

PART I | POETRY

# introduction

basic elements  
and enduring  
mysteries

AN ANCIENT FORM THAT predates written text, poetry was originally recited or sung, often to tell stories or to pass down important information. Whether in Greece or Africa or China, almost every culture across human history has enjoyed a vibrant poetic tradition. And although many of us today have probably listened to more songs than poems, poetry still plays a central role in our digital (and post-digital) lives: whether we write it for ourselves, study it in school, or follow the latest Instagram or spoken word poets.

What is it about poetry that makes it endure? After all, for an art form to survive across time and space, it must serve some basic human need or function and yet be flexible enough to be adapted. When we look up the word *poetry* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (you may be able to access this invaluable resource online through your library), we find that it dates back to the ninth century and has multiple origins—partly borrowing from the Latin *poēta*, closely related to the Greek word for making, *poiēsis*, and partly borrowing from French *poésie*. According to its many definitions, poetry is related to creation or making; to the life of the imagination; and to its particular qualities, including rhythm and sound. What is poetry to you? From its definitions and what we know experientially,

we can start to generate a list of attributes: *Songlike*. *Visual*. *Communal*. Somehow *Magical*. Tied to *Creation* and *Emotion*.

This is a good start. However, this list of attributes doesn't exactly answer the questions of why we seem to need poetry or why it persists. In fact, poetry may be trickier to define than we first thought, and maybe this is part of its allure. We'll circle back on poetry's purposes and powers as we read and write from a wide variety of perspectives. For now, however, we can begin to get a better sense of what poetry does well by briefly discussing the genre's basic elements: elements that the following chapters will take up in greater detail.

### Poetry's Basic Elements

- Lineation
- Images
- Sound and Rhythm
- Traditional Form
- Free Verse
- Theme
- Voice and Tone

How do you know that what you're reading or writing is a poem? The most obvious difference between poetry and other forms of writing is **lineation**; poems, like song lyrics, are generally broken into **lines** and **stanzas** (similar to paragraphs), unless they're **prose poems** (poems that resemble prose on the page). This fact is a reminder that poetry not only comes out of an oral tradition, but it is also most often musical in nature. In fact, many poets report composing aurally; they hear a line or lines in their head long before they know what the poem will be about or the precise shape it will take. Poems also tend to benefit from being read and heard aloud, and reading your own poetry aloud or having it read to you by a classmate or friend is one of the best ways to work on it; you'll hear the poem's **rhythm** or beat, which may help you catch places where you unintentionally stumbled.

In chapter 5, we'll work in-depth with lineation, by looking at what you've written so far, thinking about your natural inclinations, and experimenting with some of the many possibilities. However, it is important to know at the outset that lines can be short, long, or anywhere in between. They can be **regular**, meaning that each line is approximately the same length, or **irregular** (of varying line lengths). They can be **end-stopped**, so that the end of the line is also the end of the phrase or sentence. Take, for instance, the first stanza of "I wandered lonely as a cloud" by British Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850):

I wandered lonely as a Cloud  
 That floats on high o'er Vales and Hills,  
 When all at once I saw a crowd,  
 A host of golden Daffodils;  
 Beside the Lake, beneath the trees,  
 Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

All but the first of Wordsworth's lines are marked with punctuation, indicating a stop or ending. And although the first line doesn't end with any punctuation, it is nonetheless a complete phrase.

On the other hand, poets can use **enjambment**, meaning that the phrase or sentence runs over the line-break without punctuation. The beginning of stanza three of Wordsworth's poem serves as a good example:

The waves beside them danced, but they  
 Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:—

See how the poet runs the sentence over the line-break? And here, there isn't punctuation at the end of the first line because it wouldn't make sense grammatically. Most often, contemporary poets use a mix of end-stopped and enjambed lines, and there are countless combinations and possibilities. Regardless, as a poet, lineation is an important tool to have at your disposal. As you revise and refine your poetry, you'll become more aware of the tension between the **syntax**, or sentence structure, of the poem and the unit of the line. And this awareness will help you control movement, pace, and meaning.

In addition, most poems make ample use of **sensory detail**: any detail capable of being perceived by the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste), especially **images** (a detail we can picture or see). Since these details are necessary to create an emotional as well as intellectual experience for your reader, we'll take them up early on, in chapter 2. This doesn't mean that all good poems involve piling on as much description as possible. But it does mean that we can often enliven a poem by transforming an **abstraction** (such as love, peace, or hatred) through the use of sensory detail and by letting images do much of the work for us: whether we're painting a picture or telling a story.

In some cases, we'll use **figurative language**, or language that suggests more than one meaning, to do this. For example, we may use **simile** (a comparison using *like* or *as*), **metaphor** (a comparison without *like* or *as*). Or we may use **symbolism** to suggest additional meaning. In any case, images used in poetry can either be quite concrete or they can suggest meanings and associations beyond the obvious. For example, a door key could be used in a poem to simply describe an object, action, or

a scene, but it could also be used to symbolically suggest a range of meanings: entrance into the unknown, unlocking a secret, gaining knowledge, and so on. We'll only know how to read the image through the context of the poem: the other elements around it, how much space it takes up, and whether it's repeated. And we'll only know how we want to use sensory detail and figurative language in our own poems once we've tried out a range of possibilities.

We've already briefly discussed the importance of considering music in the process of crafting poems, but what about the particular sounds of your poetry, one of the topics of chapter 3 on sound and rhythm? Will you use rhyme, linking words through their sound, or will you write poetry that is primarily unrhymed? Will you use **sound devices**, including **alliteration** (the repetition of initial sounds)? And if you decide to use rhyme, how will you keep it subtle, so that it doesn't drown out the other aspects of the poem? Many poets start out with either an attachment to rhyme or an aversion to it. At some point, however, it might be helpful to try the opposite (and everything in between): to try out all kinds of sound patterns to see what makes your poems come alive. When they're well played, the sounds you use can energize your poems and create a powerful emotional experience for your reader.

