

Time Travel

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Abstract

This dissertation is the culmination of a program of study designed to both prepare me as a literary historian and develop my skills and understanding of the genre as a poet. To that end, the critical introduction focuses on the contemporary lyric sequence, while the collection of poetry is composed of several lyric sequences carefully ordered to expound the literary themes of time and memory.

Preface

During my training as a scholar, I have struggled to reconcile two opposed interests: the highly imaginative work of popular genre fiction that hooked me on reading as a child, and the high art of the literary tradition, which drew me to the study of literature later in adolescence. Certainly the academic world has turned its eye toward well-written contemporary genre fiction in recent years as a worthy subject of criticism, but the canon is still dominated by realistic fiction. The world of poetics is certainly dominated by the realistic as well, and attempts to incorporate fantastic elements into poetry are rarely well-received by the literary world at large.

One of the hallmarks of literary scholarship is its insistence upon situating literature into some kind of paradigm. As a high school and undergraduate student, I was drawn to the complexity revealed by analyzing literature with a historical eye, but this only scratches the surface of literary theory and the many lenses that can be used to read a text. In my graduate study of both literature and creating writing, I admit that I have long felt like an outsider when it comes to theory. Even the idea of grounding my own writing in a particular field or paradigm has felt too much like a gimmick to me.

I realize now that I felt that way because those relationships between text and theory cannot be forced. The connections have to happen organically, naturally, at least for me. Imposing out of requirement a framework of ideas that does not fit will not work for me in my writing, scholarly or creative. Through studying the poetic sequence, however, I realize there is a way to link the individual experience of the poem with the collective human experience. In fact, a poem will not be a much of a poem without that

link. My study of the sequence has shown me that as a poet I can forge a link from image to theme to form to theory. For me this connectivity emerged through meditation on the poetic sequence and its relationship with chronology and by extension, time. This connection opened up a new world of possibility to me, one in which philosophy, fantasy, physics and poetry could intersect in ways that I had been able to perceive in the work of others but had not been able to envision in my own work.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 The Lyric Sequence and the Struggle against Entropy	1
Defining the Lyric Sequence	3
Fidessa: An Elizabethan Sonnet Sequence	6
Modern to Contemporary Sequences.....	8
<i>Theodore Roethke's "North American Sequence"</i>	11
<i>Lucille Clifton's Dream Sequence</i>	16
Sequence and Time	20
<i>Time and Entropy</i>	24
<i>Time Travel Paradigm</i>	25
Chapter 2 Manuscript Introduction	34
Chapter 3	42
Time Travel: Poems	42
superluminal.....	42
Living Alone	43
Broken Time Machine	44
Time Travel.....	45
Glimpse	47
Forget	49
Resurrection	50
Phantom	52
Story	53
Airplane Nightmare	54
Descent of the Dying	55
Risk	56
Identity Crisis.....	58
Fire	59
In the Winter	60
Hawk Circling.....	61
inertia	62
Haunting.....	63
At Thanksgiving in the Kitchen.....	64
I Love and I Hate	65
I Tell Myself	66
Disorient.....	67
History Book for the Lit Lover	68
The Naked Greeks.....	69
Loneliness	70
Parking Lot.....	71
Road Song.....	72
Telltale	73
Bridesmaid Dresses.....	74

We Are Gathered	75
Left Hand	76
retrocausation.....	77
Cutting Room Floor	78
In the Creek.....	79
Once	80
First Almost Sex	81
First Love.....	82
The Distance between My Mother and Me.....	83
Ruins	84
Confession to a High School Crush.....	85
Over My Shoulder.....	86
High School Reunion.....	87
Hurt	88
I-40.....	89
Like a Little Girl	90
An Aunt's Lament.....	91
Effusion.....	92
Entropy of All Things	93
limina	94
Kentucky Apocalypse	95
Lake Tree	96
Hologram	97
Joseph Stalin: Video Game Villain.....	98
Breakfast with Christ	100
Specific Gravity	101
Fictitious Force: Centrifuge	102
Post-adolescent Angst.....	103
Litany for the Expectant.....	104
Blood and Water	105
Morning, Fractured	108
The Only Poem	109
References.....	111
Vita.....	116

Chapter 1

The Lyric Sequence and the Struggle against Entropy

Sequence is of great importance to the lyric poet, particularly the consideration of the sequence of poems within a larger collection. The poet of today has essentially two options for publication in media with fairly high circulation: publishing poems individually in journals or anthologies, and publishing poems collectively in a chapbook or book-length collection. Occasionally we see calls for sequences of poems; recently I saw an ad requesting a group of poems “related or unrelated.” Happy is the day when the poet receives notice that not one but two of the three to five poems sent in a submission packet have been accepted by a journal. At the editor’s discretion, these poems may or may not appear adjacent to one another in print. Practically speaking, the book-length collection of poems will include some poems already published in journals or anthologies. When the poet collects these and other poems to appear in book form, something must unify them. That unity may coalesce through common theme, form, subject, imagery, chronology, or a combination of elements, but collections are hardly thrown together without attention to a unifying principle.

In *The Modern Poetic Sequence*, M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall remind us that

a work of art is made by a human being and reflects his or her empirical life and psychological set and times and general stock of ideas... But as a work of *art* it is a construct, improvised to hold some sort of equilibrium

or balance, however frailty, against disorder: especially, against its own internal disorder. (2)

A poem is a work of art on this order; it is a construct designed to make some sense of the chaos of the human experience. A poem is a construct, but a poetry collection (or even a shorter sequence) is a construct composed of constructs in order to create order within the body of a work. The sequence may be like a musical composition, an infinite variety of rising and falling notes, crescendos and decrescendos. Or it may be like a card trick, relying on misdirection to find new ways to present a common theme or meaning.

Poets and students of lyric poetry often talk about the movement within a poem, indicating some kind of shift—in tone, mood, theme, or ideology. Some kind of relationship exists among the lines, between the beginning and the end. The act of sequencing is essential to expressing that relationship; different sequences of the same images or metaphors might take on different meanings. Within the poem, sequence then is how a poem expresses movement.

Expand that idea to a group of poems. If a poet has a theme or a concept to express, and it takes more than one poem to grapple with that concept, the poet will give careful thought to the ordering of those poems. A single poem allows the poet to strike a single note with fervor. A more complex poem might strike a chord, multiple notes simultaneously.¹ But sometimes a single stroke isn't enough to express the complexity of

¹ Obviously very long lyric poems like Whitman's "Song of Myself" or Ginsburg's "Howl" may represent exceptions to this analogy. But I think our friends Rosenthal and Gall would argue that such poems can be classified as sequences themselves. I am inclined somewhat to agree, but I think such poems might comprise their own category, something we might call the lyrical epic. In "Seriality and the Contemporary Long Poem," Joseph Conte distinguishes between the modern epic and what he calls the serial poem, but neither of these encompass the lyric sequence. A long poem, whether epic or serial, is one poem. A lyric sequence is by definition a group of discrete poems. One might compare the distinction to one from the

human experience and to sort out the tangle we often create of it. A poet can build note upon note, chord upon chord, and in musical terms, we call this movement.

This idea of poetry as composed of force or forces recalls my rudimentary education in physics. At first I was reluctant to draw such a connection, as I struggled with high school AP physics more than any other subject, but the parallels between understanding the movement inherent to the sequence and understanding the physics of time and motion persisted. Poetry is an art, certainly, but it is also a force of human will: an effort on the part of the individual to make sense out of the chaos of human experience. The sequence is a compounding of that effort. Theoretical physics can help us to understand how the lyric sequence manages two great forces of the human experience: time and memory.

Defining the Lyric Sequence

The term “sequence” is used in a variety of ways in poetry; one might reasonably argue that the craft of poetry in fact rests upon the act of sequencing—ordering words, lines, images, metrical feet, even ideas. The unique combination of these different sequences makes each poem an individual work of art. In 1918, Pound addressed free verse, or the “new fashion of poetry,” by defining it in part as the inclination “to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (31). Sequence is perhaps even more important when the constraints of meter and rhyme are removed

world of fiction: a collection of short stories, unified under one title, is similar to the sequence. A long poem, even divided into sections, is more like a novel divided into chapters.

from the equation, as the poet must rely on something other than these traditional elements to dictate the ordering and direction of the poem.

Charles O. Hartman defines a poem as the language of an act of attention, the “matrix” for both the acts of the poet and the reader (12). The poetic sequence or series of poems compounds this relationship; it gives the poet the means to carry a particular theme or subject further than the time and space allowed by the individual poem, thus extending or sustaining the acts of both the poet and the reader. It is, according to Rosenthal and Gall, “the decisive form toward which all the developments of all modern poetry have tended” (3). This may sound like an extravagant conclusion, but if we consider the book-length collection of poems a type of sequence, this statement is both valid and enlightening.

In their landmark work on the subject, Rosenthal and Gall define the modern sequence as “a grouping of mainly lyric poems and passages, rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole” (9). The key here is that the poems of a sequence work together, so that the sum is greater than its parts. Whether short or long, the poetic sequence is an important form of modern poetry. It is lyric poetry’s answer to the all but abandoned mode of the long narrative poem. This introduction will examine briefly the history of the sequence in English literature, and more thoroughly its more contemporary manifestations, including the poetry of Theodore Roethke and Lucille Clifton.

A collection of poetry is a type of manuscript; the poems, after all, appear in at least one over-arching sequence, most often of the poet’s devising. In *Taboo*, Yusef

Komunyakaa brings to light sometimes obscure historical episodes to address race and other issues we often skirt. Marie Howe's *What the Living Do* provides a sort of narrative of grief and ending through which the speaker confronts a variety of personal issues. In *Refusing Heaven*, Jack Gilbert reflects upon life, his own and others', affirming the validity of sensory experience in the here and now. Denise Duhamel's *Kinky* uses humor and the pervasive popular culture image of Barbie to ask some difficult questions about gender and sexuality. These books do not all share the same unifying principle. What these books do have in common is the manner in which they can be described. We describe novels as being "about" something, but we do not always describe books of poetry in this way, as working together as "an organic whole" (Rosenthal and Gall 9). Rarely do I hear even a fellow poet ask what a collection of poetry is about. Perhaps we veer away from that term because of its association with narrative, which has become the province of prose, but that may be a knee-jerk response. Many books of poetry can be summarized aptly in terms of theme or style.

Although the contemporary lyric sequence has evolved into its own animal, it is worth noting its ancestors in the long history of English poetry. The contrast between the sonnet sequence and the narrative poetry of the same age is fascinating—even more, that the same poets wrote both (consider Spenser and Sidney). Although the sonnet has fallen out of fashion, the sonnet sequence shares some interesting characteristics with the contemporary lyric sequence. The sonnet writers followed a complexity of rules from which writers of free verse are liberated; not only were they obligated to demonstrate a development over the course of a sequence, but they were also expected to provide a very

specific pattern of development within the sonnet itself. Contemporary writers do not follow this type of restriction often (unless, of course, they choose the sonnet or another form), but the lyric sequence does owe a debt to the sonnet sequence in terms of its primarily non-narrative cohesion, especially when considered in comparison with the narrative poetry that coexisted with the sonnet.

