

## Poetry And Non Separation

**John Brehm**

**2025-03-08**

I'm delighted to be here, and thank you all for coming. It's always a pleasure and a delight to do some practice together, to share some poems, to talk about some poems together. So thank you so much for inviting me and for showing up with your presence this morning. So I'm going to give a talk, and then we'll do some sitting practice together, and then we'll spend maybe the bulk of our time actually talking about the poems. I know we have a sort of large group for discussion, but that's where, for me, the richness is, is when we start responding to the poems, when we start moving into them together, and in a way that I like to practice where we're shifting from the interpretive mode to the appreciative mode. I'll say more about that when we get to it.

But I'm eager to hear your responses to the poem. So it won't just be me talking for the whole 90 minutes today. I'm happy to say you're probably happy to hear. So I chose this topic of non-separation or non-duality in part because I think we're all feeling the wound of separation, particularly strongly right now. I feel like it's in the field in a big way for what are probably pretty obvious reasons that I won't name, but I think you are aware of what those pressures are that we are feeling right now.

And so I think the longing for healing the wound of separation is particularly strong right now. This longing for safety, a sense of stability, a sense of calm. You know, how do we find that in these incredibly disruptive times? And how can we sustain it? What can be a reliable refuge for us in this turbulent period? And so I hope today by talking about non-separation and exploring poems about it, that we get a taste of what it can feel like to take refuge in the present moment, to take refuge in pure awareness.

And that is really what I'm going to talk about today most, is not so much separation, but the pure awareness that is beyond duality, beyond separation. But non-duality, non-separation is a very slippery thing to talk about. It's, of course, not a thing. And any word you apply to it is inadequate. It can't be captured. And, you know, as Lao Tzu said in the opening verse of the *Tao Te Ching*, the Tao that can be named is not the true Tao.

And that is absolutely true. We cannot grasp the Tao or the sacred or pure awareness in language. Lhasa also said, he who speaks does not know, and he who knows does not speak. Again, emphasizing the inadequacy of language to take us close to the Tao. Because language is inherently dualistic and we'll never comprehend non-duality through a dualistic lens. And yet that's what we're stuck with if we want to talk about these things.

So we just have to recognize that the language we use to speak about these things is inevitably inadequate, incomplete, distorting. And so we proceed with that sort of caution. You know, in language,

the subject is separated from the object. The subject is here looking at the object out there that is separate. So the knower is separated from the known. And our grammar emphasizes this, the subject-verb-object structure of sentences by which we make statements about the world is itself a guarantee of separation, of duality.

And also our need to name and categorize things further reifies this illusion of separation. We give names to things so that we can tell them apart. We can tell one thing from another. You can tell your shoe from your coat. It's not confusing. Each thing has a different name. But these names are purely for the sake of our convenience.

That is, they don't accurately reflect the world, the seamless flowing reality that is the world, which we have broken down into these separate parts. And some of these distinctions are rather arbitrary. For example, when does a tree stop being a tree and become the earth? What is the precise barrier that separates those two things and can it be identified? Or when does a river stop being a river and become the sea? And that's what the little haiku I included: losing its name a river enters the sea, which is just beautiful, such an evocative statement and true of course once the river enters the sea it's no longer a river but when does that happen?

So these things are fluid and our demarcations between things can be arbitrary and falsify the seamless reality that we truly live in. But what is non-duality? I'm going to defer to Robert Spira—I'm sorry, Rupert Spira, and I think some of you may know his teachings. He's a wonderful Advaita non-dual teacher. And he says, non-duality is the recognition that underlying the multiplicity and diversity of experience, there is a single, infinite, and indivisible reality whose nature is pure consciousness.

And Nisargadatta makes a similar claim. He says, you are not even a human being. You just are a point of pure awareness, coextensive with time and space and beyond both. You are not even a human being. You just are. And the comedian Pete Holmes, I don't know if some of you might be familiar with him. He's a Dharma person. He's a meditator.

In an interview, he talked about that. And he had, at the time, a very young daughter, an infant. And he said, you know, she doesn't know she's a girl. She doesn't know she's an American. She doesn't know she lives here or there. She doesn't even know she's a human being. She just is. And it's that state of purity before all the distinctions and names come rushing in to tell us who we are, to lead us astray.

But awareness, unlike attention, which we can direct—you can move your attention around, you can make it focus on what you want to focus on—but pure awareness is not an instrument we use to know reality. It is reality itself. We're not separate from it nor can we ever be separate from awareness. Awareness is foundational. It's the invisible, ever-present, empty space of being without doing, of knowing without thinking. Awareness is unborn and undying.

I mean, did you create your own awareness or was it always already there? And how can something that has never been born die? It's not possible. And of course, these are statements, these are approx-

imations, but they can give us a sense of the quality of awareness. It's formless and changeless. It's changeless because it's formless. It has no form that could be subject to time and change. It just is.

And in my view, I think in this time of accelerating upheaval and disruption, we can find peace and stability in unchanging awareness. We can take refuge in it. We typically try to take refuge in all kinds of things that don't really work. We take refuge in our relationships or we take refuge in the ideas and opinions and beliefs that we hold sometimes too stridently. Or we take refuge in drugs, in distraction or entertainment, social media, the various enchantments of the mind.

