

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource  
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



## *Introduction to Poetry*

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.

Billy Collins<sup>1</sup>

## **Reflections**

Each week, as I write these reflections, I try to keep in mind that there are people reading this who are far better suited for this type of scholarship, and who are far better poets than I could hope to be. I also assume that there are people reading who wish they liked poetry, and perhaps even *used* to like poetry, but don't any longer. And I also assume that there is a healthy number of people out there who fear poetry, as well as people who have no feeling whatsoever about poetry, and even some people who don't know why they keep getting this

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<sup>1</sup> "Introduction to Poetry" by Billy Collins from *The Apple That Astonished Paris*, University of Arkansas Press. Used by permission.

resource sent to their inboxes. This kind of range is true of just about everything: the NFL, for example—people love it and people hate it; people don't get it at all, and others rearrange their whole lives *because* of it. The same is true of church, pop music, dog shows, twitter, children, weather, traveling, food, yoga—there is always a spectrum that ranges from apathy to fanaticism and poetry is no different. You have your poetry-evangelists and your poetry haters. Whatever your feelings on the subject, wherever you fall, I'm still convinced that reading poetry, opening yourself up to the pleasures of poetry, can be good for you. And the reason for this resource is straightforward: I hope only to cultivate joy and beauty, something of the spirit that may be neglected.

Billy Collins' work is known for its sense of humor, its playfulness, and its authentic voice. This poem is certainly a bit tongue-in-cheek; to analyze it would essentially have us become the kind of reader it gently mocks. Instead, here are three tenets about reading poetry that I have come to hold as essential to pleasure and that I think emphasize what "Introduction to Poetry" is offering:

1. Most importantly, poetry is not hiding anything from you, nor is there a secret meaning, nor a trick, nor a special handshake you have to know in order to enjoy it. Just as you do not have to know how to cook a meal in order to enjoy food or know the words of a song to enjoy the music of it, it is self-defeating to trudge through poetry as though it were the enemy.
2. There are many rewards that poetry offers, one of which is delight. The work of poetry is the work of a good life: to be careful, to pay attention, to enter into wonder and awe.
3. Poetry matters in the way that mystery and pleasure matter; there are certain things that are True (with a capital T) and that we know (with a capital K) that we could not say or access any other way but this one. As Jane Hirshfield says, "Lives are hard and art is one way we human beings have found to see in that hardness also the beauty, the largeness."

My belief is essentially that we do not have to *understand* poetry to benefit from it. Certainly, as with anything else, the more we know about it— about craft, about tone and rhythm and image and form— the more there is to appreciate. Just as you might be better able to enjoy a flower arrangement if you can name the plants, or better enjoy a football game if you know the players, or better enjoy a song if you know the words, poetry is but a vehicle for delivering news of the spirit. Naming the elements of a poem is not necessary for liking poetry.

One of the rewards of poetry for me is that it does not seek to answer questions; rather, it asks them, generates them, moves us from one emotional state to another emotional state the way we move from one room of the house to another room. So I don't think that we need to *learn* poetry, as much as we need to *re-learn* pleasure.

Considering that so much of our daily lives, so much of what is asked of us, is really just a lot of noise and haste, sound and fury, I cannot help but think that the “demands” of poetry — that we might enter into wonder, that we might respond with care, that we might pay better attention to our interior lives— are more in line with the demands of the soul. And the work of poetry is only as scholarly as you wish it to be. Otherwise, it is meant to offer observations, to inspire questions, and to cultivate a sense of the extraordinary among the ordinary.

### ☞ Other questions to consider

1. There is one branch of pedagogy that teaches difficulty in poetry; that is, there are some who believe that difficulty in a poem is part of its value and that impenetrability is a sign of virtuosity. The same might be said of other skills, that as the level of difficulty increases (as with gymnastics, or playing an instrument) so does the value of that particular craft. What do you think is the role of difficulty in poetry? Do you think that “accessible” poetry is inferior to the more difficult?
2. The poet Li-Young Lee goes so far as to say that “every poem is a descendant of God.” How do you respond to such a statement? If you agree, why do you think it is true? If you disagree, how might you revise such a claim? What *else*—what other craft, specifically—might be considered a descendant of God? Is *this* poem— a playful, light-hearted one— as noble as one that is serious, or bleak?
3. William Carlos Williams says “the thing I like best about poems is taking them apart to see what makes them work.” You might have something similar you “take apart” in order to better appreciate it — whatever your thing is— race cars, recipes, dance, astrology, whatever—something you study in depth because it enriches and deepens and enhances what you already admire. That is what learning is supposed to do— awaken, not burden. Are you able to name this thing in your life? If you someone asked you, simply, *why this?*, how would you respond?

### ☞ Writing in response

1. I had a teacher propose an idea that the size and shape of the paper on which a poem was written was relative to the subject of the poem itself. The exercise goes like this: Turn your paper so that it is in the landscape position (that is, turned so that it is wider than it is high). Then, write a poem of expanse—about God, the universe, physics, the horizon, the ocean, the desert, etc., and force yourself to write longer lines, the length of the page. See if it is true that the literal expanse of the paper affects the expanse of your poem. (This is an exercise that might generate other ideas about shape and size; you might write in a tiny font to explore privacy or interiority, for example.)
2. Collins’ poem is *about* poems and it seems to celebrate art for art’s sake. It is for me a poem of delight and though it pokes fun at what might be considered uptight readers, it is a playful reminder that light-hearted and open-minded pleasure is a healthy pursuit. In

that vein, turn on the radio to any channel and write a poem inspired by the first thing you hear (lyrics to a song, a commercial's jingle, a deejay's voice etc.).

3. Make a list of ten images of things you have seen in the last 24 hours. See if you can use all of them in a poem even if the poem can hardly contain them.

### ✧ About the Poet

Billy Collins served as United States Poet Laureate from 2001 to 2003, and as the New York State Poet Laureate from 2004 to 2006. The author of numerous collections of poetry, he has been dubbed “the most popular poet in America” by the New York Times.



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