

THE POETRY ISSUE

The Shape of the Void: Toward a Definition of Poetry

“Poetry leaves something out,” our columnist Elisa Gabbert says. But that’s hardly the extent of it.

By **Elisa Gabbert**

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I once heard a student say poetry is language that's "coherent enough." I love a definition this ambiguous. It's both helpful (there's a limit to coherence, and the limit is aesthetic) and unhelpful (enough for what, or whom?). It reminds me of a dictionary entry for "detritus" that I copied down in a notebook: "the pieces that are left when something breaks, falls apart, is destroyed, etc." That seemed so artfully vague to me, so uncharacteristically casual for a dictionary. It has a quality of distraction, of trailing off, of suggesting you already know what *detritus* means. Part of me resists the question of what poetry is, or resists the answer — you already know what it means.

But let's answer it anyway, starting with the obvious: If the words have rhyme and meter, it's poetry. Nonwords with rhyme and meter, as in "Jabberwocky," also are poetry. And since words in aggregate have at least some rhyme and rhythm, which lines on the page accentuate, any words composed in lines are poetry. There's something to be said for the obvious. Virginia Woolf wrote of E.M. Forster: "He says the simple things that clever people don't say; I find him the best of critics for that reason. Suddenly out comes the obvious thing one has overlooked."

Is there much else? I think so. I think poetry leaves something out. All texts leave something out, of course — otherwise they'd be infinite — but most of the time, *more* is left out of a poem. Verse, by forcing more white space on the page, is constantly reminding you of what's not there. This absence of something, this hyper-present absence, is why prose poems take up less space than other prose forms; the longer they get, the less they feel like poems. It's why fragments are automatically poetic: Erasure turns prose into poems. It's why any text that's alluringly cryptic or elusive — a road sign, assembly instructions — is described as poetic. The poetic is not merely beauty in language, but beauty in incoherence, in resistance to common sense. The missingness of poetry slows readers down, making them search for what can't be found. The encounter is almost inherently frustrating, as though one could not possibly pay enough attention. This is useful: Frustration is erotic.

"What is poetry?" is not the same question, quite, as "What is a poem?" How many poems did Emily Dickinson write? It depends what you count. In "Writing in Time," the scholar Marta Werner writes, of Dickinson's so-called Master letters, "At their most fundamental, ontological level, we don't know what they are." Perhaps my favorite poem of Dickinson's is not, perhaps, a poem — it's an odd bit of verse in the form of a letter to her sister-in-law, ending with the loveliest, slantest of rhymes: "Be Sue, while/I am Emily —/Be next, what/you have ever/been, Infinity." Are the "breaks" really breaks? The letter is written on a small, narrow card; the words go almost to the edge of the paper. I think, too, of Rilke's letters, which often read like poems. In 1925, he wrote to his Polish translator: "We are the bees of the Invisible. We wildly gather the honey of the visible, in order to store it in the great golden hive of the Invisible." In these letter-poems, poetry reveals itself as more a mode of writing, a mode of thinking, even a mode of *being*, than a genre. The poem is not the only unit of poetry; poetic lines in isolation are still poetry. The poem is a vessel; poetry is liquid.

From time to time I'm asked, with bewilderment or derision, if this or that poem isn't just "prose chopped into lines." This idea of the free verse poem as "chopped" prose comes from Ezra Pound via Marjorie Perloff, who quotes Pound in her influential essay "The Linear Fallacy," published in 1981. The essay encourages an oddly suspicious, even paranoid reading of most free verse as phony poetry, as prose in costume. The line, in Perloff's view, in these ersatz poems, is a "surface device," a "gimmick." She removes all the breaks from a C.K. Williams poem to make the case that a stanza without the intentional carriage returns is merely a paragraph.

I find this baffling — as if chopping up prose has no effect. It does have an effect, the way putting more panes in a window changes the view. The architect Christopher Alexander thought big plate glass windows were a mistake, because "they alienate us from the view": "The smaller the windows are, and the smaller the panes are, the more intensely windows help connect us with what is on the other side. This is an important paradox." To state the Forsterian obvious again, adding breaks to a paragraph is not always going to make an interesting poem — but most poets don't write that way. They write *in the line*, in the company of the void. That changes how you write — and more profoundly, how you think, and even how you are, your mode of being. When you write in the line, there is always an awareness of the mystery, of what is left out. This is why, I suppose, poems can be so confounding. Empty space on the page, that absence of language, provides no clues. But it doesn't communicate nothing — rather, it communicates *nothing*. It *speaks* void, it telegraphs mystery.

By "mystery" I don't mean metaphor or disguise. Poetry doesn't, or shouldn't, achieve mystery only by hiding the known, or translating the known into other, less familiar language. The mystery is unknowing, the unknown — as in Jennifer Huang's "Departure": "The things I don't know have stayed/In this home." The mystery is the missing mountain in Shane McCrae's "The Butterflies the Mountain and the Lake":

*the / Butterflies monarch butterflies huge swarms they
Migrate and as they migrate south as they
Cross Lake Superior instead of flying*

*South straight across they fly
South over the water then fly east
still over the water then fly south again / And now
biologists believe they turn to avoid a mountain*

That disappeared millennia ago.

The missing mountain is still there. As for what is on the page, the language that changes the shape of the void, I'm of the opinion it can be almost anything. One of my favorite books that no one has heard of is "Survey Says!," by Nathan Austin. It's just a list of guesses ventured by contestants on "Family Feud," arranged, most ingeniously, in alphabetical order by their second letter, so you get sequences like this: "A bra. Abraham Lincoln. A building. Scaffolding. Scalpel. A car. A card game. A cat. A cat. Ice cream. Ice cream. Ice cream. Ice cream." We get the answers; the questions are missing. "Get a manicure. Get a toupee. Get drunk. Retirement fund. Get out of bed. Get ready! Let's go with manuals. Get sick in there. Let's say a pet. Let's say shoes. Bette Davis." The poetry seems to perform hypnosis, the found rhymes and assonance and anaphora enacting an enchantment, a bewitchery; it seems to be giving subconscious advice. Get ready! You must change your life.

Elisa Gabbert is the author of five collections of poetry, essays and criticism, most recently "The Unreality of Memory & Other Essays." Her On Poetry columns appear four times a year.

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