

# Short and Sweet

Great Poems  
for  
Literacy Students

Collected for the Cape Fear Literacy Council

by

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Teaching notes by William Cooper



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# Introduction

Poetry – one of the rewards of learning how to read – can capture life in snapshots, reveal the mysteries of language, and help learning by rhythm and rhyme. It's not hard to follow Emily Dickinson's eye:

A bird came down the walk  
He did not know I saw.  
He bit an angleworm in halves  
And ate the fellow – raw.

and fall into her world.

The poems collected here come from many different sources. Classics, blues, haiku, country music – treasure is where you find it. They are meant to be read as stand-alone pieces or in any combination the tutor and student may choose. If both agree, the 52 poems could be read at the rate of one per week and since each poem can be handled separately, the student can make it part of his life for as long as he likes – take it home, stick it on the fridge, spend time with it, find out by experience that you can hang out with a poem as easily as you hang out with a friend. The goal is to feel the magic of language coming alive off the page.

Titles have been added to the Dickinson poems and the Chippewa song. Each poem is backed by a short note toward learning, designed to help the tutor find ways into, through and beyond the poem for the student, and written in the conviction that a good poem stands as a whole, superior to any comment upon it. Welcome to the feast – above all, enjoy!

By William Cooper

# Notes for Tutors

This small collection contains a poem for every week of the year. The booklet is designed primarily for tutors so that they can pick and choose poems to use with their students. We have also printed the poems on cards. The idea is that students can take home a card and read and re-read the poem during the week, without being overwhelmed by pages of text. Some students, however, might prefer to use the booklet.

## **Why use poetry?**

Obviously, reading poetry requires no excuse. However, beginning literacy students are generally not particularly interested in being “literary.” Their primary concern is to be able to read everyday material. We believe that these poems can help them to achieve that goal.

Beginning adult readers have very particular needs when it comes to choosing appropriate supplementary reading material. Ideally they should have materials that are simultaneously

- Interesting or rewarding in themselves
- Written at the student’s reading level
- Written for adults
- Rich in the phonics patterns the student is working on
- Full of rhyme and repetition make decoding easier and to help in developing fluency
- Satisfying to read over and over
- Useful for developing reading comprehension strategies.
- Short enough not to be daunting

This is a tall order and most material falls short in one or another of these areas. Each of these short poems, however, satisfies (most) of these criteria.

## **Developing fluency and accuracy**

Read the poems over and over to develop fluency and accuracy. Becoming a good reader requires practice. Just as we develop our muscles by lifting weights, and our stamina by aerobic activities, readers need to develop their accuracy and their fluency. The only way to do this is to read every day. Poetry, by its nature, rewards re-reading. Encourage

your student to take home a poem and to read it aloud once a day until the next lesson.

Accuracy means that the student reads every word—including word endings—precisely and correctly. Fluency means that the student can smoothly read the passage in its natural meaningful rhythm without stumbling.

These are two critical skills that many students never develop. The initial act of reading a given passage is often so laborious that neither the tutor nor the student want to keep going over the same ground. However, real reading does not take place word by word. Students need to be able to read in phrases—fluently and accurately—in order to be able to really turn their attention to the meaning of the passage.

Some studies suggest that students need to read a word 350 times before it enters their sight word repertoire. Until then, they will need help in order to read it. That help comes from context, expectations, memory, or a teacher's prompt.

These poems will repay frequent reading. In many cases, deeper meanings emerge only after spending time with the poem. In each case, as the student re-reads the poem, he or she will be unconsciously learning about the craft of written language.

### **Work on the poem together first.**

Set your student up for success. Don't just throw a poem at him and tell him to read it out loud.

Start with pre-reading. Talk about the theme, the author. Ask a leading question. Go over any unusual vocabulary words. Let your enthusiasm come through.

Then, read the poem. You might want to read it aloud first, or you might ask your student to read first. Take turns. Be bold. Try reading it in different ways and decide what you like best.

