

# INTERVIEW WITH

Robert Wrigley

**Robert Wrigley** is the author of numerous collections of poetry, most recently *Anatomy of Melancholy & Other Poems* (2013), which won him the Pacific Northwest Book Award. During his visit to Butler, Wrigley sat down to talk with *Manuscripts* staff member Matt Del Busto about his most recent collection, titled after Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, written almost 400 years prior. They discussed the power of poetry and melancholy in our lives. In 2016, Wrigley retired from a forty-year teaching career and currently lives in Idaho "in the woods on the side of a mountain" with his wife.

*At what point in your life did you know you wanted to become a writer, and why are you still one today?*

I think it was when I was in the army. I got drafted in March of 1971, the Vietnam War, and had about three-and-a-half to four years left to go. I was a conscientious objector when I was drafted, and I went to Fort Sam Houston Texas to be trained, of all things, as a combat medic. While I was there, I met the most interesting human beings I've ever known in my life, and they all read books relentlessly. I'd always been kind of a half-assed reader; I mean, I read some, but I didn't read that much and these people exposed me to all kinds of things that I would not otherwise and had not otherwise had the opportunity to be connected with.

I fell in love with the idea that people could write books and other people would read them, and I envisioned myself in the beginning becoming a fiction writer, a novelist. I thought what could be better than that, but that was probably the point—I would have been twenty years old—when I thought,

“I’m going to be a writer.”

Why I’m still a writer I think has everything to do with the fact that, on a lark, I took a poetry class, even though I thought I wanted to write fiction. I took a poetry class because I thought, well, one, it apparently doesn’t have to scan anymore, it doesn’t have to march to a particular beat, two, nobody seems to be using rhyme anymore, and three, nobody really knows what these things mean anyway, so how hard can it be? But, I got into that class and it just changed my life. Within the first session I knew I wanted to be a poet, I wanted to write poems, and that’s probably why I’m still writing, because it turned out that I had no idea that I loved poetry but I did.

*Was there a particular poem in that class that struck your interest or just poetry as a whole that interested you?*

There were three poems. The professor in that class was himself not a successful poet, but he was a great teacher. He came in, and this was kind of in the long-suffering era when you could smoke in class, so he came in and he lit his cigarette and he looked out at us and said, “Alright, listen up people,” and he read a poem.

The first poem he read was by James Dickey, and it was a poem called “Cherrylog Road”. It was about a young man on a motorcycle riding to a junkyard where he was going to meet his girlfriend and they were going to climb into the back of a junked Pierce Arrow, an old, old limousine kind of car and have a romantic interlude, shall we say. The idea that you could write a poem in which, one, there was a motorcycle and, two, there was a couple of young lovers coming together to do the kinds of things that young lovers do I thought, “Whoa, I didn’t have any idea that you could do that in a poem.”

Then, he read a poem by James Wright, “Autumn Begins to Martins Ferry Ohio,” which is a poem in which there is football and these young men “gallop[ing] terribly” against one another’s bodies, and by this time I’m vibrating. Finally, he read

a poem by Denise Levertov called “The Ache of Marriage,” “two by two in the ark of / the ache of it”.

I walked up after class and said, “Can you tell me the names again of those poems?” and he knew, “I got one.” So, it was those three particular poems, those three particular poets, and I went and found their books and read like mad.

*Today, what are some challenges you face as a poet who has been writing for quite some time?*

I just retired from a forty-year teaching career, so up until that retirement which just happened in June, the biggest struggle for me was finding time to be able to write, because I taught for a living and teaching requires a lot of energy and a lot of time.

Now, there really aren’t any problems. The difficulties of writing are inherent. It’s hard work to do it well, to write something that somebody somewhere might read, first of all, and second of all, might actually be moved by and contacted via a poem. That remains the challenge from the beginning; but, the more you write, the more you make connections. You build a readership, one reader at a time, and that’s what I’ve done and that’s what I’m just going to keep on doing.

It does require a great deal of resourcefulness, a great deal of energy, and you have to be nimble intellectually and psychologically and emotionally and, frankly, I think if I weren’t writing, I wouldn’t possess very much of that nimbleness that I do right now. In that regard, poetry and writing and reading sort of keep me alive and healthier than I would otherwise be if I were not to be writing.

