

## How to write a poem?

Beverley Walsh

How do I write a poem?  
Will it come bursting out of my head,  
the words like concrete pouring from a mixer  
straight onto a page  
and set?  
Or will it be like childbirth?  
I'm told it's agony  
until  
it's joy  
and a child has emerged,  
fully formed,  
perfect in every way.  
Will my poem be like that?

Should I write a sonnet?  
Perhaps like Shakespeare  
Could I master in a minute the iambic pentameter  
with its stressed and unstressed syllables?  
If Shakespeare could do it, why can't I?  
But then there are the three quatrains and the couplet at the bottom  
to consider.  
And that's just the Shakespearean version.  
I learned that there are four types of sonnet:  
Petrarchan  
Shakespearean  
Miltonic and  
Spenserian.  
It's  
too  
much.  
I  
won't  
write  
a  
sonnet.

Free verse is the way to go,  
that's what I'll do.  
I remember e e cummings.  
What a surprise  
his *my sweet old etcetera*  
was.  
There seemed no rhyme nor reason  
but no, that's wrong.  
There was reason, just no rhyme.

His father said it was a privilege to die for your country.  
He wished he could.  
His mother hoped her son would die, bravely, of course.  
And in the meantime her son `lay quietly  
in the deep mud' dreaming of his sweetheart, her smile, her knees  
and her Etcetera.  
Now that was free verse.

Or could I write a poem with a regular six-line stanza  
like WB Yeats' *The Wild Swans at Coole*?  
It has a rhyming pattern of ABCBDD in every stanza.  
I could replicate the pattern but the content is so profound.  
Perhaps I need to be as old as he was when he wrote the poem  
to have so much wisdom.  
Oh, I am as old, what a nasty surprise,  
I'll have to think this through more carefully.

When I was sixteen I learned some of Milton's  
*Paradise Lost*.  
Now that was deep.  
It wasn't a sonnet, so I can relax,  
but an epic poem of more than  
ten thousand lines  
telling the story of Satan's revolt against God  
and so much more.  
I never got to the end.  
It  
was  
too  
much.  
I won't write an epic poem.

So what sort of poem will I write?  
Sonnets and epics and regular stanzas are out.  
Free verse is an attractive option  
but I'm no e e cummings.

I've always enjoyed *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*  
by T S Eliot.  
It's full of metaphors.  
Is that why I love it?  
The evening that is  
'Like a patient etherised upon a table'  
As it spreads against the sky.  
Could I imagine a metaphor like that?  
Of course I could. It's just a matter of thinking.  
But I don't feel like doing that now.

Poetry can be confusing.

A friend said, 'why can't poets just bloody well  
say what they mean.'  
Well, they do but they dress it up in language that  
we have to interpret.  
Can I do that?  
Of course I can.

WH Auden in writing *In Memory of WB Yeats* says  
'The words of a dead man  
Are modified in the guts of the living.'  
If he meant that people will make what they will  
of the dead poet's words, why didn't he just say so?  
As my friend would ask.  
Will my poem be interpreted and misinterpreted?  
Its words tossed around in some stranger's guts  
and belched out in a toxic stream?

It's  
too  
much.  
I  
won't  
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a  
poem.