

Cento Fever Workshop with Alina Stefanescu



Illustrations by Alice Notley.

The voices of others are always in our heads. The cento form acknowledges this—the cento opens a door that lets us play with those voices and revel in polyphonic pleasure. Centos rely on appropriation, quotation, juxtaposition.

In Latin, *cento* means “patchwork”, evoking the collage-like combinations built from lines taken from other sources. When stitching a patchwork quilt, the creative freedom comes from two places—the choice of fabrics (i.e. the lines selected) & the particular stitching between patches, or how the poet combines the various lines (i.e. enjambment, spacing strategies, fragmentation, use of the field, etc.).

In Italian, *cento* means “one hundred.” Some centos are built from exactly 100 lines selected from the work of one poet to create a homage by the authoring poet. The ancient Greeks assembled centos in homage to Homer, the Romans in homage to Virgil. This homage continues in contemporary poetics' focus on collage.

There are countless ways to cento. T. S. Eliot raided Elizabethan drama and 17th-century poetry to write *The Waste Land*. John Ashbery gave us “The Dong with the Luminous Nose.” Peter Gizzi’s *Ode: Salute to the New York School, 1950-1970* (a libretto) is a 43-page long abecedarian cento of New York School poems. Gizzi said of it:

First, I put together a chronological bibliography of over 100 books published by New York poets from 1950 to 1970. Many of these books are deeply out of print so I had to do some real digging. Then I extracted lines from each book to compose the cento
...The cento also works as an index to the bibliography.

David Lehman takes the contemporary cento as “a specialized form of the collage: an anthology poem from diverse sources.” Max Thomas urges poets and writers to “think about your imitations as translations, if not from one language into another, then at least from one idiom into another.”

"Wolf Cento" by Simon Meunch

Wolf Cento

Very quick. Very intense, like a wolf
 at a live heart, the sun breaks down.
 What is important is to avoid
 the time allotted for disavowels
 as the livid wound
 leaves a trace leaves an abscess
 takes its contraction for those clouds
 that dip thunder & vanish
 like rose leaves in closed jars.
 Age approaches, slowly. But it cannot
 crystal bone into thin air.
 The small hours open their wounds for me.
 This is a woman's confession:
 I keep this wolf because the wilderness gave it to me.

Sources: [Anne Sexton, Dylan Thomas, Larry Levis, Ingeborg Bachmann, Octavio Paz, Henri Michaux, Agnes Nemes Nagy, Joyce Mansour, William Burroughs, Meret Oppenheim, Mary Low, Adrienne Rich, Carl Sandburg]

Notice the use of a large space between words in the 6th line: "leaves a trace leaves an abscess." It adds breath and visual interest to that particular line. But the "Wolf Cento" is a vestigial sonnet—it is committed to its 14 line length—so that spacing might also be the result of a divided quotation, or the desire to not add an extra line between the two.

To stay sonnet requires Muench to refuse the line break. These are the compositional and structural choices involved in cento-making, particularly when one is playing with multiple forms simultaneously, as the poet does in this poem.

One of the formal aspects of cento is how the quoted poems or poets are notated. In this cento by Simon Meunch, you can see the most conventional notation, namely a list of sources naming the poets at the end. By naming the poets, the poet places them in the same room, in dialogue across time and space, without resorting to particularity (i.e. the titles of the poems, books, etc.) and this is a formal decision. It is a decision which influences how the poem sounds, how it is read, and what the reader makes of it.

"To a Waterfowl" by John Ashbery

John Ashbery seemed surprised to find himself writing a cento.

Since the original publication didn't list his sources, [Roseanne Wasserman's listing](#) allows us to observe how he stitched this cento together, line by line, phrase by phrase. The decision to *not publish* or include sources is also interesting.

To a Waterfowl

Where, like a pillow on a bed
 I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude
 Where through the Golden Coast, and groves of orange and citron
 And one clear call for me
 My genial spirits fail
 The desire of the moth for the star
 When first the College Rolls receive his name.

Too happy, happy tree
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan.
 Forget this rotten world, and unto thee
 Go, for they call you, Shepherd, from the hill
 And the eye travels down to Oxford's towers.

