

How Writers Write Poetry 2014

CLASS ELEVEN • Video Transcript

-Welcome back. The poet Howard Nemerov said that a poem is an act of attention and in the first video of this session Caryl Pagel invites us to direct our gaze outward, to pay attention to our surroundings as a way to begin to register the world and bring it inside ourselves to make poems possible. It's instructive that she invokes the example of the Danish poet Inger Christensen's Alphabet coming after last week's assignment to write poems from the word list that you generate, from the words that you take apart and repurpose, as an earlier poet advised us to do.

-Caryl Pagel is the author of two books of poems, most recently *Twice Told*. She's the director of the Cleveland State Poetry Center and she's the director and editor of Rescue Press as well the poetry editor for *Jubilat*. Michael Dennis Brown is professor emeritus from the University of Minnesota where he taught for thirty nine years. He's also a graduate of the Writers' Workshop here. His books include *Giver Her the River*, *Things I Can't Tell You*, a book of poetry, of essays on poetry, *What the Poem Wants*, and he's also a librettist. So he works with composing music and has written a lot for music.

-Enjoy.

-Hello, I'm Caryl Pagel. Today I thought I'd talk about something that I've struggled with, both in my own writing and alongside students as they're starting out which is the question of content in poetry and how we might more actively include the material of the world in our work. A possible title for this mini-talk, then, this series of notes, is *Get Away from Me or An Argument for the Bone, the Book, the Body, and the Stranger*. And it arose from the memory of myself attempting to begin each of my first two books and from the memory of those years in which I was studying various formal strategies and sonic gestures but had not yet hit upon something as sturdy as voice or intent or project, as moving as point of view and didn't quite know what to do with the idea of material or meaning or subject or expression. I had somehow mistakenly assumed in early poems and workshops that in order to clarify my work I was required only and awfully to tunnel deeper into my own old soul, to gaze inquisitively inward, discover the secret to my true heart's desire, and that by writing about my self struggle I would catch upon some nugget of human nature, some single simple phrase that would illuminate the condition of being alive, in crisis or ecstasy or trauma or monotony in such a way as to tether myself to the reader's trust or interest. And then I could, I imagine, once I had established this I, my I, a singular narrative voice of authority, explore what I really wanted to. And what I wanted, what brought me to the work, was a desire to inquire, to learn about the world, the world of art and philosophy and science and psychology, the world of the unknown and impossible, strange, and stranger, the world of things, and of making or imagining and not, so it turns out, of myself. Even though this was the subject of so many of the lines that meant the most to me when I first started reading.

"I've wasted my life," writes James Wright, at the end of *Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota*, or Plath's "I have done it again, one year in every ten," or Elizabeth Bishop's releasing of the fish, or Niedecker's *Little Granite Pail*, or O'Hara's lunch walks, or even



dear Dickinson, starting with herself by claiming its very absence; I am nobody. Who are you? Are you nobody too? And that's before we even arrive at the so called source of poetry itself which Wordsworth, for example, claimed arises from the very subjective and internal spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and that poetry takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility. But what if the self, certainly my boring self, and doubly certainly my dull and awkward, boring 17 or 21 or 24 or even, frankly, 33 year old self is incapable of really making art of anything, even the countless small traumas that crowd my daily thinking without the filter of the world's facts and impositions. And here I think of books, art, conversation, music, mythology, motion, technology, objects, history, etcetera. And so what if the chaos of the inside is not a place to start but where we end, if we even bother to get there at all. How do we avoid me? When considering these ideas I often return to the poet James Agee when he writes in *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*, "If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs. The rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, files of odors, plates of food and excrement. A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point." Here Agee disrupts the idea that poetry necessarily begins in contemplative reflection or a focus turning toward the interior and instead suggests that one might begin by gathering the things of the world, by accumulating material as a mode of inquisition. This sort of work might occur through listing, research, description, documentation, recording, retelling, or explication. Allowing poetry to become an exercise in haunting instead of starring, an act of investigation instead of performance. The I not merely serving as the signifier of the self but the initial sight of vision, this bewildering eye, the chronicler of the exterior, physical, material world. An example of this mode of composition, one that's transformed my approach to the self in poetry completely is Inger Christensen's *alphabet*. And you shouldn't be alarmed by the horrible cover art or font choice. In *alphabet*, Christensen employs two modes of turning outward. First she uses the Fibonacci sequence to organize her lines. The Fibonacci sequence, which is a mathematical expression of the spiral in which each previous number is added to the one before it, starting zero, one, one, two, three, five, eight, etcetera, is a form frequently repeated throughout nature: the mathematical representation of an uncurling fern, a pine cone, a pineapple, an artichoke, and many flowers. In *alphabet*, Christensen uses this external mode of measurement to increase, complicate, and expand a catalog of things she lists that exist in the natural world. The second outward mode is the alphabet. So, for example, I'm going to read the first couple sections. And you'll hear how it begins.

