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Past Due: A Collection of Poems

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PAST DUE
A collection of poems

Byron Lee, B.A.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Lindenwood
University, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
Degree in Writing

2009

ABSTRACT

“Past Due” is a collection of poems written almost entirely in free verse and almost exclusively based on personal experience. I find, at least at this point in my growth as a writer, that when I try to adhere to poetic structure, I feel confined. My style is sparse because I feel that this aesthetic best cuts to the emotion I'm trying to convey. I also love playing with line breaks, since I find that doing so can give several lines in a poem their own statement, like each poem makes its own statement even when bound in a collection.

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A collection of poems

Byron Lee, B.A.

A Culminating Project presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master
of Fine Arts Degree in Writing

2009

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY

Professor Michael Castro,
Advisor

Assistant Professor Eve Jones

DEDICATION

This collection is dedicated to my mother, Landolph Walker Lee, although I am sure she would be puzzled and/or worried by the content found in it. All of my good qualities are attributable to the wisdom she imparted on me and the unconditional love she continues to give me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would be remiss if I didn't give special mention to my readers, Michael Castro and Eve Jones. I've heard it said that embarking on an artistic endeavor with someone is a lot like traveling cross country with them: there will be moments when you don't want to be in the car. I have been quite the unruly passenger, and Dr. Castro and Ms. Jones have shown the patience of gods.

I would also like to thank Charles Wartts for his accessibility, Shirley LeFlore for her spirit, and Peter Carlos for his passion and humor. Finally, even though they are not affiliated with the Lindenwood program, I would like to thank Dr. Eugene Redmond for his generosity, the staff at the Limelight and River City Examiner magazines for allowing me to hone the skill displayed on these pages, and Randolph Walker, Jr. for the suggestion that started it all.

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INTRODUCTION

This project is not the one I intended to submit, but it's the only one I could have written.

The journey to its completion has been more personal than academic.

Nearly three years ago, I was ambling through life, working at my day job and writing an article a month for a local publication. One of my cousins, a former lawyer who gave up everything to write and teach writing, saw that I was in a rut and encouraged me to enroll in an MFA program. I did, and, as he promised, I found myself encouraged to express myself creatively by a group of people plugging away at the same task. Gradually, I grew to be less fearful of writing what I felt.

This newfound freedom meant writing about the issue of race, one that is problematic in general, but particularly to someone of my generation. (I turned 30 last August.) We have been taught that race doesn't matter anymore, despite seeing instances (the Rodney King criminal verdict, the reaction to the O.J. Simpson criminal verdict, the nation's treatment of Barry Bonds, and the

aftermath of the 9/11 attacks) where, at least in my view, race—or ethnic origin—definitely mattered.

This topic of race, it should be stated, is one that affects me, in some way, on a regular basis. I am a black man who has grown up in environments that have been either predominantly white or fully integrated. (At one point, during my grade school years, I went to a predominately white school, during the day, and attended a predominately black daycare center, in the evening.) Whites have complimented me on my manners and articulation, yet I still have purse strings covered, children clutched tightly to their parents, and automatic door locks hit, when I'm just walking down a street, or through a mall.

These experiences are not unique to me and I believe that, even today, many black Americans are still experiencing the “double consciousness” about which W.E.B. DuBois wrote. We have made tremendous strides, and many of us are thriving. Yet, we are not truly accepted in our homeland. (I fear that, as a byproduct of the historic and, for me, profoundly touching, election of Barack Obama to the presidency, that a discussion on race may be further silenced. Talk of a “post-racial” America is becoming more prevalent, daily.)

It is this mindset that is addressed in some of the poems in this tome.

(It should be noted that, contrary to my fears, I found many of my classmates to be supportive of my forays into this topic.)

My journey of self-discovery was going smoothly, until a failed attempt at writing a screenplay for a cluster. I allowed my disappointment from the experience—along with derisive comments some students in other clusters made

about my work—to scatter my focus, when it came time to start writing the project.

It was at this moment that a problem I encountered during my classes resurfaced: I would write about aspects of my life without claiming them as my own. I discovered just how detrimental that was to my ability to create, when my early prose fiction proposals fell by the wayside.

After these false starts, I was convinced that I had solved the problem: I would write a nonfiction story. This plan also proved to be a dead end.

