

Creative Writing



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Welcome, writers!

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To jump start our work in Creative Writing, you will read and annotate a selection of poems. This packet begins with an article offering strategies for reading poetry -- some concrete and others more abstract; please read the article first.

The packet includes 18 poems. I suggest breaking them up to read about two per day. Waiting until the last minute will not give you sufficient time to read and annotate well.

On our first day of class, I will collect this packet to see your annotations, which may be handwritten or typed. Your annotations should reflect careful reading and thoughtful engagement with each poem -- rhymes noticed, unknown words defined, surprising moments identified, questions asked, etc.

Feel free to email me with any questions or observations as you work.

Hope you enjoy your break and your reading!

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Reading a Poem: 20 Strategies

MARK YAKICH

A guide for the perplexed

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At one time or another, when face-to-face with a poem, most everyone has been perplexed. The experience of reading a poem itself is as likely to turn us off, intellectually or emotionally, as it is to move us. Unless patronized by celebrities, set to music, accompanied by visuals, or penned by our own children, poems do a terrible job of marketing themselves. All those ragged lines and affected white spaces make them appear as though they should be treated only as pieces of solemn art. *Look but don't get too close, and definitely don't touch.*

But what if the fine art of reading poetry isn't so fine after all? What if the predicament about poems is precisely our well-intentioned but ill-fitting dispositions toward reading them?

Here are 20 modest proposals toward rethinking the act of reading a poem.

1. Dispel the notion that reading poetry is going to dramatically change your life. Your life is continually changing; most of the time you're simply too busy to pay enough attention to it. Poems ask you to pay attention—that's all.
2. When you read a poem, especially a poem *not* meant to be a “spoken word” poem, always read it out loud. (Never mind what they said in grammar school—to subvocalize so that you won't bother your peers.) Your ear will pick up more than your head will allow. That is, the ear will tell the mind what to think.
3. Try to meet a poem on its terms not yours. If you have to “relate” to a poem in order to understand it, you aren't reading it sufficiently. In other words, don't try to fit the poem into your life. Try to see what world the poem creates. Then, if you are lucky, its world will help you re-see your own.
4. Whether or not you are conscious of it, you are always looking for an excuse to stop reading a poem and move on to another poem or to do something else entirely. Resist this urge as much as possible. Think of it as a Buddhist regards a pesky mosquito. The mosquito, like the poem, may be irritating, but it's not going to kill you to brave it for a little while longer.
5. People will tell you there are two kinds of poems: the “accessible poem” whose intent and meaning are easy to appreciate, and the “obscure poem” whose intent and meaning are difficult to appreciate. It's up to you how hard you want to work.
6. If you don't know a word, look it up or die.

7. A poem cannot be paraphrased. In fact, a poem's greatest potential lies in the opposite of paraphrase: ambiguity. Ambiguity is at the center of what it is to be a human being. We really have no idea what's going to happen from moment to moment, but we have to act as if we do.

8. A poem has no hidden meaning, only "meanings" you've not yet realized are right in front of you. Discerning subtleties takes practice. Reading poetry is a convention like anything else. And you learn the rules of it like anything else—e.g., driving a car or baking a cake.

9. As hard as it sounds, separate the poet from the speaker of the poem. A poet always wears a mask (persona) even if she isn't trying to wear a mask, and so to equate poet and speaker denies the poem any imaginative force that lies outside of her lived life.

10. When you come across something that appears "ironic," make sure it's not simply the speaker's sarcasm or your own disbelief.

11. "Reading for pleasure" implies there's "reading for displeasure" or "reading for pain." All reading should be pleasurable: [...] it pleases to a greater or lesser degree, but pleasure ultimately isn't the only point.

12. A poem can feel like a locked safe in which the combination is hidden inside. In other words, it's okay if you don't understand a poem. Sometimes it takes dozens of readings to come to the slightest understanding. And sometimes understanding never comes. It's the same with being alive: Wonder and confusion mostly prevail.

