

# WORKSHOP: SHAPING A POEM

## Accessibility text for video

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[0:06] Dr Rebecca Bullard and Kate Clanchy are sitting side-by-side behind a table with a laptop open in front of them. Kate has a book open in front of her which had the poem 'Patagonia' printed.

**Rebecca:** *We've thought a little bit about the choices that writers make when they form their poems, and one of the things to think about is how we give shape to a poem, what kind of shape we want it to make on the page and in our ears when we read it out loud. Kate, tell me a little bit about giving shape to a poem. Why is it important, and how do we do it?*

**Kate:** *It's such a big question, but it's also quite a sort of small one, because I think it's almost impossible to answer it in the abstract. It has to be what's the right shape for this poem, for your poem? And for that reason, I think when we're going to get a look at 'Patagonia,' aren't we, which is the poem that we're studying. And for this purpose, we've put it onto a computer screen, and we've put it all together, all of the-- and put it into continuous prose.*

**Rebecca:** *So do you want to talk us through how you might go from a big block of text like this-*

**Kate:** *To something nice like that?*

[1:03] Kate and Rebecca point to the poem in the book

**Rebecca:** *To something like we've got on the page.*

**Kate:** *Well, yeah, so let's do something simple. So when we paragraph in prose, we use a paragraph or a time break usually, don't we? So if we do that with this,*

[1:18] Screen switches to the laptop screen showing the following text a single block of prose

*'I said perhaps Patagonia, and pictured a peninsula, wide enough for a couple of ladderback chairs to wobble on at high tide. I thought of us in breathless cold, facing a horizon round as a coin, looped in a cat's cradle strung by gulls from sea to sun. I planned to wait till the waves had bored themselves to sleep, till the last clinging barnacles, growing worried in the hush, had paddled off in tiny coracles, till those restless birds, your actor's hands, had dropped slack into your lap, until you turned, at last, to me. When I spoke of Patagonia, I meant skies all empty aching blue. I meant years. I meant all of them with you.'*

**Kate:** *Then I guess we put a paragraph there, would we, after the full stop?*

[1:24] Kate inserts the cursor at the end of the first sentence which ends 'at high tide', pressing return to drop the next sentence down a couple of lines to form a new paragraph

**Kate:** *'I planned to wait'. Because that's a different thought, isn't it?*

[1:27] Kate move the cursor to the end of the second sentence which ends 'from sea to sun' so that a third paragraph is created beginning 'I planned to wait'

**Kate:** *Maybe there. Oh, that's a very long sentence there. So, let's put a paragraph there.*

[1:36] Kate places the cursor at the end: 'until you turned, at last, to me.' And presses return twice to drop the last two sentences down to form a fourth paragraph. The poem appears as follows:

'I said *perhaps Patagonia*, and pictured a peninsula, wide enough for a couple of ladderback chairs to wobble on at high tide.

(new paragraph)

I thought of us in breathless cold, facing a horizon round as a coin, looped in a cat's cradle strung by gulls from sea to sun.

(new paragraph)

I planned to wait till the waves had bored themselves to sleep, till the last clinging barnacles, growing worried in the hush, had paddled off in tiny coracles, till those restless birds, your actor's hands, had dropped slack into your lap, until you turned, at last, to me.

(new paragraph)

When I spoke of Patagonia, I meant skies all empty aching blue. I meant years. I meant all of them with you.'

**Kate:** *I don't think that's-- 'I thought of us in breathless cold'. It's gone amazingly flatter, hasn't it?*

**Rebecca:** *Hasn't it just.*

**Kate:** *'I said perhaps Patagonia and pictured a peninsula, wide enough for a couple of ladderback chairs to wobble on at high tide'. Full stop, end.*

[1:55] Return to view Rebecca and Kate

**Kate:** *And I think it does illustrate how if you end where you expect to end and then the tension that's in the white space just goes.*

**Rebecca:** *Yeah.*

**Kate:** *So you need quite big words at the end.*

[2:08] Cut to laptop screen which shows four paragraphs of text. The cursor hovers over the beginning of the second paragraph, 'I thought of us in breathless cold' and Kate uses the delete key to join this sentence back to the first paragraph. Then she breaks this phrase after 'thought' and moves the rest of the sentence back down to form a second paragraph. The text now appears as below

'I said *perhaps Patagonia*, and pictured a peninsula, wide enough for a couple of ladderback chairs to wobble on at high tide. I thought

(new paragraph)

of us in breathless cold, facing a horizon round as a coin, looped in a cat's cradle strung by gulls from sea to sun.

(new paragraph)

I planned to wait till the waves had bored themselves to sleep, till the last clinging barnacles, growing worried in the hush, had paddled off in tiny coracles, till those restless birds, your actor's hands, had dropped slack into your lap, until you turned, at last, to me.

