



## My Most Treasured Moments as a Writer

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**H**OW STRANGE TO FEEL MYSELF pulled towards moments that I wouldn't consciously have expected to rise up in response to this question. I'll go with them though as the unconscious, the murky depths of thinking and feeling that I don't understand have always been my compass.

My most treasured moments are when I read poems I've written for special occasions. I wrote my first epithalamion when I was working as a cleaner. My employers were getting married and so I wrote a poem and gave it to them as their wedding present.

Not long after this, an aunt asked me to write a poem for her wedding. This time, I stood up in the church and read it to the congregation. The response was rapturous. They loved having a poem that had been written for them, a poem that drew upon their lives and celebrated who they were. Before long, the poem was sitting in a frame and hanging on the wall of their lounge.

I have gone on to read poems in crematoriums, registry offices, churches, rooms in people's houses — anywhere where a ceremony is taking place. I remember standing on the front steps of a house in Wales where my dearest friend was marrying a woman from Argentina. I'd had the poem translated so we could read it in English and Spanish, and a friend from Mexico had made the poem into artist's books, each one tied with a bright red ribbon.



These poems are never conventionally published: they skittle through the air into the hearts of whoever's present, as gifts, ways of marking a moment that never comes again. They are poems of witness, poems that usher us over a threshold, that mark moments of transformation. They ring out once and their echoes travel into our bodies and continue to live and resound there.

In his final years, my dad lived in a sheltered housing scheme. He had a lung disease brought on by leather dust after decades of working for Clarks shoe factory in Street. I'd often go from giving a poetry reading to the door of his flat in Homecastle House. I liked the contrast, the earthiness of it, the reminder of where the roots of my poetry had come from and how lucky I am not to have spent my life in a factory. When he died, I wrote a poem for his funeral. Seeing my nephews bear the weight of his coffin on their shoulders gave me the strength to stand up and read. It doesn't get much more treasured than that.

I feel lucky to have the chance to write for people in this way. To read poems that serve communities, that take their place in the rituals we make to mark the important days of our lives. Everything else, as Raymond Carver would say, has been gravy.