

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

But Why Live: Poetry

May 13, 2020

[Jane] This is But Why: a Broadcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm. For seven weeks this spring, we're bringing our podcast to the airwaves for live radio shows in collaboration with Vermont's Agency of Education to offer kids who are out of school a chance for your own call-in radio show. And if you live in Vermont and surrounding areas, you can listen on the regular old radio, no Internet connection necessary.

Last week, we learned about two animals that are very active at this time of year, bats and beavers. At the very end of the show we gave you a little homework assignment that we hoped would be fun. We asked you to write a poem and, if you want to, you can read it during our show today. Now, if you missed that assignment or didn't get to it, that's totally fine, too. We're going to offer you some fun ideas to get you inspired to write a poem during the show today. You can write one now or ask a question about poetry or just enjoy the show and listen. If you want to add your voice to the conversation, grab your adult to help you give us a call or you can send an e-mail to questions@butwhykids.org.

Let's start with a poem from Oscar. Oscar is ten and lives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. And he told us he wrote this poem for Mother's Day.

[00:01:34] [Oscar]

Bike Rides with Mama

Another scrape.
My knees keep donating bloody skin to the sidewalk.
Here comes Mama keeping a straight face,
Even though I know she must be laughing inside because
It's not the first time I ride my bike into a fire hydrant.
Since we took off the training wheels,
I've been living on the edge.
The edge of a sidewalk,
The edge of the grassy hill,
The edge of her nerves.
No longer are her arms on my shoulder while I ride.
But she is always there.
I remember her clapping when I rode up to the mailbox.
"You're doing it!" she cheered.
That was three years ago.
Now, whenever we go on bike rides, we travel miles.
It's our thing.
On narrow streets, she leads the way.
Otherwise, we're side by side, even uphill.
And though she's not holding my shoulders
Like she did when I was seven,
I know I will always have balance because of her.
That's what a mother does.

To ride my bike with Mama
Is to tell her, without words,
That I love her.

[Jane] Oscar, I love that poem. I bet your mother was so, so happy to get it. Here's a poem from Cassia, who's seven and lives in Chatham, Ontario. Her poem is called "My Name is Waterfall".

[Cassia]

I walk slowly down the rocks.
My eyes are a big, whitish blue.
I carry a bubble of water.
My breath is salty.
My touch is soft and misty.
I move fast and sneaky.
My voice is smooth, soft, calm and scratchy.
My name is Waterfall.

[Jane] Hmmm, my name is Waterfall. Cassia, that is so beautiful. All right, let's get into more poems. We have more of you who are calling in to read some poems on air. And some of you may have questions about poems and poetry that you'd like to share with us as well. And I want to bring in our guide for the hour, Ted Scheu. Ted is known as "The Poetry Guy" around here in Vermont and beyond. He's been teaching poetry to kids for more than 20 years. And some of you listening might have been about to have a school event with Ted Scheu before your classes got canceled. So lucky us. He's with us today. Hi, Ted.

[Ted] Hi, Jane.

[Jane] I'm so excited to talk poetry with you.

[Ted] Well, I'm even more thrilled than you. This is such a cool honor to be on your awesome show.

[Jane] Oh, thank you. Thank you. But I'm going to start with a really tough question for you, although I think it's one you've probably answered many, many times. So, Ted, when we think about poems, some poems rhyme, some poems don't, some have a few words and then skip to the next line. Some have lines that run together. Some poems are designed to be read on the page. Others are designed to be spoken and heard aloud. Some poems follow rules about form and structure. Once you know the rules, some poems still break them. Some poems are very, very short. But some, like the epic poetry of Homer, are as long as a chapter book and have characters and plot like a novel would. So, Ted, what is poetry?

[Ted] That's a hard question. And you listed so many different ways because that's what poems are. They are lots of different things. To me, a poem is small, mostly small. It's focused, its laser focused on one important thing in your life, something you feel really strongly about. And it's sort of like...if kids live in the Northeast and especially in Vermont, they know that maple syrup, for example, is something we do here, we make here. And when you make maple syrup, you take lots and lots of sap from the maple tree and you have to boil it down. And it takes 40 drops of maple sap to make one delicious drop of

maple syrup that dances on your tongue. And it's kind of a process that everybody has to take this long, mostly long process of sort of distilling and boiling down your thoughts until it becomes a really important idea. And it doesn't have to take any particular shape. That's the cool thing about poems. The rules are super flexible.

[Jane] But so if a poem can be anything, how do you know if you're writing one?

[Ted] Oh, that's a good question. Well, yeah, it's sort of an open thing. There's so many different shapes and sizes of poems. But it is something that, you know in your heart you've written something. You know, like Oscar was writing about such detail. I love the way he described living on the edge. And Cassia was filled with details about her voice and her breath and her eyes. And it's looking at things really, really carefully. And so, you know, did I answer your question? Not really, because there isn't really an answer because poems take so many different forms. But they're not stories, even though Oscar kind of told a story. It's really just a focused little expression of something super important.

[Jane] So those epic poems and epic poets like Homer and The Odyssey and the Iliad, are those really kind of different than what we consider modern poems?

