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## Reader's Guide

from Simone Muench  
author of *Wolf Centos*

### Author Asks:

1) Of the following stanzas and lines taken from *Wolf Centos*, which one do you think best serves as the an ars poetica, or summation, of *Wolf Centos*? Why? Explain.

“Perhaps this music you are listening to  
is lovelier than these loaned words”

“I have lost my being in so many beings.”

“Certain animals converse with humans.  
Every transformation is possible.”

2) What is wolfish?—what is the ontology of the wolf in our imaginations? How does the wolf, both real and metaphorical, keep revolving, and evolving, throughout the book?

3) Why do you think poets are so often beholden to animals as modes of meditation and communication, frequently employing them as a way to explore and enable our articulations?

4) A main motif of *Wolf Centos* is issues of textuality. Can you provide specific examples and explain how they serve the project of this book?

5) Doors, windows, and other forms of entry and exit, are also recurring images in *Wolf Centos*? Why are they significant to the book's movements and meanings?

6) I wrote this book with the task of trying to create a profound lyric “I” through appropriated material; and, to employ “the power of other people's words to generate profound emotion,” as Perloff says in reference to Susan Howe's *That This*. (“Poetry on the Brink: Reinventing the Lyric,” *Boston Review*).

Do you believe this undertaking is even possible? Explain. If you do think it's possible, do you think *Wolf Centos* accomplishes this task? Why or why not?

7) There are a few poems in this collection that I consider to be “extreme form”: one fixed form superimposed over the cento form? Can you find them? What fixed form is being used?

8) What is aspectual poetry? Can you provide some examples (mine would be Wallace Steven's “13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”)? In what ways could *Wolf Centos* be considered aspectual poetry?

9) In Joshua Clover's blurb for *Wolf Centos*, he writes, “Perhaps we “played the wolf or the witch”; perhaps we were punished for these things, for the ways we had of being against the social. This book's cunning is that it makes this idea in the most social way, from the storehouse of language. But I hear in it the realization that we must be against the social absolutely, if this present world is ever to pass away. . .” What do you think he means by this statement? How are the themes of the social

and the anti-social explored in this collection?

10) For me, *Wolf Centos* is fundamentally elegiac. Do you agree or disagree? How so? Can you provide specific examples of poems within the book that you consider elegies? What elements of these poems make them elegiac?

11) In my opinion, the composition of the cento should feel seamless not cobbled. Are there places in the book where the compounds of images feel cobbled and jagged? Where are the gestures smoother? What do you think makes one poetic gesture feel ragged and the other seamless? What components do you think are necessary for a compelling cento?

12) I consider the erasure form to be a reflection of the cento form. In what ways do you think the cento mirrors the erasure poem? What are their main differences?

## Writing Exercises:

### Exercise A.

Using the example of Anne Marie Rooney's poem "Last Index: Index of first lines," (which can be found [here](#)) create an index poem of first or last lines that are either a) appropriated à la cento, or b) that are purely invented.

### Exercise B.

Try your hand at "extreme form," imposing one fixed form (sonnet, villanelle, pantoum, sestina, etc.) over the cento form.

### Exercise C.

Part 1: First, write a cento.

Part 2: Then write a shadow poem to your cento, using opposing language. It is your choice whether you want it to be directly opposite, e.g. winter vs. summer; joy vs. sadness; no vs. yes; or just opposing, e.g. winter vs. ocean; joy vs. decongestant; woods vs. tigers. When doing this exercise, try to shadow, or imitate, your cento by:

- 1) Replacing specific words with equally specific words
- 2) Imitating the line break, i.e., enjambed lines and end-stopped lines
- 3) Using the same main parts of speech: noun for noun, verb for verb, and adj. for adj.
- 4) Don't worry about replicating syllables

The idea is to remain as close to the syntactical form of your cento as possible while using new language to move away from the subject matter of your first poem.

"It might also help for you to think about your imitations as translations, if not from one language into another, then at least from one idiom into another."



er."—Max Thomas

For an example of a cento and "shadow/mirror" poem visit *Kettle Blue Review* pages 4 and 5 [here](#).

### Exercise D.

Though centos are typically tailored from other poems, attempt to write a cento constructed purely out of some of your favorite, and maybe not so favorite, song lyrics.

## Further Reading:

### Influential Books:

Robert Marteau: *Salamander*  
Vaska Popa: *Homage to the Lame Wolf*  
Ingeborg Bachmann: *Darkness Spoken, Collected*  
Sándor Csoóri: *Selected and Before and After the Fall*  
Anna Swir: *Talking to my Body (trans. Czesław Miłosz)*  
Coral Bracho: *Firefly Under the Tongue*  
Octavio Paz: *Collected Poems, 1957-1987*  
Benjamin Peret: *From the Hidden Storehouse, Selected*  
Julio Cortázar: *Save Twilight, Selected*  
Joao Cabral de Melo Neto: *Selected, 1937-1990*  
Tomas Tranströmer: *The Great Enigma*  
Joyce Mansour: *Screams*  
Larry Levis: *Selected*  
Charles Wright: *Black Zodiac, Chickamauga, and Country Music*  
Wallace Stevens: *The Palm at the End of the Mind*

### Conceptual Support:

Annie Dilliard: *Mornings Like This*  
Tom Phillips: *Humument*  
Srikanth Reddy: *Voyager*  
Mary Ruefle: *A Little White Shadow*  
T.S. Eliot: *The Waste Land*  
Ronald Johnson: *Radi Os*

### Integral Anthologies:

*An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Brazilian Poetry*, eds. Elizabeth Bishop and Emanuel Brasil  
*Poems for the Millennium, volumes 1 and 2*, eds. Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris  
*Twentieth-Century Latin American Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, ed. Stephen Tapscott  
*The Random House Book of 20th Century French Poetry*, ed. Paul Auster  
The Pip Anthologies of World Poetry, ed. Douglas Messerli

