



## Poets Apothecary Lab Ritual (After Wall, Ferguson, Nguyen and Spalding)

Composing poetry spontaneously is a ritual; a vision quest allowing you to entry into territory that can aid your effort to become more fully human. It can help you understand more deeply what you think, allow you to discover/refine your personal mythology and give you great satisfaction when you can learn to pour your energies into a multi-decade research project that re-enacts/re-envisions history, including your own. This exercise provides ideas to transform your writing practice into a Poets Apothecary Lab similar to the one behind Esperanza Spalding's "songwrights apothecary lab."

*Songwrights Apothecary Lab (a.k.a. S.A.L.) seeks to respectfully dip into the healing seas of music/musicianship/song, and distill a few grains of piquancy which carry the life-renewing flavor of the unfathomable ocean of human resiliency; then work those grains into new musical formwelas, to enhance the healing flavors and intentions innate in all works of devoted creatorship.*

*In this ongoing lab, we experiment with sprinkling the many distillations of S.A.L. into our song wrighting, and invite you to taste/hear these enhanced essences and flavors...*

*Half songwrighting workshop, and half guided-research practice, the Songwrights' Apothecary Lab (S.A.L.), seeks to develop a structure for the collaborative development of new compositions designed to offer enhanced salutary benefit to listeners...*

*The course is rooted in a transdisciplinary station, orienting itself towards archives and literature that study healing strategies drawn from a diverse range of music-based creative and therapeutic practices.*

*All Formwelas (songs) from the S.A.L. are created through our research, divination, intuition, musicianship, taste, inspiration, and*





*collaborative effort to design songs that enhance a specific salutary affect.*<sup>1</sup>

I'd recommend listening to: <https://open.spotify.com/album/3x2EYKuBcxSlog5QdD1hTO?si=Oof637EvT0K1CK4cuMyZnQ>

I think listening to the album in its entirety 3 or 4 times will help you better understand/experience the same state of consciousness one needs to write spontaneously and effectively. (The efficacy is not gauged by externalities like publishing credits. It is gauged by an inner sense that, in Michael McClure's words paraphrased: "will make you feel a little high." Formwela 4 is especially noteworthy.) My hope is that you'll create a similar lab for your own work, ideally using it to create a multi-decade research project starting today.

Next, read the Hoa Nguyen packet assembled by Kim Jacobs-Beck:

<https://paulenelson.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/hoa-poems-for-poetics-cosmology-workshop.pdf>

There are a couple of moments in Nguyen's "Autumn Poem 2012" that seem to suggest the act of composition as it is in progress, with false starts left in the final poem:

Mandible dream  
says the street  
& ash work

because the scorn  
and ions long  
there I wor I woke up  
in the overlooked dark

and

I walk I wal  
I walks down sometimes  
why the advi

abide the advice was

not "Fair better"  
but "Fail better"

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<sup>1</sup> <https://songwrightsapothecarylab.com/About>

Failure is ok in the organic poem because it is *an experiment*, you are writing for yourself and do not have to show anyone anything you write. The stakes are low in that aspect and we learn from mistakes. Hoa Nguyen understands this and is confident enough to leave false starts in the final poem. This is not workshop poetry. This is an intimate look into a personal vision quest that we are granted permission to be in on. In that respect, it is generous. The best poetry is generous. Hours, months, decades of experience are distilled into the occasion of the poem when the poet goes deep enough down their own throat.

## Understanding Ritual

Kathleen Wall and Gary Ferguson wrote a brilliant book on ritual called *Lights of Passage*.<sup>2</sup> From it these ritual basics:

### *Transforming Anxiety into Energy*

Like martial arts masters who use the energy of the enemy's attack to their own advantage, ritual can help us learn to harness the tension and pain that inevitably rolls through our lives and transform it into the positive emotional energy we need to gain new awareness and to initiate the delicate processes of growth. Ritual carries us into the belly of the change process, encouraging us to embrace it rather than become distracted or run away. As anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep pointed out almost a century ago, ritual is but a mirror held up to life, reminding us of the need for separation and reunion, for acting and waiting, for death and rebirth.

Ritual works in three basic ways. It empowers us through action, it clarifies problems and new directions, and it helps new perspectives and behaviors take root in our daily lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Wall, Kathleen, Ferguson, Gary. *Lights of Passage*. New York, Harper Collins, 1994.



- *Taking action:* To create ritual is to create action, and directed, purposeful action is one of the most reliable of all ways to feel empowered. Whenever you find yourself in a situation where you feel particularly vulnerable, taking action is a good first step. For example, after the death of a friend's husband, you may decide to cook a meal for the widow. This simple act can help you move through your feeling of powerlessness in the face of death to an awareness that you can bring comfort to the living.
- *Clarifying who you are:* Ritual allows us to clarify who we are in relationship to those around us.
- *Rooting new perspectives:* Finally, ritual can help us replace an unhealthy outlook with a new perspective that enables us to see ourselves and the world around us in a new light. Through meaningful ritual we can rewrite our "personal myths"—that weighty assortment of rules, assumptions, and precepts about how life works that we've collected over the years. As Franklin Roosevelt once put it, even so-called eternal truths are neither true nor eternal unless they have fresh meaning for every new situation.

### *The Framework: The Five Steps of Ritual*

Rituals are powerful tools for promoting and sustaining healthy change because they reflect the five processes that make up *all* human transition. It may help to think of yourself as an artist, and of these steps as the framework on which you will build a sculpture. The framework gives form and strength to your work, but the creative process—the final shape, texture, color, and meaning of the work—are up to you.







