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THE POETRY GORNER

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CHAPTER 1

Who wants to understand the poem
Must go to the land of poetry;
Who wishes to understand the poet
Must go to the poet's land.

Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe (1749-1832)

EXPLORING THE POET'S LAND

Poetry draws from inside us images which are flashed on the screens of our minds. Colorful pictures twist by. Insights swirl within us, dart to the outer limits of our space, perhaps to return, perhaps not.

THE POETIC WORLD

We live in the world of the poetic—
optical

illusory

bewitching.

Poetry travels on

radio waves

television signals

We chatter alliteratively— “What a stupendous sale at Sears!”

Our speech becomes accidentally poetic at the supermarket:

The lettuce is so green.

So are the beans.

Hey, that rhymes!

Why, we're poets.

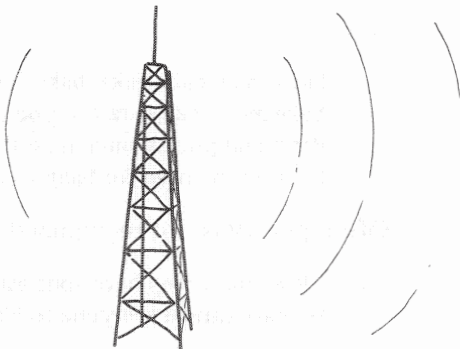
And didn't even know it.

Ever happen to you? Poetry surrounds us. On the playground as nursery rhymes are chanted:

Jack be nimble,

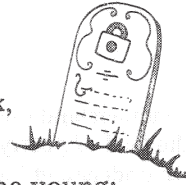
Jack be quick,

Jack, jump over the candle stick.



On tombstones in long forgotten cemeteries, epitaphs wearily maintain their vigils:

A zealous locksmith died of late,
And did arrive at heaven gate,
He stood without and would not knock,
Because he meant to pick the lock.



In our music, when we comfort the young:



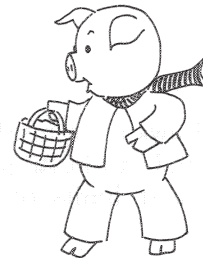
Hush-a-bye, baby, on the tree-top,
When the wind blows the cradle will rock;
When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall,
Down will come baby, bough, cradle and all.

In our music, as comfort for the not so young:

We shall overcome, we shall overcome,
We shall overcome some day.*

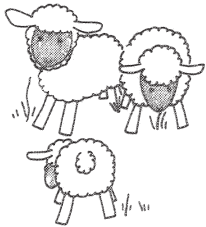
Poetry tickles us in the nursery:

This little pig went to market;
This little pig stayed home;
This little pig had roast beef;
This little pig had none;
And this little pig cried, Wee, wee, wee!
All the way home.



and

Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man
Bake me a cake as fast as you can;
Pat it and prick it, and mark it with a B,
Put it in the oven for baby and me.



Often poetry is not recognized. Consider the parallelism in Isaiah:

All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned everyone to his own way;

Or that of the Proverbs:

The glory of young men is their strength:
and the beauty of old men is the gray head.

WHAT IS POETRY?

Definitions are many but none are all encompassing. Who can say, "This is a poem; that is not."

*"We Shall Overcome" was originally sung on slave plantations before the Civil War. At the turn of the century it became a formal Baptist hymn. Black workers used it as a protest theme in 1946 on picket lines in Charleston, South Carolina.

Democritus, dead some 2,400 years, said rather pointedly to those concerned with poetry:

Whatever a poet writes
with enthusiasm and a divine inspiration
is very fine.

Poetry is as diverse as individual poets. Definitions range from the simple—"Poetry is words put together that give me happiness—" to the didactic—"Poetry is a form of literature written in rhyme and meter—" to the flippant—"What is poetry? Why, that's what poets write."

Take your pick, or make up your own.

The purists in the land of poetry cringe when writers explore new arrangements such as scrambling typeface letters on 20 pound bond paper, calling the confusion *poetry*.

To them poetry must *look* like poetry. Poetry must trip along the tongue. The best poetry rhymes, they say.

Here is one of the best by all standards. Read it aloud. If someone is in the room with you and you are embarrassed, find a place to hide yourself away. Or get up your courage and read part of William Blake's (1757-1827) "The Songs of Innocence" to them.

Piping down the valleys wild,
Piping songs of pleasant glee,
On a cloud I saw a child,
And he laughing said to me:

"Pipe a song about a Lamb!"
So I piped with merry cheer.
"Piper, pipe that song again;"
So I piped, he wept to hear.

"Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe;
Sing thy songs of happy cheer:"
So I sung the same again,
While he wept with joy to hear.

"Piper, sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read."
So he vanish'd from my sight,
And I pluck'd a hollow reed,

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain'd the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear.



What, then, is poetry? Many things.

Poetry is a grinning boy mischievously creating satire in a comic book format: *Mad Magazine*.

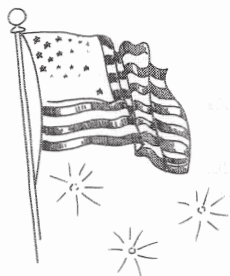
Poetry is an electronic Mork playing word games in our living rooms with Mindy.

Poetry is children on the sidewalk singing

Jumping Jack, Jumping Jack,
Missed a crack and broke his back.

Poetry is singing "The Star Spangled Banner" before a football game on a crisp, fall Saturday afternoon.

