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## MEMORIC FORM: POEM AS MEMORY

Lawrence V. Eby

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MEMORIC FORM: POEM AS MEMORY  
MACHINIST IN THE SNOW

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing:  
Poetry

---

by  
Lawrence Van Eby  
June 2014

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## ABSTRACT

*Machinist in the Snow* is a narrative long poem, much like a novel in verse that deals with the loss of memory and environmental rebirth. In the book, the narrator exiles himself into a frozen nature and attempts to return the frozen wasteland into its former, flourishing environment. The poems take on the *memoric form* of memory in a wide range of poetic forms from the traditional sonnet, haiku, or villanelle, to a scattered projective verse. In the center of these poems is an attempt to mimic the mind in the way that it shifts, in its moments of clarity, and in its attempt to dissect and understand the surrounding realities. Through logic patterning, deep image, and introspection, these poems are meant to give insight into what it means to be human in the digital age and to highlight the dwindling connection to the pastoral that is so deeply rooted in American society.

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## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:

### MEMORIC FORM: POEM AS MEMORY

“Poems are excursions into belief and doubt, often simultaneously.”

-Tess Gallagher, “The Poem as Time Machine.”

It was sometime near Christmas, 2013. My brother, Nathan, had said something full of sound, something beautiful. He said it, then said, “That sounds like a poem.” And it did. I remember the moments of thinking it was wonderfully rhythmic. I remember the moments of discussing the unique sound qualities of the line. It was cacophonous in the beginning and had a nice blend of euphony at the end. It was energetic and made me feel like running out into the cold winter day, naked, just to feel this energy even further. I used it to explain to him what I believed poetry was and how remarkable it is that even non-rhyming poetry, in all its oddities, can still be pinpointed by people not familiar with modern verse. But what did he say? I had written it down somewhere. I had spent a lot of time sorting through books just in case that scrap of paper became a bookmark. I checked through my digital notes. I scrambled through my house, digging through suitcases, drawers, and jacket pockets. I thought maybe I e-mailed it to myself. But it was gone, and I knew I would never find it again.

What does this have to do with poetry? Poetry, in its simplest purpose, is a way to record. The great poet, Denise Levertov has said, “the poem—any poem,

but especially a poem having for the poet that character of testament—is fruit, flower, or twig of a tree” (Levertov 254). The poem, in its details, helps my mind slow life down just enough so that I can remember something when I reread it. The moments that my mind can conjure through a poem can be as vivid as when I had lived them. So in a sense, I am trying to live my life more than once through poetry. Even in the moment, life seems to go too quickly, and maybe this is the problem with remembrance. I can barely keep up. It’s as if I’m watching the city pass by as I watch out of the passenger window. I can only catch glimpses of it, a bowling alley, another fast food joint, a lot of new cars, but I miss the details. Imagine, the bowling alley’s illuminated sign has a rock-sized hole in the W. Or maybe it doesn’t. And I’m sure I missed the way the gutter was full of debris from a car crash the day before. I didn’t notice that across the street a woman is getting a tattoo covered up, a tattoo she had done in high school in some guy’s garage. How disproportionate it looks. How even the cover up won’t make it look any better. But she is trying. He is trying. He has something to prove, and she just wants to get rid of a bad memory.

I’ve lived in a state of regret for a while now, and poetry has helped me cope. I regret in the moment of happening that I will forget what it is that is happening. In her essay “The Poem as Time Machine,” the poet and essayist Tess Gallagher states, “All time is during. This is why it is so hard to exist in the present” (Gallagher 114). I will meet someone today and I will forget their name. I will have a full conversation with them about the importance of image in poetry,

the importance of sound, and how I believe that the best poetry is made in between the unconscious and conscious. I will tell them, "That's where the mind is working as some type of séance for all that crazy underneath. Let the mind sort, but let it all surface unconsciously and watch what comes out." Then, years later, I won't recognize them as they stop me in the hall and ask how I'm doing. Maybe they will quote the former U.S. Poet Laureate Charles Simic and say, "To be 'capable of uncertainties' is to be literally in the midst. The poet is in the midst. The poem, too, is in the midst, a kind of magnet for complex historical, literary and psychological forces, as well as a way of maintaining oneself in the face of that multiplicity" (Simic 399). I'll agree and understand how being in the midst relates to that moment. I'll smile. But I'll have trouble remembering the original conversation, or even this one, now in its happening. It isn't because the conversations don't matter. They do. Those moments are important to me and I love this mystery person. But there is something broken in my retention.

