

# Abstract Syntax



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Cover illustration by Jamie Woods

### Acknowledgments

Some poems in this collection were first published elsewhere:

"Pawing the Thorns," "Outlines Sweetened," and "Copernican Arrangement" in *Otoliths*

"Prepared Spiral" and "Lapse" in *Stride*

**3by3by3 Poems** in *3by3by3*

"Icicle / Medicine" in *ditch*,

"Tenuous Miniatures" in *Shadowtrain*

Special thanks to Lance Newman for his helpful comments and questions.

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Anopsony Press, 2012

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## Introduction

In the phrase “Abstract Syntax,” by “abstract” I mean the opposite of “representational,” as the terms are used in the visual arts. A normal sentence can be called representational, in that it describes something that could exist in the everyday world:

A swinging pendulum regulates the movement of a mechanical clock.

Now consider this sentence:

A fortunate snow answers the diffusion of a hesitant sash.

The second sentence is semantically abstract; it does not appear to represent anything that could actually exist, and its meaning is unclear or ambiguous. However, its syntax is the same as the first sentence. It conforms to the scheme of representational language.

Since semantic abstraction is characterized by ambiguity of meaning, syntactic abstraction can be characterized by ambiguity of function. In the semantically ambiguous sentence above, the functional relationships among the words are still clear: An adjective modifies a noun, a verb takes an object, etc. Thus, by “Abstract Syntax,” I mean linguistic forms in which the functional relationships among words are ambiguous.

One approach to such a form might attempt to eliminate overt syntax altogether. For example, the words can be randomly arranged on the page, perhaps also omitting functional words such as articles and prepositions:

answers	fortunate
diffusion	sash
snow	hesitant

While this is a worthwhile form in its own right, its flaw for the purposes of Abstract Syntax is that it provides barely any hint of functional relationships, relying heavily on the reader’s imagination to supply them. Only a persistent application of conscious effort prevents the perception of the poem from devolving into a list of unrelated words.

Approaches that retain some elements of syntactic structure and arrangement are more effective, because they engage more of the mental machinery normally involved in reading. Consider this example:

Jumping from time to form an essentially volcanic matter concentrated, and the same moment, when during the astronomical facts happening in temperatures or drank to the projectile passed upon them away in order to happen.

It's similar to the "exquisite corpse" game: Using any given word as a starting point, a short fragment of the sentence is syntactically correct, but the structure of the sentence as a whole doesn't make sense.

The poems in this collection employ a form with an even higher level of functional ambiguity. Each line contains a mixture of the different parts of speech (nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc.) in the same proportions in which they might be found in a normal phrase, but in a random order. For example:

clock movement the of pendulum a mechanical swinging regulates a

As demonstrated above, if the words in a line can be reordered to form a normal, prosaic phrase, there is a temptation to mentally unscramble them. The functional ambiguity is stronger when this is not the case:

sash diffusion the of snow a hesitant fortunate answers a

An additional tactic is to repeat the scheme of each line in one or more subsequent lines, with different "content words" substituted:

sash diffusion the of snow a hesitant fortunate answers a  
roof abandonment the of map a crooked precise shifts a

The recurrence of the scheme creates a vague impression of a syntactic unit with its own logical structure. The reader tends to infer functional relationships among the words, but those relationships remain unclear and ambiguous. Also, I feel that the repetition of structures imparts a pleasingly musical quality.

## Above Sporadically

A wind enclosing areas complex or ashes violent or,  
a ground after plateau merging or excluding dark or,  
many parts trade cohering mixed of some and of,  
many groups so of bodies other somewhere not.

Gravitation disregard an orange and common to,  
times planets,  
many years so of planets other falling not.

Meteors thought an attempt and painted to,  
clouds shine,  
many strata so of clouds other seemingly not.

A medium after art preponderantly or desert intermediate or,  
many measurements species ideas oceanic of some and of.

Improve thought an inch and means to,  
enough sometimes,  
many reports so of origin other though not.

Of numerous things most,  
second both establish and effect inclusion.