Poetry is the Pledge of Allegiance being said in a one-room schoolhouse in the midwest:



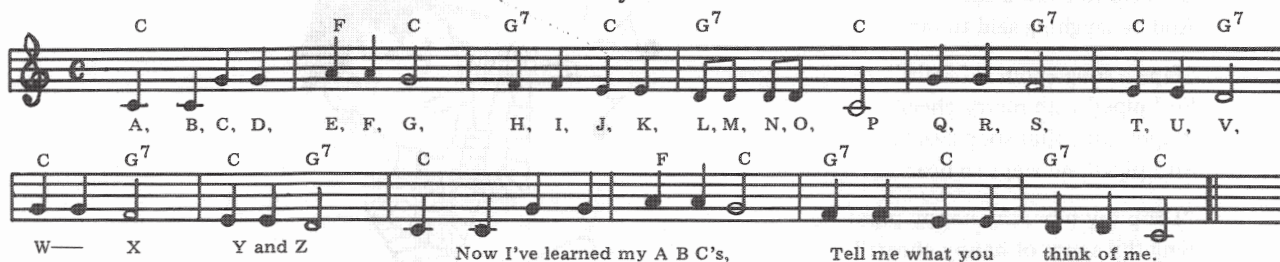
I pledge allegiance
to the flag of the United States of America
and
to the Republic for which it stands,
one nation under God,
indivisible,
with liberty and justice
for all.

Poetry is Robert Frost writing "and miles to go before I sleep"
or a voice entreating, "Grandpa, read my poem."

Poetry is singing an ABC song:

A B C D
E F G
H I J K
L M N O P
Q R S
T U V
W X Y Z

Now I know my A B C's,
Tell me what you think of me.



Poetry is Ludwig Bemelmans creating *Madeline* in a children's book and writing the text in poetry. Madeline promptly goes rhymingly off to the hospital to have her appendix removed.

After all the poets, would-be poets, and learned men and women have had their say, it is Eleanor Farjeon explaining ever so adroitly:

What is Poetry? Who knows?
Not a rose, but the scent of the rose;
Not the sky, but the light in the sky;
Not the fly, but the gleam of the fly;
Not the sea, but the sound of the sea;
Not myself, but what makes me
See, hear, and feel something that prose
Cannot: and what it is, who knows?*



And what it is, who knows?

*"Poetry" from *Eleanor Farjeon's Poems for Children*. Originally published in *Sing for Your Supper* by Eleanor Farjeon. Copyright 1938 by Eleanor Farjeon. Renewed 1966 by Gervase Farjeon. Reprinted by permission of J. B. Lippincott, Publishers.

CHAPTER 2

The proper and immediate object
of poetry is the communication
of immediate pleasure.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834)

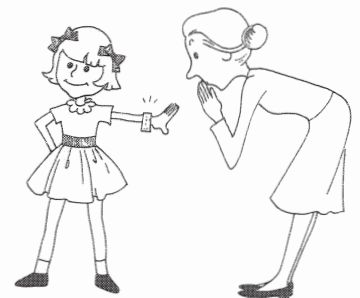
EVOKING POETIC WRITING

Not everybody can be a poet. Not everybody wants to be one. Some who do, do so for the wrong reasons. In Ciardi's *How Does a Poem Mean?** “W. H. Auden was once asked what advice he would give a young man who wished to become a poet. Auden replied that he would ask the young man why he wanted to write poetry. If the answer was ‘because I have something important to say,’ Auden would conclude that there was no hope for that young man as a poet. If on the other hand the answer was something like ‘because I like to hang around words and overhear them talking to one another,’ then that young man was at least interested in a fundamental part of the poetic process and there was hope for him.”

THE LOGOPHILE

The word logophile aptly describes a person who enjoys “hanging around words.” *Logo* and *phile* have Greek roots roughly translatable to mean “word lover.” Encouraging children to be word lovers is at the heart of poetic communication. One primary teacher cut half-inch strips of construction paper, printed “logophile” on each one plus a new vocabulary word, then attached them as bands to her children’s wrists. The proud parents were quick to point out to friends and relatives that *their* children were learning Greek in school!

*John Ciardi and Miller Williams, *How Does a Poem Mean?* 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), p. 3.



TALKING

An editorial in *The Hartford Courant* of August 24, 1897 stated, "Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it." The weather is the favorite opening line of conversation between friends or strangers. It is also a major theme among poets.

Nature responds to weather with the bleak trees of winter, the new green of spring, and the colorful leaves of autumn. Children respond to a discussion of weather through expanding vocabulary. The chalkboard divided into seasons—summer, autumn, winter, spring—evokes listings of words for later use in poetic writing. Here is a start:

Summer	Autumn	Winter	Spring
humid	leaves	icicles	lush
hot	golden	snow	green
sweat	bronze	swirl	cool
dog days	red	slush	grass

As children enter the classroom after being jostled by the cold winds and snow of a winter morning, with their cheeks still smarting and their fingers tingling, try writing down their comments about how they feel, what they saw, what they heard. Ask them: What did the wind do? What did the snow feel like? What sounds did you hear? Then have them paint pictures of the morning with words.



INDIVIDUAL DICTATION

Talking about the weather can inspire dictation for individuals. Children can come by themselves and dictate to the teacher or an aide or even to a cassette tape recorder. They just might want to transcribe their feelings.

Having a "Poet's Bag" taped to the side of the desk is a good place to drop those tidbits that fall into one's consciousness. Later, if the children wish, time can be set aside for everyone to share these short poetic sayings. This is an excellent time to reward children with teacher praise.



GROUP DICTATION

Mood is an important aspect of poetic writing. When the sound of music plays softly from a record and the shades are drawn, the chances for poetic thinking and writing are heightened. There is a stimulation that passes from one to another, somewhat mystically. As one person grasps a perception, other minds intertwine with it. The perception grows into a concept and children begin to experience the fascination of logophiling.