But these are all impermanent escapes, and so they inevitably fail. But they work well enough or long enough, some of them, that we keep coming back for more. We keep thinking, ah, this relationship or this job or this new thing in my life, whatever it might be, this will provide not temporary happiness but lasting happiness. And of course that turns out not to be true. But these things work just well enough that we keep trying. We keep thinking, ah, this time maybe it will hold.

And we do this until we become exhausted. And we begin to long, not for excitement, but for peace. Not for distraction, but for presence. Not for pleasure, but for joy. And we shift. We begin to let go of these impermanent escape routes and begin to settle into a different way of being in the world.

I was on a retreat at Spirit Rock last year, and there's a wonderful Tibetan teacher, Anand Thubten. And one of the things he said that struck me as so true and profound, it's really stayed with me. He said, awareness is already enlightened. Awareness is already enlightened. And he didn't elaborate on that, interestingly. He just kind of let it hang in the air.

But I think it's true because awareness is free of grasping and aversion. Awareness doesn't need anything to be different than it is. It doesn't want one thing and not another. It has no preferences. It makes no demands. It is just a pure, empty knowing. And we all have this. We are all already awake. We've just forgotten. We've gotten caught up in *samsāra*.

But awareness itself is not something that we have to go searching for. It's not outside of us. We have it. We are in it all the time. And so that's enormously encouraging that it doesn't require some search or huge effort. It's a relaxing back into who we really are.

And unchanging awareness, it often happens for me and I suspect for some of you as well that, you know, as we get older, you look in the mirror sometimes and you are surprised or possibly even shocked at how much your appearance has changed, your face, your body, all of it. You know, it happens. But at the same time, you might feel in those moments some intangible aspect of yourself that feels exactly the same as it did five years ago or even 50 years ago. I mean, I wonder if that's true for you. I suspect that it is. I have felt it very strongly.

And it's a curious thing to feel like, oh my God, I look so much older. But there is this other thing, and of course it's not a thing, that is unchanging, that has not aged. It's exactly the same. And that is where we can find peace and stability. But until we realize that we're already enlightened, we need

reminders. We need pointers.

And of course, our meditation practice is a form of reminding us of our true nature. When we rest in empty knowing, non-directed knowing, when we can be with the arising and passing away of each moment without grasping or pushing away, we are reminded of who we really are and we get a glimpse of this pure awareness. And for most of us, it is only a glimpse. It can pass rather quickly. And yet it's always there. It's always available.

And I think poems can be another way, another form of reminder. Poems can remind us of our true nature because they arise from the poet inhabiting their true nature as they write the poem, as the poem comes into being. Poems are not born from our egoic response to the world. If they are, they fail. And we can sense it, I think. When a poem comes from ego, it gives off a certain kind of odor, you might say, and you can sense it.

But when a poem, a great poem, arises from inspiration, from the poet becoming a conduit for the sacred, for the divine, for the Tao, for pure awareness—however, you know, whatever inadequate words you want to put to it—then the poem becomes a reminder. It becomes a space where we too can make contact with the sacred, with pure awareness. And that can be so nourishing and refreshing.

And I want to share a quote from the poet Ruth Stone, and she's in both of my anthologies, a wonderful poet. And when she was asked about her creative process, she said that she didn't write her poems, she received them. And she said, even as a child, I would hear a poem coming toward me from way off in the universe. I wouldn't hear it. I would feel it. And it would come right toward me. If I didn't catch it, if I didn't run in the house and write it down, it would go right through me and back into the universe.

And I love that, that, you know, she feels it coming towards her. First she says, I hear it, but then I know I feel it coming toward me from way off in the universe. Like, I didn't create this. It came from some other realm. My job is to receive it, is to run into the house before it vanishes. And I think that's the way inspiration works. And so poems that come from that source can remind us of who we really are and can bring us into contact with that source as well.

So poems and meditation, and particularly the joining of poems and meditation, can really take us deeply into our awareness, pure awareness. And you know, not all poems do this, of course, but great poems can embody this quality of awareness. And when we enter the poem rather than hold it at arm's length, when we enter it imaginatively, when we try to get inside the poem rather than just think about it, we collapse the boundary between ourselves and the poem, between ourselves and this quality of awareness that I've been speaking about.

But the first step is to dissolve the boundary that can so easily separate us from the poem when all we're trying to do is think about it, figure it out, say what we think it means. That takes us away from the richness and immediacy of the experience of the poem. Because what we want is not greater

understanding of the poem, but greater intimacy with it. Intimacy rather than understanding. And understanding can come later, but it can't be the primary thing. It can't be first and most important.

First and most important is entering and becoming intimate with the poem. But to do that, we have to drop what my favorite poet, Elizabeth Bishop, described as the immodest demand for complete comprehension. We want to know everything. We want to know it right now. And if we don't, we get frustrated. You know, I don't understand this line. What is this word? You know, what's happening? And we get so caught up in that that we lose our immediate engagement with the poem.

