

a poem freshens the world

—*ted kooser*

How to Read a Poem

*based on the Billy Collins poem
“introduction to poetry”*

t a n i a r u n y a n

• FG *field guide series*

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*for laura, who works harder at loving poetry
than anyone I know*

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Introduction

How to read a poem. A lot of books want to teach you just that. How is this one different?

Think of it less as an instructional book and more as an invitation. For the reader new to poetry, this guide will open your senses to the combined craft and magic known as *poems*. For the well versed, if you will, this book might make you fall in love again.

For many of us, poetry is difficult and unapproachable. Or perhaps we manage well enough, but it feels like so much work—another academic exercise to check off our lists. If poetry requires that much effort, it certainly doesn't feel like something to enjoy, something to curl up with by the fire (or pool).

Whatever your story, I'm going to try to trick you into becoming a better reader of poetry by having fun.

In this book, you will not answer comprehension questions or discuss literary terms directly. Rather, the focus will be to engage you with the poem. Sure, you will become intimately entwined with alliteration, enjambment, and metaphor, but for now, defining and memorizing terms is not important. We're not going on a scavenger hunt for literary devices. We're first and foremost taking a journey to deepen your relationship with poems. This is not about finding answers, decoding lines, or being smart. It's about paying attention to poems. And poems paying attention to you.

You're invited on a journey. Will you RSVP *yes*?

The Reading Soul

Poetry, I have a confession to make. I'm a poet, with two degrees and many editorial positions to my credit, but I don't always want to spend time with you. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, who wave their hands wildly for my attention, you sit in the corner of the garden like that quiet, intricate columbine by the bench.

Come and read me. Not as an editor working through a stack of review copies, but as you, a reading soul. There is so much to talk about. Please, just shut up and take a seat.

I grab my coffee and flip open my iPad®. Just one more *BuzzFeed* article, Poetry. Then I'll read you.

I know I've complained that you're too much work, but it's a dumb excuse. Life *without* you is too much work—trying to make meaning among all the empty words distracting me from, as Mary Oliver calls it, my “one wild and precious life.”

So teach me how to spend time with you again. Let's rekindle the passion I had before I became a poetry professional, before I knew any better.

Maybe Billy Collins can help.

Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

— Billy Collins, from *The Apple That Astonished Paris*

Without beating Collins's well-known poem to death (wouldn't *that* be ironic?), I'm going to use it as a field guide for my own reading. Join me as I walk through several poems' rooms, flip some light switches to see better how to live my wild life, and tell about it.

1

Hold It to the Light: Imagery

Billy Collins’s “Introduction to Poetry” challenges us not to analyze a poem, but to enter it, live with it, and make it a part of us.

In this chapter, I’m going to explore how Collins’s first stanza can help us fall in love with poetry’s dazzler: imagery.

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

Collins tells us to hold the poem up to the light. A younger reader may ask how exactly one can hold a large piece of playground equipment up to the sun, but the slide in this stanza is supposed to make us think of images. In the ancient days before digital cameras and PowerPoint®, people turned their photo negatives into slides to create slide shows. My best sources (um, *Wikipedia* writers) describe a slide as “a specially mounted individual transparency intended for projection onto a screen using a slide projector.” Color slides are small, just 2×2 inches, and when people want to see the image without a projector, they must hold it to a light source, squint a bit, turn it to get a good look.

So how do you hold a poem up to the light? Just look at it from several angles, and don’t worry about what the poem means.

Consider the images in the following poem:

**The Moon Is a Comma,
a Pause in the Sky**

We stand creekside. It’s tomorrow
somewhere else and we’re discussing
if we’ll have a tomorrow together.
Coyotes howl in the woods behind us.
We keep waiting for one
of us to save the other, but we’re quiet.
We can leave here still
a family or we can walk separate
directions. We listen to the chorus,
coyotes and baby coyotes, a tornado
of cries as if they’re circling.

— Kelli Russell Agodon, from *Letters from the
Emily Dickinson Room*

We can find a few pictures here: the moon as a comma, the creek, the tornado of cries. The last image stands out as the central element, the climax the poem drives toward. Let’s take a look:

...We listen to the chorus,
coyotes and baby coyotes, a tornado
of cries as if they’re circling.

