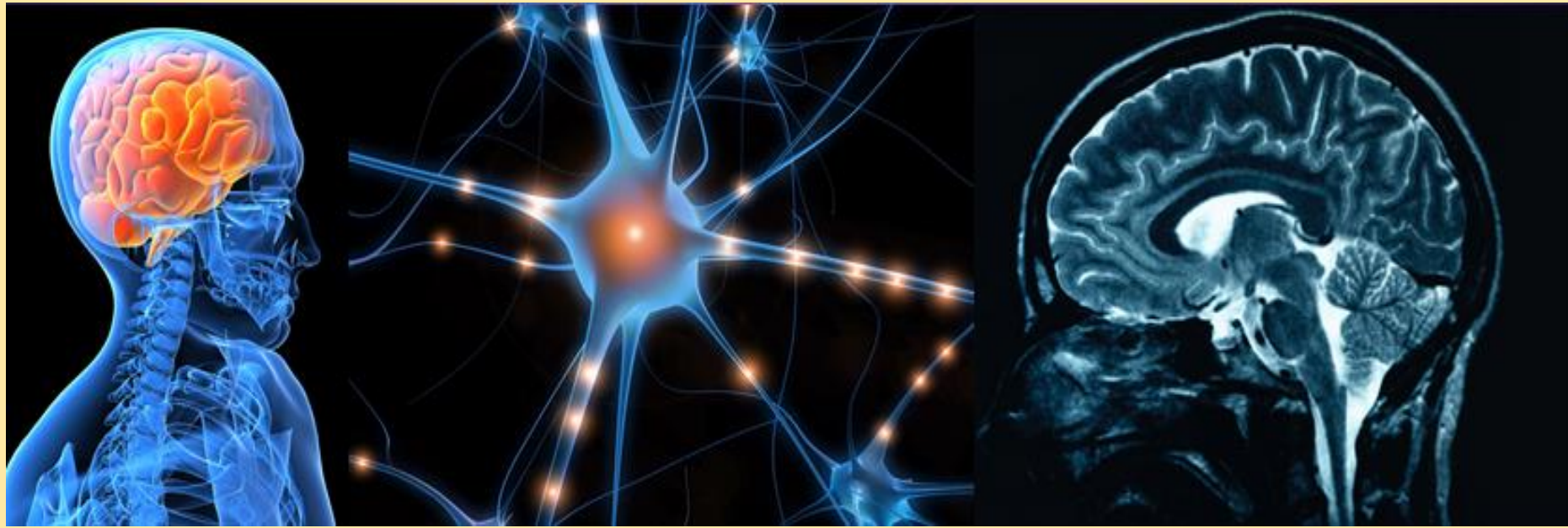


# 13 Ways of Looking at Poetry

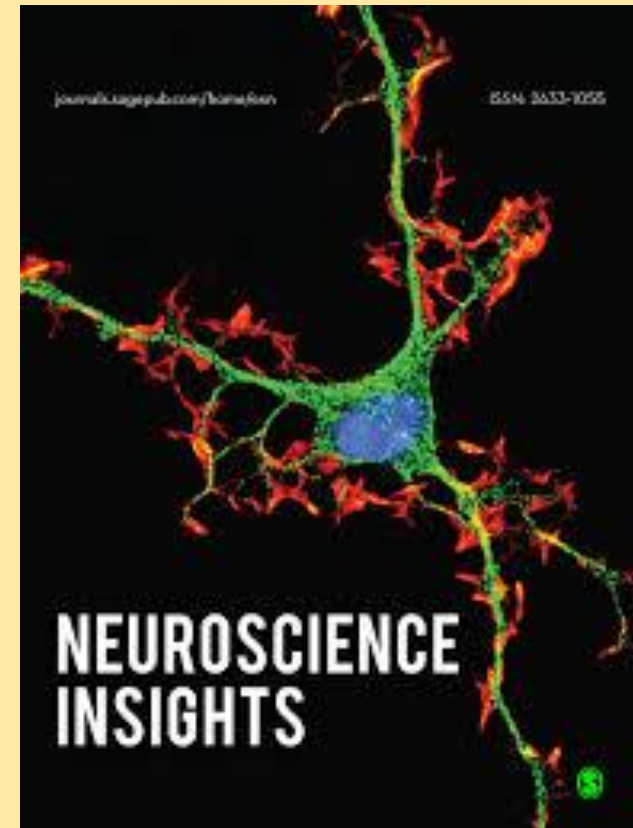
With apologies to Wallace Stevens  
and a nudge from neuroscience

A seminar by Michael Baldwin

This seminar will use insights from neuroscience to help us become more aware of how the poetic mind functions differently from ordinary thinking so we can create poetry that will inspire and gratify readers.



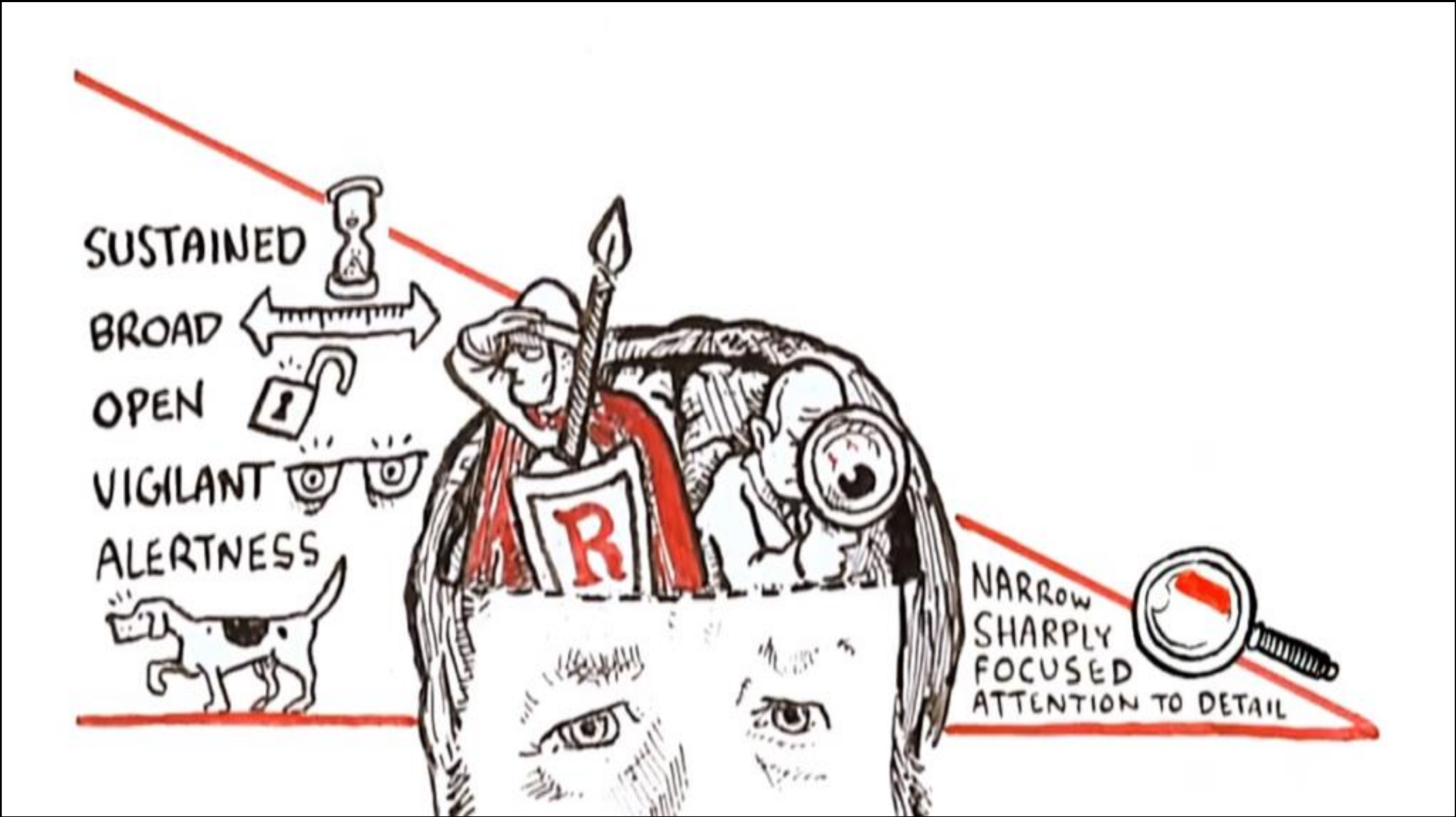
Neuroscience tells us how poetry affects the mind and what the mind likes best about poetry.



## Here are some basics about how our minds function:

1. We are **neither** left-brained or right-brained. Both sides of our brains are necessary to normal mental functioning. But they can get out of balance.
2. The right brain is not the “creative brain” nor the left brain the “rational brain.” Both sides of our brains are creative and rational.
3. But our two brain hemispheres do function differently.
4. The left brain contains the language function. Damage in the left hemisphere often means loss of the ability to speak, read, and write.
5. The right brain works primarily with images, ideas, feelings, and music.
6. The left and right brains are meant to work together, with the right brain feeding new information to the left, which then organizes, classifies, analyzes, prioritizes, and makes other types of decisions about the information.
7. As society has become more dependent on literacy and technology, the left brain has become more active and dominant, to the detriment of right brain functions such as imagination, social empathy, and holistic understanding.

# A depiction of basic right-brain versus left-brain functions



# Some basic characteristics\* of

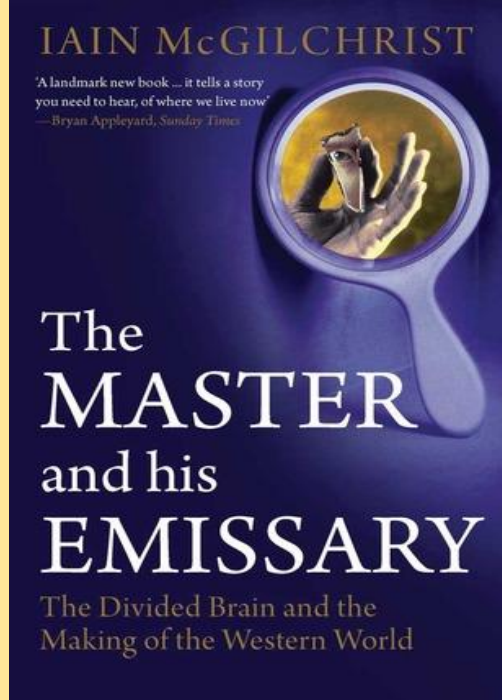
## Right Brain Thinking:

Sees the whole realistically  
Looks for what's different  
Uses metaphor, simile, symbol etc.  
Sees indirect & subtle meanings  
Emphasizes personal & interpersonal  
Enjoys the natural world  
Expresses ambiguity & emotions  
Relates self to world thru empathy

## Left Brain Thinking:

Sees parts & fragments  
Looks for the typical  
Uses language's literal meaning  
Understands only direct statement  
Emphasizes the impersonal (things)  
Enjoys the mechanical & artificial  
Needs certainty, expresses anger  
Main concern is inner self (narcissism)

\*Based on *The Master and His Emissary* by Ian McGilchrist (neuroscientist, psychiatrist, and professor of English literature)



So here are **13 ways** poetry can be enhanced by applying insights from neuroscience. 2 or more short poems will illustrate the concept of each different way poets look at the world and the creative process.



**1. Poetry Looks At the world Like a Child.** Consciously or not, a serious poet learns to view the world almost as a child does: as if seeing something new, fresh, unknown, to be inspected from many perspectives, looking closely, with a sense of wonder. To a child, the most mundane object, if new, is magical. Let us poets remember to see as children, with wonder, fresh vision, and innate curiosity.





**1. Neuroscience Aspect:** The right brain is always on the lookout for what is new, unusual, and unexpected in the outer world. If you can remember to look with fresh insight at even familiar objects, your brain will reward you with a little jolt of dopamine delight. Your creativity will be activated. Poets naturally seek strangeness and mystery. Poets create beauty simply by looking intently. But don't just describe; use your poetic insight to transform your observations into something unique.



# 1. Poetry Looks At the World Like a Child.

*In a Station of the Metro* Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.



