

Hey, it's Ezra. We're off through the end of the year, but this is our final episode and re-air of the year. It is really one of my favorites of the past year, and it's with a poet, Ada Lamone. Subsequent to this episode, she was named Poet Laureate of the United States. That is what she is now, but it's just such a beautiful and fun. I remember how much better I felt when I walked out of the studio on this one than on the day I walked into it. I came in like harried and impatient and frustrated, and I walked out so much more settled as a person. It's such a lovely conversation about poetry, about life. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

Okay, here are those loud pages. That's the sign of a good book is when you can hear the pages turning.

I'm Ezra Klein. This is the Ezra Klein Show.

Here's something I believe. In a way, it's a quiet thesis of the show. In dark times, when so much in the news is so unrelentingly horrible, it is a political act. It is a political act to open yourself to the awe and joy and beauty the world still provides. To sit with a poem or take a walk in the woods isn't an abdication or a kind of quietism. It's a reminder of what this is all for. It's an opportunity to muster the strength to continue and to see just a little bit more clearly and maybe respond just a little more compassionately. Ada Lamone is an award-winning poet and host of the podcast, The Slowdown, where she offers a poem and a short meditative thought every weekday. I love Lamone's work. I have two copies of her earlier collection, Bright Dead Things. Something about her work, sometimes poetry feels to me like it is outside of lives like mine looking in. Her always feels very inside the warp and woof of life that she's here to laughing and watching and worrying and using poetry to story tell about it. Her new collection of poems is called The Hurting Kind. And reading it, it put me in a different space. I was noticing this. I really did feel like I slowed down and I needed to slow down right then. And so I wanted to have a different kind of conversation with her, one that remained true to that experience, one organized around her poems, and it tries a little bit to recreate that altered sense of time and perspective that poetry can provide, even now, especially now. As always, my email as a client show at nytimes.com, if you've got guest suggestions, feedback, recommendations of things we should hear or listen to as a client show at nytimes.com.

Hey, the Lamone, welcome to the show. Thank you so much for having me.

So there's a line from a William Carlos Williams poem that you quoted recently on your podcast, Slow Down, which is, quote, it is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there. What's found there?

One of the reasons I love that quote is because it just ends in there, right? What is found there? One of the biggest things about poetry is that it holds all of humanity. It holds everything. It holds the huge and enormous and tumbling sphere of human emotions. And there's not a lot of places where we can go to really feel that and to sit with our feelings. In fact, for the most part, most of us are taught to compartmentalize and to avoid them. And sometimes we have to in order to do our jobs and to work and to live and take care of kids and take care of parents and all of those things. But I think it's a place to really feel, to really feel the whole human spectrum of emotions. And I think that's really important.

I'm always struck too by the question of speed. When I think about the news I read, the social

media I consume, and then the name of your show, which I know predates you as host, the Slow Down. Every poet I know talks more slowly than everybody else I know. What is the relationship

between poetry and speed, and then maybe speed and humanity?

Yeah. That's a beautiful question. I feel like there is so much in poetry that is asking us to sit back and listen, or even if you're a writer of poetry, to watch and observe and to listen as well, even to the world. And I think a lot of that is that poetry has the breath built into it. Because of its line breaks, its stanza breaks, its sajuras, any part of its prosody is really telling you as the reader or the listener when to pause, when to break. And it actually has a moment in which you are supposed to breathe. And I keep thinking for all of us who are so intent on moving forward at the fast pace that the world often requires, I think it's important to remember to breathe. Mary Oliver has that quote, are you breathing just a little and calling it a life? And I think about that a lot in that sense of what is it that we need? And so much of that is the breath and so much of that is to sit back and realize that we've been living shoved forward as if the winds at our back and we're just being pulled and shoved in a direction without so much as a moment to even recognize where we are.

I feel a little personally called out by that Mary Oliver quote, I'm gonna, I'm gonna admit. One other question about poetry and speed, it's always an interesting experience for me reading a book of poems because there's some part of me that can in a technical way read them quickly. There's fewer words on the page, there tend to not be that many pages in the book can really blitz through a book of poems and it feels completely wrong to do that. And you don't really get much out of it if you do because they don't have that linearity, there's something about letting them settle, trying to puzzle them out. I'm curious how speed and reading poetry work for you. Like how do you advise others to read poetry? How do you work with that learned tendency to just try to get to the end of the piece that we bring to so much else in our lives? Can you give me a fast clinic or insight into your own way of doing that?

Yeah, of course, because I think everyone reads differently and I know different people will read full books of poems, you know, they sit down and they'll read a book of poems from start to finish. And I've always thought that's sort of the currency of poetry is one poem. It's one poem at a time. And I love putting together books, I love reading full books. But I do think it's really important to remember that poets as artists really start by writing one poem, one line. We start small. And so I think if you are receiving the poem as a reader or a listener, it's okay to just experience one poem because it is its whole world. I think for me, I'm really interested in how, for the most part, when we read prose, any kind of, for reading news, if we're reading fiction or nonfiction, whatever it is, we're reading for sense, right? We're always reading for sense. So we're looking for the structure of the sentence and we're looking for the period, right? We see where it starts and we see where it ends. And poetry is going to confound you a little bit and kind of play on your senses with that because we don't work in the sentences, you know, as poets, we work in the line. We start really small. We start with the syllable. We start with the sound. And then we go into the space between the words. And then we go into the clause. And then we go into the line break. And then we go into the sentence. And then we go into

the stanza. It's much smaller unit that we're working with. And so when you're seeing something complete on the page, and let's say it's only 14 lines, right? Those lines, each one of them is doing something as important as you might say a full sentence and maybe even more so. And that's because it's sort of working in those spaces between the sentences, in the spaces between the lines. It's got that sense of silence. It's got that heightened musicality. And so first of all, I would advise that you read just one poem at a time, not to stress out about it, not to see a full book or a full collection, not to pull down the Norton anthology and think, okay, I'm just going to read this and then I'll know poetry. Let's start with one poem at a time. And then start with one line at a time as opposed to trying to really read through it fast. I think the other thing that slows us down when we're reading poetry and can help us really appreciate it, at least for me, is to read it out loud. Poetry is meant to be read out loud. It's both the written word, but it's also song.

