A GUIDE TO THE POETICS IN

When You Never Said Goodbye by Meg Kearney

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A GUIDE TO THIS BOOK'S POETICS

Throughout this book, Liz writes a mix of formal poems and what's known as "free verse." The following is a brief Guide for anyone who might be interested in taking a closer look at some of the forms and devices Liz employs—and just as important, *why* she chooses the forms she does.

A Teacher's Guide, also by author Meg Kearney, is available at www.perseabooks.com. Meg Kearney welcomes feedback and questions from teachers and students. Contact her through her web site, www.megkearney.com.

FIRST: THE LINE

This Guide to the poetics in *When You Never Said Goodbye* is arranged alphabetically, from "End-Stopped Lines vs. Enjambed Lines" to "Villanelle." But, in order to understand poetry at all, it is necessary to first consider the line. The line is what distinguishes poems from prose. If you see a piece of writing on a page from ten feet away, you probably can't read what the words say—but you can tell if it's poetry or prose. That's because the lines of a poem usually don't stretch to the right-hand margin of the paper. Maybe they don't even begin at the left-hand margin. There is white space surrounding a poem, framing it, in a way that marks it as different from prose. The line is the one tool poets have that prose writers lack. It's one way poets control pacing, meaning, and rhythm.

You might ask, "But what about 'prose poems'?" I'm not a fan of that term. In my mind, "prose poem" is another word for "flash fiction." Or, it's prose that employs some of poetry's tools to capture its reader. Take away the line, and it's just not a poem. That's my opinion only—many writers would joyfully disagree.

END-STOPPED LINES VS. ENJAMBED LINES

Lines that have a logical pause or stop at their close (not necessarily with punctuation at the line's end) are end-stopped; lines are enjambed when the sense carries over to the next line. Both types of lines are found throughout the book.

One reason a poet decides to enjamb a line (or not) has to do with rhythm and pacing. If a line is enjambed, the reader is drawn down to the next line more quickly than if a line is end-stopped. Unconsciously and at lightning speed, the reader wonders what the next word on the next line will be, and so is pulled down to that word. When several lines are enjambed, the reader is pulled down through the poem as if by an invisible hand. End-stopped lines slow the reader down a touch; an end-stopped line followed by a stranza break slows things down even more.

Examples:

Here is a good example of what seems to be an end-stopped line, but winds up to be a surprising enjambment. This is from the second poem in the novel, "Now Two Haunt My Holidays" (p. 4):

. . . Kate,

my chef-sister, makes gravy, rolls
her eyes. I don't. At least Bob's trying.

Note that at first the reader thinks Kate is making gravy and rolls, only to discover that she's actually rolling her eyes! Enjambments often create such twists in meaning, which is part of the fun of writing them. The second line of the couplet above is end-stopped. There is nothing more obvious than a period to mark an end-stopped line.

Here's an example of end-stopped lines followed by a stanza break, from "Post-Foundling Fall-Out," stanza 1 (p. 95):

> emptying out at Washington Square Park
> like a river empties itself into the sea.
>
> The letter seems to breathe, that animal now

Enjambed lines that include stanza breaks slow the pacing down just a touch less. Here's an example from "Late Sunday Morning Surprise" (p. 67):

> Sam Paris's voice saying he's
> the computer repair man. Like
>
> a cat, Rhett springs to her feet,

Another reason for enjambing a line might be to twist the logic or the meaning of a sentence, and/or surprise the reader with a word or phrase that's not expected. After all, "verse" comes from the Latin word meaning "to turn." Here is an example of such enjambed lines from "The Butter Cure" (p. 161):

> . . . The air smells faintly
> of lotion—mandarin orange—and of
>
> *dog.*

Here is an example of an end-stopped line from "As Gram Used to Say, 'A Friend in Needs Is a Friend Indeed'" (p. 130), which also employs the line break to change/twist meaning:

> in his arms. His graphite pencil smell calms me
> for a second, but then I think of Tim's arms—

For a moment, the reader knows only that the smell calms Liz; then with the next line learns that the calm only lasts a second.

Think of each line as a unit in and of itself that gains additional meaning when considered with the line before it and the line that follows. Here's an example again from "The Butter Cure" (p. 161):

> and there is Butter, stretched out
> on Dad's side of the bed like a sun-
> bather on the beach. Mom looks

See how the middle line stands on its own in terms of sense? The lines before and after it flesh out its meaning.

