

Forum 1

An Introduction to Poetry: What is it we are beholding and why does it matter? How can we find poetry in our daily lives?

I.

A couple nights ago, the poet Jennifer Whitaker read here and it is the beginning of a new tradition, the first of what I hope will be MANY regular, monthly readings by poets excited to read in a different kind of space and to an audience particularly curious and hungry for the kind of food only art provides.

One thing I mentioned as I introduced Jennifer is a sentiment I will offer here, too, which is that considering that so much of our daily lives, so much of what is asked of us, is really just a lot of noise and haste, sound and fury, I cannot help but think that the “demands” of poetry — that we might enter into wonder, that we might respond with care, that we might pay better attention to our interior lives— are more in line with the demands of the soul. And that the work of poetry is only as scholarly as you wish it to be. Otherwise it is meant to offer observations, to inspire questions, and to cultivate a sense of the extraordinary among the ordinary. It is safe to say there aren’t many if any churches doing what we’re doing and I admire Gary Jones for imagining this new way of engaging people and am grateful to him for letting me have a hand in it. So, if I say so myself, we have curated a pretty impressive lineup for this year, culminating with Jane Hirshfield’s reading in March.

We carry some of Jane’s books in our bookstore here,— a couple collections of her essays that make a compelling case for the ways art can change the world. We definitely have for sale her most recent collection of poems called *The Beauty*, and we’ll look at a couple of the poems in there together this morning.

But first let me just offer a couple of tenets for this three-part forum series.

One is that I am going to operate on the assumption that there are people in this room who are far better read than I am, and who are far better poets than I could hope to be. I also assume that there are people here who wish they liked poetry, and perhaps even *used* to like poetry, but don’t any longer. And I will also assume that there is a healthy number of people who fear poetry, people who have no feeling whatsoever about poetry, and people who didn’t even know that the forum today was *about* poetry. This kind of range is true of just about everything: the nfl— people love it, people hate it, people don’t even know what it means, and or why it matters, or that we are in the season of it. The same is true of church, pop music, dogshows, twitter, children,

weather, traveling, food, yoga— there is always a spectrum that ranges from apathy to fanaticism and poetry is no different. You have your poetry-evangelists and your poetry haters. Whatever your feelings on the subject, wherever you fall, I'm still convinced that what Saint Stephens is offering, can be good for you. And the reason for this forum truly is simply to cultivate something of the spirit that may be neglected.

I will ALSO assume that there are people in this room who have an idea about poetry — who like to read it even if it stays a mystery. People who love to listen to it, even if they don't think they fully "get it." People who feel like they do understand it, but don't know how to—or do not wish to—explain what they feel. People who respond to rhythm, or sound, even when the words or the form is not clear. When you hear a song on the radio for the first time, you probably mis-hear or don't hear at all some of the words — Elton John sings "hold me closer tiny dancer, NOT hold me closer Tony Danza". We still like the song. With music, we are more inclined to *enjoy* it because we realize that's the point. We are much more forgiving of our misunderstanding and we are more inclined to simply listen, without feeling like we have to beat it to death and without feeling like somehow the song is too smart for us or is hiding a Real Meaning from us. We are much more patient with music. Poetry, for whatever reason— but probably having something to do with the way its taught early in school as something rigid, or abstract, or philosophical, or formal, or serious, or theoretical, something to be "gotten through"—seems to bear a bigger burden. And I hate that. It's where I felt against the current in all my years as a classroom teacher. I hated that learning about poetry was the very thing that divorced us from it.

If you can set aside whatever your trauma from having to memorize the prologue to the Canterbury Tales or recite Emily Dickinson's poems to the tune of Yellow Rose of Texas as you may have been taught — or to the tune of Gilligan Island's theme song— let me just offer this— without a test at the end.

"somebody walked...out of a cave and looked up at the sky with wonder and said, "Ahhh." That was the first poem."

Lucille Clifton said that in an interview once, explaining how she was not "trained" as a poet how she had not taken "poetry lessons." She claims poets do not emerge from classrooms, but that poetry began when humans wondered and continues when we wonder still. Poetry began when humans first "beheld" the wonders of the world.

So, what if poetry can be defined essentially as Beauty? What if the distinction is not so great between understanding poetry and beholding poetry. What if poetry, more

specifically, is not something to get through, but something to delight in? In order for beauty to be beautiful TO US, all we have to do is look at it, perceive it. We don't have to understand it, we don't have to dismantle it, we don't have to memorize it. Poetry can be that.

