

Reading Poetry Anew with Mary Zoll

Read the whole poem, out loud, honoring the line breaks, stanza breaks, and punctuation.

What is your immediate physical reaction? What do you feel in your body?

What is your emotional reaction?

Is the poem interesting? Do you want to read it again?

Read it again, out loud.

What is happening in the poem? What is the poem about? What is the topic? Who is speaking? Who is the speaker speaking to? When? Where?

Paraphrase line by line. Look up words and allusions.

Is it narrative, descriptive, or lyric?

What does the title add?

Look at the language, both sentence structure (syntax) and word choice (diction). Is the language concrete or abstract? Concise, concentrated, or wordy? Original, imaginative, surprising, daring, intense, exceptional, or bland, trite, predictable? Is the language memorable?

Is there pattern? Is there order?

What is the form: sonnet, villanelle, sestina, haiku . . . or free verse?

Is there music?

Look at the poetic devices: rhyme, rhythm, images, alliteration, repetition, line breaks, etc.

What is the theme? What does the poem say about the topic? Is the poem credible?

Is the poem obscure or accessible? (Does it make you feel stupid?)

Is the poem too long? Do you need the beginning? Do you need the end?

If it were your poem, would you change anything? Does anything distract you, annoy you?

Do you want to read it again? Will you keep it or throw it away? Do you want to memorize it?

Do you identify with anything in the poem? Do you feel understood? Did the poem articulate something you feel? Do you feel more connected to other people? Did you learn anything? Did you have a new experience? Are you moved to action?

TOC for Bob Hicok
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having had a little bit
in the loop
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the world is ending
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the call to worship

Bob Hicok

from diodepoetry.com

It's all downhill until it's flat or uphill

You're probably wondering
why I took up skateboarding at fifty eight
and not skeet shooting, bank robbing, teleporting.

So many gerunds: this is a very active poem.
It's almost sweating.

I took up skateboarding due to all the death
my wife and I have to come: her parents and mine.

I'm not very good. I fell and broke
a tulip yesterday. The day before, I got a ticket
for not acting my age. I don't know
any of the jargon, who the great skateboarders
of the Renaissance were, but the gear's cool
and motion distracts entropy
from my sagging flesh, which is to say,
a little bit of zoom
and the future doesn't exist. It's like being
the best watch in the world
made of bones and bits of rivers
and fear that I don't really love anyone,
but since watches have no *then* to them, only *now*,
I'm off the hook for all the guitar smashing
that goes on in my brain.

Is any of this true?
Probably not. Probably all of it. Probably
you don't like this commentary and I don't care
for purists or Puritans or sitting still
when I can be out there
testing my balance and perfecting a move
I call Muddling Through.

And there's this. Mom and dad—thank you.
I know you're worried
no one will visit your graves.
I am both no one who will
and no one who won't. And sometimes when I do
I'll let the weeds grow toward the sun,
and sometimes when I don't, the weeds will die
of their own accord. The mess it will be
is the surprise it has always been. Life.
This breathing of stars.

Bob Hicok

Having had a little bit of enough

Perhaps we should stab an evil person
and then go to a church or temple or mosque
and ask one of the holy people we find there
to excuse our behavior based on the idea
that it was the knife's fault.
Probably we should stare at clouds instead
and tell each other which dead president
or extinct species of beetle
that one over there looks like. No,
the other one. The other other one.
Reading the news these days
make me want to put my head
under a lawnmower for the peace and quiet.
Also a bit of the suicide
would be nice. Just a dab.
I don't really want to die
with my boots on. First
I'd have to buy some boots and second
I'd have to go to the boot store
to buy some boots and third
I'd have to buy a horse to go with the boots
and I don't have enough room
for my depression as it is, let alone
my depression on top of a horse. Evil people
doing evil things. Maybe what I meant to say
is we should stab an evil person
with the stuffed bear they were probably denied
as a child. Whatever. We have to try something
don't we, to make this a better world?
Not a batter world, not a bitter world,
not a butter world, although I can see merits
in all of those. A better world. And no,
not a world where you can bet
whenever you want on whatever you want,
though we seem to be going down that road.
Vegas will let you slap dough down
on anything, even the when and how
of the apocalypse, though not the why.
There's no mystery to the why: because.
And what would a better world look like?
That's easy: different.

from www.onlypoems.net

Bob Hicok

In The Loop

I heard from people after the shootings. People
I knew well or barely or not at all. Largely
the same message: how horrible it was, how little
there was to say about how horrible it was.
People wrote, called, mostly e-mailed
because they know I teach at Virginia Tech,
to say, there's nothing to say. Eventually
I answered these messages: there's nothing
to say back except of course there's nothing
to say, thank you for your willingness
to say it. Because this was about nothing.
A boy who felt that he was nothing,
who erased and entered that erasure, and guns
that are good for nothing, and talk of guns
that is good for nothing, and spring
that is good for flowers, and Jesus for some,
and scotch for others, and "and" for me
in this poem, "and" that is good
for sewing the minutes together, which otherwise
go about going away, bereft of us and us
of them. Like a scarf left on a train and nothing
like a scarf left on a train. As if the train,
empty of everything but a scarf, still opens
its doors at every stop, because this
is what a train does, this is what a man does
with his hand on a lever, because otherwise,
why the lever, why the hand, and then it was over,
and then it had just begun.

