

# Excerpts from interviews with mark doty



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In an article you published in the Hungry Mind Review about your experience as a judge for the Lenore Marshall Prize, you discussed your hopes for the future of American Poetry. I'm wondering if you could talk a little more about that. Also, and this may be impossible to answer, but I'm curious to know what vision you have for the future of your own work? What are your current ambitions?

Mark Doty: I wrote the article you mention after reading a great many collections of poetry publishing during 1996 and 97, and I wanted both to complain about a certain tepidness in much of the poetry I was reading and to praise something else about it, which I would describe as a kind of formal open-mindedness. This is something I've been seeing increasingly as I travel and meet students in writing programs around the country.

It seems to me there is very little pure allegiance to one kind of practice, to one school or another; the young writers I'm meeting want to forge a means of getting their individuality on the page, and in order to do so they seem just as likely to write a sonnet as they do a narrative poem, or a non-narrative piece with a less referential quality. I think that's hugely exciting; the blurring of boundaries points towards larger possibilities to come in American poetry over the next decade or three.

I think we might see fewer camps, and more individual, alchemical fusions of esthetic strains present in our poetry now. That's my hope. And I fervently hope, too, that we will not settle for an esthetic practice that leaves out the social and the political. I, for one, am hungry to read poems of American life now, in all its messy complications, with its terrors and uncertainties and

possible grounds for hope. Which leads me to the second part of your question, about my desires for my own work. I've written a good deal, in recent years, along intensely personal lines.

Those poems move through my own experiences of grief to connect with readers' experiences of the evanescence of what we love—or at least I hope they do! The work of the poet investigating personal experience is always to find such points of connection, to figure out how to open the private out to the reader. On one level, those were social and political poems, since they deal with a highly charged, politically defined phenomenon, the AIDS epidemic—or at least with the effects of that epidemic in my life.

But the poems go about that work in a personal, day-to-day way, more individual than global. I'm wanting my own poems to turn more towards the social, to the common conditions of American life in our particular uncertain moment. I am, I guess, groping towards those poems; I'm trying to talk about public life without resorting to public language. I am trying to address what scares and preoccupies me now. The project seems fraught with peril—part of the reason we don't write political poems in America is that most of us feel, well, what do I know?

What authority do I have to speak? Where does my connection to any broad perspective on social life lie? I don't see myself ever becoming a polemical poet, or writing to advance a particular cause, but at the same time I can't believe that it's okay for us to go on tending our private gardens while there is so much around us demanding to be addressed. Wunderlich: I'd like to talk

a little more about the notion of the political in poetry. In what ways is a poem a suitable vessel for a political subject?

What is it that a poem can do with a political subject that another form of writing or discourse can't? I suspect it may have something to do with the way in which poetry engages the reader... Doty: I've been talking about this a lot in print lately—in an essay in the Boston Review this summer, which responds to Harold Bloom's introduction to the Best of the Best American Poetry anthology, and in an argument-in-print with my friend J. D. McClatchy, which will appear in the new incarnation of the James White Review this winter.

It occurs to me that my sense of what political poetry consists of is to some degree generational; I'm young enough (or old enough, depending on your point of view) to have been shaped by the notion that the personal is political. When I talk about political poetry, I mean that work which is attentive to the way an individual sense of identity is shaped by collision with the collective, how one's sense of self is defined through encounter with the social world. Such a poem doesn't necessarily deal with, say, the crisis in Bosnia or America's brutal mishandling of the AIDS epidemic, though it might be concerned with these things.

Though it does do more than occupy the space of the lyric « I »; it is interested, however subtly, in the encounter between self and history. In this sense, many of the poems I love best are political poems. Bishop's « The Moose », for instance, is a brilliant evocation of an experience in which an outsider, defined by her separation from those perennial family voices

droning on in the back of the bus, suddenly has a mysterious experience of connection, of joining a community of inarticulate wonder in the face of otherness.

The isolation of the speaker in the proem to « The Bridge» is not just an existential loneliness; he's waiting in the cold « under the shadows of Thy piers» for a reason, which has to do with his position as a sexual other. That the great steel rainbow of the bridge arcs over him there is no accident; his otherness is an essential condition which helps to create the joy he feels in the transcendent promise of the bridge. What these poems can do which discursive writing cannot is dwell in that rich imaginative territory of the interior connection, in imaginative engagement with the troubling fact of self-in-the-world.

