

Chapter 1: I, Too, Dislike It

Poetry

Marianne Moore

*I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important
beyond all this fiddle.*

*Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it,
one discovers that there is in
it after all, a place for the genuine.*

(lines 1-5)

What Is Poetry?

*Poetry is the journal of the sea animal living
on land, wanting to fly in the air. Poetry is a
search for syllables to shoot at the barriers of
the unknown and the unknowable. Poetry is
a phantom script telling how rainbows are
made and why they go away.*

—Carl Sandburg, from *Poetry Considered*

Poetry is life distilled.

—Gwendolyn Brooks

*Poetry is not an expression of the party line.
It's that time of night, lying in bed, thinking
what you really think, making the private
world public, that's what the poet does.*

—Allen Ginsberg, from
Ginsberg: A Biography by Gary Miles



Poetry is whatever poetry can be.

Poetry can be what a young woman says when she steps up to a microphone and spills her guts, and moves the room.

Poetry can be the world, observed from a window, written down in secret.

Poetry can be whispered limericks in the back of the playground.

Or the verse a young playwright writes to immortalize his mistress, behind the back of his wife.

Or kids making up rhymes, trying to outdo each other.

Or it can be the secret language of revolutionaries and spies.

Or it can be truth spoken to power.

Or it can be, simply, a place for the genuine.

It is one of those things that can be a lot of things.

What poetry has always been is a way for millions of people across time to use language to try to better understand love, hate, war, religion, oppression, joy, sorrow, sex and death—the whole human condition.

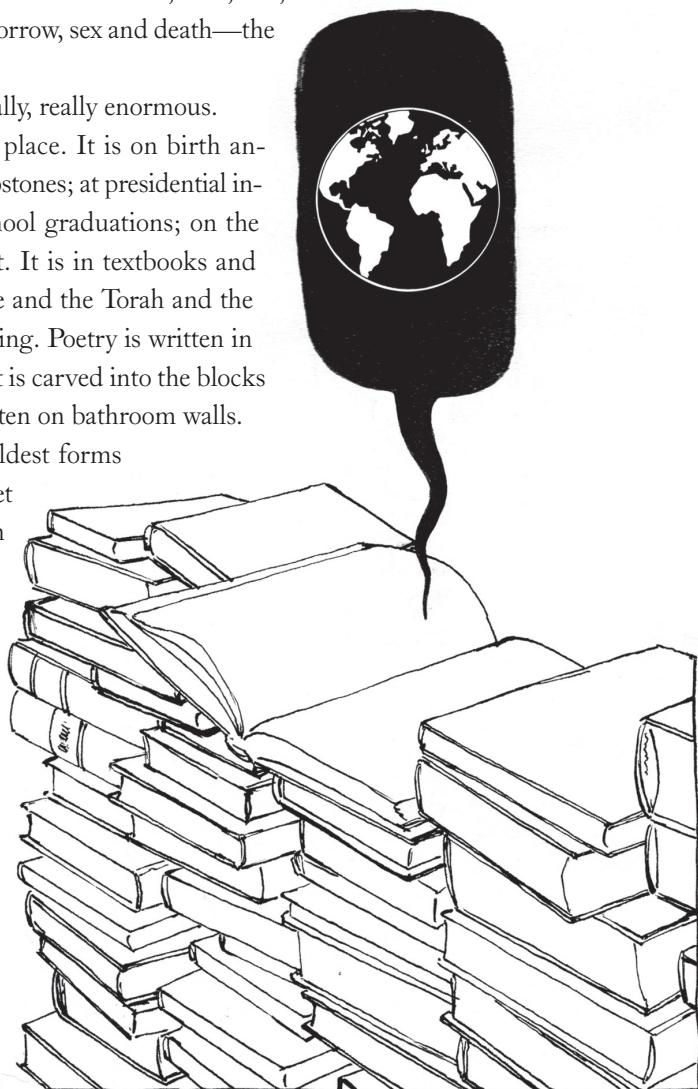
So poetry is huge. Really, really enormous.

And it is all over the place. It is on birth announcements and on tombstones; at presidential inaugurations and high school graduations; on the radio and on the Internet. It is in textbooks and prayer books; in the Bible and the Torah and the Koran and the Tao Te Ching. Poetry is written in notebooks and journals. It is carved into the blocks of ancient tombs and written on bathroom walls.

