

The Assembly Line of Surprise

Jon Wesick

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Bio

Jon Wesick hosts Southern California's best ice cream parlor poetry reading and is a regional editor of the *San Diego Poetry Annual*. He's published hundreds of poems and stories in journals such as the *Atlanta Review*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Metal Scratches*, *Pearl*, *Slipstream*, *Space and Time*, *Tales of the Talisman*, and *Zahir*. The editors of *Knot Magazine* nominated his story "The Visitor" for a Pushcart Prize. His poem "Meditation Instruction" won the Editor's Choice Award in the 2016 Spirit First Contest. Another poem "Bread and Circuses" won second place in the 2007 African American Writers and Artists Contest. His poetry collection *Words of Power, Dances of Freedom* as well as the novels *Butterfly for Zhuangzi*, *Department*, *The Disillusionment of Hal LK2154*, *Hunger for Annihilation*, and *Yellow Lines* are available on amazon.com. See his website at <http://jonwesick.com>

Contact: jwesick@sbcglobal.net

Well-Crafted Boring Poetry

Many of the poems I critique in workshops fall into a critical limbo. They're not bad, but I don't find them very interesting. I never knew how to respond to these. In the past, I'd make a few punctuation comments but never offer any critique of the overall poem that could make it better.

Charles Harper Webb gave a talk at Idyllwild on grabbing and holding the reader's attention. I feel the information he presented diagnoses what's wrong with many of these "limbo" poems. Here's a summary.

What grabs attention at a poem's start:

Title, conflict or tension, immediately interesting or arresting voice (saying something unusual), humor, passion, impropriety (truth telling), particular insight, memorable imagery, energy, ease of entry (e.g. Billy Collins), memorable language

What doesn't grab interest:

Lack of conflict, stupid or boring voice, sincere good student trying to write a poem, conventionality, obscurity, prosy language

What keeps the reader's attention:

Good story, clarity, pacing, variation

What kills attention:

Static, lack of tension, dull voice, irritating or pretentious voice, prissiness, ennui, conventionality, poor craft, obscurity, illogic, incoherence

Endings

CHW wants an epiphany at the end. I should be inevitable yet unexpected.

I'd add that you should kill all clichés and avoid using two adjectives in a row.

The Assembly Line of Surprise

Step 1 – Choose a subject to write about. This should probably be something about being human such as a mental state, emotion, or social issue. Often this is abstract.

Step 2 – Choose an object to compare it to. It's best if this is something very different than in step 1. Concrete things like machinery give good imagery. The more outrageous the better. Congratulations! You've just created a metaphor.

Step 3 – Make two columns on a piece of paper. List the parts of the subject step 1 in the first column and the parts of the item in step 2 in the second.

Step 4 – Map items in each column to those in the other. Choose the most interesting mappings. These will be phrases in your poem.

Step 5 – Put these phrases together into a poem.

Let's "cook up" an example. Steps 1 and 2 – Compare despair to a microwave oven

Step 3 - Table.

Despair	Microwave Oven
Fatigue	Klystron
Sleeplessness	Turntable
Irritability	Browning dish
Emptiness	Observation window
Loss of libido	Control panel
Gloom	Timer
Despondency	Defrost function
Hopelessness	Auto cook menu
Futility	Number pad
	Start/stop button
	Tomato sauce caked on walls
	Sparking when tin foil inside

Step 4 - I'd map sleeplessness to dried tomato sauce, irritability to sparking, and libido to the defrost function.

Step 5 – Put mapping into a poem.

The microwave oven of despair
cooked my dreams into a dried, unchewable mass.
Sleepless nights obsessing about the impossibility
of chiseling the dried tomato sauce of gloom from its walls.
My love life, a frozen turkey
with no defrost function.
Each minor irritation, the forbidden strip of tin foil
sparking and crackling while the timer counts down
to disaster.

Example

URBAN SPRAWL

Jon Wesick

a machine designed to annoy.
Houses of hostility
sidewalks of clenched teeth
roadways of livid faces.

Narcissism and cutthroat economics
the feedback loop
driving the engine harder and harder
to squeeze dollars from less and less
Driveshaft of insults
flywheel of overcrowding
clutches and brakes of boorishness and short tempers
turn the generator
power the loudspeaker
amplify the boast of commerce
the deceit of the powerful
the mediocrity posing as art.

