

Q:

A: When you teach poetry writing, you have to be more or less constantly asking for more. You

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A: Language is my life, I like to say, especially when I say something wrong or silly. The fact is, there is no more important skill than the skill with language. None. Math is right up there, I'll admit it, but the ability to communicate accurately and clearly is absolutely the most important skill anyone can learn. If you can speak and write well, everything else you do will come to you more easily. But the thing to remember is that we use the same words to wound and to woo, to lie and to tell the gospel truth. Skill with language comes with enormous responsibility.

I think, in terms of art, that music is probably superior to all other arts. But language and music are two sides of a single coin. And if music can go to places, both intellectually and emotionally, that language cannot, then language can go places that music cannot. As the dog proves in "Do You Love Me?", there are sometimes no alternatives to just saying it.

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A: Poetry purifies the language. Great poems reinvent the language. The greatest poems cannot be said any other way. They cannot be paraphrased or summarized. A culture without poetry is a disabled culture, an incomplete culture, a broken culture. Readers know this. After 9/11 poetry sales and poems swapped via email skyrocketed. People were looking for a kind of language purified, with all the cant and political jockeying and posturing cut out. And poetry was where a great many people found that clarity and honesty.

Q:

A: The situation—a child, the sole survivor of a terrible accident—is immediately dramatic. We feel for the kid there, but we also sense the simple enormity and blessing of his having survived. I suppose I'd say that the poem's about a central and beautiful human quality: that no matter what horrible thing happens to us, we go on. We have to. As President Obama said we need to do in his inaugural address, in bad times we have to "pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off" and keep on going and make things better. People are routinely heroic and brave. It's part of our biological make-up, our DNA. We suffer terrible losses, but we get up and we go on. Perhaps the poem makes us sense that we ourselves could do exactly as the kid in the poem does. He keeps on living.