

# POET AS RADIO: WEEK 5

## The End of the Line

In the winter of 2011 – 2012, I was living in Chicago and going through the process of a divorce. I had been writing poetry for over a decade at that point but was hitting a wall with my writing. It all felt so cerebral and intellectual and disembodied. In hindsight, I was experiencing all this grief of the end of a life I had been building, and words just felt so inadequate, like I had hit the margin of the page. Coincidentally, a non-poet friend at the time, nudged me to me to try out this new square format camera/social media app that was mostly visual artists and photographers posting photo challenges and sharing results. This was before Instagram was bought out by Facebook and turned into another marketing tool for self-commodification. I got hooked on the platform, and before long I was scouring my neighborhood almost daily, noting and observing and experimenting with my visual sense that had been somewhat dulled by the conceptual modes of writing that were the big poetry trend at the time. The nonhuman world around me began to burst with life, and I could feel that Outside life churning, composting my own grief. My life was turning like the line of a poem.

A year later, I picked up poetry again, bringing all that aliveness of attention back with me. Often when we get fixated on a project or an idea, the signal suddenly gets lost, garbled by the challenges of our living and we need something to disorient our fixation so that we can find that spark, that surprise, that just like a good line break, turns us back on the path the poem is making.

Eilene Myles talks about this in her short essay [“How I Wrote Certain of my Poems”](#) from her book *Not Me*, how the poem is like the universe nudging us toward revelation after revelation after revelation, each one a bit more expansive than before. In this sense the real poem, like Allan Kaprow’s “real experiment” never ends; it just keeps turning, reincarnating to a new line, a new stanza, a new sequence, a new book, etc. In that sense, discrete poems and books are like little frames or cabinets (ala Eileen’s description in more [recent interview with Maggie Nelson](#)) not unlike Joseph Cornell’s [little boxes](#), little episodes in an ongoing radio serial drama (or sit-com, depending on your take).

For this week:

Try your hand at turning the line, so to speak. Take 1-3 (or more if you have time) of your poems or ritual notes and sit down for a 2<sup>nd</sup> pass at it. Don’t think of this as editing or polishing, but a re-visiting or re-turning the piece like you’d turn a line. You might try bringing a different tool or process to the poem. If you started with bibliomancy, maybe try bringing in ritual, or a Surrealist game. If it’s a ritual note, maybe try copying the note over, and using Bibliomancy to bring in other material. Just go with your gut. It’ll tell you what you need to do next. We’ll review those 2<sup>nd</sup> passes in class next week and talk about thoughts or ideas each of you have for what you might do post-lab, how you might (or not) incorporate some of the tools or practices we’ve talked about during this 5-week lab.

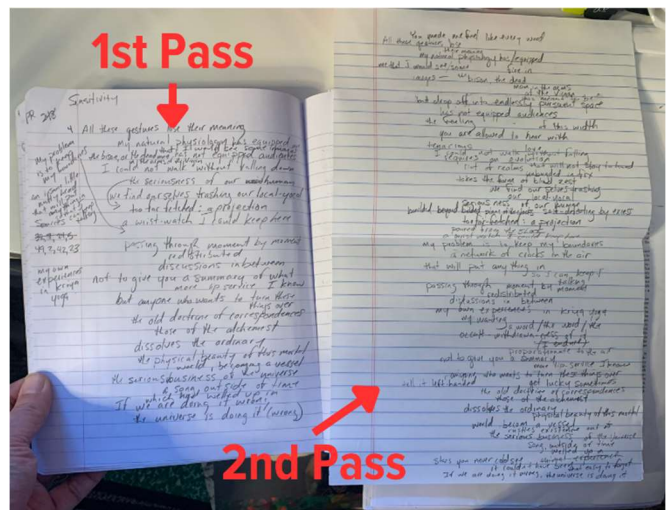
For me, and you don’t need to replicate this, I tend to use Bibliomancy as a first pass of most poem(s), but sometimes I’ll start with ritual and notes and then move on to Bibliomancy. I’ll have

like 20-40 sources sorted into piles that I'll assign a court card from a tarot deck to. I'll shuffle the cards, focus on a word or image, and pull a card. The card will tell which pile to grab from. I'll grab from there, find a random page/line, and write it down and then repeat. My first drafts almost always start in a composition book with a pencil. I'll go until I hit a line that seems like a last line of a poem or until I hit the end of a page. I try to make the page a hard cut-off, because I know I'm coming back to this. Often, I'll get all these little interruptions throughout that don't appear to fit the poem but are telling me they belong (these are usually free associations I have). I will jot those in the margins and save them for a second pass.

I often do like 30-60 poems or pieces in a batch and do 1 (maybe 2 if I have time) a day, so by the time I've gotten through the batch, it's been close to a month since I started with the first one. That's a pretty good pause to disrupt any ego-meddling with the poem, so I'll start a second pass.

During the first pass, there's usually a song or a lecture or a book or an idea/topic that was missing the first time around (sometimes I note it in the margins of the notebook during my first pass). This also sometimes shows up synchronistically while writing. One time I was channeling a poem and while I was dictating a line that referenced a crystal, I got a notification on my phone that a book I had ordered had been delivered. It was the reissue of Clark Coolidge's *The Crystal Text*. That *definitely* caught my attention! I paused my process, went to the mailbox, got the book, and started using it immediately. The poems started opening up to something new right away like I'd walked from a small foyer into a much larger room. Regardless of how the sources come to me, I take note, and make sure to use them.

On my second pass, I still work with paper and pencil, but I'll grab a somewhat bigger sheet. I'll (try to) read the handwritten mess like it was a poem. The rhythm and line breaks will always lead me to where something is missing. I'll have those missing sources on hand and probably a song or a talk streaming in my ear (like the Illot Mollot Surrealist game). If the missing line doesn't jump at me, I might pull a tarot card to tell me which source to use. By the end of this pass, a path is almost always emerging. It's not in a computer doc yet, so there's still another pass to make to type it out, so I'll repeat the process but usually with only 1-2 additional sources. By that point the form of the poem is taking shape and it'll be ready for some minimal proofreading or editing (never polishing!!!!) when it gets to be time to put a book together.



**Listen:** In 2018, St. Vincent recorded a follow-up to her wildly popular [MASSEUCATION \(2017\)](#) that was like a 2nd pass, re-recording the same songs but with altered arrangements and acoustic instruments. Take a listen to how the 2nd pass, [MassEducation \(2018\)](#) opens up the songs and album and make room for a new range of emotional response.