[Ted] I think so. I have a hard time....there aren't too many poets that write long stuff these days. And, you know, back then when they wrote those, they didn't even write them down! You had people who memorized and they would share it for many, many days, 24/7 without stopping. So that was kind of an unusual story type of poem, an epic narrative poem. And fortunately, most people write shorter stuff and I certainly do myself.

[Jane] Kids, maybe that's a good assignment for you. See, if you can just recite a poem 24/7, think about that. Maybe you can tell them that Ted Scheu told you you should do it. Let's get to some poems that kids are sending us. And we have lots of kids calling in, Ted, who want to read their poems aloud. And this is so exciting because I love it when people are able to read their own poems. But we got a found poem that was sent to us by the Cavendish Town Elementary sixth grade class. They actually wrote this poem on Zoom. They're having video conference meetings and they focused on things to do outside. So each student put a line in the chat box in their video conference and hit "send" at the very same time. And this is the poem that resulted:

Watching the birds that land on my feeder.
Going hiking.
Riding my bike.
Bright orange caterpillar under the leaves.
I breathe in air.
Running down the sidewalk as fast as I can.
Smelling the bright tulips growing.
Love it outside.

That's pretty good for a poem that everybody hits "send" on at the same time, don't you think?

[Ted] I'll say! And the ending, the last line is the perfect line for that list of things.

[Jane] No kidding. Thank you for that, Cavendish sixth graders. Matisse is calling in from Longmeadow, Massachusetts. Hi, Matisse. You have a poem?

[Matisse] Yeah.

[Jane] Go right ahead. We'd love for you to read it. Or say it, maybe you haven't written it.

[Matisse]

Nature's Song

When the rain falls down
And the lullabye starts
Every drop is a note.

[Jane] Oh, Matisse. I love that. What inspired you to write it?

[Matisse] The rain.

[Jane] I love it. Ted, what do you think?

[Ted] Yeah, pretty great, because when I listen to the rain, I do hear notes like you do, Matisse. Little, little, little notes like you're listening to music almost. It's so awesome.

[Jane] And let's hear from Charlotte, who's calling in from Asheville, North Carolina. Hi, Charlotte.

[Charlotte] Hi.

[Jane] What's your poem?

[Charlotte] It's called "The Corona Virus".

[Jane] Oooh, very timely.

[Charlotte]

Even though you cannot see it,
You will never want to eat it.
If you start to cough or sneeze,
Stay at home and hide your keys.
Even though you don't want to stay in,
If we work together, the virus can't win.
Staying home is hard to do,
But if we do, we'll make it through.
Sometimes the dates that we set
Have to get canceled that we won't regret.
Even though we don't want to stay in,
If we work together, the virus can't win.

[Jane] Oh, I love that, Charlotte. I'm not going to ask you what inspired it because that's pretty clear. And when you were writing it, you know, how did you think about what you wanted to express in your poem?

[Charlotte] I don't know, I wrote it down and.....yeah.

[Jane] Yeah, Charlotte, I love it. And I'm impressed because I cannot rhyme very easily, I find it frustrating to try to write poems that rhyme. And so I'm always really impressed with people like you who can do that well and still have a poem that makes total sense and has that sort of lyric quality where you can sense the rhythm. So thank you for calling in and sharing it with us and thank you for writing it. Ted, I mean, some people are really good at that kind of thing, like Charlotte clearly is.

[Ted] Yeah. It's a hard, hard thing to write a rhyming poem and, as you say, to have a meaning, something thoughtful that's in the poem that comes out as a message. And Charlotte, you did a super job. Getting the rhyming is not that easy, but getting the rhythm right is even harder because it has to be like a song. You could almost put it to music so that someone else can pick up your poem and read it. And that was beautiful. Wow.

[Jane] Do you think you can do that with practice? You know, does it have to be something that you're just naturally good at or can you learn and keep working at it and get better at that kind of song quality to writing poetry?

[Ted] Yeah, I think you can. Some people are kind of born with that natural interest and attraction to rhymes. I certainly had that attraction as a kid...Dr. Seuss and other rhyming poets and songs. Actually, lyrics of songs had a huge impact on me. I didn't do much writing, but I was listening to lots of music and listening to poems that were read to me. And so the rhythm of those poem melodies, I call them, was in my brain. And so I am drawn to that form. But I try to discourage kids from rhyming unless they're really good at it, 'cause it takes a while. And I guess the point, and Charlotte figured this out, is it doesn't come off your pencil first draft. Wow, you have to kind of wrestle and juggle it for a long time until it sounds right.

[Jane] Charlotte was also writing about something that's happening right now, Ted. And that is one of the things that I really get a lot of value out of. Sometimes reading poems, but also writing poetry, is that ability to...you know, you were talking earlier about focusing your words and focusing what you're writing about when you write poems. And sometimes that's so helpful to help figure out what you're feeling or what you're going through. And you do that, too, right?

[Ted] Yeah, I try to focus. A poem should be, as I said, you know, a little focused feeling or observation that you're making and sharing, as Charlotte did, as some advice to people. So it needs to be that narrowly focused approach, whether it's rhyming or not.

[Jane] Would you like to share a poem with us?