*You mention being able to establish a connection with your readers, which reminds me of an interview you had in the past with Jennifer Dean. You answered a question and you said, “Can you imagine being the poet everyone loved? A fate worse than death.” Could you expand on that sentiment a little bit?*

Sure, I'll try. I mean, everybody knows the most popular poets in America are, say, Billy Collins, who's an old friend of mine and whom I love dearly and whose poems I love dearly. But, Billy's got a big target on his back and in part that's because not everybody but a large number of people just love everything he does. If you happen to be the poet that everybody loves—not everybody loves Shakespeare, not everybody loves Elizabeth Bishop or Emily Dickenson or Whitman—so, it's an impossibility being the poet that everybody loves. **If you happen to be the poet everybody loves, you're doing something wrong. Somebody has to be antagonized by what you're doing. The art of literature is to make people uneasy, not to confirm for them what they think and what they feel but to challenge them in what they think and what they feel.** So, if you're somehow not challenging everybody, if everybody is walking away feeling very satisfied with what they've read and what you've written, then it's been my feeling that you're probably not doing your job as well as you should.

*Getting into your most recent work, The Anatomy of Melancholy, titled after Robert Burton's similarly titled book almost 400 years prior, how did his book influence your own?*

I haven't read all of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* because it's 1400-plus pages long. I've read in and around and through it and I don't have much of a command of Latin and I have nothing in Greek and he uses those languages frequently throughout the text—but, he wrote the book, as he said, to “avoid being melancholy” and poetry is a great repository of melancholy.

People find some kind of emotional release when they read poems. After 9/11, now 15 years ago, poetry sailed and poetry readership went through the roof for a few months. People were looking for some way to understand what had just

happened and I think that we find in poetry something we can't find in any other place. I think that's true both for the writer of the poem and the reader of the poem.

I feel like if you go through life without ever being melancholy or, which is to say without ever being depressed, there are only two reasons for that: you're the luckiest human being that's ever lived or you're dumb as a post. Most of us are neither of those. So, I think as Robert Burton said that melancholy is the condition of mortality, and fundamentally we are sort of melancholy because we are and we may be—I'm not sure this is true—we may be the only living species aware of the fact of our own mortality, that we are going to die.

Do trees know they are going to die? Do deer know they are going to die? Do chipmunks know they are going to die? I'm not sure, but we're the only species that we know of that makes out of that fact—our own mortality—art, literature, and that is what drew me to Burton and that's really kind of the engine that drives that collection of poems, that idea of mortality, which, as I get closer to the end, I become more and more concerned with. This is not because I'm frightened with dying—I don't want to die—but because it is the ultimate, as far as the universal condition goes. We are all going to die, and this ought to make us kinder, it ought to make us more generous, and that it doesn't say something else complex about the human situation.

So, I'm just really interested in the whole notion of mortality, of what drives us to think about our mortality and I'm really interested in the idea of melancholy. I don't find melancholy to be a crippling condition emotionally; I find it to be much more of a contemplative situation. If you can't make it end at some point, you can't crawl out from under it, you're going to be in a bad way, but most of us find some kind of tool to help us out of that condition. For Burton, it was writing about melancholy, for me in a way it's also a way of writing about melancholy, or reading.

*How does the idea of melancholy manifest itself in your poetry,*

*whether in perhaps the subject matter of the poem itself or in the structure or idea of a poem?*

That's a good question, and I'm not entirely sure how to answer it. As I mentioned before, as Burton says melancholy is the condition of mortality, it's there whether we acknowledge it or explicitly address it or not. But, I do think that many of the poems in my *Anatomy of Melancholy* come at the idea of melancholy either straight on or in a kind of sidelong way, so that the poem or the collection is ultimately a meditation on the nature of melancholy and how we contend with it, how we live with it.

*In the Anatomy of Melancholy, there is a poem where the speaker says everything, "One thinks, one..." and the speaker is sitting in the forest, thinking "one knows one doesn't want to die alone" or "die first".*

Yeah, one must not be the last one to die. One would prefer among all other people one loves that one be the first one to die, rather than the last. The interesting thing about that poem for me has always been the idea of the point of view, the idea of the first person pronoun as "one" instead of "I". I don't think that poem would succeed if it were written in the ordinary first person. "I" lying on my back in the woods, savoring the sun. So what does that "one" do? That "one" allows the speaker of the poem a certain amount of distance on his own mortality, on his own contemplations of mortality, which is what art theoretically can't do; but, this is explicitly rendering the poem in such a way that you provide yourself with a little bit of distance and it can be a cushion against the sort of horror of it.

*In the same manner you play with perspective in that poem, the world play and the interesting phrases that you use in your poems really interested me as I was reading, especially in "Ode to my*

*Boots” where the speaker describes socks as “pale intermediaries”. For some reason that phrase just really sticks with me, which makes me think of an interview you had with Sean Rubinfeld where you said, “Words are as the dead fish unto the dog, they must be rolled in and savored.” Can you expand on this idea of rolling in and savoring words and language?*

Yeah. I don't know when I fell in love with words. I think my father, who didn't quite finish the fifth grade, and my mother, who didn't finish high school, were both readers. Somehow, in our family, language had a particular kind of value. Jokes and puns were significant, and somewhere along the way, I realized that there were certain words that once I heard them I could not forget them or I found the taste of them in my mouth particularly interesting, like the word “undulate.” I love the word undulate because there's a way in which your tongue is forced to undulate the word right out of your mouth, and I love that so language has always been for me something that I do savor that I think of as a kind of candy, word candy.