I finally realized that I find it easier to write from visual to visual, and from turn of phrase to turn of phrase, and dive deeply into an emotion and a moment than to write from plot point to plot point, along the hero's journey. I don't want to GO there. I want to BE there, have my senses overtaken, and convey that feeling to a reader.

In short, I am, and will be, for the foreseeable future, a poet. My influences are Anne Sexton and Diana DiPrima, two poets who do what I described in the paragraph above extremely well. They cut to the essence of the person, sight, situation, or feeling they are describing, while still painting a vivid picture.

In addition to the question of form, I also dealt with other (psychological and inspirational) issues. I am working as a teacher's assistant at a high school thought to be one of the elite public schools in St. Louis. I'm underemployed, yet, for various reasons, many of the school's staff look to me for help. This dichotomy fascinates me, and it has been—along with the increased sense of

loneliness that accompanied my frustration with a relationship that isn't what it once was—the catalyst for a great deal of soul searching.

Also, I am coping with the declining health of my father, an issue that has brought the baggage between us, my relationships with other family members, and all of the matters listed above, into sharp relief.

Finally, my inability to get the damn thing done, and the resentment bred by it, became an additional source of trauma/fermentation, in spite, and because of, my own culpability.

I give you all of this information because the poems in this collection reflect it. The only way I can write, for now, anyways, is by owning everything I express. In these poems, you will find longing, love, and anger, along with casual observations of life, frequently written in the empowering—and incriminating—first person. It's been a year-and-a-half in the making, but it feels like a lifetime went into its creation.

Battle Royale

Wrestle with ghosts.
Entities unborn. Pouting over past,
Regret a looped scene in my
Mind's eye. Uncertainty sets
Insides aflame. The
Riot in my head
Barely contained, my body
Spastic in its strain. Mouths of others
Smirk or lie agape.
Explanations are
No remedy.

No insurance for legal
Speed.

Xanax is a
Calming wave.

Better for me to be
Petered out, than pacing.

Parentheses

"Are you in the right seat?"

"You speak so well"

"You're being too sensitive"

The unspoken speaks volumes.

Cashing In

Her hand moves iron over
Clothes she picked and bought. She
Offers to do this whenever
She needs money.

She was
Carrying me in her
Stomach, when her husband was
Planting seeds in other gardens. She
Bore it out to give her
Sons the life
She never had.

I see her, today, face
Still bright, but with
Eyelids heavy from carrying
Other people's baggage.

I give her what I can.

Mental Health Professional

She was cold.

It made me hard.

I cracked up.

Then she froze me out.

Haikus

Sunshine brings new day.
Copier is my best friend.
I need a new job.

The question remains:
Is saying goodbye worse than
Just sticking around?

The Ballad of Harold Miner

Baby Jordan. Your knees
Buckled, while standing in shoes too
Big to fill.

Reunion

She came to visit us from the grade school,
Today. She's teaching
There, now.

Blond hair down her back, gray
Sweater around her voluptuous, post-
Pregnancy frame. Sparkling
Teeth and a loud laugh.

I make sure not to
Stare. Diverting my
Gaze, but
Smiling to be
Part of the group.

I leave
Early, citing
Work.

Between Bells

Orange of hair and red of face.
Smile a wicked wonder.

Whether in hooded sweatshirt,
Or brand-name blazer,
Curves are suited to a t.

My eyes search for
Tell-tale signs. No ring
On finger. Child seats
In car.

School is a field bearing
Land mines that leave
Spirit broken. A misstep could only
Multiply misery

All that I see makes you worth the risk.

Celebration

This isn't
Teaching

They have
No food in their homes,
And I've been asked to
Make them repeat
Everything I say.

It's the least I can do.

Scissors cut open
Bags of candy bars. My 8th graders,
Straightened hair
Pulled back into
Undernourished pony tails, discuss
Movies. *Balls Deep* and *Black Cheerleader Search* are
Their favorites.

When called to my desk,
They crowd around me like
Autograph seekers.
Most thank me.

The moment is worth glances I get at the store,
Draining calls to
Dumbfounded parents, and

Lessons that bomb.

We're in this
Together.

