

# Stephen Dunn

---

an excerpt from

## *Forms and Structures*

THE shortest essay I ever wrote, maybe the shortest essay anyone has ever written, was called “Little Essay on Form.” It went like this: “We build the corral as we reinvent the horse.” Later, I added: “Craft is what nails the gate, helps formalize the space, and keeps the horseshit out of the picture. It leaves us with the necessary.”

I was rather pleased with my epigrammatic self, yet knew if I were to continue in that reductive mode I might be on my way to silliness. Metaphor pushed too far is always on the verge of collapsing. That’s why the exquisite metaphor or simile pleases us so. It goes to the precipice, dangles, and survives. In it resides a recklessness, a groping in thin air toward an unknown correlative. Eliot has Prufrock say, “The evening is spread out against the sky. . . .” How so? Well, “Like a patient etherised upon a table.” You can’t get much more successfully reckless than that . . . but, I take that back. Maybe Frank Gehry has, in some of his finest creations.

The imagination plays a large role in the creation of structures or forms, even in relatively fixed forms like the sonnet. Either we’re working within chosen confines, our details pressing up against boundaries and those boundaries pressing back, or we’re seeking those confines that will hold in place our wanderings. Or both. Each presents its own demands and opportunities.