



OKLAHOMA

HUMANITIES

Spring | Summer 2017

Culture | Issues | Ideas

Learning to
~~love~~
~~like~~
not hate
poetry





ANN THOMPSON
Executive Director

2017—A Year of New Initiatives

At Oklahoma Humanities, the year 2017 begins with continued commitment to serving the public through inspired and inspiring cultural experiences. In addition to successful programs like Museum on Main Street; Let's Talk About it, Oklahoma; *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine; and, of course, our grants program; we're working on special initiatives that we're proud to bring to our state.

First, through a partnership with the Ralph Ellison Foundation, we are sponsoring a series of public meetings on race relations in Oklahoma. Using the texts of one of Oklahoma's most esteemed writers and favorite sons, the Foundation will encourage community conversations to foster greater understanding and to promote the common good.

Second is a multi-faceted look at the Vietnam era. The Fall 2017 issue of this magazine and supplemental programs

will explore this challenging period in our nation's history. Concurrent with the magazine and local programming will be the September debut of an 18-hour, NEH-funded Ken Burns documentary on PBS called *The Vietnam War*. Our objective in focusing on the Vietnam era is to remind those of us who remember the war to think critically of lessons learned (and not learned) from the war, and to inform younger generations of the challenging issues of that period that continue to impact our national identity—the civil rights movement, the changing roles of women, student activism, how we treat veterans, and the roles of music, literature, television, and the media in forming American opinion.

This year promises to be meaningful and rich in opportunities and, as always, we approach it with enthusiasm and dedication to the citizens of our state.



OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES

Culture | Issues | Ideas

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ON THE COVER: *Circa 1968*. Diane Levesque is an assistant professor of art at Carthage College in Kenosha, WI. She has exhibited nationally as a professional artist since 1980, garnering numerous grants, fellowships, and awards. She holds an MFA from the University of Chicago. dianelevesque.net. CONTENTS: *Flowers on a Window Ledge*, John La Farge, circa 1861. National Gallery of Art

 Reader Feedback



I received the Fall/Winter [Democracy] issue of *Oklahoma Humanities*. You are to be commended for such a fine publication. Since this magazine is, as I understand it, aimed at Oklahomans, part of the article entitled “State of the Vote—Your ‘Right’ Revealed” doesn’t accurately reflect the situation in our state.

In Oklahoma it is very easy to receive the necessary ID. When an Oklahoman registers to vote they are given a free Voter Identification Card. They sign the back of the card and present it when they vote. They do not need a photo ID, but certainly may present a government-issued ID if they wish in lieu of the free card. Oklahoma is known as having the best system of voting in the United States. I enjoyed Mr. Sellers’ article.

—Jeannine Long
Oklahoma precinct worker

If ever there was a bipartisan (or multi-partisan) document that shows how the humanities add value to public and civic life—and in plain English—it is the Fall/Winter 2016 “Democracy” issue of *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine. There’s a tradition of excellence in this publication, but I do feel it has scaled yet another height, and reflects so well on the heart and soul of our work. And at such an important time, too.

—Jamil S. Zainaldin, President
Georgia Humanities

A hard copy could only do justice to the experience of reading/viewing the magazine [Fall/Winter, Democracy issue]. I found the essays to be very well written, informative, moderate yet compelling in getting their points of view across—just how a humanities discussion should be presented. It was like having a conversation with these writers.

Disparate points of view expressed congenially is what this whole country needs. And it seems to me that *Oklahoma Humanities* carries on that tradition as well as demonstrating democracy in action in which the First Amendment is used to inform and educate “we, the people.” I am also pleased that Tom Phillips’ artwork is getting more exposure. As with your magazine, the paintings in all their authentic details are very moving and impressive to behold.

—Michael Schaefer
San Francisco, CA

I just wanted to send a brief email to congratulate you on the redesign of the magazine and your rebranding. The magazine looks fabulous. I have enjoyed receiving it for some time now, but you have really moved it to the next level. I also think your new logo is very elegant. Congratulations to all of the Oklahoma Humanities staff.

—Stephen Kidd, Executive Director
National Humanities Alliance

Congrats on all the awards [2016 Beacon Award for Outstanding Nonprofit serving Nonprofits, and seven awards for *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine]. Definitely deserved—and so good for others to acknowledge what a great job you are all doing. Keep up the good work!

—Luann Sewell Waters

 Social Media | Messages

Social media buzz on the *Child Labor in Oklahoma* exhibit at the Oklahoma History Center, funded in part by a grant from Oklahoma Humanities:

I made it to the exhibit and I am glad I did. The photos were displayed well. The speakers were informative. Very interesting evening. Thank you.

—Tom Lehner

Great exhibit.

—Dale Ingram

GIVE VOICE TO YOUR IDEAS, opinions, and suggestions. Email the editor, carla@okhumanities.org, or comment via Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

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Oklahoma Humanities awards include twenty-one Oklahoma Society of Professional Journalists awards, including multiple first place honors for Best Writing, Best Cover, and Best PR Publication; five Great Plains Journalism awards, including firsts for best Magazine Feature Writing and best Magazine Page Design; three Central Oklahoma IABC Bronze Quill Awards; the State Historic Preservation Officer's Citation of Merit; and an Oklahoma Heritage Distinguished Editorial Award.

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AT LAST, POETRY

A New Genre from an Old Friend

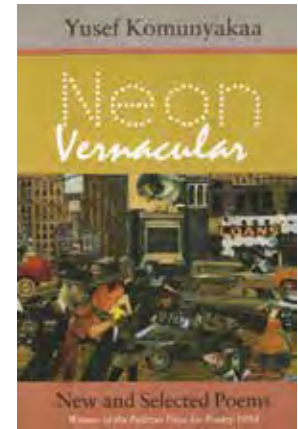
Chances are, if you haven't attended yourself, you know someone who's an enthusiastic follower of Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma (LTAIO). For over 30 years, Oklahoma Humanities has distributed this popular reading and discussion program across the state, bringing communities together to discuss the human experience through the lens of literature.

Programs take place in a variety of venues: local libraries, museums, universities, prison diversion programs for women with children, state prisons, arts and humanities councils, and a veterans' hospital. No matter the audience, exploring the humanities through a common text unites readers, opening doors to new ideas and shared perspectives.

After decades of reading series comprised of fiction and nonfiction, Oklahoma Humanities has three new themes that include poetry.

The "Civil Rights and Equality" series includes *Native Guard: Poems* (Mariner Books, 2007), the Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Natasha Trethewey, nineteenth Poet Laureate of the United States. Trethewey's collection explores issues of race in the Deep South, through the experiences of her own family and the legacy of the Louisiana Native Guard, one of the first black regiments called into service during the Civil War.

The series "War, Not-War, and Peace" features *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems* (Wesleyan, 1993)



from Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Yusef Komunyakaa. *Bloomsbury Review* calls Komunyakaa's poetry, "razor-sharp pieces that tell us more about our culture than any news report." The poems in *Neon Vernacular* reveal the voice of a black man, a child of the South, and a soldier using language to paint a gritty image of life and the Vietnam War.

"Coming and Going in Oklahoma Indian Country," a series developed by author, poet, and musician Joy Harjo, features the work of Joe Dale Tate Nevaquaya in his book *Leaving Holes & Selected New Writings* (Mongrel Empire Press, 2011), winner of the 2012 Oklahoma Book Award for Poetry. Nevaquaya's verse speaks of poverty, pain, and obstacles; of native identity, heritage, and honor; and of humor and our shared humanity.

Whether it is a lifelong passion or an eternal mystery, come explore the language of poetry, revealing the tragedy and beauty that is the human experience. Find a book discussion near you: okhumanities.org/calendar.



The Editor's Desk

CARLA WALKER
carla@okhumanities.org

Poetry. The lonely genre. Poetry suffers from neglect by association: mortifying recitations in front of teachers and classmates, essays on the meaning of obscure verse. It's no wonder we sprint toward fiction or biography or the latest commentary on current events. Anything but poetry.

Why is it, then, that we turn to poetry to mark important occasions? Poetry is there at our beginnings (in love letters and wedding ceremonies, in lullabies, and nursery rhymes, and presidential inaugurations) and at our endings (at the bedsides of the dying, gathered at gravesides, engraved on memorials). We press poetry into service—to woo and soothe, to praise and parade, to console and confess and bless. Poetry is the way we say what we cannot otherwise express.

Poetry is there in times of crisis, too. Poet Meena Alexander was in New York City on 9/11 and explains that writing and reading poetry “was a way to survive”:

People read out poems to each other, on the radio, in Union Square and other public places. There was something about the poem that could allow one the intense expression of emotion so necessary to a time of crisis.

There is something about honing words to an essential few that heightens our experience of them. Brevity somehow makes them memorable. Poet and social activist Margaret Randall notes that: “Perhaps it is poetry’s ability to reduce an idea or emotion to its minimum expression that gives it such staying power.”

You have to admire poets, pursuing their craft in the face of the ever-present question: Does poetry matter? Meena Alexander’s poem “Question Time” recounts a reading where a woman in the audience asks, “What use is poetry?” The poet is thrown by the question, feels the universe shift, and finally replies:

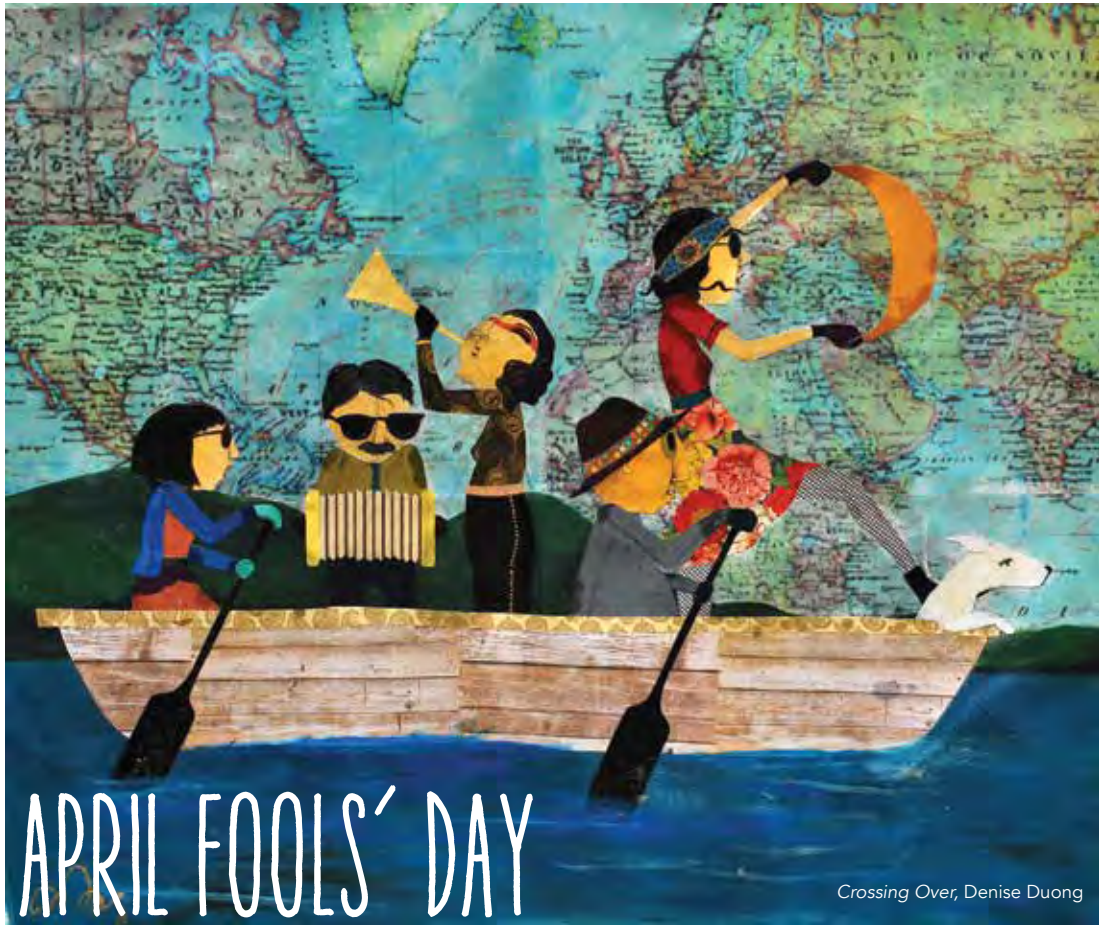
We have poetry
So we do not die of history.

And so, we ask you to suspend judgment, to give poetry a second look. For the novice, we have Ken Hada’s advice on how to read a poem. For the poetry averse, Ryan Stuart Lowe reveals that poets hate poetry, too, and Ben Myers introduces us to six poets who are a pleasant surprise. We see poetry’s cultural versatility in Kimberly Roblin’s tour through cowboy poetry and frontier ballads found in the archives of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum; Paul Varner’s look at how the Beat Generation defied the Establishment with verse; and Jason Stephenson’s riff on how spoken word poets are breaking social barriers—and finding an appreciative audience—through self-expression in the form of poetry. To hail the green buds of spring we’ve planted a garden of verse by Oklahoma poets, including five state poets laureate. Book-ending our issue are reflections from two of the greatest living poets of our generation—Naomi Shihab Nye, who shows us we can find poetry everywhere, and N. Scott Momaday, who eloquently illustrates the poet’s life and fascination with words.

Come on. Give poetry a chance. By the end of this issue, you just might like it—or love it—or at least not hate it so much.



Still Life with Books in a Niche, Barthélémy d' Eyck, circa 1442-1445. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



APRIL FOOLS' DAY IN ADA, OKLAHOMA

Crossing Over, Denise Duong

On finding poetry everywhere!

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

Travelogue, April 1, 2016—Landing in Oklahoma City at midnight, staring up at a lush, clear sky stippled with stars felt breathtaking as a poem. Such a relief to be in a quieter place after the mad bustle of a writing convention in Los Angeles. (Network! Network!)

Richly deep dark Oklahoma night. Who wouldn't like that better? I took a deep breath. Back in the center, the warm belly of the country.

Back to *yu-to-ri*, the “life-space” I learned about in Japan from poetry-loving kids. They had intriguing definitions for this concept: Arriving early so you don't have to rush. Giving yourself room to make a mistake, to surprise yourself. That space you feel inside after hearing, reading, or writing a poem—a space for thinking. I remember what Carl Sandburg said long ago about liking what happens “in the air,” how silence changes after a poem is shared.

Today launched another National Poetry Month (thank you, Academy of American Poets), now a vibrant, stimulating series of events for poetry lovers coast to coast. Two incredibly kind people picked me up to drive to the Scissortail Creative Writing Festival at East Central University in Ada. In the car we quickly found a hundred things to talk about. It felt like poetry—friends you’ve never met before, laughing easily, sharing questions, connections. Small roads, trees, stretching fields, farmhouses, limitless sky . . . then we arrived.

Writers and listeners were milling about in the student center, a building surrounded by spring flowers. I found out later that the elegant campus landscaping has been overseen for thirty years by one of the first friends I ever knew as a teenager arriving in the state of Texas. Seriously? There are millions of people in the world, yet friends keep finding one another.

The Scissortail Festival, expertly organized for the past eleven years by Dr. Ken Hada, has a strong charisma of genuineness—no hype or flash, just honest, interesting writing. (Networking, begone!) Anyone could appreciate the *variety* of voices at the many readings, whatever the style, poetry resonant in all of them, even if writers were reading prose. I listened, listened, growing richer by the hour.

It was easy to make new pals after every session. Some of us ate at a delicious, locally-owned cafe, waved at Blake Shelton’s handsome face on a hometown mural, shopped at a thrift store, visited the book sale at the public library, picked two books off the “free” table. Loretta Yin, born in China, whose business card says “Foreign born . . . art lover . . . avid reader,” was walking around town with a pull-cart full of her wonderful small oil paintings. To own one, you donate any amount you like to the Friends of the Library. We all wanted one.

Everything in Ada felt like a poem. By the end of our time we were family, citizens of a country big enough to share.

