On allowing yourself to be surprised

Poet Devin Kelly discusses paying attention, why writing is like building a house, and reading to improve your craft and your life.

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As told to Denise S. Robbins, 3927 words.

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Your poetry newsletter, Ordinary Plots, has taught me a lot. It's also inspired me, a diehard fiction writer, to try my hand at poetry. When did you first start reading or writing poetry? Is there a particular poem that really drew you to the genre?

I started writing poems in high school. My parents split when I was young, and my mom would send me packages with journals and books of poetry. It's funny looking back, she sent me some poems that were absolutely indecipherable at the time. I was 10 years old and getting a book of Adrienne Rich poems that made no sense to me. I wrote a lot in those journals, but didn't start taking poetry seriously until after college, when I went to grad school to get my MFA in fiction. At grad school, a lot of my friends were poets.

One of my friends, George—he's from Alabama and is such a kindhearted guy—I enjoyed the way he talked about writing and the way he talked about reading and the way he really loved poems. I would write poems in between my story workshops, and we would read them aloud together. He convinced me to join a poetry class during my last semester of grad school. I feel really grateful that my introduction to poetry was not through a completely institutional lens—it was through the friends on the other side of the institution. My education in poetry came through this companionship.

As for a particular poem, I have one tattoo, which I got when I was 22. It's an American buffalo on my back. And it's because my friend Jeremiah showed me a poem called "For the Last American Buffalo" by a poet named Steve Scafidi from West Virginia. It's a beautiful, long poem about this guy plodding along with a buffalo across the country. The last few lines are, "When you see [the buffalo] again, say *I'm sorry* for things you didn't do…it doesn't know you are here for love, and like the world tonight, doesn't really care whether we live or die. Tell it you do and why."

So I have those words underneath the buffalo: "Tell it you do and why." The poem still moves me. It moved me tremendously back then, in a visceral way. So all of that together was happening around the same time in my life. And the people I was most drawn to were poets.

Do you remember the first poem that you wrote that made you realize that it was something you wanted to commit to? Did it surprise you?

I do. I wrote one poem called "Reasons to Quit" that I used to know by heart, because I read it every time I gave an in-person reading. It was the first poem I remember exactly where I was when I wrote it. I remember writing it at my desk in my apartment on 130th Street, which is by a window. I remember the last six or seven lines, which were in couplets. It was a free verse poem in couplets. I wish I knew it by heart still. I just remember at a

certain point in the act of writing the poem, it sounds cliche to say, the poem started to write itself. What I mean by that simply is that when the words came and they were on the page, the primary sensation was, to use your word, surprise. Knowing that the words I was writing were coming from somewhere inside myself, but not knowing what they would be as they came out, and when they did, it was almost as if the poem was revealing the truth of myself to myself. And I think it is one of the most wonderful sensations. It doesn't happen often. Surprise is always the word. I want people who write to give themselves permission to be surprised by themselves, because it's such a beautiful thing when it happens.

Do you not get that same sense of surprise from writing fiction?

I actually do. I made such a huge shift from fiction to poetry. But I loved writing short stories in grad school. I wrote so many so quickly, I viewed them as experiments, as little bursts of magic. I actually just finished a final draft of a novel a few months ago. Spending an hour or two every night with the novel almost every day, I didn't know where I'd end up. I knew where it would begin, but not where it would go. So I think it's there, a little bit more of a drawn out surprise, than in a poem. I grew to really look forward to the time I spent with it, because I was ready to be surprised. Whereas in a poem, there's a moment, an image, a feeling, and a line comes out from you. It's a little bit breathtaking how quickly it happens.

Could you explain like I'm one of your high school students, the difference between fiction and poetry?

I want to say there is none and just leave it at that.

But I'm 14 and that answer does not suffice.