Calm was the day, and through the trembling air
 Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair
 And she also to use newfangledness...
 Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction?
 Last noon beheld them full of lusty life,
 Unaffected by "the march of events",
 Never until the mankind making
 From harmony, from heavenly harmony
 O death, O cover you over with roses and early lilies!
 With loaded arms I come, pouring for you
 Sunset and evening star
 Where roses and white lilies grow.

Go, lovely rose,
 This is no country for old men. The young
 Midwinter spring is its own season
 And a few lilies blow. They that have power to hurt, and will do none.
 Looking as if she were alive, I call.
 The vapours weep their burthen to the ground.
 Obscurest night involved the sky
 When Loie Fuller, with her Chinese veils

And many a nymph who wreaths her brow with sedge...
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
 In drear-nighted December
 Ripe apples drop about my head
 Who said: two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!
 O well for the fisherman's boy!
 Fra Pandolf's hand
 Steady they laden head across a brook...
 With charm of earliest birds; pleasant the sun
 Fills the shadows and windy places
 Here in the long unlovely street.
 Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
 The freezing stream below.
 To know the change and feel it...

At that far height, the cold thin atmosphere
 Pressed her cold finger closer to her lips
 Where the dead feet walked in.
 She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die,
 Or the car rattling o'er the stony street.

Notice how Ashbery indents the first line of each stanza. Notice also how he doesn't allude to the form in the title—this isn't "Cento to a Waterfowl" or "Waterfowl Cento"—this poem hides its cento hand, I think. And that is another choice the poet must make in relation to quotation, in relation to this appropriative form known as the cento.

Ashbery's lineation doesn't keep different sources from mixing on the same line, as in the beginning of the second-to-last, longest stanza. He also capitalitalizes the first letter of each line. Again, small choices in punctuation, typography, and grammar are the creative field of the cento.

David Lehman said of this poem:

I still remember one couplet by heart: “Calm was the day and through the trembling air, / Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair.” The first line is by Edmund Spenser, the second by Wallace Stevens, and the combined effect is the magic of Ashbery.

"The Oxford Cento" by David Lehman

After editing the *Oxford Anthology of Poetry*, Lehman said he “felt inevitably drawn to the idea of forging a cento from its pages” to honor the poets, to pay homage to their words, and to preserve it as “a souvenir of the experience of working on the project”.

The Oxford Cento

If the sun shines but approximately¹
 Only where love and need are one,²
 Who in this Bowling Alley bowld the Sun?³
 Of whom shall we speak? For every day they die⁴
 Younger than their kids — jeans, ski-pants, sneakers.⁵
 And the stars never rise but I see the bright eyes⁶
 Waking far apart on the bed, the two of them.⁷
 And so it was I entered the broken world.⁸

Good morning, Daddy!⁹
 Every woman adores a Fascist,¹⁰
 Doing a man's work, though a child at heart.¹¹
 When I am slitting a fish's head,¹²
 Would he like it if I told him?¹³
 Odd that a thing is most itself when likened,¹⁴
 Everything only connected by "and" and "and."¹⁵
 There are no flowers in Hell.¹⁶

Give all to love,¹⁷
 A burnt match skating in a urinal¹⁸
 That never lost a vote (O Adlai mine).¹⁹
 What you get married for if you don't want children?²⁰
 And because it is my heart,²¹
 Above, below, around, and in my heart,²²
 Blessed be God! For he created Death!²³
 And rock-grained, rack-ruined battlements.²⁴

One's sex asserts itself. Desire²⁵
 And that White Sustenance —²⁶
 Despair²⁷ — in a Sahara of snow,²⁸
 As a sort of mournful cosmic last resort.²⁹
 Meanwhile, the men, with vestiges of pomp,³⁰
 Weep for what little things could make them glad.³¹
 We hurt each other as the bridegroom and the bride hurt each other.³²
 And I wish I did not feel like your mother.³³

Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain,³⁴
 There is nothing lowly in the universe.³⁵
 I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils,³⁶
 The sea in a chasm, struggling to be³⁷
 Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,³⁸
 On this green bank, by this soft stream,³⁹
 Where strangers would have shut the many doors,⁴⁰
 Except the one she sang and, singing, made.⁴¹

