How to Read a Poem

Julie Patterson

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How to Read a Poem

by Julie Patterson

Readers and writers have strong—and disparate—opinions about the "right" way to read a poem. Worse yet, there's wide disagreement among accomplished and highly educated poets, too. There's really only one point we all agree on—poems are meant to be read aloud. Beyond that, it gets dicey, but here are some things to consider.

Former poet laureate Billy Collins says, "Obviously, poems come in lines, but pausing at the end of every line will create a choppy effect and interrupt the flow of the poem's sense. Readers should pause only where there is punctuation, just as you would when reading prose, only more slowly."

You can also click here to listen to Brooks read her poem (and tell what inspired it):

You, Reader

by Billy Collins

And I wonder if they had become friends

or if they were still strangers to

one of us.

I was only thinking

about the shakers of salt and pepper

that were standing side by side

on a place mat.

And not to notice the unlit candles

before one of us happened

to sit in the kitchen

and the clock humming on the wall.

But, listen—

it was just a matter

of time

before one of us happened

to re-fill the tea canisters

and the clock humming on the wall.

Plus, nothing happened that

morning—

anything.

A car whistling along the road

in the morning—

and a song on the radio,

and the goldfish circling in its

bowl.

And mention with a pen

the ivy wallpaper,

the rain-soaked windows,

and the pepper

that was standing side by side

with the salt.

The pears,

and the ivy wallpaper,

and the goldfish circling in its

bowl.

And I was only thinking

about the shakers of salt and pepper

that were standing side by side

on a place mat.

And not to notice the unlit candles

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