

process notes for *13 spines*

journals

This project is the result of a longstanding impulse to look back through my old journals, hunt lost memories and forgotten secrets, and reshape the ephemera of past selves into something new.

I've kept a journal, on and off, for pretty much as long as I can remember. The journals I ended up using for this project date back as far as 1995, when I was fourteen years old. I wrote about my (literal) dreams, crushes, music, feelings, worries. I wrote poems, playing with words, trying to make unexpected combinations that I found interesting or weird or beautiful. I doodled. Over time, my journals merged with multi-use notebooks that included to-do lists, food diaries, notes from classes and meetings. Some journals don't include any dates in them; others are meticulously documented. I've kept most of them, except for a few from about 2005-2006, which I must have thrown out. In all, I have three medium-sized storage boxes' worth of notebooks that represent three decades of life.

These journals and the text that they contain provided the source material for this project.

cut-ups

The process I developed to write these poems was inspired by the cut-up method described by William Burroughs in "[The Cut-Up Method of Brion Gysin](#)." A given text is literally cut up into pieces and rearranged at random, a form of collage. The goal is to escape the expected, the mundane, to resist hegemonic uses of language and allow for new realities. This method has also been adopted by David Bowie and Kurt Cobain for writing song lyrics. It could be considered a type of aleatoric and procedural approach to art-making, with connections to the Surrealism, Dadaism, and Fluxus movements, musicians such as John Cage and Pauline Oliveros, and computational poetry.

zines

Starting in 2021, I did several creative projects that ended up leading to this one. I think of them as zines because they're small, and I distributed a limited number of them myself, mostly anonymously. I experimented with cut-ups for each of them, as well as combinations of words and images.

The first drew material from my time in Seattle, where I lived in 2003-2012. During a visit to that city in 2022, I distributed copies in tucked-away places attached to memories of my life there.

[SEATTLE zine](#)

Two other zines form a pair: one drew material from journal entries from the month of December across the years, and the other drew material from Julys. For each of them, I used a double exposure technique with my manual camera, photographing cut-up poems on top of images then digitally editing as needed. The physical format for each of these was small accordion zine, which I left in various places while travelling in Jalisco in February 2024 and across the Midwest in July 2024, respectively.

[DECEMBER zine](#)

[JULY zine](#)

ribcage

Next I wanted to find a way to write longer poems using material from the whole year at once. When I learned about the ribcage form, I thought this was perfect.

A ribcage is a poetic form invented by Athena Liu, consisting of 24 lines alternating between 12-syllable lines and a monosyllabic word in brackets.

```
x x x x x x x x x x x
      [x]
x x x x x x x x x x x
      [x]
x x x x x x x x x x x
      [x]
      etc.
```

The bracketed words – the spine – are read from top to bottom and reflect a central theme of the poem. Since there are 12 pairs of 12-syllable lines and bracketed words, I could assign each line + word to a month of the year, using text drawn from journal entries for that month.

I started writing ribcages after attending a writing workshop offered by [Tiny Spoon](#) literary magazine in November 2024. I submitted the first few poems to Issue 13 of Tiny Spoon, which had the theme, “Superstition/Divination.” In response to the theme, I added a 13th line + bracketed word to my poems, using text from undated journal entries for that line.

process

After writing my first few ribcage poems, I refined the process that I followed for a total of 12 sets of poems, and it took me almost exactly a year. For each set of poems, I did the following:

- 1) Pull a slip of paper with typewritten text from a small Christmas tin.¹



Here is an example phrase: “a pull-apart novel?”

- 2) Write a reflection on the phrase in my writing notebook. What does it mean? What does it remind me of? What questions is it asking?
- 3) To guide the selection of source material from my journals, for each month of the year I need to decide which year I’m going to sample text from. I developed a way to select the years at random, using elements related to the JULY zine project.

I made a set of dominoes using resin and a silicone mold, embedding dried dahlia petals I’d saved from the dahlia plant I photographed during the creation of the JULY zine.



I made a chart in my writing notebook, mapping the dominoes to years for each month. I had done an inventory of my journals, so I knew that a journal entry would be available for each month/year combination in my chart.