Heard on the street, seen in a dream, heard in the park, seen by the
 light of day,⁴²
 What is yours is mine my father.⁴³
 What more is there to do, except stay? And that we cannot do.⁴⁴
 And this is not as good a poem as The Circus⁴⁵
 Especially the lines that are spoken in the voice of the mouse.⁴⁶
 He opened the car door and looked back⁴⁷
 And clapped his hands and shouted to the birds.⁴⁸
 And that was the whole show.⁴⁹

1 Laura Riding, "The World and I."
 2 Robert Frost, "Two Tramps in Mud Time."
 3 Edward Taylor,
 "The Preface" to "God's Determinations Touching His Elect."
 4 W. H. Auden, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud."
 5 James Merrill, "Self-Portrait in Tyvek™ Windbreaker."
 6 Edgar Allan Poe, "Annabel Lee."
 7 John Ashbery, "Decoy."
 8 Hart Crane, "The Broken Tower."

9 Langston Hughes,
 "Good Morning," from "Montage of a Dream Deferred."
 10 Sylvia Plath, "Daddy."
 11 Robert Frost, "'Out, Out —'"
 12 Elinor Wylie, "The Puritan's Ballad."
 13 Gertrude Stein, "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso."
 14 Richard Wilbur, "Lying."
 15 Elizabeth Bishop,
 "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance."
 16 H. Phelps Putnam, "Bill Gets Burned."

17 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Give All to Love."
 18 Hart Crane, "The Tunnel."
 19 John Berryman, "Dream Song No. 23."
 20 T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land."
 21 Stephen Crane, "In the Desert."
 22 Conrad Aiken, from "Preludes."
 23 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,
 "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport."
 24 Jean Garrigue, "Song in Sligo."

25 Herman Melville, "After the Pleasure Party."
 26 Emily Dickinson, "I Cannot Live With You."
 27 Emily Dickinson, "I Cannot Live With You."
 28 Robert Lowell, "For the Union Dead."
 29 Anthony Hecht, "The Dover Bitch."
 30 Jean Toomer, "Georgia Dusk."
 31 Robert Frost, "Directive."
 32 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself."
 33 Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Rendezvous."

34 Anne Bradstreet, "The Author to Her Book."
 35 A. R. Ammons, "Still."
 36 Theodore Roethke, "Dolor."
 37 Marianne Moore, "What Are Years?"
 38 Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning."
 39 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Concord Hymn."
 40 Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Mr. Flood's Party."
 41 Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West."

42 Kenneth Fearing, "Green Light."
 43 Walt Whitman, "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life."
 44 John Ashbery, "The Instruction Manual."
 45 Kenneth Koch, "The Circus (1975)."
 46 Billy Collins, "Workshop."
 47 Galway Kinnell, "Hitchhiker."
 48 Robert Pinsky, "From the Childhood of Jesus."
 49 Charles Simic, "Country Fair."

Lehman enumerates his sources alongside each line, creating a sort of diptych, or giving the cento two faces—that of the poem, and that of its origins. The decision to include the titles of the source poems also creates a sort of poetic juxtaposition, or a poem of titles that can be read in conjunction with the cento.

"Cento in Which the Narrative Precedes the Lyric" by Malcolm Tariq

I wanted to craft a cento made from lines of slave narratives.

A cento is a poem composed from the lines of other poems.

The slave narrative is an account of bondage as told by the enslaved or the formerly enslaved.

The enslaved and the formerly enslaved, in this case, are those generations of Africans and their descendants subjected to unpaid labor, physical abuse, mental abuse, sexual abuse and exploitation, and socioeconomic disenfranchisement in the Americas.

I am of the descendants of these descendants.

I am not one of the formerly enslaved.

The slave narrative is not a poem.

I wanted to write a cento in which slave narratives centered my experience of being Southern, black, and queer.

This is how Malcolm Tariq's astonishing subversion of the cento form begins.

["Cento in Which the Narrative Precedes the Lyric"](#) is a long poem which needs to be read in its entirety. Tariq moves from claim to claim, definition to definition, bringing imperialist logic to bear on the poem's claims and statements. The first speaker identifies themselves as "being Southern, black, and queer," and then revisits each claim in light of how dominant structures *define* and *delineate* history. What is a cento of lost voices? How do we record and repeat and pay homage to the words of persons whose personhood is erased by history?

Tariq uses the cento's traditional mode of paying homage. It gives me goosebumps.

