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The Physicality of Poetry

by Robert Pinsky

The following are excerpts from a tape recording of the Joshua Ringel Memorial Lecture, which Robert Pinsky gave last April in Baltimore. This annual lecture is sponsored by Teachers & Writers and the Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins University.—Ed.

POETRY LIKE ANY OTHER ART SHOULD BEGIN with a physical attraction. Bodily attachment is primary.

That is one reason why everyone who takes a poetry course with me is required to type up with his or her own hands or write out longhand with his or her own fingers an anthology: thirty-five or forty pages of what he or she means by the words “poem” or “poetry.”

This is the single thing I do as a teacher that I consider most valuable. Because it involves the basic elements of bodily action and autonomy, it has wide application. I ask it of graduate students and of freshmen. When my wife taught eighth graders she asked it of them.

Autonomy is powerful and not invasive. We teachers might do well to take an oath like the Hippocratic promise doctors are said to make: to do no harm. Human society needs

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school, but alas, it often does do harm. And that is another virtue of this assignment: it doesn't do harm.

I also consider the personal anthology an extremely stringent, unsentimental assignment, because I am saying to the student: What do *you* have? The invitation to autonomy is a stringent, though not unfriendly, challenge. The content of the anthology can be anything the compiler considers poetry—nursery rhymes, something your mother read to you, the words to music you danced to in high school—though in practice, students virtually never include pop music lyrics. I won't criticize the choices, I just ask that you choose something.

The anthologies are self-portraits. Often they're much more personal and revealing than anything that the students write. And inevitably, we touch up self-portraits, make them

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flattering or dignified. Transcribing means memorizing the text a phrase at a time, a very close form of attention. Often, a student describes beginning to type something he or she thought was a favorite, finding it boring, and turning to something else that surprisingly appeals. Often, typing a poem for the anthology releases writer's block, perhaps because one is already in the posture and location associated with writing. In a superstitious way, I sometimes feel that the act of physical homage to the spirit of Dickinson or Yeats leads the muse to smile on the one who performs the humble task. And if someone can't find thirty-five pages worth paying this menial tribute, perhaps that person is studying the wrong art. The truth is, I have never had that happen.

In a way, this assignment is a descendant of what happened to me when I was young. In my freshman year of college I read Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" and was stunned by it. I typed it up and put it on the wall in the room where I had breakfast. I put it over the toaster where I could stare at it, wondering: how did Yeats *do* that?

Typing or writing is not the most important physical encounter with the poem, of course. The voice is the most essential bodily medium for this art. It should be common practice from grade school through Ph.D. programs for the teacher to read aloud to the students, and for the students to read aloud to one another. That should be how you start dealing with a poem and probably how you finish as well. This notion of "Did you get it?" or "What was the poet *trying to say*?"—as though the poet has some terrible speech affliction—seems to stem from a pedagogy that is both naive and bullying. Sometimes one will hear a famous professor reading aloud and realize: this person has perfected the skill of saying things that astonish graduate students, without ever learning how to perceive a poem.

Related to that notion is the misapprehension that you're supposed to somehow "get" all of the work of art on first encounter. People who love rock music or opera would be severely disappointed if they understood every word entirely on the first hearing. Part of the pleasure is having the meaning gradually penetrate on the second, third—the seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth hearing. In the voice of the professor reading clumsily one can detect only a feeble apprehension of the main, the essential pleasure—in its relative absence, there is only the more trivial pleasure of exercising one's ingenuity, inspiring most of the students to revulsion, a few to emulation.

If the art is physically appealing, then the audience appreciates the experience of having the meaning gradually appear, as with a food or a person or a sport. It's as though I'd made you a table or knitted you a sweater or prepared a meal for you, and you said to me, "I see that you made raglan sleeves to suggest informality and used a synthetic yarn but with a nubbinness that combines a kind of modern techno-idea and also a kind of...." That's nice, but what I, as the maker, really hope is that you would say, "I wore it to a party and everybody told me I looked great. I love the way it feels." Or "It looks great in the living room," or "It was delicious."

Making a work of art is more like giving a party or preparing a meal for somebody than it is like giving people an exam. So when people come to you and say something flattering about a poem—but with that little grieving and inquisitive note that says is this the right answer, as though poetry were a form of exam—you can't help feeling a little sad.

* * *

The Favorite Poem Project undertakes to make an audio and video archive of 1,000 Americans, each person saying aloud a poem he or she loves and a few sentences about why that particular poem has importance for him or her.

I've now received something close to twenty thousand letters, without benefit of any elaborate publicity. Entered into the database by student-intern slaves at Boston University, where I work, these letters are often quite moving to read. I urge everyone here to write to the Favorite Poem Project at 236 Bay State Road, Boston, Massachusetts 02215, or to e-mail favoritepoem@bu.edu. I also invite you to visit the Web site at www.favoritepoem.org.

