

How Writers Write Poetry 2014

CLASS SIX • Video Transcript

Welcome back. Today Dora Malech and Tarfia Faizullah will be talking to us about inconstancy and multiple selves: ways to break open our work, shake things up, add in a kind of possibility that we don't get in our daily lives. Dora Malech is the author of two collections of poetry, *Shore Ordered Ocean* and *Say So*, and the recipient of a Ruth Lily Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation.

And Tarfia Faizullah is a Bangladeshi-American poet, graduate of the MFA program at Virginia Commonwealth University. She lives in Detroit and her first book of poems, *Seam*, won the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award.

Enjoy.

Hi, my name is Dora Malech. I am a poet and a teacher. I'm the author of two collections of poems, *Say So* and *Shore Ordered Ocean*. And I'm going to speak today about an element of writing poetry, the craft of poetry writing, that I hope will give you permission to head in unexpected directions in your own work. Give me your word. Your word is your bond. Be a man of your word. The idea of the word in our culture has come to be synonymous with the idea of making a promise, signing a contract, agreeing to move forward in a way that someone else expects you to do. So this idea of the word as a promise, a stand-in for faith and constancy and contract and agreement can carry over into how we approach our own writing, this sense of I know what I'm writing about. Even the way we talk in a classroom about writing, there's often a sense of, What does this poem mean? What is this poem about? And I think that that urge to be as dutiful and faithful in our poems as we aspire to be in our lives can paradoxically get us into trouble.

Robert Frost says, "No tears for the writer, no tears for the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader." So our urge to be a good person and do the right thing and know what we're talking about, be some kind of authority in our writing, can often stand in the way of discovery. And so often if we go to the poems that we love, the poems that we value, the poems that excite us and that become touchstones for us in our own lives, we find that there's an element of inconstancy, of change, of going back on one's words. And that is, in a way, the kind of hallmark of a writer like Shakespeare, who, if you look at his poems, they're full of, his sonnets are full of what a rhetoric teacher would call coordinating conjunctions and that I like to call hinge words, words where you watch a mind change: Or, but, though, if, those words that turn us around and go back on themselves. So we watch a mind at work. We watch a mind wrestling with, as opposed to giving us a clear stance, wrestling with an issue, a question, an emotion, a state of mind. And in your own poetry, you can enact those same turns.

I think a good poem to start by looking at is a poem by John Donne called *A Woman's Constancy*, perhaps because it explicitly deals with this idea of a changing mind. And if you look at it, it's essentially talking to a lover and saying, You feel this way, but will you feel that way? Will you feel that way? And then it concludes with this idea of, You know what? I may change my mind too. And it takes what is a negative thing in our own lives, which is inconstancy, and turns it into something beautiful by virtue of the poem: "Now thou has loved me one whole day, / Tomorrow when you



leav'st, what wilt thou say? / Wilt thou then antedate some new-made vow? / Or say that now / We are not just those persons which we were? / Or, that oaths made in reverential fear / Of Love, and his wrath, any may forswear?" So that's the beginning and you look down through the poem and you see "or," you see "so," you see "or," you see question marks. And then at the end, essentially Donne says 'I could dispute and conquer against this': "...if I would, / Which I abstain to do, / For by tomorrow, I may think so too." So that prerogative to change one's mind creates these beautiful motions of this poem. So in our myths, that idea of inconstancy is so often negative. Orpheus turns around and he's punished. Lot's wife looks back and she's punished. And so poetry becomes this place where we can go to dignify and find beauty in the ways in which we can't keep our word, the ways in which we are unfaithful and that's part of the human condition on some level. So these turns, these changes of mind can be enacted both through the sense of rhetoric, those hinges -- or, but, if -- so literally changing one's mind. They can also be enacted by a breaking of what John Hollander calls the metrical contract. So if you set up a poem, whether it's a question of quote-unquote "free verse," and you have the line and then you subvert that line, you break that line and change that expectation, or whether you're writing in a more traditional meter and you subvert that metrical contract. So for example in a poem like *Sailing to Byzantium*, where the poem can't hold its meter, can't stay true to that metrical contract that was begun, which is, in this case, iambic pentameter.

