opportunities and publications, refusing almost entirely all professionalism in poetry, giving my work away for free, trying to exist without fear or uncertainty in this, okay to be naive, but then in the worst scheme of things, a set of another painful economic and romantic and reproductive and deadly circumstances, what was to be my death almost came and went, the death himself appearing to me at that depleted moment in the hospital.

I couldn't lift my head for weeks though I had to go to work at all of my three jobs, and 2011 came, and I began again, this time in total innocence and vision, and I thought—with the new blood very literally slowly accumulating in me, my body in its new manufacture of itself— I could write in forms abandoned to the common, I thought, incantory and directly addressing, full of what had been forbidden to me as naive or useless (this directly political, that which could be argued with, that which would pin on me forever a badge of who was naive) (the list, the chat transcript, the tiny lyric) and in this in poems which would offer no formal pleasure and flatter me none, and if looked out would do none of the professional things that poetry does of the moment.

Some poet friends were disturbed by these poems that would abandon a set of professional directives we were issued at birth. They said to me “How gross, to be the poet of the crowd,” and many people in this era worked on their projects, many of these the project of continuing the 20th century in every way possible in their poetry. They had so many ways of continuing that century it was too hard to count them all, but I knew my project was not to continue the 20th century but to find its exit door, though I liked to say, while being dramatic, “destroy it.”

I had already, through the process of being alive, been bewitched by the possible common that was the idea, some of us thought, that would end that terrible century most of us were born into, and there it was, blooming out of what was left of me after all that. I was given the poems then whole and immediately and in visions I only had to record, like a transcriptionist, the visions came from watching livestreams. The livestreams were very innocent, I was sure of it, to be as innocent as a crowd, I thought, and thought when I give these poems to my friends they will become my former friends for how I abandoned the contemporary in them, how I became the poet whose visions came in livestreams and for which I was no longer anything but a transcriptionist.

It was at that time, in 2011, when I thought I was speaking from the dead but was probably still speaking from the Internet, that the entire world, also, and surprisingly, got better at poetry. Though I had written the poems in the spring, in the fall the US, also, began

to change, so that the poems written in spring appeared to describe the events of the fall, so much so that people really believed the poems written in the spring were written in the fall, and this temporal distortion brought me endless delight.

During this time my friends wrote better poetry—I made new friends because of all this better poetry happening—the world was full of better poetry—the parks and streets and squares full of better poetry—poetry became the most necessary thing—people would carry around poetry who had never carried it before, including that book I wrote that spring to meetings in the fall after the cops came and hurt everyone. It was hard to give up poetry after that.

I am sure I wrote after 2011: I am sure I have been writing. I have written many things since. I didn't understand that each deathly event to which I had given so much weight was, like all the others, just one in a string of things which would be occurring, so in the even years, like 2010 and 2012, there would be destabilizations and in the odd years, like 2011 and 2013, I would from these destabilizations be given poems again in visions or maybe just on the Internet.

I became close to fearless in poetry finally, though I wasn't sure if that was innocence. I was unafraid to ask questions and began to ask them obsessively. I wrote thousands of questions, questions about love and questions about gender and questions about poetry and questions about mortality and questions about wounds and questions about pleasures. In this I resembled a child. I was unafraid to sort and list all things existing and the-not-yet-existing possibilities. This was also the mode of a child. I was unafraid to record conversations and minutes, like a secretary or a spy. I was unafraid, even, sometimes, to open up my mouth like a bird and sing, sometimes 100 songs in a long day during summertime. I was unafraid and so thought I would use poetry to understand the biggest problems. I told my friends, "We go hard or go home." I said "If I were a hammer I would be anything that could hit it." In these experiments, I did achieve this thing, poetry as a source of causation, though what grew from it was not always what I wanted.

After crimes were committed in the name of my poetry, I would bemoan that I wanted some quality control over the crimes committed in the name of my poetry. I had always thought that what I didn't want was to be a professional, but eventually I have come to see that there is humility to going along with a lot of things and not just going along with other, unprofessional modes, also full of humility, but still I favor the modes available to all but particularly to women and girls and people who are poor or not very important by birth and who do not have much access to the centers of power and power's institutions. Though I am learning to not be so suspicious, I still distrust, and probably always will, the auction of the mind and the building up of monuments and gathering up of authority.