One idea of the Project is to have as wide a range as possible of regional accents, professions, ages, ethnicities, kinds of education. It would be disappointing if all the poems were in English—because there are Americans who love poems in Chinese and Yiddish and Navajo, and certainly in Spanish. And in Persian, Sanskrit—whatever, Korean, Italian. Another idea has been that maybe 10 or 15% of the contributors will be civic figures—not celebrities or show business people, but mayors, governors of states and other political figures, as well as religious, educational, non-profit people: the civic realm.

In April of 1998, we had a favorite poem reading at the White House. The President and Mrs. Clinton each read a poem. Edward James Olmos read at the favorite poem reading in L.A. a year ago, along with Mayor Tom Riordan. We also had Vietnamese immigrants read poems in Vietnamese. An American Vietnam War veteran read a poem. A quite young Japanese American boy, so little he stood on a chair to reach the microphone, read a haiku in English and Japanese. Then for good measure, he read Auden's "What Is Love?"

In Iowa the mayor of Des Moines and the governor of the state joined high school students, immigrants, a variety of citizens in reading poems. In Seattle, the fire chief read in uniform. In Atlanta, an African American postal worker began the event by reading a fiery Amiri Baraka political rap from the early 1970s, an angry poem. He framed it by saying the poem was not exactly what he felt but it represented an important navigational point for him. He sat down to applause and was followed by a woman who read a poem by Anna Akhmatova. This reader related the poem to her grief over her brother's life, shattered by service in Vietnam. Then an eleven-year-old boy read "Casey at the Bat." A woman who sits on the Supreme Court of Georgia read Margaret Walker's "For My People." An African American man who writes a gardening column for the Atlanta paper read an Edna St. Vincent Millay poem about spring. A lawyer stood up and recited an Elizabeth Bishop

poem by heart. And so forth. I felt I was seeing a portrait of a community through the works people read.

None of these readers were experts—they shared that and their willingness to read and talk about a poem. They were up on the stage together waiting their turn to read, and you could see them rooting for one another. Afterwards, you could see them animatedly talking to one another. These readings are not only portraits of communities, I believe they are also good for communities. If they're done right, ideally they don't happen in a college or university. They happen at a public library. I guarantee you, on the basis of my experience, that if you go to an office building here in Baltimore and ask among the secretarial staff who do the typing and xeroxing and faxing in that building, there'll be people among them who have poems they love. I assure you, amongst the managerial staff who work in those offices, there will be people who have poems they love that they'd be willing to read aloud and that they could say something about. The same goes for the custodial staff, the people who wash the bathrooms, clean the floors, and empty the wastebaskets—beyond a doubt, there will be people among them who have poems that they love, that they would be willing to read aloud and discuss in public. And on the boards of directors of the corporations that have offices in the building or that own the building, there will be people who have poems they're attached to.

Contrary to the stereotype of the United States, there *is* a readership of poetry. I know this from the Favorite Poem Project. If you look at the list of contributors' occupations on the web site, you will see many teachers, students, and librarians, but also business people, laborers, a ballpark beer vendor, a zoo curator, a circus acrobat. From attending some of the events, I discovered what I had not anticipated: that if you actually went to that hypothetical office building and had a favorite poem reading, it would benefit the atmosphere in the building because the participants and audience would perceive themselves and one another in a somewhat different way.

If you would like to have a favorite poem reading in your community, write to us at the 236 Bay State Road address, or at the email address, and we will send you a "How to Have a Favorite Poem Reading" kit. There have now been many hundreds of these readings, ranging from birthday parties to the one at Town Hall in New York City last week where American fiction writers read their favorite poems. Joyce Carol Oates read Christopher Smart's poem about his cat, Jeoffry. Jamaica Kincaid read Wordsworth. Alan Gurganus recited Hardy from memory. Grace Paley read Yeats. And along with the fiction writers, some New York City high school students that Teachers & Writers Collaborative provided read as well, and the poems the students selected as well as their remarks and deliveries were very impressive. I'm happy to say that outside Town Hall that night people were scalping tickets to the reading—paid attendance, with about 2500 people rising at the end to give the readers a standing ovation. If you have a reading, be sure to have some kids read. It's a very good idea to have a preacher or two—preachers understand eloquence, and often quote poetry professionally. And if you do it in a school,

try to include one of the custodians or crossing guards, as well as the principal and a local politician or two.

* * *

QUESTION: How has your perception of poetry and of language been affected by your work with computers?