When lines are end-stopped, as the first two are in the tercet above, the pacing is slower. When reading a poem aloud, there should be a slight pause at the end of each end-stopped line. Otherwise, the words on the page might as well be prose. How long the reader should pause depends on whether the end-punctuation is a period, semicolon, or question mark—or any of these marks plus a stanza break. There are no set rules about how long a pause should be, but readers instinctively know, for instance, that a period requires a longer pause than a semicolon; a dash is a bit longer than a comma, and so on.

Here is an example of three end-stopped lines from "Second Visit to the New York Foundling, Karen Mason's Questions in Hand" (p. 183):

> I'm no longer nervous. Now I'm pissed.
> Not at Sophie, but the system she works for.
> Why is it a crime to want to know who you are?

The structure of a villanelle calls for end-stopped lines, but here each line also ends with punctuation, including two periods and a question mark—those truly slow down a reader!

FREE VERSE

"Lucky" (p. 6), "Off to College, Take 2" (p. 8), "Doesn't It Figure" (p. 10), "Tim & I Play the Long-Distance Game" (p. 24), "No More Shame" (p. 25), "Regret" (p. 26), "One Could Do Worse" (p. 29), "About to Tell Rhett About My Search" (p. 52), among others, including those discussed below.

Some people think "free verse" means that the poet doesn't have to follow any rules and can create a poem that has no structure. Actually, there's nothing free about free verse. When a poet writes in free verse, the poem begins to impose its own rules, its own structure, upon itself.

See the section above, "First: The Line," if you haven't already read it. While free verse lines might lack the regular beat found in formal poems, they are still the main way the poet organizes sound in a poem. Here are some lines from from the free-verse poem "Ode to Washington Square Park" (p. 21):

> First owned by Indians, then freed
> slaves—former burial ground, parade
> ground, Potter's field—Washington
> Square, living here, makes me feel
> rich. Who else could live in Greenwich
> Village where Fifth Avenue ends

Notice how the sound of "slaves" nearly rhymes with the word at the end of that line, "parade," calling attention to those sounds. Even "freed" isn't far sound-wise from "parade." This bookend effect is also heard when "rich" picks up the sound of "Greenwich," with "live" in the middle of the line also echoing the soft "i" sound, which is then heard again in "Village" and "Fifth." Also, having the word "ground" repeat so closely (with just one word and a line break between) makes that sound pound a bit.

Notice that in free-verse poems there can be a variety of pauses, both at the ends of lines and inside them (those dashes in the above "Ode"). These pauses help create the rhythm of the line in poetry.

Once the poet crafting a poem begins to see what that structure is, it's up to him or

her to follow it. For example, if the lines of a free-verse poem start organizing themselves in couplets, and in lines that are of medium length (say about 10 or 11 syllables), the poet will probably want to create the entire poem in couplets with medium-length lines. In other words, many "free verse" poems have a visible architecture, though they usually didn't begin that way in early drafts. A good example in this book is "My Almost Party (With Parts I Don't Remember Filled in by Henri and Sam)" (p. 191), which began with 10-syllable lines but then was modified, following the sound of the lines instead of a strict syllabic count. Many free-verse poems are written in strict stanzas (see "Strict Stanza Poems," for a discussion of that element of structure).

Even though the poet isn't following any prescribed rules when writing free verse, one would hope that the poem has a sense of music and rhythm, and that such elements as syntax, imagery, metaphor, and line breaks work together to create a structure, a poem that captures its reader. Most of the free-verse poems in the book feature internal rhyme (see "Internal Rhyme," discussed below).

HAIKU

"Haiku for Tim: Snowshoeing Catskill Mountain State Park" (p. 7), "Pigeons in Winter"(p. 46), "Bad Dream as Haiku" (p. 111), "St. Patrick's Day Haiku" (p. 146), "Need I Say More?" (p. 224), "A Haiku: I Swear Before You and God Above" (p. 260).

This form that came to us from Japan is a familiar one, as students often learn about it school. The traditional haiku is written in three lines with five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second, and five again in the third. Haiku are image-based poems. Beyond this, there is a divergence of opinion on what the poem should do. Some people say that a haiku must present two images that conflict, while others say that the image *or* images presented must have emotional impact and/or offer some kind of insight. Others say that the poem's image should come from nature.

Liz has followed the syllabic requirements; most of them features nature images.

LIST POEM

"My Mind, That Hive, Buzzes With Memories . . . Wonders, What Next?" (p. 245)

Also called a "catalog poem," this form has been around for a long time. (The *Bible's* Book of Genesis, for example, can be considered a list poem that traces the lineage of Adam and Eve's children.) List poems, which basically itemize things or events, can be made of lines of any length, rhymed or unrhymed.

