



Poetry Rocks!

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Tool 21

The Visualist

WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?

FORM/SHAPE

Visual Shape

PURPOSE

To add to your Form/Shape repertoire by learning about and creating a concrete poem and/or a prose poem.

BACKGROUND

By now, you've had a chance to work with the Form/Shape of poems by your arranging of words, lines, and stanzas, and you've seen that the arrangement of these elements gives your poem its visual shape, from a tidy sonnet to a cummings-like free-for-all.

Now let's talk about poems with distinctive shapes. Since at least 325 B.C., poets have played with *visual shape poems*, also called concrete poems or visual poetry, in which the poem's actual shape mirrors the subject matter. You've already seen one example of this, e.e. cummings' poem that intertwines the words *leaf* and *loneliness* in a vertical "falling" pattern on the page to visually and metaphorically compare loneliness with a falling leaf. What does all visual poetry have in common? Because concrete poetry is a visual art, much if not all its effect is lost if it's heard rather than seen.

One of the most widely known concrete poems is George Herbert's "Easter Wings," written in 1633.

Easter Wings

Lord, Who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poore:

With Thee
O let me rise,
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day Thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne;
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sinne,
That I became
Most thinne.

With Thee
Let me combine,
And feel this day Thy victorie;
For, if I imp my wing on Thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

~ George Herbert

And, while we're talking about the shape a poem can take on a page, let's look at one more visual option that could be considered the exact opposite of the concrete poem—what's called a *prose poem*, in other words, a poem that's written in paragraph form, not in lines and stanzas. This poetic form includes all the poetic bells and whistles except that "playing off sentences against lines" that John Drury speaks of. It's the antithesis of a shape poem, yes? And yet its shape is very much a part of the experience of reading it. Here's an example that sprang from a prompt in one of my classes by one of my talented WordPlayers:

Don't Say

Don't say it's a shame that the last family picture with my grandmother is the one where someone's eyes are closed. Or complain about the squeaky stairs. Why would I fix them when they tell me you've come home? Let's talk instead about the dog and the pointed ear that falls over one eye like tired origami, the click of her nails across the wooden floor, and the nudge of her unpedigreed nose when you sit with your head in your hands. Let's take mugs of good coffee up to the dusty attic with its crumbling old dirt dauber nest under the eaves. We'll sit on the frayed German quilt that survived an Atlantic crossing in steerage and sift through the box of yellowed love letters your parents exchanged. At lunch, we'll laugh at the brazen squirrel who waits by the back door for stale bread, the one we know by his bent tail and the bald patch on his belly. When the kids get home from school, we can go for a drive beneath the leaden sky, past the old barn in the stubbled field, the rolls of hay rimmed in frost. We'll sing with the radio, and despite the grayness, something will remind me of Mother's Day dandelions, of paint-dribbled handprints, of misspelled words, and backward S's. Never mind the brewing storm. Just think of the warm kitchen when we all dash in laughing with dripping umbrellas and muddy shoes. Right now, I don't need to know what it takes to be a saint. Let me wonder about the wedding glass crushed underfoot, the dove returning with an olive branch, my body broken for you. When heaven comes, I'll be glad for an end to suffering, loss, and grief. But tell me there will still be low-slung clouds and beaches strewn with driftwood come to rest. Or worn stone benches tucked along a narrow wooded path. Won't I need a place of dappled shadow where I can sit and remember how the light shone through?

~ Caroline Castle Hicks

WHAT TO DO

Write a concrete poem and/or a prose poem. The most common "concrete poetry" is poetry in which the shape of the poem depicts the subject of the poem, as in George Herbert's "Easter Wings," an early example. But concrete poetry includes any artistic work that merges visual art with words. You can find a number of examples [here](#). You can learn more about the prose poem and see examples from poets.org [here](#).

EXAMPLE

I took a pottery class when my children were young, and it gave me a perfect metaphor for my ambivalent feelings when my children's shortcomings—and my own—reared their ugly little heads! My experience of trying, often unsuccessfully, to mold clay into a pleasing, useful shape was a perfect outlet for these feelings and a perfect opportunity to make a concrete poem.

Novice Potter

The pots I throw
have minds of
their own
like my
children
seem to turn
from day to day
Now appearing lovely
flawless proof of competence
and worth Now the work of ungifted
hands a mirror of my slips and
limitations A skill I'm afraid
I'll never master Loving
fully even when the
imperfections
show

REFLECTION

What do you think of concrete poems? And prose poems? Write a short reflection on any advantages/disadvantages you see in each of these forms.

HONE YOUR CRAFT

Look for poems in different shapes and forms and study the effect the shape and form as on your experience of reading the poem.

As you write your own poems, choose their shapes and forms deliberately.

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