

On Pop-Up Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The instructions for Pop-Up Poetry are simple. Someone sits opposite a poet at a typewriter, and the poet says, “Give me a word. We’ll talk a bit, I’ll write a poem about it, and you will have the only copy of the poem in the world.” These instructions, however, open up much more than their simplicity implies. I now see Pop-Up as its own form of poetry, distinct in style and concept, blending the individual poet’s private focus on the poem-generating word with the public performance of typing it out. The resulting poem’s often surprising meaning is found through the creative connection between the poet and the person for whom the poem was written.

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Over a decade ago, I wrote my first pop-up poems as a novelty among the serious exhibits at a Mount Royal University open house for prospective students and their families. Now I see Pop-Up as its own form of poetry, distinct in style and concept. More and more, I've valued the way it blends my individual focus on words on the page with the public performance of a finished poem as a personal connection that both audience and performers will wait hours to have. Perhaps the story of Pop-Up Poetry offers a definition of a new art form: the answer to a question you didn't know you had until the answer arrived.

The instructions for Pop-Up Poetry are simple. A poet sits at a typewriter. Someone sits down opposite them, and the poet says, "Give me a word and I'll write a poem for you about it here. When I'm done, I'll read it to you, and you'll get the only copy of the poem in the world." Following these instructions, however, opens up much more than their simplicity implies.

Into the typewriter goes the pop-up-style page. It's a half-size sheet. Pop-Up is a burst of language that can be written out and taken in in less than a minute's time for each step. The typewriter is essential. It is a printer without memory, yet it preserves every keystroke error that marks the pop-up poem as the handmade, one-of-a-kind thing it is. And the clickety-clack of the keys is the train of thought running along—the soundtrack of a pop-up poem's creation.

Pop-up reverses the poem's usual origin story. Instead of coming from the poet, the crucial "about" of it comes from the person who sits opposite. It might be someone the poet knows, but, more often than not, it's a stranger. Poet and partner now, they'll usually have about six minutes together. In that time, the work of discovering the poem's "about" begins with a single given word and will carry on through a conversation about what that word means to the one who brought it to the writing desk.

At first, many people ask for poems on abstract words, like "love" or "gratitude" or "family," the larger categories into which we sort the topics we are moved by in a work of art. But the nuts and bolts of poems are images as they are seen from an individual point of view, words that point directly to the objects which, to paraphrase Eliot, elicit our feelings because they contain those feelings within the story of our relationship to them.¹ What a poem does is touch them open with their names.

Given the chance, people quickly take up the opportunity and challenge of understanding the meaning of a part of their life as yet unexplored by unpacking the generality and getting down to specifics. Poetry is permission both to feel and to think about what we feel. Participating in the writing of a poem is an opportunity to let down the guards we post around ourselves to get through every span of time we know—from the day at hand to our whole lives.

¹ In his essay "Hamlet," Eliot (1953) writes, "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (p. 102).

The discussion before the actual writing of the poem opens the door to the *details* of a life that someone wants to have on a page and see held on to with words. “What do you think of when you say that word?” asks the poet, and a conversation that begins with a general term like “family” leads to a poem about a birthday cake. A poem called in from afar with the word “love” becomes one about painting a kitchen. A poem about “gratitude” becomes one about the corner store a student’s immigrant parents ran because it was the only job they could get in the country that denied them their qualifications but was educating their child for a better life.

I’ve written most of my Pop-Up Poetry at academic conferences. There, the muse-word often appears as the subject of the conference sessions that the person in front of me has just come from. Every conference has its touchstone vocabulary—“authenticity” for teacher conferences, for example, or “voter apathy” for political ones. Gender fluidity. Reconciliation. Resource enhancement. Social equity. Digitization. Virtual reality. Climate crisis.

Concepts in each of these sessions are presented and questioned in the rigorous terms of scholarship—the language of discipline literature, measurement, analysis, and theory. Fundamentally, then, such discussions are about how the *idea* of the moment relates to other ideas and practices on a broad scale. What Pop-Up Poetry does, when such words come to the table, is to let the participant ask, “How does what I have just been talking about relate to me?” Pop-Up turns the mind from the abstract to the particular, from the theoretical to the concrete. It lets you get a good look at your own face in a picture of the crowd assembled by a debate.

This process is not an easy one. It’s a long climb up Mount Academy and a long climb back to the messy earth we live on. I don’t just mean “not easy” in terms of the effort it takes to *think* about big ideas in a personal way. I mean in terms of confronting the barriers to personalizing information or admitting one’s own participation in the very situations that conference sessions are often set up to confront, discuss, and hopefully solve. Yet that personalization is key to finding the way in which what we know can be applied in the world or change our own lives.

A participant in a recent session among teachers asked me for a poem on “ableism.” The session’s argument was that while we may intend to remove this form of exclusion from our classrooms and buildings by increasing accessibility, expanding forms of lesson delivery, and so on, if we think of the problem only in terms of physical barriers to movement or communication, we miss the important way in which language itself is based on a normative assumption of what a human being is and what human beings ought to be able to do. So we need to examine the way we think about what we say as well as what we do.

