1) **Event Title:** Embodied Prosody, Embodied Sentences: Coping Mechanisms

2) **Event Description:** “I cannot stress enough how much this mechanistic world,” poet CAConrad writes, “has required me to FIND MY BODY...in order to find my poetry.” Conrad’s argument suggests that in the same way we can’t take connection to our bodies for granted, we can’t take connection to our writing for granted, and that to connect to our bodies enables a connection to our writing. torrin a. greathouse asks, “What tools can prosody provide us with for cultivating an embodied poetics of disability?” Jenny Johnson suggests “Prosody can be a space for wrestling with and wrestling off old scripts, and also for generating the new ones that we need.” Oliver de la Paz argues that prose poems offer a specific vantage point for the “political” gesture of sentence making, while Brian Teare suggests that a collage-based prose practice can wire our sentences to our nervous systems. This panel will explore four craft-based pathways to connecting queer, crip, women's, and BIPOC bodies to our lines and our sentences.

3) **Event Category:** Poetry & Prose

4) **Event Organizer & Moderator:** Brian Teare

5) **Event Participants and Short Biographies**

   **Oliver de la Paz** is the author of six books of poetry and the Poet Laureate of Worcester, MA. His most recent book, THE DIASPORA SONNETS was published in 2023 with Liveright Press. He is a founding member of Kundiman and teaches at the College of the Holy Cross and in the Low Res MFA Program at PLU.

   **torrin a. greathouse** is a transgender cripple-punk and essayist. She is the author of Wound from the Mouth of a Wound, winner of the 2022 Kate Tufts Discovery Award, and DEED. She teaches at Rainier Writing Workshop, the low-res MFA at Pacific Lutheran University

   **Jenny Johnson** is the author of In Full Velvet. She received a 2016-2017 Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University and a 2015 Whiting Writer’s
Award in Poetry. She teaches at West Virginia University and in the Rainier Writing Workshop's MFA Program.

Brian Teare is the author of seven critically acclaimed books of poetry, most recently The Empty Form Goes All the Way to Heaven and Poem Bitten by a Man. An Associate Professor at the University of Virginia, he lives in Charlottesville, where he makes books by hand for his micropress, Albion Books.

6) The moderator will begin by welcoming attendees and setting the agenda for the panel. Each panelist will then share strategies for crafting embodied writing as well as examples from their own and others' bodies of work. The panel includes queer, crip, women, and BIPOC poets with radically different aesthetics and approaches to genre, and each will address the ways that prosody and/or sentence-making offer ways to cope with their specific lived conditions. Each of us will read the following talks. Then we'll end with an audience Q&A.
The Silence that Surrounds:

On Prose Poems, Anechoic Chambers, and Coming to Language

I learned to write by attending to the silence on the peripheries. I learned to write within and without the boundaries of the margin rule, the rule-governed decorum of my language lessons, and from my father’s struggles with syntax. It was on the edges of dense, prose-filled spaces where my understanding of what comprises a prose poem gathered. The idea of the sonic qualities of a prose poem formed in uniform constructions: squares, rectangles, and the white space that constructed the margin edges of language. I learned to write by mimicry, listening closely to my father, conscious of his own breath. I learned from the clean white edge of the page and what that white edge surrounds.

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When I was learning to read, my father would read aloud passages of books and record them using a Dictaphone. I would replay the stories at bedtime, recorded on 60-minute Memorex cassette tapes. My father’s voice hissing in acetate. The limits of the story defined by the medium in which he was recording. It was also a means for him, my father, to erase his accent. Rehearse the English language to his own ear so that he could hear how he sounded. And so the stories would stop, abruptly. Fragmented by his stops and starts. His erasures. His ear speaking back to him a version of himself he was trying to unlearn.

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In a recent NPR broadcast, a journalist was offered the opportunity to see how long she would last in an anechoic chamber, located in Orfield Laboratories in Minnesota. They offer tours of the facility and for $60, you too can experience what it is like to sit in a
chamber that is designed to eliminate all external sound. The chamber itself is a cube and fitted along all sides, including the floors and the ceilings, fiberglass soundproofing panels jut outward in alternating horizontal and vertical grids. The room looks like something out of a Christopher Nolan movie, the world bending into a disturbing symmetry. Sitting in the room is considered a challenge. In a *Smithsonian Magazine* article from 2013, the headline reads “Earth’s Quietest Place Will Drive You Crazy in 45 Minutes.” And in account after account that I’ve read and including the NPR profile that I heard, the public cannot last longer than 10-15 minutes in the room. When people are seated in the room, they place them at the room’s center, perched atop a padded platform and turn off the lights.