[Ted] I would be happy to. And I am taking on Charlotte's lead. I'll share one that I wrote recently. The thing about this coronavirus and the quarantine that we're kind of doing and doing a little less now...the hardest thing for me...and I think for a lot of people, a lot of kids and little kids and big kids too, like me...is the uncertainty of it. Right? We just don't know exactly how long it's going to happen and last. So I wrote a poem recently and you'll notice when I read my poems, that I write not in my 66 Year Old Teacher Guy voice, I write poems in a child's voice. My writer's voice is about an eight or nine year old, sometimes younger, sometimes older. But that's sort of how the poems fly out of my pencil. So here's a poem about that. It's called "I'm Pretty Sure".

I'm pretty sure that someday soon this virus thing will pass

And someday I'll return to school and sit inside my class.
I'm pretty sure my friends and I will meet up face to face
So we can joke and laugh and scream and climb and skip and race.
I'm pretty sure my Dad will smile the way he always does.
And Mom will give us answers that are clearer than "Because".
I'm pretty sure my dog will wag her tail just like before,
And I won't feel afraid of things that lurk outside our door.
I'll soon forget my worries that my granny will survive,
And I'll be pretty certain that my birthday will arrive.
The earth will keep on spinning and the sunrise will endure.
But that is all I'm confident about, I'm pretty sure.

[Jane] I like that. And I see what you mean, too, about your voice, because presumably, Ted, your mom is not telling you what to do too much anymore.

[Ted] Not anymore.

[Jane] Let's hear a few more poems that kids are calling in with. And as I said, I love hearing everybody being able to say their poems in their voice, because when you're reading your own poetry, you get to put the emphasis where *you* want it to be and you don't have somebody else interpreting it. But, that being said, one of the joys of reading poetry is being able to interpret it yourself. And for some students and young people, if you're feeling shy and you don't want to call in and read your poem, that's fine, too. You can send it to questions@butwhykids.org. Julian is six and sent us a poem, Ted, and I think you're going to recognize what form or what rules this poem follows. Julian says:

Poppies in the breeze
like streams of water flowing
with butterflies all around.

[Ted] Well, it sounds like a haiku.

[Jane] Yeah, I checked out the syllables before I read it. Can you describe what a haiku is?

[Ted] Yeah. Haiku is really awesome and very hard. Julian, you did a great job with that. I think it's a hard form of poetry because it's only 17 syllables long. It can be a little either side, but it's an ancient form, a thousand years old from Japan. And the first line of your poem, it's usually set in nature. It's usually happening like Julian's poem right now. So it's kind of in the present. And there's usually a sense that's involved so you're listening or you're hearing things that are happening. And so the first line of your poem is almost always five syllables, not five words, but five syllables. And then the second line is seven. And then the last line is five. So it comes to seventeen altogether, which is really hard to do. And it's really fun to do.

[Jane] And Julian did such a great job, too.

[Ted] Yeah, that was super great.

[Jane] Isabel is calling in from Manhattan. Hi, Isabel. You're on the air. You have a poem for us? I think I hear you, Isabel, are you coming on the line?

[Isabel] Yeah.

[Jane] Yeah.

[Isabel]

Riding on my bike is fun.

Riding on my bike is for one.

The car next to me goes "HONK, HONK, HONK".

The helmet on my head, it goes "BONK, BONK, BONK".

The water bottle in my basket goes "GLONK, GLONK, GLONK".

When I push the seat it goes "CREEK, CREEK, CREEK".

When I pedal, the water on my shoes goes "SQUEEK, SQUEEK, SQUEEK".

The chains on my wheels go "CLING, CLING, CLING."

The finger on my bell goes "RING, RING, RING".

Riding on my bike is fun.

Riding on my bike is for one.

Riding on my bike is fun.

Now my poem is done!

[Jane] Isabel, I love it. And Ted, one of the things I love about Isabel's poem is the way she repeats that word that is a sound. And it sort of helps my brain understand and picture that sound as she's reading it.

[Ted] It's beautiful.

[Jane] It's like an onomopoeia, right? It's the sound that the thing actually makes. "My water bottle goes "GLONK, GLONK, GLONK"." That was so cool.

[Ted] Now that's a funny word, "onomopoeia". But it means you're using words that have sounds in them, so you can actually hear her honking and bonking. It was really fun.

[Jane] Isabel, thank you for that. Let's hear from Ramona, who's calling us from Glenside, Pennsylvania. Hi, Ramona.

[Ramona] Hi.

[Jane] Do you have a poem?

[Ramona] Mmhmm.....

[Jane] Great.

[Ramona]

Miss Mary, Miss Mary

Eating all she likes.

When cat eats her cream,

She will scream.

[Jane laughing] Ooooh! I like it, Ramona. That was a very great one, I like thinking of Miss Mary. That was not who I thought Miss Mary was going to be. Thank you for sharing that. Listeners, if you are a young poet, you can share your poems with us. It's me. I'm here. And Ted Scheu, who teaches poetry workshops all over the state of Vermont and beyond. And coming up next, we're also going to hear from spoken word poet and educator Rajnii Eddins. We'll be right back.

