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Poetic sequencing and multi-aspect prose-poetry

Abstract:

Multi-aspect prose-poems – that is prose-poems in diptych, triptych and polyptych forms – have begun to emerge in my more recent creative output. To examine the nature of these new prose-poems, it has been useful to consider the nature of poetry sequences, together with the role of poetic sequencing in a wider writing practice: both in the development of draft poems and in the editorial decisions and activities we undertake to order a body of poems for publication in a printed collection. Within the material context of the book how is a body of poems collected and presented, and what is the relationship between front matter and content? With exegesis of practice examples from UK poet Selima Hill and via reflections on the creative process of generative and drafting activities, I consider the significance of the surfacing of multi-aspect prose-poems at this point in my development as a creative writer. The paper examines some of the strengths and limitations of multi-aspect prose-poems and considers where they intersect with longer sequential works. The prose-poems included as an appendix illuminate the multi-aspect in triptych and diptych, and this paper is the basis for further study into what practitioners can bring to the practice-research ellipsis.

Biographical note:

Lisa Matthews is a poet, freelance writer, writing-researcher and collaborative artist who lives on the northeast coast of England. In the final year of a part-time doctorate (with Studentship), she is exploring confessional poetry and sequential poetics in a practice-led thesis. Lisa has published three books of poetry, the most recent being *The Eternally Packed Suitcase* (Vane Women Press, December 2015), and she has a fourth collection of prose-poems, *Callisto* (Red Squirrel Press) coming out spring 2018. *The Hauled-up Notebooks* is the collection at the heart of her current doctoral research, the title inspired by Anne Sexton's poem, '45 Mercy Street'; this will be published in the summer/autumn 2020. http://northumbria.academia.edu/LisaMatthews

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Introduction

Prose-poetry, like many literary phenomena and genres, continues to evolve and defy definition in the most engaging, challenging and creatively inspiring ways. This paper is not an attempt to define, redefine or un-define prose-poetry. Instead it is an exploration of the sequential characteristics and practice possibilities to be found within prose-poetry, and in this paper I will examine one specific form of sequential poem that I am currently working in, a form that I have begun to refer to as the *multi-aspect* prose-poem. The term applies specifically to works I create in diptych, triptych and polyptych, and although I have been writing prose-poem maquettes and proto versions in my practice journals for over thirty years, this iteration of a prose-poem is a relatively recent feature of my practice. These multi-aspect poems first appear in print in *Callisto*, my fourth collection – a book written entirely in prose-poems.

To develop a deeper understanding of this strand of my practice, it is proving useful to consider the wider context of sequential poetics, and to examine how other poets title, structure and set out their poems within printed poetry collections. As my prose-poetry practice continues to evolve, so too does my research into its features and characteristics, and as such this research is a work-in-progress, currently developing in two main strands. In this paper I will focus on taxonomy and issues around titling, editing and the structure of poetry books, and how a better awareness of these factors might facilitate a deeper understanding of my new prose-poem form. Running alongside this first enquiry is another paper (in development) that looks at the creative relationship between practice and critical discourse.

To begin with it must be acknowledged that, for me, the term *prose-poetry* is always co-joined, and this is a convention I will employ throughout this paper. The small typographical link between the two separate words seems significant, my hyphenated designation a kind of explorative kenning meant to hint at the conundrums inherent in the form, and in a wider context, the acts of writing creatively and writing reflexively and critically. The separate parts – or activities (of creative writing, and critical writing) – can, and do, exist independently, as well as in syntheses of unknown and less binary paradigms. However, a different set of possibilities is created by two genres of writing – in this case prose, and poetry – converging into an interlinking whole. Writing prose-poems in multi-aspect forms is another blurring of the precarious boundaries between prose and poetry. And while the definitions are wholly necessary and are creative acts in themselves, they are also there to provide the intersections we gravitate towards *and* evade. Sub-oceanic trenches offer the same kind of dynamism and fecundity. The energy of plate tectonics acts as a good metaphor for the space between poetry and prose, between creative writing and creative criticism. Iceland's land mass, I have begun to imagine, is a geological expression of a prose-poem in diptych, sitting as it does on the diverging plate boundary of the mid-Atlantic ridge (which has its own hyphen). These concepts and ideas are some of the freight I am trying to fold away into the tiny hyphens used to link prose and poetry in multi-aspect forms.