Talk about it.

### **Encourage re-reading.**

Tutors need to be firm and encouraging with their students, making it clear to them that the key to success lies in practicing a little bit each day. Homework should be short and sweet also. Suggest that your student read the poem everyday until your next lesson. (If your student doesn't respond to these poems, you might want to try a Bible verse, a

passage from the textbook or let the student choose something else. The point is they should commit to reading *something* aloud everyday.)

Have your student read the poem aloud to you the following week and note the changes in fluency and accuracy. Some tutors have even kept graphs to show students how many fewer errors and hesitations they make after practicing for a few days.

Some students may memorize the poems, because they are so short. That's fine. In fact, that's great. As long as they continue to focus on the words as they read it aloud, they will be reinforcing their independent reading skills.

### **Use the poem as a springboard for more reading and writing.**

If your student responds to a particular poem, you might want to use it to generate additional activities. For example, reading other poems by the same author or on the same theme, writing a similar poem, copying the poem in good handwriting, etc. Use your imagination.

Be playful.

In addition, you can use the poems to point out specific decoding issues. For example, in the poem *Hope*, Langston Hughes deliberately leaves off the final g in the word thinking—he writes *thinkin'*. Many students have difficulty tracking and paying attention to the final parts of words. You could use this example to talk about the differences in oral and written speech, and to help your student focus on word endings.

### **Collect more poems and passages**

Be on the lookout for other short passages or poems that might be suitable for your student. We would love to receive a copy. You can bring it into the literacy council or email it to me at [literacy@wilmington.net](mailto:literacy@wilmington.net).

By Katie Morrow  
Cape Fear Literacy Council

## Airing Linen

Wash and dry,  
sort and fold:  
you and I  
are growing old.

— Henry Taylor

**Note:** Is that all we are, just clothes slowly wearing out in the weekly Washdays of Life? Who's doing the Laundry? Who's in charge here?

## All in Green

All in green went my love riding  
on a great horse of gold  
into the silver dawn.

four lean hounds crouched low and smiling  
the merry deer ran before . . .

— e. e. cummings

**Note:** Isn't being in love like hunting? You run but you want to be caught, even if it kills you . . .

# The Angel and the Little Old Lady

an angel  
appeared to  
a little old  
lady

& said:

would you  
like a  
wish?

for my  
grand-daughter  
said the little  
old lady:

that she grow  
up to be a  
beautiful young  
lady

& marry a  
nice young  
man

two wishes  
said the angel

would you  
like another?

whatever other  
good thing you  
can think of

said the little  
old lady

the girl grew up  
to be a beautiful  
young lady

& married a  
nice young man

after a year or  
so, a child was  
born to them

(the angel's  
idea)

now the old  
lady was  
quite a bit  
older:

the angel  
appeared  
to her again  
& said:

would you  
like a  
wish?

for the  
child,  
she said:

that he grow  
up to be a  
handsome  
young man

& marry  
a nice  
young girl

two wishes  
said the angel

would you  
like another?

whatever other  
good thing  
you can think  
of

said the little  
old lady

— Robert Lax

**Note:** Don't you wish you had a grandma like this? What does she ask for? Why does she leave the third wishes for the angel to fulfill? What is her attitude toward life?

## The Angel and the Little Old Lady

An angel appeared to a little old lady and said: “Would you like a wish?”

“For my grand-daughter,” said the little old lady: “That she grow up to be a beautiful young lady and marry a nice young man.”

“Two wishes,” said the angel. “Would you like another?”

“Whatever other good thing you can think of,” said the little old lady.

The girl grew up to be a beautiful young lady and married a nice young man. After a year or so a child was born to them (the angel’s idea). Now the little old lady was quite a bit older.

The angel appeared to her again and said: “Would you like a wish?”

“For the child,” she said: “That he grow up to be a handsome young man and marry a nice young girl.”

