

For Refrigerator Poets, Verse Builds Bodies and Minds

by Con Chapman

SOMERVILLE, Mass. By day, Toby Shasniff is an installer for Fallmere Appliances, a retailer with a large share of the local market for those who find big-box stores in the suburbs hard to reach or intimidating. “It’s a pretty menial job, but I take pride in it,” he says as he tightens a dishwasher’s rubber hose to a faucet with a wrench. “Every now and then a housewife short of cash will tip me with wild, uninhibited sex for putting in a stackable washer-dryer combo, but that’s pretty rare.”

“Thanks for the wild sex—let me know if you have any problems with the lint trap.”

By night, however, Shasniff moves from the mundane to the sublime as a participant in the New England region’s growing number of refrigerator verse competitions, a sort of cross between a strong man contest and a poetry slam. “I go to open mic poetry nights sometimes, and it’s just not the same,” Shasniff says with barely-concealed disgust. “Those guys are out of shape from smoking and ‘crafting’ their delicate little sestinas.”

In refrigerator verse competitions poets must bring their own appliance to the stage, often after climbing steep stairs to cramped night clubs and maneuvering around tight corners. “The essential tools of my art include a set of magnetic poetry tiles and a heavy duty appliance dolly,” says Bobbi-Jean Nason, one of the few female refrigerator poets, who grew up bucking hay in Missouri. “I try to stick to traditional poetic forms, but one night I dropped a crate of sonnets on the stairs and I had to improvise with free verse.”



Dolly: Essential tool of the poet's craft

Refrigerator poets are locked in a struggle for the soul of contemporary poetry with so-called “flarf” poets, who compose with the aid of computer-generated web searches, and “conceptual” poets, for whom the concept behind a poem—such as reading the white pages of Shaker Heights, Ohio, while taking a bath in public—is more important than the quality of the verse or its content.



" . . . to ask if I used deodorant is a question that smells itself."

A fourth group, the "performative" poets, seek to produce poems that have an immediate impact on society rather than merely causing "a little ripple in a stagnant pond of academics," says Rod Huden, a former practitioner who is now confined to the Ernie Doerr Home for Wayward Boys in Keokuk, Iowa, after passing one of his poems to a bank teller:

*read my work close
i don't write trash
small bills only
hand over the cash*

Shasniff is running late and tired tonight, having just finished a Sub-Zero refrigerator "install" at an MIT professor's starkly-furnished condo in Cambridge, for which he had to park a block away because of the neighborhood's density.



*"You're all set in your kitchen quite Quaker.
It'll take a few minutes to start the ice-maker."*

"I'm going more for a freezer effect tonight rather than a mere refrigerator poem," he says as he takes magnetic tiles in hand and prepares his thoughts extemporaneously.

*Bird's Eye peas—I must get on my knees
to reach thee, sequestered as you are beneath
Eskimo pies, to which I'll treat myself after
eating my vegetables, starch and meath.*

Available in print and Kindle format on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) as part of the collection *poetry is kind of important*.

