My ideas about art have never been clear. It's tied in with the Dreamtime, with the subjective; associations like gnarled roots lacing up a jungle floor. I'm a child of Modernism and Post-modernism; a naive believer in duende and irony.

One of my earliest memories involves pre-literacy. I had a Peanuts coloring book; some of the pictures featured blank speech balloons for the characters. This was fascinating to me; I'd obviously already absorbed somehow (talk about media-saturation!) the knowledge that these blank balloons meant that the characters were talking to one another; but I couldn't write yet, so I had no language I could scribble down. Instead, I drew lines in the speech balloons—jagged lines, like waveforms, and I oscillated by crayon waveforms in rhythm to what I wanted the characters to say. This must be what writing is.

In the end, it's all translation. Communication requires mimesis; right now, I'm stringing a daisy chain of tokens together, each of which you can apprehend and appreciate, because we're speaking the same language. This is convention; as Saussure pointed out, it's arbitrary. I am trying to convey something about this piece Tone Row Poetry that I've been working on, so I'm tracing with a crayon some jagged lines that by convention mimic what I need to tell you about it.

There's probably a lot of noise on both ends of this: on my side, there's a fan whirring just two feet away. It's late Spring in Lorain, Ohio. If I listen I could probably hear children outside, finally released from school, playing. None of that is part of the message, the string of tokens I am passing to you (that you can only understand by convention, dig, which is arbitrary). At least it wasn't until this paragraph.

Tone Row Poetry lives at the hinge of translation and generation. Yes, it's a writing machine; I've made many writing machines, as if "writing machine" were some primal form for me, some basic expression of desire. But Tone Row Poetry is a writing machine unlike most you've encountered. It's not a "poemgen" application—it does not alter your input per se. You have a set of tools called language. With this set of tools, you arrange strings of tokens which you desire to pass to me. That you desire to pass your tokens to me is another issue (this is also why language arts are so slippery; working with language, trying to distill something startling and true, is like working with worn-down coins whose faces can be barely seen; language is the ultimate found object).

Tone Row Poetry maps the twelve tones of the Western scale, plus some wildcard sounds, some odd coloring, to the alphabet. Arnold Schoenberg, in an effort to explore new melodic territory in Western
music, proposed a method of composition commonly called serialism, in which all twelve tones are arranged sequentially in a string, sifting through the tokens to find coherence. It was one of Western Art Music's first encounters with atonality, the restlessness of melodic forms, refusing to settle on one key.

Tone Row Poetry, however, is not an exercise in stochastics. The fact that "cloud" means to me that gorgeous tuft moving slowly on an Ohio sky resonates in many ways; not the least of which is the arbitrariness of these tokens, c-l-o-u-d, coming to re-present (to present again) that phenomenon to me. Arbitrary, yes; chaotic, no. I understand words based on convention; you understand this essay because we share an imposed state, the state of re-presentation, the passing along and encrypting into these conventional forms the phenomena we find. This is how I see the issue of control in Tone Row Poetry; the poet Patrick Herron once rightly complained on an e-mail list that poetry generators strive for chaos, but end in tighter control. Tone Row Poetry is in its essence control; I have left bits of the work open to chance, but the algorithm at its heart is very solid.

Does Tone Row Poetry represent a node of utter control in terms of the network? Yes and no. Like language, the mapping of notes to alphabet keys is arbitrary and conventional; but language is generative, and so is Tone Row Poetry. The user may not determine all of the piece's content, but in using the piece she does participate in its manifestation. And since the work keeps a log of user input on the turbulence.org server, she takes part in the creation of a communal text as well. While Tone Row Poetry could work as standalone software, it is this facet that places its utility smack in the middle of network politics. The user is free to type/play anything she wants, despite the control, and anything she types will be preserved next to everything everyone else has written into the piece. The free radical of generativity becomes bound in networked art such as this.

Tone Row Poetry wouldn't have been possible without the help of many friends, and I will take a moment to thank them. Turbulence.org and New Radio and Performing Arts deserve a great deal of credit for this work, as it was a chance they took, funding a ne'er-do-well like myself. Michael Kapalin helped set up and take some of the photographs, and was a great enabler. My mother, Barbara LaCook, and my sister, Leslie Schmidt, put up with the late nights and early mornings that became routine. Sharon Bradley brought me food sometimes. Joshua Lewis helped give me the time I needed. Renee Vaverchak loved and supported me as I gathered the knowledge it took to do this.

I hope, above all, that the user has fun with this piece.

bliss,

Lewis LaCook
Lorain, Ohio, United States

June 15, 2004