For the young
the disadvantaged
becoming gears
by spitting wasps
and parroting the speaker's crackle
is the only way to gain respect.
A shopping mall
the only aspiration
allowed

Notice that I didn't end the last line with a period? This is due to Sam Hamod's advice. He thinks a period stops a poem while leaving a period out lets it go on forever in the reader's mind.

Slant Allusion

This is comparing two similar historical events that took place at different times or places. For example, I read a poem that talked about the Jamestown colonists drinking Kool-Aid. Jamestown was a lost colony in Virginia while Kool-Aid referred the mass suicide of Jim Jones's followers in Guyana, another lost colony (coincidentally called Jonestown but the names' similarity is not what excited me about the poem). I don't know the technical name for this technique so I'm calling it the slant allusion. If you do know, please tell me. I don't know how to teach this and only wrote one poem using this technique but I think it's cool. Here's the poem.

BREAD AND CIRCUSES
Jon Wesick

Robber barons toss bloody gloves out white Ford Broncos' windows.
They land behind a stone wall, on which Oliver North sits,
cracking pistachios and jokes about closets filled with honest,
semen-stained Republican cloth coats. Distracted by this information
America's appetite for truth heads south.

Lenny Bruce howls into a smoky microphone
to remind us how privileged executives got rich
from Phantom jets dropping butterfly bombs,
that sting like bees, on jungle trails half a world away.
Ho Chi Minh played rope-a-dope and evaded body bag blows,
until America screamed, "No más!" Rolling Stones gathered the blame,
while Hell's Angels feasted on knuckle sandwiches and smoked Sturgis.

The Phantoms still fly. CEOs bail out with golden parachutes.
Only the rich are guaranteed a soft landing.
African machetes rise and fall unnoticed. We watch for hours,
while helicopters search an empty ocean for a lost president's son.
Ethnic Cleanser won't remove the stains from German showers
no matter how hard you scrub.
Floods and famine blossom in Kyoto greenhouses.
This alone should raise more red flags than Tiananmen Square.
Yet editors cover up their short necks with mufflers made of newsprint.
We're distracted by presidential cigars,
which are only cigars.

John Doe cuts the microphone cord.
The governor sentences Lenny to death by lethal injection.
"Will there be rabbits, George?"
I know why the ocean's salty.
It's made of tears.

“Honest, semen-stained Republican cloth coats” refers both to Pat Nixon’s coat in the Checkers Speech as well as Monica Lewinsky’s semen-stained dress.

“butterfly bombs, that sting like bees” refers both to the bombs and Mohammed Ali’s “Float like a butterfly and sting like a bee.”

“Ho Chi Minh played rope-a-dope and evaded body bag blows” quotes Ali’s strategy and “body bag blows” is a pun on body blows and body bag.

“No más!” is boxer Roberto Duran giving up to Sugar Ray Leonard.

“Ethnic Cleanser won’t remove the stains from German showers” refers both to the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia as well as Nazi gas chambers in the Holocaust.

“John Doe cuts the microphone cord.” Not part of the technique but a reference to Frank Capra’s movie *Meet John Doe*. Very cynical and political for an American movie. See it.

“The governor sentences Lenny to death by lethal injection. ‘Will there be rabbits, George?’” This is a reference to Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* as well as the president at the time George W. Bush.

Misdirected Description

“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, staring hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,”

from Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl”

“Wait a second,” the pedant will say. “How can streets belong to one race or another? Why are injections of illegal drugs angry? Could they be sad or happy, too?”

What Ginsberg is doing here is misdirecting adjectives as kind of an abbreviation to add description. For example, in the 1950s (and maybe today too), you’d probably travel to the ghetto to buy drugs. Rather than saying that Ginsberg uses the phrase “negro streets” because sadly African Americans were more likely to live in that part of town. Angry refers to the person seeking the fix rather than to the fix itself but this phrase is more interesting.

Here’s one where I use the same technique.

DAMAGE – FOR RICHARD YATES*

Jon Wesick

Sing the reality of failure!
The forgotten millions who wager hope
at the tilted roulette wheel of the American dream.
Sing a fallen bust of FDR, its nose
smashed like your mother’s ambition.
Sing of frantic need in olive-drab pants,
the impossibility of love, and a loser
laying banknotes of dreams
on the nine-to-five counter of mediocrity
while his wife grows shackles in her womb.