I don't really believe there is such a thing as « pure» esthetics; the esthetic is always a response, a formulation, an act of resisting outer pressure, or rewriting the narratives we're given. And you're right, it is about engaging the reader. Not with our opinions about things, but with our felt involvement in the world, the self's inextricable implications with culture and time. [... .] Wunderlich: I am curious to hear why you think poetry survives as an art form today. It seems to me that the most perfect art form would probably be film making: You get to use visual images, sound, music, the spoken voice, actors, etc.

Why when we have so many choices of kinds of art-making, do people still keep returning to poetry? Doty: Poetry certainly doesn't have the « totalizing» quality that film does, a medium which just surrounds one and

hostages the viewer's attention. It lacks painting's immediacy, or photography's odd marriage of the esthetic and the palpable sense of the « real. » One would think that our late-century engagement with arts which combine media, which seek a sort of seamless experience for the viewer, would supplant poetry. But far from it. My sense is that, while still a minority preference, poetry is thriving.

Audiences for readings increase, a great deal of poetry is published, and it seems that among young people especially there is genuine interest in and respect for the art. Who knows why? My guess is that somehow poetry is a vessel for the expression of subjectivity unlike any other; a good poem bears the stamp of individual character in a way that seems to usher us into the unmistakably idiosyncratic perceptual style of the writer. I think we're hungry for singularity, for those aspects of self that aren't commodifiable, can't be marketed.

In an age marked by homogenization, by the manipulation of desire on a global level (the Gap in Houston is just like the Gap in Kuala Lumpur, it seems), poetry may represent the resolutely specific experience. The dominant art forms of our day—film, video, architecture—are collaborative arts; they require a team of makers. Poems are always made alone, somewhere out on the edge of things, and if they succeed they are saturated with the texture of the uniquely felt life. from *The Cortland Review* (December 1998).

Katie Bolick Bolick: In the book [Firebird] you write about your « education in beauty,» beginning with your sister's tantalizing drawer of shiny trinkets:

crepe and tulle, glittery ribbons, « scraps of sheer and sparkled reasure. »

Could you talk about what beauty meant to you as a child How has your relationship to beauty and artifice changed over time? Doty: I guess I was bored very early on by what seemed to me the plain nature of the clothes and toys and roles handed out to little boys. I saw no future for myself there.

The sort of stuff my sister kept in her special drawer of souvenirs was redolent of something else — exuberance, playfulness, permission. They appeared beautiful to me because they evoked other possibilities, something secretive and forbidden and rich with life. I grew up in a very disconnected suburban landscape, in town after town, and it seems to me that there was very little that existed in order to enchant, to instruct us in our larger possibilities, to engage the spirit. There was, in other words, little art, and a great deal of practicality, of ways of life determined by social and economic necessity, or social and economic ambition.

My love of that shiny stuff in the drawer was, I think, a kind of early outbreak of longing — a wish for life to be something more. That took other forms later on, of course, or I'd simply have become a drag queen rather than a poet! My relationship to artifice has changed in very complex ways. The little boy at his sister's secret drawer is interested in what's pretty. The sort of beauty that interests me now is something more revealing of character — a very personal sort of beauty, often a failed sort.

I am drawn to the ways people reinvent themselves or the world in which they find themselves — how they make order and harmony out of the chaos or uncertainty that surrounds them. There's a character in *Firebird*, for

instance, an old man I met when I was a teenager, who built a homemade grotto he called The Valley of the Moon. He had taken broke dishes and cement, scraps of old toys, and stones found in the desert and cobbled them all together into a sort of version of paradise that was intended to represent, and perhaps to preserve, innocence.

It was something of a mess, a bit haphazard and piecemeal, and yet it seemed to me strikingly beautiful, a mark of an individual sensibility in the world. Bolick: Your poems — noted for their lyrical language and wealth of detail — have been criticized for being overly concerned with adjectives and « word stitchery,» as a recent reviewer put it. What do you think accounts for the critical esistance to beautiful surfaces in your work? Do you pay any heed to the charges? Doty: There is an interesting bias toward the plain, the unadorned; what is plain and straightforward is often equated with what is true.

I have real doubts about this; I don't think it's necessarily the case that the best way to describe reality is by stripping things down to essentials. I believe that reality cannot be captured in language, period. It's too complex, too shifty, too difficult to know and to say. I think that reality can be approached, pointed to, suggested, and that the more stylistic means one has at one's disposal the better. That's why, in the title poem of my book Atlantis, there are a number of sections that circle around the same core — around experiences that I believe are fundamentally unsayable.