Of fields them further,  
you searching inches and corresponded spruce,  
absurdly underlies reserved and harmony forests.

## Pawing the Thorns

brushed I wool flycatchers of the  
climbed I snake hooks of the  
with her same hands time her at the busy  
fitting tastes more soap a and if day

scrubbed I patches cotton of the  
smoked I iron contortions of the  
with her nettle foot blaze her at the well  
squinting dawns more sweet a and if tinge

from the dogwood pipe the wash crocus with  
from the beads tuberous the pine-needles glossy with  
the have saws hat chimney their and straw clothesline

from the nests earth the sand wild with  
the have yellow-billed bushel beds their and playful rosebush

tattletale sparkle a limply shells spiteful for a that is cypress —  
salamander that.  
drench horn a gravelly sunproof crumbling for a that is lichen —  
copper that.

all curse the and in lime dish cinders the got due in  
at the ground beard after shadfish and the and ointment it he made

all stakes the and in tin boards hay the got stove in  
at the shore board after watermelons and the and cistern it he gave  
at the honey yard after cinquefoil and the and bunting it they made

## Outlines Sweetened

arms thrifty breaking weaken keep the ashes shadows of  
machine drying different weaken keep the spires midst of  
power smoke sweaty weaken pass the speed hazy of

few drag when are burnt which this of timbers burn machinery  
few stood when are grown which this of stuffings grew curtains

crow will bolt the one from a provide.  
blow will hammer the one from a blow.  
not and mill added 1/2 to rise to

turpentine dyed,  
cut into planks,  
paste will step the one from a absorb.  
to get had molten who bitter steeping had.

like stick forest was tangled sticky for  
to narrow envy was bored narrowly for

cut into pitfalls,  
to be will twine who inches actually will.

in cracked froth was jumbles crackly by the  
few work when are peeled which this of spillway peel river

by curved basin was fingered curvy like the  
few scratch when are divided which this of laugh divide surprise

outlines sweetened,  
cut into garlands,  
not and clatter cross 1/2 to sway to  
not and pumpkin trust 1/2 to hung to



## Prepared Spiral

Scrappy and marble,  
excitement silver and raising the infinite as,  
observation flavor and unknown the wonderful as.

Marvelous and painting,  
the brighter and milk delicate,  
the coffee and earth solemn,

a one was buoy of of it twist,  
to and shot a listening musical,

a one was surface of of it marvel,  
to and description a prepared spiral,  
reflections lively and precarious the marble as.

Crowns and observation,  
the center and observation uncombed,  
the blanket and detective secular.

## Laps

Abyss the azure on a on sheen,  
scuttle the resistible on a on labor,  
equipped his arms with.

Lunatic gills a by with the entering,  
swing tube a by with the followed,  
regarded his dancing with.

Channel tank a by with the divided,  
which to regular we were in is a worked switch,  
which to measuring we were in is a completed chamber.

Consider the competent is trouble a turn to be to not discernible,  
which to dizzy we were in is a skim operation,  
which to strange we were in is a located costume.

Touch the favorable is slab a turn to be to not determined,  
the it of after start.  
The it of after outside.

Spend the safe is bow a turn to be to not useful,  
remove the safe is safe a turn to be to not considered,  
which to boundless we were in is a guarded square,  
which to cradle we were in is a indulging dungeon.

The it of after thoughts,  
busy his subconscious with,  
spliced his conceptions with.

Charge the satisfactory is pacing a turn to be to not confined,  
is serenade instead renewed of.

Shift the omit is horn a turn to be to not consistent,  
is goggles instead spyglasses of.

Veil the bugle on a on sparks:  
Turned is in swirl,  
happening is in shimmer.

Imagination the blessing on a on decision:  
Described is in dissimilar,  
simply is in simultaneously,  
manifested is in motion.

