

83. You Don't Know What Love Is by Kim Addonizio - A Friend to Salena Godden

SPEAKERS

Michael Shaeffer, Fiona Bennett, Salena Godden, Paterson Joseph

Fiona Bennett

Hello and welcome to The Poetry Exchange. I'm Fiona Bennett, and I'm all alone today with you, dear listeners. Michael, who you would normally hear saying 'and I'm Michael Schaffer' is not with me today. He's busy doing what he does so brilliantly, performing in a show at the National Theatre. They're doing their previews and press night this week for the show ['Grenfell: in the words of survivors'](#), which is something I'm sure he's going to tell us more about when he when he gets back. So for today, I'm here alone. And that's okay, because there's lots of things to tell you. And there's a [fabulous episode](#) to share with you. So I won't whither on too long. But yes, a huge thank you to everybody who's been in touch in the various ways since the last episode. It was a thrill and a joy for us to share that [conversation with Lois P. Jones](#), and the fabulous Rilke poem. And many of you have been in touch about that. So I'm so glad that you enjoyed that as much as we did.

I'm not going to do the usual thing that Michael and I do, where we slightly tease you about what's coming up. I'm going to just take us straight in because it was an enormous pleasure and delight to speak to our guest who's coming up in this episode, the glorious Salena Godden: poet, essayist, activist, novelist, writer extraordinaire, and mover and shaker of the poetry world and many other worlds I think, too. We've been sort of wanting to get the right time to speak with Salena, because she is one of the poets who's had poems nominated by other people. In fact, twice we've had the delight of featuring her poems: 'Pessimism is for Lightweights', which was brought to us by [Hannah Jane Walker when we were at Latitude](#); also a poem called 'This Poem', which was [one of our earliest episodes](#). So we've been featuring her own poems. And so obviously, we've been wanting to talk to her about the poem that's been a friend to her. And we finally managed to align all our diaries, and it was an absolutely hugely enjoyable conversation - incredibly insightful. So I'm going to take us

straight in to listen to Michael and I talking about 'You Don't Know What Love Is' by Kim Adonizio: the poem that's been a friend to Salena.

Michael Shaeffer

So I suppose we should - instead of just idle chitter chatter - talk to you about the poem that's been a friend to you.

Salena Godden

Well, before we do that, can I just shout out some of the poems that are also friends to me that we're not going to discuss?

Michael Shaeffer

Please do, yeah, that would be great.

Salena Godden

Here are some of the poems that are on my list. My list is great! So imagine this is like a festival in your brain. Some of the poems are: William Blake 'London'; Bob Dylan 'The Times They Are A-Changin' - I see that as a poem; Emily Dickinson 'Hope is the Thing With Feathers'; Bob Marley 'Redemption Song' - I see that as a poem; Prince 'Sign of the Times'; Christopher Logue 'I Shall Vote Labour'; Maya Angelou 'Still I Rise'; Shakespeare's Hamlet 'To be or not to be'; Jock Scot 'You're right' or Jock Scot's 'Mod Poem'; Baudelaire 'Get Drunk'; Joelle Taylor 'Everything You Have Ever Lost'; Samuel Taylor Coleridge 'Kubla Khan'; Gil Scott Heron 'Whitey on the Moon'; Adrian Mitchell 'Tell me Lies about Vietnam'; Mary Oliver 'The Summer Day'; Ada Limon 'The Quiet Machine'; Tracy Chapman 'Fast Car'; Nikita Gill 'The versions of people you will never forget'; and Leonard Cohen 'Famous Blue Raincoat'. So there's some poems that we could be talking about!

Michael Shaeffer

That is just amazing. What an incredible list!

Salena Godden

Yeah, yeah, I really got involved in this task. But anyway, I'll let you introduce the poem that is the one that is the one that we're going to talk about today.

Michael Shaeffer

Well I'm very pleased to hear several that we've been fortunate enough to feature on the podcast here as well. So that's really great. Do you want to kick us off by reading it out for us, Salena?

Salena Godden

Oh, sure thing, okay.

