

POETRY

Rx



HOW FIFTY INSPIRING POEMS CAN HEAL
and BRING JOY TO YOUR LIFE

New York Times Bestselling Author

NORMAN E. ROSENTHAL, M.D.

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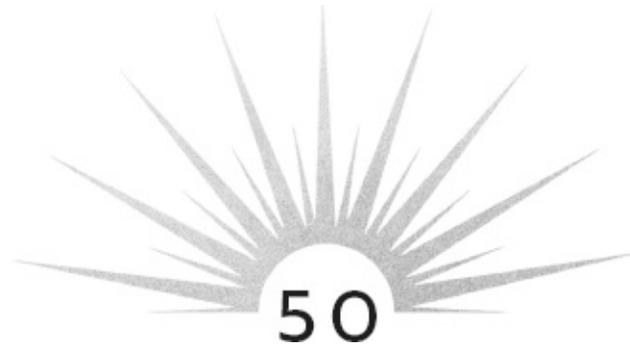
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NOTE: Although the names and identifying details of patients and clients have been changed, the essence of their stories is true.



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INTRODUCTION

You may well wonder how I, a psychiatrist with no formal literary credentials, have chosen to write about the power of poetry to heal, inspire, and bring joy to people. It all started with a single phone call that came in late one night.

The caller was my friend David, and I knew immediately by the tone of his voice that something was wrong. He choked up as he told me that he had recently lost someone very dear to him. “How can I go on?” he mused. “How will I manage?”

Clichés and generalities readily come to mind in such situations, but I searched for something specific to say, something that might actually help. Recognizing that David is a person steeped in the arts, I said, “There is an art to losing, and like all art, it can be developed.”

He was silent for a while, and when he spoke again, his voice sounded more cheerful, as though he had tapped into some hidden source of hope.

“Do you know the poem ‘One Art’ by Elizabeth Bishop?” he asked.

I told him no.

“Well, let me read it to you,” and he began: “‘The art of losing isn’t hard to master.’”

As he read on, his voice gathered strength and energy with each stanza. Afterwards his mood was lighter—and strangely, so was mine.

“Can a poem really help a grieving person?” I wondered, “and if so, might other poems also have healing powers?” I marveled also at how David had reached into the depths of his grief and presented me with a gift—a poem that offered me a fresh perspective on how to help someone out of the darkness that can engulf you when you lose someone you love. I shared the poem with patients and friends, many of whom found comfort in its words, and looked for other poems that might have similar effects.

Once I started looking, I found such poems everywhere. One friend, a

therapist, had been so moved by a poem about aging by Wendell Berry that she had given copies of it to patients (It's in [chapter 46](#) in this collection). I bolstered my promising findings with Internet reports of comfort and relief in response to particular poems.

The idea of this book is that poetry can not only inspire and delight, but can actually help you feel better, soothe your pain, and heal psychological wounds. In short, as the book's title suggests, poetry can act as a kind of medicine.

Although all literature can console, there is something about great poetry—its rhythms and cadences, its conciseness and brilliance—that has a power and charm all its own. One way in which poetry exerts its effect is that it is easier to remember, recall, and reproduce at will. We can at a moment's notice dip into our memory and conjure up Wordsworth's daffodils or Keats' nightingale.

The Poems

The fifty gemlike poems in this collection have all stood the test of time and appear in published anthologies. They are all relatively short, most fitting on a single page. In their conciseness they deliver their messages in the most efficient, effective, and beautiful way possible.

Friends, patients, and I have all enjoyed and benefited from some or all of these verses. I hope you might find the same healing power and joy from them as we have.

The collection is divided into five sections, each covering an area important for a good and happy life: (1) loving and losing; (2) responses to nature; (3) aspects of the human experience; (4) a design for living and the search for meaning; and (5) the last phase of life.

How to Get the Most out of a Poem

Although reading a poem seems like a very straightforward activity, it can be greatly enriched by a few simple tricks.

Remember to enjoy the poem.

It should be fun, not work!

Actively engage with the poem.

Give it your full attention, and it will reward you.

Read it aloud. That way you can enjoy the music in the words. Also, vocalizing the words involves different sets of nerves and muscles and different parts of the brain compared to reading it silently. Therefore it will create a

different experience. But most importantly, reading a poem aloud deepens its therapeutic potential.

Read the poem more than once. One mysterious aspect of a poem is how successive readings reveal new layers of meaning. How strange! After all, the lines are right there on the page. When you read them the first time, they may seem perfectly clear. How, then, can they still yield new insights and rewards when you revisit them? Try it and see for yourself.

Experience the poem with all of your senses. A poem is no more a purely intellectual experience than a song or a painting or a spoonful of ice cream. For an example of a poem that engages all your senses, look at “Sea Fever” ([chapter 23](#)).