Yeah. [*laughs*]. It's a great on the spot question. I would say fiction is an act of writing where your primary concern is telling and shaping a story. And poetry is an act of writing where your primary concern is language. It's an insufficient definition, though. There are some absolute poems of novels. When I read Marilynne Robinson, the whole thing feels like a poem. She has care for language and gets to the heart and soul of something. But her work is not a poem. It's a novel. But there's a lot of fiction that surprises me. I loved *Ducks, Newburyport*, which is like a hundred-thousand-word sentence. I was frustrated by it, and I loved it, and I put it down a lot. But I found it playful and critical and fun. Most of all, I found it fun. My friend Sasha Fletcher wrote a novel *Be Here to Love Me at the End of the World* and it has an unshakeable and tender voice and it is full of recipes and it is true and soulful and playful, too. So my definition is absolutely insufficient. I have read novels that are entire poems. And poems that hold a story in their heart.

Is there a difference between how you approach writing fiction versus poetry?

I allow a poem to begin with anything. An image, a moment. Sometimes I jot down a line or a phrase on the Notes app of my phone and let it sit there until I'm in a place to turn it into a poem. Actually, to be honest, when I was in the middle of drafting this novel, it was a similar thing. I would sit down to write a scene and just say, "I need to write the next moment." But what allowed me into the scene was fairly similar. I think of writing like I think of building a house. First you walk through the front door with that first line, first image, first phrase, and ask, "What am I going to do next? Am I going to build a room to my left? And am I going to go into that room? Will I allow it to have a door that leads to another room?" I think of writing as building doors to rooms, and then saying, "Let's just walk through it. And let's put in windows to see what the light shows."

I think of writing as a form of allowance and permission. It's telling yourself to keep making those doors and walking through them. That, to me, is the blueprint for surprise. When you look up and it's been an hour or two hours of writing, you're so far from your first door, you're in a room you never thought existed. And it didn't. It didn't exist in the world. You made it. It's a beautiful thing. It's why writing and making art is so special, because you can't predict what it will look like, sound like, read like, until it's been made.

So once you built your poem house, how often do you go back and tinker with it? How do you edit something that comes out so mysteriously?

I'm still working on it, especially with poems, The only way I've found to do any sort of editing is to rewrite or retype the whole thing. It's a trick my friend Bud Smith taught me. The Bud Smith secret. All his secrets are just basically, you gotta do the thing. And that really worked for fiction. That's how I redrafted my novel. Because it's more than a room. It's a giant city of rooms. With a poem, I think what's fun in the revision process is just going through, cutting out a line, cutting out four lines, and seeing what happens.

There's a lot of pressure for people to make a very polished poem, to keep shining and shining it, and say here, it's a perfect gem. There are many beautiful poems like that. A lot of Mary Ruefle's poems are like that. But there's also beauty to me in what I perceive as excess. One way I define poetry is as a blueprint to a feeling, so every line matters, even if it feels inconsequential or tangential. Even those tangents matter. So revision is really hard for me as a poet. Certain poems call to be revised because they want to look like that gem. Other poems are like, accept me as I am. Accept this mess.

How much do you listen to feedback from others? Do you share your poems before trying to publish them?

Less so now. One of the great sorrows of the pandemic is the loss of community. But I used to run a reading series in New New York City with my friend Katie for five years called Dead Rabbits. It was formative and allowed me to be in conversation with more poets. But I don't have a lot of peer readers. My friend George—not George from grad school, another George, from Dead Rabbits—he moved out to Denver for his PhD, but when he lived here, every time we saw each other, we would read each other poems. Every single time. It was a beautiful way to begin a friendship. One of my favorite things to do in the world was read poems with him, because we made each other a little better.

Now there are fewer opportunities to read aloud in New York. They're starting to come back. But now I actually have an answer to your last question. The best way to revise a poem is to take the subway to a reading with the five poems you're about to read, and just read them to yourself over and over again, nervously saying, *No, I can't say that, and Yeah, I like that.* I like to make last-minute edits or edit in the moment of reading. The audience helps. Both the expectation of an audience and the audience itself, hearing your words bounce off the walls of a room and land in other people's ears. That's how you know you wrote a good poem, when you get up in the front of a crowd and you feel that it's right.

When you're doing a live reading, do you think the poems tend towards clarity over opacity as a rule, to keep the audience from tuning out?