Salena Godden

[You Don't Know What Love Is
by Kim Addonizio]

You don't know what love is
but you know how to raise it in me
like a dead girl winched up from a river. How to
wash off the sludge, the stench of our past.
How to start clean. This love even sits up
and blinks; amazed, she takes a few shaky steps.
Any day now she'll try to eat solid food. She'll want
to get into a fast car, one low to the ground, and drive
to some cinderblock shithole in the desert
where she can drink and get sick and then
dance in nothing but her underwear. You know
where she's headed, you know she'll wake up
with an ache she can't locate and no money
and a terrible thirst. So to hell
with your warm hands sliding inside my shirt
and your tongue down my throat
like an oxygen tube. Cover me
in black plastic. Let the mourners through.

Salena Godden

Such a great poem, isn't it? I love it so much.

Michael Shaeffer

Incredible. Thank you.

Fiona Bennett

It is an incredible poem, and it was extremely powerful just to hear you give us those words, actually. It's sitting amongst this amazing array of poets that you've kind of surrounded us with by mentioning the other poets who have been friends to you. I guess, in particular, of this poem, where did your relationship with it begin?

Salena Godden

There's a lot to say here. I find this poem very visceral, I find it very dark and slightly funny as well. There is a dark comedic thread in there. I also see myself in there, I myself have danced in my underwear in some cinderblock shithole and it kind of - it feels very - of somewhere where I've been, and learning to say no, and learning to turn that person away. I think the thing I find particularly fascinating in this poem is those three words: 'so to hell', because they could mean two things. She could mean 'so to hell with your warm hands sliding inside my shirt', as in, I won't have it. Or she could mean 'why not, your warm hand sliding inside my shirt?' And it's that ambiguity which I'm really drawn to and which I find really powerful in this poem. This kind of self-sabotage, this self - um - that's self-destructive that's going on in the middle section of that poem, you know, 'blinking, amazed...few shaky steps, hardly eating', you know and that kind of thing; it so very much reminds me of me in my 20s. But then, is she protecting herself? Or is she saying 'I can take it' and there's a survival in there, which I recognise. I really do recognise myself in quite a lot of Kim's work. I've got another collection here, 'Wild Nights', which I recommend. The title, 'Wild Nights' tells you, you know, we're really going to go there and we're really going to see some stuff, but then also there's stories of survival and there's sensitivity and there's liveliness, and it's fierce and it's spicy and it's boozy and it's punk, but it's also got so much substance and so much soul and will not be written off and will not be shushed, and I really love that about her whole body of work actually.

Michael Shaeffer

It's such an arresting first line here, isn't it? 'You don't know what love is / but you know how to raise it in me like a dead girl winched up from a river.' When I first read this I was going 'I don't know where I am'; this is immediately...kind of grabbed my attention and making me sit up and go 'what is this?' And then the love in it becomes like a baby. So we've gone from a dead girl to like a baby sitting up and blinking, taking a few shaky steps. Any day now she'll try to eat solid food.

Salena Godden

Yeah. But is there a thing there of maybe not a baby maybe a zombie, like the idea that she's been winched up from the river, and as she's brought back to life by this...you know, winched up from the river, washes the sludge off and the stench of the past, because she's reborn, maybe? The love sits up - *she* doesn't sit up - the *love* sits up, blinks and amazed. And she takes a few shaky steps. And I love that - this kind of idea of, you know, the man will come or the lover will come and save you, change you, wake something up in you, reawaken something in you, bring something back to life that was perhaps dead, you know?

Michael Shaeffer

Oh, that's great.

Salena Godden

There's so many layers, isn't there, in this poem? I love it.

Fiona Bennett

The other thing that's so incredible is just how she makes the turns that she makes. It's like she's there with one idea and one image and then she turns that so quickly. So even in that very first bit from 'you don't know what love is' you sort of go, 'oh okay'. And then 'but you know how to raise it in me'...'okay, that's all really interesting.' And then 'like a dead girl', and you kind of go: 'Oh. Okay.' It's incredible, the turns in it, isn't it?

Salena Godden

Yeah, yeah.

Fiona Bennett

Which I suppose is maybe like, I don't know what you would say about this Salena, but maybe that's a kind of body imprint in the poem of the kind of turns that you might be in in this kind of experience?

