

WHERE  
DID  
POETRY  
COME  
FROM

Chapter One

*SOME EARLY  
ENCOUNTERS*

*Geoffrey O'Brien*

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MARSH HAWK PRESS | 2020

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FIRST EDITION

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Marsh Hawk Press books are published by Marsh Hawk Press, Inc.,  
a not-for-profit corporation under section 501 (c)3 United States Internal Revenue Code

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

O'Brien, Geoffrey, 1948- author.

Where did poetry come from: some early encounters / Geoffrey O'Brien.

First edition. | East Rockaway, New York: Marsh Hawk Press, 2020.

LCCN 2019041213 | ISBN 9781732614116 (paperback)

O'Brien, Geoffrey, 1948—Childhood and youth. | O'Brien,

Geoffrey, 1948—Knowledge—Poetry. | Oral interpretation.

LCC PS3565.B6689 Z46 2020 | DDC 811/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019041213>

Book design by Sandy McIntosh

Printed in the USA

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Marsh Hawk Press

P.O. Box 206, East Rockaway, NY 11518-0206

[www.MarshHawkPress.org](http://www.MarshHawkPress.org)

*for Star Black*



*What follows* is not about wanting to be a poet

or trying to become a poet  
or learning how to write  
or forgetting how to write and starting over  
or arguing about poetry  
whether alone or with others  
or attempting to come up with a valid general definition of  
poetry  
or even a valid private definition that would not dissolve and  
change under pressure of constant unavoidable revision  
only to be set aside finally as an always provisional cluster of  
possibilities  
tantalizing and radiant and unfinishable;  
it is not about making a close study of leaves or waves or  
constellations  
or crouching to observe every species of natural transition and  
every corresponding trope of mythical transmutation  
or surveying the approximately infinite techniques of poem-  
writing across time and space  
or mastering the seven thousand types of ambiguity and  
grammatical nuance  
or delving to the root the etymology of any given word  
or naming and ordering the varieties of cadence;  
or pinpointing irreversible alterations in modes of expression  
or savoring the internecine duels and denunciations of schools  
and sects  
or speculating how and when poetry emerged in the timetable of  
human evolution or in the formation of primeval tribes or in the earliest  
inscribing of epics or love songs or healing incantations.  
The question here was only  
where did poetry come from in a single random life,  
a question permanently open like a vowel that finds no  
consonants to give it form and duration and direction;  
how did it make its presence known before it had been given a  
name  
what could have suggested that such a thing existed  
what kind of suggestions were stumbled upon no matter how  
loosely or crudely understood, if understood at all,  
messily, partially, apprehended in side views, or by getting words  
wrong as when hearing a song on the radio

imposing new meanings on words or phrases by whim or  
compulsion;  
through what fitful chance encounters  
did a notion however blurred form out of shivers, scratches,  
caresses, tremors and fits, intercepted repetitions, alluring patterns and  
curious views, voices unknown even if intimately familiar people gave  
utterance to them, seasons  
of baffling incomprehension  
experiences so unforgettable you are driven to make contact with  
them again  
to discover you can make contact only by inventing them  
as in a memoir where only what is quoted is certifiably authentic  
the rest of it being a more or less fictional journey through  
accumulated fragments, a few strips of rag that dangle in the mind like  
weathered signposts, nudged into view by an aroma or breeze  
what sticks and clicks in the night tunnel, insistent drumbeats  
and hiccups  
leading back to chamber or gulf or cavelike aperture or mad  
ancestor's attic  
a spectral location disguised as memory of a first encounter.  
Where did poetry come from  
and is it still there  
continuing to spread outward beyond apprehending  
continuing to escape  
in the sound always present and never altogether sounded  
drifting up from beneath the temporary stopover where the  
hearer only perches  
haunted like a house by what is overheard  
a transience perpetually surviving.

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1.

**Diddle diddle dumpling  
My son John**

**Went to bed  
With his stockings on**

**One shoe off  
And the other shoe on**

**Diddle diddle dumpling  
My son John**

A WOMAN'S VOICE is speaking it.

She knows what comes next. Her voice expresses the pleasure of knowing it. Anticipates your pleasure. Anticipates her own pleasure at being about to shape the sounds yet one more time.

The sounds were once uttered to her in the same fashion. By which utterance she was in part fashioned. As she now in turn is fashioning. A cycle becomes apparent to her in the rounded motion of it rolling in its grooves. Molding with molded sounds. Giving form to air. Counting out, as an accompaniment to touching, an extension of touching.

Contact.

The occasion of the rhyme is an infant's bedtime. It marks a transition. It masks an interruption. It distracts from the intrusion of being lifted out of play, hauled into the disagreeable discipline of having free movement restricted, of going through all the stages of washing and undressing and being put into bed and given over to darkness. A break point approaches. Soon the mouth of a cavern will swallow the room and all it holds.

A woman's voice. It could have been a man's voice but in memory never was. Not speaking but half chanting and half teasing. It is the sound of an intimate knowledge of the inside of the body. A sound of love or what sounds like love, of a desire to give comfort. Of the pleasure of sharing what is almost too silly to be said aloud. Of a holy and inane abandonment.

### **Diddle**

What is diddle. What does diddle look like. Like nothing at all. It is the sound of some unsuspected capacity hidden in the mouth.

### **Diddle diddle**

The action of the tongue moving back and forth against the top of the mouth. Just shy of where the teeth start. A ticklish repetition that could go on forever.

### **Dumpling**

A round and busy sound, closing together and popping apart. Funny in itself and pleasurable to say again and again. A sound shaped like the mouth. And likewise a thing, something remembered and desired,