

SARAH Today on *Chalk Radio*, living poetry.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA BENNETT: Yeah, poetry is for everybody, by design. Poetry is also so old. Poetry is first. And so, yeah, I want to tap into that, that ancient thing, that ancient music.

SARAH HANSEN: I'm Sarah Hansen. My guest today is Dr. Joshua Bennett, MIT professor of literature and the distinguished chair of the humanities at MIT. He teaches courses on writing, poetry, and society, including the course called Reading Poetry, Social Poetics, which will soon be available on MIT OpenCourseWare. This was truly one of the most impactful conversations I've had since we started the podcast.

Joshua has a way of weaving stories and poetry into all of his responses, painting vivid pictures that make the ideas that he shares in this episode so potent and tangible. In our conversation, he brought in his own poetry and even talked about the people he admires that have helped to shape his approach to writing, teaching, living, and even parenting. Simply put, I *loved* this conversation, and I think you will too. So without further ado, here's my conversation with Joshua Bennett.

So let's start with the basic question. Please introduce yourself, sharing your name and your role at MIT.

JOSHUA BENNETT: Sure, sure, sure. My name is Joshua Bennett. I'm a professor of literature and distinguished chair of the humanities here at MIT. I teach poetry, the art of the essay, and increasingly, AI ethics is something that I'm starting to teach and talk more about while I'm here. What else is my role at MIT? I'm here to teach students and collaborate with them and build beautiful things.

SARAH HANSEN: I love that. Thank you for being here. I'm really excited.

JOSHUA BENNETT: Of course, honor and pleasure.

SARAH HANSEN: So you are a celebrated poet, author. And I'm so curious how you found your way to poetry.

JOSHUA BENNETT: Sure. I found my way to poetry through people who loved me. I found it through the annual talent show during Christmas in my grandmother's living room where everyone would have to get up. You could perform whatever you wanted. You could perform Bible verses, Bobby Brown choreography, or poetry. And so sometimes I would bring poetry. Sometimes I would bring song. And in those environments, I really cultivated my sense of myself as a person with a voice that mattered. I also really loved that even if you forgot the words or forgot a dance step, people would cover for you. They would lift you up. And so I found poetry first as a space of a community building and a communion. It was just an incredible spot to be together.

SARAH HANSEN: What kind of topics do you generally tackle in your poems?

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

I write about family quite a bit, both the family that raised me and now what it means for me to be the father character in that great drama because it's strange, because I know what my father was and is to me. One, he's on the cover of some of my books.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

Oh, wow.

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

With my second book of poetry, it's my dad holding me. But he was truly heroic to me. He was he was mythical in a way. Growing up, I just thought about the fact that he integrated his high school and he fought in the Vietnam War, and he only enlisted because his little brother enlisted. And he wanted to go in his place at 17. He wanted to die in the place of his little brother. And so my father was my model and moral paragon in some way. That's what I thought courage was, was listening to these stories from my pop. And so I write quite a bit about that because that's unique.

In this life, you get-- if you're alive today, you are a child or you were one. And I think I've always been astonished by that idea. You just get dropped with people. Sometimes that's your biological family. Sometimes it's a community. But if you live into adulthood, it's because people looked after you. So I've just been trying to sit with that idea, that reality in my work for quite a bit.

I write a fair amount, of course, about the natural world. Even beyond flowers, I'm really interested in water and trees, in no small part because of the work of people like Camille Dungy, who edited this anthology called *Black Nature, Four Centuries of African-American Nature Poetry*, that just transformed my life when I found it in a Firestone library over a decade ago.

What else do I write about? Love and loss. I write about disability quite a bit because a number of my siblings are people with disabilities. And it wasn't until I got much older that I realized that that wasn't the norm, that the social practices we had in our house, whether it was a sign language or thinking of-- I didn't have the word neurodivergence at that time, but thinking about my younger brother, who was on the autism spectrum, as having a beautiful mind that was holy and was designed. This was just the way my mother and father spoke about him to us. And so that was the way he arrived to us in language.

| it wasn't until, again, I got out into the more dominant narratives of the outside world that I realized there were all these negative meanings mapped onto disability and even onto to Blackness. I didn't know the *Star Spangled Banner* until I was five or six years old because I went to this independent school called The Modern School. It was founded by a woman named Mildred Johnson, whose father and uncle wrote the Black national anthem, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. So to me, that was the national anthem when I was a little kid.

I had no idea that that was strange or odd that we're singing musical theater in French, and all my teachers are Black. And our parents are-- they're janitors and neurosurgeons and pastors and lawyers. And that was the community that I grew up in. And so in so many ways, I think I'm a poet because I just grew up in all of these distinct social worlds that I didn't see reflected in the literature I studied.

Once I got scholarships to go to these rich schools, I just thought, well, this isn't the best of the world. It's just a slice of the world. It's just a part of it. There's some cool stuff happening here too. And I appreciate the chance to be here. But this is not the totality of what's happening on planet Earth. And so that's part of my process now too continuously, is bearing witness to the beauty of all that I've seen.

SARAH I love the idea of bearing witness.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA Thank you.

BENNETT:

SARAH It's really all humans ask. That's all they really want. They just want someone to bear witness to their experience.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA That's right. That's right.

