

# What You Can't Understand Is Poetry Is Connected to the Body Again

—*Thomas Robert Higginson*<sup>1</sup>

## POEM

### **What You Can't Understand Is Poetry Is Connected to the Body Again**

(Dateline: 9/2/97)

Jean allowed the body to drop  
The beautiful face bluing so perfect  
A fly buzzed by -- but no one would believe it  
She raced frantically to the offices of the *National Enquirer*  
A reporter wrote up the story -- it made the cover  
Now she could get the attention of the radical newsweekly  
That only told the truth  
She just casually flipped it down on the desk  
"Hey," an editor reading upside-down said,  
"What if this story is true? It would certainly change  
Our story -- maybe we should look into this.  
Hey! Stop those presses!"

Jean walked away. Horns were blaring,  
It was a brilliant dusty sunset and the sirens were distorting.  
She didn't hear em.  
She was remembering her lover's face,  
What they'd said about how you never know  
If someone else's orgasm is better than yours  
But that shouldn't stop you  
From coming together  
Even if it's not exactly  
At the same time.

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<sup>1</sup> Published acknowledging the real man behind the pseudonym, Bob Holman.

# ESSAY

## *What You Can't Understand Is Poetry*

The title says it all and it says it with a line break in case you think that “Spoken Word Poets” are not “Real Poets.” Real Poets eat line breaks for breakfast.

I love to read the title at a reading, parsing it out like this:

“What You Can't Understand

(take a little pause here)

Is

(big emphasis on IS, and a little pause, get ready for the matter-of-fact, always with us:) Poetry.”

The Perfect Lie. One *always* “understands” poetry! When you jump on the horse and it takes off, you don't ask where's it going, you exalt, here we go! No no. Wait. Reading a poem, that's not like that is it? not like riding a horse?....

*What you can't understand is poetry* -- because it's a mystery why poetry exists in the first place. Although you could actually say the same thing for language itself, which I suppose is what philosophers do. Which came first, the thought or the word? sounds Wittgensteinian to me. It's like when you say, something is lost in translation, what part is it that gets lost? The poetry. The poetry is what's lost, get it? The joy is in knowing that *what you don't understand*, exactly *that*, is a mix of sound and meaning, body and song that is, all together, what makes a poem a poem.

Again and again, not making sense! And this is what so many think (please don't agree with them!) -- that poetry is hard, obscure, difficult-to-impossible to understand.

WHEN IT WAS CONNECTED TO THE BODY YOU JUST DANCED IT—*Who said that?!*

Hey, hey, Order in The Poem! Let's PLEASE stick to this first line of the title before releasing the second. So ok, let's just say that the first line of the title is simply agreeing with what everyone is always saying – *Oy, Poetry! You can't understand it.*

Thus

Ends  
The  
First  
Line  
Of  
The  
Title

### *What You Can't Understand Is Poetry*

So we take a little pause here, in performance, and then (finally!) go on to:

#### ***Is Connected***

And then a little pause here, so that it becomes: What You Can't Understand is Poetry is Connected, which is another truism that's actually a false-ism: the easy way is to say that – Poetry IS connected, is the essence, to life/to meaning, and, here back to the title (*say it!*) – To The Body. Now we're getting to what the body of the poem is, and why this is the title – it's about the physical, and when I think physical, the body, I think of *Orality*.

Even though we think of it that way, the dialectic is not *Literacy* and *Illiteracy*. *Illiteracy* simply designates an individual's inability to read. *Orality*, as Walter Ong points out, is a separate and equivalent *consciousness*: when there's no writing, the only way to pass things on is person-to-person, body-to-body. You could say, "We Are the Book." This idea, devastatingly simple, is at the root of this poem, indeed, of my whole "body of work" as a poet. How to capture the way Poetry was connected to Existence, something that was inherent in Oral Consciousness, is what I'm after. It's what my mother showed me – she didn't read a book to me. The book was talking. In her voice.

#### ***Again***

Comes in after a pause. Because we used to "understand" this. In fact, "understand," the way we understand *understand*, is totally colored by literacy. Before writing, there was a spew of sound that carried the speaker's meaning – you'd ask the person to explain what they meant, but you never asked someone what a word meant because – there were no words! Before writing there were no words there was only meaning, and I know that seems crazy but again only because we don't get what a different consciousness *Orality* is. When writing began, there was no separation between words because what was being said came at you like a block of meaning, not words arranged in a pattern.

