

Poems with Disabilities

By Jim Ferris

Discussion Questions

1. “Poems with Disabilities Act” (line 4) calls to mind which civil rights law in the United States? What do civil rights laws seek to accomplish? What group does this civil rights law seek to protect? Why do some groups of citizens need the protection of civil rights laws?
2. Could a poem be considered to need legal protection? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever used a curb cut, the ramp where the sidewalk drops down to curb level? When do you use it? Why? Have you ever used an electric door opener to enter a store or school? Investigate how curb cuts and door openers became common features. When did that occur? What motivated the design changes? Who were they designed to benefit? Who actually benefits from them?
4. Who is speaking in the poem? Who is being addressed? What do you imagine the circumstances to be? What do we know about the speaker based on what he or she says? What do we suspect but not know for sure about the speaker?
5. The poem is making a parallel between parking spaces and spaces a poem might occupy in a book. What might make a parking space among the best spaces? Might different spaces be better under different conditions? Why would some spaces in a book be considered better than others? Might that change with conditions too?
6. What do you think the speaker means by “those / poems” (line 11)? In what way could it be considered necessary to keep a space open for that sort of poem?
7. What does it mean to make a “reasonable accommodation” (line 5)? How might one make a reasonable accommodation for a poem? For a person?

8. What is the poem being compared to in “Poems with Disabilities”? In what ways is a poem like a car? In what ways is a poem unlike a car? In what ways is a poem like a person? In what ways is a poem unlike a person?
9. What do you imagine changes in line 18? How does it happen?
10. How is it that a poem could earn one of the “best spaces in the book”? How is it that the poem in question earns that prime position?
11. What makes this a poem? How would your experience of it be different if it was simply written out without line breaks?
12. In her poem “Poetry,” the 20th-century American poet Marianne Moore called for poets to present “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.” In “Poems with Disabilities,” what is the imaginary garden? And what is the toad?
13. How does the length of each line impact how you experience the line? When you read the poem aloud, do you speed up, slow down, or pause at the end of the line? Why do you think the lines become much shorter about halfway through the poem? Why are the lines at the end the shortest in the poem?

Writing Activities

- Write about a time when people treated you like you didn’t belong someplace even though you knew you belonged there. How did you know they didn’t think you belonged? How did you act? How did you feel?
- Poetry has been described as “the art of the unsayable.” Write a poem in response to this one, in which you try to say the unsayable.

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