

# From the Horse's Mouth

*an interview with 17.6 contributor: Ryler Dustin*

**IHLR:** I've watched some of your poetry slam performances online, and they're riveting. How much time do you take to prepare for a performance? And how do you prepare?

**DUSTIN:** I think preparation is an interesting thing. On the one hand, memorizing one's poem can be very useful—not just to connect with an audience but as part of the editing process. If parts of the poem are proving hard to memorize, that's often because they don't sound natural or aren't important to the poem's progression. So memorization has a wonderful way of cleaning up a poem. The ability to be more present with an audience is a nice side effect.

On the other hand, I think it can be inhibiting to over-prepare, to run through a poem over and over until it's dead to you. You don't want to feel like an actor performing your own work. It's better to let a poem feel somewhat unfamiliar, somewhat “new.” It's just like writing itself—you have to remain connected to it as an act of discovery. A lot of other slam poets might disagree with this—quite a few rehearse their performances down to the smallest gestures or apply acting techniques to heighten the impact. But this doesn't work for me. That being said, one type of preparation I value is psychological—it's taking a moment to realize there are real people out there, that you wrote your words yourself in an act of vulnerability, even if it was just you and a blank page. And that you're doing something ancient and important—that sharing words is an essential form of human nourishment, more necessary today than ever.

**IHLR:** Do you still participate in slam poetry? I'm curious how it informs the way you write.

**DUSTIN:** I don't slam often anymore, though I do coach high school slam teams, and my background in slam deeply informs how I think about writing. The writing process is, for me, essentially auditory. I write from the ear. At the same time, I write very differently when I am specifically thinking of a slam context. I personally think of slam as a poetic form: it uses a very specific set of tools. In slam, “economy” has to do with timing, not word count; economy is the audience's attention span. While writing a slam poem, you might specifically add words that don't carry a lot of weight, because, for example, you need to rhythmically set up an audience to receive a powerful line or because you need to let a room breathe before you launch into something new. Some slam poems work well outside of slam, and vice versa, just like some film scripts work well in live theater without much alteration. I think slam is a good exercise, like any poetic form, with which to put certain pressures on your writing—in slam's case, an intense awareness of audience, music, rhythm, and dramatic/emotional timing.

**IHLR:** We're publishing your poem “Light Years” in print, and that's how most readers first come into contact with a poem or a poet. What do you think is lost by only reading a poem on the page? And by contrast, what might be gained?

**DUSTIN:** I hope that the music of “Light Years” comes through for readers, just as it would for listeners, and I think, if anything, a poem like “Light Years” actually benefits from the page. The page is a more intimate space than the slam; it's a place where a single writer and a single reader come together in private.

Slam is a public space—not just because it’s spoken out loud, but because of the expectations of energy and oration inherent in the slam tradition. Slam, in my view, picks up on Whitman’s tradition of the poet as “rough,” as rabble-rouser and prophet of democracy, as well as the other rich oral poetic traditions, from slave song to sermon. Of course, the tradition of poet as the speaker to or the speaker for a larger society goes back to the dawn of poetry itself. Slam is where an audience expects someone to stand up and say something. That’s the specific poetic courage it embodies. Not to overplay the distinction here, but when I imagine a reader opening up *Iron Horse* and reading “Light Years,” I imagine myself there on the couch next to them, maybe holding their hand or making eye contact—and the page seems more connected to that side of the poetic endeavor. There’s something “smuggled” about poems on the page that I absolutely love: it’s courage of a different kind. And I think that one-on-one intimacy is the space “Light Years” comes from.

**IHLR:** You’re in Lincoln now, but you were once in Houston, where you got your MFA from the University of Houston. I used to live in Houston, so I’m curious: where did you find poetry in that city?

**DUSTIN:** Houston was a tough city for me. I loved the people I met there, but I was also attacked on the street, had my bike stolen a couple of times, was kind of beaten down by the weather. Hurricane Ike arrived shortly after I moved there—on my birthday, incidentally. But it’s also a very humid and sensual place, with gorgeous trees and dramatic weather—and that’s where I found poetry. That and some amazing, community-oriented nonprofits (Inprint, Writers in the Schools, Project Row Houses).

**IHLR:** While in Houston, you also taught poetry to middle school kids. Given that middle school was, for me, the most awkward and

inarticulate period of my life, I’m sort of in awe of the fact that you did this. So my question is: how does one teach middle-schoolers poetry?

**DUSTIN:** I think middle-schoolers make great poets precisely because of that awkwardness. They’re feeling stifled in part because of the social pressures we all feel during that time. This is exacerbated by a culture of standardized testing in which courageous, imaginative, risky inquiry is a liability (just like standing out is, socially speaking). So if you can create a safe space with them, this incredible imaginative life explodes like an untapped wellspring. The only challenge is rebuilding those imaginative capacities that, for some, have begun to atrophy.

**IHLR:** In the Foreword to your collection, *Heavy Lead Birdsong*, you mention that Li-Young Lee is one of your favorite poets. In what way has he influenced you as a poet? And also, what poets are currently influencing or inspiring you (or maybe just pissing you off)?

