

Last Psalm at Sea Level Transcript

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Benjamin: My name is Benjamin and my pronouns are he/him.

Samantha: And I'm Samantha, my pronouns are she/her.

B: Today we're going to be discussing a book of poems called *Last Psalm at Sea Level* by the poet Meg Day. So before we start chatting about that, we're going to introduce Meg Day a little bit. Meg Day is the author of *Last Psalm at Sea Level*, winner of the Barrow Street Press Poetry Prize and the Publishing Triangle's 2015 Audre Lorde Award, and a finalist for the 2016 Kate Tufts Discovery Award and the 2015 Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Poetry.

S: Day holds an M.F.A. from Mills College and a Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing with an emphasis on Disability Poetics from the University of Utah, where Day was a Steffensen-Cannon Fellow, a United States Point Foundation Scholar, and Poetry Editor for *Quarterly West*. The Guggenheim Museum named Day as its 2024 Poet-in-Residence; Day's residency, All Ears, aims to highlight deaf poets, encourage engagement with American Sign Language, and reorient understandings of language. Day is an Assistant Professor of English & Creative Writing in the MFA Program at North Carolina State University.

B: Well, we are so happy to have joining us today the poet behind this incredible collection, Meg Day. So, welcome.

Meg: Hey, thank you for having me. I'm really excited to chat with y'all today and thank you for, you know, thank you for attending my work as you have. I appreciate it.

B: So, the first poem that we would love to talk with you about is "Batter My Heart, Transgender'd God." Do you want to read that?

S: Well, I don't know. The poet is here. Do I have permission to read it?

[laughter]

M: I wish you would.

S: Yeah? Alright. I'm honored. Wow. Reading this poem in front of the poet. Okay, giving me chills. Here we go:

Batter My Heart, Transgender'd God

Batter my heart, transgender'd god, for yours
is the only ear that hears: place fear in my heart
where faith has grown my senses dull & reassures
my blood that it will never spill. Show every part
to every stranger's anger, surprise them with my drawers
full up of maps that lead to vacancies & chart
the distance from my pride, my core. Terror, do not depart
but nest in the hollows of my loins & keep me on all fours.

My knees, bring me to them; force my head to bow again.
Replay the murders of my kin until my mind's made new;
let Adam's bite obstruct my breath 'til I respire men
& press his rib against my throat until my lips turn blue.
You, O duo, O twin, whose likeness is kind: unwind my confidence
& noose it round your fist so I might know you in vivid impermanence.

M: Yeah! That was beautiful. That was beautiful.

S: Thank you.

M: I don't ever get people reading me my poems. That was so incredible. We should do this a little more often. I think that would be good. [inaudible] recite their poems. Thank you. How lovely.

B: So this poem to me— Well let me share with you something that I told Samantha already. You, to me, have been a meaningful influence. I took a creative writing class in college and this poem, *Better My Heart Transgender'd God*, was one of the poems that we discussed in class, and I was so struck by it that I was like, whoa, I want to read more by this poet. And so I looked up who you were, I looked up where the poem came from, I found this book and I asked for the book actually for Christmas. And this was the first book of poetry that I ever owned as my own book of poetry.

M: That is so wild. I'm sorry, that is bonkers. That feels absolutely bananas to me.

B: Well it's wild to be talking to you about this. But one of the reasons that I loved this poem is because I think— Well okay, *Reading the Rainbow* is our podcast so we're approaching this all trying to read it through a queer lens, okay. At that time, I was attending college at a religious university where I didn't always see where I might have a meaningful voice as a queer person. And when I read this, it kind of showed me a reimagining of the canon of English poetry and what that looks like. Because, okay, for listeners who may not be aware, this poem is—how would you say this, a read, or just inspired by...?

M: It depends on whether or not the John Donne Society is listening. Who are wonderful, incredible folks. Yeah, an homage maybe or yeah, just a response.

B: Yeah, so okay, well maybe rather than me telling this whole story, can you talk about how this poem, what is it to you? As an homage to John Donne, how did that come about that you decided to write this in response to Donne's other sonnet?