13. Perform marginalia. Reading without writing in the margins is like walking without moving your arms. You can do it and still reach your destination, but it'll always feel like you're missing something essential about the activity.

14. There is nothing really lost in reading a poem. If you don't understand the poem, you lose little time or energy. On the contrary, there is potentially much to gain—a new thought, an old thought seen anew, or simply a moment separated from all the other highly structured moments of your time.

Try to see what world the poem creates. Then, if you are lucky, its world will help you re-see your own.

15. Poetry depends on pattern and variation—even non-linear, non-narrative, anti-poetic poetry. By perceiving patterns and variations on those patterns, your brain will attempt to make order out of apparent chaos. "Glockenspiel," "tadpole," and "justice" have ostensibly nothing to do with each

other, and yet your brain immediately tries to piece them together simply because they are there for the apprehending.

16. As your ability to read poems improves, so will your ability to read the news, novels, legal briefs, advertisements, etc. A Starbucks poster a few years ago read: *Friends are like snowflakes...each one is unique*. How true. But isn't snow also cold and ephemeral? Let's hope our friends are not.

17. Reading poetry is not only about reading poetry. Its alleged hermetic stylizations of syntax and diction can enhance your awareness of the world, even those things that don't deal directly in words. A dress, a building, a night sky—all involve systems of pattern-recognition and extrapolation.

18. The very best way to read a poem is perhaps to be young, intelligent, and slightly drunk. There is no doubt, however, that reading poems in old age cultivates a desire to have read more poems in youth.

19. Someday, when all your material possessions will seem to have shed their utility and just become obstacles to the toilet, poems will still hold their value. They are rooms that take up such little room. A memorized poem, or a line or two, becomes part internal jewelry and part life-saving skill, like knowing how to put a mugger in an arm-lock or the best way to cut open a mango without slicing your hand.

20. Reading a good poem doesn't give you something to talk about. It silences you. Reading a great poem pushes further. It prepares you for the silence that perplexes us all: death.

Ashulia

BY ZUBAIR AHMED

For seven years
My father drove me to Ashulia every evening
To watch the sunset.
Back then, Ashulia was nothing,
A long stretch of dirt road
Cutting through a wide river
Which passed us on both sides
Like someone lost within us.
I remember his gray hair,
His missing teeth and spotted skin.
His laughter gave birth to the softness of my skull
And the uneven beating of my heart.
He told me to fold a muslin sari,
Throw it into the river
And watch it float away.
I asked him about God,
Under which rock he hides his mansion.
He told me he found God
On the corner of his cigarette.
Twenty years later, his body floated
Through all two-hundred-fourteen rivers of Bangladesh.

Flirtation

BY RITA DOVE

After all, there's no need
to say anything

at first. An orange, peeled
and quartered, flares

like a tulip on a wedgewood plate
Anything can happen.

Outside the sun
has rolled up her rugs

and night strewn salt
across the sky. My heart

is humming a tune
I haven't heard in years!

Quiet's cool flesh—
let's sniff and eat it.

There are ways
to make of the moment

a topiary
so the pleasure's in

walking through.

from *Museum* (1983).

In Your War Dream

BY RICHARD HUGO

You must fly your 35 missions again.
The old base is reopened. The food is still bad.
You are disturbed. The phlegm you choked up
mornings in fear returns. You strangle on the phlegm.
You ask, "Why must I do this again?" A man
replies, "Home." You fly over one country
after another. The nations are bright like a map.
You pass over the red one. The orange one ahead
looks cold. The purple one north of that is the one
you must bomb. A wild land. Austere. The city
below seems ancient. You are on the ground.
Lovers are inside a cabin. You ask to come in.
They say "No. Keep watch on Stark Yellow Lake."
You stand beside the odd water. A terrible wind
keeps knocking you down. "I'm keeping watch
on the lake," you yell at the cabin. The lovers
don't answer. You break into the cabin. Inside
old women bake bread. They yell, "Return to the base."
You must fly your 35 missions again

Source: *A Mind Apart: Poems of Melancholy, Madness, and Addiction*, edited by Mark S. Bauer (2009)

Inventory

BY GÜNTER EICH / TRANSLATED BY JOSHUA MEHIGAN

This is my cap,
this is my overcoat,
here is my shave kit
in its linen pouch.