And so we have to let that go. Like, it's okay. I can't say what this line means. And there are poems that I've read a hundred times, and there are still lines that baffle me, and it absolutely doesn't bother me. You know. So we have to relax around that. And that can help us shift from the interpretive mode to the appreciative mode. And that's what really takes us deeply into the poem.

So, and it's a very simple method. We just let ourselves be drawn towards what we most like about the poem. What feels most alive? You know, what feels most lit up? What really resonates with us? Without worrying so much about why or what that might mean, we just notice like, oh my gosh, I love this image or this metaphor is incredible or this line here really gets me every time. Or it might be a stanza. It might be what Wallace Stevens described as a lucid, inescapable rhythm.

Or it might be the tone of voice in the poem. Or it might be, you know, the whole journey it takes us on. Like whatever it is, the practice is to savor it, you know, to linger with it, to savor the pleasure that you're experiencing and then let that take you where it will. Let that be a guide. So instead of kind of directing your mind to work with the poem, you follow the impulse. You follow your sense of appreciation. And then you see where it takes you. And it will take you somewhere. It will take you more deeply into the poem, for one thing.

So yeah, I feel like reading poems in this way can remind us of our true nature, who we really are beyond our conditioning, beyond the historic self that moves through time and is scarred by time and change, and bring us back to this pure awareness that can never be scarred by time and change. Even our most painful traumas have no effect whatsoever on awareness. They may affect us in every other way, but awareness will not be changed by whatever we happen to have to go through. And again, I think that's why we can take refuge there.

And it may just be for a moment. You know, you may practice throughout the day of just stopping what you're doing, maybe letting the eyes close, and just to have a minute of knowing without thinking. And it can be incredibly accessible and incredibly nourishing to take those pauses throughout the day and just step back from the contents of the mind to naked perception, pure awareness itself. And so, you know, we can practice with meditation and we can practice with poetry.

So I'd like to do some practice with you now. I'd like to do some sitting practice with you and then we'll look at some poems together. Staying in your meditative state, I'm going to read a poem and

then we'll let the poem resonate in silence for a few moments before we come out of the meditation. And this poem is called Ask Me by William Stafford.

Sometime when the river is ice, ask me mistakes I have made.  
Ask me whether what I have done is my life.  
Others have come in their slow way into my thought and some have tried to help or to hurt.  
Ask me what difference their strongest love or hate has made.  
I will listen to what you say.  
You and I can turn and look at the silent river and wait.  
We know the current is there, hidden, and there are comings and goings from miles away that hold the stillness exactly before us.  
What the river says, that is what I say.

And as you're ready, just let your eyes gently open and we'll bring our meditation practice to a close with a bow. Let's bow together to acknowledge our practice. Okay, thank you so much. That felt really rich to sit in that silence with you. So now we're going to start looking at these poems together and talking about them. But yeah, so again, the way I like to approach these poems is just by going towards what we like, you know, what feels really rich about the poem, you know, maybe a line, a word, an image, particular turn or movement in the poem, and just yeah, just naming what we what we like, what feels alive in the poem for you and it can really be anything. Yes, Claire.

### **Questioner**

What caught my attention is others have come in their slow way some have tried to help or to hurt ask me what difference their strongest love or hate made. Very powerful.

### **John Brehm**

Very powerful. Yeah, very powerful. I love that as well. That's a case where I don't know really what he means by their slow way, but I love it nevertheless. But ask me what difference their strongest love or hate has made. Like, no, there's some part of me that is deeper than that, that is absolutely unaffected by how others behave towards me, even those who hate me or those who love me. There's something that is beyond all that. Yeah, I love that.

### **Questioner**

There's something beyond all that. And yet, that informs my life. At the same time, there's There's something beneath or above all that. But it also informs who I am. Thank you.

### **John Brehm**

Wow. Oh, that's beautiful, Claire. So you feel that strength in your own life, your own sense that there's something deeper above or below. It's hard to know where to place it, actually. It has no place. It is. Yeah, yeah, thank you. It's wonderful when we have that kind of resonance with a poem. Yeah, thank you for that. Yeah, anyone else? Yeah, Len. Oh, you're muted. You're still muted.

**Questioner**

There you go. Sorry about that. So just before that section where he says, ask me whether what I have done is my life. That is kind of shocking it kind of really woke me up although it resonates what I have done is not my life, I don't know what my life is but it's not what I have done but I hadn't articulated it that way it was a real wake up for me

**John Brehm**

Yeah that's wonderful and that's what great poems do they allow us to know what we knew but didn't know. That is, they say things in such a way that our response is, ah, yes, that's true. I knew that was true. I just didn't know that I knew that that was true. And that, yeah, I think that's incredibly powerful. Ask me whether what I have done is my life. No. Again, that's the surface. That's the external. That's the events and experiences. There's something deeper than that. And that's my life. Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's, you know, you paraphrase it and you diminish it. I mean, just the way he says it, ask me what I have done is my life. It's a kind of almost defiance in that, which is wonderful. Yeah, thank you for that, Len. Yeah, Elizabeth.