(new paragraph)

When I spoke of Patagonia, I meant skies all empty aching blue. I meant years. I meant all of them with you.'

**Kate:** *So if I put that word, 'I thought', then you get a big word.*

[2:17] Return to view Rebecca and Kate

**Rebecca:** *'Thought' is a much bigger word, isn't it, even than 'tide'. It goes off into the big space. Yeah.*

**Kate:** *So if the image of the poem is of this little person thinking of a whole continent and also facing out into the big ocean, then that echoes it. So you get a stanza break there as well. 'I thought'. For kind of the first line, which is always an important one,*

[2:45] Cut to laptop screen which shows four paragraphs of text

**Kate:** *again, it's about 'and pictured'. Because it's all about this*

[2:50] The cursor hovers over the first line and Kate inserts a line break after 'and pictured' so that the second line now starts, 'a peninsula, wide enough...'

**Kate:** *This thinking person looking out. And that's how that got there. At the end*

[2:55] The cursor moves to the bottom paragraph and is inserted between 'meant' and 'skies'. A line break is created between the 2 words

**Kate:** *I use the 'I meant'.*

**Rebecca:** Right.

**Kate:** And I think if you have a pause, a bit of space after 'I meant' and a line break, then it sounds much sadder, because it's a hesitation.

**Rebecca:** It is a hesitation.

**Kate:** 'I meant years'.

[3:13] The cursor hovers the last line between the 2 words 'meant' and 'years' and a line break is created. The last line is moved down one space. The poem now appears as 4 paragraphs and a final line

**Kate:** And then it hurries up at the end. 'I meant all of them with you'. The rhythm hurries up a little bit, because she is embarrassed.

[2:17] Return to view Rebecca and Kate

**Rebecca:** And it makes that word 'years' very long, doesn't it, in time? Years is a long word to say. And we fall into that line on that and on that rhythm.

**Kate:** So actually the end of a poem is quite a good place to start your arrangement, actually. The beginning and the end. And you can see there

[3:41] cut back to the laptop screen which appears as follows:

"I said *perhaps Patagonia*, and pictured a peninsula, wide enough for a couple of ladderback chairs to wobble on at high tide. I thought

(new paragraph)

of us in breathless cold, facing a horizon round as a coin, looped in a cat's cradle strung by gulls from sea to sun.

(new paragraph)

I planned to wait till the waves had bored themselves to sleep, till the last clinging barnacles, growing worried in the hush, had paddled off in tiny coracles, till those restless birds, your actor's hands, had dropped slack into your lap, until you turned, at last, to me.

(new paragraph)

When I spoke of Patagonia, I meant (line break)

skies all empty aching blue. I meant

(new paragraph)

years. I meant all of them with you."

**Kate:** That I'm getting the length and shape at the top.

**Rebecca:** Yes.

**Kate:** And the length and shape at the bottom.

[3:49] Kate moves the last line 'years. I meant all of them with you.' up one space. The last paragraph now contains 3 lines:

'When I spoke of Patagonia, I meant (line break)

skies all empty aching blue. I meant (line break)

years. I meant all of them with you.' (end of stanza)

**Kate:** If we do, if we're on that principle, putting the saddest, loneliest words at the end of the line, we're going for 'enough' there.

[3:55] Kate returns the cursor to the top of the poem and inserts a line break after 'wide enough']

**Rebecca:** So the ends of lines

[3:59] Return to view Rebecca and Kate

**Rebecca:** And the beginnings of lines are coming out as very important points in the poem for setting the tone of what you want to write.

**Kate:** The end of the line-- the end of each line gets a special little place. I mean, the content of a whole line is important.

[4:18] Cut to laptop screen. Kate moves the cursor to the first paragraph after 'ladderback chairs' and inserts a line break. The first paragraph now appears as:

'I said *perhaps Patagonia*, and pictured (line break)  
a peninsula, wide enough (line break)  
for a couple of ladderback chairs (line break)  
to wobble on at high tide. I thought' (end of stanza)

**Kate:** Look at those hit a couple of ladderback chairs need to have it aligned themselves, because there's two of them, and they're sitting on a peninsula. So there they are like that.

[4:27] Cut to Kate's face

**Kate:** But the beginning of the line-- I'm stressing in this poem the ends of the line rather than the beginnings of the line. But the beginning of the line is important too. These are just-- actually, there's a series of prepositions at the beginning. And that's because

4:39 [Cut back to the laptop screen which shows the poem as four paragraphs]

'I said *perhaps Patagonia*, and pictured (line break)  
a peninsula, wide enough (line break)  
for a couple of ladderback chairs (line break)  
to wobble on at high tide. I thought (end of stanza)  
(new paragraph)

of us in breathless cold, facing a horizon round as a coin, looped in a cat's cradle strung by gulls from sea to sun.  
(new paragraph)

I planned to wait till the waves had bored themselves to sleep, till the last clinging barnacles, growing worried in the hush, had paddled off in tiny coracles, till those restless birds, your actor's hands, had dropped slack into your lap, until you turned, at last, to me.