Although there is an inherent beat or rhythm to most poetry, this too is an element you can tune and shape so that your poems truly pulse and ring. Basic means of establishing rhythm in poetry include the use of line-length, **repetition** and **anaphora** (the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of lines or sentences), the quirky but often helpful practice of **counting syllables**, and the process of using **meter**, a specific rhythmic pattern. Although many poets are initially wary of writing in a specific metrical pattern, once you become attuned to the language's innate metrical rhythms and begin to find organic ways to incorporate these patterns, you'll find that working with meter can be informative and satisfying. Whether or not they make it a lifelong pursuit, most poets have studied form at some point, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the way language works, rhythmically and sonically. Typically, to their surprise, about half of my creative writing students become addicted to writing in **traditional form** or set structure each semester.

In chapter 4, we'll look at a variety of forms and focus particular attention on two centuries-old ones, which are still popular today: the **sonnet** (from the Italian word *sonetto* or "little song"), a compact form that originated in thirteenth-century Italy and is written in fourteen lines with a set meter and rhyme scheme; and the **villanelle** (from the Italian word *villanella*, from *villano* or "peasant"), a dance-like form that originated in sixteenth-century France and is written in nineteen lines broken into five three-line stanzas and one four-line stanza, characterized by two

repeating lines and two repeating rhymes. We'll also explore **invented** or **chance forms**, forms that you can make up yourself, based on a concept or on a random process of selection.

Although you'll be in good company as you explore the use of traditional form, the majority of poems being written today are written in **free verse**, meaning that they adhere to no set pattern. We'll explore the **typographical** (appearance on the page) and **auditory** (sonic) possibilities of free verse in chapter 5. In particular, poets experiment with the use of **white space**, or the area around the poem, not only by focusing on line length but also by using indentation or extra spaces within and between lines. When used effectively, such techniques can lend your work breathing room, visual shape, and multiple ways of reading. How poetry looks on the page is an essential aspect of the genre, especially given the enormous print culture thriving today: from traditional journals and books to e-readers, online publications, and social media outlets. Although some poems lend themselves either to the page or to live performance, most seem to occupy a space in between; to reach their audience, working poets tend to publish *and* do live readings, so we'll focus on both aspects of poetic production.

At this point in our discussion of poetry's basic elements, you may be wondering about the role of the poem's **subject matter** or topics: are there subjects that are off-limits or others on which you'll want to focus your attention? The short answer is: it's up to you. As you progress as a poet, you'll find the subjects that seem most uniquely tied to your experience: the stories that you have to tell. We'll explore ways of getting started with this process in chapter 1 and revisit the topic again in chapter 6 on **theme**: the "big idea" or part of the work that comments on human nature. Poets often liken the experience of developing their subject matter to finding an itch they must scratch; the questions that haunt you, the repeated themes of your lived experience offer rich areas for exploration. This process of growth involves learning to avoid **truism** or cliché to gradually uncover a more engaging and complex set of poetic subjects and themes.

Connected to subject and theme is the element of organization. Although free-verse poetry doesn't adhere to a set organizational structure, poets focus a great deal of attention on designing their poems. Whether the poem is **narrative**, containing the structure of a story; **lyrical**, relying on the sound of the lines and the intimacy of address; **dramatic**, in that it is spoken through a character or characters; or some combination of these modes, it is important to consider the order of your poem to create a dynamic experience for your reader. Therefore, in chapter 6, we'll not only focus on theme, but also on strategies of organization. We'll consider **poetic sequences** or **series**: groupings of individual

poems meant to be read in a certain order. Once you've written a number of poems, it can be useful to begin to organize them in different orders, either to begin collecting them for a portfolio of completed works or simply to gain a clearer perspective on the styles and subjects that interest you.

Last in our list of poetic elements are **voice** and **tone**; voice generally refers to the speaker and style of the poem whereas tone refers to the poem's attitude or mood. Chapter 7 takes up these subtle yet crucial aspects of poetry by exploring various tones—including reflective, melancholy, and comic. We'll also consider poems that use irony and sarcasm to great effect, and think more about how **diction**, or word choice, contribute to the world of the poem. One way to directly engage these elements is to try writing **persona poems**: poems written by a narrator other than you. By speaking through a character, whether historical or fictional, you're trying on another voice, tone, and style. Not only can this be fun, many poets find this process liberating; by switching your point-of-view or by taking on a persona, you may be able to explore subjects that would otherwise feel too close for comfort.

How do all of these elements add up? When used well, they can make for one explosive little package. Consider the density, compression, or condensation involved; you're starting with a relatively short form (excluding **epics** or lengthy narratives), and whether or not you use all of the elements we've discussed, you're sure to use some of them. What this means for the poem is that those elements—the shifts in voice, the various sensory details, the elements of story—bump up against each other, creating layers of experience and resonance. Ultimately, your poem has the potential to deeply move your reader in a mere instant: so that the experience can feel alternately seamless, unconscious, physical, and even magical.

Ready to get started? Remember, this list of poetic elements shouldn't scare you off, burden you, or make the process of writing any less enchanting. Think of the knowledge you're acquiring, the vocabulary you're building, and the examples you're reading as nutrients that will fertilize the soil of your creative mind for new growth. Once your pen hits the paper, your finger starts typing into your phone, your voice starts recording, catch whatever may come out without judgment. Only look over these first thoughts later, when you've had time to digest and reflect. It's then that the equally creative process of crafting begins.