

What's the Buzz?: or Why I'm Still Writing Poems in the 21st Century

At the endings of things, it's normal to look backward for clues on how to make sense of what we have done, why we've been doing it, and what it will mean in the future. With that in mind, as I begin the final sprint toward a PhD in Poetry at UH this spring, I've been thinking about 2003 and my final quarter of Master's work at UC-Davis. In particular, I'm thinking about a poorly realized article I came across that spring – written by a man I've never met, published in a major magazine I don't subscribe to—that has nonetheless helped me greatly in figuring out what I've been doing writing poetry in the first place. Let me explain.

In May of that year, just two weeks before my thesis defense, I picked up a *Newsweek*, and flipped to an essay from their op-ed series, "My Turn." The "my" in this case was a middle-aged career ghost-writer named Bruce Wexler; whose essay was entitled, "Poetry is Dead. Does Anybody Really Care?"

Every few years another critic makes some version this case—usually lamenting how "poets today aren't great like (whoever) long ago"—typically based in short-sighted and forgettable arguments. Wexler's essay is different, though. He writes not as a critic, but a self-fashioned *everyman*. And rather than passing judgment on the quality of contemporary poems, he's here to deliver the news that modern culture no longer needs them at all (or any of their forebears). He writes (speaking, presumably, for all of us) as a mourner who once loved poems, but who "got lazy... [whose] interest waned." Poetry has no "buzz," he insists, and in the twenty-first century, an art without "buzz" is over.

This is not a well-argued essay, and I suspect time has mostly forgotten it already. But I mention it, and indeed I've found it troubling, because its most basic observations aren't exactly false. It's true that there's not a lot of money or publicity in poetry; that not many in this country can name our poet laureate or recite a poem written in the last half-century; that there aren't enough people who make poems a daily part of their lives. But instead of announcing the death of the art, I think these gaps speak to why poetry will always be important—why we still have it and why we still need it, not as Americans or literary types, but as human beings.

That sounds contradictory. I should back up a little further.

I started my Master's work in Davis in the fall of 2001, having only set foot in the city once, for a brief apartment hunt that summer. When I arrived for good, after two-and-a-half days on Amtrak from Ohio, I was disoriented and exhausted. My new roommate, Gabby, was visiting family in Austria for a week, so I caught a cab out to our west Davis flat, lugged my bags into the back bedroom, and collapsed. It was nighttime already and I fell asleep hard. It was September 10.

When I awoke, midmorning, I'd missed a half dozen phone calls already from my parents back east. The entire drama of that day, September 11, 2001, had played out while I slept: the Towers had been hit (one and then the other), and then they'd gone down. No one knew how many lives had been lost, but by now there was no more saving, just searching. The whole thing was already past tense.

I spent the rest of the day like everyone else: glued, catatonic, to the TV news; occasionally making lists of people I knew in New York who might have been downtown; feeling remote and helpless as I tried to reconcile the California sun out my own windows with the deathsmoke rising from the streets on the screen.

By the next day, with Gabby grounded in Vienna indefinitely, I knew I'd have to pull myself off the couch and learn this new city. Wandering around town alone, I found myself listening more than usual—and an unsettling pattern began to emerge. At the coffee shop, at Albertsons, on the sidewalk near campus, everyone seemed to have forgotten how to talk to one another. There were conversations, sure, but all of it seemed flat, declarative, devoid of emotion or judgment. Especially when anyone mentioned the attacks. As those first days unfolded, it was hard not to feel as though everyone in the world had taken a step away from one another. Like we'd all broken eye contact. Like we'd excused ourselves to go calm down in the hallway, and now returned: composed and terminally distant.

A week later, the Sacramento Bee (the major newspaper in the area) ran a short note to its readers, acknowledging that they had begun to receive poems from around the service area—already more than they could print—and were thinking they might begin posting some of them online. Something in the collective psyche switched on; the floodgates opened. By October 2, just two weeks later, the Bee reported that they had “received unprecedented numbers of unsolicited poems.” They were pouring in from everywhere. A spread of poetry went to press that weekend, and the paper continued posting more on the web. (It was happening in other cities too.)

It is perhaps expected that artists and writers make statements in times of crisis. But these weren't written by career poets, with commitment to their craft and a sense of duty to the world, or even by the Bee's staff of journalists and editors. They were written by people in the Central Valley, who were afraid, confused, and lonely. People who had non-poetry jobs, non-poetry lives, and may not have picked up a book of poems in years.

And therein lies something important. In that moment—in the confusion, fear, and crippling sorrow that followed the most terrifying communal tragedy most of us had ever faced; in the spine-buckling anxiety and silence that followed; with so many of us curled into ourselves, tiny islands of disquiet and clumsily feigned calm; when we finally straightened our backs and opened our eyes, when we parted our lips to call into that dark void of uncertainty—what came out were poems.

Poetry is in our wiring, it's in our bones. It persists in spite of sales-figures and hype, because we need it, because we understand it. We know exactly what breathless onlookers mean, watching a graceful athlete or dancer, when they gush that it's "poetry in motion." We know exactly what the fire-eyed ballplayers mean, blasting out of the locker room after a barn-burning halftime speech, muttering, "man, that was fucking poetry." It's no coincidence that we read Celan and the Psalms at a funeral, or Rumi and Neruda at a wedding; that we write poems as broody teenagers (when the world and its pressures first announce themselves fully) and then come back to them in times of too-big tragedy or feverish joy; that we go to poems to seduce, to inspire, and to commemorate. Poetry is not just "the best words in their best order" as Coleridge famously called it. It's a direct line to ecstasy, to grief, to loneliness and connection. It pushes us into the dangerous intersection of language, passion, and the mind. It embodies our emotional range when we're closest to it – when it is most risky and most ruthless and most itself.

I don't mean to overstate this or negate the other abstract necessities that charge our lives with meaning. We also need stories and music; we need contact and touch; we need laughter with others and quiet moments alone. But we need poems too. We can live without any of these, and most of us do for a while, but we're poorer for it. And that matters.

God knows what I'll be doing next year. Within a month I'll technically be a doctor, qualified to do exactly nothing I'm not qualified to do now. It's unsettling to march toward something so undefined and yet so utterly inevitable. But whatever exhilarations and dejections come (and both surely will, *en masse*), I know I'll make sense of them by reading poems. And by writing them. And I'll be grateful for that, and for everyone else who wants to read and write them as well. And regardless how little money or "buzz" poets generate, I'm never going to wonder whether the blood still pumps in the genre's veins; whether a life in poems is a life worth living. It does; it is.

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