Is it an attitude, poetry? A sense of magic and surprise permeating each step? A simple joy in the call and answer of language? An openness? A welcome to the next moment? An awareness that anything might happen, and it might be—good?

Looking back, I have always felt lucky to have been at the Holland Hall school in Tulsa on September 11, 2001. On that horrific day, there was such kindness and humanity present on the campus. Children had just shown me a wondrous display of posters they made using collage strips from road maps on large paper boards. They wrote their own poems between map sections, describing trips and families and dreams, modeled on my poem “Torn Map.”

Think of it: on a day when so many life maps would be ripped asunder, so many families plundered, so much heartbreak launched in the world, the kids in Tulsa were all about linkage and movement and hope. *How precious that memory would feel later on.*

Poetry has always given us a place and a way to express our dreams. And a chance to try to shape our sorrows and troubles into language too.

When you attend a poetry reading, you have no idea what words and images you will hear. Your senses sharpen. You are pitched into calm absorption, a clarified focus. If you don’t understand something or a poem doesn’t quite catch you, no great worry—here comes another one.

Next time someone says they don’t like poetry, say “April Fool! You just don’t like the poems you’ve read ’til now. Find different ones.” Then help them do that. Send them to the library. Give them a book you love or a poem printed on an index card.

It’s not hard to share poetry—our most portable art.



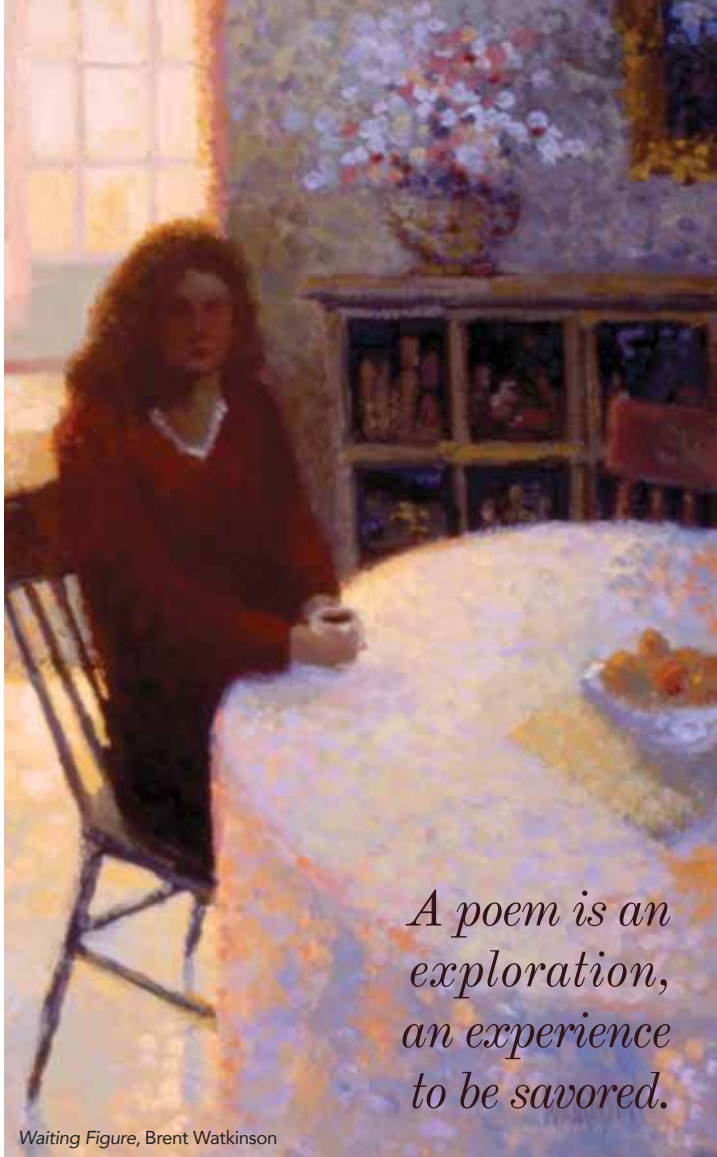
TORN MAP

Once
by mistake
she tore a map
in half.
She taped it back,
but crookedly.
Now all the roads
ended in water.
There were mountains
right next to her hometown.
Wouldn’t that be nice
if it were true?
I’d tear a map
and be right next
to you.

—Naomi Shihab Nye

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE describes herself as a “wandering poet.” Drawing on her Palestinian-American heritage, the cultural diversity of her home in Texas, and experiences from world travels, her writing communicates a shared humanity. She was elected to the Board of Chancellors of the Academy of American Poets in 2010. Among many prestigious honors, she was named laureate of the 2013 NSK Neustadt Award for Children’s Literature. “Torn Map” is from *Come With Me: Poems for a Journey* (Greenwillow Books, 2000) by Naomi Shihab Nye, illustrated by Dan Yaccarino.

DENISE DUONG is a Vietnamese-American artist, currently residing in Oklahoma City. She has a deep love for nature, adventure, and exploration, which she lives through art, one stroke at a time, one layer at a time. Her mixed media works use paper, acrylic, and a variety of printing techniques. deniseduongart.com



Waiting Figure, Brent Watkinson

How to Read a Poem

KEN HADA | ART BY BRENT WATKINSON

A poem is an exploration, an experience to be savored.

I cannot tell you



how to read a poem any more than I can tell you how to enjoy a fine meal. Reading poetry is an individual experience. I can, however, encourage you to taste the meal despite any initial misgivings you may have. I can describe some of the ingredients and, with practice, you will begin to recognize particular ingredients that flavor the dish. But fine dining is not just the sampling of singular ingredients; we must savor the meal as a whole. Let this article serve as a menu as I offer a few suggestions to help you engage more satisfactorily with poetry.

I should tell you that much of what I have to say is not original with me (or any other poet for that matter). Reading poetry is an ancient practice, though lately obscured and distracted in our big-business approach to literature. Generally speaking, we are no longer an oral (which implies a listening) culture. We have lost something essential in the transfer of symbolic meaning and contextualized emotion. But to those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, poetry speaks as significantly today as it ever has.



Table and Chair, Brent Watkinson

Every poem is unique just as every reader is unique. Therefore, I encourage you *not* to generalize poetry but to approach each poem as its own distinct entity. A poem you studied in high school will not have the same relevance as a poem you heard at a relative's funeral; and the poems you see in a popular magazine or online may not be as meaningful as those written by one of your favorite Oklahoma poets. Even rereading the same poem can bring a fresh, new experience. Robert Frost's famous "The Road Not Taken" probably will (and should) sound different to you in midlife than when you read it as a college freshman.

Consider each poem as an artifact. When you visit an art museum you experience two simultaneous sensations. On the one hand you feel the overwhelming, hovering totality of art within the wing you are viewing. You sense, perhaps on several

psychological levels, the artistic style and vision of a particular artist or period. At the same time, you are attracted to a particular work. Though it may be confusing, a more concentrated engagement with the piece may impart meaning—it speaks to you, comforts or confronts you, irritates or inspires you. Consider poetry in a similar way. Allow a poem to be an artifact framed by an artist's vision.

Consider, then reflect: *What am I feeling when I read this poem? What draws my attention? What is this poem asking of me?* First impressions are valuable starting places for satisfactory reading experiences. They help situate you with the poem. First impressions may later prove to be completely wrong but are rarely completely irrelevant. Trust your impressions. Fine-tune those initial responses. I often find that my students experience a poem intuitively (perhaps

from some subconscious reality), while on the conscious, public level, they hesitate to explore that unspoken intuition. Fear not. Voice it.



I want to underscore the oral nature of poetry. You must hear it read aloud if you are to really feel and understand the mood, the various inflections that an author intends. In my classes I practice what I call audio-analysis. That is, I demonstrate "how to read a poem" by reading it *for* them (not "to" or "at" them). I read it for them more than once. Then I ask students, collectively, to repeat as I read (they tend to mimic my voice). We read a poem aloud several times, progressing so that three or four students try reading it aloud, alone, before the whole class. As this process develops I model a voice, pointing out structures or key words, asking rhetorical questions,



GOOD POETRY LOCATES THE ETERNAL IN THE EVERYDAY.

sometimes interrupting then reasserting phrases. This audio-analysis helps us to move toward analytical understanding of the poem as we experience it emotionally.

Here is the significant point: emotional perception must join intellectual understanding if poetry is to be fully appreciated. So I tell you, as I tell students, read the poem aloud to yourself. At first, just mouth the words audibly, don't try to be dramatic. Listen to yourself. Bring the sensation of hearing into the interpretive process, along with sight and other sensory impressions.

I must emphasize that this process should be repeated with each poem. Reading poetry is not like balancing a checkbook where, once you have the concept down, it never leaves you, the task never deviates. Poetry is living art. The words are alive. The reader must approach a singular poem as if she/he is moving toward a hummingbird, searching for the best vantage to capture its essence in a photograph. At first you *glimpse* the poem, see it generally, partially, incompletely. Then you return to *gaze* at the poem, looking closely from various angles, listening for its voice, considering its personality, examining its parts. Both the glimpse and the gaze are necessary and should be practiced together.



After first impressions and reflecting on your own emotional connection, you will want to move into more specific text analysis. Even if your first impression

is negative or disconnected, those detached, distanced feelings often help move you into a significant experience with the poem. Your initial response may be, "Huh?" That's fine. Acknowledge it and allow the stranger to be introduced to you.

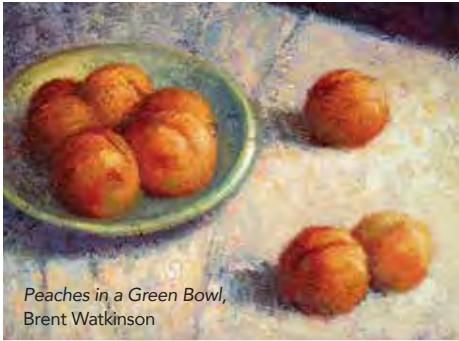
Individual word choice matters, too. Use Google and get a quick definition of prominent words. Good poets choose words for a particular effect. In a novel, well-chosen words enhance a plot, but the novel's success doesn't rise or fall with a singular word. But a poem's personality indeed depends upon word choice. Consider possible connotations for key words. What cultural feelings are associated with the terms? For example, when Frost says, "I have been one acquainted with the night," we know that more than a literal absence of sunlight is implied. We need to ask: How does night feel? How does it sound? What do we associate with night in American culture? Is it scary, dangerous, comforting, haunting, an ending, death? Why does Frost use the word "acquainted"? How do the two words function together? Start with the known and move to the unknown.

Novice poetry readers tend to make three errors: first, they too quickly try to find some amazing symbolic interpretation; second, they see only immediate, one-dimensional meaning; and third, they latch onto a word and take off on a personal association (which may have value) but ignore the remaining content of the poem. So start with what is clearly given by the poet. What

is the scene? How is it depicted? What is left out? Is it moving to a climax? Is it fizzling, burning out in resignation? Is it providing a positive, negative, or indifferent resolution—or no resolution at all?

Poetry is powerful not because it tries to be arrogantly obscure and intellectual. Precisely the opposite is the case: poetry is powerful when it compresses abstract, intellectual concepts into vivid, specifically tangible, relatable images. Good poetry locates the eternal in the everyday—the conceptual in the visual. This is why I stress audio-analysis. In poetry, sound and meaning are always interconnected.

Also pay attention to the line sequencing. What is the structure of the poem? What does it look like on the page? Follow the phrasing, like notes when playing music. Line one may indeed flow directly into line two, or even line three or four. If the poet provides clues such as traditional syntax, then follow commas, semi-colons, and full-stops. If the poet does not use standard syntax, then consider the stanzas (similar to paragraphs in fiction, or scene changes in film). For example, Maurice Kenny's poem "Going Home" posits a troubled persona on a bus going to an unknown, apparently unwelcome home. The speaker's anxious thoughts run together like the continuous motion of the bus. To emphasize this effect, the poet runs the poem together in one long, uninterrupted stanza, without syntax and with very little room to breathe, reinforcing the troubled experience:



Peaches in a Green Bowl,
Brent Watkinson

OFTEN

Often I open the door to let in
the sound of rain tapping
along with a Brahms symphony
or the Allman Brothers – often
my pen cannot keep pace
with dropping water
or chilling violins
or the tragic guitars – often
I remind myself that rain,
like music, like a pen moving
on paper, is what the world
needs most. It could be
that the thunder outside
is no match for singing birds
at rainy dawn – the collection
of voices, a light that brings us home.

—Ken Hada
From *Margaritas & Redfish*
(Lamar Univ. Press, 2013)

The book lay unread in my lap
snow gathered at the window
from Brooklyn it was a long ride
the Greyhound followed the plow
from Syracuse to Watertown

Some poems tell stories. Some express feelings. Some play with words. Some bring order out of chaos. Some tear down assumptions. Some inspire. Some agitate. Some console. Some correct. Some are dramatic. Some are subtle. Some are violent. Some are conversational. Some are pronouncements. Some are conflicted. Some are nostalgic. Some are contemporary. Some are prophetic. Most good poems function on more than one of these levels simultaneously, depending upon its place and time of origin and on the mood and situation of the reader. Your attitude, as reader and rereader, significantly contributes to the experience.

Fear not. Reading poetry is something like a first kiss. *Should I? Does she want me to? Do I really want to kiss her? When should I? Where? What will she think if I kiss her? What will she think if I don't?* All this internal consternation spins until finally you pucker up and go for it. And guess what? The kiss either confirms or negates what you thought you wanted. That's poetry.

As a reader, you are unique just as every poem is unique. There is no end to the variety of poetry available to you, but each poem is leaning toward you, with puckered lips, awaiting your move.

KEN HADA is a professor in the Department of English & Languages at East Central University. In addition to multiple scholarly journal publications, he has published six books of poetry. His poems have been featured on NPR's *The Writer's Almanac*. His honors include national awards from the Western Heritage Museum and Western Writers of America. kenhada.org

BRENT WATKINSON has been a professional artist for over 30 years, working in illustration, painting, and computer programming. National clients have included: American Express, Contadina, *Cook's Illustrated*, Sony Music, and Time/Warner. He was a member of the NASA Fine Arts Program and worked as a licensed Apple iPhone and iPad Developer. He now paints for galleries full time. brentwatkinson.com

EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- "Reading a Poem: 20 Strategies," Mark Yakich, *The Atlantic*, Nov. 2, 2014. Hints for approaching poetry—"a guide for the perplexed." theatlantic.com
- *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*, Edward Hirsch (1999). Read a chapter of the book and link to sample poems: poetryfoundation.org. Reading guide: HMHCo.com



The Fatal Loop. Charles M. Russell, 1912, oil on canvas. Gift of Albert K. Mitchell. NCWHM

WEST WORD HO!

COWBOY POEMS AND FRONTIER BALLADS

The spirit and traditions of the west, set down in verse

KIMBERLY ROBLIN | IMAGES COURTESY NATIONAL COWBOY & WESTERN HERITAGE MUSEUM



vagrant puff of wind shakes a corner of the crimson handkerchief knotted loosely at his throat; the thud of his pony's feet mingling with the jingle of his spurs is borne back; and as the careless, gracious, lovable figure disappears over the divide, the breeze brings to the ears, faint and far yet cheery still, the refrain of a cowboy song.

—John Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*

People often confine poetry to the page, but humans could speak long before we could write. To impart histories, lessons, sagas, and sins, we have recited poems and sung ballads for millennia. Few figures in American folklore are more associated with this oral tradition than the cowboy and frontiersman. With little else for amusement, cowboys, scouts, and others turned to song and storytelling. Daily life in the rugged, unpredictable West supplied inspiration equal to any Muse. Common themes included nature, work, mishap, love, loss, and loneliness. Over time, their rustic verse traveled beyond campfires and cattle trails as performers and the printed word introduced it to a global audience. It shaped perceptions of American identity—at home and abroad—and became more than entertainment. It became an inheritance.

