

NCTE Award for Excellence in Children's Poetry--Joyce Sidman

(Acceptance speech) November 23, 2013

Thank you so much! My deepest gratitude goes to the NCTE and to the Award committee members, both past and present, for all your hard work and dedication to children's poetry. Without you, this genre would not be lifted up and allowed to shine! And many, many thanks to all of you literature lovers here; to my writer's group, who helps me hone my craft; to Houghton Mifflin, who makes my books beautiful; and to my family and friends, who provide invaluable, loving support.

I am absolutely thrilled to be standing here and to be the recipient of an award I did not expect to be even considered for, for many years. In fact, as I was explaining this award to my younger son—that it was kind of a lifetime/body of work award, he said, “Huh. So . . . that means you can retire, right?”

But I don't ever want to retire from being a poet.

In my early teens, I discovered a book in my parents' bookshelf called *The Poet's Camera*. Published in 1946, it contained a selection of both classic and modern poetry, illustrated with stately, black-and-white photographs. I was totally riveted by this book, and used to sneak down to the study to look at it. Why was I sneaking? Who knows, except that the poems I found seemed too amazingly transformative to discuss with my mundane family. One in particular entranced me: “The Sea Falls All Night” by Conrad Aiken.

*The sea falls all night on the yellow sand,  
The green waves foam and thrust and slide,  
The long green waves fall on the yellow sand,  
All night they fall.*

After reading this poem, full of rhythm and magic, I knew that I, too, wanted to fit words together that would resonate like these did. I wanted to see the world as beautiful and holy and funny and terrifying all at once, and to find the words to describe it.

Recently, I discovered a stash of my old journals from that time, and began to read them. Woo-boy. (All I can say is, “Sorry, Mom.”) But in between the violent mood swings, the existential angst, the gushing about dances and Glee Club, and the carefully transcribed Joni Mitchell lyrics, were the words—in my childish handwriting— “A professional poet: my dream. I can’t think of anything else I’d rather be. Right now, that’s the only thing I want to be when I grow up.”

There is rarely a day when I do not shiver with delight that this is what I have become . . . a poet! It really **is** all I’ve ever wanted to be. Thank you so much.