

# **maggie and milly and molly and may** **by E.E. Cummings**

A National Poetry Day resource

**Ages 11-14**

**#NationalPoetryDay**  
[www.nationalpoetryday.co.uk](http://www.nationalpoetryday.co.uk)



This is a very short poem about four girls who go down to the beach to play. It looks very simple at first but there's a surprising depth to it, once you start to read and listen to it carefully.



## BEFORE READING THE POEM

1. Look at the title – 'maggie and milly and molly and may'
  - What do you predict the poem might be about?
  - Do you think it's a poem for adults or children? Why?
2. Now listen to the poem being read aloud to you.

## maggie and milly and molly and may

maggie and milly and molly and may  
went down to the beach(to play one day)

and maggie discovered a shell that sang  
so sweetly she couldn't remember her troubles,and

milly befriended a stranded star  
whose rays five languid fingers were;

and molly was chased by a horrible thing  
which raced sideways while blowing bubbles:and

may came home with a smooth round stone  
as small as a world and as large as alone.

For whatever we lose(like a you or a me)  
it's always ourselves we find in the sea

© By poet E.E. Cummings



### GETTING STARTED:

## GET READING



### Consider our theme of '*Play*'

Read the poem and then take a moment to consider what play might mean in the context of this poem.

### ACTIVITY 1:

## GET TALKING

- Talk in pairs or threes about what you learn about each of the girls from what they do on the beach and the way they play. See if you can agree a single statement about each girl. For instance: '*Maggie seems to be...*'
- Share your thoughts as a whole class.

ACTIVITY 2:

GET THINKING



1. In your pairs or threes, talk about what **you think the final couplet of the poem** is saying, and try to **come up with a single statement** that expresses it clearly.

e.g. The poem is about how....

2. Share your ideas as a whole class.

ACTIVITY 3:

GET WRITING



**Writing a poem of your own**

The way the girls play on the beach and what they choose to do expresses something about their personalities and lives.

1. Imagine you and a group of three friends went to one of the places below:

- a theme park or funfair
- an adventure playground or skatepark
- a zoo
- a shopping mall

What would each of you do, and what would you come home with? What would that say about each of you?

2. Write a poem in couplets, like 'maggie and milly and molly and may', where your choices show something about each of you. (You could choose to make up four characters for your poem if you'd rather not write about yourself and your friends).



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# A Poem by Brian Bilston

A National Poetry Day resource

Ages 11-16

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Brian Bilston is a very playful poet. He jokes, plays on words, messes around with layout, has clever little twists and turns and writes about all kinds of things, some of which are quite unusual topics for poetry. He often posts poems on social media and does live shows.



## BEFORE READING THE POEM

Read the first stanza of the poem:

*Upon returning to my desk  
having left it temporarily in search of biscuits,  
I discovered my cat had written a poem  
on my laptop.*

- Predict what you think the poem will go on to say.
- You might want to have a go at writing the rest of the poem yourself, on your own or in pairs, or even as a whole class.



## A Poem

Upon returning to my desk,  
having left it temporarily in search of biscuits,  
I discovered my cat had written a poem  
on my laptop.

It was called ';\p'#####;'#####3,' and constituted one of her more difficult pieces, but it was the kind of poem which rewarded repeat reading.

I was struck by its experimental structure, the absence of line breaks; indeed, not one single space between any of the poem's 10,000 or so characters.

[illegible]

hinted at our 21st century preoccupation with social media. And who could not be moved by that devastating final line, its message of hope piercing our hearts like an arrow: `~~~~~5555=====`.

© Brian Bilston from Let  
Sleeping Cats Lie,  
Macmillan's Children



## ACTIVITY 1:

## GET TALKING

**Now read the poem. It needs to be read on the page, as well as, or instead of being read aloud.**

Talk as a whole class about:

- first thoughts
- anything you especially liked
- how the poet showed the cat's movements on the laptop
- whether you found it funny

## ACTIVITY 2:

## GET THINKING



**If you had to give the poem a title, what would it be?** Share your titles as a class, then look at the actual title.

*Click here to see the title Brian Bilston gave the poem and talk about your reactions to it.*



**On ';'..p'[[[[[[[[[[[[[;';//////////////////////////////////3,'**

Upon returning to my desk,  
having left it temporarily in search of biscuits,  
I discovered my cat had written a poem  
on my laptop.