And to remember that if you're struggling with a poem or if you're like, oh, this really doesn't, you know, I'm not getting it or whatever it is that is feeling frustrating to you, to be able to sort of sit down and read it out loud is going to slow you down enough that you may start to see some of its beauty and hear some of its music.

I'm Lulu Garcia Navarro, the host of First Person from New York Times Opinion. On the show, I talk to all sorts of people about the experiences that shape their beliefs.

Some of my friends got shamed and called out in school board meetings. You start wondering, oh, is this going to happen to me? Beliefs that can be polarizing, but the emotions behind them are central to understanding the world we live in. Oh, yeah, I've had my concealed weapon and I've had a gun on me. But now in my later age, switching over to a classroom, that's a whole new ballgame. I want to explore opinion in all of its complexity and every opinion starts with a story. I'm going to ask you this because this is like a very volatile period and you decide to become a politician.

I really want to understand how that happened. I mean, what inspired you to run for office?

First Person from New York Times Opinion. Listen to new episodes wherever you get your podcasts. That's a lovely segue into how I want to structure our conversation, which is rather than just talking about poems. Have you read some and then we can explore them. And I was hoping we could start with

a poem from your book The Caring called The Raincoat. Yeah, I'd be happy to. Thank you. This is a poem I wrote for my mother. I have moderate scoliosis and it has caused me lots of work that I have to do to make sure I can move without pain as much as possible and all those wonderful things that we

would like to do in the world. And this is a poem for my mother, The Raincoat. When the doctor suggested surgery and a brace for all my youngest years, my parents scrambled to take me to massage

therapy, deep tissue work, osteopathy, and soon my crooked spine unspooled a bit. I could breathe again and move more in a body unclouded by pain. My mom would tell me to sing songs to her the whole

45 minute drive to middle to rock road and 45 minutes back from physical therapy. She'd say that even my voice sounded unfettered by my spine afterward. So I sang and sang because I thought she liked it. I never asked her what she gave up to drive me or how her day was before this chore. Today, at her age, I was driving myself home from yet another spine appointment singing along to

some modeling but solid song on the radio. And I saw a mom take her raincoat off and give it to her young daughter when a storm took over the afternoon. My God, I thought. My whole life, I've been under her raincoat thinking it was somehow a marvel that I never got wet.

Are those ideas that you're somebody who's able to express them in your life into your mother and they come out later in a poem? Or do they come out in a poem uniquely?

Hmm. That's a wonderful question. I think I am the person who can say these things to the people I love in my life. But I think I'm also the person, the poet that has the realization. And in this case, although this was true, I was driving home from another physical therapy appointment and feeling, you know, more open as one does after you've gotten spine work done. And I saw this image of this woman covering her small child with her own raincoat. And I had this moment of thinking, how often do we think, boy, this is something I've been dealing with my whole life? You know, even as a kid, I used to have to go to these appointments. And now I still have to go to them. And then I thought, I didn't go to these appointments. You know, my mother and my step father and my father all dropped everything and drove me to those appointments. And there really was a moment where I thought, oh, how funny it is that we spend so much time, myopically looking at our own experience and forgetting sometimes about our caretakers and the people who've looked out for us, whether it's family or friends or chosen family. And it was for me an actual realization. And so I started with the image at the end of the poem. And then I was trying to figure out if I could write the beginning. And the only way I could write it was to think about the drive and the drive back and forth and how she would tell me to sing. And then of course, when the poem came together, and I was editing it and draft after draft, I realized, oh, right, the singing is also the poem itself. And for me, this poem is an offering for her.

It's really interesting to me to know that you began with the image of the end, because the poem structure, which is true, I think for a lot of your poems is that the beginning is fairly literal.

It's a poetic recounting of a very normal story. It sounds like in your life. And at the end, it switches gears into this much more generalizable metaphor, right? I didn't go with my mother to Scoliosis appointments, but my parents took me to speech therapy appointments far away, twice a week. I developed unexpectedly, I think when I was four, a terrible stutter. And so I didn't have the same experience you did. But right there at the end, that feeling of the raincoat is very, very similar, which I think is one reason that that poem has touched so many people. But I'd be curious about how you think about those structures that move from storytelling, not to a conclusion, but to a window or something less literal.

Yeah, I think about that a lot because I do work with the material of my own life, as many artists do. But for the most part, when I say the speaker, I'm talking about myself. And I think that when we talk about biography or when we start to put something together, artistically, there is that moment in which you're like, am I transforming it enough beyond its storytelling, right? Beyond a narrative. And I think for me, what's important is to make sure that the compression is there in the music and the images so that each word has the weight that you want it to have and that it doesn't feel even in chatty poems. I like a conversational poem. I like a chatty poem. I like a humorous poem. Even in those kind of poems, I want to make sure that every single word that I'm using is a word that belongs in the poem and that its musicality and its syntax is working for the poem as a whole. That's a poem, the raincoat, that has had a life far beyond the page of the book it's in. It's a very, very popular poem on Instagram, on Twitter, and Instagram and Twitter and probably not only them, but those are the ones I know better,