And now, in this time of Literacy Consciousness, I am suggesting that we learn (unlearn?) to "connect the poem to the body *again*." Since the triumph of Literature, Poetry's voice has been owned by the book. And I love books, I write 'em myself and read a lot -- my walls are lined

with them. And the quiet space midbrain where we read to ourselves? That is a private space where we are most ourselves, a holy space. But the Poem has another power, a power we left behind when we left Oral Consciousness behind. We can feel it as children, when we haven't yet learned to read. Some kind of magic and musicality, inherent when reading aloud, that's what I'm after, in general, in my work, and specifically in the two-lined title and following body of the poem known as:

***What You Can't Understand Is Poetry  
Is Connected To The Body Again***

The poem is divided into two stanzas, twelve lines and ten. Kind of ungainly and awkward as to line lengths, form doesn't sit easily here, even if both stanzas end with four-word lines. The poem is prosy, it sort of seems to tell a story, even if we can't quite tell what it's about (the old "understand" bugaboo again), a story that makes headlines. It has a character with a name (Jean, named for Jean Howard, who I knew in Chicago as one of the first poets to use film to make poetry, someone who understood the non-separation of poetry performance), and it even ends with what may well be a joke. So it's a Poem that evokes all manner of non-poetry forms – novel, play, journalism, joke.

Let me tell you a story: the "Plot" of the Poem

***Jean allowed the body to drop***

OK. Is this the "body" from the title? At least. Right after we learn that the body and poetry are connected again, our hero, Jean, *drops* the body! Is this so that her poetry is completely for the Intellect? Because as she drops the body (which we will later learn is her lover's), the body dies.

***The beautiful face bluing so perfect***

"Beautiful" and "perfect" in the same line – ach! Redolent of romantic poesy, these are words that each signal *Poem* without the work, and here they are, together – the face is "beautiful" but dying (or dead? "bluing") and thus can become "perfect." What a move!

A move so insistent, so bold, so over-the-top, that the only thing that can possibly cap it is line 3

***A fly buzzed by—***

Emily Dickinson! At her best! "I heard a Fly buzz -- when I died" (Johnson #591/ Franklin #465). This sure enough is the way Death sounds, sigh. Well, the fly was buzzing and still is buzzing and forever will be buzzing as sure a sign of Death as the Death Haiku, that Japanese

form where the dying poet holds quill and scroll and just as last breath escapes, concludes the final character of the final line – 5-7-5.

***but no one would believe it***

Dear Reader/Listener, you are perfectly within your rights to ask What is it that no one would believe? That our hero, Jean, would drop the body? That words like “beautiful” and “perfect” could conjure up dear Emily’s fly (“bluing” is pretty cool), the Essence of Death? Indeed, why is Jean even concerned that anyone believe that her lover/Poetry itself has died? Is she the murderer? Must she have the Truth be told, it’s what she as a Poet must do? All the above? We don’t know, so it’s all these things and probably more and we’re only at line 3, my God!

Because what happens next makes one thing pretty clear about our Ms Jean – she certainly does know how to get a story out. Since this is taking place during the Media Age Stage of Late Literacy, just before the Birth of the Digital Age,

***She raced frantically to the offices of the National Enquirer,***

the biggest, ever-lying, sleazeball publication of them all. Jean *knows* the world of print: to get the absolute widest possible distribution, the most explosive telling of this Death, it’s got to be -- the checkout counter rag!

***A reporter wrote up the story***

The story of course is that the body died from lack of connection to the poem. And guess what,

***—it made the cover.***

And our story could end there, the headline “POETRY FOUND DEAD: BODY SEVERED FROM SOUL.” But Noooo. Jean has a bigger game plan. As Lines 6-7 state ,

***Now she could get the attention of the radical newsweekly  
That only told the truth***

So first she goes for and gets the Big Blast Sensationalism Launch, and now she’s circling back to get the liberal Truth-tellers. She wants to get the story told to the biggest possible audience AND she wants it to be politically correct. Or at least be validated by the liberal media.

***She just casually flipped it down on the desk***

She may have raced frantically to get this into *The Enquirer*, to play into the demands of yellow journalism, but here for the thoughtful *Voice* or *Nation*, she plays it cool.

So cool that (Line 9)

***“Hey,” an editor***

(she’s moving up, no mere reporter here!)

***reading upside-down***

(truly literate, can read upside-down!)

***said. What if this story is true?***

(you can never be sure about *Enquirer* stories – but something in Jean’s demeanor....)

***It would certainly change***

***Our story***

(they had a story? How interesting? What could that have been?)

***maybe we should look into this.***

So the radical newsweekly already has the story but it is Jean’s version of the Body dying from lack of connection to the poem, for which, even filtered as it is through the hyperbole of the *Enquirer*, the radical newsweekly is willing to Stop the presses!

