

(FEATURED SECTION)

GUERILLA
POETICS
PROJECT



WHY DOESN'T POETRY MATTER?

by the Guerilla Poetics Project

Well, we at the GPP happen to believe it does matter . . . but how much does it matter? That's a fair question. In the day-to-day and to your average Joe—we'll regrettably allow that it probably matters very little. What use are all these tattered lines when paying bills, when flipping through channels, when punching a clock, when inching along in gridlock? Probably not much. However, when you're stuck for answers to the larger human questions, when rapt in a love you can't explain, when staring headlong into your own mortality, when mourning the loss of someone dear to you, or when the world leaves you to ponder the imponderables—that is when poetry suddenly matters. What to say at weddings, at funerals? What words to seduce the new love, or convince the one you don't want to leave to stay? How do we say goodbye to grandmothers, grandfathers, parents, and all the rest we love? Had we all immediate access and the lyrical ability to instantly express the unbridled honesty within, there would be no need for poetry. But a rare few are as open, as fearless, as honest. Hence the world is littered with greeting card sentiment—these dumb, stumbling lines we're forced to settle for to explain away our deepest passions and regrets. So poetry does matter . . . but why doesn't it matter more? That's harder to say. We acknowledge that any small press publication, any press struggling for distribution, any literary journal produced knows that, based on sales, poetry doesn't matter—at least not enough to warrant reliable sales. The stuff has been fetishized, with national bookstores shelving the poetry publications beneath the skin rags. At the GPP we'd say it's three-fold and has something to do with: 1) how and what is sold as poetry; 2) how and what is taught as poetry (and, inversely, what isn't taught or sold as poetry) and 3) how the uniquely-positioned small press has failed.

Is it a problem solved by publishers? As a product, and to the population at large, what is poetry—or, specifically modern poetry? The journal entries of pop singers and the stars of hard-hitting “teen dram-

edies” on the WB? The books Oprah endorses? Where is today’s Li Po, today’s Neruda, today’s Ginsberg or Bukowski, today’s Whitman? They cannot be found because there is no room for anything new, unproven, or without a built-in market. The current poetry-publishing paradigm is solely based on the pure and brutal economics of making safe money. So what is poetry? Simple: it’s whatever the publishing conglomerate says is poetry, whatever the hell will make them money—be that poetry or not. Could they try harder? Sure. Could they publish more people, pay more than lip service to the small press poets and products—of course. Could they take more risks—clearly. But stock beautiful, hand-crafted books by talented and committed small presses in all the mall bookstores you’d like—that doesn’t mean anyone will buy them. It’s not realistic to blame publishers and distributors for minimizing risks, for refusing to take losses.

Clearly there are people who love poetry, those who put their money where their mouth is, those who buy small press gems, and those who ravenously collect new work from struggling small-press poets. But we all know there just aren’t many. Why? Avoiding a larger discussion of the utter uselessness of being artistic in a dying, artless world, and avoiding the discussion of the exclusionary nature of this cryptic “poetry” that has been long-heralded as genius even though it insults any average reader, we offer that it has something to do with how poetry is taught to the people that end up not liking it. To engage readers the work must be relevant to them, must keep them reading. The educator is generally limited by time and curriculum and poetry is generally taught to the publicly-educated students via something akin to this: you get “roses are red, violets are blue . . .” early on in school, and as your education continues, maybe you get brief sections yearly on the work of dead English-language “masters,” some Shakespearean sonnets, and if you’re lucky you get an inspired teacher who can help you understand some Whitman. But even if you do, if nothing grabs you early on, the sad fact is it becomes just another chapter to be survived, tested on, & forgotten. Grab these kids early—teach them that the books they loved as kids are filled with poetry, can easily be deconstructed as all kinds of verse. Do the same with the lyrics of the songs they are actually listening to and care about, as inventive as you may have to be! Teach Dr. Seuss as language poetry, Shel Silverstein as rhyming verse, and 50 Cent as free verse with the performance aspects of “slam poetry,” anything to keep it relevant, anything to legitimize it in the students’ eyes, anything to encourage them to write it themselves.

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Remind them that someone somewhere has felt all the things they are feeling, that it can be found, if they look hard enough. Do that and we just might end up with more than a tiny segment of the population with any appreciation of poetry. But even still, with the publishing conglomerate never taking new risks, what the hell is anyone going to read?

