

A sonnet, a spade, and one shot walk into a room

Poetry Night III - self-worth, work, pressure, war, and surrender

Discussion + read-aloud optional. Not an open mic. No poetry-slam vibes.

Tonight's likely picks

William Shakespeare • Seamus Heaney • Eminem • Wilfred Owen • Jalal al-Din Rumi

WHY THIS NIGHT

The last poetry night left some of the most pressure-heavy pieces untouched. So this round keeps the unfinished poems, opens with Shakespeare's comparison spiral, moves into work and inheritance with Heaney, turns up the heat with Eminem, lets Owen tear patriotic language apart, and ends with Rumi asking who - or what - is really moving us.

TONIGHT'S ARGUMENT

- A poem can track a whole moral weather system: envy, vocation, pressure, propaganda, surrender.
- Great poems do not just "say" things; they change what the room feels like breath by breath.
- Modern lyrics belong in the room when the language, pressure, and form do real work on the page and in the ear.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

- where self-worth turns into voice
- how work becomes identity
- when pressure sharpens craft versus deforms it
- how slogans sound before and after reality
- whether a poem gives you agency or questions it

Shared-packet note: public-domain texts are reproduced in full below; the modern poem and lyric are included here from the shared packet so the room can stay anchored to the words on the page.

How to use this packet

Read for pressure, movement, and what the language is doing to your body - not just what it "means."

HOW NOT TO GET BORED

Circle one image, one argument, one sound, one sentence that bothers you, and one line you want to steal for your own thinking. Do not wait to "understand" the whole piece before reacting.

TINY READING TOOLBOX

- Lyric = a poem or song-text driven by voice, pressure, image, or feeling more than plot.
- Sonnet = a compact 14-line pressure chamber built for turn, argument, and bite.
- Watch for the moment a poem changes register: private thought becomes public claim, or confidence cracks.
- Ask not only what a poem means, but what it makes your body do: tighten, speed up, brace, breathe.

CROSS-PIECE SCAVENGER HUNT

- Find the line that sounds like your inner critic.
- Find the line that makes work feel sacred.
- Find the line that turns pressure into motion.
- Find the line that makes language itself feel guilty.
- Find the line that gives up control - or redefines it.

"What's one line - from anything - that has actually stayed with you?"

Confusion counts. Listening counts. No correct interpretation required before reaction.

Sonnet 29

William Shakespeare • 1609

Fast take: *A status-anxiety spiral that flips into sudden gratitude. It starts in shame and comparison, then one remembered person changes the whole value system.*

Quick fact: If doomscrolling, envy, and social self-disgust had to fit inside fourteen lines, this is what it would sound like. The turn does not erase the pain; it changes its scale.

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Shakespeare notes & room prompts

Sonnet 29

"Haply I think on thee..."

William Shakespeare

FOOTNOTES & QUICK CLUES

- "Beweep" means cry over / grieve.
- "Bootless cries" means prayers that do not seem to change anything.
- "Scope" means range, room to act, life-possibilities.
- The whole poem hinges on the turn at "Haply I think on thee."

READ IT ALOUD

- Start tight and slightly bitter, like someone replaying humiliations in private.
- Let the lift happen at "Haply I think on thee." Do not rush it.
- The final couplet should feel calm and rich, not triumphant.

QUESTIONS:

1. What modern thing does this resemble most: jealousy, depression, doomscrolling, or something else?
2. Does love actually heal the speaker - or only interrupt the spiral for a while?
3. Is the poem praising love, or exposing how fragile self-worth can be?
4. What would be the modern version of "kings": money, beauty, followers, power, attention?

Digging

Seamus Heaney • 1966

Fast take: *A poem about family craft and artistic vocation, where admiration for physical labor becomes the ground from which writing grows.*

Quick fact: In a culture obsessed with prestige and "knowledge work," the poem asks whether picking up a pen is a betrayal of manual labor or another way of honoring it.

TEXT

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.

Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

FOOTNOTES & QUICK CLUES

- "Snug as a gun" makes the pen feel tool, weapon, and inheritance all at once.
- The father and grandfather are not abstract symbols; the poem loves their exact technique.
- Potatoes, turf, and spades carry class, history, land, and bodily knowledge with them.
- The ending does not abandon digging; it changes the instrument.

