

ESSAY

Suddenly, Poets Are More Willing to Address Public Concerns. The Poet Laureate Explores Why, and How.

By Tracy K. Smith

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In the mid-1990s, when I was a student of creative writing, there prevailed a quiet but firm admonition to avoid composing political poems. It was too dangerous an undertaking, one likely to result in didacticism and slackened craft. No, in American poetry, politics was the domain of the few and the fearless, poets like Adrienne Rich or Denise Levertov, whose outsize conscience justified such risky behavior. Even so, theirs weren't the voices being discussed in workshops and craft seminars.

Maybe it was our relative political stability that kept Americans from stepping into the fray. Perhaps America's individualism predisposed its poets toward the lyric poem, with its insistence on the primacy of a single speaker whose politics were intimate, internal, invisible. Then came the attacks on the World Trade Center in September 2001, and the war in Iraq, and something shifted in the nation's psyche.

I keep coming back in my mind to some of the first poems published after 9/11, the worst among them written in the heat of righteous rage. Frank Bidart published "Curse" in the spring 2002 issue of *The Threepenny Review*. As the title suggests, the poem reads as a rant directed, perhaps, at the architects of the terror:

*May what you have made descend upon you.
May the listening ears of your victims their eyes their
breath
enter you, and eat like acid
the bubble of rectitude that allowed you breath.*

What satisfaction a poem like this offers lies in its rage, the good tongue-lashing it doles out. But the fact that it could be spoken just as plausibly by the relative of an attack victim as by someone setting out to perform an act of terror goes a long way toward highlighting the vicious cycle rage

sets into motion. Bidart is a poet of such nuance and particularity that I'm tempted to believe he may have written "Curse" to highlight this very fact. Though it's also possible he was simply indulging a basic human urge.

In the intervening years, political poetry, even here in America, has done much more than vent. It has become a means of owning up to the complexity of our problems, of accepting the likelihood that even we the righteous might be implicated by or complicit in some facet of the very wrongs we decry. Poems willing to enter into this fraught space don't merely stand on the bank calling out instructions on how or what to believe; they take us by the arm and walk us into the lake, wetting us with the muddied and the muddled, and sometimes even the holy.

Danez Smith's "Don't Call Us Dead" offers just such a baptism, and it does so through the imaginative act of dreaming up a realm where black boys remain safe, where they "go out for sweets & come back." It is harrowing to accept a narrative of black survival as radical fantasy, though as Smith demonstrates, threats to black bodies on this earth are plentiful and real. They exist in society at large, as well as in intimate spaces; for Smith, who is H.I.V. positive, danger to the black body waits in the blood itself. Even so, these poems don't preach or rail so much as explore vulnerability; they are not occasional curses hurled at a disembodied target, but acknowledgment of the actual ordeals life doles out to real people in fragile bodies.



Javier Jáen

As radical as empathy and imagination can be, these qualities exist in the mind. But there is also a poetic language of embodied experience, one that uses poetry to seek out the body. In "Feeld," the trans poet Jos Charles bends language, via willful spelling, to a place where it must be parsed slowly, struggled through, read not so much with the brain as the mouth. Language becomes a felt thing, a terrain to be crossed. The title itself toys with such a transformation, the word *feeld* being a marriage, perhaps, of *feel*, *felt* and *field*. Reading lines like "i care so / much abot the whord i cant / reed / it marks mye bak / wen i pass / with / a riben in mye hayre," I can't help feeling that the body — itself a shifting and malleable possibility — is the target for these poems.

Through the strange labor of deciphering the text, I come to understand that Charles is transmitting an experience that I must allow to travel from her body into mine. When I do, the distance between us alters. It grows smaller and strangely charged. I'm made to realize that the very vernacular of the poems also tampers with history; it announces a continuum where Chaucer and 19th-century enslaved blacks and a 21st-century white trans woman seem quite effortlessly to share a lexicon.