Often explored in terms of what it is not, rather than what it is, and discussed in relation to other literary forms, prose-poetry has been described by Jane Monson as a 'non-genre' (2011: 7) and again, note the hyphen employed here. While in the forward of the

Rose Metal Press Anthology, subtitled a *Field guide to prose-poetry – Field guide* suggestive of the multiplicity of variations – it is introduced as 'hard-to-categorise' (McDowell and Rzicznek 2010: xi.), here a double-hyphenated definition. Long before I knew anything about the wider-world of practice, pedagogy, criticism and theory; long before I had published anything or had spoken to another poet, and long before I knew I was destined for a life in poetry and creative writing, the prose-poem was fiercely present in my practice. One of the opening draft pieces in my first writing journal (now over 30 years old) is a justified, three-line prose-poem fragment entitled 'Anne in her kitchen', and my notebook archive is testimony to the longevity of my preoccupation with the form. From those first murmurings has emerged a more recent need to work the prose-poem into multi-aspect pieces and I have included two of my own multi-aspect prose-poems as examples of current practice as an appendix. A lone prose-poem often doesn't seem to be enough, or else is not the right form *fit* for what I am trying to do.

This exploration of and addition to prose-poetry's taxonomy had its beginnings, in part, in the organisation of the *Callisto* manuscript. As I began the editorial task of preparing the manuscript for my publisher I noticed there was a difference between prose-poems of more than one stanza and those poems that seemed to present themselves in multi-aspect ways. I didn't quite understand those differences, but I felt they were important. As a result, I began to ask what was happening in these multi-aspect prose-poems that distinguished them from other poems. In what ways was the sequentiality of my new kind of prose-poem different (and the same as) other poems with several verses? And in a wider context how many kinds of sequential poems and structuring devices and connections might there be in individual poems, and sequences of all kinds – and how can that knowledge illuminate my study of multi-aspect work?

Initially I tried to address these questions by considering some of the ways single and series of prose-poems are structured and set in printed collections. Firstly, there is the standalone prose-poem, such as 'A Hermit Crab' by George Szirtes (Monson 2011: 58). This single poem by Szirtes is a useful piece to begin with as it introduces the debate around the lineage and length of a prose-poem. Usually consisting of a single stanza or text block, this iteration of a prose-poem is no more than one page in length, which Monson asserts is the typical, though not exclusive, range of a prose-poem when practised at its 'most disciplined' (2011: 7). Regardless of when and/or if it relates to other poems around it, the standalone has its own title and a sense of dénouement, momentum, resolution or clarification: which is not to suggest this kind of poem can be finished or fully realised, but that in its mono-page authority it holds poetic space deftly and expresses its ideas, themes or experiences in a way that requires no further explication, unless the reader looks for it. Of course it can be argued that the rest of the collection a standalone resides in is a whole other level of exploration, resonance and expansion. But here I am suggesting that a standalone prose-poem like 'Hermit Crab' is a poetic unit that has a relative level of completeness and autonomy when compared to longer single poems and more complex and sustained poems and sequences.

Secondly, there are the more extensive and significant sequential prose-poem works that can be divided and/or sub-divided into parts, sections and books. Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* is a seminal prose-poetry text that offers practitioners and readers a wider

stretch of poetic possibilities because the poems are an uninterrupted sequential procession of interconnected prose-poem blocks. While each poem in Hejinian's work can be experienced as a standalone, reading them sequentially takes the work to new levels. Thirdly, there are concrete and/or disruptive collections of prose-poems. For example, *Cain* by Luke Kennard has larger prose blocks in-set with smaller ones (2016: 53–83), italicized asides and page-long sidebars employing a variety of typefaces and font colours, set with non-traditional gutters and with dropped lines and orphaned phrases. Finally, there are multi-aspect prose-poems. These works are in diptych (two-part), triptych (three-part) and polyptych (more than three parts) forms and have an implied and enacted interconnectedness related to that found in other kinds of sequential prose-poetry.