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I imagine the sensations one hears or imagines they hear in such an enclosure. In the dark, what can be heard? Attention moves to the things felt and I can imagine hearing my skin against the fibers of my pants. I can imagine I’d hear the whistle of breath through my nostrils. The pulse of blood from behind my ears. The space of quiet becoming exceedingly loud.

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If the prose poem is informed by the borders of its enclosures, what is then magnified is the sound of the syntax made within the enclosure. The commas and periods defining clause and sentence become magnified stretches of silence. The interstice between these ideas become all the louder to us in such closed spaces.

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The audible click of the record button can be heard as my father’s voice comes on. Tinny. Restricted by the unspooling tape. This version of him which is mirrored back to him. His rephrasing and trying on of words. His stops and starts. The continued
utterances of his unlearning. He is reading aloud a passage from the local paper which is about something mundane. Livestock, etc. The fishing report. The weather. And in the shape of the recording he is sensing himself forming sentences. Listening back to his accented voice which is a voice he is ever aware of.

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When I was learning to read I was pulled from my classroom in second grade and made to read aloud because I was not pausing from sentence to sentence. My words collided, spilling past the periods and commas, crashing into other words. I was made to pause for two breaths between periods. One inhale. One exhale. One inhale. One exhale. An exaggerated stoppage so that between moments of sentences meaning lingered there in the air. I was made to stop because I read like my father who was also trying out the sound of English in his mouth.

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The journalist on NPR remarks that sometimes swallowing in an anechoic chamber becomes a magnified sound. Imagine the magnification of a word.

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The margins of the prose poem magnify what’s inside its shape. In an anechoic chamber, within its center, the things that get noticed are often the minute details. The enclosure magnifies the interior. I would very much like to visit the Orfield Labs and the chamber—I imagine what it would sound like, hearing my own body magnified in the silence amidst the noise dampening waffle tiles. I imagine my breath through my nostrils, the slight whistle of air as it splits the gap between nose hairs. Or the way my skin against denim makes a shushing sound. In the frame of a place with such margins, the audible is more audible.

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Imagine, then, the container of the prose poem, housed within the margins that define its boxy shape. What can be heard? The pause after the period? A sentence fragment? A clause? A vowel? Without the decorousness of lineation, the interior of the prose poem must be its extravagance. The elevation of the sentence, beyond the line, is the elevation of the body’s symphony in the space of a sound chamber.

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On another cassette, which my father had left on record inadvertently, you can hear him speaking to my mother, switching from Tagalog and back to English. Him correcting his “F” sound so that it sounds like an “F.” So that a feather is a feather. The fricatives pressed against his lips, pushed forward. Squeezed through the opening of his mouth, made smaller by the muscles of his lips.

***

In the space of fifteen minutes, which is the limit that is imposed on the public visiting the Orfield Lab’s chamber, they sometimes turn off the light because the filaments in the bulb emits a sound. The hum or crackle of electricity extending its tendrils down into the wire, twining its thin hot fingers around, creating a sound which, as the focal point of one’s attention in a room without any other stimuli becomes heightened. With the light’s off, it’s the breath. It’s the pulse.

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The prose poem became the form for The Boy in the Labyrinth because I needed a chamber, free of the outside distractions and impositions, that would allow me to hear my inwardness. A little space where the sound of me could hide away from the too-big world. A space where I can notice the things that I would otherwise be distracted from when other stimuli populate my sightlines. A moment defined by the edges of the page.
My father asks me to answer the phone. He never answers the phone for fear of people on the other end of the line misunderstanding him. His chief worry, that the receiver captures, in some way, the wrong version of him so that he is not seen or comprehended. He can speak on the phone for no longer than five minutes before needing to hang up. The voice on his answering machine is mine so that if someone were to call my father they would hear me asking them to leave a message.

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As my son is re-learning to speak, he hesitates because he is trying the sound out in his mouth. Fish becomes “ish” and he drags the shushing sound into the next “ish” sound. Fish becomes “ish ish,” the doubling made loud in the language loss experienced when he is first diagnosed on the autism spectrum. At first, he was full of words and then a silence that surrounded us.

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Here’s an exercise for an anechoic chamber: make a statement. Feel how that statement probes the padding of the sound dampening tiles. Try a smaller sentence. Then a larger one. Imagine how the poem, then, is an attempt to express the self in such an enclosure.

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The prose pieces in *The Boy in the Labyrinth* were conducted in a similar exercise, where I attempted to practice inwardness, first, by testing my voice against the silence biting the page and then listening to sentences form. Short sentences. Long sentences. Varying syntactical structures but also staying within the limit of my imagined chamber. I was writing about my neurodiverse child and neurodiversity in my family—my father’s. Mine. I wanted to demonstrate what sound “looked” like. Loud at times. Operatic.

