

VIRAL



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Button Poetry | Minneapolis

2013

Viral

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Matam, Lily Myers

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Published by Button Poetry, Minneapolis, MN, 55408

<http://buttonpoetry.com>

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ISBN 978-0-9896415-1-7

Foreword

I had the pleasure of being in a car with Neil Hilborn on a two-day road trip this past August when his poem, “OCD,” went viral. We were, as we’d done many times before—together and separately—driving across the country to recite and listen to poems.

Having grown up working class, I was never really one for vacations; my mother and I would go up to the lake some summer weekends and sleep in Grandpa’s trailer, but that was about it. And now I’ve been to something like 30 states of this beautiful country—I dream, now, of living in a mountain town of West Virginia and looking out at the jagged cityscape just before dusk, for example, and I recall exactly how delicious my first Philly cheesesteak was after fasting a whole day and performing poems during Lent, and I’ve spent a hundred-degree afternoon in a broke down Greyhound bus in a parking lot in Missouri on my way to Austin, Texas, where I’d arrive half a day late and without all my underwear and notebooks which were lost in transit—and all this because of poetry. I’m cosmopolitan, now, which, as I understand it, is a fancy way of saying I’m fancy.

I hear people talk about the dimming prospects of making a living as a poet, about the small and insular readership we can expect, about how poetry is dead. I think somebody forgot to tell the poets.

In 2013—a year that saw article after article offering autopsies of some small, misshapen thing the author called poetry—the poets gathered in this anthology earned nearly 12 million views on YouTube collectively. 12 million! That’s about as many views as there are people in New York City and Los Angeles combined, by the way. And I wonder how marvelous a day it might be if everybody in both of those cities watched one of these poems the same morning.

2013 was a year that saw, too, Trayvon Martin’s murderer go free, that saw Marissa Alexander and CeCe McDonald and countless others stand imprisoned for standing their ground, that saw the United States continue its wars, that saw, like all years do, large atrocities, and small but vital resistances. On the days of those atrocities, lots of people, frustrated and despairing and afraid, asked, why write poems? It’s a fair question.

Rachel Rostad, reflecting on the power of literature to shape us and our society, argues that stereotypical representations of Asian women as tragic fetishes in literature and popular culture “result in a culture that produces boys [...] who see an Asian woman not as a person but an object, even when she’s handing out pamphlets at a protest.” For Rostad, literature informs the ways we interact with each other—and even the ways we interact with ourselves. In her poem about JK Rowling, she realizes that her consumption of stories and movies has influenced her own self-understanding: “I wasn’t sure I was sad but I cried / anyway. Girls who look like me / are supposed to cry over boys / who look like him.”

But for Rostad, and for the other poets in this anthology, if literature and popular culture are used as systems of oppression, they can also be re-purposed as sites of resistance. In his poem “Rigged Game,” for example, Dylan Garity protests the injustices built into contemporary ESL/ELL

programs. Garity writes:

"In the 1980s, American slaughterhouses began building corrals in curves,
so no animals could see the blood at the end of the track.
This is how we kept them moving forward.

In 2001, we began building the hallways of our schools in curves.
This is how we keep them moving forward."

And he builds his poem in curves, too, weaving together gorgeous lyrical movements with sobering analyses of institutional racism and classism, in order, I think, to move *us* forward, to direct us along the march toward justice.

Kyle "Guante" Tran Myhre tackles misogyny, hyper-masculinity, and the rigid gender binary as he deconstructs the popular phrase, "man up." Javon Johnson laments—in his timely and urgent poem, "Cuz He's Black"—a culture that views black boys as problems rather than people, and then, in a stunning demonstration of conscience, critiques *himself* for neglecting to discuss the violences faced by black women and black queer folks. And Pages Matam, reflecting on the experience which prompted his anti-rape culture manifesto, "Piñatas," offers a beautiful vision of poetry as a mode of healing, as a way of cleaning ourselves out to make way for peace.

Driving across the country in a car-full of poets this past August, we all kept refreshing our smartphones as Neil's "OCD" got more comments on Reddit, more views on YouTube. On the one hand, my friend's poem having gone viral changes nothing for me—the first time I saw him perform it, years ago, I cried, same as the second time, and the third time, and even re-reading it today. It's a moving poem that speaks earnestly to the beauty and horror of being so vulnerable with another person. I don't need the poem to have millions of views in order to know that much. On the other hand, how glad it makes me to know that so many people have been touched by a poem! I imagine the poem might disarm people, a bit, soften them just a little to a world that otherwise hardens them. It's an intensely personal poem, and yet it touches a nerve we all seem to have in common, makes us all ring in similar ways.

Poetry, for Hilborn, for all of the poets in this anthology, is not navel-gazing, is not solipsistic, even at its most personal—and it certainly isn't dead. Poetry has a place in our everyday lives, in the everyday life of our culture and our society. Lily Myers enacts this understanding of poetry as communal and essential in "Letters to Ourselves." Taking lines and phrases from the responses of gratitude and confession she received after "Shrinking Women" went viral, she constructs a poem that speaks for and to a community of women—and, more generally, all of us. "Dear poet, / I hope those are not mere words," the poem begins. And they aren't. Not merely.

—M. Mlekoday

Bloomington, Indiana

Javon Johnson

"We both know
Black boys disappear. Names lost.
Both know this is no accident.
It's a mass lynching in auto tune
and on auto drive."

—from "Cuz He's Black"

Javon L. Johnson, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of performance studies in the Communication Studies Department of San Francisco State University. Along with being a back-to-back National Poetry Slam Champion, Johnson has appeared on HBO's Def Poetry Jam, BET's Lyric Café, and TVOne's Verses and Flow, and has written for Nike, Showtime, the NBA, and much more. Johnson's work has been published in *Our Weekly* and *Text & Performance Quarterly*, and he is currently working on a full-length manuscript about slam and spoken-word poetry communities in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York.

Cuz He's Black

"cuz he's black & poor
he's disappeared
the name waz lost"

—Ntozake Shange

I am driving down the street
with my 5-year-old nephew.
He, knocking back a juice
box, me, a Snapple, today
we are doing some real
manly shit. I love
watching his mind work.
He asks a million questions.
Uncle, how come the sky is blue?
Uncle, how do cars go?
Uncle, why can't dogs talk?
Uncle, uncle, uncle, he asks,
uncle, uncle, uncle, he asks
uncle, repeatedly,
as if his voice box is
a warped record. I try
to answer all of his questions.
It's because the way
the sun lights up outer space.
It's because the engines
make the wheels roll.
It's because their brains aren't
made like ours. Yes.
Yes. No. Yes. No. No. I think so.
He smiles at me, then
looks out the window,
spots a cop car, says,
"Uncle, 5-0," and immediately
drops his seat to hide.

I am unhappy
with how we raise

our Black boys.
Don't like that
he learned to hide
from the cops before
he knew how to read.
Angrier that his survival
depends more on
his ability to deal
with the "authorities"
than it does literacy.
I yell at him: Get up.
In this car, in this family,
we are not afraid
of the law.

I wonder if he hears
the uncertainty in my voice.
Is today the day he learns
how uncle lies,
that I am more human
than hero?

We both know the truth
is far more complex than
do not hide. We both know
Black boys disappear. Names lost.
Both know this is no accident.
It's a mass lynching in auto tune
and on auto drive. We both
know the truth is far
more dangerous than that.
Know too many Trayvon Martins,
Oscar Grants, too many Sean Bells,
Abner Louimas, and Amadou Diallos.
Know too well that we are
the hard-boiled sons of Emmett Till.
Still, we both know
it's not about whether or not
the shooter is racist,
it's about how poor Black males
are treated as problems
before we are treated as people.

