The Equation of Form: Constraints = Freedom

¶ 4.1

$$F = \text{Length} + \text{Metre} + \text{Rhyme} + \text{Structure}$$

↑
Form



While form may seem restrictive, rigid conventions force fresh, liberating choices.

The Architecture of Stanzas

¶ 4.2

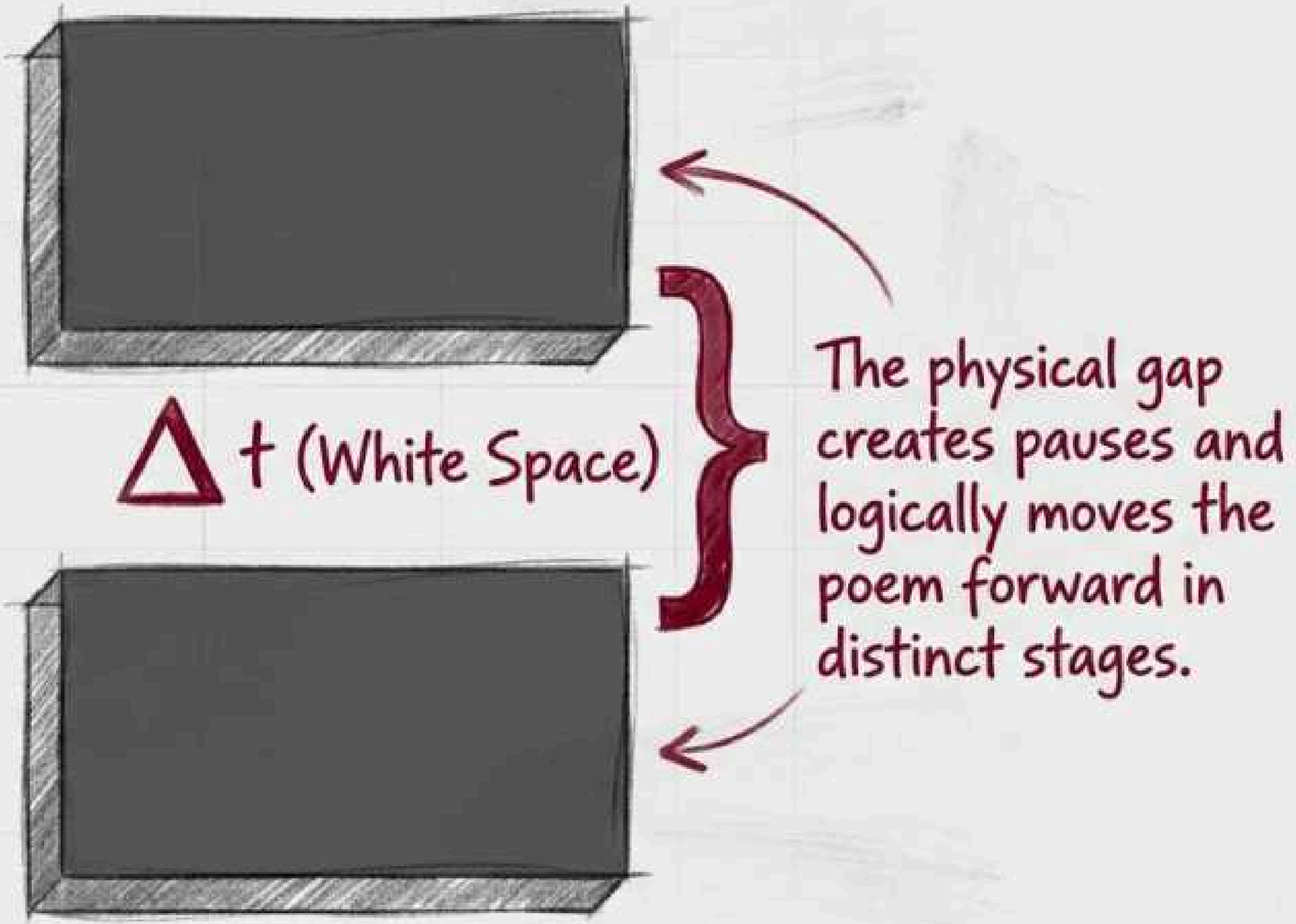
