

Classic Poetry Series

Marianne Moore

- poems -

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A Grave

Man looking into the sea,
taking the view from those who have as much right to it as
 you have to it yourself,
it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing,
but you cannot stand in the middle of this;
the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave.
The firs stand in a procession, each with an emerald turkey-
 foot at the top,
reserved as their contours, saying nothing;
repression, however, is not the most obvious characteristic of
 the sea;
the sea is a collector, quick to return a rapacious look.
There are others besides you who have worn that look --
whose expression is no longer a protest; the fish no longer
 investigate them
for their bones have not lasted:
men lower nets, unconscious of the fact that they are
 desecrating a grave,
and row quickly away -- the blades of the oars
moving together like the feet of water-spiders as if there were
 no such thing as death.
The wrinkles progress among themselves in a phalanx -- beautiful
 under networks of foam,
and fade breathlessly while the sea rustles in and out of the
 seaweed;
the birds swim throught the air at top speed, emitting cat-calls
 as heretofore --
the tortoise-shell scourges about the feet of the cliffs, in motion
 beneath them;
and the ocean, under the pulsation of lighthouses and noise of
 bell-buoys,
advances as usual, looking as if it were not that ocean in which
 dropped things are bound to sink --
in which if they turn and twist, it is neither with volition nor
 consciousness.

Marianne Moore

Baseball and Writing

Fanaticism? No. Writing is exciting
and baseball is like writing.

You can never tell with either
how it will go
or what you will do;
generating excitement--
a fever in the victim--
pitcher, catcher, fielder, batter.

Victim in what category?
Owlman watching from the press box?
To whom does it apply?
Who is excited? Might it be I?

It's a pitcher's battle all the way--a duel--
a catcher's, as, with cruel
puma paw, Elston Howard lumbers lightly
back to plate. (His spring
de-winged a bat swing.)
They have that killer instinct;
yet Elston--whose catching
arm has hurt them all with the bat--
when questioned, says, unenviously,
"I'm very satisfied. We won."
Shorn of the batting crown, says, "We";
robbed by a technicality.

When three players on a side play three positions
and modify conditions,
the massive run need not be everything.
"Going, going . . ." "Is
it? Roger Maris
has it, running fast. You will
never see a finer catch. Well . . .
"Mickey, leaping like the devil"--why
gild it, although deer sounds better--
snares what was speeding towards its treetop nest,
one-handing the souvenir-to-be
meant to be caught by you or me.

Assign Yogi Berra to Cape Canaveral;
he could handle any missile.
He is no feather. "Strike! . . . Strike two!"
Fouled back. A blur.
It's gone. You would infer
that the bat had eyes.
He put the wood to that one.
Praised, Skowron says, "Thanks, Mel.
I think I helped a little bit."
All business, each, and modesty.
Blanchard, Richardson, Kubek, Boyer.
In that galaxy of nine, say which
won the pennant? Each. It was he.

Those two magnificent saves from the knee-throws
by Boyer, finesses in twos--
like Whitey's three kinds of pitch and pre-
diagnosis
with pick-off psychosis.
Pitching is a large subject.
Your arm, too true at first, can learn to
catch your corners--even trouble
Mickey Mantle. ("Grazed a Yankee!
My baby pitcher, Montejo!"
With some pedagogy,
you'll be tough, premature prodigy.)

They crowd him and curve him and aim for the knees. Trying
indeed! The secret implying:
"I can stand here, bat held steady."
One may suit him;
none has hit him.
Imponderables smite him.
Muscle kinks, infections, spike wounds
require food, rest, respite from ruffians. (Drat it!
Celebrity costs privacy!)
Cow's milk, "tiger's milk," soy milk, carrot juice,
brewer's yeast (high-potency--
concentrates presage victory

sped by Luis Arroyo, Hector Lopez--
deadly in a pinch. And "Yes,
it's work; I want you to bear down,
but enjoy it
while you're doing it."
Mr. Houk and Mr. Sain,
if you have a rummage sale,
don't sell Roland Sheldon or Tom Tresh.
Studded with stars in belt and crown,
the Stadium is an adastrum.
O flashing Orion,
your stars are muscled like the lion.