M: Yeah, it's such a generous question and I'm so grateful that we get to have this conversation, the lot of us here. It's a really important poem to me. And when I made the poem, I was not— I had no idea what I was doing really, in terms of like what it has come to mean in my life and in the trajectory of my career and the places that this poem in particular has taken me and the people that I've been able to meet and have conversations with, the amount of hate mail I've received [chuckling]. And then also the things that it has taught me about my own religious upbringing, which I really took for many, many years, maybe too many years, as like antagonistic, like that the dynamic— that if I and religion and poetry sat down at a table together, it would be like Thanksgiving, right? It would be like really treacherous territory. And I think that defensive mode persisted for a little bit too long. And some of that comes out of just sort of my relationship to the Western literary canon in general, which has been pretty productively complicated. I didn't really come to butt heads with the thing until I was in my doctoral program, which is where I was reading John Donne very seriously for the first time. And I realized that reading a lot did not make one well-read. I had been a reader all my life, but I hadn't been reading—you know, according to my professors and my comrades, my peers—I hadn't been reading the quote-unquote right texts. And so I came pretty quickly to understand the canon as this sort of like nebulous category of authoritative texts that could be wielded in really harmful ways, like especially

related to class or race, gender or access. It took some time to really realize that having read a text didn't mean that you'd read it well. It took me even longer to realize that there is more than one canon, and that my comrades and my colleagues might be well-read in very traditional ways, but that there was no pressure on them at all to be well-read in ways that felt representative of me or to me. And I sat in that—I don't know—puddle, for a really long time, sort of marinating, like what does it mean that I'm expected to know a lot about this particular group of texts or this particular way of thinking and that no one has to know anything about my own lineage? And that perhaps even that I have had my own lineage erased. And then, this is what took me the longest to realize, is that most of the canon is full of erasures that might otherwise welcome more readers, including myself, right? With details about sexuality or disability, like why am I the one to tell my students that Milton was blind or that Langston Hughes was queer, right? So it became a kind of investigation to wiggle my way in and find both ways to renovate my relationship to the canon and to inherited form, but also to really try to locate evidence of my selves inside of its erasure. And in that way, I've had a lot of fun. And Donne satisfies that for me. I have a lot of fun with Donne. I think he's super goofy, and so sad. And he's trying so hard. Things just don't go his way. And I find him deeply queer. What's queerer than the three-bodied-ness of the Trinity? Like, gay! [Laughter] Deeply trans. And so that right there, that moment of joy and a feeling of liberation inside of reading a text like Donne fully inside of its religious context has made a really angry. I don't think that very many people anticipate that queer folks can get free inside of religion, [giggling] but he does. It gets me in the giggles. I'm like, let's do it! [Laughter] I dare you. So yeah. And the poem did feel risky at the time, but it also felt playful. And I was surprised later to learn just how playful and then also just how risky. So it's been a real education, and that poem and I have been on a long journey together. And I continue to be grateful for the ways that it reveals itself to me and the people that I get to meet, again, because of it. Yeah. Does that answer your question?

S: Very much so.

B: Oh, so much. Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing all of that. I don't want to just blabber on. I feel like I'm talking too much in the...

S: The way you were speaking about the poem reminded me of stuff we were saying before you came on. You know, we see a lot of defiance in your poetry and a lot of taking the power back. And also, we see the grief in these experiences and how those two things, the joy and the grief, kind of go hand in hand. We've been talking a lot about that. And, well, this poem was one that I didn't relate to as well, but my partner really did. And I, I was reading these— So, I need to read poetry out loud to really grasp it. So I told my partner, “we're reading these poems together” and they're just like, “okay, sure. Like, I'll listen to you read some poems.” They were really taken aback by this one, also having grown up in a religious household. And I'm, I've checked that I could talk about them before I came on this interview [laughing]. But just, the reverence in the poem for trans ancestors, and what they went through, and that remembrance I think is really important and powerful. And yeah, I just wanted you to know what an impact you had on my partner, who isn't much of a poetry person and they stopped and they were like, “oh, I get that.” And I was like, “I need to read that again. I don't quite get that.” And they were like, “no, I feel that. I feel that deeply.” So yeah, it's just an interesting experience I had reading it for sure. Yeah.

M: Thank you for sharing that with me. I think it's really wild the way that work, you know, this poem or any poem can like, move us, or—I'm not really sure what the right verb is. I'm thinking about like *punctum*. Like when Barthes talks about, you know, being sort of like punctured by a thing, surprisingly, right? Like exactly the description that you, that you've offered of your partner experiencing this poem being like, “oh, I get it.” A kind of like recognition, but then also, as you're saying, like, what does that recognition cost? That's another thing in my work that I wasn't anticipating was like, that kinship is sometimes the saddest thing, right? That I might find other people in the world who find this work resonant or, you know, personally, that it satisfies some kind of like personal need for witness, is pretty devastating.