"Cento Between the Ending and the End" by Cameron Awkward-Rich

["Cento Between the Ending and the End"](#) is one of my favorite centos—tenderness is inscribed in every physicality here. Read the linked version first, because it preserves Cameron Awkward-Rich's spacing. The poet elects to leave a line between each line, so we have either 1) one very long winding stanza or 2) a poem composed entirely of separate one-line fragments.

I say *either* even though the poet already elected for the latter, but I'm including the former as a way of encouraging study of line breaks in cento. Line breaks and spacing are everything in the cento. If I repeat myself, so does the sky.

Sometimes you don't die
 when you're supposed to
 & now I have a choice
 repair a world or build
 a new one inside my body
 a white door opens
 into a place queerly brimming
 gold light so velvet-gold
 it is like the world
 hasn't happened
 when I call out
 all my friends are there
 everyone we love
 is still alive gathered
 at the lakeside
 like constellations
 my honeyed kin
 honeyed light
 beneath the sky
 a garden blue stalks
 white buds the moon's
 marble glow the fire
 distant & flickering
 the body whole bright-
 winged brimming
 with the hours
 of the day beautiful
 nameless planet. Oh
 friends, my friends—
 bloom how you must, wild
 until we are free.

What a stunning address to fellow Black poets, and to Black queer poets— we are left with this blessing to "bloom how you must, wild / until we are free." The tension in the last few lines is not resolved—the stress between wilderness and freedom is not defined or explained away—but left as an assertion, a hope. Awkward-Rich uses the "Oh" in such a gorgeous invocative manner.

Awkward-Rich credits the sources of this poem as follows:

“‘Cento Between the Ending and the End’ is composed of language scavenged from the works of Justin Phillip Reed, Hieu Minh Nguyen, Fatimah Asghar, Kaveh Akbar, sam

sax, Ari Banias, C. Bain, Oliver Bendorf, Hanif Abdurraqib, Safia Elhillo, Danez Smith, Ocean Vuong, Franny Choi, Lucille Clifton, and Nate Marshall. All of whom have made for me a world and for whom I wish the world.”
—Cameron Awkward-Rich

Awkward-Rich's attributions are not simply a list of names but a specific homage to those "whom have made for me a world and for whom I wish the world." This is a living dialogue or conversation with beloved peers. The cento's homage is updated to speak in the present, with an eye towards the future, rather than in the lamenting or elegiac key that looks back at the past

"Cento for the Night I Said 'I Love You'" by Nicole Sealey

Here is how Nicole Sealey's long, intimate cento begins:

Today, gentle reader,
is as good a place to start.
But you knew that, didn't you? Then let us
give ourselves over to the noise
of a great scheme that included everything.
That indicts everything.
Let us roam the night together
in an attempt to catch the stars that drop.

Since this poem has many sections, and moves like a letter, or burrows into epistolarity, the You of the poem shifts, expands, and is encouraged to feel part of the poem, or part of the poem's moments, its moonlights, its disorientations.

[Read the whole thing.](#)

Now think about how this particular epistolary cento notates its lines, or acknowledges the voices in this particular room Sealey created, which is in many ways, a room of romantic love, a room inflected by eros and longing. How does one elect the distance between stanzas and series? What does an asterisk mean in a longer poem? I love how this poem allows us to consider spacing and connection, and how carefully Sealey stitches these connections in the cento without over-drawing them.

* "Cento for the Night I Said, 'I Love You'" is comprised entirely of lines borrowed from the following poets (in order of appearance): C.D. Wright, Mary Jo Salter, Patricia Smith, Toi Derricotte, Philip Levine, Lynda Hull, Langston Hughes, Malachi Black, Kimberly Blaeser, Maxine Kumine, Afaa Michael Weaver, Hédi Kaddour, dg nanouk okpik, Claude McKay, Deborah Landau, Sharkmeat Blue, George Bradley, Yona Harvey, Federico García Lorca, June Jordan, Kwame Dawes, W.H. Auden, Ana