Culmination

My father will have to
Crawl to the car. Gray patches of hair
Stick out to me like
Never before. I
Crouch down, breathe deeply, and
Vault him into the passenger seat. I
Land him on his side, and slowly
Turn his body right side up. Between
Grimaces and labored breathing, he tells me that
I did a good job. I feel
Less a man for not carrying him
The whole way. I stand at the front door,
Drained in every way,
Seeing them off.

Adjustment

Careless consumption
Changes everything in its
Wake.

Back aches
In stride. Breath
Labored, when activity isn't.

My body
Leans without my
Permission. Bathroom breaks
Exercises in contortion. New encounters begin with a
Look downward.

People offer me things
They wouldn't eat.

I rub my belly, like a worried
Teenager, caressing a life within, wondering
How I got here, and
What the future holds.

Showtime

Beneath them, I hear it all.

A mother
Holds back anger,
While asking her husband
What he wants for breakfast.

A father
Mumbles his reply,
Bitterness and guilt in each word.

A brother
Stampedes through the home,
Eager to begin a
Schedule of avoidance

I bring everyone else down,
When they know that
My ears are open.

I put on my face and
Head up stairs.

Food

My drink

My weed

My sex

All in one.

Better yet, it's

Everywhere.

I head to the break room to

Tie one on.

AA meetings in the gym.

(I get nowhere without a

Sponsor.)

I get the

Munchies without the

Smoke, but I'm just as lazy,

After the hit.

When the world beats me down,

I take it out on

The bag.

Krunchers, Lays, Ruffles.

Any one of 'em will do.

They're all the same.

No matter how many I

Pick up, they never get jealous.

We have an open
Marriage.

'Till death do us part.

Dilemma

Should my pants peak at my thighs?

Should I dangle participles?

Should a smile be rubber-stamped on my face?

Should I broadcast every thought unfiltered, or should a bitten tongue clamp down every concern?

Should my neck snap to the drums, or should my head bang to the riffs?

Should I choose between store-bought brands of black and white, or should I mix my own gray?

Requiem

Fruit born of your mind was
Mine for the taking, but I was
Distracted. Thorns from brittle branches
Cut deep. Ants, given the
Power of bulls, ran roughshod
Through my head.

Forgive me.
For running from the
Passion that pulled me in. For stepping
Back from the table with my cards
Held to my chest. For wanting a tailor-made fit, when your
Off-the-rack ways suited me
Just fine.

Extension

I e-mail video
clips to my Friends and
excuses to my
Instructors.

I know every
wink, "betcha," and "also" of
my polarizing
Obsession, but I don't
Know how long I will drag this
Ball and chain.

I know that if you
Keep adding the
Same video to your Youtube
Playlist, you really don't need a
Repeat button, but I don't know
How to initiate verse.

I'm embarrassed,
but I don't know how to
Make it real
Enough to matter.

Peer

Pink cellphone, pink purse, and pink t-shirt stretched over
Gestating life.

Blond hair as bright as your outlook.

Eye contact leaves me

Drowning in auburn.

Cheerleading makes my

Ears bleed, but your

Encouragement is Euphonic. Your climaxes are

Class fodder, and

I wouldn't mind

Inspiring a piece.

Hope is futile. Another

Brotha got to you first.

Iron Clad

It started with a
Meek smile.

Then, a
Touch here and there.

Then, a playful, but brief,
Arm around the
Shoulder.

Finally.

A long awaited, hard-
Fought comfort.

Skin meeting in a
Weighty gesture.

Hand in hand.

Overcast

I hear the rain
Drops as I raise
Curtain on
A life I don't want
To see.

I walk in
Slumber, sleep agent
Untaken and unseen. Sun-bathing
Site seers label me
Shiftless.

The waters rush.

My 30th birthday

Stacking books outside
Shuttered storage.
Boisterous blond teacher.
Smile of high wattage.
She lines up her charges,
Whispering to each, as
They approach me.

"¡Feliz cumpleaños!" Twenty times over.

How can I be anywhere else, but
Right here,
Right now?

The Routine

You know the routine:
You give something to me.
I copy it.

No need to
Bat your eyelids and smile.
No need to
Call me sweetie.
No need to
Look at the clock, like you *don't* know what time it is.
No need to
Walk away, knowing damn well that you'll turn around.