**Questioner**

Yeah, I think the whole thing about the river, Which I think about at other times and a lot is so important. And the movement, but the stillness. I mean, the ice, that's a phase or it seems like this solidity, but underneath there's this movement. And anyway, just all of that is, I think, very meaningful.

**John Brehm**

You know, I'm sorry, Elizabeth. A message came in in the chat, and I let my attention go there for a second. Would you mind just repeating what you said, the gist of it?

**Questioner**

Well, the gist of it is about sort of a, not an illusion, but this feeling of solidity, but change. And that comes through in the different points all the way through the poem. Using the river in that way.

**John Brehm**

Yeah, yeah. So there's movement, there's fluidity, I think I heard you say, and yet there is stillness as well and those are brought together in this really powerful kind of alchemical way so I think that's a really important thing to notice in the poem that there are these elements that are working together even as they are different stillness and movement solidity and liquidity even I'd say but yeah thank you for that that's an excellent point excellent observation yeah Ali.

**Questioner**

Thanks, John. It's wonderful to be here and practice together. It's the same first line, just like it really got my attention. Sometimes when the river is ice, ask me the mistakes I've made. When the ice, you know, it just talks to the topic of this. I mean, the heart of the topic is non-duality. It's because it's separate. So like cold, when I'm different than the other, I'm ice, and there's something cold inside of me. I just like got lost in the word ice. And I try to find out what mistakes I've made that I'm like this,

you know, why I can't connect. It is the basis of *dukkha*. Yeah, absolutely. The first line just got me all over the place. And then, you know, there's non-duality. It's just when I'm ice, I'm not with the other. I'm separate. Thank you very much, John.

**John Brehm**

Yeah. That's wonderful. I love that you kind of put yourself inside the poem. Like, what are the mistakes I've made? Like, what is this poem telling me about my life? And yeah, the curious thing to say, sometime when the river is ice, ask me mistakes I have made. Like, not when it's flowing and it's summer and beautiful, but sometime when the river is ice. Ask me mistakes I have made. And I feel like it's mysterious, those opening lines. And I agree, really compelling. But there's a mystery there that I feel, you know, isn't necessary to unravel. But like you, I also feel completely drawn in by the opening lines of the poem. Yeah, yeah, thank you for that.

**Questioner**

Towards the end, there are comings and goings from miles away that hold the stillness exactly before us. Speaks to me in the sense that it says, there's so much I don't know, but maybe trust.

**John Brehm**

Yes. Yes. Oh, that's beautiful. Yeah. That's in here, trust. We don't know. There are comings and goings.

**Questioner**

We don't know about.

**John Brehm**

Yeah, from miles away. The causes and conditions, you know, we might say in a different register of language, you know, from miles away, but that hold the stillness exactly before us. I mean, that's just incredible. It's so powerful. We don't know. But we know the hidden, we know the current is there. It's hidden, but we know it's there.

**Questioner**

Yeah, but we don't know what's happening miles away.

**John Brehm**

Yeah, we don't know all the things that are contributing to that one still moment that's right before us. And it's just so beautiful, just incredible. Yeah, thank you for that. Yeah. Craig, let's come back to you, and then we'll do Bill next time to see if it works.

**Questioner**

One way I'm, as I've read it several times, drawn to read it as, is that the poet is talking to himself. That it's almost like a challenge or an encouragement, an aspirational poem towards non-duality. And then maybe they're not, you know, and it's a big aspiration. Maybe they're not ready for it right now. So sometime when the river is ice, meaning sometime in the future, maybe when I can, you know, not

right the second. But it's trying to kind of bring together these different, you know, he's trying to bring together these different threads, challenge himself and present. At first, it's kind of wading through the difficulty and saying, well, what do I do when I encounter that difficulty? Well, I will listen to what you say. You and I can turn a silent river and wait. What the river says, that is what I say. So there's some really, really beautiful playing with tense and time. And yeah, I just keep, every time I read it, it kind of is coming back around to that. Thank you.

**John Brehm**

Yeah. Yeah. And you see new things every time you read it. That's a great point. I hadn't really thought about the tense issue, like sometime when the river is ice, but then at the end, well, it's still I will listen. You and I can turn. But then the last line is very much in the present, what the river says. Not that is what I will say. That is what I say. So interesting. I mean, I'm really glad you pointed to the tension between the tenses. But, yeah, it's so powerful. You know, and I can read the poem both as like he's talking to himself and he may be talking to an actual person or imagining someone there with him because when he says you know you and I can turn and look at the silent river and wait I think it accommodates both reading. Yeah.

Yes, Bill

**Questioner**

Great thanks so I especially with the person who spoke a little bit ago how can you talk about ice and ice being still and the saṃsāra of grasping because ice in a sense grasps onto let's say a river and then it becomes still and that's what we do when we grasp we change the flowing life's experience into something that is frozen and we get stuck there so I wanted to build upon what the other person had mentioned a few months ago but then ice is in some sense still but then we go to the very bottom of the poem and as someone said the comings and goings but in this moment this river is still but it is just a different experience of the stillness of the flowing river at this moment contrasting with the stillness of the ice that's a grasping.