Black boys, who are failed
by the education system long before
we fail in the classroom,
can't afford to play cops
and robbers when we're

always considered the latter,
don't have the luxury
of playing war
when we're already in one.

Where I'm from,
seeing cop cars drive
down the street feels a lot
like low-flying planes in New York.
Routine traffic stops are more
like mine fields, any wrong moves
could very well mean your life.

How do I tell my nephew to stand
up for himself, when Black men
are murdered every day for being
strong. I tell him, be careful. Be smart.
Know your laws. Be courteous,
be aware of how quickly your hands move
to pocket for wallet or ID, and
even more aware of how quickly
the officer's hand moves to gun.
Be Black. Be a boy and have fun,
because you will be forced to
become a man much quicker
than you need to.

"Uncle," he asks, "what happens
if the police is really mean?"
And, it scares me to
know that he, like
so many Black boys,
is getting ready for a war
I can't prepare him for.

Cuz (S)He's Black Too and Sometimes Queer

During a semifinals bout at the National Poetry Slam in August 2013, I performed my poem, “Cuz He's Black,” which is about a true dialogic exchange between my then-4-year-old nephew and me after he hid from, in his words, “5-0.” Ending without simple answers, without neat tie-ups and with my nephew heartbreakingly asking, “Uncle, what happens if the cop is really mean?” the poem discusses black males and our troubling relationships with the law.

Though written a couple of years ago, that particular performance was captured by the good folks of Button Poetry, who, after uploading it to their YouTube channel, were approached by my now good friends at Upworthy, who asked for permission to post it on their website. Between Button Poetry, Upworthy, Facebook, Twitter and now Worldstarhiphop, the video went viral, amassing millions of hits in the span of three weeks and sparking dialogues about raising black boys, black males, institutionalized racism, state-sanctioned violence, so-called black-on-black crime and, as expected, some less-than-informed conversations on all sorts of racial topics.

The title, “Cuz He's Black,” is taken from Ntozake Shange's “About Atlanta,” a poem that addresses the child murders of 1979-1981, when an estimated 29 to 31 African Americans—most of them children, but a few of them adults—were believed to be murdered by the so-called Atlanta Child Killer.

More than a nod to Shange's general brilliance, however, I chose that title because Shange (who admitted to crying the entire time she was writing “About Atlanta” because she was imagining what it must have been like for a black mother in that space and time) forced me to imagine this: that most black mothers (or parents more generally) face the reality of death always lurking around and looming over their children, be it state-sanctioned violence, racial assaults, or the problematic construction known as black-on-black crime. As one young sister told me, “I don't have time to debate abortion rights because they are aborting my children for me.”

While the poem received much attention for my emotional performance and for my careful commentary on a difficult topic, what is missing in any of the discussions I have had or read is a well-deserved critique of how I neglected black girls, black women, and black queer folks. Most of the tags, comments, and messages I received have all centered on, as a mother of three black boys told me, “All black males need[ing] to see this.”

While I appreciate the widespread love for black males—a group of presumed monsters who, in Jay-Z's words, “don't get enough of it”—I cannot help but wonder: where is the love and healing for straight black girls, black women, and our black LGBTQ brothers and sisters? To be fair, the poem focuses on black males because it was about an actual exchange between my nephew and me that forced me to face the paralyzing fact that he is readying himself for, to quote the poem, a harrowing “war I can't prepare him for.”

The recent killings of Jack Lamar Roberson and Jonathan Ferrell, and the much more publicized acquittal of George Zimmerman, are all painful reminders of how the so-called justice system views

black males as problems before people, and why so many of us are hesitant to call on the law. Even more, they highlight, as Mark Anthony Neal writes in his book, *New Black Man*, that “for damn sure the black man is under siege, but it's not as if the saving of the black man should come at the expense of black women and children who continue to be under siege also.”

In fact, João H. Costa Vargas, in his book, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels: Life and Meanings of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles*, details how black women and children are susceptible to certain kinds of state-sanctioned violence that straight black men simply do not have to face. More still, it is important to remain mindful that in some cases it is straight black men who jeopardize their safety (along with, I must add, the safety of LGBTQ folks).

This is not to suggest that we cannot have conversations about black males and how we uniquely deal with the law; we can and we should. Rather, our conversations must be more encompassing. They must account for how black women, girls, and queer folks face violence, too, and they must be committed and powerful enough to work toward eradicating the everyday violence we *all* face.

To be clear, I love my nephews dearly, and because of how black males are almost always seen as a threat, I fear for their lives more than I should have to. But to be even clearer, I equally love my nieces—one of whom is loud and powerful and another who is not exactly “feminine”—and I fear how their particular racial-gender makeup leaves them especially vulnerable. So I work toward creating a safer world for them as well because they are black and loved, too.

Dylan Garity

"I know, I am lucky enough to be one of the winners of this game.
I was handed a head start and a rulebook in my own tongue.
But the winners of a rigged game should not get to write the rules."

—from "Rigged Game"

Dylan Garity is a College National Poetry Slam Champion, whose work has been featured on Upworthy and The Huffington Post. He is a 2012 graduate with honors from Macalester College where he was a member of the school's first three college slam teams and placed 3rd, 1st, and 2nd in the nation, respectively. He was named Best Poet at the 2012 tournament. He was also a member of the 2011 and 2013 Minneapolis national slam teams, which ranked 5th and 9th at the National Poetry Slam. He is a recipient of a 2012 Verve Grant from Intermedia Arts.

Friend Zone

The first time I ever danced with a girl
she leaned in close and asked me

why are your arms so stiff?
Dancing with you is like
dancing with a mannequin,
if they made mannequins super bony
and with very sweaty palms.

And to be fair, my palms were sweaty
and simultaneously ice cold. I was,
and continue to be, a miracle of physics.
Who knew that adult hands
could be supported by wrists
that a five-year-old or baby duck
could easily snap?

This may be part of why I spent
my teenage years absolutely failing with women.
In middle school, I would ask girls I liked
how much they weighed to see if I might weigh more.
Numbers made me excited! I loved math!
I used to think this meant everyone else loved math, too.

In high school, I became intimate
with the friend zone. With one girl,
I spent so many years in the friend zone,
I didn't even realize I was in it.
She was from Sweden, so I guess
it was literally Stockholm syndrome.
I would come over to her house and help her
with calculus and I would comfort her
and tell her how she was beautiful
or how her boyfriend was a dick
or how integrals are related to derivatives.

Eventually, I spent so much time
in the friend zone,
I grew to think of it as some
magical home away from home,
some lush forest filled with unicorns
and elves and puppies—
none of whom were getting laid.

I was on an adventure!
Constantly uncovering new questions
about this mystical place: Are you in the friend zone
if she's sleeping with other people and not telling you about it?
Are you in the friend zone if she tells you
she could totally see marrying you in fifteen years?
Why would you marry me in fifteen years
if in fifteen years I'll still be a virgin
because you never slept with me?

A few months after my first girlfriend and I broke up,
I heard she lost her virginity to the next guy she dated.
At the time, I thought of this as a betrayal,
not her choice. As if she owed me something.

A newspaper column once defined the friend zone as follows:
*She discusses her love life with him and has the audacity to ask his advice on it.
He performs favors for her. He does everything a boyfriend would do—but without the benefits.*

As if the only reason to be a good friend
or a decent fucking human
is if you get something in exchange.

The problem is, when I thought of myself
as a savior, I thought of myself as a savior
with a salary. You put in your hours as a nice guy
and sex is just a living wage,
but sex is not a transaction.
Sex is not a handshake to close some deal.
That girl did not owe me anything.

Last year, I heard that her home was broken into
in a neighborhood known for sexual assaults.

Nothing happened to her.

We all know the statistics.
Your rapist is more likely to be someone you know.
The boogie man, the stranger in the alley, is real,
but less real than we are.