*Machinist in the Snow* is a representation of my struggles with memory. It follows a non-linear narrative of a machinist in self-exile into a nature that is broken and frozen. The machinist's goal is to restart and reawaken it to its former, life-filled glory. On the horizon is a city, still lit with fluorescence, seemingly uninhabited. Surrounding him, the machinist is immersed in a frozen forest encircled by an elevated highway. Opposite of the city, a mountain overlooks the valley, holding a portion of himself: "the creature," pieces of memories lost in the infinite void of the mind. The environment works like a

bounded infinity. Inside the forest is an infinite amount of space in which the “engine of the forest” hides. This engine is the broken mechanism in my own mind, the lack of retention. The author and critic Richard Kostelanetz speaks precisely as it relates to this work, “Some artistic experiments are based upon personal incompetence” (Kostelanetz 245). Mostly, this book is a poetic exploration of the faults of self. There is also an eco-poetic layer that I will touch on later.

Much like memory, the manuscript is fluid in its form. At times, a moment can be remembered with lucidity and is expansive and broad. At other times, memories are short, unclear, vague, like the memory of the line of poetry my brother had come up with. The variances are large. This *memoric form* is a mimicry of these fluctuations. In one moment the following section is working in free verse (broad, yet fragmented memory), then switches instantaneously into a haiku (deep, image-heavy memory) and then into an expository free verse (a base of internal response). In this section, the machinist is experiencing his first moments in exile.

If wire,  
then remove the sea.  
—if no sea, disregard this command.

A heavy branch bends,  
the snowcapped bark sounds across

the valley, a whip.

This is how I build from sounds. I gather.

I bundle. I bury them beneath my cabin. (Eby 6)

This form exploration works in various ways. For example, in the poem numbered “20” the same sort of movement happens, but this time, the poem breaks into a prose block. In this poem a few nights have passed, and the machinist feels as if the natural world is observing him just as much as he is observing it.

in their cores. The wind breaks off the mountain

and catalogues my body. The trees unalign and  
cascade into themselves. I am gravity. I am sea. I  
am all that glows in between. The generator chugs  
its rabid hum. (Eby 23)

In the first example, the haiku is a representation of the clear, short memory. In the mix of a more rigid memory (free verse/rhetoric verse), the haiku breaks out in a burst of lucidity before we return to the more rigid form. In the second example, the memory runs together in which the physics of time is quickened, almost dreamlike, and we are sped through it.

In other poems, the form becomes more formal and in the center of free verse we are suddenly placed in a sonnet, or a variation of a pantoum arises in

the midst of couplets, or even the syntax becomes more controlled and clear.

From poem 13:

Cliffside. The city chugs along, the roads splice  
and solder as they move around this wild  
engine. The rocks of this mountain hold in a creature

with steel wings, exhaust caressing its body  
in the damp cavern. This mountain, a nectarine

not quite ripe enough to peel. I seek  
your fruit, challenge your architecture. Open

the damp, cavernous mountain. Nectarines  
roll from the cliffside and into the valley's mouth,

roll from the cliffside and into the valley's aperture.

I will leave this terrace behind if you open

your hungers to mine. Porous  
body, pocked home. When I look at you

I will leave this terrace as reflection, you

as me, us together as conductor and spark

with steel wings. Our exhaust is our breath  
not quite ripe enough to peel.     The sleek

curves of our balance on the edge of forest  
and fault. There is music here, the blooming of things,  
the rapture of our outer shell.

