

Who's talking?

Thoughts on structuring a poetry manuscript

- Alice Major

You've got a pile of crafted poems that has been accumulating for months or years. You sift through them thinking, "Yes, there's enough here to make a book!" and the vision of a *whole book* makes you want to jam them all in an envelope and ship them off to the nearest publishing house. But hesitation steps in ... you step back and ask yourself, "So what order do I put them in?" and then, as you read them over, ask doubtfully, "Do these really belong together?"

So you spread them out on the floor and sort them in different ways. You notice you've actually got a surprising number featuring cats—maybe you could put all those together? But what about the others? Or maybe you could put the collection in roughly chronological order? This would mean that the poems about your divorce come before the ones about gardening (and the cat poems would be scattered all over the place.) Do gardening and divorce really belong in the same ms?

You start getting irritated and think wistfully of the days when Philip Larkin could just put 40 poems higgledy-piggledy into *High Windows* and get high praise for it. "Damn it, it's a book of poetry, not an advertising slogan. Let readers jump around in it and find what they like!"

Then you remind yourself that Philip Larkin was publishing nearly half a century ago. The world has changed. There are 3 billion more people in it, and some days it feels as though half of them are trying to publish poetry books. How are you going to

make your collection of personal lyrics seem special enough?

I've faced this problem myself, not just with my first book but with all of them. I've also helped other writers edit their own manuscripts. The challenge of assembling a collection out of an assortment of poems has become one of my favourite parts of the writing process: I've come through the slog of creating the individual poems—finding the inspiration for them, making the lines work. Now I feel as though I've moved into a different space. I'm lifting off over the whole landscape, noticing the patchwork of fields and houses below, thinking "That's the world I've been living in" and wondering, "What season is it down there? Where do those roads go? What lake is that?" Then thinking of the reader, sitting beside me, craning his neck to look around me. I am pulling back my head to allow him to look through the little window. What will he see?

So I'd like to offer a few thoughts in the hopes they help someone else boarding their own flight. I'll focus on something important that I think often gets left behind when we're packing up our poems—the question of who is talking to who.

A caveat

But before I start handing out earbuds and advice, I should talk about where I'm coming from. First, the points I'm going to make are likely to be more useful for the particular challenge of organizing a collection of lyric poems that have been written at disparate times and on various

topics. This is how many of us compose many of our books, but certainly not always. I'm not talking about the sustained narrative poem, or a well-published author assembling a "selected work." Nor would my advice be particularly useful creating a deliberately dislocating experiment with the reader's experience.

Which brings me to the second point: I come at poetry from a particular position, that I'm writing to communicate ideas and emotion with a reader. I'm not presenting a net of words for a reader to find her own way through, as if poet and reader were flying solo planes. Of course, every journey through the landscape of a book is an intensely personal experience, not always controlled by the poet herself. However, my underlying assumption is that the reader and I are both boarding with the general expectation of arriving at roughly the same destination.

I would never say there's only one way to write poetry. Poets work with the protean functions of language as it has evolved through millennia of hominid development. We're not yet sure where the deepest roots of language lie—mutual grooming and lullaby? The urgent need to warn, instruct, share information? A capacity for playfulness, like the sonic noodling you sometimes hear from a solitary magpie as you walk by a spruce tree? Did words emerge out of gesture or along with music? Poets can construct a writing philosophy from any of these starting points. Your philosophy won't necessarily be mine.

Having reviewed this safety card and checked for the nearest exit, let's move on.

Hearing voices

We talk a lot about poetic 'voice.' It's a fuzzy concept for the most part, covering everything from the idiosyncratic way you break your lines or tend to overuse the word 'little', to the way you speak from a particular socio-cultural background. What we don't often consider is 'voice' in the way that fiction writers do. The first questions a novelist will ask are: Who is telling this story? Who are they telling it to? Who are they telling it *for*? And why are they telling it at all?

Ask a poet such questions and the response is often puzzlement. We don't think of our personal lyrics as making anything like a fiction writer's deliberate choices. Ask "Who do you write for?" and a poet will look blank. "I write for myself," we'll say. Sure, many of us *start* writing poetry as an uncomplicated monologue that is "in my own voice." However, even when the "I" in one of our poems genuinely is autobiographical, we don't stop and remember that there are a thousand ways to be in the first person. Maybe you're simply observing, maybe you're spilling your guts, maybe you're being ironic, maybe you're addressing another poet/poem, maybe you're talking to God, maybe you're talking to your mother.

For many of us, our first angst-ridden poems of love or longing are attempts to locate our own house in the landscape below. But sooner or later, once we've buckled in and watched the safety video, we realize there is someone sitting in the seat beside us.

What are they looking at?