**John Brehm**

Yeah, yeah. Oh, that's wonderful. Yeah, that's a wonderful observation. And, you know, the river isn't frozen all the way through. I mean, the current underneath it is still there, but the surface is frozen. And, you know, that's interesting as well, that you have this tension between stillness, which, you know, has that quality of fixed, you know, as you point out, but then the movement underneath it, and then the identification with it, what the river says, that is what I say.

You know, that's a boundary dissolving moment. Yeah. But, yeah, thank you. Thank you for that, Bill. And then Doreen.

**Questioner**

Thank you. Six days ago at this very hour, I was sitting with a friend who died in her last breathings, you know. And as you were reading the poem, I was there. It was that for me.

And I was thinking, you know, kind of what Bill said that in that first line, sometimes only if the river is ice, only if there's that kind of grasping, can I actually answer a question like that? Because in a sense, there is no answer to that question because it's not a question. And for me, it does resolve in that last line, all that happens. It's like almost as if she might be grappling with this kind of thing. Do you know what I mean? but in a very, very soft way.

She had been dying for a day or two, but had lost consciousness, lost her consciousness a couple of hours before, and a very well-practiced Dharma person. And when it's what the river says, that's all there is. Do you know what I mean? That's all there is, really, is what the river says.

**John Brehm**

Yeah, yeah. That's beautiful. Thank you for sharing. It's a vulnerable thing to, you know, be with a friend who's dying and to share that with the group. I really appreciate you bringing that in. The poem took you there in maybe a slightly different way or allowed you.

**Questioner**

It felt like a great way to honor the hour, do you know what I mean? And so I would turn that around and thank you for it. thank you.

**John Brehm**

Yeah, yeah. And I love that, you know, what the river says, that is what I say, but the river is silent. the river's not saying anything you and I can turn and look at the silent river and wait what the river says that is what I say and it's mysterious again it's sort of I will say what the silent river says is a bit of a paradox and yet we feel the rightness of that and silence and stillness seem to come into the foreground in the last stanza of the poem So it retains its mystery, and I think all poems, great poems, retain a mystery that we will never fully understand.

In one of my essays, I say the poem that can be explained is not the true poem, in the same way the Tao that can be named is not the true Tao. There are elements that we will never fully understand or grasp, and that's just fine. That's how it should be, I think. And then poems can take us into our lives in a really interesting way. as you point out, Doreen. Yeah, Lou.

**Questioner**

Thanks. I really like the fact that he's chosen the river as a metaphor. For me, it reminds me of what I call stepping into the flow, which could be interpreted to be awareness. And when that happens to me, I lose sense of self. I lose sense of, I feel a sense of integration, mostly with nature, which I, you know, I see occurs throughout the poems that you have selected, that we tend to relate to nature more easily than the urban settings that many of us live in. And so nature is a great environment in which to remind us that we're part of it all and that we step into the flow whenever we can.

**John Brehm**

Yeah, we step into the flow whenever we can. And when we do, the self disappears, the ego vanishes.

Right. And there's no longer separation between who we really are and the flow of life just as it is. And those moments are incredibly blessed. And we'll see some of them in the other poems.

I want to do all these poems. We don't have time, but let's do a blessing. Let's do the next poem in the group. yeah a little there you go a blessing and it has been requested that I read the poem twice and I will happily do that a blessing by James Wright just off the highway to Rochester Minnesota twilight bound softly forth on the grass and the eyes of those two Indian ponies darken with kindness. They have come gladly out of the willows to welcome my friend and me. We step over the barbed wire into the pasture where they have been grazing all day alone. They ripple tensely. They can hardly contain their happiness that we have come. They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other. There is no loneliness like theirs. At home, once more, they begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness. I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms, for she has walked over to me and nuzzled my left hand. She is black and white, her mane falls wild on her forehead, and the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear that is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist. Suddenly I realize that if I stepped out of my body, I would break into blossom. Yeah, what do you like about this poem? What feels especially alive and compelling?

**Questioner**

I'm sorry, who is it by?

**John Brehm**

James Wright.

**Questioner**

Thank you.

**John Brehm**

It's below the last line. Yes, James Wright is quite a famous poem, and he's a wonderful, wonderful poet. What do you appreciate about this poem? Yeah, Bill.

**Questioner**

I just feel love

**John Brehm**

you feel love?

**Questioner**

yeah the whole thing captures love

**John Brehm**

yeah beautiful yeah it really does you know they love each other he says but they can hardly contain their happiness that these two people have come and made contact with them Yeah, the poem is suffused with a kind of grace or love or, you know, whatever word you want to use. But I feel that as well. There's a tenderness in the poem, a delicacy.

**Questioner**

An intimacy of oneness, of oneness.

**John Brehm**

Yep, absolutely. Intimacy in the poem. And then we feel that as well. you know and that intimacy comes from dissolving the boundary I mean they literally step over a barbed wire fence you know they're trespassing but they have broken the boundary and I read somewhere recently that there's almost no land in the United States that isn't owned by someone that isn't fenced off or in some other way possessed by someone. It's a strange thing to think about, this huge country. Everything is owned.