Salena Godden

Yeah. Yeah. She's not passing blame. But she is saying...I mean, who is she talking to? When she says: 'You know / where she's headed, you know she'll wake up / with an ache she can't locate and no money / and a terrible thirst'? Is it 'you know' as in *she knows, I know*? Or is it 'you' - the person that 'you don't know what love is'? You see? That's really ambiguous and gorgeous as well. It reminds me immediately of that certain time of night in a bar when the tequilas start coming out and *you know* where this is headed...and you know you should get that Uber...and then you, you know, it's kind of got that feel to it, which I find quite - quite fun - quite dangerous, like being too close to a fire.

Fiona Bennett

Yeah. And actually, you've just made me realise that's so clever, isn't it? Because that's the counterpoint of the 'you don't know what love is / but you know', you know; then she's kind of using that phrase in such a different way. And such a different context.

Salena Godden

Yeah, it's such a clever poem.

Michael Shaeffer

I'm just noticing: 'How to / wash off the sludge, the stench of our past.' So this is an old lover.

Salena Godden

Yeah.

Michael Shaeffer

There's a real history here, isn't there?

Salena Godden

Yeah. Actually, I hadn't even noticed that. It's *our* past, isn't it? It's not my past, or his past or their past. Yeah, that's interesting, isn't it? And then that next line: 'how to start clean.' So that does follow on...that kind of when we're having a fresh page or fresh start, or back together, it's going to be fine, but clearly, it's not. Yeah. This feels like when you shag your ex.

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah.

Salena Godden

Yeah.

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah.

Salena Godden

We're all knowingly going 'mmmm!'

Fiona Bennett

Well, I guess it's also in that 'you know how to raise it in me.'

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah.

Salena Godden

It's definitely the bad ex. It's not a happy ex or a fated love. It's someone that brings out the worst in her, you know, that brings out this destruction and the sabotage and the fast car low on the ground. So we're going - we're even getting to the destination in a dangerous way. We're going somewhere dangerous, dangerously. We all love a bit of danger, don't we? Come on?

Fiona Bennett

Yeah.

Salena Godden

Well, we think we do, until we're dancing in our underwear and can't get our way home, you know, and no money and a terrible thirst, you know?

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah.

Fiona Bennett

For me, I was like - she'll want / to get into a fast car, one low to the ground, and drive' - I'm just saying: yes, yes! Immediately, you know, it just took me, you know, going from that kind of very scary image of something skeletal starting to begin to eat solid food into the kind of an energy of release and drive and freedom. That's what I mean about this kind of switching from one mode to another. She just does that within the same line. I think it might have been Auden that said that in any line of poetry, there must be more than one thing happening. And I think if I was ever going to have to try and offer somebody a poem that demonstrates that I think this is going to be my new one.

Salena Godden

Yeah. I think what I love about it ultimately is there's no shame in it. There's no guilt or shame in it, there's just a series of things that one knows will happen, or something we've seen before. It's like, oh, here we go back round this block again, or back with this ex again, or back in this story again. And often in poems like this - when I write poems like this or have written poems in these themes - I tend to sort of be a little unkind to myself, or I paint myself as grotesque or as bad or as some sort of, you know...but in this, she's really not doing that. And that's what I really admire and I'm learning from this poem.

Michael Shaeffer

That's interesting. Does it give permission...?

Salena Godden

It's back to that line - 'so to hell' - isn't it? It's almost like there's a missing swear word in that 'so to hell' line, but the ambiguity would be taken if she'd done that.

Michael Shaeffer

There's a kind of inevitability about it isn't there? It's not up for debate. 'You know where she's headed. You know she's'...like there are no surprises here.

Salena Godden

Yeah.

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah, I think it's that 'so to hell'...like you were saying that ambiguity of the 'so to hell' is kind of, yeah, fuck it.

Salena Godden

Yeah.

Michael Shaeffer

I am going to press the fuck it button.