It was called '3,' and constituted one of her more difficult pieces, but it was the kind of poem which rewarded repeat reading.

I was struck by its experimental structure, the absence of line breaks; indeed, not one single space between any of the poem's 10,000 or so characters.

[illegible]

hinted at our 21st century preoccupation with social media. And who could not be moved by that devastating final line, its message of hope piercing our hearts like an arrow: `~~~~~5555=====`.

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## ACTIVITY 1:

## GET TALKING

**Now read the poem. It needs to be read on the page, as well as, or instead of being read aloud.**

Talk as a whole class about:

- first thoughts
- anything you especially liked
- how the poet showed the cat's movements on the laptop
- whether you found it funny

## ACTIVITY 2:

## GET THINKING



**If you had to give the poem a title, what would it be?** Share your titles as a class, then look at the actual title.

- What do you think of it?
- Why does it start with 'On...'?

## AGREE OR DISAGREE

**Look at these statements and choose one that you agree with.** Share your thinking about this statement with others in the class.

- The poem is funny because the poet is suggesting that the cat's movements were deliberate – writing an experimental poem – and that the cat often writes poems.
- The poet suggests that the random keyboard strokes were worth taking seriously as a poem
- The poem takes an everyday event – a cat walking on his desk – and turns it into an amusing poem
- The poem is saying something about how we read all kinds of things into poems that aren't necessarily there.
- The poem is poking fun at the world of poetry and how seriously it takes itself.
- The poem has a serious message.
- The poem is just a bit of playful fun.

## GET WRITING



## Writing a Playful Poem of Your Own

Here are some ideas to spark your thinking. Pick one, or come up with an idea of your own!

- The cat replies to Brian Bilston, saying what it thinks of his poetry and his work as a poet, or what he himself was doing that morning walking across the computer (and perhaps what he did afterwards!)
- A slug writes a poem on paper, that follows the path of its slimy trail
- Open any book randomly at any page – it could be one you're reading – and pick the first phrase that jumps out at you. Write it down.
- Do the same two or three more times. Write down these phrases.
- Now find a way of including these words and phrases in a poem that makes some kind of sense.
- Do three or four keyboard strikes or accidents yourself. Look at what you've got on screen. Find a way of including them in a poem e.g. a smash might suggest a word, or a name, or you might think of a genre that allows you to use them, like Science Fiction perhaps.



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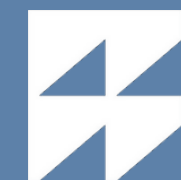
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# Russian Dolls by Rachel Rooney

A National Poetry Day resource

Ages 11-14

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A Russian Doll is a simple children's toy. Perhaps it might seem an odd thing for a poet to use to explore some quite complex ideas. Find out what Rachel Rooney does with it.



## BEFORE READING THE POEM



This picture shows a set of Russian Dolls. When they are all stacked inside each other, it looks as if they are just one doll but when you open the lids you can take each one out in turn.

Talk about what ideas a poet might explore, in choosing to write about Russian Dolls. Of course, they might just be exploring a childhood memory, but perhaps they could use the dolls to represent something else – some bigger ideas or feelings. What might a set of Russian Dolls might be a metaphor for?



## Russian Dolls

All you see is outside me: my painted smile,  
the rosy-posy shell, the fluttery eyes.  
A butter-won't-melt-in-my-mouth-type me.

But inside there's another me, bored till playtime.  
The wasting paper, daytime dreamer.  
A can't-be-bothered-sort-of me

And inside there's another me, full of cheek.  
The quick, slick joker with a poking tongue.  
A class-clown-funny-one-of me.

And inside there's another me who's smaller, scared.  
The scurrying, worrying, yes miss whisperer.  
A wouldn't-say-boo-to-a-goosey me.

And inside there's another me, all cross and bothered.  
The scowling hot-head, stampi  
ng feet.  
A didn't-do-it-blameless me.  
And inside there's another me, forever jealous  
who never gets enough, compared.  
A grass-is-always-greener me.

And deepest down, kept secretly,  
a tiny solid skittle doll.  
The girl that hides inside of me.