It starts: "That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees

- Those dying generations - at their song," so you can hear, yes, there's the human utterance. You wouldn't really read that IS no COUN-try FOR old MEN the YOUNG. You would read as a human would, not as a mathematical robot would. But you feel that underlying beat of the metrical contract. So when there's what's sometimes called an expressive substitution, a place where the meter can't hold firm, it does something to us emotionally, and it's a strength not a weakness. He's talking about aging. He's saying, This is what happens; this is where you go. And talking about the ability of the soul or the poem to overcome that.

He writes: "An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing..."

So you have this sense of the soul clapping its hands, leaping up, breaking through that metrical contract of iambic pentameter with that spondee, that two-beat stress at the beginning. "An aged man is but a paltry thing, A tattered coat upon a stick, unless," so we have this sense of this is how your life proceeds unless you jump in, unless you change something, unless you let your soul have its say. "Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing for every tatter in its mortal dress." So we have this sense of rhetorical change, rhetorical inconstancy, metrical change, metrical inconstancy, and then the very nature of the metaphor is a kind of inconstancy, a kind of surprise, a kind of subversion of what we know to be the truth. You have a poem like Andre Breton's *Free Union* or *L'Union Libre*, which is a common law marriage, but it's also this paradox of free union. You're bound, and yet you're free. And he takes all these different images of a wife: "My wife whose hair is a brush fire, whose thoughts are summer lightning, whose waist is an hourglass, whose waist is the waist of an otter caught in the teeth of a tiger..." And it moves forward like that line upon line where

the wife changes, she shape-shifts. There's this inconstancy that discovers a different kind of truth from the truth of the faithful, the constant, the dutiful, the bond. And these are all changes, inconstancies, leaps of faith, lacks of faith that you can take in your own poems. In a poem by Yusef Komunyakaa, there are these images of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. And so he says: "A white vet's image floats closer to me than his pale eyes look through mine. I am a window. He's lost his right arm inside the stone. In the black mirror, a woman's trying to erase names. No, she's brushing a boy's hair." And you would think in the process of revision you say, No, decide which it is. Do you want to say she's trying to erase names, or do you want to say she's brushing a boy's hair? Which is the truth of the situation? And in a poem, we not only can inhabit multiple truths at once, it's beautiful to inhabit multiple truths at once. It's a strength to inhabit multiple truths.

You can return to Keats's idea of negative capability, which he calls, "When a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." And so in a world in which fact and reason are valued, in which politicians are called flip-floppers if they change their mind, in which our word is our bond, we're supposed to be men and women of our words, poetry is a place where we can go to find the thrilling plurality of our words, in which we can be men and women of all of our words. So I would say while in our daily life we try and often fail to stand by our word, to be faithful, to be men and women of our bond, to be dutiful, to do the right thing, poetry gives us space to inhabit many words, to explore the human condition in our own lives and sensibilities, without judgment of ourselves or others. So I would encourage you to give me, your reader, not only your word, singular, but the thrilling plurality of your words, your negative capability. In a poem, you can look forward and look back. You can show the reader that they're not alone in their stumbling, in their stuttering, in their confusion, in their uncertainty. So in your poems, go back on your words and go forth on your words and happy writing! Thanks for listening.

Hi. I'm Tarfia Faizullah, and I'm a poet based out of Detroit, and today I'm going to be talking a little bit about vulnerability and syntax in contemporary American poetry. The poet Li-Young Lee once said that syntax is identity, which is something that I've believed for a long time, especially in thinking about how each of us has a unique syntax and vocabulary based on our own experiences, our own upbringings, the way we inherit our stories, the way that we end up manifesting or embodying those stories in poetry. And I think that form is a way of imprinting ourselves on the world. I've been thinking lately about how the cave paintings in Lascaux for example in France seem to serve as a kind of evidence that we want to imprint ourselves in a fairly impermanent life and certainly impermanent-seeming world. What I think is so great about poetry is that it allows for the self to be multiple and vulnerable through language. So for example when discussing poetry I think part of the reason that we use the term "speaker" is to allow for that kind of expansiveness. In fiction I think that we talk about characters or protagonists, and in nonfiction the self I think more closely aligns with an individual that is trying to tell a specific kind of narrative. So I guess in that way I'm also making a distinction between the self and the individual. As an individual, for example, I am a Bangladeshi- American, Brooklyn-born, raised in West Texas, currently living in Detroit woman. And as a self, I am somebody who is very concerned with how to both, how to live outside of those prescribed categories while also allowing those categories to remain as fully intact as possible. So as a self and an individual I've been struggling to articulate the difference between how we in writing view ourselves as whole people without necessarily letting ourselves fall into the trap of being assigned certain categories that we don't necessarily ever feel fully comfortable within.