¹ I’d converted the tin into a pinhole camera, then used it as a container for slips of paper with typewritten phrases from journal entries for the DECEMBER zine. Here are some of the pinhole camera images: [xmas-tin-pinhole-camera-photos.pdf](#)

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	UNDATED
1	1993	1993	1993	1995	1995	1995	1994	1994	1994	1992	1994	1991	
2	1994	1995	1995	1996	1996	1996	1995	1995	1995	1994	1995	1992	
3	1995	1996	1996	1997	1997	1997	1996	1996	1996	1995	1996	1994	
4	1996	1997	1997	1998	1998	1998	1997	1997	1997	1996	1997	1995	
5	1997	1998	1998	2001	2001	2001	1998	1998	1998	1997	1998	1996	
6	1998	1999	2001	2002	2002	2002	1999	2001	1999	1998	2001	1997	
7	1999	2002	2002	2003	2003	2003	2000	2002	2001	2001	2002	1998	
8	2002	2003	2003	2004	2007	2004	2001	2003	2002	2002	2003	2000	
9	2003	2004	2004	2007	2010	2007	2002	2004	2003	2003	2008	2001	
10	2004	2007	2007	2010	2011	2008	2003	2007	2004	2008	2009	2002	
11	2008	2010	2010	2012	2012	2009	2004	2009	2009	2009	2010	2003	
12	2009	2011	2012	2013	2013	2010	2007	2010	2009	2010	2011	2006	

I made a cloth bag to keep the dominoes in and pull them from. The bag is made of floral polyester fabric from the dress my mom wore to her sister's wedding in the 1970s. I'd removed the poofy sleeves from the dress before wearing it to a cousin's wedding a few years ago. The bag is made from the leftover sleeve fabric, beige with bright orange and yellow flowers and accents of magenta. It's lined with red velvet fabric that came from the bottom of the robe my mom wears around the house. When I stayed with her the previous summer, I worried that the robe was too long, that she would trip on it, so I shortened it for her and kept the fabric.²

Referring to the chart in my writing notebook, [I pull out a domino from the bag](#) and record the resulting year. I repeat this for each of the 12 months.

- 4) Go through my boxes of journals and pull out the ones I've selected for this poem. Gather them all in a pile.
- 5) For each month/year combination, page through the corresponding journal(s), keeping the prompt from Step 1 in mind. Try not to get too caught up in rereading the past, but skim through and focus on what jumps out. Pick an undated journal to do this for too. Write down excerpts that seem to speak to the prompt. Write them by hand in my writing notebook.
- 6) Put away the journals.

² My birthday is in July, so this symbolic connection to my mother, along with the JULY zine, seemed fitting.

- 7) Type up all of the journal excerpts in the giant Google document I'm using to write these poems. (Lately I'm trying to switch away from Google, but it's hard.³)
- 8) Identify all of the one-syllable words in my journal excerpts, organized in a [spreadsheet](#) with 13 columns (one for each month, plus my mystery 13th line).
- 9) Use spreadsheet formulas to generate random combinations of one-syllable words. Record combinations that I like. Repeat this until I have a thirteen-word phrase that forms the spine of a poem.

Here is an example spine: "leave room to want it to rage and change in clear cold light"

- 10) Check to make sure that the spine includes one word from each month of the year, plus the thirteenth undated journal excerpt (i.e., one word from each journal excerpt). Adjust as needed.
- 11) Often, there are words in the spine that are present in more than one journal excerpt (especially common words like "the" or "and"). I have choices about which specific month that word is going to represent. Use a spreadsheet to keep track of the possibilities and choices, or create a [flowchart](#) (as I did for one of the spines) to track all of the branching combinations as I proceed through the poem.
- 12) Now, write! I've created a framework in my Google doc with the spine words in brackets, interlaced with the excerpts I've gathered from my journals. Now I get to remix the words of my past selves, again keeping that initial prompt in mind and listening for what the poem is trying to tell me as I fit the words into twelve-syllable lines while maintaining a flow of meaning and grammar across the months and years. This part is so fun. I can do this on my phone or on my laptop, a little bit at a time or all at once, listening to music, on a plane, in my parents' car on the way to Thanksgiving dinner at my aunt's house, on the couch at night when I can't sleep, or in my old childhood bedroom.
- 13) Repeat the process as many times as I feel like. Write multiple poems per spine. Write multiple spines per collection of journal excerpts. When I'm done with one collection, repeat the whole process with a new prompt and a new collection of source texts.

After my cycle of poems came to a natural close, I decided to write one more. This one would be a remix of the remixes, a thirteenth beast made up of parts from the other twelve. The spine is a cut-up of the other spines. The source text is the text of the other poems.

