Will Cordeiro

Read “Burn Pile” in *Frozen Sea*

Crazy Quilts of Quasi-Rhymes: A Prompt

This prompt is designed to encourage more sound-play in a poem without resorting to traditional meters and rhyme schemes. While I personally love meter and end-rhyme when they are done well, today such formal devices tend to both intimidate writers and turn off readers, unfortunately.

This prompt starts by developing the sounds first, then generates the so-called “content” or narrative of the poem afterward.

Try to use the following types of “quasi-rhyme” or rhyming-adjacent sound devices:

1. **Pararhyme** – a kind of rhyme where the consonants stay relatively the same, but the vowel sound changes (examples include *lop*, *lap*, *lip;* or *smile*, *small*, *smell*). Wilfred Owens is probably the English-language poet most adept at using pararhyme.
2. **Eye rhyme** – words that look similar in their spelling but aren’t pronounced in a similar manner: for example, *love* and *move*, or *cough* and *rough*.
3. **Half rhyme** (also called a “slant rhyme” or “off rhyme”) – an inexact rhyme, such as *late* and *latte*, *song* and *young*, *gym-bro* and *jumbo*, or *bridge* and *bred*.
4. **“Quarter” rhyme** (this is my own term, so don’t search for it on the internet) – any barely perceptible sonic resemblance between two words that is greater than mere assonance or alliteration alone but might not rise to the level of a true half rhyme; examples might include *mouth* and *mother*, *blizzard* and *grizzled*, *dictate* and *duct-tape*, *servile* and *savage*, *chaos* and *curious*, *on-ramp* and *dam-pond*, etc.

Produce two pairs of “quasi-rhymes”—using any type of quasi-rhymes outlined above— for every three-line stanza you’d like to write. Don’t worry too much about what type of “quasi-rhyme” you are using. The technical classification isn’t important (or that precise). What’s important is that you generate quasi-rhyming pairs of words. If you happen to use an occasional, full-bodied masculine or feminine rhyme, too, that’s no problem. Just make sure you develop two pairs of “quasi-rhyme” words for each stanza.

For example, say you wanted to write a three-stanza poem. Then you would want to develop six pairs of quasi-rhymes, like this.

Stanza 1 – *cojones* and *cologne*; *fiddle-faddle* and *puddle*

Stanza 2 – *gave* and *have*; *succotash* and *sasquatch*

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Stanza 3 – *rodeo* and *radio*; *illicit* and *elastic*

Now, the challenge is to write a poem using the quasi-rhyme pairs you came up with. Using a word in any order within the stanza is fine. In this example, we’d need a poem with three three-line stanzas (the odd number of lines in a stanza ensures you resist any temptation to regular end-rhyme). Using these quasi-rhyme pairs, I came up with this:

A lean, befuddled teen **fiddle-faddle**d with

his **cologne** & dumped a whopping **puddle**

on his **cojones**—they grew homely & hirsute

as a **sasquatch**. His mama wept & said he sure

ate up his **succotash**. She **gave** him more of it.

*Let peasants take the cake & **have** some, too,*

barked the **radio**’s mad adage. His pants’ **elastic**

stretched back when he buckaroo’d at the **rodeo**,

unbuckled & shucked off—oh, **illicit** family jewels!

You might observe that I added even more sound textures to the poem as I fleshed it out. The pairs of quasi-rhymes took me in an unexpected direction—a somewhat nonsensical one in this case. The results may be surreal or serious. It isn’t always up to you, though; the sound patterns begin to guide you rather than your conscious intentions. Part of the point of an exercise like this is to help get you out of your own head and, instead, to begin listening harder to the haggling word-hoard and its sonic crackling.

In the sample poem above, a nascent story developed that I certainly wouldn’t have written otherwise. However, once you have a draft, you can then feel free to revise it in any manner you like: enhancing the sound-play, smoothing out a coherent narrative, reordering sentences, creating different stanzaic shapes, eliminating quasi-rhyme pairs, etc.

All the formal constraints of the prompt can be abandoned; they were just a “starter kit” to give you material so you’re no longer staring at an empty page. Your poetic ear

should now be busy with buzzing echoes rather than bustling with its own ego: so, go forth in good faith.