“Two wishes,” said the angel. “Would you like another?” “Whatever other good thing you can think of,” said the little old lady.

— Robert Lax

**Note:** Compare this piece to the poem “The Angel and the Little Old Lady.” Is this story better in prose, as it appears here, or as a poem?

## Begin It

Whatever you can do,  
or dream you can, begin it.  
Boldness has genius,  
power and magic in it.

— Wolfgang von Goethe

**Note:** One day a friend gave me a little round disk with TUIT printed on it and said, “No need to put it off any longer now that you’ve got a Round Tuit.” Isn’t Goethe doing the same thing?

## A Bird Came Down the Walk

A bird came down the walk:  
He did not know I saw;  
He bit an angleworm in halves  
And ate the fellow – raw . . .

— Emily Dickinson

Note: “He did not know I saw.” Ah, the unsuspecting subject . . . Think of all the things poets, musicians and painters have seen over the centuries without being seen. Would the bird have behaved differently if it had known someone was watching?

## Chippewa Song

Sometimes I go about pitying myself,  
And all the time  
I am being carried on great winds across the sky.

—Chippewa song

translated by Frances Densmore

Note: Every religion has its way of dealing with self-pity. Christians have a story about the man who sees a single set of footprints on the sand and complains to the Lord that he had to cross the desert alone. Then he is told: “I was carrying you.”

## Coward

Bravery runs in my family.

– Archie Ammons

**Note:** He may be sly, but at least he's honest. Wait a minute – is the poet talking about himself here, is he assuming the character of a coward, or is he just playing with two senses of the word *run*?

from *Death of the Hired Man*

Home is where, when you have to go there,  
They have to take you in.

– Robert Frost

Note: In this poem the laborer Silas, old and broke, has returned to the farm where he worked for many years because he has no place else to go. Warren, the owner, wants to turn him away, but his wife tells Warren something that he and all of us need to know. Have you ever experienced the truth of these words?

## Dust of Snow

The way a crow  
shook down on me  
the dust of snow  
from a hemlock tree  
has given my heart  
a change of mood  
and saved some part  
of a day I had rued.

– Robert Frost

**Note:** It's always the world around us that saves us from ourselves.

## The Early Morning

The moon on the one hand, the dawn on the other:  
The moon is my sister, the dawn is my brother.  
The moon on my left hand and the dawn on my right.  
My brother, good morning: my sister, good night.

—Hilaire Belloc

**Note:** The speaker stands in balance and harmony with the world. Do you feel related to nature? In what way?

from *Ecclesiastes*, Chapter 3

- 1 To everything there is a season,  
And a time for every purpose under heaven:
- 2 A time to be born,  
And a time to die;  
A time to plant  
And a time to pluck up what is planted;
- 3 A time to kill,  
And a time to heal;  
A time to break down,  
And a time to build up:
- 4 A time to weep,  
And a time to laugh;  
A time to mourn,  
And a time to dance;
- 5 A time to cast away stones,  
And a time to gather stones together;  
A time to embrace,  
And a time to refrain from embracing;

- 6 A time to gain,  
And a time to lose;  
A time to keep,  
And a time to throw away;
- 7 A time to tear,  
And a time to sew;  
A time to keep silence,  
And a time to speak;
- 8 A time to love,  
And a time to hate;  
A time of war,  
And a time of peace.

**Note:** “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity,” said The Preacher. Ecclesiastes doesn’t pretend to understand life, but he certainly sees both ends of it.

## First Fig

My candle burns at both ends;  
It will not last the night;  
But ah my foes and oh my friends –  
It sheds a lovely light!

—Edna St. Vincent Millay

**Note:** How fitting that this poem should be written during the Jazz Age, the Roaring Twenties, that non-stop party which only ended with the crash of the stock market, the long hangover of the Great Depression, and the nightmare of WW II. But look at it personally – have you ever been tempted to take it to the limit – and beyond? What are the dangers of such behavior? How did Edna St. Vincent Millay get away with it?