Poetry can also be more than that. It can reward us, the more we know. Because knowledge pleases. The same way you are better able to appreciate your favorite movie if you also know the actors, or have been to the place it's filmed, or watched the outtakes and directors cuts. The more you know about that film, the more you admire it. Your knowledge of it increases your pleasure of it. Or horses— I had a student once who trained and rode horses. And when someone said, "I like horses. They're pretty. They're fine." She would gasp in earnestness, compelled to talk about her history riding side saddle, the difference in riding aside a horse rather than astride, she could tell you everything you wanted to know about breeding, about color and markings, about grooming, training, birthing horses. Or if you have ever casually said to a sports fan— we can pretend we all like UNC basketball, since Gary Jones is my boss now—, "I kind of like the Tarheels," a REAL fan will say something like "what do you mean kind of?" A real fan will tell you the history of the team, their favorite player, the last time they won a championship, changes in coaching, current drama, injuries, NBA hopefuls. You see what I mean— if it's Your Thing— ballet, or the Bible, or gardening, or Harry Potter, or The Wire, or God, you feel compelled to champion it, to proselytize because, truly, the more you know of it, the more there is to admire. What a beautiful and inexhaustible pleasure! The word passion comes from the word pathos, Greek for "suffering," if something is YOUR PASSION, you suffer for it, on behalf of it.

Poetry's my thing, I suffer for it— for a long time, I suffered for it in ways that really hurt — no one goes to graduate school for poetry in order to get rich. But the best part of it is that poetry is, like God by the way, free and it is available to all of us, all the time. Henry Miller, the writer of mostly-banned books, said famously, " Every day we slaughter our finest impulses... which we stifled because we lacked the faith to believe in our own powers, our own criterion of truth and beauty." He goes on to say that "Every man, when he gets quiet, when he becomes desperately honest with himself, is capable of uttering profound truths. We all derive from the same source..." he says, "We are all part of creation, all kings, all poets, all musicians; we have only to open up, only to discover what is already there."

The poet Li-Young Lee goes so far as to say that "every poem is a descendant of God."

II.

I titled this series, “We Become What We Behold” because, selfishly, I’m still trying to figure out what it means. The origin of the phrase, from what I can tell, is actually in Corinthians but William Blake, the poet, is often credited (the line appears in a piece called “Jerusalem” from a longer work called *Milton*.) But then Marshall McLuhan, the philosopher, public intellectual, seems to get most of the glory. I don’t know. In Corinthians I think it’s sometimes the inverse— “what we behold, we become.”

It is probably too much to think about in this compressed time and we won’t get to the bottom of it — I won’t anyway, surely, ever—but I will simply offer it to you as a lens through which you might consider poetry not as an academic pursuit *of* something, but as a prayerful invitation *into* something. We become what we behold.

It is as if by beholding — by looking at, by witnessing, by perceiving— we are open to transformation, open to becoming. So that looking at one another, for example, becomes obviously a reciprocal act. My gaze upon you is influenced by your gaze upon me. And the reverse is true, too.

To behold God, to behold beauty, the sacred, to behold mystery might lead us to *become* more like that which we see. To behold the presence of God, to witness a sign of the spirit, might lead us into that reciprocal relationship, so that what we see becomes that which we also are.

It’s heady, I know, but my belief is that poetry helps us think about this, helps us get closer to this kind of Truth, with a capital T. I remind myself often that just because my human limitations prevent me from ARTICULATING something or understanding something, does not mean it ceases to be true. Sometimes capital T Truth is not nameable, not sayable, and this is when we turn to art, to music, to poetry, which has a way of accessing and expressing the otherwise ineffable. I can imagine some of my students looking at me and saying, what are you doing? what is even the point of this? why must we think about things? To which I say, Because! Because.

Socrates said so: The unexamined life is not worth living. (Of course he’s sentenced to death shortly thereafter, but...) And because Gertrude Stein said so. “Art isn’t everything,” she says, “it’s just ABOUT everything.” And because T.S. Eliot says so: “(Poetry) may make us... a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves”.

My belief is essentially that we do not have to *understand* poetry to benefit from it. You don't have to READ music in order to behold music just as you don't know how to cook food in order to enjoy food or play baseball to take pleasure in watching it. Poetry does not answer questions, it asks them, it generates them. After all, poetry moves us from one emotional state to another emotional state, the way we move from one room of the house to another room. So it isn't that we need to *learn* poetry, as much as we need to RE-learn pleasure.