Tucked away in the Dickinson Research Center at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum are books, papers, photographs, and more that document this complex legacy. Among them are works by three men: John “Captain Jack” Crawford, who popularized the West in print and on stage; Henry Herbert

Knibbs, a Canadian whose novels and poetry were inspired by the West; and John Lomax, a scholar who helped save this significant and uniquely American genre. Together they demonstrate the evolution and continuity of western story, poetry, and song.

JOHN “CAPTAIN JACK” CRAWFORD (1847-1917)

Depending on your age and interests, the name Captain Jack likely evokes Billy Joel (#piano-man) or Johnny Depp (#pirate). In the late nineteenth century, it was the moniker of an illiterate immigrant turned author and orator: Captain Jack, “The Poet Scout.” Born John Wallace Crawford in County Donegal, Ireland, he endured a difficult childhood reminiscent of a Victorian novel. Alcoholic father. Pious mother. Instability. Poverty. Potato Famine. Conditions only deteriorated as the family grew and forced his parents to search for opportunities in America while the children stayed behind with an uncle.

In 1861, John shepherded his siblings across the Atlantic, but any hope of a new start in Pennsylvania quickly evaporated. The country was at war. His father had not out-sailed the bottle and had also enlisted, leaving the family to face financial battles. As the oldest, John had little choice but to work the local mines while the others attended school. He joined the army three years later and fought in the Battles of The Wilderness and Spotsylvania before a pivotal injury sent him to Satterlee Hospital in Philadelphia. Weeks later, he emerged with a slight limp—and literacy, courtesy of a patient nurse. After returning home, he married, started a

family, and secured a good job, but contentment eluded him. He determined to forge a new start in the West.

Sensationalized by dime novels and advertised by newspapers and magazines, the West symbolized possibility and progress. It was a volatile place of risk and reward, and for an enterprising optimist like Crawford it was irresistible. Driven by innate curiosity and wanderlust, he arrived in Custer City, South Dakota, in 1876 and made quick connections as a newspaper correspondent. Before long he had gained a reputation for his words and wit. He joined local military efforts to add credentials for his new persona. While John Crawford was an Irishman, Captain Jack, “The Poet Scout,” was an American born in the West.

It was a West of men now mythic. Wyatt Earp still walked dusty boardwalks, Doc Holliday still battled tuberculosis, and Billy the Kid still eluded capture. Captain Jack crossed paths with some of its legendary characters, including Buffalo Bill Cody. The two struck a friendship and Crawford spent the next few years touring and entertaining audiences, with the showman and on his own. While Cody presented a stereotyped West, Crawford preferred a more realistic approach—more fact, less fiction. In the preface of his first book, *The Poet Scout*, published in 1879, he explained:

In the publication of the sketches and poems in the following pages I have no thought of grasping literary or poetical distinction. They are the crude, unpolished



LEFT: J.W. Crawford, Captain Jack. From *The Poet Scout: A Book of Song and Story* (Funk and Wagnalls, NY, 1886); Glenn D. Shirley Western Americana Collection, NCWHM Dickinson Research Center. CENTER: Autographed promotional photo of Henry H. Knibbs dressed in cowboy garb in the desert with two pack mules; Connecticut State Library, State Archives PG 460, Colt Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Co. RIGHT: John A. Lomax, Jr., circa 1930-1950, Library of Congress

offspring of my idle hours—wandering thoughts which came to me on the lonely trail and in the bivouac and camp.

He also warned young readers about the false promises of fortune and glory:

Boys, take the earnest advice of a frontiersmen, and stay at home . . . learn some good trade or profession, and stick to it . . . avoid those dime novels as you would a venomous, hideous rattlesnake. They are more dangerous.

These passages underscore Crawford's aversion to romanticism. Although ethnocentric, he believed he was presenting the West with all its strengths and shortcomings. Many of the poems included backstories and details (who, what, where, and why) that set his work apart. In "The First that Died," he recounted the death of a young man named Charley, who had stayed with Crawford while building his own shelter. Sadly, the new roof collapsed within days and crushed him to death. "The saddest point about this inci-

dent," Crawford lamented, "was that no letters, papers, or even the slightest [clue] to his home or friends could be found; all that we knew was that he had walked all the way from Sioux City to the Black Hills to die and start a graveyard. On that day, while sitting on the green beside his demolished cabin, I wrote these lines":

Poor Charley braved the
wintry storms,
And footed it all the way;
And now he is a bleeding corpse—
He died at dawn to-day.
His is the old, old story—
He saw bright prospects here;
He left his home, his friends and all—
Perhaps a mother dear.

If so, God pity that mother,
Perhaps alone and poor;
When some one breaks the
blighting news
Her heart will break, I'm sure,
To think she never, never more
Will clasp him to her breast;
Among the peaks in Custer Park
Poor Charley now must rest.

For Crawford, poetry was not just business, it was personal. The poems

were mileposts commemorating people, places, and important events in his life. His straightforward verse and easy charm made *The Poet Scout* popular and established Crawford as an author. His wife and children joined him from Pennsylvania and the reunited family settled in New Mexico. Ever restless, though, Crawford was rarely home. He traveled extensively, writing and lecturing, looking every bit the frontiersman with long hair, buckskin, and fringe—but the unrefined character belied a polished portrayal. He knew and played to the expectations of his audience. All told, he completed four plays, seven books of poetry, and more than 100 stories. Crawford built his career on the West and the word, transporting readers to a place most would never experience.

HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS (1874-1945)

Born in Ontario to U.S. citizens, Henry Herbert Knibbs was Canadian by birth and American by blood. His childhood shared none of the darkness

THE BALLADS AND POEMS ILLUSTRATED A RICH
DIVERSITY AMONG COWBOYS AND PIONEERS, NOT
THE WHITEWASHED WORLD SO OFTEN PORTRAYED.

and grit of Crawford's. He lived in a middle class home, summered at his grandparents' Pennsylvania farm, rode horses, and kept company with Poe, Tennyson, Byron, and others who made early and lasting impressions.

After finishing his formal education at age 18, he left Canada for Buffalo, New York, and spent the next few years somewhat adrift, clerking for companies and wandering about the Midwest by rail. He married and worked as a stenographer, but grew weary of recording other people's words. He itched to write his own. In 1908, he published his first book of poems and moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to study literature at Harvard.

We do not know how or when the Muse of the West found Knibbs. Perhaps he read Captain Jack or similar authors. Perhaps the modernization of the early twentieth century made him yearn for a simpler time and place. Whatever the reasons, he could not write of the West if he did not *know* the West. Around 1911, he gathered his wife and his convictions and moved three thousand miles across the country to Los Angeles. It provided easy access to the Southwest and Knibbs wasted little time before striking out to see it. He absorbed everything he could during his travels: the landscapes, the people, poems and

bits of verse he heard along the way. As an Easterner, he relied on these details to impart authenticity and accuracy.

His diligence translated into success and he spent the next thirty years writing short stories, novels, and volumes of poetry, including *Songs of the Outlands*; *Songs of the Trail*; *Riders of the Stars*; and more. A critic called it "high-hearted verse." It was energetic, fun, and popular with audiences. Libraries across the country carried his books and made them available to nearly everyone. Even my great-grandmother in Rocky, Oklahoma, could have taken the wagon into Cordell to check out one of his books and read "The Shallows of the Ford" and other poems.

THE SHALLOWS OF THE FORD
(Stanzas 1-3 of 7)

Did you ever wait for daylight
when the stars along the river
Floated thick and white as snow-
flakes in the water
deep and strange,
Till a whisper through the aspens
made the current break and shiver
As the frosty edge of morning
seemed to melt and spread
and change?

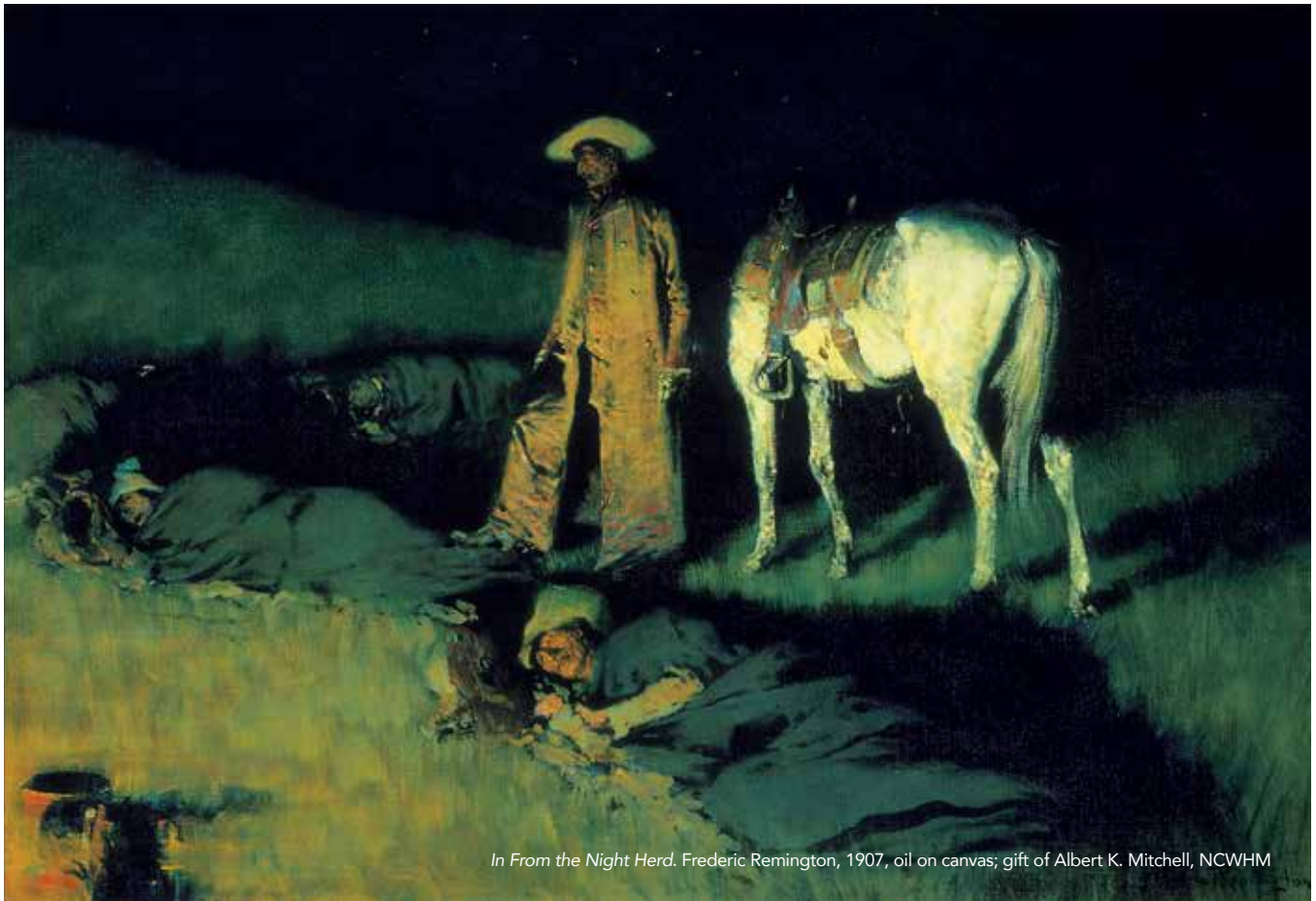
Once I waited, almost wishing that
the dawn would never find me;
Saw the sun roll up the ranges
like the glory of the Lord;

Was about to wake my partner who
was sleeping close behind me,
When I saw the man we wanted
spur his pony to the ford.

Saw the ripples of the shallows and
the muddy streaks that followed,
As the pony stumbled toward me
in the narrows of the bend;
Saw the face I used to welcome, wild
and watchful, lined and hollowed;
And God knows
I wished to warn him,
for I once had called him friend.

This last stanza shows Knibbs's expertise at setting a scene and building suspense. You can see the ripples and muddy streaks, the old familiar face. What will the narrator do? Where do his loyalties lie—with his friend or with the law? This talent for imagery dovetailed with a burgeoning industry that offered a new way to present the West—film. Knibbs adapted many of his novels into screenplays and actors like Hoot Gibson and Tom Mix brought his characters to life in early westerns. In 1920, *The Morning Tulsa Daily World* advertised *Overland Red* playing at the Wonderland Theater. It was a "Rollicking Romance of a Joyous Vagabond—Picturized from the famous novel by Henry Herbert Knibbs."

Knibbs influenced popular culture through poetry, novels, and film, and his work did not go unnoticed by his contemporaries. In 1919, four of his poems



In *From the Night Herd*. Frederic Remington, 1907, oil on canvas; gift of Albert K. Mitchell, NCWHM

appeared in *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp*, a compilation of old and new western verse collected by folklorist John Lomax. “Certain words can be ridden like horses,” Knibbs once said, and Lomax ensured that people had the chance to ride them for generations.

JOHN A. LOMAX (1867-1948)

In origin and contribution, John Lomax is the anomaly of our literary trio. First, he was of the West. Texas to be precise. Second, he was not a poet but a professor. As a boy, he didn’t need dime novels to teach him about cowboys. The Chisholm Trail ran near his home in Bosque County and provided an unvarnished education on these men and their

work. Like most rural boys, he oscillated between schoolwork and fieldwork, depending on the season. He was a good student and a good help to his father, but in time his ambitions exceeded the family farm. He preferred academics to agriculture and enrolled at Granbury College where he earned a teaching certificate. The job proved unsatisfactory, however, and he returned to studies at the University of Texas for undergraduate and graduate degrees in literature and classics.

Though Crawford and Knibbs had traveled west to find their creative voice, Lomax traveled east to foster his at Harvard. While studying Scottish ballads, Lomax recognized similarities to the songs and poems of cowboys and western culture. Other academics dismissed them, but Lomax

saw their value: As a body of work, they preserved a culture and experience unique to the western United States. If someone did not collect them, they might be lost.

Lomax pitched the argument to his Harvard professors and, with their support, he began soliciting “native ballads and songs of the West” through newspapers. He asked for “songs handed down from one generation to another by word of mouth” that “epitomize and particularize the life of the pioneers who peopled the vast region west of the Mississippi River.”

“Pioneer ballads,” he concluded, were “an expression of American literature.” (Remember that word *literature*, because we’ll circle back to it.) Letters arrived from across the country and Lomax sifted through the material for the original

and unpublished. He also gathered pieces from his travels to Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, as he “seined saloons” and haunted campfires and “broncho-busting outfits.” Some of the earliest ballads he collected were “Jesse James,” “The Old Chisholm Trail,” and “The Zebra Dun.” The authors and origins of the ballads and poems illustrated a rich diversity among cowboys and pioneers: European, African American, Native American, Hispanic. It was not the whitewashed world so often portrayed.

The result was *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, published in 1910. Contrary to strict academic standards, Lomax took liberties with the volume. He softened abrasive language and, when faced with several variations of the same song, cobbled together his favorite verses. Still, the nature of the work remained intact and represented the first collection of its kind. His introduction reveals the motivation behind the project: to capture the spirit of “the wild, far-away places of the big and still unpeopled west.” He also contextualized the use of ballads. What started as fun had practical utility:

Indeed the songs were here utilized for very practical ends. Not only were sharp, rhythmic yells sometimes beaten into verse employed to stir up lagging cattle, but also during the long watches the night-guards, as they rode round and round the herd, improvised cattle lullabies which quieted the animals and soothed them to sleep. Some of the best of the so-called “dogie songs” seem to have been created for the purpose of preventing cattle stampedes, such songs coming straight from the heart of the cowboy, speaking familiarly to his herd in the stillness of the night.

THE COWBOY'S DREAM (Stanzas 1-3 of 8)

Last night as I lay on the prairie,
And looked at the stars in the sky,
I wondered if ever a cowboy
Would drift to that sweet by and by.

Roll on, roll on;
Roll on, little dogies, roll on, roll on,
Roll on, roll on;
Roll on, little dogies, roll on.

The road to that bright, happy region
Is a dim, narrow trail, so they say;
But the broad one that leads to perdition
Is posted and blazed all the way.

Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads achieved moderate success and garnered a wide audience. Even those not from the West read the ballads and felt a sense of heritage. The West became something that belonged to everyone. Lomax published a subsequent volume, *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp*, in 1919 and included the new generation of western poets (notably, Henry H. Knibbs). He toured the country, lecturing at rotary clubs, church groups, and colleges, including the University of Oklahoma in 1921.

Although not a cowboy himself, Lomax dedicated his career to the roundup: to preserve and present western ballads—or, as he called it, *literature*. Literature is acclaimed. It is academic. It is important. By elevating western ballads to literature, Lomax validated the value of the region, its culture, and all those living in it.

Captain Jack Crawford, Henry Knibbs, and John Lomax expressed the West in words. They shaped perception and identity, influenced thought, inspired and conjured stories and songs—contributing different chapters to the same western songbook. The West meant something different to each man. For Crawford, a destination. For Knibbs, an inspiration. And for Lomax, home. By searching for and sharing their own West, they ultimately helped define ours.

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EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- The Center for Western and Cowboy Poetry. Poems by H.H. Knibbs and John “Captain Jack” Crawford, audio recordings, and commentary on their work. cowboypoetry.com/knibbs.htm
- “Southern Mosaic: The John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip,” Library of Congress. Collection of 700 sound recordings and ephemera documenting the couple's three-month trip to record folk music across the southern U.S. loc.gov
- “My Cousin, the Cowboy Poet,” Carson Vaughan, *The New Yorker*, March 16, 2016. Profiles contemporary cowboy poets and the annual event designated by the U.S. Senate as the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering.



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A stylized illustration of poet Marianne Moore. She is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark, high-collared coat over a light-colored top. Her hair is dark and styled in a short, wavy bob. She is looking slightly to the right with a thoughtful expression. The background is a mix of solid colors and patterns, including a blue sky, a purple floral pattern in the top right, and a green and white patterned area at the bottom. The title 'Poets Hating Poetry' is written in a large, elegant, cursive font across the top of the illustration.

Poets Hating Poetry

CAN'T ANYONE GIVE POETRY A BREAK?

RYAN STUART LOWE

“Poetry. I, too, dislike it: there
are things that are important
beyond all this fiddle.
—Marianne Moore, “Poetry””



ince its publication in 1921, Marianne Moore's "Poetry" has become enshrined as perhaps the most famous anti-poetry poem of all time. In particular, she takes aim at those "high-sounding interpretations" placed on poetic subjects:

When they become so derivative
as to become
unintelligible,
the same thing may be said for
all of us, that we
do not admire what
we cannot understand.

It's easy to read her lines as a gentle critique of her modernist colleagues, now famous for their convoluted and difficult poetry: T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, complete with academic footnotes; William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All*, with chapters confoundingly out of order; and Ezra Pound's cryptic *Cantos*, considered experimental and significant by some and obscure nonsense by others. It's a common complaint from baffled readers: Why can't poets just say what they *mean*? And, just as puzzling: How can a poet say that she dislikes poetry?

Since the time of Shakespeare, the anti-poetry poem has been a peculiar and embattled tradition. Readers aren't the only ones flummoxed by verse; poets, too, are vexed—for a multitude of reasons.

Moore's poem is famously contradictory. It criticizes obscurity, and yet its most famous line is thoroughly mysterious: Moore calls for poets to present "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." The line suggests that poetry can perform the impossible: to merge the ideal with the real, the beauty of the imagination with the ugliness of the world. How can imaginary gardens have real toads in them? Moore revised the poem again and

again over five decades, whittling down its thirty lines, as if the anti-poetry poem were destined for self-annihilation, pulled apart by its own contradictions.

In "A Fit of Rhyme against Rhyme" (1640), poet Ben Jonson pokes fun at the linguistic acrobatics poets attempt in service of form—in this case, rhyme. His poem against poetry shows a mastery of the form and a sense of humor about the difficulty in execution. In sixty *rhyming* lines he asks if rhyme has ruined poetry:

Wresting words from their
true calling;
Propping verse for fear of falling
To the ground;
Jointing syllables, drowning letters,
Fast'ning vowels as with fetters
They were bound!

His complaints are ostensibly aimed at bad rhymes, but his objections might apply to all poetry. Poets delight in wresting words from their literal meanings, binding language with their own particular fetters. Jonson curses the poet who invented the bonds of rhyme:

He that first invented thee,
May his joints tormented be,
Cramp'd forever.

Harsh punishment for such a crime. From jointed syllables to tormented joints, Jonson suggests "locking up" the poets who lock up language. At the center of Jonson's poem is an anxiety over the value of modern poetry; as he looks back to the Greek Golden Age of heroic verse (Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* did not rhyme), Jonson wonders if any poet in his era deserves to be crowned with immortal praise:

Not a poet in an age
Worth crowning;
Not a work deserving bays,
Not a line deserving praise.

While it seems laughable that a contemporary of Shakespeare and Milton should worry about the future of English poetry, the fortunes of these poets were far from assured. The anti-poetry poem reveals another history: the history of artistic anxiety. A patron's favor and financial support were fickle, and critics have long had the influence to make or break careers. If Jonson craved the good opinion of the First Earl of Leicester, then Alexander Pope craved the good opinion of critics—and he feared their bad opinions, too. In the century between Jonson and Pope, poetry moved from the court and country house to the marketplace; royal patrons were replaced by a broader public. In his "Essay on Criticism" (1711), Pope suggests that a lot of poetry is bad, but a lot of critics are worse: "Tis hard to say, if greater want of skill / Appear in writing or in judging ill." His epic poem *The Dunciad* (1728) takes aim at bad poets and bad critics alike.

Romantic authors—British and American—worried over the public in similar ways. William Wordsworth feared that his poetry would be overlooked by city dwellers obsessed with grisly reports in the newspapers. His poem "The Tables Turned" suggests that, instead of focusing on "all this toil and trouble," it might be better to just go outdoors:

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

There is something confessional in the poem against poetry, as if the writer is revealing a dark secret. Although Emily Dickinson would become one of America's most celebrated poets, her poems often betray a fear of going public. Despite being a bit of a rebel in school as a young woman,

POETRY

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond
all this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one
discovers in

it after all, a place for the genuine.

Hands that can grasp, eyes

that can dilate, hair that can rise

if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because
they are

useful. When they become so derivative as to become
unintelligible,

the same thing may be said for all of us, that we

do not admire what

we cannot understand: the bat

holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless
wolf under

a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse

that feels a flea, the base-

ball fan, the statistician--

nor is it valid

to discriminate against "business documents and

school-books"; all these phenomena are important. One must make
a distinction

however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the

result is not poetry,

nor till the poets among us can be

"literalists of

the imagination"--above

insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them,"
shall we have

it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,

the raw material of poetry in

all its rawness and

that which is on the other hand

genuine, you are interested in poetry.

—Marianne Moore, from *Others for 1919: An Anthology of
the New Verse*, edited by Alfred Kreymborg. poets.org



Dickinson became a recluse in her advancing years. Her poem “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” (1891) reflects these dual aspects of her personality, defying convention while clinging to privacy:

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Don’t tell! they’d advertise –
you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one’s name –
the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!

Dickinson imagines the published work (and the thought of going public) to be a mere frog’s croak for an audience that is no more than a swamp. The tone of poems like this would contribute to the dubious legend that Dickinson asked her sister Lavinia to burn all her papers after her death; if true, the request would have been the ultimate assertion of “*I, too, dislike it.*”

To our ears, these poets’ anxieties may seem overblown. Jonson’s obsession with rhyme feels strange in the twenty-first century where it is all but required in pop music. Meanwhile, modern poets experiment with rhyme, internal rhyme, slant rhyme, blank verse, free verse, and dozens of other poetic strategies. Pope’s dread of bad critics seems quaint in an era when we might worry that poetry critics (as well as poetry readers) are nowhere to be found. Wordsworth feared that cities would strangle the life out of poetry, but city life now inspires poets as powerfully as the countryside: Equal to Wordsworth’s Lake District are Whitman’s Manhattan or Sandburg’s Chicago. And if Dickinson ever worried over the dreariness of fame, she is certainly “Somebody” now.



Twentieth-century writers reveal a different kind of anxiety. When Marianne Moore writes “I, too, dislike it,” she addresses an imagined audience packed with skeptics. She anticipates readers’ disdain by asking the questions herself: Is poetry useful? Is it important, as “business documents and / school-books” are important? Moore’s poem is haunted by the demands of a world in which everything must be functional to have value. If Moore worried over this question in the 1920s, it is an anxiety that has only increased with current market demands for increasingly specialized jobs aimed at higher-profit payoffs.

Readers aren’t the
only ones flummoxed
by verse; poets, too,
are vexed—for a
multitude of reasons

Today, poetry can’t shake its reputation as a “useless” pursuit. Parents despair over their children studying the arts and humanities, asking, “But what will you *do* with a degree in American studies?” With the rise of the liberal arts degree, night school literature courses, and AP English exams, it is not the royal patron, the sneering critic, or the overworked businessman from whom poets seek favor—it is the bored college student. The classroom is the source of anxiety for Billy Collins in his “Introduction to Poetry” (1988):

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide.

Collins asks his students to enjoy a poem, to experience it, but they’re only

interested in knowing what will be on the final exam:

All they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

My university students are sometimes skeptical of the value of poetry, but, more often, they are skeptical of their ability to understand it, qualifying their interpretations with comments like, “I’m not sure if this is right, but . . .” Poetry in the classroom gives way to tests, to research papers, to grades on how well you understand. Is it any wonder that students want only the “right answer” to a poem?

In many of these poems against poetry, there’s a fear that readers and writers mangle a true experience by “forcing” a poem—through poorly executed form or convoluted interpretation—into something it’s not. Jonson complains that rhyme “wrests words from their true calling.” Moore argues that our “high-sounding interpretations” make poetry derivative. Wordsworth offers the most famous pronouncement on this idea in “The Tables Turned”:

Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous
forms of things:—
We murder to dissect.

And so the value of poetry may lie less in the poem itself than in our experience of it. Collins’s image of tying a poem to a chair and torturing it is instructive: while there may be no absolutely right way to read a poem, there is a wrong way that does violence to it. The worst readers over-intellectualize a poem: they flatten it to what the poem means, ignoring how

a poem looks, sounds, or moves us. In their poems against poetry, these authors ventriloquize the torturers, channeling their worst fears and innermost critics.

They also affirm the alternative: the sympathetic reader who loves poetry, though these ideal readers may be few. Dickinson speaks intimately to one compatriot, the second “Nobody” who avoids the bog. Pope holds out for one sympathetic critic: “A perfect judge will read each work of wit / With the same spirit that its author writ.”

As instruction for would-be ideal readers, Billy Collins offers *five* different ways to approach a poem, including looking at it through a colored lens, listening to its quiet buzz, and feeling in the dark until you catch that single illuminating clue. Collins would be happy with all of these readers, even those who only “waterski across the surface” because they recognize the author’s name. Wordsworth’s verse is an invitation to learn from nature, but his sentiments are an apt call to poetry: “Come forth, and bring with you a heart / That watches and receives.”

Marianne Moore remains the most skeptical of the bunch. In 1967, she altered her poem one last time, in what might be the most infamous act of revision in American literary history. She boiled down her original thirty lines to a mere three. “Three lines?” editor and friend Grace Schulman asked incredulously. The final published draft of “Poetry” reads: “I, too, dislike it. / Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in / it, after all, a place for the genuine.”

Gone are the “imaginary gardens” with “real toads,” the debates on what is “useful” or “important”; yet, these three spare lines still include Moore’s devastating confession and careful defense. She admits, “I, too, dislike it,” but not without an escape clause:

“however.” Marianne Moore would later argue that the three lines were all she had to say on the subject. Scholars generally dislike the final version, finding in it less poetry than earlier editions, the kernel of the “anti-poetry” poem robbed of its shell.

Laid bare, the poem against poetry reveals the contradiction at the heart of so much art: the desire to connect with an unseen audience that could be hostile, skeptical, or perhaps not there at all. “This is my letter to the World,” writes Emily Dickinson, “that never wrote to me.”

The tradition of the anti-poetry poem lives on, a series of letters to the world, confessing fears, searching for meaning, waiting for fellow haters and fellow listeners to pick them up and hold them up to the light.

RYAN STUART LOWE received his Ph.D. in American literature from Washington University in St. Louis. He teaches literature and writing at Oklahoma State University and is currently working on a book that explores the rise of the “tourist love story” in American literature and film.

MARIA BIERNIK is the art director of *Humanities* magazine, published by the National Endowment for the Humanities in Washington, DC.

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- “The Marianne Moore Revival,” Adrienne Raphel, *The New Yorker*, April 13, 2016. Chronicles Moore’s dissatisfaction with her work, while others considered her an architect of American modernism. newyorker.com
- Great Writers Inspire, University of Oxford. Essays on Ben Johnson, including images and ebooks of his writings. writersinspire.org
- Emily Dickinson at Amherst College. Special collections home to Dickinson papers includes digitized handwritten manuscripts and a link to the Emily Dickinson Museum. amhurst.edu/library/archives/holdings/edickinson
- “Poet Billy Collins,” Jeffrey Brown, PBS NewsHour, Oct. 29, 2013. Collins on his book *Aimless Love* and finding humor in poetry. pbs.org.



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Allen Ginsberg, Danny O'Connor

THE RULE OF COOL: POETRY OF THE BEAT MOVEMENT

How the Beat Generation
broke the rules and made
poetry cool

PAUL VARNER | ART BY DANNY O'CONNOR

I DISCOVERED REAL LITERATURE, as opposed to the paperback Westerns, mysteries, and spy novels I read as a teenager, when I was stationed in the U.S. Air Force near San Francisco in the crazy hippie days of the late 1960s. That's when I found the famed City Lights Bookstore and learned about the Beat Movement, the talk of my literature world. I specifically discovered poetry that mattered to me when I read Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. Here was a kind of poetry I had never encountered in high school English classes. For me, as for so many of my generation, Allen's anthology, first published in 1960, was the beginning.

The popular British poet Roger McGough remembers when Donald Allen's revolutionary anthology, with its famous red and white jacket, first appeared in Liverpool: "Everybody in town who was interested in writing seemed to have a copy of it, and they were shouting poems out of it to one another across crowded pubs." It was *the* anthology of Beat poetry.

Three years earlier, in 1957, *The New Poets of England and America* anthology, edited by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson, supposedly established the canon of truly important living American poets, with early career recognition of Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich and others. There were no overlapping poets in the

two anthologies. Donald Allen's anthology radically set aside those Establishment poets and set up a new canon of American poetry in an entirely different tradition. Because it included not only the certified rebels and outlaws of American poetry—like Beat poets Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg—but also intellectuals and, surprisingly, academics—such as Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Kenneth Koch—it seemed to legitimize the strange new poetry that was so different from the poetry studied in university courses. Allen's anthology singlehandedly shifted the landscape of contemporary American literature.

Given the complexity of the poetry of the Beat Movement, one dominating principle has been its self-designated Rule of Cool—a studied nonchalance, a style of behavior in the hipster generation and its literature that, whatever else, always countered Establishment values. Being cool required an attitude resembling the Italian attitude of *sprezzatura*—a certain degree of passivity, indifference, and snobbishness toward outsiders or "squares."

The Beat Movement has always suffered from a negative image. Its writers were dismissed as self-centered, hedonistic, sexual deviants, utterly amoral if not immoral in their approach to life. But critics of the movement often neglect the spiritual dimensions of Beat literature. Besides its

common meaning of "beaten down and defeated," the term "beat" also refers to a coolness derived from a religious ideal of beatitude, an ideal of blessed peace within. Virtually all the major Beat writers recognized this search for cool beatitude or beatness. Their quests, often extreme and desperate, led to joyrides across America and experimentation with drugs and sex, all in search of an expanded spiritual vision unavailable, they thought, through the sterile institutions of religion that were responsible for the spiritual malaise of the American post-war era.

