

# How Writers Write Poetry 2014

CLASS EIGHT • Video Transcript

-We've had a number of wonderful lectures on formal elements of poetry, on how to construct a poem, how to put ourselves in the right place to write a poem. And for this session we have two extraordinary writers who will remind us that at the root of poetry is pleasure. It is a pleasure to read a poem. It is often a pleasure to write a poem. And then it is a pleasure to see a poem in print. So for this session we'll hear from Kwame Dawes and Jim Galvin about the pleasures of poetry. Kwame is a Ghanaian born Jamaican poet who is now the editor of *Prairie Schooner* at University of Nebraska. He's the author of a great many books of poetry, of nonfiction, of fiction, even *Bob Marley*. He is a man who really knows something about pleasure.

-Jim Galvin is the author of six collections of poetry, the most recent, *As Is*, the luminous book *The Meadow*, and a novel, *Fencing the Sky*. He was also my teacher at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and I've learned so much from him, so I look forward to his craft talk.

-Enjoy.

-There's a view that has existed for a long time and articulated by a major poet which celebrates the idea of delight in poetry, that its purpose ultimately is to delight. And in a sense for the writer, that is a post-writing experience, the experience of how people react to the things that you've written, the reception that you get. It's also a kind of apologetic for what we do, as way to explain to people that what we are trying to do is to communicate something beautiful and lovely. The thing that we tend not to pay attention to is how the process of writing delights us and that the pleasure of writing, all the elements of relief, of satisfaction, of affirmation, of accomplishment, and the attendant elements of failure and inadequacy and the incapacity to make the thing really work as it should -- all of those things are contained in the idea of the delight in the process, the delight in the making of, the delight in the creation of work. And I think if there's anything that I think is almost absolutely necessary for a writer is that they find delight in the creation process. Now delight doesn't mean that it is easy. Delight doesn't mean that it is a joyful exercise, because it can be profoundly painful. But delight is a kind of emotional connection to the process, an emotional connection to the task that is before us. Very often I ask myself why do I do this. And sometimes the answer I give to myself sounds like the answer that an addict gives to themselves about why they are addicted to something. But enmeshed in that whole idea of addiction is delight and is pleasure, and it is the joy of it.

I sort of start around that point because I think one of the greatest challenges we face as writers is the haunting challenge of failure, of not doing it and finding ourselves wondering why we are doing it and whether it's worth doing. And in a sense, that is the shadow over the work that we do. I believe the process of writing is a process of constant failure. It's a process of failure because language will never be adequate to vision. Language will never be able to contain vision, because language is limited by its own self. Language cannot cover everything. Language cannot articulate everything. And I think what frustrates us as writers is that we understand vision. We see the vision. We see where it's going; we know where it's going. But what we are wrestling with is our inability to capture that vision in language. And that is the failure, but that is also the hope, because in a funny kind of way, since vision is the thing that we have the least amount of control over, we can find

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satisfaction in the knowledge that the thing we do have control over is the thing that tends to be most frustrating, which is the craft, which is the ability, which is the way that we use language. And in a sense, I think we can practice that. I think we can learn that. I think we can get better at that. I think we can master that.

But I also do think that the hunger to perfect, the hunger to find language as a way to solve the problems of what the vision is presenting is a necessary condition for the writer. I think if we reach the point where we feel that we have complete facility with language, complete authority over language, and control over language, I think we stop writing. We stop doing what we do. I think the process is very important.

So for me, it seems to me that the business of craft is something that we should embrace. The business of building on craft and working on our craft and struggling to make the craft work.

There's one little anecdote that I think might, at least it does it for me in terms of explaining what I'm talking about... I played soccer as a kid in school, badly. I was a great cricketer, and I'm proud of that. I don't care what anybody says. I knew I was very good at that, and there's evidence to that end. But my soccer playing was not as good. But I loved playing it. And I dreamt of soccer. I dreamt of myself in stadiums. I dreamt myself scoring goals, magnificent goals and so on. I could see it. And I remember going on the field and thinking, I want the ball to come to me. And I'm shouting at the other players, Pass me the ball! Because in the moment, I could see exactly what I was going to do. The ball was going to come on my foot, I was going to control it. I could see the two players that I was going to shift pass. I could see the goal. I could see the way that I was going to plant my foot and pump that ball straight up into the corner of the net. I could see it all. And I would scream, Pass the ball! Pass the ball! And when the ball came to me it just rolled off my foot and went outside into the touchline.

