

To the Teacher

This book is not about the songs. It is about the singing. The purpose is not to learn about certain poems or poets, but to learn about what poems are, how poets think, and how poems are built. Many people can recite a poem, or read it and enjoy doing so, who still are entirely unaware of the flock of elements that have just flown softly through their brains. But poetry, like all wonderful things, can be more admired when it is fully recognized. Our intent, then, is to look at poems with a closest eye, and see why they are poems, and not merely prose sentences centered on a page.

One assumption is that a passage is not a poem just because you say it is, any more than a boat is an airplane because you say it is. Poems are compositions having qualities that nonpoems lack. Poems are built.

The title *Building Poems* is not, after all, such a metaphor. It turns out to be true, perhaps to our surprise, that like buildings, poems are constructed carefully, often to exact blueprints, out of building materials. Poets have at their disposal a host of elements to employ—everything from regular kinds of brick-like feet, to room-like stanzas, to paint-like sounds, to equation-like intentions. Poems are thought about. And the ways that poets think about language are not exclusive to poets, but are the concerns of prose writers also; we think of Flaubert, screaming his sounding prose over the French countryside, to the consternation of the local farmers. We think of Melville, secretly writing paragraphs of *Moby Dick* in iambic pentameter, with assonance, consonance, and alliteration. We think of Lincoln, the poet who became president, writing the Gettysburg Address poetically. If we do not understand poetry, we will not understand the best prose.

There are bothersome modern stereotypes that pester poetry, such as the inert idea that poems are just the free expression of your feelings. Or that poems are unmanly (tell it to Byron). But these ideas can be imagined