[Jane] I'm Jane Lindholm and this is But Why, a broadcast for curious kids. We're talking about poetry today with Ted Scheu. Here's a poem from Dario, who's five and lives in Milton, Ontario.

[Dario]

Volcano rumbles louder and louder.
The lava flows quicker and quicker.
The lava bending the island.
Creatures ran away.

[Jane] That was Dario's poem. I love thinking about that, it's taking me back in time to an erupting volcano. And here's a poem from nine year old Brooke in Juneau, Alaska.

[Brooke] Hi, my name is Brooke and I'm reading my poem "Rushing Stream".

With trickling music, the rushing stream flows
Alongside the bank where the green rushes grow.
So cheerfully babbling over grey pebbles
While the birds chirp with light, high pitched trebles.
It swirls over the shore, to wet sandy edges
Slowly eroding its precarious ledges.
Smoothly swishing over the round river's stones,
As the wind whistles in fast changing tones,
Cascading round a misty bend
To swish down to its journey's end.

[Jane] Thanks for sending that, Brooke. I love that poem. We're hearing from so many young people with such beautiful poems and poetry and so much you're observing in the world around you and thinking about and then, as Ted mentioned, sort of distilling it down from a big thought into something really tight and clear and a real point of view. You guys are amazing. Let's hear from Nora, who's calling in from Shoreham, Vermont. Hi, Nora.

[Nora] Hi. My poem is called "Butterfly's Grace".

Butterflies are nature's beauty to the eye.
And what they are is so much beauty.
They lay eggs upon milkweed they eat.
Butterfly's wings are like smooth butter.
They are so graceful.
One, two, three, four
Oh, you know it's true.
It's oh so beautiful.

[Jane] Nora, that's a beautiful poem. Wow. Thank you for sharing it. I want to pair your poem with one from Bella, who's calling in from Orem, Utah. Because, Bella, what you told our producer who's screening the phone calls is that your poem is about flowers. And so a poem about butterflies and a poem about flowers seemed like they could go really well together. Are you there, Bella?

[Bella] Yes.

[Jane] You want to read your poem?

[Bella] Yes.

[Jane] Great.

[Bella]

I saw white flowers.
When they didn't bloom
They looked like little balls.
Why do flowers bloom?

[Jane] Bella, I love that. Thank you. And boy, you ask a really important question there. Why do flowers bloom? Thank you for your poems, Bella and Nora. They do pair well together. We've got the pollinator and we've got the flowers. Ted, we have you here. But let's bring another guest into the conversation as well. Rajnii Eddins is a spoken word poet and emcee and a teacher. He was the youngest member of the African-American Writers Alliance starting when he was eleven. And he teaches around Vermont and beyond now. Rajnii, nice to talk with you today. Thank you so much for being on the show.

[Rajnii] Always an honor to be here. Thanks for having me.

[Jane] Have you been hearing some of our young poets share their poems that they've written?

[Rajnii] Definitely. It's beautiful to hear the creative imagination of all the children and it's awesome to hear their words.

[Jane] Yeah. So when you talk to young people about writing poetry, I mean, you have your own experience. You started with the African-American Writers Alliance when you were eleven. How did you know that you wanted to write poetry and that you had a voice that deserved to be heard?

[Rajnii] Well, you know, even before I started sharing a lot of my own work and creating my own poems, my mother has always been a tremendously imaginative person and creative and playful person. So she would always make up songs in the kitchen sometimes like "There's a monster in the kitchen trying to cook and he's giving everybody dirty looks. There's a monster, come and see. There's a monster in the kitchen trying to cook." So she would always be fashioning little ditties like this. A lot of my inspiration comes from her because she is also a tremendous writer. That's why I kind of first encountered the craft. She would have me read her poetry back to her. You know, sometimes whether I wanted to or not. And I think that gave me a love for language and the power of words to inspire

and touch people's hearts and minds. And also just the magic that you can find in sharing your own story and your own perspective on things. So I love that about words to this day.

[Jane] Rajnii, Ted said that when he writes a poem, his sort of inner voice, his writing voice, is like the voice of a about an eight year old. How old is your writing voice?

[Rajnii] Well, I've never been asked that. I'm not sure. I think when I was younger, a lot of my poems were to either girls I liked that. I never was brave enough to tell that to, but would tell it to my journal, or about just kind of challenging things in the world, [00:23:35] you know, like racism and making sure people are treated equally and fairly. So I feel like I had an older voice pretty early on. My voice has always been pretty much my age wise. But I think early on I had got this in my mind that words could be used to transform the world in positive ways. So I wanted to speak very truthfully and powerfully to a lot of the things I saw in the world that needed to be changed.

[Jane] Ted, Rajnii started writing poems really young. Did you also start when you were a kid?

[Ted] No, Jane, I wasn't attracted to them, but there weren't...frankly, I'm a lot older than Rajnii. There weren't that many to choose from back then. There were some British poets that were sort of talking about, you know, a style of life that wasn't at all like mine. And there was Dr. Seuss, thankfully, and a few others. But no, I didn't do much writing. I was one of those kids, that kind of struggled. And my mom would read some to me, but I didn't have as awesome a mom, I don't think...she was pretty awesome, but not as creative as Rajnii's.