The problem was not my vision. My vision was brilliant. My vision was true; I saw it. The problem is I can't play football, I can't play soccer, my skills are just not there. Now my option is to get better with the skills because the one thing I can do is move from that weak, pathetic display through the honing of my skill to the position where I can make the work happen in terms of the vision.

So I believe vision is what we've been gifted with, and it's something we can't control. Although ultimately what we can control is craft. And craft is a function of the imagination, but craft is also a function of practice, craft is also a function of imitation, of reading, of studying, and paying attention to what other writers have done before us and then paying attention to what we have done. I think if we do those things and then we manage to find those singular moments, those few moments when vision and craft find a way to marry and collide and come together in this stunning way, we will have that great moment of delight that may be momentary, and it may not last forever, and it may happen only once in a while, but it would make us keep coming back, keep coming back, keep coming back to write.

-So already it's a triumph if they want to try to write something on a blank piece of paper that makes the blank piece of paper more interesting than it was when it was blank. That's an amazing accomplishment already if they have that desire, because the way that poetry is taught, the way it's presented to young people in school... it's violent and wrong. And it is presented as if it's something to be explicated or figured out, it's some kind of puzzle that when Robert Frost says "I have

promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep..." did he actually mean something else? And we have to figure out what that is? Well, we don't. Poetry is pleasure. And they should approach poetry both in writing it and in reading it as they approach anything that gives them pleasure, whether that's listening to music of whatever kind, whether it's going to the movies, or whether it's like eating a tiramisu. It's supposed to be pleasure. And it's supposed to be delicious. And it's supposed to be sensuous. And you can think about it if you want. But that's not what it's there for. And it does seem to me that to want to participate in the creation of it is just to be hungrier for it than most people. I mean some people go through life, most people go through life, without poetry. Not that many people go through life without music of some kind or movies or TV or eating. But I believe that poetry is a way of surviving. It's survival. And the fact that it's pleasure if approached in the right way makes your chances of staying alive better. So, you know, it's Darwinian, right? And if you love something, it gives you a better chance of surviving. In other words, if you have something to survive for, if you have a place in your psyche that you can go that's full of music and dance and poetry and fiction, and that place is a realm of sensuous yet unassimilable delight, and if you can get there, you have a better chance of staying alive. And also you can help other people stay alive.

Usually people start writing poetry because they read something that made them feel this really strange sensation, which was a somatosensory experience of the alphabet. And it's a surprise, you know, the first time that happens, and you want more, just like the tiramisu. You don't want just one. You want another one. And then like the next time you go to a restaurant you want another one. And it remains always beyond the reach of explication, I think, and exegesis, and analysis.

So I think it's great that people should try to do it, and it's a brave thing to do because it's almost impossible to write a poem. It's almost impossible to paint a painting, you know, that anyone would be interested in spending more than like thirty seconds in front of, right? Trying to write a symphony would be... I mean, my God, imagine "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," you know, it can't be done. And yet here we are doing it, you know?

And so I think that it's a Darwinian thing that might be a response to the fact that we know we're going to die. And it is a temporary respite from that knowledge. Now, does my dog know he's going to die? I don't know. I've asked him. But he just kind of goes... [cocks head]. You know, he just tilts his head in that RCA Victor kind of way. And if he does know he's going to die, let's say he does, does he mind? I don't think so. But people, because we have so much language and so many ways of turning these problems over and so many ways of scaring ourselves of common things, we need something that's an antidote to that. And I think that... Is it escapist? Sure. Is it only escapist? No. Because it keeps telling you new things. And it keeps teaching you new things. And you never come to the end of a great poem. I mean, when you finish Yeats's "Among School Children," do you think that's the last time you're going to read that poem now that you've read it? No. You're just going to read it over and over and over again and then keep adding to your treasures of sensuous relationship to our language.

Which is kind of a cool thing too, I mean, a lot of people are thrown off by poetry because it's in the same language as the newspaper. But once you get attuned to its language, which is, oh, to a large extent, figuration, and speaking through rhythms and sound effects, whether they be rhyme or alliteration, I mean, alliteration is a kind of rhyme -- there's a whole spectrum of sound effects that really are rhyme -- alliteration would be the lightest touch, and then straight-on, you know, exact

rhyme would be the other end. And in that sentence there are competing claims on the nature of the line. The more competing claims there are on the nature of the line, the better the line can be.

