

**A Thesis in Verse:  
Poetry Reflecting the Journey to the Attainment of a Black Belt**

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## A Thesis in Verse

By Bob Giusto

Ask one hundred people to define poetry, and you are bound to get one hundred different definitions. For some, poetry will forever be a mystery. For others, it may seem tedious, pretentious, boring, or some combination of each. Still others find poetry to be the consummate application of language, the very music of the written or spoken word. Robert Frost, the great American poet, once called poetry “a performance in words.” Another definition I have come across in my studies, author unknown, is “poetry is the best words in the best order.” As a lover of poetry and a student and practitioner of the martial art of Tae Kwon Do, I have come to realize that as different as a martial art and the art of poetry may seem at first, they are remarkably similar, so much so that one may even claim that the intricate patterns of movement practiced by a martial artist indeed constitute a poetry of motion. Likewise, the discipline and determination of any great poet, often practiced under truly Spartan conditions, may also mirror the rigor and fortitude of the martial artist. The more I study Tae Kwon Do, the more I see the connection between these two disciplines. Frost’s “performance in words” is much like the martial artist’s performance in action, and the “best words in the best order” which is poetry, can also be compared to the focused and economical application of motion by the martial artist. (The emphasis here must surely be placed on artist.)

Therefore, I have decided to combine my love of Tae Kwon Do with my love of poetry and have written a number of poems that reflect my experience to date with the Mountain Academy of Martial Arts. The poems I have created mirror the belt rankings through which each student must climb. As each successive belt, from white through black, is more difficult to attain, I have made each level of poetry more complex and involved. A brief explanation accompanies each selection of poetry, indicating why I believe it is a good match for the respective belt. While these poems may indicate that I am not Robert Frost, I am pleased with what they say and how they say it. I hope that the reader shall enjoy these works as much I have enjoyed writing them and training my mind and body in the fine art of Tae Kwon Do.

## WHITE BELT

A beginning student in Tae Kwon Do may at first feel intimidated by, or inferior to, the other students in class. The exercises are new, the language is foreign, and very basic motions may seem quite unlike anything that we have ever done before. Even learning something as simple as a straight punch may seem awkward. Poetry can also seem intimidating to the student of writing. We write memos, letters, and essays without too much of a problem, but it has been my experience in the classroom that the majority of students are highly intimidated by the nature of poetry. They seem to think that poetry is the domain of a Shakespeare or a Tennyson, not something in which a mere mortal should dabble. Like the beginning martial arts student, the beginning poet may need a boost to realize that writing poetry is not necessarily difficult, it's just a matter of saying something. You don't need to do the splits between a pair of chairs to be a martial artist, and you don't need to be able whip out sonnets in iambic pentameter to be a poet.

Still, some would-be poets need that boost, and one technique I have used with marked success in the classroom is the acrostic poem. The name sounds complicated, but the exercise really is simple. All the student needs to do to get started is, in a vertical line, spell out the subject about which they will write. It could be Christmas, a thought about school, a girlfriend or boyfriend, whatever. For each line of the poem then, all they need to do is write a line starting with the first letter on each line. Nothing has to rhyme, there is no requirement for length or meter, but if they are feeling especially poetic some end-rhyme doesn't hurt. The subject I chose, for obvious reasons, is Tae Kwon Do. Therefore, I wrote the term vertically, and wrote a line of poetry for each letter. Hot shot that I am, I threw in rhyming couplets for each pair of lines.

T emptying as it may seem  
A ggression makes some folks scream  
E veryone would like to know  
K icks to make a mean foe go  
W e practice every night and day  
O nly hoping to hear Master say  
N ice to see that practice counts  
D on't forget "kiya" when you pounce  
O f yourself, give every ounce

## YELLOW BELT

Once a student of Tae Kwon Do has advanced to the level of yellow belt, the material that needs to be mastered is somewhat more complex and involved, and yet not nearly as difficult as what is to come. Still, the student quickly learns that even the most simple of steps, like the front stance or the back stance, can prove to be extremely difficult to master. For this level of poetry, I have chosen the Japanese poetry known as haiku. For the beginning poet, this is another “user friendly” form of poetry that, like the basics of Tae Kwon Do, can be very simple and yet quite difficult. Haiku consists of three consecutive lines of poetry, but the writer must be careful to make sure that the first and third lines have exactly five syllables each, while the second line consists of seven syllables. Finding the right words to meet the exact syllable requirement can prove to be challenging, but poets often have fun wrestling with this form. As far as meaning, each haiku should focus on an idea. Traditional haiku poetry focused on the power of nature, but much has been written without that focus. Whatever the topic, the third line should read as a general truth stemming from the first two lines. Some examples follow:

We practice often  
And sweat so that legs get strong  
Belts don't come easy

The sneeze is the worst  
There's no avoiding the pain  
Broken ribs are bad

Speed, power, focus  
Technique is most important  
Master is watching

Block block kick kick punch  
Time after time we practice  
So simple, so hard

The splinters will fly  
If your technique is correct  
One-inch pine is soft

## GREEN BELT

As the student of Tae Kwon Do advances to the level of green belt, an interesting assimilation becomes apparent. Having practiced the basics countless times, the movements start to come as second nature. Muscle memory allows you to focus on more advanced techniques without worrying so much about the fundamentals of your motions. At once, what you are learning seems less difficult, while at the same time you are performing more complex exercises. Still, much needs to be remembered, and the only way to remember is to practice, practice, practice.

