

# COMPLETE POEMS

MARIANNE MOORE



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## COMPLETE POEMS

Marianne Moore was born in Kirkwood, Missouri, on November 15, 1887, and spent much of her youth in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. After graduation from Bryn Mawr College in 1909 she taught for four years at the Carlisle Indian School. Her poetry first appeared professionally in *The Egoist* and *Poetry* magazines in 1915, and she moved to New York City in 1918. Her first book, *Poems*, was issued in England by the Egoist Press in 1921. *Observations*, published three years later in America, received the Dial Award. From 1925 to 1929 she served as acting editor of *The Dial*, the preeminent American literary periodical. She moved to Brooklyn in 1929, where she lived for the next thirty-six years. In 1935 *Selected Poems*, with an Introduction by T. S. Eliot, brought her work to the attention of a wider public.

Three additional books of poetry were followed, in 1951, by her *Collected Poems*, which won the Bollingen Prize, the National Book Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. She went on to publish a verse translation of the complete *Fables of La Fontaine*, a collection of critical essays, and three more volumes of poems.

Among the many awards Marianne Moore received are the National Institute of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Poetry, the Poetry Society of America's Gold Medal for Distinguished Achievement, and the National Medal for Literature, America's highest literary honor. A member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters since 1947, she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1955. In 1967 she was made Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Republic and in 1969 she received an honorary doctorate in literature from Harvard University, her sixteenth honorary degree. Marianne Moore died in New York City, in her eighty-fifth year, on February 5, 1972.

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TO LOUISE CRANE

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**Omissions are not accidents.**

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**M.M.**

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## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The text conforms as closely as is now possible to the author's final intentions. Five of the poems written after the first printing of this volume have been included. Late authorized corrections, and earlier corrections authorized but not made, have been incorporated. Punctuation, hyphens, and line arrangements silently changed by editor, proofreader, or typesetter have been restored. Misleading editorial amplifications of the notes have been removed.

Clive Driver

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## Collected Poems (1951)

TO MARY WARNER MOORE (1862-1947)

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## SELECTED POEMS (1935)

### 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 seaside  
flowers and

trees are favored by the fog so that you have  
the tropics at 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 source 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 modest by white-wash. This would be a fit haven for waifs, children, animals, prisoners, and presidents who have repaid

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.

## THE HERO

Where there is personal liking we go.  
Where the ground is sour; where there are  
weeds of beanstalk height,  
snakes' hypodermic teeth, or  
the wind brings the "scarebabe voice"  
from the neglected yew set with  
the semi-precious cat's eyes of the owl—  
awake, asleep, "raised ears extended to fine points," and so  
on—love won't grow.

We do not like some things, and the hero  
doesn't; deviating head-stones  
and uncertainty;  
going where one does not wish  
to go; suffering and not  
saying so; standing and listening where something  
is hiding. The hero shrinks  
as what it is flies out on muffled wings, with twin yellow  
eyes—to and fro—

with quavering water-whistle note, low,



high, in basso-falsetto chirps  
until the skin creeps.  
Jacob when a-dying, asked  
Joseph: Who are these? and blessed  
both sons, the younger most, vexing Joseph. And  
Joseph was vexing to some.  
Cincinnatus was; Regulus; and some of our fellow  
men have been, although devout,

like Pilgrim having to go slow  
to find his roll; tired but hopeful—  
hope not being hope  
until all ground for hope has  
vanished; and lenient, looking  
upon a fellow creature's error with the  
feelings of a mother—a  
woman or a cat. The decorous frock-coated Negro  
by the grotto

answers the fearless sightseeing hobo  
who asks the man she's with, what's this,  
what's that, where's Martha  
buried, "Gen-ral Washington  
there; his lady, here"; speaking  
as if in a play—not seeing her; with a  
sense of human dignity  
and reverence for mystery, standing like the shadow  
of the willow.

Moses would not be grandson to Pharaoh.  
It is not what I eat that is  
my natural meat,  
the hero says. He's not out  
seeing a sight but the rock  
crystal thing to see—the startling El Greco  
brimming with inner light—that  
covets nothing that it has let go. This then you may know  
as the hero.