## Fog

The fog comes  
on little cat feet.

It sits looking  
over harbor and city  
on silent haunches  
and then moves on.

– Carl Sandburg

**Note:** Poetry is mysterious – how can fog have little cat feet? Why don't we just dismiss the idea as ridiculous? Yet this poem keeps appearing, making its own way. People like it, people who have never heard of the pieces Sandburg was so famous for like "Chicago," people who don't know Sandburg's name. Will his name vanish and the poem remain?

from *Hamlet*

To be or not to be, that is the question . . .

—William Shakespeare

**Note:** Suicide is serious business. We've all considered it – we've all rejected it, thank God. The experts agree that it should not be a forbidden subject, and Shakespeare himself counsels us

*Ne'er pull thy hat about thy brows, man!  
Give sorrow words. The grief that will not speak  
Whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break.*

## Happy Thought

The world is so full of a number of things,  
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.

– Robert Louis Stevenson

**Note:** The poet cites the diversity of life as the source of satisfaction but never states the obvious question – why then are people unhappy? Why indeed? Do you think Stevenson is happy in this poem?

## Hope

Sometimes when I'm lonely,  
Don't know why,  
Keep thinkin' I won't be lonely,  
By and by.

—Langston Hughes

**Note:** Isn't there something about the sound of this poem that makes you think of the kind of song a child sings just walking down the street alone? What were your thoughts when you were alone as a child?

## I'm Nobody

I'm Nobody – who are you?  
Are you – Nobody – too?  
Then there's a pair of us – don't tell!  
They'd advertise, you know.  
  
How dreary to be Somebody  
How public, like a frog  
To tell one's name the livelong June  
To an admiring bog!

– Emily Dickinson

**Note:** When Emily Dickinson died in 1885, few outside Amherst, Massachusetts knew or cared, yet today this eight-line lyric is the most widely published poem in English, and the woman who shut the world out for more than half her life and never gave a title to any of her poems is nearly as famous as Shakespeare. (Some of you may be used to seeing *banish* instead of *advertise* in the fourth line. *Advertise* is what Dickinson wrote; *banish* an editor's alteration.) Is she dismissing public opinion here or secretly yearning for fame? The enigma is typical of Dickinson's work; she constantly asks unanswerable questions. Her knife has two edges, both sharp.

## I Never Saw a Moor

I never saw a Moor  
I never saw the Sea,  
Yet know I how the Heather looks  
And what a Wave must be.

I never talked to God  
Or visited in Heaven,  
Yet certain am I of the spot  
As if the Chart were given.

– Emily Dickinson

Note: This is only one of Emily's contemplations of the Eternal. At times she takes a different attitude toward Him, as in the poem of loss by death in which she cries

*Burglar! Banker! Father!  
I am poor once more.*

## Japanese Haiku: Do-It-Yourself

haiku: small picture                   *(5 syllables)*

in seventeen syllables           *(7 syllables)*

you can do it too               *(5 syllables)*

There are also cyber haiku

a system failure

reduces your computer

to a simple stone

Note:                   it's easy – just start  
                          paint little pictures in words  
                          no problem at all

## Japanese Haiku

another year  
in this corrupt world  
this body

homeless now  
I view the blossoming  
Spring

**Note:** The Japanese gave haiku to the world – now entire Internet sites are devoted to this three-line form, the shortest and simplest-seeming of all poetic genres. Try writing your own: 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables. (Because they are translations from the Japanese, these haiku don't follow the classic pattern.)

## Japanese Haiku: Frogs

chin-deep  
in the fallen blossoms –  
frog!

praising Buddha  
mouths gaping wide . . .  
frogs

locked in  
a staring contest  
with a frog

looks like the boss frog  
on the high seat  
croaking

**Note:** Haiku are like frogs and frogs are like haiku:  
beautiful, spiritual, comic and funky.

## Japanese Haiku: Spring

asleep  
on the bronze temple bell  
butterfly

spring rain –  
a child gives a dance lesson  
to the cat

**Note:** The shock that butterfly is going to get . . . the fun that kid is having . . . the sweet and sour sauce of life. Why become an adult and give it all up? Why not become a poet?

