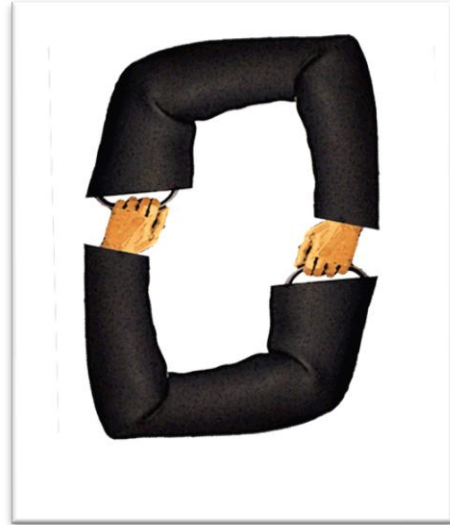


## THE SKULL IS A BANJO: WORKING WITH A WORK IN PROGRESS

There are quite a few places where the topic of 'How Poems Work' is discussed. What do texts do? What happens when reading a text? [Arc poetry magazine](#) has a series, [Sina Queyras's Lemon Hound blog](#) has some thoughtful commentary, the Globe & Mail had a series, and of course, there are many blogs, such as [Ron Silliman's](#), where the blogger takes apart poems and discusses some aspect of what is under the hood. This process is always fascinating to me.



So. I recently discovered a fragment of a poem on my computer. I thought it might be interesting to explore some thoughts as to how this poem fragment works (or doesn't work) and to investigate something of the process of creating a poem, of the process whereby the writer discovers how a poem might work for him or her.

First thought: Chris Piuma made the point that poems aren't slaves. They shouldn't be forced to work, but one should rather, "Go over them and make sure they play." Absolutely. "Working," as in, "this poetry machine is working." But even better: Poems should 'play' the way a good instrument plays, or the way a well written piece of music 'plays.' It has life, there's a vibrant interplay between parts. All work and no play, makes the poem...

Now here's the fragment:

the skull is a banjo  
with a handle for easy  
carrying

the banjo is a wolf

summer days in  
the naked hippocampus  
wolves in the wood



Of course, as I'm writing a poem I'm engaged in a continual process of "how does (should/might) this poem work?" I start with some fragment of text and then, as I wonder where to proceed, I'm continually speculating as to what kind of poem-physics to employ next. Is this a Newtonian poem, a Quantum poem, or something else? Each poem exists in a context of interpretation, of a tradition of reading.

When I'm driving along highways in different places, I have certain expectations about signage, road markings, traffic behaviour, kinds of roads and road surfaces, etc. Driving one night out of Havana along a supposedly four-lane highway, I discovered that there were no lane markings on the road. In the dim light of the headlights, I kept coming upon people and donkeys walking in the shoulder lane. I've been in taxis which have gone into the shoulder of the oncoming traffic lane, just so that they can overtake the cars overtaking the cars in the lane we should have been in.

This is how the poem unfolds for me. Now, of course, I get to decide how the poem is going to behave, or at least, try out a few things and then see how it is behaving. I can explore certain avenues. Maybe the street signs will be made of jello. Maybe the cars and donkeys will stay still and the road will move. Maybe the direction of traffic on the road will constantly switch directions or the houses will become the form of transport. Sometimes I don't understand what is going on but I try to maintain the same kind of 'not-sure-what-is-going-on-ness' throughout the poem. Sometimes I don't know if I'm done. I'm not sure if the text has enough 'depth' of material, if enough traffic can drive or obfuscate along it.

So, to return to that fragment:

the skull is a banjo  
with a handle for easy  
carrying

the banjo is a wolf

summer days in  
the naked hippocampus  
woods howling in the dark wolf



I remember some things about its creation. Troy Lloyd posted a comment about banjos on my blog ("walking down the street/pursued by banjo") so that's the initial source. I'd been working on creating images (posted to my blog) of various things with handles. The infinity sign, briefcases with images of landscapes on them, words, exclamation marks, arms, etc. They were "things with a handle for easy carrying."

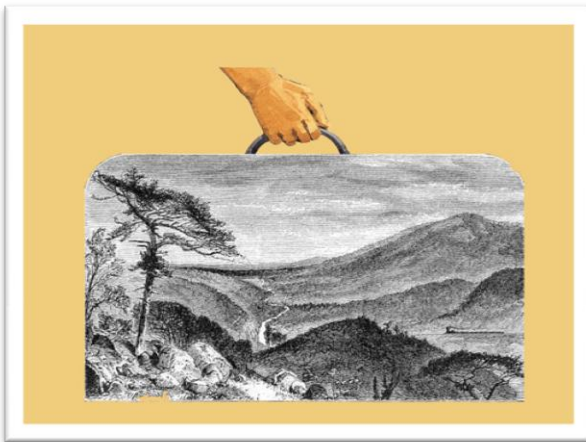
I'd been thinking about wolves as an image. I'd read and listened to some work by Angela Rawlings with owls and wolves in it and had written a few pieces exploring wolves. I've always been interested in various archetypal and folkloric uses of wolves. And of course, my mother was a wolf. No, no. Only kidding: she's an owl. The kind you can use as a stapler.