have become really remarkable spaces for poetry. I mean, it's weird to say that poems go viral a lot and I guess in ways they did in other eras too, but they now have this capacity to be removed from context and ricochet into new contexts. Do you think that social media has changed the way people read or encounter poetry or as a poet who I think bridges the sort of pre-social media and post-social media worlds, how does it feel like it's changed to the way your poems are seen and understood or how you write them? Yeah, social media is so complicated, complex, and I have my own issues with it as many people do, especially with the toxicity of spaces created in ethereal worlds. I think for me it is actually really amazing how poems are shared online and I think it's maybe one of the things that will make me stay on social media and I believe it. Like every time I think, oh, I'm going to get off, someone will tweet a poem I've never read before and it could just be a Merwin poem or someone I know well but I hadn't read that particular poem and I just can be moved to tears and it feels sort of otherworldly that a space that can be so interested in toxicity can also be the space for this wonderful way of sharing poetry and helping it flourish and I think it goes back to that idea of sharing one poem at a time that it's not always about the artist, it's not always about the book, it's not always about the larger ideas behind everything, it's just the poem and then the poem kind of gets to do its work on its own, which is wonderful. Like you talked about the raincoat and it does feel like that poem is beyond me now. It's out in the world, it's doing its thing, it's kind of looking back at me going like, oh yeah, remember when we sang together, but it's gone. I still have my connection to it, I always will, but it's a little overwhelming to see how many folks have their own connection to it, but it's really beautiful. I'd like to have you read another poem, this one out of the new book, *The Hurting Kind*, called *Folling Season*. Yeah. *Folling Season 1*. In the dew saturated foot high blades of grass, we stand amongst a sea of foals, mare and foal, mare and foal, all over the soft hillside there are twos, small duos ringing harmoniously in the cold, swallows diving in and out their fabled forked tale where the story says the fireball hit it as it flew to bring fire to humanity. Our friend, the Irishman, drives us in the gator to sit amongst them, everywhere doubles of horses, still leaning on each other, still nuzzling and curious with each new image. Two, two female horses, retired mares separated by a sliding barn door, knows each other, neither of them will get pregnant again. Their job is just to be a horse. Sometimes though, they cling to one another, find a friend and will whine all night for the friend to be released. Through the gate, the noses touch, and you can almost hear, are you okay? Are you okay? Three, I will never be a mother. That's all. That's the whole thought. I could say it returns to me, watching the horses, which is true, but also I could say that it came to me as the swallows circled us over and over something about that myth of their tale, how generosity is punished by the gods, but isn't that going too far? I saw a mare with her foal, and then many mares with many foals, and I thought simply, I will never be a mother. Four, one foal is a biter, and you must watch him as he bears his teeth and goes for the soft spot. He's brilliant, leggy, and comes right at me as if directed by some greater gravity, and I stand firm and put my hand out first, rubbed the long white marking on his forehead, silence his need for biting with affection. I love his selfishness, our selfishness, the two of us testing each other, swallows all around us. Every now and then, his teeth come at me once again. He wants to teach me something, to get me where it hurts. I think of you in this over the last couple of years, and the first of your books I read was

Bright Dead Things, but is one of the great poets of loss, of an era when a lot of people feel a lot of loss. This poem is about a very particular kind of loss, I think, which is a loss of something we don't have, something that maybe one will never have. How do you write about that? How do you think about writing about that? I don't know how you not write about it. I would love to sometimes not write about things, but it honestly helps me heal. It helps me figure out where I am, where I want to be, where I want to go. Sometimes it just helps me figure out what's happening. I write those poems, this poem in particular I wrote, really just for myself. I had that moment in the field, and I thought, I want to write that down. I think it was very important for me to stay true, to not have all of the attachments around it, to not have a drama of that statement around it, but just to say it to myself and to own it and to know it. I will never be a mother, and let that be okay, and let that sit there, and let it sort of ring out in me.

It was important for me to experience that moment, and then it was just as important for me to recount it as I wrote it down, and then to transform it into an actual poem in those four parts, each of them doing something else. It became both personal and mythic in that moment, and that was really essential to figuring out how that particular day or particular morning was an interesting kind of awakening for me, and it was actually beautiful, because I think there is that sense that we all have sometimes of letting go of a future that you may have wished for, or longed for, and we have to grieve, and we have to really work hard at trying to figure out what's next. But then there's also this idea that there are so many possibilities. We don't just have one, and I think that poem holds that in there at the very end.

You said there was a moment on the field for you that you needed to capture. What was the moment? The thought, I will never be a mother, while watching all of these mayors and all of their foals. It's a very interesting place. Kentucky is a beautiful state, and one of the things, of course, at its core is the thoroughbred world and the horses, the horse capital of the world, as they call it. It's a very strange place to be a person that is not going to have a child and could not have a child, when in the following season, there's literally all you see are mayors and foals. It's just mother and child, mother and child. I remember laughing to myself that the metaphor, that the image almost felt too much. I can't even write this down because it's almost too obvious. The world is just showing me this. For me, at least, I had the realization that the world was showing it to me because it was a moment of acceptance.

In that poem, only one of the stanzas centers on you. Throughout *The Hurting Kind*, the new book, I think that's broadly true. I would say, and I could be wrong. This is impressionistic, but compared to your previous books, animals and plants, but particularly, I think animals are often what the poems are about. It's noted the way they look at you without caring. The fox doesn't care what you think of the fox. But in general, you're very decentered in this collection, and there's a lot of letting the lives and existences of the natural world around you actually act as the protagonists of the stories. Can you tell me a bit about either that choice, if it was a choice, or just that change in you, if it wasn't a choice?

No, thank you for deeply reading this book. That means a lot to me. That is very true. It's very much at the core of this book. I think that if I'm looking at the work of the poems in *Bright Dead Things*, which began a little bit more of an autobiographical strain in my work, I would say, and then *The Carrying*, which dealt with infertility at its core. You could actually sort of, in both of those books, track a personal narrative with a beginning and a middle and an end. Then, I think with this book, I really wanted to, A, do something different for myself, and B,

I am a different person, so it's hard for me not to do something different. I was very interested in what it would be to not make myself the center of every story. I like the idea of focusing on the community that's around me, on ancestors and animals and friends and things that are so worthy of witness. Sometimes we forget to look and we forget to honor. We look at squirrels. We see squirrels every day. No matter where you are, you sing squirrels, and there's a poem in there for squirrels. I feel like there's a reaching outward to this book and to this work that is very much where I'm at philosophically. I think the work started before the pandemic, probably five years, worth of poems or worth of curated poems in the book. I think that idea of isolation and aloneness, I really wanted to look at it, interrogate it. Am I alone? I don't know if I'm alone. What does that mean? I think being able to be the watcher, but then also realizing that the animals when you leave the house are watching you and it's the same three crows and we're having this experience