So if, you probably aren't, but let's say you want to write a poem in rhyme and meter... the rhyme and the meter are going to compete against each other, and sometimes you're going to have to sacrifice the syntax for other sound effects. Another thing that's competing for the line is grammar, if you want. If you decide that reality is fragmented and therefore you need to write in fragments, well then you don't have that problem, and poetry becomes vastly easier. Think of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Things that are competing for his line are sense-making, grammar, a kind of rhythm which is more like pure music than it is like natural speech in English and more involved with falling rhythms than with rising ones. Competing for his line are also hyphenated words, words that have never been seen together next to each other, and a high degree of music that does not lose all the other things, all the other sound effects and sense-making.

Part of it is an engagement with language where you're supposed to bring something to the table, whether as a reader or as a writer, and that is passion. So all those things that people get afraid of having to think about: Oh my God, I have to learn prosody? I have to be able to understand all the allusions in Eliot and Milton? No you don't. You can. But you don't have to.

So what I'm saying is, the music of poetry takes care of itself. It's not something that a writer sits down and plans and then a reader sits down and decodes. Why didn't Keats just say, "Wouldst I were steadfast as thou art, bright star"? Because he felt more strongly about the bright star than that. "Wouldst I were steadfast as thou art, bright star..." great. "Bright star, wouldst I were steadfast as thou art." That tells you everything you need to know. You don't even really need the semantic value of the words. You're watching a guy who is so turned on by a bright star that it makes him swoon -- "thou art" -- you know? That feminine ending.

And so poetry written properly is a presentation of passion. Sometimes it's passion in regard to ideas. Wallace Stevens was passionate about ideas, but he was more passionate about exotic diction and sound effects. So, "She sang beyond the genius of the sea." You just get that line, how could you stop reading right there? You know, you can't. And if you read, you know, "The Snow Man," the ending of that is, he let's you off of the bus in the middle of the wilderness and drives away, right? "Man on the Dump..." nobody understands that poem. Well at least I don't. "When was it we first heard of the truth"? Right? "The the." The the?

So, yeah, it's a way of getting in there and devouring images, things that address your senses five. Blake didn't believe in that, but there's only one of him. So you get to see bright colors, you get to see exotic things, you get to hear beautiful musics, you get to hear a nightingale, you get to hear the bells on a horse standing in the woods, you know, in a snowfall, you get to hear other things, like "Whenas in silks my Julia goes,  
Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows  
That liquefaction of her clothes."

Well how many senses is that addressing, including erotic ones?

He's saying I have an absolutely sensual relationship with color, with form, with motion, with composition. And those things aren't problems, and they're not tests. They are pleasures. And I don't see how anybody could live without them. Who would want to live without those things? Now

if your temperament is such that, you know, television sitcoms is enough or hockey is enough, great. But that's a pretty low ceiling, and it's too bad. But if that's enough, I guess it's enough. Some people have a more complicated, more evolved, if I can sound pretentious, but really more evolved set of receptors for art. Art which comes to you, as Walter Pater says, offering nothing, except for the quickening of your moments on earth. All it does is speed you up and make you more intense for as long as you're looking at the art or as long as you're writing it. It makes you more alive. And being more alive gives you a better chance to survive.

-Kwame and I share a love of soccer, and I remember the pleasure of writing a poem once about a boy juggling a soccer ball, just trying to keep the ball in the air, through the act of writing. And as I was listening to these lectures by Kwame and Jim, I remembered the late Bill Matthews saying that the way to tell the difference between poets and fiction writers at a cocktail party is that fiction writers talk contracts and agents and money, and poets talk food. So this week what we want you to think about is how to make something delicious.

-A good way to get started with that might be to find poems that you've read in the past by other writers that to you were so pleasurable, that were in fact delicious to read. And then, you know, think about, is it the, as Galway Kinnell says, the mouth-feel of the words? Is that what causes that deliciousness? Is it the subject matter? Is it the certain slant of light that the poem captures? And then do your own take. Write poems that feel to you delicious to write, pleasurable to write and pleasurable to read. We look forward to seeing what you come up with.

-Enjoy.