

CRAFT CHAPS

"BECOMING MUD:" A NEURODIVERGENT
POETICS TOWARDS MOVEMENT

BY K. IVER



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**A NEURODIVERGENT POETICS
TOWARD MOVEMENT**

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“BECOMING MUD”

If you're reading this, you've likely internalized many rules for making a poem: embrace the *deep image*, use enjambment to surprise the reader, find a metaphor to transform an experience. You might have been encouraged to experiment with form and syntax as a way of protesting the status quo of public rhetoric. By now, you might have hit a rebellious stage, protesting, breaking, and shedding all musts from workshop and mentors.

When I took my first creative writing class 20 years ago, I needed those rules, a solid paradigm. Now, after a period of shedding, I've looked outside workshop and found other customs and rituals that work for me, based on meditative, therapeutic, and somatic traditions. In sharing what hasn't and has helped me, my hope is that you'll reimagine possibilities for your own process. First, the shedding.

A rule I now protest: *Every line should stand on its own*. I've heard someone say "should" is an argument with reality, and in poetry circles, I hear this glaring example in this exact syntax often. My beef with this rule is personal: I'm neurodivergent and often work hard to understand rules of interaction and can grow weary of hearing false, unhelpful information. I communicate to exchange information and connect, not to perform. And I've found that much of neurodivergent life is watching others lie to me and to themselves. Poetry allows me, and others like me, to say things a dinner party wouldn't allow with precision. On the page, I can practice accepting my reality rather than affirm everyone's projection of it. *Every line should stand on its own* has no helpful logic for me because lines don't stand on their own. They need other lines because they're all part of a poem, like a jazz note is part of a song; from an improvisational trumpet, some notes might sound out of place or flat until they're illuminated by the following notes. Even the line of a monostich is not a rugged individual; it relies on the reader's cultural knowledge and network of understanding.

I used to try making each line self-reliant. No one understood what I was saying. In exerting excess control by pausing too much, packing too much sound and vividness in small space after small space, even I lost track of my poem's argument. One of my breakthroughs arrived when a fellow

workshopper suggested writing everything in paragraph form and then breaking the line. Another suggested that I find a practice that suits my thought patterns; instead of trying to break out of obsessiveness and fixation, embrace them. Practice expressing them through repetition, what Gertrude Stein reframes as emphasis, in unexpected ways. Try leaping to and from thoughts a little faster, connecting them as part of a dance.

My first love was ballet. In a gym, at three years old, I began learning that movement has language, can be sequenced, can be both played with and controlled. The world would soon teach me more difficult lessons about my body: other people will assume power over it because they could. Dance helped me intuit that I could shake off stress like a dog surviving an attack. At age fourteen, while away at a five-week ballet camp, while navigating untreated depression, I wrote my first poem. I read it to my suitemates, feeling like I did during my first ballet classes, exhilarated that a stuck thought, idea, or feeling could unstick and go wherever on lined-notebook pages I wanted.

REDISCOVERING INSTINCT

A value that bugs me: lyric poetry as *above* everyday language. Why above? I find common speech beautiful: its rhythms and variations of dialect, how a friend group can create its own vernacular through improv and intimacy—recognizable to a neighborhood but distinct in vocabulary, pacing, and tone. A poem can be accessible without sacrificing pleasure. I want readers of varied cognitive abilities to be able to access my work while also enjoying its attempts at complexity. I understand the desire to transcend one's current realities through opaque, decorous styles, and I also think that language, particularly poetry, inherently transcends. The act of writing itself is proven to relieve us of overwhelming mental and emotional pain through what Gregory Orr calls the “threshold” of poetry: where order and disorder meet. Often, when someone designates a poetry collection as *intelligent*, I wonder if they mean distant from emotion, immediacy, or instinct. Does *intelligent* signify more order than disorder? A safe and comfortable splitting of brain and body?

Studies of autistic and neurodivergent people have found that they have more neural pathways than others due to the lack of “pruning” neural connections. My daily experience would verify. Memories, both consequential and unimportant, are often in front of me, replaying graphically like a film. At my best, I can watch or ignore them from a safe distance. My most acute need for poetry surfaces when I feel like I'm inside the film. Instead of trying to *get in* the headspace of creative composition, I let poetry meet me where I am. I bring awareness to the edges of my body, find the anxious and the calm muscles, and invite the tension already there; I ask myself, *What are you most unwilling to feel?* and *What do you most want?* I try to meet both inquiries with the curiosity and bewilderment my Chan Buddhist teacher speaks of when assigning me a question *to chew on*, in his words. Call it therapy, but out of all my prompts, this one has been the most generative for my students.

