

## Close Talking Episode #115

### “The Problem of Describing Trees” by Robert Hass

December 11, 2020

#### Show Notes

Connor 0:07

Hello and welcome to Close Talking the world's most popular poetry analysis podcast from Cardboard Box Productions Incorporated. I am co-host Connor McNamara Stratton and with my good friend Jack Rossiter-Munley, we read a poem,

Jack 0:21

talk about the poem,

Connor 0:23

and read the poem again.

Jack 0:25

Before we get into today's selection, a quick note that if you like what we do here at Close Talking and you have a spare minute, it would mean the world to us if you would give the podcast a rating and review on Apple podcasts.

Connor 0:36

Those ratings and reviews help boost us up the algorithm and find new listeners.

Jack 0:41

And if you have suggestions for future episodes or comments on this one, you can send us an email at [closetalkingpoetry@gmail.com](mailto:closetalkingpoetry@gmail.com).

Connor 0:50

You can also find us on social media, on Twitter the show is [@closetalking](https://twitter.com/closetalking); I'm [@connormstratton](https://twitter.com/connormstratton) and Jack is [@jackrossitermun](https://twitter.com/jackrossitermun).

Jack 1:00

On Instagram, the show is [@closetalking](https://www.instagram.com/closetalking). And on Facebook it's [facebook.com/closetalking](https://www.facebook.com/closetalking).

Connor 1:08

And our website where you can find all our past episodes is [closetalking.com](https://www.closetalking.com).

Jack 1:14

On with the show.

(Close Talking theme music)

Connor 1:19

Hello and welcome to an all new episode of Close Talking. I'm one of your co-hosts Connor McNamara Stratton.

Jack 1:26

And I'm your other co-host, Jack Rossiter-Munley.

Connor 1:29

And we greet you on a Friday in December of 2020, the longest year of our collective lifetimes, which is why we have a relatively short poem that has nothing to do with anything that happened this year, except for the ways that it does.

Jack 1:54

Yes, for sure. Remember how the year began with massive wildfires in Australia?

Connor 2:01

Oh my god, actually barely. But that was horrible. I think two to three billion animals died.

Jack 2:12

Stop it.

Connor 2:13

Yeah. Oh, my God. They stopped counting. I actually was recently doing some reading about it like for something else. And like, it reached one billion at some point in the reporting, and then they were like, a billion animals have died. And then people stopped counting. And then I found like, another article like a few months later, that was like, it's now like, at least two billion, which is catastrophically horrifying. Wow.

Jack 2:47

Geez. Well, the poem we're talking about today is not directly related to any specific events that were going on this year, but it is an incredibly good poem. And it raises some really interesting issues, sort of about the project of poetry itself. So it's, it's an interesting diversion into that realm. And it does contemplate nature, which is always all around us, even in small ways when we're in urban areas and in bigger ways when we're out in nature itself. But it's engaged with the the project of like being an aware person in the world. And so that's always good to reflect upon.

Connor 3:24

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. The poem is called "The Problem of Describing Trees" by Robert Hass, who is one of the esteemed white men of American letters.

Jack 3:41

One of the preeminent white man of American letters.

Connor 3:42

Yes, he is a wonderful poet. And actually, we've never done a Hass poem, except for his translations of Haiku, during our poetry week, on Haiku, he's he's one of the more well known translators of well, at least Basho and Issa. And, yeah, he, he's really wonderful. He's been writing for a long time. And this poem, I think, was published actually in the New Yorker first in 2005, and then came out in his book "Time and Materials" came out in '07, I think.

Jack 4:07

Yes, and which won him a joint Pulitzer Prize in 2008. And the National Book Award in 2007. So pretty good book for it to be in.

Connor 4:37

Yeah. Yeah, that's um, it's not the trifecta, didn't include the National Book Critics Circle Award. As our good friend John Ashbery pulled off way back when in the '70s, maybe, but

Jack 4:56

Like how Rod Laver completed the Grand Slam and like won all four tournaments in the year, twice, or how Steffi Graf completed the golden slam winning all four grand slams in the Olympics in the same year. And like, Serena did the Serena slam, where she won four in a row, but it wasn't like a calendar year Grand Slam.

Connor 5:16

And we do care about time in that way, so, definitely less good. Serena sorry.

Jack 5:24

It makes a certain amount of sense that we've talked about Hass through his translations, because that's sort of like, his avenue into poetry was, like Ginsberg and Snyder and a lot of other poets who were deeply influenced by writers like Basho and his and who are really bringing that poetic tradition into their own, you know, beat works or proto beat works. So the the tradition that he falls into, definitely reflects exactly what his poetic output has been both the, what he has written himself and the other works that he chooses to, you know, bring into the English language for for other English speaking readers from other poetic tradition.

Connor 6:04

Absolutely. Let's read it. Let's jump right in.