How do we open ourselves to this moment, this image?

Here are some guidelines:

1) What do I see, hear, smell, taste or touch on the first, basic level of reading?

Despite its name, imagery refers to all the senses. Upon reading these words, I hear a collection of coyotes' voices: the lower howls of the parents, the higher yelps of the babies. I see and feel the soft, silvery brown fur of the animals circling in a pack. They move intently but gently (they've got babies along), with slinking, deliberate legs. I also see the silvery brown funnel of a tornado touching down.

2) What does the image remind me of?

After taking the time to appreciate the image with my senses, I allow my mind to associate. Freely. What does this picture remind me of in my life and in the world? Here are just a few:

- A dedicated but bad choir
- My children as babies
- My new dog
- Packs of hunting canines in nature videos and the pink carcasses they chew on
- Lying in bed at night and hearing coyotes howl in the woods
- Destructive tornadoes that strike the Midwest

3) How do I feel?

Now I give myself permission to feel what I feel. Obviously,

there is no right way to do this, so I begin by revisiting parts of the poem. The last images certainly seem ominous. Circling coyotes? A tornado?

As I spend some time with these canines, I feel strangely threatened and secure at once. Coyotes howling near my neighborhood mean certain death to smaller animals wandering the night. Yet, the howls remind me I am not alone—that there is more going on than my life and its (often small) problems. The animals move through the night together as a strong family pack. Their circling tornado of cries, then, is both a trap and an embrace—both danger and comfort.

How do these feelings affect my experience with the poem as a whole?

Of course, neither Collins nor I would recommend reading an image out of context without returning to its larger poetic home, so how do those sensory experiences, associations, and emotions help us understand the poem? Let me respond not with answers, but with more questions:

- How apt is this family to have “a tomorrow together”?
- Are they a strong enough pack themselves?
- Can one of them save the other? Will they remain quiet as their destruction looms or make the move toward safety?
- Will they stay together as a family or split apart? What is more likely as the eye of the tornado closes in?
- Ultimately, will this troubled night in their lives, this comma of moon in the sky awaiting the next clause, make or break them?
- How have I experienced the same thrilling desperation of conflict?

Now that I've spent some time with the coyotes, I know how I would answer these questions. What about you?

Stepping Out

Are you ready to explore? As you read, scribble on, and discuss the following poems, allow these tips to guide you:

- What do you see, hear, smell, taste, or touch when you read the poem through the first time?

- Choose a few key images. For each image, ask yourself the following:

—What does the image remind me of?

—How do I feel?

—How does this feeling fit in with my experience of the poem as a whole?

Prelude

In the pause between spring rain
a woman pirouettes in a field.

Her skin is a thousand mirrors.

Sholeh Wolpé

Loss

She carries a miniature portrait
 in the pocket of her jacket,
 south/southwest
 of her heart,
 where it bumps
 above the ribcage,
 a little window
 the size of a salmon fillet
 and framed in black walnut.

It's just the sort of thing
 Sir Walter Raleigh may have carried
 as an icon of his Queen.

It is painted in straw-yellow,
 a field of grass with circles
 of black ash settled,
 like snow between dry blades.

We see only the field:
 the subject of the portrait is elsewhere.

Benjamin Myers

The Eagle

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
 Close to the sun in lonely lands,
 Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
 He watches from his mountain walls,
 And like a thunderbolt he falls.

Lord Alfred Tennyson

The Body Reinvented

How odd to wake up at fifty
in this body of loose boards
and tumbling bricks

with its hair like chipped paint
and its bleary breasts
like the eyes of exhausted yaks,
its back like a suitcase
full of iron nightgowns,
and its boarded-up womb—
a museum awash with ghosts.

But a body still wearing
that sly mauve dress
and dancing shoes frantic as castanets

that refuse to scrape off
or be hauled away
or dissolved in the fumes of time's turpentine
oh, won't you come dance with this body
with its songs that keep sprouting
like a million brash buds
and its face of unquenchable
five-year-old's joy
hardening into a diamond.

Pamela Miller

Blizzard

Snow:
years of anger following
hours that float idly down —
the blizzard
drifts its weight
deeper and deeper for three days
or sixty years, eh? Then
the sun! a clutter of
yellow and blue flakes —
Hairy looking trees stand out
in long alleys
over a wild solitude.
The man turns and there —
his solitary track stretched out
upon the world.

