AWP 2020
EVENT TITLE Song or Sting: Choosing Art over Fame
Time & Place TBA

EVENT DESCRIPTION Emily Dickinson warned about the song and sting of fame, yet achieving milestones is both a source of stress and the primary measure of success for many poets. Is mainstream recognition the only thing that brings value to one’s work? Is “famous poet” an oxymoron? If not, what does it mean to be “poetry famous,” and have fame and followers become more important than the poems themselves? How can poets redefine success, ignore trends, and focus on poetry as a process rather than a product?

EVENT CATEGORY Poetry Craft and Criticism

EVENT ORGANIZER AND MODERATOR

Alison Pelegrin is the author of four poetry collections, most recently Waterlines and Hurricane Party. She is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Louisiana Division of the Arts and teaches at Southeastern Louisiana University.

EVENT PARTICIPANTS

Kelli Russell Agodon is the author of four poetry collections, the coeditor of Fire On Her Tongue: An Anthology of Contemporary Women Poets, and The Daily Poet: Day-By-Day Prompts For Your Writing Life. She is the cofounder of Two Sylvias Press and the Co-Director of Poets on the Coast. Her next collection of poems is forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press in 2021.

Nin Andrews' poetry has been published in many journals and anthologies including four editions of Best American Poetry. She's the winner of the Ohioana
Award for poetry, the author of fourteen poetry collections, and editor of a book of translations. Her next book, The Last Orgasm, is forthcoming.

**W. Todd Kaneko** is the author of the poetry books The Dead Wrestler Elegies and This is How the Bone Sings, and co-author of Poetry: A Writer's Guide and Anthology. He is a Kundiman fellow, co-editor of Waxwing magazine, and an Associate Professor at Grand Valley State University.

**Jason Koo** is the author, most recently, of *More Than Mere Light* and *Sunset Park* and coeditor of the *Brooklyn Poets Anthology*. He is the founder and executive director of Brooklyn Poets and an associate teaching professor of English at Quinnipiac University.

**OPENING REMARKS**
This panel itself is an example of what can happen when someone puts a request out to the universe in good faith. A few days before the proposal deadline, I happened to see a tweet from Kelli:

*One of my #AWP2020 panels just fell through, so I have an opening on my dance card if anyone is putting together a proposal where you feel I may be a fit. No better time than the last minute! (I would love to do a panel on seeking art & not fame)*...

Within a few minutes of this tweet we were emailing ideas back and forth, and thinking of who we might ask to join us. The proposal and coming together of people felt meant to be, like a poem that comes unexpected and fully formed out of nowhere. A great reminder, I think, that art happens and that many times it is our job to get out of the way.
Kelli Russell Agodon
As poets and writers, sometimes we define success as publication, getting work accepted by a magazine or journal, writing a book, or winning a prestigious prize or fellowship—but these “successes” are in many ways out of our control. Success, for me, can’t be defined by outcomes and but in the actions we take. We can submit our work, but whether the editor accepts it (or not) is out of our hands.

What if we worked to define our success by what we could control? What if success was writing for sixty minutes, starting, revising, or finishing a poem, or helping another poet in some way? What if we could believe success is just applying for the fellowship, not in the outcome of whether we receive it or not?

Art is subjective. Someone’s award-winning poem is another person’s rejection. As artists, there is a lot we can’t control and many times, our “good news” is just luck and timing. I told my daughter when she was younger, “never find your self-worth in a number,” and for poets, we can do that too. As Sarah Gambito said, “Just because you win doesn’t mean you matter more...” We are not better because we have more followers, more book sales, or a higher number of awards won—and in a social media world where it is easy to look into the lives of our fellow writers, it’s easy to compare. And many times with that comparison, what comes is the feeling of lack. Maybe the goal is to find success in our actions, what we can control, and to work to distant our emotional highs from acceptances and our emotional lows from rejections. Maybe it’s possible to learn to live in the sweet spot of success from what we create, what we read, how we can walk into the world as good literary citizens and find different ways to be of help.

Nin Andrews
I often compare the life of a poet to taking a long plane trip. I think of the young poet as a first time flyer, about to board Poetry Airlines. In the beginning, she likes
everything about Poetry Airlines, from the packing and the anticipation of the trip, to the first moment she takes her seat and fastens her seatbelt, to her seat mates, and the lift off. Even the airplane food and those little packets of pretzels and peanuts seem delicious to her. And the unexpected turbulence—it’s all part of the initial excitement.

Think of those first workshops a poet takes, the poems she composes, painstakingly going over every line, making copies for class. And her fellow poets who critique her, and the blush of pride she experiences when praised. And the first highs of inspiration when she writes one poem, and then another. She can’t wait to show them off, to send them out—what joy, what bliss! She even likes those canned comments she receives: write what you know, avoid clichés, don’t personify. And those hand-written rejection notes! Not the anonymous form letters: Although we have read your manuscript with care, we regret to inform you it does not meet our needs, though she often lies awake at night, pondering the mysterious needs of editors.