As the reader, you complete the poem, in the process bringing your past experiences into the collaboration between you and the poet. At the moment of completion, it may feel as if the pieces of a puzzle are falling together. You may delight in the aha! moment as you think, “So that’s what the poet meant!” Allow yourself to experience the wonder a poem provides when it opens up new spaces in which your mind can roam.

Listen to others reading the poem. Many of the poems in this collection are read aloud online by talented women and men, and can be found on the Internet. One outstanding example is the sonnet “Pity me not because the light of day” ([chapter 3](#)), which is beautifully read by its author, Edna St. Vincent Millay. Neuroscientist Eugen Wassiliwizky and colleagues at the Max Planck Institute in Frankfurt have found that recited poetry can be a powerful stimulus for eliciting peak emotional responses such as chills and goosebumps, by activating the brain’s reward circuitry.

Tolerate—and even savor—ambiguity of feeling and thought. Be intrigued by what you don’t immediately understand. There is such a thing as creative reading as well as creative writing. Often in poems, circuits are not completed, ideas are left unfinished or equivocal. This is not accidental. The unfinished business may serve as a focus of continued puzzlement, a brain teaser lingering in the mind, begging for a solution. Some experimental data suggest that people remember unfinished or interrupted tasks better than completed ones (the so-called Zeigarnik effect). So it may be that by presenting the reader with unfinished ideas, the poet creates a more memorable and indelible work.

Pay attention to details. Punctuation, the separation of lines, their placement on the page, form, rhythm, and rhyme, as well as the white space that helps give the poem its shape, may all be part of what the poet is trying to

communicate.

Remember, when reading a poem, it is *your* interpretation rather than mine or anyone else's that is most important. As Dee Snider from the band Twisted Sister said, "The beauty of literature, poetry, and music is that they leave room for the audience to put its own imagination, experiences, and dreams into the words." So any interpretations I offer are mine alone; I encourage you to differ.

And most of all, have fun engaging with these beautiful and ingenious creations.

PART ONE

Loving and Losing



*'Tis better to have loved and lost than never
to have loved at all.*

—Alfred Lord Tennyson

Chapter One

IS THERE AN ART TO LOSING?

ONE ART *by Elizabeth Bishop*

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master

though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

In “One Art,” Elizabeth Bishop teaches about loss with examples from her own life. Starting with small everyday losses familiar to all of us, she suggests that loss is a normal part of life. Then she ups the ante as her losses get progressively bigger. Repeatedly she assures us that “the art of losing isn’t hard to master.” But as her losses mount, we marvel at her stoicism and may even ask whether she is merely putting on a brave face when she writes: “I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster, / some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.”

Add that to “three lost houses,” and I can hear someone asking, “Is she for real? That’s a lot of stuff to lose! How come it’s no disaster?”

At the end of the poem, we find out what she has been holding back through the first five verses. The poem is not only directed to readers, but primarily to a lost loved one, which puts us in the role of an eavesdropper, listening in on an intimate communication to a former lover.

For the first time in the poem, we feel Bishop’s pain as she writes, “the joking voice, a gesture I love.” When the poet says, “I shan’t have lied,” she fails to convince, because we realize that although losing may be an art, it can sometimes be a very hard one to master—and it may truly feel like a disaster.

In her grief, Bishop has written a masterpiece that is a gift for anyone seeking solace from the pain of loss. No wonder that it cheered up my friend on that sad day when he called me griefstricken from the loss of a loved one. And no wonder that the poem has provided comfort to so many people with whom I have shared it.

The Biology of Loss

Bishop’s reassurance that we are capable of enduring severe losses is well grounded in the history of our species, which has been biologically programmed to withstand the death of infants, older children, parents, siblings, and friends. As you read through the biographical sketches of the poets in this book, you may be astonished to see how many of them (Bishop included) were orphaned at a young age, lost siblings, or outlived their own children.

Despite our inbuilt survival mechanisms, losses may have serious psychological consequences. Pioneering psychiatrist John Bowlby developed a theory of attachment and loss based on his observations of children in war-torn London in the middle of the last century, particularly those wrenched from parental figures at a young age. Since then, the problems of early loss—notably

depression and difficulties with attachment in later life—have been extensively documented and studied.

“One Art” is a type of poem called a villanelle (see sidebar).

The Villanelle

- Nineteen lines.
- Five stanzas of three lines each (tercets), followed by one four-line stanza (quatrain).
- Two key lines that repeat at prescribed intervals.
- An alternating rhyme scheme.
- The meter is typically iambic pentameter: five feet, in which each foot has an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable, as in:

da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM.

This is the most common meter in English poetry, and resembles the sound of the human heartbeat: Lub-DUP.

Two other villanelles in this collection are “The Waking” ([chapter 39](#)) and “Do Not Go Gentle” ([chapter 48](#)).

