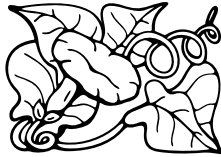


Strange Terrain



*A Poetry Handbook
for the Reluctant Reader*

Alice B. Fogel

HOBBLEBUSH BOOKS
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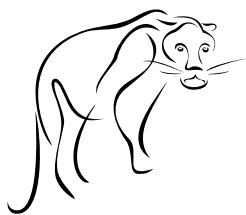
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Foreword

THIS “HANDBOOK” IS unlike any book on poetry I’ve read. I’m not sure it ever uses the word “interpretation,” and I know it is not intended, as so many books about poetry are, to train student readers to arrive at the “right” (read: the teacher’s) interpretation. There is no scansion, no talk of metrics, no listing of latinized names for clever sleights of hand or rare rhythmic schemes, names that a reader may remember for the exam and then forget.

No, this is truly a guidebook to help the intelligent, amateur reader feel more comfortable in the world of poetry. But it does not claim to explain and erase all the mystery from poetry; in fact, its last “Step” is intended to make the reader more at home with that mystery, with not being able to paraphrase or summarize it all, with “sitting with your poem.”

Even readers who up till now have found poetry to be alien, complex, and high-falutin, will be likely to get to this last step because they have here a superb guide. Alice

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Foreword

By the end of the book, this gentle, persuasive, sometimes motherly guide's aura will have replaced the strict, judgmental, somber feel that school poetry has left in many readers.

Fogel knows who her audience is, knows how resistant and afraid her readers may be of poetry. She is careful not to insist on certain readings or talk down to readers; instead, she creates an intimate bond with readers and frequently reminds us of the sense of fun and delight that she brings to the reading and writing of poetry. By the end of the book, this gentle, persuasive, sometimes motherly guide's aura will have replaced the strict, judgmental, somber feel that school poetry has left in many readers. Readers may not notice it, but Fogel's elegant prose includes many poetic devices, so readers will get practice dealing with metaphors and images even if they skip the poems themselves.

But don't, because one of the unique strengths of the book is that Fogel is not just a good reader and an empathic teacher. She is also a terrific poet, and she uses her poems to explain the steps and build the reader's confidence. Because she stands at the unusual vantage point of both reader and writer, she can talk with confidence about the intention, evolution, and surprise in a poem, and readers can make their own judgments about whether the poems have succeeded according to Fogel's plan or have developed a life of their own. As poet, she gets behind the words of poems to explore and make sense of meaning and feeling that "comes from somewhere beyond words." But this isn't a book of personal revelations and confessions. As Fogel says, "my preferred 'I' is more an 'eye' through which I look outward at the world." She works to give readers "faith in the justice" of

a poet's choices, "so that even if you don't spend a lot of time thinking about what that reason might be, you will at least trust the poet, and therefore the poem."

If Fogel were a less accomplished poet, the book might feel like amateur recital night, with readers grimacing at the crude attempts at art. But with scores of her own poems in publication, including her national poetry bestseller *Be That Empty*, Fogel knows what she's doing, and every poem is well worth reading on its own, regardless of whether the reader learns from it the lesson Fogel sees in it. By not trotting out the classic poems of famous poets, Fogel avoids making readers feel that they should genuflect in front of monuments of culture, and bypasses the inevitable "My last teacher told me this poem was about . . ." response.

Perhaps because Fogel steers clear of classic poems and tired approaches to them, she comes to the reading of poetry with wonderfully fresh insights. For instance, she has a terrific little section on silence in poems. Spaces and stanza breaks are, she writes, "the negative space that lets us see the faces in the urns," an image I won't soon forget. And in reference to the use of familiar phrases that poets can sometimes "get away with," she writes, "Reference to familiar cultural catch-phrases lends a poem the weight of accepted thought reconsidered."

Readers who have followed the steps of this guide carefully will not reach Step 8 feeling cheated because they *still* don't have a formula for unlocking every poetry secret. Rather, armed with knowledge of how a poem's

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Foreword

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shape, words, sound, images, emotions, thoughts, and literary devices work to build, communicate, and deepen the mystery, readers are likely to sigh with relief that there still is plenty in poetry to wonder about, to feel but not articulate, to sense but not say.