2 = Couplet

3 = Tercet

4 = Quatrain

6 = Sestet

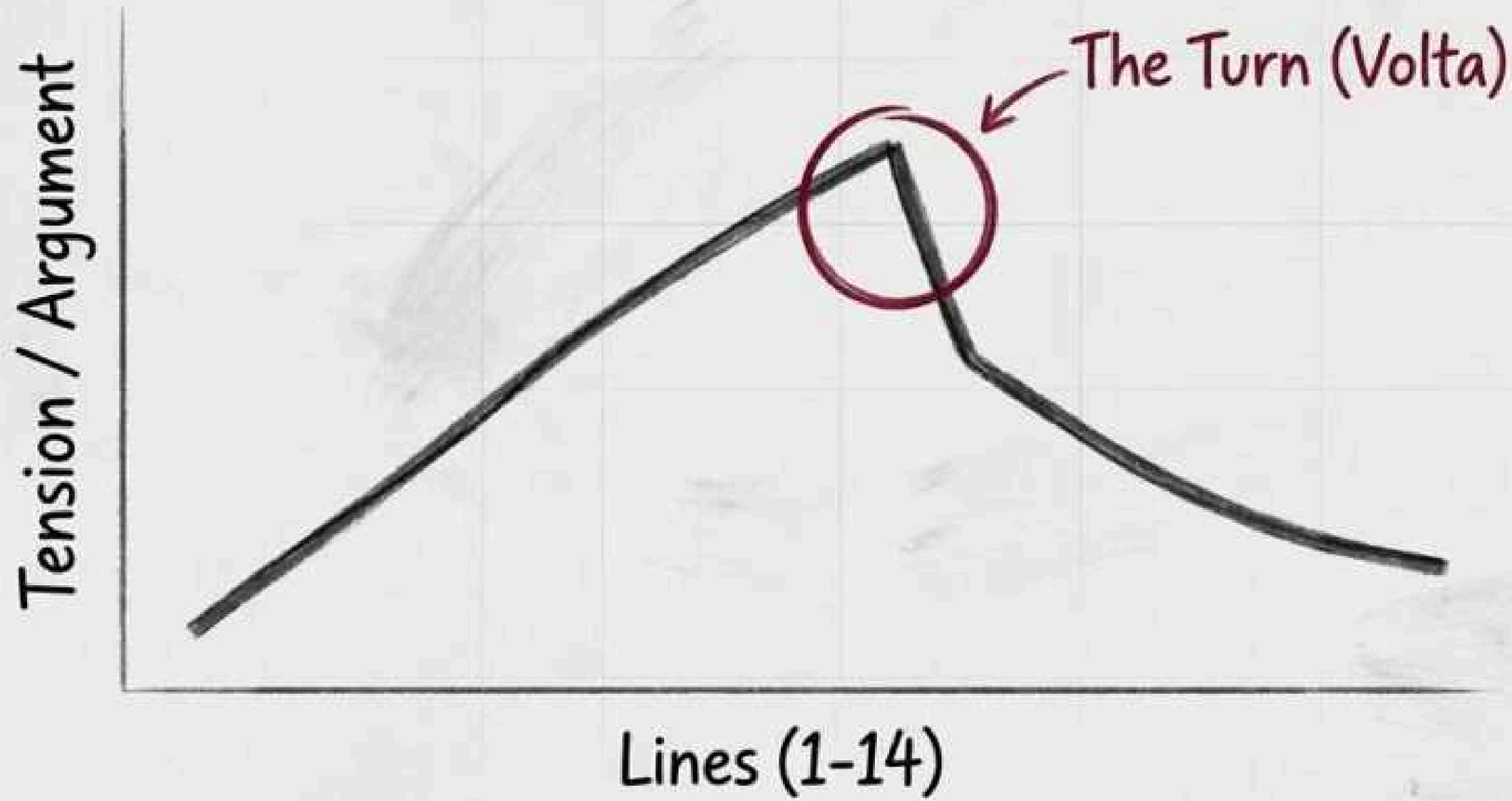
8 = Octave



The Italian (Petrarchan) Sonnet

¶ 4.3

Si = 8 (Problem: abbaabba) + 6 (Response: cdecde) = 14 Lines





Perfected in 14th-century Italy.
Iambic Pentameter.

