

## Poetry of Mayflies

by Barry R. Taylor

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**Characters:** Camera 2, a middle-aged cameraman for a local television station

**Scene:** A local news studio. A desk, centre stage, with one or two wheeled chairs behind it.

[**Cue 1:** Stage black]

[**Cue 2:** Spotlight downstage centre on **Camera 2**, standing]

Camera 2: “I should have won that poetry contest.” Those were the last words my friend Earnest said to me. Or to me directly anyway, before all this nonsense began. I don’t think he meant that the contest was unfair or the judges were biased against him. He meant that he should have been allowed to enter the contest. Trouble is, the poetry contest was sponsored, as it is every year, by CKLM, our proud local television station. And Earnest worked for CKLM, like I do. “Contest not open to employees of CKLM or their families.” It says that right in the rules.

You all knew Earnest, right? Or if you didn’t know him personally, you at least knew who he was. The fourth hand in the CKLM Local News team. Ernie the wacky weatherman. Earnie’s weather word at the end of every newscast. Six days a week on CKLM, at six o’clock and again on the late feed. Steady as an old horse, reliable as a grandfather clock. A fixture in livingrooms throughout the city. Some of them, anyway. Well, that’s all over now, isn’t it. And with way too much drama, as my daughter would say.

Earnest was so good at what he did, most people don’t realize he wasn’t a meteorologist, you know, a scientist who studies the weather. He was a weatherman: a guy who reads the weather forecast on TV. Earnest didn’t even have a college degree. He got the job more or less by accident, all those years ago. He filled in for someone for a few weeks in the summer, back in 1985, and just . . . kept the job. For thirty-two years. Whenever Earnest got around to retiring, it was pretty much a given that his replacement would be a proper meteorologist. Having a meteo on your news team is all the trend these days.

Earnest may have been shy on formal qualifications, but he was a natural in front of the camera. I know, because I’ve been watching him the whole time. I run Camera 2, you see.

Camera 2 always covers the weather. I've grown so used to watching Earnest, on camera and off, I could tell when he was having a bad day, when he was distracted by something, when he was out of sorts. Earnest could fool the camera, but not his friend behind it. So why didn't I see Earnest's personal stormcloud building on the horizon?

You see, Earnest didn't even like being a weatherman particularly. Everybody assumed he was really excited about the weather because that's how he acted in front of the camera. It was just a job. If who we are is defined by what we aspire to, then Earnest wasn't a weatherman at all. He was a poet.

Earnest told me once that he wrote his first serious poem when he was seventeen. He's been churning them out regularly ever since. Long poems, short poems, ballads, elegies, sonnets, poems with no rhyme or reason whatsoever. He tried his hand at them all. Some of his poems went on for pages. Others were only two or three lines. I heard most of them. Earnest insisted on reading them to me, in the lunch room, or down at the pub. Poetry was an obsession with him. It was like he couldn't stop. I asked him once, Why do you keep writing all this poetry? He answered, dead serious: "Why do you breathe?"

Now don't get me wrong. When I say that Earnest was a poet, I don't mean to say he was a *published* poet. It wasn't like the public was eagerly awaiting his third anthology or anything. Earnest was what you would call a serious amateur. Oh, he did manage to get a few poems accepted into a couple of small-circulation magazines, he was terribly proud of those. Mostly though, he posted his poems on-line, on these internet forums where anybody can put up a poem and anybody can comment on them. The comments are mostly kind and supportive and everybody re-assuring everybody else that they're getting better and better and they'll all be famous one day. It's like a support group for people with a poetry problem.

It all seemed rather pointless to me, turning out endless poetry that nobody wanted to read. I never understood it. Yet he kept at it, day after day, year after year. Frankly, I don't think Earnest's poems were all that great, but what do I know? Maybe he couldn't sell his poems to a publisher because he wasn't a very good poet. Lots of people dream of being an astronaut, but that doesn't mean they're going to the moon anytime soon.

