

A Poetic Practice that Privileges Invention and Discovery

Since I teach poets who are mostly at early stages in their development (with a few notable exceptions), much of the work I try to encourage them to do is focused on what they *don't* expect poetry to do. For instance, many poets, early on, associate poetry with heightened emotional states. Of course, they're not alone in this association, but I want to loosen the bind between the heightening and the emotional state itself, and between the effects that poems create and the method of creating them.

To that end, I often ask writers to try juxtaposing things that aren't immediately connected. Here are a couple of prompts I've used:

Take three entries from your journal. No two can be dated within four days of each other. Write a poem that explores how the three entries are connected.

Write a poem with two disconnected memories in it. Let the poem, through juxtaposition, create connections or sparks between them.

I like the idea of giving writers—especially in the early(-ish) stages of development—many tools for finding their way to poems. Juxtaposition is one method of invention that deliberately frames the act of writing such that the writer must articulate what connects things—the connections aren't already there. The act of writing a poem isn't an accident of emotion, or at least it isn't most of the time. It isn't (just) a state of heat or rage or love. If you want to write poems, you want to find many ways into poetry, many ways to invent poems. You want to keep discovering what poetry as a mode of discourse can do.