

Some Notes on Form and Function of the Line and Line Endings in Free-Verse Poetry by Tony Leuzzi

The main distinction between prose and verse is that prose is not sensitive to lines whereas verse is all about the form, shape, length, and meaning of lines. These instructions, for example, are written in prose; therefore, each line has only stopped and carried over into another because the horizontal space on the page has run out. If this paper were twice as wide, these lines would be doubled in width. In verse poems, however, each line is carefully crafted so that the empty spaces on either side of the words also communicate meaning. Hopefully, the following essay will help clarify some ways in which lines allow meaning to take shape in poems.

I. Lines are Everywhere: Painting, Architecture, Poems

What is a line? In painting, architecture, and music, the line is the most basic material through which any auditory or visual artifact is created. Given this scope, it would seem lines are everywhere. Looking at a house, one sees a wooden or concrete structure patterned on carefully ordered angles and lines. A vine might scale that house in a long, wandering pattern across its wall. The letters or written symbols in this essay are themselves formed by lines of different shapes and sizes. In fact, the only place lines would not exist is in negative space, or a void.

If lines are ubiquitous, they are essential to understanding the pattern and shape of auditory and visual artifacts. Many of Picasso's most famous paintings feature deliberately crude, thick lines to create deceptively primitive images, suggesting mythic connotations while corresponding to contemporary experience. On the other hand, Matisse's paintings exploit graceful lines to suggest a flowing, musical lyricism that also speaks to an aspect of our experience.

Lines occur in architecture, too. The functional, box-shaped buildings at MCC and RIT contrast sharply with the dramatic, curvaceous lines of an Eastern Orthodox Church downtown. Again, no particular pattern is necessarily better than another simply because it's different. Value can be ascribed by the extent to which the lines and shape of a building serve (or fail to serve) the purposes for which the building was designed¹.

In poetry, lines take on various shapes inducing varying effects. Some express sweeping vastness, as in Walt Whitman's lines, or cryptic compression, as seen in poems by Emily Dickinson. For example, Walt Whitman writes:

Throb, baffled and curious brain! Throw out questions and answers!
Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!

These long, flowing, all-inclusive lines reflect Whitman's concern with embracing all the elements of our perception. Walt Whitman's lines were so wide that the first edition of his book, *Leaves of Grass*, was published on oversized paper. By contrast, Emily Dickinson writes:

It would have starved a Gnat—
To live so small as I—

These compressed lines echo the persona's introverted psychological world-view and therefore support the idea that the self should be seen as small. Twentieth-Century poet, William Carlos Williams also wrote small, narrow poems. Part of the reason for this was that, as a doctor, he often traveled from house to house, writing poems on a prescription pad. "The Red Wheelbarrow," one of his most famous poems, could easily fit on a note pad, and one can see how the size of the paper might have determined the form of the poem:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

But don't let this case fool you. A line's length is not always determined by the size of the paper it is printed on; rather, it is determined by the specific purposes any line length serves. In Williams's case, his tiny, compressed poems are the perfect vehicle for clipped, crisp images that bear no explicit commentary.

Some writers like to vary line lengths for dramatic effect:

A man looks to his wife for an answer.
“Will you love me like you love the daughter you say I never gave you?”
“No.”

The contrast in the line length reveals a different psychological state for the man (line 2) and the woman (line 3) in the poem. The man’s rambling answer suggests his insecurity. Clearly he is eager to make conversation with the woman, but her terse response reflects her dismissal. She has closed all discussion with her monosyllabic answer.

So far we’ve seen that a particular line break can highlight a gesture or effect within the larger unit of any given sentence. It can also emphasize certain associations between words. Moreover each line in a poem must be considered in two ways: 1.) On its own as a single unit of meaning; and 2.) In its relationship(s) to the other lines in the poem.