READ IT ALOUD / LISTEN FOR

- Let the sound words do the work: rasp, slap, curt cuts.
- Keep the tone respectful, not dreamy.
- The ending should sound chosen, not apologetic.

QUESTIONS

1. Is the pen a betrayal of family labor - or its continuation in another form?
2. What does the gun comparison do to the poem's opening: pride, threat, seriousness, guilt?
3. Does the poem romanticize manual work, or honor it precisely?
4. Can writing really "dig" in the same sense - or is that the poem's gamble?

Lose Yourself

Eminem • 2002

Fast take: *A performance of pressure. The lyric turns nerves, ambition, embarrassment, and opportunity into momentum so aggressive it almost outruns panic.*

Quick fact: On the page, this is about auditions, class pressure, public exposure, and the terror of not getting another shot. The technical control is part of the meaning.

TEXT

Look, if you had one shot or one opportunity
To seize everything you ever wanted in one moment
Would you capture it or just let it slip?
Yo

His palms are sweaty, knees weak, arms are heavy
There's vomit on his sweater already, mom's spaghetti
He's nervous, but on the surface, he looks calm and ready
To drop bombs, but he keeps on forgetting
What he wrote down, the whole crowd goes so loud
He opens his mouth, but the words won't come out
He's chokin', how? Everybody's jokin' now
The clock's run out, time's up, over, blaow
Snap back to reality, ope, there goes gravity
Ope, there goes Rabbit, he choked, he's so mad
But he won't give up that easy, no, he won't have it
He knows his whole back's to these ropes, it don't matter
He's dope, he knows that, but he's broke, he's so stagnant
He knows when he goes back to this mobile home, that's when it's
Back to the lab again, yo, this old rhapsody
Better go capture this moment and hope it don't pass him

You better lose yourself in the music

The moment, you own it, you better never let it go (Go)
You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow
This opportunity comes once in a lifetime, yo
You better lose yourself in the music
The moment, you own it, you better never let it go (Go)
You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow
This opportunity comes once in a lifetime, yo
You better

His soul's escaping through this hole that is gaping
This world is mine for the taking, make me king
As we move toward a new world order
A normal life is boring, but superstardom's
Close to post-mortem, it only grows harder
Homie grows hotter, he blows, it's all over
These hoes is all on him, coast-to-coast shows
He's known as the Globetrotter, lonely roads
God only knows he's grown farther from home, he's no father
He goes home and barely knows his own daughter
But hold your nose 'cause here goes the cold water
These hoes don't want him no mo', he's cold product
They moved on to the next schmoe who flows
He nose-dove and sold nada, and so the soap opera
Is told, it unfolds, I suppose it's old, partner
But the beat goes on, da-da-dom, da-dom, dah-dah-dah-dah

You better lose yourself in the music
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This opportunity comes once in a lifetime, yo
You better

No more games, I'ma change what you call rage
Tear this motherfuckin' roof off like two dogs caged
I was playin' in the beginning, the mood all changed
I've been chewed up and spit out and booed off stage
But I kept rhymin' and stepped right in the next cypher
Best believe somebody's payin' the Pied Piper
All the pain inside amplified by the
Fact that I can't get by with my nine-to-
Five and I can't provide the right type of life for my family
'Cause, man, these goddamn food stamps don't buy diapers
And there's no movie, there's no Mekhi Phifer, this is my life
And these times are so hard, and it's gettin' even harder
Tryna feed and water my seed, plus teeter-totter
Caught up between bein' a father and a prima donna
Baby-mama drama, screamin' on her, too much for me to wanna
Stay in one spot, another day of monotony's gotten me
To the point I'm like a snail, I've got
To formulate a plot or end up in jail or shot
Success is my only motherfuckin' option, failure's not
Mom, I love you, but this trailer's got
To go, I cannot grow old in Salem's Lot
So here I go, it's my shot, feet, fail me not
This may be the only opportunity that I got

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The moment, you own it, you better never let it go (Go)
You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow
This opportunity comes once in a lifetime, yo
You better lose yourself in the music

The moment, you own it, you better never let it go (Go)
You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow
This opportunity comes once in a lifetime, yo
You better

You can do anything you set your mind to, man

FOOTNOTES & QUICK CLUES

- Internal rhyme and consonant patterning matter as much as end rhyme.
- The opening is bodily: sweat, weakness, breath, choking. Stakes arrive through physical detail.
- The lyric shifts between scene, mantra, and self-command.
- Unlike many page poems, timing and beat are part of the meaning.