[Jane. Laughter all around] Yeah, Rajnii, that's pretty cool to have a mom who's actually, you know, sort of singing to you and singing poems. And, you know, when you talked about the way she would make these sort of games and verbal games in the kitchen, you sang it. And it seems like from what I know of your work, that that vocal quality, that doing it out loud part and sometimes singing your poems is really important. How do you think about that idea of making it something that should be out loud for others?

[Rajnii] Well, I think that speaking and expressing, you know, singing, using the voice is something that really brings the words to life, brings a story to life. You know, we all have, you know, the voices, of course, in our heads when we read something or hearing the poem. But I think when you hear that voice of the person who is actually expressing that idea, that experience, that moment of that story, it gives it a whole other dimension of experience for you. It takes you on a journey more vividly, I think, than sometimes can be drawn from just reading out the words.

[Jane] Hmm. Let's go to one of our other young poets who's calling in. Connell is calling in from East Haven, Vermont. Go right ahead. You're on the air. You have a poem for us?

[Connell] Yes. I'm doing this for my class in Riverside School, an independent school. So, it's "Kangaroo".

Bouncy, cute, running,
Jumping, fighting.
Really great,
Cool animal.
Marsupial.

[Jane] So, Connell, have you ever seen a kangaroo? Is this an animal that you're especially interested in?

[Connell] I think I've seen one at the zoo? Yeah. I've seen one at the zoo in Boston.

[Jane] And did writing this poem about the kangaroo make you look at kangaroos differently or you're thinking of it as just sort of like, you know, this is something I have to do for my school.

[Connell] I thought of it as sort of like just something I had to do for my school, but I felt like that's just something I have to do for my school and everybody who's there.

[Jane] Yeah. Well, thank you for reading it. Yeah, go ahead. You were gonna say something else?

[Connell] I just read the first two pages of "My Side of the Mountain" and it's like boom ideas.

[Jane] That is awesome. Connell thank you very much for reading your poem. Let's hear one from Etta who's calling in from Craftsbury, Vermont. Hi, Etta.

[Etta] Hello.

The Mermaid

I see a mermaid gliding thru the water
Looking so pale.
She makes a tiny ripple.
She can have any color hair.
She lives in any place.
She is magical, mystical, beautiful.
I love mermaids.

[Jane] Oh, I love that one too. That's so cool. Thank you for sharing that poem, Etta. Let's get another poem in here before we come back to Rajnii, because Rajnii, I want you to read a poem, too. I want to hear one of yours. But first, Eve, who's with us from Orwell, Vermont. Eve, you have a poem to share, too?

[Eve] Yeah, I do.

[Jane] Great.

[00:28:17] [Eve] OK.

Poet's garden, where is the poet?
Poet's garden, who is the poet?
Blossoming trees, plums, pears, apples
Falling to the ground, blowing in the wind.
Each one a single word, thought, petal.
Something wispy in the background.
Same secret. Blue gem? Magic doorway?

One bench surrounded by green grass,
Carpeting the world in light.
Colored buds blooming into a sea of which no one can explain.
Going on forever, disappearing.
Gone. Into a yellow sky.

[Jane] Eve, I like that. So what inspired that poem?

[Eve] Well, I used to live in Chicago and I would go to (some days I don't remember the name of the museum) but they have this Van Gogh, "Poet's Garden". I would always look at it and it was my favorite painting in the museum. So I thought of it and I was, like, "Oh, I think I should write a poem about that", because words just came to me, like, describing it and putting them together as a poem.

[Jane] Eve, I love that. That's so cool. And thank you for sharing that. It's really cool when another piece of art can inspire your own art. And Rajnii, I mean, that is one of the cool, cool things. I mean, Eve said these words just came to her. It was sort of like the poem was there. Does that happen to you?

[Rajnii] You know, sometimes that does happen. And it's amazing to witness when it does, when you're kind of so struck by an idea or urge, a passion, that arises in your mind that you just have to get it out. It's like the poem takes on a life of its own, you know? So I love...I appreciate that about that inspiration.

[Jane] Will you read or recite one of your poems for us?

[Ranjii] I'd love to share...actually, I was going to share one of Mother's pieces. She has an incredible poem called "Nobody Came" that I think is really even more valuable today in the world where we need to really affirm and practice peace amongst each other and a show of more of a love for peace in the world. So this is a poem called "Nobody Came". Also a song.

[Ranjii singing]

There should be oceans of tears. [Pause] Excuse me, that's one of my pieces.

[Ted] That sounded good!

[Jane] Yeah, it did sound good!

[Ranjii] That was the teaser. All right, here we go.

I'd like there to be a war where
Nobody came.
I'd like there to be a war where
Nobody came.
Where the gunner's didn't show
And the flyers didn't flow
Like a river carrying death to those below.
Where artillery moved too slow.
Missed the boat and the whole tent show.
We all refuse to go. We all refuse to go.