II. The Sentence is Not the Line

It is important to know that lines and sentences are not always one and the same. If all line breaks were determined by sentence endings, poets would not be able to express certain ideas that can be suggested by fusing ideas and phrases together. Each of the following lines (in a self-composed poem called “On Tuesday”) breaks off when a single sentence is ended:

I get a message from her.
I turn on the radio.
The toilet is leaking.

Presented in this way, these three lines seem not only unremarkable, but disconnected to each other, suggesting at best a random routine in the speaker’s life. However, when the lines are rearranged, a new subtext emerges:

I get a message
from her. I turn on
the radio. The toilet
is leaking.

In the second line, the previously neutral statement “I turn on” now seems to be associated with “her” in the previous sentence, since the female pronoun is carried onto the same line as “I turn on.” Similarly, the radio and toilet are yoked together in line three, creating a not-so-subtle statement about the quality of radio programming. Therefore, through its clever line breaks, this

poem has transcended the banal. Likewise, Mary Oliver often uses line breaks to transform seemingly unexceptional observations into brilliant poetic utterances. One of her early poems, “Farm Country,” illustrates some aspects of her approach:

I have sharpened the knives, I have
Put on the heavy apron.

Maybe you think life is chicken soup, served
In blue willow-pattern bowls.

I have put on my boots and opened
The kitchen door and stepped out

Into the sunshine. I have crossed the lawn,
I have entered

The hen house.

The first thing a perceptive reader might notice in this poem is the way many of its line endings occur at unexpected or even awkward points in the flow of the sentence. This conspicuous organization suggests the lines were intentionally broken this way to yield specific results. For instance, the initial line, “I have sharpened the knives,” is followed by the reiterative phrase “I have” which—though grammatically linked to the rest of the sentence in line two—is retained on line one to emphasize the persona’s blunt declaration and, by extension, her determination². Taken on its own, the second line is a short and clear directive that further underscores the tone of the poem’s purposed, no-nonsense voice. In the third line, “Maybe you think life is chicken soup, served,” the final word would be, in normal speech patterns, linked rhythmically to the grouping of words in the fourth line. Here, however, it is retained on the third line to emphasize the image of someone being served—an image that is central to the persona’s argument: after all, to think life is a bowl of chicken soup is one thing; to think that same bowl of chicken soup will be served to you without working for it is another. The stress on “served” consciously changes the rhythm of the sentence and, furthermore, sets the values of the poetic voice apart from whomever the persona is addressing. This unique tension between speaker and audience is made evident through the line break.

Elsewhere, other line endings are similarly effective in communicating connotations that might otherwise go undetected. In the fifth line, the persona states:

“I have put on my boots and opened”

“Opened what?” one asks. While the sixth line will provide this information, the break itself suggests that “opened” is more than literal. The persona’s decision to put on her boots and exit the interior of her home suggests an altered psychological state, an opening of consciousness. This notion of altered consciousness is reiterated in the eighth line when, after having stepped into the sunshine and crossed the lawn, the persona says, “I have entered.” No spatial or physical indicators are provided, and this much shorter line than the rest is left largely blank. Then, after a stanza break, another brief line closes the poem. The negative space between the final two lines creates there a conspicuous chasm that indicates a psychological shift from one state of mind to another.

The discussion of Mary Oliver’s “Farm Country” demonstrates the “systematic contrast or opposition between line units and sense units”—or line ending and sentence flow (Brogan 695). This verse-specific phenomenon, known as enjambment, will be discussed at more length in the section below. However, it is important to note that the internal shape and flow of any given line is further complicated in its relationship to the shape and flow of the sentence, which may or may not correspond to the line. Therefore, “one of the chief functions of line division is to stand in tension or counterpoint to the divisions of grammar and sense, effecting, in the reader’s processing of the text, multiple simultaneous pattern recognition” (695). The excerpt from David St. John’s poem, “Iris,” further illustrates this concept:

The prairies fail along Chicago. Past the five
Lakes. Into the black woods of her New York; and as I bend

Close above this iris, I see the train

Drive deep into the damp heart of its stem, and the gravel
Of the garden path

Cracks under my feet as I walk this long corridor

Of elms, arched
Like the ceiling of a French railway where a boy

With pale curls holding

A fresh iris is waving goodbye to a grandmother, gazing
A long time

Into the flower . . .