Castillo, Erica Hunt, Muriel Rukeyser, Ed Roberson, Ruth Madievsky, Thylias Moss, Gregory Orr, Yusef Komunyakaa, Elizabeth Spires, Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon, Tim Seibles, Nathalie Handal, Wisława Szymborska, Lucille Clifton, C.P. Cavafy, Rainer Maria Rilke, Raúl Zurita, August Kleinzahler, Louise Glück, Victoria Redel, Adélia Prado, Sonia Sanchez, Jean Sénac, Claribel Alegria, Remica L. Bingham-Risher, Sylvia Plath, Harryette Mullen, Emily Dickinson, Sharon Strange, Larry Levis, Sherman Alexie, Franz Wright, Marianne Boruch, Andrea Cohen, Linda Susan Jackson, Carl Phillips, Robert Hayden, Eavan Boland, Anne Waldman, Dorianne Laux, Natasha Trethewey, Eric Gamalinda, Galway Kinnell, John Murillo, Yves Bonnefoy, Tina Chang, David Wojahn, Nick Laird, Simone White, Catherine Barnett, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Brenda Shaughnessy, Kazim Ali, Brenda Hillman, Valzhyna Mort, Blas Falconer, Theodore Roethke, Kahlil Gibran, Rita Dove, Brigit Pegeen Kelly, Khaled Mattawa, Tracy K. Smith, Ed Skoog, Alice Walker, Pablo Neruda, Adrienne Rich, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Aimé Césaire, Jake Adam York, Bob Kaufman, William Blake, Frank Bidart, Marilyn Nelson, Polina Barskova, Santee Frazier, Suheir Hammad and Cornelius Eady.

Sealey also acknowledges that portions of this poem have been previously published, and she includes those in her credits:

Sections from this poem have been previously published in Harvard Review, No Tokens, Pinwheel, Ploughshares, Provincetown Arts Magazine, and Washington Square Review

Modified Centos

David Lehman wrote a book of *poems in the manner of* writers who influenced him. The book is a tribute of imitative poems, and one might even argue that they are odes to beloved writers. Inspired by Ted Berrigan's sonnets "Poem in the Traditional Manner" and "Poem in the Modern Manner," Lehman kept his *manner of* category flexible enough to include homage, parodies, imitations, appropriations, translations, and various creative combinations. Rather than denying his poetic lineage, Lehman foregrounded it.

"[Poem in the Manner of a Jazz Standard](#)" is exactly what it promises. "I've got five dollars and my love to keep me warm," Lehman begins this poem composed from song lyrics. In this sense, it is a modified cento. Here, each line yokes together two parts of song lyrics into one single lyrical line.

Each poem is a miracle that has been invited to happen... I must be willingly fallible in order to deserve a place in the realm where miracles happen.

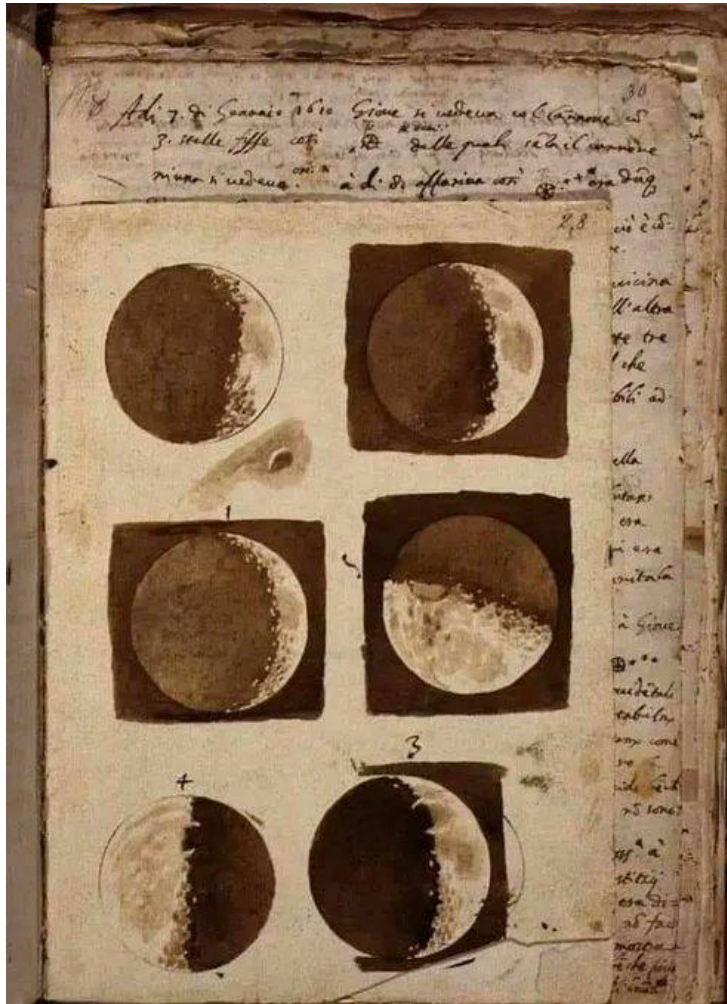
- William Stafford (introduction to *Oregon Message*)

