

INTERVIEWER

Hi Adam, thanks for agreeing to an interview. Can you give a brief timeline of your writing career: when you started to think of yourself as a writer, what you started writing, and your major projects along the way?

GOLASKI

Okay. In brief. Writing was very painful for me until I was 12 or 13, when I began to write stories for my friends. I wrote and "edited" a magazine for my pals--a 7 page issue every week. That's when I started to define myself as a writer.

I was very serious about writing in high school. Sent work out to a new publication called *The 21st Century*. What was nice is they paid--ten bucks a pop! The poetry journals I send to *now* can't compete.

Anyway, I barely made it through high school, but, in part because of a story I read at a talent show, I was accepted (off the wait-list) to college in Boston. I went to study / make film, and did, but they also had a strong undergraduate writing program.

INTERVIEWER

Talent show?

GOLASKI

The spring, high school talent show. I read a story and teachers who never paid me much mind wrote letters of rec. I believe I was accepted on the strength of those letters.

INTERVIEWER

That's good material for a biopic.

GOLASKI

A boring biopic! In college I spent all my non-movie-making time with writing majors, in writing clubs, editing the magazines, etc. After college I started *New Genre*, a horror and science fiction literary journal.

INTERVIEWER

At this time in your life, did you go to bed and wake up thinking "I'm a writer?" or "I'm a poet?" or anything of the sort?

GOLASKI

Yeah, yeah. "I'm a writer." Since I was 13. Though I drew and was OK, I actually believed I was great at writing. But NOT a poet. Poetry perplexed me, and what I wrote--I did write poetry--reflected my total ignorance of the genre. I attended to that as an undergraduate, and then became serious about poetry after college.

INTERVIEWER

And what for you made poetry poetry? Was it just very carefully considered, carefully arranged, musical prose? Or did it occupy a different ontological status?

GOLASKI

That was THE question. It perplexed me in a way that it still does, I suppose.

INTERVIEWER

But it's *not* prose? It's definitely other?

GOLASKI

Poetry did seem like an "other." A not-prose. I doesn't seem that way anymore. Now it's fluid. I took a poetry course in college because I (rightly) believed it would improve my prose.

INTERVIEWER

How did it/does it improve your prose?

GOLASKI

Then, it allowed me to write without the concerns attendant to fiction, and it forced me to attend to a kind of writing I had avoided--I was forced to read poetry. I found joy in specificity. And, to quote Prince, "joy in repetition." I also learned that I have a musical ear--just totally untrained.

But I didn't think of myself as a poet until I started to read at open mics in Boston--I read a few times a week, every week.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by 'concerns attendant to fiction?' You talking about all the sex scenes?

GOLASKI

Concerns attendant to fiction. Telling a good yarn! Moving characters from A to B. Ha! Sex scenes. No, I liked to write those. I was free to be a little more abstract with poetry (without being vague). And all that freedom opened doors in my fiction.

To touch on the readings--NOT slams. Slam culture, I realized very quickly, would harm my work. Fortunately, people found the very non-slam poetry I wrote to be of interest.

INTERVIEWER

Does poetry have attendant concerns? Some believe what makes poetry poetry is that it doesn't.

GOLASKI

All writing does. But those concerns are not *real*. Genre--parameters--bleed, *wonderfully*. I try to be awake to the arbitrariness of (many of) those concerns. But I do like parameters. Like writing a story 150 characters at a time because that's what my flip phone allows.

I teach nonfiction, if you can believe it, and I like to talk about--and take students to--the borders.

INTERVIEWER

As you know i'm now editing a "poets' fiction" section of what is mostly a poetry journal. I intuit that genre fiction is closer to poetry than other kinds of fiction. What does poets' fiction bring to mind?