Takeaways

✘ **There is an art to losing.** Like all skills, the ability to survive loss may improve with experience, a fact that may offer comfort when loss occurs.

✘ **Accept the loss.** Acceptance of suffering is fundamental to dealing with all types of adversity. In general, acceptance of suffering lessens its pain, just as denial of suffering amplifies it. You will see this general principle arise with regard to other poems in this collection, as it does in life. The value of acceptance is perhaps best expressed in the famous Serenity Prayer attributed to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, which reads in part, “God, give me the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed.”

✘ **Beware of all-or-none thinking.** This type of thinking has been classified as

one form of cognitive distortion, which can contribute to depression and other negative mood states. (Confronting and correcting cognitive distortions can help people feel better.) When people engage in all-or-none thinking, they gravitate towards extremes—for example, that something either is or is not a disaster. This may cause emotional problems, such as depression in the former case or denial in the latter. When you encounter adversity, including the loss a loved one, it may be neither a disaster nor easy, but something in between, as the poet finally concludes.

✂ **Write it down.** Bishop’s advice to herself to write down her thoughts and feelings is in line with modern science: writing down your deepest thoughts and feelings can be therapeutic and instrumental in recovery from trauma. James Pennebaker, professor of psychology at the University of Texas in Austin, pioneered this line of work, which has revealed many physical and psychological benefits that can accrue from such writing exercises.

The Poet and the Poem

Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979) was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, to Gertrude Bulmer and William Thomas Bishop, owners of the J.W. Bishop contracting firm. She learned the art of losing early in life. Her father died when she was only eight months old. Her mother, who spent the next five years in and out of psychiatric hospitals, was then permanently committed, and Bishop never saw her again.

After her mother’s hospitalization, Bishop was raised at first by her mother’s loving and comforting family in Nova Scotia. Later she was moved “unconsulted and against my wishes” to stay with her paternal grandparents. Of her time with them she wrote, “I felt myself aging, even dying. I was bored and lonely with Grandma, my silent grandpa, the dinners alone ... at night I lay blinking my flashlight off and on, and crying.” In 1918 she was rescued by her mother’s sister, who lived in a happier home in South Boston. Years later she confided to her friend and fellow poet Robert Lowell, “When you write my epitaph, you must say I was the loneliest person who ever lived.”

Bishop was a sickly child, so before age fourteen her education was limited, but she became an excellent student and was accepted into Vassar College. She won an important fellowship from the college and an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, which enabled her to travel to Brazil. There she developed a serious allergy and, as she recovered, she fell in love with her friend

and nurse Lota de Macedo Soares. She and Lota lived together for fifteen years, during which she wrote to Lowell that she was “extremely happy for the first time in my life.” Both women suffered from physical and psychological distress and were hospitalized in Brazil. On recovery, Bishop left for New York. Soares followed later, but on the day she arrived in New York, she took an overdose of tranquilizers and died.

Bishop returned to the U.S. to teach at Harvard, where she met Alice Methfessel, a much younger woman who was to become a source of strength and love for the rest of her life. “One Art” was addressed to Alice at a time when it seemed that the relationship was over, because Alice was planning to get married. She changed her mind, however, and returned. Bishop suffered from alcoholism, which afflicted her for many years, and drug abuse: she took stimulants during the day and sleeping pills at night, along with Antabuse, a drug used to treat alcoholism, in an attempt to remain sober. Alice stayed with Bishop till the latter’s death from a brain aneurysm eighteen months later.

Through all her difficulties, Bishop remained productive. She received multiple honors, including the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1956 and the National Book Award for Poetry in 1970. She is regarded as one of the greatest modern poets. “One Art,” which went through seventeen drafts before publication, is her most famous poem.

Chapter Two

CAN LOVE TRANSFORM YOU?

 HOW DO I LOVE THEE? LET ME COUNT THE WAYS
by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints—I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.



“How do I love thee?” These five small words, clustered together this way, are among the best-known in English literature. The phrase that follows, “Let me count the ways,” as famous as the first, has provided titles for songs, books, and TV episodes. What about this poem has led to such immortality, and who was its author?

This poem is a sonnet written in the tradition of the famous fourteenth-century Italian poet Francesco Petrarch. The sonnet form is versatile, used by many poets in this collection. One of my patients, Rusty, a computer engineer in his mid-forties, reported that his wife complained that he was not expressive enough in telling her he loved her. “I do tell her I love her,” he protested. “What else does she expect me to say?”

I referred him to Browning’s famous sonnet for inspiration.

In asking, “How do I love thee?” Elizabeth Barrett Browning frames the subject of her love in a novel way. She examines and expresses her *own* feelings towards her beloved. This is an inversion of a common preoccupation of people in love: “Do they love me or not, and if so, how much?” These questions reflect the insecurity and romantic uncertainty of the questioner. In contrast, Barrett Browning examines her own feelings, and in so doing provides a beautiful description of profound love.