The multi-aspect prose-poems almost always begin in two main sites within my practice, both of which are centred around the initial inspirational stages of writing. I noticed that many of my multi-aspect prose-poems have their beginnings in unconscious and random processes. That is, in contrast to pieces that start in a conscious decision to write from a specific experience, memory, research strand, commission, collaboration or pedagogical context, these strange multi-aspect prose-poems were emanating from a more subconscious place of unknowing and intuition. To date – almost all my multi-aspect poems, and all of those in *Callisto* – came out of spontaneous, surrealist and random generative writing activities. And while these activities are meticulously planned and the outcomes sometimes go on to be rigorously crafted, they usually unearth unexpected, unknown and surprising raw material. Or else the random act of free associative writing mines preoccupying themes and ideas in more subconscious and mysterious ways. And it is a universal truth worth repeating that writers and artists of all kinds experience extended moments when we are not sure what it is we are doing, and it is the *not-knowing* and the *un-knowing* that is of vital importance to practice. I write to music played in loops, in trance states, in the dark, with my senses curtailed or sublimated by curtains, eye masks, retro video games and headphones – all in an attempt to tap in to my subconscious. Part of the development of my craft is to jettison, in controlled and measured ways, what I've already written and experienced. Once I locate and/or create and can inhabit this creative space of un-knowing, my aim is always to find ways into new work, and to face the blank page as if for the first time. Mirroring this un-knowing, and aptly expressed in that small hyphen, are some of the mysteries inherent in multi-aspect prose-poems.

After considering these initial findings (concerning the standalone, etc), I realised the investigation required refinement. My doctoral research into sequential poetics, which includes close readings of the work of Selima Hill, is contributing to the expansion of this enquiry. Though she is not a prose-poem practitioner, many of Hill's collections – almost half of her output to date – are made entirely of sequences. What follows is research into the front matter and structure of printed poetry collections, and how various forms of sequence are structured and titled in books of poem, leading me to consider where my multi-aspect form of prose-poems may fit in these practices. And while I don't always access a poetry book at the beginning and read it in chronological order to the end, this mode of access is the one I will apply for the remainder of this study. This mode of reading is one I always employ when coming to Hill's collections

for the first time: I read the front matter first and work my way through the text to the back of the book. Hill's work is often highly fragmented, surreal and can be initially confusing and I find the table of contents useful in gaining insight into the work.

Different kinds of sequencing

A first, or primary level of sequencing in my study is identified as the printed poetry collection itself. The material context of the book provides a template for a body of poems. The front matter is a way to introduce the content of a book of poems. Regardless of form, theme and the grouping and setting of poems, a book presents poems in a physical sequence, and the primary order of a poetry collection immediately creates relationships between the poems within its pages. Christine Thatcher's collection *More than you were* (2017), is a collection that has a single list of poems at the table of contents. While this volume is not a prose-poetry collection, it is an example of how a poet can effectively use the front matter. The poems within *More than you were* proceed and are listed one after another, in a single and uninterrupted list. There are no parts or sub-sections to the book, and what the reader experiences first are the titles of the poems and their corresponding page numbers. Within the primary sequence, the relationships between poem titles can be employed to whet the reader's appetite, and there is the potential to imply and/or suggest some of the book's thematic range and content by creating resonance between the titles listed within the front matter. Present in Thatcher's collection is a diction of illness and bereavement that is established with titles like 'The toxicologist', 'Men in our family die early' and 'What grief has become' (Thatcher 2017), while a narrative arc is established, and temporality implied, in the relationship between the first poem 'First drafts' and closing poem, 'Finding you'. Thatcher's collection opens in a place of early creation and uncertainty and ends with a more active and positive verb.

Within the primary sequence there are a huge variety of ways to order poems. In my edition of Hejinian's text there are no poems listed within the front matter (there is no contents page) and the text-block, which for the entirety of the book defies the single-page model has, instead, prose-poems set over double-page spreads, and/or running over two or three pages; the poems in the book intricately interconnected through form, location, discourse and memory. The typographical setting of my edition creates a top left-hand corner text-block disruption as each title claims a square of white space around it – the same shape at the beginning of each poem in the book – and the titles alone, read in sequence, create fragmented and staccato versions of the life, and the lives, Hejinian explores in the text.