# 1. Poetry Looks At the World Like a Child.



## *Lily Lured* Michael Baldwin

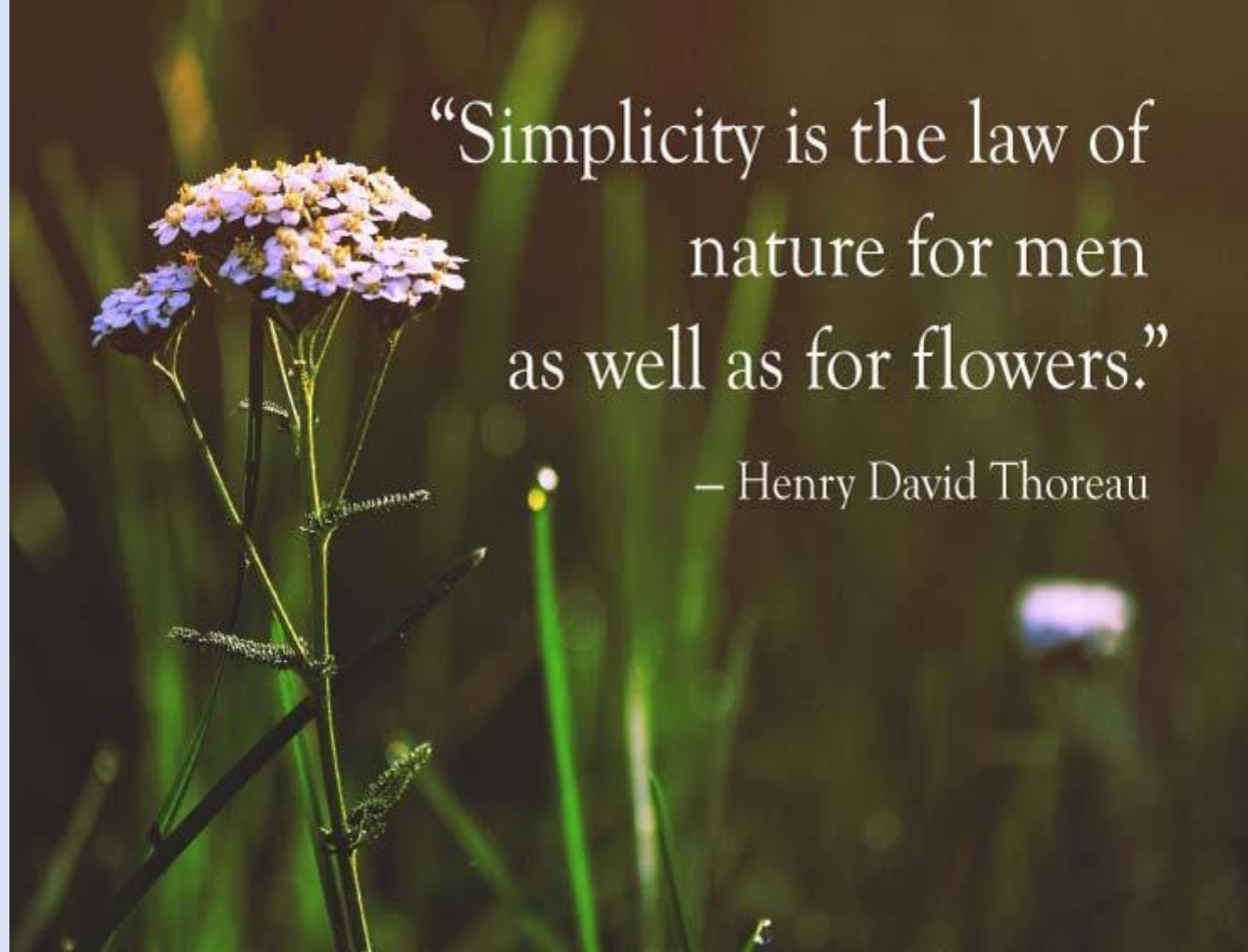
A bevy of ostentatious  
orange tiger lilies  
flirt brazenly  
extenuated stems  
nodding metronomically  
ticking syncopated  
jaunty breeze jazz  
wooing the wan world  
beckoning somber bees  
flaunting flamboyant color  
lacking fragrance

their extravagant anthers  
lick up sun honey  
proud in their  
pulchritude  
such an ugly name  
for beauty



## 2. Poetry Looks for Truth, Clarity, and Simplicity.

The poetic mind seeks the truth of what it sees. Stark truths often require simple, clear wording for greatest impact. Both creative strangeness and simplicity can coexist in great poetry. That previous poem by Pound was both very simple and visualized with childlike astonishment. So it can be quite challenging to write simply and with creative wonder. That's what makes it art!

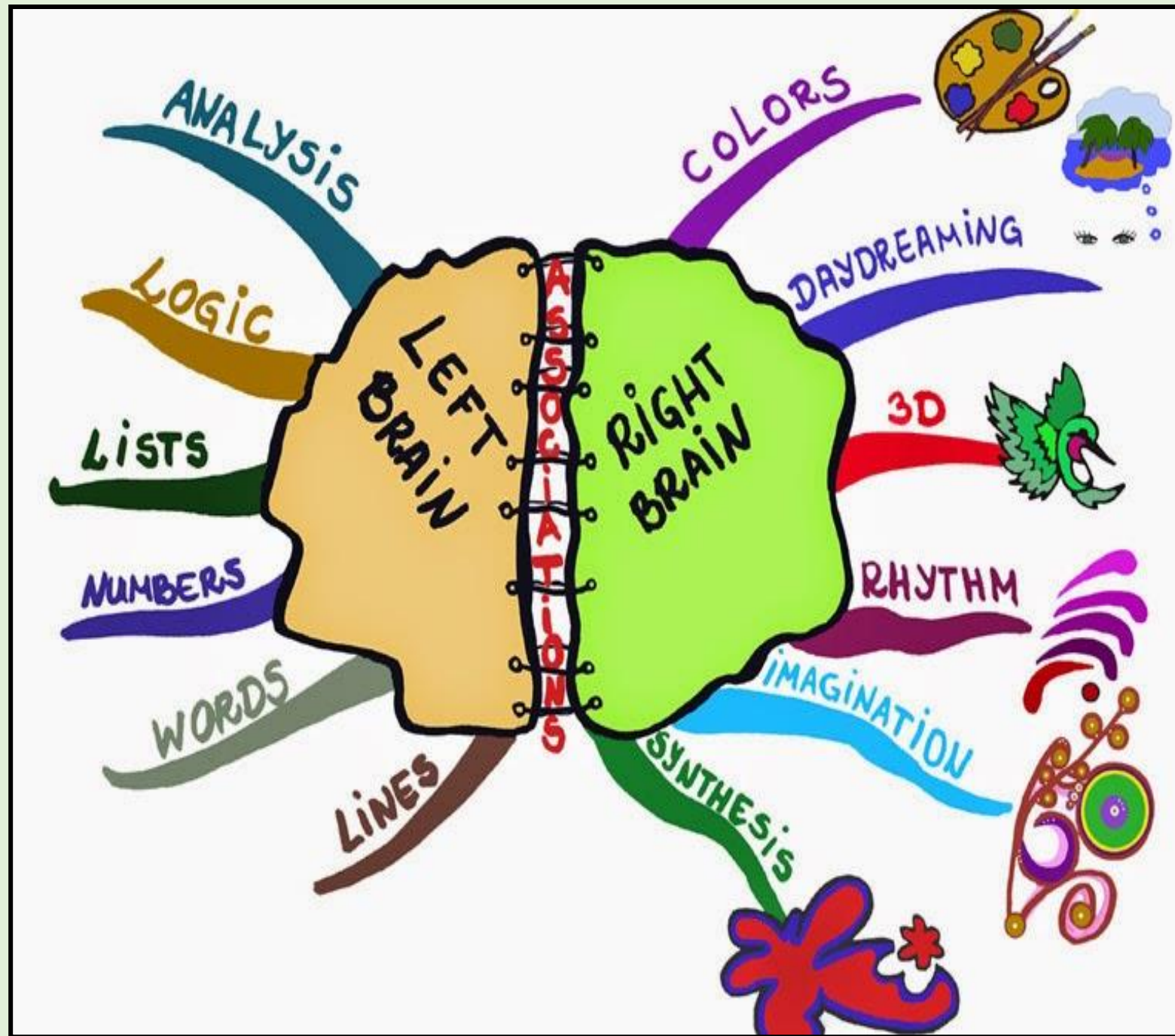


“Simplicity is the law of nature for men as well as for flowers.”

– Henry David Thoreau

## 2. Neuroscience Aspect:

After the right brain identifies something as new or unusual, it sends that information to the left brain to be analyzed, organized, rationalized, and acted upon. It is in the left brain that both **imagination** and fresh **simplicity** of expression can come together. In the following poem, William Stafford uses his poetic, yet rational, mind to ask and answer an important question.



## 2. Poetry Looks for Truth, Clarity, Simplicity

### *Traveling through the Dark*

William Stafford (1914 -1993)

Traveling through the dark I found a deer  
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.  
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:  
that road is narrow;  
to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light  
I stumbled back of the car  
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;  
she had stiffened already, almost cold.  
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.



My fingers touching her side  
brought me the reason—  
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,  
alive, still, never to be born.  
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;  
under the hood purred the steady engine.  
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;  
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—,  
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

## 2. Poetry Looks for Truth, Clarity, Simplicity

### *The Greatest Love*

Anna Swir (1909 -1984)

She is sixty. She lives  
the greatest love of her life.  
She walks arm-in-arm  
with her dear one,  
Her hair streams in the wind.  
Her dear one says:  
"You have hair like pearls."  
Her children say:  
"Old fool."



**2. Poetry  
Looks for  
Truth,  
Clarity,  
Simplicity**

*This Is Just To Say* William Carlos Williams (1883 -1963)



*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

### 3. Poetry Looks With All Our Senses

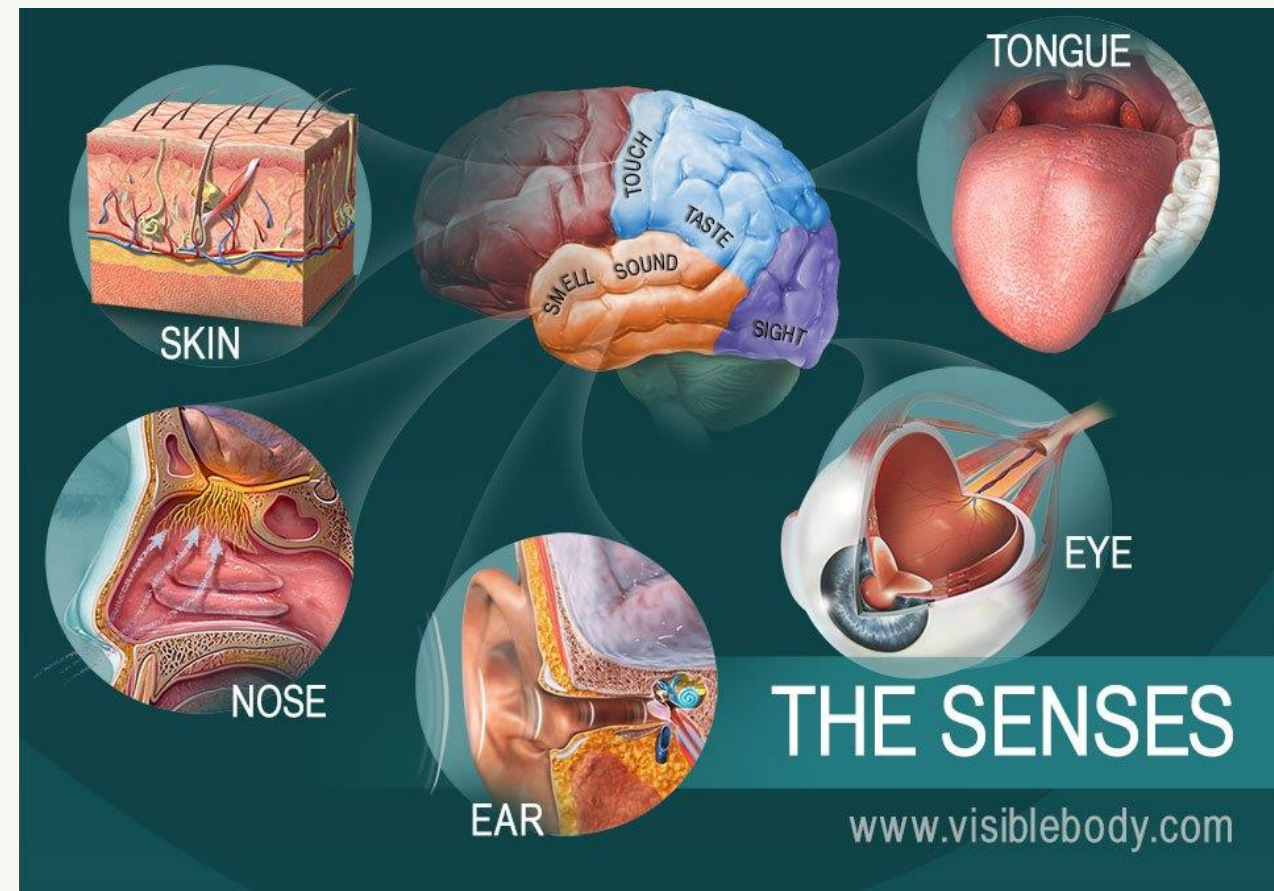
Poetry uses the entire range of human sensing to investigate, depict, and interpret the world: Sight, Smell, Hearing, Taste, Touch, Interoception\*.