Fidessa: An Elizabethan Sonnet Sequence

As a brief example of a predecessor of the lyric sequence, let us consider an excerpt from a lesser known sonnet sequence² of the Elizabethan period, *Fidessa, More Chaste than Kind*³ by Bartholomew Griffin from 1596. The sonnets of *Fidessa* are notable not because of their unique take on the sonnet but for their persistent exemplification of the developing conventions of the English sonnet and sonnet sequence.

Fidessa comprises sixty-two sonnets total; as was the custom, each is numbered rather than titled, indicating its fixed position in the sequence (which is more than can be said of Shakespeare's sonnets, which *Fidessa* predates). As is typical of sonnets in the Petrarchan tradition, Griffin assumes the identity of the forlorn lover, fixated on a young lady who rejects his passion. Sonnets 20 through 29 paint a picture of a young man foolishly in love with a young woman who will not be his, but in sonnet 20 the speaker

² The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics traces the origins of the lyric sequence to Petrarch, whose influence disseminated the sequence throughout Europe, because of the powerful attraction "to write lyric in extensor, allowing each poetic integer to hold its autonomy as it participates in a larger unity" (834). This definition also fits my description of the lyric sequence, but the differences between the Petrarchan sonnet sequence and its successors and the lyric sequence are vast.

³ My edited version of sonnets 20-29 appears in the Appendix.

shares the culpability for falling in love with Fidessa, who he believes has (in today's vernacular) led him on:

It's faire Fidessa that this comfort bringeth,
 Who sorrie for the wrongs by her procured,
 Delightfull tunes of love of true love singeth,
 Wherewith her too-chast thoughts were nere inured. (lines 5-8)

She expresses sorrow, and she loves him, but her chastity prevents her from acting on that love in any physical way. Instead, she entreats him not to love her:

She loves (she saith) but with a love not blind,
 Her love is counsaile that I should not love,
 But upon virtues fixe a staied mind:
 But what? this new coined love, love doth reprove. (lines 9-12)

Sonnet 20 represents the turning over of a new leaf for Fidessa: she admits she loves him, but since virtue prevents them from being together, she advises him (out of love) not to love her, which of course is confusing to the speaker, a paradox he laments in the trick of the final couplet:

If this be love of which you make such store,
 Sweet, love me lesse, that you may love me more. (lines 13-14)

He finds her version of love unsatisfactory and asks that she love him less emotionally and love him more physically instead.

The speaker's playfulness lessens throughout this particular sequence, and with each sonnet he seems a bit more desperate. He relies on conceits and classical references common to the sonnet sequence: admonitions to Cupid (22-23), the drowning man (24), Pygmalion (25), the folly of the "flie" drawn to the flame (26), the worm and the sun (27), and appeals to death for respite since life without Fidessa is not worth living (28-29). These ten sonnets represent the ups and downs of the entire sequence well; this

speaker meets no happy ending with his love. But that is the point of the sonnet sequence: as a whole it as an entreaty from the speaker to his love for reciprocation, so we must not expect the romantic resolution of a happy ending in the sequence itself. The sequence is a means to an end.

Modern to Contemporary Sequences

Certainly the sonnet writers were not the first or last poets of the English language to explore the advantages of the sequence. *The Canterbury Tales*, which we often refer to as one poem, is a sequence of narrative poems within a looser narrative. Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* are arguably the most studied sequences in secondary and post-secondary general literature classes. Whitman's *Song of Myself* is generally considered a long lyric poem, but Rosenthal and Gall call it "the first great unmistakable exemplar of the form" of the modern poetic sequence (308-9). They seem to believe that Whitman was so far ahead of his time that he did not realize he was writing a sequence. Rosenthal and Gall and others have even argued that Emily Dickinson's poems should be grouped into sequences based on the original fascicles of her arrangement (48-73), an orientation obscured by the varied orderings of the many publications of Dickinson's work over the years. Arguably, Whitman and Dickinson are two of the strongest influences on American lyric poetry, and their attention to sequence highlights its importance.⁴

⁴ The problem in comparing the contemporary or postmodern lyric sequence to early modern sequences (and perhaps many modern sequences) lies in the lack of titles for individual sections and poems. Part of the genius of *Leaves of Grass* is Whitman's ability to put together these disparate sections without a formal

Scholarly work on the idea of sequence in contemporary poetry can be confusing, perhaps because we do not yet reap the benefits of hindsight in examining the contemporary period as a whole. Already I have referred several times to the 1984 landmark work on the subject, M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall's *The Modern Poetic Sequence*, which focuses on the roots of the lyric sequence in Whitman, Dickinson, and Thomas Hardy, and continues to the modern examples of Yeats, Pound, and Williams. Their definition of the sequence is the basis of my own understanding of the sequence, and yet their work focuses on the modernist poets (no surprise, as this is the focus of both critics' scholarship).

To account for this deficiency in criticism, we must answer this question: what separates the lyric sequence as it has been used in the last century and a half from its older counterparts? The impulse to both draw together and keep separate is one that contemporary poetry has refined and made its own. In "Modern British and American Sequences," Rosenthal writes,

the modern sequence has evolved out of a serious need for an encompassing poetry, one really involved with what our lives mean and at the same time self-contained—a poetry that projects and reorients our consciousness in action. That need reflects the ultimate pressure on modern sensibility to understand itself and the importance of what Charles

unity and yet unify them through theme and motif. We do not generally study the sections of *Leaves of Grass* separately, as we do poems appearing in other collections, but Whitman makes his distinctions. His publication of the entirety of *Leaves of Grass* under one title indicates that he meant for it to be considered as a totality. Dickinson, on the other hand, is more disconcerting because she did not publish in her lifetime or use titles. In contemporary poetry, we tend to think of titles as necessary and unifying, but I do not think a sequence of poems must be unified under one title. Title can be a unifier, but it does not have to be the only unifying element of a sequence.

Olson called the ‘human universe.’ The pressure is felt inescapably by poets even when they hardly realize why they write as they do. (417)

From the examples Rosenthal uses, I take the use of “modern” here to extend beyond only the period dominated by modernism. The sequence fulfills the need to both expand meaning and to remain “self-contained” in a way that the single poem cannot always accomplish, and the sequence allows the poet to create that effect more often and more accessibly than a volume of poems. The sequence also allows for a great degree of movement or development, and not just in terms of time and space. This very exciting idea is what Rosenthal refers to as “consciousness in action.”

This is not to say that the single lyric poem is devoid of action, but the sequence allows for a continuation of movement or development beyond an isolated construct. And the sequence allows that movement to continue in any direction, without limits. In that sense, the lyric sequence is the logical continuation of the impulse of the confessional poets to lay it all on the table. In a recent interview with Bill Moyers, Rita Dove characterized the crisis facing poets in the postwar, post-Freud twentieth century: “...there were poets saying, ‘You know, we just can’t cover this up. We’re in turmoil inside and outside.’ And that’s I think, what gave the impetus for the confessional poets to say, you know, ‘We’re not talking about this stuff, we’re going to talk about—we’re going to break down all these final walls.’”

In a sense, one of those “final walls” was the confines of the lyric poem itself—its ingenious but limiting tendency to capture and distill a singular moment of human experience. But human experience is not made of only single moments, and the

relationship between those moments is not always one of chronology or even commonality. The brilliance of the sequence is its capacity for exploring any kind of thematic relationship, including chronology and commonality, but also irony, paradox, contrast, contradiction, or any kind of relationship brought to light by the juxtaposition of two or more distinct poems.

For the modernists, freedom from the confines of meter and rhyme was a heady thing, but it did not eliminate the desire for form, connection, organization—the need for expressing the strange coincidences and jarring discord of living. This explains the gravitation toward the sequence, a form that could be plucked out of tradition to use with the new, modern poetry because of its flexibility. By the middle of the twentieth century, the impact of psychoanalysis had, as Rite Dove recently said, caused people “to realize that we aren’t even in control of who we are inside ourselves” (Dove).⁵ The lyric sequence offers the perfect opportunity to formally present that chaos.

Theodore Roethke’s “North American Sequence”

One of the extraordinary things about the sequence is that it is available to poets writing virtually any type of poetry. Its primary appeal is that it “fulfills the need for encompassment of disparate and often powerfully opposed tonalities and energies” (Rosenthal and Gall 3). As an example of the bridge between the sequences of modernism and those of postmodernism, consider Roethke’s “North American Sequence”

⁵ This explanation/transition is not quite as fleshed out as I would like it to be.

collected⁶ and published in the 1964 collection *The Far Field*. If, as Rosenthal and Gall wrote, the sequence as a work of art is a “construct, improvised to hold some sort of equilibrium or balance, however frailly, against disorder” (2), then “North American Sequence” is Roethke’s most successful personal construct. John Rohrkemper argues that in this sequence Roethke finally achieves the separation of his poetic voice from his own mental illness, a distinction that was difficult for him throughout his career because he often felt he wrote his best poems when he was ill (31). Roethke recalls the metaphysical poets with his descriptions of nature but uses them to convey the darker undercurrent of postmodern consciousness.

“North American Sequence” also illustrates the distinction between the long poem and the lyric sequence. Together, the poems appear first in *The Far Field*, under the heading of the Roman numeral one, followed by the title “North American Sequence.” This sets up the expectation that what follows, until we see the next Roman numeral, makes up a related whole. Each of the six poems bears its own title, and each of those poems is also divided into numbered sections,⁷ suggesting that those sections are not discrete poems but the six titled selections are.⁸

The sequence contains the following poems: “The Longing,” “Meditation at Oyster River,” “Journey to the Interior,” “The Long Waters,” “The Far Field,” and “The Rose.” Through meditation inspired by or focused on the natural, the speaker turns his

⁶ The six poems of “North American Sequence” were published separately in *The New Yorker* and *The Sewanee Review* between 1959 and 1963 (Staples 189).

⁷ See chapter two for my discussion of the sequence poem, a form characterized by the ordering of particular passages to compose a single poem.

⁸ I should note that Thomas Gardner refers to “North American Sequence” as a long poem (237) rather than a sequence of poems, but to refer to this sequence as a singular poem ignores the facts that it contains six titled sections and that each was published separately as an individual poem.

gaze inward. Gardner categorizes the poems as a self-portrait on the order of “Song of Myself.” In 1963, Roethke himself wrote, “The human problem is to find out what one really is; whether one exists, whether existence is possible. But how?” (“On Writing” 20). This sequence is dense, full of sensory detail that makes the reader see and feel, in the case of “The Longing,” things he or she may not want to experience:

And the spirit fails to move forward,
But shrinks into a half-life, less than itself,
Falls back, a slug, a loose worm
Ready for any crevice,
An eyeless starrer. (lines 19-23)

The speaker creates a nature reflective of his personal inner landscape, fraught with the tumultuous and grotesque. According to Gardner, in this first poem, the speaker “presents a blasted landscape that functions as an obvious correlative for the condition of Roethke’s consciousness” (238).

