

# The SemiCento

by Bob Holman

**Cento** (sen-to), literally “stitched together.” A late Roman form where a poem is formed from scraps by other authors. Often 100 lines long.

**SemiCento** (se-mi-CHEN-to) Make that 50 lines.

Originally commissioned by the world’s largest bookfair, the Frankfurt Buchmesse, for its 50th anniversary in 1998, “The SemiCento” is a single poem that weaves 50 lines by 50 poets in twenty-nine languages into a poetic fugue you can dance to. In any language.

As if it were a physicalization of the Internet, each SemiCento line is linked to the poem it comes from, the poet who wrote it, the language it was written in, the place and time in which it was written. Within these 50 lines you’ll find links to the whole History of Poetry itself. Not the history of footnotes and dust motes, but the vibrant, controversial and lush language of the world’s greatest writers — from Sappho to Basho, from African chants to Nuyorican rants.

Among the poets you’ll meet are U Sam Oeur, recent émigré to the US from Cambodia, whose poems chronicle the horrors of Pol Pot in a chant-song that speaks heart-to-heart; Mirabai, the wandering Indian poet of the 13th century, the female counterpart of Rumi (Rumi’s here, too). Meet Albert Caeiro, a heteronym (imaginary friend grown up) of Portuguese maestro Fernando Pessoa, who wrote poems for over 80 such characters. Rimbaud, Yeats, Rilke — Ginsberg, Walcott, Neruda. The Bible. Shakespeare. Dante. And Nora Marks Dauenhauer, contemporary Tlingit poet from Nome. Akhmatova. Alamanda, female Troubadour, 15th century. Connections to connectors, voids to words, spirit to dirt, letter by letter (including Kurt Schwitters’ own made-up language, *Merz*).

Spinning through these historical references are four very contemporary, very different poets who turn the performance of *The SemiCento* into a strikingly original form. Dana Bryant, Regie Cabico, Bob Holman, and Edwin Torres have all been involved in the project since its inception, and in the fully-staged version, the audience gets to know them not as actors portraying roles but as performing poets who share the same words as the mentors they quote. To watch the ensemble step through the historical layers of the poem to land in today’s conundrum of a society is to be reminded of poetry’s staying power — and be given an encouraging peek into poetry’s future.

Research for *The SemiCento* was commanded by Chris Connolly, ably assisted by David Grand, and Carley Moore. The performers also contributed to the text, and the piece was created collaboratively, with Edwin Torres serving as Designer. Books made by Biruta Auna of Purgatory Pie Press.

The *SemiCento* is the performative edge of a poetry media project, *The World of Poetry*, a digital anthology underway through Washington Square Arts and Films. (<http://www.worldofpoetry.org>)

## SemiCento

*A birthday card for the Frankfurt Bookfair's 50th Birthday*

- I Oh Poets, why sing of roses? Let them flower in your poems  
Listen!  
In the beginning was the Word  
The world is holy! The soul is holy! The typewriter is holy  
the poem is holy the voice is holy!
- V Sing, O Orpheus! A tree grows in your ear!  
"Tree! You can be a canoe! Or else you cannot!"  
Here are swim-stick words you can use to scare away sharks  
The sound is spirited, green, and full of silence  
The colors ripen on the weightless branch of time
- X A black, E white, I red, O blue, U green  
A word sits on the kitchen counter  
Let the house be dead silent  
Today is the world-pregnant day of judgment  
Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and.'
- XV The prison guard said he didn't like my poetry and bolted the door of my cell.  
This poetry, I never know what I'm going to say.  
It's the long story that never comes to an end  
To write into emptiness  
It has always been this way
- XX The slightest pain hurts me, the slightest joy overwhelms  
What you see here is colorful illusion... corpse, dust, shadow, nothing  
Only the poet sells his soul to separate it from the body that he loves  
Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing.  
The abyss doesn't divide us. The abyss surrounds us
- XXV In the middle years of the journey through life  
My task was to be a sower of eyes  
Grown old, do we hear silence splitting open  
Whistle at the other end and let me sing it.  
And I can also rightly be quiet.
- XXX The stones, the water, the sun speak  
Of the stone I say, "It's a stone."  
O Saints! Ye divine Washermen!  
Please listen as if I were a bubbling spring  
If I had known it was a dream, I would never have wakened
- XXXV A terrible beauty is born.  
The prison cells say nothing, like an animal whose wound bleeds inward.  
When even my grave I remembered no more  
A brand from a brand is kindled and burned, and fire from fire begotten.  
Night after night, I danced on dynamite
- XL Every slam a finality  
As for the hibiscus on the roadside — my horse ate it.  
Come, Hendecasyllables, one and all  
Do not shatter my heart, learn to be still.  
No one will write the final poem... what worries me is the final dream
- VL When I close the book, I open life  
And to search for nothing, that was my intent  
O poets! Poets male and female, listen to the ruins!  
Rinnzekete bee bee nnz krr muu ?  
What was was cool. What was it?
- L Now, today, I shall sing beautifully for my friends' pleasure