The Petrarchan Sonnet

- Named for the great Italian poet Petrarch.
- Fourteen lines (a property shared by all sonnets).
- A miniature story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end.
- Divided into an octet (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines).
- The octet (the beginning) raises a question or problem.
- Then comes the volta (the middle), a shift in topic.
- Finally, the sestet (the end) provides a resolution.
- The meter is typically iambic pentameter.
- Rhyme scheme: octet: ABBACDDC; sestet: EFEFEF (with some variability).

In the first eight lines (octet) of the sonnet, the poet is anchored in the present. She starts her inventory as one might measure some concrete object (its depth, breadth, and height) but soon realizes that her love is so vast as to be out of sight and immeasurable. She then shifts her frame of reference and compares her love to “every day’s / Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.”

Her love is not just an entertainment or embellishment to her life. Rather, it is a fundamental need, like other needs that, though crucial, can easily be

overlooked because they are “most quiet,” such as air, water, and the internal space necessary for contemplation.

In the last two lines of the octet, the poet expresses two qualities she has observed in men she admires: They “strive for right” and “turn from praise.” It is with the same free and pure spirit that the poet embraces her love.

To the modern reader, these qualities may seem quaint or out-of-date. I recently asked a graduate student what she was looking for in a partner. She responded with a smile, “Everything, just like everybody else. I want someone who is attractive, fun, adventurous, and sociable. Someone who wants to travel and is good in bed.” There was no mention of striving for right or turning from praise. Elements of character were not on the menu. There is much that the modern woman or man can learn from this famous poem.

At the twist (volta), the poet shifts from the present to her less happy past. She refers to “my old griefs,” and writes: “I love thee with a love I seemed to lose / With my lost saints.” Her relationship has helped her reconnect with those early wellsprings of love, allowing her to experience love with the “breath, smiles, tears, of all my life.”

In her final line, the poet may be suggesting that she will continue to love him in the afterlife or that if her husband (the poet Robert Browning, to whom the poem is addressed) dies before she does, her love will continue after he passes away. We will return to this theme of continuing to love people even after they die in “Remember” (chapter 14) and “Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep” (chapter 50).

Takeaways

✦ **Consider words as a “love language.”** In his book *The Five Love Languages*, author Gary Chapman suggests five different ways in which love can be expressed: (1) quality time; (2) gifts; (3) acts of service; (4) physical touch; and (5) expressions of love. He points out that different people appreciate these forms to different degrees, which is useful for couples to remember if they are to enjoy a loving relationship. For those relationships where words of love are appreciated by one or both parties, Barrett Browning’s famous sonnet may offer some helpful insights.

People in relationships often assume that their partners know how they are feeling, or, more commonly, they don’t give the matter enough thought. As a result, the other person can feel misunderstood, neglected, or taken for granted.

In my work with couples, as misunderstandings are clarified, I often hear, “Why didn’t you tell me? I’m not a mind reader.” With the help of therapy or experience, it is possible to move this question into the present tense, as in, “Please tell me what’s on your mind, and skip the “mind reader” part, which contains an element of sarcasm.

✂ **Put feelings into words.** For Rusty, the computer engineer at the start of the chapter, his difficulty in expressing love was just part of his difficulty in understanding his feelings in general and putting them into words—a problem called *alexithymia*.

Often bodily sensations can provide useful clues to emotions. Pioneering psychologist William James brought this idea to general attention in a famous essay entitled “What Is an Emotion?” If you see a bear in the woods, James suggested, you run first, then feel afraid. Your body leads your emotions. Likewise, if you see an attractive person, your heart may flutter before you can find words to express your attraction. Putting emotions into words can advance a relationship. For anybody who has difficulty verbalizing feelings, “How do I love thee?” may be a resource.

With some help, Rusty has now found new ways to let his wife know how he loves her, and the couple is thriving. Even those of us without alexithymia may be able to do better at recognizing and communicating our love and appreciation to those who are important to us. It is so simple to offer words of kindness and appreciation, yet so easy to forget in our busy lives.

✂ **Feel and express gratitude.** Another way to take inspiration from this poem is to regard it as a gratitude checklist. There has been a growing awareness that gratitude is a healthy and enlivening emotion, conducive to happiness. Gratitude is also an antidote to one of the most prevalent maladies of our time—a sense of entitlement. Writing a gratitude checklist regularly can increase your awareness of the good things you have, thereby improving your sense of well-being.

The Poet and the Poem

Elizabeth Barrett, the eldest of twelve children, was born to an affluent English family in 1806. Her life was marked by a curious mixture of suffering, joy, and enormous success.

Barrett was a child prodigy, who read classics such as the works of Shakespeare before her teens and wrote her first book of poetry by age twelve.