Rosemary Sullivan argues that, alongside the rest of the last poems written in Roethke’s life, “North American Sequence” suggests “[a]n ambition to find order through poetry”: “The poems read like last poems, attempts to integrate his themes and bring his vision to final statement. All seem preoccupied with the fear of death and the threat it poses to the validity and endurance of the self, a fear that was responsible for his continuous interest in mysticism” (765). This desire to assemble a complete portrait, perhaps not of self but of the speaker’s or poet’s concerns, describes the arc of movement in “North American Sequence.” “Meditation at Oyster River” opens with the speaker at an almost idyllic water scene, one of “No sound from the bay. No violence” (line 6) and moves in the second section to a morose take on life: “The self persists like a dying star,/

In sleep, afraid” (line 24). The final section ends on a finite but positive view of the small integrity of life:

Water’s my will, and my way,
And the spirit runs, intermittently,
In and out of the small waves,
Runs with the intrepid shorebirds—
How graceful the small before danger!

In the first of the moon,
All’s a scattering,
A shining. (lines 63-70)

The contrast of the stillness from the beginning of the poem to the quiet movement at the end of the poem represent an assembling of the speaker’s identity through consideration of the metaphysical side-by-side with the natural.

“Journey to the Interior” emphasizes a change in the speaker’s self-perception: the perspective weaves through his interior space to the exterior world and back again, all the while emphasizing a lack of movement [“Neither forward nor backward,/ Unperplexed, in a place leading nowhere” (lines 72-73)]. “The Long Waters” returns to a more visceral meditation on the natural world, beginning with a question of “Whether the bees have thoughts, we cannot say” (line 1) and yet again inviting a change in the speaker at the end through a kind of baptism of sleep:

I, who came back from the depths laughing too loudly,
Become another thing;
My eyes extend beyond the farthest bloom of the waves;
I lose and find myself in the long water;
I am gathered together once more;
I embrace the world. (lines)

One could read this two ways: this rising from the water and gathering together of the self may be a reinvention, an new beginning, or it may be the beginning of the end, an embrace of death.

The final two poems, “The Far Field” and “The Rose” emphasize this metaphysical journey toward some kind of inner peace, be it a peace of identity understood or of identity ending. In the midst of a corner of the field, he writes,

I learned not to fear infinity,
The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,
The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,
The wheel turning away from itself,
The sprawl of the wave,
The on-coming water. (lines)

The movement throughout the sequence, manifests through a change in imagery in “The Rose”:

And I think of roses, roses,
White and red, in the wide six-hundred-foot greenhouses,
And my father standing astride the cement benches,
Lifting me high over the four-foot stems, the Mrs. Russells, and his
own elaborate hybrids,
And how those flowerheads seemed to flow toward me, to beckon me,
only a child, out of myself.

What need for heaven, then,
With that man, and those roses? (lines 51-7)

The rose imagery allows for a kind of self-reflection in connection with his father and the past. And yet the attention to sound and the water imagery persist, and the rose becomes by the end of the poem a symbol of the coexistence of opposites.

And in this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,
Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light,
Gathering to itself sound and silence—
Mine and the sea-wind’s. (lines)

I see this rose as both the speaker's take on individual identity ("mine") and a collective identity ("the sea-wind's) that coexist, existing impossibly "[r]ooted in stone" and holding the entirety of both light and sound.

It may not be a cheerful journey, but the speaker still comes out of the morose reservation that characterizes his mood in the first poem, in this case by venturing back into his memory. The tone and imagery between these first two poems is very different, but it gradually changes to show a development within the speaker. This examination illustrates the kind of thread of development the sequence can present.

Lucille Clifton's Dream Sequence

Lucille Clifton's work is a prime example of poems amplified by the fact of their collection into sequences. Her 1987 collection *Next* is composed of several sequences unified by repetition, subject matter, and theme. Even the title itself is suggestive of sequence. We might consider each of the three sections its own sequence, but I wish to examine the sequence about dreams at the end of the first section. Dreams make fascinating material for poems, as I will discuss later when I get to my own work. Clifton is adept at capturing the fragmented and surreal nature of them in her poems while still making the poem mean something.

Obviously all of the poems in this sequence are about dreams, but I think the beauty of Clifton's sequence is that she cycles through different kinds of dreams, preserving the dreamlike imagery and still managing to sneak in disparate existential

observations. In the first poem, “my dream about being white,” she dreams she is “white me:”

hair a flutter of
fall leaves
circling my perfect
line of a nose,
no lips,
no behind.... (lines 4-9)

She starts by defining this new self in positive terms with her descriptions of her hair and nose but abruptly moves to the negative: “no lips,/ no behind....” As “white me,” she misses these attributes of her blackness, which remind her of its value:

and i’m wearing
white history
but there’s no future
in those clothes
so I take them off and
wake up
dancing. (lines 11-17)

There is no future in “white history;” it is in the past, but it is also an incomplete lens on the world. That she “wake[s] up/dancing” suggests elation at waking up in her own skin again. But the dream allowed the speaker to be someone else, if only for a time. This is a marked distinction from some of the other poems in *Next*, such as “I. at nagasaki” and “I. at jonestown,” in which the poet is fully vested in the persona of the speaker of the poem.

The theme of racial oppression resurfaces in the next poem, “my dream about the cows.” Sometimes dreams seem to have meaning, but sometimes the subconscious reorders our thoughts and memories in such baffling ways that we cannot find meaning.

and then i see how all despair is

thin and weak and personal and
 then i see it's only
 the dream about the cows. (lines 9-12)

Sometimes a dream is just a dream, she seems to say, but having read the preceding poem, the theme of race transforms the image of “the cattle of my town” into a metaphor for racial oppression, “rustled already,/prodded by pale cowboys with a foreign smell/into dark pens built to hold them forever” (lines 24). The language of captivity is suggestive of slavery, especially

...a few of them
 rib thin and weeping low over
 sparse fields and milkless lives but
 standing still standing.... (lines 5-8).

The cows are “standing still standing” despite desolation and fruitlessness, just as many African Americans withstood slavery and subsequent oppression. But what is really fascinating about the poem is how she captures in the final lines the fleeting nature of dreams by showing how fleeting understanding can be: “then i see it's only/the dream about the cows.”

The sequence continues with “my dream about time,” which further explores the heritage of slavery [“...a lifeless house/with too many windows which open on/a world she has no language for” (lines 2-4)] through the female perspective. This emphasis on gender provides a transition to the next poem about “a fruitful woman/such as myself” (lines 1-2), “my dream about falling.” The fifth poem, “my dream about the second coming,” is also from the female perspective, in this case a version of Mary the mother of Christ, and the religious theme continues with the following poem, “my dream about God,” which introduces the concept of creation sustained in the final poem of the

sequence, “my dream about the poet.” This pattern illustrates an important characteristic of many sequences: the poems do not all have to deal with the same subject or theme to be considered a sequence. Instead they may be linked, poem by poem, in a chain of ideas that might not even seem to be related without the connections provided by the sequence. Thus the order in which they fall is as important as the fact of their grouping. Each poem seems to build upon the one before it which is especially true of the last poem, which is just as much about God as the poet:

he carves.
 he is making a world
 he says
 as his fingers cut citizens
 trees and things
 which he perceives to be a world (lines 5-10).

Each poem certainly stands on its own, but reading them together provides an entirely different experience, especially since they concern dreams. Reading a series of dream poems provides a certain insight into the speaker’s mind; in Clifton’s sequence, the speaker grasps at a truth in each one that is within reach only within the dream, which is likewise the case of certain truths that are better accessed or more clearly expressed through poetry.

In contrast to Roethke’s form, Clifton’s poems are morsels of meaning. She does not require the reader to dig too much to get to the first layer of meaning, although there is certainly more than what is on the surface. The sequence is one of those layers. Clifton originally began writing in this short form as she took care of her children, without formal training, but she has virtually created her own form and packs as much into her short poems as many poets manage in much longer pieces. Her sequences only

compound her genius. She truly understands how poems can both retain their independence and fit together into a meaningful sequence. Another poet might put together poems as short as Clifton's into one long poem, but through theme and image, her poems are distinct enough to hold their own ground.

Sequence and Time

Having thus defined and described the lyric sequence, let us consider how the principles of physics, particularly in relation to time, can help us understand its scope and function.⁹ The force that physics and poetry have in common is time. Time is sequence, although sequence does not have to be arranged in a chronological fashion. One moment follows another; one tick of the clock follows the previous. Our identities are defined in part by the events and experiences of our lives in the context of time. Taken out of context, those events do not have the same significance they once had; nor do they have the same effect on the formation of our memories and identities. It seems to me that there are three ways to understand time: one, by our observations of the effects of time; two, as a physical force; and three, philosophically.

Time cannot be perceived by the senses, so it must be described in relationship to something that can. We can measure time by the sunrise and sunset or, on a smaller scale, by the ticking hands of a clock. Aristotle defines time thusly:

A thing, then, will be affected by time, just as we are accustomed

⁹ What I don't want to emphasize here is chronology; taking a chronological approach to reading the sequence might be severely limiting if not damaging.

to say that time wastes things away, and that all things grow old through time, and that there is oblivion owing to the lapse of time, but we do not say the same of getting to know or of becoming young or fair. For time is by its nature the cause rather of decay, since it is the number of change, and change removes what is. (*Physics* Book IV, Part 12)

We measure time relative to the effect it has on something, from the deepening of lines on a face to the erosion of rock. We tend to think of time in a linear fashion: this happened in the past, this is happening now in the present, this may happen in the future.

We can observe the effects of time on physical bodies and objects quite readily. With our own eyes, we witness infants grow to adulthood, but at a certain point, when the forces of growth and maturity slow, the changes that time brings to the human body become negative: hair thins, teeth fall out, skin sags. The industries of skincare and cosmetic surgery have been built on the promise to prevent or even reverse those effects. To the average person, these changes are ways of measuring and comprehending time, a concept that is otherwise abstract and intangible.

The physicist perceives time somewhat differently, thanks in part to Einstein's theory of relativity. Time is relative. We tend to think of the passage of time as fixed: sixty seconds on the clock equal one minute, sixty minutes comprise one hour. The twenty-four hour day derives from the time it takes the earth to rotate on its axis; the year is based on the time it takes the earth to revolve around the sun. But these measurements are relative because they are in fact defined in relation to something else, and the

reference points themselves may be inaccurate or even change. Consider the advent of the leap year in the Gregorian calendar. Every four years, we add a day to February to compensate for the fact that the earth takes slightly more than 365 days to complete its revolution of the sun. The popular belief is that this revolution takes 365.25 days, which is why we add a day every fourth year. But even this is inaccurate, as the solar year is actually somewhat less than that figure, and so another set of rules is implemented to “keep time”: if a year is divisible by a hundred, it will not be a leap year, unless it is divisible by four hundred, in which case it will be a leap year.

Even the basic scientific observations upon which our timekeeping is based are subject to alteration. The magnitude 8.8 earthquake that devastated Chile in 2010 shortened the Earth day by an estimated 1.26 millionths of a second, while the magnitude 9 Sumatra earthquake of 2004 shortened the Earth day by 6.8 millionths of a second (Than). The shortening of the day was only temporary in both cases, but the fact that a unit such as the standard day can be changed by an earthquake, volcanic eruption, or even the moon’s effects on the tides (Than) is a blow to any fixed system of measuring time.