BENNETT:

SARAH I'm really curious about your process of crafting a poem. It looks a little bit different for everybody. Can you

HANSEN: describe what that's like for you?

JOSHUA Terrifying and beautiful at the same time, as so many things are that are worth doing. I've written poetry forever,
BENNETT: since I was about four years old. My mom still has a box of my old poems under her bed that she's kept since we all lived together in Yonkers, New York. I wrote poetry on the bus. I was on the bus a lot as a young person. My high school was about two hours away from where I lived. So it was two buses and a train every single day. And in that interim, I wrote poetry quite often. And now, as a husband and a father of two and a professor and a touring poet, as a screenwriter, I just write poetry whenever I'm moving through the fog of sleeplessness and can just capture some beauty.

I really do think about my practice as trying to keep an amber the astonishment that I experience every day, the great beauty of spending time with my children or looking at the Japanese maple outside of our window, or even just listening to the music that I grew up with, Marvin Gaye and Sam Cooke and really experiencing Yolanda Adams, listening to the gospel and Motown kind of tunes of my youth and being taken aback now that I'm older and have, I think, a deeper appreciation for that music, that artistry, that poetry. So my practice is all about trying to create a kind of ensemble out of all of these influences and moments and get it on the page in order to share it.

I think if you talk honestly to a lot of humanities professors, they'll tell you that your prose style really changes in graduate school, by necessity, kind of the way you're trained out of a certain version of your natural voice quite often. And so I think part of what I'm trying to bring into the practice of both my poetry and my prose is that sense of a human one-to-one conversation.

SARAH That's interesting. And what does revision look like for you?

HANSEN:

JOSHUA It's constant. I'm always going back to poems, saying that doesn't fit right, either because of the syllable count,
BENNETT: or it's not quite the frame of reference that I want to use, especially with endings. I think I tweak endings quite a bit because you want to land the thing properly. And that's part of just coming up in performance. Quite often, people don't really remember the middle of the poem. It's usually like, what is their first impression of you, and how did you land? And so even on the page, I want to keep that sensibility intact.

SARAH I get the sense that you don't do this in isolation, just calling back to what you were saying in the beginning, that
HANSEN: poetry for you is about community. Do you share your poems when they're in process with the community around you? How do they come to be what they are?

JOSHUA Yeah, so I try to do that in two distinct ways. One is that every collection of poetry I've written was finished as
BENNETT: part of an exchange with another poet. So part of how I complete my books is I'll ask one of my friends if they want to do sort of a 10 for 10, which means for 10 days, we send each other a poem every single day. And those poems tend to be what kind of end up as the capstones of my books.

Another way that I do that is that I edit on the road. So any collection of poetry you've read from me, I toured those poems first. I see where people laugh, where they cry, where they react, what they want to talk about in Q and A's. And that for me also feeds the poems. It's a process of always bringing the stage and always bringing a pretty wide kind of constellation of voices into the process of editing. It's never solitary for me.

SARAH That's interesting. Do you ever get stuck?

HANSEN:

JOSHUA Stuck in the process of writing or stuck with editing?

BENNETT:

SARAH Yeah, stuck in the process, Like, I have this idea, but I just can't bring it through to fruition, or I'm really-- like, I'm
HANSEN: not sure what to do here, or the ending, it just isn't right. What do you do when you just feel stuck? And I'm asking because lots of students, lots of learners, lots of artists get in that space. And there are strategies we can use to get unstuck. And I'm curious what you try to do.

JOSHUA That's really interesting. Maybe something's wrong with me. I never think of myself as stuck. Even when a poem
BENNETT: might take me a little bit longer, I just come back to it. Maybe that's my wife's influence. Maybe it's Pam. I just think it flows--

SARAH So we all need a Pam.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA Yeah, Pam's great. She's the best. I'm glad I got her. But I think it flows into one another. So some of this, too,
BENNETT: maybe is that I'm used to thinking about fits and starts as just part of the natural process and praxis of writing. Growing up, I had five siblings. I grew up in New York. It's very noisy.

And so now, with a three-year-old running around the house, and a dog, and a two-month-old baby girl, June, it's like that's my natural environment. You don't get two hours uninterrupted to work on anything, not really. The only time I ever had that was grad school. But even then, I always wrote with my friends, I was hanging out with my friends at Union Theological Seminary to write the entirety of my dissertation. I wasn't at Princeton alone in a library, as suggested, because that was how you became a genius. You sit alone for 12 hours. That was the idea that was given to us. But in actuality, that just never worked for me.

So whether it was the bus, whether it was kicking it at the seminary, or whether now it's my life in suburban Massachusetts, I don't really think about when I'm stopping as being stuck so much as now we're going to take a pause for breath. And we're going to revitalize, and we're going to come back to this. And the poems are going to be different than it would have been if I just kind of sat there for an hour or so. But it's just not the nature of my life. And sometimes when you're not writing, it's because you need to be living and experiencing and changing. And then you come back to it and let the work reflect that.

SARAH
HANSEN: Yeah, I love the idea of reframing stuckness as taking a breath, but I also like the idea of sometimes the answer is in others--

JOSHUA
BENNETT: That's right.

SARAH
HANSEN: --and looking outside of ourselves.