PINSKY: My ideas about poetry and about language have been affected by my work with computers. I wrote one of the early text adventures, a product called *Mindwheel*, that was marketed as an "electronic novel." I think that project perhaps made me think about the fluidity and speed of poetry, its power to surge from place to place like a speedskater. The work quotes some Renaissance English poetry, and owes a certain amount to Dante. I was interested to note that those elements in *Mindwheel* were popular. I'm now poetry editor of the online weekly magazine *Slate*, published by Microsoft. Each week *Slate* publishes a poem which readers can hear read aloud, through the speakers of their computer system. These experiences have clarified and deepened my perception of poetry's strength—its physicality, its human scale, its combination of depth and speed.

In other ways, the interesting thing is *how little* my perception of language has been affected by my work with computers. Language is language—the word means "tongue-work" I suppose—and its ways of drifting away from the body and back to it again, and many of its other ways, seem to be transposed, rather than transformed, in new media. The computer to me is an artifact that reeks of humanity, as do music and dance and architecture and germ warfare and torturing people by putting electrodes to their genitals, and the heroic couplet and the dyeing of fabrics and the rise of the shopping mall and gene splicing and extravagant American design in the '50s and '60s and those super-tiny medical robots that are being developed to crawl around inside our body. All these things smell of us; they're our works of art. Like language, the digital computer is an extension of our nature.

Working with computers and working on *Slate* has—like the Favorite Poem Project—intensified my perception that in the context of eternity, these are all equivalent to the dances the bee makes. The different steps in the dance may seem different to us, locally or temporally, but in their essence they're all very similar.

In relation to that, I'll read a poem of mine called "The Haunted Ruin." The haunted ruin of the title refers, as much as anything, to the computer. The thesis is that more or less everything we make or do is a haunted ruin. Body piercing has a history. This language in which I'm addressing you has an extraordinary history—English's vocabulary is huge, larger than that of French or Italian, because of all of the rape and invasion and expropriation that mongrelized the speech of the island. Each conqueror, having enslaved or raped or terrorized the preceding inhabitants of the island, traded a certain amount of language with the conquered. And the island, therefore, generated this language bizzarely rich in synonyms.

My favorite example of this process is the hill in Cornwall called Torpenhow Hill. A *tor*, in the language of the Scandinavian raiders, meant a high place. And if the invader asked the invadee or the rapee, "What do you call that?" the answer might be *pen* in Cornish. The generic name is mistaken for a local place name. So it becomes Tor Pen, which means "hill hill." But a *hough*, in Germanic languages, is a rise or elevation. So the place is really called Hillhillhill Hill. And presumably if invaders come from another solar system and conquer us and enslave us, it'll be Hilhillhillhill Grbzofttu.

The city in Lithuania called Vilna or Vilno or Wilno is palpably haunted. It was once a Polish and Jewish city, culturally. It's now a Lithuanian city. The place names and street signs and the languages of the shop signs have changed. Most of the Jews—the city was a great center of Jewish culture—were exterminated. Most of the Poles left. That city is obviously haunted, but so, more subtly and invisibly, is this room. If we understood the architecture of this room—if we understood the electronic devices, understood the electric lights, the design and engineering of all these elements, as something separate from ourselves, our presence here—all would be seen as haunted by the presence of the past, and as a ruin because that presence is incomplete, lost.

We get our customary garments and manners from dead people, as well as our language. We don't eat *pig*, we eat *pork*. Because *pig* is the Germanic language of the conquered and *pork* is the French language of the conquerors—like *veal*. We don't eat *calf* or *pig*. You don't eat *cow*, you eat *boeuf*. And those little matters of expression are part of the haunted ruin of consciousness, our partial understanding of where our world originates, far back.

The Haunted Ruin

Even your computer is a haunted ruin, as your
Blood leaves something of itself, warming
The tool in your hand.

From far off, down the billion corridors
Of the semiconductor, military
Pipes grieve at the junctures.

This too smells of the body, its heated
Polymers smell of breast milk
And worry-sweat.

Hum of so many cycles in current, voltage
Of the past. Sing, wires. Feel, hand. Eyes,
Watch and form

Legs and bellies of characters:
Beak and eye of A. Serpentine hiss
S of the foregoers, claw-tines

Of E and of the claw hammer
You bought yesterday, its head
Tasting of light oil, the juice

Of dead striving—the haft
Of ash, for all its urethane varnish, is
Polished by body salts.

Pull, clawhead. Hold, shaft. Steel face,
Strike and relieve me. Voice
Of the maker locked in the baritone

Whine of the handsaw working.
Lost, lingerer like the dead souls of
Vilna, revenant. Machine-soul.



CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The "I Remember" Project

Teachers & Writers Collaborative, in conjunction with Creative Time and Day without Art, is embarking on a project that will result in an collaborative piece that echoes and expands upon artist and writer Joe Brainard's book-length work, *I Remember*.