As mentioned in the brief analyses of Oliver's "Farm Country" and the self-penned poem, the arrangement of these lines exacts, with regards to form, two levels of comprehension: the shape of the line and the shape of a sentence. Each line can be understood discreetly, in terms of individual units of meaning, such as in the line "A fresh iris is waving goodbye to a grandmother, gazing"—which suggests that the iris is waving then gazing, not the boy of two lines previous. But it would be incorrect to ignore the sense of the sentence, too. Part of the complex richness of poems such as St. John's "Iris" is the way line endings create secondary rhythms that are superimposed onto the rhythms of the sentences. The reader's interpretation of pauses, emphases, and pitches in the lines "...and as I bend/Close above this iris, I see the train/Drive deep into the damp heart of its stem, and the gravel/of the garden path/Cracks under my feet..." will depend upon the degree to which one honors the structure of the line in comparison to the sentence. Will one, for example, read "Close above this iris, I see the train" in a rising or falling tone? The answer will depend on whether or not the line is interpreted as the latter half of the compound sentence it is linked to in the previous line or as an individual unit of communication that anticipates more context in the next line. The reader is continually negotiating between the two levels, where the meaning and rhythms of the sentence are often contrasted to and/or augmented by the line-sensitive arrangement. And as Brogan further notes, when reading enjambed verse, "the mind makes projections . . . based on what has come before [and] what word is most likely to appear at the beginning of the next line" (695).

III: Kinds of Line Breaks: Terms and Examples

As the previous section demonstrated, an astute reader can detect two ways of ascertaining sense in a poem: the sense of the sentence and the sense of the line. The following passage from Corrine Hales's poem, "Power," where two children place a stuffed effigy on train-tracks, further demonstrates this concept.

The shirt and pants looked real enough
Stretched out across the rails. I felt my heart
Beating against the cool ground . . .

This three-line passage conveys clear and literal information in two grammatically complete sentences. But the yoking of two phrases (one from each sentence) on the second line communicates a deeper psychological truth. "Stretched out across the rails. I felt my heart" suggests that, on a metaphorical level, the persona as well as the effigy is stretched out across the rails waiting to be run over by a train. Perhaps, then, she is saying that a part of her will die when

the oncoming train runs over the joke she and her brother created for this occasion. This insight is confirmed later when, in the final stanza, the narrator admits “morning seemed too long ago.” She is not the same person she was before. With the aid of a deft line break, this abstract transformation is made concrete.

Different kinds of line breaks include the end-stopped line, the reflexive line, the enjambed line ending, the anticipatory line ending, and the transformational line ending. In the case of the **end-stopped line**, the writer decides to stop the line when s/he’s finished with a sentence or phrase. The effect is often logical and tidy, and the pause that ensues after the end-stopped line is as full as the pause one makes at the end of a sentence. Charles Simic's witty poem, "Charles Simic," begins with end-stopped lines:

Charles Simic is a sentence.
A sentence has a beginning and an end.

The end-stopped, full-sentenced lines are appropriate for this poem because they demonstrate the very content of the poem through the choice of line endings. In other words, if the poem is concerned with sentences about Charles Simic, it would seem logical that these very sentences determine the choice of the line.

Here is a sample of two lines from a poem called “I Advertised for a Part-Time Job,” by Kathleen Iddings:

I took a job in an office,
\$6.00 an hour.

Each line provides essential information, which is clear on its own but even more effective when seen in relation to one another. In this case, the first end-stopped line sets up an expectation that is undercut by the information provided in the next line. A job in an office might be considered respectable and lucrative, but not for such a low wage. This effect is called thesis-antithesis, which works well with end-stopped lines, where one line will deflate or contradict an expectation established in the first line.