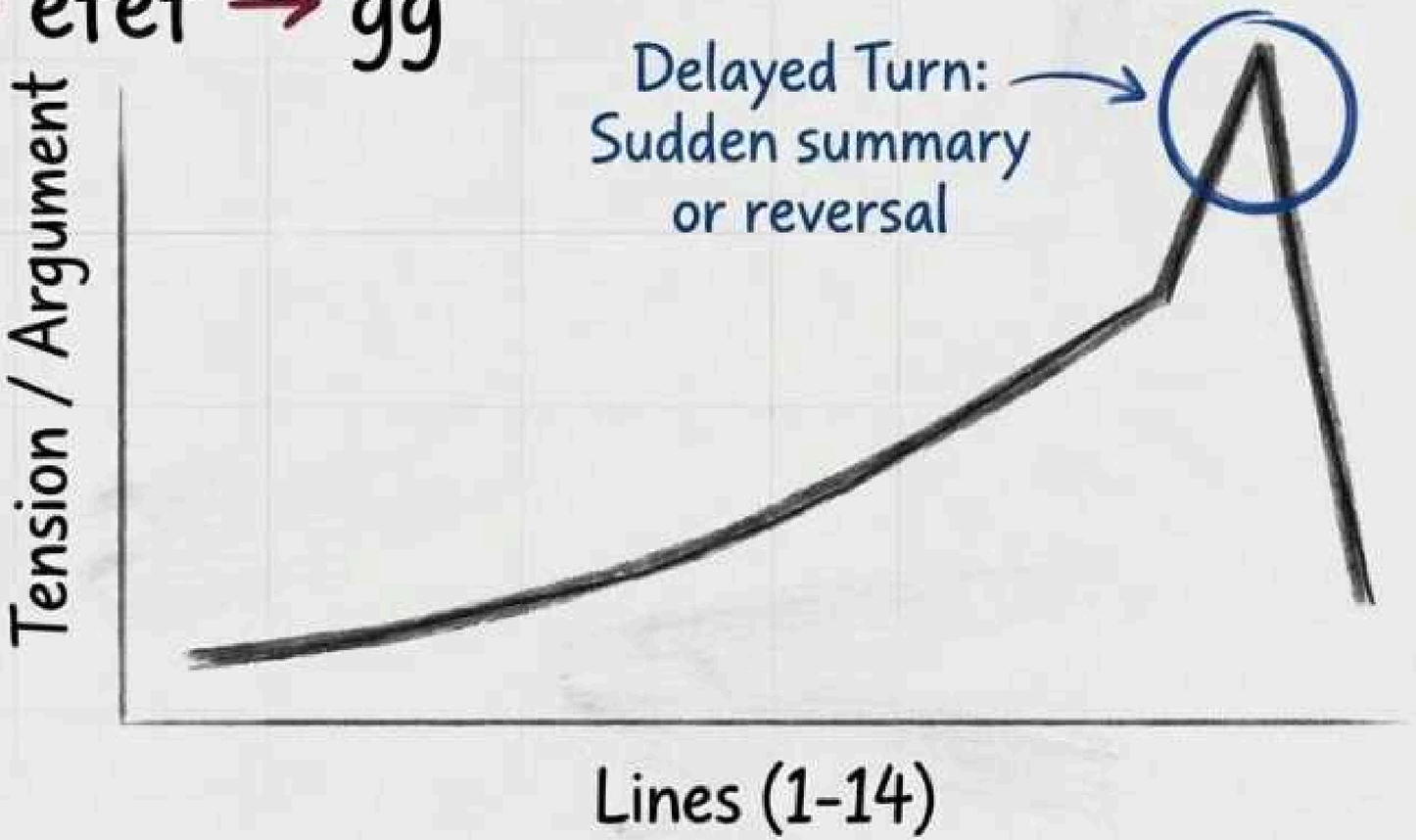
The English (Shakespearean) Sonnet

¶ 4.4

Se = [3 × 4 Quatrains] + [2 Final Couplet] = 14 Lines

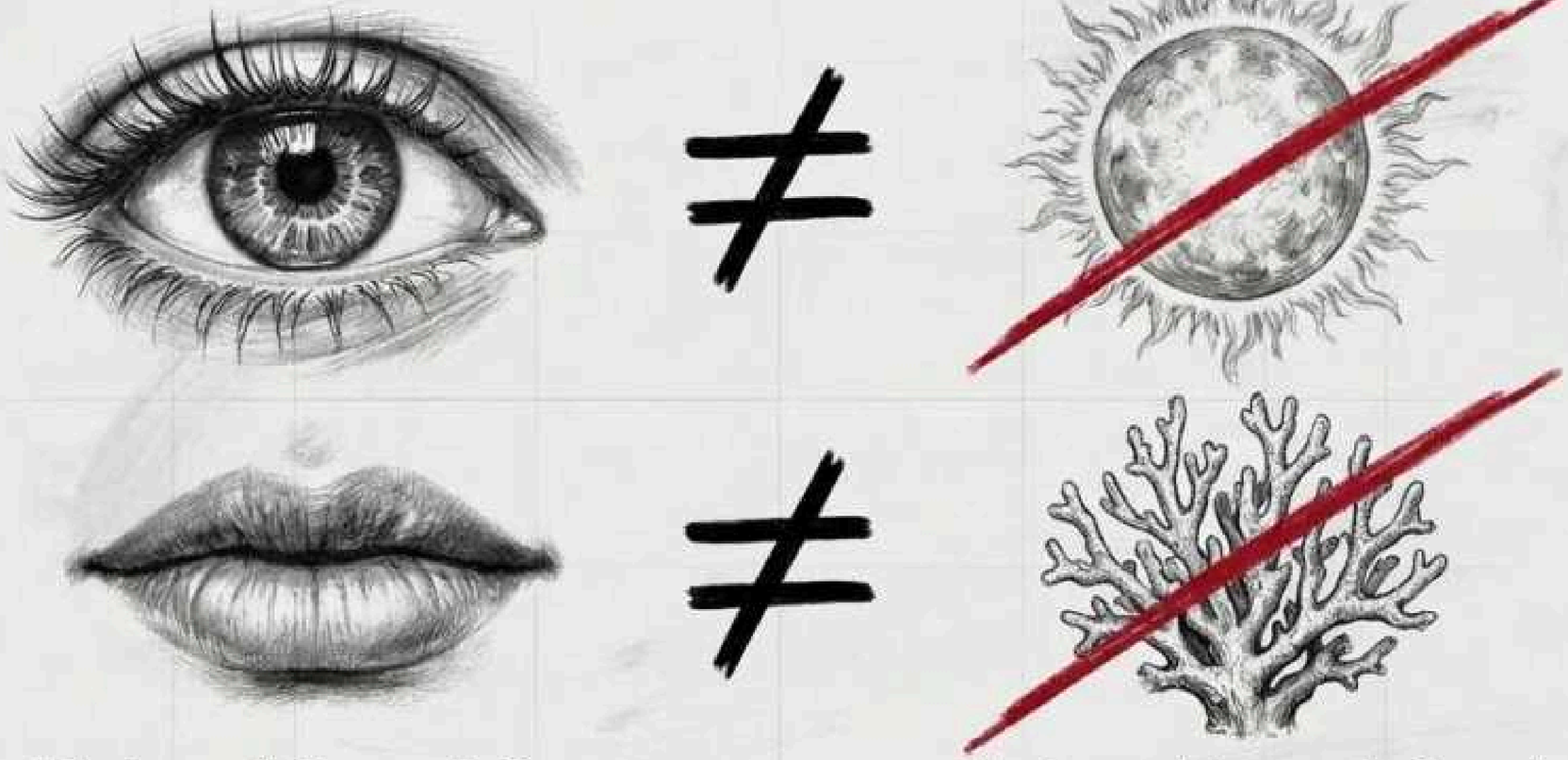
abab + cdcd + efef → gg

Brought to 16th-century England by Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard. Culminated in Shakespeare's 154 sonnets (1609).