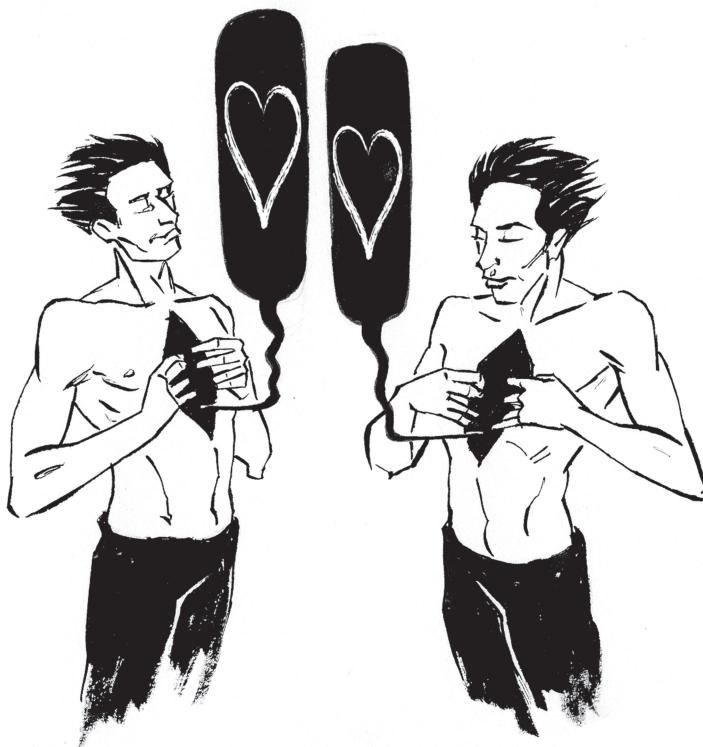
Poetry is one of the oldest forms of writing in the world, yet it is also fiercely modern and constantly evolving.

Poetry can be incredibly dense and complex, yet you probably learned to read by reading poetry.

Like many art forms, poetry is difficult to define. But let's try:



Poetry is writing that communicates intensely and intimately through and beyond language, using rhythm, sound, style and meaning.



Got it?

Poetry is intense, it is intimate, it uses language but it is more than just the words. It uses the rhythms, sounds, styles and meanings of the words to communicate.

We'll spend the rest of this book explaining exactly what that definition means.

That poetry is hard to define might be why some people find poetry intimidating. Many things we think of as part of "poetry"—emotion, love, rhyme, rhythm, line breaks, imagery—exist in lots of poetry, but certainly not all.

Which means that we can't tell you what poetry is by listing a set of component parts.

So let's look at what poetry does.

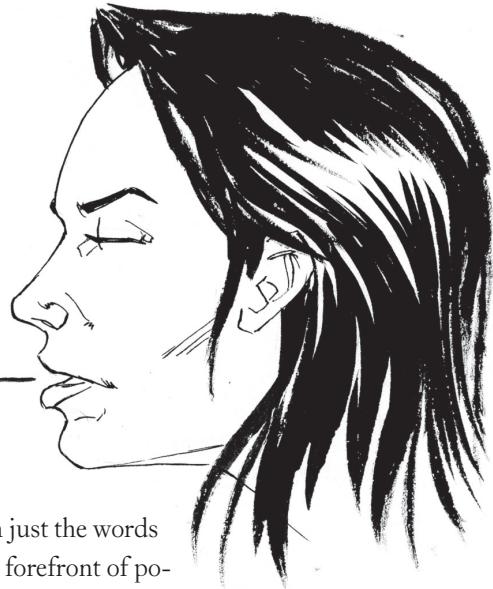


At its most basic level, poetry is a form of literature that focuses language's ability to **evoke** feelings, ideas, experiences, not just to transmit meaning. Poetry is writing that does more than just mean what the words themselves mean.

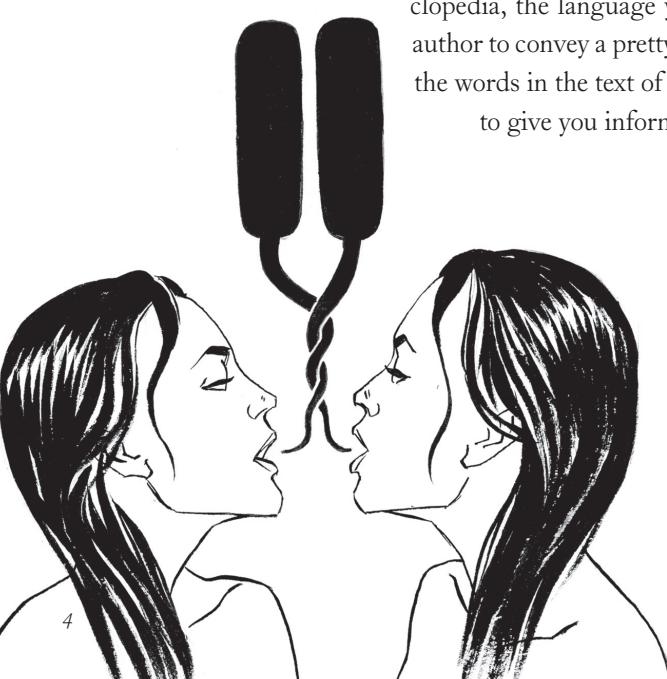
Because poetry can mean more than just the words as written, poets have often been on the forefront of political, cultural and intellectual change.