I think a lot of what it means in poetry to become more and more vulnerable, to become formally and structurally vulnerable, to offer the vulnerable content of political thinking, to offer the vulnerable content of desire and sensation while never trusting either of them, to remain vulnerably grounded in formal undoing, too, to undo competency at every turn, to remain humble in the language of the era and as vernacular as possible requiring no special training to be understood. I thought any kind of being unafraid is mostly being vulnerable and that the common by which I was eventually inhabited was also about exactly this.

I thought a lot about what Epictetus said about how a sheep does not throw up her grass to prove how well she has eaten, and though I have never given up my need to know everything I know, poetry was not the place to demonstrate this.

I thought a lot about what Rimbaud said¹ about the poetry that would come from future women and felt fortunate to be alive at

¹ "There shall be poets! When women's unmeasured bondage shall be broken, when she shall live for and through herself, man--hitherto detestable--having let her go, she, too, will be poet! Woman will find the unknown! Will her ideational worlds be different from ours? She will come upon strange, unfathomable, repellent, delightful things."

the time when we could all be that future woman and write that future poetry of strange and unfathomable and repellent things.

There is not a day I am not terrified by poetry, and not a day that this terror is not mediated by the love of my friends and my amor mundi. However terrifying it is to be a poet, though, is nothing like the terror of being alive as a human in the world.

FABLE

Initially, the book was blank. Only as human hands and fingers touched it did words begin to appear. The nouns came in, soft and blurry at first, then, with time, became legible: page 118, “ambivalence,” on 74, “police,” on 319, “manufacture.” Verbs emerged from a brisk rubbing of anything against them. One reader, who had dropped cracker crumbs on page 17, brushed the page with her fingers and eventually read the words “disassociated” and “would have been.” Each time breath fell upon the page, the book gained some adverbs and adjectives. The falling of one page on another brought out the book’s prepositions. A reader who had previously touched page 235, revealing “debt collection,” became agitated, and threw the book across the room. Through this she learned the means by which a person might see some punctuation (!). Conjunctions came and went. They arrived under conditions of sunlight and disappeared under conditions of florescence. In the dark, the conjunctions were neither here and/or nor there. Eventually, when one of the book’s first readers rested the book against his chest, the beating of his heart brought the title:

ANNALS OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE DESTRUCTION OF UNWRITTEN LITERATURE

After a number of years, readers brought *the book that took a while to appear* fully into being. At the moment when the last question mark appeared at the end of the last fully formed question, the readers of this book that took awhile to appear came together to form THE SOCIETY FOR THE DESTRUCTION OF UNWRITTEN LITERATURE. They did this in future-reverse².

² HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE MINUTES OF THE FIRST MEETING OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE DESTRUCTION OF UNWRITTEN LITERATURE IN FUTURE REVERSE:

“I am no longer sorry that I have not lived in such a way to leave behind proof that I have never lived.”

“We would like to un-erase ourselves.”

“We must re-remember this previously unfelt feeling that we have the right to re-exist.”

THE SOCIETY FOR THE DESTRUCTION OF UNWRITTEN LITERATURE soon experienced a schism over the project of a universal history of un-forgetting. Hardliners insisted it was only by a series of un-orchestrated and un-careful touches that whatever was true but not apparent might be revealed. A small but vocal group of the membership insisted that for every touch that could reveal what was once lost, so existed a touch that in equal measure could wear away what was sufficiently maintained but ought not to be.

Inevitably, *the book that took a while to appear* had a rival. In this rival book full of boldly printed and immediately apparent words, a reader could find accounts of the scandalous misdeeds of otherwise virtuous humans, a series of confessions and exposures, and a great number of secrets kept for millennia, like what to do about a broken heart and how not to worry too much about the future.

Everyone wanted to get their hands on *the desirable book of so much something with so many immediately apparent words*; everyone wanted to turn each page with their hands to arrive at the next page that they would turn with their hands for the next one and the next. Yet as readers touched the book's pages, the words faded. The ink evaporated, taking verbs with it, then nouns and pronouns, then prepositions and conjunctions and adverbs and adjectives.

Finally, when the frustrated reader wept over these losses, and her tear or tears landed on almost any page, the entire book (the one that appeared so full of boldly printed and immediately apparent words, accounts of misdeeds, well-guarded secrets, and other fully desirable things) all-of-a-sudden dissolved.

Though I am not certain if any of the readers of *the book in which the words appeared so vividly* ever discovered this, it was on the dedication page alone, that the reader could shed, without consequence of the book's dissolution, all of her tears.