We all know the statistics,
but we don't know how to accept
how easily we become part of the problem.

You cannot kill a monster

until you are willing to see it in the mirror.
Until you recognize its shape in your own skin.

Rigged Game

Every day when I was five, my older sister would play teacher.
Her students were me, my stuffed rabbit, and an American Girl doll.
She'd line us up at the end of the bed and teach us
whatever she'd learned in school that day.

Now, she teaches ESL at an elementary school in Boston.
Every week she tells me stories about her students:
Ana does not know how to read in Spanish, much less English,
but when she grows up, she still wants to be a writer.
Juan chooses to stay inside and study at recess
so one day he'll be able to teach his own brother.

These kids are good organs in a sick body.
In 2001, No Child Left Behind gutted bilingual education.
Students who have been in the country for one year
are now expected to perform at grade level on standardized English tests.
My sister is not allowed to instruct them in Spanish.
If the kids can't jump high enough, the school loses money.

Improving a school by picking its pockets
is like tuning a guitar by ripping off the strings.
Learning to read in a new language before you can read in your own
is like learning to walk while a pit bull is chasing you,
like learning to sing with the conductor's fist down your throat.

For my sister's birthday this year, I bought books for her students.
A poem on one page in Spanish, the next in English.
She is not allowed to help them read the first even if they beg her.
Their heritage is a banned book.

Learning to read in a new language before you can read in your own
is like treating a burn victim by drowning them.

We are telling these kids
who have spent their whole lives in the deep end
they'll learn how to swim if they just float out a little farther.

In the 1980s, American slaughterhouses began building corrals in curves,
so no animals could see the blood at the end of the track.
This is how we kept them moving forward.

In 2001, we began building the hallways of our schools in curves.
This is how we keep them moving forward.
You never learn, you fail the test. You never learn,
you fail the test. You fail the test, you drop out.

I know, I am lucky enough to be one of the winners of this game.
I was handed a head start and a rulebook in my own tongue.
But the winners of a rigged game should not get to write the rules.

On the television, some senator preaches
that throwing money at an “urban school”
is like feeding caviar to your dogs:
they just won’t know how to appreciate it.
After all, if these parents can’t take care of their own children,
why should we?

Tell that to Ana, who has my sister translate newsletters
aloud to her father because he, too, was never taught to read.

Tell that to Juan, whose mother and baby sister
are still in Guatemala, whose father works three jobs.

My sister tells me that school
is the most stable place in these kids’ lives.
She has been a teacher
since she was smaller than they are.
But since when does being a teacher
mean having to swear not to help?
Since when does being a teacher mean
having your hands tied
as the schoolhouse burns to the ground?
We are leading these children
along a track built in circles
while their lungs fill with smoke,
telling them it’s their fault
they can’t find a way out.

On Balance

I am stubborn. When faced with criticism or argument, I tend to react defensively. Rather than listening to a point, I immediately try to make a counterpoint, a balanced argument in the opposite direction. I attempt to neutralize, rather than actually engage. I'm not alone in this trait, and in the aftermath of "Friend Zone" and "Rigged Game" going viral, it's something I've been thinking about a lot.

I received many messages, both positive and negative, about "Friend Zone," but two interactions in particular speak to this point.

A week or so after the poem went viral, I came across a blog post which appeared to be written by a college-aged man. The post praised certain elements of my piece, but was ultimately negative; the writer discussed his own regular experiences with unrequited love and was hurt by what he viewed as an attack on himself, and on others in his position.

After some thought, I decided to message him. I explained that my goal with the poem was to try to highlight some of the more subtle elements of rape culture—the ways it influences the very way we think about relationships—and to do so in a way that would hopefully draw in people who might not otherwise have a dialogue about the issue. I also commiserated with him about my own (extensive) experiences with unrequited love, while differentiating those experiences from the larger points of the poem. He wrote me back, and it was an extremely positive interaction.

More recently, I received an aggressive message from a man who resented my points about the friend zone because of his own experiences. He said my poem came at the expense of "decent guys who just wanted a chance to date and have a meaningful relationship." I responded with the same points as before. I have, unfortunately, yet to hear back.

Though the second interaction never had a positive outcome, both of these men were writing from a place of genuine, personal hurt. The problem is, they were unable to view their personal hurt in a larger, balanced context. This brings me back to my original point. Often, when I'm in an argument with a close friend, it goes like this: the friend tells me, "When you do this thing, it really hurts me." I respond, "Oh yeah, well, I'm also hurt sometimes. And you being hurt hurts me." Rather than listening to them, I try to neutralize the issue. "Well we're both hurt, so I don't have to change unless you do."

But not every case of injustice, of hurt, is equal. It's important to think about context when we react to something we perceive to be antagonistic. Your own hurt may not be the most important factor in a situation. If there's a car wreck in front of you and you're late for work, making sure everyone involved in the wreck is okay is more important than clearing the road so you can keep driving. As I said, I struggle with this in daily interaction, not just in larger political and social arguments. The realization that not everything has to be balanced, that many issues don't have multiple, equal sides, is difficult, especially when you have a personal connection to one of those sides. But in order to move forward, in order to better ourselves and the culture we create and live in, it's important for us

to start.

Neil Hilborn

"Usually, when I obsess over things, I see germs
sneaking into my skin. I see myself crushed
by an endless succession of cars. She
was the first beautiful thing I ever got stuck on."

—from "OCD"

Neil Hilborn is a College National Poetry Slam Champion, and a 2011 graduate with honors from Macalester College with a degree in Creative Writing. Neil was a member of the 2011 Macalester Poetry Slam team, which ranked first in the nation at the 2011 College National Poetry Slam. He co-coached the 2012 Macalester team, leading them to a second place finish nationally. He was also a member of the Minneapolis adult National Poetry Slam team in 2011, which placed 5th out of 80 teams from cities across the country at the adult National Poetry Slam. He is the co-founder of Thistle, a Macalester literary magazine, and has run numerous writing workshops with college and high school students. His work has been featured in publications such as Borderline Magazine and Orange Quarterly.

OCD

The first time I saw her, everything in my head went quiet. All the tics, all the constantly refreshing images, just disappeared.

When you have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, you don't really get quiet moments. Even in bed I'm thinking: did I lock the door yes did I wash my hands yes did I lock the door yes did I wash my hands yes. But when I saw her, the only thing I could think about was the hairpin curve of her lips or the eyelash on her cheek the eyelash on her cheek the eyelash on her cheek. I knew I had to talk to her.

I asked her out six times. In thirty seconds. She said yes after the third one, but none of them felt right so I had to keep going. On our first date I spent more time organizing my meal by color than I did eating or talking to her, but she loved it. She loved that I had to kiss her goodbye sixteen times, or twenty-four times if it was Wednesday. She loved that it took me forever to walk home because there are a lot of cracks in our sidewalk.

When we moved in together, she said that she felt safe, like no one would ever rob us because I definitely locked the door eighteen times. I'd always watch her mouth when she talked when she talked when she talked when she talked. When she said she loved me, her mouth would curl up at the edges. At night, she'd lay in bed and watch me turn all the lights off and on and off and on and off and on and off and on and off. She'd close her eyes and imagine that days and nights were passing in front of her.

Some mornings, I'd start kissing her goodbye but she'd just leave because I was making her late for work. When I stopped at a crack in the sidewalk, she just kept walking. When she said she loved me, her mouth was a straight line. She told me I was taking up too much of her time.

Last week she started sleeping at her mother's place.

She told me that she shouldn't have let me get so attached,
that this whole thing was a mistake, but how
can it be a mistake that I don't have to wash my hands
after I touch her? Love is not a mistake. It's killing me
that she can run away from this and I just can't. I can't
go out and find someone new because I always think of her.