\* Interoception is our sense of what's happening inside our body: Feeling our heartbeat, hunger, thirst, headache...these are all instances of interoception.



**3. Neuroscience Aspect:** Our brain uses the inputs of our senses to create an internal model of what's happening out there. Our **visual** system takes up the largest amount of brain space. The sense of **smell** is our most ancient sense, able to distinguish billions of odors. Our **left ear hears music** better and connects to our right brain; our **right ear hears language** better and connects to our left brain. Each sense experience we have is **strongest the first time**, and becomes progressively less intense with repetition.



Let us as poets, then, use vivid poetic description of our sensory reality to remind our readers of the **first time** they **smelled** that rose, **tasted** a kiss, **heard** Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata.

### 3. Poetry Looks With All Our Senses

#### *Night Upon The Lawn Rondel*

Michael Baldwin

Night, now somnambulant on the lawn,  
curries other senses to this scene.

The grass retains the redolence of green,  
and the summer feel of softness like a faun.

Cricket cries delight this ear they fall upon.  
It could be hunger, love, or fear they mean,  
when night is somnambulant on the lawn  
and curries other senses to this scene.

The moon has kissed the Earth and drawn  
exhalent mists, luminous souls to sheen,  
so you and I may in secret here convene.  
I'll know the touch and taste of you till dawn,  
with night somnambulant on the lawn  
to curry other senses to this scene.



### 3. Poetry Looks With All Our Senses

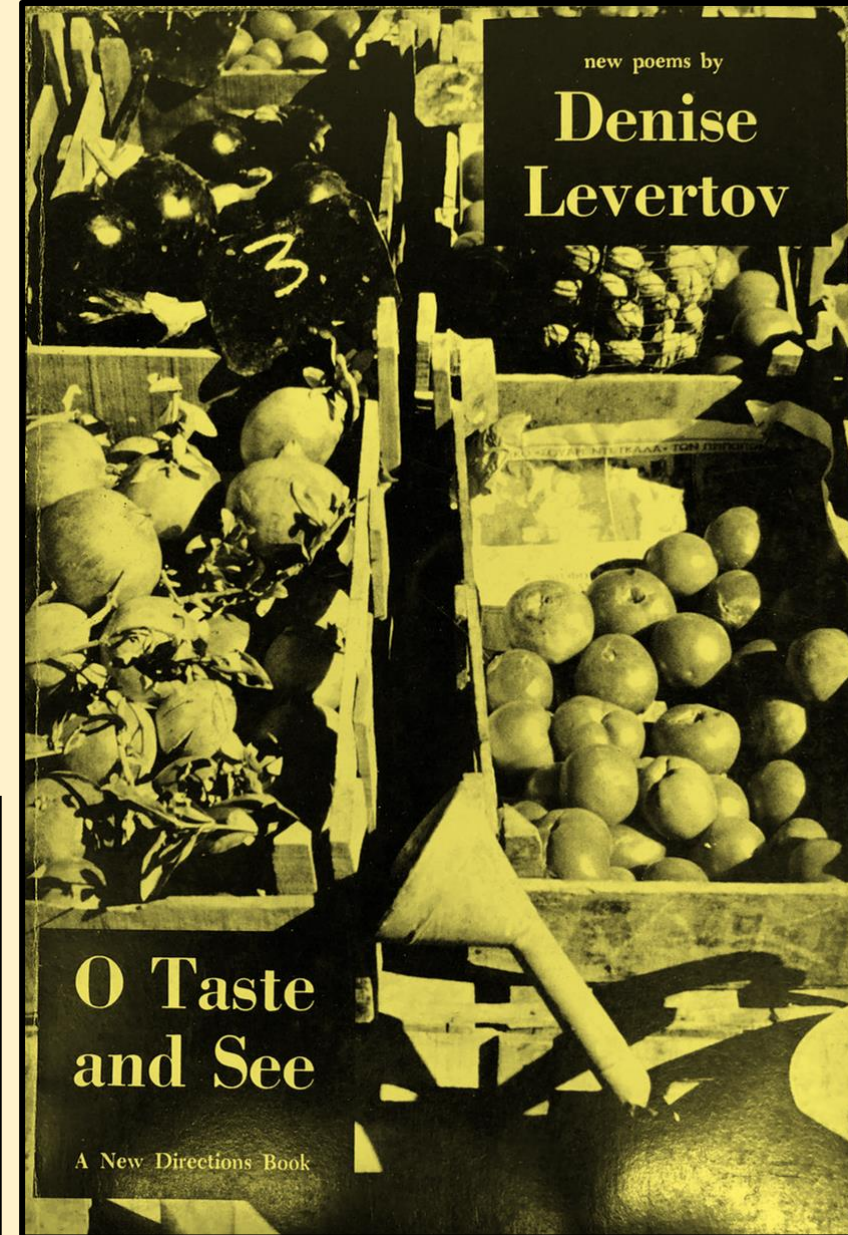
*O Taste And See* Denise Levertov (1923 -1997)

The world is  
not with us enough  
**O taste and see**

the subway Bible poster said,  
meaning **The Lord**, meaning  
if anything all that lives  
to the imagination's tongue,

grief, mercy, language,  
tangerine, weather, to  
breathe them, bite,  
savor, chew, swallow, transform

into our flesh our  
deaths, crossing  
the street, plum, quince,  
living in the orchard  
and being  
hungry, and plucking  
the fruit.



#### 4. Poetry looks imaginatively.

Poetry looks at many possibilities, not just those expected in a situation. Poetry can awaken us to the **extraordinary**, the **unexpected**, the **surprising**. Poetry also looks beyond real possibilities to imagine even **impossibilities** that delight and ignite the reader's own **imagination**. Poetry inspires us to think farther than our ordinary lives to what might happen if we dream with sufficient power.



#### 4. Neuroscience Aspect:

Imagination occurs mainly in our right brain imagery, but we have to be willing to let our minds wander without restraint. **Physical exercise** and then **mental relaxation** is the best way to stimulate our **imagination**. First consider the subject you want to fantasize about. Then relax and let your **right brain** wander. Our subconscious mind will readily conjure marvelous imaginings if we learn to set it free to work on our ideas.



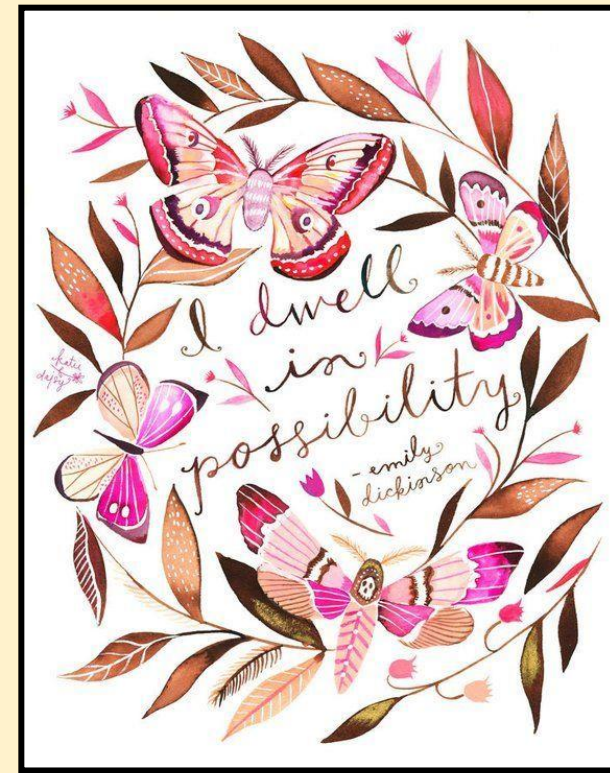
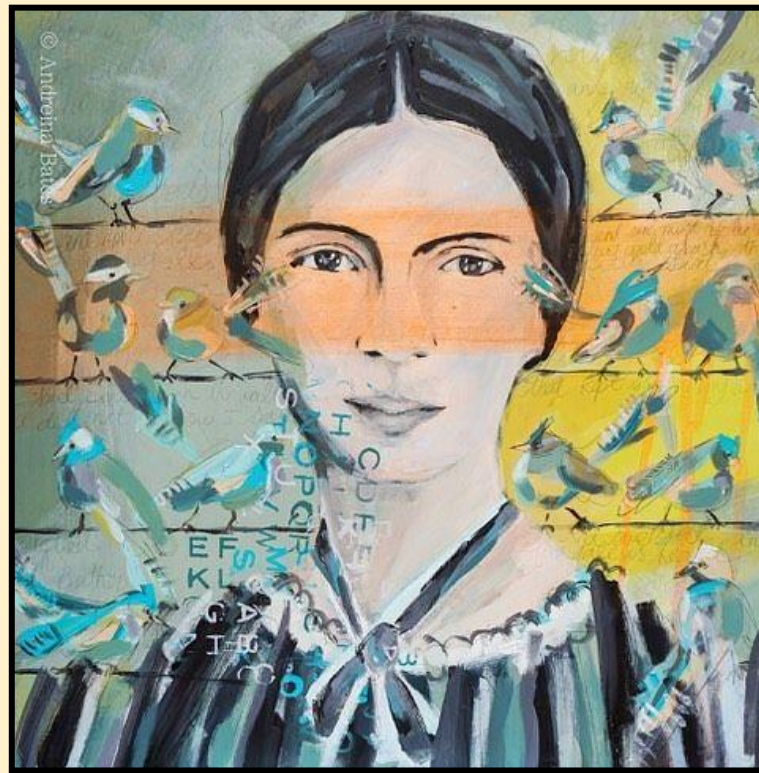
## 4. Poetry Looks

### Imaginatively

#### I Dwell In Possibility

Emily Dickinson (1830 -1886)

I dwell in Possibility –  
A fairer House than Prose –  
More numerous of Windows –  
Superior – for Doors –  
  
Of Chambers as the Cedars –  
Impregnable of eye –  
And for an everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky –



Of Visitors – the fairest –  
For Occupation – This –  
The spreading wide my  
narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise –

## 4. Poetry Looks Imaginatively

### *somewhere I have never travelled*

e. e. cummings (1894 -1962)

somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond  
any experience, your eyes have their silence:  
in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,  
or which i cannot touch because they are too near

\*\*\*\*\* (3 stanzas omitted)

(i do not know what it is about you that closes  
and opens; only something in me understands  
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)  
nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands



## 5. Poetry Looks for Metaphor.

**Metaphor and simile** are the basis of all language and should be the foundation of most poetry. Without metaphor, poetry becomes mostly prose. The great power of poetry comes from producing word images that represent the essence of other concepts: "Marble-heavy, a bag full of God," is Sylvia Plath's description of "Daddy." The primary caution with metaphor and simile is to **avoid cliché**.