Lists can provide a powerful structure for an idea to develop and build. "My Mind, That Hive . . . " (p. 245) actually lists people, objects, and events from all three books in the Lizzie McLane trilogy: *The Secret of Me*, *The Girl in the Mirror*, and *When You Never Said Goodbye*.

PANTOUM

"Sophie Fedorowicz's Small but Sunny Office, New York Foundling" (p. 92), "Birth Mother Letter Dream" (p. 215)

This is a French form similar to the villanelle. The second and fourth lines of each quatrain repeat as the first and third in the next, and so on. Though the number of possible quatrains is indefinite, the second and fourth lines of the final stanza must repeat the first and third lines

of the first stanza—and ideally, the second and fourth lines of the last stanza should appear in reverse order.

Notice how circular this form is, with the first line also being the last line. This means that line has to be very powerful, as it drives home what's central to the poem. This is also a reason for employing the pantoum in the first place. When I make a pantoum, the content is usually something whirling and obsessive, mirroring the mind as it attempts to absorb and understand experience.

PUNCTUATION

To a poet, punctuation is similar to musical notation. The poet can't always be present to read a poem out loud so people can hear how it is supposed to sound, what its rhythms are, so she (or he) uses punctuation as a guide.

Every decision about punctuation—whether to use a period, semi-colon, comma, dash, line break with end punctuation (and what particular kind of punctuation it is), line break with no end punctuation, stanza break, etc.—is made with care, as it helps to guide the reader in the poem's pacing and how the poem should sound. Punctuation (including line breaks) indicates such things as "pause here for just a breath," "pause here for a tiny bit longer than a breath," "read this part a little bit faster," "go slower here," and "this word is important."

RHYME

There are various approaches to rhyme throughout the book. While not essential to a poem, rhyme makes a poem memorable and accentuates a poem's rhythm. Here are some examples:

end-rhyme:

Repetition of sound(s) are found at the end of lines, as in sonnets or poems like "My First Time at The Rock . . . II, Rhett's Story" (p. 35), which is rhymed abab cdcd efef ghgh etc.; "Jan & Jade Arrive at GCT to Stand by Me at the NYPL" (p. 56), rhymed aba bcb ded, etc; "Good News While Studying in the Park" (p. 221), rhymed aba cdc efe, etc; or as in "Lost" (p. 133), which is rhymed ababdcddee. "Surprise in Profile" (p. 152) and "Scrabble" (p. 167) are rhymed aabcb ddefe, etc.

near-rhyme:

Sounds repeated are very close, but not exact: as in "sauce" and "glass"; "disappeared" and "hear."

internal rhyme:

Repetition of sounds within lines and/or stanza(s); just a few examples:
"stake" and "break" ; "soon" and "honeymoon"; "squeeze" and "Louise"; "hear" and "weird."

Here are some lines from "In the Laundry Room: I Meet Rhett's Nemesis" (p. 41); note the rhymes: "surpise" and "eyes"; "squeeze" and "Louise"

> There's a trace of surprise in her eyes
> as we shake. I give her hand a firm
> squeeze—just like my dad taught me.
> In case she forgets my name, she'll
> remember this. Turns out her name's
> Louise . . .

alliteration:
Repetition or echo of the first sound of several words in a line; e.g. "first fetching" ("After the Text," p. 227); "different / . . . Dad's death" ("Waiting for Karen's Email, Thinking, 'A New Road Beneath Me,'" p. 230); "but who suddenly / brakes / because . . . " ("Mom & I Have the Longest Talk Ever," p. 257).

identical rhyme:
The same word is repeated as rhyme, such as in "After the Text" (p. 227), where Liz repeats the word "remember."

SIMILE / METAPHOR

When unlike ideas/images, or unlikely resemblances are yoked together, they are referred to as similes or metaphors. Similes are easy to spot because they use the words "like" or "as" to introduce them. "You are like the sun!" is a simile; "You are the sun!" is a metaphor, and perhaps more powerful.

This book is full of metaphors and similes. Some poems are extended metaphors, such as "Tim" (p. 38), "The Hamster in My Family" (p. 40), and "Metaphor Poem for Last Workshop: 'Studying for Final Exams'" (p.225).

An example of a simile is found in Journal Entry #2176 (p. 71): "Kate's as practical as an umbrella on a rainy day."

SESTINA

"Home on Break / Break for Home"(p. 156), "April First" (p. 199)

This form consists of six stanzas of six lines each, with a concluding tercet. It is usually unrhymed, but the end words of the first stanza force a pattern on to the poem that's similar to a rhyme scheme, because they are all repeated in the succeeding stanzas in a strict order that varies with each stanza, and some repeat again in the tercet.