Logical Reversal: Sonnet 130

¶ 4.5



Mistress' Eyes ≠ Sun

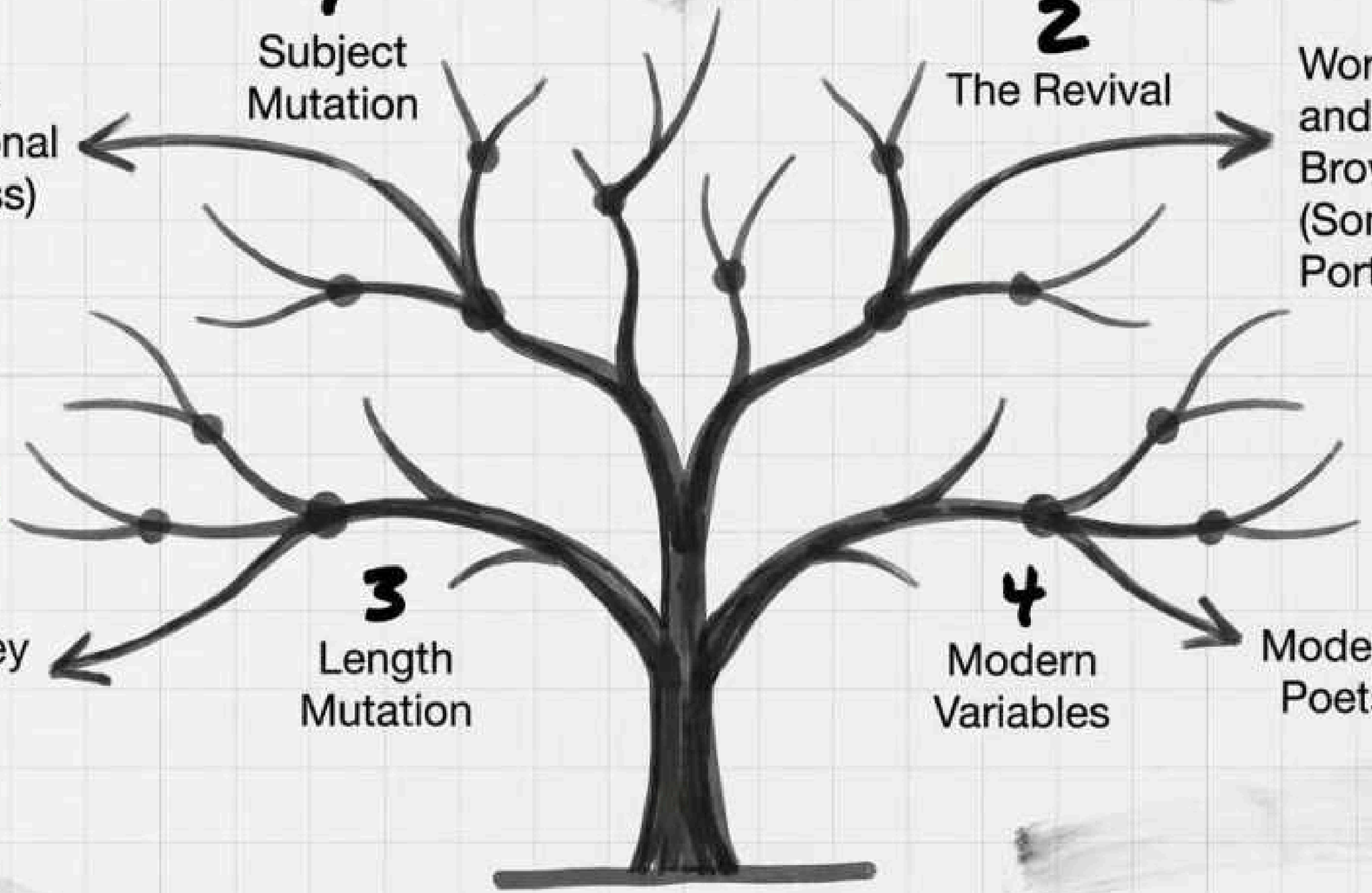
Mistress' Lips ≠ Coral

The structural form perfectly sets up this logical reversal.

