

And so It Happens: This Poet's Response to Pop-Up Poetry

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ABSTRACT

As a follow-up to my previous article in *Imagining SoTL*, entitled “The Word: What’s in It,” this reflection further explores the relationship in the art of Pop-Up Poetry, specifically the emotional impact for both the poet and the participant.

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It is a privilege to not only be asked to participate in the SoTL symposium as pop-up poets, but also to be trusted by the participants in opening a small aspect of their emotional lives. As writers, we've long understood the impact of poetry in and of itself, but what happens in pop-up sessions—those inexplicable intersections of the poet, the participant, and the typewriter—can be academically explained by the narrowing of the word given by the participant, generally an abstract/theoretical term, and a couple of minutes of verbal exploration of the participant's personal experience of the word.¹ But even here, in this essay, it sounds too academic for what *happens*, and what happened in November at SoTL. What happens when a single word is given to us, the poets, to explore is worthy of further discussion.

Granted, there was much belly-rubbing laughter, but also a lot of tears. While those are the extremes, the emotional experience is generally somewhere in between. All is unpredictable. However, a predominant tenor of many of the pop-up sessions in November 2023 revealed to me a much-troubled inner world for many of the participants. While this is not a surprise given the current political and perhaps economic turmoil, it does give me pause to reflect. In fact, many things happened on those few days that had me thinking about impact and intimacy of Pop-Up Poetry.

First of all, Richard and I have only a very few unwritten rules about our sessions. We plan nothing about the sessions ahead of time, except for where we need to be, how to get there and when, maybe what to wear, and which typewriters we will use first and which will be backups when the machines malfunction, as is quite predictable when working with antiques. While copyright belongs to us as individual poets, the original copy of each poem belongs to the participant. After the poem leaves the typewriter, we do often scribble on the only copy to make it more readable by inserting a few corrections in pen. Once it is written, we read it to the participant, we sign it, and we give it away—without keeping a copy. This is important to us because we don't want to change the nature of what *is*. The rest, we let happen as it may. And happen it does.

On this note, interestingly, I had a participant who came back to me the next day to ask if I would retype the poem on a clean piece of paper because he wanted to frame it. This was a first. Not the framing, as that happens often. Amused, I said no, and then explained something that I had not thought much about. My response was about value—not the monetary value, but that the value of the experience itself, which includes the immediacy of the experience. This experience would be different if I “cleaned up the copy” of not only my errors, but a misspelled word here or there, or a typo, or the addition of the letter *a* that does not work on my beautiful red Brother Deluxe 220. (It's hard to imagine how often one uses the letter *a* until you see a written piece with each *a* missing.) Rewriting the poem for a *clean copy* would change everything. A clean copy would be simply a clean copy of the original, not the original experience of the poem. There is a difference. The participant agreed and happily held on to the original, and only, copy. I tell about this incident because, again, it had me thinking about true *value*, particularly the

¹ In previous essays, Richard Harrison and I have written about what *is* the experience (see [Imagining SoTL 3.1](#)).

value of the experience of this type of poetry.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Webster's* tell me that the word “value” has roots in the Old English *valere*, meaning “to be strong, to be worth.” In art, value refers to the relative “lightness or darkness of shade or colour,” in phonetics, the “quality or sound of a letter or diphthong,” and, in mathematics, “the quantity or amount for which a symbol stands.” So, what’s my point? Value is wrapped up in language, in mathematics, in art, in beauty, in emotion. The poem itself is the artifact of the emotional experience rendered by the happening of the poem. We could ask what is the value of the experience of Pop-Up Poetry?

I still don’t fully understand what it is that happens to create the intensity of many of these intersections of poet and participant. We start with a word—any word of the participant’s choosing, but often it is a word that has been a large part of the themes of the conference. And that works well for Pop-Up because the first step in making the poem is to very quickly break down the barrier of the word to make it personal. What does the word mean *very specifically* to the participant? It can help to break the barrier between the academic and the personal. However, the word might come from any source. And we work with it. Sometimes, this is a bit harder than one might think. I do know, though, in the end, participants often respond by saying to me “I’ve never thought about it that way”; or “I didn’t know it was bothering me”; or “now I understand in a different way about authenticity or community” or any other important academic concept they had been exploring at the conference; or “that’s exactly what I was feeling but couldn’t put it into words”; or “how did you know what I was trying to say”; or “how can you see what’s inside my head.” I can’t. I don’t pretend that I can.

Or maybe the participant’s body language suggests meaning all its own, that the emotion is so strong, so difficult to express, so painful, so full of angst or love or rage or grief or confusion or amazement or beauty or joy or something else. Sometimes there are no words. Maybe the participant arrives to the pop-up table already with eyes filled with tears. These brief moments of intimacy are the most difficult to write. Perhaps there are no words. I have come to understand that. That has value. They have value. They are valued. I am touched that the participants are willing to share. Value. *Valere*. To be strong. To be worthy. To have the courage. Courage: to “give heart to.” Courage. Give their heart to. The experience. The words.

And there was one participant who had the courage to share. Not words. What I remember the most were the eyes. The depth of the tears. The hands. We held hands across the table for a long while. And then, I remember the feel of my fingers on the typewriter keys. The sound of the clacking hollow of the letters. The reverberation of some nothing. I remember writing. The tap tap of the typewriter. The feel of the roller as I freed the slip of paper. The feel of the slip of paper as I handed it across. I couldn’t read it. I had written something, perhaps not of value, but sometimes there are no words. There was the experience. The value. The true value. The truth. But sometimes, there are just no words.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Beth Everest not only engages in the electrifying endeavour of Pop-Up Poetry, but also writes and publishes poetry, fiction, and reviews for the literary market. Her latest book *Some of the Facts: Jasper: When Tales Were Told* was released in December 2024.