alphabet

One

Apricot trees exist. Apricot trees exist.

Two

Bracken exists and blackberries, blackberries

Bromine exists and hydrogen, hydrogen

Three

Cicadas exist, chicory, chromium, citrus trees

Cicadas exist

Cicadas, cedars, cypresses, the cerebellum

Four

Doves exist, dreamers and dolls

Killers exist and doves and doves

Haze, dioxine and days

Days exist, days and death and poems exist

Poems, days, death

Five

Early Fall exists

Aftertaste, afterthought, seclusion

And angels exist

Widows and elk exist

Every detail exists

Memory, memory's light

Afterglow exists

Oak, elms, junipers, sameness, loneliness exist

Eider ducks, spiders, and vinegar exist in the future, the future.

So, we can see through Christensen's inventory through the eerie echo of the word exist and its implications of the opposite that the speaker's tone and presence is experienced through the list of what is seen or known, what is observable to the narrator in her world. It makes the poet's self both distant and intimate, a stranger to her environment in her own mind and simultaneously focuses the language in such a way as to include the entire universe. Other books that perform what I see as a study of the outside as a way to get in are Robyn Schiff's *Revolver*, C. D. Wright's *Deepstop Come Shining*, Emily Wilson's *The Keep*, Cole Swenson's *The Glass Age*, Mark Nowak's *Cold Mountain Elementary*, and Dan Beachy-Quick's *Spell*. Thank you.

-Of course the sun is angry, the moon has slid under the earth so the wind is a rich man's hand. Of course the universe is a simple mirror and your eyes a feast day. Of course death is a misunderstanding, speech an obedient horse. Of course the star is a cow's eye, the sky a palace in ruins. Of course love is a lost bird. One of the great joys of teaching, for me, over many decades has been introducing writers to poems that they don't know about, poems, poets, periods of poetry which excite them and show them new possibilities.

This happens to be a poem by Nadia Tueni, it's in translation from the French. She was a Lebanese poet who died in the early nineteen eighties, as I remember, at the age of forty nine only. And this, to me, is one of the indispensable poems. As I tell my students, when I write my own poems I have to, initially, be very playful and be alone with my own craziness, my own wildness, which I believe I still have but in some point in the poem I need to have a vision of order. I think order is an exciting thing. Novalis says, art is chaos shimmering behind a veil of order. So at some point in my own process I get help from a poem I love by Elizabeth Bishop or Gabriela Mistral or Robert Francis or Guillaume Apollinaire or N. Scott Momaday or Nadia Tueni. I carry these poets with me. It can be a problem, of course, if you sound too much like someone else and that certainly happened early in my poetic career as I was soaking up all these new poetries. I did sound too much like poets, on occasion. This actually led to a falling out with a well-known American poet, whose name I will not give you, who had been kind to me and I kind of apprenticed myself to him and ended up, apparently, imitating him.