## The Lama

In Tibet there lives a lama  
Got no papa, got no mama.  
Got no wife and got no chillun  
Got no use for penicillin . . .

– Ogden Nash

**Note:** The Chinese have chased all the lamas out of Tibet, ending a 2,000-year-old tradition, so this poem is dated, but don't forget: poems are snapshots of their time. Do you want to explore the poem as it relates to world history, or do you want to relax and contemplate the lama's stress-free lifestyle? After all, Buddha said, "He who has ten dear ones has ten woes, he who has three dear ones has three woes, he who has one dear one has one woe, he who has no dear one has no woes."

## Leisure

What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.  
No time to stand beneath the boughs  
And stare as long as sheep or cows . . .

—William Henry Davies

**Note:** What is the value of wasted time? Can time be wasted at all? Doesn't it pass whether we "waste" or "use" it? Can we rats get out of the rat race? Have you?

## Morning

dam's broke,  
head's a  
waterfall.

– Robert Creeley

**Note:** How's this for the perfect description of a hangover?  
Oh, you've never had one? Oops, sorry . . .

## My People

The night is beautiful,  
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,  
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.  
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.

– Langston Hughes

**Note:** Why does this poem have such a serene, harmonious feeling?

## Night

Over the mountains

all is peace

You can almost hear

the silences.

The birds in the pine-woods

sink in their nest.

Wait! Only wait!

we too shall rest.

—Humbert Wolfe

**Note:** Peace is hard for humans to find. Some humans, the poets, see peace all around them in nature, but it only reminds them of how restless we are. What answer to this problem does he suggest in the last line?

## The Old Dog

The old dog barks backward without getting up.  
I can remember when he was a pup.

## The Jellyfish

Who wants my jellyfish?  
I'm not sellyfish.

– Ogden Nash

Note: Ogden Nash made the outrageous twisting of words to achieve “atrosbus” rhymes his stock in trade, appealing to an anti-poetic streak in the American character and allowing the reader to identify with a fellow victim of English spelling. Focusing on this poet’s style, however, you are surprised by an unexpected element – Nash’s humanity. His animal poems are a comic zoo, but there’s usually a grain of truth included: if the pup is old, hey, what about me?

## The Pasture

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;  
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away  
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):  
I sha'n't be gone long – you come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf  
That's standing by the mother. It's so young  
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.  
I sha'n't be gone long – you come too.

—Robert Frost

**Note:** The poet invites us out for a walk on the farm. Or perhaps he's writing about his own life. Frost and his wife never bonded emotionally – is this his longing for her to share with him?

## Poem for Rodney

people always ask what  
am i going to be  
when i grow  
up and i always  
just think  
i'd like to grow  
up

—Nikki Giovanni

**Note:** Who is the child and who is the author? If you didn't know that Nikki Giovanni thinks of herself as a black poet, would you be able to tell that this poem was written by an African-American?

## Prayer

I ask you this:  
Which way to go?  
I ask you this:  
Which sin to bear?  
Which crown to put  
Upon my hair?  
I do not know,  
Lord God,  
I do not know.

– Langston Hughes

**Note:** When Hughes was twelve, his congregation forced him against his will to declare that he was saved. The experience embittered him against religion. Years later as a mature man he comes before the Lord again and asks these simple, searching questions, questions for a soul in trouble.

## The Purple Cow

I never saw a purple cow,  
I never hope to see one;  
But I can tell you, anyhow,  
I'd rather see than be one.