S: It is.

M: It's like, I'm— Or it's like that uncomfortable laughter now where I'm like, oh, I didn't mean, I didn't mean to make, like, a meetup where we could all gather. And also, I guess I did. I think that's part of the education of this poem, and others, for me. And poetry in general, right? Like I think often about how James Baldwin talks about, like, you think that you're, you know, you're pain—I'm going to butcher this quote—but like, you think you're pain or your heartache in the world are yours alone, and then you read. Right? Meaning, you find out that you are not unique in your suffering. And that is both such a disappointment and also thank goodness, like, oh, praise be.

B: Well, this is so much like— We were talking through “On Nights When I am Your Husband.” This feels a lot like what we were saying, that in that poem, there's this: “let their oversight be our refuge / and let the privilege of our brief ruse unite us as some / shared reverie when morning finally comes.” It feels like, and what we were talking about is what you're describing, how there's so much sadness that this reverie is a ruse, and that morning does come and we realize: we're so united and we're so hidden and we're so scared of being recognized sometimes. And what a nice thing to just be familiar, even when the familiarity is a big mistake. So it's interesting that, yeah, that just something that I think these poems offer and communicate so well, that it offers kinship, and it also expresses how hard sometimes or how sad that kinship can be to experience.

M: Yeah. And it's strange to me also the way that sometimes that kinship or that reprieve arrives in, I don't know, ways that surprise us. Like in that poem in particular, the, you know, “let their oversight be our refuge.” I don't know that this will make a ton of sense, but for the longest time I was like, “Oh, homophobia is like everywhere in my, in my life. It's just like in the fabric of my life.” And maybe this is goofy to confess, but like, it took me an embarrassingly long time to realize that actually what I was experiencing was transphobia, like the majority of the time. And it's not to say that homophobia wasn't there. I think that the two are obviously— they hold hands, right? They're sort of inextricably linked, for better or worse, through legislation and politicization, and then just like the realities of how it is that we live our lives in certain subject positions. But I really didn't know, like, for example, at the time that I wrote this poem, right? I— we go to the symphony and everybody thinks that I'm your husband. And it like, doesn't really click for me that the reprieve I'm finding from what might otherwise be homophobia is inside of a kind of tension of gender and a tension of visibility or witness, being, you know, pushed out of refuge, pushed back into some kind of like—I don't know, “stealth mode” is not really the phrase that I want to use, but it was just a strange realization that I went from fearing homophobia to finding refuge inside of transphobia.

B: It's like when people clock me as being gay sometimes, or if I get called the F word sometimes, I'm like, I must be walking kind of fabulous. I like, feel kind of like, well, so you know me, like, so you do recognize me, you know? Yeah.

M: Right. Yes. Or like for years when people would—or, it was mostly students, let's be honest, when I used to teach high school in San Francisco—the F word would get thrown at me all the time and I'd be like, “you're not even using the right slur!” Right? And then like years later, I'd be like, “wait a minute [laughing], these young people, they're really on to something. [laughter] Like, oh, it's such a strange... Right? And like, I'm so glad— I hope it doesn't sound insensitive or, or somehow irreverent, but like, I feel so much relief that like, as I've gotten older, I really do laugh about a lot of things. I take it all very seriously, obviously. Our lives are on the line, right? My students' lives are on the line. There's no joking about it. And also, that we get to have sort of these private, intra-community, insular, safer conversations about, you know, the irony at play feels also like a gift, right? Like there is a kind of like goofy playfulness to the ignorance that we swim inside of all day, every day, but then also the ignorance that like, I'm still sort of like, wringing out of myself. It's like, I've been so thoroughly erased from my own socialization and also have had so few models for like, what to do and be in the world. But sometimes I even, right?, I even think that the wrong thing is happening to me. Right [laughing]? Does that make sense? Like, I think I'm being oppressed in a certain way, but actually it's a [laughing] totally different way.

B: It's hard when you get confused over what kind of oppression you experience. [laughs]

M: Right. And I under— like, this is why intersectionality, et cetera, is so important and why it's also so scary to people who, you know, who don't want to think about the sort of, like, the simplicity of their privilege, but man, are poems helpful.

B: Yeah.