W. H. Auden said first and foremost, a poet must be someone who is passionately in love with language. So beyond diction, beyond the individual words, there's what happens when you put the words together and they start talking to one another and they start making sparks between one another. Syntax becomes a kind of holy thing, how you make the words march across the page. For my money, a poet is someone who, in addition to being someone who is passionately in love with language, has to be passionately in love with the process of rendering language from ordinary thoughtfulness or ordinary contemplation or even ordinary expression into art.

*Could you expand on your own process from perhaps first picking up a pen or pulling out a computer to a finished poem?*

I have a little building that I built myself, twelve by



sixteen feet, about sixty yards from my house. I live in the woods on the side of a mountain, and I go out there on days I'm going to write and I almost never know what I'm going to work on. I may have some poems that I have been working on that I need to go back and revise and I'll tinker with them but then I'm about to start something new or feel it's time to start something new, I have a particular kind of notebook I use. I always begin longhand, and unless something comes to me from outside—for example, a raven could land on the porch rail of my shack (it's not a shack as I call it, it's very plush), and appear to be looking at me but it's actually looking at its own reflection in the window, that might set me off—if that kind of thing doesn't happen, if the world outside doesn't send me a message, here's where you start. I've got 4,000 books or something up there in this building, and I'll reach up and I'll take a book down from random.

I won't even look, I'll pull one down and I'll just start thumbing through it until I find a word or a phrase or an image that \*snaps\* flips on the switch and I just start, and starting is, you know, it's really hard. You know even what you're writing about, but if you begin with something in mind even if it's an image or the sound of a particular word and you just keep going, something always leads to something else. You trust, you learn to trust the process more than you trust the product. So you let the language, you let the form take you where it will, and for me it almost always takes me somewhere.

I write a lot more than I save, I publish in magazines, say, a lot more than I wind up using in books, but that's because I'm a process-related person. I have to write a lot to get a little, and after I've got a draft down long-hand—or, I print actually—then, I'll go to the computer and type it out and it looks more formally arranged. It looks more finished—that's an illusion—and then you have to figure out okay what's working and what's not working. What's working about the form, what's not working about the form? What's working about the structure, should the end be the beginning?

Frequently that happens to me, I'll write a draft of a poem and I'll realize all I've done is write my way to where the poem really should start, which used to be kind of depressing—well shit, I thought I was done and here I'm just starting. All I do is get started and move from that point on until I get somewhere, and where I get is somewhere I will stay and the poem will be finished or abandoned as Paul Valery said it is—he said the poem is never completed, it's just abandoned, and that's how I do it.

*You mentioned you usually don't have a clear idea of "I'm going to work on this certain poem" or "I'm going to pick this book off the shelf." Why do you think that's important to have a certain spontaneity?*

I try to tell this to students, too, students have ideas for poems, and that's fine, that's good, but an idea for a poem is also a kind of dangerous place to be. Sometimes, when you have an idea for a poem, you have in mind the end of the poem, so you have in mind the kind of completed product. But, my experience has always been if you know where the poem is going the difficulty in getting there is going to be magnified by a factor of about fifty.

If you don't know where the poem is going when you start, chances of your being surprised or of surprising yourself—that's when I know when I'm getting somewhere, the first time I surprised myself—I thought okay, alright, I don't know where to go now but I'm surprised. So that's again a process-related question, you allow the process and the procedures of writing to take you where the poem lives rather than imagining the poem as a finished product when starting out.

Now there are other times when I'll find that it's really difficult to get started even if I pull something down off the shelf and I find a phrase or a word or an image and it interests me, I still have a hard time getting going. So, what I will do—I

call them wind sprints—I'll write sonnets, I'll write three or four sonnets in a day, and the sonnet, I mean it's going to have fourteen lines, and when I write a sonnet I count syllables, I have a relatively traditional rhyme scheme whenever I write a sonnet, so when I do that, you know exactly the shape of a poem.

I love working in form for that reason because it allows you to take a shape and just fulfill the shape. So that's another strategy, and I can do that with a sonnet, I can do that with pretty much any other form even ABCB quatrains or ABAB quatrains or some other stanzaic form that rhymes where you know the ends of the lines in a certain pattern are going to rhyme. It's not the same as knowing it's going to have exactly fourteen lines, but I love working in form for that reason. I love teaching students to work in form for that reason because some students really just take to something like the sonnet—"oh, I get it." It's a very useful thing.