The repeating end words in "Home on Break / Break for Home" (p. 156) are: (1) home, (2) river, (3) time, (4) follow, (5) until, and (6) see. The order in which these words are written sets up the pattern for the rest of the poem. The whole thing has to go like this:

1,2,3,4,5,6
6,1,5,2,4,3
3,6,4,1,2,5
5,3,2,6,1,4
4,5,1,3,6,2
2,4,6,5,3,1
5,3,1

The tercet at the end not only goes 5, 3,1, but these last three lines must *also* include end words 2, 4, 6, either at the start or in the middle of the lines. Liz breaks this last rule in "April First" (p. 199), although the last tercet does end 5, 3, 1.

SONNET

"Perfect Roommates" (p. 18); "Rhett & I Wind Up at The Rock" (p. 33); "In a Coffee Shop After Leaving the NYPL" (p. 60); "Taking Kate to Hear Guitar Woman" (p. 70); "Pulling Back" (p. 128);

"In Workshop" (p. 179); "The Rest of April First" (p. 201); "After Church: Easter Sunday Brunch, Then Back to the New York-Bound Train" (p. 220); "Karen's Call (On Speaker Phone)" (p. 232); "Like a Tree" (p. 261)

A form most people are familiar with, the standard sonnet has fourteen lines written in iambic pentameter. There are three main types of sonnets: "Spenserian," "Petrarchan," and "Shakespearean" (aka "English"), each of which has different rules about stanza breaks and rhyme schemes. I always look them up when I'm working on a sonnet; my "bible" is Babbette Deutch's *Poetry Handbook* (my copy is very old, but I know there are updated and used versions available). Sonnets are typically about just one thing (often underscored by strong emotion), which is introduced in the first part of the poem and commented on/changed/explained/turned on its head later on.

A Miltonic sonnet, according to Deutsch, features the rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan octave [first eight lines] but does not employ the customary break or turn in the sense at the start of the sestet [last six lines]; the result is a poem that works more as a unified whole. Sonnets that match this description are "Perfect Roommates" (p. 18), "Taking Kate to Hear Guitar Woman" (p. 70), "In Workshop" (p. 179) and "After Church, Easter Sunday Brunch, Then Back to the New York-Bound Train" (p. 220).

"Like a Tree" (p. 261) is a sonnet in couplets; the rhyme scheme is the same as that of Robert Frost's "Mowing." "The Rest of April First" (p. 201) is a made-up sonnet form.

The power of the sonnet is in its compression; a sonnet is able to express a strong emotion or even tell a pretty large story using relatively few lines. Its rhyme scheme also makes it easy to memorize.

Lizzie's sonnets are often *sonnet-like* in that they follow the fourteen-line limit and rhyme scheme of sonnets, but they are not always in strict iambic pentameter. Nor do they always break where rules say they should. The poem "Rhett's Post-Party Blues, First Day of Spring Classes" (p. 81) is sonnet-like, as it has fifteen lines and features the rhyme scheme ababcdcdefefgfg.

STRICT STANZA POEMS

These lines of poetry are organized so that they form a pattern, which is repeated throughout the piece. The word "stanza" means "room" in Italian, and so one could think of stanzas as places that have to be big or small enough to "contain" what's inside them. Stanza breaks, or the spaces between stanzas, indicate a small pause (like a *very* short hallway between rooms). Unless working within a strictly dictated form like a sonnet or villanelle, the length of strict stanzas is something a poet has to decide on her/his own, based on desired timing, effects caused by enjambment, how the poet wants the poem to look on the page, what the poem seems to be doing "on its own," and gut instinct. In other words, many poems featuring strict stanzas are also written in free verse. See the section on Free Verse for more explication.

Here are some poems written in strict stanza forms:

Couplets (pairs of lines)
"When My Birth Mother Said Goodbye" (p. 118), "After the Text" (p. 227), "Mom & I Have the Longest Talk Ever" (p. 257), "Charmed" (p. 259), "Like a Tree" (p. 261)

Tercets (three-line stanzas)
"Jan Sends Me to a Facebook Page" (p. 28), "My First Time at The Rock, 1: Recognition" (p.