As in the outward social behaviors of the Beats, the Rule of Cool was elemental in their poetry. Values of twentieth-century modernist critics (such as self-containment, tension, irony, metaphor, or complexity of form) were not values held by the Beats. Their poetry was as free as the lifestyle it reflected. Charles Olson was the intellectual prophet of the Beats, a proven academic and Herman Melville scholar. "New American poetry" derives from Olson's idea of "projective verse," poetry that is open form—as opposed to an inherited poetry based on line, stanza, and overall form. "There must not be any preconceived notion or design for what a poem ought to be," said poet Amiri Baraka. Spontaneity in the composition process or in the form itself was essential. But

the philosophy extended beyond the page as well. Olsen's principle of form being merely an extension of content applied not only to the aesthetics of art but also to the business of living one's life: constructing ourselves means we have to discover the proper forms for our actions. This is what it means to be Beat, to be cool.

The Establishment, of course, often dismissed this poetic lifestyle. In *Tales of Beatnik Glory*, Ed Sanders used short narratives to reimagine—and mock—the heyday of coffeehouse poetry readings, with poets reciting beat verse in cool tones to the subdued patterings of bongo drums, suave beatniks listening and click-clicking their fingers in approval (instead of clapping) when a poet got up to read and began:

Drip, drip, drip, went the faucet.
Drip, drip, drip,
Drip, drip, drip . . .

And so on for ten or fifteen minutes, the crowd clicking fingers, too cool to ask, "Say, what?"

Early reviews of the Beat Movement defined it narrowly, referring almost exclusively to the works of Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Jack Kerouac, and other early New York Beats. Now, we see the movement more broadly with a wider range of writers. Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* is synonymous with the poetry of a Beat Movement still alive today. Poets Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gary Snyder are still going strong in the twenty-first century. And feminist writers and performers, such as Bernadette Mayer, Alice Notley, Patti Smith, Anne Waldman, and the late Kathy Acker, have maintained that cool Beatness even as they have pushed the movement in directions only dimly foreseen by the original Beat poets.

SURELY NO POEM OF THE MOVEMENT IS more noted than Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, the expansive poem that influenced the last half of the twentieth century much as T. S. Eliot's long poem, *The Waste Land*, dominated the first half of the century. *Howl* was a loud, prophetic blast condemning the square, sterile, crewcut American status quo. Ginsberg first read *Howl* at the renowned Six Gallery Poetry Reading in San Francisco in 1955. Jack Kerouac passed around jugs of wine and sat to the side, chanting, "Go, go, go," as Ginsberg muttered long lines of outrage and obscenity, lamenting the loss of the best minds of his generation, those destroyed by madness:

who wept at the romance
of the streets with their
pushcarts full of onions
and bad music,
who sat in boxes breathing in the
darkness under the bridge, and
rose up to build harpsichords
in their lofts,
who coughed on the sixth floor of
Harlem crowned with flame under
the tubercular sky surrounded by
orange crates of theology,
who scribbled all night rocking and
rolling over lofty incantations
which in the yellow morning
were stanzas of gibberish . . .

Beat chronicler Seymour Krim reported: "Allen Ginsberg, chanter of the scorchingly present-tense 'Howl,' is one to the true lunar voices rising about the skyscrapers . . . keening a mighty song for his generation." Ginsberg's legendary debut on the scene that October night is recounted in multiple books and movies.

Howl is an example of the Beat poets' heavy reliance on spontaneous composition. Urged on by Kerouac, Ginsberg composed the long poem in a San Francisco apartment, channeling an inner voice while high on Benzedrine and with Bach playing loudly in the

background. Simultaneously, Kerouac was composing his *Mexico City Blues*, in which "183rd Chorus" speaks to the spontaneous method:

Only awake to Universal Mind,
accept everything,
see everything,
it is empty,
Accept as thus – the Truth.

In describing this spontaneous style, Kerouac said that the writer sets an object before his or her mind; then, without stopping, begins writing, allowing an "undisturbed flow from the mind" of thoughts and phrases and language.

Spontaneous writing naturally led to an idea of spiritual composition. According to biographer Tom Clark, Kerouac relied on an "artistic self-crucifixion" as his spiritual practice, writing every day and composing "holy works by candlelight," emulating monks who discipline themselves to sit and pray contemplatively. Clark noted that "Kerouac was attempting to tap the well of the subconscious directly through automatic writing." Kerouac claimed that he wrote "with the Holy Ghost speaking through him."

Brother Antoninus, billed as the Beatnik friar in the 1950s and 1960s, demonstrated the spiritual side of Beat in search of beatitude in his poem "A Canticle to the Waterbirds." Antoninus uses projective verse to generate poetic responses to God's creation, carefully detailing the sounds and sights of the seashore:

Clack your beaks you cormorants
and kittiwakes,
North on those rockcroppings
fingerjutt'd into the rough
Pacific surge;
You migratory terns and pipers who
leave but the temporal claw-track
written on sandbars there
of your presence;
.....



**Everything
Is ignorant of its own emptiness—
Anger
Doesn't like to be reminded of fits—**

—Jack Kerouac, from “113th Chorus,”
Mexico City Blues (Grove Press, 1959)

Jack Kerouac, Danny O'Connor

Jack Kerouac, Danny O'Connor

Break wide your harsh and salt-
encrusted beaks unmade for song
And say a praise up to the Lord.

The poem continues at length in a series of lists of water birds on the California coast. Its form is fluid and random as the seashore itself as the poet gropes for knowledge of his Creator. It reflects an ecstasy we associate with visionary poets such as Gerard Manley Hopkins. In later years, after renouncing his vows, Brother Antoninus changed his name to William Everson and developed a significant reputation in the later Beat Movement.

WOMEN OF THE BEAT MOVEMENT
projected their voices, often sounding

out against the stringent masculinist forms of the Rule of Cool—at least in their poetry. In her book *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, Diane di Prima defines the rule of cool by name, portraying its expected aloofness, studied nonchalance, and absolute denial of any display of personal emotion. “The Quarrel” reveals a frustration with the strictures of cool:

It's damned arrogant of you I thought
to assume that only you have
things to do.
Especially tonight.

And what a god damned concession
it was for me to bother
to tell you that
I was bugged at all I said to the back
of his neck. I didn't say it out loud.

Sometimes the women's voices were muted to nonexistence. Elise Cowen had a short relationship with Allen Ginsberg and remained infatuated with him long after he moved on to a long-term partner. As a typically “invisible” Beat Chick marginalized by the males in her circle, Cowen descended deep into the drug culture and mental illness. She committed suicide in 1962 when she jumped through the plate glass window of her parents' apartment and plunged to her death. Her parents trashed most of her poetry, but some survived. Her poem “A Lady” reveals both her brilliance and a dark view of women's roles:

The lady is a humble thing
 Made of death and water
 The fashion is to dress it plain
 And use the mind for border

While the Rule of Cool pervaded virtually all of Beat poetry, later Beats reacted against it. Scholar Nancy M. Grace notes that Hettie Jones's poetry "demands that we see her." Jones counters patriarchal Beat influences in poems like "Hard Drive" with a matriarchal vision that expands gender boundaries:

I have always been at the same time
 woman enough to be moved by tears
 and man enough
 to drive my car in any direction

A repeated theme throughout Jones's work, says Grace, is "the need of a woman to claim her own agency."

WHEN I PICKED UP MY COPY OF THAT BEATNIK poetry anthology back in my early years, I had no idea how the poetry it celebrated for the first time would affect my future (as a scholar, I would later write the *Historical Dictionary of the Beat Movement*) and the future of American poetry. The Beat Movement was to become the most significant literary and artistic movement since World War II, streaming into American postmodernism and feminism and melding serious poetry with popular culture.

A fellow traveler of the early Beat poets was young singer-songwriter Bob Dylan, whose talent for being cool, being Beat has so influenced American culture that it was lauded with the 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature. "Blowin' in the Wind," just one of hundreds of Dylan hits, is considered an anthem of the 1960s era:

How many years can a mountain exist
 Before it's washed to the sea?
 Yes, 'n' how many years can some people exist
 Before they're allowed to be free?

Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head
 Pretending he just doesn't see?
 The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
 The answer is blowin' in the wind.

In a career that has lasted more than five decades, Bob Dylan shows the enduring influence of the Beats—a generation of poets and performers searching for answers, breaking the rules, and oh, so cool.

PAUL VARNER is the author of *Historical Dictionary of Westerns in Cinema* (2008), *Historical Dictionary of Westerns in Literature* (2010), *Historical Dictionary of the Beat Movement* (2012), and *Historical Dictionary of Romanticism in Literature* (2014), all published by Rowman and Littlefield. He has edited two scholarly collections: *Westerns: Paperback Novels and Movies from Hollywood* (2008) and *New Wests and Post-Wests: Literature and Film of the American West* (2013) by Cambridge Scholars Press.

DANNY O'CONNOR, Liverpool, UK, is an artist of contrasts, drawing inspiration from sources as diverse as comics, illustration, tattoo art, and graffiti to influences from Abstract Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Art Nouveau, Pre-Raphaelites, Modernism, and Constructivism to create hyper-stylized, abstracted works. Paintings are built up in layers using mediums such as correction fluid, spray paint, ink, paint markers, texture pastes, charcoal, graphite, oil sticks, and collage. [instagram.com/artbydoc](https://www.instagram.com/artbydoc)

EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- "A Brief Guide to the Beat Poets," American Academy of Poets. Brief description of the Beat Movement and links to Beat writers' poetry. [poets.org](https://www.poets.org)
- City Lights Bookstore. Bio and interviews with City Lights founder Lawrence Ferlinghetti, publisher of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and works by other Beat poets. Includes poems by Ferlinghetti. [citylights.com/ferlinghetti](https://www.citylights.com/ferlinghetti)
- "Bob Dylan, The Beat Generation, and Allen Ginsberg's America," Sean Wilentz, *The New Yorker*, Aug. 13, 2010. Excerpt from Wilentz's book, *Bob Dylan in America* (Doubleday, 2010), on how the Beats influenced each other's work. [newyorker.com](https://www.newyorker.com)
- "On Writing 'A Canticle to the Waterbirds,'" William (Brother Antoninus) Everson, Modern American Poetry Site. Everson's 1968 essay on circumstances and inspiration for writing the poem, plus other literary criticism of the poem. (search: *William Everson*, english.illinois.edu/maps)



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JASON STEPHENSON | PHOTOS BY TED ROEDER

THE POET HAS SPOKEN

CAN WORDS BREAK DOWN
SOCIAL BARRIERS?

YES. YES, THEY CAN.

Imagine a quiet room at a university with chairs aligned in neat rows. The crowd is sparse, but they listen politely as a professor in a tweed jacket reads verse from behind a podium. As the poet concludes each piece, the audience responds with a dignified golf clap. Such is the textbook poetry reading.

Across town at a bar, no podium is in sight and the rowdy conversation hushes only when a poet approaches the microphone. Reciting verse from memory, the poet modulates her voice—loud and fast for emphasis, then slow or soft to stir emotion—using her whole body and the available space to communicate her message. The audience is cheering and applauding before the poem is even over. (Our next poet, poor chap, is roundly booed.) This is spoken word.

Since the 1980s, spoken word has made giant leaps in popularity as technology has made it readily accessible—as close as the corner cafe or the nearest internet connection. Spoken word poetry places importance on both content and its *performance*—a crucial component that prompts some poets to refer to themselves as spoken word artists. In contrast with print poetry, audiences cannot linger over word choice, line breaks, and nuanced themes. Instead, they rely on a poet's delivery, his use of volume, speed, and gestures to glean meaning.

Spoken word performance, the give and take between poet and audience, makes for a more visceral experience of verse because it is immediate, temporary—recited and then gone. The inventive style has brought a renaissance to poetry, driven by its appeal to a younger generation, its embrace of diverse voices, and an informality that puts poet and audience on equal footing. This populism of poetry has opened the doors for more varied poets and audiences who have not felt welcomed by the traditional literary establishment. With spoken word, the common man and woman, not the literary critic, determine the value of poets and their work.

Poetry as Competition

The current evolution of competitive spoken word poetry—slam—has its origin in Chicago in the mid-1980s. Marc Smith, a construction worker and poet, felt like an outsider in the poetry world. *Poetry* magazine had rejected his work for sixteen years. He was tired of the stuffy, poorly attended poetry readings by academics. He wanted to stage readings with vibrancy and interaction between poets and audiences.

Smith started his experiment in a blue collar neighborhood at the Get Me High Lounge. On Monday nights, while patrons were watching Cubs games, a handful of poets took turns delivering poems, enhancing their performances with makeup, costumes, boom boxes, and wild gestures. Eventually, the weekly poetry show found a permanent home at the Green Mill Jazz Club on the north side of Chicago. When a set ran short one evening in 1986, Smith filled the time by getting the audience to participate. He called it a slam and encouraged them to cheer, applaud, boo, or hiss as they evaluated each poet's performance. Random audience members served as judges and assigned scores on a scale from 0 to 10 to determine the winning poem.

Thirty years later, the Uptown Poetry Slam still draws crowds every Sunday night at the Green Mill. The terms “spoken word,” “performance poetry,” and “slam poetry” have become so common as to be interchangeable, regardless of whether the performance is for competition.

Success in Chicago swept the country as slams and open mics grew in bars and cafes of American cities, including the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York City, a cultural icon that remains a vibrant hub for poetry and music. After a team of Chicago slam poets competed against a team from San Francisco in 1989, the idea for a National Slam was born and continues as an annual competition.

Slams embraced diversity by including voices of differing races, sexual identities, and educational backgrounds who shared poems on personal, political, comedic, and dramatic topics. This inclusivity helped break down social and cultural barriers, democratizing poetry. An open door policy meant anyone could attend, compete, or judge.





Poetry On Demand

HBO introduced spoken word poetry to an even wider audience with its *Def Poetry* series, which ran for six years from 2002 to 2007. The series highlighted poets such as Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, and Patricia Smith, performing for an enthusiastic audience. Renowned slam poet and former teacher Taylor Mali appeared three times, once to recite his now famous poem “What Teachers Make,” which relates a conversation with a smug dinner guest inquiring about Mali’s teacher salary. At a crucial point in the poem, Mali uses hand gestures to convey meaning:

I make them understand that
if you’ve got *this*, [brain]
then you follow *this*, [heart]
and if someone ever tries to
judge you
by what you make, you give
them *this*. [the finger]

Though the stage directions provide clarity in Mali’s book *What Learning Leaves*,

the poem loses some of its edge in the process, demonstrating the occasional difficulty in transforming a spoken word poem into print form. Nevertheless, spoken word poets maintain a body of work available in both print and audio formats.

In 2005, poet David Groff claimed, “A recited poem vanishes faster than a vapor trail.” It was the same year YouTube launched, which gave spoken word an enduring platform that has generated an exponential following. The Button Poetry channel launched in 2012 and now has over a thousand videos and more than *half a million* subscribers. Neil Hilborn’s performance of his poem “OCD,” uploaded in July 2013, now has over twelve million views. His subject (the tension of a romantic relationship coupled with obsessive compulsive disorder) is complemented by his fast, repetitive phrases and head jerks. Hilborn’s raw emotional voice rises and falls until the poem’s conclusion when

he pauses and states the final line. (No spoilers here. Watch it!)

What is the significance of this relatively new online audience? The top ten spoken word videos on the Button Poetry channel have, combined, over 42 million views. By contrast, most print poetry books sell, at best, two thousand copies.

Poetry as Pop Culture

A clear indication of the mainstreaming of spoken word poetry is a growing presence in popular culture. Its hallmarks of raw honesty, emotional appeal, and heightened delivery are often mocked in storylines. In the 2014 film *22 Jump Street*, Jonah Hill’s character, Schmidt, is put on the spot to improvise a spoken word poem at an open mic night. Schmidt takes the stage and indeed makes it up as he goes along by throwing in every cliché he thinks he knows about slam—a sing-song tone, dramatic pauses, and heavy

Lauren Zuniga Speaks

The thing that poetry slam has given me, more than anything, is community. The true power of a slam is not that it gets people to care about poetry again, it is that it gives a voice to the silenced. Not only does it give a microphone to anyone with a story, but it gathers people in a room to *listen* to each other.