Brainard, who died of AIDS in 1994, was a brilliant and hilarious writer who recorded more than a thousand of his memories in *I Remember* (published by Penguin in 1995, and available from T&W). We are inviting individuals from all around the country—and all walks of life—to write up their own "I Remembers" for inclusion on a special page to be featured on T&W's WriteNet web site (writenet.org).

Submissions can be as long or short as you want. The submissions will be edited and ordered so that they will interact and correspond to each other in lyrical and interesting ways. The web page will be made available to the public on April 1,

the first day of National Poetry Month, but will not be limited to this window of time.

Your "I Remembers" can be about anything. Here's an exercise to help you get started:

- 1) Close your eyes and relax. Take a deep breath, in and out. Let your mind go back to something you remember pretty well.
- 2) Let whatever you remember happen all over again in your mind. Notice as many details as you can.
- 3) Open your eyes and write down exactly what you just remembered. Begin your lines with the phrase "I remember..."

Send all submissions asap (and direct any questions you might have) to Daniel Kane at dkane@panix.com.

The Walk Poem

by Ron Padgett

GUESS WHAT. THE WALK POEM INVOLVES A walk. The interesting thing is that there are so many ways for the walk to be a part of the poem, and the poem to be a part of the walk.

Writing poems about a walk has a long history, going back at least as far as to ancient Greek literature (Theocritus). Dante's *Inferno* could be seen as a long walk poem. Edmund Spenser's "Prothalamium," John Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," and John Cowper's *The Task* are other famous walk poems. In ancient times—or even as recently as three hundred years ago—the notion of going for a walk was different from today's notion, and so the walk poems that have had the strongest influence on modern examples began in the nineteenth century with poems such as William Wordsworth's "An Evening Walk" and "Descriptive Sketches." Also of note are the walk poems of his contemporary John Clare (such as "Careless Rambles" and "Mist in the Meadows"). Among nineteenth-century American poets, Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" is an outstanding example.

In the twentieth century the walk poem developed in different ways among a variety of poets, such as Guillaume Apollinaire ("Zone"); Robert Frost ("The Wood-Pile" and "Good Hours"); Wallace Stevens ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"); Federico García Lorca (*Poet in New York*); William Carlos Williams (*Paterson, Book 2* and "The Desert Music"); Marianne Moore ("An Octopus"); Edwin Denby ("Elegy—The Streets" and many of his sonnets); Theodore Roethke ("A Field of Light" and "A Walk in Late Summer"); Elizabeth Bishop ("The End of March"); Sylvia Plath ("Berck-Plage"); Frank O'Hara ("A Step Away from Them" and "The Day Lady Died"); Gary Snyder ("Above Pate Valley" and "A Walk"); A. R. Ammons ("Corsons Inlet"); and John Ashbery ("Au Grand Galop").

Also, a number of personal essays focus on walking, such as Richard Steele's "Twenty-four Hours in London," William Hazlitt's "On Going a Journey," Thoreau's "Walking," Max Beerbohm's "Going Out for a Walk," and Virginia Woolf's "Street Haunting."

There are at least four basic types of walk poems, of which there are a great many variations and blends:

1) A poem about what the poet sees during a particular walk.

2) A poem about a walk that produces a revelation of some kind.

3) A poem whose length, style, and shape mirror the length, style, and shape of the walk.

4) A poem that reflects the way the mind works during the walk. (When we're out walking, our minds flow somewhat differently than they do when we sit at home.)

No single poem fully represents all these types and their variations, but one by American poet Bill Zavatsky (b. 1943) gives a good general sense of the genre:

Class Walk with Notebooks after Storm

"These puddles floating
down the street
must lead somewhere."

Or so I think
but don't tell
the whole third grade

trailing behind me
stopped to lean on cars
or telephone poles

scrawling their seeing
on spiral pads
or blowy paper sheets.

I want them to stalk
their own lives, to see
that all of matter matters

and so—outdoors! Arms
flying into sleeves
down rickety stairs

into the rain-wet streets
all eyes and ears
with ballpoint pens alert

to make sense of this town
that's made them much
of what they are.

A wandering pooch
plots afternoon smells.
I too lead my students

by the nose, exhibiting
everything: the basketball
ogled by a fishtank fish

in Don's Hobby Store window;
the candy store's weathered wood
—"like the gravestones"

RON PADGETT's *New & Selected Poems* was published by Godine. He served as editor in chief of *World Poets: An Encyclopedia for Students*, which Scribners Reference has just issued. In July the University of Michigan will bring out *The Straight Line*, a book of Padgett's writings on poetry and poets.



notes one melancholy
boy I can't help patting
on the head

he reminds me so
of my gloomy self
at that age, when

"Smile!" my parents chirped
"Smile!" and I would answer
"What is there to smile about?"

