Anne Bradstreet is buried in a North Andover cemetery. She lived in her North Andover home from the early 1640s until her death in 1672.

As residents of The Andovers, we live in the Valley of the Poets. We recognize the most famous names: Robert Frost, John Greenleaf Whittier. However, the justification for primacy, for staking our claim as the birthplace of poets, stems from the work of one woman: Anne Bradstreet. She was the first.

Not only was she our first poet; Bradstreet also was this country’s first published poet, and the first female poet published in either England or the New World. If a region can truly claim to be a birthplace, it is only fitting that the designation can be traced to a woman. And in this case, a woman who bore eight children.

Bradstreet gave birth to more than children, however: She also gave birth to dreams. From within a Puritan stronghold, she conveyed — with humor and skill — the value of women within any society. She also affirmed the power of faith, and the passion that a man and woman can hold for each other. And she did so through poetry.

Perhaps there was no better way. Poetry can cuddle our words, frame them within cadence, and protect them with rhyme. Poets are allowed creative license not afforded to other authors, and certainly not permitted to the scribes that report on everyday living. Those common communicators are left using pure, naked words. And words are at best blunt tools for the task they hope to accomplish.

Bradstreet too, without the cover bestowed by poetry, was foiled by our inability to decipher meaning from terms. Her words are almost comically quoted in part on a gate leading to Harvard yard: “I came into this Country, where I found a new World and new manners, at which my heart rose.” It’s easy to interpret this as an excitement for the New World, unless you continue reading: “But after I was convinced it was the way of God, I submitted to it and joined the church at Boston.” She was not excited to reach these shores, but rather was convinced to stay.

Bradstreet is not alone. We all are misunderstood to one degree or another, and the main culprit is also our most frequently used weapon: words. Words are easy when what we want to describe is tangible — a book, or a table, or a butterfly on a flower. Words fail us, however, when we hope to capture the abstract: what it means to love; to lose a child; or to experience an awakening. Words fail us when we move beyond the basic and instead attempt to capture what it means to be human. Words are incapable of precisely capturing our emotional lives.

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Blunt tools

In this Valley of Poets, Anne Bradstreet led the way.
about Anne Bradstreet

Anne (née Dudley) Bradstreet (1612-1672) lived, loved, and died in North Andover. She was not born here, but rather emigrated from England to the New World in 1630 and, after several eventful stops, found her final home in North Andover in the early 1640s. Her bones remain here, although their exact location is lost to history.

Her words, however, are very much alive. Bradstreet was the first published poet from the American colonies and thus is not only the founding mother of the Valley of the Poets (the Merrimac Valley), but is the original North American poet. Her historical importance is not limited to the United States: With her text, “The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America,” she also became the first female published poet in England.

Without the means to express it, we are acutely aware of a basic human malady: We may never truly be understood. This is not hyperbole. Humans had rich emotional lives before the invention of language. We felt honor, pride, joy, and sadness long before we agreed upon sounds to represent these feelings. But even with this social contract, does anyone believe that the love we experience is identical to the love that any random person experiences? No. We all feel that we are uniquely affected by circumstances and that our responses to those close to us are flavored by our personal characteristics. We already know that words are poor surrogates for reality.

We are equipped beyond our ability to communicate in order to maintain a connection to our essence. And no human trait can be more clearly and acutely illustrated than the New World...