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Bob Hicok

from www.onlypoems.net

The Definition of Insanity

Wednesday and once again
I've not brought peace to the Middle East.
I'm not even trying, other than swearing
at the TV and calling politicians idiots.
I have gathered twenty dead bees
in a jam jar, an interesting alternative
to potpourri, and dusted the deer skull
on the mantel. But as far as settling
ancient conflicts, nothing. How do you think

of history? As something in a book? A thing
you said on a bridge once
about the water flowing past
while holding the hand of someone you loved
and all of it gone now, the bridge, the river,
the hand? When I think of the Middle East,

I see a bear that's eating a lion
that's eating a wolf, see people
trying to murder murders
that have already happened,
as if to kill a way back to the dead.
The desire for blood is the desire for life
and how do we put an end to that?
With missiles and guns? Rape?
And what problem is solved
by bombing a hospital?
Only the problem of not having enough evil
that needs to be avenged. I don't think the dead

need more neighbors and friends.
We could make life out of their deaths,
write books about their jump shots
and overbites, use their old shoes
to carry moonlight out of the house
and into the garden where it belongs,
form a choir of our crying. War

should be fought by people brave enough
to listen, men and women trained
to stand naked under white flags
in the wind and rain, to argue
and dream of more humane ways
to be human. This is only a fantasy
if it never happens.

Bob Hicok

This Again

The recommendation from some website quoted on the news is to rape, cut the throats of, and throw female Jews off a cliff. But how far are the cliffs of Ithaca from Cornell, where the raping and throat slashing is supposed to occur? And if you don't have a car, are you supposed to borrow one or can you Uber a body to a cliff and ask the driver to wait while you chuck it off? And what if you're afraid of heights? It's time we address the shocking lack of detail in antisemitism. It's one thing to hate Jews but another to ask me to hate Jews without telling me how to hate Jews or why I should hate anyone when loving everyone is an option. A difficult one, I admit, impossible even, but in a process sense, it requires no knives or cars or evil and can be conveyed in a simple phrase: See someone, love someone. Or, Love thy neighbor as thou loves apple pie. Or, love thy stranger as thou loves starlight for touching us without knowing our names. Have you ever felt as brittle as kindling shattering to pieces just under the shower curtain of your skin? It's a rhetorical question because I know you have and will, as I have and do right now. So screw every cult of hate. Every bullet and knife and bomb and shitty thing said under the breath or with the full conviction of the lungs. If you see a Jew, be a Jew. If you see a Muslim, be a Muslim. If you see a human, be a human. The lend-an-ear or a hand kind. The "how's it going" kind. The kind kind. No one chooses who or where or when to be. We just sort of collectively are.

[no stanza break]

So hating you for being you makes no more sense than you hating me for being me. And I don't want to be raped or have my throat slashed or get thrown off a cliff, hard as that is to believe. I want to see the cliffs of Ithaca in moonlight. The Kaaba in Mecca circled by a crowd pulsing with faith. The Ice Hotel in a snow storm. I want a really good pizza with an egg on it. To kiss my wife on top of the Eiffel Tower. All the parts of her that are Jewish and all the parts that are human and all the parts that make her sigh and moan. Being human means understanding that being human is the hardest thing you'll ever do. That we're all partisans in this struggle, fellow teamsters in not knowing what the hell is going on, brothers and sisters stuffing our befuddlement every morning into pants and dresses we hope don't make us look fat and stupid and lost. Everyone I know feels lost. The trick is to feel lost together. Maybe you have a map and I have a canteen. Certainly someone has a pogo stick or cyclotron. We need food and light and harmonicas and theremins and stories about monsters who decide not to eat the child or stomp the village or fly over the night with death on their wings. Lost together, our nowhere becomes our somewhere. Lost together, the dream of home never dies.

from Poets Respond. November 5, 2023
from www.rattle.com

Bob Hicok

The World Is Ending

My father the empty house. My father the novel

written with erasers. My father the cloud

painted on the wall of a sinking ship. My father

the goldfish forgets every lap around the bowl

and I forget when I realized

I'd never see my father again, that he'd died

but gone on breathing. The other day,

immediately after reminiscing about my move

from Ann Arbor to Blacksburg twenty years ago,

my father was surprised to learn

I no longer live in Michigan and asked

when I'd moved. My father the hole in the air.

I speak to him with the same voice

I use with our cats and deer in the yard,

a voice meant to soothe, to reach in

and pet his brain, just as I imagine

he once spoke to me: my father the child

is unlearning himself. Ending in the sense

that everything is, no more or less. That a black hole

makes no apologies for its appetite. That you can't

dig your way out of water. My father the dream

of the echo of the story of the rumor of the man

who isn't there.

from www.onlypoems.net

Bob Hicok

Eulogy for my vanity, written in advance of its
demise to shame me into being a better person

I can't sleep.