So what I like to do in my teaching very often, is to feed our group and myself, before we improvise. And the word improvise, improvisori, means not foreseen, you don't know what's coming. A poem that has a strong rhythmical character. I think rhythm is the essence of poetry which this poem, in its refrain, of course, certainly has, it's repitand, its irregular refrain and ecstatic kinds of imagery and imagery that has contrast in it. We have the universe and your eyes, and we have a cow's eye and we have palaces. The kind of wildness that the unconscious mind has innately. You know, Roethke says somewhere that if you go dredging in the river you're going to bring up a lot of weird stuff and so whenever I work with students I encourage them to be as free as possible. I do believe that poetry and teaching poetry is about liberation of things that are often hidden in us and need a rhythm, an image, an atmosphere from other poetries maybe, to bring them to the surface.

Nobody could say, "I'm gonna be so bored by the dreams I'm going to have in the next 20 years." No one could say, "Oh Friday, the dreams will all be reruns tonight." Psychically dreams are always fresh material, obviously sometimes mixed with older material. And I think that poetry - I've felt this all my life - should have freshness and the strangeness of dream.

In my teaching of poetry, of course, I encounter many people who want to write poetry and who write it, but write it, as it were, now and then, who don't have a solid practice, who don't sit down on a daily basis, perhaps in the same place and make themselves available to themselves, and sit there with a pen and paper, whether they're in the mood or not, in case something occurs to them.

And a lot of young poets and sometimes older poets, who really are not very well acquainted with what poetry can do. So in a week like this in Iowa City, which I'm just finishing, it's been my joy to introduce a very enthusiastic but somewhat inexperienced group - at least some members - to dozens of poems that are essential to me that are news to them, and of course, as Pound says, literature is news that stays news.

So that's a main joy for me, and a poem like Nadia Tueni or a poem by N. Scott Momaday, called "The Delight Song of Tsoai-talee" uses repetition and imagery, and I think of repetition as a tremendous tool. You could be feeling quite placid on the surface, but when you start digging rhythmically, images that were perhaps experienced the night before in dream but you've forgotten about are drawn to the surface, and something begins to happen.

Eliot, I think, described "The Waste Land," that great poem, as just some rhythmical grumbling. And very often the subject matter in your notebook stays on the page inert because you don't have some initiating rhythm, something that intoxicates, that initiates the long flow of the poem. And so total freedom by way of examples of poems, by way of imagery, by way of repetition, which later you can come back to and be quite brutal with.

I can't write well very often but I write all the time. And in my favorite poets, there are maybe - some poets I can think of - and I love every 17th poem. That's enough. How many great Emily Dickinson poems do I love? Well a relatively limited number. In the case of certain poets I won't name, I revere them, on the basis of one poem written in a lifetime that is unforgettable.

Well I'll give you the name: Robert Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays." Just a great poem, and which I've memorized, like many poems - very helpful to memorize poems and achieve a kind of intimacy of acquaintance by having those rhythms and syllables available to you at any time of the day or night.

The intimacy of that acquaintance through memorizing somewhat resembles the intimacy the poet goes through creating the poem in the first place. So that's my joy, to bring students closer to poetry. When often I see interesting stuff scattered on the page, but it's not constellated, it's not organized, it doesn't know how to sequence itself.

I call upon a sequence of imaginative decisions, but you might have to write 37 things and then say number 4, number 11, number 17, number 18, and you send the rest away, and no one ever sees it. One of the things Gertrude Stein said she learned from William James was to exclude nothing.

So it is very much an open audition in the early stages in your notebook, and most of us can do that with the right kind of prompts, but learning how to stay with the poem, to persist with the poem, to constellate it satisfactorily - excitingly eventually - a lot of people don't want to stay the course. And when I ask a student about a poem and I say, "I think that's got some really good possibilities. How many drafts is that?" And the student says, "Oh I think that's number 4." I say, "Well let's look at number 17 or number 18, X number of weeks or months from now."