JOSHUA
BENNETT: That's exactly it. And sometimes it's just not the moment for that particular project. I thought my dissertation in grad school was going to be a totally different thing. And now I'm writing this book that's largely about flowers, that's picking up these questions I literally asked 13 years ago.

I didn't throw them in the trash. I just brought them back. It's just they weren't ready yet. They weren't fully cooked. I needed to read and listen to 100 other things to say, oh yeah, this is where these early 20th century biologists can come into my larger intellectual project. I wasn't ready to do that work in my 20s. And now, especially being at MIT, I have a much deeper understanding of what someone like Charles Henry Turner or Ernest Everett Just was up to. And I think I can capture it and reflect it in a different way.

SARAH
HANSEN: Would you read an example of a poem that you really love that you've written?

JOSHUA
BENNETT: Sure. So this is one of my more recent poems, actually. I wrote it after reading a bit of this poet, Major Jackson, who wrote a book called *Hoops*, which is another one of those books I pulled off the shelf in Firestone. I don't have a degree in creative writing. I'm a self-taught poet. And so a big part of my process in my teens and my 20s was just seeking out these other voices that I could pull into my orbit. So this is *We*.

We grew up listening to the gossip of elders in crowded salons, the Holy Spirit, Hot 97,

Our guts drum major signaling whether to run left or right when a bullets ricochet cracked the nighttime air,

Jokes about our hair, mama's weight, our place in the great graph of human potential.

We slap boxed until it turned to scrapping unexpectedly,

Scuffles blossoming from schoolyard play we claimed was meant to enhance precision, little else.

We had no good words for wealth,

No trust in arbitrary rules or sense of power beyond the kinds that shaped our lives inside discernible bounds,

The belt, the badge, shoeboxes underneath the bed, which held Abuela's savings,

First poems, the heels our mothers wore to shuffle the shine off the floor of a disco spot downtown, where working people went to let the stress of day last shift's weight evaporate.

We knew the cool ambrosia of hydrant water, how without it, we might not have survived the height of July's brutality.

We learned Spanish to talk to girlfriends' mothers via landline, ask permission for a half hour after school para discutir la tarea or some other benevolent, though transparently false claim.

We dreamed of flight and heavyweight fights and playing our latest hits on late night TV,

Crossing up small forwards on the NBA on NBC with our uncles watching,

Their voices so loud, neighbors assume someone must have lost a bet.

We imagined a world without debt, or early death, or stress so heavy the mind must be lifted elsewhere to bear it and yet persist.

We were latchkey kids, troubadours, substitute parents at 14, teaching little brothers to read and long divide and ride the bus home alone in time to reach the front door just before dark.

When the world put on another face, so we did too,

And with masks and wigs we got from Grandma, devised productions to fill the day's remainder,

Command the language we inherited to live anew or else fail magnificently at trying to say what we held most dear, but could not yet sketch onto the palimpsest of the world as we knew it.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

I just want to give that a minute. Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about what you love about that poem, what speaks to you so much?

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

It feels more true than what I let myself get onto paper sometimes, like the texture of that first litany in particular. We grew up listening to gossip in salons, Hot 97, and the Holy Spirit. That triangulation just feels so true to me, listening to the radio with my big sister.

And then my grandmother owned three salons in Harlem growing up. And so I would spend time there, and the older women would give me \$1 if I could spell a word longer than 3 syllables. So I'd go in there and talk about loquaciousness and malfeasance and things being indubitable, stuff like that. And that is what made me a scholar. That's what made me a writer. That's what made me feel like I was a part of the great human story. And no one could ever take it away.

And so in some ways, I'm just quite thankful for the invincibility that those places granted me, even if it wasn't true. I'm a mortal being. But I didn't feel that way when I was a little kid. Anything was possible. So that's what I love about that poem, is I think it reflects a particular moment in time, but it also reflects a sensibility that I think has kept me alive on the inside, that has kept me alive spiritually as I've navigated my life and career.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

Thank you. It's very beautiful.

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

Thank you.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

And I love that part where you talk about long division and then you bring remainder, like--

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

Yeah, look, on first listen. That's incredible.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

I like it.

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

You got to guest lecture in my poetry class, help the students.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

I love it. Let's talk about your poetry class, one in particular that you teach here. It's called Reading Poetry, Social Poetics.

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

Sure.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

And you write that the central concern of this class is the historical relationship between the social lives of everyday people and the US American poetics with a special emphasis on what June Jordan once termed the difficult miracle of Black poetry in America. I'm wondering if you could talk us through this. There's a lot there. Break it down for us.

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

Yeah, it's quite a bit there. And it's at the top of the syllabus for the class, so shout out to my students for reading the whole thing with me on the first day. So Social Poetics, the class takes its name from a theory by a brilliant arts educator named Mark Nowak, who wrote a book called *Social Poetics*. And the theory he's really trying to outline there is a theory of aesthetic practice that takes place in spaces where working and poor everyday people congregate.

So he writes about poetry workshops that take place not in elite universities, but in alternative schools, in prisons, in union spaces. And that's the social poetics he's really interested in and committed to. And importantly, he thinks about that in a kind of international scale. So he's writing not just about the US, but about Cuba, Kenya, Nicaragua, South Africa.