GOLASKI

To your intuition... genre fiction can be. There's an amazing author in Japan you should read--I published him in New Genre--Matthew Pendleton. He translated a poem by Jessica Smith, is doing some Zukofsky, and he writes sf. But sf readers don't like what he writes. The readers who would like Pendleton are the same readers who read sf that feels decidedly diff. from mainstream sf. Or sf written by folks who don't think about sf. A lot of horror writers' prose thuds along 'cause they are only interested in the "good yarn."

Poets' fiction. Well, by def., that would be fiction by poets. Which is often very good. I think of Melville. But I also think more generally of hybridity. Prose poetry vs. short short. Russel Edson.

The best short story writer is Mary Caponegro. She doesn't write poetry that I know of, but I can't imagine a poet not liking her stuff. Not because her prose is {gag} lyric or {choke} luminous, but because of the way her stories operate. They are complex.

{gag} and {choke} come straight from EC horror comics, by the way.

INTERVIEWER

I was going to comment on gag and choke as if --I may be reading my own crisis into your words --as if you used to believe poetry was something luminous and lyric (and we can add ineffable or anything along those lines) whereas now, with the experience of middle age, you see behind the curtain, and poetry is really just about techniques which can be applied to fiction, or other things.

In short, I'm talking about a loss of faith.

GOLASKI

Yes! Very well put. I'd add "profound." Poetry is deep, man. After I got past the worry that poetry was magic, I had another hurdle to deal with--poetics. Theory. I thought I had to ally myself with a poetic. I was drawn to Language (forgive me for not typing the = signs). I wanted a "school."

There were lights along the way. Who questioned my assumptions.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you say theory was a hurdle?

GOLASKI

I believed I wasn't serious without allying myself to a theory. This was a vague belief, one that didn't change much of what I did, but it did worry me.

Worried me because it was a blank spot--I was ignorant about it. A "literary blind spot" I called it.

I have had that feeling -- poetry is not just another trade and you have to be up on the latest technology.

INTERVIEWER

I still have some belief that poetry is other. Do you have none?

GOLASKI

Poetry is tools but it's also all the indefinable stuff that is wonderful to think about / experience. To speak of joy, again--there is joy in making a phrase well. Making a phrase *good*. Language is a place where we work AND play.

Do I have "none" what?

INTERVIEWER

None of the romantic belief that poetry is of the spirit. That the rules that determine the workaday world don't apply so much to poetry. That poetry transcends!

GOLASKI

I am a romantic person. I love mystery (deep mystery). And I feel excitement. But I wouldn't call it sacred. And as for technology... you can write poetry using the same tools Homer (except the brain--no small thing!) used, so... well we certainly don't need to worry about what's current. Poetry transcends the mundane the way any art *can*--it's a matter of the experience you have with it--poetry is not inherently transcendent.

INTERVIEWER

You told me earlier you were pitching a monograph on a horror movie, and the idea that a slightly lyric form might be best.

What did you mean in that case, and, in general, how do you know what subject or content calls for what form?

When do you write fiction, and when do you write poetry?

GOLASKI

Spec. to the monograph. The film monographs I've read--the BFI books, Cultographies, Devil's Advocates, etc.--tend to approach their subject with a critical lens. How does X film fit into or bust out of the cannon, what does the film mean, how has it impacted culture, etc? And that's interesting. But the reason I would enjoy writing about a film (or a book, or an album, or a building, or a dance...) is to interact. To enter. X film made me think about the world in a certain way. How can I express that? What's strange about the film? Why is that strange to me? How do I feel when I leave the theater?

Some of that is the result of my personal experience as a movie-goer. Some of it is the result of my dual occupation as a story-teller and story interpreter.

As far as knowing what content calls for what form... that's instinct, built by study and practice. And it just as often (for me) goes the other way--there is a form and I want to enter it. The monograph is a form. A sheet of paper is a form. This thing we're "hanging out" in is a form. Don't you sometimes seem a pad of paper or a box and you just want to fill it up?

INTERVIEWER

Lately I feel like the world is over-full, and want to empty it --but I know what you mean about the primacy of the form

GOLASKI

Maybe instead of "filling up" we could think of it as making use of what's around us.