So I think the other distinction I'm making is between confessionalism and autobiography. If autobiography is the self writing about the self from a more objective position, and if confessionalism is writing about the self from a more personal, more subjective viewpoint, then I've been thinking a lot about how there should be room for something like vulnerability, which is the plumbing of one's own inner life and really owning I think oftentimes helplessly the very different tendencies we have, the different phases we've been through, whether as a child or as an adolescent or as an adult again as well as our multiple histories, multiple kinds of cultural heritages. And I guess the question I've been thinking about a lot is how we write poems that really are human in that way, that are multiple and varied and not just necessarily assigned to one aesthetic or one form or one craft or one personhood. So when I say vulnerability, I guess I am talking about writing from the position of one's own inner life and not just ideologically or in practice but also in art-making as well. And I think this is especially important in a world that is increasingly focused on categories and ideologies.

I think that we tell ourselves because of the ways in which globalization is occurring at a very rapid rate that we are all learning at the same rate that globalization is happening, but I don't actually think that's true. And even something as innocuous as a hashtag makes us sort of aligned with a category even if temporarily. So in that way it seems all the more important to really delve into our own inner lives as a way of not just sort of understanding the world that's changing around us, but also as a way of being even more capable of empathy towards others, certainly, but also towards ourselves. And I think poetry when used in its fullest form allows us to do that very thing. And I guess the question then becomes, How do we do that? How do we write a truly vulnerable poem that is informed by our experiences and our perspectives, but not necessarily beholden to them? So another way to ask this is, How do we marry content and form in order to create a truly human poem? And for me the answer always goes back to craft.

I think we are in the middle of a very profound moment in American poetics, and I think vulnerability is the best word I can think of to use to describe what I see happening in the work of not just emerging writers but also established writers. I'm really thrilled to see so many poets and writers in general without any of the same fidelities to, say, narrative or experimentalism. What I think I'm seeing instead are, or the poets that I'm really fascinated by, moved by, are poets who are willing to be a Southern poet, a narrative poet, an avant-garde poet, to use all sorts of registers and tones and all sorts of movements as it pertains to them. I feel, for myself, without any fidelity to an aesthetic or movement, and what that allows me to do is that it gives me an entire range of techniques and tools to render what I believe is important to render.

So a really wonderful example of a poet who I think is doing that kind of work is the poet Erica Dawson. She is fiercely formal and I think that it actually makes sense to call her a neo-formalist in a way that it doesn't necessarily make sense for other poets. And part of why she's so wonderful is that she's so fearless in terms of what she's willing to use in a poem, in a very rigid formal structure. So I'm just going to read this poem called *In Black and White* where she addresses a really commonly addressed figure in poetry, which is Death. But it's what she tells Death and how she tells Death that I think is so fantastic and there's a lot to learn from her in that her speakers use pop culture, use vernacular, use all sorts of rhetorical gestures, as you'll see from this poem I'm about to read and in this poem she vacillates from pleading with Death, from mocking him, from, to trying to seduce

him to asking him what's wrong with him and I just feel like it's wonderful in part because there is such astonishing vulnerability in being able to be willing to address Death multiply, as I think we all actually do. So this is In Black and White:

Who else is really trying to fuck
 With Hollywood endings, the clipped
 Finish sealed with a kiss and dipped
 In dark chocolate ganache? I've stuck

My hand into the bonbon box
 Too many times. The Juliet
 Costume won't fit my body, yet
 Dear Romeo's a pair of socks:

One size fits most; and, we all die
 So many times before our deaths.
 I huff on all my last orgasmic breaths.
 So, death, take off your shoes, stretch, sigh,

And take me from behind and check
 The paw prints on my back. They'll climb
 Away from you. There is no time
 To mess around. Quick, clip my neck

With your grim reaper teeth—and, keep
 Your hood on, hon—until we throw
 Our costumes on the floor for show,
 Expose ourselves as one big heap

Of bone and flesh and bone. With luck,
 You'll clip me hard and I'll shout, Dei,
 Ave Maria... and people will say
 If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck,

That girl's going to Hell. Please, can
 I hold your scythe? And if I don't
 Go to Hell, can you say it's that you won't
 Take me. A spade's a spade. A plan

Can change. I love your pivot, covet
 Your line, pin, point, arbor and shaft;
 And I can dig it. Feel that draft?
 Come close. Now tell me how you love it.