Employing an uninterrupted sequence of end-stopped lines may also be an effective way to establish tone. Anne Sexton does this in her famous poem "Man and Wife," which offers its withering commentary on the institution of marriage primarily through the dull, numbing tone of the man and wife themselves:

We are not lovers.
We do not even know each other.
We look alike
but we have nothing to say.
We are like pigeons . . .

The man and wife speak simply, directly though in entirely uninspired end-stopped sentences or phrases which dramatize the monotonous, routine aspects of their existence.

Sometimes an end-stopped line is **reflexive**, meaning that the line ending refers to something previously in the line and therefore forces the reader to move backward as well as forward (Myers and Simms 163-64). Here's a line from a poem by Richard Hugo:

My eyes were like this photo. Old.

Note that the line has been end-stopped, and therefore closed, but reflexivity forces the reader to move in two directions. "Old" will only make sense if the reader links it with information that preceded it—eyes and the photo. Likewise, the eyes become old only when the reader has reached the end of the line, thereby forcing one to return to the initial reference and create a new association: eyes/old.

In the case of the **enjambéd line**, a line ending is not stopped at the end of a sentence or grammatically complete phrase. Instead, the sentence or phrase carries over into the next line. Here is a group of enjambéd lines in a poem called "A Small Song," by A. R. Ammons:

The reeds give
way to the

wind and give
the wind away.

All four lines of this little poem could have been arranged on one line, but the effect would have been different.

The reeds give way to the wind and give the wind away.

In the initial example, the broken lines at once emphasize certain word pairs in each line (reeds give, way to, wind give, wind away) but force the reader to recognize a pronounced anticipation: “The reeds give” what? “Way to the” what? If the entire sentence appeared on one line the sense of word association and anticipation would be non-apparent.

End-stopped and enjambed lines can be characterized in three main ways: anticipatory, transformational, and emphatic. According to *The Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms*, the **anticipatory line ending** does exactly what it says: creates anticipation or suspense by “holding back or delaying either syntax or sense necessary to the complete understanding of a sentence” (Myers and Simms 165). As a result, “the last word in the line is meant to increase the reader’s curiosity” (165). The aforementioned “Charles Simic” poem illustrates this principle perfectly:

What is the object of the sentence?
The object, my little ones,
Is not yet in sight.

While the first line is end-stopped, the second breaks significantly at the very point where the object mentioned might be revealed. We have to read the third line to find out. But we have been duped: the object is not yet in sight. The third line cleverly echoes what we already knew from the previous line break.

Not all anticipatory line breaks are as deliberately frustrating. These lines from Yusef Komunyakaa’s poem “Facing It”—where the speaker of the poem sees people reflected back to him on the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial in Washington—feature end-stopped and enjambed lines. The enjambed lines are largely anticipatory:

The Sky. A plane in the sky.
A white vet’s image floats
Closer to me, then his pale eyes
Look through mine. I’m a window.
He’s lost his right arm
Inside the stone. In the black mirror
A woman’s trying to erase names:
No, she’s brushing a boy’s hair.

The first line is purely end-stopped, but lines two and three demonstrate an anticipatory effect. The vivid image, “A white vet’s image floats,” deserves its own line, but a deeper appreciation will come with more literal information. “Closer to me” suggests that the image is now not only floating but is moving closer to the persona. This is literally reflected in the stone, but figuratively

representative of how the speaker is becoming intimate once again with the realities of the war. The line break here is anticipatory because it spurs the reader to reach for more information in the following line. At the same time, the break is crucial because it emphasizes the importance of the floating in and of itself—an idea that would have been lost if the break had been removed or altered.