My ego is smashing its drum kit
because the internet is erasing me.
I'm dying as an electronic soul, disappearing
from about two hundred websites
every day. I decide
the time has come to change
into an ancient Chinese poet.
Everyone is drinking wine.
Li Pai. Hsin. Tu Fu.
We are walking up hills,
lamenting and reflecting,
crying metaphorical streams.
I take the bullet train
Confucius rode. Google myself
as Wang An-shih did in 1041
before he wrote "What is important
doesn't come from outside."
Finally I write a poem.

*The underside of the branch
never feels the moon.
I am the underside of the branch.*

I am happy with the first two lines.
I toast them with six sips of wine.
The third line
is that of a disappearing American poet.
Too direct, too worried
that I won't win the Pulitzer,
that people won't love the nuthatches
that sing in my head
singing in theirs.
So I drink more wine.
Lament and reflect more.
Cry a deeper stream.
Years later I write a poem.

*I walk up a hill.
It is not high enough
to jump from.
I stand on my toes.*

[stanza break]

Wang An-shih slaps my head.
In part because he likes to.
When you slap someone's head,
you mostly feel your head
not being slapped.
"Your suicidal tendencies
do not interest the crane," he says.
I look over at the crane. The crane,
in not looking back at me,
confirms that Wang An-Shih
is a philosopher
with capable eyes.
I drink more wine.
Lament and reflect more.
Cry an even deeper stream.
But this time I see
how hard my desire is working
to cut a path through rock.
I want to soothe my heart
by erasing my desire.
I want to stop confusing renown
for accomplishment
and accomplishment for god
looking at me and saying, You are.
Finally I remember Li-na's
famous poem—"It is easier
to ask a stranger
to weed your garden
than weed it yourself"—
before writing the poem
that ends my life.

*The lotus blossom
picks my eyes.*

from www.poetrynw.org

Bob Hicok

Elements

But enough about me. Have you ever noticed
that your mind is everywhere and nowhere
you look or grope, and that it's odd how clearly
you can see yourself not seeing yourself at all?

This raises the inevitable question: What's your policy
on fog? When it gets in bed with you, who's on top?
Dances with you, who leads? And if I admit
that it's my doppelgänger, that I aspire
to its humid spiritualism of touching entire skies
and horizons at once, that I am transparent
in my lack of clarity vis à vis the faces of likewise
apparently solid but actually silkily composed
and wispy beings, will you, as a fellow wisp,
recognize that fog is the truest biography
of the species, and cling to me and get lost
in my embrace as I cling to your diffuse
and unbearable yearning?

I'm sorry. We just met. Interrogation
isn't the way to get to know someone. Sometimes
I simply want us all to meld together, and fog
has more magic up its sleeves than I have magic
or sleeves, is unified and glorified and uncuttable
with a knife or remark and reminds me
that I am a constant presence in my life
sometimes, since I am elsewhere now
and somewhere often and usually everywhere
missing a screw or faith, for though I want to believe
in life after death, I struggle to believe
in spring after winter, roses after tulips,
and that stuffing my pockets with fire and dried leaves
to burn myself down and start over with ashes
to fashion a new day will lead to anything
more lasting than bones made of smoke
that know better than to stay.

from <https://granta.com>

Bob Hicok

My Most Recent Position Paper

A little bit of hammering
goes a long way toward making
the kind of noise I want my heart
to look up to—or have you ever
gone into a woods and applauded the light
that fights its way to the ground,
and the shadows, and the explosions
of feathers where blue jays
have been ripped into the bright
and hungry future of hawks—
and there's this—writing an etude
by pushing pianos off a cliff
until one of them howls or whispers
just so—like a vagrant
slipping into a clean bed
or a man lifting a dying child
toward the sun and begging help,
rescue—if my eyes could speak,
they'd be mouths—the tongues
of my fingers ask to be words
against your skin—and when I
was a librarian, I lost my job
for exhorting patrons to sing
“Bye Bye Miss American Pie”—
it's not what we do here, I was told—
yet I know this is a world
made by volcanoes, and don't want
to keep this awareness of kaboom
to myself—so have picked up
my zither and begun walking
and strumming like an idiot
who thinks music is all
a body needs to feed itself—
and though I haven't eaten
in years, I have been fed.

from www.poets.org

Bob Hicok

The Call to Worship

The possibility that the zero gave birth to the universe,
that all our somethings come from nothing, the fear
of being alone like that, children of chance, orphans
down to our atoms, is mother to the idea of god. God

is a dress we slip over solitude, a mask
for oblivion to wear, a rule-giver in a world
where no flower or bear cares that we are here
or what we do.

I prefer a theology of silence, the eschatology
of the shrug, a religion of holding my wife's hand
for now.

But, if the industry of the church is what it took
to give me bells ringing Sunday mornings,
to which crows sometimes rise and deer turn,
I'm grateful for a sound that pulls me out of myself,
lifts my head toward sun and clouds, into the up
and all, the blue, the on and on of it, when I bend
the only knee I have to bend, feel
happily small, contingent, and held, by what
I can't say, short of everything.

The New Yorker. [May 27, 2024](#).