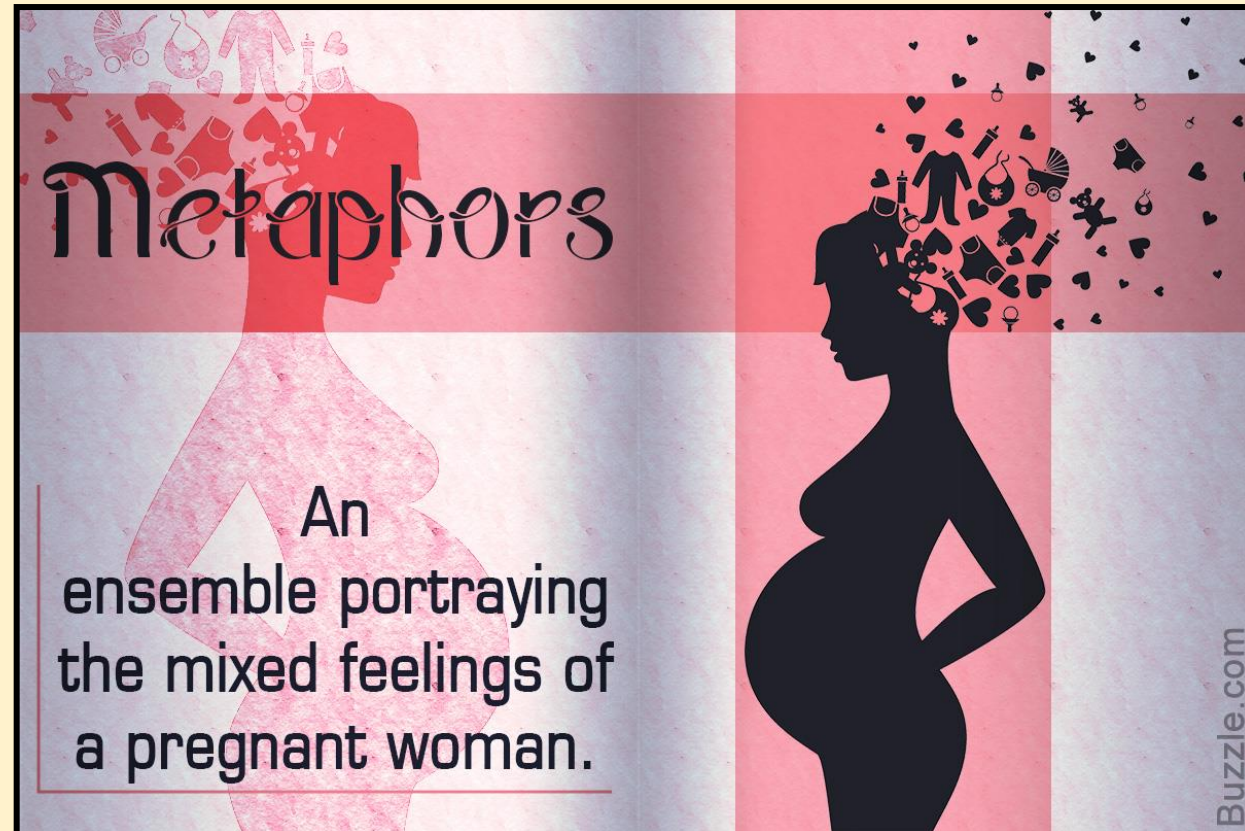
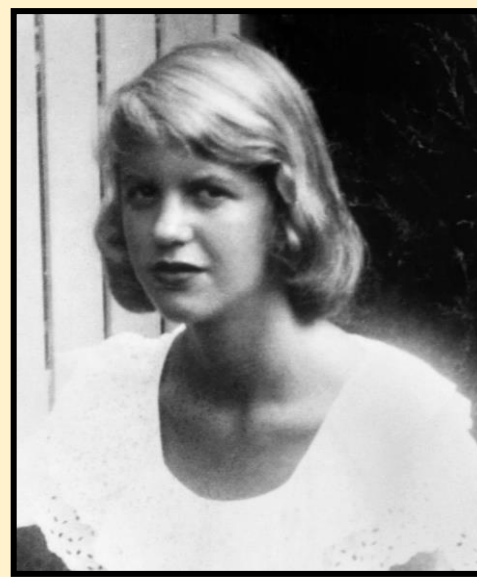


## 5. Poetry Looks for Metaphor

### Metaphors

Sylvia Plath (1932 -1963)

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,  
An elephant, a ponderous house,  
A melon strolling on two tendrils.  
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!  
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.  
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.  
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.  
I've eaten a bag of green apples,  
Boarded the train there's no getting off.



## 5. Poetry Looks for Metaphor

### Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) (Sonnet 18)

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,

Waterhouse  
Ophelia



Renoir  
The Umbrella

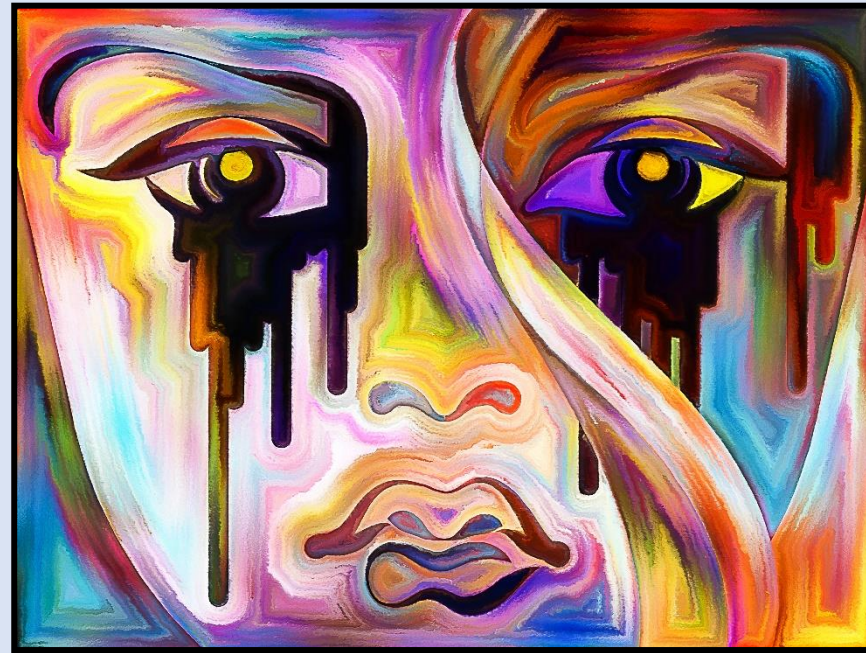
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimm'd;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;  
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st;  
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

## 6. Poetry Looks for Emotion, Passion, Compassion.

(with humor, absurdity, awe, ecstasy, sadness, happiness, love, longing, etc.)

Poetry is the primary **art of emotion**. In an effective poem, emotion is evoked subtly and without sentimentality. Good poetry encourages the reader to work for the emotional impact of the poem rather than banging them over the head with it.

Read poetry aloud with appropriate emotion rather than flatly, as too many poets do.

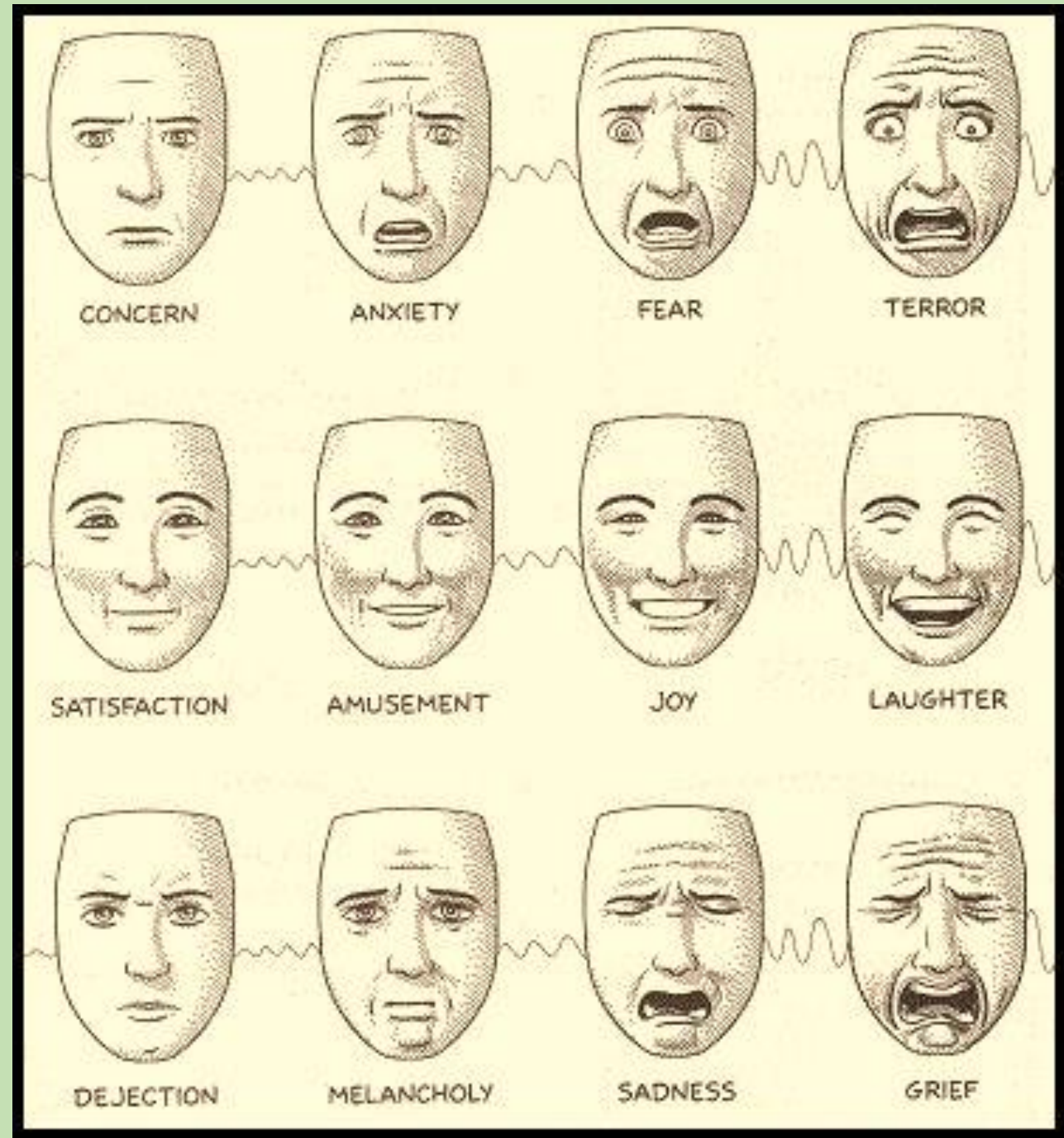


Images by  
Andrew  
Ostrovsky



## 6. Neuroscience Aspect:

Neuroscience experiments have shown that poems with **vivid imagery** and **strong emotion** are what readers most **desire** and **value** in poetry. The **right brain produces all the emotions except anger**, which comes from the left brain's amygdala. Think of the poems you care most about, and I'll bet they have a strong emotional component. Read a poem with appropriate emotion to help the reader appreciate it.



## 6. Poetry Looks for Emotion, Passion, Compassion

*Western Wind*     Anonymous  
(early sixteenth century)

Western Wind, when will thou blow  
The small rain down can rain?  
Christ, if my love were in my arms  
And I in my bed again!



Windy Day by MoZaky

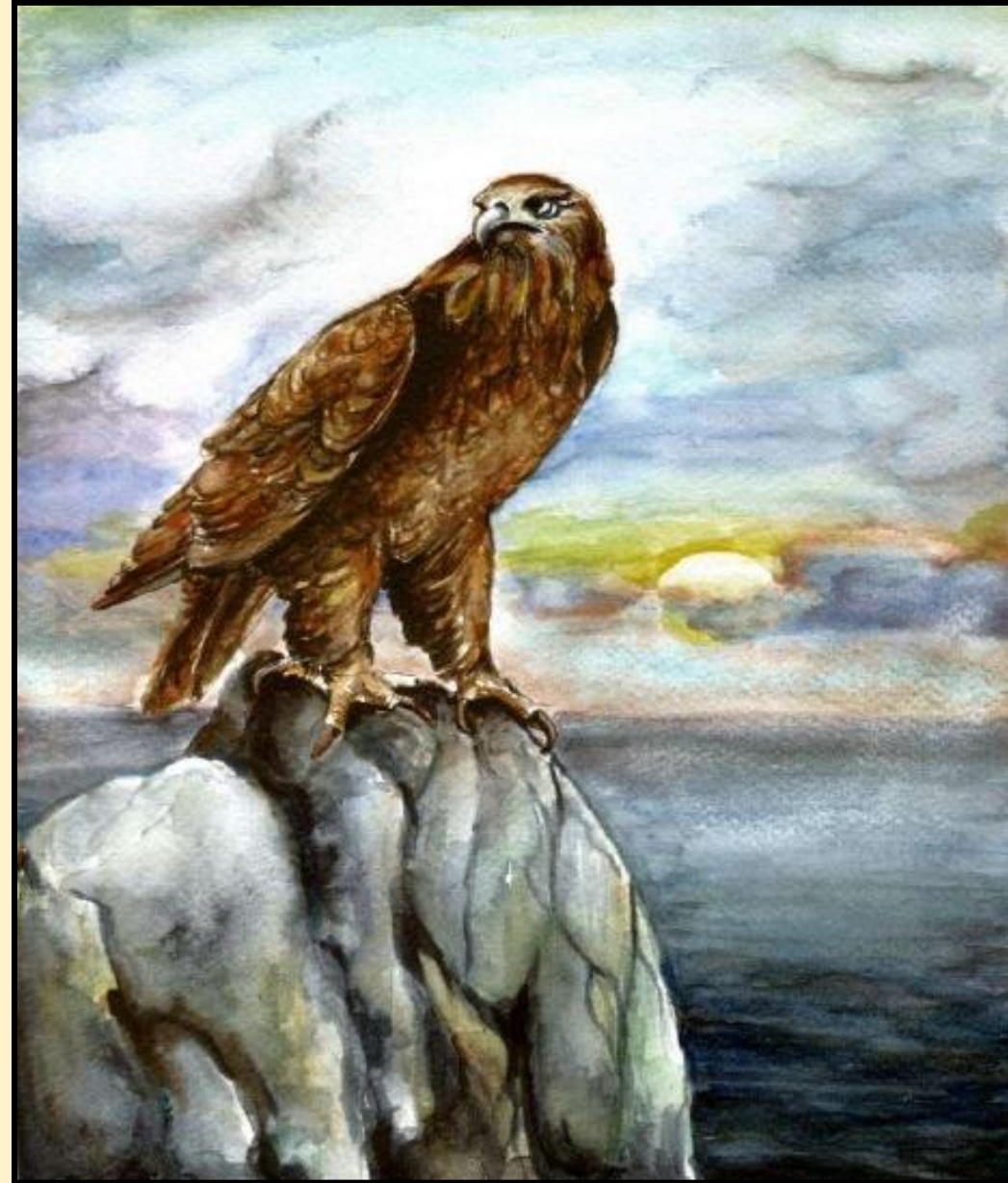
## 6. Poetry Looks for Emotion, Passion, Compassion

### *The Eagle*

Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809 -1892)

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls,  
And like a thunderbolt he falls.



