

MTB: Beginnings

Hi Folks, it's **Peter from Australia** with my first Meet the Bar for the year.

Tho it's late in January, I'm still having trouble getting this year started. Languorous days, steamy nights, mosquitoes whining sweet nothings...the drone of cricket on the radio and cicadas beating in the eucalypts: it's summer in Australia (sunny cheers to all you chilly Northern Hemisphere folk).

So tonight, I thought we'd start on beginnings – particularly that all-important first line (for those of you that prefer this Meet the Bar is available as a PDF).

Ask Siri or Alexa for poetry's best first lines and in a fraction of a second (without ever asking what 'best' is) they'll suggest gems such as:

- **'Let us go then, you and I,' from T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock***
- **'I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,' from Allen Ginsberg's *Howl***
- **'Because I could not stop for Death,' from Emily Dickinson's verse 479**
- **'He came home. Said nothing.' from Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska's *Going Home***

Putting aside the rest of the poem, what is it in these lines that makes them 'great'? They're intriguing, they set up the action, they introduce setting or characters and importantly they jump right in, there's no preamble or throat-clearing here: 'He came home' is about as direct as you can get.

The lines also tell us what to expect, what kind of poem follows: Eliot invites us on a journey; Ginsberg's powerful image tells us the poem that follows is about waste, loss and death; Szymborska intrigues: who is this character who has returned home? from where? and what have they seen that compels such silence? Finally, uber-master of compression, Dickinson tells us in seven words, about a busy life cut short, dying and to expect a dialogue between indefatigable Death and the (now deceased) poet, gothic irony coming up.

So here's a few reasons why first lines are important.

1. **A great first line gives the reader a reason to continue reading.** Use a vivid image, a striking phrase, or some unusual language and it's more likely the reader will read further.

There is of course a question of who cares? "**I'm a poet dang it and I serve my muse. If you can't be bothered to read all the way through, then you're not for me.**" Fair enough too, here at the bar we celebrate the individual poetic vision. For some though, poetry is also a form of communication and hooking the reader into travel further into your poem is a good thing.

2. **Tradition.** Starting a poem somewhere is a tradition in the English-speaking canon. We normally start reading from top left on a page and progress rightward and down.

One of the interesting things that concrete poetry does it to remind us that traditions can be (and sometimes need to be) broken. Sometimes the shapes words make on a page is more important than the words themselves. There are also poems with only one line and even one-word poems. A wonderful avant garde experiment in 20th Century minimalist poetry in both Paris and New York culminated in Aram Soroyan's 1965 one word poem 'lighght' (which becomes more marvellous the more you read it).

The image shows a white rectangular card with the word 'lighght' written in a yellow, lowercase, sans-serif font. The letters are slightly irregular and have varying thicknesses, giving it a hand-drawn appearance. The card is centered on a plain white background.

lighght

Aram Soroyan's one word poem 'lighght'

With the internet came the exciting world-wide world of hypertext where links in the poem introduced other texts, images or dead-ends. There are also collaborative efforts where no individual is identified as the poet – traditional forms such as the *renga* in Japan where two or more poets supply alternating lines in the poem. All just fascinating but the point for tonight is to remember is the first line is part of a tradition in English-language poetry, and sometimes it's good to shake up traditions.

3(a). It's part of the method. There are forms of poetry such as collage or dada-ist poems, found poetry and even fridge-magnet poetry where texts are cut up and randomised. Sometimes a great first line emerges from the maelstrom of possible words. (Charlie back in 2013 hosted a session on cut-up poetry here at Dverse).

3(b). It's part of the method. There's also a genre of poetry I call 'Poems-starting-with-a-line-by...' poetry (or PSWALB). There are way too many to cover here (Alexa or Siri can help if you're interested) but my current favourite PSWALB is American poet Lisa Jarnot's "Poem Beginning with a Line by Frank Lima". Frank Lima (1938-2013) was an American poet associated with the New York school. Jarnot takes the line 'and how terrific' from an unidentified poem of his and spring-boards into a surreal tribute full of energy and weirdo imagery.

**And how terrific it is to write a radio poem
and how terrific it is to stand on the roof and
watch the stars go by and how terrific it is to be
misled inside a hallway...**

PSWALBs can be critical, ironic, show-offy or homages to the original work.

4. It's about winning prizes. If you're like me, you've got a collection of rejection emails with polite thanks for entering a poetry competition, noting the many hundreds of worthy entries received and what a difficult job the judges had etc. A great first line (and a great title) is a way to get your worthy poem noticed among that tower of other worthy poems. British poet Wayne Holloway-Smith won the 2018 UK National Poetry Competition with this knock-out poem...

The posh mums are boxing in the square

**roughing each other up in a nice way
This is not the world into which I was born
so I'm changing it
I'm sinking deep into the past and dressing my
own mum
in their blue spandexes...**

5. The first line is inevitable. In his book *On Poetry*, British-American poet Glyn Maxwell talks about a poem's conception, the poem arising

"from the urge of a human creature, once, upon a time – to break silence, fill emptiness, colour nothing with something, anything."

Maxwell describes the opening line as the moment at which the pressure of that silence breaks into an utterance that *must* be heard.

Maybe this is your creative process. Perhaps a poem will leap from that pressurised silence onto the page, like Robert Frost's Thought Fox; perhaps it progresses from an image and works its way onto the page; or maybe it'll hang about like an over-staying house guest or a ripe cheese (or that Christmas ham that you're still eating) – until the only answer is to write something.

Whew! There's so much more to say on beginnings but I've just got to sit down and start something.

So come on poets, join me at the beginning. Let's find that best first line:

- **see if you can hook yourself a new reader with upfront vivid images and unusual word use**
- **maybe stick with tradition (starting top left) or forge out in a new direction, maybe even a one line, or even a one-word poem (though please read the article that I've linked to Saroyan's poem)**

- **perhaps try your hand at some found poetry, make something shapely or striking or something off the fridge**
- **or perhaps a poem beginning with a line by a poet who's provoked or enthralled or charmed or annoyed you (don't forget to link to the original poem in your post).**

Yes, your poem is already there waiting for the inevitable wonderful first line.

Whatever you choose, tonight we're focusing on that knock-out first line (Sorry, I can't get the image of the boxing mums out of my mind). You know what to do...

- **Write your poem.**
- **Post it on your blog.**
- **Link it up to our Mr. Linky. (Don't forget to check the little box to accept use/privacy policy)**
- **Importantly, visit other blogs, enjoy some amazing first lines**
- **and above all have fun.**