

Field Notes on Form

By Selene Frost

I quit poetry when I was nineteen years old. I was a creative writing major at a small college in the South and that night I attended a workshop mixer. I was sitting on a covered porch between a heavy-lidded Romanian woman and some guy my father's age from Idaho. The woman staggered deliciously out of a cloud of smoke and slurred "It is not possible to create without a cigarette." The guy from Idaho leaned in, inquiring whether I'd like to get out of here. Suddenly, the future flashed and no one saw but me, the way I was, already sallow-faced at forty, still a smoker, my life's work amounting to some hideous recitation of masturbatory *Ars Poetica*. I forgot somehow that there was more to it. I obliterated the space between the writer and the writing. I dismissed the trick of hearing music in ordinary speech. I forgot the way words can burrow inside you and blossom in the warmth that's there.

I quit and spent ten years, colloquially, "in the hole." Buried alive in medical school and surgical residency, I didn't think about words again until one afternoon after a residency-wide wellness lecture. We had just suffered through an hour of a well-meaning counselor mercilessly detailing depressing burnout statistics. She delivered some half-hearted suggestions on integrating "mindfulness" into our practice, inspiring me to absentmindedly web-search suggestions for "meditations." That was when I first encountered the work of Robert Hass, former US poet laureate, widely considered to be one of the most lyrical poets of the last hundred years.

The poem I found was "[Meditation at Lagunitas](#)." In it, he remembers a woman he loved through his memories of sensory experience and language. A few of the memorable lines: "*Longing, we say, because desire is full/ of endless distances. I must have been the same to her./ But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,/ the thing her father said that hurt her, what/ she dreamed.*"

If you say the words aloud you can hear the mastery in his composition—its flow and its tenor. I let them roll off my tongue and took pleasure in the sounds they made. I started thinking then about the flow and the tenor of a surgeon's language and how we develop, over time, something master poets develop, which Daniel Khalastchi refers to as "an economy of words."

When we begin our education, we start with reciting the "medical students epic," an odyssey through erroneous lab values and irrelevant physical exam findings. We slowly learn, over time, the literary principle of Chekhov's gun. If there's an elevated bilirubin in Act I, it had better turn into an ERCP by Act V. We start with the Odyssey and end with what I've dubbed the Chief Resident Quatrain.

Hass, in a lecture for the University of Iowa, defined the poetic quatrain as:

1. A question or a statement
2. An affirmation or contradiction
3. The weaving of the first 2 lines
4. The fourth leg of the table, the structural integrity of the verse.

Here's an example of a Chief Resident Quatrain:

1. We were consulted for a bowel obstruction. (statement)
2. It is not a bowel obstruction (contradiction)
3. Lactate and white count normal, nontender, having bowel movements. No bowel dilation on scan. (weaving)
4. Patient has gastroenteritis, admitting to medicine for PO intolerance. (stability)

or

1. Patient is really sick.
2. Lactate is 7, peritoneal, elevated white count. CT scan consistent with perforation.
3. History of diverticulitis and atrial fibrillation on coumadin.
4. Reversing INR, booking for sigmoidectomy.

Our idiolect possesses its own beauty, and much of that lies in its form. Structure is important in poetics and in surgery because it has the ability to organize our thoughts, to increase our signal within the noise, and through the remediation of chaos—etherealize the mundane. Denis Johnson's poem "White White Collars" comes to mind. It begins as a dull free verse, a lamentation at being a boring white collar worker, getting lost as a cog in a terrible soul-crushing machine. He writes:

*We work in this building and we are hideous
in the fluorescent light, you know our clothes
woke up this morning and swallowed us like jewels*

He rides up and down the elevators, boring words to boring colleagues emanating from his mouth when suddenly, something shifts and he falls into a nearly perfect meter. His speech adopts a rhyme scheme:

*...But in my belly's flames
someone is dancing, calling me by many names
that are secret and filled with light and rise
and break, and I see my previous lives.*

That's the trick of it, the learning. The gaining of aptitude to allow us to break into a realm of light and rise. That's the wonder, the mysterious power of what language can do. All it takes is—you got it—mindfulness.

It turns out I never really quit poetry, I only learned a new economy. I exchanged the pastoral for the patient history, the limerick for the chief complaint, the invested reader for the censorious attending. It's a stunning example of the way medicine, like art, is a craft. It's a slow reckoning with the needless and the necessary. It's the whittling down to the truth of things. It's that slow mumble of words swishing around your mouth as you whisper *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*.

References

Hass, Robert "Meditation at Lagunitas." *Praise*, Harper Collins Publishing, 1979.

Johnson, Denis "White, White Collars." *The Incognito Lounge*, Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2017.

"How Writers Write Poetry" was created and presented by the International Writing Program at The University of Iowa.

The structural analysis of poetic form appearing in this essay is drawn from material presented in online courses from the International Writing Program created and presented by the University of Iowa. These courses can be downloaded at this site: <http://www.distancelearningiwp.org/poetry14>. The courses taught by Robert Hass and Daniel Khalastchi on "How Writers Write Poetry" are explicitly referenced.

Selene Frost is a writer as well as a chief resident in general surgery. She has spent the last year developing and implementing a narrative medicine curriculum for her surgical residency program involving weekly prompts for clinical reflection and quarterly didactic and discussion sessions. Her interests include the intersections between art and medicine and the examination and rewriting of surgical culture. Frost believes the future of medicine lies in the revision of the narratives holding us back and the telling of stories moving us forward. She hopes to dedicate her career to the training of empathetic and humanistic surgeons. Her creative work has been published in Oddball magazine. Find more about her work IG @selenefrostpoetry.

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