Your fruit challenges your architecture. Do not open  
to the hungers of me. Open to the hungers of me. (Eby 16)

This memoric form is formally structured. It begins with seemingly no particular structure (the moment before the memory begins), then transforms into a pantoum that is slightly warped but retains the basic formal shape. This form resembles one of my most vivid memories, when I was about five years old: I discovered death. I was looking at a pine tree my parents had planted and suddenly realized that it would someday vanish out of existence. Then I looked around. The small slope of our driveway, the fence that kept our dogs in—those vanishing dogs!—the field of deer grass next to our home where a large oak tree stood, the tree house within it my brother had built, all of it would someday no longer exist. Even in those very moments everything was dying as it changed

states in the flickering of time. The tree was not the tree it was a second ago. Time had a way of creating the death and I was watching it pass by.

This realization isn't new, as there are representations of it throughout the history of literature, but I would argue that it hasn't been given much focus. For instance, looking at a haiku of Matsuo Bashō, we see the deep concentration of this image: "Autumn moonlight— / a worm digs silently / into the chestnut" (Hass 12). The intense clarity of this image is evocative of a deeply seeded memory in the mind. It is a short clip, but vast in its understanding of how slowly time can move given this type of concentration. It is as if this poem is working to slow the world down, attempting to transcend time, but ultimately, it fails due to the futility of this move. This is a memoric form due to its failure to transcend time. Much like a memory, this image is bound to the reality in which it exists. "The poem not only makes time, it is time; it is made of time as is the bee who dances out the directions that are and are not the map of a place, the remembering of a way back to the flower feast that belongs to others, to the hive, and to the very moment that way is given," (Gallagher 108). This metaphor of the dancing bee is important here because it signifies the difficulties of the infinite moment. Even the bee directing its hive to the flower is bound to the memory of what it has found. This dance is the memoric form of the bee, much like the poem is the directive dance of the human.

For a more recent example of memoric form, contemporary poet L.B. Aaron Reeder IV's poem, "After Yesterday" works in a blend of these ideas, fragmented, yet wrinkled in the fabrics of deep image:

sitting at the center of  
intersecting streets  
depressed from crowds  
that sleep under the fear of falling buildings  
your tongue  
slides the cracked beads  
of an abacus into the space of the sun sets  
  
yesterday  
after the alarm wires in-  
side us were cut  
the spaces between the beads  
were an old friend inhaling the ash of  
his children being so still under a desk (Reeder 22).

With the way this poem fissures in its center, it evokes a structure in the mind that is connected, though distant. Time passes between the fissure of "sets" and "yesterday" and there is no telling how much time has passed. This resembles the type of memory that is evoked through association. For instance, if I were to walk down the hallway and flip on a light, catch a fluorescent reflection

off the refrigerator handle, I might be reminded of the first car accident I had been in. The sun glared over the San Bernardino mountains and across the window, visibility low. Then, the next piece of the memory is stepping out of the mangled car. There is a fissure in the memory and a fissure in the association of the memory, which, depicted here in Reeder's poem, is the memoric form of what had happened.

The reason this acknowledgement is important is because there is something inherent in the way poems are formed that give great insight into the human mind. As I said earlier, in its simplest purpose, poetry is a way to record. The way we record, even if consciously we don't realize it, is a mimicry of something, and to me, that something is memory. According to former U.S. Poet Laureate W.S. Merwin, a poetic form is "the setting down of a way of hearing how poetry happens in words" (Merwin 304). To me, memory is where all of our experiences nest, where all of the things we have learned throughout our lives take shelter from the drain of time's incessant death-dealing. Even if these memories do not escape the imminent void, they still leave behind their traces, their structures, and in these structures poems are born. Whether or not a memory is lost, we still have a piece of it, whether it is fragmented, vivid, jumbled, wrinkled, remnant, twisted, or slowed down to an almost infinite moment, it is there for us to decipher and trigger.