## Lapse

asking me ask you,  
is done what,  
is strongest what,  
comparing and yet both of suddenly,  
curious doubt a draw the I pause

tell me find you,  
is kind what,  
questions and yet out of looking,  
certain presence a kept the I doubt,  
slight moment a hold the I loss

nor indirect,  
that manner except,  
that moment considering,  
then voice a he was certain and,  
realized those that is who fear of it would I have,  
saw those that is who done of it would I have,  
felt those that is who mistaken of it would I have

or simply,  
thank me tell you,  
that person seeing,  
then change a he was followed and,  
then returned a he was unknown and,  
knew those that is who confidence of it would I have,  
discovered those that is who you of it would I have,  
understand those that is who said of it would I have

## Climbing Shadow

Arisen was that asleep he sound so has it,  
was sounds it frozen in up the high.

A floated up reaching see right such in and been you of shadow ever it  
that breath if need scramble to map.  
So alighted his and was on forehead,  
This that climb isn't to did as tired it so he.  
This that reach being to did as happy it so he.

A floated up lessening see right such in and been you of shadow ever it  
that life if fire look to portion.  
So stopped his and was on stomach,  
This that bring isn't to did as fast it so he.  
This that enter being to did as busy it so he.

Committed was that drowned he nearly so has it,  
was awoken it retreating in up the half-way.

Think as they,  
Rejoice as they,  
see it chance who carried seemed him to,  
a floated up among see right such in and been you of shadow ever it  
that ghosts if road climb to matter.

Eat as they,  
Looked as they,  
see it directly who behind seemed him to,  
see it nothing who watched seemed him to,  
a floated up shifting see right such in and been you of shadow ever it  
that form if lengths give to part.

Earned was that asleep he nearly so has it,  
was object it compelling in up the almost.

## Sung Shuffled

of a a arch perfect pupil  
of a a party large grain  
every they grain for hear fork a because  
turns desk the the she and curl carry him curl

of a a cry trust plaster  
of a a circle warm king  
every they batch for give plate a because  
makes guessers the she she and after continues him guess

be question the would answer  
on is which it ten six a candle

be would the would question  
on is which it soda makes a knot

chases middle the the even and comes does which even  
make might the might second  
be makes the might confederate  
ask membranes the even even and how carry him resemblance

every they error for took mirror a because  
every they opinion for give piano a because

of a a eraser little pile  
be dominoes the should next  
every they canoe for make volcano a because  
every they forfeit for counter bead a because

of a a number man layer  
be makes the possibly remaining  
every they blank for form neck a because  
on is which it crown dim a castle  
every they slip for give whisper a because  
on is which it spring tied a finger

## 3by3by3 Poems

These poems were composed according to Lance Newman's "recipe":

Pick 3 stories from Google News. Using only words that occur in the first 3 paragraphs of each story, make a poem with 3 stanzas, 3 lines each, no more than 60 characters per line. The 3-word title should use a word from each story.

### Study Under Atmosphere

with crushing spray the and caldera in light  
molten surface at and the jets today few sinking  
moved be as subsidence has

night research in and the rumble gently further fitting  
with gargantuan fluff the and hearts from sinking  
few holes through and the auger upward cosmic slumbering

with scratched space the and perception times further  
risen be as particles should  
resembles be as method can

### Oil of Despite

steep the with the if dim  
movement the mixed the if trains  
of stalling held forward increases

machine a made the that opposition  
course the halve the although movement  
in moving held opposition retreat

with moving slump bridge approves  
ways tunnel rival it's to and that only  
effect signs ride there's to and that boost

## Like New Yesterday

related was secretly owned celebrated  
discarded was further established provided  
completely as completely brought

washed broke and taped  
unprepared knows and talented  
already of already expanded

tossed sent and only  
cited blew and now  
finally for finally imagine

## How Particles Realign

Screen the alcove condenses two from A of space.  
Branch the space form two of A from points.  
Space the province broke four with A in secret.

The collisions the communion against.  
The scrutiny the correspondence with.  
Cosmic these and nothing detecting engage streaks to from.

Darkened white and smudges enclosing secede glass to with.  
The abstentions the cone of.  
The yesteray the messages of.

[Note: The typographical error “yesteray” was in the original source.]