The three pegs of voice

The shape of any poem is mapped around three pegs:

- There's an "I", a narrator speaking, the eye that watches and interprets—even if the pronoun I is never named or claimed.
- There's a "you" being spoken to—but this isn't the second-person "you" of English grammar. It's the addressee, the occasion for the poem. It's the focus of the poem's attention. It can be animal, vegetable, mineral; past, present or never.
- Finally, there's a "we," the readers, who are engaged with reading/hearing the poem.

All these stakes are moveable, and the poem is like a line of string taking its shape as it is pulled around them. In an intensely autobiographical poem, "I" and "you" can be positioned very close together; the poet talking about himself with no one else in the room. Alternatively, "I" and "we" can be pulled together to observe a more distant "you": a landscape, a political situation, an idea from science.

Perhaps an example would help. Cats turn up occasionally in my poems, and yes, they're usually autobiographical, based on my own pet-owning experience. (I'm using my own work here, not from ego, but because these are fairly easy poems to get and I know what I was doing at the time.) There's one called "[On helping an old cat defend his territory](#)." It's about the cat, and it's also addressed to the cat; I'm empathizing with the shrinking of the territory that once he defended with honour and torn ears. The reader is off on the other side of the room, called on to sympathise and smile and reflect on passing time.

The other poem is "[Privacy Acts](#)," written in response what seemed an over-zealous application of privacy legislation when I took my cat for a kennel stay. The focus of attention is, once again, the cat—but this time, he's off at the back of the yard. Instead, it's the reader who stands close to the "I". We're being asked to get indignant, not only about bureaucracy but also about our larger paranoia over being observed and the legalistic assumption we can ever be fully private individuals.

Two poems about cats, both mildly humorous, both from personal experience. But they aren't the same voice—the second is the voice of satire, the voice that invites you to join the poet up on the stage and wag a finger at the follies of society. The first is the personal voice, a poet letting you overhear that she's a little worried about time passing and the losses that will bring.

T.S. Eliot talked about three voices of poetry: "The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse." There's some overlap with what I'm saying. But he was struggling at the time with writing poetical plays and I don't think his categorization gets at the fluidity, the *many* shapes that poems can take as they wind around these three stakes.

The important thing for us poets to remember is that these tent-pegs of voice change from poem to poem. Not every poet puts them in the same place every time. But all too often, we assume that a reader will get the relationships effortlessly as we hop from piece to piece, because we don't even think about how we've shifted the anchors.

In particular, “I” is a very defining kind of word to encounter at the beginning of a poem. It sets up an expectation—this is not a detached authorial voice but an autobiography. “We” are being invited to listen in on something that matches up with the gender of the author’s name and the photo on the book’s cover. As the writer, you hope that by the time the reader has gone through a (relatively short) poem, she’ll have worked out the necessary relationships and figured out whether the “I” of the poem is actually your great-grandmother, or the future inhabitant of a doomed planet.

A reader may negotiate the individual poem successfully, but if the “I” on the next page has shifted even slightly to the side, she’ll have to start over. “Just a minute,” she thinks, flipping back a few pages. “What’s she doing with a wringer washing machine?” As the writer, we are often so invested in the individual poem that we don’t realize it’s not immediately obvious (and confusing) if we’ve moved the pegs.

All of us tend to have habitual patterns we make of relationships between ourselves as writer, the reader we’re communicating with and the material to which we’re turning attention. When we speak more generally of a poet’s ‘voice’, we’re usually talking about such characteristic shapes she makes around the three pegs.

I think this is why we often like to hear the author read aloud—it can make explicit the three-way relationships encoded in the text. The physicality of voice signals all sorts of things about how we are supposed to understand the I, you, and we. Hearing a poet read her work helps us recognize whether he is inviting you to stand beside him or expecting you to listen

in as he addresses her own past. We often hear someone say how much more they get out of a writer’s work after they’ve heard her read it aloud. That’s because, afterwards, the listener can lay that shape over the words on the page when she reads them to herself.

And this is why it’s important to read your poems aloud as you’re editing. It’s not simply about deciding whether the rhythm of a line is working. It’s to help identify what voice you’re using—to bring your unconscious assumptions to conscious awareness, just as you bring the sounds of language to the front of your mind and into the physicality of tongue and throat.

When you read your work aloud to yourself, really think about what role you’re playing as the narrator of this particular poem. Is the audience in front of you as you declaim it over their heads, or are you inviting them to stand beside you and look at the cat/the cradle/the beauty/the horror? What would you say to the audience to introduce the poem?

[Back to that manuscript](#)

Okay, let’s put down the mic and reconsider your own pile of pages. How do you shape them into a book? What do you do to ensure the book feels whole, as though its constituent parts belong together?

For me, as you may have guessed from the foregoing, voice is the great organizing principle. However, not many of us want to (or can, or should) write whole books with the coordinates of voice staked in the same relationship. It would be a rare (and possibly boring) poet who did so. Nor do we want to add distracting stage directions or individual footnotes like “this poem relates to my experience doing

laundry but is actually based on the life of my great grandmother Elise.” How can you keep readers moving with you through the book without getting their necks wrenched as you change direction?