That is where the independent press must answer the call—the independent press, not the “small press.” The small press is small because it either cannot escape its financial constraints or because it simply chooses to be. The independent press is ideally positioned to do something different, to make itself matter now as it has mattered in the past. As a publishing project, the GPP can appreciate the problems facing any independent publisher trying to make and sell a magazine, a book, or poetry product. But the GPP is largely a response to the business-as-usual approach many small presses still settle for. We know times are tough; we know nothing sells. That’s the ugly fact of the matter. Fine then—innovate! Become less reliant on sales or dream up new ways to get the word out about what you are doing. There are some terrific (though relatively unknown) independent presses and projects. Find them, seek them out, support them, see what they’re doing and then try to outdo them. Here at the GPP we knew that, to throw our hat into the independent publishing ring, we needed an angle, a new approach, a way to keep the project alive and viable—with 10 members or with 10,000. We found it. It took us years, but we found it. We implore you independent publishers (or those that dream of it) to do the same. The independent press is an exploding or collapsing star and we the publishers will decide which. If we stand still, we die. We at the GPP say abandon all large press business models: accept that we cannot do what they do—can’t make 50,000 copies, can’t sell 50,000 copies, can’t distribute 50,000 copies, can’t buy materials in bulk to keep our costs low enough to sell what we make above cost but below cover so distributors can sell it at cover and make their slice. We cannot pay authors (much). We cannot promote products (very well . . . yet). We simply cannot compete, if we play by the larger presses’ rules. So we say, to hell with their rules. Because the large press can’t do what we can do either—they can’t give

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50,000 copies individual attention, they can’t get 50,000 hand-painted and autographed covers straight from the authors themselves, they can’t letterpress gorgeous covers, and they can’t really love the goddamned books and magazines and broadsides they make . . . but we can! We can honestly love the beautiful and insignificant little books and magazines and broadsides we make. We don’t have to continue to settle for the folded-n’-staple Xerox-zinery. Innovate. Experiment. Evolve. Dream. Get your hands dirty creating. Make 100 copies of something beautiful instead of 500 junked-up copies of pap. Because why is someone else going to love anything we ever make if we don’t first love it ourselves?

Is that enough to change the world, to make poetry matter to everyone at least a little? No, probably not. But here at the GPP we don’t see that as reason enough not to try. Come hell or high water, we’re determined to publish the best overlooked voices in the independent press, bring them to a larger audience of book-readers and book-buyers. Come hell or high water, we’re going to publish broadsides as artfully as our memberships and donations will financially allow us to. And, come hell or high water, we’re going to give it away to unsuspecting strangers in hopes of reaching them in a meaningful and significant way. This is our war mantra in this, the battle for the survival of the written word, the battle for every nameless, faceless nobody with something inspired to say, in this battle for artistic salvation in a cold and dying world. Whatever comes of the GPP, we’ll leave behind what we did proudly, leave it to rot with integrity . . . because we loved what we made and gave it freely to those we thought might love it too. And in this world as we currently know it, we think that’s pretty damn good.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE *Guerilla Poetics Project*

What is the GPP?

The Guerilla Poetics Project (or GPP) is a handful of passionate, committed publishers & poets who’ve been active in the small press for many years now, but were largely dissatisfied with the small presses’ efforts to 1) put out a top notch publication & 2) gain a wider readership. It’s understandable, of course; they are constantly strapped for cash & even if they wanted to shoot the works in terms of production value--they don’t make enough to even cover the costs they currently have, much less costs of really great paper & cardstock & inventive design. We felt like there was some really strong writing happening in the small press, but it was writing that would never have a wider readership because so much of what drives the small press is selling enough books to the people who already know about your magazine & your stable of writers to stay afloat--meaning that is the priority, & not expanding your readership. For years many of us self-published, continued submitting to magazines, trying to publish bigger collections, better collections...all the while searching for like-minded individuals & dreaming of undertaking a publishing venture that did it right. We also made mental laundry lists of who we’d most want to be involved if we finally did get our chance to try. Then it all finally clicked.

How did it start?