every morning, it started to feel like, oh, I am in community, even though we're all sort of social distancing and in the early days of the lockdown, all of that. I was sort of suspicious of the idea of loneliness because I wasn't lonely. I was in community with these others and some of those others were ancestors and memories who are with me all the time. I think I just started to unravel that for myself of what it was to be part of something larger and it felt so refreshing. I can't even tell you. It was really wonderful to write poems that weren't always coming back to the eye. There's a term used just a minute ago in community and you're saying that you see yourself as it in community with animals, with ancestors, but I want to hold on that for a minute because it helped click something together for me, which I'm not going to be able to get it in words quickly enough to make it work, but maybe I can get it enough that you'll get it what I'm saying, which is there's a way that you treat animals across your books. I've read and say a lot, but enough poetry that there's a certain style of nature poetry, of observational nature poetry, which is nature, isn't it beautiful, remarkable, perfect? What if we could only pay attention to it, which is beautiful and I like a lot of that work, but you treat animals unusually as equals, as if they're just creatures from another place who you don't speak exactly the same language, and this will come up actually in the next poem I'll ask you to read, but it's here too and horses, I think you practically have this relationship with. If I don't misremember, Bright Dead Things opens with a poem about a horse and its strength and you imagine having the heart of that horse. Can you talk a bit about your relationship with horses, with animals, like how you understand the human animal dynamic? Yeah, well, I think that phrase that you just said was perfect, which is the human animal, like we are animals. And I'm always so fascinated by the fact that we deny that in ourselves. And I think it's partly hubris and the idea that we've somehow, if we're animals, we're the perfected animal. And I think we can clearly say, as someone who listens to your show, that we are not a perfect animal. I mean, we know what's happening in the world right now, we see what's happening. And I think there is something to be said for the fact that that remembering of our own instinctual nature, of our own connectedness to the planet, I think is really important as we move forward into whatever is next for us. Because I feel like when we lose that connection and we forget that our relationship with the world is reciprocal, that's when we sort of give up. And I don't want to give up. But I think for me, the animals are always equals. We're doing the same kind of work. I look out and when I'm sort of toiling at my poems or I'm answering emails or whatever it is, and I'm kind of in my space and I'm thinking about this and that. And I look over and I watch a robin kind of got his head down and he's doing

this thing with this worm. And this literally happened this morning. And I laughed that we both kind of had the same expression in our eyes of this, like, oh, right, I'm just sort of toiling over this thing that I do to survive. And I've always thought that was really important. And I'm not sure why it's so important to me. I'm not sure if I can articulate it. But I know that even as a child, I was that person that would deeply look at the animals on the trees and and feel like they were as important as whatever I was learning in the classroom and as important as ideas. And I sort of sometimes wonder if we give too much credit to ideas and thoughts and the life of the mind and not the life of the body, the animal moving through the world.

What a lovely setup for the poem I'm going to ask you to read now, which is Service from Bright Dead Things.

I love you're going to have me put this on this great.

Bring in the gray lady down a notch.

I mean, I love it. Okay. This is a poem in my book, Bright Dead Things. And I think it was probably written in about 2012. But here it goes. Service.

Somewhere outside of Albuquerque, I was all fed up with the stories about your ex-girlfriend's guest billboard in New York City. And to make matters worse, I had to pee like a racehorse or like a girl who did too much to drink way too far from home. You stopped at a friend's body shop to talk about a buddy who was stuck someplace in Mexico. You were talking pulling strings and taking poles off a brown bottle. And no one told me where the restroom was.

So I walked back to where the hot rods were displayed like dogs ready for a fight, bearing their grills like teeth. I was hungry. The air smelled like hot gasoline in that sweet carnation smell of oil and coolant. A girl pit bull came and circled me as I circled the cars. She sniffed my ankles like I was her kin or on some kind of rescue mission. You were still talking, not a glance in the direction of me and the bitch working our ways around the souped up corvettes and the power tools. The pit was glossy, well cared for, a queen of the car shop. And when she widened her hind legs and squatted to pee all over one of the cars dropped canvases. I took it as a challenge. That strong yellow stream seemed to be saying, girl, no one's going to tell me when to take a leak, when to bow down, when not to bite. So right then, in the dim lights of the strange garage, I lifted my skirt and pissed like the hard bitch I was.

One thing I love about that poem and a lot of your work is I think poetry, for many of us, has developed a reputation as being the realm of the sacred. It's formalistically complex, it's beautiful, it's attentive, poets feel like these more sensitive out of humanity people.

It's a temperament many of us believe we don't possess. And you have a lot of poetry that I don't want to call it the profane, but it's very much, you're a great poet of what it feels like to be at the bar at 3 a.m. And I'm curious how you think about that kind of poetry. I've heard you say about Write Dead Things that you wanted to write a book of poetry for people who don't read poems. Could you talk a bit about what you meant by that and how it comes out in the work? Yeah, I'm always interested when people will say, oh, that subject is not poetic enough.

And I've also always had that experience when I first started in graduate school at NYU in 1999. I had a moment where I felt like I really wanted to write about whatever was happening to me, but whatever was happening to me was not beautiful. I was living in New York City, I didn't have a lot of money, and I couldn't figure out how to make poems about it. And I think there was a moment in which I really felt like writing poetry was not only about beauty, but it was also about intelligence. And I thought, oh, I just need to prove

my intelligence. And that's a lot of graduate school stuff that's not even really comes with the community of graduate school, but it comes from within, right? And as I aged as a poet and *Write Dead Things* is my fourth book, there was that moment where I thought, okay, you've done what you need to do in terms of establishing that you can write a poem. Now, just tell the poems that you want to tell. And I think that idea of unraveling and sort of connecting with subject matter that was important to me, that chewy, juicy subject matter that you would tell a friend at a bar or the funny story that you might lean over and say, like, I've got one for you. And I thought, I can make those into poems. Why not? I mean, poems and poets have done that way before me, of course, and have been doing it for years. It was new for me. I didn't know how to conflate the two. I wasn't sure how to make that idea of the pit bull in the garage into a poem. And then, of course, I realized that my teachers who were brilliant gave me all those tools, which was, it's the language and it's the image and it's the musicality. And if I can focus on that and make sure that the line breaks are working and that the poem still has its tension, then it becomes a full event, a full transformation because it couldn't just be a story. It couldn't just be like, oh, here's the thing that happened. It has to do more than that. And so I think it was a shift in my work, the *Poems and Bright Dead Things*. And I think it's continued over these last three books. I know many people in my life who

