



Innovation in Conversation (Part IV): Speaking with Randall Mann, Richie Hofmann, Phillip B. Williams, and Chen Chen

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Over the past few months, I've spent time here at *The Kenyon Review* blog with the art and thought of [contemporary poets engaged in formal innovation](#), focusing in particular on the constraint of the [anagram](#), and touching on unconventional rhyming couplets ("stutter rhyme" or "echo verse"), the acrostic, and the telestich (of which the [Golden Shovel](#) form is an innovative contemporary sub-category) as well. I was interested in both the forms themselves and in how (and why) each poet might have arrived at such a form, considering potential lineage and "necessity" thereof. Titling many of these posts "[Innovation in Conversation](#)," it seemed necessary to follow up on my musings with literal conversation with some of these poetic innovators and thinkers. [Chen Chen](#), [Phillip B. Williams](#), [Richie Hofmann](#), and [Randall Mann](#) all generously responded to my questions on their poems and process. I have compiled their responses here in "conversation" with each other, though each poet responded individually in writing.

Having spent time with Randall Mann's "[Straight Razor](#)" and "[The Heron](#)," both of which cohere through the tradition of rhyming couplets, while troubling our expectations of that tradition (the first poem, through a kind of "stutter rhyme" in which the second line of the couplet is comprised of just a single stress, the second poem, through anagram rhyme), I asked Mann about the formal genesis of each of these poems, in terms of influences and innovations. Mann responded:

"The Heron" is one of the first true poems I wrote, in 1993, as an undergraduate, an ekphrasis about a painting in the Harn Museum in Gainesville, Florida—in which there sat a heron. At the time, I was reading J.D. McClatchy's The Rest of the Way, the first poem of which is "The Landing," which uses anagram rhyme, as you call it. I loved the form and thought anagrams would be perfect: the poem both mirrors and rearranges the details; also, in the painting the heron is mirrored in the water, but changed. I wrote "Straight Razor" in 2008 or 2009: the words in the first five and a half lines came to me the moment I started writing; I chose the structure because I liked the stretch of the first line coupled with the tense pullback of the second; for me, the pairing seemed appropriate to the subject, the speaker wanting to go with the formalized roleplay but then being unable to, always abruptly turning away from it. The disparate lengths of the lines also help to represent, perhaps, the uneven coming together of the active and passive participants of the roleplay.

When I asked Mann to place these poems in a broader context in terms of a relationship with form, he said:

I would say both of these poems build on the tradition of the couplet, but each offers, I hope, a renewed sense of possibility—form, in other words, is a puzzle for the upending of form. The innovation comes not just from destabilizing the couplet itself but allowing the subject matter to qualify both the choice and the destabilizing; form informs content informs form; it's not enough to acquit oneself well in a form if the subject matter is not itself qualifying the choice. The choice of form—just as the choice of diction and syntax—is an extension of content. Is content. And I think the innovation comes when a poet listens to what he or she wants to say and allows it to be said in the best way possible, the only way, through whatever formal choice (and by that I mean free verse, too, because no poem, one hopes, is unformed). I continue to be shaped by so many, including Marianne Moore, Countee Cullen, Derek Walcott, Louise Glück, Philip Larkin, Adrienne Rich, Thom Gunn, Marilyn Hacker, Frank Bidart, and Jorie Graham.

Richie Hofmann, too, explored both the "stutter" rhyme and the anagram rhyme in the couplets of "[Mirror](#)" and "[Illustration from Parsifal](#)," respectively. Of these poems' origins he elaborated on the aesthetic "conversation" as such:

*I wrote both "Mirror" and "Illustration from Parsifal" while staying at the James Merrill House in Stonington, Connecticut. A third poem from this time period is "First Night in Stonington," which I wrote in rhyming pattern (abcabc, etc.) of corresponding tercets, though the poem appears as a block of text. The work of James Merrill, his house, his imagination, suffuses these poems in their contents and in their forms. My poem, "Erotic Archive," which also appears in *Second Empire*, is a later, more retrospective meditation on some of my time in that uncanny*

place.

