



## The Best Advice I Received as a Writer

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**A**T THE TIME, the advice gave me some pain.

Mark and I were exchanging poems over email. It was years since we'd been classmates on an MA at the University of East Anglia, so we were somewhat familiar with each other's style. Mark was of the intellectually rigorous school, writing poems I admired but couldn't aspire to, and sometimes couldn't even pretend to understand. In the context of our wider MA group his critiques were always to-the-point and – it must be said – just. He would often point to the very problem that I'd been hoping to sneak past the rest of the group, whose comments tended to be kinder, more circumspect. They'd praise before softly offering areas for improvement, so Mark's more forthright offerings were somewhat cushioned. But when we renewed our correspondence a decade later, it was just me and Mark. What had I been writing? He wanted to see it.

I resisted the temptation to send him polished work, instead emailing a piece that was very much 'in progress'. If I'm scrupulously honest I didn't really know what the poem was *about*. But I did know that something about the setting (the back of a bakery van) and the circumstance (the van being used as an ambulance in World War Two) intrigued me. No matter the meaning! Weren't some of my favourite poems opaque? Wasn't this exactly the sort of mystery I was aiming for?

Mark replied. He wasn't convinced. At the bottom of the page, he'd made a note of one word, followed by a question mark.



‘So?’

So? The cheek! That naughty word trailed behind it the implication of another: ‘what’. And ‘So what?’ is the most dismissive, the most withering criticism yet invented.

And ‘So?’ raised further uncomfortable questions. Aren’t we always battling against that nasty little question? On bad days it undermines; on good days it underpins. And here it was, so bold and uncompromising, footnoting *my* trusting poem — which was exposed as a fraudster, a verbal worm cringing in the shadow of those two letters, that impertinent question mark.

I took to my bed.

Well, not quite. But I certainly took it to heart. I scrapped the poem.

And I kept coming back to that disquieting question when I drafted the next poem. Why *was* I writing it? What did it *mean*? Did it signify anything other than my flimsy little interests? It didn’t make writing that next poem easier, but it did, incidentally, make it better. That poem was not set in the back of a bakery-van-cum-ambulance just for the inexplicable sake of it.

I’ve received, or learnt, other bits of advice over the years. They include: *Staring out of the window is work; you don’t always have to be nice in a poem; go for a walk*. But ultimately, I think I’m most grateful for ‘So?’. So easy to ask, so difficult to answer. ‘So?’ made things complicated, and for that I’m thankful.