

POETRY AS SURVIVAL
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26 Centos from Gregory
Orr's *Poetry as Survival*

Alan Harnum

About These Centos

These centos have been composed by selecting lines from every page* of Gregory Orr's *Poetry as Survival*, a seminal modern volume on the importance of the personal lyric to poetry, the poet, and to society.

The only imposed constraint on composition was the page order, which I generated using a small computer program and then adhered to throughout. It is reproduced on the last page of the chapbook for the curious.

Additionally, I have used only Mr. Orr's words, and not those of poems or other works he quotes in the text. Where a page consisted only of lines from other poets (or is blank), it has been skipped in the composition.

I have used words in order only, and repunctuated or reflowed text as the need took me.

David Lehman ("These Fragments I Have Shored", *New York Times*, April 2, 2006) has said "Writing a cento may be a kind of extension of the act of reading, a way to prolong the pleasure." This has been one goal of this project, and I encourage any who find meaning or resonance here to read Orr's original book if they have not done so. Reading and rereading it (and now, using it as a source volume for composition) has significantly influenced my sense of poetry's purpose to my own life, both as a writer and a reader.

Alan Harnum, July 1, 2017

* An accidental constraint must be noted: I realized at the end of the composition process that my program had left out the final page (230) when generating the order. I have simply let this mistake stand (a reminder to always check my work, both in software and poetry).

Enter The World

Think not alone under the sun
what hurt her into song,
what varieties of chaos
dramatizes the previously taboo?

Enter the world of abstract language
to shatter its ordering power;
another badly fragmented elegy
is more necessary and more precious.

The profound link between trauma and
being silent is the only way
in, the rhythm that sounds
objects to concrete particular things.

This Little Accident

A fierce and terrifying disorder
alters it and alters his
relationship,
the self-educated son of a failed
horrifying experience of twelve
straight days.

An image of weaving,
according to the mythic models,
a story shared only by a single
person:

A callow youth arrives at
this little accident,
a personal experience of violent
destructiveness.

How does he do this? First,
somehow something has gone wrong
with poetry.

The Shell Changes

Spoken by a woman
wearing his mask,
someone rushes forward
and says,

“The stone is geometry, the
shell
changes radically.”

Culture-Haunted

Whose wheels were grinding
with astonishingly simple eloquence?

We create our own personal
constellations out of
the trauma of change,
so pervasive in our culture-
haunted
physical world as
a song passes through.

Struggling to Transform

The steadfast quality
of the star
is far more destabilizing
than grief;
most marine life
forms inhabit
the following
poems,
struggling
to transform.

Some Things Are Real

Further out into the tumultuous
sea - only apparently
chaotic - the quiet
violence of
the scraped ear
examined the effect
of writing on the
equatorial rain forests.

Sung over the corpse
some things are real,
become larger and more
awake.

Authentic Male Warrior

Within the narrow compass of
a vision of benevolent inclusion
manifesting itself physically

(the agony of experience
at which sobbing takes on
a rhythmic pattern)

surely he might have added
discovering this authentic
male warrior system?

But she never once kissed him,
his self, and the self of others;
the son must put on his shoes and
the salmon struggling upriver
has little or no regard for
the horrific scale of the casualties.

Wrestling Such a Creature

Wrestling such a creature, we may
 (if we prevail)
arrive at written language -
only that part of
 the world that
endured the condition
concentrates powerful,
 perverse
manifestation of a god's
totems and emblems.

This Third Source

They also evoke a third idea,
with whom she corresponded for years:

 this third source
 of ordering,
 the eros quality
 inherent in the
 losses and hurts
 and the agonies.

The Governing Abstraction

She had almost no one with whom
the governing abstraction
of violence,
and alcoholism,
and the image of waltzing
about the bomb,
across great gaps of
lost language
obsessed with
shame
or fear
or inhibition,
is reversed;
what purpose
does it
serve?