This lack of a contents page is mirrored in Hill's collection *Lou-Lou*, and immediately, as a practitioner, I wonder why Hill does not want us to experience the poem titles before reading the book. Why dispense with the table of contents in *Lou-Lou* when, in all of Hill's other published works, she employs the convention and uses it to great effect? In *Lou-Lou*, I believe it is because Hill wants us to come to the poems fresh and without any of the potential thematic baggage set up or implied by a contents page. *Lou-Lou's* narrative is chronological and to experience it in real time resonates with the experience of the main character in the book. Each of the poem titles in *Lou-Lou* is a

combination of a locale and a specific time. The poems take us on an emotional and visceral tour of 'Ward 6', 'Night-room', 'Day-room', 'Side-room', 'Stairwell', 'Corridor' and 'Patients' kitchen', and under each place name we find a date. The poems begin on 'June 2nd' and end 'September 26th'.[1] To read the book with no contents-page preconceptions allows us to walk more fully in its protagonist's shoes, and while the temporal reach of the poems can be read as taking place in the same year, the reading experience and the lack of a year (no year is ever specified in the poem titles) the text has the potential, via the sequentiality of the titling, to suggest many years may have passed, not just one.

In *Lou-Lou*, we see a kind of contemporary anti-epic poetry – the epic itself another example of sequential poetry. Here Hill's work is one long sequence with temporal and location-specific framing devices that make the book feel expansive with an implicit wide-ranging narrative, like an epic poem. The speaker in *Lou-Lou* is in a medical facility for an indeterminate length of time and though this may not be the timescale of a traditional epic, any time clinically incarcerated must feel like a lifetime. In *Lou-Lou* we don't get the speaker's full story, nor the edited highlights – instead their biography, often a harrowing one, is offered to us in sequential tesserae. There are heroines in many of Hill's texts: women and girls, sisters and wives, are trapped in abusive households, relationships and marriages, they endure protracted temporal journeys through clinical institutions and domestic settings. They battle against the odds and suffer in micro and macro ways. The women usually survive and convey their stories to us, in their own voices. Their experiences are obfuscated and distorted by systems of patriarchy, illness or other forms of societal control, but as sequential works Hill's poems have something in common with the ancient epics, Hill reclaiming the epic canvas for a wholly female point of view in contemporary practice.

Closely related to this primary level of sequence is the secondary level that manifests at the table of contents. Here, systems of sequencing and sub-division occur within the front matter. Hill's collection *The accumulation of small acts of kindness* contains this secondary level of sequencing, in which the table of contents is not a single list of poems but a sub-divided body of work. In *The accumulation* we see that, within the primary sequence of the book there is a secondary level, dividing the text into named parts and chapters (Hill 1988). In contrast to Thatcher's collection, *The accumulation* is a three-part series of interconnected longer poems. The first two parts of the book are numbered 1 and 2, and sub-divided into three numbered chapters, with a closing third part, 'The last week'. As in Thatcher's collection the poem titles give some sense of what is to come, however, the poems in the numbered parts of Hill's collection are much longer, ranging over several pages, with far fewer titles to work from.

Where the sequences in *The accumulation* each house only one long poem, Hill's later collection *Jutland* consists of a pair of multi-poem, interconnected sequences, the first of which, 'Advice on wearing animal prints' is juxtaposed – at the contents page – against a second, 'Sunday afternoons at the gravel-pits' (2015). 'Advice', written in a distant and de-humanising third-person voice tells the story of Agatha – a young girl or child of indeterminate age who is, for some of the time, incarcerated in clinical facility. The voice in this first sequence often refers to Agatha not by her name, but as an 'it'. Agatha is portrayed as naïve and strange, and the childlike tone is underpinned by the

early-reader, A-Z lexicon of the 26 poems of this first sequence. The opening poem in the sequence is titled 'A', the second 'B', and then so on through the alphabet, ending at 'Z'. 'Sunday afternoons', written in an intimate first person voice – that I take to be Agatha's – describes the patriarchal presence of Agatha's father who moves silently around their shared domestic spaces. Agatha experiences horrific treatment at the hands of her father, and other professional men – like the doctor – who inhabit or move through Agatha's home. There are only rare glimpses of a mother, while the father figure casts a long shadow across the entire work. The patriarch appears in both sequences, though mention of him is totally absent in the titling of the first sequence. Of the 61 poems within the second sequence, 'Sunday afternoons', 21 have the words 'my father' in their title. Residing next to each other in the front matter the titling of these two sequences suggests the child of the first sequence is intimately connected with the patriarch of the second sequence. The narrative, if it the book can be said to have one at all, is scant and fractured – the space between the sequences articulates that which cannot easily be spoken creating a disorientating dual-aspect to the work. *Jutland* shatters and then scatters its narrative into sequential shards, its two sequences are in constant conversation with each other and we are left wondering whose version of reality to believe.