In explaining his theory of relativity, Einstein illustrated that even time is not fixed because it is calculated according to a reference point. He wrote, “Every reference-body... has its own particular time; unless we are told the reference-body to which the statement of time refers, there is no meaning in statement of the time of an event” (12). What is a second without the ticking of the clock? Time is relative, and this is further

compounded by the fact that in reality (or any system influenced by gravity, Einstein would say), even our reference points tend to be relative.¹⁰

Perhaps it is fitting that physicist Sean Carroll would define time in terms of space:

Physics says that all the moments of time are equally real, and that tempts us into saying that they all exist simultaneously, they all exist now, but that's not what it's like. Different moments of time are really like different places in space. They're not here; they exist somewhere else. The difference is that unlike space, we can't help but experience time one moment after the other. We can't go back to moments in the past, and we can't—right now—talk to moments in the future. (“Is Time Travel Possible?”)

In his famous lecture “The Concept of Time,” Martin Heidegger describes time not in relationship to another object but as an action; he says that “[t]ime is an unfurling” (5E). This is the most poetic definition of time that I have encountered. But it reverberates with the reasoning of the second law of thermodynamics in the sense that time *unfurls* but does not actually *furl*. It only moves in only one direction.

Even Heidegger defines time in relation to events, while still acknowledging its lack of substance and inability to be perceived independently: “Time too is nothing. It persists merely as a consequence of the events taking place in it. There is no absolute time, and no absolute simultaneity either” (3E). The first part of this is easy to understand; time can only be understood in relation to events. Time can only be tracked

¹⁰ Do I need an example here, either Einstein's or my watered down version, to explain this?

in relation to events, which explains why time moves so slowly when nothing seems to be happening but seems to move more quickly when events keep us occupied. That time cannot be absolute is also logical, as it can only be discussed in relation to a reference point. Thus time can be manipulated according to that reference point, just as memories will vary according to the one remembering.

Time and Entropy

The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that a process acting on a system that is not at equilibrium (or maximum entropy) will increase the total entropy of the universe. Carroll explains entropy as a measure of

the ‘disorderliness’ of an object conglomeration of objects. Entropy has a stubborn tendency to increase, or at least stay constant, as time passes...

And the reason why entropy wants to increase is deceptively simple:

There are more ways to be disorderly than to be orderly, so (all else being equal) an orderly arrangement will naturally tend toward increasing disorder. (*From Eternity to Here* 9)

Over time, any process will contribute to the entropy of the universe. Everything is in the act of decomposing, or breaking down into its most basic components, under the influence of time. The tendency toward entropy is what allows time to be expressed in a linear fashion, what is referred to as the “arrow of time,” or the fact that “the past is different from the future” (Carroll, “What Is Time?”). Time moves in only one direction. As an armchair physicist, I see entropy as the effect of time. The correlation, at least, is

evident. Carroll also says that “[t]he reason why time has a direction is because the universe is full of irreversible processes—things that happen in one direction of time, but never the other” (9).

Time Travel Paradigm

The manipulation of time is what has obsessed science fiction writers and theoretical physicists alike (and perhaps some experimental physicists as well): the reversal of the irreversible. This is very similar to what the poet does. Not in the sense that the poet attempts to change the past literally, of course—but that the poet can manipulate time and space to reorder and even reorganize experience to magnify meaning.

Poetry is about putting experience into context; it is a vehicle whereby the poet creates a context to share something, to make a connection, with the audience. The poet often recalls the past in order to make sense of it or to put it into context more clearly. When past experiences are recalled (for the poet or any human being), our minds relive the experience; our brain activity is the same as it was during the initial experience. But just because our brains are reliving the experience, this does not mean they relive it exactly.

Our brains are not like computer hard drives, in which the same information can be copied again and again, theoretically without change or error. Instead, each time we recall what we know as fact, our brains reprocess it and restore it, and there is room for error. This is called source amnesia:

Facts are stored first in the hippocampus, a structure deep in the brain about the size and shape of a fat man's curled pinkie finger. But the information does not rest there. Every time we recall it, our brain writes it down again, and during this re-storage, it is also reprocessed. In time, the fact is gradually transferred to the cerebral cortex and is separated from the context in which it was originally learned. (Wang and Aamodt)

Eventually, we can forget where we learned something, but the effects can be even more significant. What we initially learned as a lie can become true.

If this can happen with the storage of facts, perhaps it can also happen with the storage of memories. As I age, I find that not only do I forget who told me something, I forget whom I have told. And even more frustratingly, I can confuse a particularly lucid dream with reality and forget if I dreamed it or actually experienced it. So, false or tainted memories may be indistinguishable from true recollections. Our brains can play tricks on us, and the effect can be the same as if we have actually time traveled: in our minds, we have changed the past or even glimpsed the future.

H. G. Wells used time travel as a metaphor for the fears brought on by the technological progress of his own time and the disquieting implications of evolution (Arata viii), but it is difficult to dissociate time travel from human memory, even for Wells' Traveller. In his article on Roethke's "North American Sequence," Rohrkemper writes, "Lyric poetry is the province of memory..." (28), but I would argue that memory is the province of lyric poetry. Memory is essential for any consideration of time travel. Without memory, whether personal, cultural, or historical, there would be no past to

which to return, and without the hopes and dreams generated by memory, there would be no future to which to travel. To understand this application of the idea of time travel, we should consider the time travel theme as represented in literary and popular sources, as well as its treatment in physics.

Time Travel in Science Fiction and Theoretical Physics

First, let us consider the traditional literary concept of time travel. One steps into some kind of contraption that can, with varying degrees of precision, control its passage through time. For Wells' *Time Traveller*, this was "a glittering metallic framework" with components of ivory and crystal. For Michael J. Fox, it was a shiny 1981 DeLorean DMC-12.

Other manifestations abound. Some consider Dickens' 1843 *A Christmas Carol* a time travel story, along with Twain's 1889 *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Both of these predate *The Time Machine*. In the popular book and film adaptation *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, a magical timeturner allows the bearer to return to the past to change the course of events, although we discover that the past does not actually change; instead, events that had previously occurred are explained by the intervention of the time travelers. In Stephen King's novella *The Langoliers*, a passenger plane serves as a kind of time machine, only instead of traveling into the past or the future, the passengers seem to fall just a step behind the present, during which time they witness the physical space occupied by the past consumed by hungry mouths.

More recently, in Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*, a time traveler named Henry spontaneously and uncontrollably travels through without the aid of a machine (and without the benefit of retaining his clothes). This anomaly turns out to be genetic, as his daughter Alba inherits the same tendency. Henry often returns to familiar places and people. In Diana Gabaldon's popular *Outlander* series, World War II nurse Claire stumbles into a ring of standing stones on a visit to postwar Scotland and finds herself in the eighteenth century, in a Scotland on the brink of the Jacobean rebellion. Through the course of the series, this ability to travel through time is accorded to the magic inherent to particular places and a hereditary ability to pass through them into another time. Television periodically picks up the theme as well with successful series such as *Dr. Who*, *Quantum Leap*, and *Lost* and more ill-fated ventures such as the 2007 series *Journeyman*.

One sticking point for all of these depictions is the logical paradox suggested by the ability to travel into the past and change what happened. This is sometimes known as the grandfather paradox in reference to its most famous illustration: if one travels to the past and inadvertently kills his or her grandfather before he fathers children, the traveler will not exist in the future, making it impossible to intervene in the past in the first place. Therefore the grandfather cannot be killed.¹¹ Logic says that this cannot happen, and upon this basis many reject the notion that a time traveler can exert control over past events in order to affect the future. Others suggest that one can change past events to

¹¹ The animated series *Futurama* presents an interesting commentary on the grandfather paradox in the episode "Roswell That Ends Well," in which the hapless Frye travels back in time and does kill his grandfather inadvertently. Initially, this seems to disprove the grandfather paradox because Frye continues to exist, only to fall into bed with his own young and attractive grandmother, thereby becoming (or revealing that he is) his own grandfather.

create an alternate reality. This is demonstrated in a parody of *The Time Machine* by *The Simpsons*, in which Homer uses a toaster as a time machine to return to the past and sneezes on a Tyrannosaurus Rex, immediately forcing the dinosaurs into extinction. When he returns to the future, his life has improved in every way, except that no one knows what a doughnut is. Since the doughnut is Homer's favorite food, he continues to go back in time to try to manipulate his present back to the way it was. When he reaches a present where everything seems normal, with the exception of his family scooping up their dinner with lizard-like tongues, he says, "Close enough." This supposition that a small change can drastically affect the future is known by the more common terms ripple or butterfly effect. This concept of the present as the result of a network of past experiences intertwined inseparably is an intriguing one that can allow the poet to consider and reconsider the past and its influence on the present without the influence of nostalgia.

Physicists, including Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking, have speculated that time travel might be physically possible (although Hawking suggests that if it had been accomplished, we would be overrun by tourists from the future). Theoretical physicist Sean Carroll suggests that the logic behind it is pretty simple: "...traveling back in time is nothing more or less than the fourth-dimensional version of walking in a circle. All you would have to have to do is use an extremely strong gravitational field, like that of a black hole, to bend space-time. From this point of view, time travel seems quite difficult but not obviously impossible" ("How to Travel through Time" 41). Carroll refers to this

as a “closed timelike curve,” which may be possible theoretically but is implausible in actuality.

Time Travel in Memory and Poetry

In an interview for *Wired.com*, Carroll cuts to the very heart of the difference between what has passed and what is to come: “We remember the past, but we don’t remember the future.” Carroll further posits that while it is possible to travel to the future (“We’re going there right now!” exclaims the interviewer), we cannot return to the past because “you can’t define a consistent arrow of time.”

Poetry can create an impression of how the mind (or one particular mind, at least) perceives or misperceives memory in relation to time. What we experience in our lives shapes who we are; so does what we remember and how we remember it. Time can take its toll on memory, changing it for better or for worse, turning us into strangers to ourselves, a theme explored in Derek Walcott’s “Love after Love:”

The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other’s welcome

and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.... (lines 1-7)

At least in Walcott’s future, you will recognize your past self. We may change so much throughout our lives that we become unrecognizable to ourselves.

One of the most common conflicts in time travel fiction, introduced by H.G. Wells in *The Time Machine*, is whether a time traveler can change the past and thus change the present (or the future, as the case may be), as represented in the grandfather paradox. I would argue that as our memories change, the past also changes—if there is no concrete record to prove what happened, there is only the human impression of what happened (and even records can reflect impressions). And if that impression changes as time passes, the effect upon our sense of self is the same as if the original event changed as well. If we forget some detail of our lives, it is as though the effect that detail should have had disappears. Memory calls into question the very nature of truth.

But there is paradox in this as well when people share memories of the same event which do not correspond. Clifton addresses this in her poem “why some people be mad at me sometimes”:

they ask me to remember
but they want me to remember
their memories
and i keep on remembering
mine.

As the title suggests, recollection from different minds can be a divisive force. But we can only recall something the way our memory stores it. Sometimes our memory might be changed unconsciously by someone else’s recollection or if we decide their version is truer than our own. This is the case not only with personal memory but with cultural memory, with which, considering its context of Clifton’s addresses of the themes of race and gender, this poem is probably more concerned. No longer, this poem suggests, is it acceptable for the dominant perspective to subsume the memories of those who have

been on the periphery of society. Whether personal or cultural, Clifton's speaker insists that her memory is self-sufficient and can withstand the pressure of outside influence.