So for the purposes of the class, really what I wanted to emphasize was not only Nowak's really important theory-- so we read the parts of his book in the class-- but also how we could extend social poetics to think about a poetics of sociality, not just in the human world, but in the nonhuman world, the more than human world. So what is the kind of sociality of trees, of fish? How is that captured in poetry? How is it captured in song and on film?

So we watch films, for example, like *Moonlight*, which I think is not only a really beautiful love story, but a poem in a way, a kind of extended visual poem about our relationship to the water and to the Earth. I think that's absolutely central in that story. And alongside a film like that, we would read Aracelis Girmay's poems from *The Black Maria*, which were all about these dark spots on the moon that early astronomers thought were oceans but weren't. And that book is so beautiful in the way it thinks about perception, and beauty, and our relationship to the cosmos. And so that's really the beating heart of the class. And it was the first class I taught at MIT. And I had 16 students for it. And they were incredible. They did incredible work.

SARAH

And tell us a little bit about June Jordan and what she means by the difficult miracle.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA

BENNETT:

Yeah, for her, the difficult miracle of Black poetry in America, I think, is that we do it at all, that we've ever done it. She talks about this at the end, published or not published, we persist. The essay largely focuses on the life and legacy of Phillis Wheatley, who is a teenage girl, one of the first Black poets published in the United States, I believe only the second woman ever to publish a book of poetry in the United States.

And I'm interested in Phillis Wheatley for all sorts of reasons. We'll talk about AI, I think, a little bit later, hopefully. But this public policy paper that I worked on here at the institute, Phillis Wheatley is a part of it because if you read someone like Thomas Jefferson's response to her, it's almost like he thinks she's a kind of early large language model or something because within the philosophical scope of the 18th century for someone like Jefferson, she's not a human being. So he says her work is beneath the dignity of criticism.

And even these early responses that you see from places like the UK where her first book is published, people are like, well, if she can write so beautifully, how can she be enslaved? These things are at odds. If we're saying that these people can be enchained because they have no interior life, then how could she possibly have produced this work? And right here in Massachusetts, actually, there was a two-day-- it's been called in print, the trial of Phillis Wheatley, where basically lawmakers and scholars, a group of them, were tasked with figuring out whether or not she had actually produced those poems. And at the end of the two days, they wrote a public letter saying she actually had, this young Black woman has produced this work.

And so June Jordan's essay is thinking about how can a expressive tradition emerge from those sorts of conditions? How can poetry come from a space where you were considered to not be human beings, if you think of poetry as a kind of apotheosis of written and spoken human expression? So yeah, I wanted to trace that line of thinking through the course. And June was not only a masterful poet, but an incredible teacher. So I try to learn from her example on both of those fronts.

SARAH

And an activist?

HANSEN:

JOSHUA

BENNETT:

Oh yeah, for sure, Black feminist, anti-imperialist activist, someone whose activism took on so many different and ever more lovely forms. In the early '70s, she founded a program called The Voice of the Children, which was a social program that essentially took the form of a Saturday school at places like the Church of the Open Door in Brooklyn, where essentially, Black and Puerto Rican kids would come and they would write for an entire Saturday. One of the rules of the space was that adults couldn't bother the kids. You couldn't interrupt them.

SARAH That's amazing.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA BENNETT: You couldn't vocally evaluate the work, which I think is really important. So even the opinions of the adults were just not important.

SARAH Wow. I love that.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA BENNETT: It's amazing. It's an amazing idea. And Voice of the Children, eventually, when she moves to Berkeley-- she eventually teaches at UC Berkeley-- becomes a poetry for the people, which is a multigenerational, multiethnic program that ran for many years and was another incredible pedagogical space, where she was training future teachers to think about the poetic tradition of the world, of planet Earth in as capacious terms as possible. So June was incredible. She was a world historical intellectual.

SARAH Amazing. And you named your daughter after her.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA BENNETT: I named my daughter after her as well, yeah.

SARAH Do you want to read us a piece from June?

HANSEN:

JOSHUA BENNETT: Sure.

SARAH June Jordan?

HANSEN:

JOSHUA BENNETT: Absolutely. So this is actually from a graduation speech that June Jordan delivered in 1970 at IS 55 at Ocean Hill-Brownsville in Brooklyn.

Last night, I was trying to think how I could share what I deeply believe with you.

And the single belief I beg you to share with me is this one, that your life is the most important fact and also the most important and valuable promise on Earth, period.

It is a once only life that you have, and it is a vulnerable life that you have, subject to increasing dangers that too few of us struggle against or even understand.

But it is this, your once only life that we come together this morning to honor and to celebrate.

Any time we come together, any time we can come together to celebrate the lives of children, the precious life of Black children, I think, to myself, this is how we should start.

This is how we should begin to build another way, another kind of humankind, a really new nation.

We have to begin by cherishing our children.

SARAH That's beautiful.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA Thank you.

BENNETT:

SARAH It's just an observation. But I noticed in June Jordan's writing, in your writing, it's an invitation to understand. I
HANSEN: don't feel like you're trying to be opaque at all. I think you're trying to put your thoughts out there in a way that people can take it up. And maybe that's intentional. I don't know. But I feel invited in. I don't feel excluded from the poem.

JOSHUA That's good to hear. Yeah, my aim is always to create community around works of art. And I honor people who
BENNETT: don't do that. I love a good bit of opacity, with the stuff, especially the theory and the poetry, that takes that up as its central concern or aim. But for me, my primary influences are Black church and the spoken word, poetry slams, cafes founded by academics and their friends to invite people from all across the world to come listen. An open mic list is a certain kind of democratic form.