Earnest taught me a lot about poetry. He tried to, anyway. We went fishing sometimes, and since we never caught anything we had plenty of time to talk. Earnest said poetry wasn't about rhyming and cadence and all that like we learned in high school. It was about expressing

how we feel about the world. He told me this great quote, let me see if I can remember it: poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility. Someone named William Wordsworth said that. No idea who he was, but I told Earnest that with a name like Wordsworth, he had to be a great poet.

There was one fishing trip in particular that I remember vividly. Earnest and I were down by the river one day, watching the slow, cool water flow by and not catching any fish, as usual. We may as well have been fishing for penguins. It was late afternoon in early summer; the sun angled through the maple trees, making the water glitter as it rolled by, like the river was wearing a diamond bracelet. Abruptly, we were surrounded by mayflies: hundreds, maybe thousands of them. They were everywhere, flitting and darting and sparkling in the summer air. For a few moments I felt like we were standing inside a snow globe.

The mayflies we saw are called Blue-Winged Olives. Fishermen know all about mayflies, because fish eat mayflies so we try to make lures that look like mayflies. That's the theory, anyway. The young ones, the nymphs, live for months, sometimes years, at the bottom of the river, hiding under rocks and growing bigger and trying not to get eaten by a trout. Then, when the time is right and the weather is warm, the nymphs climb out of the water and transform into adults with wings, all at the same time. The adults only live for a day, maybe two. Just long enough to mate in the air and lay their eggs in the water. Sometimes, if you watch closely, you can catch a glimpse of a female skipping across the water like a stone, dropping her eggs, ensuring another generation of mayflies.

Earnest held out his hand in the midst of this swarm and a mayfly landed right on it. They're amazingly delicate, up close: a long, golden body with three splaying tails and fragile, upright wings as clear as a window. The wings trembled in the slightest breeze.

Earnest said, "You know, in a way, every mayfly is a poet. Think about it. The nymph spends its entire life creating one fleeting, tiny thing of beauty. And when it's done, it dies. Isn't that what poetry is all about?" I told Earnest I had no idea what he was talking about.

Earnest even made me try writing poetry once or twice. That's rather like teaching a horse to sing, isn't it. He told me to forget everything I learned about poems in school and simply write down in words whatever I felt. Choose something that is meaningful to you, he said, and explain why. Well, I tried. My first poem turned out like this:

Once I had a happy dog.

I lost her in a Dartmouth fog.

Earnest said I wasn't really trying.

Earnest kept trying though. He kept trying to write better poetry, he kept trying to get published. Mostly though, he kept trying to convince Murray, our news producer, to let him read some of his poetry on air. Murray wasn't having any of it. "Doesn't fit with a news program," he always said. "You're the weatherman. Stick to the weather."

Of course, that didn't stop them from reading the winner of the CKLM-sponsored poetry contest on air. Year after year. Dan, our movie-star co-anchor, usually read it at the end of the newscast, while we aired a picture of the winner behind him, smiling at the camera with her braces showing and the lights reflecting off her glasses.

Can you imagine poor Earnest, what torture that was for him? He had to sit still in front of the camera, pretending to be interested, without wincing or rolling his eyes, as Dan overdramatized yet another precious, sickly sweet poem by a 16-year-old high-school student; poems with titles like Love is a Rainbow or The World is My Family. Those were the kinds of poems the station liked. Feel-good poems you could read on the supper-hour news. And Earnest felt every one like a personal insult.

I think that was why Earnest was so fixated on the CKLM poetry contest. It wasn't like he needed it to get noticed, or sell his poems, not really. Even the endless rejections from poetry magazines didn't matter that much, at least in a practical sense. These days anyone can publish himself. Stitch a few dozen poems together using some fancy editing software, then sell the book on Amazon for 99 cents. No, Earnest wanted the world to see his poet's soul; he wanted everyone to know he was more than the funny guy who read the weather on television. And he really, really hated the poems that won the contest every year.