True Love > False Comparisons

Bending the Formula

¶ 4.6

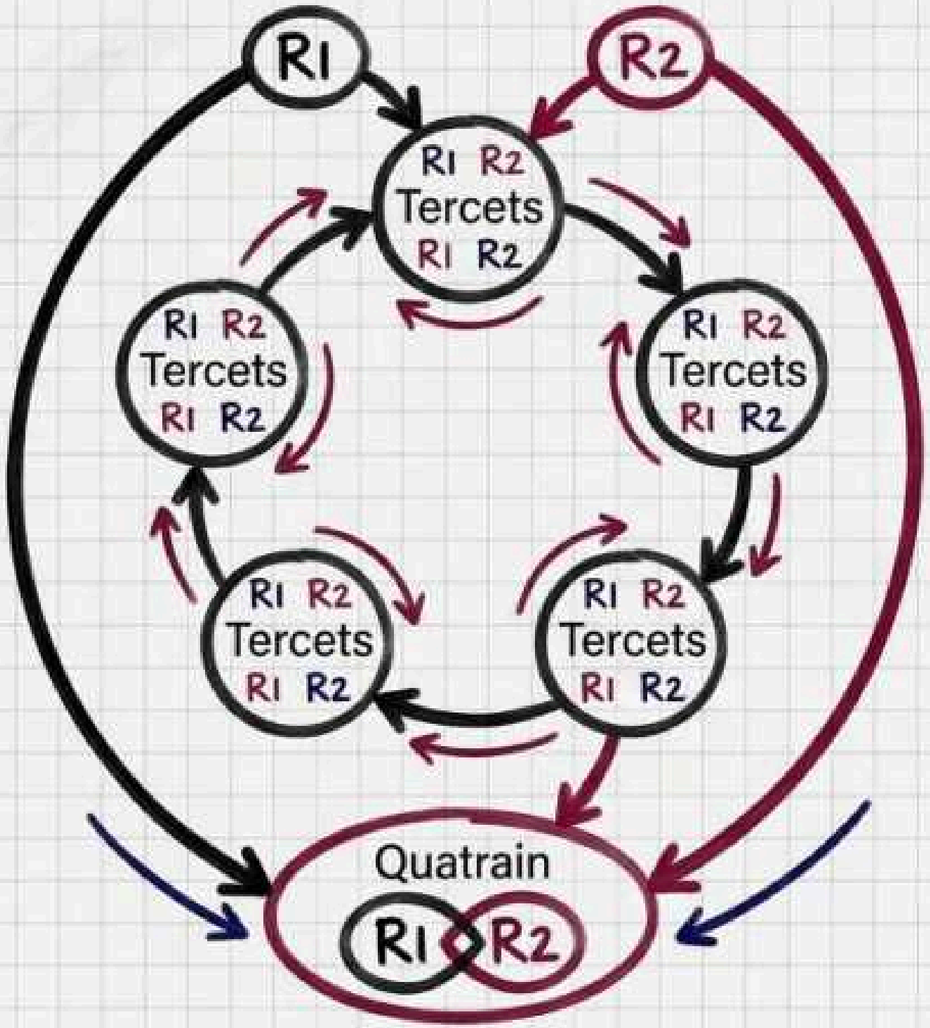


¶ 4.7

The Villanelle: The Algorithm of Obsession

V = 5 × 3 (Tercets) + 4 (Quatrain) = 19 Lines

(French Origin)



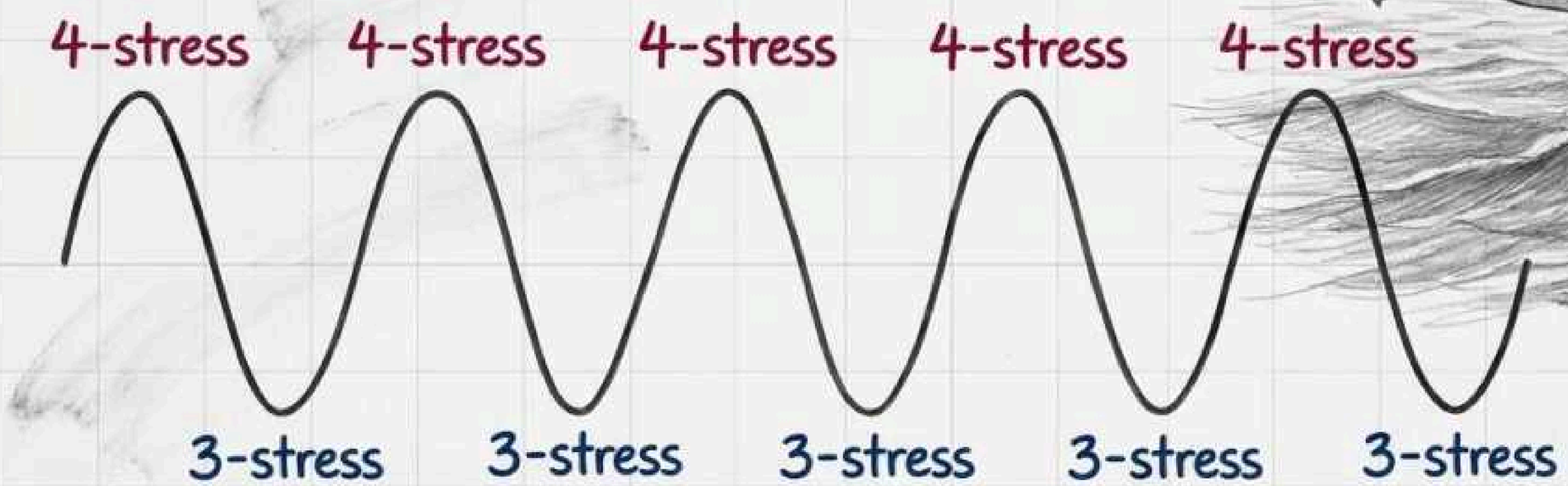


Dylan Thomas: *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night* (1951) — urging his dying father to fight death. The repetition perfectly suits grief and obsession.

The Ballad: Alternating Frequencies

¶ 4.8





a · b · c · b · b

Origins: Anonymous, oral traditions telling stories of love, death, and the supernatural. Example: Sir Patrick Spens.

Literary Masterpiece: S.T. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798).

Common Metre &
The Dickinson Variables

8 + 6 + 8 + 6 syllables per quatrain



Emily Dickinson used this strict, familiar hymnal form for nearly all her poems, injecting disruptive variables and startling ideas that made her unconventional thoughts all the more surprising.