Despite physical and personal setbacks, she continued to write essays and poems and translated Aeschylus's *Prometheus Unbound*. As a child, she was deeply religious.

Then a series of tragedies occurred. At age fourteen she developed a lung illness, which required morphine for the rest of her life. The following year she sustained a significant back injury. Her mother died in 1828, and financial difficulties required the family to sell their estate and relocate to London. Because of her ill health, she later moved to the seaside to be with her brother. Tragically, he drowned, and Barrett returned to the family home in London. Her father was devoted but notoriously overcontrolling; their relationship became the subject of a play and later a movie called *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*.

Barrett continued to write and gained the attention of the public. Fellow poet Robert Browning wrote to her expressing his admiration for her and her work. Over the next two years, they exchanged hundreds of letters, fell in love, and, because her father disapproved of the relationship, decided to elope. Her father disinherited her and never spoke to her again.

The married couple moved to Italy, where their son was born. Shortly after arriving there, Barrett Browning published *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, a collection of forty-four famous love sonnets. (The title's reference to the Portuguese was deliberately misleading in order to conceal the fact that they had been written to Robert Browning.) Number forty-three, "How do I love thee?", has become her most famous work.

In light of Barrett Browning's history, it is understandable how her relationship with Robert Browning freed her from a background of tragedy and dependency and offered her love, support, a new home in a new country, intellectual passion, and a son. As we read the sonnet, we can feel the all-encompassing nature of her love for her husband. The history of their relationship deepens our understanding of the transformative power of her love.

For reasons that are unclear, Barrett Browning became ill in her midfifties and died peacefully in her husband's arms. According to him, the last word she uttered was, "Beautiful."

Chapter Three

THE HEART VERSUS THE MIND

 PITY ME NOT BECAUSE THE LIGHT OF DAY
by Edna St. Vincent Millay

Pity me not because the light of day
At close of day no longer walks the sky;
Pity me not for beauties passed away
From field and thicket as the year goes by;
Pity me not the waning of the moon,
Nor that the ebbing tide goes out to sea,
Nor that a man's desire is hushed so soon,
And you no longer look with love on me.
This have I known always: Love is no more
Than the wide blossom which the wind assails,
Than the great tide that treads the shifting shore,
Strewing fresh wreckage gathered in the gales:
Pity me that the heart is slow to learn
What the swift mind beholds at every turn.



This sonnet came to my attention when a patient of mine, Beth, mentioned that she had found it particularly helpful. A physiotherapist in her mid-thirties, Beth sought treatment for problems with mood swings and romantic relationships, which felt wonderful at first but invariably deteriorated.

Beth found that this sonnet spoke to her. In it, the poet acknowledges that all

things pass: the light of day, the beauty of summer, the full moon, and the ebbing tide. Because everyone experiences such losses, she asks for no special pity from the reader, not even when the man she is seeing no longer desires her. She has known these things always and understands that life and love involve risk, like venturing out into a storm.

The key to the poem comes from its last two lines, which Beth found so valuable:

Pity me that the heart is slow to learn
What the swift mind beholds at every turn.

Here the poet is saying that she asks for pity only for a particular problem to which she is specifically vulnerable, not for those issues to which all people are susceptible. For Beth, those two lines illuminated what she needed from therapy. Her mind was swift and recognized the poor choices she tended to make in romantic relationships. Now she needed to bring her heart and mind in line with each other. By viewing her problem as entirely outside her own control, Beth had allowed herself no agency in escaping from the predicament of repeated unhappy relationships. If she could figure out a way to find a sense of agency in her romantic life, Beth realized, perhaps she could turn things around.

In therapy, Beth realized that she had come by her problems honestly. Her mother had often been depressed and unavailable. Her father had been erratic, by turns seductive and rejecting. The times when he had paid her attention stood out as highlights of her childhood but always left her feeling disappointed when he withdrew his interest.

At that point, Beth confessed to me a second set of problems. To comfort herself between romantic relationships, she would go to bars, meet men, and after a few drinks (or maybe more) often ended up in bed with a stranger. She felt ashamed of this pattern, which had taken both an emotional and a physical toll on her. She brought to my attention yet another sonnet by Millay, which once again spoke viscerally to her:

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh

Upon the glass and listen for reply,
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.
Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.

Beth was determined not to end up like a lonely tree, and I was determined to help in any way I could. Her treatment required more than therapy. She needed medications to stabilize her mood swings and Twelve Step programs to help bring her addiction to alcohol and sex under control. Beth became better at spotting potential problems early on and avoiding them. For example, she became expert at detecting inconsistent men and started to find dependability more appealing.

Beth met a man who treated her kindly, fell in love in a way that felt stable and fulfilling, and married him. The last time I heard from her was in a note announcing the birth of her daughter.