INTERVIEWER

I'd like to hear you talk a little more about the primacy of the poem as it relates to poetry, fiction, and your identity. And in order to lead you on, I'll interpolate a small confession: namely, that I was badly misled by my conception of artistic identity and specifically the identity of a poet. The poète maudit, for example, was an inherited form I wanted to fill.

You seem to keep your head on straight. You mostly talk about yourself as a writer, but you are also a father and a teacher and husband How has your artistic identity changed? And as it's changed, what's been the give and take on your writing?

GOLASKI

"Seem to" is key, here.

I do think of myself as a writer. I think some of that is a result of when I came to think about it at all. As a newly minted teen I wanted to be something. And I wrote. But I didn't write poetry. So I would never call myself a poet.

Now, I do.

Because I am (among other things).

INTERVIEWER

So if you go through the pearly gates and the winged clerk asks "who are you?" do you say "I'm the poet, Adam Golaski?"

GOLASKI

You bring to mind two scenes from a horror flick I recently watched. A very flawed horror film at that.

One scene: Dante in *Inferno* going to sit with Homer and Ovid, etc. And from the horror flick. Have you seen *Sinister*? There's an argument the wife has with her husband. She keeps reminding him that all his worth isn't just in being a writer. He's a husband and a father too!

INTERVIEWER

Hehe

GOLASKI

Intentionally or not, you've touched on the question of legacy.

And when you get to the Pearly Gates, I assume a slightly bored Peter stops you before you can even finish telling him your name, and he tells *you* who you are.

I'm not looking forward to that.

Sinister, by the way, is the type of film I love. It's flawed, it does stuff that annoys me (the jump scare at the end), but it's stylized and often lovely, and it is sometimes spot on re. a writer's anxiety.

My hope is that, in the end, my children say Adam Golaski was a father, my wife says he was a husband-- everybody else can say Adam Golaski was a writer. As for myself, I like being all those things and try to keep my attention where it needs to be in the moment (but it all bleeds...).

INTERVIEWER

And do you have in your mind a black and white photo, and find yourself trying to write like the person in that photo?

(There's an essay by Villa Matas in which he claims he decided he wanted to be a writer upon seeing a black and white photo of Gombrowicz, and then began his career trying to write like Gombrowicz -- without ever reading him!)

GOLASKI

Very funny. Sometimes I wish I was as handsome as Albert Camus (b&w photo of him in a trenchcoat, ciggy in mouth) and I *did* try to write like Camus, but that was coincidental.

If I take you meaning--I fantasize about being a more scholarly, patient writer, who can concentrate.

All those stories--who knows if they're true--of the author waking up, pouring a bourbon on their corn flakes, writing till three, smoking the whole time, then eating a feast with their beautiful wife (wives) and daughters, then writing till three...and... repeat. But that's just me being romantic.

What I sincerely wish for is the time I need to write the way I already write.

And I know, too, that the way I write might be a product of not having that time--so my sincerest wish may not be a good one to make.

INTERVIEWER

A writer is supposed to be totally dedicated

GOLASKI

Right! Right! Again, stories. Maybe Dostoyevsky wrote in a garret while sitting on a stove to keep warm... but he didn't do that all the time!

INTERVIEWER

I want you to speak a little about *Color Plates* or some of your other hybrid work, and whether your ideas of form (prose, poetry, fiction) were important in the shape of the work, and how you hope a reader encounters the work?

GOLASKI

Sure, *Color Plates*.

That started while I was in a hostile (to me) workshop, in Montana, at a little second-hand bookshop. I found a little art book about Toulouse-Lautrec and thought the copy was hilarious. Dumb. And I thought: I could turn this copy into poems.

Instead, a story happened, inspired by the first "color plate" in the book.

And then I thought, I could write a little story for every color plate in the book.

INTERVIEWER

And you had the idea of writing poems, but stories came out?