A lot of it's in the delivery. I've heard hundreds of poets read aloud, and there's no one formula. But I do think that some things change as a result. I'll find myself at times in a longer poem, inserting these lines, these moments of pure clarity. They're like thematic statements, or images that are meant to be taken as touchstones.

It's something George Saunders talks about in fiction. Or it might not be George Saunders, it's one of those legends, who knows how it's formed. But maybe-George Saunders said you need moments in a story that operate the same way those little accelerators operate in Mario Kart, where your car goes over it and it zooms along more quickly. Zoom pads? I don't know if that's the phrase he used. But I think of this in poetry, too. Inserting these images, these little crystals, these nuggets of things that the reader can gobble up and zoom forward. Something that lets people know they're alive and reading a poem.

You write essays about all different poems every week. Every poem is different, and the topics vary, but there tends to be a through line supporting vulnerability, openness, and tenderness. Did you come up with a life philosophy or maxim that guides your writing and thinking outside the lens of poetry, or is it emergent from the poems you read?

I think it's emergent. It's actually a question I asked myself when I started the newsletter two years ago, in June 2020, in an attempt to be more intentional with my reading and to have an accountable practice. At the time I was very active on Twitter (I've since deactivated), but most of my Twitter personality was posting pictures of poems without commentary or context. And I thought, maybe instead of doing that and spending a lot of time on

Twitter, I'll just write about poems. I didn't really know what would happen. I was hoping it would allow me to be more patient with myself, to move a little more slowly through the world.

I also started this during the height of the pandemic when my work as a high school teacher felt precarious and difficult. I usually write my newsletters on Friday nights, and I relish that time. I find it really sacred. Because while I think about the poems, the poems become a vehicle for me to take intentional time to think about myself and the world. And for the better part of the past two and half years, I've found the world lacking in the grace I wish it had. I wanted to be someone who could offer that grace to others, and I look for that grace in poems. So that's why there's this throughline—which I've noticed too. It's almost an obsessive reminder to myself, every time I sit down to write the newsletter, to pay attention. It's okay to remind myself to be tender because when I'm done with this newsletter, I will go into a world that isn't always tender.

I would love to know more about that process. You write this newsletter every Friday night. What do you do if you sit down to write on Friday night and you don't know what to say? How do you overcome that?

It happens a lot. If I get back late from going out on a Friday night, it'll be midnight and I'm like, Oh, I gotta start my newsletter. I usually almost always start it on a Friday night no matter what. Even if it's just for 30 minutes at midnight, I start and let it marinate. My fiancée has seen me many times on Saturdays editing my newsletter on the phone while we're out. But ideally I like to write a basic draft on Friday night and then take Saturday to tinker with it in my free time, to add little bits and subtract and reread. I give myself a lot of grace with it and go wherever it goes.

What about the rest of the week? Do you have a daily routine for reading and writing?

I read every morning when I get up for 15-30 minutes. I like to read for 30 minutes to an hour before I go to sleep. And I read on the subway. Anytime I'm on the subway, it's my favorite thing to do. I read relentlessly. I love it. It's like, I'm not grateful for the pandemic at all, but I'm grateful that it allowed me space to get into the practice of reading. Now I feel weird and slightly gross if I go a couple days without it. When I'm reading a lot, it feels liberating, because I'm walking around with this big balancing brain that wants to make connections between anything and everything. I feel like I see bigger and feel bigger and dream bigger.

And do you write throughout the week as well?

Less so. It's partly due to my work. I wrote a lot more when I was an adjunct professor and working part time at a community center. I had a lot more time but it was a much more economically precarious life. My life is less economically precarious now but my work is so much more exhausting. The most difficult part is that it's emotionally exhausting. I think I've said it in my newsletter, but I come home often feeling like my eyes are being vacuumed from the inside of my face. It feels like my eyes are two inches deep in their sockets. I don't feel as much in a space of creativity. I'm always ready to read, which I'm grateful for, but it's harder to give myself space to write. It's one reason I love having the newsletter, because even if it doesn't feel like creative writing, it is writing, and it makes me feel good to write. It really does. It calms me down and puts me in touch with language, organizing language around something. Honestly sometimes when I'm writing a newsletter I'm like, this is so fun. It's exhilarating. I don't want to give that up selfishly because it's a real joy to me.