Some field rations:
my dish, my tumbler,
here in the tin-plate
I've scratched my name.

Scratched it here with this
precious nail
I keep concealed
from coveting eyes.

In the bread bag I have
a pair of wool socks
and a few things that I
discuss with no one,

and these form a pillow
for my head at night.
Some cardboard lies
between me and the ground.

The pencil's the thing
I love the most:
By day it writes verses
I make up at night.

This is my notebook,
this my rain gear,
this is my towel,
this is my twine.

Source: *Poetry* (April 2009)

Learning to Love America

BY SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM

because it has no pure products

because the Pacific Ocean sweeps along the coastline
because the water of the ocean is cold
and because land is better than ocean

because I say we rather than they

because I live in California
I have eaten fresh artichokes
and jacaranda bloom in April and May

because my senses have caught up with my body
my breath with the air it swallows
my hunger with my mouth

because I walk barefoot in my house

because I have nursed my son at my breast
because he is a strong American boy
because I have seen his eyes redden when he is asked who he is
because he answers I don't know

because to have a son is to have a country
because my son will bury me here
because countries are in our blood and we bleed them

because it is late and too late to change my mind
because it is time.

from *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* © 1998

Ode to My Socks

BY PABLO NERUDA

Mara Mori brought me
a pair of socks
which she knitted herself
with her sheepherder's hands,
two socks as soft as rabbits.
I slipped my feet into them
as if they were two cases
knitted with threads of twilight and goatskin,
Violent socks,
my feet were two fish made of wool,
two long sharks
sea blue, shot through
by one golden thread,
two immense blackbirds,
two cannons,
my feet were honored in this way
by these heavenly socks.
They were so handsome for the first time
my feet seemed to me unacceptable
like two decrepit firemen,
firemen unworthy of that woven fire,
of those glowing socks.

Nevertheless, I resisted the sharp temptation
to save them somewhere as schoolboys
keep fireflies,
as learned men collect
sacred texts,
I resisted the mad impulse to put them
in a golden cage and each day give them
birdseed and pieces of pink melon.
Like explorers in the jungle
who hand over the very rare green deer
to the spit and eat it with remorse,
I stretched out my feet and pulled on
the magnificent socks and then my shoes.

The moral of my ode is this:
beauty is twice beauty
and what is good is doubly good
when it is a matter of two socks
made of wool in winter.

One Art

BY ELIZABETH BISHOP

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

from *The Complete Poems 1926-1979* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983)

Siren Song

BY MARGARET ATWOOD

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:

the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see the beached skulls

the song nobody knows
because anyone who has heard it
is dead, and the others can't remember.

Shall I tell you the secret
and if I do, will you get me
out of this bird suit?

I don't enjoy it here
squatting on this island
looking picturesque and mythical

with these two feathery maniacs,
I don't enjoy singing
this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,
to you, only to you.
Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!
Only you, only you can,
you are unique

at last. Alas
it is a boring song
but it works every time.

from *Selected Poems 1965-1975*. Copyright © 1974, 1976

The Quiet World

BY JEFFREY MCDANIEL

In an effort to get people to look
into each other's eyes more,
and also to appease the mutes,
the government has decided
to allot each person exactly one hundred
and sixty-seven words, per day.

When the phone rings, I put it to my ear
without saying hello. In the restaurant
I point at chicken noodle soup.
I am adjusting well to the new way.

Late at night, I call my long distance lover,
proudly say *I only used fifty-nine today.*
I saved the rest for you.

