

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

November 13, 2017

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



## *Bath*

The day is fresh-washed and fair, and there is a smell of tulips and narcissus in the air.

The sunshine pours in at the bath-room window and bores through the water in the bathtub in lathes and planes of greenish-white. It cleaves the water into flaws like a jewel, and cracks it to bright light.

Little spots of sunshine lie on the surface of the water and dance, dance, and their reflections wobble deliciously over the ceiling; a stir of my finger sets them whirring, reeling. I move a foot and the planes of light in the water jar. I lie back and laugh, and let the green-white water, the sun-flawed beryl water, flow over me. The day is almost too bright to bear, the green water covers me from the too bright day. I will lie here awhile and play with the water and the sun spots. The sky is blue and high. A crow flaps by the window, and there is a whiff of tulips and narcissus in the air.

Amy Lowell<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections

I love the invitation this poem seems to offer—to idleness and luxury and pleasant languor. Set in springtime, the poem is relatively untroubled; its only real conflict is that “the day is almost too bright to bear.” What a delicious retreat.

Lowell's poem offers an opportunity to mention something about form: namely, the prose poem, a contradictory sounding name. Here is how one editor, Peter Johnson, explains it in the first issue of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*: “Just as black humor straddles the fine line between comedy and tragedy, so the prose poem plants one foot in prose, the other in poetry, both heels resting precariously on banana peels.” In other words, the prose poem *looks* like prose, but *reads* like poetry and uses certain traditionally poetic techniques—compression, repetition, fragmentation and, most especially in this case, precise imagery. “Bath,” without line breaks and using traditional sentence structure and punctuation in

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<sup>1</sup> “Bath” by Amy Lowell from *The Complete Poetical Works of Amy Lowell*. Houghton Mifflin Company. Used by permission.

addition to poetic elements—cadence, meditative description, imagery—is an example of a prose poem.

It is the poem's particular precision of detail that provides us with some literary context. During Lowell's career, she was highly involved in what is known as the Imagist Movement. This poem is an example of imagism, whose mission was to replace abstraction with concrete, crisp exactitude in order to pierce the heart, the essence, of life; it aimed to use common speech rather than decorative language, and was viewed by some as a kind of antidote to highly charged and arguably verbose romanticism. The difficulty, of course, in writing imagist poems was—and is—finding a way to present a subject with detail but *without* any excess, an essential balance. The poet Ezra Pound is usually regarded as the leader of this early 20th century movement; he defined the image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.”

Perhaps this information muddies the clarity and delight of Lowell's poem and her intimate “instant of time.” Maybe it enriches whatever feeling the poem evokes, knowing that her concentration was born of a deliberate aesthetic sensibility. Regardless, it is hard not to revel in the poem's stretched-out moment, its long gaze, its ability to extend time and thereby preserve it. If there are some readers out there who are also writers, this poem strikes me as a fine prompt for a writing exercise in imitation. On second thought, it might be a good exercise for all of us: simply, to sit still and see.

### ✂ About the Poet

Amy Lowell (1874-1925) was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, the youngest of five children in an Episcopal family at the top of New England society. “Bath” typifies Lowell's dedication to clarity of expression and echoes one of her most well-known aphorisms: “concentration is of the very essence of poetry.” She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1925 for her collection *What's O'Clock*.



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by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,  
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