Marianne Moore

He "Digesteth Harde Yron"

Although the aepyornis
or roc that lived in Madagascar, and
the moa are extinct,
the camel-sparrow, linked
with them in size--the large sparrow
Xenophon saw walking by a stream--was and is
a symbol of justice.

This bird watches his chicks with
a maternal concentration-and he's
been mothering the eggs
at night six weeks--his legs
their only weapon of defense.
He is swifter than a horse; he has a foot hard
as a hoof; the leopard

is not more suspicious.How
could he, prized for plumes and eggs and young
used even as a riding-beast, respect men
hiding actor-like in ostrich skins, with the right hand
making the neck move as if alive
and from a bag the left hand strewing grain, that ostriches

might be decoyed and killed!Yes, this is he
whose plume was anciently
the plume of justice; he
whose comic duckling head on its
great neck revolves with compass-needle nervousness
when he stands guard,

in S-like foragings as he is
preening the down on his leaden-skinned back.
The egg piously shown
as Leda's very own
from which Castor and Pollux hatched,
was an ostrich-egg.And what could have been more fit
for the Chinese lawn it

grazed on as a gift to an
emperor who admired strange birds, than this
one, who builds his mud-made
nest in dust yet will wade
in lake or sea till only the head shows.

.
Six hundred ostrich-brains served
at one banquet, the ostrich-plume-tipped tent
and desert spear, jewel-
gorgeous ugly egg-shell
goblets, eight pairs of ostriches
in harness, dramatize a meaning

always missed by the externalist.

The power of the visible
is the invisible; as even where
no tree of freedom grows,
so-called brute courage knows.
Heroism is exhausting, yet
it contradicts a greed that did not wisely spare
the harmless solitaire

or great auk in its grandeur;
unsolicitude having swallowed up
all giant birds but an alert gargantuan
little-winged, magnificently speedy running-bird.
This one remaining rebel
is the sparrow-camel.

Marianne Moore

He Made This Screen

not of silver nor of coral,
but of weatherbeaten laurel.

Here, he introduced a sea
uniform like tapestry;

here, a fig-tree; there, a face;
there, a dragon circling space --

designating here, a bower;
there, a pointed passion-flower.

Marianne Moore

Marriage

This institution,
perhaps one should say enterprise
out of respect for which
one says one need not change one's mind
about a thing one has believed in,
requiring public promises
of one's intention
to fulfill a private obligation:
I wonder what Adam and Eve
think of it by this time,
this firegilt steel
alive with goldenness;
how bright it shows --
"of circular traditions and impostures,
committing many spoils,"
requiring all one's criminal ingenuity
to avoid!
Psychology which explains everything
explains nothing
and we are still in doubt.
Eve: beautiful woman --
I have seen her
when she was so handsome
she gave me a start,
able to write simultaneously
in three languages --
English, German and French
and talk in the meantime;
equally positive in demanding a commotion
and in stipulating quiet:
"I should like to be alone;"
to which the visitor replies,
"I should like to be alone;
why not be alone together?"
Below the incandescent stars
below the incandescent fruit,
the strange experience of beauty;
its existence is too much;
it tears one to pieces
and each fresh wave of consciousness
is poison.
"See her, see her in this common world,"
the central flaw
in that first crystal-fine experiment,
this amalgamation which can never be more
than an interesting possibility,
describing it
as "that strange paradise
unlike flesh, gold, or stately buildings,
the choicest piece of my life:
the heart rising
in its estate of peace

as a boat rises
with the rising of the water;"
constrained in speaking of the serpent --
that shed snakeskin in the history of politeness
not to be returned to again --
that invaluable accident
exonerating Adam.
And he has beauty also;
it's distressing -- the O thou
to whom, from whom,
without whom nothing -- Adam;
"something feline,
something colubrine" -- how true!
a crouching mythological monster
in that Persian miniature of emerald mines,
raw silk -- ivory white, snow white,
oyster white and six others --
that paddock full of leopards and giraffes --
long lemonyellow bodies
sown with trapezoids of blue.
Alive with words,
vibrating like a cymbal
touched before it has been struck,
he has prophesied correctly --
the industrious waterfall,
"the speedy stream
which violently bears all before it,
at one time silent as the air
and now as powerful as the wind."
"Treading chasms
on the uncertain footing of a spear,"
forgetting that there is in woman
a quality of mind
which is an instinctive manifestation
is unsafe,
he goes on speaking
in a formal, customary strain
of "past states," the present state,
seals, promises,
the evil one suffered,
the good one enjoys,
hell, heaven,
everything convenient
to promote one's joy."
There is in him a state of mind
by force of which,
perceiving what it was not
intended that he should,
"he experiences a solemn joy
in seeing that he has become an idol."
Plagued by the nightingale
in the new leaves,