Well, obviously you can group poems into sections. This doesn’t mean putting all the cat poems together. It’s about arranging them according to voice. Perhaps the poem about cats belongs, not with tender poems of remembering childhood’s tabbies, but with the poems of snarky social critique.

Does this mean you *must* divide your collection into sections? Of course not—it wasn’t done much in the middle of the 20th century when Leonard Cohen and Al Purdy were publishing. Lots of illustrious poets of today don’t do it either. A fine poet like Micheline Maylor builds her [Little Wildheart](#) as one uninterrupted chain. And some books just shouldn’t be chopped up—they are conceived and written as a single emotional or narrative arc. As an example, there is Benjamin Hertwig’s [Slow War](#), in which a returned soldier from Afghanistan tries to find the meaning in that experience.

However, most of the recent poetry books that I’ve read do break the text into sections. Perhaps, to some extent, this is a matter of fashion, but it’s also a very practical solution to the challenge of keeping a reader oriented and connected to what you’re doing. Sections can help make a longer collection more readable, provide a break for the reader to catch her breath and refocus, and reduce the whiplash effect of switches in voice.

Of course, it’s not that easy. The next step is to agonize over what poems belong in what sections; personally, I find this process can go on for months. It’s not as though your landscape has been neatly planted with a field of barley here and an

acreage of canola over there. There are creeks that wander through, small clumps of trees that aren’t big enough to count as a section, but somehow belong to the territory, and the occasional city streetlight that doesn’t fit the metaphor at all, but somehow you *have* to get it in.

After you’ve had the poems all over the living room floor for a while, you herd them into clumps based on the voice relationships you’ve identified: these are the poems that question ironically the relevance of modern life (laundry, going to work); this section is darker—the narrative voice is fearful. This section pulls back to look at family’s history in a series of dramatic monologues that explore where anxiety comes from. The edges of the groups may be blurry, but usually there are one or two poems in each that seem to set a key. Overall, the poems in the group should speak in a kind of chorus—not absolutely the same voice, perhaps, but voices that harmonize, provide counterpoint and descant.

(And by the way, sections will often cluster around the same subject matter. Your poems about cats may indeed come from the same voice. Just don’t *assume* that this will be true without carefully thinking about it.)

The next challenge is deciding how to order individual poems within sections, and then how to order the sections into a manuscript. I think the most effective structure emerges rather in a way that a writer of fiction plots a novel. There’s an emotional arc to the whole novel, with arcs within that arc. Start with thinking about the whole collection first—what movement could those key-setting poems trace? Where do you want the reader to start and end in terms of growing understanding? Do

you want the book to move toward resolution; or do you want to go in the other direction, towards greater dissonance?

The temptation we often face is to slap sections into some sort of narrative chronology: put the family history first, then your expression of fear, then the ironical poems about daily life today. That *might* be effective and useful to readers, but it's not inevitable. Perhaps you want to start with the dark present (the audience listening to you writhe/write), then move into the set of dramatic monologues that speak in voices from the past, and leave the ironical struggle with laundry out of the book entirely.

Once you know how the sections overall will help the reader move along an emotional journey, you can burrow back into each group and decide the specific ordering of poems within them. Even within a smaller group of eight or ten poems, you'll find there are shifts of voice and mood that can mirror the overall arc of the book or create a counterpoint—brighter to darker; snarky to more sympathetic.

How many sections should there be? How many poems in each? There is no formula for deciding this from afar. Perhaps the shifting voices of your book mean you need five or six sections. Perhaps only two. Perhaps none.

My own rule of thumb for the length of sections is that they should be at least 8 pages—you're trying to build momentum, not a patch of freckles. A section with only two one-page poems can seem a bit feeble. If those two orphan poems truly don't belong with any other section, ask yourself sternly whether you need them in the manuscript at all?

With this ordering plotted out, take a breath (and allow the reader to do that with you). Add those section-title pages of white space and rest throughout the manuscript. Find a title for each section, or an epigraph—not ones chosen to impress readers with your erudition but in a spirit of genuine helpfulness. A little bit of context goes a long way when you're travelling.

What do you leave out?

But you've got that brilliant orphan of a poem, and it just won't fit in any particular section. Do you have to chuck it out of the manuscript entirely? "No-o-o" you protest. "Surely the reader's brain is sufficiently elastic to accommodate it. Who sits down to read a book of poetry from end to end anyway?"

Well, dear poet, the first person you'll want to do that is the editor for the press you're hoping to interest in this book. Yes, you may startle him with the luminescence of that first poem, but if it has nothing to do with the rest of the work, he'll quickly lose interest—perhaps faster because he's been misled about the journey he was headed on. (As one further note: we're sometimes told to put a powerful poem right at the beginning to grab the reader's interest. But what if that makes no sense in the dramatic arc? Part of the answer is not to put in any poems that *aren't* interesting.)