Revisiting the sequence in multi-aspect prose-poems

An awareness of the complexities and nuances of sequencing is facilitating my commentary on and exegeses of my own prose-poem practice, and the final section of this paper will look at two of my prose-poems, a triptych 'Tiller' and 'The private rooms of Stanley Spencer' a prose-poem in a diptych form.

Triptych: 'Tiller'

Selima Hill uses fragmented sequential forms to articulate – even enact – trauma; similarly, I am finding ways of exploring and writing from traumatic experiences by experimenting with multi-aspect prose-poems. On returning to the poem 'Tiller' after a period of research into another topic, I recalled that the shape of the triptych came to me during a session of automatic writing – a technique I find most appropriate to use when the subject I wish to explore is personal and problematic. Grace Paley said, 'you write from what you know, but you write into what you don't know' (2016) and this concept of starting from the known is something I have embraced in my practice; I feel that to begin in a moment or occurrence of reality offers a solid foundation. The work I am currently developing in multi-aspect forms is neither biography, memoir nor non-fiction, but it has its roots and beginnings in personal memories and lived experiences. These currently centre around traumatic familial bereavement and its associated and ongoing estrangement. Immediately, and intuitively, I felt I'd found the right form for these familial themes when proto versions of three-part prose-poems began to emerge from bouts of free and associative writing.

Together with the personally-inspired impetus, the practice compost that has helped to inform and develop the tri-fold setting of 'Tiller' includes the split-screen aesthetic of

1970s British cinema and the European surrealism of the early twentieth century. The collection of books that sits to the side of the early stages of 'Tiller' is a kind of literary mixtape and includes the tesserae of Sappho, Dickinson and Levertov, Queneau's *Exercises in Style*, Beckett's prose shards, Gorey's *Fantod*, Theroux's journals, the writings of Jane Hirshfield, Carson's sea trilogy, Oulipo, Kafka's *Blue Octavo Notebooks*, Stein's *Tender Buttons* and Barthes' *Mourning Diary*. During writing practice, I don't read these books in a linear way, and some of them already resist the notion of being accessed and experienced from start to finish, or from back to front. Rather I dip in about out, experiencing extracts randomly, then I respond making notes, prose-poem maquettes and sketches as I go.

The reason why 'Tiller' has developed as a prose-poem in triptych also has something to do with being brought up Catholic in a Northern working-class neighbourhood in 1970s Britain. Back then the only religious discourse I encountered was that of the Catholic church. At school and during worship my ears heard mass read and sung entirely in Latin, the text of which I could recite from memory. Most of the diction, activities and iconography of our masses centred around the notion of the holy trinity, and the god I learned about was a god of three persons, the father, son and holy-ghost. The significance of this trinity was everywhere. It was in the stained glass, the vestments, the altar and its accoutrements. It was multiplied into floor mosaics and in stations of the cross. There were three kings who brought gifts to the holy birth, an apostle's fear articulated as a triptych of denial and the holy family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. As a holding pattern the triptych has deep roots for me, and there is no doubt that my early spiritual experiences have left watermarks that are visible if I hold my practice up to the light.

Panelled visual artwork in triptych were, and still are, commonplace in Catholic spaces. Three scenes from the same narrative are depicted in this kind of visual art, and they offer the congregation an intimate, multi-aspect glimpse of a story, while simultaneously enacting and celebrating the holy trinity through the framing device itself. A major function of a triptych is that the three parts can be viewed, then folded away and transported after use. For this to be possible the triptych is usually physically connected, by hinges or some other kind of binding, so that the two outer panels can be folded inwards over and on top of the middle section. The flexible, hinged connection is the reason a triptych can be so compact and condensed yet express such expansive narratives when opened outwards. For a large and personal familial theme the triptych seemed to offer a useful poetic frame, giving some boundary and division to the uncomfortable, sometimes unbearable, story I wanted to write from.

Having amassed a haul of automatic writing, I began to wonder how a painter would choose which aspects of the story to highlight, and whether these choices were an act of tripartite narrative inquiry and distillation transferable to a writing practice. How does a visual artist tell a weighty biblical story in a three-panelled artwork? What do they leave out? Which objects, places, characters, tropes, scenes and interactions will best suggest the larger story? These questions are relevant to practising poets and other kinds of creative writers – perhaps not during inspirational or early draft stages of new work, when reflexive thinking (in my experience) is to be avoided at all costs – but once

a poet takes the step back and considers what has arrived, and how it can be developed away from its first draft stages.