So again one of the things I love about that poem is the range of it and yet it's all very focused towards addressing Death and in that addressing we can see how vulnerable the speaker is, we can learn so much about what, where she is emotionally, where she is intellectually, what sorts of things maybe populate her life, both as objects and artifacts but also as centers of gravity. So another

interesting consequence, I think of syntax that is both expansive but specific is what it can do in terms of inviting a reader into a unknown world without a lot of explanation. I think as writers we're accustomed to feeling as though we should use a lot of description in order to set the scene but lately I've been really interested in how syntax can actually do the work of creating an atmosphere and therefore more fully orienting a reader, not just in time and place but also in terms of, again, where one is locating oneself in terms of ones' concerns, whether emotional or intellectual.

So Jamal May's poem 'There Are Birds Here', for example, is a poem about Detroit but it doesn't begin by describing Detroit. Detroit, rather, is the dedication of the poem and in that way the poem is sort of addressing Detroit as much as it is attempting to describe it. So that combined with the first line, 'There are birds here' immediately places us in the city of Detroit but what's so wonderful about this poem is that we're not looking at an abandoned train station or, you know, a sort of like post-apocalyptic zombie landscape in which the poor, crime ridden people of Detroit are struggling to live. In fact what we're doing is we're looking at birds of which, the speaker says, there are many, in the poem. And the speaker in the poem is arguing repeatedly and emphatically through syntax and through diction that it's the birds we should be paying attention to. Again, the vulnerability of this is breath taking to me and as the poem continues I'm really awed by the way that he uses one single word to, to describe this phenomenon of looking, which is the word 'no'. This is 'There Are Birds Here -

'There Are Birds Here
For Detroit

There are birds here,
so many birds here
is what I was trying to say
when they said those birds were metaphors
for what is trapped
between buildings
and buildings. No.
The birds are here
to root around for bread
the girl's hands tear
and toss like confetti. No,
I don't mean the bread is torn like cotton,
I said confetti, and no
not the confetti
a tank can make of a building.
I mean the confetti
a boy can't stop smiling about
and no his smile isn't much
like a skeleton at all. And no
his neighborhood is not like a war zone.
I am trying to say
his neighborhood

is as tattered and feathered
 as anything else,
 as shadow pierced by sun
 and light parted
 by shadow-dance as anything else,
 but they won't stop saying
 how lovely the ruins,
 how ruined the lovely
 children must be in that birdless city.

And again, one of the things I love about this poem is that there is an 'I' in it but the I isn't necessarily trying to describe, in detail, a full individual but a full self, one that is paying attention to things like the birds in a city that is being depicted the way, as a very troubled city in the media and I think that, like Erica Dawson's poem *In Black and White*, we are being asked to consider landscapes that we haven't necessarily before but in completely new and fresh and really expansive but very precise ways. And I just want to close with a couple of quotes. Louise Glück has said that, all earthly experience is partial and Nabokov wrote, reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as kind of gradual accumulation of information and as a specialization. You can know more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing. It's hopeless - so that we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects. So I love this notion of ghostliness, of earthliness, of never being done, of never being quite done enough and I think it is in that dichotomy, that vulnerability in its syntax really resides partially maybe but certainly fully.

Tarfia gives us a lot of options as far as, you know, what aesthetic will work for us, what tone, what frame of mind, all of these things, the kind of vulnerable syntax, incorporating all of this in and letting the poem become what it wants to become, what it needs to become. Dora also shows us a lot of ways to incorporate change, metaphor, rhetorical change, metrical change, all of these kinds of things that we can add into our writing, bring into our practice, to open up these kinds of possibilities within the poem. So we'd like to propose two writing exercises for you during this period. You can write a sonnet which has a major change - voice, style, sonic possibility, you're going one direction and then let's go in another direction - and then try and write a poem with six hinge words. That will be your marker, those hinge words. We look forward to seeing what poems you come up with this week. Good luck.