“Mirror” is, of course, about the large gilt-framed mirror in the parlor. It was such a strange experience to see myself in that mirror, and to see around me the room that is at the heart of *The Changing Light at Sandover* (and so many other poems by James Merrill): the bat wallpaper, the little objects. Is rhyming a kind of mirroring? Of course, we recognize the sonic correspondences between words, but what comes out of the mirror is not quite the same goes into it. I like your phrase “stutter,” Dora, for the rhyme, because it suggests something of an affective surprise, as if there’s something almost involuntary about the word we arrive on.

I’ve loved Randall Mann’s poem, “Straight Razor,” (and so many of his poems, which I love also to pass to my students) since the time I heard him read it on Poetry Magazine’s podcast the summer I wrote my “Mirror” poem. I love rhyming couplets for the closeness of the rhymes, for the way the rhymes seem to carry the poem forward while always looking back. In Mann’s poem, the proximity of rhymes was even more daring and tantalizing and suggestive. I want my poem to be in conversation with Mann’s work, and also to Merrill’s, and to the tradition of poems about mirrors—Cavafy’s (“the old mirror was all joy now, / proud to have embraced / total beauty for a few moments.”) and Merrill’s (“I grow old under an intensity / Of questioning looks”) and Plath’s (*I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.*) and Gluck’s (“AIAIAI cried / the naked mirror.”)

Rhyme is such a dramatic limitation. I feel, when I rhyme, like I’m relinquishing some responsibility for writing the poem to the poem itself. That phenomenon feels supernatural, or divine, to me. And it feels Merillian.

Aside from the mirrors and the coastal light, the other things that fill the rooms in the James Merrill House are books; and in every book, Merrill is scrawling hilarious, ingenious, ungenerous, clever anagrams. One memorable instance was Merrill’s transformation of DYLAN THOMAS to HOT LADY’S MAN. My “Illustration from Parsifal” is an ecphrastic poem, in a way, about one of Willy Pogany’s fabulous drawings of scenes from the Wagner legends (a book in Merrill’s extensive and eccentric library) and nod to Merrill’s anagrammatic play. The anagram-rhyme poem I knew of was J. D. McClatchy’s “The Landing.” Anagrams are fun and clever and they’re visually very stunning and impressive. But it’s not the visual aspect of the anagram that draws me, but the sounds they make. What I love most about the anagram-rhyme form is the unusual symphony you get to create in the sonic resonances between words. Of course, words that are anagrams of one another share the same sonic building blocks. The sound effect that results from their proximity is really interesting and really beautiful to me. Of course, “treasure” and “austerer” or “spread” and “drapes” don’t rhyme in the traditional sense, but you hear the recombined relationship of their vowels and consonants in a way that feels original and forceful and striking—it’s like painting a new subject with the same palette; whatever shapes they take, they share a kind of primordial essence. They’re made of the same stuff.

As Hofmann’s “Illustration from Parsifal” and Mann’s “The Heron” each engage with both “traditional” form (through their “rhyming” couplets) and the anagram as poetic form, Phillip B. Williams’s poem “[A Spray of Feathers, Black](#)” uses anagram rhyme to craft a terza rima sonnet. When I asked him about the formal genesis of the poem, I referenced a previous interview in which he had noted the influence of his professor Carl Phillips. He elaborated and contextualized “A Spray of Feathers, Black” as follows:

I can’t say that I recall reading anyone’s anagram poems outside of what Richie Hofmann has in his collection *Second Empire*. I’d read a late manuscript version and remembered a poem I wrote that was an acrostic sestina in my no-longer in print chapbook *Bruised Gospels* and in the chapbook I have in an anthology of chaps called *Frequencies Vol 1* through *YesYes Books*. I have been playing with acrostics for a few years but only a couple of those poems have been published. Seeing Richie’s use of anagram was very useful for me. Richie himself is an exquisite formalist but I had no use for anagrams until I got the assignment from Carl Phillips.

In Carl’s class, we focused on the history or prosody and the “why” of it, meaning why do some poems take their formal constraints. Is it to show how difficult it is to trust a lover? Is it to reflect on having too many choices from which to make life decisions? Is it to show trauma or lapse in memory? To arbitrarily have a poem in a form that the poem itself did not demand was something I was taught against. Every sonnet is a sonnet because it must be, not because it can be. So part of my portfolio for our prosody class was to write a fifteen page essay explaining why the two poems we included (one in a traditional form and another in a nonce form of said tradition) had to be in those forms. The poem that is paired with “A Spray of Feathers, Black” is called “[Sonnet with a Cut Wrist and Flies](#),” which appears both in my book *Thief in the Interior* and in an earlier issue of *The Rumpus*. I suggest reading those two poems together to get an idea as to what I was going for.