A **transformational line ending** occurs in enjambed lines where the meaning or suggestion of the last word of a line is transformed or altered by what follows it (167). Take a look at these:

He ran as fast as a tiger
with only three legs.

and

When she wouldn't go out with him
he climbed on top of her
house and sang off-key all night.

and

She raised her hand and slapped him
on the back, to get him to stop
coughing.

and

He kissed his wife and his daughter
moaned in disgust.

An **emphatic line ending** usually creates a sense of emphasis or reiteration through the repetition of a word or phrase or idea (168). The following example demonstrates an emphatic line ending that repeats certain words for emphasis

When he was good, he was
as happy as a clam.

Compare this line to

When he was good, he was as happy as a clam.

In the first sample, the words “he was” are visually linked with the first four words of the line; therefore, they reiterate the idea of the man being good. This emphasis would be lost if the line break did not appear where it does. In the second sample, the line ends when the sentence ends. In this case, all information is presented on one line but, ironically, the sense of emphasis through reiteration is lost.

In his essay, "Free Verse Lineation," Jack Myers again explains that the emphatic line ending "emphasizes, reinforces, and/or restates previous context, often with new semantic and tonal effects" (183). He then demonstrates this point by comparing three sentences as they are grouped in prose and verse. First, as prose:

My readers are confused. They feel that more examples are necessary. They are bored and this is unfortunate.

And then, as verse:

My readers are confused. They feel that
more examples are necessary. They are
bored and this is unfortunate.

In the prose passage, the sentences do more than express the literal state of mind of the readers. In the verse version, the emphatic line endings create fresh and provocative associations. In line one, for example, the confusion the readers feel is reinforced through the positioning of "They feel that" on the same line. In line two, the fact that more examples are necessary is emphatically supported by "They are," which might anticipate any rebuttal to the sentiment expressed. In line three, "bored" and "unfortunate" are placed in a line that equates the two concepts with each other.

IV: Applying Some Terms You Have Learned: Mary Oliver's "August"

Many of the terms above are employed simultaneously in a single poem to enhance its meaning and/or music. Another Mary Oliver poem, "August," may serve as a useful example of how line endings contribute to the overall form and design of a free verse poem:

When the blackberries hang

swollen in the woods, in the brambles
nobody owns, I spend

all day among the high
branches, reaching
my ripped arms, thinking

of nothing, cramming
the black honey of summer
into my mouth; all day my body

accepts what it is. In the dark
creeks that run by there is
this thick paw of my life darting among

the black bells, the leaves; there is
this happy tongue.

Though this poem is arranged into fourteen lines (perhaps a not-so-distant echo of the sonnet?) its grammatical form is comprised of two sentences broken into smaller, enjambed lines that maximize the poetic potential of an otherwise somewhat prosy passage of language.

Most of the lines break at a crucial moment where essential information is withheld. This technique is obvious in the first line, “When the blackberries hang.” Location is not provided until the second line, thereby setting up an anticipatory line ending. But the effect of withholding location does more: it fractures the line and suspends the remaining image so that what is emphasized is the image of hanging. Superficially at least, the second line is concerned with placement; however, the two phrases—“swollen in the woods, in the brambles”—connote a state of being: ostensibly the persona herself, not the hanging berries, is swollen in the woods and the brambles. Once again, the line ends with anticipation, and, once again, the ensuing line conveys more than just setting or location. The line “nobody owns, I spend” features a surprising contrast, since two dissimilar concepts—lack of ownership and personal spending—are yoked together by the fractured line.

The information between lines three and seven is further complicated by the breaks. Syntactically, the text reads, “I spend all day among the high branches, reaching my ripped arms, thinking of nothing.” But the line arrangement says more. Line five reads “branches, reaching.” On the level of the sentence, it is the persona who is reaching into the branches for berries; but when reading the line in isolation, it appears as if the *branches* are reaching. Likewise, the “ripped arms” in line six appear to be thinking—a form of synesthesia that would have been impossible without the line ending. What’s more, that very point in the poem provides a striking

transformational break, since the information provided on the seventh line undercuts one's expectation for the act of thinking: thinking anything is possible, except "nothing."