M: Poems are so helpful. Not just as like benchmarks of where we've been, but also in terms of like, I can look at this poem now and be like, oh, right. I did, I did know what was happening. I was just calling the wrong thing. So, sorry, that was sort of a goofy tangent, but thinking a lot about, as I try to like put together this next book and I'm like, what, what is this book about? Like, it really seems, you know, like it could go in a lot of different directions. So anyway.

B: So can I ask you, then, a question? With these questions of identity, like queer identity, and like you're saying, not a lot of models, especially like thriving into— Aging thriving, okay?, as queer people, not a lot of great models there. And kind of along with what we were talking about, where the English literary canon—whatever—also doesn't offer a lot of inroads or is gatekeepy. And yet there are these lineages of like, when we write a poem, we are already entering into this inheritance and this lineage. And so I'm curious, as you're kind of conscious of all of these things, when you write a sonnet, for example, what does that mean to you that you're claiming that form, that you're entering into this canon? Especially, this poem has become canon for so many people. I mean, so many queer poets, this is such an iconic queer poem. I mean, it seems, you know what I mean?

M: Is it?

B: Yes! I, like, this is a big deal! And I think— So, when you go to write, like, a sonnet, for example, what does that mean to you, to be utilizing a form as a queer poet in this English tradition of poetry?

M: Yeah, it's a good question. I think, and it's a— I wish everybody got asked this, right? Like, not just in terms of how it fits with poets that we might consider like outsider poetics, but like, I'm not sure anybody writes a sonnet in this contemporary moment and doesn't feel like they're renovating the form, right? Like when I read John Donne, I think like, oh, right. I'm experiencing a kind of—what does Jill McDonough call it? Body snatching, right? Like you can read the poem exactly the way John Donne read it, because of how tight the, you know, metrical qualities and, not that he writes— you know, I don't mean like the purity of the form or anything, but there's a kind of time travel that's possible. And we're using, I think, different tools in more contemporary spheres. I think that I've always approached inherited form with a kind of, like a playful skepticism. I love it. I really love it. But I think that really aligns with what we've been talking about in terms of like, the inherited form of gender, the inherited form of the skin-suit you're stuck in or not stuck in, right? The ways that you can amend it or amend your thinking around it, and what it can do, and who it can be with, and et cetera, et cetera. Right? And so an inherited form in poems has become a kind of, Kim and I have talked about, Kim Johnson and I have talked a lot about this as a kind of like consensual constraint. I consent, I'm interested, I'm excited. And in that way, it feels like there is no—forgive me for borrowing the term—like there's no dysmorphia inside of the sonnet for me. In part, because I feel quite— like, time has allowed me to grow quite comfortable in that space, but also because it really does feel like I have permission to play. I like to be in conversation historically, but the thing I really love about the sonnet is that it like, it's another way to complicate a poem and to complicate the readings. I like poems that are complicated. I like them to be working on all cylinders. And form can be a really significant player in that way. And so, to approach the sonnet is really to see like, what can I get away with? Like, how can I push it to its, to the maximum of the form? And what would be, like, really goofy or problematic ways to make a metaphor out of that? You know, it's like, how far can I go before people don't recognize my gender at all? Right? Or, how invested can I be in making sure everyone *always* thinks that I'm your husband and not just on some nights when I happen to be

wearing a suit. I think of form as a way to not just guide content, but really, yeah, I return to the word complicate. I like to be interested. I'm not—this is a thing I've also learned as I've aged is like—I'm not actually interested in being happy. Like, happy's great (giggles), I don't mind being happy. I'm not going to turn it away. But the thing that like really satisfies me is being interested. I really, I'll stick around all day. If I'm interested, I'll stick around for a lifetime. I'm just, you know, like— and engaging inherited form in ways that sort of maximize or I don't know, duplicate or yeah, it's like a, it's like a secret third thing that's always happening. And it means different things for different people. And so, if you can find— I find that if I can push on different elements of subject matter to activate different elements of form, things get really interesting, really fast. I think the other thing that I like specifically about the sonnet is that it's a real sonic challenge. And the sonics of the sonnet sort of feel like tension and like things are going to— it's like a pressure cooker. You gotta get a lot done in a very small amount of space. And the more it looks like a box, right? Like the stanza, the room, the little song that happens inside, feels so deeply satisfying just in its mechanisms. Yeah. I don't know that I have anything else intelligent to say about it. I just, I'm really jazzed about it. It's a fantastic little machine. It's like a little jewelry box, right? Like I'm trying to think of like, a better metaphor than that. But it really is sort of like this beautiful, you know, ornate (can be ornate) like self-contained thing that might have, might have, you know, very valuable things inside it. But then I think about like the jewelry box I had as a kid, which like, of course, had like a little pop up ballerina. It had a little— Right? So like, there's motion inside, there's, jack-in-the-box, right? And then also music, right?, I'm assuming that the thing turned and made music. But then the things that I kept inside of my, inside of my jewelry box were like, rocks. And I had a little tiny metal harmonica that was just like, Oh, that was precious. [Laughter] I remember I stole like smarties from my sister once and I put them in the jewelry box. And I was: “these are *stolen* smarties.” [Laughter] It was definitely not the jewelry box of, of some kind of, I don't know, sequined or gem—you know—magnetic kid. So yeah, I just find it thrilling. You don't know what's going to be inside. You don't know how it's going to turn. Oh, yeah, and the volta! Right? Not just like the turning of the head or the changing of direction, but like the spoiling of milk. Right? Like, the volta *turns* sometimes. And that seems also thrilling. I just feel like a big geek for this on it now. We should move on.