She has yet to feel her bottom ache, her knees cramp, her seat-mates snore or impinge on her space. Or to notice the passengers in first class with all that leg room. How did they get there? she wonders. Are they part of some literary Mafia? And why do they get all the extra attention from the flight attendants? Jealousy sets in. But then, she reasons, soon enough she will arrive at her destination. She can almost picture it: the publications, the book contracts, the awards, and fame. What she doesn’t realize, this is not a direct flight. There are lots of unexpected landings, delays, and detours along the way.

**W. Todd Kaneko**
The poet Li-Young Lee talks about the two worlds poets inhabit: the life of scarcity (the world of markets and contests) and the life of abundance (the poet’s capacity to create art). On the one hand, this is a helpful division of a writer’s life into two spheres of work, a disunion that can help a writer to keep their eyes on their own pages as they make the best poems, essays and stories they can imagine regardless
of how well published (or not) they might be. On the other hand, we can’t pretend that publication and other forms of external validation of our work don’t matter. If you spend a month writing a poem, it can feel like defeat if no one wants to publish it, if no one cares enough to read it, if it languishes in the dark on your hard drive for years gathering more cobwebs than compliments. And for many of us, publication is the main factor by which the worth of our creative lives is determined by our employers in the academy.

It’s a privilege to be able to separate the business and artistic spheres of a writer’s life. It’s difficult to ignore the pressure to publish and collect the accolades like those enjoyed by our peers. The competitive spirit that darkens a poet’s creative drive via the inevitable comparison between the self and those with whom we imagine competition can often feel unavoidable. It can make the hours spent in solitude with our words feel that much more lonely, and our endeavors that much more like failure.

Maybe there is a third life out there, a life that is neither scarce nor abundant: a life of citizenry, perhaps—a mode in which a writer operates as one who walks in a community, navigating scarcity and abundance through a communal effort and a conscientious uplifting of others while maintaining the solitude necessary for a poet and their poems. Maybe there is something we can learn about ourselves as artists and as writers who participate in the precarious world of contemporary poetry publishing and about how neither of those things has to be limited by what we think they mean.

Jason Koo

I was once asked by a high school student after a reading I gave: “How do you become famous on Instagram?” To my surprise, he thought I was famous on Instagram, because I had over 1000 followers. I laughed and told him that I’m not even close to Instafamous. But that moment showed me just how ridiculous the world has gotten with the concept of fame. Look, if you’re a poet, you are not famous—you’re just not. You’ve got 25,000 Twitter followers? Great. Will people recognize you in an airport? No. People like LeBron James and Beyonce would
laugh at the notion that someone with 25,000 Twitter followers is “famous.” I don’t think the obsession with followers is ruining poetry, because there are still plenty of poets who don’t care at all about this; and I think a lot of the poets who do have this kind of Instafame still do care about their craft. But the problem I see is how this obsession with Instafame is influencing the younger generation of poets, the poets who are starting out and learning the art. Their reading of contemporary poets is totally different from the reading my peers and I did when we were starting out. They won’t know any poets who aren’t well known on Twitter or Instagram; or they might know some other poets, but they only buy the books of the people who are big on Twitter. There doesn’t seem to be any sense of actual discovery in their reading—finding some “unknown” poet and becoming obsessed with their work. The whole notion of reading, I don’t know, a dead poet is not even considered. Seems like the only poets who are read these days in a “mainstream” way are published by Graywolf or Copper Canyon—and those presses are often signing the poets who have a big social media following (for obvious reasons). This is creating the sense that only if you have that kind of social media stamp are you worth reading. That is absurd.

Alison Pelegrin
As a poet, my favorite thing is to move my pen across the page to see where words will take me--no deadlines, no expectations, no narrative arc. As soon as I set my eye on a publication or prize [which I excuse by calling it ambition], this magic wears away and is replaced by strategy, which is not art. Trying to make one’s poems fit the “secret formula” of a poetry prize or journal or manuscript is a huge mistake. I lose my voice and the creative joy I described earlier, and I become unconsolable when I miss out on whatever accolade that seemed so important.

I’ve heard a lot of talk about writer jealousy, but I think this problem stems from a fear of scarcity. There is always room for more poems--even bad poems have their place.

For me, to focus on accolades is a source of extreme stress, and it stifles my creativity. Does anybody else remember happily doodling in art class only to
crushed after sneaking a peek at someone else’s work? Why can’t we all just fingerpaint and be happy? The way crafting used to be before Pinterest Fails made me afraid to try anything.

Ambition and drive are good--but that can’t be all that you are as a writer. Back in the days of paper rejections (yes, I’ve been getting passed over for decades!) I used to keep a mobile made of neon colored straws and my collection of rejection slips. I remember celebrating the tiniest sign of positivity from an editor--analyzing my returned manuscripts for any sign that they were getting close to being good.

Poetry is a religion to me. A liturgy, or a prayer. I laughed out loud in high school when a nun tried to convince me that every breath should be a prayer. Yeah right! All these years later I have converted to that idea, but it was poetry, not a rosary, that got me there. When I say a prayer, the words may come out confused, or it may be selfish or whiney, or it may just be done by rote--a big long mumble with no true intent. But I am still saying the words, and that means something. For me the act of creating has to be more rewarding than the artifact.