³ Here are some good resources for de-Googleing your life: <https://decolonize.digital/>

images

As my collection of ribcage poems started to come together, I knew that I wanted to make them into a little book, and I knew that I wanted to include images along with the poems. I decided to photograph a selection of my journals with my manual camera (a Minolta XG9 that used to belong to my mother). I chose the most visually interesting ones, including gifts from relatives in the 90s that had cover art and notebooks I'd made myself or covered in collages. I sent the film to be developed at [Ballard Film + Foto](#) in Seattle, which I'd discovered on a recent trip.

Once I finalized my selection of poems to include in the book, I chose a journal image to pair with each poem. The journal had to be one of the ones that was selected for source material for that poem, and I also looked for journals with imagery that resonated in some way with each poem.

When I got closer to self-publishing the book, I started to worry about copyright for some of the journal images. After consulting with a colleague at work who specializes in copyright and fair use, I decided to edit the journal images further, in a way that reflected my writing process more specifically.

For each image, I "spliced" in sections of other journals that I had taken source material from for that poem. In order for this process to be complete, I photographed all of the other journals that I'd used (this time with my camera phone). I deleted "splices" of each originally chosen journal image, aligned with the spine words from the corresponding poem, creating horizontal gaps. I then layered in images for the other journals I'd used as source material for that poem (in black and white). For each spine/slice, I selected a journal that corresponded to the month/year combination that had been selected for that spine/line of the poem. You could think of the final striped images as a kind of data visualization of the poem composition process I described above.

For the 13th poem, I did something completely different.

Right around the time I was finishing the 12th set of poems, I visited Seattle again for a camping trip and creative retreat. I brought print-outs of the poems and journal images with me, as well as a Zoom H4n recorder. I spent time in the woods reflecting on the poems and images, and one afternoon I took the recorder with me to an [outdoor amphitheater](#), where I recorded myself reading all of the poems.

On the last morning of the camping trip, there was a gentle rain, and on a sudden impulse, I collected some rainwater in a glass jar (which I'd brought along for a cider pressing activity that didn't end up happening). After I'd gotten back home and written the 13th poem, I decided to use that rainwater to make a small watercolor painting with the color blue.



audio

When I first explained to my mom how I was writing these poems during a visit home in summer 2025, she asked me to read one out loud to her, to help her try to understand it. I normally think of poetry as a visual phenomenon, as words living on a page, but I know that the auditory experience of poetry is important. I decided to share audio of myself reading the poems, so that other people could experience them this way too.

As I was writing the poems over the course of 2024-2025, I would read them aloud to myself, recording voice memos on my phone, trying to remind myself to think of them as sonic compositions and not just words on a page.

Once I decided to share an audio version of the poems along with the book, I also recorded myself reading the poems with a proper vocal mic, in the bedroom closet where I've done various home recording projects.

For the final audio versions of the poem, I used three sources of recordings: the voice memos, the closet recordings, and the Zoom H4n recordings from the woods. Since the poems' source material covers three decades of journal entries, I mapped each decade to a different audio source: 1995-2004 is the recording from the woods (stereo right), 2005-2014 is the voice

memos (stereo left), and 2015-2025 is the closet recording (stereo center). For each poem, the recording type for a given line corresponds (more or less) to the decade that the source text for that part of the poem came from.

references and acknowledgments

An earlier version of this essay, accompanied by the 13th poem, first appeared in [Adrift: Notes From Night School Bar](#), Issue 1.

Things that are referenced in the poems:

- Anne Sexton, [The Fortress](#)
- Zona: A Book About a Film About a Journey to a Room, by Geoff Dyer
- [Eschaton](#)
- The Flowers of Guatemala, by R.E.M.

[Tiny Spoon](#) experimental literary magazine, in particular [Issue 13](#) and the workshop, [Form Fetish: Celebrating defiance against convention](#), where I first learned about the ribcage form

Fort Collins Book Fest workshop, [Crossing the Field: Poetry and Photography](#)

[Night School Bar](#) writing workshops:

- Yearlong Writing Group (2022, [2023](#))
- [Secrets and Lies: Writing Our Selves](#)
- [Fragments and Ephemera](#)
- [Experiment and Experience](#)
- [Writing With Words and Images](#)
- [The Lyric](#)

Other inspiration:

- [Alphabetical Diaries](#), by Sheila Heti
- [Quietly Between](#), by Megan Kaminski, Brad Vogler, Lori Anderson Moseman, and Sarah Green
- [A Softer World](#)
- [Computational poetry](#)

[Copyright and fair use guide](#)

Open source software:

- [LibreOffice](#)
- [Gimp](#)
- [Scribus](#)
- [Audacity](#)