Addressing these questions leads – as it invariably does – to a whole other level of enquiries and I would like to spend a moment looking at the critical writing of UK scholar Kim Lasky, and specifically, her work on poetic statements. Lasky, while addressing the challenges faced by creative writing students required to comment on their own practice, has devised a triptych (Kroll and Harper 2013: 14–24) of practice-led activities and outputs that is invaluable as a tool to help examine the intersections between practice and criticism, and to better understand the practice-criticism ellipse. Lasky's work draws on the reflexive thinking of three established novelists, and the self-authored practice-led commentaries of James, Fowles and Lessing are cited to illuminate three aspects (or panels) of writing research. In Lasky's model – which she envisions as a triptych – the critical/theoretical occupies the left-hand panel, poetics the middle, and creative output the right-hand panel. Lasky begins from an Aristotelian definition of poetics, one that encompasses all that we do when we create new writing in any genre, not just poetry, and each panel in Lasky's model is distinct while simultaneously and flexibly linked.

'Tiller' is confined, aside from in performance, to the material context of the book. In this two-sided environment how might I set the distinct parts of a three-part prose-poem? The physical trifold of the altarpiece is not available and therefore, I must write the implications and connections into my poem in other ways. Lasky describes how the triptych can produce interesting possibilities when the separate panels overlay one and other and come in physical contact. I took this literally and imagined folding up the poem as if it were a three-sided leaflet and this critically-inspired visualisation suggested a shape for the poem. In 'Tiller' a diction-based and prosodic echo is achieved with the repetition of the eponymous title as the first word of each of the three panels, the incantation and evocation of the anaphora enacting and implying connection. A tiller is the means of steering a ship, and in part the poem is a personal mediation on navigating familial bereavement, estrangement and its associated, ongoing trauma. The subject of 'Tiller' is a family broken by traumatic grief, and the trinity/holy family-inspired models of the triptych offer a certain kind of defined, intersectional and co-joined space within which to negotiate difficult material and experiences. In the context of my Catholic childhood the triptych is a deeply significant scaffold for a poem, bringing certainty and solidity to dangerous part-biographical themes, while simultaneously signalling the breakage.

Diptych: 'The private rooms of Stanley Spencer'

This multi-aspect prose-poem, published in the UK poetry journal *Butcher's Dog* (2014), was initially inspired by the portrait 'Two Sisters' by the British artist Sir Stanley Spencer, the diptych form mirroring the two female subjects of the picture, and providing two hemispheres of potential articulation. In the piece, I use typographical aesthetics to convey distinct yet interconnected iterations of the same voice, or speaker. Spencer's portrait morphed, in the drafting of my poem, into a single person explored via two of their internal voices. Each voice occupies its own distinct hemisphere of the

diptych. The left-hand panel – set in a regular font – is a block of direct speech and conveys the voice of a woman stifled by her station in life. This character-sketch, articulated through poetic monologue resonates with the right-hand hemisphere of the diptych – set in the same font, but italicized – and conveys the voice of the same woman, but this time her private thoughts are experienced as an internal monologue. The two hemispherical voices of the poem began on the page as a pair of ekphrastic texts blocks. Then, over the drafting process they became a visible, linguistic enactment of the speech and thoughts of an unnamed and unknown woman. As humans, we speak and think simultaneously all the time; physically *and* psychologically present in each situation we find ourselves in, 'The private rooms of Stanley Spencer' is an attempt to articulate and visualize this dual-aspect experience. Bound intimately, as they are by the hinge of the diptych, the connection between the hemispheres of the poem is expressed through the form and offers a two-sided conversational space to both experience and consider. Articulating the voice of one woman from two different perspectives is also a way to build a sense of temporality – the interconnectedness emphasizing that these fragments, or voice-sketches, reside within a much bigger narrative. There is an actual gap between the panels of the diptych that coexists alongside the narrative gaps implied by the fragmented yet interwoven form. The left-hand panel is set in a parlour, as is the right-hand text block. However, the parlour in the right-hand panel has fallen out of time, is italicized on the page, and reports tesserae of external dialogue, the voice of a parakeet intertwined with the address. The two women in Spencer's portrait inspired a transformative diptych distillation into one poetic voice. In the right-hand panel of 'Tiller', it is very hard to know, as readers, exactly where or when we are. The notion of the journeying of a woman's life – Anne Sexton framed this concept of female-centred odyssey as a 'hegira' – for me, was inspired through readings of Sexton's collection *45 Mercy Street* (Sexton 1982: 481); through repeated listening to the audio album *Hejira* by US singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell, and through my awareness of Hill's temporal expanse held in the front matter of *Lou-Lou*. The train ticket imagery in 'The private rooms of Stanley Spencer' evokes this movement although the woman remains locked in the domesticity of the parlour throughout the reality of the poem. Utilising the diptych folded form, Spencer's name imprints from the left-hand panel becoming 'Stan' in the right-hand panel. The concept of imprinting images, tropes and diction from one side of a diptych to another creates new possibilities, and to experiment with this idea I have been physically folding panels of text over onto each other and marking out where words, grammar and white-space touch and imprint.

