

Scratching Below the Surface...An introduction to poetry

Note from Mrs. H: I've had this for ages, and I don't know where it came from. I want to share it anyway, noting these are not my own words though they express my beliefs! It reminds me of Logues' New Numbers.

A poem is... Well, what do the *poets* say a poem is?

Edgar Allan Poe said: *With me poetry has not been a purpose, but a passion.*

Emily Dickinson said: *If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that it is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?*

Percy Bysshe Shelley said: *Poetry is like the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds.* His contemporary, William Wordsworth, called it *a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions.*

Robert Frost said: *Poetry is a fresh look and a fresh listen.* And he also said: *a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom*

What all of these poets seem to be saying is that they write poems because what they want to say is too passionate, too tenuous, too supernal to be expressed in prose.

But maybe that's too "high falutin'." One might say, simply... A poem is an **itch**.

It teases and torments you; it will not go away; *it will not let you be.*

If a boy in second grade learns "I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me..." the lines will pop up and haunt him decades later in the middle of an important business meeting.

If a fourteen-year-old girl memorizes "Out of the night that covers me/ Black as the pit from pole to pole..." she will find the words surfacing a half a century later when despair threatens. The same goes for twelve and thirteen year olds with: "...I want my poems to come between the raised stick and the cowering back..." or "...For all the history of grief, an empty doorway and a maple leaf..."

A poem is an **itch**.

It asks—who am I? and who is God? and *why* is the world? A poem never asks simple questions, like "What are we going to have for dinner?" It always asks absurd questions, like "What is a friend?" (impossible to answer) or "Tell me, exactly what is love?" (blasphemous even to ask!)

A poem is an **itch**.

It will never let you be. It wants you to do outrageous things like imagining that the strokes of a clock are really apples falling from a tree, and the tree is life's time, and you can't ever, ever pick up those apples once they have fallen ("A Harvest to Seduce" by Melville Cane). It wants you to place failure, and insults, and the contempt of the world on one side of the scale and love on the other, and find *love* the weightier ("Sonnet 29" by William Shakespeare). It wants you to endure the death of one loved by discovering within yourself the ribs and beams of the structural pattern underlying life ("Patterns" by Amy Lowell).

A poem is an **itch**.

It gives you insomnia; it appears suddenly in a vagrant cloud; it makes the mind rock; it plants the seed of discontent that can shatter smugness; it contradicts—freezing and burning simultaneously. It lulls, and agitates, and maddens, and soothes.

Never mind. Let Archibald MacLeish say it:

*A poem should not mean
But be.*