So he kept pestering Murray to let him read his own poems on the news. And Murray kept telling him to forget about it and read the weather. A couple of times, over the years, Earnest even tried to sneak in poetry by doing the weather forecast in rhyme:

Low pressure area coming our way, expect heavy snow by late in the day.

Snow may continue for most of the night; sun in the morning, no blizzard in sight.

Murray told him to stop doing that too.

The annual CKLM poetry contest was a big hit again this year. You all remember what happened, right? This year's winner was called Ode to an Ordinary Day, and it stank so bad I wanted to open the windows and crank up the ceiling fans. You know a poem is awful if I can tell that it's awful.

Dan read the poem on air, as solemn as a priest, while Miriam, his co-anchor with the thousand watt smile, and Neil the sports guy looked on as if they were delighted. I was on Camera 2, as usual, and while Dan was speaking on Camera 1, I was watching Earnest, who was sitting by his blue screen, looking almost physically ill. "Wonderful poem," Dan said, in his newscaster's voice. "Thanks Emily Murch! That's all the news for this Friday night. Earnie, what's our weather word for today?"

That was when it happened. I heard Murray, up in the control booth, say "Go to Camera 2." The green light on my camera came on. I zoomed in on Earnest. His famous smile was gone. He looked down at the floor for a long time without speaking.

Dan said: "Earnie? What's your weather word? More thunderstorms on the way?" Earnest was still staring at the floor. He muttered: "Thunderstorm . . . thunderstorm," as if the word reminded him of a childhood friend. He stood up and straightened his tie. He looked directly into the camera. At that moment I got the uncanny impression he was looking right at me. He spoke, slowly and carefully. He said:

Mid-summer day grown hot and still; the trees curl up their leaves  
Damp, sultry haze hangs in the air, and men roll up their sleeves  
And lift their hats to mop their brows, against the August heat,  
Cows seek shade in shadowed glades, where newly shorn sheep bleat

Off camera, I could see Dan and Miriam looking at each other. Dan gestured at the floor manager, as if to say, "What the hell?" The floor manager shrugged right back. Earnest was still speaking:

Atop the endless sun-bleached sky, a cloud fans out and swells  
Unfurling puffs of grey-white mist in a land where giants dwell  
Coupat on the earthward side, it boils and foams up high  
Then slowly darkens, anvil-tops, o'er-fills the summer sky

Then I heard Stella's voice, she's Murray's bossy assistant, from up in the control booth. "What's he doing?" she said.

Murray said: "I think . . . he's reciting a poem,"

Stella said: "This is off script. Ready Camera 1. We'll go to final credits."

I'm not supposed to talk while we're on air, but I whispered into my throat mike: "No, don't cut him off. Please. I think he needs this." Silence for a couple of heartbeats. Then Murray again, bless him, as clear and kind as I've ever heard him: "You're right. Camera 1, stand by. Camera 2, stay on him."

Stella said: "I don't believe this."

While we were debating, Earnest had finished another verse. He was still going, louder now, stronger:

Like dragon's growl far thunder tolls, a rumble low and deep,  
That silences the singing birds; into the air there creeps  
A sense of omen, breathlessness, the wind is still and slow,  
The tense and swollen thundercloud looms o'er all below.

From the control booth, I heard Stella say: "This is going to sink our ratings like a loaded torpedo." And Murray reply: "Well, at least he's talking about the weather." In front of my camera, Earnest kept right on:

From the purple, pregnant sky, the first fat drops of rain  
Shake the grass and wet the path along the dusty lane  
Yet quick the rain is drumming down, the wind begins to rise,  
And raindrops splash 'gainst window glass beneath the ink-black skies

He was pacing about now, gesticulating, becoming more and more agitated. I had to go to shallow focus so no one could see the bewildered looks on the news team sitting behind him.