B: It's so good. Oh my gosh. I was telling Emily before you logged in that you should just have your own podcast. I could listen to you talk for hours.

M: So goofy. What would I talk about?

B: I feel like—

M: “Here's another foolish metaphor I came up with for the sonnet.”

B: Okay, okay. If it's okay, we want to talk about one more poem with you.

M: This is a difficult poem you've chosen just before you say anything. This is a hard poem.

B: Yes. Well, all of the— So, something else to say about this collection that just offered a lot of interesting things, was the kind of mini-series. There were all those poems, “On Nights When...,” there were a few aubades, there are all these “portraits of selves,” some Psalms. Okay. And so as you read, you're not only kind of experiencing each poem, nor this whole collection of poems, but there's these like mini little series inside that kind of each offer their own threads. These portraits of selves are fascinating to me because, well, the title itself, Portrait of My Selves, each one is a portrait of two beings, and they're called my selves. And they're different characters in each of these poems that are described. Here's the reason that I wanted to talk about this one alongside “Batter My Heart, Transgender'd God:” because the form of this one was so fascinating to me in that it itself, it forms this tiny little sonnet crown. It's like a little double sonnet that loops itself back. This is another thing about all your poems that we were talking about, is just how they're kind of crafted to prompt a reread. Every poem kind of realizes something that sheds light on the beginning of the poem, so that you want to go back and like, rediscover things based on how the poem concludes. And this one does

that, not only in like, its ideas, but in the way that it repeats lines and forms these two sonnets kind of stacked on top of each other. So continuing this conversation about form, I wanted to read this poem. Well, and then ask a couple questions. Would you read this one? Is that okay?

M: Yeah, I can. Yeah, I can read it. Yes. Of course. I don't actually think that I've ever read this poem in public.

B: Well, exclusive. [Laughter] This is an exclusive.

M: Nobody—I'm going to say this as if anybody wants to talk about poems ever—but nobody ever wants to talk about this poem. And I have some ideas why. But anyway, thank you. Yes, I'd be happy to read the poem.

Portrait of My Selves at Eleven, as Kings

One ruler next to the other, they measure
the chains they've made & together they hang
strands of daisies from each other's necks,
draping them across bare arms like emperors'
new clothes. She braids chamomile into his hair;
she grinds lupine bells & narcissus against flat
shale, spitting to make the color run smooth.
With the tips of her fingers, she streaks the dye
along his collarbones & between each rib,
pausing only to let his hands paint her in his image.
In another life, she will trade her corporeal currency

for a kinder hand: a full house of health, a royal flush,

two scars that stretch like crowns atop each lung.

She will know him differently: less shadow, more subject.

He will shadow her differently: knowingly, less subject

to scrutiny. He will be the knee on which she steps

to mount the steed; her steady liege; the relief

of all that's possible with two instead of one.

Together they take long strides out of the shade,
emerging in the heat of the sun, bold stripes
running. The clearing erupts with an exaltation of
larks, fifty applauding bodies lifting then
settling into stately quiet. She takes his hand
& moves ahead, the shift of her silhouette parsing
him into prime cuts, features disembodied by light.
Without knights or pawns to keep her sovereign,
they'll stay that way, a protected distance,
measured, one ruler next to the other.

B: Ugh, that is so awesome. So, okay, well, I'm curious, why, when you say nobody wants to talk about this and you think you know why, why do you say that? What do you think is the reason?