It's that sense of separating everything. But yeah, a sense of love, of intimacy. And you feel that the poem is suffused with that. It's not any particular line, although some lines point to it, but it's more the overall gestalt of the poem that you feel. So yeah, thank you for pointing to that. Yeah, Claire?

**Questioner**

well i agree with the um the feeling of tenderness and love suffusing the whole thing but the the line and its placement and it's just such a puzzle to me it is there is no loneliness like theirs. You know, and it's there right after they bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other. There is no loneliness like theirs. That'll take me a couple of decades to chew on.

**John Brehm**

Yeah, and to just let that be okay. You know, let that be okay. Like, you know, I can't really say what that means or know what that means, but, you know, I can kind of live with that. And I also not struggled with that line, but it felt a little puzzled by it. But then, you know, we remember that horses are herd animals. They're not meant to be alone or even in pairs.

I mean, these aren't completely alone, but they're meant to live in a herd. And so that may be partly what's going on there. There is no loneliness like theirs, But the fact that he so confidently seems to know what they're feeling is quite extraordinary. I mean, it's quite wonderful that, you know, he can sense, you know, they ripple, you know, with happiness. They bow shyly.

**Questioner**

It's just such a puzzling, it's a short line, but it's such a puzzling one. It's like a little metallic thread in a weaving, you know, that suddenly you just go, Oh, okay. Let me think about this. Thank you. Wonderful.

**John Brehm**

Yeah. And sometimes, you know, poets will say things that they don't know what it means. It just, it has a rightness about it. And so it goes into the poem and they may not be able to explain it either. And that's just fine. It's coming from some unknown source that can't be necessarily perfectly articulated. But yeah, yeah, I agree. Yes, Doreen.

**Questioner**

Thank you. Just a moment to that line. There's in my head, and I think it's from Rilke, a memorized line, which is, I am too alone enough, not alone enough in this world to make every moment sacred. It's something like, I am too alone in this world and not alone enough to make every moment sacred. And that line comes as a kind of answer in a way. And then if the next also I'm home. You know, there's a sense of now they're home, which also at first confused me. That was the line that confused me, but it is sort of flows from that. What really is loneliness, you know, in terms of authenticity and yeah. So anyway, Rilke.

**John Brehm**

Yeah. Well, Rilke is a poet that James Wright loved. I mean, everybody loves Rilke, but maybe even he translated Roka. But in fact, I'm sure that he did. So, yeah, you're right to feel a resonance with the Roka lines for sure. Yeah. Thank you. Len, and then Morgan.

**Questioner**

So, I'm just enjoying his metaphor. It's just delightful. Maybe this is on a surface level, but just delightful. Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass. Whoever thought of twilight bounding softly? Delightful. And munching the soft young tufts of spring. As delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist. Just, anyway, just delightful.

**John Brehm**

Yeah, it's really important to notice those and just to savor them. You know, like to savor the delight you feel when you encounter a surprising way of saying something, a lovely metaphor. Yeah, I think we too often just skip over that. You know, it's, oh, that's nice. And we kind of go on to the next thing. But to stop and just kind of savor it, you know, it's really a wonderful thing to do. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you for that. Yeah, Morgan.

**Questioner**

Yeah, thank you. I really like what you brought up about the tenderness. Someone said about the tenderness of this, and it seems like there's a few moments that almost feel painful. The walking over the barbed wire, the painfulness of crossing that boundary of separation. And I see that in the last two lines, that if I stepped out of my body, I would break into blossom, break. Like it reminds me of who is that, you know, that line of the blossom is so tight, you know, because it, wants to expand into a flower. It's the painfulness of remaining so tight in the blossom. I'm sure some people know the poem I'm trying to reference, but it reminds me of that. There's like this fear and pain when you're right at that threshold of about to go into the next phase of your transformation.

**Questioner**

Yeah. Yeah. It reminds me of another line that the river shudders in fear when it's going to meet the ocean. Oh, wow. Yeah. I feel that in here. It's like the love is almost overwhelming that there's fear when you're about to give yourself into it completely.

**John Brehm**

Yeah. Yeah. The fear that comes from surrendering, from letting go, from, you know, letting yourself be taken into that transformation. And yeah, transformation isn't necessarily easy. It can be sort of a kind of catastrophe. And yet the result is, you know, I realized that if I stepped out of my body, I would break into blossom. But yeah, break into blossom. He could have just said I would blossom. But he says break into blossom. So, yeah, that's a wonderful observation.