Generally speaking, the more difficult the transition, the more fully the rituals surrounding it will need to focus on these processes. Don't worry if these stages seem foreign to you; your understanding of them will gradually grow and ripen as you make your way through the chapters of this book.

1. *Letting Go/New Emergings*: This aspect of transition consists of making a conscious decision to let go of an old way of being or relating, while at the same time cultivating a feeling of readiness—of remaining open to the fact that a new quality is about to emerge.
2. *The Wandering*: The wandering is a period of limbo, a time of confusion. You have no clear sense of direction, and no vision of the road that lies ahead.
3. *Polarities*: Polarities are opposing urges or emotions. While it's frustrating to feel like you're being pulled in several directions at once, contradictory feelings inevitably arise during a significant change. One of the key purposes of ritual is to help reconcile these conflicts.
4. *New Beginnings*: At some point in the midst of all change, you will see a vision of new beginning—a fresh and ultimately more satisfying way of relating to the world around you.
5. *Rooting*: This is the emphatic "Yes!" of ritual, the process whereby you integrate your inner vision of a new beginning into the daily realities of your life.

### *The Setting: Exclusive Time and Exclusive Space*

Just as the five steps of change are the framework on which you will create your ceremonies, two further elements must form the background against which your rituals will take place. These are exclusive time and exclusive space.

## Exclusive Time

Simply put, exclusive time means that whatever period you set aside to conduct a ritual or rite of passage should take priority over *everything else*. A family that plans a special dinner for a certain night twice a month, for example, must keep that dinner as top priority. Only the most unavoidable conflicts should be allowed to interfere with it; the need to shop or run errands, or being saddled with work that needs to be done at the office, are generally not acceptable excuses. We realize that you have to keep some level of flexibility in your life. But the amount of growth you ultimately experience is directly related to honoring the special time you've set aside to focus on your changes and relationships through ritual.

Exclusive time in ritual also means making sure that you will not be interrupted—no phones, no television or radio, no one dropping by. Before you begin any activity, ask yourself if there is anything that might keep you from focusing on the task at hand. If so, get rid of it, or wait until a more appropriate time.

## Exclusive Space

Exclusive space refers to the need to find or create a special setting for ritual. Some of the reason for seeking exclusive space has to do with the need to remove yourself from familiar distractions. But there's more to it than that. The going away, the journey out of the familiar, is a powerful emotional metaphor for change. Most people find that the act of immersing themselves in different surroundings serves as a kind of threshold, a means of getting into a state of heightened readiness.

It's no coincidence that in virtually every myth, legend, or fairy tale you can name, the hero or heroine gains his or her wisdom outside of familiar surroundings. Odysseus heads for the Mediterranean, and Little Red Riding Hood goes into the woods. Psyche and Innana descend into the netherworld, and



the Arapaho maiden climbs to the sky. Similarly, people have long recognized the need to conduct their rituals beyond the places where they go about their daily routines. (At first glance, family ceremonies—things like holiday or birthday celebrations—would seem to be the exception.

The authors continue by suggesting that even on those occasions, surroundings are usually altered by cleaning and decorating.

### The Poem

The *action* you are taking is making a poem. You may want to use Hoa Nguyen's approach to leave false starts in if that feels right as you write or type the poem. (I generally compose on the screen so I do not have to transcribe. My exception is my American Sentences practice.)

The *clarification* you are making is to better understand how you think. When you let "the other" in to the poem, you are engaging energies larger than your ego into the poem and yet they are energies to which you are connected, or can be seen as a part of you. (You may see where this is going based on the basic ritual material above, including the wandering which can happen when composing spontaneously. "Is this GOING anywhere" we sometimes think. It may or may not be but in the moment, trust it is and commit fully to the process. )

Start a poem entitled *Autumn 2021*. You may want to add a subtitle that includes the name of your home, or your writing space, or the name of this exercise, or whatever feels right. Composing spontaneously is an exercise in building intuition, so trust yours is accurate. You can use the Cover Poem technique and add the specific details of a pet memory that was less than pleasant, but described with luminous details like:

black and white like the  
long-dead starved pet rodent





eating the basement  
curtains and peanut shells



I love her line from the packet's previous poem (Ficus carica sonnet) which asks:

Do homeless ancestors live inside the tree?

The tree of the "strangler fig" of all trees!

Maybe the relationship you have with a favorite ancestor, or poet ancestor, or ancestor whose photo is on your altar, or a dead parent (or child) is helpful to relate here or finds a place in the poem. Maybe just an image. Relate something of the here and now and what is sticking out in Autumn 2021 for you. Covid, sure, but what specifically for YOU. Don't be afraid to let your mind jump cut in the poem to such things. If you get stuck, look at "Autumn 2012" again and snag the first association that makes sense to you in the moment. Or, go up a few lines in the poem you are composing, or maybe to the top of the poem, and read. You'll remember something that just went through your mind that you wanted to add to the poem. This is a technique Kerouac called Alluvials which Michael McClure described in a SPLAB workshop in the early 00's. You do have Brenda Hillman's "Permission to be Strange" You don't have to show anyone this or any poem you write. You can use jargon or words from other languages. Make it "least careless and least logical." Risk something. Add a divination component. (If you have a Personal Universe Deck, use that.) Make it a real ritual. Clear out some exclusive time and exclusive space for you to do this with candles, or incense, or other ritual accoutrements. Do an invocation. Have a clear intention. Maybe you write this over several days, with each new segment starting from where you left off.

As Denise Levertov suggests in her poem A Clearing:



It is paradise, and paradise  
is a kind of poem; it has  
a poem's characteristics:  
inspiration; starting with the given;  
unexpected harmonies; revelations...

*Autumn 2021:* \_\_\_\_\_



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17 Oct 2021  
Casa del Colibrí