The participant and I agreed that language-ableism is everywhere, and it’s not difficult to find examples of it in a wide range of documents, including textbooks. But, as the session leader suggested and the participant and I agreed, challenging a social practice isn’t just about pointing to others and saying, “That’s wrong,” or “They should know better.” It’s about examining the self.

When I started to explore the idea of “ableism” with my partner in the creation of the pop-up poem I had been asked to write, however, all they talked about was

ableism in the abstract. The stigma of committing it was so strong that they weren't willing to tell me what their own example of it had been. But without calling out the instance by name, there is neither a solution, nor a poem, nor the model of what is needed for the personal change to occur. In the end, I had to promise to trade a story of one of my own ableist moments (with all the attendant vulnerability) for one of theirs in order to get the poem. It was the act of making a poem that brought this participant to the point of equality (and thus credibility) with the people they wanted to help by eliciting the missing piece for a concept they'd just learned to think of differently and take on as part of their lives. In this case, as in many others, the pop-up experience became both the test and resolution of theory and practice.

As much as this aspect of Pop-Up Poetry at the conference is valuable, there is another level of engagement that's important to address to understand the full range of roles that Pop-Up can play: the times when the word has *nothing* to do with the conference but *everything* to do with someone's life. Thinking deeply about one subject opens the door to thinking deeply about others, whether they are directly related or not. Deep thinking in one room of the mind affects what wants deep thought in others, the way the right vibration from the harp in a piano can set the resonant strings singing in a guitar on its stand in the corner.

People have sat down across from me and asked for poems about newborn grandchildren, parents in care homes, unsteady relationships that need advice, and longstanding ones that want celebration. I've written about career doubts, a parent's homeland that the participant had never visited, and new paths of study or travel that people are thinking about taking but not sure whether to play it safe or have an adventure.

Sometimes, though, what Pop-Up Poetry offers is the chance for a poem someone has wanted for a long time and just never had the chance to get. These poems have been among the most profound I've been honoured to be asked to write. The one I'm thinking of now was asked of me at a pop-up street event in front of the old Loft 112 gallery in Calgary's East Village during the nationwide *Word on the Street* festival. I was at a desk on the sidewalk facing west and the setting sun. A woman's voice came out of the light and said, "drunk driving." She moved out of the light, and I saw her face, half of which was scarred from wounds and their repair. She showed me a photograph from a modelling shoot she'd done a few years before. She wanted a poem, she said, that she could use in her ongoing national campaign. She walked back across the street and left me to it. Later, she used the poem as part of her work.

Depending on the length of the conversations involved, I write between five and seven poems an hour, and, as you'd expect with any series of requests that come at that rate, some are for lighter topics—poems where the "abouts" are pets (mostly dogs, some cats, and once, a horse) or favourite foods or a word that someone wants to see in a poem because they've never seen it in one before. People have brought their children to meet me and requested a poem that has to be a jailbreak story or something with alligators in it. At those times I think of former US Poet Laureate Billy Collins' comment that "poetry is sad content in a happy form." While there is

joy in poetry itself—we love plays of language no matter where we find them—Pop-Up replies: not always sad. We can carry happiness for a long time, too.

I would guess that I've written about three hundred pop-up poems. With a couple of rare, short exceptions, I remember the words of none of them. Sometimes, months later, people show me the ones they got. While I can recall the stories that brought those poems to the page when I see them, the poems I wrote are news to me. It's a fascinating side-effect. In them, I can read my own work the way others read it; I see myself as I am seen.

At work at the desk, I forget the poems within minutes of their being written. Even as I see them being carried away, I don't know what they say. When I tell a recipient that they have the only copy of their poem in existence, my brain is doing its job of making sure that's true. But rather than being a problem, I see the absence of memory as part of the meaning of Pop-Up Poetry—also as a surprise blessing of the form for me as an artist. Where the poems I write for books and journals are written to be beautiful and as publicly permanent as we can make such things, as far as my artistic life goes, pop-up poems are made to be beautiful and lost to me.

I'm with those among my fiction-writing colleagues who teach that imagination is our best way to change what we know about self and other, which is what we can speak of, into what we understand, which is how we live together. In terms of the effect that I feel them create in me, writing pop-up poems is the closest I have ever come to what I imagine as the Buddhist practice of the sand mandala: a work of art that instead of being made to answer mortality with permanence, tells us to embrace change as the only permanent thing in life. Mere days after its intricate creation, the sand mandala is swept away. All that's left of it is the effect of its making in the minds of its makers. I say that part of that effect is a full commitment to the consuming beauty of the moment and acceptance that what you make must leave you.

I cannot write a pop-up poem on my own. I've tried. I've started one or two, but in the absence of the person with whom I'm working, the part of me that is the "I" takes over, and the poem becomes one of mine. The process of making it slows down; it could take weeks. Writing a pop-up poem is about finding what's there when I am absent, and all that's there is the language that showed itself between me and another—first in a word, then in a conversation, then in the moment when the part of me that is poet says, "There's a poem. Here's a typewriter. Trust the keys."

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Author of seven books of poetry, including the Governor General's Award winning *On Not Losing My Father's Ashes in the Flood*, **Richard Harrison** (rharrison@mtroyal.ca) is currently working with SoTL on an approach to student writing in which teachers and students speak to one another as fellow writers in their respective disciplines.

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