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The boy in the labyrinth resides inside the opera house. Swells of music glow blue and ionize the air. He delicately rotates his hands in tune to his emotion, which is like a dwelling. In here he dwells, he thinks, as his hands twirl into sad feelings. It is the beauty of the minotaur’s song that is derived from a single fact--within its song someone is present. With every note there is transference. As when wind from spinning hands substitutes actual wind. As when the reeds of a throat do not require an audience. As when the audience is far from the stage and the stage stammers its incongruity.

As my son is re-learning to speak, he is in the care of my father. My son watches my father’s lips form around a letter, shaping it into a sound. My son watches my father’s mouth grapple with a sentence which he pushes forward into the space before him.

Throw the declaration into the space in front of you and feel the air rise up, pushed from your diaphragm. Try speech in short bursts. Attune the ear to the sound of your throat. Attune the ear to the sound of the wind through your teeth.

Imagine yourself escorted out of the chamber’s enclosure. How loud the world must be. How, from within the chamber you would be most within yourself, hearing your body’s breath-paces or when you open your mouth, how the region or country of your birth is almost physical, accenting your vowels or gliding along your tongue in delicate syntactical constructions that shimmer in front of you, lace-like. How the body is embodied, undecorated in the silence of that room. And hear how much is noticeable before sound folds back into its expected cadence. How you cease to hear your breath leave your lungs when the door shuts behind.
NOTES TOWARD A FAILED THEORY OF CRIPPLED PROSODY

1. Let me begin with an admission: Meter, and by extension prosody, used to scare the shit out of me. For the longest time, I simply avoided this integral element of poetic craft, clinging to any critical work I could find which reaffirmed my strained relationship with meter, thinking I could simply position myself as a free-verse-poet and wash my hands of it.

2. I particularly chafed against the concept of a regular and universal prosody. This tension is inextricable from the larger difficulties with language I have had since I was a child. I lisped and stuttered, struggled with phonetic and phonemic disorders, and did not speak aloud until I was over three years old. Though many of these symptoms have lessened or resolved with time, their underlying cause—my autism spectrum disorder—remains and with it my phonological difficulties. In particular, my capacity for identifying phonemic stress.

3. Despite my best efforts, I did not manage to stay away. My growing interest in prosody—particularly the accentual-syllabic prosody common in English language poetry—stemmed from my obsession with the sonnet, and I learned to hear somewhat more accurately the metrical pulse of poems by writing dozens of them. I never quite mastered the use of a regular meter though, my lines always packed with little alterations, stumbling away from the expected rhythm.

4. I still believe that, for all of meter’s valuable uses, a “regular” prosody is impossible. Consider the word “Coyote.” You may have clocked the way I say it as irregular, but that’s always been the word’s shape to me. Across dialects and accents, this word can be scanned as a trochee (CAY-ote), a dactyl (CA-yo-tee), what could be either scanned as a
trochee followed by a loose stressed syllable or the more obscure cretic foot (COY-o-TAY), and likely more that I have not heard yet. This conviction became the first spark of my interest in the possibility of a personal prosody, a way that we might capture the individual and irregular rhythms of personal speech, particularly in the presence of bodily and mental deviation from the cultural “norm.”

5. The first scholar I ever encountered writing on the relationship between meter and the disabled body was Jim Ferris in his essay “The Enjambed Body: a Step Toward a Crippled Poetics.” In this essay, Ferris discusses the common use of bodied metaphors to describe poetry, gesturing subtly to the ways in which these metaphors often assume a “perfect” (read: nondisabled) body, before pivoting toward an etymological examination of a few key terms. “Enjambment: from the French jambe, leg.” It follows logically that we call the unit of meter a foot. More interesting to me, however, is what Ferris later notes, quoting from Karl Shapiro and Robert Beum’s *A Prosody Handbook*: That the word iambic—the most statistically common metrical foot in English—is taken from “the Latin iambus derive[d] from a Greek word meaning ‘a cripple.’ The short syllable represents the lame foot, the long one the foot descending with normal strength.”

6. As a poet who, like Ferris, experiences motion and a bodily connection to the world through the lens of my gait altered by disability, I immediately resonated with this reading and with his refusal for the bodied language of poetry to be rendered separate from his own body. If, as A.R. Ammons writes, “A poem is a walk,” I have yet to find a metrical pattern which represents my own uneven gait. Nor one for my own uneven mind.
7. Another aside: For the sake of simplicity, I will often be using the language of “body” herein, know that despite this I am always thinking of the body and mind as inextricably linked. In disability studies, we often use the term bodymind, which the scholar Margaret Price, often credited as introducing the term, describes as acknowledging that “mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other—that is, because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood as two.”