You also just wrote a novel.

[*laughs*]. That's true. You reminded me. That was born out of practice. I started it a year and a half ago. I would start, stop, start, stop, start, touch, that kind of thing. I was in a place with work where I was expressing literally the same thing I just told you, emotionally exhausted, and I just realized, well, Devin, you gotta just do it. If you love it, if writing means so much to you, then just try to do it a little bit each day. That's what happened. It worked and I felt great. So thank you for reminding me that I wrote a novel because now it means I just need to do another one so I can feel more in touch with that.

What's your advice for writers or readers of poetry who are terrified of poetry?

The first advice is to read. Truly read. I used to see my therapist in person—now it's all digital—but when it was in person he was not far from The Strand bookstore in New York. I would purposely go to The Strand before each session, partly because I was anxious and partly as a little treat to myself. My therapy treat. I'd browse their poetry section, which is never crowded. Half the people there don't know where it is. I would set my budget at, like seven dollars, and find something. But mostly what I would do is pick books off the shelf and flip through the pages. I'd spend 15 or 20 minutes there and maybe buy a book, maybe not. Then I'd go to therapy. Now I have way too many poetry books—or maybe there is no such thing. But reading is one of the first steps of wonder. I don't ever want to be in a place where I can't give myself permission to pick up a book of poems and be absolutely wonderstruck.

I had a teacher once whose advice was to put a book of poetry by your bed, then read one poem before going to sleep, and one poem the moment you wake up. That way the poem you read before sleep would seep into your dreams, and the poem you read when you wake would be jarring and almost in dreamscape because you're still groggy, trying to figure out the language.

Poetry is not prescriptive. It's a way of changing how you make connections between yourself and the world. What poetry has taught me is the ability and willingness to give myself permission to write or feel or see or pay attention to things in a way I wouldn't have otherwise. And I think that permission and that allowance and that willingness to surprise and be surprised, those are all wonderful consequences of a life in poetry. Or they have been for me.

Devin Kelly Recommends:

This poem (and all poems) by Steve Scafidi.

Walk or run around the Central Park Reservoir at the moment dawn makes its way over the buildings and shines all orange along the still water.

Buy a little rinkydink landline phone for your apartment. Give the number to a few people you care about. You'll get a million calls a day from telemarketers, but if you keep answering, one of those few people you gave your number to will call you with really great news. I promise.

Do something, as often as you can, to remind yourself that writing isn't always about publication. Read a poem out loud to a friend. Text someone to ask them what they're reading, what they're writing. Be interested for the sake of it, for the joy you get out of it. Watch a documentary about old Italian men and their dogs foraging for truffles. *Remind yourself that this is life; full of what is unsaid and imaginative and beautiful.*

Maybe it's a cold, kind of gray weekend morning. Maybe you're with someone you love; maybe you're not. So maybe, if you're not, you invite a few friends over. Maybe either way, you do this. You invite some people over in the late morning. You ask one friend to bring a bottle of red, another to bring some carrots, onions, celery. You go out while they're on their way and you get a can of peeled tomatoes and some ground meat. And everyone arrives, right? And it's already beautiful. And you divvy up the knives, and you dice the veggies, throw them in a big pot. You let them sweat in some butter and oil, you throw the meat in at some point. You each have a glass of wine and pour the rest in the pot. You throw it all in the pot with a parmesan rind and some bay leaves, a little bit of broth, a little bit of cream. You let it simmer. You open a window and feel the almost-winter come in and touch your cheek while you stand in the warm kitchen. You think about your life, and every sadness you've ever had – which, I know, is many—becomes as light as dust lifted up in a streak of sun shining through a window. You look at the little room of your life. Someone knows how to play the guitar. Someone wants to put on a John Prine record. All of it can happen. You have all day. The sauce will simmer. It will get better by the minute, every minute. Like love, I want to believe, if you work at it. Like life, I hope, if you let it work on you. It's been all day. It's cold outside but warm here. Will you join me?

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