You know, and it's for many years I read this poem like it's already happened, like he's done this. But what he realizes is that if he stepped out of his body, he would break into blossom. So it's kind of a sort of preliminary epiphany. But that, interestingly, you know, they step over the barbed wire fence. They step over that boundary. and that initiates a process whereby it ends with suddenly I realize if I stepped out of my body, I would break into blossom. So it's the stepping over that initial boundary, ignoring the fence, you know, and making contact with these horses that allows them to realize that there's a further stepping over or stepping out of that, you know, comes into play at the end of the poem.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I love poems that take a real experience and just find the mystery in it, find the potency, the significance, the beauty, and bring that to us in such beautiful language and rhythm and sound, metaphor. It's just, you know, it's what great poems do, and it's just such a joy to encounter them, especially in a group like this. I mean, it really feels rich to look at them together and to feel the collective intelligence of the group illuminating the poem. So the poem becomes, I think, even more luminous because of the attention that you are all bringing to it. Yeah. Yeah, Misha.

**Questioner**

I just wanted to thank you for the poems, first of all, and to add an observation to the last two lines, which I also really like. It kind of reminds me of haiku because it kind of builds, for me at least, an anticipation, kind of negative anticipation. If I stepped out of my body, I would break, and you would expect a kind of negative consequence, but then it's, in fact, it's all the more powerful because it would break into blossom.

**John Brehm**

Yeah, that's a great point. I feel that too, and I think you're absolutely right to point to its resonance with haiku. And James Wright was one of the poets, he was mainly publishing in the early 60s and 70s, but there were a number of poets who were just discovering the ancient Chinese and Japanese poets at that time. And so that influence is really strongly present in a poet like James Wright, Robert Bly, and some others. So I think that's quite right. You know, and the ending does have that feel of the sudden illumination that we often encounter in haiku. Yeah, it's beautiful. Yeah, yeah. Well, we could stay longer on this poem, but let's, I want to do at least a few others.

I think let's do the Rilke poem I hate to skip the Robin poem it's wonderful but I think the Rilke poem is maybe more in the flow of what we're talking about right now and this is from the Song to Orpheus,

### See the Flowers

See the flowers so faithful to earth.  
We know their fate because we share it.  
Were they to grieve for their wilting, that grief would be ours to feel.  
There's a lightness in things.  
Only we move forever burdened, pressing ourselves into everything, obsessed by weight.  
How strange and devouring our ways must seem to those for whom life is enough.  
If you could enter their dreaming and dream with them deeply, you would come back to a different day, moving so easily from that common depth.  
Or maybe just stay there.  
They would bloom and welcome you, all those brothers and sisters tossing in the meadows, and you would be one of them.

yeah such a beautiful poem, so beautiful yeah, what in particular do you feel drawn to in this poem. Yeah. What do you like? It's also tempting to just sit with it in silence, but our discussion has been really rich, so yeah. I think you'll appreciate about this poem. Yeah, Len.

### Questioner

Well, I guess I can start it off. Thank you. I was surprised that you had time to read my email about this. I appreciate your...

### John Brehm

And I forgot to read the poems twice as someone in the group had asked me to, so I apologize for that.

### Questioner

Would you like to read that again?

### John Brehm

Yeah, since it's been asked. I mean, we have to use our time wisely, but yeah, See the Flowers.

See the flowers so faithful to earth.  
We know their fate because we share it.  
Were they to grieve for their wilting, that grief would be ours to feel.  
There's a lightness in things.  
Only we move forever burdened, pressing ourselves into everything, obsessed by weight.  
How strange and devouring our ways must seem to those for whom life is enough.  
If you could enter their dreaming and dream with them deeply, you would come back to a different day, moving so easily from that common depth.  
Or maybe just stay there.

They would bloom and welcome you, all those brothers and sisters tossing in the meadows, and you would be one of them.

Yeah, it is nice to hear it twice to let it kind of, the sound of it sink in a little more deeply. But yeah, and so go ahead, Len, what are you going to offer?

**Questioner**

Oh, well, just briefly, what speaks to me in this poem is this tension between the apparent lightness of the flowers tossing in the meadows and the human tendency to slog through things ponderously. And yet I think there's something to both sides of that somehow. I don't quite get it. And that's true of many of these poems that you've offered. There's a lot in them that I don't get, which is fine. It's like Archibald MacLeish, a poem should not mean but be. I've been with that little line for 60 years. Anyway, it's just the tension between – but can you really just toss in the wind? Don't we need to do more than that? And the flowers do. They suck up moisture. They generate new cells. There's a lot of work to being a flower. And we just put on to them whatever is in us, whatever we think a flower should be doing. But they're doing what flowers do. We don't know. I'll stop babbling.

**John Brehm**

Thank you. Yeah, you're welcome. I mean, I think it's important to notice those tensions in the poem. But my feeling is letting go of the figuring out part and just staying with the appreciation and letting that kind of lead you. And that may lead to deeper understanding, but it's kind of relaxing the part of the mind that wants to figure things out. Letting that be in the background and just loving what we love about the poem. And then the poem kind of reveals itself. Like we don't have to figure it out. It opens more deeply like a flower in the sun of our attention, of our awareness. So, but in any case, yeah, I appreciate what you said about the tension between weight and lightness. It's really interesting in the poem and one that can't be easily, you know, summarized. So, yeah, thank you for that. Yeah, Debbie.