Such is the nature of memory; not only is it mutable, but it is constantly in flux. Even if we, like Clifton's speaker, insist on the validity of our own memories, they may still change without our permission. And two people experiencing the same event will process, remember, and re-remember it differently. The lyric sequence, then, allows for a realignment; a chance for distinct minds (the poet's and the readers') to engage within a series of poems. Certainly that engagement is possible in a solitary poem, but the sequence sustains that engagement to allow for more than just a spark of human contact; instead, the sequence delivers that "consciousness in action" referred to by Rosenthal and Gall. The sequence says to the reader, "Here is a mind in action, processing and remembering, aligning and realigning, this mind's experience, so that you and the poet can simultaneously arrive at some abstract touchstone that allows you to connect and understand what it means to be human, to be alive, to experience joy or pain or enlightenment or confusion."

A sequence that contains only two poems raise an interesting semantic question: how many poems must a sequence contain before we consider it a sequence? Certainly there must be more than one. Seven poems comprise Lucille Clifton's "my dream" sequence from *Next*; Roethke's "North American Sequence" consists of six poems. The final nine to twelve poems of Plath's *Ariel* are considered a sequence, although the tally depends upon whom one consults (Rosenthal and Gall 428). And yet the sequence of "Firsts" by Olds that inspired my sequence is only three poems. Further, who decides

what makes a group of poems a sequence? I feel safe saying the poems I have mentioned by Clifton and Olds qualify as sequences because, first and foremost, their titles unify them. The repetition of the words “my dream about” (in Clifton’s case) and “First” (in Olds’) cues the reader that something similar or related is happening in all of the poems. The repetition also introduces similar themes or subject matter, of course, which further plucks at the common thread among the poems. Roethke’s “North American Sequence” is a sequence first and foremost because he set it up as one, but the movement from dream to reality makes it as one as well.

Chapter 2 Manuscript Introduction

When I sent out my first round of submissions to journals, the first response I received was an acceptance. I knew this was incredibly lucky but hoped it also portended a bright future. Eleven years later, I have yet to publish a book-length collection or even a chapbook.

I have not counted how many poems I have written that I consider complete and ready for publication; I know it is more than enough to comprise at least one volume. But I have struggled with the assembly process, which is why I undertook the study of sequence.

Faced with the requirement of putting together a manuscript for the PhD, I did not want to lose sight of the importance of cohesion and slap together every poem I had ever written. I drew inspiration for finding a direction for my collection from one particular poem I felt embodied what sequence can do for poetry: “Time Travel,” and I decided to run with the title theme as well in preparing new poems.

My decision to study literature alongside creative writing stems from my belief that poetry is not an insular genre, as it is sometimes made out to be; nor does it have to be unrelatable and unintelligible to the average person. While I would not consider the following poems a science fiction collection, the poems draw from a wide variety of influences, including the popular genres of fantasy and science fiction. In my notes I collected quotations from many popular sources as I shaped the manuscript. In particular, one quotation from the 2002 film adaptation of *The Time Machine*, directed by Simon Wells, the great-grandson of H. G. Wells, resonated with what I wanted to say: “We all

have our time machines, don't we? Those that take us back are memories, and those that carry us forward are dreams." Through memory we can achieve something that approximates time travel.

This turned out to be just a foundation for assembling the collection. Themes began to emerge within this framework of time travel, in terms of both science fiction and theoretical physics interpretations. Most obviously, I saw an occupation among the poems with the past, memory, and dreams. As I studied the art of the lyric sequence, and considered this time travel paradigm I had created for myself, I found that new poems began to reflect these influences as well. I found some interesting parallels between the art of sequence and theoretical physics, and from that point, I began to see physics as a metaphor for sorting through life experiences as well.

As a reflection of over eight years of work, I saw the development of a particular narrative from a particular speaker, one whose life did not always proceed as planned. As is typical of lyric poetry, the poems are unified by the speaker, a stand-in for the poet. Much of the inspiration is drawn from memories and events from my own life. I did not choose to link all the poems that follow through their titles, but I hope that the shaping I have given my manuscript will make its direction and the connections between poems somewhat clear. I want the reader to feel like the collection is going somewhere, that the poems describe not necessarily a story but an arc of character development for the speaker. My desire is not to make it difficult to understand, but I do want to open up questions rather than provide answers. Life is messy. Time travel is messy. I do not want

all the poems and themes to be neatly and scientifically categorized; the reader needs room for his or her own reading to emerge.

Originally, I divided the poems into three sections representing the past, the present, and the future, but rather than using these terms related to time, the titles of the sections instead indicated the theme of memory: “know,” “remember,” and “dreams.” The poems in the “know” section represented the present, and just as time travel begins in the present, so did the collection. “Remember” represented the past, while “dreams” represented the future. The grouping of poems in each section went beyond merely the tense of each poem; rather, the poems were grouped according to their thematic treatment of time.

As I added new poems to the manuscript, however, this organization became too simple, and I added a fourth section of poems that would not fit neatly into those three categories and began to rethink my section titles. Now the first section is entitled “superluminal,” or faster than the speed of light, the condition necessary to travel into the future faster than the present carries us. The second section is “inertia,” the physical condition roughly analogous to the present: we are traveling in a direction until some force acts upon us to change that path. “Retrocausation” refers to the influence of the past on the present. The final section, “limina,” explores those moments that cannot conform to one tense or another, the ones that depend upon an amalgamation of time and experiences.

Loosely, the poems in each of these sections comprise a sequence, although my intentions when composing did not necessarily reflect the final product. The “superluminal” poems reflect efforts in the past to develop a controlled future. “Inertia” focuses on a present preoccupied anxiety with the future and its possibilities. “Retrocausation” examines the way the past constantly shapes and intrudes on the present. The poems in “limina” come from a future that is now the present and the speaker’s attempts to make sense of why it has turned out the way it has.

My study of sequence influenced the development of two different groups of poems as sequences from inception. I consider the poem “Time Travel” as the cornerstone of this collection, both in terms of its themes and its strange humor. A dream inspired it, and the following three poems (“Glimpse,” “Forget,” and “Resurrection”) came from similar disjointed and strange dreams that seemed to meditate upon life and death. A poem from several years ago, “Coffee with the King,” inspired a sequence about imaginary interactions with famous personas (including “Hologram,” “Joseph Stalin: Video Game Villain” and “Breakfast with Christ”).

Despite having written about other poets’ sequences, I find it difficult to detangle the web of relationships among the poems in these sequences. The descriptions in the above paragraph oversimplify. Perhaps that is why we avoid talking about poetry in terms of “what it’s about,” because such a description focuses on an image or a premise or a narrative thread to the exclusion of the many layers of meaning at work in a poem.

An important characteristic of the lyric sequence is that the poems do function independently; they must have their own meaning and stand on their own two feet. The

sequence is not only the sum of the poems but their immediate context, and the sequence expands and compounds the meaning, perhaps teasing out different themes than might go undetected in the individual poem. But the poem has to be able to stand on its own.

Here a distinction should be made between the lyric sequence and the sequence poem, a poem composed of separate parts arranged in a particular order. Those parts may focus on separate images or moments in time or experiences, but the poet has decided that they are parts of a whole and do not stand alone as individual poems. I cannot identify the first sequence poem I read or when I read it, but this form has become essential to me as a poet. When I began seriously writing poetry as an undergraduate, I gravitated to the short lyric poem, composed of one block stanza that focused on one idea or theme or image. Michael Bugeja writes that this tendency toward the succinct is typical of “novice poets,” who “[t]ypically...divide a long work into parts because they admire how it appears on the page” (321). With practice and maturity, however, I found this limiting and wanted to expand beyond the pith allowed by that form, and I began to explore more varied relationships. “Time Travel” was my first poem that seemed to evolve organically into a sequence poem.

To my mind, the sequence poem and the lyric sequence are distinct. The sequence poem is a matter of form, while the lyric sequence is a matter of design. Bugeja ambiguously calls what I would refer to as a sequence poem “the sequence,” but I think his definition conflates two concepts I would argue are distinct. He writes, “The sequence is made up of individual poems that can stand alone, but when grouped together under one title, become a greater work” (321). Minus the “under one title” part, this would

coincide with my definition of the lyric sequence. But Bugeja is talking about a group of poems under one title, which is not always the case with the lyric sequence.

Roethke's "North American Sequence" nicely supports Bugeja's definition, as would Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Dickinson's fascicles, especially given her lack of titles. But consider Derek Walcott's 1967 poem "Crusoe Island," which is roughly contemporary with the publication of "North American Sequence." This poem is uncharacteristically long for Walcott's work to this point and in comparison with other poems from the same collection (*The Castaway and Other Poems*), running five pages as opposed to his usual one page poem. Walcott numbered the three sections with Roman numerals; the sections are unified by their island setting and the sound of a church bell, which echoes through a meditation on separation from God and the attempts of art to deal with it. This poem fits my definition of the sequence poem: a poem divided into distinct sections that function as individual units or movements (sometimes beyond the scope of the stanza) within the poem, but each unit is integral to the total meaning of the poem. Those units do not stand alone as individual poems, as is the case with "Crusoe's Island." In terms of length, each section is certainly long enough to be its own poem, but without each section's occurrence of that unifying bell, the sections would lack coherence and resolution if considered as individual poems. The image (or sound, in this case), provides the resolution for the poem and its themes:

At dusk, when they return
 For vespers, every dress
 Touched by the sun will burn
 A seraph's, and angel's,
 And nothing I can learn
 From art or loneliness

Can bless them as the bell's
Transfiguring tongue can bless. (lines 111-118)

This exemplifies my definition of the sequence poem: one poem comprised of disparate parts or sections under one title that work out meaning together. Some kind of “church bell” must unite them. In contrast, the lyric sequence is composed of separate poems which can be published separately but aligning them in a particular order expands or their meaning.

This semantic confusion rises from the lack in poetics of technical terms to appropriately categorize the units of meaning that fall between stanza and poem. We can call them sections or parts, but we do not have a universal, formal term for them. But as poets, our desire to use them is evident. Poetry is about putting things side by side: to notice their similarities, their differences, their ironies, their humanity. The sequence poem is one way to do that on a smaller scale, and the lyric sequence, ranging from a grouping of poems to a chapbook to a book-length collection, is a way to do that on a more dramatic scale.

I see sequence operating in so many ways in poetics: most basically, the ordering of words and lines, but the scope of sequence extends far beyond that. Our consideration of the semantics of sequence boils down to length and assembly. A book-length collection of poems could be a lyric sequence, or a section of a collection could be a sequence. A chapbook could be considered a lyric sequence. A lyric sequence could be a grouping of a smaller number of poems. Both intention and manifestation separate the lyric sequence from the idea of sequence: the order and the assembly of the poems must

create something metaphysically larger than the individual poems themselves. If we ignore the poet's organization, we miss the forest for the trees.

Chapter 3

Time Travel: Poems

superluminal

Living Alone

I wake up standing
I have dreamed something
crawling on the wall
and only when I feel the
mattress springs dig
into my feet
do I realize my error

always there is someone
coming through my bedroom
door or window while I sleep
the sounds don't scare me
only these unbearable dreams

I know they're not real
though I see them with my own
blinking eyes

Broken Time Machine

I think a broken time machine must be like
one of two things—a hurricane in a glass, out of
reach and out of control. Put your fingers in and
interrupt the swirl but the outside rages on
in its centrifugal path until
it fizzles out.