34), “In the Lounge, Waiting for Dryers” (p. 43), “Ms. R in the Park” (p. 49), “Jan & Jade Arrive at GCT to Stand By Me at the NYPL” (p. 56), “As Winter Term Nears Its End . . . ” (p. 75), “The Butter Cure” (p. 161), “Visiting Dad’s Bench . . . ” (p. 171), “Won’t I Ever Learn?” (p. 194), “Train Ride, Easter Saturday” (p. 216), “Good News While Studying in the Park” (p. 221), “No Joke: One Might Say She’s ‘Taken’” (p. 233), “Kate Texts Bob, Who Sets Up a Family Conference Call” (rhymed aba cdc efe, etc.) (p. 237), “We Three (Henri, Rhett, & Me)” (p. 244)

Quatrains (four-line stanzas)
“Frozen: My First Student Reading/Mixer at the Café Du Monde” (p. 147), “(Other) Mother” (which ends with a tercet) (p. 185), “Easter Saturday Lunch” (p. 217)

Cinquains: (five-line stanzas)
“Native New Yorker” (p. 50), “No More Shame” (p. 25), Late Sunday Morning Surprise” (p. 67), “Poetry Reading at the Lillian Vernon House: Spring Series” (p. 84), “Surprise in Profile” (p. 152), “Scrabble” (p. 167), “On Second Thought” (p. 180)

Sestets: (six-line stanzas)
“Back at Mack’s Auto” (p. 169), “April First” (p. 199), “The Workshop Challenge” (p. 209)

Septets: (seven-line stanzas)
“Lounge Party to Celebrate End of Winter Term, Start of Spring” (p. 78), “At Gertie’s Diner” (p. 158)

Octaves: (eight-line stanzas)
none

Others
“Lucky” (p. 6) and “Rough” (p. 142) (nine-line stanzas), “My Almost Party . . . ” (11-line stanzas) (p. 191)

SYLLABIC VERSE
“In the Lounge, Waiting for Dryers” (p. 43), “Native New Yorker” (p. 50), “Open Secrets” (p. 64), “Rhett’s Anti-Bad-Dream Prescription” (p. 112), “In Workshop Today” (p. 125), “Won’t I Ever Learn?” (p. 194), “The Rest of April First” (p. 201) “Confronting Ruth” (p. 211).

In this form, the determining feature is the number of syllables in a line, as in “In the Lounge . . . ” (p. 43), which has 10, 8, and 6 syllables per tercet. The tercets are also rhymed (aba, dce, efe, etc.).

As in writing any strict form, writing in syllabics can produce some surprises—the poet will find herself or himself writing lines she/he otherwise never would have written. For example, the first word that came to my mind in the middle line of stanza five was country “bumpkin,” but I needed one more syllable—that’s when I hit on “cow-tipper,” which I think is much more surprising and fresh.

VILLANELLE
“Birth Mother Villanelle” (p. 23); “‘Ms. Guitar,’ Washington Square Park” (p. 32); “Birth Name Villanelle” (p. 105); “Revenge is Powdery White” (p. 116); “Torn” (p. 120); “Second Visit to the New York Foundling, Karen Mason’s Questions in Hand” (p. 183); “Decision: Ruth” (p. 202)

This form, like the sestina and pantoum, comes from the French. It is made of five tercets and a quatrain (nineteen lines total). The first and third lines of the first tercet take turns repeating at the end of the tercets that follow, and both lines repeat as the last two lines of the poem. Notice that there are only two rhymes in the poem, determined by the end words of the poem's first two lines.

Villanelles are great for expressing an obsession. Liz's poems about her birth mother and her thoughts about the singer, Ruth, certainly fall under this category.

"Second Visit to the New York Foundling, Karen Mason's Questions in Hand" (p. 183) is a modified villanelle: it keeps the repetition of those first and third lines, but the other lines in the tercets don't rhyme. Instead, the second line of each tercet rhymes or nearly rhymes with its third line ("for" and "are," "fist and pissed." etc.).

RECOMMENDED BOOKS ABOUT POETRY FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

How to Read a Poem & Fall in Love with Poetry (Harcourt Brace, 2000), by Edward Hirsch.

Poetry Handbook: A Dictionary of Terms (HarperResource, 1982), by Babette Deutsch. There have been several editions of this book; it's easy to find a used one online.

Rhyme's Reason (Yale University Press, 1989), by John Hollander. This is a fun little book that explains different forms by writing in them . . . an amazing feat in itself.

To Read a Poem (Heinle Publishers, 1992), by Donald Hall.

The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics (Princeton University Press, 1993), edited by Alex Preminger and T.V. F. Brogan.

Sleeping on the Wing: An Anthology of Modern Poetry with Essays on Reading and Writing (Vintage, 1982), by Kenneth Koch and Kate Farrell.

Teaching the Art of Poetry: The Moves (Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers, 2000), by David Cappella and Baron Wormser.

Also, there is the terrific Conference on Poetry & Teaching held at the Frost Place in Franconia, New Hampshire, every summer. Visit www.frostplace.org for information.

The New England Young Writers Conference at Breadloaf is a four-day event for high school students who love to write. Visit http://sites.middlebury.edu/neywc.