The brain, according to research, is best at letting a thought pass after it is written down, processing disturbances like a to-do list that can obviate the need for future reminders. In essence, writing can function like a compulsion, providing momentary relief, but without the side effect of making its predecessor—obsession—stronger. When some writers say they feel ill after a period of not writing, this might be why. Unlike other art mediums that use

one of the five senses directly, words on a page are inherently metaphorical. Somebody decided what a collection of characters and sounds mean, and those meanings are always changing. The translation of experience to noun and verb, however cliché those nouns and verbs, does *move* the experience. And the poetic practice, a deeply attentive state of finding “the best words in the best order,” (Samuel Coleridge) need not be ranked. I, and many other neurodivergent people I know, are weary of hierarchy in all its insidious forms. We are often preoccupied with fairness, justice, and imbalances of power both collectively and interpersonally. Rimbaud talked about the function of poetry as a “derangement of the senses” and I’m most satisfied when poetry shakes up ideas of high and low. Perhaps because the need for ideas of high and low is deeply embedded, preceding our current social structures. Our primate cousins love a hierarchy and will form their own capitalist structures. Bees fight for territory. Poems are the perfect container for questions, and this irreconcilable tension directs many of the questions I chew on.

I’m less interested in the whether a poem is well crafted than whether it moves. When a poem asks me to stop and consider every adjective, adverb, noun, and pause, I can lose focus. Like in life, my body at rest tends to lose awareness of its surroundings. Movement—a walk, a dance, a strenuous workout, sex, a gentle rock of the upper body—brings me back. Once, a literature professor of a class focused on women and travel said that she wasn’t assigning much poetry because, in her words, *poetry is about stasis*. I thought, *none of my favorite poems*. The professor was not a poetry scholar, and I was not in the mood to bring up the existence of Frank O’Hara, admittedly not a woman. Since then, I’ve been interested in poetry that does not register as alone and static, but kinetic and alive. The work of neurodivergent poets has been showing me how to reach beyond décor, obfuscation, looking away, and toward life-affirming movement. Why *above*? Why not below?

With her book *The Kissing of Kissing*, Hannah Emerson has provided what I most long for when reading, and would like to provide as a writer. Emerson is autistic and nonspeaking. When reading these poems, I feel spoken to or, more precisely, spoken with. I sense the same joyful tension of transcendence and grounding as I do when hiking in deep woods. Throughout the book, Emerson begins many sentences with “please” and punctuates them with “yes yes.” Between the two: swimming, kissing, yearning, worms, and “permission to go.” Each line creates a connected, fluid rush so that I forget that I’m reading a

poem. Instead, I am becoming a ground creature, am going to “hell”—the center of the earth—because a voice is saying “please try” and promising I’ll “find the light there” and encouraging me to “kiss [my]self for going there.” Emerson’s adjectives are not there to decorate or even describe. They don’t want me to stop and look and think but dance with the “the beautiful/beautiful beautiful dreaming/beast that we are yes yes.” These poems are spells, for reaching when I feel stuck, and connecting with both my surroundings and my own skin. Emerson’s language and syntax surprise without stopping. The origins of the words “great” and “beautiful” have hierarchical contexts, and Emerson assigns them to a beast and other lifeforms of the underworld. Metaphors and images in *The Kissing of Kissing* are ones my body recognizes, perhaps from before memory, when my DNA was more wormlike, of the mud:

...Please greet me in
the mud it is great mess please go to oh

the bucket to get the water to try to make
more mud yes. Please try to get the mud

helpful to you if you become mud too.
Please get that great animals are all

autistic. Please love poets we are the first
autistics. Love this secret no one knows it.

These lines have reminded me that poetry is miraculous. I’ve gotten unexpected relief from translating and reimagining my past. [b]ell hooks said, “the function of art is do more than tell it like it is—it’s to imagine what is possible.” For over half my life I’ve studied poetry deeply, and Emerson’s recent book has shown me a new magic, the use of one’s attention while writing. Whenever I meet a new therapist and inevitably tell them how my brain works, about wrestling constantly with unwanted thoughts, I often brace myself for advice that’s never helped me. Two years ago, a therapist said, *what would you think about if you wanted to?* Such a possibility, a kind of antidote to despair, hadn’t occurred to me since that summer at ballet camp, twenty-seven years ago. For months after that conversation, my creative output led to the manuscript of my first book. *The Kissing of Kissing* has resurfaced that

moment for me, using want as an engine for connection in what Mary Oliver called “the family of things.” Now, instead of wondering if what I’m “yearning” for is possible while writing, I’m going to “please try.”

WRITING PROMPT

Draft a poem in which something dead is coming back to life. The thing can be physical or spiritual. Be as present and descriptive with the subject's deadness, pre-death, and resurrection as this draft wants you to be. What must change radically to make your subject breathe again? What must be spoken, moved? What other elements, people, archetypal representations can come together to resurrect the dead? As your subject comes alive, as you progress through editing and revision, what visual form does the draft's voice want to take? What's the most life-affirming container—of sound, texture, and structure—for this subject?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



K. Iver (they/them) is a nonbinary trans poet born in Mississippi. Their book *Short Film Starring My Beloved's Red Bronco* won the 2022 Ballard Spahr Prize for Poetry from Milkweed Editions. Their poems have appeared in *Boston Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *TriQuarterly*, and elsewhere. Iver has received fellowships from The Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, the Sewanee Writer's Conference, and the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation. They have a Ph.D. in Poetry from Florida State University. For more, visit kleeiver.com.