Certainly every line of Oliver's "August" features deft endings that give the poem a greater texture. Without taking the poem line by line, this case can be made with two more examples. In lines 10-11, the break isolates and, consequently, confuses the sentence's grammar in an intriguing way, whereas in the penultimate line an emphatic line ending underscores the importance of the image and provides lovely music as well. But these are only some of the effects Oliver's technique yields here. It is sufficient to say the line breaks in "August" cause the reader pause, which in turn exacts a certain level of concentration and meditation on individual lines.

V. "The Portrait": A Reading, Line by Line

Stanley Kunitz's poem "The Portrait" demonstrates the powerful effects line breaks can achieve. Unfolding the poem line-by-line allows us to study such effects more closely. The first line reads:

My mother never forgave my father

This declarative statement is at once revealing and mysterious. As readers we are aware that a mother and father are involved, and the persona of this poem must be their child. We also know there is a distinct conflict: the mother cannot forgive the father for something he has done. But what has he done? The line is anticipatory because it breaks off before crucial new information is produced, thus suspending what comes next. We learn the father's "crime" in the next line:

for killing himself,

This information is unexpected. Had the father committed adultery, abused the mother, or gambled all their savings away, the "crime" would have been more predictable. But even if suicide is not the most obvious answer, one can make sense of the information. The mother feels that, in killing himself, her husband has left her alone to raise their child. Therefore, maybe she sees his self-inflicted death as cowardice. The next line will provide more context:

especially at such an awkward time

This new information is unusual. Is there ever an appropriate time to kill oneself? The first word, "especially," signals an ironic turn, since it emphasizes the time of the suicide over the suicide

itself. What's more, the word "awkward" seems petty, selfish, neurotic—as if it were referring to an annoyance rather than a suicide. A careful reader might sense that this word is not the persona's but the mother's. Maybe she has said this frequently since his death. Whatever the case, the word reveals that the mother is not dealing fully with the true impact of the father's death.

The next line reinforces this notion:

and in a public park,

Here we sense the mother's shame in being associated with the father's public gesture of self-surrender. Moreover, each line since the beginning has been adding more context and one more bit of information. Now we not only get action but setting, too. The following line reveals time:

that spring

This line emphasizes a fundamental irony: why would someone kill himself in the spring, a time often associated with growth and rebirth? This irony is further emphasized in the following line:

when I was waiting to be born.

The persona's entrance into life is juxtaposed with his father's exit from it. This life-death theme is enhanced when we realize all of the challenges that must face a single mother under such circumstances. Although we never learn why this man has killed himself, enough detail and action has been supplied to provide a dynamic internal and external conflict for both the persona and his mother. The use of line breaks up to this point helps clarify this tension.

While the first six lines of "The Portrait" provide narrative details for one event, the rest of the poem focuses on the cause-effect relationship of the suicide. The poem now shifts to a different time: the life of the mother and child since the suicide. Presumably years have passed, but, as the following metaphor reveals, her anger and hurt have not:

She locked his name
in her deepest cabinet
and would not let him out,
though I could hear him thumping.

The first line in this section emphasizes the act of locking a name, while the ensuing line reveals where it is locked. The third line highlights the mother's resolve in doing this, though the final line—in an expert stroke of antithesis—demonstrates that such repression cannot be successfully

contained. Again, each line reveals a new crucial piece of information that ultimately sheds light on the previous lines. At this point, however, the poem takes yet another turn, this time towards narrative involving the son:

When I came down from the attic
with the pastel portrait in my hand
of a long-lipped stranger
with a brave moustache
and deep brown level eyes,

Without specifying who the stranger is, the reader knows the persona is referring to his father. What motivates the boy to do this is unstated. But a few key details of this man's appearance (seemingly too gallant to have committed suicide!) suggests that the persona admires the man in the portrait. In turn, his curiosity demands to be sated. The mother will not allow this:

she ripped it into shreds
without a single word
and slapped me hard.