8. In poems throughout my first book, I attempted to utilize physical form, rather than prosodic gesture, to render poetic bodies (and by extension bodyminds) like my own. Though I hold affection for them, I consider many of these poems failures. I also once sought to break form in an attempt to mimic this body. Again, failure. And with it, the implication that my disabled body might be defined by the act of breaking.

9. In recent years, informed by my reading of Ferris, I have been obsessed with trying to create an approach to prosody which embodied my body, mouth, and mind’s irregularity, while still systematizing a mode of patterned speech. There have been many failures along the way.

10. Another critique Ferris levels, and which became part of the underpinning of this experimentation, was the concept of symmetry as an imperative, an assertion of normativity, the expectation of a metered poem’s steady and even gait. Among these experiments was a speculative poetic form which I named “The Limp.” The concept was to disrupt this metrical symmetry through a series of constraints:

- Each line must be written in iambic hexameter (the last foot an overstepping of the sonnet’s rhythm).
- Each line but the last must be enjambed.
• Every second line (2,4,6,8...) must include an anceps (or pickup beat) in the meter before the first iamb.

• Every third line (3,6,9,12...) must enjamb through a word, breaking it into two words, or leaving one syllable to act as the anceps in the line below.

• The final line is exempt from these other rules. The only requirement it must somehow invoke, refrain, or revisit ideas from the first line.

I’ll put an example of an early draft on screen, but forego reading it for the sake of time. Though theoretically interesting, there are several readily apparent issues with this form. For one, it is highly prescriptive, the meter made to resemble the particularities of my own irregular gait. In this way, it fails to offer an embodied prosody for even other cane users. Second, is the lack of replicability; the form is too constrained and frankly very difficult to write in—this presents potential issues in terms of accessibility. Lastly, I always disliked the way this form demanded a kind of regular irregularity, though I never found a coherent methodology to avoid this.

11. Often, a lack of knowledge leads us to recreating that which already exists.

12. It is important to note that, despite both Ferris and myself taking it at face value and though compelling, the earlier quote from Shapiro and Beum is wildly incorrect. They conflate the etymology of the iamb with that of “choliambic verse,” which derives its first syllable from the Greek chōlos, meaning “lame.” Sometimes also referred to as “limping iambs” or “halting iambic,” this form of verse is written in regular iambic tri- or hexameter, with the final metrical foot inverting to a trochee, each line bringing the reader down on the wrong “foot.”
13. While I am not totally satisfied with this metrical convention, for similar reasons to those I cited with the limp, this discovery does make me feel as though, by repeating the past I might discover new paths toward the future prosody of my own crippled poetics.
Risking Rhyme
Johnson, 2023

First, a confession. I am a poet who pleasures in rhyme. I like it, because it’s pleasing to my ear, and I like it because it feels a little risky. In contemporary poetry, rhyme can sound excessive, old-fashioned, child-like, overtly resolute, or sentimental. (In song writing, of course, rhyme functions differently – say in a hip-hop song or in a pop ballad.) But alone and naked on the page, it’s reasonable to fear rhyme as a writer. And yet, I’m here, this morning, (I hope) to embolden you to experiment wildly with rhyme.

In fact, I want to offer three reasons to risk rhyme, and share how it can function as an embodied element in your work. As a heads-up, I’ve been paying specific attention to rhyme in the work of queer writers, so my examples draw from this study, but what I’ll be sharing is applicable to writers across subject positions.

1) Rhyme can be generative

For me at least, rhyme often appears in a draft without my noticing it. In this way, I consider it a curious compositional force. When we generate rhyme, often the body is ahead of the mind; sound is operating ahead of sense. This generative space I trust. In The Prosody Handbook, Karl Shapiro and Robert Beum write that rhyme can be “heuristic” in part because the limitations of it free “the mind from the near-infinity of vocabulary.”

Maggie Millner’s debut collection Complets, which came out this year is composed almost entirely in rhyming couplets. In it, Millner tells a story-in-verse of a speaker processing the experience of leaving a loving hetero marriage to self-actualize as a queer person. The rhymes in Millner’s books are funny, sexy, linguistically engaging, and at times, embarrassingly earnest. Let’s look briefly at an example.

By the way, if you’re not used to attending to rhymes in poems, I put a little glossary on your handout from Annie Finch’s A Poet’s Ear. And so briefly, I want to mention that when there’s a pattern of rhymes at the end of the line -- this is called an end rhyme. Exact rhymes like “bed” and “head” in this poem -- we call exact rhymes. Imperfect rhymes which offer surprise go by many names….near, slant, off... When you rhyme one word with a group this is called mosaic rhyme. When rhyme feels a little forced, as in it takes work to say and hear, this is called a wrenched rhyme. Usually, you’d want to avoid the music of a wrenched rhyme because it’s clumsy feeling, but here in Millner’s poem 2.1 there’s humor and awkward pleasure to be found in the wrenched mosaic slant rhyme of words like “torqued” and “particle board.”