Usually, when I obsess over things, I see germs
sneaking into my skin. I see myself crushed
by an endless succession of cars. She
was the first beautiful thing I ever got stuck on.
I want to wake up every morning thinking
about the way she holds her steering wheel.
How she turns shower knobs like she's opening a safe.
How she blows out candles blows out candles blows out
candles blows out candles blows out candles blows out candles
blows out—now, I just think about who else is kissing her.
I can't breathe because he only kisses her once.
He doesn't care if it's perfect. I want her back so bad,
I leave the door unlocked. I leave the lights on.

Today, on The Wild Kingdom, we will observe

The Mating Habits of the North American Hipster.

Look there. Just through those bushes. We can see the hipsters dancing. Watch as they do something called “freaking” to something called “dubstep.” No, that is not other animals mating, it is dubstep. Observe how they keep their faces as relaxed as possible so as to not seem too invested in the activity at hand. The male even produces a pocketwatch from inside of his neon yellow vest. He then goes on Craigslist to search for more pocketwatches. Notice his smartphone case that weighs as much as and resembles a pocketwatch.

Remember always the hipster creed: “Why be efficient when you could be inefficient?”

The preliminary mating ritual is now over. Let us follow them back to the filthy hovel in which they will attempt to produce awful, mustachioed babies. Hipster dens are often decorated in trash, and this one is no different: bent bicycle rims and brown paper bags are nailed to every wall. But what is this? The male is continuing his disinterested façade! He is...he is sitting down to his typewriter! Extraordinary! Now he is taking an Instagram photograph of himself, at his typewriter, blatantly ignoring the half-naked female in the background! In retaliation, the female is using his straight razor to shave her pubic hair into what she is calling her pusstache. Or perhaps her muffin chops. Now she is taking her Macbook, and his Macbook, and her other Macbook, and her book on Macbooks and arranging them in a circle. The male deems this an acceptable mating habitat, and amidst the Apple products, he mounts her—indifferently—but not before setting his Deguerrotype camera to take a silver nitrate photograph of them humping. Slooooooowly.

Remember always the hipster ideal: if you base your life around your possessions, make sure they are bizarre, inconvenient, and obsolete, for then no one can accuse you of being shallow.

Dear viewer, you may laugh at the noble hipster, but consider this: He has a fixed-gear bicycle, you have a Lexus. You drink top shelf liquor, he drinks PBR at bars where it costs ten dollars. You have a diamond ring, she has a tattoo of a diamond ring. Next to her vagina.

Indeed, the hipster may be an asshole materialist, but at least he warns you with his uncomfortable shoes made of vegan alligator skin and good intentions.

No, dear viewer, I would posit to you that the North American Hipster is just like us, only, sillier.

The News Anchor Is Crying

because I called in during a Q and A segment and broke up with her on air.

Q: Is dating a news anchor the dangerous and sexy fun you would imagine?

A: I never got to ride in a helicopter. A: I never got to see horrific tiger accidents. A: She never

took me tanning or teeth-bleaching. She also never said "I love you," but that was probably

because A: she half-believes she is a robot but with less emotional capacity, circuits

where the veins should be, or because the dark is rising, or because her hair and thereby the timing

was never right, or because she actually didn't love me, because she probably didn't, why

would she, but anyway, the news anchor is crying and now she has to report on a shooting,

another shooting on the north side of town and her hair is just right. The tears are just so.

Rachel Rostad

"No wonder Harry Potter's got yellow fever.
We giggle behind small hands and "no speak Engrish."
What else could a man see in me?
What else could I be but what you made me?
Subordinate. Submissive. Subplot."

—from "To JK Rowling, from Cho Chang"

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To J.K. Rowling, from Cho Chang

When you put me in your books, millions of Asian girls across America rejoiced. Finally, a potential Halloween costume that wasn't a geisha or Mulan! What's not to love about me? I'm everyone's favorite character! I totally get to fight tons of Death Eaters and have a great sense of humor and am full of complex emotions!

Oh wait. That's the version of Harry Potter where I'm *not* fucking worthless.

First of all, you put me in Ravenclaw. Of course the only Asian at Hogwarts would be in the nerdy house. Too bad there wasn't a house that specialized in computers and math and karate, huh?

I know, you thought you were being tolerant. Between me, Dean, and the Indian twins, Hogwarts has, like, five brown people? It doesn't matter we're all minor characters. Nah, you're not racist! Just like how you're not homophobic! Dumbledore's totally gay! Of course it's never said in the books, but man, gays don't *just* have to be closeted in real life—now they can even be closeted fictionally!

Ms. Rowling. Let's talk about my name. Cho. Chang. Cho and Chang are both last names. They are both Korean last names. I am supposed to be Chinese. Me being named "Cho Chang" is like a Frenchman being named "Garcia Sanchez."

So, thank you. Thank you for giving me no heritage. Thank you for giving me a name as generic as a ninja costume. As chopstick hair ornaments. Ms. Rowling, I know you're just the latest participant in a long tradition of turning Asian women into a tragic fetish:

Madame Butterfly: Japanese woman falls in love with a white soldier, is abandoned, kills herself.
Miss Saigon: Vietnamese woman falls in love with a white soldier, is abandoned, kills herself.
Memoirs of a Geisha. Lucy Liu in leather. Schoolgirl porn.

So let me cry over boys more than I speak.

Let me fulfill your diversity quota.
Just one more brown girl mourning her white hero.

No wonder Harry Potter's got yellow fever.
We giggle behind small hands and "no speak Engrish."
What else could a man see in me?
What else could I be but what you made me?
Subordinate. Submissive. Subplot.

Go ahead. Tell me I'm overreacting.
Ignore the fact that your books have sold
400 million copies worldwide.
I am plastered across movie screens,
a bestselling caricature.

∴

Last summer, I met a boy
who spoke like rain against windows.
He had his father's blue eyes.
He'd press his wrist against mine and say
he was too pale, that my skin
was so much more beautiful.
To him, I was Pacific sunset,
almond milk, a porcelain cup.

When he left me, I told myself
I should have seen it coming.
I wasn't sure I was sad but I cried
anyway. Girls who look like me
are supposed to cry over boys
who look like him.

I'd seen all the movies
and read all the books.

We were just following the plot.

Media Matters: a Lecture Delivered at UC San Diego, November 2013

Last spring, my poem, “To JK Rowling, from Cho Chang,” was put on YouTube. I posted it to Tumblr, thinking there were people who liked slam poetry and people who liked Harry Potter and so maybe some people would like my piece because it was both of those things! Well, they did—I got lots of write-ups and got featured on Jezebel, and even got turned into a gifset. (Still haven’t figured out how to put that on my resume.)

I got lots of criticism, enough to feel justified making a response video. The criticism was for good reasons and bad reasons—which I will discuss tonight, because I think at the heart of my piece and response is the issue of media representation, which is why I was asked to be here tonight.

When I was a kid, I remember disliking Cho Chang—well, first of all because she’s kind of a crappy character, but even more so because she was the only Asian girl I’d ever encountered in any book or movie. I knew I was supposed to identify with her—I dressed up as her for Halloween and midnight releases and midnight showings—but it always felt disappointing. She was so ... boring. As I got older and encountered more Asian women in the media I consumed, I realized they were all variants of the same character. Submissive, shy, beautiful. But not beautiful the way white girls were allowed to be beautiful. Asian girls were never allowed to be more than exotic, foreign, Other.

Though my piece is addressed to JK Rowling, it’s not really about Harry Potter. This is a common form in slam poetry, an open letter—so I get why people unfamiliar with this thought I was attacking JK Rowling personally. Nope, Harry Potter is not the most racist, Orientalist portrayal ever. I wanted to use it as an example because it was so popular, and because Orientalism isn’t always as obvious as geishas anymore. It’s the Asian female character who is silent and giggling and beautiful, a passive sexual object. The Asian female character who must sacrifice herself for a white male character. The Asian female character who is always crying.

