

WHAT IS A POEM, ANYHOW?

Well, I still don't quite know! *BUT* . . . here are some things I believe to be true:

A poem's two essential—and equal—ingredients are language and imagination. How a poet *sees* something is as important as how the poet *says* it.

A poem makes music. Remember that poetry was first of all an oral form, speaking to the ear as well as the mind. Formal or not, the music of its language is an important factor in shaping the reader's imaginative response.

A poem should surprise. So make it *fresh* music. Fresh imagery, fresh words jostle the imagination awake. Faced with the predictable and clichéd, the imagination becomes bored and loafes on the job. So make the reader sit up and work!

In a poem, *everything* counts. The most compressed art, poetry has to accomplish the most in the smallest space. So *everything* must be a considered choice: line breaks, capitalization, punctuation, how the poem is shaped on the page—each contributes to the poem's effect, intentionally or not. The mark of a craftsman is respect for detail.

Your poem doesn't have to follow somebody else's rules. *But* it has to have its own rules. They can be whatever you want them to be, as long as they *serve your poem's objectives* and you are true to them—and know what they are and are prepared to defend them.

A poem is *not* journalism. *It is difficult to get the news from poems,* William Carlos Williams said. *Yet every day men die miserably for lack of what is found there.* Poetry doesn't have any obligation to the facts, but it must deal with truth -- which may be in the spaces between the lines, the things just hinted at, just out of sight.

A poem may teach the poet. If you let your imagination lead you -- don't censor or edit according to your (or anybody's) expectations, but let your subconscious have its way -- you'll know more about what's on your mind when you finish than you did when you started.

Finally, and chiefly: Poetry is one of the most subjective experiences in the world. It is an intimate transaction between, first, writer-and-self, then writer-and-reader. It embraces ambiguities. So who's got the last word? Nobody.

Florence Nash, who was an editor and writer for Duke University Medical Center, has published two volumes of Poetry. She lives in Durham, NC, and leads the poetry workshop for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Duke.