Or a moth trapped under a glass,
flitting on and breathing what air is left
until it's all used up, and the moth makes
one last feeble attempt to stay afloat before
landing on the surface below.

If I tell you that I dreamed about a school shooting
the night before, you probably wouldn't believe me,
especially if I said I dreamed about
watching it on the news.

I hardly believe myself sometimes.

And what does it matter?
When I woke up, it was already over.
I couldn't do anything.

Sometimes
I am broken. The sand can't stay
in one end of the hourglass, and time gets all
mixed up inside my head.

Time Travel

I.

In an age of flesh and blood digital
 Spidermen and Wolverines,
 my nephew and I spar in the living room with
 our light sabers glowing green and red,
 crying out with each clash:
dooj dooj bjzzz.
 I cut off his arms and legs
 (I'm two feet taller);
 he slices my torso in half
 (it's at his eye level).
 Later he'll throw bat-shaped
 boomerangs at me from his bat belt.

It's tough for him to pretend
 without something tangible to inspire him.
 But his best superhero is of his own
 invention: he stuffs a pen that lights up
 blue down the front of his Underoos
 and says, *My superpower*
is my glow-in-the-dark wiener.
 And what does your wiener do?
It takes me to the future.

II.

I dreamed I met a nice young man
 in graduate school, short with a neat
 brown beard and glasses. He got
 hit by a car on the way
 to class. I traveled back in time to
 warn him at a Nine Inch Nails concert in 1999,
 where I had to avoid a younger,
 thinner me to maintain
 the space-time continuum.
 In the back row, I ran into Stewart Bible,
 penultimate high school crush, lanky
 Leonardo DiCaprio with a tennis racquet.
 I explained I was from the future
 and confessed my former love for him.

He looked at my breasts and said, You've
really changed. I said, I got fat.
He said, You wear it well.
At sixteen I would have fainted in ecstasy,
but from the future I could see
that up close he was skinny and snorting
instead of suave and svelte,
Anthony Michael Hall to my
Molly Ringwald.

Glimpse

I.

In the dream my dad drives, my pregnant sister
and me in the backseat. We are laughing, but then
a tornado sucks up the van, and we are
spiraling through the sky. I choke on a
soundless scream. Blackness
replaces the air, and I think,
please, no wicked witches.

I wake in a hospital and say,
Gretta
but think,
baby.
But she is there and she brings the baby,
a perfect thing,
almost-black hair and rosebud mouth,
nose not as long as her brother's.

In the morning, her face is clearer
than any dream.

II.

I was the first person who knew you existed,
after your mother. She crawled into bed with me
like we were little girls on Christmas morning and said,
I took a test. Then a new person was
blossoming, becoming more
real with each person she told,
though you were only a tiny knot of cells.

I knew you'd be a girl. Not like I knew
what you'd look like later but
in the way hope
can solidify into certainty.
Rylan prayed for a baby brother,
wanted to name you George.
But Gretta needed you to be a girl.

III.

A month passes after the dream, and she calls
from a hospital that's not Oz. I want to know
how the baby looks.

Like you said she would, she replies,
without surprise.

Forget

First is pain, then blood—
a tiny life expelled.
I reach into the bowl, into the red
thickness, and lift it out,
admire its tiny features, beak of a nose,
fingers and toes that will get no bigger.
Bring it in, the doctor says. I place it in
its prescription pill bottle coffin, like
something terrible in a lab jar.

But this is not me. I wake with my hand
on my abdomen, still feeling no sign of life.

My mother told this story to me again
last week. Asked if I had any books with
pictures at different stages of development,
wanting to figure out how long
it was dead inside her.

She says it was like a tiny person,
and the image haunted her, she says,
until Hannah was born.
I am the only person in the room
with her. I want
to cry.

Resurrection

I. *Shannon*

During the day the past rests,
but in dreams it returns to life.
I see my childhood friend, dead
from cancer for half my lifetime,
riding a lawnmower in her front yard.
She rests the balls of her feet on the platform
foot rests—treatment has caused her
tendons to draw up so she can't
drop her heels.

She runs her hand over her bald head just as she used to do,
not with fingers closed over her skull but with
the meaty part of her hand, fingers extended.

Always I say, you're dead.
She ignores the accusation and acts as though
she saw me yesterday and I've come to play
ponies and dolls and make believe.

II. *Annabella*

I close my eyes, grow still,
let my tongue loll out of my mouth.
My two year-old niece throws herself
against me, says, "Are you dead?
Ha-ha, are you dead?"
just a touch of panic in her voice.

She takes a new tactic:
"Teeckle-teeckle," she says,
scratching me with her little
sharp nails. I rise up
to tickle her back.

III. *The End*

What a relief it must be to close
your eyes one last time and know that

time has stopped for you:
nothing to see or think or feel,
no terrible dreams or visions.
And even if it's only for a little while,
you won't know, won't anticipate
reawakening, because all you know
is nothing.

Phantom

When I saw her the last time, she was fifteen
and knew she was dying.

I didn't.

My sister cried.

I didn't.

She died while we were on vacation. I remember
the position of the bed in the hotel room
(next to the window, facing the door);
remember waking in the middle of the night in a
flood of unnamed foreboding..

I want to write, *I never saw her again*,
not even at the funeral, but
you already know that
isn't true.

Story

I.

I write in a fever, drawn to a frozen dream image:
a young man staring into a field at night
framed by a doorway.

The story begins to incubate,
layers of flesh over the tiny
seed of that first picture,
scenes strung together.
My fingers are hers: she
traces the mystery scar on his back;

I see his blindingly white shirt,
reflecting the moon through the window;
other blanched and motionless
faces look on.

II.

Though it gains
flesh, I fear it will be stillborn,
features blank and unformed.
I can't quite define who is
gazing through the back door or
why the staring faces are so bewildered.

III.

Threads unravel in doubt.
This always happens.
Who am I to tell a story
that isn't mine?

Airplane Nightmare

Eyes open to the sound of the seatbelt light
turned on by the captain, and the plane drops
but recovers, though your stomach succumbs to inertia.
You didn't know you fell asleep,
didn't know you were on an airplane until
now when you heard the bell
not tolling, but dinging, overhead.
The oxygen masks drop, but you've got
bigger problems. The metallic coldness of
the arm rest crashes into your consciousness.
It somehow separates you from the large
figure in the next seat, whose folds of flesh
are spilling into your space, who is clothed, alas,

unlike you. You had to take this flight today,
couldn't let no clean clothes stop you.
No one has noticed yet, as you'd hoped,
but you are now violently, keenly aware
that all your private parts are on display,
and it's as if someone has opened up
your head on a hinge, and everything
you've ever tried to hide has spilled out and
scrawled itself on your bare skin.
You use your hands to cover
what little you can and half hope
that the plane does crash, so you don't
have to get off naked amid
the crowds at the airport.

Descent of the Dying

The dying cannot tell us if
the sensation you feel in transition
is like the sudden shift
in the hum of the airplane engine
as the pilot makes his descent,
if the inertia of the soul compares
to the drop of the stomach
as the plane quickly loses altitude.
Sitting near the engine all your life
you can't sort out your thoughts,
but when the landing begins, the engine
hums you into submission,
the calm you've been waiting for
after a long life,
but you are no longer weightless
or spaceless—this is real—
and gravity has caught up with you;
you can feel it rumble under your feet,
and that is how you know it's over.

Risk

I am not here listening to this man
whose hair reminds me of a medieval minstrel
read his work because I want to be.
I'm here because I should
want to be
because
I love poetry.
But what I really want
is go home
watch TV
give up
give in
drop out
let go

wake up tomorrow
as someone else, someone
with a different set of obligations,
a dozen roses pulled from behind a back

sleep with older men,
younger men, women

have psychedelic visions of panthers
debating talking toasters or
Walt Whitman in my bedroom closet

go to work every day
and make something
other people can touch
with their hands—
bowls, plates, prime rib

take a plane
to somewhere I've never been
and will never go
to see people I'll never meet

wake up again
back in my own bed,
next to the minstrel maybe,
reading me poems

that require explanations

for those nights I will keep
a glass of water and a bottle
of aspirin, no—a bottle of
good dark rum,
by the bed,
to celebrate.

Identity Crisis

Maybe I will become a librarian too.
Then we can be two librarians living
in an old house, surrounded by our books
all day. It would be better though if you
were a woman, and then we could be lesbians
disguised as spinsters. Two lesbian librarians
and nine or ten cats in a Cape Cod
at the end of a quiet small town cul-de-sac.

But I yearn for the bustle, the road noise
of the city. I would rather write the books
than shelve them, and you would make
a terrible lesbian, since I can never seem
to get your face between my legs.

Fire

I feel it in my blood, crawling;
itching need for a drink,
for the slur of thoughts and vision and
dreamless, drooling sleep.

Someone speaks a word or my eyes
touch it in a text, and I am on fire for it—
my skin tingles, heat rushes between my legs,
like the guilty pleasure of romance novel sex.

In the Winter

In the winter, water seeps
out of the cracks in the cut-through
mountain pass and freezes
into icicles longer than ladders,
as though the cold has squeezed
the water out of the mountain.
The face of the rock bleeds ice
even when the temperature
rises above freezing.

Cut me open and see that I leak
inside, all the love and
kindness God put in me
has been squeezed from its
quiet resting place by the world's
winter, trickling out
of only the cracks and fissures
where it freezes into incapacity.

Hawk Circling

On the parkway I see hawks
circling over tall trees.

I wonder what their keen bird eyes
have focused on below. Are they stalking
prey on the dry winter ground? Have they
sensed the dying of a wounded animal,
keeping their distance from life like vultures?

Once a hawk swooped down over my car and then
swept back up to the trees like a pendulum.
It came so close I thought it must be
scouting me out, another dying animal,
life slowly ticking.

inertia

Haunting

On a windy day the air bewitches
my hair, long spirals that swirl above
my head, defy gravity

A girl says your hair
is haunted

We joke that it is like my mom marrying
his dad. I say
she would not put up with the tantrums or
the horned owl eyebrows. He says,
would he bite his tongue
until it bleeds?

But it's true.
He shuts down into silence
and I am becoming more like her
every day. The butt at the end
of her nose is growing on mine—
I can see the twin slivers of
cartilage pushing white
through the skin:
ski slope nose and
witch's chin.

I say all women
are witches. We can open some
secret sealed off chamber in the hearts of
men and charm the snake in it
 for a time
tear up the floorboards and bust the windows
like scare-happy haints

until a new one moves in.

At Thanksgiving in the Kitchen

there are too many of us.
We bump backs, my sisters and I,
directed by our mother.
Gretta leans over the sink, mashing
potatoes, Jana bends at the waist
to check the turkey in the oven,
and I stand straight, at attention.
My place is nowhere, not
here anyway, not in the warmth
of tasks in progress.
I have to be handed
something to do. Tear up the lettuce,
set the table—I am the baby and
can't join this circle of mothers,
bakers, caretakers, can't
create something from
nothing. Alone I can do all of this,
but in this struggle I get
pushed to the side,
right out the kitchen door,
take out the trash,
run to the store,
bring in the groceries,
stay out of the way of
the women.