When asked more broadly about his relationship with formal “conversation,” Williams said:

I believe every poem I write is in conversation with poems and traditions that came before it, regardless of any intention on my part. I am a sum of my knowledge and ignorance. What I don’t know lives within my poems as well. So I suppose my viewpoint is one of being in conversation with tradition in such a way that it builds on tradition.

I can list writers who have inspired me formally. That would be easiest for me to do: Camille T. Dungy, Evie Shockley, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Ben Jonson, Sonia Sanchez, Jorie Graham, David Baker, Tyehimba Jess, Terrance Hayes, Octavio Paz (particularly his long poem Blanco), Airea D. Matthews, Douglas Kearney, Orlando White.

While Chen's poem "[Chen \[No Middle Name\] Chen](#)" doesn't progress through an end-rhyme scheme, like the three previous poets, it is a poem entirely composed of anagrams (using only the letters of the title), and it too, through its internal rhyme, tonal turn, and 14 line stanzaic form, engages with the tradition of the sonnet through its anagrammatic experimentation. Of the formal genesis of the poem, in terms of influences and innovations, Chen said:

The poem started as an assignment in Curtis Bauer's 2015 graduate poetry workshop. Curtis asked us to write a poem using only the letters in our names. He said, "You can use middle names, too," as an act of generosity, I guess. Except I don't have a middle name. Trying to write this poem, I felt limited; I felt like my name yielded little, not anything very interesting or meaningful. I also felt that not having a middle name was a terrible thing. Another limitation. Everyone else in the class had middle names and a range of letters with which to work. So many more vowels! These feelings of limitation and being on the outside felt familiar.

I've grown to take pride in my name (I think it's a marvelous name for an author), but when I was younger I was deeply ambivalent. I liked that people wanted to know the story behind my name. I liked that my name was easy to remember, sort of catchy. I disliked many of the nicknames people ended up giving me, cutesy diminutives that sounded a bit too close to a racial slur poking fun at Chinese language. At times I disliked the simplicity of my name, the exact repetition, which isn't the case in a tonal language like Chinese. Also, in Chinese characters, the two names appear completely different. In Roman letters and American pronunciation, all the richness and beauty of my name seemed to vanish.

So for the poem assignment, I began to wonder if I could tap into these complicated backstories and understories, dominant narratives and counter narratives involving race, culture, and naming. I started out very frustrated with Curtis's assignment. But the thing is, I love prompts and I love creative restraints. I love a good challenge, especially one that allows me to dive into something huge and personal and heartbreaking and political. I didn't go in with this goal but I think part of what I was trying to do in this poem was restore to my name, as it appears in English, the full magic I see in it.

And I needed that "[No Middle Name]," a phrase that appeared on school forms (in full or as the abbreviation "nmn") so many times that my first email address was chen_nmn_chen. I needed "[No Middle Name]" to complete the spell of revealing and transforming "Chen Chen" . . . I'll just add: Growing up, I felt the absence of my middle name as a serious presence. It was never a blank. It was always, No Middle Name or NMN. So I wanted to call on this NMN in my life, to help me out, give me some more letters. I wanted to use a perceived/imposed lack to help spell out (and create the spell of spelling out) the lack and my alchemizing of it.

This poem taught me a certain concision and swiftness when it comes to writing about the politics of identity formation and transformation. If I can unlock this much messiness using only these letters and this sonnet form, then I can try harder in my longer poems to pare down and hone in.

Of his broader relationship with form, Chen elaborated:

I love sonnets. I've written quite a few poems in this form, but I'd say I'm definitely still at the beginning of exploring and experimenting. No mastery. I don't know if I believe in "mastery." Writing sonnets allows for a kind of unmastering, actually. A letting go of habitual ways into a poem. A shedding of tired or unnecessary word combos. An unlocking of imagination while straitjacketed, Houdini-like. But the fun isn't in escaping the form; it's in taking up residence, putting in a breakfast nook without destroying the kitchen, trying to cook an omelet with only a pan.