*I know a lot of your poems do end up being in a certain form, whether they're in quatrains and have an end rhyme, or some of them have end rhyme part of the time but not others. Would you say more often you free write and then turn it into the form, or is the form already present upon first being written?*

That's another interesting question. If I begin a poem that's going to be in quatrains or that happens to be in quatrains and it happens to rhyme ABAB, I'm usually aware of that by the end of the first quatrain. I'll know, this is what I've done, and I'll see an opportunity in line three, to have the third line rhyme with the first line, to have another A rhyme, and when that happens then I know then okay I can either rhyme the B line and have a quatrain or I can expand the stanza to something else.

I would say I write my way into the form and then try to sustain it. I also have this feeling that anything you do in

writing a poem that increases the level of difficulty is a good thing so when I see students struggling to get a handle on how the line should function as a unit of expression and a unit of meaning, I'll tell them, "You need to count syllables, you need to say, okay, the next poem I write is going to have ten syllables per line even if I have to violently enjamb the lines, even if I have to break the lines in unlikely places. You can always go back and fix that, but I'm going to make 10-syllable lines."

What happens is it makes them hyper aware of how they're ending lines and if gets them to the first time they have to violently enjamb the lines and they end the line on "the" or something like that, they're reviled, so they've got to go back and rewrite. So, it increases the level of difficulty and it increases the demands of the poems on us as wielders of the lines and syntax, and that's just a good thing because it teaches you more.

*What is the importance, as a poet, of taking risks?*

Well, it's probably no different than life. I just got back from in Zion National Park last week, the three of us, my two oldest friends in the world, we go every summer and have done or sometime during the year for 31 consecutive years, hiking or backpacking or whitewater rafting or something like that. We were climbing up this trail that has over a thousand foot drop on either side for the last 200 yards, and one friend is terrified of heights, which complicates things for him, but he just kept his eye on the back of the person in front of him and we got to this particular place called Angels' Landing down there, and it was spectacular. The other two of us knew we're not scared of heights, we knew he was sort of terrified, but we also knew that by the end of it he'd be so glad doing what he had done, and I think he knows that, and even though it frightens him, he does that.

I think that taking risks in writing can be done in so many different ways. It can be writing at material that is so

volatile you'd rather not write about it. You can write a poem in which you admit to having done something you wish you hadn't done, in which you'd do anything not to have done it, and that's a risk. You can write in a point of view that's completely other than your own. That's a dangerous kind of thing, but it allows you also a kind of freedom. You can write in form, you can write without form, all of those things if you're doing the job well is some kind of risk.

I think if you calculate it, if you think too much about "Well what am I risking now?" you're sort of defeating the purpose. You've got to trust your instincts to do something that you yourself could not quite have predicted you would do, and you train yourself to take those kinds of risks. I've written poems that are entirely safe, I've written poems where I haven't really taken a lot of risks, and I'm getting by on wits alone, I'm getting by on just being good enough at what I do to be able to write a poem. But, I recognize those poems eventually as slighter things that probably don't deserve to be saved and I'll throw them or put them in a box and even some that I've published have probably been that way. Writing is itself a risk. I mean if you decide to be a poet, that's a kind of risk. Certainly, it's a monetary risk. You've got to find a way to make a living--how are you going to make a living writing poems? Some people do, Billy Collins does, Mary Oliver does, but they're unique.

*What advice would you have for aspiring college writers and beyond?*

Don't stop. Don't give up. Writing is the easiest thing in the world not to do, and to make a go of it, to feel that you're productive enough that you can keep on doing what you're doing, you have to have a kind of doggedness, you have to say, well there's no evidence that the world gives a rip whether I write this or not but I'm not writing for the world.

I'm writing for the smartest person in the world, who's not me but who is the person I idealize as my reader. I just

encourage you to keep on going. It's really hard. I mean, early on in my career as a poet there were periods where I couldn't place a poem, I couldn't place a poem in a magazine, and that bothered me. But, what bothered me was that it bothered me that I couldn't place a poem, because publication doesn't mean anything. I mean it just means you're published.

That's how we succeed in poetry at one very unimportant level but how we succeed in poetry at a much larger level is that we keep at it and finally arrive at something if we're lucky, and who knows? I'm not in charge of my fate, and when I die my poems may die with me, and if they do, I mean too bad for my heirs—won't be any sweat off my nose, I'll be dead. That, and write that which you don't feel equipped to write. Your reach should always exceed your grasp.