The idea itself came about in a rapid internet exchange & like all great ideas, it suddenly was as clear as day to all involved what it was we had to do: build a project that was not contingent on sales but was, instead, built on an army of passionate small press poets, publishers & readers--& anyone else artistically minded who wanted to help. And here we are. It is the perfect manifestation of our collective artistic ideals: egoless, faceless, everyone helping each other & reaping the shared rewards--while printing the best poetry we can get our hands on, giving it the royal treatment on a beautiful 1920s letterpress, then using



our egoless, faceless army to help disseminate the work in very specific places, free of charge, giving art away to the people, putting something beautiful in the hands of the those who are most likely to respond to it. We're bringing the small press to the big world!

Who are the people involved?

As to who is involved--everyone can be involved, provided you are the kind of person that believes in poetry's place in the human lineage, & that you've got the right kind of spirit, the money-where-your-mouth-is kind of attitude. But as to specific people--individuals are unimportant. The fact is we're all serving one larger goal, & that is to carry the torch of the written word as far as we can, to illuminate as much as we can for as many as we can. You can go to www.guerillapoetics.org if you want to know more.

How does it work?

Between the core group & the invited poets we cull the very best work & put it through a few stages of voting. We hope this brings us to the work that suits our rather specific needs. The competition is tough, with some tremendously strong work missing the cut for the first GPP broadsides. Once we have the work, our printers get to marching, putting out glorious broadsides, each individually numbered so as to allow for tracking. Our Global Distribution Center sends multiple copies of each & everything we print (along with some extra special collectibles for Operatives to keep--as payment for being in the trenches) to our Operatives, who then disseminate the material according to our very specific Operative's Manual. After that, we let fate decide. The way this is possible is each Operative, each Poet, each Patron puts his/her money

where his/her mouth is by donating \$25 to cover the cost of mailing the broadsides out each month for a year. That money also gets each Member of the GPP two copies of each broadside every month for his/her personal collection of small press goodies. So far the GPP's ranks are growing at a quick pace, with everyone sharing the cost of bringing a greater awareness to the small/independent press and its talented writers and publishers.

How does one get published by the GPP?

Right now the GPP only takes poetry submissions from the folks we invite, for a few reasons. The GPP has a long list of people to invite & if you've been active in the small press for many years & if our editors have always admired your work--chances are your name is on the list & we just haven't gotten to you yet. Really, the only way to get published by the GPP is to bomb the small press with tremendous work . . . then, after being invited, simply out write some of your most talented contemporaries.

Who makes these decisions?

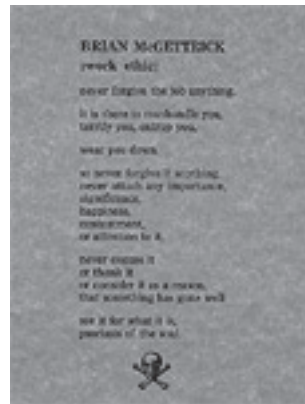
The GPP Core is responsible for all editorial decisions. We strive to invite only those whose work has a chance because being struggling writers ourselves, we wouldn't want to get conned out of our money when our work doesn't have a single chance of seeing publication--so we certainly won't do that to our fellow poets. As with everything else, we send specific requirements for submitting--& the GPP Editorial Core makes all decisions.

What is the goal of the GPP right now?

Right now, the GPP seeks to expand its membership, to add Operatives who believe in the cause of art and who understand and believe in the tenets of the GPP. We hope that anyone who hears of us will go to the website www.guerillapoetics.org and explore, read the manifesto, check out some of the links, and then donate his/her time and money to help spread great writing for free across the world. Further, we hope to expand the reach of the entire small press, bridging the manufactured gap between reader and writer.

Why the GPP?

The reasons are many; the large press has no place for poetry—only publishing what will make them money—their decisions are purely economic, meaning there’s no place for small, relatively modern unknown poets who are living & writing now. They crank out mass-produced books of long-famous & dead poets (who don’t put out too much new work). The small press, using the larger press as its model, struggles to make ends meet financially & can’t really afford to widen its reach. The small press has to make decisions based on economics as well—but in a different way: they can’t use great paper, can’t perfect bind, can’t use an expensive stock for covers, can’t create a quality product because they can’t afford to buy on a larger scale, & can’t afford the more expensive materials. They don’t produce mass copies, & even if they could, they probably couldn’t sell them. Academia also has no real place for the work being written today. They are also concerned almost exclusively with the dead poets of the past. They use their respective college journals to publish their MFA program writers, the ones who will eventually work in the large press, editing safe, bankable books for profit. This is the system as it is currently designed. It has no place for modern poetry, no use for modern poets. In fact the system, as it is currently designed, does more to destroy new poetry than to promote it—with modern poets basically resigning themselves to years of unappreciated struggle, to unheralded deaths, & to never making enough at this poetry racket to even afford a decent pine box to rot in. Now, a few broadsides from the GPP won’t change that. There are precious few American poets then can turn a profit on any scale, large or small. Poetry might be a dying man’s game, something the world at large doesn’t really need anymore. A few GPP Broadside won’t change that either. The poetry audience is eclectic, widely dispersed, & almost impossible to reach. But, as fans of poetry, we realized that we wish we would’ve known, sooner, about the guys that we’ve grown to like: the Patchens, the Locklins, the Levys, the Huffsticklers. As fans