READ IT ALOUD / LISTEN FOR

- Try one section slowly on the page, then imagine the beat underneath.
- Notice how much force comes from compression, not just volume.

QUESTIONS

1. On the page alone, what survives - story, voice, rhythm, imagery?
2. Does the lyric become art because of technical craft, emotional stakes, or performance charisma?
3. Which hits harder - concrete detail or motivational slogan?
4. What makes rap lyric feel poetic even to people who resist the label?

Dulce et Decorum Est

Wilfred Owen • 1920

Fast take: *A poem that drags patriotic war language through mud, gas, blood, and nightmare until the slogan at the end sounds unforgivable.*

Quick fact: The Latin tag means "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country." Once you have read Owen closely, every clean war slogan starts sounding suspicious.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.
Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!--An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.--
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,--
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Owen notes & room prompts

Dulce et Decorum Est

"The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori."

Wilfred Owen

FOOTNOTES & QUICK CLUES

- Blood-shod = feet so torn and bloody it is as if blood were their footwear.
- Gas-shells were poison-gas artillery. "An ecstasy of fumbling" means frantic scramble, not joy.
- "Like a devil's sick of sin" is so extreme it suggests even hell would recoil from this scene.
- The poem shifts from witness to accusation when it turns and says "My friend."

READ IT ALOUD

- Keep the first stanza exhausted, not heroic.
- Let the gas attack rupture the rhythm.
- Slow the final address; it should accuse, not speechify.

QUESTIONS:

1. What makes the Latin tag land so hard at the end?
2. Is the poem trying to shock, witness, or accuse - or all three?
3. Who is "my friend": a propagandist, a reader, a teacher, the whole culture?
4. When does vivid description become ethical necessity instead of spectacle?

We Are as the Flute

Jalal al-Din Rumi (trans. R. A. Nicholson) • Masnavi I.599-607

Fast take: *A short spiritual poem about agency. We like to imagine ourselves as fully self-made; Rumi says we are instruments, echoes, banner-lions moved by a wind we do not control.*

Quick fact: In an age of personal branding, algorithmic nudging, and nonstop self-authorship, the poem asks a blunt question: how much of what feels like "me" is actually moving through me from elsewhere?

We are as the flute, and the music in us is from thee;
we are as the mountain and the echo in us is from thee.
We are as pieces of chess engaged in victory and defeat:
our victory and defeat is from thee, O thou whose qualities are comely!

Who are we, O Thou soul of our souls,
that we should remain in being beside thee?
We and our existences are really non-existence;
thou art the absolute Being which manifests the perishable.

We all are lions, but lions on a banner:
because of the wind they are rushing onward from moment to moment.
Their onward rush is visible, and the wind is unseen:
may that which is unseen not fail from us!

Our wind whereby we are moved and our being are of thy gift;
our whole existence is from thy bringing into being.

Rumi notes & room prompts

We Are as the Flute

"We all are lions, but lions on a banner..."

Rumi

FOOTNOTES & QUICK CLUES

- Flute = instrument; breath makes the sound.
- Mountain echo = your voice comes back larger than your original call.
- Banner-lions look fierce, but they are cloth moved by wind: ego, nation, performance, image.
- The poem can feel freeing or unnerving, depending on whether surrender sounds like relief or loss.

READ IT ALOUD

- Keep it calm and spacious.
- Let each image arrive cleanly: flute, mountain, chess, banner.
- The last line should sound like prayer and argument at once.

QUESTIONS:

1. Does this poem free you from ego - or shrink human responsibility too far?
2. What is the invisible wind in modern life: God, culture, trauma, class, desire, the algorithm?
3. Is it comforting to think of yourself as instrument and echo - or terrifying?
4. After the rest of tonight's packet, does this sound like wisdom, surrender, or a refusal to pretend total control?

SPACE FOR FAVORITE LINES / NOTES

TEXT NOTE & SOURCES

- William Shakespeare, Wilfred Owen, and the Rumi passage are reproduced here from public-domain texts and translations.
- The Rumi closing piece is taken from R. A. Nicholson's public-domain translation of the Masnavi, Book I, lines 599-607.
- Heaney and Eminem appear here from the shared discussion packet; the notes were rewritten for this room.

Listening counts. Confusion counts too.