But I try. I try it plain, colloquial; try it elevated, formal; try it through narrative; try it through lyric; try it through metaphor. So formal density is



one strategy, both in *Atlantis* and in *Sweet Machine*, but there are other poems, in both books, which are drop-dead direct. « *The Embrace*,» for instance, from the last book, is as plainspoken a poem as I will ever write; its mode of speech felt right for the gravity of its occasion. But I'd hate the idea that every poem ought to be that uncompromisingly plain.

The gendered nature of this criticism is interesting, I think. The charge is « word-stitchery,» not « word-welding» or « word-carpentry. » The implication is that this craft is something feminine and trivial, as opposed to the more masculine and worthy work of plain speech. I suppose that part of my queerness is an interest in made surfaces, surfaces of all kinds, and the inevitable discordance between that surface and the core, between the speech and what it represents. Bolick: I'm interested in your attention to rupture — the rent in the surface, the fractured shell.

In *Heaven's Coast* you use the image of a crack in a delicate cup soldered with a seam of gold as a metaphor for the way loss first shatters, then alters us. Did you come to this idea of fractured beauty through your experiences with grief? Doty: You're right, this is a profound fascination with me. It precedes my experience with grief — I feel as if I came into the world with this preoccupation. In part it's that the complete, the entirely achieved, doesn't seem to need my attention. You can look at, say, an ancient Greek sculpture, or a superb carved wooden staff from Ghana, and say, « Yes, that's complete in itself, whole. But I am always drawn to those things that aren't intact, those that bear some evidence of limit or failure. Perhaps

it's just that this is a sort of beauty I think I might be able to achieve! And it may be, too, that this is something with deep psychological roots. We all experience a disjunction, sometime early on, between our interiority — the deep, luminous world of inside — and the way other people see us. That original experience of recognizing that we may not seem to be what we are seems to me one of the primary social experiences — it happens sometime around the beginning of school, at age six or so.

I suspect it has even further implications for gay kids, who learn that they have within them a crucial difference that others cannot necessarily see. We were talking before about surface and core — I think this is where a fascination with that tension originates. Think about all the little gay boys who grow up to be so involved with decor, appearance, staging, style. Such practices all involve an attention to the tension between what something is and what it seems to be — a kind of rupture. from « Fallen Beauty» in Atlantic Unbound — [www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/ba991110](http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/ba991110).  
Interview with Michael Glover It was two years ago that I first read a book by a remarkable young American poet called Mark Doty.

He was completely unknown in this country. His poems had a compassionate, lyrical urgency, a descriptive and metaphorical power that was more exciting than anything I'd read from America since the death of Robert Lowell in the 1970s. Last month Doty came to Britain to lodge in a converted pigsty at the Arvon Foundation in Totleigh, Devon, and do what he regularly does at the University of Utah: teach poetry to aspiring poets.

He is one of a species that is common in the United States, but rare and often regarded with some suspicion over here: the professional, tenured poet. His schedule at Utah is relatively light he teaches two days a week from January to June. But the rest of his income comes from workshops and fees for his many poetry readings, as well as from grants and book royalties. In Devon, he says, it was « very intense». With 16 student poets, he « spent all day, every day, doing workshops and writing exercises, talking about poems, reading poems - theirs and mine. »

Isn't it bad for poets to spend so much of their time thinking and talking about the art? Shouldn't they have some life outside poetry so that, when they return to it, they have something to write about? « What's good is that I get to participate in a conversation about the art,» he said, when we met at the Poetry Society in London's Covent Garden. He speaks in a gentle, insistent voice. « Of course, talking about poetry and writing it are two very different things, but there's something about that dialogue between teacher and student that is nurturing for me as a writer.

I enjoy that kind of structured contact with their people and their stories, with their struggles to shape themselves on the page. » Reading poetry to audiences, he says, helps his writing. « I learn about new poems in the process of reading aloud. You listen differently when you're reading to an audience - it's as if part of you is in that audience listening to that new poem. You hear weaker lines, glitches, rhythmic problems, and that helps in the revision process.

Of course, the real work of poetry happens when one reader is alone with one book because, when we read a poem by ourselves, we can stop and start, daydream about what we've just read, take time to examine. What you hear in a poetry reading is always the skin of a poem. You can't apprehend the depths and complexities of a good poem when it's simply read to you once. »

He thinks of himself « as a literary writer with roots in a tradition that values complexity and a certain sort of thickness of language; a poetry I hope that can't be gotten in one hearing. But why was poetry worth listening to anyway? Why was it so humanly valuable? « Poetry is a kind of distillation of individuality amidst a world where the unique, the one-off, is at some risk. Driving through Devon this morning, I was startled to come upon a branch of Staples, an American office supply chain, a store that you can walk into in almost any medium-sized city in the States. Let that stand for the universalisation and standardisation of so many kinds of experience. Poetry is absolutely resistant to that.. .» So poetry is a bulwark against consumerism? « It is in a way.