I Love and I Hate

Boys. Little ones I love.
I am not an impartial aunt:
I love the boys best.
Can I help it that my five-year-old
nephew and I share
a love of Spiderman, Spongebob,
and all things Legolas?

Boys. Big ones I hate.
Until they reach about sixty or so,
they are useless. I hate
that I have to pull my skirt down
to cover my knees when I sit,
that truckers honk as they pass
me in construction zones.
I love them but hate that they can't
decide to marry me
after five years or
put the seat down.

I Tell Myself

it's transference,
the pricking of desire
along my legs. He is like
my man in his coloring,
the delicate hands that handle
books for a living, the curl of his hair
the longer it gets. Even the forearms
darkened by hair, so like the ones
I let embrace me.

It is the consequence of distance:
if the other were here,
I would not want this one.
Instead I could thread my fingers
through the prickly hairs of his beard,
the man I love, and be content.
But I have a hundred and seventy
miles to drive and seven months to wait
for a marriage I hope
will cure me of comparing.

Disorient

I walked out the automatic door to see
a circle of dirty white gulls, at least a dozen,
over my dirty red car.

Where is the river? I thought.

Too far for so many.

The kind of gulls I imagine
should be by the seashore in
New England, not in
the parking lot of a Wal-Mart nestled in the
Tennessee hills that creep toward mountains.

I shielded my head with a plastic bag that
only contained one or two items anyway,
and then I backed into
the car waiting for my space.

History Book for the Lit Lover

a casual affair: a little something you pick up every night
to ease loneliness or welcome sleep.

You don't devote yourself to it
like *Jane Eyre*,

dote on its amazing intricacies
as if it were *Moby Dick*,

search it out in spare moments for comfort
like Whitman or Plath,

or spend the entire night devouring it like
so much young adult vampire-magician trash.

You may drink it in tonight like it's the only
book that means anything to you, but when

it's back on the shelf, you'll forget its name.

The Naked Greeks

Can I look at this book?

I hesitate, look at the cover, then
consent. She turns each
page slowly, her eyes
blue and wide.

Why are all these people naked?

Her mouth remains open
even after the words
have filtered out.

How do you explain
naked goat men and charioteers to
a five-year-old?

I tell her it's art, from a long
time ago, when they thought
people were more beautiful
without their clothes.

She turns some more pages and
traces a finger over
a statue of bronze and says,

*I think they are
beautiful.*

Loneliness

There is a loneliness without
the alone: when
you stand next to someone,
your breath mingling with his,
but you can't make your hand touch
or your mouth speak.

Parking Lot

warmth returning to
fingertips slipped from

gloves to touch faces, hands—
futile heat blowing from the dash—

sweat beading underneath
layers of t-shirts, sweaters—

coats coming off—
engine still running but going

nowhere, staying in the same
space, between the yellow and white lines

Road Song

windows down
cold night air in
rock song with tinkling piano on

nothing matters in this moment
only the crooked fingers
of the wind in your hair

no family or lovers calling
this song is your lover, your family
it lets you sing like you can only when
no one's there to hear

if it tells you to you will
continue driving into the night to
nowhere

always in the night
always to this one song
life rolled into this instant

Telltale

My kind bruises easy—
legs and arms branded by blues and purples
every time I run into the bedpost,
confused in the dark.

Bridesmaid Dresses

Our purple finery is not
the treasure that defends us....

Alcman, fr. 1

I don't even have my own gown,
but this satin and silk is enough to color
my future in paint by number. Now
it is all filled in—the lavender roses of my
bouquet, the U-Haul crammed once again
with my belongings, the round belly
and babies' names—a life about to begin,
and my last measure against it,
hemmed and pinned,
oohed and aahed
out of existence.

We Are Gathered

We are bound as a sheaf of paper,
tenuous at first,

 a student essay
folded over at the corner, ready
to come apart in a shuffle.

The paper clip binds us with less
wiggle room.

 The staple,
with its prongs, pierces
us in a way that can't
 be taken back:
even if the serpentine staple puller

 wrenches us apart

we'll still have tiny perforations
that won't heal.

Left Hand

In the vault of a little jewelry store waits
a very expensive bauble
with my name on it.

I imagine it ringing my finger,
its white, emerald-cut facets
glittering with the touch of the sun
or the glare of florescent tubes overhead
or the joy of my lovesick
Material Girl heart.

I often find myself gazing at that finger,
at the space where that ring should rest,
shifting the hand back
and forth in a beauty queen wave
to let the imaginary stone
collect and disperse
the light, my face a plaster of Paris mask
smooth enough to hide
misgiving.

retrocausation

Cutting Room Floor

what you are not supposed to speak
out loud

when we were kids, my nephew and I played
house and crawled onto his parents mattress to play
“bed”

we made kissing noises under the covers

lost my virginity after twenty years, *American History X*,
and a can of Budweiser
still don't remember saying yes the next time

got my first period in my sister's old bathing suit
in the woods with my friends when they pointed to the blood
I said I scratched myself on a stick

in sixth grade I pretended to be a girl from my summer
camp photo to “go out” with Jared Alig
it was strictly a telephone relationship

frames on the floor of shame
moments I have edited, that do not show
in who I am now
(I think)
but have still made me

In the Creek

The water is so clear and cold that you can see past the minnows and other little gray and green fishes right down to the rough, sandy pebbles that make the bed of the creek. Stand here, feet submerged, and watch them while the coolness washes away all else. At the bend, the wall is high; a long time ago, before we were born, the creek rose to eight feet deep, and now the wall is covered in clay the color of all colors combined, and it is slippery and hard like plastic, only it oozes between your toes and tells you you're home.

Once

Once my mother tried to run away.
I remember my dad coming into the house:
Your mother's leaving. I ran outside and
caught her crossing the yard.
I cried and begged.
She didn't leave.

I see her with a bandana tied over her head,
shirt knotted at the waist maybe,
all her belongings tied up in a
polka dot handkerchief hanging from a stick over her shoulder—
this is what running away
meant to me then.

I doubt she had that stick,
despite the clarity of the image.

If I asked her now
what she was wearing or what
she would have taken with her,
she wouldn't remember. No doubt
she'd tell me something anyway
to add to the jumbled memory, further
removing it from the truth.

If no one else remembers,
my memory is truth.

Another memory says she set out
across the yard (I caught her by the
tulips, didn't I?) with only air
in her clenching fists, so angry or hurt
that she'd leave everything
behind.

First Almost Sex
(after Sharon Olds)

We took our shirts off after school
in the guest bedroom upstairs
where he was staying while his parents
remodeled the basement for him,
I unhooked the white bra that held my
big breasts against me, pale and untouched
(as far as he knew). I cannot
forget the blank look of his
eyes on me—I was smug
with his bewilderment—nor the kissing
biting scratching rolling,
and finally I sat up and said
I should go but did not leave
without reaching into his pants
to touch him, already limp
with the expectation of
being alone

First Love
(after Sharon Olds)

Not mine, but his:
heads laid in laps,
kisses that tasted of pink
bubble gum,
pledges whispered
in high school hallways,
I did not love him,
I regret it now,
should have tried harder,
should have treasured him
like a favorite book
that would one day burn
in a tragic fire, but I didn't,
I was cruel
as teenage girls can be,
and I let him go, I did not go
to the funeral though I wept
for days, and finally—
I shut him out as if he were
someone else's old boyfriend,
a sad story someone once told me.

The Distance between My Mother and Me, or
Postmodern Education

The news channel says
such and such percentage of people
in Liberia trace their heritage to here,

and my mother scoffs in disbelief because
she thinks the passage from Africa
ran only one way.

I enlighten her gently: for her,
history is a different animal. It is
what happened; it is facts in books;

a continuous line
moving into the future
with no tangents, no digressions.

She thinks I am a diagramed sentence:
even the splinters have splinters.
To her, I'll probably never be whole again.

Ruins

They are all the same.
Stone hewn and sculpted by hand,
evidence of civilized accomplishment,
testimony of our fleeting tenure.

My first ruins were column drums, flutes
eroded almost smooth; square and silent
Roman baths; a frieze of a parrot, of all things.
I was transported.

Between those and the Parthenon,
I saw so many ruins that awe
fled and wonder ceased to fill.
Ruins have by definition
outlived their usefulness,
existing only to provide pleasure to tourists
seeking a comforting reminder that we
build with steel inside stone.

Confession to a High School Crush

Nick Puckett, I am profoundly unhappy.
I cannot confess this to anyone else,
too afraid to disappoint, but I give you
my confidence. I would know your face
if I felt it with my eyes closed.

It is my health, my weight,
the empty space beside me in bed
six nights out of seven, the blooming
grind of my empty womb every
thirty-four days.

It is that girl I was when I knew you
but you didn't know me, dead now,
balanced on my collarbone, crying;
the woman I should be if I trusted God
to give me what I need,
who lives a parallel life in my mind,
perched on a pew, husband in arm,
little ducks in a row.

Nick Puckett, tell me—
tell me who you thought I was,
and I'll see if I can still be her,
resurrect her from tearful reverie
and start again.

Over My Shoulder

Nick Puckett watches me.
I have not seen him in six years
because he looms behind me, thinking:

This girl I knew in high school, no,
this girl who was in my pre-calculus class,
who never spoke to me but

left a carefully crafted collage
of ragged words pillaged from
teen magazines, my name in the center

surrounded by a heart, another dotting the *i*,
under the windshield wiper of my
car during an away game, who always

watched me with eyes bold, embarrassed:
she has forgotten to watch for me or anyone,
dribbled coffee on her shirt without shame,

stopped looking over her shoulder,
from the corners of her eyes
in that wanton, virginal way.

No longer a tease, no longer
the kind of girl you would want once
just for the thrill of having had

what no one else had been able to get.
Now she wants more: all a man
can give and still more.

High School Reunion

I.

Ten years. Even the men
have swelled like pregnant women
all day on their feet.
The ones I want to see
don't make an appearance,
so I pretend to be glad to see others.
I have come back to show them
I am alive, successful,
so they can't forget.
I sip my drink and watch
them bring their plastic
cups to their mouths. I can tell by the way
they raise their eyes
over the rims that we are all here for
the same reason.

II.

I didn't go.
I watched the reunion website without
registering, saw my own name listed as
lost. But I did
browse the photos
afterward.

Hurt

I have always been a fool in hotel rooms.
Down to my panties in a flea-bitten bed
on the first date with Matt before
I even took a drink.
Wrapped around poor Andrew,
stiff with uncertainty in all
the wrong places, a girl named Abby
passed out in the bathtub. A fight picked in
Albuquerque, reconciled with suffocating
sex in the dark in a suite with
high speed Internet.

But I play the part. Nights I wish for
love that is hard, that hurts, wake up
knowing there has been a dream in my
bed, my pelvis so awash in nauseating
desire that the mirrored points of my ovaries
hurt like knife pricks. They are only dreams
though. No shame,
no folly in my own
bed. After all, I have to
lie in it.

I-40

Somewhere between Oklahoma City and Little Rock,
he starts talking about someone
he was with before me.

Up ahead are twin sets of tail lights
moving in tandem, one following
the other's every swerve, however slight,
mile after mile. Soon
there will be a disengagement, and one
will take an exit ramp, just as he
parted from her.

Perhaps our lights will separate
as well. Even this long road
ends.