## THE JERBOA

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*Too Much*

A Roman had an  
artist, a freedman,  
contrive a cone—pine-cone  
or fir-cone—with holes for a fountain. Placed on  
the Prison of St. Angelo, this cone  
of the Pompeys which is known

now as the Popes', passed  
for art. A huge cast  
bronze, dwarfing the peacock  
statue in the garden of the Vatican,  
it looks like a work of art made to give  
to a Pompey, or native

of Thebes. Others could  
build, and understood  
making colossi and  
how to use slaves, and kept crocodiles and put  
baboons on the necks of giraffes to pick  
fruit, and used serpent magic.

They had their men tie  
hippopotami  
and bring out dappled dog-  
cats to course antelopes, dikdik, and ibex;  
or used small eagles. They looked on as theirs,  
impalas and onigers,

the wild ostrich herd  
with hard feet and bird  
necks rearing back in the  
dust like a serpent preparing to strike, cranes,  
mongooses, storks, anoas, Nile geese;  
and there were gardens for these—

---

combining planes, dates,  
limes, and pomegranates,  
in avenues—with square  
pools of pink flowers, tame fish, and small frogs. Besides  
yarns dyed with indigo, and red cotton,  
they had a flax which they spun

into fine linen  
cordage for yachtsmen.  
These people liked small things;  
they gave to boys little paired playthings such as  
nests of eggs, ichneumon and snake, paddle  
and raft, badger and camel;

and made toys for themselves:  
the royal totem;  
and toilet-boxes marked  
with the contents. Lords and ladies put goose-grease  
paint in round bone boxes—the pivoting  
lid incised with a duck-wing

or reverted duckhead;  
kept in a buck  
or rhinoceros horn,  
the ground horn; and locust oil in stone locusts.  
It was a picture with a fine distance;  
of drought, and of assistance

in time, from the Nile  
rising slowly, while  
the pig-tailed monkey on  
slab-hands, with arched-up slack-slung gait, and the brown  
dandy looked at the jasmine two-leafed twig  
and bud, cactus-pads, and fig.

Dwarfs here and there, lent  
to an evident

poetry of frog grays,  
duck-egg greens, and egg-plant blues, a fantasy  
and a verisimilitude that were  
right to those with, everywhere,

---

power over the poor.  
The bees' food is your  
food. Those who tended flowerbeds  
and stables were like the king's cane in the  
form of a hand, or the folding bedroom  
made for his mother of whom

he was fond. Princes  
clad in queens' dresses,  
calla or petunia  
white, that trembled at the edge, and queens in a  
king's underskirt of fine-twilled thread like silk-  
worm gut, as bee-man and milk-

maid, kept divine cows  
and bees; limestone brows,  
and gold-foil wings. They made  
basalt serpents and portraits of beetles; the  
king gave his name to them and he was named  
for them. He feared snakes, and tamed

Pharaoh's rat, the rustbacked  
mongoose. No bust  
of it was made, but there  
was pleasure for the rat. Its restlessness was  
its excellence; it was praised for its wit;  
and the jerboa, like it,

a small desert rat,  
and not famous, that  
lives without water, has  
happiness. Abroad seeking food, or at home  
in its burrow, the Sahara field-mouse  
has a shining silver house

---

of sand. O rest and  
joy, the boundless sand,  
the stupendous sand-spout,  
no water, no palm-trees, no ivory bed,  
tiny cactus; but one would not be he  
who has nothing but plenty.

### *Abundance*

Africanus meant  
the conqueror sent  
from Rome. It should mean the  
untouched: the sand-brown jumping-rat—free-born; and  
the blacks, that choice race with an elegance  
ignored by one's ignorance.

Part terrestrial,  
and part celestial,  
Jacob saw, cudgel staff  
in claw-hand—steps of air and air angels; his  
friends were the stones. The translucent mistake  
of the desert, does not make

hardship for one who  
can rest and then do  
the opposite—launching  
as if on wings, from its match-thin hind legs, in  
daytime or at night; with the tail as a weight,  
undulated out by speed, straight.