Your life was not wasted. Not the straightjackets.
Nor the impotent days in a plaid bathrobe.
Not the roach-infested hours at a typewriter
in a dank apartment. Nor the bloody handkerchiefs,
four packs a day, and gasps at the top of the stairs.
Your Chernobyl psyche powered
a spotlight of honesty to immortality.

Parodies

I have a lot of fun writing parodies of famous poems as well as songs. The trick is loving the poem and then choosing an absurd theme for the parody. In fact, if I had to teach poetry appreciation, I'd have my students write parodies of the poems I wanted them to get familiar with. Here's an example, parodying Yeats' "The Lake Isle of Innisfree."

YEATS' AISLE AT TRADER JOE'S
Jon Wesick

I will arise and go now, and drive to Trader Joe's
And shopping cart wheel there, all steel and plastic made:
Fourteen aisles will I find there, full of shoppers I suppose
Looking for curry, vodka, marmalade.

I'll sample tofu sausage beside the false wood mast
But careful must I park on pavement packed with SUVs.
And I shall buy some pasta, for pasta boils up fast
Toppings: basil, pine nuts, grated cheese.

I will arise and drive now. No time to cook. Too much to do.
Since on this poet's budget it's hard to eat gourmet
I'll stand at the checkout, slide my bank card through
Then take home a crate of two-buck Chardonnay.

Fake Ads

CLARK'S MIXED MARTIAL ARTS BUFFET
Jon Wesick

Do you enjoy fine dining but worry about what it will do to your weight? Then come to Clark's Mixed Martial Arts Buffet where you can work off that 16-oz. prime rib in a life-or-death struggle against a trained mixed martial arts fighter.

Start out with our all-you-can-eat, soup-and-salad bar. You'll need that energy when you go three rounds against Rick "Mad Dog" Slaughter to win a chance to advance to entrees. At Clark's MMA Buffet we feature ham, chicken, turkey, our famous prime rib, and a realistic venue to test your martial skill. At Clark's MMA Buffet you can experience joint locks, eye gouges, and finger jabs to the throat all while working up an appetite for our delicious side dishes. And if you win three matches in a row, we don't give you some silly trophy. We give you cheesecake!

At Clark's MMA Buffet paramedics are standing by so you don't have to miss dinner by going to the emergency room. We're open from 11:00 AM to 9:00 PM every day. That's Clark's MMA Buffet where a bone fracture means your meal is free!

Nonsense Poems - Cento

A cento is a poem made up from text from a wide variety of sources. Typically, you raid the library pulling a sentence out of a magazine, another out of a book, and so on. Then you chop the sentences up by maybe separating subject from verb and object or subject and verb from object. Finally, you rearrange everything so it sounds like English. Ed Coonce calls these a Nanninga after Bob Nanninga who used to record one line from each poem in a reading and piece them together afterwards. Here's one that I used Rumi, Rimbaud, and *Dance Instructor Magazine* to create. It's the first one I wrote but I thought "Cento 1" wouldn't get published so I titled it "Cento XI" to make it sound like I was a pro. It worked. Paul Strangland published it in *Poetry Conspiracy*.

Cento XI
Jon Wesick

The drunkards are rolling in too many carbohydrates.
Midnight. No waves,
no wind
and not enough protein.
Now hire for me the tomb
out of all the forests, ore mines, and stone quarries.
Between conscious and unconscious
those who hold to wine are approaching
whitewashed with the lines of cement in bold relief.
Every book has put up a swing
and in the case of drug-induced states
asks us to experience suffering.
No superior being created samsara¹
only forests, ore mines, stone quarries, and
not enough protein.

1. Realm of suffering

Getting Your Poems Published

Look at the numbers. The Duotrope website lists the percentage of poems accepted and response times for publications. The yearly fee is a good investment if you're serious about publishing. You can also extract this kind of information from the *Poet's Market*.

You're better off submitting work with higher acceptance percentages and faster responses. On average poetry journals accept between 5% and 10% of poems submitted and fiction magazines accept 5% or less. In general, I'd suggest submitting to journals that accept at least 5% and respond in 6 months or faster. Of course, you still have to write the best poems you can and submit them to journals that are appropriate. Use common sense. Don't send your erotic poems to *Highlights for Children*.

For more details see my paper "Moneyball for Creative Writers: A Statistical Strategy for Publishing Your Work," *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, Volume 7 Issue 1, pages 155-171. Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm/vol7/iss1/13>