

## Essays

### **An Introduction to Split Sequences**

*by Peter Jastermsky*

This essay will offer a brief history of the split sequence, with examples of collaborative and solo versions, as well as a brief how-to primer on writing a split sequence at the end.

I created the split sequence form in 2017. Having just written a selection of haiku and senryu, I looked at the poems in front of me and asked myself, “What would happen if I did *this*?” I took one of the haiku, split the three lines apart, and placed a haiku between each of those three lines. The line format became 1/3/1/3/1/3. After some tweaking, and adding a title, I realized that I had created a linked piece of some kind. But what was it?

Garry Gay created a linked verse form, the now famous rengay, in 1992. Perhaps the aspect that has been rengay’s staying power is its communal aspect. My 2017 discovery is also a linked form maintaining certain elements of renku. Over time, the rengay caught on with poets, and that communal form is strongly being written 30 years later. Linked verse brings us together. So let’s share a split sequence!

To teach you how to join me, I will demonstrate the process for writing a collaborative split sequence with an unpublished piece composed between Bryan Rickert and myself. To signal Bryan’s contributions, I’ve italicized them.

A split sequence starts once an original three-line haiku is picked that you judge will be suitable in its individual lines to split into thirds. This piece will provide the split sequence structure:

ghost moon  
between the flickers  
a round of untelling

To produce our desired structure of 1/3/1/3/1/3 in line lengths, continue by adding the first three-line haiku that links with L1 of the original haiku. With two people, this is your partner's verse:

ghost moon  
  
*looking back  
a rearview mirror full  
of questions*

Now, we add a second three-line haiku, composed by the author of the original haiku, that will link with L2 of that original haiku:

between the flickers  
  
shunning the neon  
one of her taillights  
speaks for her

Lastly, add a closing haiku by the author of the second link. Strive to make it memorable, perhaps something you've yet to develop in your theme.

a round of untelling  
  
*moving on  
all the miles lost  
in a sunset*

This finishes the split sequence. Just hammer out a title together and you've done it. Sit back and enjoy!

## Hindsight

Peter Jastermsky and *Bryan Rickert*

ghost moon

*looking back  
a rearview mirror full  
of questions*

between the flickers

shunning the neon  
one of her taillights  
speaks for her

a round of untelling

*moving on  
all the miles lost  
in a sunset*

Please be aware that, when you co-write a split sequence, or any short form piece for that matter, you'll usually want to italicize the work of one of the authors, or you can place each author's initials beside or below each section. I strongly prefer italicization because I think it makes for a cleaner looking page. And the mystery of "who wrote what?" is solved.

Now that you've seen the split sequence process broken down into steps to write with a partner, here's a complete solo split sequence I wrote in 2019:

## Beyond Knowing

scattered blossoms

gusting wind  
another cloud  
of color

how it once felt

covering up  
the mystery holes  
in the hill

to run free

straight ahead  
the trail becomes  
a field

I should note that, in addition to linking haiku that have a logical connection in imagery, I also pair two pieces with contrary or opposing imagery.

### **Yes, You Can Write a Split Sequence!**

1. Write a three-line haiku or senryu.
2. Between each of the three lines, place another three-line haiku or senryu that complements or contradicts the specific line it is linked to. I encourage you to “mix it up” to create some tension. Invite the Greek Chorus in!
3. Play with the wording of each piece to see if you can release an unintended meaning or reference. For example, what if ‘last whisper’ became ‘lost whisper’? Going one step further, turn ‘lost whisper’ into ‘lost whimper.’ What is the piece about now?
4. Just like haibun, each split sequence needs a title that is not directly lifted from the piece itself. You’ll note that, in the

collaborative example, the images include rearview mirror, taillights, and looking back. So, Hindsight it is!

5. Twelve lines, and twelve lines only, provide the structure for a split sequence. The title does not count as one of the lines.
6. There is no punctuation in a split sequence.
7. Can you write a split sequence from scratch? In other words, is it okay to write a piece off the top of your head? Yes, it's very okay, and I've done "from scratch" with myself and with a co-writer. It's nice work if you can get it.
8. If inspiration doesn't strike from scratch, there's still hope for you. Just grab some of your pieces that editors have rejected and see what magic you can create with your castoffs. Maybe these haiku were just waiting for their big moment!
9. Edit, Submit, Rinse, Repeat!

The split sequence is a fixed but forgiving form. The tone can range from reverent to risqué and all points in between. You can use 5-7-5 haiku, if you prefer, or three-line scifaiku. If you want to include *kigo*, just be consistent with the seasons. And keep in mind that there's a whole world beyond cherry blossoms. So, shake the tree. See where imagination takes you. Happy writing!

*Peter Jastermsky is an award-winning cherita poet, a Best of the Net and Dwarf Star nominee, and the author of seven books of haiku-based writing. Titles include Steel Cut Moon (Cholla Needles Press, 2019) and two from Yavanika Press: The Silence We Came For (2020) and Fingerbone Sky (2021). His short-form writing has appeared in many journals and anthologies, including Failed Haiku, Haibun Today, Heliosparrow, MacQueen's Quinterly, Sonic Boom, and The Cherita. His recent book Just Dust and Stone (Velvet Dusk Publishing, 2021) is a collection of collaborative split sequences co-written with Bryan Rickert.*