© Rachel Rooney from  
The Language of Cat and  
Other Poems, Otter Barry  
Books (2021)



### GETTING STARTED:

## GET READING



**Consider our theme of 'Play'**: read the poem  
and then take a moment to consider what play  
might mean in the context of this poem.

Listen to the poet, Rachel Rooney, reading the  
poem aloud.

<https://childrens.poetryarchive.org/poet/rachel-rooney/>

### ACTIVITY 1:

## GET TALKING

- Talk in pairs or threes about **what the biggest, outside doll is like**, and then **what different aspects of the narrator are hidden** in each of the dolls in turn? What is the smallest doll, the most hidden and secret one, like?
- Look at all **the last lines of each stanza**, with the hyphenated words, to help you decide.
- Share your ideas as a class.

ACTIVITY 2:

GET THINKING



On your own, think about this:

If you had to describe yourself as a Russian doll, with **different aspects of yourself represented by each doll**, what would each be like?

What would the tiniest doll be like, the secret part that's most hard to reach and most hidden from other people?

Write some phrases made up of hyphenated words to describe different aspects of yourself.

ACTIVITY 3:

GET WRITING



**Creating a Class Poem – We are...**

Pool your ideas for hyphenated words to create a class poem with the title 'We are...'  
Read it aloud and display it on the classroom wall.

OR

**Writing a Poem of Your Own**

Write your own 'Russian Doll' poem about yourself and different aspects of your life and personality and how others see you. You could use your phrases made up of hyphenated words if you want, or do it in another way.

OR

Think of other toys or playthings that might be used to describe a person's life, character and feelings. Here are a few examples to start you off:

- a pile of wooden bricks
- a lego set
- a cuddly toy
- a jigsaw puzzle

Choose one and use it to create a poem, in which the toy represents the person described. You could do it to talk about your own life and identity, or you could make up a character.





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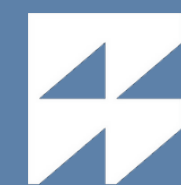
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# **Black Bee** **by Alfonso D'Aquino**

A National Poetry Day resource

**Ages 14-18**

**#NationalPoetryDay**  
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Black Bee

Syllables that buzz ooze	Silence mirror silence recess	Magnetic zoom of the deep labyrinth of the ear	Bone silence  its splendor erupting in my brain
inside of my head	radiant in the sand filament on fire	returning to the first and only hive	mirror swarm
dark honey	solar and intrasolar driftlight		where I saw all the night
echo as gold	from the eye to the coming thing	inmost silence intense	imaginary and Africanized
honey water beating to the bottom of the weakened water	from the thing to the going gold	pristine golden thorn thin- ning out in the water	from soft dirt a bee

Alfonso D’Aquino, “Black Bee,”  
translated by Forrest Gander, from  
fungus skull eye wing: Selected  
Poems of Alfonso D’Aquino.  
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Photo credit: Forrest Gander



ACTIVITY 1:

BEFORE READING

‘Black Bee’ uses layout on the page in playful and inventive ways. Its structure is unusual.

Without even thinking too much about the words and their meanings, try to say something about the layout of words on the page. What do you notice?



ACTIVITY 2:

READING THE POEM

- In pairs or threes, try reading the poem aloud. In order to do that, you’re going to have to make some choices. For instance, will you read down each column or across? Will you pause after line spaces? Will you use the sense to pause in other places?
- When you’ve read it once, try experimenting with reading it differently. Then choose your favourite reading.
- Share a few different readings across the class.

ACTIVITY 3:

## TALK ABOUT IT

Now talk about what the poem seems to be about.

### What do you discover in the poem about the black bee?

Do you think it's the black bee's voice and point of view - a bee's eye view of the world, or someone experiencing the presence of the bee?

ACTIVITY 4:

## GET WRITING



Alfonso D'Aquino represented the bee by using the layout on the page.

Try doing your own poem which uses the layout and organisation of words on the page imaginatively, to write about one of these things or something of your own choice:

- a tennis match
- a skyscraper
- a dancer or ice-skater
- a school playground
- a crab
- a bird (such as a seagull, eagle, pigeon or woodpecker)

**Don't name what it is, or give it a title.**

Share what you've written with someone else. Can they work out what you've written about?

