

On Poetry: An Interview with Andrew Peterson

by Bailey Gillespie

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Gillespie: *Although the majority of your work, or at least most familiar work, is not specifically poetry, you have a uniquely poetic way of crafting lyrics. As a songwriter, how is the truth behind words enhanced by a melody?*

Peterson: I'm not sure the truth behind words is enhanced by a melody, but I suppose a pretty song might help the truth go down a little easier. Songwriting and poetry share some similarities, but they're vastly different; they're cousins, but they don't live in the same town. And the difference is bigger than the presence or absence of music. It's rare that a lyric to a good song, stripped of its music, can come close to the power of a good poem. In the same way, it's rare that a great poem could be put to music and sustain the same impact. Add music to a poem, and it becomes something different altogether.

The point is, when I sit down to write a poem (something I've only begun to attempt in the last few years), the conception and execution and revision of it is different from songwriting in almost every way. The creative process is mysterious, and to me it feels more like groping blindly than following a road. The object of the question, the thing that gets you going in the first place is, for me, either a poem or a song at the outset. I don't think, 'I have this idea to convey. Now, which would be the best way to convey it: poem, song, or story?' It doesn't work that way. Rather, the matter and the means are conjoined. So, every decision along the way (which metaphors to employ, which words to use, which meter to follow) is informed by the medium.

Now that I've confused even myself, I'll repeat what I said in the beginning: a pretty melody married to a good thought is a powerful way to tell the truth—but no more powerful than a poem. Just different.

Gillespie: *There are often references to classic literature in your lyrics ("The Havens Grey" comes to mind). Which authors and/or literary works have inspired and compelled you the most?*

Peterson: Frederick Buechner, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Annie Dillard, George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton, Wendell Berry, and Walter Wangerin Jr. are a few whose works have lit me up. I was talking to my dad the other day about some current popular authors—authors whose books I have read and enjoyed, mind you—and how sadly uninspired their actual writing is. Their ideas are good, and what they're teaching is sound. But we couldn't think of a single line or quote from their books, no sentence that was so beautifully written that it lodged itself in our brains like a ruby in a cave wall.

That's what I love about the above authors. They don't just say true things. They have a beautiful way of saying them. So, when I'm writing songs, I'll often struggle to find a way to say something—groping in the dark again—and then see that ruby in the cave, that perfect line from a Buechner book or a potent scene in *The Lord of the Rings*, or some subtle string of words in a Berry poem, and I'll know how to finish the song. I suppose it all comes down to stealing the good stuff.

Gillespie: ***You created an online community known as The Rabbit Room. How did this vision come about, and is it fulfilling your expectations?***

Peterson: The dream for The Rabbit Room was born in a pub in Oxford, England. I was having fish and chips at The Eagle and Child, where Lewis and Tolkien used to hang with their storytelling friends, and I learned that that the little room was nicknamed The Rabbit Room. I've long been struck by the lasting, excellent nature of works that grew out of the friendships contained in that room, so I decided to try to emulate that in my own community. The Rabbit Room is a community of authors, songwriters, and artists who are Christians and want to do good work. It's grown into a yearly conference called Hutchmoot, as well as a publishing house called Rabbit Room Press.

As for my expectations, I didn't have many. It was a project with a clearly defined goal as much as it was an experiment, or even a daydream brought to life. My brother and I just wanted to see what would happen if we gathered some good writers interested in good stories and started a conversation. The fact that a community has grown up around it has been a source of delight to everyone involved. Later this year, we're publishing *The Molehill*—a literary/arts journal featuring stories, essays, poetry, and art from the community, as well as putting on our next conference. We can't wait to see what happens next.

Gillespie: ***There's a consistency in your writing that expresses a longing for eternity, especially vivid in the earnest imagery of "The Reckoning." Have you had a specific event in your life that prompted this outlook?***

Peterson: I can't think of anything specific that happened to pique the longing you describe. I have a suspicion that everybody feels it. I just happen to write about it a lot.

I once heard Rich Mullins say that every preacher really has just one sermon and every songwriter has just one song. When you look at a body of work, there are themes that rise to the surface, and, yes, there's a certain longing that I suppose rears its head in many of my songs. It's something I've always felt in one way or another.