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we would’ve supported these folks who were putting out solid work in the small press, bought the books that otherwise go largely ignored because there’s no way to spread the word about them. Your typical book-buyer might not know anything about the small press (after all how often is it mentioned anywhere?)—yet, might be willing to buy a hand-crafted, beautiful little chapbook made by one of the many small presses out there, if they only knew they existed. The GPP is an attempt to work through all these assorted obstacles & get independent press work to the book-buying public. If we’re lucky it’ll work. If not, well, at least it’s a proud stab at change that can rot with a smiling integrity.

The changing face of poetry?

We don’t see big changes & if there are changes, they are for the worse. In fact the GPP is a response to the more-of-the-same approach the small press has settled on as much as it’s a response to the exclusive ivory towers & big-time publishers. By design they aim to put out exactly the right number of copies of the magazine they can afford to put out—no way to grow & once you lose your readership you die. We’ve seen extraordinary magazines fall by the wayside which is rough to watch. But, in terms of what “poetry” is, these days the emphasis is on SLAM poetry, poetry that can be filmed, packaged, produced as albums or HBO specials or TV shows. This isn’t so much poetry as it is spoken-word based performance art, & it’s less about what is being said than about who is saying it. Be it legitimate as poetry or not, it’s the pop-music-ification of the written word, & at the end of this road is a Britney Spears or Ricky Martin look-a-like whose work is created by a team & who they become little more than spokesmodels for. If that’s the work that moves you, then go on with your bad self, more power

to you. But we at the GPP feel the work has very little to do with the person who puts the words down & has everything to do with the people it reaches, people who might just need the words most. We aspire to a fairly anonymous army of talented poets creating brand new work daily & supporting not ourselves but one another. The GPP is meant to be the epicenter of modern American poetry by inviting the very best who want to be affiliated (& not everyone does), enlisting the help of independent press fans everywhere, printing up a beautiful product & giving it away to the people who might never have known it existed. It's slightly subversive, slightly



revolutionary in that we aren't subject to the same obstacles that most independent presses face. We've dreamed up a model that is not reliant on sales; the materials we print with & on are not as limited by finances. A model that allows us to give away gorgeous letterpress broadsides for free to unsuspecting readers while giving our friends, patrons, operatives & poets the ability to collect our stuff for dirt cheap. We promise you that, with the GPP, you get a lot of bang for your buck--24 letterpress broadsides mailed to your door, an entire year's worth of Indy Press gems, for \$25. If the face of the Indy Press is changing, then we hope the GPP has something to do with that. It's high time that the small press stops being the small press (small in lots of ways), abandon the notion that it should be modeled after or can go toe-to-toe with the large press & starts capitalizing on what it can do best. At the very least, the GPP isn't mass-produced pap. The work is chosen based on double-blind voting which refuses to take into consideration name, fame or accolades. It's hand-crafted, hand-set, hand-printed, & hand-delivered by the best faceless literary army on the planet. Art, true art, pure art should be given away by those who believe in it most.

The Guerilla Poetics Project Mission Statement:

The GPP will act according to its Manifesto, and will print beautifully letter pressed poetry broadsides featuring a poet invited to submit based on their poetic reputation for quality work. These broadsides are then distributed via our worldwide system of Operatives, funded solely by donations, membership subscriptions and sales of donated materials. The Guerilla Poetics Project exists to bring the best poetry being written in obscurity today to the forefront of the larger literary landscape and to do so in a uniquely subversive manner, thus giving art away for free.



