Poems

“The Last Speech and Confession of John Ryer,: who was executed at the White-Plains, on the 2d of October 1793…,” woodcut at the top of a broadside (New York? 1793). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Last Words of the Dying

VI

Listen! This'll
hurt someone!

Do not disturb
my circles.

You can get more
with a kind word

and a gun—Lady,
you shot me!

…this is a mortal wound.
But how the devil

do you think
this could harm me?

That picture is awful
dusty.

Sources: Archimedes, Al Capone, Sam Cooke, Denis Diderot, R. Buss Dwyer, Alexander Hamilton, Jesse James
[All dead by suicide or murder]

VII

What's that? Do I
look strange?

Come, come, no weakness;
let's be a man to the last.

I must go in, the fog
is rising.

Sources: Lord Byron, Emily Dickinson, Robert Louis Stevenson

The Last Words of the Condemned

To Loved Ones

Y'all stick
together. In your hearts.

I'm going home
babe—out of here.

Keep me—the love
the closeness

given me.
Don’t waste any time

in mourning.

Sources: James Allen Red Dog, John Cockrum, Joe Hill, Kevin Watts, William James “Flip” Williams, Jr.

“Life, last words and dying speech of John Sheehan,: who was executed at Boston, on Thursday, November twenty-second, 1787…,” woodcut at the top of a broadside (Boston, 1787). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Statement of Poetic Research

While watching Ken Burns’s television miniseries *The Civil War*, I was struck by the telling of Confederate General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson’s death from complications after being hit by friendly fire and having to undergo amputation of his arm. The documentary included Jackson’s final words: “Let us cross the river and rest under the shade of trees.” I was immediately charmed by this poetic utterance, and wrote it down in my little writer book. The documentary continued but, in my mind, the words were running on loop. I picked up my little book again and wrote, “Poems using last words.”

That is the romantic beginning for the poems from my chapbook *Death Centos* (Ugly Duckling Presse, forthcoming). Now, for the actual—and more tedious—beginnings. I had just finished the first year of my MFA at the California Institute of the Arts, and had taken a workshop on poetic form. Aside from the traditional, we also explored alternative forms. Though I had used collage in the past, it was in this course that I realized how much I loved working in the form. I had also recently read Christian Hawkey’s *Ventrakl* and fallen in love with his Trakl color centos (along with the whole of the book). With these poems I saw the power of weaving whole lines of thought, versus merely a cluster of words or a small phrase from each source, as can often be the case in collage.

The cento (pronounced *sent-oh*, as it is from the Latin word for a cloak made of several patches, versus the Italian word for "hundred," which would be pronounced *chent-oh*) is an ancient form dating as far back as the second century. Just to show that I've read about the cento in sources other than Wikipedia, the *Princeton Encylopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines a cento as the following: "A poetic composition made up of passages of some great poet of the past." It goes on to state that since Hosidius Geta's *Medea*, written in the second century, poets have been employing this form using works by Homer, Virgil, Cicero, Shakespeare, and others up to our modern era. The cento is a way to simultaneously pay homage to poets and the beauty in their writing, and also bastardize their works. In employing the cento form, we believe we are doing for the poet what she or he could not do her or himself, hoping to illuminate the poetry in some way not done in the original text. In a sense this is what my centos are doing with history and reality. I weave voices that are otherwise separated by time, space, history, and sense: Sam Cooke and Alexander Hamilton, Archimedes and Al Capone. These ostensibly are voices that would never have found one another save for in this manuscript—voices that one would think don't have much to say to one another. But, as I hope these poems illustrate, even the most disparate sources of thought can and do say things to one another, and can even work together toward lyricism or another kind of beauty (and I use the term "beauty" loosely, for really anything that is captivating for any reason has a beauty, even if horrific). So I am bastardizing history in these poems for the sake of my defined beauty, and to examine death if only to allow me some agency in facing the terror of that unknown.

Now, to specifically reference Wikipedia, simply because I love this fact: there were people who created centos (patched cloaks) for Roman soldiers, and they were called *centonarii*. Whether or not this is true, I hope any writers of centos will take up the title.

This gets ahead of my own thought process in writing these poems, though. I was unaware that I was employing a variation on the age-old cento form, though the seeds had been planted by professors and poetic texts alike. Really I just wanted to weave these lines together and, if any last words were as beautiful as Stonewall Jackson's, the poetry was waiting there for me. Then began the hours and hours of research, which often led me to unsavory websites, but, all the same, websites that purported to catalog people's dying words (I have since found far more appropriate sources to appease the Ugly Duckling Presse editors and my conscience). I wrote down any and all that caught my attention, along with the person who spoke the words. The variation on modes of death was what struck me the most, and it was illustrated remarkably through these utterances—some were peaceful, others were uttered in moments of delirium, of anger.

I also frequently found the last words of people just before being executed. This presented a hodgepodge of people from an array of periods and walks of life: royalty, intellectuals, radicals, sociopaths, murderers. I did not quite

know what to make of these phrases, as they did not “fit” with the others. They rather seemed to fit with each other. So when creating the chapbook of these poems, I split it into two sections: “Last Words of the Dying” and “Last Words of the Condemned.”

I have been making mixed tapes (now just “mixes”) since I was in middle school, and these poems allowed me to play in a way that felt undeniably similar. I put lines next to one another that seemed to hum more than when placed next to others. I shuffled them around, read, reread, shuffled some more. I had an incredible and instant agency with tone and meaning, and I would be lying if I didn’t say it was nothing short of a gleeful experience. This is not to say I was unaware of the gravity of it all, that these were the final sentences spoken by people before death. In writing poetry that one feels is revolutionary (and by revolutionary I mean within one’s own writing) it is thrilling, no matter how difficult the content. So my own personal history has played a role in these poems, beyond my aesthetic proclivities.

This was the case in writing the “Last Words of the Dying” section. There was ostensibly less at stake there—combination for poetry’s sake, an attempt to create vignettes in which the words potentially communicate and/or capture similar experiences of passing on. In “Last Words of the Condemned,” especially considering my personal objection to capital punishment, I wanted to have the words “say” more. I wanted to show that condemned deaths can be in turns terrifying and heart-wrenching, but mostly I hoped to illustrate the horror of any governmental or ruling body feeling it has the right to take a life. Each of these poems had a thesis, so to speak, and I often clustered lines together depending on whom the person about to be executed was addressing (“To the Public,” “To Loved Ones,”) or the subject they spoke on (“On God,” “On Innocence”).

Once I felt the chapbook was complete, I realized I had been essentially writing centos. The title *Death Centos* captures the content of the chapbook, but also my feeling about those who spoke these words, as the cento is defined as a form employing words of poets. In most cases the speaker was aware of impending death and spoke. It would be callow or even callous of me to assume that these are words of choice, but my hope is that there is potentially a quiet intent to convey something before death. My own quiet intent is to honor the tragedy, dignity, and/or atrocity of the deaths of those whose words I have used in these poetic texts. To plait a diverse group of voices in such a way is to play with the historical reality of their isolation from one another and with the poetic reality of their being marshaled together.

Diana Arterian was born and raised in Arizona. She currently resides in Los Angeles where she is pursuing her PhD in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Southern California. She holds an MFA in poetry from CalArts, where she was a Beutner Fellow. Diana is the Managing Editor of Ricochet, a publisher of poetry and prose chapbooks. Her chapbook Death Centos is shortly forthcoming from Ugly Duckling Presse, and her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *H_NGM_N*, *trnsfr*, *Two Serious Ladies* and *The Volta*, among others.