Takeaways

✘ **Recognize and learn to avoid repetitive behaviors.** Many of our problems display repetitive patterns, which is a clue to resolving them. A simple analogy, which I have found surprisingly helpful in my therapy, is that of someone walking along a sidewalk with a hole in it. At first the person doesn't see the hole and falls into it. The next time, the person sees the hole but once again falls into it. The third time, the person sees the hole and steps over it. This analogy reminds us that: (1) it is important not only to recognize a problem, but also your role in it; (2) if a problem recurs, ask yourself whether you may have a role in perpetuating it; (3) it may take several tries before you can correct your error, even after you know what it is; and (4) with recognition of the pattern, a willingness to change your own behavior, and practice, it is often possible to

break a cycle of repetition and avoid further injury.

✘ **Use your “wise mind.”** The concept of the “wise mind” comes from dialectic behavior therapy (DBT), developed by psychologist Marsha Linehan. The term “dialectic” refers to the juxtaposition of different ways of seeing something. Thus the person entering DBT is taught to recognize the “reasonable mind” and the “emotional mind” and engage them in a debate that produces a synthesis—the “wise mind,” which helps the person make a better decision.

✘ **Consider how early experiences may lead even an intelligent person to keep making the same mistake.** This insight-oriented approach may be less directly helpful in curtailing such behaviors than the behavioral approach, but it may provide understanding and a reassuring sense of coherence between your past and your present.

✘ **Consider that certain behaviors may be addictive like drugs and alcohol.** For this reason, recovery groups patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) have been established for people with addictive patterns of gambling, spending, eating, sex, and love. As in Beth’s case, different addictions may coexist. For those who don’t like the Twelve Step model of AA and similar programs, SMART (Self-Management and Recovery Training) recovery is an alternative resource.

Beth realized that seductive men made her feel wonderful (high, in the terminology of addiction). Later, when they put her down or rejected her, she felt as though a drug had been withdrawn, and she would often work hard to recapture their interest or try to find comfort in the company of strangers. For Beth, recovery from this hurtful cycle involved recognizing the pattern and owning her part in it, then finding others who could empathize and support her recovery.

Millay’s mastery of the sonnet can be seen in the two sonnets featured here. The former, “Pity me not,” is a Shakespearean sonnet (see page 59), and the latter, “What lips my lips have kissed,” is a Petrarchan sonnet (see page 16).

In “Pity me not,” the revelation that the poem is addressed to a man who has lost interest in the poet (line 8), not just to the reader, resembles the device used by Bishop in “One Art.” The final couplet, which so influenced Beth, packs a punch worthy of Shakespeare.

In “What lips my lips have kissed,” the volta at the end of the octet marks the shift from the poet’s past life of intense sexuality with many partners to her

present state of depleted loneliness—like a birdless tree in the winter.

The Poet and the Poem

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950) was for much of her career one of the most successful and respected poets in the United States, particularly famous for her sonnets. She won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *The Ballad of the Harp Weaver* in 1923. Aside from her professional success (she also wrote plays and a libretto for an opera), she was a famous and popular cultural figure of the Roaring Twenties, embodying the new sexually liberated woman of the period.

Millay was born in Rockland, Maine, to Cora Buzzell Millay and Henry Tollman Millay. Along with her two sisters, Millay was raised by her mother, who divorced her husband for irresponsibility and lack of support. Although the family was poor and moved around frequently, Cora always took along books by great writers. She recognized, nurtured, and unstintingly encouraged Edna's literary talent. Millay (who liked to be called "Vincent") was first recognized for her poem "Renaissance," published in 1912. She attracted a benefactor, who enabled her to attend Vassar College, from which she graduated in 1917.

Millay moved to Greenwich Village, where she supported herself by writing poetry and short stories for magazines under the pseudonym Nancy Boyd, while continuing to write serious poetry under her own name.

A woman of intense sexuality, Millay was catnip to both women and men. In a book about her love life, appropriately titled *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed*, Daniel Mark Epstein writes of her serial and simultaneous sexual relationships with women at Vassar. After graduating, she met two prominent men in the literary world: Edmund Wilson and John Bishop. Wilson wrote, "The more we saw of her poetry the more our admiration grew, and we both, before very long, had fallen irretrievably in love with her.... One cannot really write about Edna Millay without bringing into the foreground of the picture her intoxicating effect on people, because this so much created the atmosphere in which she lived and composed." Towards the end of his life, with more than thirty years of perspective, Wilson wrote, "Edna ignited for me both my intellectual passion and my unsatisfied desire, which went up together in a blaze of ecstasy that remains for me one of the high points in my life. I do not believe that such experiences can be common for such women are not common."

In 1923 Millay married businessman Eugen Jan Boissevain, having turned down proposals from other suitors. As Edmund Wilson wrote, "She was tired of

breaking hearts and spreading havoc.” Boissevain supported Millay’s career and took care of the logistics of their lives, freeing her up to continue her creative pursuits. They had an open marriage until Boissevain died in 1949. Millay lived alone for the last year of her life at Steepletop, their estate in Austerlitz, New York.