The action is relegated to one key detail per line setting up a continuous stream of anticipation. Incidentally, the second of these three lines suggests that her reaction is not rationally based. Words could have been used to reason away her tearing the portrait to shreds. Instead, her bound up repression springs uncontrollably to the surface in the form of violence. The final section of "The Portrait" retreats from narrative back into contemplation.

In my sixty-fourth year
I can feel my cheek
still burning.

Here we are confronted with the distance of years. A special emphasis is made, with a line break, "still burning," which reveals that the repercussions of this experience persist sixty-four years later.

V. Pausing and Acceleration: Line Breaks and Matters of Breath

So far, I have said nothing about pausing or accelerating when reading poems aloud; yet most beginning readers assume (or are taught) that the primary reason line breaks exist is to mark a pause in group of words. In her excellent introduction on teaching poetry, *For the Good of the Earth and the Sun*, Georgia Heard says "I write my poems in lines; when I read, I pause at each

line break. Professors probably tell us not to pause to prevent us from exaggerating the pause and treating it like a period” (55). While I feel Heard’s observation should be rephrased to include *degrees* of pausing, what she says is true. Many poems actually sound better when the reader pauses for breath at the indicated line break. Using Stanley Kunitz again as an example, the first four lines of his poem, “Firesticks,” demonstrate how a line break signals the pause:

Conjugations of the verb “to be”
asleep since Adam’s fall
wake from bad phosphor dreams
heavy with mineral desire.

If the reader failed to pause after each line break, the phrasing would seem awkward and prosy. In pausing, each line frames its own music. Moreover, this pausing at line breaks emphasizes the simultaneous autonomy and dependency each line’s image has in relation to the images in other lines. It would seem, then, that line breaks promote pausing. But this is not always the case. The following lines from Linda Pastan’s poem, “To a Daughter Leaving Home,” demonstrate how line breaks can often promote a more fluid, non-stop delivery through the opposite effect—acceleration:

I kept waiting
for the thud
of your crash as I
sprinted to catch up . . .

Here each line break forces a quick return to the left-hand margin of the poem in the following line. If the reader paused significantly between each line, the rapid-fire effect of the action would be lost. However, a slight pause between the end of one line and the beginning of the other in a poem like this cannot be avoided and is, in fact, expected. Poet Denise Levertov says a reader might pause at an enjambed line for about “a half comma in duration”—which, though slight, can be detected by the naked ear (*New and Selected Essays* 81). With regards to Pastan’s poem above, such slight pausing creates an intriguing tension since the reader’s ear demands pause while the reader’s eye wants to rush from one line to the other in order to keep a steady pace with the content of the poem.

When deciding to accelerate or pause at a line break, the poem’s tone and content must be taken into account, especially if one is dealing with verse written in free form devoid of any regular rhythmic patterns. (In this light, reexamine the lines from David St. John’s poem “Iris” at the end

of section two.) Test your skills at pausing and acceleration using lines from yet one more Stanley Kunitz poem, this one called “A Journal for My Daughter”:

Outside your room
Stands the white-headed prowler
In his multiple disguises
Who reminds you of your likeness.

VI. Putting Your Knowledge to the Test

Knowing what you now know about line breaks and line endings, take a look at Sheryl St. Germain’s “Rent,” printed in full below. Look carefully at every line break in the poem and postulate why the line ends where it does. Once you can do this, free-form verse will seem like poetry that follows distinct formal patterns. However, these patterns are determined not by regular line lengths and end rhymes of formal verse, but instead utilize the intentionally broken lines. Note, too, that this poem is not only organized by well-intentioned line breaks but through groupings of lines divided by space. These groupings of lines are called stanzas (Italian for “room”) and are also important aspects of free-form poems³.