2.1

Everyone had the same Ikea bed.
    She tied my wrists to hers, above my head.

(She liked what she called clean lines. I would learn;
    her major had been architecture.)

Sometimes when I lay there, waiting, bound or free,
I’d envision its assembly:

the tiny standard-issue wrench that torqued
  the socket of the bolt, drawing the particleboard

flush against the rails. The hundred screws.
  The greasy crossbar with its queues

of stapled slats. The wooden dowels,
  which had seemed too large to fit their holes,

that gently she’d forced in. The plastic pegs.
  The vinyl footboard, trussed between the legs.

--Maggie Millner, from Couplets (2023)

We’ve strayed a little because I’m having fun, but let me get back to my point. Rhyme can be generative and can create a surprising feeling in poems for the reader, when it feels as if we’re witnessing a mind in a space of discovery. So some of my favorite instances of rhyme in Millner’s book do this – they reveal a speaker’s mind in action processing and working through difficulty. Let’s look at one more example.

3.10

Some mornings, leaving my girlfriend’s
  house, I’d glimpse my whole existence,

all its eras, as a single arc—unified, unbroken.
  I saw a person who kissed mostly men,

wrote poems in the prevailing style, owned a cat.
  I saw a different person after that,

and before, I saw a little girl.
  What was I saying? That there were

these different selves—I need you to see them—
  they were shapes made out of lines, and then

one day they all began to cross, the lines,
  as if by some obscure design

the analysis of which became the purpose
  of my life. Or maybe the pattern was
my life, and its analysis
   merely my living. Sexuality is,

after all, a formal concern:
   finding for one’s time on earth

a shape that feels more native than imposed—
   a shape in which desire, having chosen

it, can multiply.
   And isn’t love itself a type

of rhyme? And don’t gender and genre share one root?
   Maybe I really am a poet,

needing as I do from these imperfect sets,
   which constitute a self, the lie of sense.

--Maggie Millner, from *Couplets* (2023)

We could spend a while on this poem. But consider the moment in couplet 3 where Millner very bluntly rhymes cat/that. Here where the rhyme is most obviously exact the speaker stumbles, “What was I saying?” What’s beautiful to me about this moment is the way that doubt and hesitation carry the speaker deeper into a tumult of rich self-reflection.

2) Rhyme is relational

When words rhyme, we link the words together at the level of sound and meaning. And so rhyme is relational, because it invites us to sense and search for likenesses, differences, and the textured spaces in-between.

In John Keene’s brilliant collection, *Punks*, questions of belonging across time and space, when one is queer and black, are ever-present. In the poem “Mirror,” correspondence and the lack thereof is questioned, troubled, celebrated, poked fun at, and complicated by slant rhyme collisions. The poem begins, “Mirror,” “Does it rhyme with other?” And so immediately, we hear in this near rhyme an unresolved relationship between the words: “mirror” and “other.” Sonically, Keene invites the reader to continually identify and dis-identify. He mirrors words, such as: “whammy” and “swagger” // “thwart” and “mute” // “stilettto” and “slow-mo.” I’ll read the first 3 lines of this poem, and then the last 8 so you can get a feel for how Keene uses slant rhyme.

**MIRROR**


--John Keene, from *Punks* (2021)

3) Rhyme can generate heat

Thom Gunn’s “The Hug” captures a brief gesture in the night, where a hug happens between former lovers. For a little context, this poem famously opens Gunn’s collection *Man with Night Sweats* published in 1992, a book which memorializes friends and lovers lost to the AIDS epidemic. So, it’s a poem, too, that moves me because it captures a quiet moment of queer care, kinship, and intimacy. You’ll notice when I read it that the poem has a discrete pattern of end-rhymes. But the poem also has another moment of rhyme design, where Gunn uses what are called crossed or interlaced rhymes. Some cross-rhymes are: slept/pressed, instep/chest sex/set. Some interlaced rhymes are: lengths/strength sex/instep blades/braced This secret-feeling stitched quilt of rhymes takes place during the exact moment when the hug happens, during the specific moment where the poem carries the greatest physical and psychological heat.

In closing, I will read “The Hug” to you.

**The Hug**

It was your birthday, we had drunk and dined
Half of the night with our old friend
Who’d showed us in the end
To a bed I reached in one drunk stride.
Already I lay snug,
And drowsy with the wine dozed on one side.
I dozed, I slept. My sleep broke on a hug,
  Suddenly, from behind,
In which the full lengths of our bodies pressed:
    Your instep to my heel,
    My shoulder-blades against your chest.
It was not sex, but I could feel
The whole strength of your body set,
    Or braced, to mine,
    And locking me to you
As if we were still twenty-two
When our grand passion had not yet
  Become familial.
My quick sleep had deleted all
Of intervening time and place.
    I only knew
The stay of your secure firm dry embrace.

