

Every year I share my favorite poem (Billy Collins's "Aimless Love") with my AP Literature class. Every year, I am greeted with blank stares.

"Fall in love with a sliver of soap? What does that even mean?" My students are nonplussed.

I try to explain. "Have you ever had that feeling of tenderness — like you are just so overcome with emotion, you could fall in love with anything?"

Crickets.

I try again. "Do you sometimes see beauty in something that may not normally seem beautiful?"

Nothing.

And once more: "Have you ever been so heartbroken you swear you'd rather never fall in love again rather than subject yourself to that kind of pain?" Maybe one student will look up.

I once read an article about how to teach students how to write. The author came out with guns blazing:

*"The most challenging writing students I have had have been the ones who had a few hobbies or interests and did not read or learn outside of their narrow interests. If their free time was spent in easy television, easy books, easy games, their writing was never going to be high caliber. If a child has not thought about the world, he will not be able to write about it, either. If a child is not interested, he will not be able to write interestingly."*

I'd argue: if a child hasn't experienced emotional highs and lows — really, *life* — they will have a hard time enjoying poetry.

My students are sheltered. We're a small school, where dating relationships amongst students can sometimes feel incestuous, in an everyone-feels-like-a-cousin way. In each grade, a handful of them may have had

a crush, even fewer a public crush, maybe a couple have had a relationship, and maybe just one has been in love.

Most of these kids are sheltered in other ways, too — their parents prioritize academics, so they come to school, go home, do their homework, then go to bed.

I grew up similarly sheltered, but now I'm 41. A relatively sheltered 41. I've only had two official boyfriends, one of whom I married. My parents are still alive. I love my work. And yet... you can't get through 41 years on this earth without crying on the bathroom floor. Without experiencing such an intensity of joy, you feel like the very center of the universe. Without reeling from rejection, or rejecting. Without wondering if you've made a mistake.

When I read Collins's lines "I fell in love with a wren / and later in the day with a mouse," my chest tightens with what feels like anxiety. I feel it now, writing these lines.

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Once I slept in a tiny cabin at the edge of Lake Ontario. The cabin belonged to my in-laws' college friends. They gave us the cabin while the rest of them bunked in a double-wide trailer because I was the newest to the family, and we had a baby girl.

I don't remember much about the room, but I remember the particular blue hue of daybreak that filtered through evergreens and the curtains when I woke up.

Even the memory of shapes and colors makes my heart full. In a Billy Collins poem, I would say I'm in love with a particular shade of blue, a patch of a curtain. But really what I mean is I am overwhelmed with a mix of nostalgia, sadness, and joy when I think about a place that's no longer there, a time long gone, the memory of being 25 with a baby in my arms.

The color blue, a patch of a curtain. It's shorthand for those emotions, in a code that can be cracked if some part of your heart relates.

I was once chased down an alley in the black of night by a boy with a BB gun. In high school, I found out my boyfriend spent New Year's eve with another girl. (I found out from her, not him.) I've witnessed a sunrise in the Himalayas. I've stared down a puff adder in an East African meadow. I cast a rose on my oldest friend's coffin, when she died in a car accident at 22. I've given birth, twice, to two breathing miracles.

All of these experiences - the intense pain and the intense beauty - have stretched my heart, thinning its walls. I am a sitting duck, a wide-open target to every emotion, "ready for the next arrow."

Here's what I've fallen in love with this past week: a watermelon cake, specially made for a friend with celiac disease. The slight chill in the air during a nighttime walk. A scene in a movie, in which one character leans towards the other. A crisp linen duvet. A little white puffball of a flower.

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But if I really believed there's no way for a teenager to understand a poem unless someone breaks their heart, I wouldn't teach high school English. There would be no point.

There is a way to circumvent this; a shortcut, if you will. But it's kind of paradoxical: a student will learn to relate to "Aimless Love" by reading "Aimless Love."

"Fall in love with a 'miniature orange tree?'" It doesn't make sense, until it does.

One kid may stare at the lines and feel something creep into their hearts like a worm through the skin of an apple. Another may shake his head in class, only to look down at a bar of Dove soap in their freshman dorm room six months from now and think, "Oh, I read about this feeling once." Yet another, a decade from now, may sign divorce papers and swear off love altogether. She may walk down the beach at dusk, pick up a smooth pebble, and think, "This is about all the love I can handle right now."

Poetry gives us glimpses into experiences we've yet to have, unlocks the emotions buried in our chests, and reflects back what we are feeling to remind us we're not alone.

So: you live, and poetry comes alive. You read poetry, and maybe you'll come alive.