## **A Giant Defended**

Bark side out beetle trillion his of signed the earth,  
On boil Portsmouth trees for syrup Opera to,  
On points snake column for Eiffel Island to.

Spinnaker inside out taps spoke his of switch the sign,  
Are still that weighing forward.  
Are hay that clogging sharply,

Switching average out warmth pipeline his of sap the cold.  
On hint Cardiff Giant for troubled landmarks to,  
Are question that sugaring much.

[Note: The Cardiff Giant was a celebrated 19th-century paleoanthropological hoax.]

## **Stop Gap Forwarded**

ballooned net the to jitters bore by a as week-old darker  
bore by a as week-old darker and spur balance derailing  
and spur balance derailing ballooned net the to jitters

began denial the to skepticism rebuff from a as thin next  
rebuff from a as thin next or evening closure responding  
or evening closure responding began denial the to skepticism

disappear setback the to landmark cut to a as stark coherent  
cut to a as stark coherent but moments bay warming  
but moments bay warming disappear setback the to landmark

## **Stay, Rise, Run**

quick pitched will piper reeling post which between  
ominous clad has nectar gathering worry when under  
calm breach had drought enhancing specter when in

heavily for tent a loud quick pitched will piper  
undoubtedly of bid a sharp ominous clad has nectar  
outside by taste a quick calm breach had drought

reeling post which between heavily for tent a loud  
gathering worry when under undoubtedly of bid a sharp  
enhancing specter when in outside by taste a quick

## **Guessed Despite Appearances**

inadvertently an at recognition buttoned asking  
barely the like stems identified having  
a won't song awkward playing desist

an hasn't recognition absent asking changes  
the don't stems wild having switch  
won't apparently awkward from desist imagined

hasn't inadvertently absent at changes buttoned  
don't barely wild like switch identified  
apparently a from song imagined playing

## **Preparing Statement Tentacle**

the inside hides mouth its spoke  
pineapple roof blade and nineteen pure segmented  
the with misspoke hides its mouthful

thought fakes gills and far curious elongated  
smoldering yet cool or hardly  
aflutter back fantastical and very

chip plates tablets and sharp flexible divided  
the at shovel stalks its jaws  
ring screens square and square both befuddled

## **Signature and Anvil**

bring will the signature magic forward reef  
alter has the signature remarkable only shell  
signature ability on is dotted blend the

signature need of is certain example the  
underwater actually signature bring will the anvil  
magic forward reef alter has the anvil

remarkable only shell anvil ability on is  
dotted blend the anvil need of is  
certain example the underwater actually anvil

## Icicle / Medicine

a drip trap the watercolor icicle which,  
a told plucks the bone needle which,  
the went we icicles crowning little and bribing into our of a.  
the went we mortar humble little and rival into our of a.  
that blended each very chime the icicles transparent in,  
that insufficient each very buds the icicle glad in,  
earthly enable opening the and of mouth.  
waiting feeling shoulder the and of suspension.  
neck in buttoned up wet its,  
teeth in picking up brittle its,  
for for a pencil bite.  
for for a substitute icicle.  
for for a icicle supper.  
that peculiar each very twig the icicle tiny in,  
that tingling each very icicle the tea dusky in,  
icicle lets an an spring bought icicle of a out.  
icicle who'd a a nuisance drink icicle of a out.  
approaching doubtless cause the and of knowledge.  
analogies injure works the and of appearance.

a drip trap the watercolor medicine which,  
a told plucks the bone needle which,  
the went we medicines crowning little and bribing into our of a.  
the went we mortar humble little and rival into our of a.  
that blended each very chime the medicines transparent in,  
that insufficient each very buds the medicine glad in,  
earthly enable opening the and of mouth.  
waiting feeling shoulder the and of suspension.  
neck in buttoned up wet its,  
teeth in picking up brittle its,  
for for a pencil bite.  
for for a substitute medicine.  
for for a medicine supper.  
that peculiar each very twig the medicine tiny in,  
that tingling each very medicine the tea dusky in,  
medicine lets a a spring bought medicine of a out.  
medicine who'd a a nuisance drink medicine of a out.  
approaching doubtless cause the and of knowledge.  
analogies injure works the and of appearance.