For example, I used to drive a little Yamaha scooter when I was in high school, and many times I'd cruise around the dirt roads outside of town. There was this one cornfield that I discovered one night as the sun was setting, and something about the way the sky opened up over those piney woods struck me as the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. (I was a starry-eyed teenage, so I didn't know that sunsets were cliché.) I cut off the motor, removed my helmet, and watched in silence as the sun went down in a blaze of glory, the stars appearing. I remember crying and feeling a terrible ache for that beauty. I felt terribly alone, but at the same time, I felt spoken to. I felt a warm presence that somehow comforted me and made me sad at the same time.

After I pulled myself together and drove home, I wrote it all down in a journal that's long since been lost. Years later, when I read C. S. Lewis describing joy as *sehnsucht* (a German word for longing), I knew I had felt it that night in the cornfield. It's the same thing when I read *The Chronicles of Narnia* to my kids, the same thing I felt in the storm the night I started "The Reckoning." That joyful ache is one of the things I'm always trying to get at in my songs in the hopes of waking the same thing in the listener's heart. That longing is one of the surest signs to me that the gospel is true.

Gillespie: ***Words are powerful tools. What have you found to be the balance between using art to honestly confront the darkness and using it to present themes of beauty and redemption?***

Peterson: I think of it in terms of Christ's death and resurrection. When Good Friday rolls around each year, we have a service at our church called *Tenebrae*. It's a Latin word for "darkening." Over the course of the service, as we read Scriptures that describe the crucifixion, a series of candles is blown out one at a time until, at the end, a final candle is extinguished, signifying the death of Jesus. The room is plunged into darkness, and we exit the building in silence. There's no happy ending that night. The darkness isn't merely figurative. Even knowing how the story will end, I carry the grief of the cost of redemption. I worship in my sorrow. It's good to remember the night, to be confronted by it, to be troubled by it.

But the story doesn't end there. We spend a somber Saturday longing for Easter morning. Then, when the dawn breaks and death is killed, the joy is greater because of the sorrow we endured. We worship again, but now with victory—with gladness made sweeter by the long night. So, when you're writing a song or poem or story, you wade into the darkness. You tell about it. You let it do its terrible work. But darkness isn't the final word. If you're going to tell a story, there's no better author to emulate than God himself.

Gillespie: ***As a poet, author, musician, and lyricist, you have a lot going on. When your schedule gets busy and your life a bit overwhelmed, what do you enjoy doing that relaxes you and inspires those creative juices?***

Peterson: I soak up time with my family. We watch good movies. I read good books. I spend time alone, which isn't really time alone at all. Yesterday, my wife and I took a walk to Radnor Lake and happened upon a newborn deer, wobbling along the trail in front of us. There's no system. It's just a matter of paying attention.

Gillespie: ***It's safe to say that music, books, and film have cornered the market in mainstream culture these days. Do you see poetry as having a revival in the future?***

Peterson: I doubt that poetry will ever satisfy our culture's craving for the quick thrill of a good movie or a good song. Those things are easy to digest, and there's nothing necessarily wrong with that. Poetry, on the other hand, asks us to slow down. Poetry takes time and reflection and rewards those who are willing to work for their rest.

But as to whether or not poetry will experience a revival in popularity, I don't think it needs reviving because it never really died. Thank goodness for poets like Billy Collins, whom I think of as the 'gateway drug' for future poetry addicts. I heard "The Revenant" read at a retreat a few years ago, and it helped me realize what a poem is capable of. Collins led me into a world of great poets I didn't know existed.

Most people don't like poetry because it seems elitist or esoteric. Nobody likes to feel dumb. But after I came to love Billy Collins, I found the guts to try Wendell Berry, then Mary Oliver, then Richard Wilbur, then Robert Frost and John Betjeman, and I kept traveling back and back, finally to Tennyson and Milton. I suppose you could call what happened to *me* a revival, but it was more of a slow realization. Poetry will be around as long as there are words and someone to speak them, which is to say, forever.