Poetry written by committee? It should not be possible, yet my family and friends often play a game which produces something like poetry. Short stories, too.

The game is very simple. Four or five of us sit in a circle. We each write a poetic-sounding line on the top of a piece of paper and then fold the sheet down so no one else can see, leaving only the last word in the line (appropriately punctuated) visible. We each pass our sheet to the person next to us who writes another line and folds it down. And so forth, until everyone has written one line on every sheet.

Some nights the resulting 'poems' -- out of respect for the art, perhaps we should call them pseudoems -- are meaningless and only barely amusing. But other nights we get surprising and consistent results. For example,

Where were the words?
The chiming steeple calls the tune
Through the answers of your eyes
That never sought my own.

If this were a real poem, it would not be hard to find a meaning for it. It is about language. The poet feels cut off from his source which is nothing but language itself. Language (the chiming steeple) beckons the poet yet then refuses his artistic entreaty, for language's beckoning does not single out this or that person for its call. Thus language's eyes have never sought the poet's own, although the nonlinguistic appeal of language itself announces to all who can heed its presence. This turning-away by language turns out to be the true source of poetry, as the pseudoem under discussion makes clear: language's renunciation of the poet results in the pseudoem.

Or something like that. As may now be obvious, much of the fun of this game consists in the discussions of the pseudoems.

Sometimes one has to make allowances for a certain poetic vagueness, as in the following pseudoem:

What does the sparrow mean by this it sings?
I saw a droplet singing as

The droplet? Surely? The identity of the droplet is now unknown.

Or,

The droplet's droplet? Surely?

Or,

The droplet's droplet? Surely?

We occasionally become moronic, lines knowing nothing, managed to include

Every effort sometimes the life. For example:

So
To
So
A
And

In this pseudo...
This pseudoem is ambiguous. Who was failing to think and utter? Me? The droplet? Or does this point to the fundamental unity of self and droplet? Surely the pseudoem has in mind Aristotle's doctrine of the identity of the knower and known, although perhaps in its later formulation by Brentano or Husserl. There is a sophomore term paper in here somewhere.

Certainly not all pseudoems are in the same style. Sometimes we get concatenations of images which yet manage to have a Higher Meaning:

Boyhood memories jarred by faded house and storefront,
From window to window, laughing at their reflections
From a two-way mirror, the image gone.
Or,
Bubble colors changing on the air,
You swallow and it burns,
The frost's flame shivers and dies,
Is reborn, never is noticed.
Or,
This searching hand upon the ancient stone
Too dull to burnish your study
Of the meanings of a face,
The face of the guilty one.

In this pseudoem, the 'she', obviously refers to the Other Woman, whereas
the poet is the mouse. Cheese, then, must stand for temptation.

Or consider the following pseudoem:

The English garden blooms profusely.
The rain fell in torrents throughout the day.
And like the moon by day,
And the day after, until the end of all to be --
The meek first, and always the last.

It does not make much sense until one applies a certain interpretative transformation: reverse the order of the lines.

There is a rather sneaky variation on this game. After all the pseudoems in one round have been read out, announce that you would like to hear each participant's total contribution read as one poem. You have written the first line of one pseudoem, the second of another, the third of another, and the fourth of another. Have them read out in the order in which you composed them, and do the same for all other participants. The resulting pseudoems usually show the consistency of each contributor, and often reveal something interesting. For example, the shy one among us has written four steamy lines, the pacifist has written four bloodthirsty lines.

We also have had fun with another variation. If four of us are playing, we let the sheets go around twice so we get eight-line compositions, and we write short (very short) stories. If five or more play, the sheets only go around once. Instead of fiction, we should call these stories "artifictions".

Often we find that if we make up a title afterwards, the artifictions become more meaningful. For example, after hearing this one, we decided to call it simply "Waiting".

The darkness felt cool on his wounds. / Slowly he felt consciousness returning. / It was a quarter past twelve, and he knew. it was too late. / The clock was always ticking, the hour always late. / No, that wasn't true. Not any more. / Then, deep in the grocery bag, he found one, / one more time. Time was the only thing he had. / It had been that kind of year.

The following artifiction, called "The Third Ring", makes three points:

She was the fat lady from the circus; he was the sword swallow-er. / The razor needed stropping, and he was ashamed he could not bring himself to find it. / What was it? Who the hell cared? / He had no feeling left, only a plan of action. / We had always acted, pretended. / He thought for once he had understood. / "Look where the light is," she murmured kindly. / Her kindness was the final insult.