And then the brain. The brain is a kind of wolf. It, too, is a modern day archetype. The various regions of the brain are like regions of a country, or archetypes of place – the

dark forest, the medulla oblongata, the castle, the pineal gland, and so on. I see images of the brain as a new set of archetypal images. The hippocampus regulates emotion and memory. And its name means “seahorse.” It’s one of the first regions to go in Alzheimer’s patients. Maybe it’d spike the stanza more to switch “naked hippocampus” with “naked seahorse” – but maybe that’d just be sending the reader on a bit of an arcane naked wild seahorse-chase.

There’s certainly a kind of image rhyme between the roundness of the banjo head and the skull. I could see the head as a kind of instrument that one plays. Maybe folklorically. I sit on the porch and play my head. And stereotypically: What is in the mind and is inbred? The first stanza is both sort of funny, surrealish, and waiting further development. It is the first statement of an argument, or maybe, a syllogism. We wait to see what kind of physics operate in this world.

The brain is a kind of wolf, also. That’s seems straightforward, perhaps too straightforward. It prowls. It lurks in deep forests. One can be transformed into the wild, self-creating wolf. A pack of thoughts howl on the other side of day, under the othersun. Brain and wolf: both archetypes. There’s obviously something bathetic in equating the complex and non-human image of a wolf with a banjo. Yes Deliverance, but also Steve Martin being goofy with a banjo. Dueling brainboxes. Is it the Far Side cartoon where the Maestro is surrounded by banjos? (Or are they accordions?) There’s also something plaintive, and ‘poetic’ about the simple statement that ‘a banjo is a wolf.’ There’s some kind of banjo-brained logic. The skull is a banjo. The banjo is a wolf. Now what is the wolf?



‘Summer days’ – halcyon days, a nostalgic moment of retrospection, perhaps a childhood in the country? The opposite to the more dangerous wolves. Maybe we went swimming naked in the ol’ fishing hole. Maybe we went swimming with naked seahorses in the gravel pit of the mind. Hippocampus: memory, emotion, but also: its anatomical naming has something to do with scientific knowledge, rationalism. Again, maybe this is also a bit of a cliché, a bit too simple: the naked hippocampus: raw emotion, raw memory, the unclothed thoughts from childhood.

Originally, the last line was ‘wolves in the wood,’ but that seemed to further expand the cliché of raw emotion. So now, an inversion: “woods howling in the dark wolf.” It’s the woods that howl in the dark wolves rather than the expected opposite. Is this some kind of genetic/species memory, some kind of lupine collective unconscious? Did wolves read the same European folktales that I did in my childhood? The ‘dark wolf’ sounds right out of Jung and out of the Grimm Brothers. Maybe ‘woods howling in the green wolf.’ The Green Man, the Green wolf?

But then again, I'm not stuck with the alliteration of woods/wolves or the assonantal relations of woods/wolves/howl. What about trees? "Trees howling"? Yet 'howling' seems a bit overdramatic, and slants the poem into some kind of over Deep Image, Jungian thing. What about 'Trees smirk in the dark wolf.' Or "trees smirk at..." There's something truly dark about smirking so. And the wolf is also a banjo. I confess. I've smirked at banjos, though I love them. What if the wolf was "a repentant wolf"? That might go somewhere.

That seems to have more energy to continue the poem forward. And it seems the particular physics of this poem is saying that I'm going to have to bring more into this poem, to (not that'd I'd ever mix a metaphor) further develop some of the balls that I've got in the air. Is the wolf going to be something? The wolf is a skull? That'd continue the "logic," or at least the equation structure. And if the wolf was repentant? So, maybe then 'the wolf is a banjo.' That's perhaps inane enough to continue with.

the skull is a banjo  
with a handle for easy  
carrying

the banjo is a wolf

summer days in  
the naked hippocampus  
trees smirk at the repentant wolf

the wolf is a banjo



How does this poem work? *Does* it work? *Will* it work? Stay tuned: Keep your fingers by the pound, your ears to the rhinestone, and always, always, wait for the toaster.

Gary Barwin