I'd like there to be a war where
Nobody came.
I'd like there to be a war where
Nobody came.
Where the infantry's so low
In they taste the snow.
And the bomber's steering clear.
They won't go anywhere near.
And sharpshooters close their eyes
Much to the brass' great surprise.
Where's the peace where no one cries?
We chose the peace,
With no reprise.

I'd like there to be a war where
Nobody came.
I'd like there to be a war where
Nobody came.
Where we first will check ourselves.
See what our
Tweek where tweeking...
Then maybe check ourselves again.
Remembering some crazy macho need
has not signified
cannot signify
So I'll say it once again.

I'd like there to be a war where
nobody came.
I'd like there to be a war where
nobody came.
We'd like there to be a war where
nobody came. Wouldn't you?

[Jane] Rajnii, thank you. Thank you for that. And thanks to your Mom for that. What's your Mom's name?

[Rajnii] My mother's name is Randee Eddins and she was the founder of the African - American Writers' Alliance back home in Seattle. It's a foundation for song writers and poets of African descent sharing their art and it really got me immersed in the craft as a youth. So I always am thankful.

[Jane] Well, I loved hearing that and I loved hearing your voice and your power in singing it and singing your Mom's words, but also through your voice and the power in that, and carrying it from one generation to the next. And that idea that, you know, we all have the power to sort of elevate our voices and elevate and illuminate other's voices, as well, while we're doing this work of being artists and enjoying and learning from art. So, Rajnii, thank you so much for being with us.

[Ranjii] Oh, my honor. Thanks for holding space.

[Jane] That's Rajnii Eddins. He's a poet, author and facilitator and his most recent work is called, "Their Names are Mine". We have a little more time to talk poetry today and we want to hear more of your poems. And we know we can't get to all of your poems, but we are so enjoying hearing you read your poems and thinking about poems and poetry with you. Here's a poem from Evan, who's 8 and lives in San Marco, California.

[Evan]

I have a silver key
That is special to me.
A bad guy stole the key
And ran away from me.
I chased him really fast
But could not get past.
I hijacked a car
But couldn't get far.
The town police stopped me
Before I got the key.
Now I'm in jail.
That was a fail.
And that bad guy who stole the key...
He'll always be a mystery.

[Jane] I like that, Evan. And this one is from Andy, who's 7 and also lives in California. Andy sent us a haiku.

[Andy]

We feed the black crows.
They eat our driveway.
They like fish crackers.

[Jane] 5, 7, 5. We talked about haiku earlier, Ted. That was a great one there from Andy.

[Ted] It painted a picture perfectly.

[Jane] Yeah, that was wonderful, and let's hear from some other poets and young poets and slightly older but still young poets. I want to bring in Iris Robert. Iris is a high school student here in Vermont. And Iris writes with the Young Writers Project and has her own podcast called Line Break. Hi, Iris. Nice to talk with you.

[Iris] Hi. I'm so excited to be on!

[00:35:03] [Jane] Well we're so excited to have you. And so, I think, are many of our young poets because, you know, it's one thing to hear from old people like me and Ted about poetry, but it's another thing to hear from a high schooler, because, you know, this is one of the ways that you think about, well, "What can I do and what am I going to be like when I'm just a little bit older?" and, you know, in that sort of space between childhood and adulthood. So what makes you care about poetry, Iris?

[Iris] Oh, I care about poetry because I feel like there aren't any, you know, rules for how I can have to express myself. Like I can just write down whatever is on my mind. And that's poetry. And it's so freeing to be able to just have that in my life.

[Jane] Will you read one of your own poems for us?

[Iris] Yes. This is called "Wishes".

Age Five.

Standing before a cloudy mirror.

Can't decide between purple or dark red hair bows.

Eleven minutes past.

Finally time to leave.

"Go on, let's hurry, hurry, Iris."

Jacket stickers are still my favorite keepsakes.

Love is twirling around in a tutu.

Liquid dreams fill up my bones.

Marshmallow melodies play in my mind.

Nudges from reality sneak past over meadows of thoughts.

Purple bows rule over my hair,

Queens of the amber waves.

Resting on my wrist are seven bracelets...

A pink, blue, green, yellow, orange titanic monstrosity,

All the color in the world.

Uncloaked, my soul shows a thousand vivid candles,

All on fire and waiting to be wished upon.

lullabies, blow out your candles, darling girl.

Watch as your wish zips into the cloudless sky.

[Jane] Oh, Iris, that's beautiful.

[Iris] Oh, thank you.

[Jane] I like that you chose one that is in your voice now, or now-ish, but looking back on yourself as a five year old.

[Iris] Mm hmm.

[Jane] And Ted, what do you hear in that?

[Ted] Yeah, I love that, that she's looking backwards. And I heard some of the most beautiful images. "Marshmallow melodies" was a combination of words that just sounded like music to me. It was music, melodies, but lovely alliteration. We call that "alliteration" when the m's are continued. And I just thought it was a marvelous memory. Thanks, Iris.

[Iris] Thank you so much.

[Jane] Ted, when you think about writing poems and poetry, I understand that in some ways you think people who are writing poems...in some ways writing poetry can make you a better writer. Can you explain why you think that?