William Carlos Williams

In a London Drawingroom

The sky is cloudy, yellowed by the smoke.
 For view there are the houses opposite
 Cutting the sky with one long line of wall
 Like solid fog: far as the eye can stretch
 Monotony of surface & of form
 Without a break to hang a guess upon.
 No bird can make a shadow as it flies,
 For all is shadow, as in ways o'erhung
 By thickest canvass, where the golden rays
 Are clothed in hemp. No figure lingering
 Pauses to feed the hunger of the eye
 Or rest a little on the lap of life.
 All hurry on & look upon the ground,
 Or glance unmarking at the passers by
 The wheels are hurrying too, cabs, carriages
 All closed, in multiplied identity.
 The world seems one huge prison-house & court
 Where men are punished at the slightest cost,
 With lowest rate of colour, warmth & joy.

George Eliot

End of the Comedy

Eleven o'clock, and the curtain falls.
 The cold wind tears the strands of illusion;
 The delicate music is lost
 In the blare of home-going crowds
 And a midnight paper.

The night has grown martial;
 It meets us with blows and disaster.
 Even the stars have turned shrapnel,
 Fixed in silent explosions.
 And here at our door
 The moonlight is laid
 Like a drawn sword.

Louis Untermeyer

Storm Ending

Thunder blossoms gorgeously above our heads,
 Great, hollow, bell-like flowers,
 Rumbling in the wind,
 Stretching clappers to strike our ears . . .
 Full-lipped flowers
 Bitten by the sun
 Bleeding rain
 Dripping rain like golden honey—
 And the sweet earth flying from the thunder.

Jean Toomer

Crossing 16

You came to my door in the dawn and sang; it angered me to
 be awakened from sleep, and you went away unheeded.
 You came in the noon and asked for water; it vexed me in my
 work, and you were sent away with reproaches.
 You came in the evening with your flaming torches.
 You seemed to me like a terror and I shut my door.
 Now in the midnight I sit alone in my lampless room and call
 you back whom I turned away in insult.

Rabindranath Tagore

Vernal Equinox

The scent of hyacinths, like a pale mist, lies between
 me and my book;
 And the South Wind, washing through the room,
 Makes the candle quiver.
 My nerves sting at a spatter of rain on the shutter,
 And I am uneasy with the thrusting of green shoots
 Outside, in the night.
 Why are you not here to overpower me with your tense and
 urgent love?

Amy Lowell

2**An Ear Against a Hive: Sound**

In the last chapter, we explored how to fall in love with poetry’s darling, imagery. Continuing to use Billy Collins’s poem “Introduction to Poetry” as a stanza-by-stanza field guide for reading poetry, we’ll now take a look at my personal favorite: sound.

Here is the entire second stanza. Ready?

or press an ear against its hive

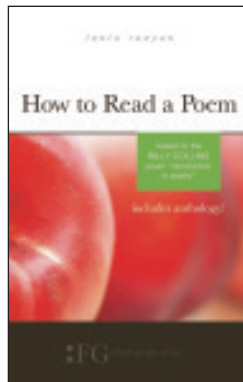
I’ve never pressed my ear to a literal beehive, but I’ve been close enough to a swarm of bees to feel that unsettling—yet delicious—hum in my bones. Sounds sock us in the gut, but we can’t always explain why. Try explaining how and why we react so emotionally to a coyote’s howl or a piece of music. We have our “pet” sounds, too, that delight us. A burbling coffee pot, a kid coloring with markers, people turning magazine pages in a waiting room—those sounds hold my attention.

“A Love Poem,” by Benjamin Myers, is a celebration of sound itself.

A Love Poem

There is magic
 in the way a woman hums,

Want more *How to Read a Poem*?



How to Read a Poem offers delightful advice on how to explore poetry for enjoyment and meaning.

It uses images like the mouse, the hive, the switch (from the Billy Collins poem)—to guide readers into new ways of understanding poems.

Excellent teaching tool. Anthology included.

“This book will not sit on my shelf, but on my desk.”

—Lexanne Leonard, teacher