will do something that they wonder if they should do and they'll think, well, I'm going to do this one for the story. I come out of nonfiction journalism. I know many journalists who are, you know, this might go bad, but it's going to be a great piece. When you're squatting behind the auto body shop with your shit boyfriend out in front, are you thinking this is going to be a killer poem? That's amazing. I love that question. No, I mean, in fact, what I remember most about that experience was feeling somewhat unsafe and feeling like, oh, this relationship is coming to its conclusion. I need to leave. And I did. So no, there was, for me, I wish I was thinking of the poem, but instead I was thinking about really what were the next steps for me and how could I go find

my own identity and pleasure again. And so the poem didn't come until years after that. It was probably, I didn't write the poem until 10 years after the experience. You can tell me if this is wrong. It just occurred to me literally the second, but I feel like a lot of your poems actually take place in cars. You write a lot of road poems, a conversation you're having with your current partner, an ex-partner, a drive you're taking, the first poem I had you ask you to read, you were in the car with your parents going to spinal appointments. What are cars for you? Why are cars a good setting for poetic storytelling? I'm so pleased that you asked this question because my best friend Trish Harnato is a playwright and she has been telling me this since '98, maybe '97. She was like, you, all of your poems take place in cars. She's the only one who's ever said it to me. And now you. Me and Trish. You and Trish. This is amazing. She actually convinced me or almost convinced me to call my thesis for NYU the passenger side. I would have said driving in cars with poems. Yeah, exactly, which is great. I think that there is that time where in cars you're in transition and I think so many poems exist in liminal spaces and they begin with the idea of like, oh, that's a place where you're often quiet, right? Where you're going from one place to another. There's this transition. There is silence. And I think that's really important for me because they bring up, oh, I remember this other time that this happened to me. I wonder too, if there's something in me that is almost inspired by

that kind of white noise that driving can give you, it's not so much the music of the world, but almost a hum. And that may also do something to me when I compose. And I'm not sure why. But yeah, I think that's absolutely right on. And I'm not even sure how to articulate it, but I know that you and my best friend are now the people who have said this to me. I wonder if there's actually something about speed, not the speed that you're going, but the speed that it forces you to go. Because just while you were saying that, I was thinking that I don't think there's anywhere I'm as creative as planes and cars. I really miss being on planes. I actually don't like to travel that much. I just really like the plane ride, which I know is bad from a carbon perspective. And I don't just take planes for the pure associative thinking of it. But you're a little bit trapped somewhere, where in my life, I mean, my house is so well set up that for the barest flicker of boredom or discouragement or exhaustion, I have a million selves. But I'm in the car, I don't have that much. When I'm in the plane, I can't do that much. And so my mind has to expand and slowly I become more spacious and more aware of what's actually being served up. Yeah, I think it's the same way with walking. I mean, all of those spaces in which we can't get out of ourselves. I think that's really true because, you know, especially if I am driving, even if there's music on, there's still there's so many thoughts rushing to me, you don't have your email, you don't have your phone, you're not having this constant sort of barrage of stimulation. Instead, you're focusing on getting from one place to another. And in that, I think those memories and impulses and music all kind of move together. And I do think they can be seeds of poems when I get back to the place where I can write.

You spent 12 years in New York City and then moved to Kentucky with your now husband. And I'm very

interested in that change, the subject of a fair amount of your poetry. Can you read someplace like Montana from Bright Dead Things? I just met a woman in, where was I? I was here. I was in Kentucky at the book party and she and her best friend have tattoos of the state flower of Montana based on this poem. Oh, that's lovely. Which is so amazing and kind of intense and beautiful. But I laugh because I don't think they have a connection with Montana. They have a connection

to the poem and, you know, which is beautiful too. Now I'm just looking for it. You know, it's weird. Nobody tattoos anything from my political columns that you know of. Never happened. That you see, you've just asked for it. Now it's going to happen, Ezra.

Yeah, don't, don't do this. Audience don't, I will not be impressed. Don't, don't do this.

I mean, you know, it can happen. Yeah, this is a poem for Trish, who we were just talking about. Someplace like Montana. Now when I go to the grocery store, I'm amazed at the wide aisles of bright food and foodstuffs. And it's nothing like the bodega I shopped in for years in Brooklyn between the bars we liked. Once when I was going for groceries, I ran into tea and we decided we needed to drink rather than shop and we did. There were a lot of beers on tap and the taps were all different like toys in a dentist's toy chest. So I said, I'll have what she's having. And maybe it was snowing out and it seemed to be at a time when every shirt I bought at the secondhand store would turn out to be see-through, but I wouldn't know it until I was out. So a lot of conversations would start, is this shirt see-through? And it was. We talked for a long time, grocery bags empty on the chair, and we both talked about moving to someplace like Montana and how sometimes it would be nice to see more sky than just this little square between the bridges and buildings. But

then we'd miss Brooklyn and each other and we ordered another beer. Tea was writing a play, also some articles, and we both just needed some money and maybe to make out with someone who wasn't an asshole. But also we wanted to make great art. Tea was really good at naming things, so we decided she should be a titologist and she liked that. So she agreed. What do we do if we lived in someplace like Montana? We'd go for walks and look at trees and right and look at the sky. Yes, and we'd cook and go to those huge grocery stores that have toy cars attached to the carts so kids can pretend to be driving. Yes, and we'd probably have kids too.

All of this seemed really far off and not like us at all, so we ordered another beer and said, life is long. Now I'm walking around the grocery store in Kentucky and I've just looked at trees and sky and I should write something. So I asked tea to tell me what to write about. She says, saturation. And I think of that feeling when you're really full or life is full and you can't think of anything else that could fit in it. But then even more sky comes, more days. And there is so much to remember and swallow. I asked tea what I should call the thing I write about saturation because she's a titologist. And she says, someplace like Montana.