In the last decade of her life, Millay’s long-standing addiction to morphine, alcohol, uppers, and downers spiraled out of control. Her husband supported her and took her to rehabilitation centers, to little avail. After his death, her addictions escalated. On the last night of her life, alone at Steepletop, she fell down the stairs to her death. The doctor diagnosed a heart attack as the cause.

Her famous poem “First Fig” may serve as a fitting epitaph:

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

Chapter Four

LOVE IN THE MOMENT

LULLABY

by W. H. Auden

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm;
Time and fevers burn away
Individual beauty from
Thoughtful children, and the grave
Proves the child ephemeral:
But in my arms till break of day
Let the living creature lie,
Mortal, guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful.

Soul and body have no bounds:
To lovers as they lie upon
Her tolerant enchanted slope
In their ordinary swoon,
Grave the vision Venus sends
Of supernatural sympathy,
Universal love and hope;
While an abstract insight wakes
Among the glaciers and the rocks

The hermit's carnal ecstasy.

Certainty, fidelity
On the stroke of midnight pass
Like vibrations of a bell,
And fashionable madmen raise
Their pedantic boring cry:
Every farthing of the cost,
All the dreaded cards foretell,
Shall be paid, but from this night
Not a whisper, not a thought,
Not a kiss nor look be lost.

Beauty, midnight, vision dies;
Let the winds of dawn that blow
Softly round your dreaming head
Such a day of welcome show
Eye and knocking heart may bless,
Find the mortal world enough;
Noons of dryness find you fed
By the involuntary powers,
Nights of insult let you pass
Watched by every human love.



In some ways, “Lullaby” is a curious title for Auden’s poem, since a lullaby generally refers to a song sung to children to help them go to sleep. Here, however, the poet addresses an adult lover who is already asleep, his head cradled in the poet’s arm. The poem begins with the gentle line, “Lay your sleeping head, my love,” which may recall the snug and secure feelings of a child being sung to sleep by a protective adult. In this context, the second line may come as a shock: “Human on my faithless arm.”

Right up front we see an extraordinary paradox. How can the poet caress and sing a lullaby to his sleeping lover while acknowledging that he is faithless? Does he mean unfaithful? It seems likely, given what follows. In the same line, the poet recognizes that his lover is human and goes on to speak of the transient nature of beauty, youth, and life itself. He acknowledges a sad truth about life: being human is being mortal. Life is finite. The poet also refers to his lover as guilty. Of what, we are never told. Nevertheless, whatever the nature of the guilt, in that moment of togetherness, his beloved is “entirely beautiful.”

In the second stanza, Auden describes aspects of physical love in terms that are at the same time familiar and original. As lovers swoon together on their “tolerant enchanted slope,” the boundaries between them disappear. But even in the midst of these idealized feelings of fused identities (“supernatural sympathy”), the poet sounds a cautionary note. Although the vision offered by Venus, the goddess of love, is intoxicating, it would be well for lovers to recognize that her message should also be taken seriously. Just as a hermit living among the glaciers and rocks may feel the thrill of sexual desire and release (“carnal ecstasy”), at the same time he becomes aware that there are vague implications to this experience (perhaps a warning) that require attention.

The theme of warning is sustained in the third stanza, where the poet acknowledges that “Certainty, fidelity / On the stroke of midnight pass.”

The poet is pointing out here that there are hazards in the passionate connection between lovers where there is no contract of fidelity nor any certainty about where the relationship is going. That is a common dynamic for people in open or polyamorous relationships, where lovers often try to set limits around what is and is not permissible. Yet such passionate connections may be risky and disruptive. As the poet points out, certainty can become as transient as the vibrations of a bell.

The poet goes on to put the harshest warnings in the mouths of “fashionable madmen,” who offer “their pedantic boring cry” that it is in the cards that the lovers will have to pay “every farthing of the cost.” (A farthing, by the way, was a quarter of a penny, a tiny brass coin whose value was too small for it to survive into our modern inflationary times.) Despite these warnings (which the poet implies may actually be correct), he clearly views his night of loving as worth the price. This speaks to an important theme in poetry, literature, and life. *Carpe diem*. Seize the moment. The power of now. The past is irretrievably gone. The future is uncertain. The present is the only time over which we have dominion. So, the poet says to his sleeping lover (and perhaps himself), set aside the

warnings of these fashionable madmen, and do not allow a whisper, a thought, or a kiss to be lost from this present moment.

In the first three stanzas the poet has prepared his lover for the last one. He has warned his lover from the very beginning that he cannot promise fidelity and has acknowledged his lover's own frail humanity. Although he has attributed some of the warnings to others—such as the goddess Venus and “fashionable madmen”—the alarm bell has been rung, and the vibrations can be heard loud and clear.