As I state in my poem, this depiction of Asian women has a long history in Western media. The East has become the ultimate site of the Other for the Western gaze: a place at once both perilous and alluring. This fear and desire for the East has been transplanted onto women’s bodies. Colonialist fantasies wrapped up into sexual desire. Thus, we have the Dragon Lady, the Lotus Blossom.

Stock characters exist for a reason. As a writer, I totally get that writing comes to us and to a certain extent, we can’t control what inspires us. However, those first inspirations often resonate with us so much because they’re clichés. For example, it feels “right” to write a hero who’s an orphan. It feels “right” to have a nerdy girl wear glasses. In the same way, it feels “right” to write a shy, crying female who is Asian. As any creative writing teacher will tell you, these characters who feel “right” are often the most boring and flat, even outside of a racialized context. Inside a racialized context, it becomes tokenizing.

In response to my piece, many have asked me why artists should be expected to learn the

perspectives of people whose identities they don't share. As they say, "write what you know." But in my opinion, writers and artists are uniquely skilled in that they are able to imagine worlds beyond their own. Perspectives that they might not share in real life. Would any writer say, "I'm not a bad person, so I can't possibly write a villain"? "I don't have children so I can't write a realistic mother"? No. I think that the same questions when exploring characters you don't immediately relate with are applicable to oppressed social groups as well. Research. Intentionality. Vulnerability.

To those who responded to my piece that Harry Potter is "just a book," I respond: All art is political. It's the title of this event—Media Matters! Media does matter. Harry Potter is not politically neutral just because it's "art" or "a book." It has political opinions. Maintaining the status quo is a political stance.

These representations of Asian women have tangible impacts. Let me give you a particularly salient example. This last fall, I attended a protest of Miss Saigon in the Twin Cities in Minnesota. The Twin Cities are home to a large Asian population. The Ordway, a local theater, was putting on Miss Saigon, whose Orientalist & colonial themes I touched on in my piece. I attended the protest and handed out flyers about the cause. Two white boys walked through the square where we were protesting and told me and a friend: "We totally support you!" After they had walked past and were across the street, they shouted back: "Because you're beautiful!"

Though this was obviously super annoying, the writer part of me is glad it happened just because it's just such a nice symbolic moment that sums up a lot of what I'm talking about tonight. The repeated representation of Asian woman as only being valuable because of their exotic beauty—like in Miss Saigon—results in a culture that produces boys like these: who see an Asian woman not as a person but an object, even when she's handing out pamphlets at a protest.

There were definitely some valid critiques of my Cho Chang piece. I performed a slightly edited version for you tonight. In the original poem, for the sake of a better joke, I used the line "Cho and Chang are both last names. They are both Korean last names. Me being named Cho Chang is like a Frenchman being named Garcia Sanchez." Which is not quite true. I used the lens of the Korean names for the sake of the brevity of the joke, and I totally understand why this is—ironically enough—misrepresentative.

Responding to critiques of my piece has been really illuminating for me. I'm a Korean adoptee, raised in a white, middle-class family, so I'm not exactly the typical Asian-American. Though I am affected by racial issues, it's not quite the same as being first-generation, second-generation, and so on. I also have not formally studied American Studies in college. When I was talking about my anxiety about my identity as an Asian-American with some friends, particularly in relation to my mistakes with the Cho Chang piece, they told me that I don't need to have academic authority or align with some invented standards of "authenticity." My lived experience was enough for me to talk about Asian women. I don't know if I quite buy that, so now I've just been trying to be more intentional about how I position myself.

But I want to question a portion of this mindset—I want to question, at least a little bit, my worries over misrepresentation. I've gotten lots of messages from Asian women who tell me that I'm way off-base, and that I am misrepresenting them and their experiences. I totally understand this frustration; isn't it the same thing I feel about Cho Chang? There are some Asian women and girls who recognize themselves in her. Are they duped? No. Instead, I want to pose the question: What is

it about our society that makes us so sensitive to representations of our marginalized identities? It's because the norm is the white, heterosexual male. Anyone that deviates is reduced to one salient label: Brown. Queer. Black. Female. Trans. It's sad that we live in a society where my voice is so easily mistaken for any Asian woman's—where our differing identities are so easily seen as interchangeable.

So how can we fight this? How can we get a diversity of identities—and more importantly, diversity within those identities—represented? In our vast, multicultural country, many scholars argue that it is the media that unites us. It gives us a shared language: the language of *The Simpsons* and *James Bond*. The language of *Twilight* and, yes, *Harry Potter*. If this is true, imagine the impact of a show or movie or book series that represented more identities than just a white heterosexual male and his love interests.

Of course, it's hard to say whether media representations cause real life stereotyping or the other way around. I think of the media as a magnifying glass: It takes what's already there, simplifies it, makes it more extreme. *Cho Chang* wouldn't work if people didn't already think of Asian women the way they do.

I wish there was a straightforward solution. Media change and policy change have to be interlinked with grassroots social change as well. So where can we start? I'm sure we have some artists in this room: We can create this art ourselves. And we are all a potential audience.

Since I don't want you to come away from my *Cho Chang* poem and this talk feeling guilty for liking *Harry Potter*, I want to quote Reni Eddo-Lodge, who wrote a lovely piece about my poem for a UK feminist blog, *the F Word*. She says, quite eloquently: "We're going to like some of this media, but that doesn't make us bad people. We might unwittingly participate in the status quo, because it benefits us in some way or another - and that doesn't make us bad either. But we always need to be vigilant, and we always need to acknowledge the fact that it exists."

And I'd like to add: Sometimes there is very little we can do besides raising our voices. We cannot always see tangible policy changes when we speak up. An activist's life would indeed be very depressing if that was always our expectation. Our voices, sometimes, must be enough.

Kyle "Guante" Tran Myhre

"We teach boys how to wear the skin of a man,
but we also teach them how to raise that skin
like a flag and draw blood for it."

—from "Ten Responses to the Phrase 'Man Up'"

Kyle "Guante" Tran Myhre is a hip hop artist, two-time National Poetry Slam Champion, social justice activist, educator and writer. He and/or his work has appeared on Upworthy, MSNBC, Racialicious, Feministing, MPR, the Progressive, City Pages' "Artists of the Year" list, and URB Magazine's "Next 1000" list. He's shared bills with Talib Kweli, Saul Williams, Brother Ali, Dead Prez, Sage Francis, Andrea Gibson, Doomtree, Zion I and many more. Guante also founded the MN Activist Project and Hip Hop Against Homophobia concert series, writes a regular column at Opine Season, and facilitates writing/performance workshops for youth.

Ten Responses to the Phrase “Man Up”

1. Fuck you.
2. If you want to question my masculinity, like a schoolyard circle of curses, like a swordfight with lightsaber erections, save your breath. Because contrary to what you may believe, not every problem can be solved by “growing a pair.” You cannot arm-wrestle your way out of chemical depression. The CEO of the company that just laid you off does not care how much you bench. And I promise, there is no lite beer in the universe full-bodied enough to make you love yourself.
3. “Man up?” Oh, that’s that new superhero, right? Mild-mannered supplement salesman Mark Manstrong says the magic words “MAN UP,” and then transforms into THE FIVE O’CLOCK SHADOW, the massively-muscled, deep-voiced, leather-duster-wearing super-man who defends the world from, I don’t know, feelings.
4. Of course. Why fight to remove our chains when we can simply compare their lengths? Why step outside the box when the box has these badass flame decals on it? We men are cigarettes: dangerous, and poisonous, and stupid.
5. You ever notice how nobody ever says “woman up?” They just imply it. Because women, and the women’s movement, figured out a long time ago that being explicitly ordered around by commercials, magazines, and music is dehumanizing. When will men figure that out?
6. The phrase “Man Up” suggests that competence and perseverance are uniquely masculine traits. That women—not to mention any man who doesn’t eat steak, drive a big pickup truck, and have lots of sex with women—are nothing more than background characters, comic relief, props. More than anything, though, it suggests that to be yourself—whether you wear skinny jeans, rock a little eyeliner, drink some other brand of lite beer, or write poetry—will cost you.
7. How many boys have to kill themselves before this country acknowledges the problem? How many women have to be assaulted? How many trans people have to be murdered? We teach boys how to wear the skin of a man, but we also teach them how to raise that skin like a flag and draw blood for it.
8. Boy babies get blue socks. Girl babies get pink socks. What about purple? What about green? What about orange, yellow, chartreuse, cerulean, black, tie-dyed, buffalo plaid, rainbow.
9. I want to be free to express myself. *Man up.* I want to have meaningful, emotional relationships with my brothers. *Man up.* I want to be weak sometimes. *Man up.* I want to be strong in a way that isn’t about physical power or dominance. *Man up.* I want to talk to my son about something other than sports. *Man up.* I want to be who I am. *Man up.*
10. No.