Sonnet makers I look up to: Robert Hayden, Jack Agüeros, Henri Cole, Marilyn Hacker. One of my favorites is Shakespeare's sonnet 29, "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes..." Amazing, the single sentence sonnet that feels effortlessly spoken. Rufus Wainwright does a gorgeous "cover" of this poem. Amazing, that a Shakespeare sonnet can be sung. Then again, I think of the word "sonnet" from the Italian sonetto, little song.

*Other forms I love and would love to write better in: sestinas, ghazals, haiku, zuihitsu. Last year at the Kundiman Writers' Retreat, Kimiko Hahn led a fabulous workshop in zuihitsu, the form in which Sei Shōnagon wrote her magnum opus *The Pillow Book*. I think of Patrick Rosal's reinterpretations of Kundiman, a genre of Filipino love song that takes on political concerns. I also think of Marilyn Chin's work with haiku and quatrains steeped in both Chinese and English traditions. I'm interested in Asian American poets' engagement with forms typically labeled "Western" and with forms that emerged out of "Asian" locations—keeping in mind the politically constructed and contested nature of these labels.*

In considering all of these poems, I kept returning to Rickey Laurentiis's description of "Queering Form," a course he offered last year at Poets House, of which he wrote:

Since at least the mid-1990s, "queer" has emerged as a socio-political and theoretical framework set in opposition to the normative, "stable" or strictly binary. In 2016, then, what might it mean to write a poetics queerly, to insist upon a queer reading of a text or, indeed, to queer a form?

While critics have used this terminology for some time now, I wanted to know how these practicing poets engaged (or chose not to engage) with this kind of critical framework. I asked each of these poets if they have any sense of themselves as poet engaged in "queering form," and in what ways might they embrace or reject this critical construct.

Mann replied:

I embrace this construct; in particular, I like Laurentiis's designation of "troubling" a form to queer it, which gets to the heart of the "queer," which I see as an inclusive designation of an outsider. Here I think of Bidart's opening lines in "Borges and I": "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed." I think poems, even those written in the traditional forms, are most affecting when they undermine the form itself, not for its own sake, but to subvert expectations and evince change. My work is as queer as it comes, both in meaning and method.

Hofmann replied:

There's something queer to me about poetic form, in general, I would say. Even though certain rules and structures of poetry can become codified as artistic law over time, poetry—or poetic utterance—remains disruptive. It remains uncategorizable. It remains, in some sense, in opposition to identity. It's performative. What it is and what it does are inextricable. It expresses itself as it moves, in action.

Rhyming is about brining things into relation, often in surprising and non-normative ways. That seems queer to me.

Williams replied:

I don't think I embrace or reject it. I think poetry is at its most interesting when it constantly refers to the past as it moves within the present. With the passing of time also comes the passing of the baton but each writer has to run their lap in their own way, hence transformation, hence innovation. So I think my approach to poetics is possibly in line with queering form. And, really, this is my approach today. Tomorrow my answer could be drastically different and different the day after that. Perhaps that is also queer.

Chen replied:

As a queer Asian American, matters of race and ethnicity are inseparable from matters of sexuality or from matters of the non-binary more broadly conceived. For example, the ways in which I am racialized as "Asian" have so much to do with how I am desexualized and rendered invisible as "male" or rendered hypervisible as "unmasculine male." The category "Asian" contains within it a multitude of assumptions about gender and sexuality. I have to queer poetic forms or else I would never see myself or the ones I love appear in any real, complicated way in my own writing.

To take things a step further, I want my poems to question and resist the reassertion or recuperation of "authentic" masculinity as the "answer" to the binaries we who identify as Asian American men find ourselves in. I do not wish to reproduce patriarchal thinking or behavior. A queer approach to form must be rooted in an intersectional feminist approach.

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You can order Randall Mann's most recent books of poems, *Straight Razor* (Persea Books, 2013), [here](#), and you can pre-order his forthcoming collection of poems, (his fourth) *Proprietary* (Persea Books, 2017), [here](#).

You can order Richie Hofmann's debut collection of poems, *Second Empire* (Alice James Books, 2015), [here](#).

You can order Phillip B. Williams's debut collection of poems, *Thief in the Interior* (Alice James Books, 2016), which recently won the Kate Tufts Discovery Award, [here](#).

You can order Chen Chen's just-published full-length debut collection of poems, *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* (BOA

Editions, 2017), [here](#).

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