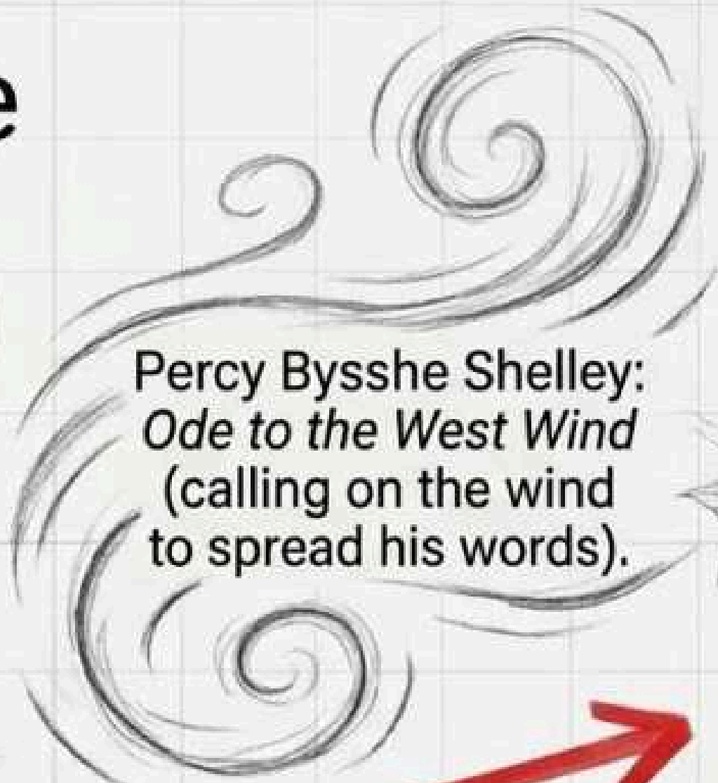
The Ode: Targeting the Sublime

¶ 4.10

Focus =



John Keats:
Ode on a Grecian Urn



Percy Bysshe Shelley:
Ode to the West Wind
(calling on the wind to spread his words).



John Keats:
Ode to a Nightingale

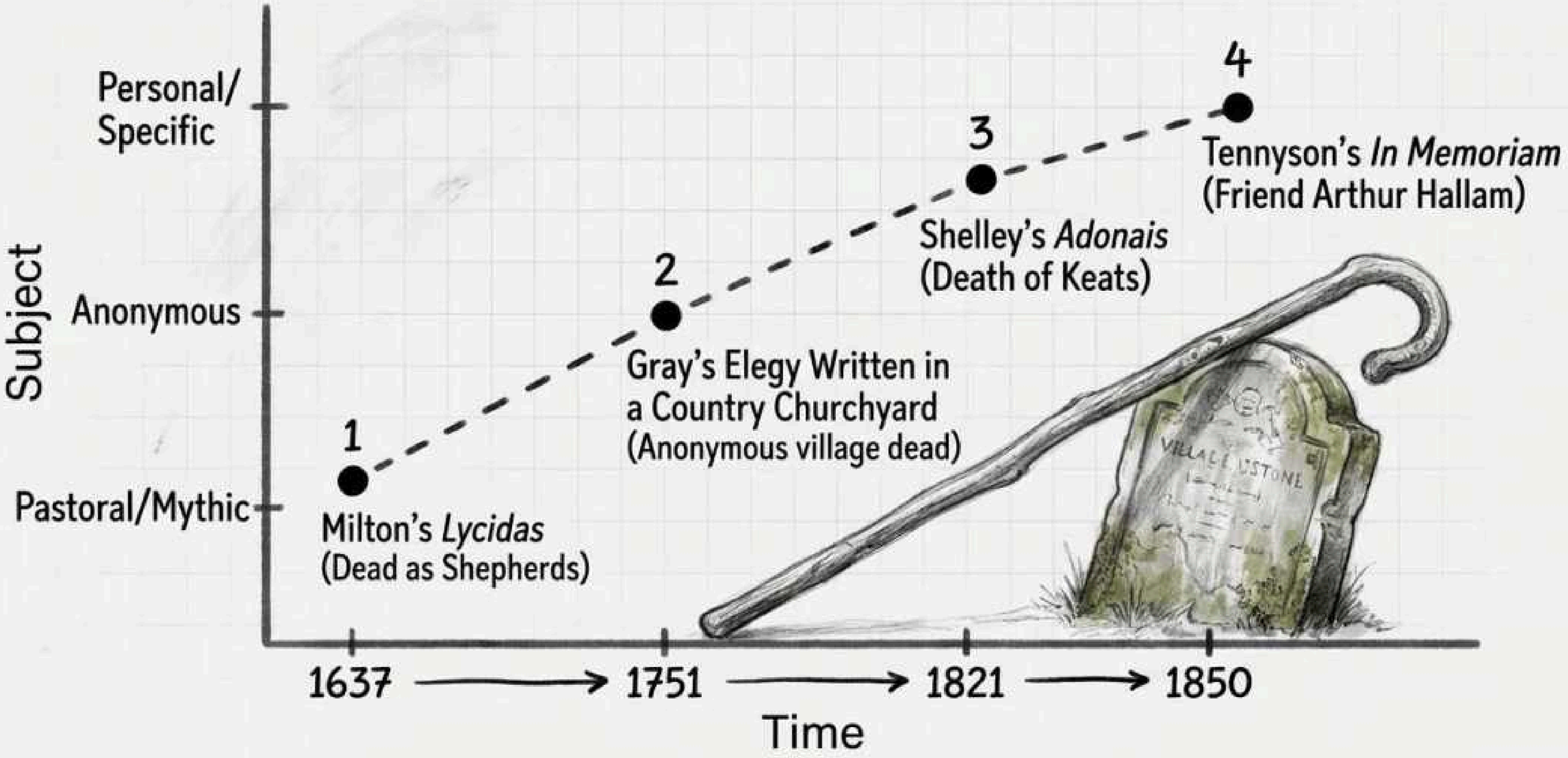
A long, serious lyric meditating on beauty, art, and mortality, intensely addressed to a specific person, thing, or idea.

