

VEDA CARMINE-RITCHIE IN CONVERSATION WITH JEFF WHITNEY



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NDR: The poem of yours featured in *NDR*, “What Thou Lovest Well Remains American” shares a title with three other pieces of yours published in 2026. “What Thou Lovest Well, Remains American” is the title of a Richard Hugo book published in 1975. Then in 1948, there is the passage, “What thou lovest well remains, the rest is dross...” in Ezra Pound’s, “Canto LXXXI”. What does this continually evolving phrase mean to you, and how did your personal iteration of it arrive as a repeated title?

JW: *I first encountered the phrase reading through Hugo's collected poems, Making Certain It Goes On, and it's always stood out to me; why did he decide to use the antiquated "thou" in the title? Why can't I stop repeating it to myself like a prayer or mantra (What thou lovest well, what thou lovest well...)? I didn't know about the allusion to Pound's "Canto LXXXI" until an embarrassing interval of time later.*

I've gotten to mid-life crisis age, but instead of driving a convertible or getting really into fly fishing, I've just gone really nostalgic. This poem, and the others you mentioned, along with a handful of others that also share the title, were written around the same time, and at the center of them is that idea that if you (are lucky to) live long enough, the country / world you were born in is not the same as the one you wake up in. There are a lot of different ways to consider that. For me, under Hugo's influence (I got my MFA at the University of Montana, and there was a framed picture of him in one of the classrooms, staring at us all day), I think about my hometown, old friends, relationships that once meant the world to me with people I no longer hear from or see. So I wanted to bring them back, and that's how this poem and the others got their start. Hugo's poem of the same title and his oeuvre in general are constantly evoking nostalgia—for places, the people in those places, a time he can't get back to—so it's no wonder I've adopted the title for my own purposes here.

Oh, and how did it arrive as a repeated title? That came after. A lot of the poems mentioned above originally had different titles, but once I changed one, the dominoes just kept falling, and now here we are, with a full-blown series on our hands.

NDR: What is the role stylistic form plays in this series? Does it interact with nostalgia? Does it interact with inevitable change?

JW: *The longer I've been writing poetry, the longer my lines have gotten. I don't know why that is except that it matches my preferences as a reader. I rub my hands together and say, "oh, boy!" when I come across a poem in a journal or collection stretching its little fingers across the page. The poems in this series follow that trend (though now having said that I feel the immediate urge to rein this impulse in).*

This poem's triggering subject, to use Richard Hugo's term, was the memory of a friend (not actually named Martin) who had a bad trip and spent all night in a bathtub, and never quite seemed the same afterward (though this was likely due to other things going on in their life, which I recognize now). It started with that line "Martin once ate mushrooms and smiled in an empty bathtub," and from there developed into the poem it became, though during composition I had no idea where it was going, just that I was thinking about this moment. As far as form goes, once I had that first line, I tried to keep a fairly uniform line length as I composed. I've heard of some writers who will write their first drafts without lines, then go through and lineate after, but for me, breaking the line while in the flurry of composition is part of what keeps the momentum going, the surprises coming.

*I consider myself a pretty boring writer formally, so in this series, and a lot of the poems I value, story and imagination are the predominant temperaments. I've come to understand that plainness in form allows me to tell a story, and from there make leaps and connections (for example, the connection to the movie *The Prestige*) I wouldn't have thought to make, or to compose a mural of images that together form their own logic. I guess I'm saying the simplicity of the container demands that I make the poem strange and interesting in other ways, which leads to the brain's natural exploration of memory, grief, the meaning of anything, and also allows me to take those leaps in topic and thought that themselves enact a kind of change. Is this making sense? I don't know.*

NDR: I want to focus on the last thing you mentioned, "topic and thought that themselves enact a kind of change." I see this with the way you begin the poem with the mushroom trip of course, and then bring in earthquakes, moments in childhood, even the act of a magician revealing his secret—things that once they happen, feel as though they can never be reversed. How has your view of linearity changed while writing this series? Do you believe that time moves ahead relentlessly or is there another form of magic that manipulates aging?

JW: *That's a good way to put it—the nextness of events, and a great question about time, linearity, all that.*

I'm really taken with the idea that whatever is happening, was happening, and will, is happening all at once. There is no time. We die but we don't. And I think that's one of the reasons I'm drawn to poems. Richard Hugo isn't dead, Lucille Clifton and Li Po and Rumi and Dickinson and whoever else we might visit on the page, take your pick: poems allow for us to inhabit their time. I can't remember who put it this way, but I once heard someone describe a poem as a "little empathy machine," and I like that, but I would also call it little machine against time, improbable flying peach, stuck hand on a clock.

Paradoxically, being a person entails being strapped to a dying animal, to put it in a way I heard Kaveh Akbar say recently, so I also think time marches on, and changes the world around us utterly (remember Pangea?). After all, all those stars that had to die so we could be here took a long time to fusing hydrogen, or whatever it is they were up to, before they could burst their contents all over the universe, the stuff of which we're made. And I like that idea, too. It gives me great optimism in a time when it would be very easy to go full-cynic in response to the challenges of our day.

I don't think my view of linearity has changed, but then again, what do I know? Maybe I'm changing all the time in imperceptible ways. And yes, I guess I believe both that time marches on relentlessly, but we have this amazing technology—the poem—a powerful time machine without the need for flux capacitors, flashing lights, or concern about tearing a fabric in space-time through our human need for meddling.

NDR: Who are some writers, or artists in general, whose work has struck, inspired and/or propelled you into creation recently?

JW: *I'll focus on just the poets to keep this from going on too long, and since fiction, television, film, and other art forms already have a lot of PR wind at their backs. At the risk of getting linear with time, some recent collections that have struck and inspired me are: Sasha Debevec-McKinney's *Joy is My Middle Name*, Andrew Hemmert's *No Longer at This Address*, Maria Zoccola's *Helen of Troy*, 1993, Cortney Lamar Charleson's *It's Important I Remember*, Threa Almontaser's *The Wild Fox of Yemen*, Yuki Tanaka's *Chronicle of Drifting*, James Allen Hall's*

Romantic Comedy, *Rosalie Moffett's* Nervous System, *Kinsale Drake's* The Sky was Once a Dark Blanket, *Richard Siken's* I Do Know Some Things, *Kim Hyesoon's* Poor Love Machine, *Rob Macasia Colgate's* Hardly Creatures, *Rebecca Wadlinger's* Terror Terrible Terrific, *John Gallaher's* Brand New Spacesuit (*This is my North Star poetry collection, and the single largest influence to my writing over the past 6 years.*)

Oh, I also listen to music while writing, and these albums are great inspiration and accompaniment: Julien Baker's Sprained Ankle; *Sand Duney's* Plant Material; *Godspeed You! Black Emperor's* No Title as of 13 February 2024 28,340 Dead; *A Silver Mt. Zion's* Horses in the Sky; *Mono's* Walking Cloud and Deep Red Sky, Flag Fluttered and the Sun Shined.