When she doesn't respond,
I know she's used up all her words,
so I slowly whisper *I love you*
thirty-two and a third times.
After that, we just sit on the line
and listen to each other breathe.

from *The Forgiveness Parade* © 1998

Today

BY BILLY COLLINS

If ever there were a spring day so perfect,
so uplifted by a warm intermittent breeze

that it made you want to throw
open all the windows in the house

and unlatch the door to the canary's cage,
indeed, rip the little door from its jamb,

a day when the cool brick paths
and the garden bursting with peonies

seemed so etched in sunlight
that you felt like taking

a hammer to the glass paperweight
on the living room end table,

releasing the inhabitants
from their snow-covered cottage

so they could walk out,
holding hands and squinting

into this larger dome of blue and white,
well, today is just that kind of day.

Source: *Poetry* (April 2000).

[in Just-]

BY E. E. CUMMINGS

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman

whistles far and wee

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful

the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing

from hop-sotch and jump-rope and

it's
spring
and

the

goat-footed

balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee

faithless

BY QURAYSH ALI LANSANA

*I would have freed thousands mo,
If dey had known dey were slaves.*

Harriet

herd on da wind you come back fo me
didn't think you come back fo me
didn't think you come back at all
been so long my skin grew tired

dis life too hard to know all alone
caroline cover me jus fine
she a quilt ginst the cold in ma blood
she mend de torn spots in ma soul

aint got no mind ta leev dis place
go on moses find yo promise lan
mines is here beside dis fire
wid folks we knows from when we's born

from *They Shall Run: Harriet Tubman Poems*, published by Third World Press. © 2004.

my dream about falling

BY LUCILLE CLIFTON

a fruitful woman
such as myself
is falling
notices
she is
an apple
thought
that the blossom
was always
thought
that the tree
was forever
fruitful
a woman
such as myself
the fact is the falling
the dream is the tree

The New Colossus

BY EMMA LAZARUS

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Source: *Emma Lazarus: Selected Poems and Other Writings* (2002)

We Never Know

BY YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

He danced with tall grass
for a moment, like he was swaying
with a woman. Our gun barrels
glowed white-hot.
When I got to him,
a blue halo
of flies had already claimed him.
I pulled the crumbled photograph
from his fingers.
There's no other way
to say this: I fell in love.
The morning cleared again,
except for a distant mortar
& somewhere choppers taking off.
I slid the wallet into his pocket
& turned him over, so he wouldn't be
kissing the ground.

from *Dien Cai Dau*. © 1988

What Kind of Times Are These

BY ADRIENNE RICH

There's a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows uphill
and the old revolutionary road breaks off into shadows
near a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted
who disappeared into those shadows.

I've walked there picking mushrooms at the edge of dread, but don't be fooled
this isn't a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else but here,
our country moving closer to its own truth and dread,
its own ways of making people disappear.

I won't tell you where the place is, the dark mesh of the woods
meeting the unmarked strip of light—
ghost-ridden crossroads, leafmold paradise:
I know already who wants to buy it, sell it, make it disappear.

And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you
anything? Because you still listen, because in times like these
to have you listen at all, it's necessary
to talk about trees.

from The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems 1950-2001

A Supermarket in California

BY ALLEN GINSBERG

What thoughts I have of you tonight Walt Whitman, for I walked down the sidestreets
under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the full moon.

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit
supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of
husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!—and you, Garcia Lorca, what
were you doing down by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in
the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.

I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price
bananas? Are you my Angel?

I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you, and followed in my
imagination by the store detective.

We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes,
possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does
your beard point tonight?

(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd.)

Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add shade to shade, lights
out in the houses, we'll both be lonely.

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in
driveways, home to our silent cottage?

Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have
when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching
the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?

Berkeley, 1955

from *Collected Poems 1947-1980*. © 1984

When You Are Old

BY WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

Source: *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (1989)