It’s an image I loved in black & white, the massive whirling printing presses grinding to a halt, screaming headlines erupting. The news is overpowering!

We know that Poetry is News that Stays News (Pound), that it Makes Nothing Happen (Auden), that It Is Difficult / To Get The News From Poems / Yet Men Die Miserably Every Day / From Lack / Of What is Found There (Williams – Rich used the last six words as the title for her great book of essays).

***Hey! Stop those presses!***

Now we understand, as Jean understands, that the life, music, vitality of the poem can never be separated from the poem’s meaning. By physicalizing the so-called Death of Poetry, she in fact shows us that poetry will never die. THAT POETRY IS CONNECTED TO THE BODY AGAIN and the single voice and vision of our poet-hero Jean is going to make, well, not sure what, let’s call it Nothing. Make *Nothing* happen. But I mean, make it *really* happen.

She does. She just puts an end to the literary tradition, right then and there. We get the poem to the book and then our job is done. Gets published, distributed, bought, and read. Each step of

course is fraught with complications, and at the end maybe 2000 copies will sell, but hey, this's a poem, so let's just give it the drama that Mayakovsky did when he demanded an airplane with propeller whirling be parked outside his study so that when he finished one it would be whisked away to the publisher – not a second to lose.

The second verse begins, like the first, again with our hero, Jean. But now

***Jean walked away. Horns were blaring,***

Is it celebratory tooting, poetry's reconnection being cheered on by the public at large? Or simply the continuing, ongoing noise of our blating culture? Both? Both. The Poet's Choice, as Gregory Corso once told me, "When somebody asks you to pick one, always take both."

The cinematic vein of "Stop the presses!" continues,

***It was a brilliant dusty sunset***

Yes, in a poem you can pick both, and the unusable poem-word "sunset" can become even more golden when it's "brilliant" and "dusty"

***and the sirens were distorting.***

Is it the Apocalypse brought about by reconnection of Poetry with Body (again)? Or is it Just the Apocalypse? Both (you're getting it!).

It's the end of *The Terminator*, of *Snowpiercer*, the end of every walk-into-the-sunset Hollywood potboiler poem ever written.

Jean has passed on the oral tradition into print. She has insinuated Orality into Text, clawing her way into the inner sanctum of the print medium. And, in so doing, she has preserved her lover's face for all eternity.

***She didn't hear em.***

What didn't she hear? The car horns playing music – Beethoven? *Ode to Joy*? Guns and Roses? Randy Newman's *Faust*? Aretha's *Respect*? David Thomas's *Mirror Man*? or Captain Beefheart's, for that matter.

***She was remembering her lover's face***

Yes, the action of creating art, of living her life in the service of Poetry, has caused her to lose the *Poem Itself*, the Source! Her lover's face now fades in through the Apocalyptic Sunset Waltz, and now she does hear, not music nor horns nor sirens but words, just words and now it's clearer, the conversation with her lover,

***What they'd said about how you never know***

True Poet lovers know you Never Know, echoing the poem's title, and in that way stay connected – Poem as Body – but this line break skittering into riot control

***If someone else's orgasm is better than yours –***

Yes! Exactly! Understanding a poem and demanding a locked-down analysis, forever footnoted and irrefutable, -- who would know, who could know? The meanings keep changing. Eros is flowering out the mouth, People! Only the poem/orgasm stays the same.

***But that shouldn't stop you***

from what? From having an orgasm? Well, yes, of course, but there's more –

***From coming together***

Yes, that's it! That's what the poem in the oral mode is about – it's about the audience experiencing together the meaning of the poem, the connection of the griot to the body politic, the poem bringing/giving Rapture that the listener accepts/understands. Brings all that inside.

***Even if it's not exactly***

o! the quivering between Oral and Written, the twin mouths finding each other, that poem that is the kiss, not exactly, OMG whatever IS exactly, Jean, Jean you must not leave us in the vagueness of not exactly, the orgasm goes back inside ...

***At the same time***

Yes, she said, Yes! “You never know if someone else's orgasm is better than yours, but that shouldn't stop you from coming together. Even if it's not exactly at the same time.” Oh God! as these realizations ripple through the audience, wave after profound wave of orgasm, feeding each other, yes, coming together *years* later, why, it is – it's a Poem! It can be read later, after the poet is long-gone dead, it's still being read. You are coming with the poet years later as the orgasm of meaning reconnects you at that moment. Ah, Jean and Emily! The gentle laugh as her lover, dead and blued and perfect and gone gone gone, reconnects through the poem. The fly! The fly! Then the fly buzzed by