Jack 6:08

Let's do it. Let's find out what this problem with all these tree description is.

Connor 6:13

Seems to be there are many problems, but I think he might just talk about one.

Jack 6:18

Hmm, I think there might be two. This is an episode.

Connor 6:21

Uh oh, counting, never good for poets. This is

Jack 6:26

I actually did a lot of counting for this episode. You're gonna be shocked. I'm notoriously terrible at counting. On the side, as a paralegal, one of my jobs was to check the annual disclosure document of the MTA for like math errors and stuff. So I probably shouldn't admit to either that or my problems with counting on air, but

Connor 6:47

Less Close Talking be held for liability from the New York Metro Transit Authority. Hopefully the statute of limitations is rapidly approaching for that one.

Jack 6:58

Yeah, I think I got away with without making any errors.

Connor 7:02

Okay. Let's get to trees.

Jack 7:06

Let's do it.

Connor 7:07

"The Problem of Describing Trees" by Robert Hass

The aspen glitters in the wind.

And that delights us.

The leaf flutters, turning,

Because that motion in the heat of summer

Protects its cells from drying out. Likewise the leaf

Of the cottonwood.

The gene pool threw up a wobbly stem

And the tree danced. No.

The tree capitalized.

No. There are limits to saying,

In language, what the tree did.

It is good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us.

*Dance with me, dancer. Oh, I will.*

Aspens doing something in the wind.

Jack 8:07

Such a cool poem. I have a very quick question before we get into, like quasi-narrative breakdown.

Connor 8:13

Sure.

Jack 8:13

First time that you read it.

Connor 8:16

Uh, huh.

Jack 8:16

Did you get annoyed when it became a poem about poetry, or like when poetry was explicitly brought up, because I feel like I sometimes have a knee jerk reaction to things like this, like when AC/DC has another song about rocking, and it's a song about they want to rock. Guys, just do it and don't talk about how you're doing it. Once can you please?

Connor 8:43

Well, I'm not probably the app, like the right person to ask this question, because

Jack 8:50

I was afraid of that.

Connor 8:50

Um, I love when poems talk about their poem-ness. And it's something that I get quite a great deal of delight from our little term, that is, it should be. Yeah, I want to come up with a less weird sounding word, but self-reflexivity is the is the term-y term, but it's really just like looking at your own reflection and commenting about it, you know? And reflexivities got, I don't know, when you get the x's and the v's and the y's, you're just like, it's like you take something and then you're just getting like a smudge eraser and you're kind of just blurring it. You know?

Jack 9:41

Intersubjectivity, verisimilitude, I'm with you. Yeah, it's a real phenomenon. Yeah, I ended up loving it. But I did the first time I read through this, as I was reading through it go like, uh-oh, I don't necessarily mind mind it when that happens in poems, but something about how this poem began, and we'll probably get into this as we discuss it, I was ready to go somewhere with

this poem. And then I felt like it stopped me and was like, actually, I'd like to talk about where we're going first. And we might be going somewhere you're not expecting and so I did end up loving that. But the moment that it veered, I caught myself as a reader thinking. Ah, Robert,

Connor 10:26

Robert,

Jack 10:27

Don't mess with me, Robert, don't play with my heart. But then it ended up being really cool. Yeah. So we'll get into all that, though. But yeah, let's let's do our brief little narrative breakdown, as we tend to do at the beginning.

Connor 10:40

Sure, sure. Yeah. And I will say that, when it's done poorly, the kind of self aware stuff can, it can come off as very clever. Like, I know, I'm so clever kind of thing. And like, I know what I'm doing kind of thing. So it is, it's a thing that happens often enough that you're like, oh, you know, it's happening again. And so you don't know if it's gonna be in a good way or bad way.

Jack 11:11

I think you're just setting yourself up a really challenging task as a writer when you do it. And I liken it, I don't know. What is the there's a term-y term for when poems are laid out in a certain way, like when they're laid out in the shape of something?

Connor 11:26

Oh, concrete?

Jack 11:29

Concrete - that's it. Yes. Because it's not as term-y a term as I keep thinking it is. But like, no, a concrete poem about a window shaped like a window is automatically very likely to be less interesting. But a concrete poem shaped like a window that's about Alzheimer's disease, that could be having an interesting conversation between, like, why is it shaped that way? And what is the content of the poem? I feel like that's the difference for me of when calling out a poem's poem-ness in the poem works well, and doesn't you're like, you could just be doing something really literal, that ends up detracting from your subject that you're talking about in the poem. And then you also want to talk about the poem-ness of you're talking about it, or you could be mobilizing that other conversation to further what you're talking about, which is what this poem does, so well.