with its silence --
not its silence but its silences,
he says of it:
"It clothes me with a shirt of fire."
"He dares not clap his hands
to make it go on
lest it should fly off;
if he does nothing, it will sleep;
if he cries out, it will not understand."
Unnerved by the nightingale
and dazzled by the apple,
impelled by "the illusion of a fire
effectual to extinguish fire,"
compared with which
the shining of the earth
is but deformity -- a fire
"as high as deep as bright as broad
as long as life itself,"
he stumbles over marriage,
"a very trivial object indeed"
to have destroyed the attitude
in which he stood --
the ease of the philosopher
unfathered by a woman.
Unhelpful Hymen!
"a kind of overgrown cupid"
reduced to insignificance
by the mechanical advertising
parading as involuntary comment,
by that experiment of Adam's
with ways out but no way in --
the ritual of marriage,
augmenting all its lavishness;
its fiddle-head ferns,
lotus flowers, opuntias, white dromedaries,
its hippopotamus --
nose and mouth combined
in one magnificent hopper,
"the crested screamer --
that huge bird almost a lizard,"
its snake and the potent apple.
He tells us
that "for love
that will gaze an eagle blind,
that is like a Hercules
climbing the trees
in the garden of the Hesperides,
from forty-five to seventy
is the best age,"
commending it
as a fine art, as an experiment,
a duty or as merely recreation.

One must not call him ruffian
 nor friction a calamity --
 the fight to be affectionate:
 "no truth can be fully known
 until it has been tried
 by the tooth of disputation."
 The blue panther with black eyes,
 the basalt panther with blue eyes,
 entirely graceful --
 one must give them the path --
 the black obsidian Diana
 who "darkeneth her countenance
 as a bear doth,
 causing her husband to sigh,"
 the spiked hand
 that has an affection for one
 and proves it to the bone,
 impatient to assure you
 that impatience is the mark of independence
 not of bondage.
 "Married people often look that way" --
 "seldom and cold, up and down,
 mixed and malarial
 with a good day and bad."
 "When do we feed?"
 We occidentals are so unemotional,
 we quarrel as we feed;
 one's self is quite lost,
 the irony preserved
 in "the Ahasuerus tête à tête banquet"
 with its "good monster, lead the way,"
 with little laughter
 and munificence of humor
 in that quixotic atmosphere of frankness
 in which "Four o'clock does not exist
 but at five o'clock
 the ladies in their imperious humility
 are ready to receive you";
 in which experience attests
 that men have power
 and sometimes one is made to feel it.
 He says, "what monarch would not blush
 to have a wife
 with hair like a shaving-brush?
 The fact of woman
 is not `the sound of the flute
 but every poison."
 She says, "`Men are monopolists
 of stars, garters, buttons
 and other shining baubles' --
 unfit to be the guardians
 of another person's happiness."

He says, "These mummies
must be handled carefully --
`the crumbs from a lion's meal,
a couple of shins and the bit of an ear';
turn to the letter M
and you will find
that `a wife is a coffin,'
that severe object
with the pleasing geometry
stipulating space and not people,
refusing to be buried
and uniquely disappointing,
revengefully wrought in the attitude
of an adoring child
to a distinguished parent."
She says, "This butterfly,
this waterfly, this nomad
that has `proposed
to settle on my hand for life.' --
What can one do with it?
There must have been more time
in Shakespeare's day
to sit and watch a play.
You know so many artists are fools."
He says, "You know so many fools
who are not artists."
The fact forgot
that "some have merely rights
while some have obligations,"
he loves himself so much,
he can permit himself
no rival in that love.
She loves herself so much,
she cannot see herself enough --
a statuette of ivory on ivory,
the logical last touch
to an expansive splendor
earned as wages for work done:
one is not rich but poor
when one can always seem so right.
What can one do for them --
these savages
condemned to disaffect
all those who are not visionaries
alert to undertake the silly task
of making people noble?
This model of petrine fidelity
who "leaves her peaceful husband
only because she has seen enough of him" --
that orator reminding you,
"I am yours to command."
"Everything to do with love is mystery;

it is more than a day's work
to investigate this science."
One sees that it is rare --
that striking grasp of opposites
opposed each to the other, not to unity,
which in cycloid inclusiveness
has dwarfed the demonstration
of Columbus with the egg --
a triumph of simplicity --
that charitive Euroclydon
of frightening disinterestedness
which the world hates,
admitting:

"I am such a cow,
if I had a sorrow,
I should feel it a long time;
I am not one of those
who have a great sorrow
in the morning
and a great joy at noon;"
which says: "I have encountered it
among those unpretentious
protégés of wisdom,
where seeming to parade
as the debater and the Roman,
the statesmanship
of an archaic Daniel Webster
persists to their simplicity of temper
as the essence of the matter:

`Liberty and union
now and forever;'

the book on the writing-table;
the hand in the breast-pocket."

Marianne Moore

Nevertheless

you've seen a strawberry
that's had a struggle; yet
was, where the fragments met,

a hedgehog or a star-
fish for the multitude
of seeds. What better food

than apple seeds - the fruit
within the fruit - locked in
like counter-curved twin

hazelnuts? Frost that kills
the little rubber-plant -
leaves of kok-sagyyz-stalks, can't

harm the roots; they still grow
in frozen ground. Once where
there was a prickley-pear -

leaf clinging to a barbed wire,
a root shot down to grow
in earth two feet below;

as carrots from mandrakes
or a ram's-horn root some-
times. Victory won't come

to me unless I go
to it; a grape tendril
ties a knot in knots till

knotted thirty times - so
the bound twig that's under-
gone and over-gone, can't stir.

The weak overcomes its
menace, the strong over-
comes itself. What is there

like fortitude! What sap
went through that little thread
to make the cherry red!

Marianne Moore

No Swan So Fine

"No water so still as the
dead fountains of Versailles." No swan,
with swart blind look askance
and gondoliering legs, so fine
as the chinz china one with fawn-
brown eyes and toothed gold
collar on to show whose bird it was.

Lodged in the Louis Fifteenth
candelabrum-tree of cockscomb-
tinted buttons, dahlias,
sea-urchins, and everlastings,
it perches on the branching foam
of polished sculptured
flowers--at ease and tall. The king is dead.

Marianne Moore

Peter

Strong and slippery, built for the midnight grass-party confronted by four cats,
he sleeps his time away -- the detached first claw on his foreleg which corresponds
to the thumb, retracted to its tip; the small tuft of fronds
or katydid legs above each eye, still numbering the units in each group;
the shadbones regularly set about his mouth, to droop or rise

in unison like the porcupine's quills -- motionless. He lets himself be flat-
tened out by gravity, as it were a piece of seaweed tamed and weakened by
exposure to the sun; compelled when extended, to lie
stationary. Sleep is the result of his delusion that one must do as
well as one can for oneself; sleep -- epitome of what is to

him as to the average person, the end of life. Demonstrate on him how
the lady caught the dangerous southern snake, placing a forked stick on either
side of its innocuous neck; one need not try to stir
him up; his prune shaped head and alligator eyes are not a party to the
joke. Lifted and handled, he may be dangled like an eel or set

up on the forearm like a mouse; his eyes bisected by pupils of a pin's
width, are flickeringly exhibited, then covered up. May be? I should say,
might have been; when he has been got the better of in a
dream -- as in a fight with nature or with cats -- we all know it. Profound sleep is
not with him, a fixed illusion. Springing about with froglike ac-

curacy, emitting jerky cries when taken in the hand, he is himself
again; to sit caged by the rungs of a domestic chair would be unprofit-
able -- human. What is the good of hypocrisy? It
is permissible to choose one's employment, to abandon the wire nail, the
roly-poly, when it shows signs of being no longer a pleas-

ure, to score the adjacent magazine with a double line of strokes. He can
talk, but insolently says nothing. What of it? When one is frank, one's very
presence is a compliment. It is clear that he can see
the virtue of naturalness, that he is one of those who do not regard
the published fact as a surrender. As for the disposition

invariably to affront, an animal with claws wants to have to use
them; that eel-like extension of trunk into tail is not an accident. To
leap, to lengthen out, divide the air -- to purloin, to pursue.
to tell the hen: fly over the fence, go in the wrong way -- in your perturba-
tion -- this is life; to do less would be nothing but dishonesty.