We start small. We'll start with rhythm. Because at the root of every poem is a rhythm. Because at the root of EVERYTHING is a rhythm. Macrocosmically, consider the rhythm of the day, the hours, the rhythm of the clock's movement second by second. Consider the solstice, the seasons, the rhythm of a year. And then consider the turning of the earth on its axis, the tides, the ocean's waves, the moon and sun rising and setting. It could be that the rhythm is so internal, and so ubiquitous that it goes unnoticed and maybe unnamed *as* rhythm.

Did you know that, for most of us, for most speakers of the English language, our natural speaking voice assumes an iambic cadence. Iambic—in case you've forgotten—is a rhythmic pattern that is one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Like the words “exist,” “belong,” “away,” “hello,” “goodbye,” “I can,” “okay,” “I will,” “the one,” “come here,” “not now,” “but when” “tonight”. Do you hear? The name Brianne is iambic — BriANNE. not BRIan.

But the IAMBIC rhythm is everywhere— your very own heartbeat is an iambic rhythm.. Du DUH, Du DUH. It is iambic meter that soothes us as infants— probably because in the womb ALL WE HEAR is the sound of our mother's iambic heartbeat. But rhythm—not even iambic, that's just one pattern— is everywhere: You rock a baby to sleep, back and forth— the way you walk, the way you breathe, or speak, or pray, the way you tap your foot when you're nervous or rock back and forth at a podium. You might think of poetry as the BODY for this kind of rhythm that is already everywhere, whether you are beholding it, —noticing it, hearing it, naming it— or not.

But, the ability to NAME elements of a poem is not necessary for pleasure. It's just cool.

III.

Before I came to church, which was only three years ago, I was interested in religion for years. I liked reading about it, I liked learning the Bible as literature, I liked learning about “characters,” I liked visiting churches, I liked architecture. I liked the IDEA of it

all. But I often found myself in a sort of cul-de-sac in my mind, going around and around about whether church was where one went to know ABOUT God or be near TO God and it was difficult for whatever reason for me to realize that it could be both. I am relatively uneducated about church things. And it was not until recently that I realized my religion, all along, had been poetry. I found God in poetry, through poetry, by poetry, the way others might find poetry in God. Poetry saved my life, by which I mean God saved my life.

So to sort of accept this challenge of my new job to marry religion with art feels to me like the work I have been doing all along, but have perhaps not been able to call it that. Gustave Flaubert claims, “There is not a particle of life which does not bear poetry within it.” But if you replace “poetry” with God — “There is not a particle of life which does not bear GOD within it...” they both feel true to me, if not synonymous.

Let me briefly introduce Jane Hirshfield to you and then share with you one of my favorites of her poems. She graduated from Princeton, in the school’s first graduating class to include women. She has eight collections of poetry, and *The Beauty* was named a “best book of 2015” — another was a best book of 2006, honors named by the Washington Post— and *The Beauty* was long-listed for the National Book Award. Her new work appears regularly in all the top tier journals— from *The New Yorker* to the *Atlantic* to the *LA Times*— and she’s also an award-winning translator notably of ancient Japanese writers, classical Chinese poets and even the lesser known Eskimo poets. Our former poet laureate, Kay Ryan, said of Hirshfield that she is an “elegant ambassador for poetry in the greater world (think Japan, Poland, China)—a writer who demonstrates in every possible way that this life matters.”

Interestingly enough, when I met Jane, she had just accepted a position as a Visiting Artist in the Neuroscience department at The University of California, San Francisco, in a program “created to foster dialogue between scientists, caregivers, patients, clinicians and the public regarding creativity and the brain.”

AND, she’s a practicing Zen Buddhist. She took a leave from writing poetry to join a Zen Monastery where she practiced for three years, mostly in silence. I’ll say more about this later, but you can get a sense of the depth and breadth of this woman— and she’s coming HERE.

Allow me to read you a short poem from *The Beauty*, on page 29, and it’s called “A Cottony Fate.” It’s short — only six lines long and arranged in three sets of couplets:

A Cottony Fate

Long ago, someone
told me: avoid *or*.

It troubles the mind
as a held-out piece of meat disturbs a dog.

Now I too am sixty.
There was no other life.

The story goes that a teacher of Jane's cautioned against the use of "or" in poetry—I'm thinking the advice is to do with a poem's precision in image and in metaphor. But the advice, "avoid or" leads the poet outside of craft and into life itself—this is what illuminating poetry does.