Connor 12:22

Yeah, no, I think that's exactly right. I think that's exactly right. Yeah, so yeah, get into the the narrative, yeah, it's pretty simple, in some ways, the problem of describing trees, there's an aspen tree, it's glittering, the leaves are moving around. And then the speaker's kind of like talking about, you know, maybe like scientific or evolutionary reasons for why it's moving. Then the, you know, then there's "T gene pool threw up a wobbly stem / And the tree danced. No. /

The tree capitalized. / No. There are limits to saying, / In language, what the tree did." So there's this kind of like, the speaker's trying to describe the tree in a different way. And then is like trying again and again and again, and is not satisfied. And it's kind of like, you know, you can only say so much. And then the last three lines are kind of all different, in a way and they're all separate stanzas. "It is good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us." And then and then it's this italics moment "*Dance with me dancer. Oh, I will.*" Which kind of refers back to the tree dancing, but it's a little unclear, you know, where it's exactly it's coming to but then the poem ends with basically a restatement of the beginning of the poem, but in like a vaguer way. So like aspen's doing something in the wind. It's like the aspen glitters in the wind. Yeah. And, you know, that's basically terms of what happens.

Jack 14:04

And you're left in a position where you're kind of knowing or saying less than you did when you start because the beginning is this much more descriptive. The aspen is glittering and it delights us like that's a lot of visual and emotional information. And it ends in this totally desaturated, decentred, de-descriptivised, aspen's doing something in the wind, like, ah.

Connor 14:29

Exactly, no, no, that's really right. It's, it's, yeah, like one of, the poem's obviously doing like a number of different things. But one of the like, key things as you're talking about is like, and it's all laid out in the title, "The Problem of Describing Trees," it's like, so, you know, like delight is kind of one of the initial concerns of the poem that like both nature and observing nature has this, is has beauty that can glitter, causes pleasure and then all at the same time also, like, poems are sources of pleasure and delight too. And yet there's and there's kind of like an in those two things, the thing itself and then talking about the thing or describing the thing are like in tension with each other. And kind of like, by the end, you know, the aspen's doing something in the wind, like ruin, I mean, it's not entirely ruined, but they, they kind of they like cancel each other out in some kind of way where it's like, you get the sense that the speaker appreciates the aspens less, or at least in a less delightful way, maybe he's learned something else. And then also the poem itself has become less of poetic-y, or something, you know, it's not specific.

Jack 15:59

Yeah, you're right, because by the time you get to that last line, on the poetic front, it's doing everything wrong. From like a, what you would learn to do to write good poetry, if anybody was teaching you, they would use this line as an example of what not to do. This line doesn't belong in your poem, because it's not doing anything for the reader on its own. It does a lot here because of how it's constructed. But like, the fact that it gets to that point in this poem is so telling.

Connor 16:27

Yeah, no, I think that's, that's really right. You know, cuz, cuz it's interesting, because, like, at least, like, in terms of my own reader response, like when I get to that last line, I do have something of a, that kind of like, something felt profound a little bit or like, felt like it moved me

in some kind of way. Not necessarily like, oh, that's so beautiful, or something, but like, but by itself, obviously, like aspen's doing something in the wind has none of that. And so it's it's entirely how the poem, the way that the poem itself is, is contained in the last line and how it moves to get there from the glitters, you know, which already it's like, more specific, but it's still it's not like, it's not Hass' like finest line, you know, I mean, which I think

Jack 17:22

It's like, I mean, even that line, though, it is much more descriptive, it is also the kind of line that you would just kind of find as a throwaway line in a poem, that is not trying to be a great line. There's nothing particularly exciting about the sounds in it, the description is maybe not a cliché, but it's not far from one. It's not, you know, a really artful, poetic opening to a poem, the way that I mean, we've discussed a lot of poems that have really stand out openings and a lot of different ways they describe something that's striking to imagine, they do it in language that is really, that you've never heard before, that's engaging for some reason, but it is kind of a throwaway line.

Connor 18:04

Yeah, yeah. And then it's, it's, like one thing that I was thinking about, so there's, there's kind of two big stanzas where there's like a attempts to describe it differently, you know, like "The leaf flutters, turning, / Because that motion in the heat of summer / Protects its cells from drying out." And then the next one, "The gene pool threw up a wobbly stem / And the tree danced." And then we get the no's basically. And both of those are kind of like, the way that I think about it sometimes is like, it's there, like, in the psychology of the speaker poet, it's like, okay, you know, I'm trying to get to the real description of the aspen or like, what is it actually doing, you know, like, it's not actually glittering. And so then it's like, okay, well, maybe we turn to like science in a kind of way as like a proxy for truth or something like "The leaf flutters, turning, / Because that motion in the heat of summer / Protects its cells from drying out." So that's like, the leaf isn't doing anything to delight us, right? It's like the its motions are governed, you know, based on the evolutionary like laws or whatever. And, and then it's kind of like taken to another extreme in the next sentence, like "The gene pool threw up a wobbly stem / And the tree danced," which is almost like, beyond literal comprehension. Like it's a little unclear, but, but it's sort of like the gene pool in like, threw up a wobbly stem, it's like, I guess it's like it, you know it in terms of evolution, the way that evolution happens in my very rudimentary understanding is that you get these like, basically chance mutations or like errors in, you know, in the gene that that wasn't there before. And so the the new mutated organism is slightly different. And that happens like a million times times a million over huge, like, stretch of time. And it just is like, the each change happens by chance, but then over time, it's like, the ones that survived better are the ones that are going to survive better. And so those those pass their genes on and the ones that don't survive, well just die out. And so I guess the the kind of, I guess, the kind of literal description, I'm sort of, like coming to understanding this, myself right now is like, the gene pool was like, hey, a tree. Your stems were super non wobbly for a long time, but this time, I'm gonna throw up a little wobbly one, and then you're gonna, it's you're gonna dance basically, like your leaves are going to be flowing everywhere in the wind, and it's going to look cool, but that'll actually help you survive, because summer's hot, and, you know,