Salena Godden

Yeah, because that's what I - when I read it - I'm reading 'so fuck it to hell.' I'm kind of adding that in my head for some reason, but it's not there. There's something so powerful about just the way she's used that there. And then that last line 'let the mourners through', is gloriously melodramatic. Like 'just leave me here!' Like there's not one mourner, there's many mourners coming to witness, you know, that she's finally submitted, or finally just died. Like you kill me with your love. Like, you know, and there's something in that, I think. It's very gothic. 'Let the mourners through. Don't mind me!' Yeah, it's got that to it, which I love.

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah.

Fiona Bennett

It's great.

Salena Godden

And this other bit here 'and your tongue down my throat / like an oxygen tube' - now an oxygen tube is saving your life. So the analogy there is that this is a life-giving thing and so we're back to where we were with those first lines of like the dead girl winched up from the river. So the love is bringing the dead girl back up to the surface to the light. And then the tongue down the throat like an oxygen tube that's giving air. So this idea of like, air and light and love comes from this bad place, you know, which I, which I totally get.

Michael Shaeffer

That's really good.

Salena Godden

It's got a very Mae West feel in that, you know, like, 'looking for love in all the wrong places.' You know, I really admire Mae West and, yeah, so there's a real sort of - yeah - like a sass to it, which I really love. I'm looking for a word...would it be sassy? Yeah, sort of spicy, sassy...kind of, like, *twist* in there, you know? It's not at all a victim. You know?

Michael Shaeffer

What do you know about Kim?

Salena Godden

Well, I got these three books just recently - this is a new obsession of mine. I know I'm really late to her work. I figure she's a good generation before me and was doing very much the scene - the New York sort of scene - and from what I can pick up she's very Italian and toughy and punky. And just from reading her work, you know, it's so - I'm just gonna say it - it can be so stuffy, the poetry scene and poetry and literary festivals. And so I just was enthralled and thrilled to read her memoir, her 'Confessions of a Writing Life' and to read these poems, and to find someone, you know, that was having a fun time with it all, as I have always tried to do. Poets are where the party's at, you know, it's not really - it's kind of funny that we imagine poets to be in sort of frilly shirts like lying in the daisies - when actually, if you go to a festival, the poets are the hardcore lot still going at dawn, well the poets I hang out with are anyway. Or maybe it's just me! And of course, she's called her memoir 'Bukowski in a Sundress', which is very cool, because basically a reviewer reviewed her work and said - and put it as a put down, like - 'oh, you're just Bukowski in a sundress.' And she actually liked it and wore it as a

badge of honour. I'm quite new to it. It's very boozy and badass and really reminds me of what it was like to be a woman in the 90s doing poetry and that kind of poetry rock & roll thing that I really signed up for and believed in, up to a certain point. But I'm still unravelling and there's loads - she's got loads of books and loads of amazing YouTube videos and things, so I highly recommend her.

Fiona Bennett

What a fantastic introduction. And I love this, what you're saying there about the Bukowski. You know, it feels that there's a freedom for men to have a kind of loose, wild identity and there are...and, you know, to put a *fuck it* here or *whatever* there...and I'm sure this is all changing now, as many things are, but I, I still feel that to find that freedom to voice, you know, into that wild, full self is difficult. So the poets like Kim and yourself, who give us that voice, are really important to me.

Salena Godden

Thank you, and I really agree with you. When I was younger, like in my 20s, I remember I was called things like 'potty mouth poet' and things like that. But you know, you wouldn't really say that about a man just because he's used the word *fuck*. You know, I mean, I used to call myself Salena Saliva. It used to be like my punky sort of name and I really...it was punk and it was rock & roll and hedonistic and, and all of that. But there was a hell of a lot of hard work going on, behind all the chaos... There had to have been, because otherwise, how would I have survived?

Fiona Bennett

You're saying about hard work? And I think: yes. And I'm really interested in, you know, how the poem is a friend to you as a writer. What is she doing here that that is something you want on your shoulder when you're, you know, when you're at your desk?