GOLASKI

Found text suggested poetry, and I was writing a lot of poetry and for the first time getting poetry published. I met Jon Minton while I was there (he lived in Helena). But I was also writing a lot of fiction.

What I did with the Plates, though, is I set up rules. As one might with a poem. There were five or six. And all 60+ plates adhere to those rules.

I also introduced each Plate with found text. Which I subsequently removed in favor of a kind-of narrator (who was sort-of Mary Cassatt).

INTERVIEWER

That sounds like a clear example of your study of poetry making your prose better, and shaping the prose form.

GOLASKI

Not only that, but of writing prose liberated by poetry.

Also, in Montana, the only folks who immediately got *Color Plates* were poets. So I stopped bringing them to the fiction people and started reading them to poets. I ended up with a thesis committee composed of an art history prof., a novelist who has only written one novel (as far as I know), a literary scholar, and a poet.

The point, I suppose, was that I had to (mostly) go outside of the Fiction Department to find people who would be on my committee. And who I respect. The novelist is Debra Magpie Earling. Who was largely ignored by the rest of the Fiction Department. All the weirdos went to her!

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INTERVIEWER

So today I wanted to start by asking you about translation. Before I get to the Green Knight: have you ever translated your poetry into fiction, or your fiction into poetry?

GOLASKI

Recently, I wrote a scene of dialogue as a sonnet--without drawing attention to the fact (I presume readers just see / read dialogue). I've written poems for stories, and recently a story with verse passages. I'm reworking an abandoned Color Plate into a more traditional fiction. But... no. I don't think so.

INTERVIEWER

But you nest poems within stories . . .

GOLASKI

Absolutely, and not just dropped in, but essential to the storytelling.

INTERVIEWER

What makes them essential? Why impose the sonnet form on the dialogue?

GOLASKI

The dialogue specifically: I found when I wrote the exchange in prose, it felt... flabby. It needed shape. The 14 lines, the volta, etc., seemed a solution--it would give the dialogue shape. And I suppose that's the answer in other cases, too. A story written in 37-word sections had sections that needed a few extra words--haiku suited. In other cases, the character drove the decision. A failed author, dying, is "given" a poem by the being taking him; a mother who wrote poetry in her spare time.

Those characters had poetry--it struck me as a cheat not to show it. And to show it was an opportunity to show the characters' interior lives.

As far as taking prose and making it poetry--found stuff, and sometimes my own found stuff.

INTERVIEWER

Are there any books or authors that you would hold up as standards of excellence as far as nesting poetry within prose? *Ulysses* and *Pale Fire* are probably the two most famous . . .

GOLASKI

Oh gosh that's interesting. I think the most famous is so famous we don't think about him anymore: Poe. Poe's "Conqueror Worm" in "Ligeia"--the story is better for the poem. Vastly so. And he does it elsewhere in his fiction.

I'm trying to remember if the medieval romance at the end of *The Fall of the House of Usher* is in verse. Who does it now? I don't know. Joyelle McSweeney calls *Flet* a novel, and there's lots of poetry that has strong narrative (Peter Richards' *Helsinki* comes to mind), but I don't know contemporary writers who do both really well.

INTERVIEWER

It was common practice in the old days. *Tale of the Genji*, which some call the first novel, is filled with poems. *Arabian Nights*, *Rabelais*, even the philosophers intercalated poems: Montaigne . . .

GOLASKI

And Basho's *Narrow Way* is a mix.

INTERVIEWER

People still do it. Lucy Ives in *Nineties*. . . Ben Lerner put a poem in *10:04*.

GOLASKI

Montaigne? I think lots of writers had poetry at their fingertips in a way that some of us don't, but I also think one of the reasons we don't see it as much is because readers aren't so familiar. Our parents, and certainly their parents, immediately got references to the Bible, for instance, that students today don't. Authors may be reluctant to make such references (if they know them to make them).

I haven't read Lerner or Ives.