"Write that down!" I urge
us both as we pass the diner
popping with pinball bells,

ajump with light. "What
crazy kind of food could they
be cooking there?" I blurt,

biting my tongue and begging
of the Muses
their forgiveness.

Then unto the barber
—"He's always standing there,"
a girl at the window mutters

jotting down his white suit,
eternally folded arms,
the monumental bald head

which ushers us toward
the adjacent darkness
deepening the Funeral Home

its dripping canopy
like a coffin maw
waiting to clamp shut.

Each glowing clapboard
a stroke of chalk
on the blackboard of eternity

so perfectly drawn
the whole shebang might
lift into heaven tonight!

A turn onto Main Street,
we go feasting
on flashes of imagery:

a stately 1928 engine
fenders drawn by eagles
pulling strands of firehouse gold

glides past us. I think
of the gold five
Williams watched clanging

through his darkened city
and his friend Charlie
Demuth painted, gleaming

on a firetruck door
"Among the rain
and lights," he wrote

—like us, skirting
the sunlit puddles, the
fallen sky framed

in odd nooks and crannies
all over town,
"Look down and see

the sky, the clouds.
Look at the mirrors
at your feet!" I shout,

thinking how nice
to snuggle in a hole
the world has made for you,

your job finally through
as part of the sky;
at last allowed to stare

at the home you came from
all the time
intent on going back,

Yes, everything's looking up
A fireman's rubber boot
smack in a wavery cloud

as he motions that engine
(hunks of red and gold)
back to its berth, pausing

to smile and let pass
two nyloned women scissoring
long legs over

a slippery patch
of pavement, gliding angelically
while we scribble.

Some bug bruise splashing
his cuff, ticked off,
wipes and smirks.

That dog, still following
us with long pink tongue,
pauses to lap up bits

of cloud, his eyes
mirroring the chills
along the water's spine.

And weather itself, crushed
by clumsy shoes,
regains composure,

collecting itself in
the mantra of reflection
for a haiku:

Puddles in the street—
at last the dog gets a chance
to see its own face

We halt for mirrors, too:
a sundry shop of images
browsed by the glare

of my own horse face
haloed by the faces
of the kids

shows me dawning
to the idea that
this little town

with its one main street
and local shops
is itself a collection

of knickknacks
balanced carefully
on a shelf

in the mind of the boy
who lived where
I grew up!

That is, me—
walking around
a new town

letting my eye
embrace the real
like a hungry rose

that gulps a drop
of wetness, like
the roses that

exploded every spring
as my grandmother coaxed
with the clippers and hose.

All of this pleasure
I squeeze from a morning's rain
in residence around us.

Let me tell my students
these puddles are fallen stars
they must write down

whose light will guide them
to where they live on earth,
scattered up and down

the streets we walk
all day, heaven grounded
temporarily, the sky

one constellation shy

Perhaps the easiest way to start writing walk poems is to take a walk and write about what you see during it. It's helpful to walk in a neighborhood or a natural setting that you don't usually walk in, because there everything will tend to look fresh and interesting. If feasible, go alone, and walk slowly, from time to time directing your attention away from the things you normally notice; for example, look way up or way down, or only for red objects or tiny details, or only at things in shadow, or only at words on signs, or only at doors or clouds. But also feel free to open yourself to everything around you, as well as to your responses to those things. You might want to take notes, jotting down specific details. You could even write the whole poem as you go, though most poets seem to prefer to do the writing after the walk. Whichever way, you will find the walk itself much more vivid than usual, simply because you have devoted special time and your focused attention to it. As for form, there are endless possibilities. You could take a fourteen-block walk, writing one line per block, to form a sonnet; you could walk in the woods, stopping every ten paces and turning to focus on whatever hits your eye, and writing an instant haiku; or you could use free verse, allowing the poem to develop and form itself. As always, read as many walk poems as you can find.

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"The Walk Poem" is a new entry in the forthcoming revised second edition of The T&W Handbook of Poetic Forms edited by Ron Padgett. The new edition, which will be available in September, 2000, features a new preface, new entries, and an updated resource section featuring books, CDs, audiotapes, and web sites.



Q & A: Nature Poetry

with Susan Karwoska

QUESTION: My school district wants us to include poetry that deals with environmental issues in our English classes. Can you point me to some good texts and suggest ways to discuss them in the classroom?

SUSAN KARWOSKA: The first thing I would say is that I think the assignment is a little tricky. Although there are poems on environmental themes, good poetry is not so easily pigeonholed. Poetry will not address environmental issues in the same way that non-fiction accounts might; a poem will take you to other, unfamiliar places as well. Teachers should be ready and even welcome the mystery and multiple interpretive opportunities that poetry affords.