So, intimacy with poetry, poems with a strong vitality of rhythm, also what I call elegy - energy of attitude - not elegy, although I like elegy - energy of attitude, the way that you see the world, your worldview. It's easy to sound cantankerous and say there's lots of dispirited poetry around, and there are elements in the world that are very dispiriting in these times of 2013. But I believe in what Rilke says - Rainer Maria Rilke - "The possibility of love in a climate of death."

And Sharon Olds, visiting our class once in Minnesota, talked about poems on the sound - on the side of life, poems on the side of life. And I do think that that's a unique place for poets to go, to other poetry to other poets. Great prose too, of course, have been key to me and I share them in my teaching. Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, a fairly recent book by Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There*. Good clear challenging prose about the art of poetry is also key.

Writers are readers. Readers are writers. And that continues to be my joy as a poet, to share the things that I love with other poets. I want to say some line by Scott Momaday to finish up here. This also has a repetition in a somewhat slightly different way than the Nadia Tueni poem. It's "The

Delight Song of Tsoai-Talee." Not sure I can pronounce that, but that's Momaday's Kiowa tribal name. It means rock-tree boy.

"I am a feather on the bright sky
 I am the blue horse that runs in the plain
 I am the fish that rolls, shining, in the water
 I am the shadow that follows a child
 I am the evening light, the lustre of meadows
 I am an eagle playing with the wind
 I am a cluster of bright beads
 I am the farthest star
 I am the cold of dawn
 I am the roaring of the rain
 I am the glitter on the crust of the snow
 I am the long track of the moon in a lake
 I am a flame of four colors
 I am a deer standing away in the dusk
 I am a field of sumac and the pomme blanche
 I am an angle of geese in the winter sky
 I am the hunger of a young wolf
 I am the whole dream of these things."

That's most of Momaday's wonderful poem, not all of it. And I saw him on our campus about 5 years ago. He was in a wheelchair. His wife had just died. But I sought him out and said how much that poem meant to me, and I'd carried it with me 30 or 40 years. And he seemed pleased. He didn't remember me from the past, but he seemed pleased. And I do believe we should write fan letters to living poets to tell them what a certain poem means to us.

These letters to the world, as Emily Dickinson calls them, that we carry with us. So very late in my poetic career, I feel like a young poet in the sense of my continuing passion for discovering new ways to use language, new ways to use imagery, both for their own intrinsic sake, but also a little selfishly, to open up my own possibilities.

I think sometimes of a church organ - my dad was an organist - and sometimes a beginning poet is like someone's sitting on the bench, not touching the pedals, which are meant to be used by the feet, playing with two fingers on one keyboard, but the organ is a king of instruments. It has several manuals or keyboards, has combinations of stops, has pedals for the feet. And so, over the years, the more you come to document your passion for poetry you can use the full range of the king of instruments. I'm thinking that the imagination itself is the king, queen, emperor of instruments we all carry inside of us. We can all do it, I think more or less. I think the imagination is our birthright but we sure have to practice. And so I still try to practice in my notebooks poetry everyday and hope that every seventeenth or twenty seventh or ninety seventh time, I get lucky. So, that's what I have to say today. Thank you.

There's a long tradition of writing letters to poets and to others. And there is a long poetic tradition of writing letters. From Alexander Pope to Adam Zagajewski to Richard Hugo and Robert Hass'

letter to his longtime editor Daniel Halpern. So the first assignment we want to give you after this session is to write a poem in the form of a letter, maybe to another poet, maybe to your beloved, maybe to some historical figure. A poem in the form of a letter.

-Maybe to Britney Spears.

-You're on.

-The other, the other assignment we want you to think about tackling, and you can do both or just one or the other, is to think about what Caryl brought up with the Inger Christensen alphabet. And so for this one, write an entire poem, and it can be, you know, a hefty one, in which every noun begins with the same letter. And see what you make of that, see if those constraints push you into new discoveries.