Greek Origins: Pindar

English Romantics: 1819

The Elegy: A Matrix of Mourning

¶ 4.11

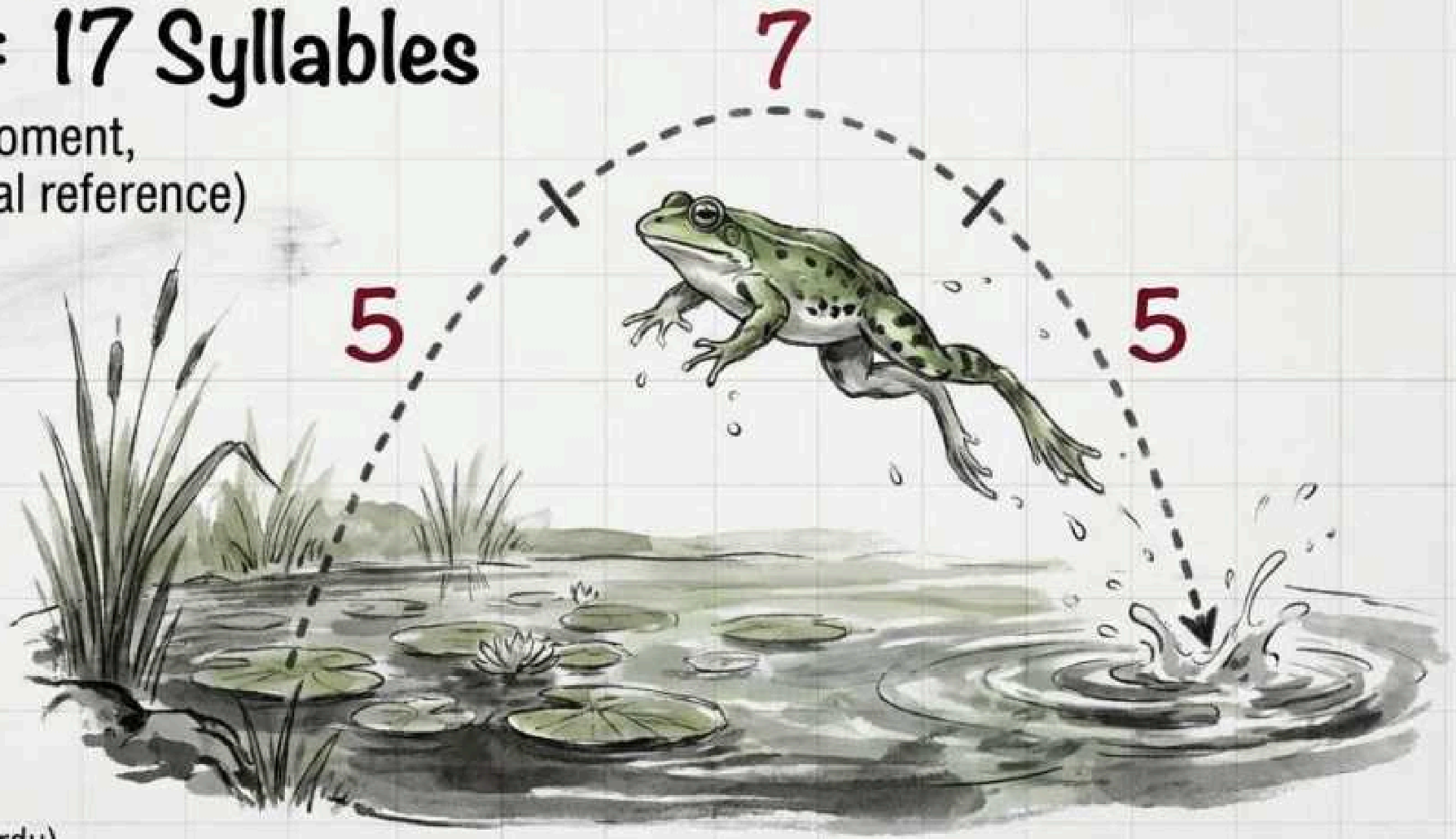


Borrowed Forms: The Haiku Arithmetic

¶ 4.12

5 + 7 + 5 = 17 Syllables

(Capturing a single moment,
usually with a seasonal reference)



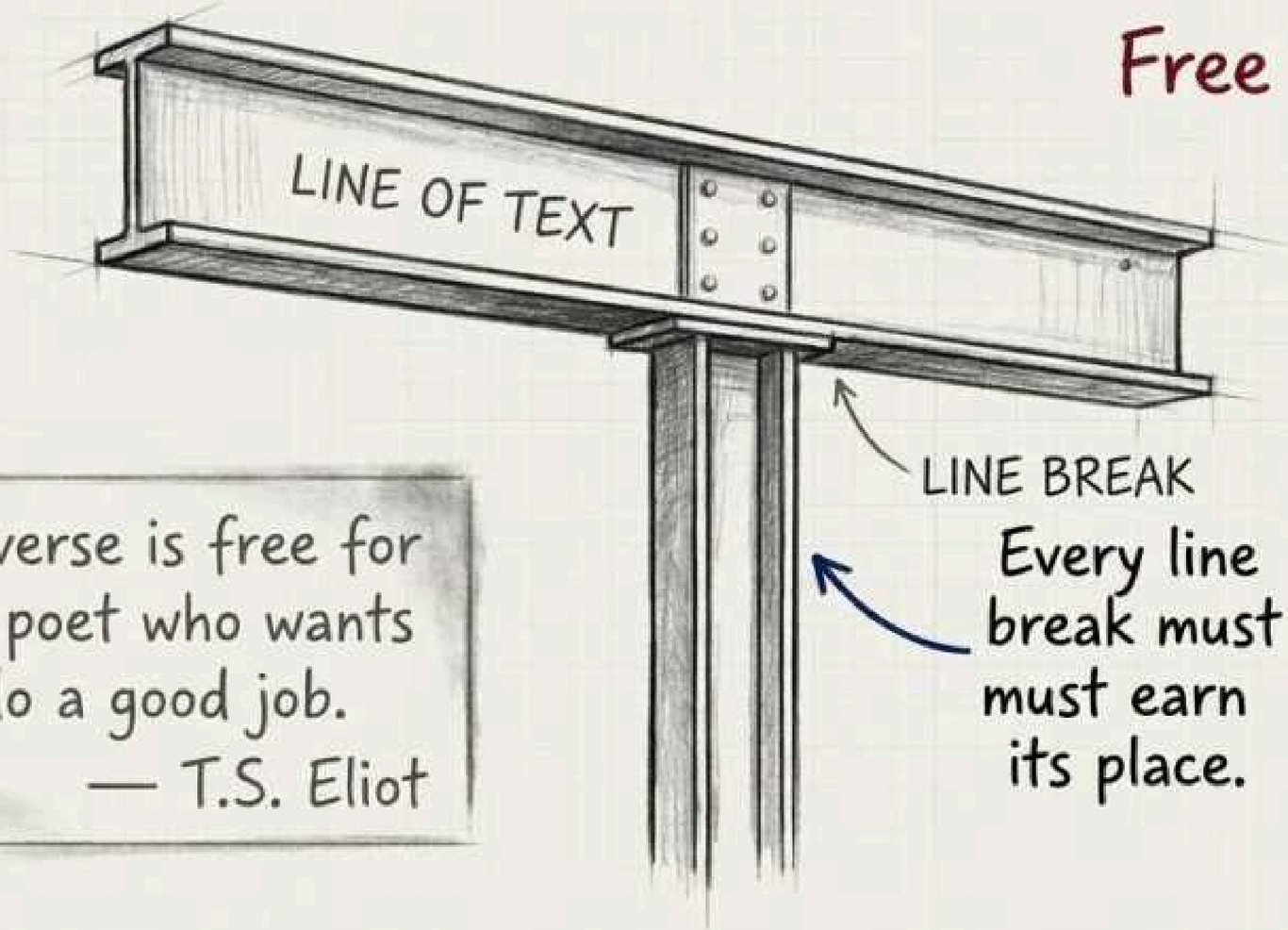
Other borrowed forms enrich English: the ghazal (Persian/Urdu) and the pantoum (Malay).