SARAH Yeah, absolutely.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA Anybody who walks through the door can sign up. And you get up there, and you can talk, ostensibly for as long
BENNETT: as you want. If you go on too long, we're going to ask you to leave.

SARAH Of course.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA But there's an interesting kind of breath and open air there that I think is really important and models how we
BENNETT: can come to know one another. So yeah, it's always, for me, an invitation, the work.

SARAH I think so. I think it's worth saying because you're immersed in this world. But for people who are not in it, they
HANSEN: may hear poetry and think like, well, that's not for me, or I don't have a voice I could lend to it and I don't have an ear that can receive it because they have a preconceived notion of what poetry is and who it's for. But I think through your teaching, through your writing, you're really saying, poetry is for you.

JOSHUA Yeah, poetry is for everybody. Poetry is for everybody by design. Poetry is also so old. Poetry is first. It's before
BENNETT: prose. We have these kind of epic poems that were memorized, weren't even really written down. We have poems kind of before a certain kind of written tradition for these modes of creative expression. And so, yeah, I want to tap into that, that ancient thing, that ancient music.

People all over the world, hip hop resonates with them. They don't necessarily speak English. It's the energy behind the lyric, it's the lyric heights. It's that kind of spirit, that soul, whether you're talking about soul, lowercase s or capital S, whether it's the genre or kind of metaphysical thing. I think there's this wonderful moment of transformation that happens when you give language to the world people can't see that lives inside of you.

And I teach children as young as four or five, and I teach people who are twice my age poetry. And I've been doing that since I was 17 or 18 years old. And I almost can't imagine another way into what I do now. I'm not an English professor because I don't think I can do anything else. It's just that the practice stopped me in my tracks when I was a teenager. And I thought, one, I feel like I'm good at this, but two, this feels like it matters more than almost anything else I can do with my life, with my particular skill set and upbringing and human heart.

So that's what I'm trying to pass on to my students, almost none of whom at least share aspirations of being professional writers. It's totally beside the point. It's just part of what it means to be a human being. That's why we read poetry. When people die, when new people are born, when we get married, why do we have these words that we bring out in these ceremonies to worship? Religions have holy texts, but those holy texts are often poetry, filled with poetry. Why? It's because we don't always have the words readily at hand for what we need to say in the moments that matter most. We all desire those words. And luckily, we have a genre at hand that we can turn to. It's a great blessing.

SARAH HANSEN: Yeah, yeah. In what ways was teaching the course also a form of poetry for you, if you could think of it that way?

JOSHUA BENNETT: That's a great question. It was certainly a kind of choral poem. I'm always co-creating the classroom space with my students, which is why I always try to walk in with a certain air of gratitude. It's amazing that they show up. You can drop a class pretty late here at MIT. And I was taken aback by this. Almost every single student came to every single class for Social Poetics. Maybe one or two days we were missing one or two people. But for the most part, that entire ensemble showed up twice a week to talk about poems at MIT. That's incredible.

And I was a visiting professor at the time. I really didn't take it for granted that the students were committed to making this project with me. And that felt poetic. It was only possible because of the presence of people bringing their entire selves to the classroom space because often what we were talking about, of course, were the words on the page, but also the lived experiences that gave those works energy for those particular students.

People wrote and said very beautiful things about their mothers, about their communities, about the experiences in certain kinds of high schools with metal detectors and guards that brought them to MIT and that really changed the way they thought about what they were here to do in college. So I appreciate that. That felt very much like the poems I was writing with the spoken word groups I was a part of when I was a college student and a high school student and a graduate student, eventually.

SARAH HANSEN: So the innermost workings of our soul, our heart, it's not only appreciating the beauty, it's also there's loss. There's grief. There's darkness. There's the metabolizing of unjust things that have happened to you. So how do you handle that as a professor in the classroom when those things emerge through spoken word or poetry?

JOSHUA BENNETT: I make room for it, as I would with anything else. Reading a poet and scholar like Fred Moten, people like Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, really helped me with this. You can't properly analyze the beauty without the terror. And you can't properly analyze the terror without the beauty.

And so I have to make room for both of those to enter my classroom and for us to think together about tragedy in the world, about great personal tragedy. Students have openly spoken in the classroom about when they're grieving family members and friends. And I think that's, at least for me, that's a core element of what I'm actually here to teach and here to learn about as part of this big choral poem I'm building with my students across time. We're learning how to be human together, which is why we write poetry in the first place. I also think it's how we write poetry, which is where I think the pedagogical element really comes in.

SARAH Can you say more about that?

HANSEN:

JOSHUA Yeah. I think the best poems come through us. So a lot of times what I'm trying to do is just catch that moment
BENNETT: of electricity and be fully present for it. But that's something you have to practice. It's much easier, or at least I'll say it comes to me individually more readily, to just say this is what an audience would like because I've performed in front of thousands of people over the course of my life. So I can engineer the poem that way.