blah, blah, blah. And so it's this interesting kind of, combination of, and, you know, like, the kind of almost anti-beauty truth, like of science, causing the beautiful or whatever, but then the speaker is like, dissatisfied with that, basically.

Jack 21:48

And it feels to me like the way that this poem moves into science, and the way that it's constructed overall is very self consciously kind of imitating the way a lot of poems might go about the subject. Like as a kind of poetic cliché, or even as like a creative nonfiction cliché, and even some longer form journalism, you start with a little narrative piece at the beginning and then you dive into whatever contextual history you need, like, that's the structure of most New Yorker articles, there'll be a little opening paragraph, and then the next one or two paragraphs is historical context, and then it goes back into the story that it's actually telling you about something going on in the present. And it'll also do that if there's a scientific element at play. And we've seen obviously, there's a lot of poems that incorporate that kind of scientific, either lens or language. Very artfully, we talked about "Medical History," we talked about "Nursing Home," which literally incorporates like medicalese, if you want to call it that. But the way that this is being brought up here feels very much to me, like aspen's are glittering in the wind, perhaps it is because of the way that those leaves turn and yes, I have researched why they do that. Yeah, I have researched why its stem was not straight, like its brothers, you know, like, I feel like that's the, when you can sort of transparently see a poet writing, a lot of times, it's when those kind of formulaic constructions are showing up in their work. Like, I feel like that's something that this poem is interested in replicating to a degree in its own way for its own purposes. But yeah, I definitely take that away from that segment of the poem as well.

Connor 23:29

Yeah, I think that's exactly right. It actually makes me think of, I'm gonna make a little pretentious reference. I'm not positive the exact article, but I think that at least one of them it's talked about in so as Jean-Francois Lyotard, who was a French philosopher, kind of in the post-structuralist something, and I think that he was also thinking about Walter Benjamin, who wrote about, there's the famous article by him of something in the age of mechanical reproduction,

Jack 24:16

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

Connor 24:19

Yes.

Jack 24:20

And we're all thinking about that one from time to time.

Connor 24:23

It just sort of comes up. But Lyotard, he was concerned about painting and photography. And what that made me think of is that when photography started to happen, it was capable of

representing the real in a way that was far superior to in terms of just technical ability than painting, and it was also much more efficient. And so the one can trace the sort of move of painting away from just sort of realism, sort of like, into less and less realism, you know, from impressionism to, like abstract expressionism to minimalism, as in part, a response to the advent of photography, and the kinds of the domain of representation, needing to change for painting, because realism, like itself, whatever that may be, was, like, basically usurped or something. And this makes me think of a little bit, it's a little different, but I think a lot about how science is both kind of itself, you know, just the scientific process of way of finding out about the world, and at the same time, is the kind of language of capital T truth. Whereas before, like there's a, in Virginia Woolf's like "A Room of One's Own," she talks about how that, you know, libraries, and museums are like the new, you know, that the secular churches of the modern day or whatever, and so that those have sort of, like, taken the place of religion as, like, the authorities on what is or whatever. And so science, like, kind of has that role or has had that role in some extent. Anyway, it just struck me as like, the, the poet in sort of, kind of like having to demonstrate their authority over the subject, that then they're trying to, you know, be able to say something more about right, like, alright, I've got this app's this aspen tree, and like, I need you to believe that I'm actually seeing it and know about it, and that it's a real thing. And then once you think it's real, then I can use it as my great image, and revelation and metaphor for blah, blah, blah, that like, like, at a certain point, it would be enough. And still, it's not that it's not enough all the time to just describe the aspen tree in great detail, right, as a kind of painting of the tree, right, this sort of representational thing. But I think, since the dominance of science as like, an authoritative discourse, poets have, sometimes and to your point, like to a point sometimes of cliché, perhaps, turned to using the language of science as like a way of also establishing authority over their subject so that, then they can kind of do, you know, use it, like, because the readers like, oh, shit, this guy knows about the aspen. And now I know about it. And now I know that it's real. And now, I'm gonna think about aspens and whatever this metaphor is that Robert Hass just threw down. And so, in this poem, it's kind of like, he sees himself going through those motions and is like, eh, like, you know, there's, there's limits to, it's like, I tried just describing it, eh um okay, I tried to describe like, the scientific beta, you know, evolutionary whatever about the aspen. Eh, like, what else can I say about you know, what other technologies are in language, you know, like, if sat like, if science is kind of the photography of language, in some sense, or scientific discourse of like, the precise depiction of reality, right? And if that is not enough, right now, then, what can I do? And so then we get to that line of "It is good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us," where we kind of, we learned that the poem before that point is like, trying to enchant us like a aspen glitters in the wind, oh, do do do. But then maybe it's maybe we need to be disenchanted sometimes. Like in the same way that painting is aware of its like inadequate ability to be the masters of realism anymore because of photography. You know, poems and poetry can also become aware of its limits and that so that the reflexive self aware part is useful for like engaging with that kind of problem, I guess.