        --Thom Gunn
Gesturing Towards Rhyme – Writing Exercise

1) Think of a moment where a small gesture was memorable. You might think of a moment you experienced or a moment you witnessed between others. For example, you might consider memories of any of the following: a hug, a wink, a trip, a bite, a handshake, a fist bump, an elbow, a shove, a slap, a head scratch, a back rub, a squeeze, a head shake, a kiss, a nod, a laugh, etc.

2) Without worrying about sound, music, or rhyme, tell the story of this small moment in as much detail as possible.

3) Then, experiment with telling the story of this moment again using a rhyme scheme or loose pattern of rhyme. You might try writing in couplets that loosely end-rhyme or writing in quatrains, each of which must contain two forms of rhyme. Use the exercise as an opportunity to experiment with forms of rhyme that are new to you: mosaic, wrenched, interlaced, etc.
Collage & Embodiment: Styles of Being

i. The Quotidian

Though the word *collage* is derived from the French, *coller*, for “paste,” its basic process consists of two operations of equal importance: first cutting, then pasting. A practice made public in the 1910s by visual artists Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, early collages cut imagery from one context – often from mass print media like newspapers – and integrated it into the compositional field of a painting or drawing. Its most radical effect was to refuse the single perspective of representational art and instead present a multi-perspectival surface, where the real never pretends it wasn’t made by hand. Instead, the real appears as a field of simultaneous vantage points assembled from angular juxtapositions.

As in Braque’s classic “Violon et pipe (Le Quotidien)” from 1913, whose collaged objects travel through time and space wearing the distortion of having been handled and shorn of their original context by cutting and pasting. When we see his fragments of newsprint, we perceive them gesturally and incompletely, as part of a picture plane of pattern and color and not as part of a newspaper we are leafing through. The strip of wallpaper on the left might evoke a wall, and the faux bois against it might suggest a table, but our sense of the interior in which this still life is arranged has been atomized much in the way the violin has been, much in the way the genre of still life itself has been.

What matters most in achieving these effects in our own writing: 1) the level of the cuts. In linguistic collage, we can cut anywhere from the paragraph to the letter, the macro to the micro. 2) the frequency of the cuts. Does perspective or source text shift with each comma, or after each period between sentences, or after each paragraph? 3) the relative disjunction of the cuts. Collage occurs on a continuum from rough to smooth. Micro cuts made frequently in a text can lead to a distressed linguistic surface that resists easy semantic meaning; macro cuts can lead to a smoother linguistic surface and the appearance of a coherence that the collage might undermine on grammatical, syntactical, perspectival, or narrative levels. In most collages, the level, the frequency, and the disjunction vary from cut to cut, and calibrating this variation is a craft, an art, and a relationship to reality.

Braque’s still life shows us the real as apparently haphazard yet meticulously constructed. The scale, duration, and varying coherence of the collage’s composite parts let the seams of the real show, and is, in fact, *all about the seams in seeming*. Subtitled after one chosen fragment of newsprint, Braque’s collage suggests that in art, the appearance of daily life, the quotidian itself, is not a given: it’s always a construction. To what extent does it hold together, to what extent does it fall apart, to what extent does it exceed our full comprehension, and to what extent is it more like the fabric of the real than almost any other art form? It lets life look both less still and less unified than we pretend it to be, closer to the complexity of its simultaneity.
ii. A Style of Being

But I haven’t yet acknowledged a third operation that enables collage, one that precedes both cutting and pasting. First, the collagist needs to select the source materials from which to cut. Writers could call their source materials a “corpus,” the assembled body of language from which they will cut. In many ways, the corpus determines the linguistic flavor of the final collage, especially in terms of its tone, diction, and themes.

The poet Mei-mei Berssenbrugge in her book *Four Year Old Girl* makes poems from a highly varied corpus curated to support meditations on illness, health, fate, phenomenology, and perception. Written in the aftermath of a pesticide exposure that impacted Berssenbrugge’s health for almost a decade, *Four Year Old Girl* thinks through bodily integrity, subjectivity, gender, and phenomenological experience by sampling language from books of Buddhist spirituality, theology, psychoanalysis, feminist theory, art criticism, and philosophy.

As detailed in an interview with Eileen Tabios, Berssenbrugge first reads “in a trance” and makes “notes on what floats to the surface,” typing out relevant passages from her corpus, notes that she calls “the first form of the poem.” The poem’s first full draft takes shape when she begins to select, order, and edit specific phrases from her notes, phrases that eventually get overwritten, cut down further, and then rewritten. At each step of the process, Berssenbrugge splices already edited found language with her own, creating sentences of eerie hybridity, their diction drawing on the lyrical and the technical, their syntax telescoping from interior to exterior and back.