You know the routine:
You give something to me.
I copy it.

It's not that hard.

For She

Night turns into midnight in the
Twilight of our time together. We speak in
Disguise. Big goodbye encased in
Small talk.

I wanted more from you than
You could give me, and
I asked for it in the
Worst way.

You use to
Burn me to a
Crisp.

I miss the singe.

Past Due

It's time to perform and once again I'm
Limp, the genius contorting the world at the
Mercy of my muse.

It's what has me
Where I am. Nice guy who can't
Finish. 30-year old
Sore on the basement couch who
Bites the hand that feeds me, then
Begs for seconds. Whose insides
Rages over my inbox. Who'd rather toil away at
Dead-end jobs than break a
Sweat carving my own path. Who'd rather look for
Helping hands than use the ones at the end of my
Arms.

I test people's patience with an
Act grown old. They grin at me, holding back
Resentment with the strength of Hercules.

At what point did I
Free fall?

When I gave myself completely
Over to the school house, all to get into a
"Good" college. My destination had
Teachers who were better researchers and school
Spirit on life support.

The return didn't match
My investment, so I stopped
Putting in.

I'm reaching for my wallet.

It's time to
Pay up.

Removal

Odor of urine and shit an
Invisible fog. Mattress and furniture
Align hall walls.

Beige carpet, darker where
Dad soiled it, lies
Bare in bedroom. My brother, in grey
Wifebeater and matching gym shorts, pulls the
Culprit from the floor, sweat pouring as
Hammer and sickle do his bidding, seams
Popping as they rip.

He emerges, focused on
Duty, and dumps the roll of
Stink out onto the patio.

Workplace Matrimony

Too many

Hens in this house. Copies aren't

Enough. I must

Proctor during

Potty breaks.

It's like I'm

Married to them. Every

Disappointment blown up to

Grand scale. They wonder if they

Made the right choice.

Our time together has come to an end.

At least I'll get to keep my stuff.

BMOC

In brother's shadow, though
Twice his size. Sports made him social. Shelter
Stunted my growth

If not held
Together in blood,
Bond would break.

He scolds me like a parent when I
Disappoint him. Tongue an ice pick
Jammed through sore spots.
Pecking order preserved.

Antagonist turns angel.

Arms welcome youth in need.
Coaching is his calling.

Support saves sibling.
Title loan
Paid in full.

Heart thaws, as
Mind wonders.

Where I would be,
If alone?

Grade School

I'm black, but I'm okay, so they say.

School an ivory coast.

Aftercare a chocolate city.

My voice heavy, even at that age, and it
Tells tale over phone lines. White fathers ask their
Daughters who I am, in background.

Longest lasting lessons learned
Outside of class.

Knee Jerk

I stroll through
Desolate mall.

White family walks
In opposite direction. Matriarch
Abruptly alters path to
Shield her children.

Not the
First time.

Won't be the
Last.

Houdini

During conversations, I disappear.

It's not as bad
As it used to be, my lips now
Weighed, instead of
Flapping at will.

But my head still hangs as I
Delve deeply into the abyss.

Sometimes, I return,
Before eyes catch my escape.

Sometimes, I don't.

Sometimes,
Eyes meet,
My only
Trick saving face.

Solitude brings solace.

It's not healthy,
But it's home.

The Translator

The S on my chest stands for
Secretary, but I
Leap to the rescue when I hear their
Cries, delivered in a
Code of bellowing
Belligerence.

Those most in
Need don't always know
How to ask.

Fair-skinned peers,
Clueless, callous, or chicken
Shit, walk past the show some of us feel
Compelled to
Put on.

I walk away, also, but only
During intermission.

King Dethroned

A warrior has been turned into a
Weakling, a complex hero drawn in
Two dimensions.

Your words are shaped by those who
Loathe the people that you led, crafting a measuring
Stick used to hit others.

The strain of your struggle has been
Buffed away on a
Shining, sturdy monument to
Falsehood.

Borrowing Money

Welcoming smile

Fades to cool

Panic. They pat the

Back of their pants like they

Don't know where their

Wallet is, then

Pull it out in

Quick, cautious surrender.

You get what

You ask for, at

Least some of it.

It's as

Hard for you as

It is for them.