Marianne Moore

Poetry

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in

it after all, a place for the genuine.

Hands that can grasp, eyes

that can dilate, hair that can rise

if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are

useful. When they become so derivative as to become unintelligible,

the same thing may be said for all of us, that we do not admire what

we cannot understand: the bat

holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under

a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a

flea, the base-

ball fan, the statistician--

nor is it valid

to discriminate against 'business documents and

school-books'; all these phenomena are important. One must make a distinction

however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry,

nor till the poets among us can be

'literalists of

the imagination'--above

insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them', shall we have

it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,

the raw material of poetry in

all its rawness and

that which is on the other hand

genuine, you are interested in poetry.

Marianne Moore

Rosemary

Beauty and Beauty's son and rosemary -
Venus and Love, her son, to speak plainly -
born of the sea supposedly,
at Christmas each, in company,
braids a garland of festivity.
Not always rosemary -

since the flight to Egypt, blooming indifferently.
With lancelike leaf, green but silver underneath,
its flowers - white originally -
turned blue. The herb of memory,
imitating the blue robe of Mary,
is not too legendary

to flower both as symbol and as pungency.
Springing from stones beside the sea,
the height of Christ when he was thirty-three,
it feeds on dew and to the bee
"hath a dumb language"; is in reality
a kind of Christmas tree.

Marianne Moore

Silence

My father used to say,
"Superior people never make long visits,
have to be shown Longfellow's grave
nor the glass flowers at Harvard.
Self reliant like the cat --
that takes its prey to privacy,
the mouse's limp tail hanging like a shoelace from its mouth --
they sometimes enjoy solitude,
and can be robbed of speech
by speech which has delighted them.
The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;
not in silence, but restraint."
Nor was he insincere in saying, "' Make my house your inn'.
Inns are not residences.

Marianne Moore

Spenser's Ireland

has not altered;--
a place as kind as it is green,
the greenest place I've never seen.
Every name is a tune.
Denunciations do not affect
the culprit; nor blows, but it
is torture to him to not be spoken to.
They're natural,--
the coat, like Venus'
mantle lined with stars,
buttoned close at the neck,-the sleeves new from disuse.

If in Ireland
they play the harp backward at need,
and gather at midday the seed
of the fern, eluding
their "giants all covered with iron," might
there be fern seed for unlearn-
ing obduracy and for reinstating
the enchantment?
Hindered characters
seldom have mothers
in Irish stories, but they all have grandmothers.

It was Irish;
a match not a marriage was made
when my great great grandmother'd said
with native genius for
disunion, "Although your suitor be
perfection, one objection
is enough; he is not
Irish." "Outwitting
the fairies, befriending the furies,
whoever again
and again says, "I'll never give in," never sees

that you're not free
until you've been made captive by
supreme belief,--credulity
you say? When large dainty
fingers tremblingly divide the wings
of the fly for mid-July
with a needle and wrap it with peacock-tail,
or tie wool and
buzzard's wing, their pride,
like the enchanter's
is in care, not madness. Concurring hands divide

flax for damask
that when bleached by Irish weather
has the silvered chamois-leather
water-tightness of a

skin. Twisted torcs and gold new-moon-shaped
lunulae aren't jewelry
like the purple-coral fuchsia-tree's. Eire--
the guillemot
so neat and the hen
of the heath and the
linnet spinet-sweet-bespeak relentless? Then

they are to me
like enchanted Earl Gerald who
changed himself into a stag, to
a great green-eyed cat of
the mountain. Discommodity makes
them invisible; they've dis-
appeared. The Irish say your trouble is their
trouble and your
joy their joy? I wish
I could believe it;
I am troubled, I'm dissatisfied, I'm Irish.

Marianne Moore

Spenser's Island

has not altered;--
a place as kind as it is green,
the greenest place I've never seen.
Every name is a tune.
Denunciations do not affect
the culprit; nor blows, but it
is torture to him to not be spoken to.
They're natural,--
the coat, like Venus'
mantle lined with stars,
buttoned close at the neck,-the sleeves new from disuse.