Or I can say, let me be quiet and listen to what I hear coming to me from the air. Let me meditate on both beautiful and terrible moments and see what I can bring forth. And that can happen within structure. That can happen within a schedule. But that practice of just being quiet and listening to yourself and listening to the past, I would even dare say, maybe even listening to the future, that's something you have to work on. And working on it as part of a group, I think, is something we're incredibly fortunate to get the chance to do.

SARAH Yeah. And it also points to the fact that writing is not only that moment when pencil hits the paper.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA That's right.

BENNETT:

SARAH It's actually like a practice of walking through the world and waiting, opening yourself to the moment and being
HANSEN: the vessel through which the words can come--

JOSHUA That's right.

BENNETT:

SARAH --or the message can come.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA No, that's exactly it. And we talked about this a little bit earlier. But if you feel stuck, if you feel like the writing is
BENNETT: not coming, you might need to go for a run, or go dance, or listen to something beautiful, or laugh with someone you love, reconnect with someone who you loved once and don't talk to anymore, not exes, necessarily--

SARAH Different podcast.

HANSEN:

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

Yeah, that's a different podcast-- but even family. I think, again, I talked about family as a kind of anchoring element of the poetry. But yeah, thinking about my parents in old age and trying to figure out how to take care of them has been deeply humbling. And it's forced me to forgive them, but also I've had to find ways to forgive myself for being young and 15 and slamming doors and saying I hated them, for example. It was normal. It's a normal teenage thing to say and to feel.

But now that I'm doing it, I'm like, oh my goodness, I love these little kids so much. My whole life is about them. Anytime I get money, I get paid, I'm like, this money is for the kids. It's to feed the kids and house the kids and send the kids to the best schools I can find. I love them so far beyond myself, it almost feels heartbreaking sometimes, even right now.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

Yeah, I know. I know.

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

It's so tough. And to think about the resources I have that my parents certainly did not, not even just the formal education, in some ways, but just cash on hand, living in Massachusetts, as opposed to living in the Bronx or in South Yonkers, living in a neighborhood where people get murdered and are dealing drugs, versus where I live and beautiful neighbors that shake my hand and talk to me about strategies for taking care of the trees. It's so radically different.

And even there, I still feel the pressures, I think people tasked with raising children, whether they're their biological children or not feel, which is that you have to keep this life alive. You're trying to keep this person here desperately, while trying to maintain yourself in ways that will allow that to be possible. So yeah, writing poetry and growing older, both of those things have always forced me back to the material facts of my life and how I got here and not looking away, bearing witness again, really looking at my mother, looking at my father, my grandmother, may she rest, looking to her example and saying, this is part of what I'm going to preserve and praise.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

Sometimes I feel like my child is a poem. Have you ever felt like that? Even though I'm not writing her on a page, her existence is a form of poetry and just being able to participate in that and shape that. I feel sometimes like I'm trying to do the work of a poet, to try to keep this light alive and make it beautiful and let the world hear it. And so sometimes I think, like I said, writing is not only writing on the page, but sometimes it's like living.

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

That's right. That's right. I love that. Yeah, etymologically, I think that's exactly it. Poesis is making. And your child is making themselves every day. And you're helping them make themselves. Are we giving them values? I wish somebody really would have warned me about that because it's a deep thinking process that goes behind that. What values am I conferring, not just verbally, with what I say to you, but how I model myself? You're watching me every day.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

It's a lot of pressure.

JOSHUA BENNETT: It is. But it's really starting to hit me the past couple of weeks because my daughter is now just starting to hold her head up and smile. But she follows me around the room with their eyes. And I'm like, oh yeah, I'm the dad in your story. I'm not just Joshua. And I've never shared this, I think, with anyone really, besides my wife and my close group chat. But for the first time in my internal voice, I'm Dad. In my mind, I don't call myself Joshua. I call myself Dad. It's like, Dad, pull it together. And the first time I did that, I was cleaning-- I was cleaning up after the dog or something. I was like, all right, Dad, let's get this done.

SARAH HANSEN: Let's do this.

JOSHUA BENNETT: And I said--

SARAH HANSEN: Dad?

JOSHUA BENNETT: I'm not Dad. My dad is Dad. How can I be Dad now? And it's because it had just become my primary identity. And this is where life is a poem. I'm rewriting the central characters. I'm rewriting the meaning of this story in real time and without always meaning to.

SARAH HANSEN: I know. Yeah, it's powerful.

JOSHUA BENNETT: It is.

SARAH HANSEN: It's also very human, which brings me to the next thing I wanted to ask you about--

JOSHUA BENNETT: Yeah, please, please, please.

SARAH HANSEN: --which is the opposite of human--

JOSHUA BENNETT: Oh, goodness.

SARAH HANSEN: --which is artificial intelligence, which is really at the forefront of everybody's minds today. And you participated at MIT's Day of AI symposium, and you read a poem. And I'm wondering if you could read it and then talk to us about why this poem at that symposium.

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

Oh, that's a great question. So I'll think about that as I'm as I'm reading the poem. So this is a little bit of background. My father and I, we would watch *Star Trek* every week, alongside the NBA on NBC, which has already appeared. So we would watch those, those great Knicks teams with John Starks and Patrick Ewing. And we watched Jordan and those great Supersonics teams with Detlef Schrempf and Shawn Kemp. So I love '90s NBA. But we also would watch *Star Trek*. My father loved *Star Trek*. And it just gave me such a deep sense of what was what was possible, which was anything, that we were meditating on these stories. So this is *Ode to Mae Jemison*, who in addition to being the first Black woman in outer space, also had a guest spot on *Star Trek*.