Matsuo Basho (17th Century)

Free Verse: Architectural Discipline

¶ 4.13

Free Verse ≠ Randomness



> No verse is free for the poet who wants to do a good job.
>
> — T.S. Eliot

Architects of the Form:

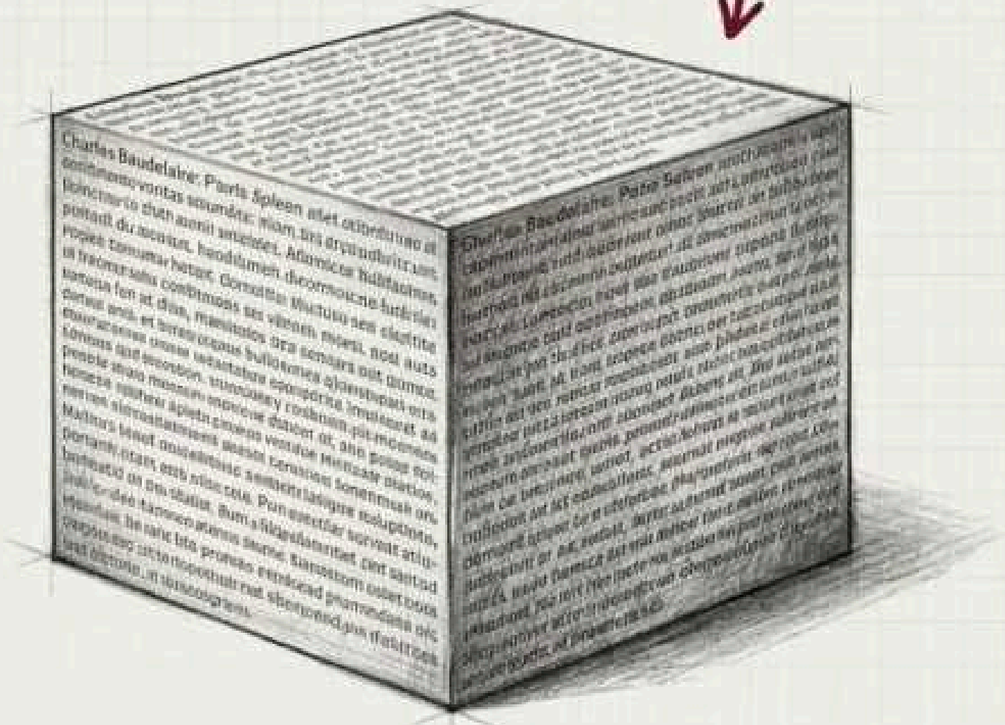
- T.S. Eliot
- William Carlos Williams
- Langston Hughes
- Sylvia Plath

Abandons regular **metre** and **rhyme**, but maintains <u>strict</u> discipline.

The Extremes of Physical Space

¶ 4.14

Lines = 0



Charles Baudelaire: *Paris Spleen* (1869).
Drops the line but keeps poetry's compression, imagery, and music.

Form = Subject



George Herbert: *Easter Wings* (17th Century).
Arranges words on the page into visual shapes.

Exercise: Solve the Sonnet

¶ 4.15

[8 Lines: Input a Problem/Subject that Troubles You]

↓ (Volta / Δ)

[6 Lines: The Forced Response / Solution]

Or: [3×4 Quatrains] → [Turning Couplet]



Notice how the form pushes you toward an answer.
Do not worry about perfect metre for now.

Summary: The Grand Equation

¶ 4.16

$$\text{Poetry} = \{\text{Fixed (Sonnets, Villanelle, Ballad, Common, Ode, Elegy)}\} \cup \{\text{Borrowed (Haiku)}\} \cup \{\text{Limitless (Free, Prose, Concrete)}\}$$

Form Shapes Meaning.

→ These constraints stretch the art.

Next: Surveying the History of Poetry in English. →