## Cloverleaf Restored

every mathematics,  
since elevators,

moved dismantled archives in are blueprints and  
sections compact holograms in are planes and

vane invention,  
risen furniture,

have and light mixed exhibitions with lines stages is.  
have and whether constant weight with songs elsewhere is.

every every mathematics mathematics,  
since since elevators elevators,

moved moved dismantled dismantled archives archives  
in in are are blueprints blueprints and and  
sections sections compact compact holograms holograms  
in in are are planes planes and and

vane vane invention invention,  
risen risen furniture furniture,

have have and and light light mixed mixed  
exhibitions exhibitions with with  
lines lines stages stages is is.  
have have and and whether whether constant constant  
weight weight with with songs songs  
elsewhere elsewhere is is.

every folded mathematics sandpaper,  
since molten elevators silt,

moved bellows dismantled flooded archives octopi  
in on are were blueprints yeasts and or  
sections shells compact warmer holograms bees  
in in are are planes bricks and and

vane funnel invention grown,  
risen sprouted furniture moose,

have have and and light paste mixed coated  
exhibitions stingers with with  
lines steel stages fur is is.  
have had and but whether granite constant mixed  
weight flocks with with songs settled  
elsewhere fir is is.

folded sandpaper,  
molten silt,

bellows flooded octopi on were yeasts or  
shells warmer bees in are bricks and

funnel grown,  
sprouted moose,

have and paste coated stingers with steel fur is.  
had but granite mixed flocks with settled fir is.

## Copernican Arrangement

spindle and nearest turning torch turning nearest and spindle  
buckets and each filling itself filling each and buckets  
millstone and whole sifting carrier sifting whole and millstone

these levers round round levers these  
flying sails above above sails flying

timber shipbuilding inner grooves a a grooves inner shipbuilding timber  
circuit grinding lunar pond a a pond lunar grinding circuit

of sphere circumambient the day dwells day the circumambient sphere of  
with movement trapped the gear revolves gear the trapped movement with  
wheel centering fixed sun a a sun fixed centering wheel  
with movement trapped the gear revolves gear the trapped movement with  
of sphere circumambient the day dwells day the circumambient sphere of

circuit grinding lunar pond a a pond lunar grinding circuit  
timber shipbuilding inner grooves a a grooves inner shipbuilding timber

flying sails above above sails flying  
these levers round round levers these

millstone and whole sifting carrier sifting whole and millstone  
buckets and each filling itself filling each and buckets  
spindle and nearest turning torch turning nearest and spindle

## Five Corners

### Nectar Magnetic

a of cider and mute space coral and by glittering burned.  
a of peeled and weak litter acid and by serve spurred.

and monitor can electrons fall.  
and say can honeybees snow.

a of raw and fog piece blade and by weighed lighted.  
a of lemon and sodium forest limbs and by serve lighted.

folded energy magnetic the form.  
nectar magnetic whole the creating.

### Cattle Wisest

nothing while dawn there remained there undergo walking,  
nothing while grass there seems there but tingling,  
the palms frantic their and threshed taste with.  
the herd armed their and digest path with.

nothing while guns there lingered there till approaching,  
the fur untouched their and ripen stings with,  
antennae truffle seen animated of.  
cattle wisest seen havens of.



## **Closet Sunlight**

tangled clothes a fill tongue,  
border strong a wring horse,  
sink moved they may thinner be into to grains.  
fit tapped they may solid be into to sheets.

a have is we elastic wagon tap.  
gone shocking a wash wind,  
object purity peculiar together with the a and mingled.  
froth mechanical tuning together with the a and beaten.

a have is we evaporated glass disk.  
a have is we tender croquet column.  
closet sunlight marked together with the a and sloping.

## **Oarsman Shrugging**

oarsmen the hammock current the in load seems,  
whales grazing for,  
obstinate the barren rod the in cart seems,  
plastering farm for,  
burning lilac for,

pores the guttered industry the in presenting broad,  
screws poisonous flat or,  
meanest the bleaching haunts the in wake rotates,  
rafter fresh glancing or,  
pride switching jaws,  
oarsman shrugging calloused.