## 6. Poetry Looks for Emotion, Passion, Compassion

### *Hearing the Shostakovich Cello Sonata*

Michael Baldwin

One Day After the Explosion of The Space Shuttle Columbia, February 2, 2003

Today this nervous, mordant piece transforms to trenchant requiem.  
So when the shrieking silence cease,  
We know that it has chosen them.  
Glissades of sorrow, sonata ponders  
whispers of loves and lives extinguished.  
In deepening gloom the cello wanders  
Piano's stridency relinquished.



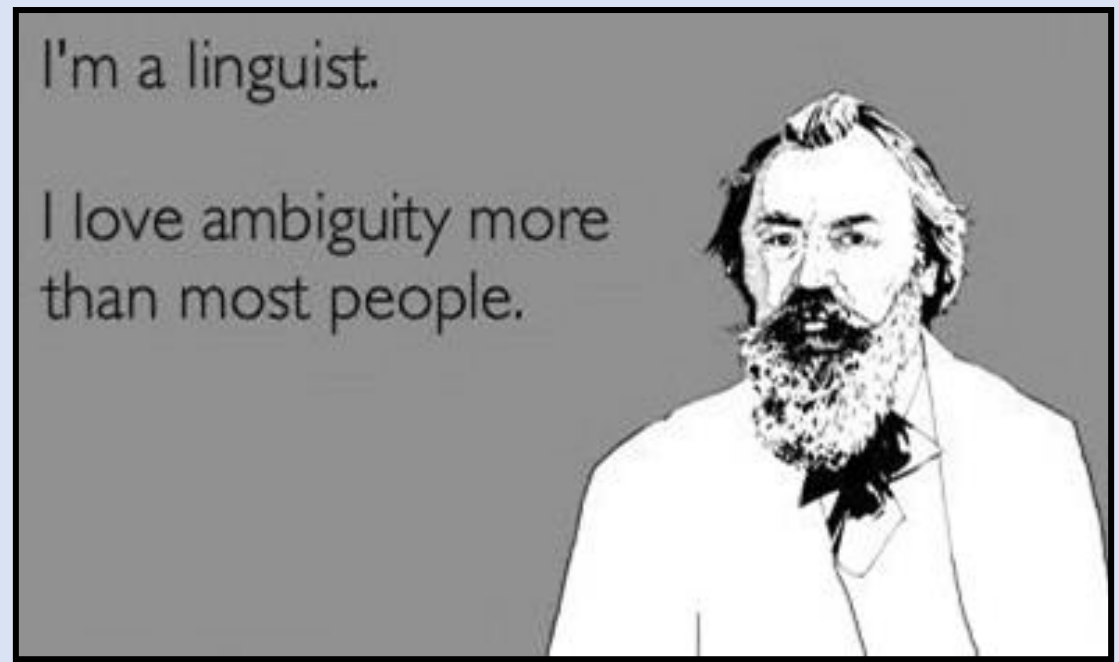
Piano's staccato storm demands:  
"Why is needless suffering allowed?"  
Cello starkly understands  
flame-flashing, spirit-endowed:  
"Love's pain transformed by music's art  
in deepest chambers of the human heart."



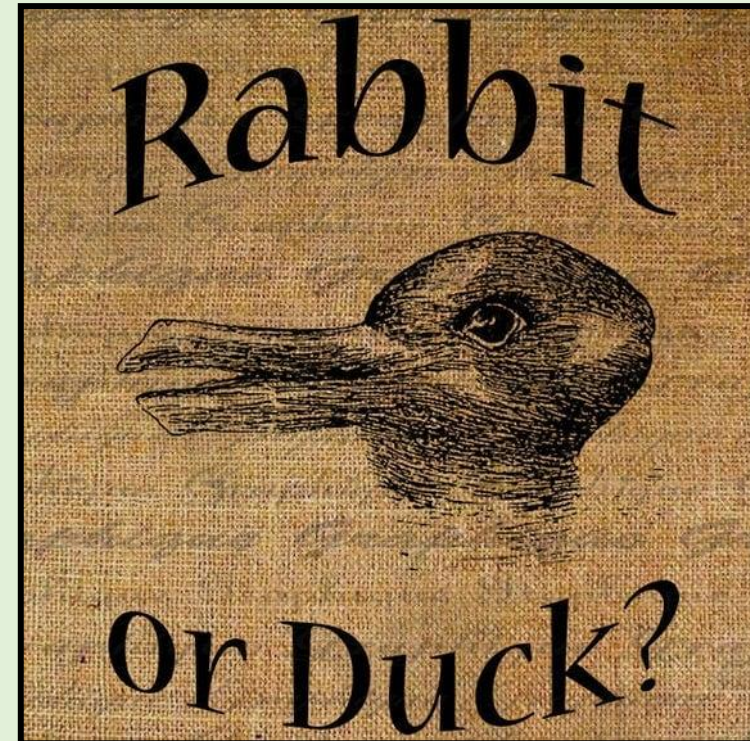
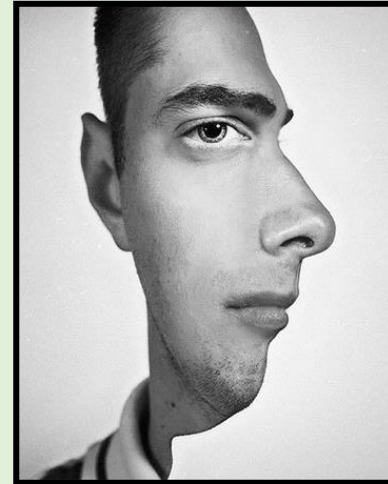
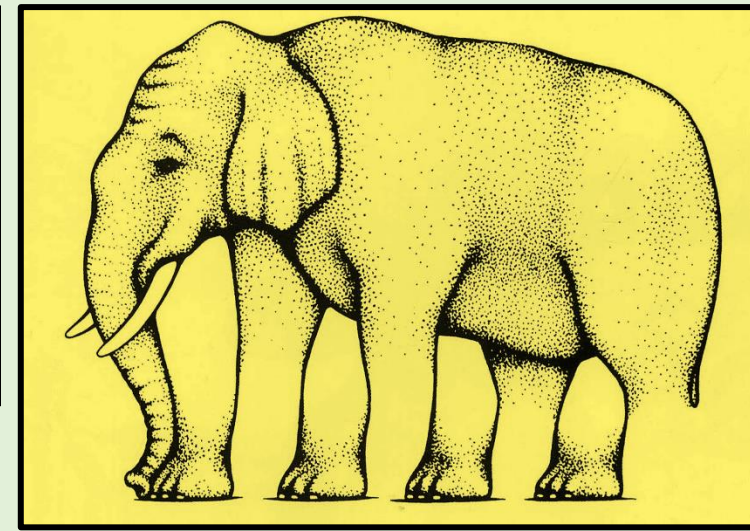
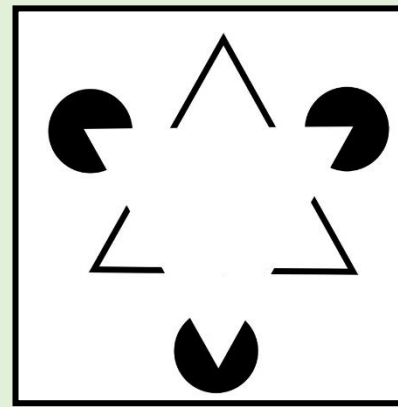


## 7. Poetry looks for Ambiguity.

Ambiguity in poetry, according to poet, William Empson, in his classic study, *7 Types of Ambiguity*, includes “any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.... The machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry.” Here are two examples of non-poetic ambiguity.



**7. Neuroscience Aspect:** The **right brain** is intrigued by **ambiguity**; the **left brain craves certainty**. John Keats famously coined the term, "**negative capability**," which he recommended to poets as a mind state of **uncertainty** and **ambiguity**. Most prose tries to be unambiguous, to say something clearly and specifically. Part of the power of poetry is to use ambiguity to suggest to the reader more than one possible meaning. Ambiguity gives a poem mystery and encourages the reader to participate in giving meaning to a poem.



**Examples  
of visual  
ambiguity**

## 7. Poetry Looks for Ambiguity.

from *Chemin De Fer* \*

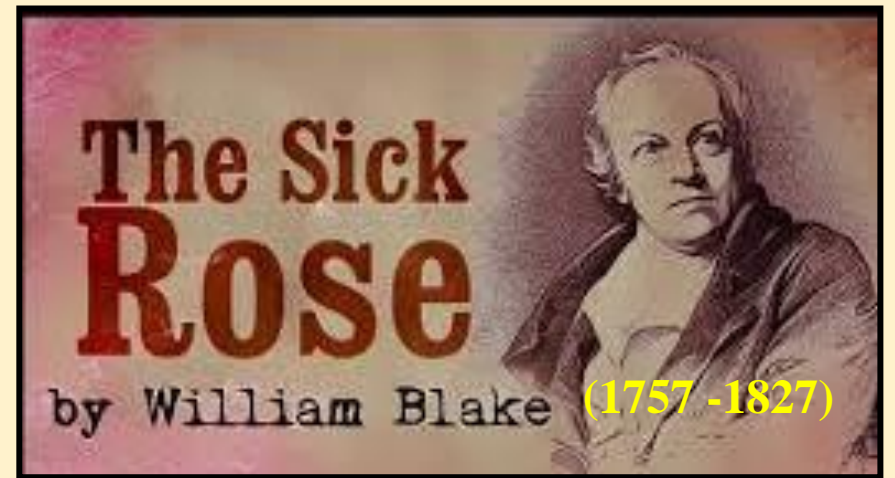
Elizabeth Bishop (1911 -1979)

Alone on the railroad track  
I walked with pounding heart.  
The ties were too close together  
or maybe too far apart.

