

1- The shape of your poems always seems really important, the visual side of the thing, but never more so than in the piece "Reciprocity Effects." That piece is primarily punctuation, and only contains, by my count, 17 words. Hearing this piece read aloud without looking at it would be a very different experience than seeing it on the page. It almost feels like an art object to me. Do you have thoughts about this visual side to your work?

I appreciate the stately beauty of a box of text. Justified margins, indented paragraphs, periods with capitals after them, all laws followed, each thing in place.

Prose has proven itself as a durable model; we're taught the layout early in school, and no one ever questions it. When it's time to impart information textually, the irrefutable form is there to receive ideas. The language of information thoughtlessly falls into one beautiful, monolithic format, time after time.

Now what if you accepted this as fact, but entertained its alternative as well?

Growing up back in Connecticut, my friends and I would take our magic markers, and instead of tearing down any prohibiting signage, we'd modify the meaning and leave the sign up. "Private property? No. Fishing allowed." Which is to say that I find a powerful value in leaving the prose box intact, working within its limits yet destabilizing and challenging it. And how much more effective to do this subtly, almost respectfully, and as simply as possible. Three punctuation marks affect private property more than a whole spray-can of graffiti might. To subvert prose more truly, more harassingly, make poetry that mimics it.

About 10 years ago, in 1996, I wondered what would happen if I subjected all of my loose poetic work to strict prosaic treatment. I accepted the prose box, and began trying to wrap poetry into it. The ellipses in "Reciprocity Effects" are meant to imply, and map out, evenly, the parameters of interacting paragraphs in a standard work of prose. In effect, the ellipses quote the absent piece, marking lost time, listing where words were, once.

Nowadays I've come to think of the paragraph-threshold as an ethical transition. Like-minded sentences settling into neighborly blocks – or something like that. And "Reciprocity Effects" became an attempt at marrying prose to the kind of poetry that uses the page in an all-over way.

Words

like

this

were transposed into lines and made to respect the prose-laws of information, but they maintain their original poetic pace and rhythm and space.

The paragraphs become strange hybrid neighborhoods, though hopefully upholding their civic, ethical duty to strive for greater sense, even to the point of residing in the same boxes as every single one of my other written neighborhoods, my rigorous texts.

Words.....like.....this.

Illustrating what reciprocity between poetry and prose effects.

2- We've talked a bit about having a poetic community. I often feel we create our own poetic communities by reading and creating this chorus of other poets in our minds that guides us a bit. Do you feel like you get writing lessons by reading other poets? And what do you feel is the importance of being engaged with other living, breathing poets?

Maybe poetic communities don't really exist. I don't know. I thought I had one while I was in college, but perhaps that sense is only relative to the fact that now, because I wait tables and hang out with non-writers, mostly, I have very little in the way of "living, breathing poets" who add to the chorus I create in my head.

I know I miss the conversations from college, conversations like this one, talking about art. I wish that every day I might engage in inquisitive discourse with talented readers who are committed to critique. That would be a big part of my utopia.

I guess I do share a sense of community with the work of some writers, dead and alive. Although when I read, it's generally only with editing in mind. I'm either gathering information, which edits what I already know about the world; or I'm studying philosophy, which makes me rethink concepts; or I'm appraising imaginative literature, which always spurs me, not to enjoyment, but to re-figuration.

Some of my favorite and enduring fellow-poet-citizens are the ones who filled my own old notebooks. All those dedicated past selves. (And what a delightfully submissive faction of my writing community! Any present or future me might edit that old work with divine impunity.)

3- In an interview with Birdie Jaworski for Mipoesias.com you briefly discussed your idea that you wanted to make all of your "poetic strands and kernels submit to the test of the sentence." This is a beautiful notion... possibly one about accessibility? Do you feel as though this is still the goal in your new, as yet unpublished, second book, *Glass Harmonica*? Back to this notion of the visuals of poetry, the poems that I've seen from *Glass Harmonica* are shaped differently, in a way less like micro-fictions.

My "test of the sentence" wasn't about accessibility, not at first, although accessibility has eventually come into play. To me, it began as a battle (or a truce) in the old war between philosophy and poetry: I wanted to subject poetic language to the test of prose.

A sentence is a kind of cultural currency, whereas poetry has a different value altogether. I have an essay that I'm ready to publish that's called "Toward a More Rigorous Text." It explains my whole attempt to traverse the area between poetry and prose, and to concretize that relation.