Like a Little Girl

Baby hairs, my sister used to call them.
They are the ones that grow at the hairline,
short and downy, separating shiny scalp
from bald forehead.

But the ones at my temples, they grow long,
not long as the rest, and tickle
my face when I pull my hair back.
Once I had a neat hairline, before migraine
medication made my hair fall out in clumps,
waving like arms disappearing
down the shower drain.

Now, wisps. They betray me: my untidiness,
weakness, narcissism. Always
pulling them back,
pulling them forward.
They get in the way, make me conscious
of my appearance in ways I thought
I had outgrown.

An Aunt's Lament

I said good-bye to my little man
today. He wrapped my arms around
his baby fat belly and held them there
to keep me from going. He is somewhere
between baby and boy; I am
somewhere between mother
and sister. Someday he will forget
that he slung his arms around my neck
and rested the back of his head
on my chest. Someday when I call
he will not ask when he'll see me again.
But I will carry his wet kisses, his child's
curiosity, under my arm, wrapped like a gift
that I can open again when
he has become a man.

Effusion

It had to have been May, blossoms in bloom, tree branches sinking with the weight of
so many leaves.
The warmth of early Kentucky summer swelled our fingers, made our armpits sticky with
the smell of flesh too close.
Bright sun, cool breeze: I marked its irony with the sadness spilling
from your lips—
there was a night with too much heat, too much alcohol in the blood pumping fast
through your hearts.
No one said wait or stop. You felt nothing but your own need to take in his heat
without barrier,
and then when clarity dawned cold there was more of Mitch left in you than anyone had
bargained for.
You said it was a mistake, that a baby would be a mistake, don't you see? As if you
needed to convince me.
Leaves fell in my hair. A bee buzzed past our knees, and we kept walking. I was still a
virgin then—
or was I? I said, I'm sorry, but I thought, I will never be so stupid. I remember my
cheeks burning.
I wondered if you had asked me to walk with you to Planned Parenthood so you could
tell me this story.
I still wonder if you really wanted to warn me, or if this was your confession and penance
rolled into one.

Entropy of All Things

Smashed frog, fresh roadkill raccoon,
even once a dead goose:

as a I kid I'd walk or ride my bike along
our country highway and visit
startling displays of dissolution.

Each day I'd pass the same site
and see time take its toll:
stiffening then
bloating of the body,
maggots—eyeballs always went first—
then deflation.

Rain would intervene, matting
fur and washing away its color until
it was hardly distinguishable from the
pebbly shoulder gravel.

Eventually (after months, to my impatient
child's mind), the fur would coalesce into a
thin blanket over bones
as the skin disintegrated.

In the end perhaps only the sunbleached
skull would remain, fangs protruding,
foreign to its formerly enfleshed shape,
now picked and washed clean.
Another child would have pocketed it as
a souvenir, a curiosity to be later studied.

Even now I see a little plump girl child with
a tangle of yellow hair
squatting by the road, examining
day by day until nothing remained—
bones scattered, fur blown away,
gone and forgotten

except for here,
now, a bright
flame of truth in the murky cavern of memory.

limina

Kentucky Apocalypse

My brother once witnessed the explosion
of a transformer on a telephone pole
one icy winter night, and he said:
“The light was so bright,
I thought it was Jesus!”
his voice exploding with that last sacred
word, just like the transformer.

I had my own second coming scare
driving the Daniel Boone Highway between
Hazard and London, nestled deep
in the curves of the hills,
where the darkness is so thick
you can see it move across the road,
cutting through the high beams,
diffusing through the light like
ink from a startled squid through water.

Up ahead between two hills I saw
the light bright as day, growing
up into the sky, taking over the darkness.
I thought of my brother;
then I thought this is it—
Christ has come back
with me in the mountains—
but as it came closer,
I saw the light was only
the high beams
of another traveler.

Lake Tree

It grows low to the ground, parallel.
Three feet up, the trunk crooks,
a knobby elbow.

Then branches sprout to the sky,
five fingers reaching into the breeze.

The leaves levitate silently on the
almost still air, curled fingertips
reaching back to the base of the trunk,
to the beginning.

Its dreams are humble:
to thrive by a manmade lake in the middle
of the desert; to grow more leaves,
more crooks.

Hologram

Inside the black hole, I am

Bradley Cooper.

Tall, handsome, blade nose to cut
through bullshit, face to sell it.

Inside the wormhole, Bradley Cooper
is Lucifer:

pretty, pretty Lucifer,
in a lost production of *Paradise*.

In an alternate dimension, am I
a woman wearing a face of a man
with the face of the devil?

Joseph Stalin: Video Game Villain
(with Walt Whitman)

“Startlingly handsome yet pockmarked, strong yet with a withered arm and webbed feet, charming and charismatic yet ruthless, he was a clever student and voracious reader yet a viciously vindictive enemy.”

--Simon Sebag Montefiore

Select evil mode and become the most
feared fascist of all time:

I speak the pass-word primeval

plow down civilians in a Christmastime mall,
eliminate opponents with a Facebook click.

I know I am deathless

Bury guilt and regret in the permafrost.

*Logic and sermons never convince
I think I will do nothing now but*

listen

Secret bonus round: battle millions of zombie serfs and
party members with firing squads and primitive nukes,
excerpt Song of Myself as a battlecry:

And I am the poet of the Soul

And I am the poet of the Soul

Coffee with the King

This is not the conversational venue
I prefer; for the rest of the day,
my mouth will taste like an old
professor's breath smells.
But it is what Elvis likes, along with
biscuits and milk gravy and riding
in my old hatchback Escort.
He is forever in the kitchen, watching me with
those sad eyes
while I cook breakfast.
He is a profound listener
for a man who's made so much noise.

Breakfast with Christ

Me and Jesus meet over toast,
a novelty for him, a staple for me.
Jewish rye, wheatberry,
pumpernickel, Italian herb.

I say, Jesus, I need some help.
Life is too much.
This bicycle has no brakes.

He offers me butter, says,
Too much? You haven't even made it
thirty-three years, walked on water, healed
the sick or raised the dead.
To give is to live, not to be
trite.

I take time to spread the pat,
watching the warmth melt it, and say:
I grew a person though, brought him to life. That should
count for something.

Specific Gravity

When I close my eyes and
plunge into dreams,
the experience is so visceral,
so finite, so focused, so piercing

I can hardly tell what's reality and what is
not, the fabric of the dreams
woven tightly as daytime.
I only know the difference because I soon recall
I'm not a heroine in a Tom Cruise movie after all,
despite the specific lines of his face, the remembered
timbre of his voice. Later in the day
I'll think of something he said or a look on his face and
laugh nostalgically before I realize
I dreamed it all.

There are places I return to, in dreams:
back to the Dairy Queen for the summer, or to the
movie theater, where I apparently forgot to put in my notice
and still get shifts,

or the underground thrift store in Lexington that doesn't even exist,
where I always miss some vintage designer sale or
a vinyl White Album walks out the door just as I walk in.

Fictitious Force: Centrifuge

Stopped, my husband's silver pocketwatch
keeps time still.

Annabella says, *I keep time
in my head.*

My time is lost in invisible pockets,
out of order, out of control.

Time pushes out and away—
rotation becomes revolution.

We spin out and away on a
search for new anchors.

Post-adolescent Angst

His white smile, undifferentiated by teeth,
illuminated by his plastic California tan,
stays still even as I systematically tweeze
each plug of hair out of Ken's head.
He starts out sunstreaked, progresses to
male pattern baldness,
until there is little left
but fuzz over his ears
and a tuft at the peak
of his forehead.

And yet his grin is unflinching—
as fixed as it was when he
rolled off a conveyor belt somewhere in China,
his head full of shiny plastic hair.
I look deep into his flat, violet eyes,
whisper, *I like to have
my hair pulled too.*

Litany for the Expectant

corn dog sausage biscuit with cheese
 pink lemonade
 dipping sugar cookies in icing like
 French fries in ketchup
 McDonald's
 Buffalo sauce
 cold coffee
 candy corn Cadbury egg
 cheesecake

laid up in bed
 folded over the toilet bowl
 morning noon night
 bile like a broken yolk

swell swell swell
 ache ache

forehead splitting
 scratchy throat

hologram dreams
 dead baby nightmares

mother, God, someone help me

Blood and Water

I. Tender

First anxiety attack:
tenth grade biology,
surgery video.

Doctors shaved a little girl's head,
cut across her scalp, peeled away her face:
skin of a red grape,
flesh underneath raw,
ripe.

Panic gripped my chest and twisted.

II. Flood

Doctor had said: if you bleed, hospital.
I waited for days, cataloguing every prolonged
flutter
cramp
twinge

unprepared for the cold,
sentinel rush of blood
not a pain or a pinch, but a sanguine deluge of life
(mine or his?)

dripped all over the house, ran
stifflegged to search
for anything absorbent

did not want to see the mass on the floor
(clot? placenta? arm?)
thick with uncertainty,
gelatinous with expectation

*(What happened to your leg?
Annabella had asked.
Why is the baby doing that to you?)*

III. Antediluvian

After a desert rain,

lines are leaner, colors clearer.
Dust has been tamed, everything
washed clean and sharp.

There is a baptism of water, of fire, and
one of blood and pain,
one to purge and one to
begin.

Future Perfect

Once, the threads of my life
snaked out before me, rivulets
of dream and desire cutting
paths through the delta of possibility,
all emptying into a gulf so vast
I could not fathom all the paths
my life could take.

Now, I stand at a precipice,
possibility crumbling beneath my feet.

The future is endless abyss;
I cannot see anything in front of me.
If I look back, I am Lot's wife,
perpetual, immobile
pillar of salt.

Needs must; footsteps forward,
fear behind.

Morning, Fractured

He sings his alphabet as the words
pour from my pen. This is all he ever says,
a litany of letters cadenced by lisped fricatives.
Before *mom*, before *dad*,
Before *cookie*. A-B-C.

He cries and
tries to commandeer the pen as I turn the page.
Yesterday he spelled out DREAM, and my heart
trapped in my throat.

How can I live, when so much of me is lost in him?

It's almost dawn.
I watch the unclouded sky fade from
cerulean to electric then powder blue.

I crawl back into bed with my husband and son.
Baby boy cries out in his sleep, presses his back,
solid and warm, to my shoulder.
This is life.
I breathe.

The Only Poem

Before, love was a straight line.
 Or maybe a line segment drawn taut,
 point A to point B.
 Now it is circular, spiral, ovular,
 centripetal.

He grew from a tiny bud in me, a hope
 given up on suddenly thriving.
 So careful to preserve the arrow of his life:
 no drink no secondhand smoke no chemicals
 In utero, he was torture:
 sickness, blinding headaches
 nodrivingnoliftingnocaffeinenosex

Then: birth.

I had to learn to feed him from my own body,
 learn to love him as my own soul,
 only separate.
 Two points on the same closed time-like curve.

So much hope, so many expectations: to love to shape to influence
 to control a
 finished product

all love,
 scold to keep safe, gently correct
 bad manners

Perhaps I can influence
 reactions, attitudes

but I cannot change
 the core of what God made him, his
 immutable self.

I can only listen as
 he tells me who he is.
 His will is strong, stronger
 than mine.
 I can refine, distill, guide.

I was, and he is.
Now I am
we.

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