The following poem is a limerick. After grappling with the form and metrical requirements of this kind of poem, some people become quite adept at writing limericks and create them with relative ease. Still, the poem is a good compliment to the green belt because while some people can write them with ease, when you break down the structure you realize how strong you need to be in the fundamentals of poetry to write a proper limerick. The poem consists of five lines. The first, second, and fifth lines must rhyme. Also, these lines should each carry the same number of syllables (8 or 9 is typical). The third and fourth lines should rhyme with each other, and they should each carry six syllables. Additionally, the meter needs to be anapestic. This means that every group of three syllables must consist of an unaccented syllable, another unaccented syllable, and an accented syllable. Sounds complicated, right? Well it isn't really, and once you 'hear' the beat of anapestic meter, writing it becomes easy. Take, for example, the word "interrupt." It consists of three syllables: in-terr-upt. Say the word out loud. You place more stress on "upt" than on the previous syllables: it is accented. The first two syllables are unaccented, and therefore you have a word that can be considered an anapestic 'foot' of poetry. InterrUPT. See? Three syllables with the accent on the last: so simple.

For the limerick that follows, I have included two copies, one as straight text, and the other marked with the accents, syllables, etc., that go into making this a perfect limerick. Limericks are fun to write, fun to read, and nobody breaks your ribs. Except in Ireland. They take their limericks very seriously over there. In fact, the limerick originated in County Limerick, and poor practitioners of the art have been known to take their lumps in public houses from time to time. Perhaps poets in Ireland should learn Tae Kwon Do before reciting their work in front of live audiences. Green, by the way, is the traditional color of the Emerald Isle, so I had little choice but to pick the limerick as the poem for the green belt. Enjoy!

Now there once was a green belt so scared  
 To break bricks with her small hands so bare  
 But she learned the technique  
 And one day with a squeak  
 She broke brick after brick without care

Below, I have broken down the meter of the poem line by line. Each group of three syllables (each foot) consists of unaccented, unaccented and accented syllables in succession. The number of syllables in each line is exact as well. Also, the first, second and fifth lines rhyme, as do the third and fourth lines. Nothing to it!

Now there once was a green belt so scared

To break bricks with her small hands so bare

But she learned the technique

And one day with a squeak

She broke brick after brick without care

uu / → 3 syllables, an anapestic foot

## BLUE BELT

As the student of Tae Kwon Do prepares to test for blue belt, a new territory looms on the horizon. On the one hand, you know that there is still a long way to go before attaining a black belt, but at the same time you realize that you stuck with it long enough to have completed approximately half the journey. You are not a beginner anymore and have learned enough forms and technique to actually begin to feel some confidence. The honeymoon is over, so to speak, and now training takes on a more serious tone. I have tried to capture this tone in the following poem. The structure of the poem is simple: four quatrains, which is the term used for four-line stanzas. Each quatrain consists of a pair of couplets. A couplet is two consecutive lines that rhyme. I didn't worry about the number of syllables per line or the meter; my paramount concern was the tone. I believe the end product captures some of the spirit that a martial artist experiences upon attaining this rank.

For the belt of blue, competition gets tougher  
There's much to learn, and even the girls are rougher  
Breaking boards with hands, feet, and elbows too  
You'd better work on your game if you want to wear the blue

Knife hands slice like sleet across cold, grey skies  
Pine boards shatter to the tune of triumphant cries  
You're so much stronger now, more limber and more quick  
You feel the power and speed in every single kick

No easy pickings, your opponents all know the score  
If you can't take the heat, you'd better find the door  
Sweat and strain as you practice your technique  
Mastery of even the basics, you learn, is no easy feat

It's getting serious now, leave the easy meat behind  
It's getting serious, though you might be surprised by what you find  
But you'll surely know you've paid some dues  
When you finally wear that belt of blue

## RED BELT

If the student thought things were getting serious at the blue belt level, well they get a whole lot more serious in the course of earning your red belt and advancing through the two levels of stripes that will keep you at this station for about six months or so. You learn the last form you will need prior to testing for the black belt. Self defense gets much more involved as you need to invent twenty-five of your own techniques as well as learn wrist and clothing techniques. In short, things get much more complicated, and your training becomes as much mental as it is physical. Due to the heightened complexity in advancing through the stages of the red belt, I have chosen to write the most technically complex poem in this collection: a Shakespearean sonnet. Sounds complicated? Well, it is.