That said, if the class is to study environmental issues by reading poetry, I think that what you can hope to gain is, first, an understanding of what is at stake in the interaction of human beings and nature, and second, an understanding of how we have arrived at the particular relationship we possess with the natural world—how we see and have seen ourselves in relation to nature. This can take you to a discussion of “environmental issues”—a discussion of where we, as a species on this planet, go from here. It is a wonderfully wide-open—rather than narrowly focused—place to start. After all, why do we care what happens to the environment? Why is this important to us? What is the ultimate value of the wild? Any discussion of environmental issues has to start here, and poetry is a wonderful place to explore these questions.

Some books you might want to look at include: *White Pine* by Mary Oliver, especially her poems “I Looked Up,” “Hummingbirds,” and the title poem “White Pine”; *Mountains and Rivers without End* by Gary Snyder, including his poems “Afloat,” “The Bear Mother,” and “Covers the Ground,” which begins and ends with John Muir’s words describing California when it was still wild land, while the body of the poem lists the man-made “stuff” that defines the place now; and *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems* by Wendell Berry. You can also move away from more contemporary writers and look to Keats, say, or Wordsworth. But my feeling is that students will have a more immediate connection with contemporary voices, and can use what they learn about reading this poetry to look back at the voices of earlier poets.

QUESTION: How would you begin talking about a poem such as Mary Oliver’s “Hummingbirds”?

SK: There are many questions one could ask: “Why is this important to us, this encounter between the speaker and these birds?” “How does the poet place herself in the world?” “What does she bring away from her intimacy with nature?” “Why do we value what she has to say about the natural world?” I think it’s really interesting to discover, while delving into these questions, that our experience of nature has parallels with our experience of poetry. Both things connect us with something outside of ourselves, with some sense of mystery.

QUESTION: Does this sense of mystery have anything to do with the way the ego sometimes dissolves in the face of—for lack of a better word—what we might call “Beauty”?

SK: Our age is more and more about ego and consumption. We’ve lost many of the rituals and ceremonies that connect us with a sense of awe, with something larger than our workaday world. Art and nature are two portals into a sense of something greater, something outside ourselves. For example, Gary Snyder’s poem “Water” (from *Riprap*) and Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “The Moose,” (from *Geography III*)—which I’ve always loved—both describe a scenario in which humans and animals quite literally share space for an instant. Two animals next to each other on the earth! Like Snyder, Bishop describes coming face to face with another creature—in her case, a moose—and there’s that moment of revelation, that moving into another sphere. There’s a sense that one can never grasp or define this other intelligence, and the shiver of proximity to something completely outside our ken. To learn how to appreciate and to live with that sense of unknowingness—given all our smug, 21st century knowingness—is something I value, and something Bishop and Snyder helped teach me.

QUESTION: Are we beginning to make a distinction here between using poems as “propaganda” and using poems as a way to open our eyes, to refresh and revivify what we ordinarily leave out or ignore?

SK: Well, yes, but I don’t want to discourage using poems as propaganda—any excuse to use poetry in the schools is great. Because the truth is, no matter what preconceived ideas you bring to it, poetry is subversive and will not be pinned down. Whatever reason students are given to read poetry, once they read it, seriously and with close attention, they will be changed. They will be educated in ways that have nothing to do with the assignment at hand. So I think that looking at “environmental issues” through poetry is a perfectly fine thing to do. This isn’t a disservice to poetry.

SUSAN KARWOSKA has taught writing for Teachers & Writers Collaborative, in a drug rehab program for mothers with young children on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, and at Brown University, where she received an MFA in creative writing. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband and three children, and is at work on a novel.



Talking about the Sonnet

by Bernadette Mayer & Daniel Kane

Poet Daniel Kane recently interviewed Bernadette Mayer about her poem "Sonnet," the sonnet form, and teaching poetry—Ed.

Sonnet

There was a man on 8th Street
around independence day
Looking for help to get back to his house
The old man said, Now you're going to see
something you've never seen before
We guided him there behind the locked door
up the indoor stairs to the outdoor floor
and there were flowers and 7 doors
he was ninety-four
On 13th street a stoop and the front
of a tenement collapsed
For no reason killing Evelyn
who was in Sophie's class
Right around independence day an american
something
Shot down an Iranian passenger plane saying
it was an accident or tragedy
Killing everybody nobody's ever gonna know
what really happened
Some people die you know them right next door
Other ones they die what seems like anonymously
in a war
Some do both things or all three and now
You are going to see something you've never seen before
Up the indoor stairs behind the locked door
we guided him there

* He said the landlord paid him two months rent to move in forty years ago and there were no other tenants for a year.