A flash of lightning, blinding bright, a yellow-stitching spark  
And then another, forking light, sharp-etched against the dark  
Boom-cracks of thunder roil the air with cannon-blasts of sound  
That echo off the valley walls and shake the rain-beat ground

Earnest was becoming frantic. He leaped up on the sports desk, startling Neil the sports guy who rolled his chair back so fast he fell over. "Stay on him, Camera 2," came Murray's voice. "This was your idea. Don't lose him now."

Earnest was practically shouting:

Relentless rain in pulsing sheets, the wind a shrieking gale,  
The slamming raindrops hammer-struck with bouncing, thumping hail  
That rocks reverberating roofs and flattens fields of grain  
While lightnings lash and thunders crash to trumpet pounding rain  
Suddenly he stopped. He climbed down off the desk. Stella in my ear again: “This is insane. We’re two minutes over time. Go to credits!”

I said, louder than I should: “Stay with him! I think he’s almost done.”

Then Murray’s voice: “I sure hope so.”

Sure enough, Earnest had stopped shouting. He carried on, but in a quieter voice:

The rain is falling gently now, the wind has lost its roar,

The thunder rumbles from afar, the lightning comes no more

Darkness fading from the sky speaks that the storm is done

And in the west, ‘twixt fleeing clouds, a glimpse of yellow sun

Watching him through my camera lens, it struck me then for the first time that Earnest looked old. His face was tired and care-worn. His eyelids drooped. He sat down behind his desk, beside the blue screen. The final verse came out with hesitations, as if by great effort:

The sky of ever-spreading blue gives chase to stormy dark

Against the softly showery clouds, a rainbow’s prised arc

In the lambent westward sun, water glistens on the leaves

And all the world is silent now, but for the dripping of the eaves

Earnest stopped speaking. He folded his arms on the desk and set his head down on top of them. He closed his eyes. He let out a long, sibilant breath, like a lover’s sigh.

The dead air lasted eight seconds. I know because I timed it. Then, Murray’s voice in my ear, serious as a judge: “Camera 2, switch to Miriam. Somebody check on Earnie!” But I didn’t move. I kept my camera fixed on Earnest, where it’s always been. Where it belonged. Murray could have cut me off from the control room, but he didn’t. Neil the sports guy came over and gave Earnest a gentle shake. “Earnie, you all right? Earnest didn’t move. Neil’s fingers moved to his neck. “I haven’t got a pulse!”

Suddenly everyone was talking, and moving, at once. I heard Murray shout “Go to Stand-By! Now!” and Stella: “I’m calling 911!”, while the floor manager said “What’s wrong? Why isn’t he moving?” and Miriam the co-anchor shouted “Who knows CPR!”

Dan and Neil the sports guy got Earnest down on the floor and Miriam started mouth-to-mouth, while everyone else milled around looking panic-stricken. I stayed where I was, shooting the scene, even though the green light on my camera had gone out. What else could I do? I'm a cameraman.

[**Cue 3:** Fade to spotlight on **Camera 2**, downstage centre]

It turned out that quite a few of the staff at CKLM were trained in CPR. It was too late though. Earnest was just . . . gone. By the time the paramedics arrived a few minutes later there was nothing left to be done.

In the next couple of days, leading up to the funeral, everyone wondered what happened. Earnest had apparently been in robust health, fit as a fiddle and sound as a dollar. He never told me about any medical problems, and we told each other everything. The coroner said something about an acute cardiac infarction, whatever that may be, but it was more like Earnest simply . . . expired. And I think, finally, I'm beginning to understand why.

You see, my friend Earnest the frustrated poet was kind of like a mayfly himself. He spent his entire life creating something beautiful, delicate and fleeting. "Why do you write so much poetry?" I asked him. "Why do you breathe?" he said. No more poetry: no more breath. The mayfly takes a mate in flight, lays its eggs upon the water, and dies.

[**Cue 4:** Three-second pause then fade to black stage]