First, this:
A mediocrity shows that else's style.
Barthelme. "What was interest in all the last"

Sometimes genre. For at the bottom:

The and hang was began "Put in the

Although I e well set up too often every and the result easy. We have artifictions which are just still

Learn base only come of each come

A few hi in artifiction that the people to end your ation. This person after Them Both setting up the each pseudo emerge on to imbue them come out be
First, this artifiction demonstrates the importance of the last line. A mediocre artifiction can be saved by a good last line. Second, it shows that artifiction, as well as pseudoems, can end up in someone else's style. "The Third Ring" sounds to me like a parody of Donald Barthelme. Third, it shows how laziness can mar a work. The line "What was it? Who the hell cared?" was written by someone losing interest in the game, and who resented being passed the word "it" as the last word in the line before his.

Sometimes at the bottom of one or two of the sheets we specify a genre. For example, the following piece had "Cowboy Story" written at the bottom so everyone knew to aim his remarks in that direction.

The white horse still seemed out of reach. / He raised his arm and threw the lariat over the highest branch of the infamous hanging tree. / "That noose's been waiting for me ever since I was a buckeye crawdad," he said. / So he drew the gun again. / They'd hang him this time, he was through. / And they really began to let go, whooping and hollering and wavin' their hats. / "Put up them guns, boys. We don't take to outlaws too kindly in this town." / "What town?" the horse ventured.

Although I enjoy this artifiction (mainly because of the twist ending, so well set up by the first line), I am not very fond of this variation, for too often everyone writes a funny line exaggerating the genre's style, and the result does not hang together very well. Some genres are too easy. We have never had luck with science fiction; hard-boiled detective artifiction comes out better. The following "True Confessions" artifiction worked out fairly well, but too often the ones in this genre are just silly. We entitled it "I Loved Two Men -- And Lost Them Both":

Lean and tan in the summer sun, Brain strode / into a church basement where he seized her hand and said, / "Love knows only what it believes." / "Oh well then ...". No words would come. / And then he went. / The two of them gazed, aware only of each other, into one another's eyes. / The tears would not come. Not yet. But soon.

A few hints may make the game go more smoothly for you. First, in artifiction, avoid naming your characters, for it is extremely unlikely that the people writing after you will use the same names. Second, try to end your line with a provocative word, and, if possible, some punctuation. Third, don't always go for the big line; be willing to set up the person after you. For example, in "I Loved Two Men -- And Lost Them Both", the author of the second line generously ended on "said," setting up the next person for some enjoyable quotation. Fourth, read each pseudoem out loud twice; sometimes the meaning does not fully emerge on the first reading. Also, read them dramatically, striving to imbue them with significance. Fifth, encourage speed. They seem to come out better when the participants have written quickly, instead of...
pondering. There really is nothing to ponder anyway. Finally, discour­
age participants from trying to be funny. One person I know thinks that
there is nothing funnier than inserting into pseudoems lines like "He
smelled like a dead fish and the flies were retching". We do not play
with him any more. The aim is to write a line which will blend into
the whole, not one that stands out.

It would be unethical and otherwise improper to submit pseudoems
anywhere as real poems. Especially if they were to be published.

HOW TO MAKE AND SELL ORIGINAL CROSSWORDS

William Sunners, the author of a 256-page book published by
Sterling (1981) for $12.95, has constructed and sold crossword
and other word puzzles for nearly half a century. Delayed in
publication more than a year, this book presents in considerable
detail the "tricks of the trade" that he found useful in developing
his markets, and describes the types of puzzles (words with pic­
tures) which he found most saleable. The book is aimed more at
the word-tyro than the average Word Ways reader: for example,
he devotes one ten-page chapter to the numbering of the boxes in
a crossword, and in another chapter he advises the would-be sub­mitter to avoid "erasable bond" (slippery to handle, soils editor­
ial fingers) as well as controversial commemorative stamps.

One-fifth of the book contains a listing of Webster's Collegiate
words by letter-length, and another section reproduces 33 blank
diagrams for the constructor unable to design his own.

Sunners' book provides a glimpse of a number of successful word-
puzzle ideas of the past; the reader should bear in mind, however,
that it is hazardous to predict from these what form the money-
makers of the future will take. He strongly urges his readers to
go after untapped regional and special-interest markets (frater­
nal and religious publications, educational magazines, etc.) in­
stead of the more prestigious markets such as Games or the New
York Times -- wise advice, if his readers are as inexperienced
as he assumes.

A WORD

LEE A. GILK
Dallas, Texa

Can you make:
1. elocution
2. ventriloq
3. circumlo
4. Oblocuto
5. brevio
6. somniloq
7. colloqua
8. tristilouq
9. locution
10. altiloqu
11. prolocut<
12. eloquenc
13. dentiloqu
14. grandilo<
15. allocutio
16. loquaci0
17. interlocu
18. amphoril
19. soliloquy
20. fattiloque