To acknowledge that the poem may be invited to happen among the words of others. To give the poem this space in order to touch its influences, and to name them, however closely. To play with the meaning and temporality of tribute or homage. To blur the interlocutor in a way which makes space for the missing. The cento form or mode enables us to do all of these things, and to create by breaking, rupturing, and refashioning the line.

[CENTO EXERCISES AND PROMPTS]

1. Cento Pastiche

Write a cento made from quotations in magazine articles, academic texts, or a novel that you are currently reading.



2. Cento Lunar Ekphrasis

Poets won't give up the moon for anything—and every poet has their moon-eyed poem, even if it only flexes the muscle of a sidelong glance at the moon. Look for references to the moon in poems by poets you love; make a list of them. Include titles. Then use Galileo Galilei's first drawings of the moon after seeing it through the telescope in 1609 as a setting or frame or epkrastic backdrop for a cento about the moon and how we see it.

Isn't it weird, really, how close *commune* and *co-moon* sound? Isn't it wacky that someone can look at the moon and change their entire understanding of the cosmos, or the planet, or the meadow near the train tracks where your lover left you for a girl whose dad was on the college admissions committee?

3. Modified Index Poem Cento

Read "[Blind Side: Index of first lines](#)" by Anne Marie Rooney.

Now create an index poem composed entirely of last lines that are either 1) appropriated in the cento form 2) entirely invented, or 3) a combination of the two. If you go with #3, then include invented names alongside the quoted ones at the end of the cento.

two rubber balls connected by a twig. Let's see how long this lasts; the tension is unnatural. Review Notley's illustrations (@aenotley on Instagram) or use the collage below to write an imago-cento which combines your descriptions of illustrated objects with the words written by Notley.

8. Cento after Dana Levin

In the difficult space after the USC decision overturned *Roe v. Wade*, poet Dana Levin thought about voices and choices. This resulted in a cento, "[Without Choice](#)", which wove multiple voices into the voicelessness. Borrowing from Levin's creation of community on the page, and using the cento as a form of literary activism, pick a political issue which matters deeply to you and write a cento about it. Use lines from ancient poets in order to include archaic language and expand the temporality of the poem.

9. Book Review Cento

Speaking of excruciating brilliance, there is "[The Nightfields by Joanna Klink: A Cento Review](#)" by Eloisa Amezcua, first published in *The Poetry Project Newsletter*. An incredibly creative and beautiful use of the cento as book review, foregrounding the repetition strategies and language of the poet. Speaking of that poetry book you loved and planned to review, why not follow Amezcua into this form?

10. Anthology Cento

Like David Lehman's Oxford cento, you can write a cento from poems in an anthology. Best American Poetry anthologies, for example, come out every year and combine diverse forms, voices, and styles—these anthologies are begging to be reinscribed or reenvisioned as centos. But any poetry anthology will do. Make this a 100-line cento. Allow a conversation to emerge between the poet and poems within the cento.

11. Poet Tribute Cento with Italics

Pick one of your favorite poets or poetry books and write a cento composed entirely of their lines—a tribute, or a portrait of the poet as seen from across the room. If you'd like to really push this cento against the wall and stare into its eyes, then use italics. Add italics within the quoted lines, wherever you think, in order to slightly alter or rupture the intonation of the line and how it is used. Or what it means. How does the meaning of "please help" depend on whether one screams it or whispers it? How can italics alter the volume or pitch of certain lines?

12. Epistolary Cento after Nic Sealey

Re-read Nicole Sealey's cento and try to write your own based on something important you said to a particular person. The challenge is to expand the interlocutor into an epistolary You which allows the reader to enter the You, to throb in this tension between a particular moment and selfhood. Notice again how Sealey begins with a direct address—and then moves into a question. Include questions at the beginning of your cento in order to make the reader feel implicated or involved.