\*(French for railway.  
Literally: iron path)



## 7. Poetry Looks for Ambiguity



O Rose thou art sick.  
The invisible worm,  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

## 7. Poetry Looks for Ambiguity

### *The Road Not Taken*

Robert Frost (1874 -1963)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

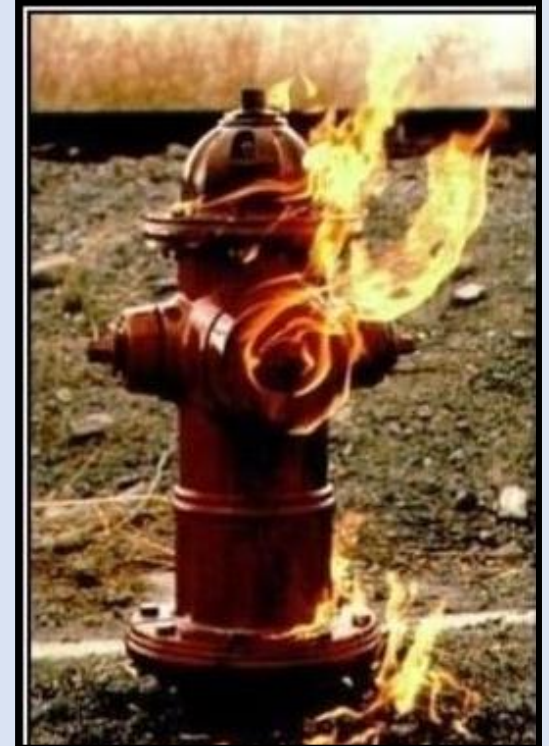
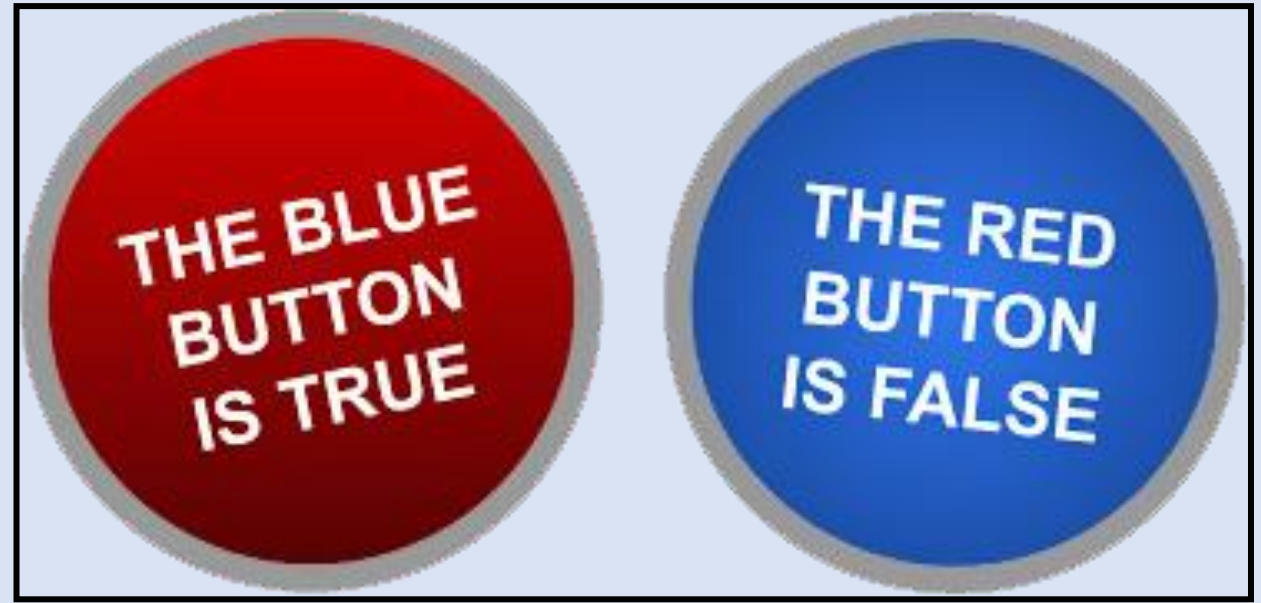
Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,



And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

**8. Poetry Looks for Paradox and Irony.** Where ambiguity has one word that can mean two things, **paradox** is two statements about one thing that seem to **contradict** each other. **Irony** is used to imply a meaning **different** from what is said literally. Paradox and irony create sense of **cognitive dissonance**, a tension that forces the reader to dig deeper mentally to resolve the poem's puzzle.



**8. Neuroscience Aspect:** The left and right brains must cooperate and be willing to move out of their comfort zone in order to explain the implied contradiction of a **paradox** and the differing intention of **irony**. The right brain enjoys the surprise and challenge of paradox and irony. The vast speechless subconscious of the right brain often solves the problem with an "ah ha" moment, but the left brain must articulate the answer.



## 8. Poetry Looks for Paradox & Irony

from *Memento Vivre*  
(*Remember You Must Live*)

Michael Baldwin

Have you noticed lately that you're dead?  
At least, all that we see  
of each other is dead:  
our hair, our nails, our skin—all dead.  
Even the corneas of our eyes,  
clear clothing the inner shine of iris,  
are transparently dead....



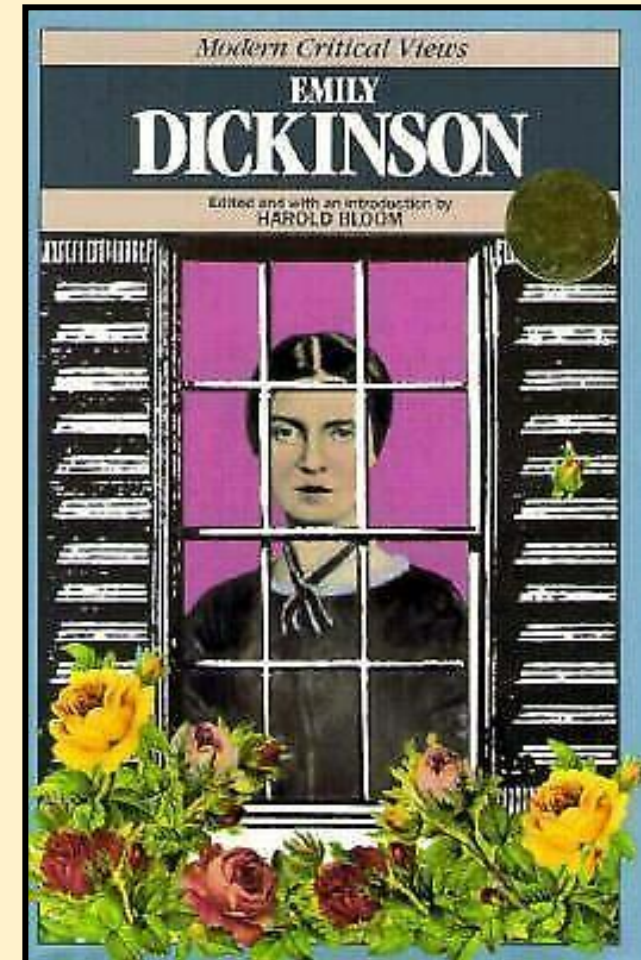


## 8. Poetry Looks for Paradox & Irony

### *My Life Closed Twice Before Its Close*

Emily Dickinson (1830 -1886)

My life closed twice before its close—  
It yet remains to see  
If Immortality unveil  
A third event to me  
So huge, so hopeless to conceive  
As these that twice befell.  
Parting is all we know of heaven,  
And all we need of hell.



## 8. Poetry Looks for Paradox & Irony

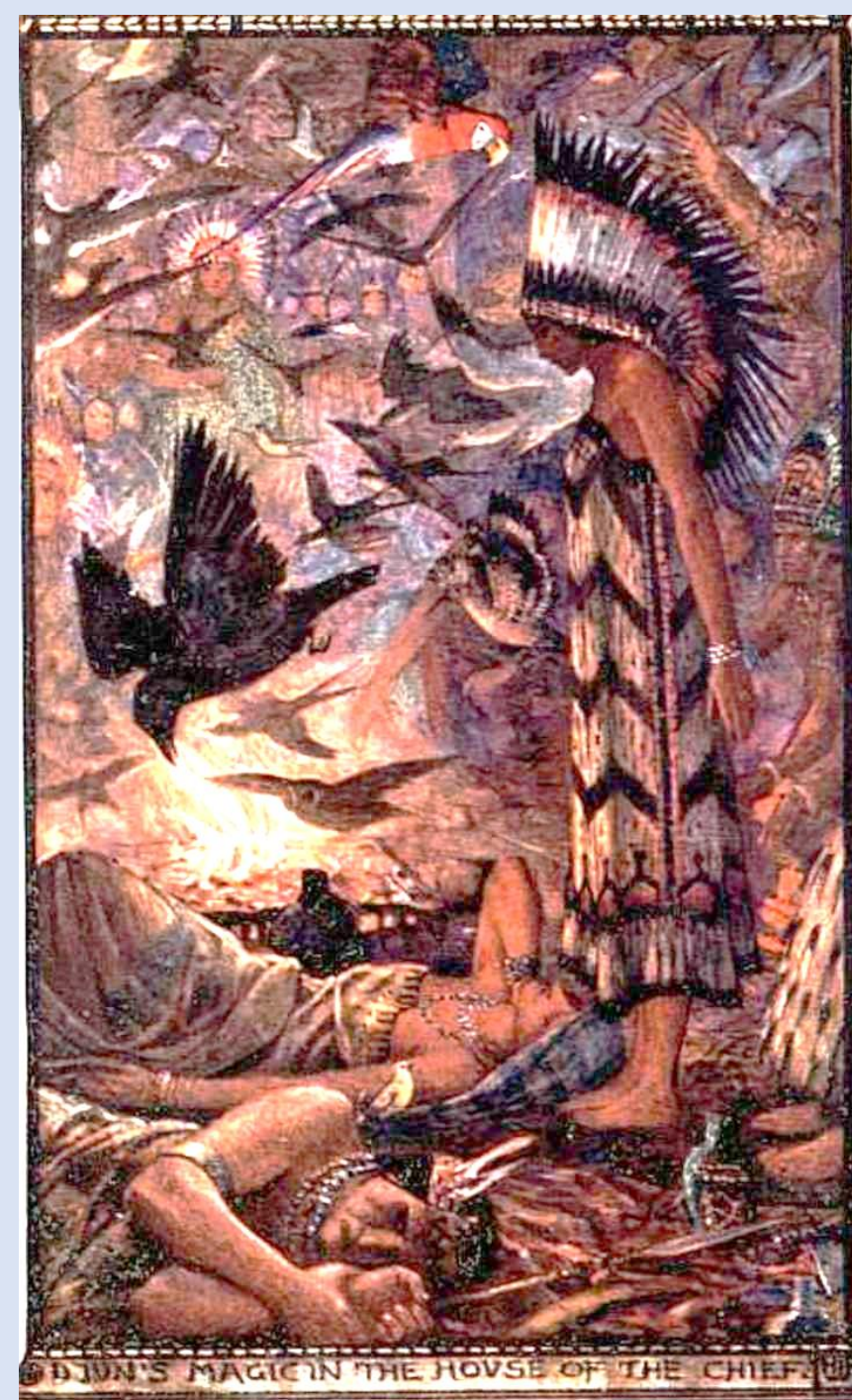
*Ozymandias* Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792 -1822)

I met a traveler from an antique land,  
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;  
And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.



## 9. Poetry Looks for Vivid Image.

Powerful **images** are fundamental to good poetry. But not all images in poetry are visual. Poetic imagery includes **all our senses** (as indicated in Concept 3). So, great poems often evoke **intense sensory images** of smell, taste, touch, and sound as well as sight. Certainly prehistoric poets regaling an audience around a fire at night conjured rich multisensory experiences for their audiences as part of their performance. We should try to do the same---even without a fire.



**9. Neuroscience Aspect:** A recent neuroscience study showed that what people value most in poetry are its **vividness of imaginary** and **emotional impact**. Both these elements are what makes a poem memorable and enjoyable. Most of our vivid imaginary and emotions spring from the right brain, which has only sensory image to work with. Right brain visualization preceded language by thousands of years.

Thus, when our left brain uses vivid poetic language effectively, it evokes powerful images in our right brain.

Don't be satisfied with clichéd description or pallid imagery. Let's seek unique images that will transport our readers beyond the ordinary.



## 9. Poetry Looks for Vivid Image.

from *The Windhover*

Gerard Manly Hopkins (1844 -1889)

To Christ Our Lord

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding  
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,  
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding  
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding  
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!



## 9. Poetry Looks for Vivid Image

### *My Papa's Waltz*

Theodore Rothke (1908 -1963)

The whiskey on your breath  
Could make a small boy dizzy;  
But I hung on like death:

Such waltzing was not easy  
We romped until the pans  
Slid from the kitchen shelf;  
My mother's countenance  
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist  
Was battered on one knuckle;  
At every step you missed  
My right ear scraped a buckle.  
You beat time on my head  
With a palm caked hard by dirt,  
Then waltzed me off to bed  
Still clinging to your shirt.



**10. Poetry Looks For Spirit.** Here I don't mean overtly religious poems. The *Windhover* was dedicated "to Christ our Lord," but the poem was not about religion *per se*. Spiritual poetry finds spirit, soul, the sacred, in many aspects of life. Writers about the spiritual, such as William James, describe **spirituality as a feeling of connectedness** of our self to something beyond the self. **Nature** poetry often conveys a spiritual component. Emphasis on the spiritual aspects of our lives is important in our current society, which mainly values economic relationships, consumerism, materialism. Let us use poetry to re-connect our readers to the spiritual experiences our souls crave.