DONUT SHOP

The baker is also
a painter and
as the years go by
the pastries start
looking more and
more like Picassos,
Degas, Chagalls,
Dalis while his
canvases take on
the appearance of
Bearclaws, Maplebars,
Chocolate Eclairs.

**OLD HOMELESS MAN
IN FRANCIS HOTEL LOBBY**

I could see
it was all
he could do
to keep
from crying
and I
kept expecting
his lower lip
to begin trembling
and sobs
to shake
his bent body.
But he was dignified,
holding himself erect
as he talked to the
nightly news,
cursing raving
at the television
over the
war.

POEM FOR D.A. LEVY

In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was run off on a
celestial mimeograph machine,
and God looked at it and said,

“It’s a bit crude, but it’ll do.
Here, Adam, go run off about
500 of these and pass them out
to the people.”

CENTURIES OF PROGRESS

the books
gather dust
as the poets
and philosophers
roam the streets
confused
and
wondering

still
the clouds continue
across the sky
an ant crawls
across an acorn

as wealthy men
hit golf balls
into the Pacific Ocean
from the comfort of their
front
lawns

A REAL POET

if I was a real poet I would have a poem
in *The New Yorker*
but that would mean I had compromised
my literary soul
by sacrificing unadorned language
for the obtuse lines
that are the hallmark of the college professor's
safe and uneventful existence.

great lines are written at home
after a twelve hour shift
despite the screaming pain
of hands as raw as life itself
or
after waking up in a seedy motel
with flickering neon lights
and your wallet
lifted by a girl named Candy.

A GOOD MORNING

when i woke
up this morning
i saw
your head on my
chest

your leg draped
over mine

and three arms

of which
at least one
was mine

AUTUMN AND WINTER

Back under the pepper tree
I spoke to the dog
Buried there under its shade.
I was not expecting answers.
I was drunk with autumn
And winter would be no different.
This time of year I marvel at
The changes in the weather.
I welcome the cold and rain.
The muses sing from the branches,
A blackbird and a crow.
I prefer the crow's drunken song.

ONE OF THOSE

It was one of those moments
you understand everything,
partitions in feathers
of sparrows, straw in bricks,
puddles of sunshine
that could provide enough
warmth for a lifetime,
one of those, one of those
moments that makes everything
worth it, find enough
of those moments
and put them together,
ride them low, you might
be alright, one moment
with everything in it, physical
impossibilities and what
you know is quite possible,
one of those moments
there is not even time
to examine, so the moment
is inherently incapable
of letting you down
while it's there, once
and forever, at your side
with its sword.

FLOWERS OF EVIL

those flowers of
evil Baudelaire wrote
about are sitting here
in my vase, a parting

gift from me to her. she
looked at them coldly
and told me, flowers
won't work this time.

then she left without
another word. they've
been in the vase
on the kitchen table

ever since, brown and
wilted, rotting in
stagnant water, growing
more evil by the day.

HOMELESS AMERICA

They are
the thoughts
of yesterday's
broken promise

painted ghosts
scattered like
moonlight
across alabaster canvas
dying to be
reborn into
this heaven
but always
falling short
of our

religion.

THE ONLY THING

To be beautiful
in spite of everything,

that is what is needed.

In spite of the ugliness
of these times
and of these people.

In spite of what
you have done
and what has been
done
to you.

In spite of life,
in spite of death.

To be beautiful
when nothing else is.

It is not an easy thing
but it is the only thing
that matters.

I will try
if you will.

UPON THIS AGE

I will not obey
I will not compromise
I will not nod
I will not shrug my
shoulders
As if it's all hopeless
I will not tell a lie
To you
Or myself
I will not kneel to the
powers
That want to destroy
us
I will not ignore
The weak and the
wounded

I swear
I will erase my past
history
I will let it go
I will not hate
I will not forsake
I will reinstate
My conscience
Because
Now
I
Am
Upon
This
Age

DRIVING AROUND AFTER RAIN

Windows down to
smell the gravel

beer between my legs
and all I want

to be when I grow up
is left alone

NEON PINK POST-IT NOTE

in the morning
drinking coffee
laced with cream
and regret
staring into the air
while the toast and eggs
burn
leafing through catalogs
seeing things I can finally
afford
but don't want anymore
writing a message to myself
on a neon pink post-it note

keep your heart to yourself

hearing the baby cry
and scrawling
another thought

remember what really counts