

The American Sentence

Allen Ginsberg invented this short poetic form to give the poets in the U.S. a succinct form comparable to Japanese haiku. This form, like haiku, usually has 17 syllables, but its lines needn't be 5-7-5. There are few rules to this miniature form except that in its totality its 17 syllables make up one somewhat grammatical sentence.

Try several of these for today's poem. Perhaps they might be put together as stanzas of a longer poem. In this case, don't make the sentence stanzas form a logical or continuous storyline; juxtapose disparate and mildly incongruous sentences to create poetic interest. They could be surprising fragments of story or description. They exert what some might call poetic license, and yet no one could doubt that they are a poem.

This is in part a mindfulness exercise. It asks you to lean out and notice small meaningful or surprising images. Sometimes they can be found poems. You might overhear something or read a passing T-shirt. See if you can include a little music or rhythm in your sentences.

It's fine to use vernacular speech or break free of ordinary syntax as long as the meaning comes through. Still, it should be a sentence, if only an odd one. American Sentences are also practice in condensation.

In Paul Nelson's workshop handout on the American Sentence (www.paulEnelson.com) he says:

"Like most other good poetry it (the American sentence) should be **imagistic** some sort of gap of meaning between the writer and the reader; i.e. phenomenology. Some kind of juxtaposition helps to create a tension."

These examples are from Ginsberg (in *What Book!? Buddha poems From Beat to Hiphop*):

Four skinheads stand
in the streetlight rain
chatting under an umbrella.

A gray-haired man
in business suit and
black turtleneck
thinks he's still young.

Stood on the porch in
underwear shorts watching
auto lights in warm rain.

This one is by Lawrence Ferlinghetti:

Poetry is the shadow
cast by our streetlight
imagination.

Poet Paul Nelson has written at least one American sentence a day for over twenty years. Some are too bawdy for my taste. These more polite examples are his:

After I got her email, I pulled the extra pillow from my bed.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at Lowe's — Rotorwash of ceiling fans.

His T-shirt said: Vegetarian is Indian for bad hunter.

From Wes "Scoop" Nisker:

I sit in wonder
at the illusion of self

and the endless stars

Diane Lockward in her poetry newsletter March 19, 2024 gives another sort of American Sentence poem prompt:

“ First situate yourself in front of a window. Sit and observe what’s going on (even nothing can be made interesting). Keeping in mind what you have observed, write your first American Sentence. Let it be descriptive.”

Her assignment continues: “ Then let your first stanza tell you what should come next. Keep on going. When you become weary of description, move to imagination or, optimally, memory. End with an emotion, e.g. sorrow, longing, anger, jealousy.”

Next she says to look back and revise, considering stanza form, music, meter and such.

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Seventeen syllables
comprise an American Sentence
like this!

The sentence looks into the mirror
and sees there
an awkward haiku.

We needn’t feel left out
that we’re not Japanese
since we have this form.

Old Japanese haiku masters
on their death beds
still count syllables.

It's hard to count syllables
without letting your fingers dance
the count.

Old poets are expected
to leave a death poem
when they're passing.

Poems tend to be short anyway
when you are running out of breath.

I'm not passing yet,
just quitting for the day
as the night comes on.

These fingers are tired from
doing their dance on the table
and the keys.

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