Conclusion

The multi-aspect prose-poems emerging in my current practice offer a different space for drafting and articulating specific familial-based themes. This space, held and created by the multi-aspect prose-poem, feels safe to me and I don't think it is a coincidence that I have found this form during a very difficult period of my life. Unlike the standalone poem and longer primary and secondary sequences, the diptych and triptych poem can simultaneously hold fragmentation while implying or suggesting a wider narrative-whole. We don't actually get the whole story, however, the framing device

can suggest a whole story exists beyond the frame. Even when, as in Hill's work, the narrative is exploded and shared in juxtaposed fragments, the multi-aspect prose-poem can be a space to hold a great deal of implied material. I am using multi-aspect forms, I believe, as a way of approaching a completeness that can never truly be present in my life again. However, an exploration of sequencing reveals there is no completeness – in reality, it is a state we may aspire to but can never fully realise. The multi-aspect is an elegy to what is lost and an attempt to fix what is broken by grafting the solidity of the trinity onto something far from stable and centred. In a wider sense the multi-aspect poem is an iteration of secondary sequencing that can inhabit a single poem: a sequence having the potential to contain any number of poems from one standalone or multi-aspect poem, to hundreds (and beyond in digital contexts). My new reading of Hill's sequentiality as a contemporary anti-epic is helping me to view practice through an entirely new lens, locating today's diverse sequential poetics in the context of a longer timeline of practice stretching back to the ancient epic poets and sonnet sequences of the Golden Age. The effect of naming and creating sequences draws attention to the sequences themselves, it draws on the history of the form and implies relationships between the poems and the larger primary sequence they reside within. The editorial ostentation of naming, titling and listing sequences and sequential poems offers a wealth of practice possibilities. If a poem can be said to offer a single moment of clarity or distillation, perhaps a sequence, interconnected sequences and multi-aspect poems shatter that clarity and present the lived experience of the poem as a dislocated and exploded constellation of poetic tesserae. A multi-aspect prose-poem offers the potential to juxtapose tesserae in a smaller, more compact space. Unlike epic or long, multi-part and/or multi-stanza poems, that take longer to experience, the splintered and fractured multi-aspect perspective creates atmosphere, and the three parts of a triptych or the two of a diptych offer a compression of dialogue. One powerful effect of juxtaposing the parts of a multi-aspect poem is that the reading becomes confused because of the compression. The repetitions between stanzas, the riffing of images and diction, the skewing and echoing of places and memories puts us as readers, in a confusing no-man's-land where there is no dominant voice. Like a poetic kaleidoscope, Hill's texts lay out shattered realities before our eyes. The dislocation of the multi-aspect space holds the cacophony of voices, memories and images in distillation, changing them from being what is mine to that which is universal. I can un-know what I have experienced and use the certainty of the multi-aspect frame to create prose-poems that hold both standalone autonomy and the uncertainty of the un-centred, exploded whole. In the end, it may be the sheer amount of uncertainty packed away into the double hyphen of the multi-aspect prose-poem form that is most intriguing and challenging at this moment of my practice, and at this juncture of our lives.

Endnotes

1. *Lou-Lou* (Hill 2004) is an example of a poetry collection devoid of a table of contents. Within the front matter of this work there are no poem titles to aid the reader's journey through the book, and the concept of covert and overt sequencing is one that is still developing in my research. At this juncture, I would suggest that *Lou-Lou* is an example of covert secondary sequence. While Hill chooses not to list the poems for us at the start of *Lou-Lou* the collection

is sequential beyond the primary sequence of the book itself. The titling system employed throughout the work suggests another iteration of a sequential method and requires further investigation.

