

# “Oatmeal” from *A New Selected Poems*

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(Will Judy Lecture, September 21, 2007)

(Author’s introductory remarks):

**S**o I am going to read a poem called “Oatmeal.” I wrote it at the McDowell Colony in New Hampshire. The McDowell Colony is a place where artists of all kinds can go and they can spend four or six weeks there in a little cabin out in the woods writing or working at whatever art they practice. And it’s amazing how much you can get done if you just had the whole day there to work. They would bring lunch to you. You would see your fellows at dinner and at breakfast. I wanted to get even more work done so I didn’t go to breakfast. I got called over by a painter in the evening one day and he said: “why don’t we ever see you at breakfast?”

I said, “I wanted to get some work done and so I eat oatmeal in my room.” He startled back somehow as though I had said something strange. And he said, “alone!?” Had I eaten the oatmeal alone? I don’t know what he had been thinking, but I thought about it and then I wrote “Oatmeal.”

## Oatmeal

I eat oatmeal for breakfast.

I make it on the hot plate and put skimmed milk on it.

I eat it alone.

I am aware it is not good to eat oatmeal alone.

Its consistency is such that it is better for your mental health if  
somebody eats it with you.

That is why I often think up an imaginary companion to have  
breakfast with.

Possibly it is even worse to eat oatmeal with an imaginary companion.

Nevertheless, yesterday morning, I ate my oatmeal with John Keats.

Keats said I was right to invite him: due to its glutinous texture, gluey

Lumpishness, hint of slime, and unusual willingness to  
disintegrate, oatmeal must never be eaten alone.

He said it is perfectly OK, however, to eat it with an imaginary  
companion,

and he himself had enjoyed memorable porridges with Edmund

Spenser and John Milton.

He also told me about writing the “Ode to a Nightingale.”

He wrote it quickly, he said, on scraps of paper, which he then stuck in  
his pocket,

but when he got home he couldn’t figure out the order of the

stanzas, and he and a friend spread the papers on a table, and  
they made some sense of them, but he isn’t sure to this day if  
they got it right.

He still wonders about the occasional sense of drift between stanzas,

and the way here and there a line will go into the configuration of a

Moslem at prayer, then raise itself up and peer about, then  
lay itself down slightly off the mark, causing the poem to move  
forward with God’s reckless wobble.

He said someone told him that later in life Wordsworth heard about

The scraps of paper on the table, and tried shuffling some stanzas

of his own, but only made matters worse.

When breakfast was over, John recited “To Autumn.”

He recited it slowly, with much feeling, and he articulated the words

lovingly, and his odd accent sounded sweet.

He didn’t offer the story of writing “To Autumn,” I doubt if there is

much of one.

But he did say the sight of a just-harvested oat field got him started

on it.

And two of the lines, “For Summer has o’er-brimmed their clammy

cells” and “Thou watchest the last oozing hours by hours,” came

to him while eating oatmeal alone.

I can see him – drawing a spoon through the stuff, gazing into the

glimmering furrows, muttering – and it occurs to me:

maybe there is no sublime, only the shining of the amnion’s tatters.

For supper tonight I am going to have a baked potato left over from

lunch.

I’m aware that a leftover baked potato can be damp, slippery, and

simultaneously gummy and crumbly,

and therefore I’m going to invite Patrick Kavanagh to join me.