Building Poems

Second Edition

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We make buildings strong to resist the wind, but why do we make them beautiful?
Building Poems

We are the builders.
We are the makers.
Human beings make things.

Beautiful things.

We build with wood, glass, concrete, steel—and we build with words.

The things we make—whether they are buildings or poems—have parts, and the parts fit, and they are arranged in a pattern for a purpose.

Like a glass tower that reflects the sky—that almost becomes part of the sky—a poem is built—with poem pieces.
A poem is a kind of building.
Brunelleschi’s Dome

In 1418 Filippo Brunelleschi, a grumpy architect from Florence, Italy, was challenged to build an enormous dome above the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence.

No one knew how to do it.

Even Lorenzo Ghiberti, who had cast the great bronze doors of Florence’s Baptistery of San Giovanni, could not do it.

The opening that the dome would have to cover was huge—impossible—138 feet across, and the walls that would support the base of the dome were 180 feet high—a long fall.

But Brunelleschi designed a hollow dome, two dome-shells with space in between, made of bricks in a strong herringbone pattern.

After six centuries
his dome still stands.
Like Brunelleschi, poets solve problems, but poets do not make domes of brick. They build domes of words, arranging sounds to confirm the meanings of ideas.

Poets use the sounds of words as building materials.

When Thomas Hardy wanted to describe thorny vines on a freezing day, he used scratchy sounds—\( k, sk, st, t, \) and \( g \)!

The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres...
The *k*’s and *g*’s in English words can sound scratchy and rough, but if they are present in a line full of soft sounds, such as *l*’s, *m*’s, *n*’s, *f*’s, and *v*’s, they can lose their sting. Here is a line of poetry from William Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*. When Juliet’s mother asks her if she can like Count Paris, Juliet, who really does not like Count Paris, answers her mother:

**I’ll look to like, if looking liking move.**

In other words, “I’ll try to like him, if trying can move me to like him”! Even though there are some *k*’s in Juliet’s words, the line is soft; the *k*’s absorb the softness of the rest of the sentence. Why do *f*’s and *v*’s sound soft? How are those two sounds different from one another?
look
like
looking
liking
if
move
like
looking
like
PATTERNS

alliteration

assonance

rhyme

consonance
PATTERNS OF SOUND

Assonance

Consonance
P A T T E R N S

One thing to do with sounds is to repeat them in patterns. There are different ways to repeat sounds.

When words end in the same sound, like *flake* and *ache*, that is **rhyme**.

When words begin with the same sound, like *moon*, *milk*, and *meanie*, that is called **alliteration**.

When words share the same vowel sound, like *croon*, *dupe*, and *newt*, that is **assonance**.

And when words share the same consonant sound, like *begin*, *aghast*, *snuggle*, and *rigging*, that is called **consonance**.
Rhyme, words that end alike, is one of the most important techniques in poetry.

When poets put the rhymes at the ends of the lines, that is called end rhyme. There are wonderful end rhymes in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*:

“You are old, Father William,” the young man said,
“And your hair has become very white,
And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
Do you think, at your age, it is right?”

“In my youth,” Father William replied to his son,
“I feared it might injure the brain;
But, now that I’m perfectly sure I have none,
Why, I do it again and again.”
When the rhymes are inside the lines, that is called **internal rhyme**. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, used internal rhyme in his poem “The Splendor Falls”:

The splendor **falls** on castle **walls**
And snowy summits old in story;
The long light **shakes** across the **lakes**,
And the wild cataract leaps in glory.

**internal rhyme**
When the rhyme looks the same but does not sound the same, that is called **eye-rhyme**.
The British poet Thomas Hardy used this eye-rhyme in his poem “The Darkling Thrush”:

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At once a voice arose **among**
The bleak twigs overhead
In a fullhearted **evensong**
Of joy illimited.
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*Among* and *evensong* are eye-rhyme because they rhyme only to the eye!
They look like rhymes, but they do not end with the same sounds.
I never saw a purple meter.
Words have rhythm.

When we speak, we give more emphasis to some words or parts of words than to others. We stress sounds by pronouncing them with a higher volume and with more firmness.

We say CHICKen, not chickEN.

We say baNAna, not banaNA.

By controlling the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in poems, poets can create regular rhythm, called meter. They do this by using small units of meter; each unit is called a foot.
The American poet Gelett Burgess, who was born in 1863, is remembered for one poem. Look at the stressed syllables, in purple, and notice how he arranged the patterns of stress into a regular meter:

I never saw a purple cow,
I never hope to see one;
But I can tell you, anyhow,
I’d rather see than be one.

Did you notice the way Burgess alternated between unstressed and stressed syllables? Every other syllable is stressed. We could say that the pattern in this poem is a two-syllable pattern, with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

A two-syllable foot with the stress on the second syllable is called an iamb.
If we broke Burgess’s poem into its iambs and put slashes between the feet, it would look like this:

I ne / ver saw / a pur / ple cow,  
I ne / ver hope / to see / one;  
But I / can tell / you, an / y how,  
I’d ra / ther see / than be / one.

Notice that the foot is made up of syllables; “ver saw” is an iambic foot, and “a pur” is an iambic foot. When we talk about the poetic foot, we are only thinking about the pattern of stresses, not about the words. A foot can be part of a long word, or the end of one word with the beginning of the next.
Notice that Burgess’s poem has four iambs in the first and third lines. Four iambs per line are called

**iambic tetrameter.**

Notice, too, that lines two and four have three iambs followed by a single unstressed syllable. When we add a final unstressed syllable this way, it is called a **feminine ending.**
There are four main kinds of foot in English poetry. They are called the iamb, the trochee (pronounced TROkee), the dactyl, and the anapest.

The iamb and trochee have two syllables. In an iamb the stress is on the second syllable, and in a trochee the stress is on the first.

The dactyl and the anapest each have three syllables. In a dactyl the stress is on the first syllable, and in an anapest the stress is on the third.

There was a crooked man... he went a crooked mile.
The Queen of Hearts, she made some tarts...
I do not like thee, Doctor Fell; the reason why I cannot tell.

Barber, barber, shave a pig...
Mary, Mary, quite contrary...
Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.
dactyl

Hickory, dickory...
Home again, home again, jiggety...
Ladybird, ladybird, fly away...

anapest

an old woman who lived in a shoe
an old lady upon a white horse
there I met an old man

There are many who say
that a dog has his day.
(Dylan Thomas)