"[OR] troubles the mind / as a held-out piece of meat disturbs a dog." That's iambic, by the way.

Jane says "A poem can use anything to talk about anything." So this held-out meat, this particle of life, is an unexpected direction that bears poetry, bears God. And speaks to primal desire. Meat DISTURBS a dog—and so temptation, desire, it's all a disturbance, a form of suffering.

OR means choice. And it is choices, the poem argues, that disturb us. Choice, or desire, that is at the root of our suffering. Let's think about that.

Many of you are probably familiar with Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" — but did you know it is the most widely misunderstood poem in the English language? If I asked you to sum up the "moral" of Frost's poem many would say, that to take the road less travelled is what we should do, is a good thing, if not the SUPERIOR CHOICE. We use the "road less travelled" to talk about courage, and trail-blazing, and being unique. But look: The title is the Road *Not* Taken. It's not even called "The Road Less Travelled" or "The road I actually took" but for whatever reason we are drawn to those last lines and we cling to them as though they gave us an answer.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Those are mostly iambic lines, by the way, which is one reason you remember the phrases — it's pleasing to you even when you didn't know it!

Note that the poem does not say, "I took the one less traveled by AND I HAVE POSITIVELY BENEFITTED FROM THIS CHOICE." You might assume that much, but remember that the poem is not hiding anything from us. Nowhere on the page does the poem say that this is advice for a life well lived. The poem says simply what is true, that it has made all the difference. Because of course it has! Because, and this is true for everyone, we are our choices. We get on one road and therefore can not take another road — nor do we ever get to know what was on that other road. We don't get to be in two places at once, and so whichever place WE ARE *IS our actual life*.

Frost says just before those lines, "I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence" — that wistful sigh, of nostalgia, or sorrow, or whatever it is that has us sighing. So, the poem is not advice about taking one road over another road. The poem claims that you must get on A ROAD. And thusly you do not get to be on some other road.

Hirshfield's poem is grappling with something similar:

"Now I too am sixty. There was no other life."

Also iambic. There WAS no OTHER LIFE. Isn't that pleasing?

I will read you a little thing Jane says about this poem:

"[for a while] we believe we can do this or do that, that all paths are open. At a certain age, that is no longer so. I will never become a horse trainer, a biologist, a person competent with a hammer. My loves were my loves. Certain doors are closed. I feel [the poem] is more about *thusness*, about saying yes to one's own existence. ...Moment by moment, we write in indelible ink."

The word indelible means un-deletable. Permanent. Un-eraseable. For anyone still trying to connect poetry to religion, you might think about the use indelible to describe God's grace, God's pen, God's mark on you.

To avoid "or" means to avoid choice, deny option. I think that choice implies privilege — this is another theme that runs throughout her work — ideas about what she calls "accidents of birth, time, and geography". In some lives, few "or"s are possible. I'm also

interested in this idea of fate as cotton— something fibrous, soft, malleable even. A thin material is used to describe what feels like a certainty of fate, a permanence of fate. Your fate is your fate. Thusness. Thus, you are you, you are your choices.

I hope it is clear that I do not have answers — nor does the poem. The poem raises questions; it generates or RE-generates the questions we ALL have— though they may lie dormant, or mute. We live in a world of answers — we love clarity. We love data and evidence and proof. Some people love math and science because there IS, often, an answer. You even get to “check your work” — a way to prove your rightness. Poetry is different. It seeks a different kind of Truth, that is not fact. And it’s “answer” is in its question.

A poem of this brevity—this poem is only six lines— leaves what is called negative space, or white space, which is not to be confused with blank space, or nothingness. It is often in negative space, in what is left unsaid, that is most pregnant with meaning and richness. It’s the great paradox — where there is seemingly nothing, where things are seemingly empty, is often the place where the fullness of everything actually is. So for poems that take up very little room on the page, there is not only aesthetically pleasing room for breath, but it speaks to the content of the poem itself. Consider what the poem DOES say — there was no other life — coupled with what it does NOT say and it seems highly relevant. After all, what is there for the poet to say about the lives that did not— and will not ever— come to be?

When I have taught negative space in writing workshops, I often remind people that this is a thing not only in poetry. If you think about the ends of chapters, the space left on the page before another begins— often something HAPPENS in that space. Time passes, a new character is introduced, the landscape has changed. And this kind of space is around us always — between songs, between elements in the liturgy, between the prayers of the people, between episodes of your favorite tv show — there is time— purposeful, deliberate space is NOT EMPTY working to guide you to some other emotional state, some other room of the interior landscape. When dialogue is working — when we aren’t interrupting and when we are listening well— the negative space between voices can be hugely important, if not MORE important than what is actually said! Silence is not mistaken as absence.

