

# POET AS RADIO: WEEK 2

## Practicing Outside

20 years ago, on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kurt Cobain's death (April 5, 1994), I decided to pay tribute to one of my earliest writing inspirations by composing a poem made entirely of Kurt's lyrics. I had been working somewhat seriously at being a writer for about 6 years at that point, and I had some publications and even won a decent cash prize for my poetry. But honestly, I was growing bored with my writing. The content of the poems was so hit or miss, and I felt like the expectation was for me to capture some profound insight to wrap my poems on. But most of the time I didn't feel like I had anything unique to express. I felt like an imposter.

Like a lot of poets do in April, I gave myself a challenge to write a poem a day. At the time, I was wrestling with and kept coming back to Denise Levertov's essay [On the Function of the Line](#) where she introduces the idea of "organic form," so that month I decided to experiment with what I thought she was talking about. Each day I would get a "word of the day" from Dictionary.com, so I took the word that was sent to me and tried to imagine what that word would be as a poetic form. On April 5, I got the word *palaver*, which that online dictionary defined as "empty nonsense or useless talk." I had been wracking my brain for a couple of hours trying to think of how that might translate into a form when the NPR station started a string of stories about Kurt Cobain. I was in a punk band in high school when he died, and when my friend pulled me aside to tell about it, it had floored me. Kurt had embodied a lot of the frustration my friends and I felt with most of the adults in our lives. His lyrics were transgressive and often sarcastically mocked the vapidness of the entertainment culture and the Neoliberal state. When he died, it was like a bubble had popped for my friends and I, and many of us shut down creatively. Something in that NPR bit pulled at me. I wasn't sure how, but I knew if I listened to Kurt again, I might get the answer for my poem. I put all my Nirvana albums on repeat and just sat there scribbling lines and phrases as they came alive in my ear. As the poem started materializing, I noticed how the lines were wilder and more transgressive than I had ever allowed myself to be in poems to that point, but I struggled with feeling like the poem wasn't mine, like I was cheating somehow.

In the end, my anxiety about authorship and control kept that poem from fully coming together, yet my engagement in that process haunted me. There was an ironic aliveness I felt in letting go of control, as if I had found a way to tap into some paranormal energy source. I kept trying to replicate the experience, relying almost exclusively on found material and arbitrary rules and limitations that many of my writer friends at the time complained were a waste of my time or "uncreative". They felt I should focus more on "craft" and editing and making poems that were entertaining and "clever", with recognizable narrative and complete sentences and pithy messages that were easy to swallow. Despite the pushback, I stuck with my search, developing a writing practice that was more like the types of spiritual practices Gary Snyder describes in his essay, ["The Yogin and the Philosopher,"](#) one that's brought me closer and closer to my actual lived experience, while many of those writer friends of mine have long since closed up shop, pouring their identities into more socially acceptable routines and bemoaning the loss of their writing lives.

Over the course of those 20 years since, I've been working out a concept of Poet as Radio, the phrasing of which comes from [SF-Renaissance](#) poet, [Jack Spicer](#), who himself borrowed the image from Jean Cocteau's 1950 film *Orpheus*, in which the titular character takes poetic dictation from a car radio. Over the course of the 1950s and early 1960s, Spicer developed his idea as a practice of what he called "outside," in which the poet works to clear the mind and, like a radio, tune-in to messages emanating from outside the egoic self, be it the natural world, the spiritual aetheric dimension, or (Spicer's favorite analogy) the Martians<sup>1</sup>. Spicer outlined this approach to poetry most clearly in a series of lectures he gave in Vancouver, BC in June 1965, just a month before he died. His longtime partner, Robin Blaser, pulled these threads together in a long essay titled "The Practice of Outside", which served as an introduction for the *Collected Poems of Jack Spicer*, which was published in 1980. While that essay is too long and dense for us to read in a week, you might want to put it on your radar for future reading, particularly if the ideas that come up in this lab are something you want to pursue. While the Spicer collection it originally appeared in is long out of print, it was reprinted in *The Fire: Collected Essays of Robin Blaser* from UC Press, a book I highly recommend.

So what exactly is a practice of "outside"? Well, it's not exactly something you might sign up for at REI or access with a Discovery Pass. Outside is one part of a duality or binary that separates two states of being (Inside/Outside). Often, when we talk about an individual self, we talk in terms of what's "inside" as unique and separate and autonomous and authentic (notice many of those prefixes have something in common with "author"). In practice, though, we describe someone as individual by walling them off from the collective and from the world around them by means of hyper-specific concrete definitions of identifying characteristics. However, once delineated those traits become a laundry list of limiting and objectifying expectations (not unlike this summer's TikTok craze "[looking for a man in finance, trust fund, 6'5", blue eyes...](#)"), basically, a branded box to stuff the self into. Outside is what's outside of that box – a state of mind where the border between you and not-you is difficult to perceive, not unlike the experience one has on hallucinogens or with meditation.

This is not an easy process, since we're trained from an early age to think of our interior experience as being separate and superior to the natural world, which is often discussed like it's just a collection of lifeless stuff, props to bounce our thoughts off of, or fodder for our ever increasing energy needs. To consistently step outside the self requires a lot of practice and humility, and a willingness to listen and follow the path where it takes you. There are lots of paths that can help get you started, like a daily meditation practice, or simple morning rituals that connect you to your space (I like putting away the clean dishes while I wait for my coffee). There are also some more odd things to do to help you listen, like writing poems entirely with words that aren't yours.

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<sup>1</sup> Side note: Spicer and fellow SF-poet, Robert Duncan once shared a living space with sci-fi novelist [Phillip K Dick](#), who wrote of a similar concept in his novels *Radio Free Albemuth* and *Valis*.

For this week:

While I find most audio books to be a tortuous experience (probably because prose in our culture is far too utilitarian to be anything but monotone or cartoonish), I do love listening to talks and poetry readings, and Pennsound is a great repository of those types of recordings. They probably have recordings of many of your favorite poets from mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century to the present. [The Pennsound page for Jack Spicer](#) has recordings of his Vancouver lectures. As an exercise, listen to as much as you can from Lecture 1 (parts 1 and 2) and (unless you're driving) spontaneously jot down words and phrases that come alive for you as you listen. These don't have to be what Jack actually says; the goal is to listen for whatever arises in the moment. If you can do the listening and note taking in the dark, that would be ideal but go with what is most accessible for you. Later on come back to those notes, and see if you can make a poem from them.

Here's print versions:

Internet Archive version of [The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer](#)

Jack Spicer, [Textbook of Poetry](#)

Other reading for when you have time:

[Jason Morris, "Crystal Gazing"](#)—an essay on Clark Coolidge's [The Crystal Text](#), which is a 10-month daily journal in which the poet attempted to listen to a rose quartz crystal he was given as a gift. The book had long been out of print but has recently been reissued by City Lights.

Also, you might want to check out the work of Hannah Weiner, who in the 1970s began keeping a poetic journal in which she attempted to capture words she would often see appear on her forehead and on the forehead of others. Her book, [Clairvoyant Journal 1974](#), gives a visual sense of the experience. But there's also [footage of her from Public Access Television in New York](#) reading (with some of her peers) that conveys the auditory aspect of the experience.

And here's a couple of albums I like to put on repeat to write with:

Son Volt, [Trace](#)

Adrienne Lenker, [Bright Future](#)