Jack 30:12

I think that's right on. And especially science is like a quasi-penetrative way of looking at and categorizing the world, we've talked many times about the sort of human impulse to conquer

or whatever. And there's like a baked in element of that in the way that science is practiced by necessity and by the very nature of what it is, it is human beings creating an order out of a disorderly world. That's what taxonomy is, that's like what a lot of the scientific project is, that's not necessarily a bad thing. I know, I've just kind of couched it in some pretty negative language. But like, it's an effort to understand the world but we are, of course, naturally limited by our own viewpoint. And I know Hass has talked about this poem a little bit and it's mostly talking about how like, you can describe you seeing the tree, but you don't know anything about what it's like to be an aspen tree. So you don't actually know what it's doing. And that disconnect, and like, my cat hangs out with me, I generally know when he's like, happy or scared, or hungry, or whatever. But I don't have any inkling about what if any, internal thought processes are going on and what form they take, because like, I think in my head in english, it is hard enough for me to talk to like, understand what the subjective experience of another human being who thinks in multiple languages is. And there are people all around the world who do, that's my own species, and I know some other languages, and like, the closest I would come is that if I, I have a highly auditory memory, and so if I have been listening a lot to a particular voice, I will start to be able to think in that voice. Usually consciously, but sometimes not so consciously. But like, that's still so far removed. And that's even within like human experience. And so trying to describe a tree, you're also trying to describe what that tree is going through. Maybe not necessarily from its point of view, but like to accurately describe it, you should know what it's doing. And you can't actually know what it's doing from the viewpoint of not being able to know what trees do because they're trees, and you're human. And so that gets you to a point of like, aspen's doing something in the wind. They're doing aspen stuff. And I mean, I'm, I fully dig it. I'm so into aspen stuff. But I don't know what it is. I know what I think it is, I think it's dancing, I think it's all sorts of other people things. But those are people things that aspen is not dancing, because it's an aspen. And it doesn't do that. Or maybe it does, but I don't know if it does or not. And so there's like, there's that level, which I know is one that I think Hass himself has talked about. But I also sort of take it as exactly what you were saying a poem that is examining the limits of poetry, to say something, not just language, but like poetry as a form and is deeply interested in poetry as a form of language and expression. And for me, I sort of as I was saying, I read back from the point where the poem turns, the ways that the beginning of the poem is like, setting up cliché, adjacent poetry constructions that you can see once it tells you that it's a poem that's not just about trees, but also about poetry, because you get in a very short poem, almost all of it's about trees only. And then you have a line that says, "It is good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us," which is your big red flag signposts like wait a minute, well separated out poetry and language, hold up, like, this was a tree thing, and it's not. And then you get two lines that are in theory then explicitly addressing that tension. And it's those two lines, the last three are all their own stanzas, as you mentioned. And those last two, the first one italicized "*Dance with me, dancer. Oh, I will.*" I would like to get into, I have questions. And the last one, "Aspens doing something in the wind," but that italicized line feels to me like there's a lot of readings in it. Is it the speaker inviting the tree and then the tree responding in some way? Is that line if that is the case, what is it trying to do in the poem? Is it trying to go beyond description and saying and turning, like describing the dance of viewer and object and describing and experiencing? Is that the dance? Is that the invitation and negotiation in describing it that way? Does that then do a better job of

describing this experience? Without ever mentioning aspens or wind or anything? Like is that what's actually going on here? The one line that doesn't talk about either poetry or trees? I feel like maybe it is. And then you get to that last line where like, no, the best way I could describe this is this italicized line about dancing. So actually, it could be anything you're looking at, it could be anything I'm looking at. You know, aspen's doing something in the wind, it's actually about that dance between observer and observed and writer and object and experience and the way that it's filtered through the the writer, and it is most accurately described, when the writer becomes aware of all of that, and just invites the objects to be in conversation with them in some way. And here again, like he's, he would just be imagining aspen agreement. In some ways, that line to me feels like where the real description happens. And it is, in many ways, the most removed from anything that's, we've been told is actually in any concrete fashion going on.