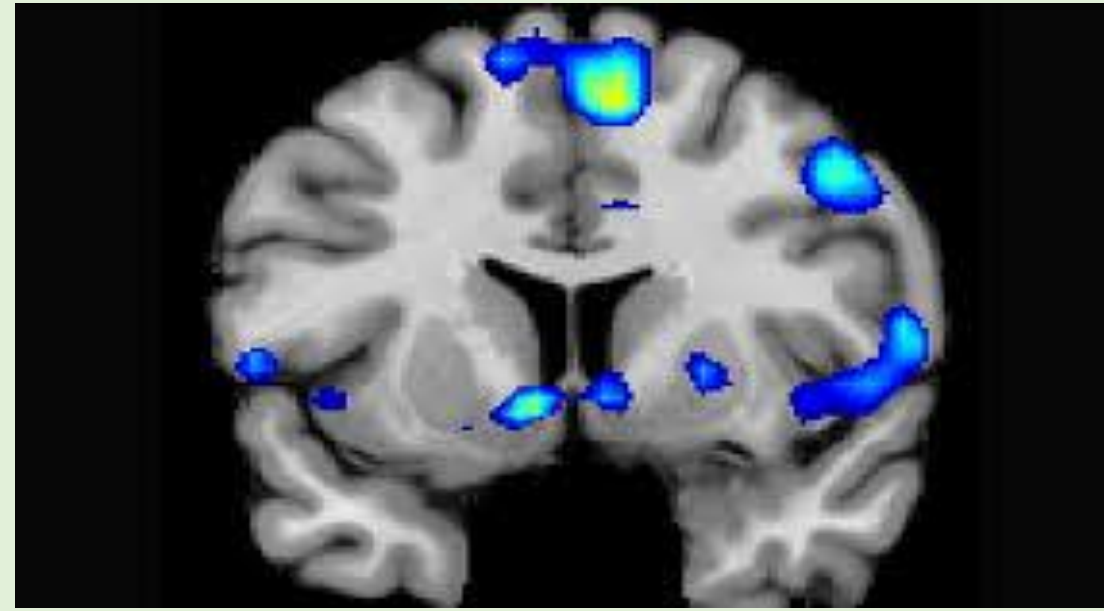


Images by Andrew Ostrovsky



## 10. Neuroscience Aspect:

Neuroscience has found that most **people have an affinity for the spiritual**, for the sacred. There is a particular spot in the brain that responds with a spiritual experience when electrically stimulated. Meditation, prayer, rhythmic rituals, harmonic chant, and, yes, poetry can create neural synchronization, which may generate spiritual experiences.



What your brain looks like on God. Brain areas triggered by a spiritual experience.

We are not human beings having  
a spiritual experience.  
We are spiritual beings having  
a human experience.

~ Teilhard Chardin

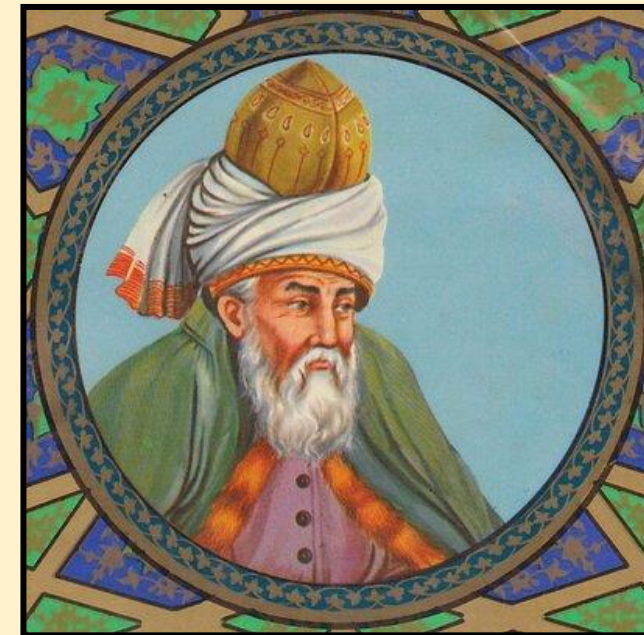


## 10. Poetry Looks For Spirit

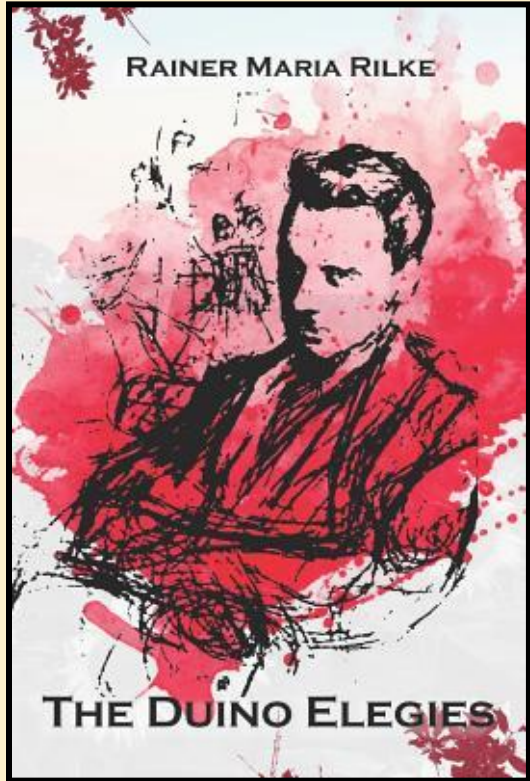
### *The Rose*

Rumi (1207- 1273)

That which God said to the Rose,  
and caused it to laugh in full-blown beauty,  
He said to my heart,  
and made it a hundred times more beautiful.



# 10. Poetry Looks For Spirit



from **Duino Elegy #1**

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875- 1926)

Who, if I cried out, would hear me  
among the Angelic Orders?  
And even if one were to suddenly  
take me to its heart, I would vanish  
into its stronger existence.



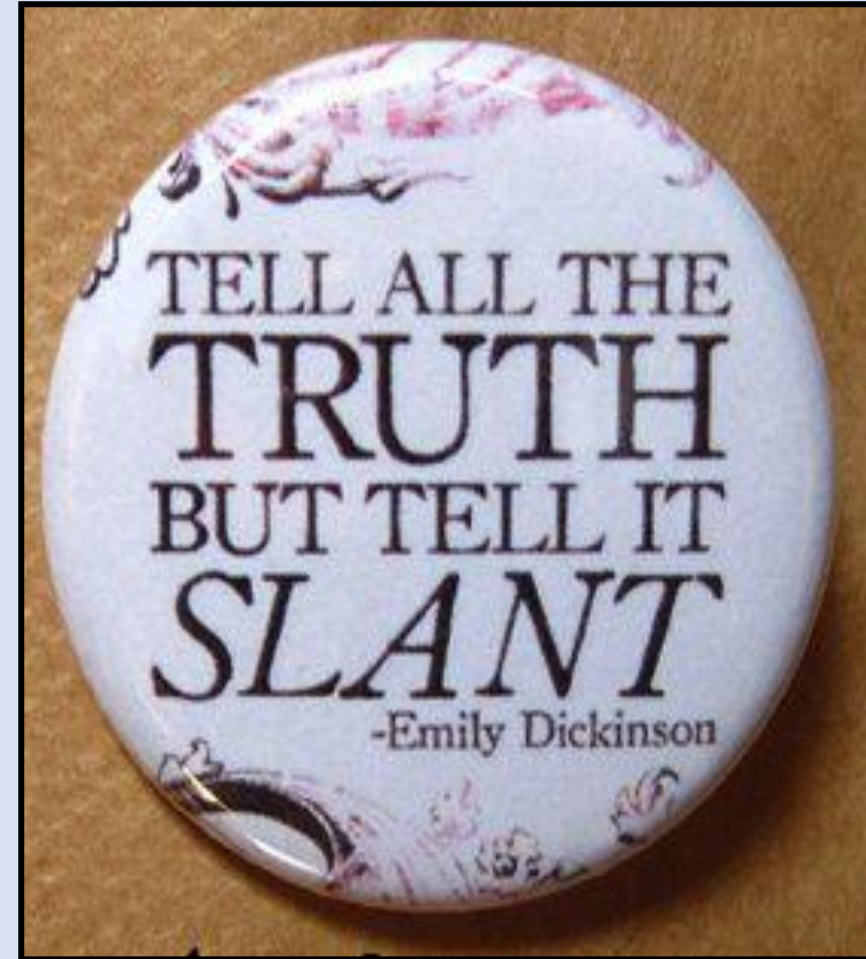
For beauty is nothing  
but the beginning of terror,  
that we are still just able to endure,  
and we revere it so, because  
it calmly disdains to destroy us....

## 11. Poetry Looks for What Cannot Be Said.

“Poetry is not the thing said, but a way of saying it.” **A.E. Houseman.**

“... A poem is not the outer event or phenomenon it ostensibly describes....” **Jane Hirshfield.**

Poetry often delivers a subtle but powerful indirect message to the attentive reader. This unsaid communication, delivered thru allusion, evocation, symbolism, or suggestion is one of the unique strengths of poetry.



**11. Neuroscience Aspect:** Most of our **knowledge** comes from our **right brain**, which can only communicate thru **feelings and images**. **Left brain language** is seldom adequate to express all the meaning our right brains generate. Poetry communicates what cannot be adequately said by **arousing emotions, sensations, and understandings** in the reader that are more potent and affecting than if stated directly. This can be done thru use of **symbolism, suggestion, and allusion**.

Because our eyes have a blind spot in the middle, we can often see something better by not looking directly at it. Or, in the case of poetry, by saying something indirectly.



# 11. Poetry Looks For What Cannot Be Said

*Harness* Jane Hirshfield (b 1953 )

Little soul,  
you and I will become

the memory  
of a memory of a memory.

A horse  
released of the traces  
forgets the weight of the wagon.



# 11. Poetry Looks For What Cannot Be Said

## *Cherries*

Michael Baldwin

The cherries  
we gathered  
have ripened.  
I tasted your  
fingerprints  
upon them.

The thrush  
that sang  
for us left  
only a  
feather.

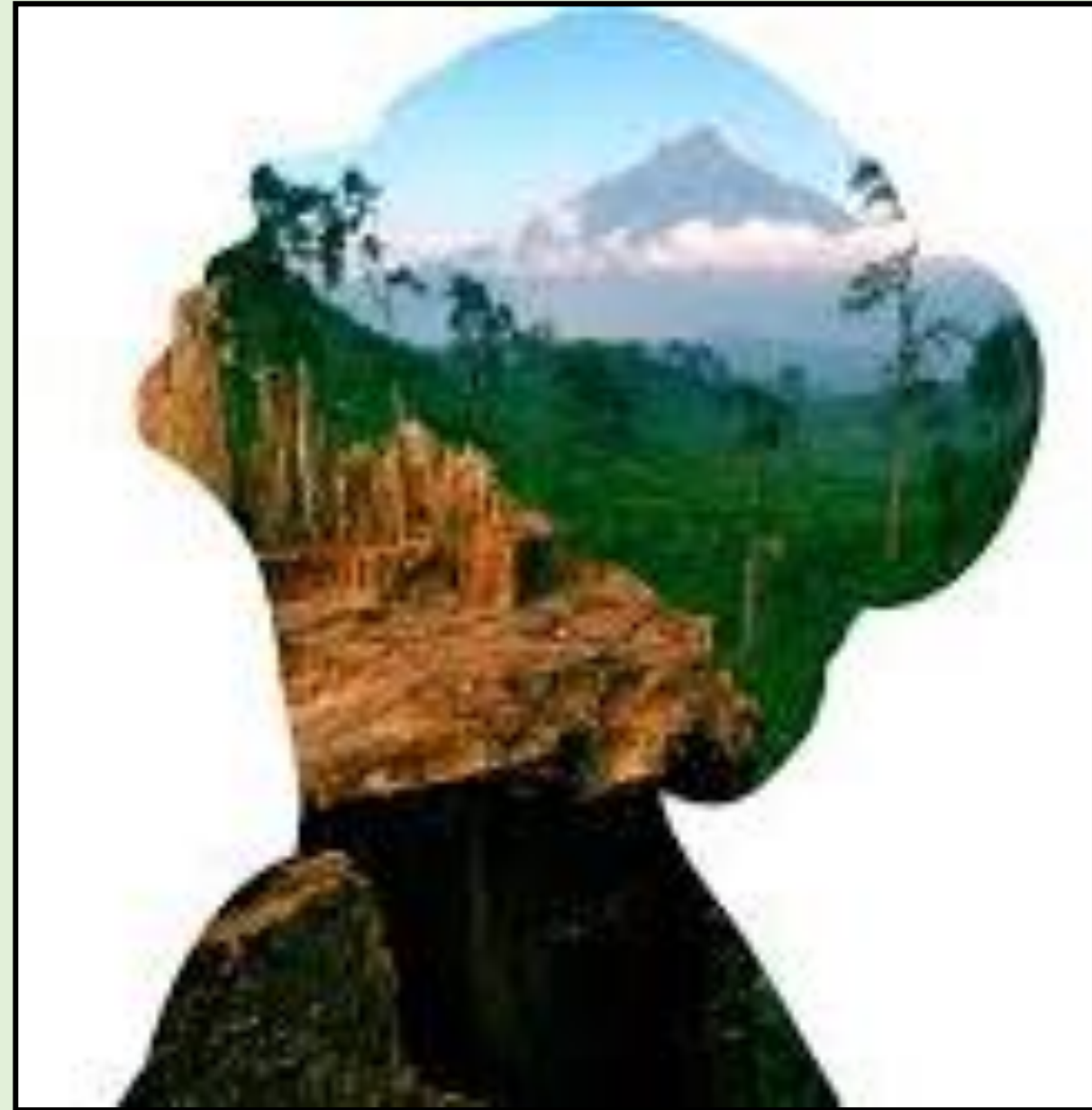


## 12. Poetry Looks to Nature.

Nature was the original wellspring of poetry and should still be (along with human relationships) the primary subject for most poetry. This is especially important today when so much of **nature is disappearing**, destroyed by human greed, indifference, and population growth. Thousands of species go extinct every day. Wildlife now comprises only about 4% of the Earth's biomass. Poetry can be important in reminding humanity to appreciate, protect, and cherish nature.