– Gelett Burgess

**Note:** Once a poem is published and enjoyed, it escapes its author's control, as in the case of this, the most notorious nonsense verse in the world. Maddened by its popularity, Burgess was finally driven to write a sequel:

### *Confession*

*Ah, Yes! I Wrote the "Purple Cow" –  
I'm Sorry, now, I Wrote it!  
But I can Tell you Anyhow,  
I'll Kill you if you Quote it!*

# The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens

—William Carlos Williams

**Note:** Can anything depend on such a homely object? It just sits there in the barnyard, printed on your mind . . . Wait a minute, how did that happen? Sure enough, that's what rain does to paint, polishes it till it gleams. Isn't he talking about not just looking but seeing what's right here in front of us? Red and white in this word-painting are just two of the colors splashed before our eyes every day. If we respond to what Williams is saying we will not just look, but see; not just listen, but hear; not just touch, but feel, how beautiful the world is . . .

## Requiem

Under the wide and starry sky,  
Dig the grave and let me lie.  
Glad did I live, and gladly die,  
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse that you grave for me:  
“Here he lies where he longed to be.  
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,  
And the hunter home from the hill.”

—Robert Louis Stevenson

**Note:** If you haven't read *Treasure Island*, welcome to the world of Robert Louis Stevenson. His wishes were carried out and this poem is carved on his tombstone in Samoa. His generous and fearless soul shines clearly in these lines. If you had to write your own epitaph, what would it be?

from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,  
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread – and Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness –  
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow! <sup>1</sup>

– translated by Edward Fitzgerald

**Note:** Here is Omar Khayyam's vision of heaven on earth.  
How does it match your vision of Paradise in this life?

<sup>1</sup> Wilderness would be Paradise enough!

from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,  
Moves on; nor all your Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line –  
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

– translated by Edward Fitzgerald

**Note:** The moving finger, the irreversible course of time, reminds us of the dreadful hand writing on the wall of King Belshazzar, foreshadowing his doom (Daniel 5:5-31). What about your past would you change? How have you adjusted to the fact that the past can't be changed?

## The Secret

We dance round in a ring and suppose  
But the Secret sits in the middle, and knows.

– Robert Frost

**Note:** How much about life do you know? How much don't you know? Which is bigger, the known or the unknown?

## Small Song

The reeds give  
way to the  
wind and give  
the wind away.

– A. R. Ammons

**Note:** It's as if the poet challenged himself to say the most with the fewest possible words.

## Song

You bound strong sandals on my feet,  
You gave me bread and wine,  
And sent me under sun and stars,  
For all the world was mine.

Oh, take the sandals off my feet,  
You know not what you do;  
For all my world is in your arms,  
My sun and stars are you.

—Sara Teasdale

**Note:** Here's a relationship with an unintended development – a pupil (child? patient? athlete?) is taught to be independent but ends up bound to the teacher. Has something gone wrong or is this the proper course of events? Is this poem about dependency or the strange ways of love?

## Song from *Cymbeline*

Fear no more the heat of the sun  
Nor the furious winter's rages,  
Thou thy earthly work hast done,  
Home art gone and taken thy wages.  
Golden lads and girls all must  
Like chimney sweepers, come to dust.

—William Shakespeare

**Note:** Death. Garrison Keillor calls it “the big D in the basement.” Isn't it our awareness of our own end that makes us human? That drives us not only to commit crime and wage war, but also to build pyramids, write plays, and seek God?

## Taps

Day is done  
gone the sun  
from the lake  
from the hill  
from the sky.  
Safely rest,  
all is well –  
God is nigh.

**Note:** Here is the most commonly seen verse of many written for this tune, the best-known piece of military music in the USA. Interesting legends surround its Civil War origin. One of the best tells about a Union officer who, hearing a soldier moan from the dark in front of the Confederate lines, risked his life to pull the man back to safety. He struck a match and saw that the soldier, a Confederate, was dead, but worse, that it was his own son, who had been studying music in the South and enlisted without telling his father. The major was not permitted a band for his son's burial service next day, only a bugler, who played the notes of the melody written on a piece of paper found in the young man's pocket. It was "Taps."