Both Sides of the “Is Poetry Dead?” Debate Miss the Big Picture

Every few months, someone publishes another “Is Poetry Dead?” essay. I understand why—it’s easy click-bait, and there are certainly valid arguments to be made on both sides of the debate regarding aesthetic populism, outreach to new audiences, the accessibility of MFA programs and other weighty topics. The problem, however, is how the question is framed: poetry is dead because fewer people buy poetry books or read poetry journals, or poetry is dead because it’s stylistically stagnant, or poetry is dead because it doesn’t have a presence in the upper echelons of American media or culture.

Left out of these equations, due to either simple ignorance or a willful distaste for the form (and its practitioners), is performance poetry. Even the inevitable response essays and counterpoints that talk about how vibrant and important poetry still is almost always ignore performance poetry.

And performance poetry is very much alive. Just about everywhere in the U.S. and beyond, colleges, high schools, community centers and after-school programs are using it as a tool for both education and empowerment. Videos are going viral and racking up millions of YouTube views every day. Poetry slams and poetry-focused open mics are drawing larger and larger audiences. I, and a number of my peers, make a living through poetry, whether or not we’ve been published. This movement is growing, and is only going to get bigger.

In two days, I’ll be leaving for Brave New Voices, one of the biggest, most vibrant annual performance poetry festivals in the world. I have the honor of coaching the team representing Minnesota this year. Out of respect for all the work they’ve been doing, I wanted to use this space to share a few thoughts on why I think performance poetry is—and will continue to be—important.

Performance Poetry Recognizes that Everyone Has a Valuable Story

Maybe some people think poetry is dead because they’ve built their ivory tower so tall they can’t see us moving around down here. A fundamental pillar of performance poetry is that it’s open. It’s democratic. Anyone can show up, sign up, and share something. You don’t need an MFA, or a co-sign from some authority, or X number of publishing credits to write, appreciate, or critique poetry. Poetry is for everyone.

Does that mean that you’ll often hear some stuff you don’t like at the local open mic? Of course. Hell, I dislike most performance poetry that I hear. But I can also see the bigger picture—at a given event (or online space like YouTube), you have the masters and the beginners, the innovators and the hacks, the elders and the youth, all right next to each other. Everyone learns from everyone. Everyone pushes everyone.

Furthermore, when you open up the space for performers, you also open up the audience. Performance poetry, nationally, is truly multicultural and multigenerational. This means that it’s also relevant; it’s connected to the community. There is incredible value in that.

Performance Poetry Creates Spaces for Real Community Dialogue

I've traveled all over the country as a performer, and everywhere I go, people are using poetry to tell their stories. They're talking about the issues that are important to them. They're having in-depth conversations, networking, and building movements. And whether the audience is in the dozens, hundreds, or thousands, they're doing all this publicly. And loudly.

There's a stereotype that all performance poetry is political. And while subject matter in the performance poetry community is actually very diverse, there is an element of truth to that stereotype—a lot of it does deal with social justice issues. The key, however, is in understanding why that is. Where else can a teenager get up in front of 300 people and talk about racial profiling (and be applauded wildly)? Where else can a survivor of domestic abuse do the healing work of sharing her story? Where else are we celebrating both the linguistic ingenuity and the change-making ability of young people? Where else are we getting large groups of people in the same room at the same time to appreciate language, share our stories, and build community?

These spaces matter; we're witnessing an artistic movement, but also something that transcends that.

Performance Poetry Crosses Boundaries

Both of the first two points could be considered “extracurriculars.” What about the art itself? Isn't performance poetry all just style-over-substance, formulaic ranting and raving and pandering?

Some of it is, sure. But if we're going to judge a culture by its stereotypes, shall we talk about how all page poetry is soulless, masturbatory navel-gazing? Or how it's all just intricately-constructed gibberish about trees and clouds and shit? Or how it's all white yuppies refusing to engage with any issue or idea outside “the exploration of the now” for fear that writing something relevant will “dilute their Art?”

To generalize like that is unfair and inaccurate. Page poetry can be engaging and exciting. And performance poetry is so much bigger than that one crappy open mic you went to five years ago. Even the page/stage divide is a false binary—an enormous overlap exists between published poets and performance poets, and we can all learn from each other.

The takeaway here is that while there is a lot of not-so-great performance poetry out there, the best stuff is some of the most breathtakingly dynamic and powerful art being made right now. Check out Bamuthi's “red, black & GREEN: a blues” or Khary Jackson's “An Unauthorized Biography of Superfly” or any Patricia Smith you can find on YouTube. The best performance poetry combines rigorous word-craft with theater, music, dance, rhetoric, stand-up, storytelling, and other arts, creating a hybrid form that is then presented directly to living, breathing audiences. The performative element doesn't take away from the artistry—when it's done right, it adds to it.

And you don't have to like it. We could go back and forth forever arguing about the art itself, but one thing that isn't up for debate is the fact that performance poetry has an audience. It's a diverse audience. It skews young. It's the future of poetry. And that's scary for some people, but progress always is.

Pages Matam

"Rape is a coward hiding its face
in the make-up of silence,
a murderous fruit that grows best
in the shadows of taboo."

—from "Piñatas"

Pages Matam is a multidimensional creative writing and performance artist, residing in the D.C. metropolitan area but originally from Cameroon, Africa. He is a Write Bloody author, educator, activist, playwright, host, event organizer, award winning slam poet, and his greatest accomplishment is being a father. A proud gummy bear elitist, bowtie enthusiast, professional hugger, and anime fanatic, be prepared to be taken on a journey of cultural and personal discovery unapologetic in its silly, yet visceral, and beautifully honest in its storytelling.

Piñatas

After Tina Mion's "Piñata" painting

To the man on the bus
I overheard tell a woman in conversation,
presumably a friend, "you are too ugly to be raped."

Dear man on the bus,
Tell the one in five women of this country
they are beautiful, their four counterparts
spared torment ugly.

Tell the one in three women of this world
that you will not make piñatas of their bodies.
Watch morsels of them spill greedily
to the famished smiles of your ignorance
shaped like bloodthirsty children. How your words
broke them open like a shattered papier-mâché cradle,
their blood flowed like candy until hollow insides,
their jaws mangled into misfortune from
when they tried to scream for legs torn crucifix,
loud cry of eyes muted.
Tell them how beautiful their silence is.

Dear man on the bus,
From smothering cat-calls
to a quickened pace of trek home:
Raped with a dress on,
Raped without a dress on,
Raped as children who couldn't even dress themselves.
Tell them how ugly their consent was.
Tell the depression, the post-traumatic stress,
the unreported. Tell Mahmudiyah,
a footnote in the history of crimson Iraqi sands,
how beautiful the military's silence is,
cloaked in how we don't ask and they
didn't tell in the name of country.