I want to hold on that idea of life feeling full. Do you have that recounting early in the poem of talking with Trish and you both saying, wouldn't it be nice to have someplace like Montana? But oh my god, we'd miss Brooklyn and the hubbub and each other and all of our friends. And I think that there's a belief among many people who live in big city centers that that's what makes life feel full. And something I see in your poetry that I've known and other people have made these moves that I felt in myself for small periods of time when I've changed my life up kind of dramatically is that maybe that's a very literal definition thought about what makes life feel full. And it seems to me that actually fullness has come for you in a different way. How did moving to Kentucky make things feel full? What was behind it and what was unexpected about it? Yeah, I love that. I think that's so true. How many times people will say, you know, what do you do? And I think it's fascinating to me because I feel like Kentucky offered to me something that I didn't even know I needed, which was time and space. I mean, I knew I needed those

things. That's actually a lie. I knew I needed those things desperately. I just didn't know that they would be in Kentucky. And I also think that there's a lot of people that have misconceptions about Kentucky as a state. You know, there's this idea that it's sort of this backwater, you know? And in reality, I've built a really beautiful community here. It has incredible literary legacy. And I think for me, I really needed to get out of this idea that writing could only be in one place and that writing could also only be in a place that was really hard to live. And I think it goes back for me also into that idea of the suffering artist, which is really rampant in big cities in New York and San Francisco. As you know, this idea that in order to make art, you kind of have to suffer and you probably have to have an addiction and you have to have, you know, all of these things and you can't be a healthy person. And I realized fairly early on that I really wanted a life that was whole in many ways. And if that meant that my writing wasn't always at the center of my life and that sometimes friends and my husband and my animals and nature and family that they take over the center, that was okay too. And I think that sort of sense of wholeness, the seeking of wholeness and the seeking of balance was really a remarkable thing that came to me in Kentucky. And it is a different kind of fullness. And it's also the idea of not always praising busyness, but able to give yourself that break, to give yourself a little bit of ease. And for me, it was turning to the work full time, to really write

full time and to know that what kept me whole the most was being able to align my life with also how I made a living. And that never happened before and certainly didn't happen in New York City as much as I love the city. I spent the weekend reading your poetry to prepare for talking with you and rereading a lot of the earlier books and these poems and then a bunch that you really write from the other side of them, the other side of the move. Really reawakened this longing and point of fracture in myself some number of years ago after I'd stepped down as editor of Fox, which I used to run. My partner and I, we left DC where we lived at the time and we went and we spent, you know, almost three months in like a little cottage basically near the beach on California Central Coast. And the very explicit idea of that was to let life be small for a while, to just shrink everything down. And I thought I would go a little crazy with boredom in a really healthy, revitalizing way. And the genuine shock of that period of my life was that I've almost never felt bigger as a person. I did nothing. Like I did not, I mean, I worked, but I didn't see people really, I didn't go that many places. And it has infected me with this horrible lurking suspicion that I am wrong about what my own preferences are as a person.

My sense of being an urban person is incorrect. Now look, I had fewer responsibilities at that moment and I didn't have kids and there are all kinds of changes in my life. But that sense that we're socialized or many of us to think that fullness comes from a kind of hubbub and to maybe miss what gets drowned out by that, maybe the wholeness you're talking about has really, really lingered with me. And a lot of your poems really reawaken that ongoing worry I have about the decisions I've made in my own life and continue to make. Yeah, I love that story because I think it's so true that I did have moments, really hard moments when we moved to Kentucky. Primarily it was missing friends and family, but a lot of it was just like, you know, what do I do? And then within days, honestly, I was like, oh, I write, I read, I do these things. And, you know, of course, I had to make a living. So immediately I was freelancing for all the magazines I left in New York and I was working in New York on those hours anyway. But I felt like it was, it opened something in me that I didn't know I needed. And I am always sort of surprised by, I don't know, there's a sort of sense that we're often told who we are by other people, you're a city person, like you're the New York girl, you do this. And I remember thinking, oh, yeah, of course, yeah, that's me, that'll be me. And I was like, no, I'm not, though, I'm from Sonoma, California, I'm technically from Glen Ellen, like I'm in a very rural place. And I think that being able to push against some of the narratives that were put on me by other people and assumptions, and then my own stories that I would make up for myself of sort of never being able to adjust life. I think that's a big thing. But I'm sort of, as I age, sort of becoming more and more all elbows when someone is like, you're this or you're that or I'm this or I'm that, because I'm really believe in the mercurial changeability of our souls. And I'm counting on it to save us again and again, is that we can change. And then we can shift and then we can make decisions that will make us feel whole and make us feel more complete. And in doing so, we might be better people and kinder to each other. It reminds me of a line. And I think I'm right about where it comes from, but forgive me if I'm not from the Buddhist master, Thich Nhat Hanh, where he once said paraphrasing that many of us mistake excitement for happiness. Yeah. I mean, I think about that a lot. I think about also like the emotions that are overlooked in our lives, like contentedness. I think people

are often more comfortable with anxiety than they are with contentedness. Because what happens if you admit that you are okay? That's a strange place to be, you know, when all we are supposed to do is desire and desire and desire. What a great segue to sanctuary from the herding kind. Sanctuary. Suppose it's easy to slip into another's green skin, bury yourself in leaves and wait for a breaking, a breaking open, a breaking out. I have before been tricked into believing I could be both an eye and the world. The great eye of the world is both gaze and gloss to be swallowed by being seen, a dream, to be made whole by being not a witness, but witnessed. So that one hit me a little hard on a lot of levels, but in particular, and I guess it relates to our earlier conversation about the last poem, but that idea that you could be made whole, not by being a witness, but by being witnessed feels to me to your point about being told who we are by the world around us to the question of how social media makes us think and feel, right? You know, we're validated, we feel real because we're getting all this feedback. It does feel in a way like a central delusion of the age that we can be made whole by being witnessed. But maybe I misread it completely.

No, I love that. That's definitely there. The idea of needing an eye, E-Y-E, to become an eye, the capital I, I think is fascinating to me and that sense of not knowing who we are unless we are in relation to others. I find that fascinating as well.

You have this line in there, I have before been tricked into believing I could be both an eye and the world. What do you mean by being both an eye and the world? And again, it's a letter I, not an E-Y-E. Yeah, I think that idea that there's so much work that I do to try to, in some ways, reimagine who the self is, who I am, what kind of fear and anxiety and depression and all the things that the human experience can often encompass that goes on in me. And there's that idea of like, oh, we've always been like, oh, at some point we can release that, right? At some point you come to some wisdom, some age that you can let go of that ego, that self, that's the heart-pounding self, the part that is full of need and want and the part that is holding on to the thing someone said 20 years ago or the thing you said 20 years ago. And I've always thought, okay, at some point that will leave us and I'll become more the world and dissolve into something more. And I think that as I've aged, I realize everything is an ongoing process and that it isn't something that suddenly you've done this work and therefore you become enlightened, right? That you're like, oh, you wake up one day and be like, oh, guess what?