It was perhaps our oldest ritual, my father and I watching *Star Trek* on the living room floor,

Quiet as calculation, my small frame beside his own like an image and its draft.

We studied any and all variations of this show we loved like no other,

Voyager, Deep Space Nine, The Next Generation,

Comparing each version to its ancestor only once it had run its course.

I saw myself everywhere, Data, Worf, Geordi La Forge, scientists and warriors, interstellar adventurers in every form you could imagine,

All comportements welcome central to the mission of the Starship Enterprise,

My boyhood eyes aglow, as I dreamed of darting through the infinite blackness of the great beyond,

Smooth as a blade, even in hyperdrive, me and my intrepid crew cruising at lightspeed toward the promise of another life.

Pop never explained the tradition, but the call to see that story unfolding was its own inheritance,

A journey through outer galaxies as it was through his own mind, the stillness in that room no issue for me,

Who knew even then that quiet had its own texture and richness, that my father was born in Alabama in the 1940s, had always been this way,

A man who spoke with deeds, a look in his eyes that could level a room or else lift it into orbit.

Over the years, he would teach me many names, Benjamin Banneker, Lewis H Latimer, Mary McLeod Bethune, narrators of our heroic human drama,

George Washington Carver, Arthur Schomburg, Mae Jemison, who I would later learn was born in Alabama, just like Pop, and loved *Star Trek* too, and was the first Black woman to reach outer space and the first real astronaut to ever go on the show, *The Next generation*, to be exact,

At the invitation of LeVar Burton, who was already a hero in our household based on the transcendent power of *Reading Rainbow* alone.

But this was another level, this woman who had held an audience with the moon, seeing the other side of the atmosphere that held us here, this dreamer of a human civilization on Mars, this teacher, this healer, this author of children's books and once distant goals made real for generations of us told we would inherit nothing and learn to love that absence.

Instead, Dr. Jemison said, the very cosmos could belong to us.

The darkness of our skin, our hair, our eyes were shared with that shimmering infinitude, that endless breath, the possibility that we too might one day take flight,

Achieve the weightlessness we had felt only in dreams, or heard when we heard Stevie Wonder sing, or saw on TV in briefest flashes of stars millions of miles beyond our own,

But more palpable now, so close you could almost grasp them, almost hold them there in your palm, like a promise.

SARAH Thank you.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA BENNETT: Thank you. Yeah, so that's about my dad. Why did I pick that poem? They asked me for a poem about being human. That was the prompt that I got. And when I thought about that, I thought, well, what do human beings do? We tell stories.

SARAH I thought you were going to say, we watch TV.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA BENNETT: We do. We also watch TV.

BENNETT:

SARAH But yes, we tell stories.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA BENNETT: Yeah, and we take care of the vulnerable among us. Sometimes those are our children. Sometimes those are people who've been injured. Sometimes those are our colleagues and collaborators from the more than human world. We take care of animals and plants and the soil beneath our feet. We're supposed to do that, at least supposed to be stewards of the planet, I believe. And so that's what I thought I would bring.

This is one of the first stories my father ever shared with me, that the cosmos could belong to us too, that we weren't limited in any way and that sense of unlimited potential. I just thought, yeah, this is the core of being human. And this is what I want to share on this stage, a story about my dad who is, again, heroic to me, but also helped run a Bible study for deaf and hearing people at the post office for decades, like that theory of social poetics from Mark Nowak. It's not the first time I'd encountered that idea necessarily. That idea lived with me in the forms that my mother and father and big sister brought home every day.

SARAH To me, it's like the essence of being human is making these moments together in shared spaces. And I'm not sure that's anything artificial intelligence will ever be able to do. Now that I say that, I'm sure there's--

HANSEN:

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

No.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

--an MIT researcher working on that.

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

Sure.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

But it seems like that is the core of being human.

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

Yeah. And we can also think about why we would want to outsource that to machines. It's a curious thing, though, and I think we really need to sit with the kind of psychological and emotional impulse that has led to even the social excitement around the-- innovation is great, sometimes. Innovation can also lead to great world-ending destruction, as we know, as our species knows.

And so I think in the case of AI in particular, a lot of what I write about is the fact that large language models are largely built on stolen material. They're built on works of visual art and works of literary art that people have not been compensated for. And it's very strange to me, the idea that we can just dance around that problem.

Yes, I have a personal stake in it because I talked about this at the conference, that my first book of poetry was used by Meta to train their large language model, to change and to train it. And yeah, I've never seen a cent from that. There was no acknowledgment of that. If you didn't use the kind of search tool in this very important, I think, article that came out in *The Atlantic* about this, you wouldn't know that.

But beyond that, James Baldwin's stuff is in there. Toni Morrison's stuff is in there. You can look up a number of my friends and colleagues, and their books are in there. And that's a certain kind of problem, in no small part because there are other collaborative models, where if we're going to train the large language models, if we're going to help them be, not sexist, not racist, not cruel, that's something we can collaborate on. We can work on that together.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

With intention.