The fact is I read poetry, I read the classics, etc., that stuff is on hand for me--it's not any more difficult to refer to *The Iliad* than it is to refer to David Bowie's "Low" or Kanye West's "Yeesus" or *The X-Files*. To not use that stuff--from Dante to *Sinister*--would be to deny myself a tool.

And we don't see it as much because people don't read poetry anymore. As you know. Americans stopped sometime in the late 70s when we were born.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever consider translating *Sir Gawain* into prose? You are, after all, a story writer as well as a poet.

GOLASKI

Sort of. I started to translate *Sir Gawain & the Green Knight* because I was writing a novel about a quest for an early color silent film that captured one of the last living Irish Deer, and I modeled the main character after Gawain. Since I didn't want to get permission to use someone else's translation, I started my own. And I found that I loved SGGK's language, and that no one had preserved its music to my liking... and so I began to translate in earnest, abandoning the novel.

But a straight prose translation of SGGK loses too much. And plenty exist.

INTERVIEWER

This was your first major translation project?

GOLASKI

Yes. Except for a misadventure with Francis Ponge.

INTERVIEWER

What did you learn from your misadventure?

GOLASKI

That I have no French.

That an alabaster candle and a moth are not just an alabaster candle and a moth.

INTERVIEWER

Did translating Gawain put you elsewhere? Can you describe the experience of translation when you're deep into it --I understand that much of the time it's just sussing, but sometimes it's something else, right?

GOLASKI

Yes. Do you have personal experience with this? Yes. It's an exchange--a conversation with the text that sometimes feels to me like a conversation with the poet. All the essays that speculate who the Gawain poet was--I bet they were inspired by someone both close-reading and extrapolating AND getting a feeling.

That's what I'm doing when I'm writing those weird essays on my blog and elsewhere about film or music. I'm entering the work, and having an exchange.

INTERVIEWER

This concept of entering and engaging seems critical to your poetics. Is that correct, and can you elaborate?

GOLASKI

I'd say so. I don't claim this is unique, but my romantic nature, my loneliness, my imagination and vivid dream life, my critical mind, and the fact of my being a writer--who is always translating into written language stuff that's other than written--set me up (is that the right phrase?) to have a powerful interactive experience with art. I don't "veg out." Even the stupidest films offer gifts when interacted with. Maybe this is also a product of loving genre--I grew up watching black and white horror films and

b-movies and listening to horror radio shows from the 30s and 40s, and reading horror comics from the 50s and 80s, and watching *Tron*, etc., and I loved it--all the goof-ups, all the weak spots, all the disappointing endings--those all were open doors to making up my own, better versions. Failure is generative. A great film or book or album also invites interaction and opens doors. The little bits of transitional music on *Abbey Road* fascinated me--

It gets back to mystery. Those things left unexplained.

INTERVIEWER

Ben Lerner's book *The Failure of Poetry* is making waves. You say failure is generative, and that statement is vividly illustrated by your reference to B flicks. Does poetry offer more openings than fiction?

GOLASKI

No. Why would it?

INTERVIEWER

If all poetry were failure --failure to live up to the promise of poetry, and if failure generated openings . . .

GOLASKI

As far as Lerner is concerned, I don't know, I've not read him at all. But the statement "all poetry is failure" is prescriptive, and I instinctually reject such statements. Nor do I know why anyone would wish to make a statement that starts out "All"--how arrogant!

Something that is very crucial to my comments about failed art --it's love.

I honestly, without irony, love *Them!* The original *The Thing* and its remake. I also love great art. But that's key to making from other work--in some way loving that work, or loving the ideas it contains (or suggests).

And what, exactly, is the promise of poetry? That sounds like the deforming notion that there's a "contract" between an author and her audience.

INTERVIEWER

One promise of poetry is that it is not a representation of a thing, but a thing itself, and in that sense differs from prose. Prose is an art of correspondence where $A = B$. But, in poetry you can't even say $A = A$. Just A . *A is A* to quote Heidegger.