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Marianne Moore

The Pangolin

Another armored animal—scale
lapping scale with spruce-cone regularity until they
form the uninterrupted central
tail row! This near artichoke with head and legs and
grit-equipped gizzard,
the night miniature artist engineer is,
yes, Leonardo da Vinci's replica—
impressive animal and toiler of whom we seldom hear.
Armor seems extra. But for him,
the closing ear-ridge—
or bare ear licking even this small
eminence and similarly safe
contracting nose and eye apertures
impenetrably closable, are not;—a true ant-eater,
not cockroach-eater, who endures
exhausting solitary trips through unfamiliar ground at night,
returning before sunrise; stepping in the moonlight,
on the moonlight peculiarly, that the outside
edges of his hands may bear the weight and save the
claws
for digging. Serpented about
the tree, he draws
away from danger unpugnaciously,
with no sound but a harmless hiss; keeping
the fragile grace of the Thomas-
of-Leighton Buzzard Westminster Abbey wrought-iron
vine, or
rolls himself into a ball that has
power to defy all effort to unroll it; strongly intailed, neat
head for core, on neck not breaking off, with curled-in feet.
Nevertheless he has sting-proof scales; and nest
of rocks closed with earth from inside, which he can
thus darken.
Sun and moon and day and night and man and beast
each with a splendor
which man in all his vileness cannot
set aside; each with an excellence!
"Fearful yet to be feared," the armored
ant-eater met by the driver-ant does not turn back, but
engulfs what he can, the flattered sword-
edged leafpoints on the tail and artichoke set leg-and
body-plates
quivering violently when it retaliates
and swarms on him. Compact like the furled fringed frill
on the hat-brim of Gargallo's hollow iron head of a
matador, he will drop and will
then walk away
unhurt, although if unintruded on,
he cautiously works down the tree, helped
by his tail. The giant-pangolin-
tail, graceful tool, as prop or hand or broom or ax, tipped like
an elephant's trunk with special skin,

is not lost on this ant-and stone-swallowing uninjurable
artichoke which simpletons thought a living fable
whom the stones had nourished, whereas ants had done
so. Pangolins are not aggressive animals; between
dusk and day they have the not unchain-like machine-like
form and frictionless creep of a thing
made graceful by adversities, con-
versities. To explain grace requires
a curious hand. If that which is at all were not forever,
why would those who graced the spires
with animals and gathered there to rest, on cold luxurious
low stone seats—a monk and monk and monk—between the
thus
ingenious roof-supports, have slaved to confuse
grace with a kindly manner, time in which to pay a
debt,
the cure for sins, a graceful use
of what are yet
approved stone mullions branching out across
the perpendiculars? A sailboat
was the first machine. Pangolins, made
for moving quietly also, are models of exactness,
on four legs; on hind feet plantigrade,
with certain postures of a man. Beneath sun and moon,
man slaving
to make his life more sweet, leaves half the flowers worth
having,
needing to choose wisely how to use his strength;
a paper-maker like the wasp; a tractor of foodstuffs,
like the ant; spidering a length
of web from bluffs
above a stream; in fighting, mechanicked
like to pangolin; capsizing in
disheartenment. Bedizened or stark
naked, man, the self, the being we call human, writing-
master to this world, griffons a dark
"Like does not like like that is obnoxious"; and writes error
with four
r's. Among animals, one has a sense of humor.
Humor saves a few steps, it saves years. Uningnorant,
modest and unemotional, and all emotion,
he has everlasting vigor,
power to grow,
though there are few creatures who can make one
breathe faster and make one erecter.
Not afraid of anything is he,
and then goes cowering forth, tread paced to meet an obstacle
at every step. Consistent with the
formula—warm blood, no gills, two pairs of hands and a few
hairs—that
is a mammal; there he sits in his own habitat,
serge-clad, strong-shod. The prey of fear, he, always

curtailed, extinguished, thwarted by the dusk, work
partly done,
says to the alternating blaze,
"Again the sun!
anew each day; and new and new and new,
that comes into and steadies my soul."

Marianne Moore

The Paper Nautilus

For authorities whose hopes
are shaped by mercenaries?
Writers entrapped by
teatime fame and by
commuters' comforts? Not for these
the paper nautilus
constructs her thin glass shell.