Foreword

BROCK DETHIER

Director, Utah State University Writing Program



How to Make Use of This Book

WHEN I TELL people I write poetry, I often experience a sensation of wind—my partner in conversation has backed off just enough to let more air circulate between us, as if it were viral.

There is something about poetry, about how it was taught, about its reputation as encoded messages only a certain kind of person can crack, that makes otherwise healthy, highly functional people, literate and perfectly intelligent—even those who love to read—squirm with a sense of inadequacy, burst into sheer belligerence, or quietly avoid it like the plague, especially in public.

But deep inside, there may be a wistfulness, some primal memory that knows it could be different—we could be let back in, we could have a nonadversarial relationship with these mysterious missives from the hearts and minds of others. We could be readers of poetry.

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*How to
Make Use of
This Book*

According to a study published in *New Scientist*, billions of neurons per millisecond light up like Times Square on New Year's Eve whenever we read poetry.

Think of it as Poem Traumatic Stress Disorder. This book is your self-help manual.

It is my belief that everyone can gain from the “news” that poetry brings us. With a bit of instruction, poetry will bring you significant new interactions with the world around you, with ideas and sensations, with yourself and others—not to mention that it will literally expand your mind: According to a study published in *New Scientist*, billions of neurons per millisecond light up like Times Square on New Year's Eve whenever we read poetry.

To these ends, *Strange Terrain* is structured around three premises or necessities integral to being comfortable with—and finding comfort in—poetry: *demystification*, *information*, and *remystification*.

First, **demystification**: Readers will benefit from a glimpse of what it is that poets are up to when they pause to write about their experiences or perceptions of the world, and from a reminder that poetry is not personal or private “journaling” but an art and a craft. The two introductory chapters that follow this give you a chance to discard any sense of estrangement you might have felt in the presence of poetry in the light of this basic demystification of what poetry is. It may still feel like a strange land, but at least it will be one whose landscape you're interested in exploring.

Information is what the Steps of this guidebook are all about. They provide a walk through the strange terrain of poetry by means of eight basic tools that I'm going to show you are already in your backpack. The reason that poetry is, in fact, approachable and effective (once

Step 1

✦ SHAPE ✦

Poems Look Different on the Page

BUT YOU ALREADY knew that. See how easy this is?

When you look at a poem you can readily see that it looks different from most things we read. The left hand margin often lines up neatly, but the right one almost never does. Sometimes even the left hand margin is jagged. What's up with this?

Poems used to rhyme; they were originally actual songs, and a useful way to remember stories, events or important personages. Rhythm and rhyme make information more catchy, which is why we often have commercial jingles stuck in our heads so annoyingly. Ending lines of poetry with a word that's going to be rhymed later on, or making the line itself a single phrase, contributes

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Step 1
SHAPE

You don't need to learn the rules or names of forms, but it doesn't hurt to look over the shape of a poem initially, simply to acquaint yourself with its structure.

to that ease in memorization. We don't use poems for these purposes so much anymore, but some of the same explanations still apply. And, just as teenagers have fun twisting the point of what you say for their own excuses, poets enjoy choosing different reasons to shape their poems. Doing so can create interesting underlying tensions or expectations in a poem, especially if you know that we're still at least subconsciously getting a kick out of breaking old-fashioned rules.

But let's stick with the traditional for a moment more: Existing formats for poems, like sonnets or sestinas, lend necessary shapes, and poets still like to force their creativity into them, even if sometimes doing so while simultaneously bending some of their rules. "Pattern" (page 31) is an example of a form called the villanelle.

You don't need to learn the rules or names of forms, but it doesn't hurt to look over the shape of a poem initially, simply to acquaint yourself with its structure, scanning for any patterns of rhyme or repetition, or looking for more open weaves or dense construction. You'll ready your concentration accordingly, just as you settle differently on a bar stool, an airplane seat, or an old couch.

In introducing "Pattern" here for its shape, I will say a few things that will also introduce you to almost all the other Steps, so hang onto your hat. And don't worry if you're unsure of your footing as I walk you through this poem; we're still reading to focus mainly on how poems look, not what they "say."