**OR**

Re-write 'Black Bee' in your own way, choosing some words and phrases and leaving others out, repeating phrases if you wish, to give your own angle on the bee.



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# Summit of Flight by Inua Ellams

A National Poetry Day resource

Ages 14-18

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## Summit of Flight /

Mother means well / She is in the next room / but knows I'm crushing socks into balls / of white cotton and shoving them down / the throat of my sneakers as she shouts / Are you off to play that game again /

When I don't answer but squeeze and roll / my old towel till it's silent / forlorn as a dead body I lift into a black bag / she wants to know / Why not football like everybody else /

Mother means well / but I wring the neck of my water bottle when she yells / Even rugby is better than throwing a large onion into a basket like a girl in a market it's a game for girls / she says / as I twist two sweat bands like wrists into my back pocket / Sailing / cycling / anything else / but you had to pick what no one cares about what kind of kid does that /

Mother means well / as I shoulder the bag and stare down the summit of flight / of stairs imagining the many routes out / of the house / each one a multitude of lines and circles / perfect geometry / on which to forge my path / I stay low

Five strides and I've passed each creak and crevice / pivoted on the last step / edged the sharp desk onto the carpet / nimbling towards the door / without a sound or uttered word / only the human breath pushed down / the tangled line of tendon / muscle / bone and the human spirit's strive to lift it all / all the while spinning the ball / like a world

on a fingertip / a lone star / out on a limb / brighter for all the empty darkness around it / drifting through the door / Before it slams / Mother asks why I play the game / I respond softly / You just won't understand /

© Inua Ellams

### ACTIVITY 1:

## GET READING / WATCHING



**Inua Ellams writes about basketball – a game that has meant a lot to him – and he explores his mother's attitude to him playing it.**

Consider our theme of 'Play': read the poem and then take a moment to consider what play might mean in the context of this poem.

Watch Inua Ellams introducing the poem and reading it here:  
<https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/videos/collections/ks3-poetry-plus-inua-ellams/?video=Summit+of+Flight>





ACTIVITY 2:

GET THINKING



After reading/hearing the poem

Talk about these things:

- A favourite line or phrase in the poem
- Which line or phrase you'd pick out as being the most important one in the poem and why

Which of these statements do you most agree with:

- The poem is more about his relationship with his mother than basketball.
- Getting out of the house unnoticed is described as if it's playing basketball
- The poem conveys the joy of playing basketball
- The title of the poem cleverly uses different meanings of 'flight' to convey both basketball and leaving the house
- The poem makes us understand, even if his mother can't.

ACTIVITY 3:

GET WRITING



Writing your own poem

Write a poem about a game or sport that means a lot to you. It could be anything from football, or swimming, to chess, Trivial Pursuits or a computer game. You could simply try to convey what it's like and what it means to you. Or, like Inua Ellams, you could focus on how others (parents, friends or other people) view you playing it.

Here are a few starter lines, in case you're stuck for ideas:

- He/she watched me as I....
- 'Are you off to play that game again?'
- I put on the kit
- I set out the pieces/cards



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# Monopoly by Paul Farley

A National Poetry Day resource

Ages 14-18

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Paul Farley uses the game of Monopoly as a metaphor – a way of exploring serious ideas about the world and life.



## BEFORE READING THE POEM

As a class, pool your knowledge of what the game Monopoly is like, what players have to do, what the counters look like and the way you win the game.

Predict what ideas you think the poet might use the game to explore.

Write one or two lines of a poem of your own, in which you use a board game to explore serious ideas.

## Monopoly

We sat like slum landlords around the board  
buying each other out with fake banknotes,  
until we lost more than we could afford,  
or ever hope to pay back. Now our seats  
are empty — one by one we left the game  
to play for real, at first completely lost  
in this other world, its building sites, its rain;  
but slowly learned the rules and made our own,  
stayed out of jail and kept our noses clean.  
And now there's only me — sole freeholder  
of every empty office space in town,  
and from the quayside I can count the cost  
each low tide brings — the skeletons and rust  
of boats, cars, hats, boots, iron, a terrier.

© Paul Farley from *The Boy from the Chemist is Here to See You*,  
*Pan Macmillan (1998)*



### ACTIVITY 1:

## GET READING



**Consider our theme of 'Play'**: read the poem and then take a moment to consider what play might mean in the context of this poem.