"A poet's work is to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world, and stop it going to sleep."

—Salman Rushdie, novelist,
Independent (London)



When you read a set of instructions, or an encyclopedia, the language you read was chosen by the author to convey a pretty precise meaning. We chose the words in the text of this book first and foremost to give you information.



"A poem is true if it hangs together. Information points to something else. A poem points to nothing but itself."

—E.M. Forster,
novelist, from *Two Cheers
for Democracy* (1951)

While poets also want to engage and inform, poets look at language differently. Poets consider the sounds of words, the rhythms, the way words look on a page. They consider the symbolism of language, and the multiple meanings of words. They think about how the sounds and appearance of the words may affect you (the reader), how these things may trigger memories, or emotions, or images.

This means that not only does poetry contain the actual meaning of the words, but it contains a second meaning—it contains the meaning a reader gets from the poem.

So when you read a poem, you create the meaning of the poem. You are the one who makes the poem mean something. So for poetry to mean anything, you need to start reading it.

How Do You Read Poetry?

Try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.

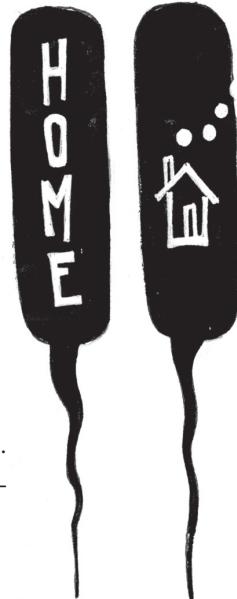
—Rainer Maria Rilke, from *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell

Like any sort of reading, poetry gives you access to ideas and experiences. When you read poetry, you get to peek into the mind of a poet, and see whether that person's experiences have any connection with your own, whether that person's ideas have a place in your life.

At some point in time, someone started spreading the rumor that to understand poetry, to know how to read poetry the “right way” you had to have all of this super-secret special insider knowledge about both poems and poets.

But that is just a rumor. Anyone can read any poem, anytime, anywhere. There is no super-secret insider knowledge. As long as you are fluent in the language the poem is written in, you can read it. And if you aren't fluent, you can probably find the poem in translation.

As you study poetry, you might gain information that changes the meaning you get from a poem, like what certain symbols might stand for, or which personal experiences a poet might be bringing into his or her work.

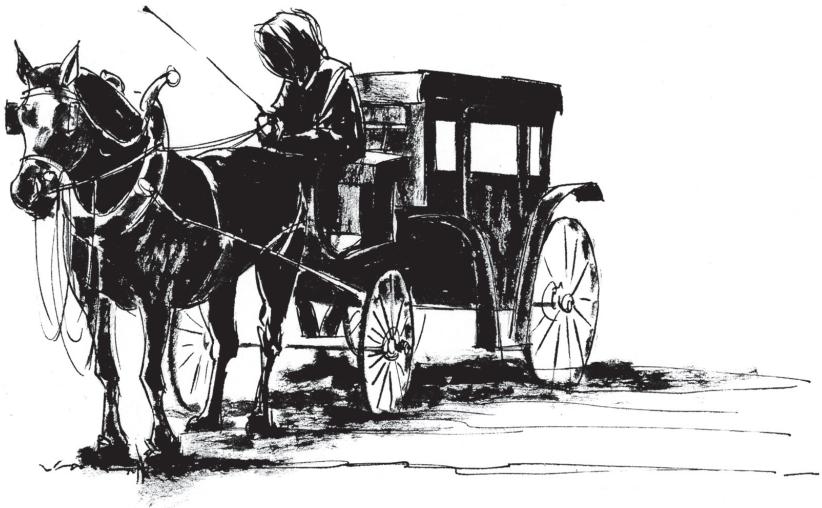


And while learning more about how a poem is created, and to what poets might be referring in their poems might make reading poetry more exciting, and give you new things to consider while reading, it doesn't make any meaning you get from a poem any more correct.

It might make it more fun.

Let's start reading.

Here's one of the most famous poems in the English language, Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death—":



Because I could not stop for Death—(479)

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

We slowly drove— He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and Chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle—

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Shorter then—’tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity—



Read it? Read it again. Out loud. We won’t listen.

How did the poem sound? On its surface, this poem is deceptively straightforward. Though it sounds simple, even childlike, it is complex and highly crafted. The words produce a rhythm that guides you as you read. Dickinson repeats vowel and consonant sounds, and even little phrases at the beginning of lines. Sometimes she uses rhyme in expected places, sometimes she doesn’t. But the rhythm is constant throughout.