Connor 36:35

Yeah, no, I think that's really right. Yeah, I it's, it's an incredible line where it comes in. No, I I agree, I think I think definitely one reading of it is, is a kind of an offer or a, you know, to the, to the tree to the aspen. It's also you know, probably also directed outward to the reader to some extent, you know, especially because we've, we've brought up poetry so like, we know, we're in a poem. And so when there's a poem, there's a reader. And so the reader is also engaged in the dance potentially. And I think it's, it's, you know, it gets back to the fundamental challenge and problem, but also delight of poetry, which is that it's kind of describing stuff. And then it's doing it's also doing something or is something right, it's, you know, it's and, and it's a dance in that way, right. So it's not, like, yeah, it's, it's that whole thing of like, but what does it mean, right? It's like, it's poems are not just a, a description or representation of something, their their act, or an event of whatever, that has a kind of dynamic, you know, process but but at the same time, it's so because it's only language, and because it's so description based a lot of the time and that that images are one of its, you know, most common like devices, it's having to, like get out of the sort of like, representation pigeon hole that it's like, put in all the time or something, you know. The other thing that this reminded me of which I was not planning on making two pretentious references, but here we are. And it actually made me think of Yeats. Um,

Jack 38:55

That's not a pretentious reference. That's just a Connor reference.

Connor 38:58

That's just a Connor reference.

Jack 39:00

That's to be expected at this point. I think anyone who's listened to a few episodes of this podcast knows that Connor has a Yates.

Connor 39:07

Yates thing? Yeah, I got Yeats situation. Well, I do. And Yeats, one of his more well known poems, is called "Among School Children." And it's kind of a long-ish poem in eight parts. That's

like, but the parts are just stanzas. And basically, Yeats himself is like, going to a school and he's kind of an old man at this point. He's like, or I think he self this, he's like, 60 says, he's 60 in the poem or something. And he's kind of talking to the children and then it gets very like philosophical and he's sort of like, talking about Plato and Aristotle, and like, images and stuff. And it's kind of like this mundane moment of, you know, a famous Irish old poet who's like visiting kids. And it's like, wow. But then, at the end, basically, the last section, which I'll I'll read, which he says,

Labor is blossoming or dancing where  
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,  
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
O, chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O, body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Jack 40:58  
Nice.

Connor 41:00

Yeah. Which is pretty tight. But a lot of lots been made of the kind of dancer and the dance kind of thing. And that's why I initially thought of, you know, "*Dance with me dancer. Oh, I will.*" And kind of like, the crude sort of meaning of that is like, the image or the symbol for Yeats of a poem is like, this embodiment of, like an idea. And it's, it's kind of like, we have this artificial split between the mind and the body. But like, the dancer, who's like, fully in the dance, it's a synthesis of the body and the mind kind of thing. And so it's, it's kind of like, it's both the aspen and the word aspen or something, you know, it's like, the language and the thing. It's the idea and the reality. The symbol, like has the possibility to bring that together, which I do think is like a lot of kind of what we talked about in, in the podcast is like, the poem making space for a feeling or an idea to be like, experienced, right, which there's that felt quality to it. And so it's hard to say if Hass is directly alluding to Yeats, but I'm certain that he read Yeats at some point. And I think like "*Dance with me dancer. Oh, I will,*" it's this kind of moment of like, in a way, this is what's complicated about the poem, in that at the same time, that it's sort of like giving up on its ability to describe the tree, it's also shedding the kind of, like, artificial qualities of the poem, like, it's like, these like acts of description, or like, the scientific mode or whatever. These are, like, kind of, you know, flashy garments, or tricks or whatever, like, by kind of bringing them up and tossing them aside, even though the poem is kind of bringing us farther away from the tree perhaps, it's like bringing us closer to like, some place where the speaker is in some kind of way, you know, because it's like, yeah, and so then by the time we get to "*Dance with me dancer. Oh, I will,*" that's like, the moment where we're like, really there kind of thing and it's like, a gesture to be like, let's be in it, like we can, we are the image, like, we are the aspens, you know, and, like, who knows what we're doing, but it doesn't really matter. Like, that's why it's kind of also moving at the end with the doing something in the wind, because it's, it's like, it

also doesn't quite matter, what's being described at that point, right. It's like, doing something, who cares? Like, it's just, you and me aspen and we're dancing and like, I don't know what you're doing, but it's still a dance, and like that kind of embodiment of, like, a relationship or like, seems to be kind of like where the poem is trying to get, um, and I think where it gets by the end. And, yeah, I think that like, you know, if it is an intentional illusion, you know, then it's also like, it's bringing us into the reality of poems like the life of poems, which is filled with poets talking with one another. And so like there's a kind of the shared language among poets that like we're kind of stepping into with that kind of reference.