GOLASKI

Just "A"

Are the Objectivists Aristotle's children?

INTERVIEWER

I do think about Zukofsky's: "a poem conveys the totality of perfect rest," in that context.

GOLASKI

I don't understand why prose can't be transcendent too. I know there's a difference, but I think it's more a matter of form. Prose doesn't have to be prosaic.

INTERVIEWER

Translation is transcendent almost by definition.

GOLASKI

As long as you don't mean that it "surpasses" something or other. If to transcend is to go beyond... what can't be? It comes back to the author, not the form. The author determines if the work is transcendent.

And the audience!

INTERVIEWER

And when you refer to a deformative contract between the author and audience?

GOLASKI

Oh, that thing. Fiction workshop garbage. There's a contract between an author and her audience--the audience expects, and if the author doesn't honor the contract, and delivers work that the audience doesn't expect, the author has broken her contract. I.e., has done something bad.

INTERVIEWER

Hehe

GOLASKI

Prescriptive stuff. You know, "There's only two kinds of stories..."

Fiction people love that nonsense. I don't know why. Some poets do, too. Fiction writers who roll up their sleeves and eschew "art."

INTERVIEWER

You don't think there's anything to it?

GOLASKI

It's useful to think about audience. There's that. When you think about audience, you begin to give your work parameters, and working within parameters is generative.

It's OK, though, if that audience is yourself.

INTERVIEWER

I was going to ask whether you feel any obligations to be more veracious in poetry than in prose. The idea that poetry has an obligation to the truth, whereas fiction can and perhaps should deceive. . .

But it sounds like you're against prescriptions of that sort?

GOLASKI

Fiction is made up, of course, but that doesn't mean it's less truthful. Verse is neither fiction or nonfiction. As of late, my fiction is borrowing from nonfiction, and I'm allowing imaginative... visions?... into my verse. Instead of veracity I might say--about all the writing I do--sincerity.

I try to be honest about my motivation to write. And I try to avoid motivations I deem false or bad.

That would be harder, maybe, if people actually read my work, or cared!

INTERVIEWER

Could you not include "marketability" among the restraints of form? Or constraints, rather.

GOLASKI

Trying to be marketable is a restraint, but I don't think it's useful, because who knows what's going to be marketable? AND that's the kind of motivation I try to avoid. There are stories about people who try to be marketable and succeed--Crichton, for instance. I don't know if that's true, though. And there are folks I've encountered who brag about how much money they made for a story they whipped up in no time, that sort of thing--but that doesn't attract me. I want to make work that I would be delighted to discover in the world.

Oh! Constraint! I worked as a copywriter for a while--writing advertising copy, taglines, etc. It was my job to come up with pithy statements that would convey a corporate "personality" that was attractive to that company's target market. It's an interesting way to write, and I learned from it. I even wrote work that I like, but it never attained durability. Every bit of it was meant to be thrown out. I felt sorry for my boss, who wanted to be a respected author, but had traded that to become a successful copywriter. He could shop at Louis Boston on his lunch break, but I think he was disappointed in himself. I think that's why all new employees had to read his novel manuscript.

INTERVIEWER

Was it any good?

GOLASKI

I honestly don't remember. It wasn't laughable. But it wasn't publishable, either.

INTERVIEWER

I want to thank you again for all your time. I should have begun by thanking you.

One thing I did want to ask before I allowed myself to get sidetracked is what you learned from the Sir Gawain translation.

GOLASKI

Aside from what I learned about SGGK and medieval lit in general --which was loads and is alone worthwhile--I learned that I can take a literal translation--which is sometimes so jumbled as to appear meaningless--and find a way to make it meaningful AND true to the source. I believe, with help, I could do that in other languages as well. (I'm about to embark on a project in English and Japanese--with help--so we'll see if I'm right.)

INTERVIEWER

I can't thank you enough.

GOLASKI

You already have!