Now say “Tippet only tulle” five times fast. A tippet is a shawl, and tulle is netting. Think about how “a shawl made of netting” is not nearly as fun to say as “Tippet only tulle.”

She starts the poem with a little joke. Seems like she was going to miss her date with Death, but death went out of his way to meet up with her. How kind.

Emily Dickinson lived a solitary life, was never married and had no children. This poem seems to be her own reckoning with mortality; she imagines death as a journey to eternity. And it is hard not to think, with the poet in her gown and tulle, of a nineteenth century bride on her wedding day, being taken to her new house. Only this house is just “A Swelling of the Ground.”

Notice how she uses dashes. That was Dickinson’s trademark punctuation. Those dashes feel like they mean connection, not ending. So why does she end her poem with a dash? What comes after eternity?

Modern-day poet Billy Collins couldn't resist putting himself in the poem as Emily's groom. In "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," he helps her with that tippet.

First, her tippet made of tulle,
easily lifted off her shoulders and laid
on the back of a wooden chair.

(lines 1-3)

Mortality is a common subject in poetry; Dickinson's poem is particularly effective because it combines humor with a kind fatalism or acceptance of death, and because these ideas play out in easy rhythm and simple images.

You should read the poem out loud one more time, after we picked it apart.

This is the unique capability of poetry—to combine the ideas, sounds, and the look of language in affecting and enticing ways, so that as we read poetry, the poem becomes not just the sum of its parts but an experience.

But over the course of history, poets have written in almost every possible way about almost every aspect of the human condition.

Which leads us to ask...

Where Did It Come From?

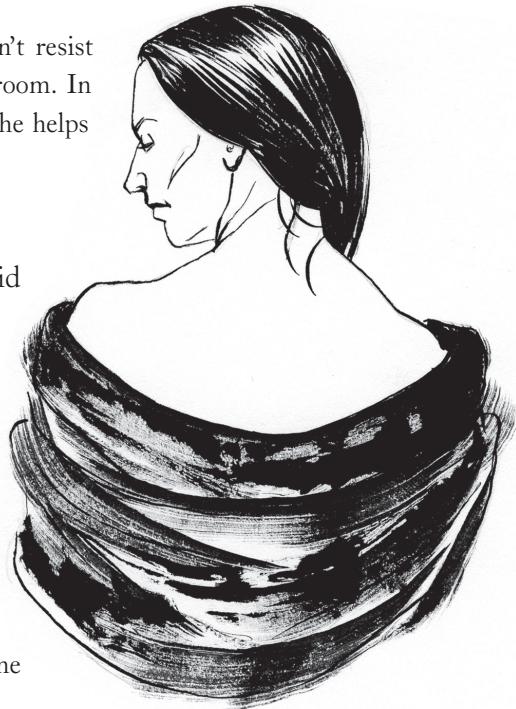
Poetry is one of the oldest forms of writing in the world. In fact, poetry is probably even older than writing itself.

The oldest known poetry was most likely sung, or chanted. Ancient poets used poetic techniques like rhyme and rhythm to make their poems easy to memorize.

The oldest known writings in the world are accounting and law codes—records of what people owned, and what they could and could not do. After people figured out the basic business of keeping track of things, they started using writing to record those poems they had been just memorizing and repeating for so long.

Example of poems that were probably written down long after they were first repeated:

The Epic of Gilgamesh, an ancient Mesopotamian poem about King Gilgamesh and his friend Enkido, is the oldest known poem, from around 2000 B.C.E.

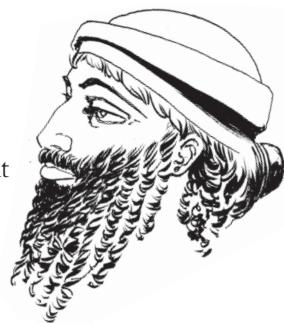


Tablet X, column V

How, O how could I stay silent, how, O how could I keep quiet?
My friend whom I love has turned to clay:
Enkidu my friend whom I love has turned to clay.
Am I not like him? Must I lie down too,
Never to rise, ever again?

trans. Stephanie Dalley

The Hebrew Tanakh, and the Old Testament from which it is derived, are written in poetic forms. "The Song of Solomon" is a highly symbolic (and some say erotic) love poem.



Song of Solomon 2:10-13

My beloved spoke, and said to me,
"Rise up, my love, my beautiful one, and come away.
For, behold, the winter is past.
The rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth.
The time of the singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.
The fig tree ripens her green figs.
The vines are in blossom.
They give forth their fragrance.
Arise, my love, my beautiful one,
and come away."

World English Bible