SUITCASE OF IMPOSSIBLE

That night we emptied everything.
The twenty-seven-story chocolate cake,
the curly-haired girl who climbs to the top
to place the cherry, a room made of icing,
a music box where the white dwarves keep
the pale blue sky at night, the Cleveland
County tooth fairy who has paid her \$8.50,
and the bearded king with reindeer.

It all started when she asked me what *gay*
meant and why her teacher says *gay people*
are going to hell and if I thought kids could
go there.

The only thing worse than coming into contact
with someone who has unthinkably wrong ideas
is finding out that person has been in contact with
your children.

You get to keep anything you want in there,
I said. Some people choose a fiery place to send
bad people when they die. Some choose statues
or beads or elaborate ceremonies. Some
just want a chocolate fountain super slide or
detachable limbs. Some don't want anything.

We went through each item we carry. Holding them
up to the light to see if they still fit. When we got to
Santa Claus, she wept in my arms for ten minutes.

Suddenly, she sat straight up, wiped off her cheeks, dusted
off his red velvet sleeves, placed him in her suitcase and said,
I'm keeping him.

TUESDAY EVENING

Talia pots the citronella to keep
the mosquitoes away. Hangs the mirror.
Waters the rosemary. The tape player
offers muffled trumpet, backyard clarinet.
Keeps time with the curtains slapping
their knees against the window.

The kids are lined up at the corner
waiting for the ice cream man.
Pink headband gang. Drumsticks
in back pockets. Silver coins drop
from hips. They know their loot
will go into the freezer until after dinner
but the little ones giggle, nervous,
as the big ones count their change.

Penny slices onions and the freshest
block of tofu. Megan scoops
spaghetti squash in yellow mounds
of ribbon. Chickweed and dandelion
salad. Sprinkle of sunflower seeds.
Wild rice and morel mushrooms.

The girls built the raised bed while
I was at work. Cedar planks, a truck
full of black dirt. I staple chicken wire
to the wood frame for the compost bin.
The staples punch like snare.
The breeze sings like a plastic harmonica.
I fall in love a thousand times before
I ever get called into dinner.

—Lauren Zuniga, poems from *The
Smell of Good Mud* (Write Bloody,
2012), used by permission.

LAUREN B. ZUNIGA is an international touring poet and teaching artist. Her poetry collections include *The Nickel Tour* (Penmanship Books, 2009) and *The Smell of Good Mud* (Write Bloody, 2012), which was a finalist for the Oklahoma Book Award. She has over one million views on YouTube, is a three-time International Poetry Slam finalist, and finished in the top twenty at the Women of the World poetry slam three years in a row. laurenzuniga.com

emphasis on random words. His poem “Cynthia” begins:

Slam poetry!
Yelling! Angry!
Waving-my-hands-a-lot!
Specific point of view on *things!*”

In season five of NBC’s cult sitcom *Parks and Recreation*, Amy Poehler’s character, Leslie Knope, lampoons spoken word because “those poems do not rhyme.” She mimics the style, noting that: “*Anything . . . can be a slam . . . poem . . . if you say it like this.*”

As evidence of their pop culture status, spoken word poets are gaining unprecedented attention. Beyoncé incorporated the work of Somali-British poet Warsan Shire in her critically acclaimed visual album, *Lemonade*, released in 2016. Beyoncé recites excerpts of Shire’s poetry throughout the video, including “For Women Who Are Difficult to Love”:

you can’t make homes out of
human beings
someone should have already
told you that
and if he wants to leave
then let him leave
you are terrifying
and strange and beautiful
something not everyone
knows how to love.

Two of Shire’s poetry chapbooks sold out on Amazon within hours of *Lemonade*’s debut. Her 2012 digital album, *warsan versus melancholy (the seven stages of being lonely)*, is available for download or streaming on bandcamp.com at an affordable £5 (roughly \$6.10 U.S.). Shire’s body of work spans print and digital formats, a sign that twenty-first century poets will meet their fans wherever they are, in multiple platforms.

Spoken Oklahoma

Lauren Zuniga, one of Oklahoma’s most prominent spoken word poets, won a poetry slam at age eighteen and has represented Oklahoma City in thirteen national and international slam competitions, earning three top ten finishes. Perspective from many voices infuses Zuniga’s work: her Creek-Seminole heritage, her grandmother’s role as the first director of the ACLU in Oklahoma, and her own queer identity. Her collection *The Smell of Good Mud* (2012) includes the poem “To Oklahoma Progressives Plotting Mass Exodus.” Originally published in the *Oklahoma Gazette*, the poem was written in response to the 2010 election in which voters supported state referendums to affirm English as the official state language, deny Sharia law, and require photo ID for voting. It was a way for Zuniga, a fifth generation Okie, to convince herself to remain in the Sooner State and “be a part of what’s good about Oklahoma.”

Here is where the sunset stretches
its arms wide as forgiveness
across stolen plains. / Here is
where Clara Luper sat down at the
Katz lunch counter and asked to be
served. / Here is where black and
white soldiers fought alongside
each other for the first time.
.....
It’s where the healing has to take
place. / Tell them you are not mov-
ing. / Oklahoma is worth the wait.

Oklahomans eager to participate in the spoken word scene will find plenty of venues—and great performances. According to Poetry Slam Inc., sponsors of the National Poetry Slam, “Oklahoma has been able to boast two of the top ten poets in the entire country.”

Red Dirt Poetry forums are a weekly event on Wednesday nights at Sauced on Paseo in Oklahoma City. Slam nights begin with an open mic segment when poets can read their work without scores or ranking. The audience is encouraged to respond if so moved, including the crowd favorite—a drawn-out, awestruck “Daaaaaamn.” Score cards had been forgotten the night I attended, so we improvised by making an X or O with our arms to vote for a favorite poem in each round of the competition.

Spoken word poetry exists all over the world. England, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, and Madagascar have flourishing slam poetry communities modeled after Marc Smith’s original slam competitions in Chicago. The egalitarian nature of spoken word ensures that future generations of poets will share their voices with an ever expanding audience. Will you be listening?

JASON STEPHENSON teaches creative writing at Deer Creek High School in Edmond, Oklahoma. He received his master’s degree in English from the University of Central Oklahoma in May 2015. A past president of the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English, he is a teacher consultant for the Oklahoma Writing Project.

TED ROEDER is a documentary photographer focusing on communities, including a series of portraits of poets, artists, and performers. He has photographed the Poetry Project’s Annual New Year’s Day Marathon (images in this piece are from 2016 and 2017) in New York for several years.

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- “A Brief Guide to Slam Poetry,” Academy of American Poets, May 29, 2004. Link to info on slam poets and sample poems. poets.org
- Button Poetry Channel. Watch videos of spoken word, including Neil Hilborn’s poem “OCD.” youtube.com/user/ButtonPoetry
- “What Teachers Make,” Taylor Mali. Video: youtube.com/user/taylormali. Cartoon illustration: zenpencils.com. (PG: explicit gestures)



Alphons Marie Antoine Joseph Grandmont (1837-1909), the Artist's Second Husband,
Tutoring Two Italian Girls, Bramine Hubrecht, ca. 1900-1909. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

SIX POETS TO MAKE YOU FALL FOR POETRY

Even the most poetry averse will find something to love in these poets.

BENJAMIN MYERS



he best compliment I ever received came with chocolate pie. I was asked to read after a pie auction for a museum fundraiser. Afterwards, I was enjoying a hard-earned slice of French silk when a man walked up and said: “Ever since high school, I thought I didn’t like poetry. I was here for the pie. But I liked your poems. I could identify with them. Maybe I was wrong about poetry.”

Best compliment ever.

A lot of well-meaning teachers spoil poetry for students by presenting poems as a secret code to be cracked. A good poem is not a puzzle. It is a pleasure. A poem may be wonderfully mysterious, but it should never be simply baffling. A poem may invite us to read more, and even

send us to other books to learn more in order to fully enter its world. It shouldn't, however, simply turn us away.

Still, generations of students have been taught that poems hate *us*, that they want to confuse and even shame us. And so, generations of students have turned away from poetry. When is the last time you saw someone on a bus or plane reading a volume of poems?

All is not lost. There *are* poets who offer a way back in, poets whose poems offer the pleasures of good verse. For the poetry averse, I recommend the following six. These poets represent a great variety of techniques and perspectives, so, if you don't like one, try another.

JANE KENYON

An American poet active from the late '70s to the early '90s, Jane Kenyon is often remembered for her compelling life story. Born in the Midwest, she fell in love with one of her professors at the University of Michigan, the renowned poet Donald Hall, married, and moved with him to his family farm in New England, where they devoted their lives to writing poetry. This romantic idyll was cut tragically short when Kenyon died in 1995, leaving behind just four complete books of poetry and a posthumous edition of "new and selected" poems called *Otherwise* (Gray Wolf Press, 1997).

Kenyon's work appeals through an exquisite combination of plain style and spiritual depth. Her poems are both understated and frank, like a conversation with a friend who is wise and sensible, unflinching yet consoling. In "Father and Son," she hears her neighbors cutting wood:

From time to time he let the saw idle,
stepping back from the logs and aromatic
dust, while his son kicked the billets
down the sloping drive toward the shed.

This is a moment of quiet connection, a simple true-to-life picture of two men quietly at work together. When we learn, at the poem's end, that the wood will be used to warm the father and son through their last winter together, we are already comforted by the unstated love between them and by the quiet dignity of their labor.

One of Kenyon's best-known poems, "Let Evening Come," seems, at least in retrospect, to offer the same kind of preparation for her own death:

Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.

The speaker takes comfort in the everyday—"Let the cricket take up chafing"—knowing how great a consolation is beauty even as one must move into the "late afternoon" of life.

Kenyon's poems can also be quirky, even funny. When reading "Church Fair," we chuckle with recognition at the portrait of her grandmother:

"Mrs. Kenyon," the doctor used to tell her,
"you are simply killing yourself with work."
This she repeated often,
with keen satisfaction.

"Keen" is also an excellent description of Jane Kenyon as an observer of life.

B.H. FAIRCHILD

Raised around the oil fields of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas, B.H. Fairchild writes about the hardscrabble lives of working men and women, often finding dignity, even holiness, in the lives of people others might consider "losers."

In an age when many contemporary poets fixate on fragmentation (seemingly unconnected bits of imagery) and indulge in



PRAYING DRUNK

Our Father who art in heaven, I am drunk.
Again. Red wine. For which I offer thanks.
I ought to start with praise, but praise
comes hard to me. I stutter. Did I tell you
about the woman whom I taught, in bed,
this prayer? It starts with praise;
the simple form
keeps things in order. I hear from her
sometimes.
Do you? And after love,
when I was hungry,
I said, *Make me something to eat.*
She yelled,
Poof! You're a casserole!—and laughed
so hard
she fell out of the bed. Take care of her.

—Andrew Hudgins, stanza excerpt from “Praying
Drunk,” *The Never-Ending: New Poems* (1991),
used by permission of Houghton Mifflin
Company. All rights reserved.

Image: *At the Beer Garden*, Alolph Menzel, 1883.
Private collection [PD] Wikimedia Commons

Background: *Maler des Chinesischer*, print circa
12th century. Private collection / [PD] Wikimedia
Commons (repeated pp. 37-38)

nonlinear thinking (long strings of word association), Fairchild has remained dedicated to narrative. His recent *The Blue Buick: New and Selected Poems* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2014) features verse that reads like exceptionally trim short stories. In one of his best known poems, “Body and Soul,” he tells the story of a young Mickey Mantle playing as a ringer in an amateur game. The poet focuses not on the gifted young player, but on the old men, sitting around remembering the day they met him, the day they discovered “the vast gap between talent and genius.” It is a story about ordinary men marked by their encounter with greatness.

Fairchild’s poems often tell stories of desperation and transcendence among hard-working people on the plains. In “Rave On,” he depicts four high school boys so hungry for meaning and a sense of being alive that they spend their evenings repairing junk cars solely for the excitement of intentionally wrecking them:

Rumbling over caliche
with a busted muffler,
radio blasting Buddy Holly
over Baptist wheat fields,
Travis screaming out *Prepare
ye the way of the Lord*
at jackrabbits skittering beneath
our headlights

In “Beauty,” Fairchild confesses that “no male member of my family has ever used / this word in my hearing or anyone else’s except / in reference, perhaps, to a new pickup or dead deer.” Even so, he tells the story of men desperate for some glimpse of beauty, even as they are shamed by the light it casts on their dim lives. No one has written better about rural masculinity.

MARILYN NELSON

Marilyn Nelson is one of several poets associated with the “New Formalists,” a

group of poets rising to prominence in the '80s and '90s with a goal to bring back poetry audiences by returning to the use of rhyme, meter, and narrative. Many of these poet proponents appeared in the 1996 Story Line Press anthology, *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism*.

Nelson’s work, often focused on family and the African-American experience, is accessible yet rich with mystery. Her work is hospitable to the reader; unlike experimental poetry’s leaps in logic and violations of syntax, Nelson’s poems don’t resist being read. But she is not afraid to address harrowing subject matter. Her volume of new and selected poems, *The Fields of Praise* (LSU Press, 1997), offers examples of her best work as she writes with sympathy and humanity about the Rwanda massacres between the Hutu and Tutsi, as well as tragedies closer to her home. In “April Rape,” the poet vividly and sympathetically imagines the inner life of a rape survivor who has barricaded herself in so that “the mouths of all the locks in the house / snatch at her like cats.” Nelson, however, doesn’t reduce the woman to a mere victim:

She is trying to grow teeth
everywhere.
She will bite the next man that comes,
eat him up like a piece of ice.
She is glad to be home again.

The poem is a testimony of survival.

Other poems, like “No, No, Bad Daddy” and “Woman Kills and Eats Own Infant” look unflinchingly at the human capacity for evil and the potential for relationships to go horribly wrong. These poems are not lurid or despairing. They offer a sense of shared sorrow and of common humanity. Nelson’s poems remind us again and again that we don’t belong only to ourselves. Her poems of family and community explore the nets

of love and obligation, the shared joys and burdens that tie us together.

ANDREW HUDGINS

Andrew Hudgins, another veteran of the *Rebel Angels* anthology, is very much a Southern poet and, like many Southerners, he knows how to tell a good story. His 1985 debut collection, *Saints and Strangers* (Houghton Mifflin, 1985), includes a sequence of poems narrated by the daughter of a revivalist preacher. Like a novella in verse, it follows the main character from childhood into adulthood. His second book, *After the Lost War: A Narrative* (Houghton Mifflin, 1988), is a fictionalized account of the life of Georgia poet Sidney Lanier, who was a Confederate soldier before becoming a musician, writer, and professor.

Even when Hudgins's poems aren't narratives, they maintain a straightforward, conversational manner. One of his best poems, "The Hereafter," amusingly ponders scenarios for life after death before confessing:

For so long
I have thought of us as nails
God drives into the oak floor
of this world,
it's hard to comprehend
the hammer turned
to claw me out.

Has anyone so vividly described our inability to face mortality?

Considering the titles of his memoir (*The Joker*, Simon & Schuster, 2014) and a recent book of verse (*A Clown at Midnight*, Mariner Books, 2013), it is no surprise that comedy abounds in Hudgins's work. In "Praying Drunk," he begins:

Our Father who art in heaven, I am drunk.
Again.

In that line break one discerns the knack for comic timing crucial in a good story-

teller. "Playing Dead" recounts how his father used to lie perfectly still, letting the children poke him until they were convinced that he was dead. The poem's young protagonist begins to fear the worst, introducing the element of anxiety found in most great comedy, until he tries jabbing his father "in the jewels," a move that brings a quick end to the game.

DU FU

While the rest of the poets on this list are contemporary and American, I want to include one who is not. Living from 712 to 770 A.D. in Tang Dynasty China, Du Fu attempted and failed to make a life as a civil servant. In an age marred by rebellions and civil unrest, he struggled to care for his family while writing hundreds of beautiful poems.

