Outline for AWP Panel: *A CAT’S BELLY*
*Structuring Your Debut Collection Through Place and Movement*

**Day:** Saturday, February 10, 2024  
**Time:** 9:00 a.m. – 10:15 a.m. CT  
**Room:** Room 2105, Kansas City Convention Center, Street Level

**Description:** In *Marbles on the Floor: How to Assemble a Book of Poems* (Giragosian and Konchan, eds.), Diane Seuss asks: “Might your book’s arrangement, taken far enough, be you?” This craft talk will look at various ways poets have engaged in the amorphous process of arranging, scrubbing, and sewing together poems. The panelists will examine how poems can cohere and create necessary movement and coda throughout a collection, and how the sounds, cadences, and colors of a place can ground a written work.

**Category:** Poetry Craft and Criticism

**Organizer & Moderator**  
Tiffany Troy is the author of *Dominus* (BlazeVox [books]) and co-translator of Santiago Acosta’s *The Coming Desert /El próximo desierto* (forthcoming, Alliteration Publishing House). She is the Managing Editor of *Tupelo Quarterly* and Book Review Co-Editor of *The Los Angeles Review.*

**Participants**  
India Lena González is a poet, editor, and multidisciplinary artist. She received her BA from Columbia University, where she graduated with honors, and her MFA from NYU’s Creative Writing program. *fox woman get out!* (BOA Editions, 2023), selected by Aracelis Girmay as part of the Blessing the Boats Selections, is her debut poetry collection. India is also a professionally trained dancer, choreographer, and actor and has had the pleasure of performing at Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, St. Mark’s Church, La Mama, New York Live Arts, and other such venues. She is the features editor of *Poets & Writers Magazine.*

Loisa Fenichell is the author of Wandering In All Directions of this Earth (Ghost Peach Press, 2023), having been selected by Eduardo C. Corral as winner of the 2022 Ghost Peach Press Prize. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in Guernica Magazine, Poetry Northwest, The Iowa Review, and elsewhere, and she was a finalist for the 2021 Narrative Magazine 30 Below contest. She received her MFA from Columbia University and is currently a PhD student in English Literary Arts at University of Denver.

Ryan Cook is a Brooklyn based genderqueer bookseller, events manager, and poet whose work specializes in queer mythologies, digital cultures, and curses, and has been published or are forthcoming in Iterant, Tupelo Quarterly, Thimble Lit Mag, the Nightboat Blog, No Dear Mag, the Poetry Project’s Footnotes Series, and Hot Pink Mag. They also work as an Events Host for McNally Jackson Bookstore, an events manager for Futurepoem, as well as work as a Program Associate for the Flow Chart Foundation. Currently, they are working on a chapbook about Cringe.

Opening Remarks

Good morning, and welcome to “A Cat’s Belly: Structuring Your Debut Collection Through Place and Movement.” Thank you all for being here. We know you have a lot of panel and bookfair options, and we really appreciate you spending the next seventy-five minutes with us. I hope you’re as excited about this topic as I am.
This panel initially came about because of the importance of cohesion in putting together the “marbles on the floor,” so to speak. I’m thrilled today to be surrounded by these wonderfully talented poets who have practiced trial and error in sequencing their work: India Lena González, Meghan Maguire Dahn, Ryan Cook, and Loisa Fenichell. Each of the poet panelists speaking today has thought deeply about how to structure their poetry collection or manuscript through place and movement.

As a poetry critic who reads dozens of books each year, I have noticed trends in contemporary American poetry. The poet Beth McDermott (author of *Figure 1*) is spot on when she spoke of the three sectioned poetry collection as a default, thinking of a beginning, middle, and end, broadly defined. Within a section, poet and panelist Meghan Maguire Dahn (author of *Domain*) speaks of her professor Lucie Brock-Broido’s folio approach, where the strongest poems are front-loaded and back-ended as the first, second, and penultimate and ultimate poem in each section. These are all great strategies to structure a collection, but are by no means the only means.

We’re here today to do a deep dive into the nuts & bolts and thought process in adopting and shifting the normative idea of what a poetry collection should be, to make it, in many ways, a form that speaks most to our body of poetry. To get us started, if the panelists could each introduce yourselves and describe briefly how many “sections” your collection has and why. For Ryan, can you speak from the perspective of the publishing side, in terms of what publishers are looking for in the overall structure of a collection?