Salena Godden

Okay, so first of all, it's this feeling of a big sister, and it's kind of someone that went before me. And then it's this feeling of recognition and somewhere where I've been and somewhere where I still go. It's that unapologetic thing that I was talking about earlier. That there's no shame or guilt in it. There seems to be a real fierce thing in there running through all of Kim's work, actually, that I really admire. And, yeah, it's just not *pretty*. I don't really like pretty

poetry. I like poetry to have a bit of spit and fire. I like poetry to have a bit of fury and a bit of pepper on its tail. And Kim really does that for me and I like that in poetry.

Fiona Bennett

And we do have this other question - which in many ways I have a sense of the answer to this very strongly from this amazing conversation - but to ask it anyway: what kind of friend is this poem?

Salena Godden

Oh, this poem is the kind of friend that would keep me up all night and make me drink all the tequilas and sing until sunrise and tap dance on the table in my underwear. And I would be happy with that!

Fiona Bennett

Yeah, yeah, great.

Salena Godden

Maybe not the underwear part. Tap dancing on the table, singing I can do.

Fiona Bennett

Kim Addonizio: *You Don't Know What Love Is*

You don't know what love is
but you know how to raise it in me
like a dead girl winched up from a river. How to
wash off the sludge, the stench of our past.
How to start clean. This love even sits up
and blinks; amazed, she takes a few shaky steps.
Any day now she'll try to eat solid food. She'll want
to get into a fast car, one low to the ground, and drive
to some cinderblock shithole in the desert
where she can drink and get sick and then

dance in nothing but her underwear. You know
where she's headed, you know she'll wake up
with an ache she can't locate and no money
and a terrible thirst. So to hell
with your warm hands sliding inside my shirt
and your tongue down my throat
like an oxygen tube. Cover me
in black plastic. Let the mourners through.

Fiona Bennett

So that was 'You Don't Know What Love Is' by Kim Addonizio. Our huge thanks to Salena Godden for being with us and bringing us that amazing poem and conversation and for allowing us to share it with you. And also to Norton, who published the collection that that poem comes from and the collection is called ['what is this thing called love?'](#) And we will as usual put those details on the description page. I do want to say that Salena's collection ['Pessimism is for Lightweights'](#), which I think was initially a chapbook of 13 pieces is now republished with an extended version in hardback: '30 pieces of courage and resistance' available now from the fabulous Rough Trade books. And I've got to say, I think that is a treat for yourself or anyone you might need to be finding a gift for because I'm sure courage and resistance is something we all need a little fuel for. If you head to Salena's [brilliant blog page](#), where you can see some wonderful thinking and writing from her, you can also find dates for when and where you can go and hear and see her read and perform. What a treat that would be for your summer. So if you're anywhere near any of those festival venues, I would urge you to get along.

So we've been in the tradition of having an extra poem, you know, often Michael might invite me to read one or vice versa. Well obviously I'm here alone today, but what I did manage to do was, with the help of John, to get into the archive and find something a bit special to bring back as a sort of little coda to this month's episode. So I'm gonna offer you up this fantastic reading of D.H. Lawrence's poem 'Escape', which was read for us at our last online reading event, *In the Company of Poems*, by the wonderful Paterson Joseph. So let's hear it.

Paterson Joseph

Escape

by D.H. Lawrence

When we get out of the glass bottles of our own ego,
and when we escape like squirrels from turning in the cages of our personality
and get into the forest again,
we shall shiver with cold and fright
but things will happen to us
so that we don't know ourselves.

Cool, unlying life will rush in,
and passion will make our bodies taut with power,
we shall stamp our feet with new power
and old things will fall down,
we shall laugh, and institutions will curl up like burnt paper.

Fiona Bennett

So it feels like we've been in poems of freedom and poems of courage and resistance and I hope that gives you all a boost for the summer months that remain. It certainly was fantastic to hear that poem back from Paterson. That's about all we've got time for. We'll be back next month with more poems as friends. Thank you for listening.

Credits:

'You Don't Know What Love Is' by Kim Addonizio © Kim Addonizio. From *'what is this thing called love'* by Kim Addonizio (2005, W.W. Norton & Co.)

Episode & transcript © The Poetry Exchange, 2023

The logo for The Poetry Exchange, featuring the text "THE poetry exchange" in a serif font, with "THE" in a smaller font size above "poetry", all contained within a light beige circular background.

THE poetry
exchange