Jack 45:13

And even before the reference with the sort of hints that form that it takes earlier on.

Connor 45:19

Exactly no exactly. Yeah. And so yeah, it's interesting, like, well, you sent me this poem. Wow. Was it a week or two ago or something? Yeah. And it was kind of in response to, there was a bit of poetry kerfuffle, on the, on the social medias, which we won't really get into. But Ocean Vuong, who's incredible poet we've discussed on this podcast had kind of done this Instagram explanation of metaphor. And then it caused a bit of a, an uproar over whether it was a good explanation or not on Twitter. And then there was kind of like another backlash of the backlash where, yeah, it just was, it was a complicated situation. But it got us thinking about metaphor. Generally, it's like, it's kind of a bummer, because it's like, there was a lot of good discussion that happened about metaphor as a result of the controversy. But the controversy was so gross. And so sad, like unnecessary in a lot of ways, I think

Jack 46:37

It ended up being fairly complex, because there were so many layers to it, and there were different levels of response. So someone might be responding to the original posts, even though the discourse at large had moved on to a third level of reaction to the reaction kind of situation as many of these Instagram to Twitter, dustups tend to be it ended up. Yeah, but it did spark a lot of really good conversation about metaphor, and really like poetry as a vehicle for saying something basically, and like, the ways in which you can attempt to say something.

Connor 47:13

Yes, yeah.

Jack 47:14

And that's sort of where this poem fit in for me, because I came across it around the time, all that was happening, Connor and I had been, you know, keeping an eye on the Twitter discourses as we do, you know, out there, and this poem, its project seems to be similar to that which was going on in the more constructive parts of that metaphor and simile discourse, which was, like, how do you say stuff in poetry? Can you? And if so, like, how?

Connor 47:46

Yeah. And how do you? And how do you talk about poetry? Like, what is the use of talking about poetry? In a way? Like, which, yeah, which is kind of like, I don't know, it caused a lot of thoughts for me. But one that I, I don't know if this is, this is like a now I'm, I'm, like, becoming self reflective about the podcast is a highly embarrassing, but I'm, I'm like, you know, we're Close Talking, the world's most popular poetry analysis podcast, but you know, we, we break down poems in a matter of craft and like, so there was a lot of sort of conversation about, like, what is craft? How should people use craft, who controls the conversations about craft, which I think was a lot of, ultimately what was at the heart of it was that, you know, like, Ocean Vuong, like, is a, you know, queer, like, refugee from Vietnam. And like, in many ways, his his identity and his life and his poetry are not the typical white American, stodgy American canon blah, blah, blah, type thing. And so which, actually, Robert Hass is in some ways, firmly in line with the stodgy part of it, but at the same time, he's also you know, he's he's a, I think, a fairly accessible poet in a, I mean that in a mean that word's been, but he's one of the more popular ones that that reaches audience. It's not a he's not a poet that only poets read, I suppose what I mean to say, and I think that we like there was one part of me, that was like, who I really care about what like, a metaphor is and what a simile is. And then I also was like, like, I care about it, I don't know where. And then it's like, obviously Close Talking is not a, you know, it's a labor of love. And we have our listeners that we love and adore and hear from occasionally. You know, and we're not like, you know, gatekeepers in any sense at this point, although maybe at some point, we'll, I mean, we can wish. But you know, we're also, you know, we are straight white guys, I did go do an MFA, I have the kind of like cultural keys to the castle with my MFA or whatever. And so, but part of the reason that I, this is maybe too long or should be something else, but in some ways, the mission of the podcast is to convey craft as a way of getting it outside the pearly gates, of that as a way of also then getting poetry itself outside of its insular stuff. But then I had this kind of, like, competing impulse of, I guess, would probably just be my own thoughts about what is what. And I was really glad when you sent me the poem, because it just was like, a, it's just such a great poem that's thinking about this stuff. But it also just, it got me thinking about, like, you know, there's poetry and then there's all the talk about poetry, and like, what is the role of that part of it? And like, when is that good to focus on? And when should it be less so or something. And, and anyway, I felt like, yeah, this poem was like, doing both of those things, talking about poetry and being a poem at the same time. And so it was just, yeah, it was great.