M: Oh, gosh, yeah, I suspect, well, one, it has a different kind of musicality than I think a lot of my work at the time had. It's a little bit, it's got a little bit more body to it, both in terms of the density of the language, but also the clarity of the images. What exactly is happening in this poem? And do I want to know, right? Seems to be the kind of response, at least when I've, you know, talked about these poems with other folks, young or otherwise. And I think also some of my apprehension about reading it really came from the very beginning of this series, which—I've told this story before, but—you know, when I started writing these poems, I was in a workshop that was very resistant to the idea of selves, plural, without, like, pathologizing it. And someone said in my workshop, "this poem has two gendered selves in one body. How can that be possible?" And at the time, I was like, "I'm sitting right here. Like, I'm sitting right here." And I think that's, like—so many thoughts are going through my mind—but like, one, that's evidence and also support, I think, for the argument of like, why for a long time, I was like, it's homophobia, not transphobia, right? Because I just felt certain that the deviance that folks could read on my body obviously had, you know, everything to do with like, what at the time, which is like, I don't know, this is like 2011, 2012, right? Like, at the time was like, a lot of conversation, intercommunity, about like, visible queer people, quote-unquote, *visible* queer people, right? And like, all of the problematic baggage that comes with the sort of like, re-centering of, like, masc-of-center lesbians at the time, and like, really difficult language about like, the, you know, quote-unquote, the power of being out, the power of being visible, the sort of like, ocular-centric fetishizing that was occurring in, at least in communities that I was inside of. And all of which is to say, sort of rewind, that I think the poem is trying to work through the interiority of that in many ways. And it's not a place that was comfortable. And I don't think that the poem makes people feel comfortable when they read it, for whatever reason. So that's my, that's my guess. The others in the series are a little more contained, a little more visually lucid, I think, to a lot of readers. So yeah, thank you for asking.

B: Well, that's interesting to hear. One of the things that we've talked about with a lot of these "portraits of selves" poems, is the way that the two selves kind of are intimate with each other, or like the intimacy between them and the tenderness between them. So for me, that's what the first section of this, this opening stanza of the two, seeing them hanging strands of daisies around each other, braiding each other's hair. It just felt like a beautiful self—like a tenderness to a self.

S: Yeah, I find it so interesting that your perception is that people are uncomfortable with the poem. I found it, especially the first half, very comforting in this nurturing of the self. And this sort of gentle exchange between the masculine and the feminine working together. I found that very beautiful and comforting. So, that's so interesting to me that others might see this poem and be like, "oh, whoa, you can't, you can't do that." You know, because you absolutely can, yeah.

B: And yeah, another thing that I found when I was reading this poem, and I got to the, I guess it would be the 13th line that says, "two scars that stretched like crowns atop each lung." This poem to me, and a lot of your poems, they kind of create their own catalog of images and give them their own meaning. And so they kind of teach you their own interpretation as you read. And maybe I'm reading this totally wrong. But when I read that, I'm realizing, oh, the scars in this poem are like crowns. And so the crowning, the crowns, the kind of like royalty of these people is these scars atop each lung, which I'm reading as like surgical scars. So then the fact that this whole poem is a little tiny crown of these sonnets, and the crown in the poem is their scars, that's what makes them kings. And even and maybe this is a little too, maybe I'm overstepping here. But when you turn the whole poem sideways, and it has this little like crown shape to the lines when they're turned sideways, so that the whole poem is almost like claiming these scars as their own power. That's what makes us kings. And I just found it so beautiful. How like you said, it's just—

M: It's so good to talk to great readers! It's so good! I can't handle it.

B: I couldn't handle it when I— because yeah, when, when I was realizing like, oh my gosh, every single part of this poem is realizing itself as these selves. It was just so like, it was so so satisfying. Yeah, honestly, it was so satisfying.

M: I'm not gonna make it. I gotta fan myself. [Giggling]

B: And so— go ahead. Were you just gonna say something?