**Participant Initial Remarks**

**India Lena González:** Hi everyone, my name is India and I’m a debut poet, as of last fall, as well as an editor and a performer, with a background in dance, choreography, and acting. To answer this initial
question, I would say that my book doesn’t have any sections at all, but rather breaks in content for the reader to breathe before diving back in again. In writing my collection I was focused on my own body and spirit, and what felt most organic to me in terms of shuffling parts of myself around to create a book. The end result for me was a collection that starts with an opening poem (a pre-birth work as I see it) that has no page numbers, and that ends on two poems (post-death poems) that also have no page numbers, so as to exist outside of the construct of time and a certain chronological ordering. What takes place between those pre-birth and post-death spiritual realms are poems that are separated by symbols I created in the initial pre-birth piece, symbols of construction, for I was building a home with this book, a place for my readers to live, a type of womb, and those symbols were my literal building blocks. I don’t label any of the three “sections” between the opening and closing floating works, and in doing so I was focusing on the flow of water—a river, an ocean—and how one stream or wave is never separate from the larger body of water at play (i.e. the collection in its entirety) but rather an extension of it. In seeing each poem as a current/wave, it naturally followed that I wasn’t going to cut up and separate the water, I was going to focus instead on allowing the content to live together in the way of the natural world. I have four breaths throughout the work, where the symbols come into play to offer a moment of reprieve, but I wanted movement—both in the literal sense of being a dancer and seeing this collection as my body moving through space, and in the literary sense of just how far a book can travel contest-wise—to test more readily accepted ways of structuring a written work, to see how much wild living my collection could hold without me trying to rein it in with more rigid sections.

**Meghan Maguire Dahn:** Hi everyone. I’m Meghan Maguire Dahn and I’m so pleased to be here. Thank you, Tiffany, for including me—and generally for asking questions about poetry that make me think in the highest order. And thank you to India, Loisa, and Ryan for all your brilliance.
My debut collection, *Domain*, has three sections and an overture. There are a few things I love that informed that decision—liminality, emptiness, and stillness. But basically, I chose to use sections because I think people need empty space to reflect. (I’ll never forget reading Milton’s prose for the first time. It doesn’t have paragraphs – just big blocks of prose. It makes every sentence seem equally important. So, breaks can allow readers to feel the pull of emphasis.) One of the key obsessions in *Domain* is contingent logic, this kind of series of if-then propositions that unfold across the book. Within the situation or domain of the book’s sections, I was hoping to offer up a series of conditional realms where that logic could play out. And I think for that to work the book needed spaces where readers could pause.

We encounter interstices across art forms. In music, it’s not just rests and suspensions, but those parts of scores that are left open to interpretation or even chance. In dance, the house lights go down, the sets change, the scrim lifts. In film, there are shots that establish texture (Kieslowski is great for this). In visual art, there’s negative space (the smart use of which promotes more dynamic eye movements in viewers). Those parts are essential. Poetry, with its spatial use of the page, is well-suited to working through this same dynamic and, on the level of a collection, section breaks are an integral part of that.

As for why I chose three sections, three is a strong number. Our ability to understand where we are in a space depends on triangles. We make maps using trigonometry. I could go on and on.

**Loisa Fenichell:** Hi! I’m Loisa. It’s great to see everybody here today, and Tiffany, thank you so much for facilitating this panel – I really love the topic. My debut poetry collection, “Wandering In All Directions Of This Earth,” was released from Ghost Peach Press this past autumn, having been selected for publication by poet Eduardo C. Corral. Writing these poems, and putting together the overall book, I was very much inspired by Sabrina Orah Mark’s *The Babies* and Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*. The former is a collection of prose poetry that is at once playful, funny, whimsical, and vulnerable. The latter is a book that
is poetry meets prose meets playwriting. In a journal entry of Woolf’s, she wrote, prior to writing *The Waves*, that she wanted to put together something that would be at once poetry, prose, and playwriting, and I believe she successfully does this with *The Waves*. When writing my own poems, I was compelled by the balance of whimsy and vulnerability in Mark’s poetry, and was also fascinated by the hybrid nature of Woolf’s “novel” (I am of course using this term somewhat loosely). I decided I wanted to endeavor to put together a collection that would accomplish something similar – that is, a collection that would be, as with Mark’s, whimsical and vulnerable and, as with Woolf’s, would blur together various genres. I should say that Karen L. Green’s *Bough Down* and Bernadette Mayer’s *Memory* also served as sources of inspiration – both poetically written prose books and both pairing the prose with images (Green’s collages and Mayer’s photographs). My own book is structured so that there are a few quintessential poems, with line breaks, at its opening, and then a first section – or “act,” as in an act in a play — of prose poems, all of which are titled with the word “scene” followed by a sequential roman numeral and paired, like in Mayer’s *Memory*, paired with one of my photographs. The rest of the book sort of follows suit, alternating between poems with line breaks and these prose poems. There are altogether seven of these acts, in addition to the opening lines, which I’ve been thinking of as a sort of prologue or even akin to something like stage directions.

