

Talking Back to a Poem

It would be convenient if there were a short list of universal questions, ones that could be used anytime with any poem. In the absence of such a list, here are a few general questions that you might ask when approaching a poem for the first time:

- Who is the speaker?
- What circumstances gave rise to the poem?
- What situation is presented?
- Who or what is the audience?
- What is the tone?
- What form, if any, does the poem take?
- How is form related to content?
- Is sound an important, active element of the poem?
- Does the poem spring from an identifiable historical moment?
- Does the poem speak from a specific culture?
- Does the poem have its own vernacular?
- Does the poem use imagery to achieve a particular effect?
- What kind of figurative language, if any, does the poem use?
- If the poem is a question, what is the answer?
- If the poem is an answer, what is the question?
- What does the title suggest?

Does the poem use unusual words or use words in an unusual way?

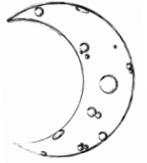
Embrace Ambiguity

Here's a tricky issue: the task is to grasp, to connect, to understand. But such a task is to some degree impossible, and most people want clarity. At the end of class, at the end of the day, we want revelation, a glimpse of the skyline through the lifting fog. Aesthetically, this is understandable. Some magic, some satisfaction, some "Ahhh!" is one of the rewards of any reading, and particularly the reading of poetry. But a poem that reveals itself completely in one or two readings will, over time, seem less of a poem than one that constantly reveals subtle recesses and previously unrecognized meanings.

Not Thirst. Preparation.

By Roscoe Burnems

My daughter drinks a lot of water
And I was worried it was because
she's trying to quench the fiery passion in her belly.
[Or] so concerned about the singe of failure
she prays to countless bottles of Dasani
to drench it.



"My daughter drinks water
like a fish" I'd say in jest,
but I've been looking at it all wrong.
She isn't gills and fins.
She is hydrogen and oxygen.

My daughter drinks water
because she understands this world
will either suffocate you or leave you out to dry,
But nothing evaporates the sea.

My daughter drinks lots of water to replenish.
Sometimes her eyes are Atlantic and Pacific.
Even then, there is a continent's worth of resilience between them.

My daughter drinks a lot of water
and has become a stream of childish innocence,
And a tenacity that comes in waves.
Her favorite place to be is the beach,
for her it's like looking at a mirror:
She knows when to push people and when to ebb.
She only bows to the moon
and keeps the same crescent smile.

My daughter drinks a lot of water
after every playground session, ballet lesson, fight, and argument.
The hurricane brewing inside,
needs all the fuel it can get

Discovering your voice through poetry— Rafael Campo's Poem

Wilhelmina Shakespeare
By Rafael Campo

Blond hair, blue eyes, buck teeth: we taunted you because of your intelligence. You loved to read, and secretly I envied how you gave yourself to poetry, alone beneath the shade a mango tree provided. We dubbed you “Wilhelmina Shakespeare” when we locked you in the basement, proving force could triumph over wisdom. “She’s a witch!” we bellowed as we torched your diary — but nothing we could do would make you cry. You knew the scientific names of rocks; you tried to teach me Spanish once, but I responded to your questions in pig Latin. At night, when all my other cousins watched reruns of “Hawaii 5-0,” I’d sneak away to spy on you. Out on the porch, you’d be there with your sketch pad studying the moths that crowded the bare lightbulb, starved for that dim light, that least illumination. Your features softened as I gazed at you: I understood my insignificance as I saw it was possible to know the beauty in even the plainest things.



Poetry is like music to the mind, scientists prove

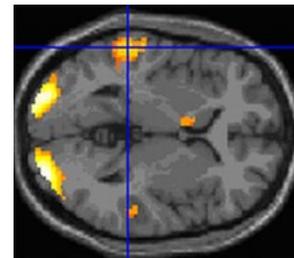
New brain imaging technology is helping researchers to bridge the gap between art and science by mapping the different ways in which the brain responds to poetry and prose.

Scientists at the University of Exeter used state-of-the-art functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology, which allows them to visualize which parts of the brain are activated to process various activities.

No one had previously looked specifically at the differing responses in the brain to poetry and prose.

In research published in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, the team found activity in a “reading network” of brain areas which was activated in response to any written material. But they also found that more emotionally charged writing aroused several of the regions in the brain which respond to music. These areas, predominantly on the right side of the brain, had previously been shown as to give rise to the “shivers down the spine” caused by an emotional reaction to music.

—University of Exeter Press Date: 9 October 2013



"Killing Me Softly"

[LAURYN:]

Strumming my pain with his fingers,
Singing my life with his words,
Killing me softly with his song,
Killing me softly with his song,
Telling my whole life with his words,
Killing me softly with his song.

[FUGEES:]

Hi, yo yea yea.
This is wyclef refugee
El boogie up in here...
Rise well, little

While I'm on this I got my girl L one time! one time!
Hey yo L you know you got the lyrics!

I heard he sang a good song, I heard he had a style,
And so I came to see him and listen for a while.
And there he was this young boy, a stranger to my eyes,

Strumming my pain with his fingers (one time),
Singing my life with his words (two times),
Killing me softly with his song,
Killing me softly with his song,
Telling my whole life with his words,
Killing me softly with his song.

I felt all flushed with fever, embarrassed by the crowd,
I felt he found my letters and read each one out loud.
I prayed that he would finish, but he just kept right on...

Strumming my pain with his fingers (one time),
Singing my life with his words (two times),
Killing me softly with his song,
Killing me softly with his song,
Telling my whole life with his words,
Killing me softly with his song

[CLEF:]

Yo L-Boogie, take it to the bridge

[LAURYN:]

Strumming my pain with his fingers (yes, he was singing),
Singing my life with his words,
Killing me softly with his song,
Killing me softly with his song,
Telling my whole life with his words,
Killing me softly with his song.

[Fading:]

Strumming my pain
Singing my life with his words,
Killing me softly with his song,
Killing me softly with his song,

And he just kept on singing
Singing clear and strong
Strumming my pain with his fingers
Singing my life with his words
Killing me softly with his song
Killing me softly with his song
Telling my whole life with his words
Killing me softly with his song

[Break]

Strumming my pain with his fingers
Singing my life with his words
Killing me softly with his song
Killing me softly with his song
Telling my whole life with his words
Killing me

He was strumming my pain
Yeah, he was singing my life
Killing me softly with his song
Killing me softly with his song
Telling my whole life with his words
Killing me softly
With his song

"Killing Me Softly with His Song" was composed by Charles Fox with lyrics by Norman Gimbel and performed by Lori Lieberman in 1972. In 1973, Roberta Flack sang a version and it became a number one hit. In 1997 the hip-hop group Fugees covered of the song on their album, *The Score* (1996), with Lauryn Hill singing the lead vocals.

"'Killing Me Softly' was a pivotal moment in music for many young black women coming up in the mid-1990s. Never before had a female member of a hip-hop group been given center stage to shine like that on a platform like that—in a song like that—and when Hill did, she changed the way we contributed to and related to that sphere of musical culture."

—Janelle Harris. June 1, 2016, *The Radical Power of 'Killing Me Softly'* *The Atlantic*