[Ted] Yeah, I think that's the message I like to leave with kids when I teach. There's lots of reasons poems are great, but to me the reason, the absolute top reason, that writing a poem is great is because they're so short, mostly. A poet has to really choose her words or his words super carefully. Every single word that goes into your poem, especially if they rhyme (but not necessarily), every poem has to have powerful words. And I like to make the point that of all the words we use in our poems, and you heard a lot of great ones, verbs, action words are the most [powerful]. Like Etta had "gliding" and "flicking". And Brooke in her Alaska poem had a rushing stream, you could even hear the water, the way it sounded. So to me, it's a word choice issue. And once you write your first draft, that's fine. But then my favorite part of writing is the juggling that happens after your first draft when you go back and start to think of every word. Is that the best possible word to describe what I want to say? And to me, it makes you a better writer of everything. Even letters to your mom!

[Jane] Which you should all be writing! Iris, I mentioned that you write with the Young Writers Project, which is a program here in Vermont. But I imagine a lot of other states also have programs for young people who are writers and want to get better and explore writing and poetry and other forms of writing. Can you describe what you do with Young Writers Project?

[Iris] Ah, yes. So, it's a really amazing community really, where you can share your writing and get feedback on your writing and read other young teens' writing. And it's just really great to see that and get the support from everyone. And I started my podcast, Line Break, and I'm featuring teen writers from Y.W.P. and it's so cool to hear writing from my peers and just talk about random things in our life.

[Jane] We're going to put a link up to Line Break, Iris's podcast on the But Why kids page which you can find at butwhykids.org so you can listen to Iris and the other young poets from the Young Writers Project talk about poetry. Iris, thank you so much for being on the program today.

[Iris] Oh, thank you so much for having me.

[Jane] That's Iris Robert, a high school student in Vermont. We've got more poems and poetry here on the show in the last few minutes of the program. But first, let's go to Izzy, who's calling from Downers Grove, Illinois. Hi, Izzy. I understand you have a question for Ted.

[Izzy] What do we celebrate in Poetry Month?

[Jane] Oh, good question. Ted, what is Poetry Month all about?

[Ted] Well, Izzy, every month is poetry month for me, but April is officially Poetry Month. And we celebrate so much of what we've been hearing today. We celebrate the spoken word, the written word, images that are painted with words. So it's a celebration of poetry and I highly recommend, not just in April but all year long, to find a favorite poet. Read a lot of different poetry, find one. I have several that I just love. And I read them over and over. And the music of their words just inspires me to write my own poems. So that's a great question. I think a National Poetry Month is just a celebration of words, the sounds of words.

[Jane] You know, it's interesting, Ted, you say, "Find a poet that you like," and and then, you know, what I find is that you wind up coming back to that poet and those poems. I've been thinking a lot right now about the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop. And my stepmother wrote a book about Elizabeth Bishop. So I've spent some time thinking about her, Elizabeth Bishop, and her poetry. And she has a poem called "One Art" that's about losing and sort of coming to terms with losing things. And even though in the past I never would have thought about that poem in this way, right now, while we can't go out to see friends as much, we can't go to school, we can't do the things that we've always come accustomed to doing, I've been thinking about that poem and that new approach to thinking about losing things. So I find that you sort of see your favorite poems in a different way as you move through life.

[Ted] Yes. Every time I read a poem, I pick up something different, the sounds of the words, the images that are being painted. And I'm finding that I find myself inspired. There's several of my poems that I've written that were inspired by someone else's concept or someone else's basic premise of their poem. I wasn't copying, we should never do that, but it is it is pretty cool to to see poems and read them again. It's like going back to see and visit an old friend.

[Jane] And that's not cheating to be inspired by someone else's poem?

[Ted] I don't think so. No, you're coming up with your own thoughts, your own images, your own ideas. And that's the important thing. But it's fun to be inspired by someone else.

[Jane] Will you read us another of your poems?

[Ted] Yeah, sure, I'd love to. This is a little bit of a silly one. I have a silly voice sometimes, but it also could be a suggestion for how we might weather the storm of our quarantine right now, we're inside. And so I wrote this a couple of years ago but it works and it's worked for me. I actually did this. The poem is called, "I Wrote Myself a Letter."

I wrote myself a letter. It's true,
I'm not pretending.
It's filled with lots of juicy news
That soon I will be sending.
So when I get it in the mail,
I'll know what I've been doing.
The games I've played,
The trades I've made,
The food that I've been chewing.
I told myself important stuff
That I should know about me.
I made it absolutely clear
I couldn't live without me.
I gave myself some good advice
To keep myself on track.
And maybe if I'm lucky,
Someday I'll write me back.

So grab a piece of paper and an envelope, get a stamp from your parents and write yourself maybe a poem and put it in an envelope and send it off. And then when it comes in the mail, you can go, "Look, somebody really cool sent me a poem!"

[Jane] Or even keep it for when you're older. I've found some things from when I was younger, and it actually is kind of amazing to realize and remember and that flood of feelings that comes back to you when you read your own poetry.

[Ted] Yeah, it's really fun. Poems I wrote twenty years ago, I pick them up and I sometimes scratch my head and wonder where that idea came from. But they're usually really fun to revisit. I totally, totally agree.