Justin Phillip Reed, whose "Indecency" received the 2018 National Book Award in poetry, writes close to the flesh. His poems take up the body in desire and violence, and they do so by thrusting the reader into a stark visceral encounter with their material. The poem "Portrait With Stiff Upper Lip" is graphically rendered so that it can't be read line by line; the page must be turned, repositioned so that text, overlapping and running every which direction, can be seen. Beyond typography, the poem asks the reader to take on the physical and emotional sense of a black man hearing himself, or someone like him, discussed via fragments. A reader staggers through a field of statements like "looks like planet of the apes" "probably has / a huge" "probably has a parent" "in / prison" "NO" "[in / the / pen]" "I've never had" "with a really hot BLKguy." The reader, dragged forward yet afraid to keep reading, is made to feel caught in a hostile gaze, shoved around by heedless voices.

An even more radical use of the body as the poem's site of operation can be found in CAConrad's somatic poetics, which the poet describes as "a poetry which investigates that seemingly infinite space between body and spirit." This is poetry rooted in actual rituals involving nature, crystals, meditation and interactions with strangers. It is a response to the cruelties of the "rational" world, a world where, as CAConrad recounts it, in 1998 the poet's boyfriend was bound, gagged, tortured, raped, doused in gasoline and set on fire. And it's worth considering that ritual might be one means of recovering from a world of such unrelenting cruelty — that ritual, rather than reason, can foster moments of healing like the one in this passage from "Pluto.3," from CAConrad's collection "While Standing in Line for Death":

*even when we have
forgotten where we
are love finds us just
sticks us
sobbing [...]
saying no doesn't matter you can't say no for long*

CAConrad's poems invite the reader to become an agent in a joint act of recovery, to step outside of passivity and propriety and to become susceptible to the illogical and the mysterious.

In his "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," Wordsworth writes that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: It takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity." For him, the poem emerges after the heat of immediacy has cooled, when the mind calls forth old feelings anew, allowing them to bubble up and submit to honing through contemplation. But as I see it in

this new strain of American poetry willing to engage with politics, it's not exactly contemplation that is happening. Honing is no longer limited to the mind; in the work of these poets, Wordsworth's head chakra is allowed to work in concert with energy centers throughout the body.

Take Evie Shockley's "semiautomatic," which grapples with the violent imprint America has made upon black bodies through the ages. The poem "supply and demand" shines a light on the absurdity of merely *thinking* about outrageous injustice:

*the more black boys you have, the more you want.
you act like we're swimming in black boys.
you can't keep black boys in your pocket.
if you had a million black boys, what would you do with them?
do you think we're made of black boys?*

A reader can very clearly see the work Shockley has asked "black boys" to do in her poem. They are to stand in for a commodity, something exhaustible. This ought to ring false, wildly absurd; however, two lines from the latter half of the poem abruptly change my relationship to the work as a whole: "you don't just find black boys lying in the street," and "black boys don't grow on trees." Here, something akin to muscle memory disrupts my strategy for negotiating the poem. Call it the collective memory of Michael Brown's body lying in the street, and of the terrible yet familiar photographs of black victims of lynch mobs hanging from trees. I can no longer second-guess the poem. Here I thought it was only teasing, but it has caught up to me and knocked me to the ground.

Wordsworth's description of "emotion recollected in tranquillity" is sometimes cited as shorthand for what poets refer to as the lyric "I," the poet's vehicle for private, meditative reflection. So what becomes of the lyric "I" if poems are not so much reflecting as enacting? I suggest that lately it seems concerned with seeking revelation not in privacy, but in community. Not in the meditative mind but in bustling bodies in shared space, in the transactions our physical selves are marked and marred by. The lyric "I" at this very moment is not alone, like the speaker of Bidart's "Curse," who hurls invective into the ether. Rather, it is speaking to a large, shifting, contradictory, multivalent body that is not guaranteed to hear or even to agree. Still, the "I" speaks. It is speaking at once from and to something like America.

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