

## 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.

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