

Pre-conference Assignment #1

In a recent interview, Catherine Barnett noted that the sequencing of a poetry collection as a whole, the order in which you place individual pieces, is “the last poem you’ll write for that book.” Like a satisfying poem, a well-structured collection has an arc, a shape that resembles narrative or story.

With that said, we tend to forget that many stories are possible from the same set of facts, and many potential sequences are contained within a single group of poems. Your task will be to uncover at least three possible stories that your collection can tell.

First, print out a single section of your manuscript. If your manuscript doesn’t have sections, simply print out the first fifteen poems. Then sequence them in the following ways:

- **Creating a narrative arc:** Look closely at the last lines and titles/openings of each poem. Place them in the order that seems most natural when considering the transition between the ending of one poem and the beginning of the next.
- **Creating tension:** Place your poems in an order that juxtaposes vastly different aspects of your voice and your aesthetic. This can mean thematic shifts, shifts in tone, shifts in form, shifts in voice or the type of speaker we are presented with, or all of the above.
- **Allowing formal shifts to become content:** Start with a poem that seems like a natural opening for that sequence. Then follow it up with a formal shift, one that is meaningful when considered after the opening poem. For example, starting with a poem in couplets, then presenting something fractured, fragmented, can read as a powerful commentary on the narrative. This is just one possibility, and you’ll need to consider how the different forms you’re working with can illuminate the story your poems are telling.

You’ll want to keep each sequence for future reference as a PDF or Doc file. Before the conference, please consider how all of these techniques are at play in your existing draft. Which of them are you underutilizing? Are there moments where you could vary your strategy when comes to sequencing the poems, allowing for greater surprise, variation, and tension? Select two pairs of poems from this exercise and send them in a docx file to kmiles@tupelopress.org.

Preconference Assignment #2

As you revise, the narrative arc may shift, and some titles may no longer suit individual poems, sections of the manuscript, or the work as a whole. In order to prepare for this stage of the revision process, it's often wise to create a "title bank," a list of phrases, lines, and pieces of language that call out to you as possible titles for a finished work.

Your first task will be to mine your manuscript, creating a Word doc of phrases from your own poems that contain worlds. Once you've exhausted your own manuscript, move on to a literary text that was important to the creation of your own book. Choose phrases from that literary text that are similar to your own voice in tone and style, and also language that's much different. Then move on to at least one non-literary text, culling pieces of language that could strike sparks against one of your poems.

Bear in mind that titles can do many different types of work in a poem or sequence: providing context for the poem, complicating the poem, creating tension with the poem itself, describing its narrative arc, instructing the reader as to how to engage with, and imagine with, that poem, teaching us how to read form or formal shifts, and so on. You'll want to cull language that could serve each of these purposes in relation to your work.

Bring the "title bank" with you to the conference. We'll discuss strategies for titles on the level of individual poems, sections, and the work as whole, as well as how to approach this aspect of revision.

Preconference Assignment #3

Choose the three strongest poems and the three weakest poems from your manuscript. Send both lists of poems (unlabeled) in advance of the conference in one docx file to kmiles@tupelopress.org.

Preconference Assignment #4

In a recent craft essay that appeared in *The Black Warrior Review*, Jennifer Cheng notes that “every story has a shadow story.” The “shadow story” haunts the narrative proper, following the arc of the collection with the utmost fidelity, but never making itself fully known. When considering a poetry manuscript as a whole, this “shadow story” can be incredibly meaningful, even more so than what is plainly stated in the poems.

In preparation for our discussion, make a list of all the elements of plot and narrative we are given in your sequence. Then consider the following questions:

- What is left unsaid in the larger arc of your collection, and why?
- What is the story of that silence?
- What do these silences reveal about the speaker(s) of your poems and their emotional/psychic landscapes?
- Where in the manuscript could you potentially exercise greater restraint, allowing the silence to speak?

Please think through these questions in advance of our discussions. We will talk about ways of using silence in poetry collections, and how what is left unsaid can heighten the impact of what’s already on the page.