Sensory Overload

Blue curtains drawn.
His stained gown drops
Below his waist. I hold his arm to
Keep him steady, feeling
Matter without mass.

Yellow liquid in a
White jug.
Second time in an hour.

The past fades. Late nights
Waiting on his arrival. Surprise meetings with
Half-siblings. Life lessons
Aborted. All vaporized
In this place.

Before I leave, we
Embrace. Hugs are more
Tender, now. It's
All we have.

Past Time

Bass guitar leaning against
Closet door. Gray dust on its
Black paint job. 2nd string
Missing. Others are loose.

Price of repair
Unknown.

I never bothered to find out.

T-Shirt Tribute

Run-DMC's DJ. 2Pac. Two of the Ramones.

All victims, a
Second time over.

They're not around,
Anymore. So they're
Safe.

Safety becomes
Shorthand for cool.

They won't run
Afoul of your tastes. They won't do reality shows, or
Marry a starlet you put
Above yourself.

You have them
Right where
You want them.

You wouldn't
Have it any other way.

Targets

A sista finishes her meal at a
Restaurant.

A couple
Arrives.

Their paths cross.

She sees the
Brotha.

She sees the
White girl.

Her eyes
Stab them,
As they pass.

Her tongue is
Firmly in cheek, but ain't a
Damn thing funny.

Losers

She lost weight.

I lost interest.

Temptation

The apple looks good to me.

The apple is she.

Skin of butter pecan.

Chins that

Double the pleasure. Dark hair in bouffant.

Black sweater and blue denim hugging

Generous frame

Just right.

Ego-stroking

Euphonic. Terse

Tantrums color aura.

My opponents in images

On desk. Three children

Mocha in face and husband with

Stubble and cropped hair. All of them in

Toy spectacles smiling.

The apple looks good to me.

Resigned, I leave you be.

InFATuation

Sexy smirk under blond strands.

Black bra a treasure

Chest. Burgundy

Lace guards

Gates of heaven.

Full fingers

Spread scent over

Snow capped

Mounds of ecstasy.

Goddess before me.

I am so blessed.

Break Up

She finally tells me
In words what she's been
Telling me
All along.

Movie Night At The Nursing Home

Sinatra-Kelly Flick.

Audience slumped, some drooling.

Pizza squares on plates.

Coke in cups.

Tears break my levees.

The sky opens up in

Bathroom stall.

I return and excuse myself in

Raspy voice.

Hugs to mom and pop.

(Humbled father

Holds closer.)

I exit too slowly, for my liking.

Father's Day

White Hawaiian shirt over his
Frail frame.
Gray chest hairs
Peeking out, until I
Button them out of sight.

The last shots in my
Mother's yellow camera
Are for us.
My father fights his face and wins,
Saying cheese.

Under Her

Smile equal parts
Sunshine and snarl.
Mouth as smart as mind.
Tongue slicing foes with ease.
She rolls up her sleeves, while others
Rip their skirts
Straddling the fence.
Taut body in mid-life.
Pale back flesh exposed from under
Black blouse.
Gray undergarment peeks out from
Olive-colored denim.

She leans in close, when we
Speak in confidence.
Low cut-blouses a blessing,
Chest acne a delightful constellation.
Breath a spring breeze.

Lust in the workplace is such
Sweet suffering.

Sports Drink

A legal,

Toxic boost

Contained in a can with

Heavy metal artwork.

I hold it in my hand, broadcasting

Chemical dependence.

In two hours, *it* will drop *me*.

Parade

Hunched backs, nagging coughs, oxygen tanks.

Wives steady their

Husbands' hands at

Check in.

Sports highlights on

Waiting room plasma.

Woman forsakes relative to

Annoy stranger.

Her iPod blares,

Earbuds merely props.

Youth cherished while

Basking in twilight.

Ultimate Question

How much time can you
Piss away, before it
Passes you by, your goals
Swirling around in
Willful surrender?

At Your Service

You part your
Strife to smile, mouth
Delicate enough to
Break.

I would do anything...and I have.

I bare the burden your
Narrow shoulders can't. You find your
Path difficult. I bend over
Backwards. You walk on
The arch.

I would do anything...and I have.

I'll never be more to you that
What I am, now.