I've sometimes wiggled round this by using the orphan poems as a prologue and/or epilogue. There are poems you just *know* that belong in a book, but how? Sometimes you realize it's because they make a commentary on the main body of the text, but in a different voice—like the Clown stepping forward at the end of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, after all the couples are happily paired off, to sing

plaintively of the wind and the rain that raineth every day. But sometimes they just don't belong. Accept it. I've got poems that have been sitting around for decades waiting for an appropriate place in a book.

I know, I know—you're writing a book of poetry, not a play. The poems were separately conceived and constructed; each one is its own universe. Why all this fuss over putting them in an order that was never thought of when you wrote it? Well, it's *because* it's a book, and a book is a different experience than a single poem. The different pieces can't help but speak to each other. You might as well make the dialogue as interesting as possible.

A case study

So far, I've been talking about collections made up of unrelated poems of similar length. However, that's often *not* how poems come to us. We write sequences, or long multi-part meditations on a subject, or groups of poems exploring a particular stanza form. Such chunks are not book-length in themselves, but putting a book together with them is like trying to achieve an interesting view of a landscape that's skewed by one glaring section of bright-yellow canola.

Let me give you another personal example from my own work, to illustrate how I have tackled something like this. I had found myself writing a poem, "Welcome to the Anthropocene," that started out to be a two-page commentary on how humans alter other living creatures, then morphed into a 20-page contemplation of where we find ourselves today, trying to make sense of our relationship with the world through the lenses offered by science. When I finished it, I started trying to find other

poems that would combine with it to make a book. I had the usual miscellany accumulating—poems worrying about climate and how the changing weather of my region is a harbinger of what we're bringing on ourselves; a group about cognitive biases and illusions we're all susceptible to; personal poems about family; older poems about working in an office tower that I've been trying to find a place for since forever; a suite of very sarcastic poems creating imaginary coats of arms for people who piss me off. The tone was all over the map—some are meant to be amusing, others deeply personal.

I tried various groups in various orders, but there was just no place I could plunk the long poem in the middle of them—it would be like an ostrich sitting on a chicken egg. But, when I looked carefully at the voice of the long poem, it gave me an idea. The "I" in that poem is satirical, the voice of someone standing back from the vast canvas of humanity and shaking her head. It's partly the voice of my mother, profoundly exasperated at the political idiocy of the television news and not caring whether anyone agreed with her. But the voice modulates a little over the length of the poem, becomes less certain. The author steps down from the platform to join the reader, acknowledging that 'we' are all in this together, all fallible. This suggested a possible map for the overall book.

I moved the long poem to the beginning, where I think of it as being the blocky support for a cantilever construction, something that anchors a beam extending outward from it. The next section shifts the global subject matter to my local environment, and has the same modulation from satirical distance to personal engagement. Later sections move to the

more personal poems. Then the last section circles around the writing of poetry and the cognitive illusions that we poets work with, and that section adopts that voice of exasperated satire again at the very end.

I decided I had to leave out the very sarcastic suite. It belongs, not to the voice of Horatian satire (which is relatively indulgent towards its targets) but to another tradition—Juvenalian satire, which makes bitter mockery of them. The former invites ‘we’ the reader to share the view of folly with the poet; the second wants to make the subject ‘you’ uncomfortable and possibly the reader as well. Perhaps I could have oriented the whole manuscript towards satire and held back the personal poems. But somehow, I felt that would have undercut the seriousness of the long poem and the book overall.

Why you should ignore my advice

There is no one, perfect order. There is no one right way to organize a collection; there aren’t compulsory figures to this art form.

I’m hardly the best example myself. It took me quite a while to work out what I was doing and why, and certainly my first book was flawed. One commentator pointed out that the final section seemed a bit trivial. It’s true. That collection has a long poem in the centre (“Words selected and imposed on time”) that tries to move out from the personal, family poems at the beginning via a group of poems that take their metaphors from science. But the last section is a raggle-tag group of some lighter poems that went over well at readings. I just didn’t couldn’t bear to leave them out. And even today, I don’t entirely regret that.

I still occasionally read the poem about trying to match socks after laundering.

I’ve had reviewers and editors suggest everything from lopping off the last third of a manuscript to reordering the arc completely so that there’s ‘hope’ at the end. Some still find the shifts of tone too jarring.

Well, there you go. You, too, will be criticized. Some readers, in spite of your best efforts, will still be confused about the structure you’re trying to achieve. Everyone thinks you should have written the book that *they* would have liked to write.

I merely offer this recommendation to think carefully about voice as a way of packing your own suitcase-book. There is a reader beside you. You are not travelling alone.