Giving her perishable
souvenir of hope, a dull
white outside and smooth-
edged inner surface
glossy as the sea, the watchful
maker of it guards it
day and night; she scarcely

eats until the eggs are hatched.
Buried eight-fold in her eight
arms, for she is in
a sense a devil-
fish, her glass ram'shorn-cradled freight
is hid but is not crushed;
as Hercules, bitten

by a crab loyal to the hydra,
was hindered to succeed,
the intensively
watched eggs coming from
the shell free it when they are freed,--
leaving its wasp-nest flaws
of white on white, and close-

laid Ionic chiton-folds
like the lines in the mane of
a Parthenon horse,
round which the arms had
wound themselves as if they knew love
is the only fortress
strong enough to trust to.

Marianne Moore

The Past is the Present

If external action is effete
and rhyme is outmoded,
I shall revert to you,
Habakkuk, as when in a Bible class
the teacher was speaking of unrhymed verse.
He said - and I think I repeat his exact words -
"Hebrew poetry is prose
with a sort of heightened consciousness." Ecstasy affords
the occasion and expediency determines the form.

Marianne Moore

The Steeple-Jack

Dürer would have seen a reason for living
in a town like this, with eight stranded whales
to look at; with the sweet sea air coming into your house
on a fine day, from water etched
with waves as formal as the scales
on a fish.

One by one in two's and three's, the seagulls keep
flying back and forth over the town clock,
or sailing around the lighthouse without moving their wings --
rising steadily with a slight
quiver of the body -- or flock
mewing where

a sea the purple of the peacock's neck is
paled to greenish azure as Dürer changed
the pine green of the Tyrol to peacock blue and guinea
gray. You can see a twenty-five-
pound lobster; and fish nets arranged
to dry. The

whirlwind fife-and-drum of the storm bends the salt
marsh grass, disturbs stars in the sky and the
star on the steeple; it is a privilege to see so
much confusion. Disguised by what
might seem the opposite, the sea-
side flowers and

trees are favored by the fog so that you have
the tropics first hand: the trumpet-vine,
fox-glove, giant snap-dragon, a salpiglossis that has
spots and stripes; morning-glories, gourds,
or moon-vines trained on fishing-twine
at the back door;

cat-tails, flags, blueberries and spiderwort,
striped grass, lichens, sunflowers, asters, daisies --
yellow and crab-claw ragged sailors with green bracts -- toad-plant,
petunias, ferns; pink lilies, blue
ones, tigers; poppies; black sweet-peas.
The climate

is not right for the banyan, frangipani, or
jack-fruit trees; or for exotic serpent
life. Ring lizard and snake-skin for the foot, if you see fit;
but here they've cats, not cobras, to
keep down the rats. The diffident
little newt

with white pin-dots on black horizontal spaced-
out bands lives here; yet there is nothing that
ambition can buy or take away. The college student

named Ambrose sits on the hillside
with his not-native books and hat
and sees boats

at sea progress white and rigid as if in
a groove. Liking an elegance of which
the souch is not bravado, he knows by heart the antique
sugar-bowl shaped summer-house of
interlacing slats, and the pitch
of the church

spire, not true, from which a man in scarlet lets
down a rope as a spider spins a thread;
he might be part of a novel, but on the sidewalk a
sign says C. J. Poole, Steeple Jack,
in black and white; and one in red
and white says

Danger. The church portico has four fluted
columns, each a single piece of stone, made
modester by white-wash. This would be a fit haven for
waifs, children, animals, prisoners,
and presidents who have repaid
sin-driven

senators by not thinking about them. The
place has a school-house, a post-office in a
store, fish-houses, hen-houses, a three-masted schooner on
the stocks. The hero, the student,
the steeple-jack, each in his way,
is at home.

It could not be dangerous to be living
in a town like this, of simple people,
who have a steeple-jack placing danger signs by the church
while he is gilding the solid-
pointed star, which on a steeple
stands for hope.

Marianne Moore

To a Steam Roller

The illustration
is nothing to you without the application.
You lack half wit. You crush all the particles down
into close conformity, and then walk back and forth on them.

Sparkling chips of rock
are crushed down to the level of the parent block.
Were not 'impersonal judgment in aesthetic
matters, a metaphysical impossibility,' you

might fairly achieve
it. As for butterflies, I can hardly conceive
of one's attending upon you, but to question
the congruence of the complement is vain, if it exists.

Marianne Moore