Jack 52:20

Definitely. And I think the part of the sort of online conversation that really energized me, and part of why I found this poem interesting, and it's a lot of what you're talking about is like, what is the place of craft? And what is the use of it? And I think something that we often try to do on this podcast is contextualize, not just like, craft, but also, how is it most useful to deploy it? Because there are times when it is useful to look through the lens of craft, and there are times when that becomes an incredibly restrictive lens. And in fact, in the Haiku series that we did, we talked a lot about the ways that the traditional, hard rigid rules around what is a haiku 5-7-5, are not necessarily what makes a haiku, there are bigger things at play that can be more useful in looking at something and thinking, is this a haiku? The shortcut route is to say, well, it's 5-7-5, three lines. But that's not particularly useful or accurate. And you can get really hung up on

those kinds of strict definitions. But that doesn't necessarily help you in the long run. It can be very useful to know about, and it can be important context in terms of what is the tradition of the form you're looking at. But it's not the only thing that's useful when you're having a conversation about a poem. Or when you're trying to decide, is this a haiku or not? Yeah, there were there were a lot of more useful pockets in what was by and large, a frustrating step.

Connor 53:53

As is often the case on the Twitter's.

Jack 53:56

But it got us to this poem. So I think overall, a lot of positives.

Connor 54:02

True. Very true.

Jack 54:06

Shall we read it again?

Connor 54:08

I think we should read it again.

"The Problem of Describing Trees" by Robert Hass

The aspen glitters in the wind.  
And that delights us.

The leaf flutters, turning,  
Because that motion in the heat of summer  
Protects its cells from drying out. Likewise the leaf  
Of the cottonwood.

The gene pool threw up a wobbly stem  
And the tree danced. No.  
The tree capitalized.  
No. There are limits to saying,  
In language, what the tree did.

It is good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us.

*Dance with me, dancer. Oh, I will.*

Aspens doing something in the wind.

(Close Talking theme music)



Jack 55:18

Aside from digging deep into Twitter discourse and thinking about Robert Hass, whatcha been reading, whatcha been watching?

Connor 55:28

Okay, well, I'm a little late to the show. But this weekend I just watched with Sarita the entirety of Queen's Gambit. Which was delightful. Um,

Jack 55:43

I have not watched it yet. But we were - important information for listeners - Connor and I were both on the chess team in high school Connor for a lot longer than I was.

Connor 55:55

Yeah, but also I was a lot worse. And I was definitely the last board.

Jack 56:00

I was a little more intense during my short stint on the chess team. But you were more involved with the chess team over I just don't want to misrepresent how on the chess team, you were, I want to give you full credit for how many meets you went to before you finally convinced me to do chess.

Connor 56:17

No, it was so funny. I'm glad you brought that up, because I was watching it and they make chess look fucking cool and sexy and dramatic. And I was like, oh, man, I love chess. And I was like, I should start playing chess again. And then I remembered being on the chess team, and the chess tournaments, and just losing game after game. And there is a frustration in chess that I have not experienced anywhere else, which is you think so hard about something and make a choice. And then you miss that one thing. And then you're toast, and there's nothing you can do. And then you realize the error of your ways. And you just have to watch it just destroy you. Ah, yeah, the show very fun, probably has some problems. Super fun. Very emotional, high drama. Chess is great. That's, you know, to be honest. That's where I've been at. It's Queen's Gambit.

Jack 57:33

That's what I'm doing next weekend.

Connor 57:35

Yep. It's only seven episodes.

Jack 57:38

I know. But I just feel like I'm gonna want to watch all of them so I haven't even started.

Connor 57:43

Yeah, that's sort of what happened. Yep. We watched two on Saturday and probably five on Sunday. So.

Jack 57:52  
Nice.

Connor 57:53  
Yeah. Yeah, Jack, what do you what have you been up to, what have you been reading, watching, listening to?

Jack 58:01  
Well, let me tell you. Something that I'm also a little late to the party on, I guess in terms of my full appreciation because I was like, aware, but I was not aware. Like I had heard it but I hadn't heard it is the pop masterpiece of 2020 Dua Lipa's Future Nostalgia every. single. song.is.incredible. And I know maybe you're out there thinking like oh that's so mainstream. Like everybody knows about Dua, fine you know, have some boutique Dua Lipa and go watch her on the NPR Tiny Desk Concert that just got released, whatever, maybe that'll be good enough for you. But in the meantime, I'm gonna be over here, levitating. Okay. Just an album of nonstop, bop and a half's like,

Connor 58:54  
Wow.

Jack 58:56  
Like, here's the thing, right. Okay, so it's like, it's a great mix of unabashed poppiness.

Connor 59:03  
Uh huh.

Jack 59:04  
Got a little dash of funk, little dash a disco. Yeah, and the way that Dua Lipa sings, is a very sort of, it's not like a classic pop or disco type of vocal, she gives a very more like, emotive I don't know, rock-ish, folk-ish kind of vocal performance to my ear. Like it's still very, very pop. But I her voice has that quality to it. It's sort of like the difference between album and so it ends up being this great mix, where there's a lot of pop production, but you really, it's very smart and careful production. So you actually hear all the separation in the instruments in a fun way. And like the yeah, it's just a great listening experience. It's it's fun for me on both just dancing along to it level and also want to know how they do that. I would like to replicate things in my own music from this.

(Dua Lipa clip)