**Questioner**

I was really moved by, in the beginning of the class, you talked about nature's pure consciousness. And you mentioned the baby. And my youngest grandchild is six months old. And I've always thought of him just not even aware of, like, I'm your mormor, and this is Poppy. Just he doesn't have those distinctions. So that line about nature's pure consciousness, just I felt it in the first stanza. see the flowers so faithful to earth we know their fate because we share it were they to grieve for their wilting that grief would be ours to feel i think it goes back to what you were talking about at the beginning of the workshop um the rilk has lost the distinctions i mean well there are distinctions but i feel an encouragement to lighten up in this poem so i really i've never read this poem. I'm really glad to be in front of it right now. So thank

**John Brehm**

you. Yeah, it's a great poem. Joanna Macy is a wonderful translator. And she has some videos where

she reads some Roka and she's just incredible. But yeah, the boundary is dissolved. Like we know their fate because we share it. We too are impermanent. And were they to grieve for they will think that grief would be ours to feel. And again, it's like were they or if you know there's this kind of quality of of uh you know it's not happening but if it happened this is how it would be but only we move forever burden pressing ourselves into everything obsessed by weight how strange and devouring our ways must seem to those for whom life is enough that's such a powerful i think way of describing our the way you know we humans behave? I had a lot of hands up. Lou, and then Bill, and then Barry, and then Michelle.

**Questioner**

I focused on the line that you just mentioned, and really that life is enough. I'm fortunate to live on a farm with an orchard and garden, and every day I go out and see the changes and it's a gift. It's a gift that we need to recognize and appreciate and so, you know, it is enough.

**John Brehm**

But we always want more. We're conditioned to always want more and we can see what that has done to the world. But, you know, this poem is a reminder that life is enough and that our ways must seem strange and debowering to those for whom life is enough. So, yeah, those are my favorite lines in the poem. Yeah, Bill, and then Barry.

**Questioner**

I'm sorry to speak so fast. I wanted to also point to those lines. I don't live on a farm. I live in Washington, D.C. And to connect what you said at the very beginning of the workshop in terms of burdened and pressing ourselves into everything, reading the news too much and obsessing about all that stuff and then the whole process perhaps of maybe putting some of that down and then becoming lighter and then focusing on what life is really about and how strange it is that we obsess over these things which we know in a hundred years are all gone anyway

**John Brehm**

Right, I mean they're important but also there's something more important you know, there's a great Schimporska poem where she says, when I see such things, I'm no longer sure that what's important is more important than what's not. It's in my first anthology. She's also just a brilliant writer. Yeah, yeah, thank you for that.

**Questioner**

When I read the very bottom of the screen, translated from the German by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows. I felt tremendous sadness because this poem would sound so different in German. And I know this is a common problem. How do you translate a poem? But I think of the German language as having such a different sound quality that the poem would be so different in the original German.

**John Brehm**

Yeah, but then you're limited to German speakers, and translation is an imperfect, Robert Frost de-

finest poetry as what gets lost in the translation. But I'm happy to have, I mean, I think it's a beautiful poem in English. I mean, I think Jonah Macy, she's a Dharma teacher. Yes. I think she did a wonderful job with it, but I agree. I took German in high school. I've forgotten all of it. But yes, of course, it would sound different and more the way Rilke wanted it to sound, of course, if it was in German. But still, there's so much here that I just find so beautiful.

**Questioner**

Yes, I don't mean to negate anything in the poem the way it's translated. I guess I, in a more perfect world, I would want to hear it in German, too. Even if I can't speak German, I wouldn't understand it. but the sound landscape would be great.

**John Brehm**

Yeah, the soundscape, yeah, beautiful. Yeah, Mischa, and then we'll probably have to close.

**Questioner**

Yeah, maybe I can say something about this, because German is my mother tongue, and so I read the poem in German. And actually, I find it interesting how much I like the English version. Actually, for me, I like it even better because it's way more clearer. In the German, there's so much music. You actually, it's hard to understand what he says because there's so much music and nearly every second word seems to rhyme. So I really like it.

**John Brehm**

Oh, that's wonderful.

**Questioner**

Just to add this.

**John Brehm**

Yeah. yeah I mean ideally it would be nice to have both you know to hear it in German to see it in this translation but yeah it doesn't insist on the rhyme scheme and so there's a certain kind of freedom in the poem maybe it feels a little more relaxed but I just think what Rilke is saying you know if you could enter their dreaming and dream with them deeply I mean just the idea that flowers are dreaming you would be transformed you would come back different to a different day. Or maybe just stay there. They would bloom and welcome you, all those brothers and sisters tossing in the meadows, and you would be one of them. I mean, you know, it's a different way of saying if I stepped out of my body, I would break into blossom. But that we can join, that we're not separate. These are our brothers and sisters. You know, we had a kinship relationship with the earth and all its beings for hundreds of thousands of years before we decided that we were fundamentally different from and superior to all other life forms. And so it's a reminder of who we really are and our right relationship to the earth, you know, brothers and sisters, and we could become one of them. Well, I wish we had more time to talk about the other poems, but thank you so much. I just, I so appreciate everything that you offered and our practice together.

Bye.