**JOSHUA
BENNETT:**

Sure, with intention, and compensation, and a desire to revitalize communities, rather than just replace people's labor power. It's I guess in part just because of not just the way I was trained, not just my formal and social education, but I guess because of my best dreams of the kind of world I want. It's not one where we create these powerful machines based on theft.

It would be one where the machines are like any other beautiful instrument, where it's something we've built together to express what we love and to change what needs to be changed and to make the world more equitable and wonderful and just. And I also think, yeah, of course, machine learning can be used towards that end. But we have to be very thoughtful about it. We have to be dynamic. And we have to listen and be motivated by something other than profit.

SARAH I was just in a class with a visiting student from Harvard. She's in art education, and we were studying AI
HANSEN: together. And she was like, it feels like having to constrain or filter artistic feelings through language to put it into AI really limits--

JOSHUA Yes.
BENNETT:

SARAH --our thinking because she's like, it's not about the words. It's about something else. And I was like, that's so
HANSEN: interesting--

JOSHUA Yeah, that's exactly it.
BENNETT:

SARAH --the limitations of the tool, yeah.
HANSEN:

JOSHUA Yeah. It's just not what it's for. There are things that are beyond words, that-- and again, I love poetry. I've loved
BENNETT: poetry my entire life. But my sister is a singer, my big sister. And I've told this story before, not on this podcast, but elsewhere. But she would go in the back of our house and she would practice Whitney Houston songs because she was trying to find the upper limits of her voice. She was trying to discover it.

And there's something that I think is made available by hearing Whitney Houston sing or hearing my sister sing Whitney Houston that I could not put down into words easily and would not even necessarily attempt to because it's not the point. The point is to be present and feel the thing and feel gratitude that you were present for the thing.

SARAH That's what I'm saying. Life itself can be the poem.
HANSEN:

JOSHUA That's right.
BENNETT:

SARAH You're reading the poem--
HANSEN:

JOSHUA That's right. That's right.
BENNETT:

SARAH --in the moment.
HANSEN:

JOSHUA Yeah, and sometimes Monk and Coltrane and Mingus are the poem too. Listening even to music without words
BENNETT: has been so transformative for me, putting on Tchaikovsky for August when he was just a baby. And also gibberish and sound come before speech, even developmentally. So I think that's something I've learned a lot from, seeing hip hop artists I like a lot who just stand in front of the microphone and go da-da-da-uh-an-uh.

And what they're trying to find in the beat is actually just the pace of the words. But they don't have the words yet. But they're creating a kind of architecture in which the words can live. And so, yeah, I want us to just think about that a lot more, about chatter, and nonsense and moments where there are no legible words. What do we feel in those spaces? And what do those tools make possible for us?

SARAH
HANSEN: Is there anything else you wanted to add about poetry, or teaching, or activism in the community that we didn't touch on?

JOSHUA
BENNETT: I've had great teachers my whole life, I guess is something I want to say, whether it's Ms. Quinn in the second grade who used to carry my report cards in her purse. On paper, it couldn't be more different. You would not necessarily look at a picture of a-- I believe her name was Olivia Quinn. You look at a picture of Ms. Quinn and look at me and say, yeah, she's going to really have a connection with that seven-year-old boy and inspire him to be deeply invested in his education.

I think part of why this is really resonating for me is my son's teachers. I really appreciate them because I think they know August is a human being. And he has the freedom to be that way in the classroom. And I think for many of us, for so many of us, in ways I did not appreciate until I became an educator, the classroom is a battleground. The classroom is a traumatic space for many people. School is not fun, in not only in the ways that school is not fun for almost all of us. School is a place that does real violence to a lot of people.

And that was not my experience. And it was not my experience in part because I had teachers that really looked after me and took care of me. So it was her. It was Ms. Iandoli when I was in fourth grade, Ms. McCormick, Ms. Sims, yeah, yeah, yeah, Ms. Sims, my 10th grade English teacher, who had a room full of Black students at an elite private school and helped all of us get into Honors and AP eventually, programs that in my high school at the time, there were no Black kids at that moment on AP track.

And when we graduated, I think we went to Yale, Yale, Harvard, Harvard, and Penn. And Ms. Sims helped set us in that direction. Two of us were the graduation speakers, at those schools, and so shout out to Chiamaka. She was the graduation speaker at Harvard the year I gave the graduation speech at Penn and I believe was the first Black student to ever do that. And that was possible in large part because I had great teachers who looked after me and believed that what they were doing wasn't art because it is.

SARAH
HANSEN: Yes.

JOSHUA
BENNETT: Teaching is an art--

SARAH
HANSEN: Yes.

JOSHUA
BENNETT: --that has the capacity to transform the world. So I hope in this country, in this moment, we can invest in teachers, materially, can materially invest in teacher training programs, that we can socially invest in making sure people know that it's a profession that's worthy of respect and honor so that we can continue to build it up and strengthen it.

SARAH I couldn't agree more. Thank you so much, Joshua. It's been a pleasure.

HANSEN:

JOSHUA Thank you for having me, Sarah. I appreciate it a lot.

BENNETT:

SARAH That was Dr. Joshua Bennett, Professor of Literature and distinguished Chair of the Humanities here at MIT. You'll
HANSEN: soon be able to find course materials for Reading Poetry, Social Poetics on our MIT OpenCourseWare website. As always, they are openly licensed, so you can reuse and remix them in your own teaching.

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