(new paragraph)

When I spoke of Patagonia, I meant (line break)  
skies all empty aching blue. I meant (line break)  
years. I meant all of them with you.' (end)

**Kate:** Each line stops in a spot where the speaker is kind of thinking or listening or on the edge of something. And then it drops onto a preposition, so it keeps going.

**Rebecca:** Great.

**Kate:** 'I thought'. And then she gets another big hesitation, you see.

**Rebecca:** Yes.

**Kate:** With the stanza. Stanza's a bigger one.

**Rebecca:** So there's a break between lines, which is a short pause.

[5:04] Return to view Rebecca and Kate

**Kate:** A short pause.

**Rebecca:** And then there's a break between stanzas between verses, and that's a much bigger area of white space.

**Kate:** It's a bigger area. And I always think it's almost always a movement in time.

**Rebecca:** Right.

**Kate:** I was about to say a movement forward in time, but of course, not necessarily. And look, there's another facing word.

[5:23] Cut back to the laptop screen which is zoomed in on the first three stanzas of the poem

"I said *perhaps Patagonia*, and pictured (line break)  
a peninsula, wide enough (line break)  
for a couple of ladderback chairs (line break)  
to wobble on at high tide. I thought (end of stanza)  
(new paragraph)

of us in breathless cold, facing a horizon round as a coin, looped in a cat's cradle strung by gulls from sea to sun.  
(new paragraph)

I planned to wait till the waves had bored themselves to sleep, till the last clinging barnacles, growing worried in the hush, had paddled off in tiny coracles, till those restless birds, your actor's hands, had dropped slack into your lap, until you turned, at last, to me.'

**Kate:** *There's another looking outward. In this one, she's actually literally facing the horizon,*

[5:28] Cursor is placed over the second paragraph, between the words 'facing' and 'a' and a line break is inserted

**Kate:** *'facing a horizon round as a coin'. And I think using this principle, 'I plan to wait' needs to go into that stanza, doesn't it?*

[5:3] Kate deletes the paragraph space between 'from sea to sun' and 'I planned to wait'

**Kate:** *Because there is a big*

5:45 [Kate adds a line break after 'I planned to wait' and moves the remaining text into a new paragraph. The poem on the screen is now appearing as:]

"I said *perhaps Patagonia*, and pictured (line break)  
a peninsula, wide enough (line break)  
for a couple of ladderback chairs (line break)  
to wobble on at high tide. I thought (end of stanza)  
(new paragraph)  
of us in breathless cold, facing (line break)  
a horizon round as a coin, looped in a cat's cradle strung by gulls from sea to sun. (line break)  
I planned to wait (end of stanza)  
(new paragraph)  
till the waves had bored themselves to sleep, till the last clinging barnacles, growing worried in the hush, had  
paddled off in tiny coracles, till those restless birds, your actor's hands, had dropped slack into your lap, until you  
turned, at last, to me.' (end of stanza)

**Kate:** *movement in time. So 'looped' -- it's not fantastic.*

[5:50] Kate inserts a line break after 'looped'

**Kate:** *There's always compromises. But if I want that 'I planned to wait' at the end of that stanza,*

[5:57] Kate inserts a line break after 'gulls'. The 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza is now showing as:

of us in breathless cold, facing (line break)  
a horizon round as a coin, looped (line break)  
in a cat's cradle strung by gulls (line break)  
from sea to sun. I planned to wait (end of stanza)

**Kate:** *and I really do, then I have to have those lines. In a way,*

[6:04] Return to the view of Rebecca and Kate

**Kate:** *something like 'round as a coin' would be lovely on its own.*

**Rebecca:** *Yes. But 'looped' also works with 'round as a coin', doesn't it? It's the same sort of image.*

**Kate:** *Same sort of idea.*

**Rebecca:** *Same sort of idea separated by a comma. So how did you move from this long sentence, paragraph, into lines?*

**Kate:** *Well, that long sentence paragraph, she's building up a series of things that will take you to the moment when he's going to turn to her. So it needs to have tension in it, because the 'until you turned at last to me' needs to be sad. So they've got*

[6:46] Cut back to the laptop screen

**Kate:** *'until you turned, at last, to me'. There we go. That's a line like that.*

[6:51] Kate inserts a line break after 'slack into your lap,'

**Kate:** *So I'm going to-- I'm working at the bottom, and I'm working into four, because it's a four at the top*

[6:00] Kate deletes the paragraph space between 'until you turned, at last, to me.' And 'When I spoke of Patagonia, I meant'

**Kate:** *-- 'bored themselves to sleep'.*

[7:05] Kate moves to the 1<sup>st</sup> line of the stanza she is currently working on. She adds a line break between '...themselves to sleep,' and 'till the last clinging...'