Negative space is a technique in almost all the arts — sculpture, dance, garden design, graphic design and typography. Often, artists will say that it is the negative space that is the REAL subject. But of course the only way you get negative space, is if there is not-negative space... it depends on something else existing, something else being seen or said.

If we think about what is left UN said in a poem about choices and roads taken, that becomes a huge part of our processing and of our understanding about our own daily lives. But again— this kind of attention is not, repeat IS NOT, necessary to the pleasures of the poem. My argument is simply that a close reading often REWARDS us in ways not otherwise available.

IV.

“My Skeleton” is on page 12. It’s long, compared to our first one, but let me introduce it by saying that this is an ODE — an ode is a particular kind of poem that takes the form of an address. It’s a poem that speaks directly TO something particular. There are several of these in *The Beauty* — “My Weather,” “My Proteins,” “My Eyes,” “My Corkboard,” “My Sandwich.”

I will read this to you— there is a word in here you may not recognize: flensed. Which means to slice or strip the skin or fat, as from a carcass.

My Skeleton

My skeleton,
you who once ached
with your own growing larger

are now,
each year
imperceptibly smaller,
lighter,
absorbed by your own
concentration.

When I danced,
you danced.
When you broke,
I.

And so it was lying down,
walking,

climbing the tiring stairs.
Your jaws. My bread.

Someday you,
what is left of you,
will be flensed of this marriage.

Angular wristbone's arthritis,
cracked harp of ribcage,
blunt of heel,
opened bowl of the skull,
twin platters of pelvis—
each of you will leave me behind,
at last serene.

What did I know of your days,
your nights,
I who held you all my life
inside my hands
and thought they were empty?

You who held me all my life
inside your hands
as a new mother holds
her own unblanketed child,
not thinking at all.

In this case, the poem — the ode— is a way of paying careful attention to that which might go unnoticed, unexplored— Jane would say when is the last time you really considered your feelings about your own bones?

And really the larger questions that the poem asks are of mortality. What is it to be mortal? What lasts? What disappears? What do we take for granted? In this case, we take literally our own body for granted. To give you some context, I will say a little here — and I'd like to speak more about this next time— Hirshfield's interest in Zen Buddhism is never explicit in her poems. She tends to avoid speaking too overtly about this part of her life and in many ways, as famous and as public a figure as she is, she is incredibly private. But I detect some traces of her interest in Buddhist practice. In the earlier poem we read, the idea of desire causing suffering—which is not so much on the

page, but sort of implied through that “avoid or” phrase. And, in this poem, in “My Skeleton” it is largely about the temporal nature of things, of our own bodies.

Hirshfield in an interview explains, “A central teaching of Buddhism is that nothing lasts. Not love, not monasteries, not life itself. But in any case, no one enters a Zen monastery for life, not even those who become priests. It’s a training situation, a time to practice intensely, without distraction, to learn the flavor of undisturbed concentration.”

I suppose it is not too far-fetched to see the parallel there between a poem of concentrated attention whose subject is mortality. Jane says, “Zen pretty much comes down to three things -- everything changes; everything is connected; pay attention.” But even if you knew nothing of this— knew nothing of Hirshfield’s living in a monastery, I think there’s still a lot to delight in— I mean, that last image of a mother “holding her own unblanketed child, not thinking at all” is one that resonates, I would think, for all people. Whether you are a mother or not, there is something primal, and something delicious about beholding a miracle.

Poems themselves, at their best have a way of being unblanketed this way. A little miracle in your hands. They are clear, without sacrificing complexity. They are able, in Jane’s words, “to know the world in many ways at once — heart, mind, voice, body.” I would add that they can reveal rather than obscure and what you may first have feared was inaccessible or impenetrable could actually be something true that you already know but had not yet known you knew. Jack Gilbert has a beautiful essay called *Craft of the Invisible* in which he talks about the invisible spirit, the spirit of poetry that makes the heart ripen.

In that essay he includes an anecdote from an interview with a famous musician who had been a child prodigy and he ends with this “...his father was cleaning out his music and dumped some of the scores in the child’s toy box. When the boy found them, he wasn’t sure what they were. When he finally managed to pick out the notes on the piano, he got more and more excited. Finally he ran upstairs to his little sister and said: *We don’t have to be afraid anymore.*”