What begins as a rough collage at the level of the sentence and of the phrase turns into smooth collage when Berssenbrugge constructs grammar that appears to follow the rules. But under the somewhat detached and clinical surfaces of her sentences, odd swerves of POV, time, and setting occur. The long lines of her dense verse paragraphs hover between poetry and prose and resemble Braque’s method of creating still life from many perspectives and materials, including both the found and the self-generated, as in the first two sentences of the six-part sequence “Fragrance”:

> As if a flower were handmade in daylight with it in mind, instead of coming across a flower in the material of your flash in the dark with nothing in mind. Finding it consists of a style of being, as if in dark.

*As if a flower, as if in dark* – even the perceptions and the settings of the perceptions are conditional here. The flower is neither photographic nor pictorial, but cognitive and linguistic, hovering on the edge of the actual. Nonetheless, “finding it,” should one come “across a flower in the material of your flash in the dark with nothing in mind,” “consists of a style of being.” It is a style largely cut at the level of the prepositional phrase, so that our orientation *in, with, of, across* constantly shifts. It’s a complex phenomenology, and it is consistent throughout *Four Year Old Girl*. In assembling a corpus beyond her own writing, Berssenbrugge actively curates a second body of language – a conceptual one – that intermingles with her own. “Her autobiography
speculates,” Berssenbrugge writes next in the third person, “it’s impossible/for identity to be closed inside itself—flower or person is an irreducible spacing.”

iii. “a flux where the body always is”

Collage can be a speculative form of autobiography, Berssenbrugge suggests; the trance-like process of association involved in cutting and pasting can perform the complex style of being in our body that usually lies beneath and supports both perception and conscious awareness; the process of revising collage can bring what lies beneath up to the surfaces of sentences whose stylized grammar performs being embodied, which is never as straightforward as we think, never actually “closed inside itself.” But for some writers, collage attempts to capture other styles of being embodied - states that arise from a family history of migration.

A British national whose family was displaced from their ancestral home in Lahore by Partition, Bhanu Kapil spent two decades writing and teaching in the United States before she returned to England, and her work necessarily performs a sense of self dispersed between India, Pakistan, England, and the U.S. “All of Kapil’s books differently and yet with tremendous repetition of traumatic detail give voice to the horrors of Partition,” the poet and critic Sandeep Parmar writes, “the effects of migration, intergenerational trauma and the loss...of family.” All of Kapil’s books also share their origins in notebook writing she uses as source material for prose-based collage, and in books like Schizophrene, these notes and even the physical notebooks themselves play a central role in the overall narratives.

Schizophrene is, on the one hand, a meditation on migration, trans-generational trauma, and mental health. It is, on the other, the narrative of having failed to write, in Kapil’s words, “an epic on Partition and its trans-generational effects.” In a prefatory note, the narrator recounts that, when she realized this epic had failed, she threw the notebook containing the “handwritten final draft – into the garden of my house in Colorado.” She let a season of deep winter snow pass. In early spring, she retrieved her “notes and began to write again, from the fragments, the phrases and lines still legible on the warped, decayed but curiously rigid pages.” The end result of this unorthodox process is full of unpredictable durations of white space that both separate and join a sequence of nonsequential paragraphs.

Sometimes these paragraphs contain sentences that seem to make the book itself another body, a separate yet connected and very literal physicality:

The book before writing, arcing once more through the crisp dark air. And the line the book makes is an axis, a hunk of electromagnetic fur torn from the side of something still living and thrown, like a wire, threaded, a spark towards the grass.

Though she utilizes many levels of the cut, Kapil collages often at the level of the phrase; her commas act as hinges that open onto unpredictable nexts, small acts of migration in and of
themselves. Indeed, Kapil’s sentences sometimes use unpredictable phrasal sequences to comment on the experience of writing for and about nomadic subjects whose bodies pass through many sites and are subject to varying rules, customs, and expectations:

A line for someone on their first voyage, a non-contemporary subject, the woman or even the man, the person with an articulate gender, a flux where the body always is: who asks what’s forbidden, what’s expected. In the annular zone. In the airport. On the earth.

And sometimes her paragraphs critique the implicit assumptions she’s made in previous paragraphs:

But this is to individuate a common sorrow in the time extending from August 1947 to the present era, which is already past. Folds generate density on a contour map but for what? A map is a kind of short term memory: the genealogy of an historical time versus the chronology of geographical form. No. I need a different way to make this decision.