Tell Elizabeth Fritzl
how pretty the flame of her skin was,
turning her father into a torturous moth of incest
'til she gave birth to seven choices she never had.

Dear man on the bus,
Tell my 11th grade student Lauren
that she wanted it, her beauty had them coming.
Tell my 7th grade student Mickayla
that she wanted it, her beauty had him coming.
Tell my 3rd grade student Andre
that he wanted it, his beauty had him coming.
Tell the 8-year-old me
the God in me I loved fiercely was so gorgeous
that cousin twice my age
wanted to molest the Holy out of me,
peeled raw, until I was as ugly as she was.

Rape is a coward hiding its face
in the make-up of silence,
a murderous fruit that grows best
in the shadows of taboo,
a Vietnam prostitute with red, white, and blue skin.
A murmur of bodies left vacant by the souls that spend
years, pills, poems, and even death
trying to learn how to reclaim them.

Dear nameless assailant,
How this bus carries the burden
of your stick and blindfold patriarchy
that has only taught you to treat women
like ceiling-strung jugs. Violence claws up
from your throat like a monstrous accomplice
to the 97 percent that will never see jail.

Dear man on the bus,
As these words fall out of your mouth,
I pray no one finds your children beautiful enough
to break open, making a decorative, silent spectacle out of them.

To the men/people on the bus

On the aftermath of going viral, the effects of Piñatas, and understanding my responsibility as a man and artist.

Peace.

So a lot of people have asked: “What exactly happened? What did you hear? Did you ever get to speak to the man on the bus?”

No, I never got to actually speak to the man on the bus. I would have loved to, to have positive dialogue on how what he said is problematic, that rape is never something to joke about whether with ill intent or not. On what being an active ally means and how it starts within, with curing your own violent language and showing love and compassion always. How the small things are what can make such a BIG difference. I don't hate the man, nor do I have any anger towards him. But the experience itself, just hearing those words, was triggering due to my own experience.

I was getting off of work riding home on my usual route. Sitting maybe two seats in front of me, this young black man (let's call him X), is in a conversation with another young black man and a young black woman. They all look about the same age range, 18-28. They were talking about a party that took place, presumably in their neighborhood, where a woman they knew was raped and no one said anything. Facing X, the young woman responded, saying, “I know no [person] could ever rape me, because I would fight and beat their ass and kill a muhfucker that would try to even touch me that way.”

This is when X, as I state in my poem, replied to her in laughter: “Girl shut up, you are too ugly to be raped.”

After I heard those words, I turned around and saw his eyes, and X locked with mine and even if it was for a small fraction of time, he understood what just happened, how what he said was wrong, that no matter how his “friend” even took it, it wasn't well taken at all. But it was a split second. A quarrel then ensued, and I saw the face of the young woman he was talking to—she did not look happy. I wanted to get up, I wanted to say something.

But by then, I had blacked out. Almost immediately after hearing those 7 words, my heart began beating increasingly fast. I felt my blood stirring, the floodgates of memories I had thought locked away came through: the rush of emotions, the pain, everything. I don't even remember to this day how I got home. But there I was, in my dark room in tears. I thought almost it was a dream. I wished it was. I wanted to write, I still didn't know how, I felt raw all over again. I put some words down, but nothing stuck. Even with therapy (both medical and through art as I do now), even with years of time for “healing,” after the poems, the feeling of being strong, the notion that I know is so pervasive and completely erroneous of “manning up” and toughening up, that single moment, made me feel like that small child all over again. How depressed I had been, how ugly I've felt (and still

battle with most days) for so many years, the amount of loneliness I had accumulated for feeling like no one cared, no one could help me to deal with the fact that an older female cousin twice my age raped me, and that another family member molested me, and that being an African man—a culture where manliness is exalted, where it means not speaking about your emotions, where rape/molestation of a man is even more taboo—did not make me feel strong or help me at all.

Three weeks later, when I saw Tina Mion's painting, the concept and the imagery became more vivid—that's how I felt when I went through my experience, like a piñata, being broke open, the goodness I had inside of me stolen, for the pleasures of another person, until I was left empty. How I broke down in the museum, looking at that painting, in front of my then 5-year-old son, him not understanding or knowing what had happened three weeks earlier, and what is happening now.

I am happy to be a bit stronger now, for my son, my loved ones, but most importantly, for myself. Artists, especially poets, have this tendency to want to cure all of the ailments of the world. We bear such superhero complexes with our words, when we ourselves are still very messed up individuals inside that can barely take care of our own torment. I chose to no longer do that when it came to my own journey. I chose to take more action, understanding that I cannot help others heal if I blatantly ignore my own healing.

I am so thankful that Art Therapy has helped me so much without even knowing what it was, which is what I try to demonstrate for youth and adults I workshop and teach with. I am so thankful for the support of trusted ones in my slam community that helped me through this poem, for the loved ones I was able to open up to, even if it was very small. Trust, for someone who is always as guarded as I am, means a lot. Without them I don't know where I would be. I am thankful for my son, this beautiful bundle of joy and innocence, that reminds me every day why I need to keep pushing, that it is going to get ugly, but we have to #talkUGLY in order to live beautiful. In order for my son to live beautiful, and for him to do everything in his power to hold that beauty for himself. Furthermore, this work is in support of others who may have their beauty, their bodies, their voices taken away.

I want to keep growing as a person, and be a part of a community of healing, a safe space for people to have healthy dialogue and discourse, and to stand together to uphold each other as we fight against anything or anyone spreading this emotional, mental, and physical violence through speech, actions, or silence. Silence is violence. I especially implore the men, as many of you have been pouring so much love and sharing your stories: speak. In support of women and those closely affected, speak against the rape culture. Speak to other men, to the boys. Communication is words, but it is mostly in action. How do our bodies communicate what we want or mean to do with our words? The silence in your speech will reflect the silence in your actions. We have to stand up, we have to take action, and keep each other accountable. All people. To not fall to the farce that women are only emotional, hence all they say is invalid and erratic because there is no logic involved. To not fall to the farce that men are not emotional, that we do not feel, and that we must always be “manly,” that to talk about how someone has traumatized you is not acceptable. To not fall to the farce, that this issue is only a “women's issue” so men should stay out of it. Of course this goes far beyond just strictly men and women; the spectrum stretches so wide, it is an ALL-ENCOMPASSING ISSUE across genders. We men, who are afforded more privilege in the current power structure, are the ones who should be taking even more action.

The first change comes from within. I know I myself have to constantly be aware of how much space I am taking up, and be aware of my own faults and shortcomings, checking myself on my own

speech, actions, and even silence. This will not be easy. This is not something a lot of people care about because they don't think it "affects" them. This is something a lot of people care about, but don't feel they can speak about, because they either don't know how to or are too scared to. And I want to make one of my missions, through my art, through my speaking, through my teaching, to let anyone I meet know that you can absolutely be the change that you want to see. That love and compassion is key, that active listening (listening to understand, not listening to respond) is necessary, that making people aware is necessary, that YOU are necessary.

So to the young man on the bus:

Dear X,

I wish I could've spoken to you, about the many reasons why, however you may have said it, even if said in jest, it does not make it ok. That I don't know if you saw the look on the young woman's face that you said this to like I did, but she did not take it in jest. That free speech does not equal dumb speech. Does not equal hurtful speech. Does not equal hateful speech. Does not equal foul speech. Your freedom to speak doesn't take away any of my freedoms to talk back and tell you how I feel if you are threatening the safe spaces, the sanity, the health, the bodies, the places of people all around. If you have seen the video, reach out to me. Understand that this poem is not me trying to attack your free speech, that it is me as a survivor, as a person that still deals with the constant pain and memories of it all, as a person who is an ally to those who go through daily struggles of being comfortable in their own skin when being bombarded with triggers and things this society uses to perpetuate trauma and silence, that I'm not just speaking to you directly, I'm speaking to a mentality, to an entire pervasive culture, of men/people on the bus, on the train, in the alley, at the party, at the family reunion, at the store, on the street, in the music, in the movies, in the home as one tries to sleep, who believe making such statements or acting upon that mentality of those associating beauty with rape, who believe that rape jokes are just jokes, that associating or excusing rape or giving reasons for it other than what it is, RAPE, makes any of it ok, when it absolutely is not.