Looked at by daylight,  
the underside's white,  
though the fur on the back  
is buff-brown like the breast of the fawn-breasted  
bower-bird. It hops like the fawn-breast, but has  
chipmunk contours—perceived as

---

it turns its bird head—  
the nap directed  
neatly back and blending  
with the ear which reiterates the slimness  
of the body. The fine hairs on the tail,  
repeating the other pale

markings, lengthen until  
at the tip they fill  
out in a tuft—black and  
white; strange detail of the simplified creature,  
fish-shaped and silvered to steel by the force  
of the large desert moon. Course

the jerboa, or  
plunder its food store,  
and you will be cursed. It  
honors the sand by assuming its color;  
closed upper paws seeming one with the fur  
in its flight from a danger.

By fifths and sevenths,  
in leaps of two lengths,  
like the uneven notes  
of the Bedouin flute, it stops its gleaning  
on little wheel castors, and makes fern-seed  
foot-prints with kangaroo speed.

Its leaps should be set  
to the flageolet;  
pillar body erect  
on a three-cornered smooth-working Chippendale  
claw—propped on hind legs, and tail as third toe,  
between leaps to its burrow.

**CAMELLIA SABINA**

and the Bordeaux plum  
from Marmande (France) in parenthesis with  
A.G. on the base of the jar—Alexis Godillot—  
unevenly blown beside a bubble that  
is green when held up to the light; they  
are a fine duet; the screw-top  
for this graft-grown briar-black bloom  
on black-thorn pigeon's-blood,  
is, like Certosa, sealed with foil. Appropriate custom.

And they keep under  
glass also, camellias catalogued by  
lines across the leaf. The French are a cruel race—willing  
to squeeze the diner's cucumber or broil a  
meal on vine-shoots. Gloria mundi  
with a leaf two inches, nine lines  
broad, they have; and the smaller,  
Camellia Sabina  
with amanita-white petals; there are several of her

pale pinwheels, and pale  
stripe that looks as if on a mushroom the  
sliver from a beet-root carved into a rose were laid. "Dry  
the windows with a cloth fastened to a staff.  
In the camellia-house there must be  
no smoke from the stove, or dew on  
the windows, lest the plants ail,"  
the amateur is told;  
"mistakes are irreparable and nothing will avail."

A scentless nosegay  
is thus formed in the midst of the bouquet  
from bottles, casks and corks, for sixty-four million red wines  
and twenty million white, which Bordeaux merchants  
and lawyers "have spent a great deal of  
trouble" to select, from what was  
and what was not Bordeaux. A  
food-grape, however—"born  
of nature and of art"—is true ground for the grape-holiday.

The food of a wild  
mouse in some countries is wild parsnip- or sunflower- or  
morning-glory-seed, with an occasional  
grape. Underneath the vines of the Bolzano  
grape of Italy, the Prince of Tails  
might stroll. Does yonder mouse with a  
grape in its hand and its child  
in its mouth, not portray  
the Spanish fleece suspended by the neck? In that well-piled

larder above your  
head, the picture of what you will eat is  
looked at from the end of the avenue. The wire cage is  
locked, but by bending down and studying the  
roof, it is possible to see the  
pantomime of Persian thought: the  
gilded, too tight undemure  
coat of gems unruined  
by the rain—each small pebble of jade that refused to mature,

plucked delicately  
off. Off jewelry not meant to keep Tom  
Thumb, the cavalry cadet, on his Italian upland  
meadow-mouse, from looking at the grapes beneath  
the interrupted light from them, and  
dashing round the *concours hippique*  
of the tent, in a flurry  
of eels, scallops, serpents,  
and other shadows from the blue of the green canopy.

The wine-cellar? No.  
It accomplishes nothing and makes the  
soul heavy. The gleaning is more than the vintage, though the  
history *de la Vigne et du vin* has placed  
*mirabelle* in the *bibliothèque*  
*unique depuis* seventeen-ninety-seven.  
(Close the window,  
says the Abbé Berlèse,  
for Sabina born under glass.) O generous Bolzano!



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