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Appendix: practice examples

Tiller

Tiller stands to one side of where the light is. Tiller is not a woman, nor is Tiller a man. Tiller is someone you have always known. Below where Tiller's feet would be if Tiller were upright there is water. Black water with points of radiance deep down. Somewhere it sounds as if a massive clock is ticking. The resonance of the metal hands juddering around a face. When Tiller thinks, the light sharpens. You read a book in the light until the end begins and the story starts. Tiller makes a sound like a tongue on the roof of a mouth. You remember a woman in a shop tutting, stacking cans of Coca Cola on a painted green shelf. Tiller used to collect knots from tree branches but they are all gone now. Some iron from the fence around the burial ground remains fallen and stacked to the side of the space where ivy spreads though sentences of moss and verbena. Were we free we would live forever, we'd take our children to the park.

Tiller tells of the time when we all held hands without touching, and this was called *family*. Tiller wears a shroud made of every high-water line in every harbour in the world. This was called *teleology*. Or else tide. Then Tiller left in a ship made of balsa wood and blood, and this was called *appropriation*. There is a house with smoke coming out of the front door, letters go down the chimney. The last time I wrote something the sides of the paper were moving like larvae in honeycomb. I posted it knowing it would never arrive but that it would drop through a brick tunnel to flare and disappear in a grate. There is a kite string, a hand at one end. On the central panel is a promise. Beyond word and message the wind and water tell us all we need to know. Tiller left no note. There was no imprint on any bed. Under the stairs there were signs of struggle but in the end all the clean slates went to make a roof we never maintained.

Tiller knows the exact number of times sleepers dream of anything elliptical. This is such a gift and never a curse. Some days the birds fly inverted. Dogs sit at stop signs. Knives bend themselves into forks. Tiller moves through your house like a curtain pulling along a soft plastic track. Arriving for huge piles of time like seasons that settle in grey backyards. Autumn is winter, spring is summer, the whole year a picnic blanket in the boot of the car. When they bring you back there's a small mark in that webstretch of skin between thumb and forefinger. Check for it now, you too may have been taken away. Tiller lends gravitas to certain situations. Like, for instance, when you have to board a tram at an unfamiliar stop, or sign a form for something you want. The street where I was born, long and angled towards the river, is gone now and it twists my heart like tautrope to say it, but wherever I fall I never feel at home.

The private rooms of Stanley Spencer

I.

Henry's socks are absurd. He sat yesterday afternoon with his legs crossed talking so loudly that I wanted to break the barometer over his head. He thinks it's daring to reveal socks that clash with the colour of his suit. I'd rather die than marry him. I'd rather sit with my hands in freezing water for hours. I'd rather sit amongst broken glass, or on the jury in some tedious fraud case. More than once – as I sat – Henry looked directly at me. And every time he did I looked straight back, not at him, but into the space to the right of his ridiculous sunburned cheek. It's an effort to be here. More than anything it is my desire to fly an aeroplane. Mrs Erhart does. Is she a *Mrs*? The thought of all that sky, flocks of birds, bones flexing over the therms, the terns, sunrise witnessed from remarkable angles. Imagine sitting in an aeroplane, in the cockpit, restrained in all that sky? A seatbelt, a harness, Mr Spencer's hand on the rudder. He'd land in a field, we'd build a fire but he would not touch me.

II.

This idle engine, this finished heart. Plumb-line in a corner, a forgotten art. Handprints. A cave roof. The space between the parquet, the parakeet covered over. 'Goodnight Stan'. The inside of an ivy stem, the second after 'remember when': it's the tape reel paused, or a kiss meant for other lips. Between stockings tops, the clouds torn open, the pocketbook wrenched from a stranger's grasp, the propeller just before it engages and all the words (un)spoken. Have you noticed the white glaze between the pattern on the dinner service, the way the maid regards the shoes in the hall, the way tickets printed in a heavy type face look better in upper and lower case? Our skin is our cage, our bones a brace, but it shouldn't be this way. I wish I had another. I wish my dress were thrown over the arm of a chair, my petticoat exceptional on the fender. I wish when I rang that bell it would all be over, then we would be free to crawl in the dirt and on all fours. Spelt, and welt and affected.