Be aware of the energy you carry in your words and the work of your hands. You never know who is listening. You never know how this may hurt them, or even save them.

I must say if it wasn't for you, X, this poem would've never happened. I would've never chosen that day to go back and make the decision to face my trauma, and work towards rising and healing above it—a privilege a lot of people don't always get, either due to resources, or lack of support, or just plain loss of will. I am grateful for how far I have come, and for how much longer I still have to go. I am grateful for the Grace and love of God holding on to me, and never letting go, even despite all of the times I've wanted to, all the times I actually did let go. Through your violent speech, you somehow managed to in a small, yet very large way, save me.

Now I understand and can grasp my purpose even more, on the necessary work I must do, to help create, uphold, and keep a safe path, for those still trying, still working, still fighting, to save themselves.

Amen.

Lily Myers

"I wonder if my lineage is one of women shrinking,
making space for the entrance of men into their lives,
not knowing how to fill it back up once they leave."

—from "Shrinking Women"

Lily Myers is a Sociology student at Wesleyan University, where she competed on the 2012-2013 WeSLAM team. She grew up in Seattle, Washington and is convinced that by sharing and listening to each other's writing, we can better understand and thus humanize each other. She loves poetry for the way it makes us honest and vulnerable. She is looking for poetry submissions for her feminist blog: <http://shapeswemake.tumblr.com>. Contact her with thoughts or submissions at lmyers@wesleyan.edu.

Shrinking Women

Across from me at the kitchen table,
my mother smiles over red wine
that she drinks out of a measuring glass.
She says she doesn't deprive herself,
but I've learned to find nuance in every movement
of her fork, in every crinkle in her brow
as she offers me the uneaten pieces on her plate.
I've realized she only eats dinner when I suggest it.
I wonder what she does when I'm not there to do so.

Maybe this is why my house feels bigger
each time I return; it's proportional.
As she shrinks, the space around her
seems increasingly vast.

She wanes while my father waxes. His stomach
has grown round with wine, late nights, oysters, poetry.
A new girlfriend who was overweight as a teenager,
but my dad reports that now she's "crazy about fruit."

It was the same with his parents; as my grandmother
became frail and angular, her husband swelled
to red round cheeks, rotund stomach.
I wonder if my lineage is one of women shrinking,
making space for the entrance of men into their lives,
not knowing how to fill it back up once they leave.

I have been taught accommodation.
My brother never thinks before he speaks.
I have been taught to filter.
"How can anyone have a *relationship to food*,"
he asks, laughing, as I eat the black bean soup
I chose for its lack of carbs.
I want to say: we come from difference,
Jonas, you have been taught to grow *out*
while I have been taught to grow *in*.
You learned from our father how to emit,
how to produce, to roll each thought off your tongue
with confidence. You used to lose your voice
every other week from shouting so much.
I learned to absorb. I took lessons from our mother
in creating space around myself.

I learned to read the knots in her forehead
while the guys went out for oysters.
I never meant to replicate her, but,
you spend enough time sitting across from someone
and you pick up their habits.

This is why women in my family have been shrinking
for decades. We all learned it from each other,
the way each generation taught the next how to knit,
weaving silence in between the threads which I can still feel
as I walk through this ever-growing house,
skin itching, picking up all the habits
my mother has unwittingly dropped
like bits of crumpled paper from her pocket
on her countless trips from bedroom to kitchen
to bedroom again, nights I hear her creep down
to eat plain yogurt in the dark, a fugitive stealing calories
to which she does not feel entitled,
deciding how many bites is too many,
how much space she deserves to occupy.

Watching the struggle, I either mimic or hate her.
I don't want to do either anymore, but the burden
of this house has followed me across the country.
I asked five questions in genetics class today
and all of them started with the word "sorry."
I don't know the requirements for the sociology major
because I spent the entire meeting deciding
whether or not I could have another piece of pizza,
a circular obsession I never wanted but

inheritance is accidental,
still staring at me with wine-stained lips
from across the kitchen table.

Letters to Ourselves

After the Shrinking Women video became popular, I was overwhelmed with responses from people I'd never met, expressing support, love and their own stories. What was striking to me was the amount and variety of people who could resonate with the same story, seeing themselves or their loved ones in the same set of words. Each line below is taken from responses I received. Thank you to everybody who reached out. Words can connect us, words can set us free.

Dear poet,
I hope those are not mere words.
I hope there is life in the poetry.
I feel awakened by it somehow.
Truth sets one free:
say it over and over again.

Dear mother,
I did my first 1/2 marathon today. It did not go well.
There was pain with every step after the 3rd mile.
Body trembling. Another event in which I was the last finisher.

Dear mother,
At night I kiss my little sister's head
and hope she won't be like me.
One of those docile women, eyes hungry.

Dear daughter,
When I was a very little girl
all I wanted to do was shrink.
To be one of those docile women.
I am sad that I didn't grow out of that mold for both of us, you and me.
I know I passed along a lot of unfortunate things.
I wish I could have felt entitled to more space, for my sake and for yours.
I am sorry for that.
I still have my work cut out for me.
I still have to learn.

Dear daughter,
Just a note to say that as women
we can change so much with time
and compassion of ourselves.

Dear sisters,
we are constantly blaming
the nature of the art form

we are constantly blaming
ourselves
our mothers
for things that reach back generations.
We all turn into our moms.
How us women struggle with appearance,
I know how hard that can be.
I have watched grown women talk, eyes hungry,
watched them run, bodies trembling.

Dear sisters,
I'm not necessarily exempt—
I struggled with anorexia for years, as my mom did before me
and my little sister now does, and I think more people
need to be aware of it as the thing that you talk about,
not as a dieting fad or an easily shakeable bad habit.
The only control I had was to not eat.
But I think more people need to be aware of it
as the thing you talk about.
I think we need to talk about it.
I think we need to say it over and over again.
It is brutally true.
It is strength.
It occupies your body.
It reaches back generations.

Dear poet,
Dear mother,
Dear daughter,
Dear sisters,
Dear self,
We fully deserve to occupy these bodies.
Say it over and over again.
Feel awakened by it, somehow.
Breathe change into the world.
Expand and contract to take up space on this planet.
Learn from your mothers
your daughters
your sisters
expand and contract
give other women (eyes hungry, bodies trembling) strength
recovery
brutal truth.
We can change so much
with compassion.
With the miracle cure called Self-Love.
With the expanding and contracting universe.

Dear mother,
when you were a very little girl
all you wanted to do was shrink.
But everything you say
needs to be said over and over again.
You fully deserve the miracle cure called Self-Love.
This is the expanding and contracting universe,
not another event in which you are the last finisher.
Have a wonderful day from a strong woman,
a dancer, a poet, a little sister, a mother of two
in Oregon, California, New York, in high school,
Ireland, recovery.

Dear mother,
we all turn into our moms.
Just a note to say
that for me there is no one
more strong.
We set each other free:
Say it over and over again.

Notes

Thanks, to *The Root*, where Johnson's essay, "Cuz (S)He's Black Too and Sometimes Queer," was first published.

Thanks to all the readers, viewers, listeners, bloggers, journalists, teachers, students, and poets for giving these poems places to live in the world.