

Picture the Poet – Fusion Digital Gallery audio transcript:

Poet Andrew Motion, interviewed at National Portrait Gallery, London, 14 March 2014

For me, poems begin with a sense of, well, I think it is a sort of musical ache if that means anything to anybody else; it's a preverbal back-of-the-mind unlit part of the mind yearning to complete something.

Robert Frost very beautifully says 'a poem begins with a lump in the throat, a love sickness, a homesickness'. That has always meant a lot to me, that remark, partly because it catches the distress often involved in writing, lovesickness and homesickness being horrible things, but also because it allows us to think a little bit about preverbalness; a lump in the throat is not quite a verbalised thing yet.

So, far back in my mind, I have a feeling of wanting to complete something that is unfinished, to satisfy something which is already disappointed, to complete the circle in some way; but what idea that might have to do with at that point, I really don't know. And I then drag it to the slightly better-lit front of my mind, and in that process words, what we call ideas, concepts, phrases, allusions, references, bits of childhood etc. etc., all start to stick to it; so it becomes something that is recognisable as a poem.

Writing poems for me, and I guess for most people, is a strange business of getting the side of your mind that knows what it's doing, that *is* calculating, that might go to a place to get inspiration, with the side of your mind that really doesn't know what it's up to at all; that is the expression of your 'un' or 'sub' conscious. Good poems don't get written unless there is that harmonious relationship created between knowing and not knowing, between yin and yang, between light and dark, between knife and fork, between conscious and unconscious.

So my solution to that, to the question of how to arrange that balance or marriage or integration of those two things, is perhaps rather paradoxically-sounding to have a very strict writing pattern in my life, where my body now at my great age seems to know that this is what's expected of it, my brain seems to know that this is what's expected of it. So I get up very early in the mornings—I get up at about half-past-five, I feed the cat, I have a shower. So I am working before six o'clock.

So I then, on an average day, have several hours, sometimes many hours, before I have to go and have to do something else: kill dragons, earn my living, teach, write reviews, answer my emails, whatever it might be. And in that time, which is I hope fed by whatever happens in my mind when I'm asleep, which is, whatever it is, not quite like how my brain works when I'm awake, when the possibilities of that rapprochement between different things that I've just been talking about is most likely to occur. So I'm at once fully awake, but off somewhere in my imagination.

I have a few favorite words. My favorite word of all is probably 'evening'. The poems I like are elegiac poems. That helps to explain why I like 'evening'; it's the end of the day, it's coming to the end of the day. I like the vowel-consonant arrangements in that word, which seems to describe the feeling that an evening has. When I say the word evening to myself I see purpling light, I feel the wind drop, I see people coming home, I feel a sort of coziness coming into life that the world of work doesn't readily allow; the world of coming home, indeed of fires being lit, of settling down for the *night*, which is another word that I like very much. So generally speaking, the words I like are words, which in some definite but unostentatious way do enact the thing that they mean.

I think the friendships between poets, the famous friendships between poets, are exemplary things. So Robert Frost and Edward Thomas, Wordsworth and Coleridge, and I'm sure there are many others, but those are the two that have meant most to me looking back over literary history.

I met when I was a student at Oxford, somebody who is now a novelist, Alan Hollinghurst, and we became very fast friends then and we've remained so ever since. He is the person I show my poems to before I send them off to my publisher, and I'm the person that he shows his novels to before he sends them to his publisher.

There are plenty of poets that I have read over the years that I've, as it has turned out, not been ready for yet. So when I first read eighteenth-century poetry, when I first read Alexander Pope, I couldn't quite get it, but now I read Pope every week, he has become one of my favourite poets. Getting older, part of me wants to say *growing up*, has allowed me to see things there, which I simply missed first time around.

If someone had an emerging appetite for poems, I think that they could do very much worse than go to the *Poetry Archive*, this thing that I set up as Laureate, and cruise through it looking for poets they like. And if they find somebody they like, dwell with them for a bit, then maybe explore that further, get that person's work. If they don't like it, don't fret about it. Get a good anthology and just hunt through it looking for the things that you like.