

BRICOLAGE POETRY



Step 1:

Put yourself in some state of marvel combined with desperation, anxiety, and/or half-comprehension. My own techniques for this involved multiple pints of coffee first thing in the morning or writing at 3am. Another place I wrote from was simply remembering, keenly, my father's disorientation and dementia. Whatever gets you to that precarious mental and emotional place (in physical safety!).

Step 2:

Pick two texts that speak to you in some way you don't quite understand. Maybe the subject matter fascinates or horrifies you. Maybe you are completely confused by the language but the accompanying diagrams are intriguing.

I've included here several to pick from, including ones I used in *The Genome Rhapsodies*. If you prefer to pick your own texts, I recommend texts that have colorful vocabulary or a strong voice.

Don't think too much about it except for, minimally, the things below.

- For me, the best bricolage poems come from texts with seemingly contrasting voices, dictions, material, imagery.
- It helped me if one (but not both) of the poems had an "I" in the text. Two highly contrasting "I"s could be interesting, but difficult.
- I always chose at least one text that included sensory detail.

Step 3:

Print out the two texts. Read them through, without analysis or even literal comprehension, quickly highlighting words and phrases that seem rich in voice or that simply strike you as compelling, or funny, or odd, or lovely, or strange, etc. I recommend highlighting "I" phrases. Do not highlight words (even little ones like

articles) that aren't rich to you in some way, even though what you highlight won't make sense. You *want* to take the language out of context.

I always highlighted more than I needed. Roughly 30-80 words from each text. (If you can't get that many that grab you, you may need to find a different text.) You also want to make sure you're highlighting only a portion of the text, not the whole thing. Again, the idea is to dismantle the original context.

Step 4 (optional):

You can skip this step if you can easily cut up the highlighted portions of the texts (for example, if the font is large enough). Set aside the unused portions of the texts, but don't dispose of them.

Otherwise, type the highlighted words and phrases from each text into a word document. For my own interest, I like to use a radically different font for each text's pieces. That way, I can more easily see if I have evenly distributed words from the two texts.

Step 5:

Scissors. Cut up everything. If there are up to three-word phrases you absolutely love (I did cheat and once use a 6-word phrase), keep them. Otherwise, brutally cut apart words in beloved images, or technical terms, or even proper names. You can always put them back together.

Step 6:

A large flat surface and scotch tape. Lay out all the pieces, all the words and phrases. Scramble the phrases, mixing the two texts, so that as little recognizable context remains as is possible.

This part is a bit like Magnetic Poetry, but with less determination or intent. I often begin by grouping words that create something odd and original among them. Resist the urge to create a whole poem yet. Try not to create any beginning, end, or purpose. You're just putting together words that have chemistry. Gradually create syntactical phrases. Tape these together. How much conventional syntax (or unconventional) you use is up to you. You will not use all the words you've cut up.

When you have enough groups of poems and phrases, start thinking about how to move them together. At this point, if you need to, harvest small utility words from the text you set aside (articles, conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, etc). Don't add any words not originally from either text, and do not repeat any not already repeated within the texts. Continue to resist the desire to create any singular meaning. Tap into your sense of desire, need, and half-comprehension. As you assemble the groupings, you may find you need to re-cut up a particular grouping.

Play; see if the strangeness emerging from the groupings has a characteristic or aesthetic. Begin to look for voice, or a speaker. Think about how to use the "I"

throughout the new text emerging. See if the chaotic text can come together into some kind of precarious cohesion. Don't fix it into literal meaning, though; don't turn on that part of your brain yet.

Tape it all into place. At this point, I usually tape together chunks I feel strongly about, but I don't tape the whole poem together. Instead, I tape the chunks to the table so that the chunks can be lifted up again and moved if necessary.

Step 7:

Go away, rest, remove yourself entirely. Go to bed, or into your day. Return to the thing on the table only when you're clear-headed. Re-read it. Now you can start to think more precisely and logically (though also still with your intuition). What is the dynamic in the poem? (Dark humor? Erratic nervousness? Barely checked anger? Desperate tenderness?) Who is the speaker?

Considering openings, endings, and pacing, move things around. Watch for places that the energy in the poem drops (you may need to remove things) and look for relative evenness of this new dynamic (this is where the different fonts help you see if you have distributed the two texts throughout). Judge which leaps in logic work and which are too alienating for a reader. You might even begin to think about what this poem has to say for itself.

Step 8:

Type it up. Read it out loud. How is this voice or aesthetic different from the voice you usually write with? How is it similar?

Can you tell where the seams between the two texts are? How much of each original text exists in the poem? How much of *you*?

Possible Texts to use in Bricolage Poems

1. Preamble to the Declaration of Independence
http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html
2. Apparatus for Facilitating the Birth of a Child by Centrifugal Force (with diagrams) <http://www.google.com/patents/US3216423>
3. Wikipedia entry on "Safety Pin" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Safety_pin
4. Apparatus for Obtaining Criminal Confessions and Photographically Recording Them (with diagrams)
<http://www.freepatentsonline.com/1749090.pdf>
5. Chapter 103 "Measurement of the Whale's Skeleton" from *Moby Dick*
<http://americanliterature.com/author/herman-melville/book/moby-dick-or-the-whale/chapter-103-measurement-of-the-whales-skeleton>
6. Love letter from Samuel D. Lougheed (Union army chaplain in the Civil War) to his wife, December 21, 1862
<http://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collectio n/civilwar/id/389/rec/4>
7. A personal document of your own (a diary entry, an old love letter, etc.)
8. Wikipedia entry on "organism" <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organism>
9. Any ad or series of ads, especially vintage ones (fast food, wine, guns, high fashion are all good).