

## **PEN LYRICS AWARD – INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

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In his poem “Ode to a Nightingale,” John Keats utilizes a number of classical literary devices that I’d like to analyze in painstaking detail. It will, of course, be helpful for our discussion if you possess a working knowledge of ancient Greek rhetoric, and a more than passing acquaintance with the history of English prosody. If you’ll bear with me I’d like to begin with a somewhat technical treatment of poetic meter, paying special attention to Keats’s rather unusual use of the spondee which—I’m sure I don’t need to tell you—is a metrical foot consisting of two stressed syllables...

Oh, wait that’s the wrong speech. That’s the “lyric” speech and this is the “Lyrics” event. What a difference that little “S” makes. It’s the difference between “My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains/My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,” on the one hand, and “I’m so lonesome I could cry” on the other.

Let me just say right off the bat that I’m pretty nervous about giving this introduction for the first ever PEN New England Award for Song Lyrics of Literary Excellence. I’m telling you, you don’t know what it’s like. I mean, I’m dizzy, my head is spinning. The best way I can describe it is to quote Bob Dylan on the subject of stage fright: “Your

brow is sweatin' and your mouth gets dry/Fancy people go drifting by.”

I'm clutching the podium, looking out at all these faces, and there are just two thoughts in my head: “Well, how did I get here?” and “My God, what have I done?”

To be perfectly honest, I only agreed to do this because I'd heard the event was sold out, and this seemed like a pretty good way to get hold of a ticket. So I said yeah, sure, let it be me, I'd be happy to get up, stand up and say a few words at the JFK Library about the cultural importance of song lyrics. I mean, who wouldn't want to play a small part in an event that honors two giants like Chuck Berry and Leonard Cohen, and that includes performances by Elvis Costello and Shawn Colvin, and special appearances by Paul Simon and Salman Rushdie.

So that was the easy part, saying yes. But then you've got to come up with something to say, and for the longest time my mind was blank. You know what it was like? It was a lot of pressure, that's what it was like. And not just everyday, garden variety, gotta-speak-in public-pressure. I'm talking about real pressure, the kind of pressure that burns a building down, splits a family in two, puts people on streets. That's the kind of pressure I'm talking about.

I guess I could've stepped down, could've said, I quit, I give up, I'm a loser, set me free, I wanna go home, take this job and shove it. But time goes by, and not always as slowly as some people seem to believe, and at some point you've just got admit that it's too late to turn back now.

So here I am. Signed, sealed, delivered. I got one last chance to make it real.

I mean, that's the thing about song lyrics. They're everywhere. You can't turn around without bumping into one that explains, or at least illuminates, your situation at this very moment, no matter what your situation happens to be. You say it's your birthday? Well, happy birthday to you. Are you lonely? Just call out my name and you know I'll be there. You want to marry me? Well, that's the way I've always heard it should be. You're having my baby? What a lovely way to say that you're thinking of me.

You get the idea.

It's mind-boggling to think of all the song lyrics that have passed through our brains in the course of a lifetime, over and over again, mostly while we weren't even paying attention, an airborne flood of words and rhymes. The vast majority of them come and go without leaving an impression. Others will echo nonsensically in our minds for a day or two and then vanish. It's Friday, Friday, Friday, Sharif don't like it, the levee was dry. Some of them we'll get wrong and we won't know it for years and years, and even when you find out that "Flashdance" wasn't telling you to take your pants off and make it happen, that's still the way you'll remember it. Others will stick in our memories not because of any connection to lived experience, but because we're human, and we're weak. I haven't spent a lot of time around horses, but if you were to

whisper in my ear about a pony named Wildfire who busted down her stall, I can pretty much guarantee you that I'll be crying. Not that I'll admit it, though. If you take a good look at my face and ask me what's wrong, I'll just tell you that there's something in my eye, you know it happens every time.

But then there are those other lyrics, the ones that attach themselves to important moments in our lives, and never fade away. I'll always remember my high school girlfriend playing a Cat Stevens song a week before she headed off to college, because she wanted me to know how scared she was, because she was just seventeen, she's leaving home, and Cat said what she was feeling better than she ever could: it's a wild world, and it's hard to get by. And I also remember some very long days in a North Carolina hospital, waiting to find out if someone I loved would live or die, with two very different Bruce Springsteen lyrics bouncing around in my head. One was bleak: "Empty sky, empty sky/I woke up this morning to an empty sky." But the other was "Waiting...waiting on a sunny day/Gonna chase the clouds away." Those were my dueling mantras in those dark days, one that expressed my fears, the other the hope I couldn't even verbalize without the help of the song.

Some lyrics matter enough to enough people that they become part of our history, part of the fabric of our collective memory, the way we locate ourselves in time and tell our stories to ourselves. How many years can some people exist before they're allowed to be free? It's been a long,

long time coming, but I know, a change is gonna come. War...what's it good for? It's just a shot away, only love can conquer hate. Tonight we're gonna party like it's 1999. It's the end of the world as we know it. We've all come to look for America.

The thing you can't help but notice about these unforgettable lyrics is how simple and sturdy they are, how mysteriously ordinary and universal, as if each of them were a thought anyone could think. Over a century and a half ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "The roots of what is great and high must still be in the common life," and that's certainly true of song lyrics. The great ones both reflect and create our common life, the everyday culture we share, the communal air we're breathing right now.

We're here today to honor two of the master lyricists of our time, artists who've given us the words we fall in love with, the words that break and fix our hearts, the ones that teach us how to have fun and fight the power, and maybe even make us think while we're dancing in the streets. They say that there's a rock and roll heaven, and rumor has it that there's a pretty good band up there, but they'd have to be pretty damn good to match the band that we could assemble with the people who are here are with us today. So without further ado, I'd like to introduce our master of ceremonies, Bill Flanagan.