The fragmented final form of Schizophrene records the writer’s rejection of conventional strategies for writing about shared historical trauma, and even the conventional strategies for representing subjectivity, nationhood, and human history. Instead, the narrator chooses to mark their failure and to make a book that documents her own allegiance to knowledge as a primarily somatic event embedded in history, an event that leaves traces in language and is communicated best via the intensity and irreducible strangeness of collage. Cutting and pasting constantly crosses borders of here and there, present and past, self and context, and allows Kapil to leave “a flux where the body always is.”

Works Cited:

What matters most in achieving these effects in our own writing:

1) the level of the cuts.  
   In linguistic collage, we can cut anywhere from the paragraph to the letter, the macro to the micro.

2) the frequency of the cuts.  
   Does perspective or source text shift with each comma, or after each period between sentences, or after each paragraph?

3) the relative disjunction of the cuts.  
   Collage occurs on a continuum from rough to smooth. Micro cuts made frequently in a text can lead to a distressed linguistic surface that resists easy semantic meaning; macro cuts can lead to a smoother linguistic surface and the appearance of a coherence that the collage might undermine on grammatical, syntactical, perspectival, or narrative levels.
The scale, duration, and varying coherence of the collage’s composite parts let the seams of the real show, and is, in fact, *all about the seams in seeming*. 
Inside the fog there is a jail fire, where flames are trying to lure a quantity of what is going to happen to her into equivocalness by softening her body with heat, as if the house is in a sudden rise, because people still want her.

She prefers to lie down like a river when it is frozen in the valley and lie still, but bright lines keep going back and forth from her mouth, as she is vomiting out salt water.

This is the breakthrough in plane. The plane itself is silent. Above and behind the plain lies the frozen delta. Above and in front of her fog sinks into the horizon, with silence as a material.

So she is walking among formations of rock. Once again she can make a rock in a distant wash move closer to her, where it plays out like contents its occurrence there. Once again her solitariness can flow into the present moment, although she seems to know what is going to happen.

This is an image represented by a line of ice slabs facing a line of rocks. One rock seems heavier and blacker than the others, but now they are two lines like two tinkly unaccompanied voices.

The rest can be correspondingly inferred, as a line of rocks leading toward a distant mountain, as into a distorting mirror once again growing darker and denser, and so forced to cross over.
As if a flower were handmade in daylight with it in mind, instead of coming across a flower in the material of your flash in the dark with nothing in mind. Finding it consists of a style of being, as if in dark. Her autobiography speculates it's impossible for identity to be closed inside itself—flower or person is an irreducible spacing.

A gold poppy effervesces in the polaroid, using essence and appearance without picturing them, like no edge on the weave of a space or tracing a border not part of the flower.

You're involved with a sense of being relating what happened and what you see.

The person could disappear from the light of you or suppress without a border of your forgetting.
The ship docked. The ferry left Calais at dawn, a green sky, I kept drawing the horizon, the static line somehow disc-like.

Near seven, I saw an intense set of orange, red, and gold lines above the place where the sun would be.

The ship docked, and I found my home in the grid system: the damp wooden stool in the bath, a slice of bread with cheese on it, and so on. All my life, I've been trying to adhere to the surface of your city, your three grey rectangles split into four parts: a red dot, the axis rotated seventy-six degrees, and so on.

But then I threw the book into the grid. It was a wet grid.

The snow wet the book then froze it like a passive sun. These notes are directed towards the region I wanted to perceive but could not. Notes for a schizophrenic night, a schizophrenic day, a rapid sketch.

The book before writing, arcing once more through the crisp dark air. And the line the book makes is an axis, a hunk of electromagnetic fur torn from the side of something still living and thrown, like a wire, threaded, a spark towards the grass.

Do psychiatrists register the complex and rich vibrations produced by their dreaming subjects? The indigo or emerald-green crown that coats the hair and shoulders of an interviewee, erasing distinctions between what is outside, the sky, and what’s beneath it? What digs into the head?

“The emanating structures appear in the light that comes from the body, and it is these structures that perform a rudimentary narrative.” A memory or two:

But to write this narrative is not to split it, for which an antidote is commercially produced in quantities that exceed populations. A schizophrenic narrative cannot process the dynamic elements of an image, any image, whether pleasant, enriching or already so bad it can’t be tendered in the lexicon of poses available to it.

I need a new pen.
You are like a textured swatch. I am preternaturally still, my fingers stroking the fur of the wall behind my thighs.

"If you touch it, it's yours," says the butcher to the housewife as she extends her hand towards the ham. In this way, you are the velvet body of a boy or girl, the raised part of the pattern.

But this is to individuate a common sorrow in the time extending from August 1947 to the present era, which is already past. Folds generate density on a contour map but for what? A map is a kind of short term memory: the genealogy of an historical time versus the chronology of geographical form. No, I need a different way to make this decision.