The majority of *Living Room* displays clearly plotted situations, usually domestic, or at least societal, and the movement in the book is a motion of seeking and guiding. I think *Living Room* seeks, through subversion, to guide to higher common ground. Maybe I could say, *Living Room* starts with plots and tries to make each one ready for music, while *Glass Harmonica's* music goes out seeking plots. The first book tells little tales that coalesce around single conceits, and the second has multiple conceits re-coalescing.

By and large, *Living Room* was written with a strong sense of subject matter, a sense of "aboutness" from which I'd inch away, away, away. And *Glass Harmonica* began from various blanks, and tried to see what subjects loomed or shot into view. Even my writing process changed from book to book. For the first one, I'd generally sit down and ruminate on an idea and hammer out salencies right there in the moment. For the next I wrote lines, phrases, paragraphs, sentences, single words, who knows? And later I'd begin to develop the connections and see what grew, always editing and adding and taking away material, with the thought in mind of trying to make meaning, and to make it as clear as possible.

But still, in both books, and in everything I've been working on since, I've fully respected the periods and paragraphs and capitals of the prose box, and playfully respected the grammatical rules of the English language. So all the work looks the same on the page. That's one constant. I also strive to define discernible situations or consistent ideas or coherent states of mind; to embody expressive and/or mimetic rhythms and syntax; and to entertain suggestive imagery and significant word-play.

4- In that same Jaworski interview, you referred to the short poems in *Living Room* as your "little stories." They say brevity is the soul of wit, and it certainly applies to these bite-sized poems. They're small, but the ideas don't feel small. I've seen some poems from *Glass Harmonica* that are similarly tiny and intense (I'm thinking of "It was Late and Deep in Snow.") I guess what I'm asking is, how can you be so restrained? How do you know when something is a shard of poem waiting to find a home and when it's a poem in its own right?

I've always brooded over the concept of "enough." Have I eaten enough? Have I slept enough? Exercised enough? Did I do everything I was supposed to do? It's a good question to wonder when we should stop doing something. To learn when our terms are meant to come to terms.

Regarding the "finishedness" of works of art, I've always admired and remembered what William de Kooning related about Vincent van Gogh. De Kooning said that when van Gogh thought a painting might be finished, he would bring it into his bathroom and place it down on the tiled floor. If the painting looked as real as the tile – the story goes – then van Gogh knew his work was done.

It's telling, I think, that van Gogh used a mimetic referent – the real floor – but he used that referent expressively. In other words, he didn't take a painting of a tree and hold it up to a tree; he wasn't concerned whether his expression of a tree looked as real as a real tree; he just wanted his painted expression to be a real object in and of itself.

I think I've developed a pretty solid, zeroed, baseline, "van Gogh's bathroom floor" feeling. I can usually tell when a poetic expression is more or less complete, and when it still needs something. The real challenge, for me, is to avoid making art that's overdone. But in our makings we shouldn't try to surpass the realities of bathroom floors (which anyway is impossible). I'm always cutting back and expanding, paring and re-growing, figuring out when a piece of writing stands up to my "van Gogh's bathroom floor" feeling. And then, hopefully, I stop right there.

5- You've talked before about how you write nearly every day, and that when you don't write you don't really feel so hot. Was this a

conscious choice on your part, or is it just instinct?
And does time
editing feel like time writing?

I have no idea whether I feel good because I've written well or whether I've written well because I felt good. I'm reminded of another confused primacy, between smiling-because-you're-happy, and becoming-happy-because-you-smiled. Of course, the spontaneous smile that arises out of the depths of your tickled soul is more honest and more immediate, but what's wrong with realizing that you feel melancholy, and then starting to smile to try to make yourself happy? Can't it work both ways?

Editing old lines and bringing the music out of them can be gratifying, but not in the same way as pulling new poetry out of nowhere. I remember recently thinking that I'd been very productive, but not very creative. It was a good thing, getting work done, but creativity's what sets me on fire, a blazing mood of glory, whereas productivity might just be fashioning candles and wicks: good for potential future fires, and much better than nothing, but still it's only wax and strings.

I have exercises where some mornings I'll just start writing a single word, over and over, to get my pen moving. Or I'll copy a very long sentence (of Proust's, let's say) so that my mind and hand can get the feeling of what it's like to write a developing continuous thought. Usually, after a half page or so, I've snapped into a more creative mode and spontaneous ideas begin to flow.

And if not, there's always those old notebooks of mine that need attention.