M: I don't really I mean, I have nothing. What could I add? It's like, it's like, you know, this is like a goofy tangent, but— One thing that's been really helpful, like, as I make poems now compared to when I was making poems then, is like, workshops are wonderful, but when poems are close to being done, they don't really do a ton for me at this particular moment in my life. And what's most useful is for me to explain to someone—it doesn't actually matter who it is, is somebody who knows a lot about poems or not—like explain to them exactly what's happening in the in the work. And like: and here's this other thing, and here's this other cylinder on which it's moving, and then if you turn it sideways, it's also a crown. And just sort of like explain everything that I feel is possible as a reading in a work, knowing that most poets or most folks who read poems are going to end up spending enough time to maybe get half of it. Right? Like, and that's not a criticism. That seems like, that's lucky. I think that poetry is largely about attention and about, you know, sort of defiantly slowing down in a deeply ableist-capitalist moment. And the thing that like my students struggle with most is that like, a thing might need to be read twice. Right? They're just like appalled [laughing] at the idea that they might have to read something— They're like, I already read it. I'm good. [laughter] And, right?, because rereading is not a thing that we, that we were— We don't reward reading to begin with, but *re*-reading is like, now you're really stepping out. And so, yeah, I'm just finding like just extreme joy and not surprise, but just like pleasure in being read so well. And maybe that's also what I mean when I talk about the difficulty of this poem, the poem was incredibly difficult to write and do all of the things that I wanted it to do. And then also, it's a poem that like doesn't really lend to pleasure in maybe a typical way, is a better way of saying what, you know, what I attempted to say earlier. And as you're saying, like, there's insider language here, right? Like this isn't a poem that's meant for everyone. And the fact that it reached you or, you know, that you experienced it in a way that felt available, I think only further proves the point that like, there is a way to describe engaging bodies, engaging gender, engaging language either, with a kind of intimacy or a kind of intention or a kind of tenderness that really is deeply queer, not just in this moment, but in all moments. There is a kind of defiant vulnerability in allowing oneself to be touched or moved by a thing, in taking time, in being soft despite, you know, the environment. And so many times I've used poems to try to dream myself forward, right? It's like that, that absence of models that we were gesturing toward, like, how do I imagine forward another life, another body, another way of understanding the self? I didn't know how to do that for so long, and so did it in poems. And I do think that very few people want to sit through your world-building around self-conception, especially if you're someone who's like, really invested in self-knowledge and want to understand things and want to explore what things mean. People just want to like do what's quote-unquote expected of them, because there's not a lot of friction. But nobody talked to me about like the deviance of my body or how to have relationships, except in ways that made me feel, I don't know, ashamed and small. So how do you learn expansiveness? You stretch it out in a poem. So, yeah, it's so satisfying to talk about with you. Thank you. What gift you've given me this afternoon.

B: You...

S: Yeah, talking about gifts!

B: You are the gift, oh my!

S: To kind of wrap up, you know, we've been talking a lot about empathy and compassion through your poems. So in general, you know, how can or does reading poetry foster empathy and understanding?