I don't have an ego. I'm not bothered by anything. And instead, of course, it's just the ongoing slug of being a human and returning to the practice and like, okay, here we are again.

That's bothering me. Here I am again. I'm full of faults. And I think that's at the core of those two lines. It reminds me a little bit of the poem about Montana, but about moving to Kentucky.

Let me think about how to say this. I think it's an idea that what is poisonous is for us to care about the world's judgment of us, to care what other people think, right? And I think it's almost in a way subtler than that, that it's actually about one of the things I thought about when you said the delusion that you could be both I and the world. I think there's something there about you don't really want to know too much about how the world sees you, not because you care and

don't care about their judgments, but because you can't help but see yourself the same way, that it becomes the way you see you, right? To give an example from the podcast that we're doing right now, I have a tendency sometimes these shows come out, I've worked hard on them, I go look

at
the feedback in the email inbox, maybe I'll search the link for the show on social media, see what people are saying about it. And I have an authentic view, the view I had the moment the recording ended and nobody else had access to it of what that show was and what it is in the world and what I thought of it. And it's very, very hard for the unrepresentative but nevertheless consensus view that I then expose myself not to become my view of it. If I'm not just going to be I, if I'm going to look through the gaze of the world, I actually become the world, right? I can't keep the two separate anymore. And social media is sort of the obvious example here, but it's also, I mean, it's one reason that it was very different for me to leave DC and then just be at the beach because wandering around in my journalist friend groups, I really always saw myself as a journalist, I really always saw myself through that eye on me. And I think we're told this should be a discipline, right? That we're supposed to not care what the world thinks, as you put it, you just lose your ego as you get older. And I don't know if that's true, to go back to maybe the example of the monks, there's something telling about the fact that so many spiritual leaders go and live in hut somewhere or retreat to monastery so often, that if you don't want to see yourself through the eyes of the world, you actually have to stop letting either the world see you so often or stop at least being exposed to how much the world sees you so often. I think that's really true, everything you just said. And I think as an artist, there's a way that you can let the world in too much. It's very easy to get caught up in reviews or any kind of chatter or noise around the work. And sometimes even that's the good things, right? Even when someone's like, oh, this work's amazing. And that's a beautiful thing to hear, but you also have to go back into your room and be like, okay, how do I write a poem again? And you can't sit down
there and go like, well, I can write anything because I'm amazing because that is not going to work. That is not going to be okay. And you're not going to write good poems that way. And so I have to really make sure that I am leaning into the impulse, the real authentic impulse of making the poem and making the poem for me. And that's really essential to doing what you said, like this idea of how we can be in the world and also sometimes shut the world out. And I think that's important, especially as an artist, to not always be looking for how we are seen. And I think about labels a lot. And of course, as people write headlines, people have to have labels. It's understandable. You know, there's the Twitter bio, there's all these things that you have to sum up these things. And I'm just very suspicious of any kind of summing up of any kind of, this is who I am. Because, you know, first of all, who I am is changing rapidly all the time with what I'm reading and who I'm with and what I'm experiencing. And then the other thing is, even I can't sum up who I am, you know, so I don't know if I can trust someone else to do it. It reminds me of something you said in a recent interview. You said someone asked me what my muse was and I said the world. And it strikes me, it's actually a quote that can be read very much in two ways. To the point you're making, your muse can be the world in the sense of you gazing out onto it or even beyond that you being in community with it. And your muse can be the world in you are receiving feedback from the world. You know, how do you let the muse be the world, but your world, not, you know, the world coming directed back at you in your own sense of self?
Yeah, I mean, I think it's a lot of work. Every advice I've gotten from any writer who's really had a career that's been long and beautiful and they've written for a long time was always to to not listen when they say anything good and to not listen to when they say anything bad.

That you have to treat them with equanimity, that those both exist in the same place. And that is really hard because I think the ego will lean into the good things and be like, I'm just going to keep doing things like that forever. Or the ego will lean into the bad things and say, well, I will just never write again. So either one is really dangerous. And I have to remember that. And, you know, I do meditate every day. I do a lot of that work that will hopefully sustain me when I get tempted by either of those two polarizing opposites that hinder creative work. What's your meditation practice? I usually sit for at least 15 minutes a day, sometimes in the morning and sometimes at night. At night, it's usually because I've forgotten to do it in the morning. Or like I had something early and or early flight or something like that. But I try to start my day with it. I also try to do set an intention every day that I just kind of hold with me throughout the day. And sometimes it's just like, oh, I am feeling a little stressed out. And I'll just say, let's just think about ease. And I'll say, I just keep saying the word ease and it comes up. And then my meditation practice, it differs. Sometimes it's, I think the core is always loving kindness. That's what I learned many, many years ago. And that's my fallback. But I'll do, I'll do different kinds. That's a nice way to get to the poem I wanted to end us with, which is, I've wanted clarity in light of my lack of light from the herding kind. Yeah. This is a poem that begins. The title is a line from the poet Alejandra Pijarnik from Argentina. I have wanted clarity in light of my lack of light after Alejandra Pijarnik. Fireworks in the background, like an incongruous soundtrack, either celebratory or ominous, a veil of smoke behind a neighbor's house, the air askew with booms. The silver suitcase is dragged down the stairs, a clunk, another clunk, awkward wheels where wheels aren't any use, uselessness of invention. There's a knocking in the blood that is used to absence, but hates this part the most. The sudden buried hope of illusion. Lose my number, sadness. Lose my address, my storm door, my skull. Am I stronger or weaker than when the year began? A lie that joins two selves like a hinge, saw dust in the neighbor's garage that smells of the men who raised me. What is the other world that others live in? Unknown to me. The ease of grin and good times. Once I loved fireworks so much, they made me weep without warning. I smoked too much pot one young summer and almost missed them until I simply remembered to look up. Gold valley, crackling in chaos. Now it is a sound that undoes me. Too much violence in the sky. In this way, I have become more dog, more senses, shake and nerve. Better now, when the edges in the night's edges are just bats, erratic and avoiding the fireflies. How much more drama can one body take? I wake up in the morning and relinquish my dreams. I go to bed with my beloved. I am delirious with my tenderness. Once I was brave, but I have grown so weary of danger. I am soundlessness amid the constant sound of war. I love that one so much that I'm almost flowed to ruin the mood with my questions. But that line in there, how much more drama can one body take? I wake up and relinquish my dreams. That's a very beautiful poem about aging, it seems to me. Can you just talk a bit about that idea? Do you wake up and relinquish your dreams? Yeah, I mean, I have a very active dream world. I have to relinquish, I have to put them somewhere. I guess, yeah, that works on two levels. There's a moment when I wake up that in this poem, I think it's both the dreams that you have at night and then also the idea of the dreams of that sort of, oh, right, this is the real world