**DUSTIN:** Li-Young Lee’s *Rose* was one of the first collections I ever loved. I think this is because of the tone. It’s intimate, gentle, but incredibly severe. By *severe*, I mean that it is going straight to the heart, that it is not trying to make something pretty or interesting. It’s doing those things as the side effect of trying to say something true. Recently, I’ve been blown away again and again by Ross Gay, the conspiracy of joy and goofy human openness that he seems to be trying to ferment. And I just picked up Marie Howe’s first book again, *The Good Thief*. And Tranströmer, for the image.

I am actually not pissed off by very many poets, even ones whose works don’t excite me—except in moments when I let myself be corroded by this false idea that we’re competing against each other. While I recognize the insight that we are all anxious about our progenitors, and resentful of our competition, I also think this can be overstated. We live in a country where poetry isn’t illegal (though it

may be more difficult for many of us to have access to it). This is a tremendous gift, but it has allowed us the illusion that we are not working for the same thing, against tremendous odds.

**IHLR:** “Light Years” (a gorgeous poem, by the way) touches on themes of family but also the idea of distance and light and, lastly, music. I see some of these same themes in your poems in *Heavy Lead Birdsong*—especially family—but not to the same extent. How have your preoccupations as a poet changed since that book came out?

**DUSTIN:** My fascination with science and empirical reality has grown since *Heavy Lead Birdsong*. For me, the vastness of the cosmos and our non-central position within it isn’t a threat to intimacy, as seems to be the view of some spiritual or religious people. This vastness is actually an argument for that intimacy: because of it, human connection is more remarkable, more heroic. I think that my poems have actually grown more intimate in tone since *Heavy Lead Birdsong* because of my growing consideration of these cosmic themes: the blind momentum of nature, cosmic distance, empirical reality, etc. And, though I’ve never articulated this to myself, I do think music is at the heart of these concerns. It’s that moment when a language of emotion arises out of mathematical relationships. Like the human voice, it haunts us because it’s unlikely.

—Sarah Viren, column editor

# Bits & Pieces

## Resolutions

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In November, Claire Vaye Watkins’s *Tin House* essay, “On Pandering,” lit the writing community on fire. “Let us burn this motherfucking system to the ground,” she wrote in reference to the white male viewpoint that controls what is and is not published, who is and is not critically acclaimed. We’re glad Watkins has awakened to the battle that women and people of color have waged for a long while now. Let’s welcome her talent and fervor to our numbers, applaud her ability to strike up anew this national conversation, and move forward with purpose. To do that, we’ve shaped some 2016 New Year’s Resolutions.

**Follow your instincts.** Stop. Writing. For. Other. People. Every time you consider steering a manuscript toward established aesthetics, picture that photo in Watkins’s essay, the one of young girls lined up along the fence at a boy’s ball game, watching someone else have all the fun.

**Step outside the aesthetic comfort zone you built.** If you would never write formal poetry, write a sonnet. If you would never use second- or first-person-plural viewpoints, try them. If you think present tense is foolery, conjure an essay that requires it and put it to work. Quit buying into rules about what can and can’t be done.

**Honor other writers.** Give a shout-out on FB or Twitter. Stop grousing when another writer earns an award or a publication—even if you applied for the same prize, even if you “dislike” the winner, and especially if it’s a classmate or colleague. At AWP2015, we heard someone say, without any shame, that Claudia Rankine didn’t deserve the NBCC Award, she wasn’t a poet, *Citizen* was not poetry. Why do writers talk in this atrocious way? At the very least, let’s value the privilege of reading more than that.

—Leslie Jill Patterson, column editor

**DANTE DI STEFANO**'s poetry and essays have appeared recently in *The Writer's Chronicle*, *Shenandoah*, *Brilliant Corners*, *The Southern California Review*, and elsewhere. He was the winner of a Thayer Fellowship in the Arts, the Allen Ginsberg Poetry Award, the Ruth Stone Poetry Prize, the Phyllis Smart-Young Prize in Poetry, the Bea González Prize in Poetry, and an Academy of American Poets College Prize.

"Outlaw Country" began, Di Stefano writes, "the way most of my poems begin: as a love poem to my wife, Christina. She has beautiful hair, and I was thinking about how it looks splayed out on the pillow in the morning. Imagining her hair led me to think of different types of belonging. The poem decided it wanted to be about notions of national belonging and American identity. I invoke Richard Manuel, pianist for The Band, because his lifelong exploration of American roots music ended in suicide. I wanted to echo, praise, and challenge the narratives about our country implicit in rock and country music. More importantly, I wanted to write a poem that Johnny Paycheck could recite to Waylon Jennings, Merle Haggard, Dolly Parton, and Jerry Reed up on Cripple Creek."

**RYLER DUSTIN**'s poetry has appeared in *New South*, *Portland Review*, and elsewhere. He holds an MFA degree from the University of Houston and is a candidate for a PhD in Poetry at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. He was a finalist in the Individual World Poetry Slam, and his book, *Heavy Lead Birdsong*, is available from Write Bloody.

Of his poem "Light Years," Dustin says, "I'd been trying to write this poem for years when I came across Richard Hugo's *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*. I was struck by the boldness of this collection, wherein Hugo, a real practitioner of formal grace, seems to all but break down into private correspondence. There's something radical about this—seeing a poet go so far as to end poems with phrases like *Stay healthy. Love, Dick*. It gave me the courage to lean in and speak as directly and honestly as I could to someone I love, and to trust that music would follow from that quality of attention."

For more on Dustin's poetry, read this issue's **FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH**, pages 37-39.