In *Machinist in the Snow*, although the content doesn't relate to my personal memories, the journey through nature by the protagonist is a metaphor

resembling my journey to understand memory and possibly repair my many failures with remembrance. As I mentioned before, there is also an eco-poetics thread running through the manuscript that I would like to touch on now.

Very often in the manuscript, the protagonist mentions finding a home. “I will find myself / home in the rock / and slide” (Eby 26) and “you traveler in the home / of my body” (Eby 44). These sections work as a metaphor for the distance the protagonist feels humanity has given itself from nature. There is a longing to return and an understanding of the sacrifices needed for a type of harmony to be restored. This isn’t a “death to all humans” harmony, but an intertwined harmony that takes the shape of a vine. In the moments of restoring the forest’s movements, the Machinist observes:

I still

feel home

this light

billows in

an arc fire

that burns

like you

in the casting  
of this wild

delicate  
vine. (Eby 53)

This is where the “natural world” and the “human world” no longer have distance, but are intermingled in a tight embrace of one another. There is no “otherness” here, but a connection deeply imbedded in reality. With this movement I’m attempting to lessen the distance the mind has between the false binaries of human versus nature, or if possible, completely disassemble them.

In the beginning of the book, while the Machinist is stepping out into the wild, he is in the mindset of this binary’s existence.

My house opens—a box with no binding, collapsed  
flat and parallel to the sky. This open body,

this beyond my reach in the green just out  
of view. My exile is no choice of mine. The mailboxes

slip out the ground as rejected transplanted  
wrists. (Eby 13)

But as the book progresses, this binary is broken over time until he begins to see the “pelicans / fly in / perch / atop the medians. Their talons / grip like

wrenches” (Eby 39). The natural world becomes a blend of his experience and in his own mechanical diction, he speaks of it. Through his observations, he realizes this frozen nature is in desperate need of rebirth, or in his terminology, “restarting” or “repair.” The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard states, “Winter is by far the oldest of the seasons. Not only does it confer age upon our memories, taking us back to a remote past but, on snowy days, the house too is old” (Bachelard 41). To the Machinist, this house is old and in need of desperate repair. So he travels through this cold, searching, taking notes, and learning what needs to be done.

In some of the more narrative aspects of the book, the Machinist confers with an outside source. This other voice is mysterious, distant, and almost a divine guidance throughout the book.

What will occur?

*This is dependent on time. Take this moment to let yourself breathe.*

If I move now, what will be lost?

*The constellations are reshaping. Wake now and lift yourself.*

What should I do?

*Cast yourself into the gears. (Eby 30)*

This voice develops as the book progresses and is exposed as an inner force within the protagonist, a type of connection with nature that is still there inside of him.

You emerge

*follow me*

and where have I lost

the scent of the past. A television *it's time*

scuttles the cracked, evaporated floor. Who

are you? The shadows

*you*

have followed me till now then retreat *always you*

into the propellers of time. (Eby 42)

These lines attempt to show that not all is lost in the distance of humankind and nature. There is still something inside of us that wants to live in harmony, or perhaps, we realize that there already is a harmony that is only slightly disheveled. The destruction that humankind has brought forth along its path is nothing short of astounding. It seems that it is within our nature to disassemble and rebuild, but now, as mankind progresses through the

information age, we are becoming more aware of the problems this is causing. So, to me, there is hope.

According to a variety of sources including National Geographic, the Natural History Museum, and the Informnauka (Informscience) Agency, more than 90% of all species that have ever lived on Earth are now extinct. This number varies depending on the source, but remains between 90% and 99.9%. Regardless of this variance, this number is haunting. It projects our inevitable demise, regardless of how well we fight it. This isn't something to be afraid of, but something to think about in regards to the health of the planet we leave behind. Maybe it isn't too late to reconcile with our nature and, perhaps, let the vines regrow over the city. If we can only find the broken engine, the machinist within us can restart all of this and change our trajectory.

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APPENDIX  
MACHINIST IN THE SNOW