[00:44:10] [Jane] Let's see if we can fit a few more poems in. We're getting close to the end of the show, so I don't think we're gonna get to everybody, but we'll see if we can squeeze in at least a few more. Let's go to Cole, who's with us from Mattapoissett, Massachusetts. Hi, Cole.

[Cole] Hi. This poem is an ode and it's to our dog, Bella, that we're going to get.

When I see Bella, I hear a ruff ruff.
I daydream about the time we will be together
And the love you wear on your sleeve
For the world to see.
At a water park is where I want to be
Splashing together with you,
Bella.

[[Jane] Oh, I love that, Cole, and congratulations, what a cool thing to be getting a new dog. I'm going to see if we can squeeze a few more in here so we won't pause on your poem, but it's really cool. Adeline is calling in from Corinth, Vermont. Hi, Adeline. Go right ahead.

[Adeline] Hi. My poem is called "Weeping Willow".

Green, peaceful, fun-catching,
Hung on by children
Sat on by two kids
My weeping willow tree.
My favorite place to be.

[Jane] Oh, that's beautiful. And do you have a weeping willow tree?

[Adeline] Ah, yes. On our farm, we have a few that I like to climb.

[Jane] Oh, Adeline, thank you for sharing that poem. What a beautiful image. Lena is calling in from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Lena, go ahead.

[Lena]

I wanted to see a unicorn,
But rather
I saw
A big moose.

[Jane] Well, you know, what I love about that is that it's beautifully put, but also right to the point. You could put a period on it. Ted, that was what you're talking about, you sort of focus your thoughts when you write a poem, in some ways.

[Ted] Exactly, like a laser beam on the two horns instead of one.

[Jane] Willem is calling in from Orford, New Hampshire. Hi, Willem.

[Willem] Hi.

[Jane] You have a poem for us?

[Willem] Yes.

[Jane] Go right ahead.

[Willem]

My Sister

My sister
Sits on the couch and reads
An audiobook
Motionless and
Unblinking
With her head
Resting
On a pillow
Her toes wiggle
With every
Word.

[Jane] Willem, that's so great. Have you read that for your sister?

[Willem] Yes.

[Jane] What did she say?

[Willem] Well, she was kind of surprised that I had been doing it cuz I snuck in the room.

[Jane] Well, that's very cool. I really appreciate that you wrote a poem about your sister and I bet, you know, if you give that to her, she's going to appreciate that for the rest of her life. Thank you. Ted, we don't have much time left, but I wanted to see if you had any ideas for us for what we call writing prompts or something that we could use as an idea to get us started with writing, especially if just the idea of writing a poem feels daunting or feels like, "I don't even know how to get started!" Do you have any ideas for us?

[Ted] Yeah. Here's an idea. All you need is your imagination, which I know you all have. And a mirror. Don't go off and find one now. But wait a second. And a pencil and paper. And I love to do this for myself and with kids. Go to the mirror tonight, maybe with a bright light, and look at your amazing face. And look with a poet's eye. Look at what your eyes look like. What do they remind you of? Maybe they're puddles of maple syrup if you live in

Vermont, surrounded by vanilla ice cream. Or like mine... slices of kiwi doing the backstroke in milk and eyebrows could be furry caterpillars and your nose could be a mountain and your skin could be peach ice cream or fudge ice cream. So think about it and then just make a little list poem. "My eyes are like puddles of maple syrup swimming in ice cream", you know, and take maybe five or six different face parts you pick and just describe them using the most beautiful words you can and make sure you give a verb. Don't just say your eyebrows are like furry caterpillars, but maybe they're doing the Cha-Cha across your forehead. So give them something to do. That makes your image come alive. So just make a little poem about your face, your awesome, amazing face. Just using similes...those things when you say something is like something else. So I think it will make a pretty fantastic poem. Or you could write about your sister and talk about her wiggling toes.

[Jane] Yeah, that would be pretty cool. Well, Ted, this has been such a pleasure talking and thinking about poetry. And, you know, I wish that we were all in our classrooms and in our school groups still doing our poetry workshops. But what a treat to be able to have you with us today.

[Ted] Well, Jane, it's been a huge pleasure, a treat for me. I'm a big fan of your show and when I look at a Google search, But Why comes up as the top one in the whole country, which is pretty cool. So this is a great honor. So thanks for including me.

[Jane] Oh, you're welcome. And thank you. And thanks to all of our budding poets for sharing your poems with us today. What a treat to be able to hear you read your poems. And again, thanks to Ted Scheu, the author of six poetry collections. He's also a poetry educator. You can find him doing poetry workshops in schools around the country and also at poetryguy.com. That's all the time we have for today. Next week, you're going to want to join us here because we are going to be talking about space and space exploration with the chief scientist at NASA, Jim Green. So send your space questions to questions@butwhykids.org and listen live next Friday at 1 p.m..

We also have great other shows coming up for you, including a kid press conference with the Vermont governor and a show all about music. Thanks to James Stewart, Melody Bodette, and our producer, Lydia Brown. And our theme music that you're hearing now is by Luke Reynolds. I'm Jane Lindholm. We'll be back next Friday. Until then, stay curious.