A Shakespearean sonnet consists of fourteen lines. These lines must be arranged in three quatrains and one couplet. That is, three stanzas each of four lines, and a pair of rhyming lines to conclude. This closing couplet should summarize the meaning of the quatrains. To make matters more complicated, each line of the poem must be exactly ten syllables in length, and each foot of each line must be iambic. An iambic foot is a pair of syllables, back to back, whereby the first syllable is unaccented and the second is accented. Shakespeare wrote predominantly in this form. It is called iambic pentameter, where each line is comprised of five iambic feet. Not complicated enough? The poem needs to have a rhyme scheme of: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. That is, the first and third line of each stanza must rhyme, as must the second and fourth lines. The couplet, by definition, must rhyme at the conclusion. As you can see, this style of poetry is quite complicated. I have broken down the meter of the first stanza to demonstrate that it is technically correct. I believe it is the perfect match for the red belt, which the student will wear for many months before testing for the black.



A Shakespearean sonnet, sample analysis of scansion:

Perhaps when learning something quite complex

Your best bet is to seek a teacher who

Knows best to teach you slowly in small steps

And thus by increments you learn to do

*iambic foot: u /*  
*each line consists of*  
*5 iambic feet ....*  
*iambic pentameter*

Perhaps when learning something quite complex

Your best bet is to seek a teacher who

Knows best to teach you slowly in small steps

And thus by increments you learn to do

Like Dante, though, at times the way is lost

The sky grows dark, the path winds on and on

While aches and pains remind you of the cost

Your greatest fear is when desire's gone

To press forever onward is supreme

Allowing nothing but your strongest will

To push you down the road though your legs scream

To climb without remorse the highest hill

And thus you'll know the value of the black

That earned in sweat and blood you'll not give back

*14 lines total*  
*Note pattern of end rhyme*

## BLACK BELT

Thus far I have incorporated in this thesis a variety of structured poems to reflect the respective levels through which the student of martial arts needs to progress. I have taken pains to state the metric requirements required of each type of poetry, the most structured of which I included in the red belt section. It has been said that in martial arts, the black belt symbolizes a blending of all the colors, that once a student attains the rank of black belt, all that has been learned blends itself with the very being of the student. In light of this symbolic meaning then, I have chosen to write a free verse poem, as I believe those poets who write in free verse need to blend all the skills and techniques of poetry in order to write an effective poem. A free verse poem has no requirements regarding the number of syllables in a line, the metric feet in the lines, the rhyme scheme, nothing. Nothing matters aside from the fact that the author needs to express, using the best words in the best order, that which he is feeling and thinking. No rules might seem simple, but in fact, I believe it is extremely difficult to write well when you have total freedom. Some people disregard free verse poetry by saying that anyone can throw a bunch of words on a piece of paper and call it poetry. True. Much of what is called free verse poetry can be considered bad poetry. But those who write in free verse face a very difficult challenge in bringing into their work the literary elements such as metaphor and simile, assonance and consonance, alliteration, etc. that truly bring the written word to life and therefore make the reader sit up and take notice.

To me, the martial artist who attains the rank of black belt is much the same. In learning and applying structure and technique, mastery should mean that you transcend the structure. The black belt who spars against an opponent should bring a degree of effortlessness to the sparring, whereas the lower ranking opponent still needs to think and focus on fundamentals. The black belt should simply be. Thus, the comparison to free verse poetry is, in my opinion, appropriate. The following poem captures some of what I have felt and thought as I have made my way toward this milestone called a black belt. The narrator refers to “you” several times, as if he is speaking to a particular person. I did this in an attempt to create the effect that I am talking to myself, telling myself about what significance this moment has, and what I have said to myself along the way. I have paid no attention to any kind of structure or pattern, and yet the words seem to have taken on a structure of their own. Rhyme has popped up in a number of places, and lines separated themselves into stanzas. It works for me; I think it is poetry. I hope you enjoy it and consider it worthy of this belt that blends all colors.

The road certainly has been intriguing  
Uphill and down, steep-pitched curves  
And slippery slides 'round rocky ravines

At times your resolve may have wavered  
Where you wondered whether the price were worth the paying  
But taking counsel not of your fears  
You continued along the arduous path, you pressed on

Broken bricks, splintered pine, a broken rib  
Sore knees and back, aching most of the time  
Not to mention the fetid pools of perspiration  
All as sign posts for the steps you have taken

And upon the capture of each colored flag marking this journey's route  
That old sense of accomplishment, that fuel to carry on  
Certainly seemed worthy of a mighty shout

Press onward warrior  
Though youth no longer is your friend  
Though time now seems a bitter bitch  
There's ample chi still waiting to be tapped  
No, you've not yet truly tasted of age's betrayal

So press on, press on

Savor the sweat that drips from your brow to sting your eyes  
Savor the fist that, before the kiya's call, shatters wood and batters weakness  
Savor the kick that scatters shards of uncertainty across the floor

And press on, press on

There are miles yet to be run  
Boards yet to break  
So much yet to learn  
A lifetime still at stake  
Indeed, savor the belt that blends all color  
And never let your hunger slake

This test of all you've learned  
Is not an ending by any means  
But merely a new beginning  
You'll find the journey not nearly over  
Rather, your race but only just begun  
So take a moment, lad  
Drink in all that this accomplishment means  
But don't spend too much time in reflection  
For soon you'll need to press on, to press on