**Ryan Cook:** Hello! Thank you, Tiffany, for the lovely question, as as well as you all for coming out to this early panel. I think that the question of what a publisher is looking for in a particular manuscript is an age-old question. When I was first brought into the publishing world I was tasked by Futurepoem to read the “slush pile” of over 100 manuscripts for a prize, before picking my favorite 3 to send to the judges. Each manuscript was roughly 50-80 pages in length, varied in the types of sections that were used. When you are like me and wait until the last weekend to read all 100 manuscripts it becomes a rush hour of words, themes, and motifs to follow. If you ever have the opportunity to read a slushpile as a poet though I highly recommend it, because it gave
me the unique perspective to see contemporary poets, most of whom had previous prizes and books under their belt, give masterclasses on what types of sections worked and didn’t work. Some poets had wonderful poems, yet without any theme or direction it felt more like a “greatest hits” of a person, which didn’t interest me or the other readers. Publishers are looking for sections that make sense with the theme or idea, and that logic isn’t one of statistics but of sound and patterns— if your manuscript is freeform and features a spiral into madness, then the sections can mimic this, or can reinforce and distill the madness out to create a freight train of chaos that pushes the reader along. The main goal is to have a concise vision with your sections and think of them as a journey of sorts. They are more akin to theatrical scenes than people realize. This doesn't mean your poetry has to be a project; Dorthea Lasky has an amazing essay for free online called “Poetry is not a Project” which talks about just that. I’m going to quote from it now: “Real poetry is a party, a wild party, a party where anything might happen. A party from which you may never return home. Poetry has everything to do with existing in the realm of uncertainty. In a great poem, there is no certain beginning, middle, or end to the real human drama which incited it, propels it, and will finish it. What differentiates a great poet from a not-great one is the capacity to exist in that uncertain space, where the grand external world folds into the intense internal world of the individual.”

I love this quote because it talks about uncertainty as a formal element— which should be considered when sectioning out your manuscript. Don’t think of it like organizing your lego box, but rather think of it as trying to get into the Black Lodge, like in Twin Peaks. There are rituals and ideas you can follow yes, but the rest is unknown, and isn’t that such an interesting space to make room for in your work? The unknown can guide you into sections you never thought possible. I know one poet who lay her manuscript on the floor and pushed it around with her feet because it required a aspect of chance. I know another poet who made an alter for their manuscript. The formation and arrangement of the manuscript should be as interesting, if not more interesting than the writing of it.
Moderator Questions

1) Many contemporary American poetry collections feature three sections, mirroring the idea of a beginning, middle, and end. How many sections does your poetry collection have, and what are some of the considerations that go into your decision-making process of whether or not to have sections and how many sections to have? For Ryan, can you speak from the perspective of the publishing side, in terms of what publishers are looking for in the overall structure of a collection?

2) Did these books being your debut poetry collections play into your thought processes about structuring?

3) How do you go about sequencing poems within a section? Do you draw from your literary experience and aesthetic, or life/work outside of writing? What variations do you notice from the common rule or theme?

4) In thinking about the “proem” or the first poem in your respective collections, how important is that piece in setting up the framework for your readers (for you as the poet/author)? How did you know that your “proem” (i.e. prologue poem) was the right one to open with?

5) If you could go back in time and talk to your past self, what is the one piece of advice you would give yourself in organizing the collection?

6) We’ve spoken quite a bit about structuring and organizing, but how does it happen? Can you speak about the mechanics of organizing a collection? Do you print out each poem and arrange them by hand? Or do the same on a computer? What are some of the pros and cons you noticed in the method that you utilized?