—Bernadette Mayer

DANIEL KANE: Why are you attracted to the sonnet form?

BERNADETTE MAYER: I like the sonnet form because it gives you the chance to develop some thought, and then come to a conclusion. It's all totally false—that's not how you really think, but in a way, it *is* how you think. So that's why sonnets are interesting. Sonnets pretend to reflect the way you think. That's always been my theory.

BERNADETTE MAYER is the author of many books of poetry, including *Midwinter Day* and *The Bernadette Mayer Reader* (both New Directions). She is also co-author of *The Art of Science Writing* (T&W). Daniel Kane coordinates T&W's WriteNet web site and teaches at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn. His poetry has appeared in *Denver Quarterly*, *Fence*, *Exquisite Corpse*, and other magazines.

DK: You mean when you have a thought, your mind runs through it, and then your eyebrows dart up in a kind of pleasurable acknowledgment that there is now a sense of conclusion?

BM: Yes. It's weird, because it's not the way you'd want people to respond at a poetry reading. You wouldn't want them to say "Aha!"

DK: Does the way you use the sonnet, especially in the poem, "Sonnet," fight against the form? What I love about this poem is that there's a sense of mystery throughout the whole thing. Were you consciously playing with the expectation of a reader who, this being called a "sonnet," would assume his or her eyebrows were probably going to go up in the end?

BM: Yes. My poem has a footnote at the end, but you can't figure out where that note belongs. I'm talking about those final two lines, which break the fourteen-line "rule": "He said the landlord paid him two months rent to move in / forty years ago and there were no other tenants for a year."

DK: I love the footnote. How would you explain that footnote to a kid who might yell out, "Hey, what's that doing there?!"

BM: After writing the poem, I wanted to explain what the old man had said to us about the landlord. It would also be interesting to tell kids about the numbers in the poem. I noticed that there are a lot of numbers in this poem, so then I started mentioning as many numbers as I could. I figured, "It's a number poem!" Also, of course, a sonnet is famous for having a certain number of lines, even though it doesn't really. Fourteen lines is the traditional kind of sonnet, but a sonnet until recently could be as long as fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, or eighteen lines. When I say "recently," I'm talking about the sixteenth century.

DK: The footnote business aside, I thought it was funny the way you snuck around that fourteen-line rule by indenting the lines. It's still fourteen lines.

BM: Right, the lines are so long, and that's why I decided to indent them, to stick with the fourteen-line rule. But there is that addendum, so the poem is really just a hoax. But as long as it looks good I think it's OK! (*laughs*)

DK: Now what would a kid learn about sonnets from reading your poem "Sonnet," assuming the kid was determined to only see a poem as a sonnet if it followed the Petrarchan or Shakespearean templates? How would the kid respond ideally, when suddenly encountering this strange Bernadettean sonnet?

BM: I think it's important to tell children—or anyone who's learning about poetry—that a sonnet isn't always a fourteen-line poem. Many ancient authors wrote sonnets that were

longer or shorter than what many of us might imagine a sonnet should be. Catullus wrote eleven-line poems that were twelve lines long. I think if you tell somebody a form is a certain length, they really believe you, and that's too bad. Catullus didn't write sonnets, of course. He wrote in hendecasyllables, which are eleven-syllable lines, and then a lot of them were twelve-syllable lines. In other languages or in other times, people broke these rules all the time. I'm sure they took the rules seriously, but they seriously broke them. That's kind of fun, actually, breaking the rules. It also calls attention to the way in which you broke the rules.

DK: In a weird sort of way, breaking these rules manages to confirm the strength of the "conservative" Petrarchan or Shakespearian sonnet, because our attention is drawn to how the sonnet is "supposed to be" that much more—we contrast the new rule-breaking sonnet with the old, "established" sonnet. What about other formal decisions you made? For example, we could talk about the rhyme in your poem, which I think is really funny and great. I'm thinking about rhyme, because I've seen that a lot of students' rhyming poems tend to promote either rap-style bravado or, on the other side of the coin, a Hallmark-style treacly sentimentality. How would you teach this poem as a model for surprising and fresh uses of rhyme, and how would you talk about rhyme in general?

BM: I always thought that rhymes were interesting if the words looked the same and if they were directly underneath each other. That's what happens in this poem. If you're talking about the *doors, four, before, floor*, I must say that was all an accident. It just worked out that way.

DK: So your rhymes weren't that intentional—that's interesting. I noticed that you've placed the words *collapsed* and *class* so that they work as a slant rhyme, which I really like. Slant rhymes can be a healthy alternative to predictable rhyming, encouraging students to think about language in a slightly more sophisticated way. But do you ever read students' rhyming poetry and want to run away, locking the door behind you?

