



## The Best Advice I Received as a Writer

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Jonathan Edwards

**A**LL THIS HAPPENED at Totleigh Barton, on an Arvon writing week, about fifteen years ago. I write that last part of the sentence with some surprise, because it seems like five minutes ago, and if I look to the right now, through the window at which I'm writing this, I'm pretty sure I will see it all happening out there, in the garden here, on this sunny day. It was a sunny day then, too, fifteen years ago, when it really all happened, in the garden at Totleigh Barton, and I was myself, but younger. I was sitting there with Hugo Williams, or Hugo Williams was sitting there with me, and he was the person about to give me the advice. I like to think that he built up to it, knew it was momentous, that the world did too, that a light breeze drum-rolled through the hedges around us before he said it, because the advice has shaped so many things. But among Hugo's great talents is to make the amazing seem casual and effortless, and like all the best advice, it doesn't sound like something to build up to. Perhaps he ran his fingers through his hair or flicked something from the knee of his immaculate jeans as he said, 'All you can do with poetry is keep going. Try and write a poem every month or so. You can't do anything about the quality of your writing. All you can do is make sure it exists.'

I guess I went about the rest of my day the way I went about the rest of that week, feeling that this was a momentous time, but with no idea of the ways in which it would become so. One of the reasons that advice has stayed with me is because of who said it. Hugo's work is a constant inspiration, the reassuring, friendly nature of his poetic voice, the warmth of his writing, the beautiful places it gets to.



The advice stays with me too, though, because of its nature. It's extraordinary I think in its reassurance — 'You can't do anything about the quality of your writing.' I think of it whenever writing is tough, whenever the odds of success seem overwhelming, whenever the latest rejection appears, or I have a day of trying and trying and finish up further back than when I started. Whenever I have to do the hard work again of lowering my expectations, in order to get anything written at all. Writing is so hard that it's essential to have a voice inside too that is kind, or else you wouldn't keep doing it. Hugo's advice is that voice when I need it, as I often do. My job isn't to get better as a writer, or to worry about how people will respond, or if they will respond at all. My job is only to do what I can: to show up every day, buy pens and paper, buy books, sit down at a chair and start scribbling, generate text. Magic usually doesn't happen even if you do that, but it never happens if you don't. The best writing advice I ever received isn't glamorous, isn't sexy, but it is vital and, like the good writer, always there. It's sustained all this for fifteen years, all these words, including this one, now.