Rent

The hardball came hard and fast,
not unexpected, but surprisingly
cruel to the one who ran,
face uplifted and radiant with joy,
his first baseball game,
arms outstretched as if in love,
just to the place where
his nose would meet the ball
straight on—

I heard the scream, saw him turn
around, the blood spurting out
of both nostrils as if in every vein
and capillary in the nose were cut,
the blood pouring down the nose
into his mouth, the mouth filling
with blood and grief, overflowing
to the chin, running down
underneath the Cub Scout shirt,
the dark red splotches turning
the gold neckerchief red
with blood’s beauty.

I saw him put his hands to his nose,
cup it, pull one hand away
full of blood, *father take this cup
from me*, and I couldn't move
for a moment, though knowledge
continued to pour and run down his face,
though he looked screaming
at his palm, as if it were
the palm's fault, the blood darker
there and drying a little, now
filling in the fingerprints and life
line.

It is my own hand, after the car accident,
I am in the back seat,
I have put my hand on my father's head
to shake him awake, I have pulled
my hand away, he has not woken.
I am looking at my palm, sticky
with the blood and hair of my father,
all of his mortality foretold
for me there in the blooded palm.

When one breaks a nose,
for that is what my son has done,
the evidence is in the X-ray,
the crack like a lost hair
there in the bone, the invisible
made visible. If only we could
X-ray our souls that way, find
the cracks, the cancers,
the evidence of love—
there in my father's head,
that crooked line, that's love,
here, this other one, that's regret.

After you know the thing
is broken, there is nothing
to be done, you can only watch
the nose swell and bloom, flatten
and poke out where it shouldn't,
bruise, open and blossom
like a flower that doesn't
want to die, its petals open beyond belief
for days after cutting, as if the very act
of cutting has brought on its most intense beauty.

My son looks at himself in the mirror,
fingers the bruised and broken
thing as if it were a hurt animal.

I think of my father's cracked head,
the palm of blood, the beginning
of knowledge.

Another poem to consider would be Scott Cairns's "Mud Trail," also printed in full below:

I'd been walking the mud trail, the mud
leaping out the sides of my boots for hours.
I was thinking I was alone, surrounded
Only by the high reach of douglas fir
and cedar. I think it was a change
in the air I noticed first, a warmer
heavier scent of animal, I was
alone in the small clearing,
then I was not alone and was
surrounded by the elk rising a hundred
times. And the forest was a moving river
of elk, none of them hurrying away, but all
slowly feeling ahead, and beginning
their journey to the east, a hundred times
the same journey.

Miles from there,
they would rest, bed down among
huckleberry and salal, all of them
pulling in their hundred sets of hooves, lowering
a hundred velvetted heads, waiting
for whatever sign or word that calls them
all together to rise again.

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End Notes

¹All of the examples in section one discuss lines in terms of tangible objects in the physical world. But lines also relate to auditory impressions, particularly those in music or organized sound. For instance, a singer's vocal range will determine the kind of lines of musical notation he or she can sing. Vocalist Mary J. Blige has a deep voice with a restricted range, which means the notes she sings will appear close together on a musical staff without moving dramatically up or down. Mariah Carey is another matter entirely. She can sing four or five octaves—and usually does. As a result, any given song she performs will be represented in music notation by dramatic rising and falling. Neither vocalist's style is better or worse because of the type of lines she sings. The real question is whether or not the line each uses is appropriate for what she wishes to communicate through her music.

²It is worth noting that the reiterative "I have" may also reflect an idiomatic speech pattern of someone unaccustomed to Standard English. (A student told me once that she remembers farmers in Scotland and Northern England talking in this way.)

³If stanza means "room" in Italian, perhaps then, the poem might be likened to a house. If the poem has three stanzas, then the house has three rooms. Each space between a stanza might be a hallway for the reader to walk through in order to reach the next room. Those poems with no stanza breaks might be considered similar to a large loft space with no walls or separation.