Du Fu speaks to us in ways that seem contemporary. Like Marilyn Nelson, he reminds us of our interdependence. In one of his most anthologized poems, "Qiang Village (1)" at right, the poet is reunited with his family after a brief separation in the turmoil. Few poets have so vividly and succinctly captured what it means to live a private life within the context of a community. Du Fu is also a precise observer of nature, often weaving natural images into his depictions of everyday life. The detail of the flapping magpies around the gate not only fills out the picture but also subtly reminds us of the contrast between the seemingly eternal stability of nature and the changeableness of human fortunes.

Friendship is a frequent theme in Du Fu's poems. In a heart-wrenching poem about fleeing with his family from the rebels overrunning their village, he writes with palpable gratitude about the friend who took them in when they were on the verge of starvation, bathed their feet, and brought them platters of food. Elsewhere he writes of friends met on the road and of friends who



QIANG VILLAGE (1)

From mountainous red clouds
looming in the west
a shaft of sunlight
falls on the flat plain
magpies flap and chatter
around the brushwood gate
all this is hugely welcome
to such a tired traveler
my wife and children
are wide-eyed with surprise
they greet me and of course
must wipe their streaming tears
all of us know these times
whirl families in all directions
we know I'm very lucky
to have returned alive
the neighbors climb their walls
to witness our reunion
pretty soon most of them
are blubbing too
night comes
we light some candles
look at each other
wonder if we are dreaming.

—Du Fu (David Young, trans.)

Image: Wang Xizhi *Watching Geese*,
Qian Xuan, circa 1250-1300. Metropolitan
Museum of Art, NY / [PD] Wikimedia
Commons



HAUER YOU

Hi, my name is Rutger Hauer,
and this is my cooking channel.
Today on my cooking channel
I will make beef.
Great beef starts where you'd
least expect.

But before we get into details,
let's open a window or two.
I also do have orange juice in
the fridge if anybody wants one.
Do you care that I've been in
more than fifty

movies and that I am 72 years old
and from the Netherlands?
I learned to say American "hello"
at very young age.
There is nowhere I would rather be
than Iceland, though.

Or that my parents sent me to sea
at the age of 15?
Currently running a charity
obstetrics clinic in Greenland,
my mind races as I think about
what could have beenland.

—Aaron Belz, first publication, *Oklahoma Humanities*, Spring/Summer 2017. All rights reserved.

Image: *Still Life with Bottle, Carafe, Bread, and Wine*, Claude Monet, circa 1862-1863. National Gallery of Art

have passed from this life. Again and again, his poems call us to meditate on our connections to other people.

There are many fine translations of Du Fu's work, but I recommend David Young's *Du Fu: A Life in Poetry* as a starting place. Young has translated the Tang poet's work into straightforward and accessible verse, and he has arranged the poems to tell the life story of the poet. It is a book I cherish and carry with me often.

AARON BELZ

Compared to the rest of the poets on this list, Aaron Belz is a young upstart, but his first three books have had great appeal for a general audience. Like Hudgins, Belz is a joker. Consider just a few of his poem titles: "2005 is an Important Year for Alec Baldwin"; "Thomas Hardy the Tank Engine"; and "Arguing with a Buddhist."

Belz is a master of silly word play. In one poem, he imagines people in the horse-drawn carriage rental business "at loggerheads" with the inventors of the typewriter over who owns the phrase "carriage return." In this short poem from his collection *Glitter Bomb* (Persea, 2014), he continues the fun:

HIPPIE SLANG

When I say
"I dig graves,"
what I mean is
I enjoy and/or
understand them.

Belz often mocks literature itself, as with this mashup of John Ashbery, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, and music legend Michael Jackson:

MICHAEL JASHBERY

I'm starting with the man
in the convex mirror.

The great modernist poet Marianne Moore famously begins her poem "Poetry" with the confession, "I, too, dislike it." If you have felt the same, reading Aaron Belz's irreverent romp through literary culture can be a therapeutic form of revenge.

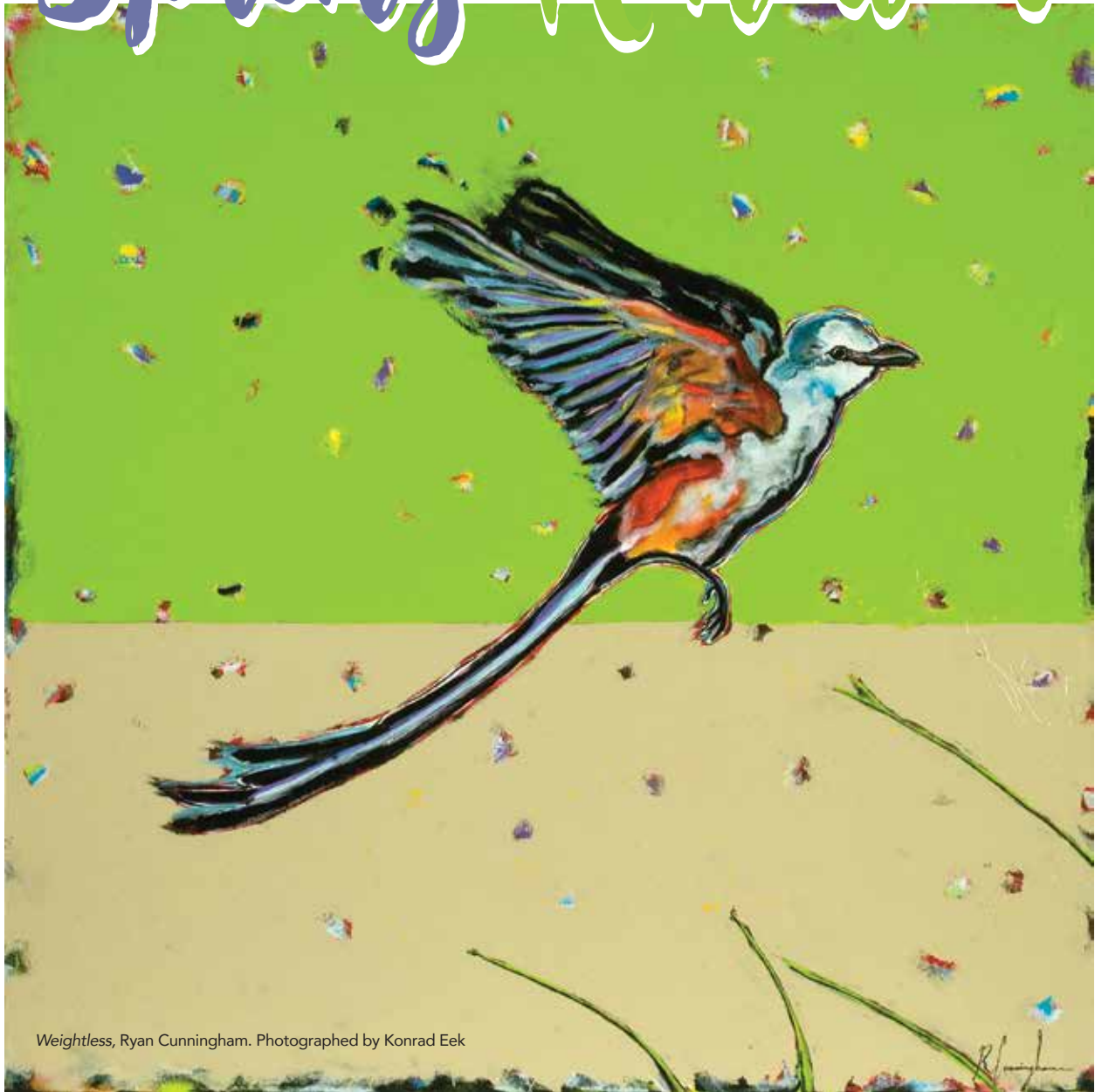
Maybe reading these poets will convince you to dislike poetry a little less. Maybe they will be a gateway to the many great poets not included in this list. If you want more recommendations, I'd be happy to give you a thousand names.

BENJAMIN MYERS is author of two books of poetry and just completed a term as Oklahoma State Poet Laureate. His poems appear in many prominent literary journals. He teaches at Oklahoma Baptist University.

EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- "A Life Together," *Bill Moyers' Journal*. Video profile of married poets Jane Kenyon and Donald Hall, including motivations for their work and footage of poetry readings. billmoyers.com
- "What the Light Gives Back: An Interview with B.H. Fairchild," Jenny Molberg, *The American Literary Review*, Nov. 24, 2014. Discusses Fairchild's writing process and his book *The Blue Buick*: americanliteraryreview.com. Videos of Fairchild readings: poetry.la/index.html
- "In 'Poetry,' The Story of an African-American Military Family," Arun Rath, NPR, Feb. 8, 2014. Interview on and excerpt from Marilyn Nelson's memoir, *How I Discovered Poetry*: npr.org. Nelson poetry, interviews, and video: blueflowerarts.com
- "'Joker' Asks: Have You Heard the One About the Joke-Telling Poet?" Scott Simon, NPR, June 8, 2013. Andrew Hudgins on his memoir, *The Joker*, and the role of humor in his life: npr.org. Hudgins poems: slate.com
- "Great Tang Poets: Du Fu," Asian Topics, Columbia University. Scholar commentary on the life and writings of Du Fu: afe.easia.columbia.edu/at. English translations of Du Fu poems: chinese-poems.com
- "The Elusive Aaron Belz," Brian Howe, *Indy Week*, March 5, 2014. Profiles Belz's quirky "micro-fame" as a contemporary poet: indyweek.com. Belz essays, interviews, and poetry: belz.net

Spring Renewal



Weightless, Ryan Cunningham. Photographed by Konrad Eek

A garden of verse from Oklahoma poets

 Indicates first time publication

SCISSORTAIL

A comparison of bird and poet

The official Latin name of the scissortail is *Tyrannus forficatus*, king of the fork-tails.


The poet, king of words, transforms the mundane with common language, a swooping upward, a groundward descent, a flutter of spirit.

The bird's forked tail allows abrupt midair turns to catch the insect in flight. With a quick mid-phrase turn the poet catches us—abrupt—the verse takes flight and we must rethink the trajectory of the line.

The scissortail wanders wide traveling to winter grounds, shows up unexpectedly, far from its summer habitat. By the poet's words we explore the same expanse, arriving unexpectedly, far outside ourselves.

 —Katricia G. Pierson

A garden of verse from Oklahoma poets

 Indicates first time publication

UNTITLED

Mimosa-feathered branches
bowed as I walked under
a kind of benison
the closest I could come
that hellish spring
to grace

 —Britton Gildersleeve

APRIL FESTIVAL

We poets clot around the land, around tables,
in halls and bars, under trees, pass around copies,
emote. The air everywhere vibrates
with our voices as well as earth's hopeful procreators'
. . . the frogs, the mockingbirds, the early and enduring insects.
Spring loosens our tongues. The cavernous, dark and dank bar
where we gathered ourselves in the center of the plains
was still heavy with an all-night fill of words when I entered
its morning depths, a velvet ambiance. There was a workshop
in the loft up wooden stairs, and the cappuccino machine
squealed out its own creation. I stopped to chat
with the bright-eyed Virginian of the day before,
met his wife. They stayed until 2 a.m.
Four holdouts huddled around a microphone
on the shadowy stage as if about the last embers
of a campfire. One played a mournful flute
beneath the words muttering on and on
in this endless exhalation that insists
just how much a part of spring we are . . .
just how much a part of earth's
last word we hope to be.

 —Carol Hamilton
Oklahoma Poet Laureate (1995-1997)

USED TO BE A RIVER

You are skipping rocks across a creek
that used to be a river, like the woman
who used to be a girl and the man
who used to be a boy in the year
from a different century than the one
they were born in. The press of time
is a current that changes the landscape
in seasons of drought and flood, divorce,
denial, the loss of children to things
worse than death. Let us be here now,
no matter the water reaches our necks
or does not wet our toes, no matter
we do not know the shape our lives
will decide to take around the next bend.

—Shaun Perkins
Used to Be a River (2015)

SPRING THOUGHTS

You asked if I think about you
when you're away
I answered: "No . . . well . . . sometimes,
now and then . . .


. . . in the mornings
when I wake . . .

Well . . . also at night . . .
as I lie down to sleep

And, oh . . . yes, in the afternoons . . .
Oh, my god, the afternoons,
those spring afternoons . . .

And, well, . . . also
in my dreams . . .
all night long . . .

But, other than those times,
I don't think of you . . . at least
not much."

 —Robert Herman Broyles



SPRING COMES TO ONE-HORSE, OKLAHOMA

Winter slinks away, leaving mailboxes
leaning each way on rotting posts,
gathered along the street, stunned like dead
on the day of resurrection. We rise
a little earlier, even on Saturday,
and sit in plastic lawn chairs to feel
wind shifting north, south, north,
like a boy walking back and forth
in front of the house where a girl lives.

Everywhere the smell of coffee
in Styrofoam cups, bacon frying.
Overhead, the spry agitation of squirrels
shaking the first nervous blooms of redbud.

Everyone's lawn needs mowing.
Everyone's windows are open.
And, one by one, the men are crawling
beneath cars and trucks on cement blocks
and metal ramps. Wrenches in hand, they know,
against all flat good sense, that this year
they can make those engines run.



—Benjamin Myers
Oklahoma Poet Laureate (2015-2016)

BIRTH

You're here one month early,
the scalpel visible
from where I sit
with my notebook of fears,
palimpsests of ghosts
on fingers of air.

The nurse blurs by
in a moment of white,
cuts through the air
of cool anesthesia.

I watch the first spank
with no response,
then another, and another,
please breathe, please breathe . . .

Outside the window
the precarious branch
that holds the world.

Tomorrow's bird comes.
Small mouths open
to swallow the sky.

—David M. Linebarger
War Stories (2006)

UPON DREAMING

do any of my dreams
perhaps a few of yours
hover in consultation
late at night above my bed
before they descend
to soothe a sweating brow
other nights in devilish mood
to tease alarm even terrify
at those instances it may be
in a kindlier frame of mind
your dreams then convince
it is possible to end it by awakening
and so I do dream terrors thankfully
forgotten this Thursday spring
morning my night clothes damp
not from fevered sleep but from May
showers braved while getting the paper
its news spread before me on my desk
nothing that can shatter morning peace
I settle glad once again
to attend not to the fraught
but the simply ordinary



—Carl Sennhenn
Oklahoma Poet Laureate (2001-2003)

INDIAN PAINTBRUSHES

Flowers grow
flickers of orange fire
dancing on green fields under Oklahoma skies.
Like weeds
they hold to the worst terrain
and spread everywhere.

They beautify discarded Coors cans
and swarm beneath barbed wire
filling empty cattle pastures,
piercing coyote bones
taken by the grass
on land where, long ago,
Choctaw and Chickasaw hunted.

Once,
as a boy,
I worked the roots of a handful loose
from the rocky soil
across the gravel road
running in front of my house
and brought them to my mother's flower beds.

With all the care a ten year old could muster,
I replanted the fire
between the petunias and the four o'clocks.
But there
among the tame flowers
soon
they perished.

"They grow wild;
that's just how some things are meant to be,"
Momma said
as she watered her carefully tended garden
in the summer heat of Oklahoma.

But always
without fail,
before she'd go back inside,
she would walk over to the edge of our yard
and look across the dusty road
at the fiery red-orange blanket,
burning in the last light of day.

—Ron Wallace
Songs of Eretz Poetry Review (Oct. 2015)



A garden of verse from Oklahoma poets

AFTER THE STORM

I want to tell you something new
about the rain. How it comes down
in the morning before the light comes up.

Tell you how it drums on a tin roof
and reminds me that once I was twelve years old,
curled up on my grandmother's porch.

How the sound raised a knowing
in my child self, told me the mystery in the world,
told me to go look for it. To follow it.

The drops spoke to me of things to come,
roads to travel, sadness in passing. Told me
to move out, to stand as near the edge as I dared,
without drowning in the flood.