Of course there is a tiny degree in which poetry can be commodified and sold, but it can also of course be endlessly xeroxed, published on the Internet, memorised and possessed by many people. And what is a poem but a sort of replica or model of an individual process of knowing, and since each of us knows a little bit differently, and each of us has that combination of voice and internal rhythm and ways of seeing which are capable of making something idiosyncratically and unmistakably ours, then the poem keeps putting the self into the forefront in a way which is profoundly valuable.. »

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Poetry, then, establishes a kind of world-wide community of interior lives? « That would be my hope, yes, that it continues to put interiority into the foreground. Also, happily, a poem can't just live in the interior. If it did it would be perhaps just a journal entry. It might just be solipsistic. Or purely private. The best poems, real poems, reach out to include readers, and so they model the process of interiority meeting the exterior, the self in a community. Hooray for that.. .» Doty's voice sounds Southern - and that's where his forebears come from.

His mother's family, Irish immigrants who left during the potato famine, settled in Sweet-water, Tennessee. « My great-grand-mother remembered riding in the back of a covered wagon from Georgia to Tennessee, fleeing Sherman's return march. They were dirt-poor millet farmers. » Doty's parents left the rural South at the beginning of the second world ar.

His father was an army engineer, so they moved from town to town, sometimes in the South, sometimes in the West, from one anonymous place to another. I grew up with a sense that home was something one constructed or carried around inside. I grew up loving books because they were reliable company. You could take them with you.. .» Aged 16, Doty met a poet, realised that « poetry might be a way to live» and enrolled at the University of Tucson, Arizona. He then dropped out, married at the age of 18, got into school teaching, graduated and took an intensive poetry course. He didn't begin to accept that he was gay until 1981. He gave up on a bad and stultifying marriage and, with \$600 in his pocket, headed to Manhattan.

I got a job as a secretary,» he says, « and began what seemed to me a real life because in my early twenties, like many gay men of my generation, I had been in flight from my sexuality. I had issues of identity to work out before I could begin to live a life that was founded in something more authentic.. .»

He had two poetry collections published. Then his life and work were dramatically changed by the discovery that his lover, Wally Roberts, was HIV-positive. Wally's subsequent decline, culminating in his death in 1994, transfigured Doty's art rather as the intimate and terrible experience of war transfigured Wilfred Owen's 80 years ago.

In two poetry collections - *My Alexandria* and *Atlantis* — and a prose memoir entitled *Heaven's Coast*, Aids became, in Doty's words, « the great intensifier», and the poetry itself an increasingly anguished and complicated negotiation with imminent death. During Wally's decline, the couple settled in Provincetown at the very tip of Cape Cod; in the poems that little town, with its salt marsh and shifting dunes, seems to embody the very idea of transience. I asked Doty how his poetry - and his image of that coastal town (he still lives there for six months of the year) - had changed since Wally's death.

After the removal of the Damoclean sword, what next? « Well, the poems I have found myself writing over the last two years are much less about grief than they are about a passage back to participation in the world, about the renewal of that contract that we make with life to be a part of things. In some ways I think these new poems are more public because they are less involved with some desperate negotiation with mortality. I am turning my attention out to other things.

I think they have some different sorts of colour to them, too, a different music, and a different harmonic character maybe.. » But did he see Provincetown differently now? « I've spent much less time there over the past two years. In part, that was because I wanted to clear the slate, to get away from its intensity and small-town character. It's a place that's so fraught with history for me - not only my life with Wally, but so many people I knew there have died in such a short period of time. In some ways I feel like I've lived there for decades ven though I've in fact only lived there for about seven years. The character of the community's changing, too. When I first came there, it was very much a refuge for people who didn't expect to live long. Now, because of new drugs and the sort of strange new hopeful position of the epidemic, suddenly people aren't moving to Provincetown planning to die any more.. .”

When I asked him about his politics Doty replied with an uncharacteristic lack of assurance and fluency. He said that he had consistently voted Democrat but that, in his heart, he was something much closer to a libertarian. The places where I've een most politically engaged have been with gay issues, but I think that the best use of my energies is not in organising but through writing... » That does not mean necessarily writing overtly political poetry, though.

The reason for that is as follows. I've mostly written from the principle that I wanted to make a discovery in the course of writing a poem. If I knew what I thought or felt, I would be less likely to write because I depend upon the energy of uncovering what I think and feel about any subject. Which makes political poetry - overtly political poetry - particularly difficult. “