

to feel the words in their throats, quite often write this way without thinking much about it. We can't know whether Burton Watson labored to write these lines in just this way or whether they came to him without effort. If as a young person you learned to read without sounding out the words in your head, to take the symbol of the word directly into your mind as a meaning, you are at a slight disadvantage as a poet, but you can counter that by reading your drafts aloud to yourself, which will immediately make you aware of the sounds and rhythms you've put into your work.

As a poet you need to be aware that rhythm in language can effectively suggest the rhythm of an action described, but it would be discouraging, if not paralyzing, if you slowed yourself almost to a standstill just to work on an effect. You can easily lose the driving impulse behind your poem by stopping to get analytical. It is usually far better to push on to the end, riding the wave of your inspiration. Then later, during revision, you can go over what you've written and see what can be achieved by making adjustments here and there.

There are a number of ways of creating rhythms with words on paper. The manuals I mentioned earlier are useful in understanding these variations.

Let's look at this poem:

⇒ THE MEN WHO RAISED THE DEAD

If they had hair it was gray,  
the backs of their hands wormy  
currents of blue veins, old men  
the undertaker believed  
had already lost too much  
to the earth to be bothered  
by what they found, didn't find,  
brought there that May afternoon  
dogwood trees bloomed like white wreaths  
across Jocassee's valley.

They took their time, sought the shade  
when they tired, let cigarettes  
and silence fill the minutes

until the undertaker  
nodded at his watch, and they  
worked again, the only sound  
the rasp and shuck of shovels  
as they settled deeper in graves  
twice-dug, sounding for the thud  
of struck wood not always found—  
sometimes something other, silk  
scarf or tie, buckle, button,  
nestled in some darker earth,  
enough to give a name to.

One quit before they were done,  
lay down as if death were now  
too close to resist, and so  
another stepped in his grave,  
finished up, but not before  
they shut his eyes, laid him with  
all the others to be saved  
if not from death, from water.

This poem by Ron Rash is written in syllabics. Syllabic measure is quite popular today because it has an easygoing, conversational feeling to it. Syllabic measure sets line length by counting the number of syllables. This differs from accentual measure, which counts only the number of accents per line, and from traditional meters like blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter), which tries for a consistent number of both accented and unaccented syllables, with occasional variances.

Reading Rash's poem, it's unlikely that you would have noticed its form had I not called your attention to it. The poem looks and sounds like "free verse," but it isn't "free" at all. Count the number of syllables in each line and you'll be surprised at how meticulously the poem is kept to seven syllables per line. I know Rash's poetry quite well, and this seems to be his favorite form. I have one of his books in which nearly every poem is like this, seven syllables per line, but his counting is handled so deftly that most readers would never notice it.

Syllabic form doesn't in any way require or demand that you count