Now, the light is coming, the rain is letting up.
I am grateful for the news the raindrops brought
to my young heart all those years ago,
especially now that the storm is over,
the sky sunshine bright, the world made new.
Again.

 —Dorothy Alexander

MY MOTHER'S IRIS

I sleep under the wing
of night, singing
the long winter

requiem, stealing
purple out of black
earth. I dream flesh

is made flower, bulb
is made heart, stem
and leaf unfurl

like new flags
breaking into May,
bearding the world again.

—Jane Vincent Taylor
Miriam's Well (July 2010)

WILL

Late March, and the wind whips up dust
over early spring fields, the sorrel soil blooming
into sky until the sun blurs and limps,
red-faced, toward the evening horizon.

Somehow, though, the wheat has found
its way up after a dry winter,
pushing through the roof of earth
with flat green fingers.

I would account it a matter of genetics,
of careful agricultural science
that makes seeds resilient and efficient,
growing on the mere rumor of rain.

Or, it might be something more common,
like the general will to life,
like the way a child tosses a ball
too heavy for her small thin arms
at the sky, mouth open in wonder,
at the height.

—Paul Bowers
The Lone, Cautious, Animal Life (2016)


THE CARDINALS AND FINCHES KNOW MY MOTHER

The cardinals and finches know my mother now,
along with this backyard she built for them.
Through generations flocking here each spring,
they come because their great-great granddads did,

and this backyard is all they've ever known.
And I don't know a cardinal's or finch's lifespan,
but hearts so tiny cannot last that long . . .
they beat so fast to keep their bodies warm.

So I assume it's generations who
have come to eat her sunflower n' thistle seeds,
her feeders filled like altars she maintains
to honor some celestial feathered god.

And I'm afraid how lost they'll be someday
when she is gone, though not as lost as me.

 —Nathan Brown
Oklahoma Poet Laureate (2013-2014)

MAN WALKS DOG

Double-leashed grip,
left hand wrapped
like a bull rider's,
we sally forth
to tilt at the world.

Readiness is all –
coiled spring
of exuberance
in this cold spring,
unleashed against
winter's reticence.

Amber-jeweled eyes
entrapping ten thousand
thousand years of radiance,
embers of fire
melting winter's vestige.

No map to dictate
distance or direction,
only instinct and discretion
when inscribing an arc
the length of a leash.

The movement forward
not so much choice
as capitulation

the way home
a promise
of eternal return.

—Daniel Simon
Cast Off (2015)

A RANNAIGHEACHT GHAIRID ON SPRING BURNING

Slowly, smoke
settles in the hollows. Poke-
weed grays, cinquefoil withers, jack-
in-the-pulpits crack. Frogs croak.

The woods ring
alive with the fire of spring.
Though the flame may kill first plants,
no rants are raised at burning.

Rather now
in this cool time of hawk, owl,
and hummingbird—acceptance
of the balance due to fowl,

beasts, creatures
of the leaves and grass. Features
of ash give way to the force
that will course fields and pastures

with a green
that will outlast the first seen
things of the small woods and ways.
All the days of spring we keen,

being slow,
loss of faster things. We know
so little the force of fire:
death here, we say, should grow slow.

—Jim Barnes
Oklahoma Poet Laureate (2009-2010)
On a Wing of the Sun (2001)

Rannaigheacht Ghairid is a Welsh poetic form that requires a patterned rhyme and cross-rhyme in each stanza, and a syllable pattern of 3/7/7/7 in each stanza.

NEAR EQUINOX

A ruby crocus near the porch sends up
hope—winter of sorrow is waning
the dire moon of almost-spring rises
full with promise of renewal, shaming
twinkling city lights in its splendor.

I search for my faith, wonder where
I lost it, find it in deep cinnamon
mud smushing up between my toes.
Across a sere field, a lake in shadow
serenades curvature of earth.

As if on cue, a comet streaks
across somber roiling river of sky.

 —Jeanetta Calhoun Mish

WHAT I CANNOT DO

I cannot make you love
the way rain dripping
from April sky
sharpens redbuds
like lasers dissecting
a heart with precision
a surgeon envies


a fiery fuchsia
glowing against gray
skies and drizzled bark
scattered in the brush

but I can show you
new clover as small
as drops of water
bright as an emerald
sun, under cover
of dead winter grass.

—Ken Hada
Persimmon Sunday (2015)

SIGNS OF SPRING


This short month is too long,
teasing us with the promise of spring,
then plunging us into numbing cold,
but the mockingbird is busy
scoping out a nesting site
while the cardinals engage in red wars
to establish territories, and flocks
of red-winged blackbirds engulf the lawn.
Only the hollies and photinias are green
and spiky shoots pushing through
frozen earth from the bulbs
of surprise lilies and daffodils
portending blooms to come.
And the goldfinches are no longer
merely asking questions but composing poems
as they exchange their drab winter coats
for flashy yellow suits.
And on my morning walk
down the road to the river
I hear, then see two gray skeins
of sandhill cranes cheering raucously
as they head north toward spring.


 —Jennifer Kidney

BUILDING A HOUSE IN APRIL

Suddenly the wind kicks up.
Redbuds and Bradford pears
scatter Oklahoma confetti
over newly-poured walkway.

You planted concrete
but they wanted a garden.

 —Sandra Soli

 *Indicates first time publication*

Our call for poetry yielded a profusion of poesy—bouquets of verse too bounteous to fit these pages. Visit our website to find more great poems and bios on all our featured poets. okhumanities.org/poetry

N. SCOTT MOMADAY

THE POET'S LIFE



Vase of Flowers on a Mantlepiece,
Edouard Vuillard, circa 1900.
National Gallery of Art

THOUGHTS FROM A POET ON HIS CRAFT

To Oklahomans, N. Scott Momaday is a cultural treasure, a Native son in every respect: He was born in Lawton and is a member of the Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma. His honors are legion. To name a few, in 2007 he was appointed Oklahoma Centennial Poet Laureate by Governor Brad Henry and awarded the National Medal of Arts by President George W. Bush. His novel *House Made of Dawn* won the 1969 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. He is an accomplished painter and printmaker and has spent his lifetime as a scholar and keeper of words, crafting novels, plays, folk tales, memoirs, essays, and poetry.

“Poets are the people who really are the most insightful among us,” Momaday observes. “They stand in the best position to enlighten us, and encourage, and inspire us. What better thing could you be than a poet?”

With a bit of never-before-published prose, and a classic reflection in verse, Momaday gives us a glimpse of the poet's life and we agree: what better thing, indeed?

POEM AT RIGHT: *Contemporary American Poetry*, Vol. 2, Cary Nelson, ed. (Oxford Univ. Press, 2001)



A BENIGN SELF-PORTRAIT

A mirror will suffice, no doubt.
The high furrowed forehead,
The heavy-lidded Asian eyes,
The long-lobed Indian ears.
Brown skin beginning to spot,
Of an age to bore and be bored.
I turn away, knowing too well
My face, my expression
For all seasons, my half-smile.

Birds flit about the feeder,
The dog days wane, and I
Observe the jitters of leaves
And the pallor of the ice-blue beyond.
I read to find inspiration. I write
To restore candor to the mind.
There are raindrops on the window,
And a peregrine wind gusts on the grass.
I think of my old red flannel shirt,
The one I threw away in July.
I would like to pat the warm belly of a
Beagle or the hand of a handsome woman.
I look ahead to cheese and wine,
And a bit of Bach, perhaps,
Or Schumann on the bow of Yo-Yo Ma.

WORD SAMPLER

There is a Native American verbal formula that goes:

As my eyes search the prairie
I feel the summer in the spring.

This seems to me a remarkable example of the power and mystery of language. It seems to express the nearly inexpressible. I have lived with these words for many years. They are not diminished in time. In my poetry I have tried to achieve this level of expression. I wonder if I have succeeded.

Poetry, I believe, is the highest form of verbal art.

I have written in other genres—novels, essays, plays, criticism, and travel literature. All of these have been intensely rewarding to me, but poetry has been my greatest occupation. To have written just one successful poem—one poem that deserves to be read and preserved for its own sake—is enough to justify the poet's life. It is a kind of immortality.

When I was a small boy in Oklahoma, waking to the eternal sunrise and seeing the rolling plains reaching out to the horizon, the seed of poetry was invested in me. I felt the summer in the spring.

I see the mountains as I saw them
When my heart was young.
But were they not a deeper blue,
Shimmering under the fluency of skies
Radiant with crystal light? Across the way
The yellow land lies out, and standing stones
Form distant islands in the field of time.
There is a stillness on this perfect world,
And I am content to settle in its hold.
I turn inward on a wall of books.
They are old friends, even those that
Have dislodged my dreams. One by one
They have shaped the thing I am.

These are the days that swarm
Into the shadows of legend. I ponder.
And when the image on the glass
Is refracted into the prisms of the past
I shall remember: my parents speaking
Quietly in a warm familiar room, and
I bend to redeem an errant, broken doll.
My little daughter, her eyes brimming
With love, beholds the ember of my soul.
There is the rattle of a teacup, and
At the window and among the vines,
The whirl of a hummingbird's wings.
In the blue evening, in another room,
There is the faint laughter of ghosts,
And in a tarnished silver frame, the
Likeness of a boy who bears my name.

THE POET IN LOVE

I find that writing a poem is like falling in love. There is a fierce excitement to it. It is mysterious and deliciously dangerous. It is the most intimate kind of courtship. Each syllable, each word, each line is something of your lover discovered. You want to give wholly and unconditionally of yourself, and you cannot give enough. Your suffering is exquisite. You think you will die of delight. Then you reach a plateau, and ecstasy becomes a calm and serene contentment. The giddy part of the honeymoon is over, and you settle into a constant, seamless state of bliss. You know your heading, and the wind is ever in your sails. And at last you reach your destination, and there is no satisfaction like it. The prize has been won, the dream come true, the marriage consummated. You have earned the rest of your life, and in the perfection of destiny you have earned the end of it as well.




Vanitas Still Life with Books, anonymous, 1633. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

THE WAY WE WORKED



EXPERIENCE THE SMITHSONIAN IN OKLAHOMA!

The traveling exhibition *The Way We Worked* chronicles 150 years of change in the American workforce, and how work became central to the American dream. See this national exhibit and discover how work shaped each local community along the tour.

- 
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The Way We Worked, an exhibition created by the National Archives, is part of Museum on Main Street, a collaboration between the Smithsonian Institution and Oklahoma Humanities. Support for Museum on Main Street has been provided by the U.S. Congress. Oklahoma programming is generously supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and our local sponsors: the Gelvin Foundation, the Jerome Westheimer Family Foundation, and Beaver Express Service. *Image*: Switchboard operators direct overseas calls, Dec. 1943; National Archives, Records of the Women's Bureau.



NOTEWORTHY



FROM THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Ken Ferguson, Chair

It is often noted in our magazine, website, and press releases that Oklahoma Humanities is the state's affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). In 1971, Oklahoma Humanities launched as an independent nonprofit, charged by NEH to bridge the general public with the academic disciplines of the humanities. For 46 years, Oklahoma Humanities has been an exceptional steward of public funds and the public trust by providing rich cultural opportunities for thousands of Oklahomans.

Each year, we receive a general support grant from the NEH to supplement donors' contributions that fund public humanities programs throughout the state. The grant is incredibly valuable to Oklahoma—it traditionally leverages \$7 of local funds for each \$1 of federal support. That's a terrific return on investment by anyone's standards.

As Chair of the Board of Trustees, I'll be in Washington D.C. this spring to participate in a daylong advocacy event to share the importance of this federal funding to Oklahoma. I'll be joined by other board and staff members in meetings with Oklahoma's congressional delegation. Having the opportunity to share the work of Oklahoma Humanities with U.S. Congressmen and Senators is critical to the continuance of our work, especially statewide grants that fund cultural programs in local communities.

Grantees and program participants regularly write to their representatives, thanking them for making Oklahoma Humanities programs possible. Their personal experiences relay to legislators that maintaining funding for the NEH (and consequently Oklahoma Humanities) is essential to help us all learn about the human experience, understand new perspectives, and participate knowledgeably in civic life, and I am grateful for their efforts. I look forward to sharing our work and its impact in Oklahoma with our elected officials.

OH Welcomes New Board Members



BEN ALPERS is Reach for Excellence Associate Professor at the Honors College, University of Oklahoma. He holds a Ph.D. in American History from Princeton. His research and teaching focus on twentieth-century U.S. political culture, film history, and history and memory. He is working on a book on how

1970s-era Americans processed social and cultural changes through explorations of the past. He is a founding member of the Society of U.S. Intellectual History and edits its blog.



PAULA BROOKS lives in Chickasha with her husband, Patrick. She had the good fortune to be a full-time mom and participated in community organizations while raising her family. Paula currently enjoys semi-retirement, which includes spending more time with grandchildren, continuing her involvement in PEO, and other social/civic activities.



PHILIP BUSEY, JR. handles marketing, public relations, and government affairs for Delaware Resource Group of Oklahoma. He has multiple "40 Under 40" recognitions, including *The Journal Record*, *Oklahoma Magazine*, *OKC Biz Magazine*, and the National Center for the American Indian Enterprise Development.

He serves and has held leadership positions on the boards of numerous organizations, including the SWOSU Foundation, SWOSU Alumni Association, Cherokee National Historical Society, and American Indian Chamber of Commerce, OKC.



DEWAYNE DICKENS is a Developmental English Associate Professor at Tulsa Community College and a Co-Director of the OSU Writing Project. He holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Social Foundations from Oklahoma State University and was listed among OSU's 2012 list of 100 Graduate Students of Significance. He is a member of the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation Board and serves as a mentor-scholar to encourage African American males in higher education.



MARILYN FEAVER is Executive Director of Southwest Oklahoma Impact Coalition, with 20 years' experience in business, transportation, and tourism initiatives. She was the Oklahoma Chamber of Commerce Executive of the Year in 2000 and was recognized by *The Journal Record* as one of 50 Women of the Year in 2002. She is First

Lady of the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma in Chickasha and serves on numerous boards.



BARBARA SNOW GILBERT is a lawyer and mediator, and serves as Law Clerk to United States District Judge Stephen P. Friot. She is the author of three young adult novels, which have won awards including two Oklahoma Book Awards. She serves on the Nichols Hills Planning Commission and has served on a variety of community

boards and committees. She is a graduate of the University of Texas School of Law and The Colorado College.



EDNA MAE HOLDEN is a practicing attorney with Gungoll, Jackson, Box & Devoll, P.C. Her western stories have been published in *Western Horseman Magazine*, *Cowboy Magazine*, and *Persimmon Hill Magazine*. She created the Oklahoma Centennial Symphony, *Oklahoma... Where the West Remains*, which received a 2008

Wrangler Award and was voted best album by the Western Music Association. She received the Governor's Art Award in 2008.



SUNU KODUMTHARA is an Associate Professor of History at Southwestern Oklahoma State University and teaches courses in American and Oklahoma history. She holds a Ph.D. in American History from the University of Oklahoma. In 2014, she received a grant to attend an NEH Summer Institute. She serves on

the executive boards of two national history organizations and was awarded the SWOSU Brandy Award for Faculty Member of the Year, 2015-2016.

ABOUT OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES

Oklahoma Humanities (OH) strengthens communities by helping Oklahomans learn about the human experience, understand new perspectives, and participate knowledgeably in civic life. As the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, OH provides and supports programming for the general public that uses humanities disciplines (such as history, literature, ethics, and philosophy) to deeply explore what it means to be human.

OH accepts grant applications from nonprofits across the state for programs that may take the form of museum exhibits, film festivals, teacher institutes, oral history projects, or other formats that best serve local communities. In addition, OH administers programs that provide free access to cultural humanities content, including: *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine; Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma, a

reading and discussion series; and Museum on Main Street, a collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution to provide traveling exhibits in small rural communities.

Visit our website to find an event near you, read archived issues of this magazine, or explore grant and program opportunities. We look forward to hearing from you. (405) 235-0280 | okhumanities.org
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