**Kate:** Let's see -- 'growing worried in the hush'.

[7:07] She adds a line break between '...last clinging barnacles,' and 'growing worried...'

**Kate:** I think they need to 'paddle off' on their own, don't they? That needs to be a line ending.

[7:12] She adds a paragraph break between '...had paddled off,' and 'in tiny coracles...'

**Kate:** *How are we doing?*

[7:14] She adds a line break between '...had paddled off,' and 'in tiny coracles...'

**Kate:** *'Paddled off in tiny coracles'.*

[7:16] She adds a line break between '...had' and 'paddled off,' and rejoins 'in tiny coracles...' back with 'paddled off,'  
The screen is showing the following parts of the of the poem:

'of us in breathless cold, facing (*line break*)  
a horizon round as a coin, looped (*line break*)  
in a cat's cradle strung by gulls (*line break*)  
from sea to sun. I planned to wait (*end of stanza*)  
(*new paragraph*)  
till the waves had bored themselves to sleep, (*line break*)  
till the last clinging barnacles, (*line break*)  
growing worried in the hush, had (*line break*)  
paddled off in tiny coracles, till those restless birds, your actor's hands, had dropped slack into your lap, until you  
turned, at last, to me. (*line break*)  
When I spoke of Patagonia, I meant (*end of stanza*)  
(*new paragraph*)  
Skies all empty aching blue. I meant (*line break*)  
Years. I meant all of them with you.' (*end*)

[7:20] Return to view Rebecca and Kate

**Kate:** So it gets so much better, doesn't it? 'I planned to wait', long pause, 'till the waves had bored themselves to sleep'. And I think I've let that be a long sentence because it's about being relaxed.

[7:34] Cut back to the laptop screen. The poem is now appearing as:

'of us in breathless cold, facing (*line break*)  
a horizon round as a coin, looped (*line break*)  
in a cat's cradle strung by gulls (*line break*)  
from sea to sun. I planned to wait (*end of stanza*)  
(*new paragraph*)  
till the waves had bored themselves to sleep, (*line break*)  
till the last clinging barnacles, (*line break*)  
growing worried in the hush, had (*line break*)  
paddled off in tiny coracles, (*end of stanza*)  
(*new paragraph*)  
till those restless birds, your actor's hands, had dropped slack into your lap, until you turned, at last, to me. (*line break*)  
When I spoke of Patagonia, I meant (*end of stanza*)  
(*new paragraph*)  
Skies all empty aching blue. I meant (*line break*)  
Years. I meant all of them with you.' (*end*)

**Kate:** 'Till the last clinging barnacles, growing worried in the hush, had paddled off in tiny coracles, till those restless birds, your actor's hands,

[7:44] Kate adds a line break between 'your actor's hands,' and 'had dropped slack...'

**Kate:** had dropped slack into your lap'.

[7:47] Laptop screen zooms out to show the whole poem.

'I said *perhaps Patagonia*, and pictured (*line break*)  
a peninsula, wide enough (*line break*)

for a couple of ladderback chairs *(line break)*  
 to wobble on at high tide. I thought *(end of stanza)*  
*(new paragraph)*  
 of us in breathless cold, facing *(line break)*  
 a horizon round as a coin, looped *(line break)*  
 in a cat's cradle strung by gulls *(line break)*  
 from sea to sun. I planned to wait *(end of stanza)*  
*(new paragraph)*  
 till the waves had bored themselves to sleep, *(line break)*  
 till the last clinging barnacles, *(line break)*  
 growing worried in the hush, had *(line break)*  
 paddled off in tiny coracles, *(end of stanza)*  
*(new paragraph)*  
 till those restless birds, your actor's hands, *(line break)*  
 had dropped slack into your lap, *(line break)*  
 until you turned, at last, to me. *(line break)*  
 When I spoke of Patagonia, I meant *(end of stanza)*  
*(new paragraph)*  
 Skies all empty aching blue. I meant *(line break)*  
 Years. I meant all of them with you.' *(end)*

**Kate:** *There's a sort of heaviness that comes in towards,*

[7:53] Cut to Kate's face

**Kate:** *and that's because the lines are getting more end stopped is the term we use, which means when the punctuation matches the end of the lines.*

[8:02] Return to view Rebecca and Kate

**Kate:** *And it's lovely to look at it and think, gosh, that's so much better than the paragraphs at the beginning.*

**Rebecca:** *And it is. It's a poem.*