Let us remember that a lullaby is meant to soothe and to induce feelings of protection. In a relationship, part of protecting your partner is to be honest so as to forestall nasty surprises. The poet has fulfilled his deal in the first three stanzas (assuming his lover knows about his infidelity when awake). Now the poet can feel free to pour out his love unqualified by any warnings. And he does that in what is surely one of the most moving and beautiful blessings in literature.

Takeaways

✘ **Romantic love comes in many different forms.** In Barrett Browning's “How do I love thee,” we see love that is all-embracing, exclusive, and transformational. It is the kind of love that is held up as an ideal—one in which two people live happily ever after. While such love is undoubtedly a wonderful thing, it is not available to, or desired by, everyone. Nor is it the only valid kind of love. “Lullaby” invites the reader not to judge but to enter into the experience of another person and understand the value of love, even if it is transient and in the context of a complex life.

✘ **There can be a value to peak experiences, though they may come with risks.** In “Lullaby” Auden describes what psychologist Abraham Maslow called a *peak experience*, which he defined as “rare, exciting, oceanic, deeply moving and exhilarating” and may “generate an advanced form of perceiving reality.”

A few other poems in this collection also describe and extol such experiences, notably “High Flight” ([chapter 33](#)) and “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” ([chapter 43](#)). Some people, when asked what experiences in their lives were most meaningful, will cite such peak experiences, even many years after they have occurred. As Maslow observes, a peak experience is precious in its own right.

In “Lullaby” we encounter a transcendent feeling of love. The experience might have been short-lived, but it appears to have had long-lasting effects for the waking lover, who transformed it into a masterwork, which will endure and continue to give pleasure to readers for years to come.

✘ **Open or polyamorous relationships sometimes work.** I have seen examples where couples live in relationships for years, apparently happily, and remain strongly bonded with each other despite an agreement between the two individuals to permit sexual activity outside the relationship. In such instances, honesty appears to be a prerequisite, and certain rules are generally agreed upon. As you might imagine, issues in polyamorous relationships include jealousy and insecurity. I have also seen examples of people who have experimented with polyamorous relationships for a while but have later chosen monogamy instead.

✘ **In allowing yourself to be swept away by passion, it is important to weigh the risks involved.** These include degradation of quality of your primary relationship, and even the end of it.

I am reminded of one of my clients, a married man who decided to embark on an affair with an old flame. Although his wife apparently did not find out about the relationship, she must have detected that something was amiss, because she disengaged from him in all but the most basic ways. As he put it, “I have a no-perks marriage.” After several other affairs, he recognized this loss of “perks” to be a recurrent pattern in their relationship whenever he was involved with another woman and decided that fidelity worked better for him as well as for them as a couple. They remain happily married years later.

✘ **Rapturous experiences are more valued by those who crave novelty and less by those more geared to avoiding harm.** Neurobiologists have identified different brain neurotransmitter systems that mediate novelty seeking and harm avoidant behaviors: dopamine predominantly for the former, serotonin for the latter. With regard to these two divergent behavioral drives, the ancient dictum, “Know thyself,” is important to bear in mind when considering risky passion.

The Poet and the Poem

According to Edward Mendelson, the literary executor for Auden’s estate, Auden wrote this poem to Michael Yates, a younger man with whom he was in love “at first distantly, later intimately,” when Yates was in his late twenties.

Auden remained friends with Yates and, after Yates married, with his wife Margaret as well. Auden dedicated his final book of poetry, which was published posthumously in 1974, to the couple. So love turned to friendship, which endured for the better part of four decades.

Auden remained friends with other lovers as well, including the author Christopher Isherwood and, later, the much younger American librettist Chester Kallman. Auden and Kallman had been lovers for two years when Kallman told Auden that he did not want to be in a monogamous relationship with him and had already been unfaithful. Auden chose not to continue their relationship as lovers, but they remained good friends throughout Auden's life. It seems as though the conflicting themes of love and fidelity present in "Lullaby," written years before Auden met Kallman, were destined to play out in the poet's life.

Chapter Five

WHEN LOVE FADES

FAILING AND FLYING

by Jack Gilbert

Everyone forgets that Icarus also flew.
It's the same when love comes to an end,
or the marriage fails and people say
they knew it was a mistake, that everybody
said it would never work. That she was
old enough to know better. But anything
worth doing is worth doing badly.
Like being there by that summer ocean
on the other side of the island while
love was fading out of her, the stars
burning so extravagantly those nights that
anyone could tell you they would never last.
Every morning she was asleep in my bed
like a visitation, the gentleness in her
like antelope standing in the dawn mist.
Each afternoon I watched her coming back
through the hot stony field after swimming,
the sea light behind her and the huge sky
on the other side of that. Listened to her
while we ate lunch. How can they say