

Stand Very Still and Hold Out Your Hands

Instructions for Approaching an
Untamed Poem

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TEACHING POETRY to students with little prior exposure to literature is always a challenge. Teaching poetry in English to students for whom English is a second language adds even more layers of complexity.

I wrote the following piece for the students in my Introduction to Poetry Studies class at the University of Cyprus. The course was intended to introduce first-year students to the basic terms and elements of poetry in English by exposing them to poems from different historical periods and genres.

My students were largely native Greek speakers, with varied levels of English proficiency. One of my goals was to encourage students to let go of the desire for prepackaged notes that could be memorized for the test, and instead, to search for meaning

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Lithograph of a lion tamer, published by Chromolithograph, Gibson & Co. (Cincinnati, Ohio), c. 1873. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

in poems on their own terms.

To help get them into this frame of mind, I composed the following for them at the start of our unit on metaphors. I think it provides a playful reminder for students of any age that learning to read—and write—poetry is best accomplished when the task is approached with curiosity, patience, focus, and, most of all, with an open mind.

Instructions for Approaching an Untamed Poem

1 *First, stay calm.* Remember that, contrary to rumor, most poems are not hostile and are unlikely to pose a threat to your well-being.

2 *Approach the poem with an air of friendly confidence.* Poems are more likely to allow you to get close to them if you are pleasant and positive.

3 *Try to get a general sense of the poem before attempting a more detailed examination.* Does the poem seem native to your time and place? Might it have travelled from a previous era, or from a different cultural context? Do you recognize its place of origin?

4 *Once you have a sense of where the poem has come from, take note of its appearance and characteristics.* Does the poem have bright plumage, ornate language? Or is it plain and drab-colored? Does it move with a steady gait, or does it have an off-sync beat? Do you recognize its species? Its style, form, meter?

5 *You are now drawing closer to the poem.* However, continue to move slowly and calmly. You don't want to scare it away before you can appreciate its subtleties. Rushing your examination will mean that you'll be left with only a vague impression of what makes this fine poem so special.

6 *Now you're close enough to observe all the elements that make up this beautiful creature.* Note the poem's agile, muscular body, its finely formed limbs, the unique details of its markings. Remember that even though you may have identified its species, no two poems are exactly alike.

7 *The poem is now looking back at you, communicating with you.* Pay attention to whether it holds your gaze steadily or seems to skitter away.

Listen to the timbre of its voice. Does it hum, purr, sing? Does it intone, whisper, shout?

8 *Can you sense the emotion flooding this poem?* Is it happy, sad, angry, elegiac, meditative, ironic? How is the poem conveying this emotion to you? Does it offer it readily, or does it demand that you work to capture it?

9 *Even though the poem is speaking poem-language, can you get a sense of what it might be saying?* Don't worry if it seems impossible to understand it at first: just keep listening.

10 *Now stand very still, hold out your hands, and open your mind and heart.* Does the poem begin to approach you? Don't make any sudden motions: allow the poem to move toward you in its own time. You may be startled to find that it is suddenly right in front of you, gazing at you with wide, beautiful eyes.



Congratulations: you've just approached an untamed poem! Enjoy its beauty and then give it its freedom. Poems don't always do so well when you try to pin them down or lock them in a box. But don't worry: now that you know how to approach a poem, you'll always be able to find one again when you need it. And don't be alarmed if a poem's meanings seem to shift slightly each time you approach it; that's what happens with living things. Just remember that each time you approach a poem you'll have changed a bit too. ☺