A home is a collage of preconceptions of rooms, all the pre-made elements of kitchen, living room, bedroom, bathroom incorporated together to form a picture of a home. We tend to lean towards the safe and the known, sometimes this feels like home, rather than a new and unknown place, a home away from home. We like our trips away to feel familiar, like we haven’t really gone anywhere, and like the holidays in films and books. We should be able to find all the components in one of those felt kits we had as children where you can place all the little bits (inflatable ring, bucket, ice cream, shell) on a yellow sand and blue-sky background.

Writing is like creating a felt kit from scratch for a place that doesn’t yet exist. When I write, I don’t want my stories or poems or essays to be a list of impeccable sentences I collected and then string together; neither freely whisked blocks, nor delicately painted tiles in a uniform mosaic. I’m not enthralled by language per se. I let myself start and be led by images and scraps I’ve found while rifting and ticking through everyday life. I let them hang in my mind like a mobile of abstract and distinct impressions, shifting in the draughts of breath that are my moods and realisations. Some are clear and specific: an object, a plate of food, a face. Others are sprawling, bleeding and vague: a colour, a building, a variety of the weather. A word, a face. Others are clear and specific: an object, a plate of food, from home. We like our trips away to feel familiar, like we want to form a picture of a home. We tend to lean towards the safe and the known, letting them lead us. Whenever I have writer’s block I use Wikipedia - I hit the ‘Random article’ option and take whatever it gives me to write a new piece, arranging those different parts together to make a story or poem. The aim is to make something that feels consistent and using the frame of a story while using disparate found material. When leading workshops, I get writers and translators to make poems from short stories - picking lines and words from someone else’s story to make their own poems - as well as literal collages.

I break down the lines into their little elements, which appear scattered about in the German word order, then rearrange them into an English order. At this early stage, every line of the translation is an individual collage, disconnected from its neighbouring sentences because I composed it in isolation. As I edit, I smooth them together to form one whole image-text, like puzzle parts knifed over groups of dots. A flattening can happen when everything becomes symbolic. In his book After Lorca, Jack Spicer warns directly against this: ‘I would like to make poems out of real objects. The lemon to be a lemon that the reader could cut or squeeze or taste - a real lemon in a newspaper is a real newspaper. He wants a lemon to be a real lemon because it’s to record a tangible live-life living-life, living-giving lemon, not to commentate on the sharpness of emotion, the bitterness of existence or the seamlessness of disappointment.

It’s so electrifying when we manage to write or translate something unusual, or even without precedent: the description of an apparently unique thing or something that hasn’t appeared in literature before, a seemingly wholly new metaphor, an unexpected sequence of events. When you lack of the author surprises me with something difficult, something so specific, something I’ve never read or experienced before, something that doesn’t cross so easily into a new iteration, it excites me. Incidentally, I think this is why I like art galleries: they’re filled with rooms like no room you’ve ever seen before, with unclear uses and mysterious functions, offering new ways of living you’ve never considered.

Collages can tell us about ourselves - both through the making of them, and through seeing them form us. Whenever I have writer’s block I use Wikipedia - I hit the ‘Random article’ option and take whatever it gives me to write a new piece, arranging those different parts together to make a story or poem. The aim is to make something that feels consistent and using the frame of a story while using disparate found material. When leading workshops, I get writers and translators to make poems from short stories - picking lines and words from someone else's story to make their own poems - as well as literal collages. Both are in their own way collages, telling the story of the attendees’ own reading experience, their own tastes and what just jumps out to them and lingers. For the latter, I ask them to pick an article in a newspaper and make a collage from old magazines to illustrate the information and feeling of the article; again, as a way of expressing or translating the writing into a unique pictorial form that displays what they see in the piece. I want them to feel empowered by their own readings and their own unique voices, which don't need to be stifled when they translate or write literature (whose voices are forced to change in the production of literature?), as much as I want to consolidate the reader's own biases (what do others see in the same text that I don't? Am I looking too narrowly, or making too many assumptions, or relying on cliché and stereotypes in my own writing?)

We can collage when we’re inspired by source material, but also in the absence of any such inspiration. Before moving cities recently, I went through my pile of unread copies of The New Yorker because I wanted to make a collage. I was inspired by an illustrator who uses collage to great effect, and what had always struck me about The New Yorker was how many times images of starry skies appeared - in cartoons, in photos, in illustrations. I collected them, then cut-out shapes usually doodle-like, and arranged them on a sheet of blue card. Of course the essays and short stories and poems I had read in the magazine, this is what had caught my eye, this starry sky motif. What if I thought to myself, this was one of the integral things about The New Yorker? Not only the highly recognisable house style, but this subtly recurring sky style? Had it affected my reading, helped to create a night-time atmosphere at any time of the day when I was reading? A nocturnal tone. Was this possible?

The collage had been there all along really, I had just needed the pieces and brought them together to celebrate it. Not perhaps I had just wanted to do something productive with the inert magazines. Translating thoughts into writing or writing into more writing makes me feel useful, so the collage was presence that came out of the lack of my reading, a recognition that I had not been engaging in, an artful and cathartic acknowledgement that I had stopped reading during the pandemic; cricket chirping at night. And it made me feel satisfied; out of reappropriated snippets of Nothing had made something.

This essay, too, started life as a collage. I sat and rearranged the composition of my ideas so that your eye would follow my orchestration of highlights and lowlights, so you would get an experience and not just a collection of sentences and stories. For the latter, I hope you cut it up, rearrange it, recycle it into a new form that does something for you.