

How Kim Dower's Relationship with Her Late Mother Changed Through Poetry

As National Poetry Month comes to an end and Mother's Day approaches, a poet contemplates the form's cathartic power.

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My lifelong relationship with poetry began at five with my mother's reading A.A. Milne's *Now We Are Six* —“They're changing guard at Buckingham Palace/Christopher Robin went down with Alice” to me, which delighted me so much, I, in turn, propped my dolls up in chairs and performed those same lines for them. My grandmother from Kiev would recite Pushkin in Russian from memory, the two of us cuddling together on the couch in her dark living room. I didn't understand a word, but the music of the verse, the joy and passion in her recitation, was like a trap door—a room from which I never wanted to emerge.

My first poetry reading, 2nd grade of New York's Public School 75, called the Emily Dickinson School (foreshadowing?), was a rhyme from my notebook: “When I grow up/A nurse I'll be./A better one/You'll never see!/Whenever needed night or day/Just call me I'll be on my way!” I stood on that bleak auditorium stage in

my black patent leather Mary Janes, my heart pounding as I pronounced the words on Flag Day, all of us in white button-down shirts and red ties. Probably the happiest day in my grade school life.

In the 7th grade, when Miss Josephs read us Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," while I could see that some of my classmates' eyes were glazing over, I "got" the meaning and understood how "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— /I took the one less traveled by,/And that has made all the difference" meant one thing, and then it meant the *other* thing. Yes! A poem could be folded like a paper fan, opening up to meaning after meaning, one image after another, bringing more joy. Here was a simple poem about making a choice between two country roads, but also one about all the choices we make and will make throughout our lives. Yes! I got it, and I remember feeling less alone in that classroom. It's a poem I still read aloud today for comfort and pleasure. For the music of it.



FOR THOSE OF US WHO WRITE AND READ POETRY YEAR-ROUND, WE CAN'T IMAGINE OUR LIVES WITHOUT IT.

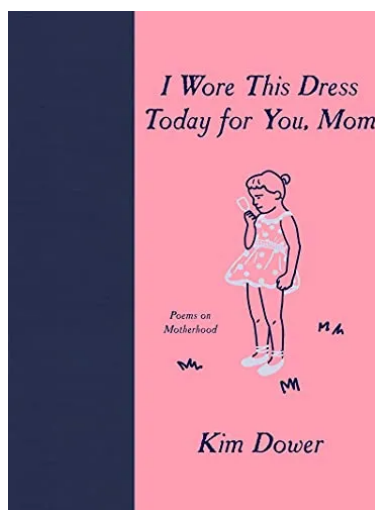
As we turn the page on another hopeful April (the "cruellest month," as per T.S. Elliot), we also say goodbye to National Poetry Month, the 30 days set aside each year to honor and appreciate poetry. The Academy of American Poets launched this commemorative month in April 1996, saying, "National Poetry Month reminds the public that poets have an integral role to play in our culture and that poetry matters."

Given my enduring love of poetry, I find it ironic, even maddening, to think that others need to be reminded that poetry matters, in the same way I find it unsettling that we need to be reminded in February—Black History Month—that Black History matters, or in March—Women's History Month—that women made a difference! Poetry, the minority of literature, follows in April, and gets its chance to be in the spotlight, remembered and celebrated for 30 days out of the year.

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I can't imagine life without poetry. For me and all those who feel the same, I wonder where, in its absence, we would turn to seek solace, humor, surprise? What other piece of writing but a poem can we spend five minutes reading just before bed, or first thing in the morning, and feel instantly understood and connected to another human being? How else might we see our own story through a stranger's concise, perceptive, emotional words?

The great poet W.H. Auden said, "Poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings." For me, this says it all. This is why I write poetry and why I read it. It can explain the inexplicable, sort out the unbearable or confusing, help me put into words my dark or ecstatic feelings. It can also just make me laugh. And most of us, when we fall in love, when a baby is born, reach for a poem. At our wedding, give me a poem, please! And, of course, when a loved one passes, it's a poem that captures our loss.



I Wore This Dress Today for You, Mom

SHOP AT AMAZON

After my mother died in 2011, my poems about her came out fast and furious. Comic, sad, revealing — composing them pulled me across and beyond the years of our relationship, and through putting pen to paper, our relationship changed. Not all poetry is autobiographical. The events themselves may not be true, but for the poem to “work,” to connect with others, the feelings, the emotions, must be authentic. And they were.

My mother and I forged a new relationship after her death. She'd probably like to hear all about that—and I know she'd have a lot to say on the subject—but I'm confident I gave her some lines in my poems that she would enjoy, that would make her happy. What annoyed me about her when she was alive, I found humor in. As I gained a more “clear expression of mixed feelings,” I acquired a new appreciation of her, of us. Regrets softened. Anger dissipated. A much less complicated love was what remained.

Some of those mixed feelings still get stirred up each year around Mother's Day. And while I'm both relieved and sad that I no longer have to worry about whether I'm going to buy her the right gift or take her to the right restaurant for lunch to mark the occasion, I can count on a poem popping out to help me un-mix those feelings.

Since my mother's been gone, hundreds of poems have sprouted, and I've collected the ones I like best in one volume I've titled *I Wore This Dress Today for You, Mom*—a gift I wish I could wrap and give to her in person.

Now a mother myself, I have inherited the Mother's Day tradition, and I always hope for a special day, but mainly I just want to spend time with my son. In my new relationship with my mother that evolved through writing these poems, I believe that all she ever really wanted was an entire day with me, doing nothing but being together, sitting in the backyard, watching the birds, laughing, listening to one another's stories, perhaps reading a poem or two.

Kim Dower, former Poet Laureate of West Hollywood, is the author of five collections of poetry. I Wore This Dress Today for You, Mom, has just been published by Red Hen Press.

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