again. And it's not a fantasy and the war isn't always far off. And I think that's important to remember as a human person moving in this world at this particular moment, I think too often we can

kind of compartmentalize violence into another space. And at the same time, we still have to live within it. And so that idea of tenderness that follows those lines, it's like, well,

I can still be in this place that has both violence and this incredible sort of surrender that sometimes comes over you, like I need to give up, right? But then also the tenderness and the doubling down on connection. And I think this poem holds a space for both.

I realized it was this poem that had brought the Tecknot Han quote to my mind. And so I actually have it in this part of my notes, and I'll read it here, where he wrote in the Art of Power, quote, many people think excitement is happiness, and then he continues, but when you're excited, you are not peaceful. True happiness is based on peace. And I wonder if that rings true to you.

It goes a little bit to our conversation about leaving hubbub for more open sky. It feels very true to this poem, this idea that maybe there's something about contentment that requires to go back to the name of the podcast, slowing down a little bit and not being so tightly on the edge.

Yeah. I think as a person, I'm naturally wired for anxiety. And I think it can sometimes transform into excitement. And the excitement is much more fun than the anxiety. But I think as I've aged and as I continue to work on my poems and myself, I do think that finding that space within the self that is at peace, at ease, that can find the breath,

right, that can live in that space of like, okay, what does that feel like? How are we different after we took one breath? That to me feels like an easier place to live. And I think for a long time, I thought you just sort of lived with your heart kind of going a million miles a minute. And now, I think I really would like to live for a very long time. And I would like to be writing poems.

It's a very old woman on a porch somewhere, or maybe by the beach. And I would like to get there as easily and as peacefully as possible. And I think partly I want to do that because I feel like I want to honor this work and honor this life. And if I keep kind of giving back to it in some ways, writing the poems help me slow down, writing the poems help me breathe, and writing the poems help me remember that there is more to this world than that kind of madness and rush and the sort of fury of busyness that we all live in. And I believe in that importance of taking that breath and slowing down and actually being in the moment and being present. And I hope as I age, it'll continue to guide me.

You said a minute ago, when you were saying that you're suspicious of headlines, of trying to boil people down to a label, that one reason you're suspicious of it is that you're not even always the same person moment to moment, certainly not year to year. And one reason I really love this poem as a poem about aging, something my best friend and I have been talking about a lot, is the way that what worked for us, and maybe it didn't, but seemed to work for us in our early 20s, maybe what we wanted doesn't really work now. I just turned 38. It's not that old, but it's different. And I've kids in a different life and more responsibilities. And it's hard, I find. And I know it's been a theme of this conversation. It's hard to track the way you've changed, forgetting what the world tells you you want. There are also things that you told you want. And you may have been right. I mean, it's something I really like about this particular poem. It doesn't imply that there's some greater wisdom. It's not that you didn't like fireworks, that you were wrong to like fireworks. It's just that your body has absorbed the drama it can take to a certain extent. And so that part of you is changing. And I think it's really hard to recognize

that we change. Sometimes we're forced into the recognition by an injury, by an illness, by grief. But sometimes there isn't that forcing mechanism. And so we run along harming ourselves by trying to

chase past preferences, long past the time when our body has new ones.

I think that's very true. I think there's also to go back to the fireworks. There is that moment of bravery. And I say it was brave and courageous and this sort of sense of that righteousness of youth that is so beautiful and amazing and fiery. And then there's another part of me that's like, when do we get to praise tenderness and vulnerability and also just a need to be quiet or a need to not be the person that's on the front lines all the time, but to also do some self-care and some caretaking. And I mean that in the most authentic sense, not in the way that you could purchase something. And I think that's important because so much of, especially when people talk about artists, it's that, oh, you kind of always have to be off kilter to write or there has to be something kind of going on that is a disturbance. And I think if you're really paying attention, I mean, the world is full of disturbances. And anywhere you look, you can find them. But the question about that is, can you be still enough to receive it and to notice and to witness everything in a way that's not always about either recreating trauma or in some ways, furiously defending the self that you may no longer be?

What's the relationship between your anxiety and your poetry?

Hmm. I don't have anxiety when I write poetry. It's not there. In fact, it's gotten so much better. I actually don't have it that often. I made a lot of choices in my life to make that the case. But honestly, the calmest and most myself and most at home, I feel, is when I'm making poems. I think it's a lovely place to end. Always our final question. What are three books? Hopefully, maybe books of poetry you might recommend to the audience.

Yeah, I love this question. I love *Stones* by Kevin Young. It's a beautiful book.

Diane Seuss' book that just won the Pulitzer, it's called *Frank Sonnett's*. And then Natalie Diaz's book of poems, post-colonial love poem, is incredible.

And Ada Lamone, your new book of poems, which is beautiful, is called *The Herding Kind*, and your podcast is the slowdown. Thank you very much.

Thank you so much. It was such a pleasure to talk to you.

The *Israclin Show* is produced by Andy Calvin, Jeff Geld and Roje Karma. Backchecking by Hailey Millican. Original music by Isaac Jones and Jeff Geld. Mixing and Engineering by Jeff Geld.

Audience Strategy by Shannon Busta. Our executive producer is Irene Degucci, and special thanks to Kristen Lin and Christina Samieluski.