Her Own Genius

A first, strong
step towards healing,
the production of
stories and symbols
can dream
her own genius.

Never Forgives Her

Like those conch shells
you lift to
the thin lady in white
who sometimes
never forgives her,

The richer a use we
make of our
safe place to bury
the strange and massive
savagery of it,

A real figures emerges
its pleasures, the only
cause of forlornness.

Only the Shell

You must lose your balance
not to be afraid -
who had, or almost had, control.

But only the shell also has
to be on the side of order,
floating above the bed;
down the wrong end of the telescope,
the dramatic
facts of whiskey and waltzing.

Perhaps Only the Horrors

This whimsically anguished
chaotic material of our
dwelling at night, and

A tumultuous sacred lyric
has replaced the shattered
spurned male lovers, and

We have passed from the
keeping of its overculture
into other people's lives, and

As a threshold between
the initial nightmare of
connection between self, and

In a world that has been
like the narrow passage -
to open the door and

Armored,
 against experience,
 perhaps only the horrors.

Like the Phosphorous

In the act
of making
the letters
form a kind
of autobiography
like the phosphorous
yearn to give expression.

Builds a Wall

A language primer
to disrupt our lives:
naked of inherited beliefs,
individual selves fell;

Writing poem
after poem
builds a wall -

His snares have caught
birds
to lift him up,
to rebuild the web,
to devastate whole
societies.

The Patients Had Kept

A sign of
arriving at
a world totally
dominated
of love and death:

There,
as an inextricable
part of
its efficacy
for survival

the patients
had kept
the roller coaster.

All Impulses and Passions

On the blank screen
of the future
she wrote
an open forge, where
if you ignored the
dream
constellating or
the defiant
lucid force...

As early as
three thousand
years ago,
a crisis of the spirit
against the horror
faces the past
and the present;
this tormented earth
will be assimilated,
all impulses
and passions.

Open, night sky!
Bring us near
our own threshold.

Interrogate My Intuitions

Inside the world of my body

The shared world of language

Changed the world irrevocably;

That passionate love was

To interrogate my intuitions

against the declines and quiet.

Infancy Permanently Altered

The young boy's aloneness
became
accurate, and
you must dance
to keep;

The world is full,
my brother's death
another voice,
his own infancy
permanently
altered.

A Biological Entity

A new self to inhabit
and preside over
frequent prospects
of starvation;
among the younger generation,
ceasing to exist as
a biological entity
is
made into a story.

Made Remarkable

The material physical world
but also
the father's ceaseless labor,
the son's fearful
beverages or passionate love
in the world,
protect us as well from
uncanny overlapping of
designer and admirer;

these poets have read
Freud, and
Jung, and
others,

by which a series of
young artists
whose vast scale,
threatened,
is marked, and
made remarkable.

A Denigrated Language

arresting people, throwing them into
the destructive or isolating silence,
a denigrated language was first given
the form of incantatory raptures on
higher pain thresholds than most of us:

sixteenth through the nineteenth
self to translate its whole being
into language;

since all earthly things must perish
in the shape of a gingerbread man or
a star,
Our Lady of the Strange Angels
invented a relationship to nature
that such an illness can bring.

Kept Alive

When his beloved sister
propose survival
even as he wrote,
the mind-body split
takes on the subject of
those huge cave systems
that writhe and dive,
god of gates and entrances
kept alive, in its house of
self and nature, self and
other selves.

Popular Music to Earth

Trauma, it
negotiates directly,
popular music
to earth
a minnow,
own being
our daily
thanatos principle,
bisected circle
of love,
hunting accident
among his
dinner party.

Flowers to the Jeopardy

These images of
 provisional hope
as the making of
 a rope of flowers,
to the jeopardy of
 life itself
this naming of
 the birds and beasts.

Page Order of Composition

The page numbering is that of the 2002 University of Georgia Press edition, ISBN-13 978-0-8203-2428-9.

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