M: Hm. I feel a little bit suspicious about empathy, just in this particular moment. In part, because empathy feels a little more distant than, than what we *could* do, which is just like love people. Right? Empathy asks us, in my understanding of it, to really project ourselves into a version of reality, wherein we can...tolerate(?), manage(?) to love somebody. Right? Like it, like we read about other experiences in a book, and we think, "Oh, like, I could, there's some, there's some overlap here," right? Like, "our Venn diagrams touch." And I feel a little suspicious of empathy and the way—maybe especially because I'm inside of academia—the way that it's used as a way to like, defend the humanities. Whereas like, instead of teaching us empathy, we might instead just skip the part where we have to understand. Or skip the part where Venn diagrams have to touch. And maybe I'm, you know, parsing language here. Maybe I'm taking issue on a technicality. But sometimes I think that poems, their power, their impact, their function, has much less to do with what it is that they say, or what it is that they describe, and much more to do with the fact that they provide an opportunity for us to share space, and lend attention. And empathy, I think, sometimes requires a kind of—oh gosh, I'm going to get myself into trouble—I think sometimes empathy is about like, kind of faking it. Whereas like, we could just make space for people. We could just sit alongside them. We could just lend them our attention because they are deserving of it as humans, and not because there's something that ties us. I don't know, either—from the other side of it, right?—if I'm interested in someone's empathy, if it is that it comes at the cost of pretending that we have something in common other than being people, which is just kind of like in my mind a given, right? You shouldn't have to read a book [chuckling] to remember that. And so in some ways, I feel just a tiny bit skeptical about empathy because I think it lowers the bar. It's a very, very low bar to ask folks to recognize one another as deserving of respect and humanity, basic civil rights, food, water, et cetera. So in that way, I think that poetry does its best work, again, by demanding our attention. And, attention is a kind of love. Even when that attention is difficult or arrives in ways that are maybe not consensual, I really do believe that the places that we put our brains, our bodies, impacts what it is that we do and how we feel about the world. And if, I guess, at the end of the day, the thing that comes out of that is empathy, great. But I suspect a lot more comes out of that. Poems direct our attention toward things and demand our time in such a way so that one might look closely enough, right?, and with enough curiosity that we are less likely to destroy the thing that we are looking at. And that feels... I'm not sure there's greater power. Is there a greater power? I guess unconditional love. That sounds a little hokey, but I believe it. So I don't know. I read a lot of children's books. I have a toddler—I guess she's not a toddler anymore, she's four. And I read a lot of children's books. And so much of what I'm learning from reading so many children's books is really just, like, evidence of the world is loving the world, right? I'm going to show you a snail; I'm going to show you a little girl picking out her first-day-of-school hijab; I'm going to show you how a dirty dog becomes a clean dog and we realize it was our dog all along, right? It doesn't really matter. "A bear in a department store loses a button" is as much evidence of the world as "a non-binary Black kid with two dads decides to become an artist." These are all books that I've read in the last 48 hours. And I don't know that I would call what I'm teaching my child empathy, is empathy, right? It's just information about the beauty of the world. "Here are things. Look at them. Here are people. Know them. Understand that they are out there. They might not be in our home, but they're in other homes like ours, or that there are other homes that are not like ours and they're still homes," right? Just like: information, information, information. I'm absorbing the world. And isn't it incredible? Which is not to say—The book that we most recently read, I'm not gonna be able to reach it from here, is about an olive tree in Palestine. And it's like this beautiful children's book, and it doesn't say there is violence. It doesn't say there is genocide in the book, but it describes a refugee camp, right? And my kid is like, "and here's another way to have a home." And I'm not saying that it's uncomplicated. I'm not saying that poems that don't give you all of the information, or hide one part of a thing in order to offer up something else, aren't doing politicized work. Indeed, they are. All poems are. Because they ask us to spend time in this one tiny little pocket of, like, levitated lyric, right? While the rest of the narrative of the world goes zooming by. And also, I want to be in the world because of the way that attention is paid to that one thing, given everything else it could have paid attention to. It's not that we're not going to know about the violence. That seems a given. But maybe it's violence's fault that we have to then, I don't know, transform what it is that we know about, just, things being beautiful and part of the world, into empathy. I think the other thing about poems that is true is that they are a way to not be

alone. And for many years, I thought it was kind of hokey that people were like, “oh, poetry saved my life.” You know, like *as* poetry was saving my life. It was really challenging for a long time for me to see just how integral the thing was in giving me a world that I could live inside of, as a mainstay, until the world could have me without trying to kill me. And that seems so powerful and like such a gift and such a tool, right? You teach young folks how to make poems, they're gonna be okay. I believe that. Like, you know, you have to feed them and house them and protect them, right? But like, if you give them the imaginative space of a poem, they're never alone. They can, you know, find their way forward. I think all of us need that, a way forward that doesn't hurt. So I'm not sure I answered the question, but forgive me my finickiness about empathy in general.

S: I love that. You turned that question on its head. And I think it needs that. Yeah.

M: I think the way we're spending our time is fantastic, and good for the earth; good for children and good for living things. I'm jammering.

S: Not at all.

B: No, it was beautiful.

S: I mean, we certainly want to be respectful of your time, right? We're at, oh, five minutes over. Wow.

M: Yes. Oh, I'm sorry.

S: No, don't be. Don't be. This is like life changing experience, honestly. Thank you so much.

M: Thank you!

B: Is there anything else that you would want readers of this book to know about this book if they were to want to read it after listening?

M: I think the only thing that I didn't anticipate about writing a book is how much of a company, how much company it would lend me, but also how much of a prophecy it would be. There were so many things that I wrote about in this book that I had to live my way forward to come to really understand. And that is not the thing that you want to be like confessing when the book comes out. So it's good that I didn't know that then, right? [laughter] I don't even understand my own poem. [laughter] But I think that there's a lot of welcome. I feel a lot of welcome humility in that the idea that one can make something and that it can serve a particular purpose chirocally, right?, in a particular space at a particular time, and that it might grow with you and accompany you. I feel very, very lucky for that. And that it continues to make sure that I'm not alone. Here we are, right? This is not a young book. And that it continues to bring me into conversations like this one is, is just like an incredible, incredible pleasure and gift. So thank you.



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