## The Ten Commandments in Verse

- I. Have thou no other gods but me,
- II. And to no image bow thy knee.
- III. Take not the name of God in vain:
- IV. The Sabbath day do not profane.
- V. Honor thy father and mother too;
- VI. And see that thou no murder do.
- VII. Abstain from word and deeds unclean;
- VIII. Nor steal, though thou are poor and mean.
- IX. Bear not false witness, shun that blot;
- X. What is thy neighbor's covet not.

These laws, O Lord, write in my heart, that I,  
May in thy faithful service live and die.

– Anonymous

**Note:** History makes me curious. This rhymed version of the Decalogue was stitched into a sampler 270 years ago by a little girl named Mary Vining. What became of Mary? How faithfully did she follow the laws that Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai so long ago?

Their Sex Life

One failure on  
Top of another.

—A. R. Ammons

**Note:** Don't tell me this guy doesn't have a sense of humor . . .

## There Was an Old Man with a Beard

There was an old man with a beard  
Who said, “It is just as I feared! –  
    Two Owls and a Hen,  
    Four Larks and a Wren  
Have all built their nests in my beard.”

— Edward Lear

**Note:** OK, all poetry is not great. Well, even poets have to kill time once in awhile . . .

## This is Just to Say

I have eaten

the plums

that were in

the icebox

and which

you were probably

saving for breakfast

Forgive me

they were delicious

so sweet

and so cold

—William Carlos Williams

**Note:** Do you ever leave notes for members of your family? Could any of them become poems? What changes would you make in them so that they became poetry?

from To My Dear and Loving Husband

If ever two were one, then surely we  
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee.  
If ever wife was happy in a man,  
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.

– Anne Bradstreet

**Note:** Here speaks a completely satisfied woman. Anne Bradstreet, a Puritan, a housewife, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century pioneer on the rocky coast of New England, is counting her blessings.

## Watermelons

Green Buddhas  
on the fruit stand.  
We eat the smile  
and spit out the teeth.

—Robert Simac

Note: Is there any substitute for the poet's imagination?  
Don't you wish you had thought of this?

# We Real Cool

THE POOL PLAYERS.

SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We

left school. We

lurk late. We

strike straight. We

sing sin. We

thin gin. We

jazz June. We

die soon.

—Gwendolyn Brooks

**Note:** Deceptive simplicity! How did the poet do it? She captures the tragic cycle of street life in street language: six lines, 24 one-syllable words, only three of them longer than four letters. Catch the finger-poppin' rhythm of *WE lurk late/ WE strike straight* that makes you read across the line ends and create a tense drum beat to go with the violence. Life at the Golden Shovel isn't for everyone . . .

## Wild Nights

Wild Nights – Wild Nights!

Were I with thee

Wild Nights should be

Our luxury.

Futile – the Winds

To a Heart – in port

Done with the compass

Done with the chart.

Rowing in Eden

Ah – the Sea!

Might I but moor

Tonight – in thee.

— Emily Dickinson

**Note:** Emily Dickinson may have lived alone all her life, but not in her imagination! Here we have love as a vast ocean best seen from a safe harbor. What are the ways in which being in love is like sailing?

## The Wind

Who has seen the wind?  
Neither you nor I,  
But when the trees bow down their heads  
The wind is passing by.

Who has seen the wind?  
Neither I not you,  
But when the leaves blow off the trees  
The wind is passing through.

—Christina Rossetti

**Note:** Many authors have written for both adults and children. Does this seem to be a child's poem, an adult's, or both? Does it matter?

## A Word Is Dead

A Word is dead  
When it is said  
Some say.

I say it just  
Begins to live  
That day.

—Emily Dickinson

**Note:** This prophecy came true for the prophet herself. She makes it look easy, but there's a catch: to live for all time, the words have to be perfectly selected, distilled from a lifetime of passionate suffering and keen insight. The great words of the future *will* be written – who will be the poet?



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