BM: Well, I made my students at the Staten Island school I've taught at join the Rhymers Anonymous group.

DK: Were there a lot of members?

BM: Oh, yes. They loved it. Twelve-step programs for rhymers proved very popular. Before they joined the program, I asked them what their favorite poem was, and they'd respond with that Valentine's Day poem, "Roses are red, violets are blue." After all, it rhymes! And then they would rhyme every poem. One woman in the same class made much more money than I ever did as a poet by selling a poem she had written to a greeting card company. It rhymed—boy, did it rhyme!

DK: In Rhymers Anonymous, was the purpose to wean students off of rhyme?

BM: Yes, definitely.

DK: But you use rhymes—fairly traditional ones, at that.

BM: Sure, well, that's breaking my own rules, which I encourage! (*laughs*)

DK: At moments like this, I think of Whitman's "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" But perhaps to rhyme imaginatively, one initially has to take a break from rhyming, think about how one tends to rhyme in predictable, familiar ways, and then finally start rhyming in an interesting way.

BM: Hopefully you can do both things—rhyme, not rhyme. If you want to break bad rhyming habits, using internal rhymes is fun.

DK: Can we talk a little bit about mystery—the role of mystery in "Sonnet"? I'm thinking in particular of the final couplet: "You are going to see something you've never seen before / Up the indoor stairs behind the locked door we guided him there."

BM: There's no mystery about it to me. Does it seem mysterious to you?

DK: It does, because the fact that the old man says, "You are going to see something you've never seen before" sets me up for an answer or revelation at the end of the poem, and of course the sonnet form itself promises some kind of conclusion. The mystery for me is in the final line, which ends "we guided him there": it doesn't even have a period to indicate closure! It ends on an open note. The monster I expected to see in the living room or the old guy's dead mother sitting in a rocking chair—they aren't in the poem.

BM: In reality, though, the guy just meant that he was paid to live in this place, which I had never seen before. That's all he meant. That's the job of the addendum, to clear that up. This guy's apartment was off West Eighth St., near all those shoe stores.

DK: Can you tell us more about the names and places in this poem?

BM: Sure. Sophia is my daughter, and Evelyn was her friend at school. Evelyn was sitting on her stoop and it collapsed underneath her.

DK: You mention these personal events, and you also allude to political events, like the time when an American warplane shot down an Iranian passenger plane. However, you don't sound like you're unfurling banners or putting on your combat boots. How would you suggest that kids deal with their political concerns in terms of writing poetry?

BM: That's a difficult question. I wrote a *Utopia*, a whole book in which I got political. A lot of people have said it's my worst book, but a lot of people say it's my best book, so who knows? I don't think I can be directly political, but some people can be. Allen Ginsberg was good at political writing. Catullus wrote great poems making fun of Julius Caesar. Paul Goodman also wrote great political poems. I don't know if you can still get Goodman's *Collected Poems*, but read it if you can.

DK: Is there such a thing as a popular poet for students who might not be in the “poetry world”?

BM: I once asked some of my students, who were college age, who their favorite American poet was, and they said Jim Morrison. I had made a bet with them that whoever it was, I’d teach that poet for a week, so I had to teach Jim Morrison for a week. I actually grew to like him! You know who’s a good poet? Leonard Cohen—he’s popular, I guess. Patti Smith is an interesting writer, too.

DK: People could teach Patti Smith as an introduction to a lesson on Rimbaud, maybe?

BM: That would be fun. I made my students write down the words to the Led Zeppelin song “Stairway to Heaven,” because they kept mentioning it, and actually it’s a pretty good poem.

DK: Really? Even with “There’s a lady who knows / all that glitters is gold”?

BM: Well, that doesn’t sound very good, does it? (*laughs*)

DK: Let’s get back to the sonnet form. What if William Shakespeare were to walk up to you one day and ask you, “Bernadette, how does your poem fit into the definition of the word *sonnet*?” How would you respond?

BM: First, I’d invite him to dinner. He’d be a good guest. We could eat rabbit, stuff like that. And then I’d say, “William, it has fourteen lines!” And then he’d probably say, in a dubious tone, “Yeah, fourteen lines.” Then we’d see what happens next.

DK: Is there anything else you’d want to say to me about this poem? Imagine I’m thirteen, and I’m looking out the classroom window, maybe not paying attention.

BM: I would just say write any way you want. You can make the lines short or long. And looking out the window is a good way to write a poem. A good way to write a sonnet is to walk fourteen blocks. Write one line for each block. I know a poet, Bill Kushner, who used to do that. I used to see him all the time with his notebook on the street. You can do it easily in a city, because there are so many words all around.



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