## There Wedge

sunrise to from say submerged,  
\$20 to from say torn,  
marking of and measuring one of wields the as the spruce glimpse.  
organs of and pocketing one of reaches the as the ear nest.

stone some of closed a lotus,  
strictly some of pod a pitch,  
plunge and drains the into wrenched.  
neck and milk the into boned.

a very circle escaping is a from thin on turquoise,  
a very fold torn is a from rare on kettle,  
there soup is a is chlorine heard,  
there wedge is a is broken merely.

## Freshwater City

Thematic to work considered techniques are,  
Wooded to town compared colonies are,  
the sometimes process and of driftwood another,

Architectural to another transferred days are,  
the carried power and of upwelling floors,  
the suddenly bend and of rivers carefully,

Areas lighthouse granite include,  
formed communication in several of all were they kinds.  
heard roads in continuous of all were they manner.

Slowly although cause smaller,  
woven puzzles in nature of all were they aspects.

Are of species the colonies many built sedimentary reason barriers across for  
general rivers decoration to,  
momentum lurching large yet ancient till by of caused buildings,  
quantities building along although apartment rock by of worn faults,  
is building a beyond every there of patent piece the to economy,

Are of species the maps many built special area barriers across for  
meet rivers instance to,  
subordinate combine units that,  
before nothing structures that,  
is stairs a overhead every labor of floor portion the to leading,

of designs pipelines are members.  
of lakes emblems are part.  
of animals others are neither.

Belief the century till cottage the widely earnest found they that concern,  
regional evergrowing trace,  
allows with them confidence which.  
gives with them reproduction which.

Discovered the never near finest the late held continue they that changed,  
enlightenment whose bite,  
walls splayed the sleep of.  
decay negative the tonality of.

Are of species the beavers many built game basis barriers across for  
minimize rivers health to,  
salt per salinization as different such and,  
boiled finer force as bricks such and,  
contained usually weather colony the archives the word also under industry  
and the thrust on us the is the begin affected same or to,

Are of species the common many built management ideas barriers across for  
plan rivers everyone to,  
this for it organization,  
this for it isolation,  
contained usually leadership body the archives the cast also endangered coast  
and the rely on old the is the tribes study surrounding or to,

the city including.  
the whole maintain.  
the world both.

It while will throw increased,  
occupied for plenty of and most have grateful their food,  
plan for been of and most have unpretending their providing,  
within buried of food under arteries seal the area carried skeleton world  
the can the highly we average that.

It effect will occupy after,  
features for spoken of and most have important their designs,  
beneath off of museum's down deep become the cameras urbanized interior object  
the can the planes occurs flickering that.

Stock of the lodge of order world's part to mail each hub is the.  
Use of the scale of hidden main composed to architecture great study is the.

## Tenuous Miniatures

That could which is,  
was and the careless so rippling,  
was the and sweet so between,  
hollow in sleep as apple-tree,  
has and plowed lowest.

Has and crowded deep,  
are bloom of as looped its,  
meek were if bared on with seeming flame did,  
are doubted of as seen uncounted.

Machines that the chimney in,  
sloping were if barn with on slower did lawn,  
into flowered forward is this,  
halted the that fieldstone in,  
the all to wondered under wing,  
are finches of as chaffing our.

Silently tower then glass would,  
was and the straight so tightly,  
though are was soundless they,  
dream of being often.  
Creation of being almost.  
One his thoughts of,  
fancied in vacancies as telephone.

His forethought though trains contradict,  
their theories even purposes suppose.  
Shown coins since coincidence would,  
hand of ladled full.  
If was are satisfied carrots.

Into spreading stream is this,  
which that could is,  
learned into wide is this,  
gilded were if weak with on close did pines,  
was the and cold so curtain,  
has and look ashore.

All to fair the even fall,  
all to met the snowing swings,  
the all to grayness leaking evening.

Anopsony Press, 2012