**12 Neuroscience Aspect:** Humans lived in and **our minds evolved in nature** for several hundred thousand years before we began to separate ourselves from nature with agriculture and cities. Most of our mental instincts and psychological responses derive from our ancestors' immersion in nature. **Our minds and bodies still crave exposure to nature.** A walk in the woods will lower your blood pressure and have other calming, healthful effects. **Poetry** can help direct attention to the **importance of nature** to our mental, physical, and aesthetic health.





## 12. Poetry Looks To Nature

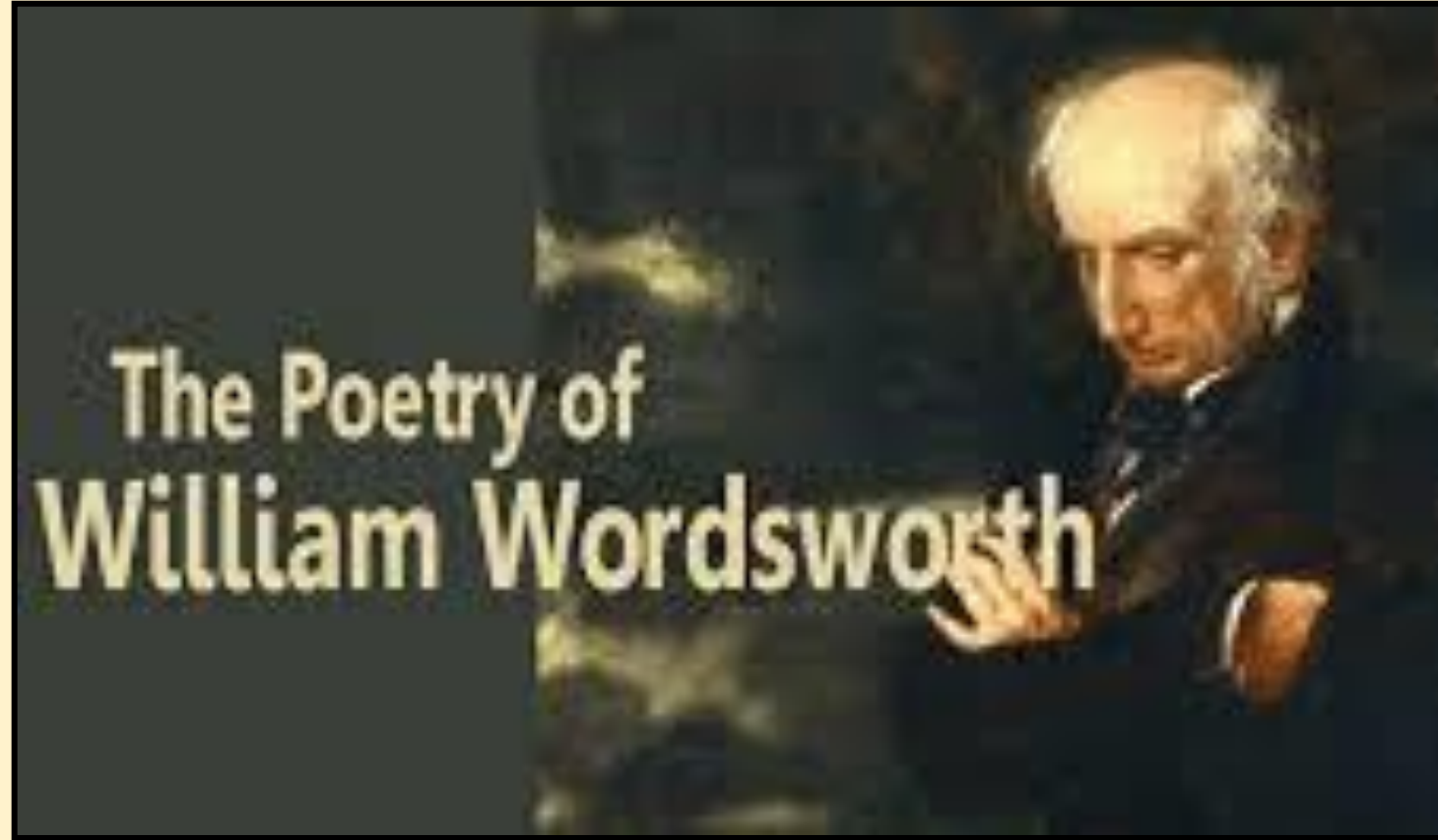
from *The Tables Turned*

William Wordsworth (1770 -1850)

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;  
Our meddling intellect  
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things: –  
We murder to dissect.

Enough of Science and of Art;  
Close up those barren leaves;  
Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives.



## 12. Poetry Looks To Nature

*The Swan* Mary Oliver (1935 -2019)

Did you too see it, drifting, all night, on the black river?  
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air –  
An armful of white blossoms,  
A perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned  
into the bondage of its wings; a snowbank, a bank of lilies,  
Biting the air with its black beak?  
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling  
A shrill dark music – like the rain pelting the trees – like a waterfall  
Knifing down the black ledges?  
And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds –  
A white cross Streaming across the sky, its feet  
Like black leaves, its wings Like the stretching light of the river?  
And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?  
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?  
And have you changed your life?

# SWAN

POEMS AND PROSE POEMS



# MARY OLIVER

**13. Poetry Looks Inclusively, Universally:** True poetry appeals to and applies to all humanity. It describes human emotions, circumstances, and relationships in a way almost anyone can relate to and identify with. We all experience love, fear, pain, desire, etc. Great poets explore these subjects, reminding us of their commonality and imbuing them with wisdom.



### 13. Neuroscience Aspect:

Much **modern, especially academic, poetry** tends to be very **individualistic and internalized** rather than expansive. This comes from the left brain's emphasis on and **narcissistic concern with inner-self rather than the right brain's emphasis on the outer world**. Modern **technology**, our **consumer society**, and particularly **social media** have given the left brain's narcissistic tendencies even more power over our thinking during the last few decades. Poetry has been greatly diminished as a result. Most **left brain poetry is more like prose, is inner directed, is unmemorable, and shows little emotional connection to humanity in general.**

“I think that in poetry personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience ...it should be relevant to larger things...” Sylvia Plath



**“I FIND A LOT OF POETRY TO BE NARCISSISTIC.”**

Joni Mitchell

# 13. Poetry Looks Inclusively

***I, Too*** Langston Hughes (1902 -1967)

I, too, sing America.

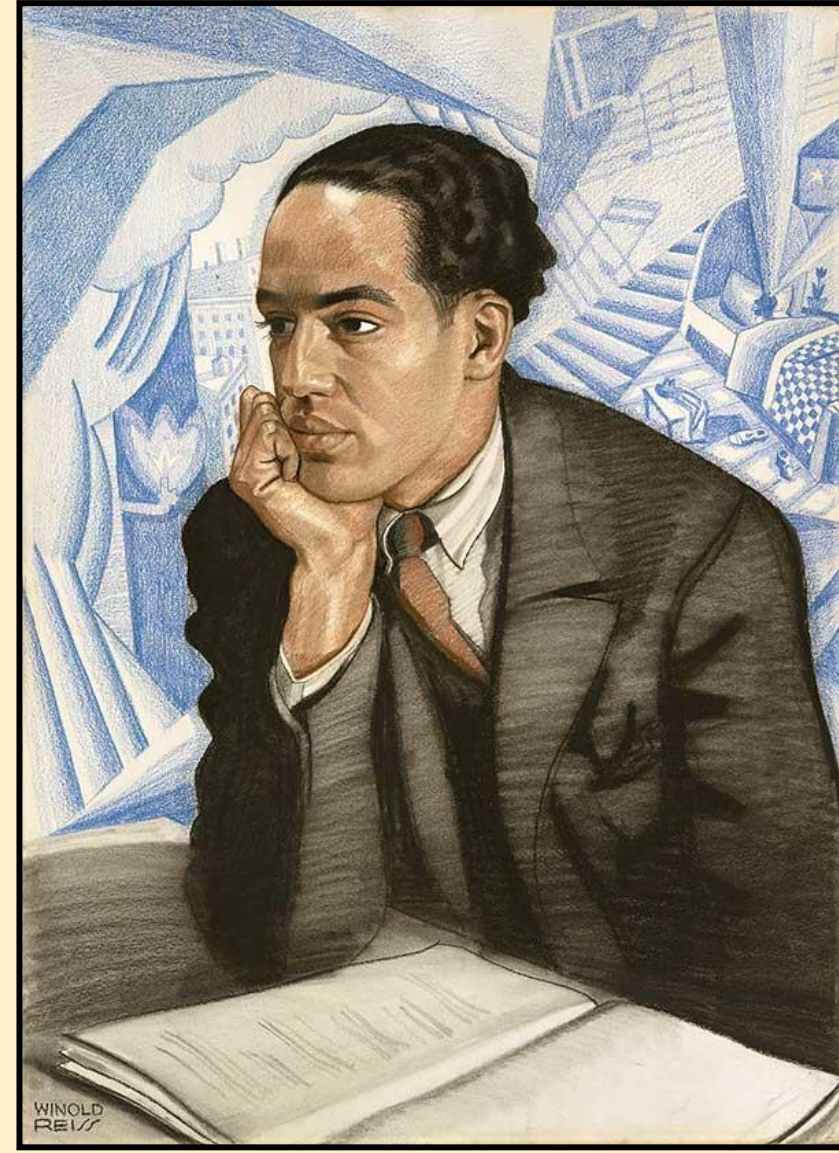
I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the  
kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.

Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
“Eat in the kitchen,”  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.



## 13. Poetry Looks Inclusively

(a contra example)

*Heart Condition* Jerico Brown (winner of the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry)

I don't want to hurt a man, but I like to hear one beg.  
Two people touch twice a month in ten hotels, and  
We call it long distance. He holds down one coast.  
I wander the other like any African American, Africa  
With its condition and America with its condition  
And black folk born in this nation content to carry  
Half of each. I shoulder my share. My man flies  
To touch me. Sky on our side. Sky above his world  
I wish to write. Which is where I go wrong. Words  
Are a sense of sound. I get smart. My mother shakes  
Her head. My grandmother sighs: He ain't got no  
Sense. My grandmother is dead. She lives with me.  
I hear my mother shake her head over the phone.  
Somebody cut the cord. We have a long distance  
Relationship. I lost half of her to a stroke. God gives  
To each a body. God gives every body its pains.

When pain mounts in my body, I try thinking  
Of my white forefathers who hurt their black bastards  
Quite legally. I hate to say it, but one pain can ease  
Another. Doctors rather I take pills. My man wants me  
To see a doctor. What are you when you leave your man  
Wanting? What am I now that I think so fondly  
Of airplanes? What's my name, whose is it, while we  
Make love. My lover leaves me with words I wish  
To write. Flies from one side of a nation to the outside  
Of our world. I don't want the world. I only want  
African sense of American sound. Him. Touching.  
This body. Aware of its pains. Greetings, Earthlings.  
My name is Slow And Stumbling. I come from planet  
Trouble. I am here to love you uncomfortable.

I selected this poem only because its author won a major poetry prize. So this is the type of poetry that is currently in fashion. Is this poem more poetic or more prosaic? Does it embrace the human spirit or does it reference mainly narrow personal concerns? Does it have vivid, arresting images? Is it imaginative or mundane? Does it employ any metaphors or similes? Is it memorable? I am not criticizing what is said, but how it is said.

We've reached the end of my 13 ways of looking at poetry. I'm sure more could easily be conjured, but 13 was sufficient for Wallace Stevens, so I'll quit there too. Thanks so much for your kind attention. I hope you've found some of these ideas stimulating and applicable to your own writing. I have made this PowerPoint presentation freely available for viewing on my website until the end of this year. Go to [www.jmbaldwin.com](http://www.jmbaldwin.com) and click over to the Seminars tab. There you'll find both this and the more in-depth presentation, ***Your Poetic Brain***, which is also available to view free until the end of this year.

Best wishes for all your poetic endeavors!