Read the poem to yourself and then hear it being read aloud.

Read it for yourself a second time, **underlining any words or phrases that jump out at you**, either because they're surprising and need discussion, or because they give direction to your thinking.

For instance, does 'Now our seats/are empty' mean we've grown up now?

ACTIVITY 2:

GET THINKING



Share your thoughts so far.

- On your own write one statement, starting 'This poem is about....'
- Share your statements across the class and talk about both interesting common ideas and different ones.
- Choose one phrase, line or pair of lines that you find especially interesting or important or enjoyable. Spend a bit of time thinking about what's at stake in that phrase or line. Share your thinking with others in the class.
- For instance, 'I love the way the poem ends with...because of the way that...'

Or

- 'For me, the most important phrase in the poem is....because it reveals...'

ACTIVITY 3:

GET WRITING



Writing your own poem

Choose another game and use it as a metaphor to convey ideas about life, growing up, or another issue that matters to you.

For instance:

Skipping, football, chess, snakes and ladders, kiss chase, snap, jenga, a video game.

Before you start, think hard about a match between the game you've chosen and what you want to explore in the poem. For example, snakes and ladders might lend itself very well to the idea of chance and fate – the roll of the dice – leading to life being unpredictable and bringing unexpected successes, happy times and heartbreaks too.

Try writing your poem, as Paul Farley has, as a sonnet, or another very short lyric poem.





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# Microaggression Bingo by Fatimah Asghar

A National Poetry Day resource

Ages 16-18

**#NationalPoetryDay**

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Fatimah Asghar's poem packs a hard punch, showing a playful inventiveness to deliver some powerful messages.



## BEFORE READING THE POEM

1. Talk about the game Bingo and pool your understanding of how it works, what a bingo card looks like and how you win.
2. Talk about the title of the poem. What expectations does it raise for you? What do you think of it as the title for a poem?

Microaggression Bingo

White girl wearing a bindi at music festival	Friend defends drone strikes to play “devil’s advocate”	Teacher still calls you “Fat-ma” on the last day of class	“But you are lucky you have something exotic to write about!”	Everyone thinks you’re an expert yogi even though you can’t touch your toes
Stranger calls you sexy samosa at the bus stop & then asks for your number	“I went to India once, to <i>find myself</i> .”	Casting call to audition for Terrorist #7	All the actors in a movie about Egypt are white	“Oh, but you don’t <i>really</i> seem Muslim.”
“You’re from Kashmir? I have a <rug/ sweater/ scarf> from there!”	Someone misspells both your first & last name in an email	<b>Don’t Leave Your House For a Day - Safe</b>	“Oh, but I read a book by Jhumpa Lahiri once: all South Asians are <i>so</i> rich.”	Editor recommends you add more white people to your story to be more relatable
Casting call to audition for Battered Hijabi Women #42	“I’m working on a story about Muslims. Could you read it & tell me what you think? I’ll take you out to coffee!”	“But America is so much safer for women.”	Get called a FOB & told you smell like curry	“So what’s Muslim food taste like?”
“You’re from the same place that M.I.A is from, right?”	“I love hanging out with your family, it always feels so <i>authentic</i> !”	The villains are wearing headscarves in yet another fantasy series	“Oh, did your parents make you wear a Hijab?”	In the 5 <sup>th</sup> week of class on Bollywood a student refers to South Asia as the Middle East



© Fatimah Asghar from *If They Came For Us*, Corsair (2019)



ACTIVITY 1:

GET READING

Read the poem and look at the layout on the page, in the form of a bingo card.

Talk about what you think the messages of the poem are and why you think Fatimah Asghar chose this very unusual structure for her poem.

Talk about whether there’s any logic or rationale to the placing of each of the bits of text in different positions.

Consider our theme of ‘Play’: take a moment to consider what play might mean in the context of this poem.

ACTIVITY 2:

## WRITE YOUR OWN POEM



**Try writing your own Bingo poem** in which you choose a topic and put into different squares aspects of that topic that you'd like the reader to think about. Consider carefully the impact of placing different comments in different squares.

OR

**Think of another game format for a poem** and use that to write about something that matters to you

For example:

- a chess board
- a noughts and crosses grid
- a snakes and ladders board
- a board game that you make up yourself



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