

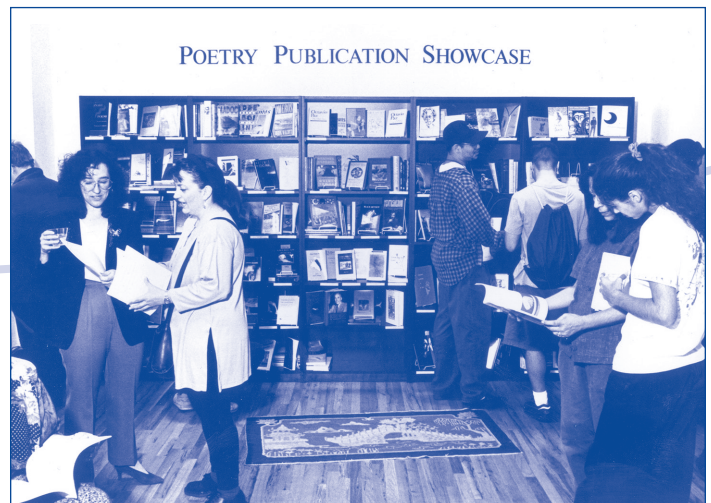
READING, WRITING, RECITING

At the Gathering and in our lives — as readers, writers, performers and listeners — we're all engaged in the quintessential human activity of poem making and sharing. The goal of the Gathering is to invite the audience into a deeper listening, a more intimate understanding through memorization, a broader reading through the Poetry Publication Showcase, and an active role in all aspects of creating and sharing poetry.

Poetry Publication Showcase

Poets House's Poetry Publication Showcase is an exhibit of the year's new poetry releases and a series of events celebrating the diversity of poetry in print. Poets House's Poetry Publication Showcase gives the country its most trenchant view of the whole art in print. Of the 1,300 poetry volumes exhibited last year, the vast majority are brought out by independent presses; in fact, only about 10% of the poetry books published annually come from the commercial sector. There has been a 500% increase in the number of small and independent presses in this nation in the last 30 years. New computer technologies have given underrepresented groups access to new means of production, consequently democratizing the art. This has resulted in a wider range of Americans, among them gays, women and ethnic minorities, finding their way into print.

All People's Poetry Gathering events at Poets House are presented against the backdrop of the exhibit. Everyone is invited to return during regular Poets House library hours throughout April to view the state of the art. Poets House is located at 72 Spring Street (between Broadway and Lafayette), 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10012.



Poetry Publication Showcase at Poets House.

Ghost Memory

— Carol Conroy

Verbatim memory is our link to historical greatness, the means by which we share the triumphs, torments, and inspirations of other minds and make them our own. Great words move us like bars of music.

— Rebecca Rupp

Once human memory sustained us. The Great Rememberers stood on a bare stage and recited poems they learned by heart. This lost tradition of memorizing and reciting verse deserves to be revived.

Recitation is a cultural event — and a quiet human drama. The audience receives a memorized poem with total attention as though the assignment of remembering engages the entire tribe in a unifying and holy task. Reading involves as act: memorization involves a re-enactment that contains the seeds of ritual theater. Homer could recite all 27,000 lines of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Before the invention of the printing press, folk bards and troubadours traditionally recited from memory. These prodigious mental feats preserved whole literatures.

What happens when we read a poem that articulates our deepest truth? Longing compels us. We want to become the true. Willingly, we commit to the art of memory. Paraphrasing is a pale second compared with memorizing the exact words — line by line, word by indelible word.

Poet Etheridge Knight believes verse needs to be spoken aloud. He declaims: Poetry is an oral art — and the difference between a poet who conceives of the poem as an oral entity, meant to be received by the ears, and the poet who conceives of the poem as a written entity, meant to be received primarily by the eyes, is (to quote Mark Twain) the difference between “a bolt of lightning and a lightning bug.”

On the second Wednesday of each month, at 6:00 pm, at Poets House, I host a memory circle, called Poems By Heart. Here at the People’s Poetry Gathering we invite you to join with us to explore these ideas and recite from memory poems you love.

The room reverberates with awe to hear the poemwriting on the air. Lightning strikes! Bright bolts of memory as the poem begins to speak in your voice.

The Art of Recitation

— Nancy Groce

Before the advent of mass media, poetry recitation provided a common source of entertainment in the United States and the British Isles. Family parlors, variety theaters, and even church halls provided characteristic settings for performances by amateurs and traveling professionals. The rock star Mick Jagger, for instance, recalls that when he was growing up, every family member was expected to be able to perform some song or poem that would contribute to family entertainment.

Occasionally poems were written by the performers themselves; more often they were memorized and dramatized by the performer and were already familiar to members of the audience. A second person might softly play piano or violin in the background as the recitation was delivered. The performer’s skill was judged by his or her ability to present the poem accurately in a dramatic and moving way. The poems were occasionally humorous (such as Marriet Edgar’s “Albert and the Lion” cycle made famous in the 1920s by Stanley Holloway), but more often they embodied strong patriotic, sentimental, or moralistic messages; the works of Kipling, Robert Service, and Sir Henry Newbolt (“*Vitae Lampada!*”) were perennial favorites.

These “Victorian” sentiments and the rise of mass media led to a marked decline in this genre’s popularity during the second half of the twentieth century. Yet the tradition remained active in the British Isles until the 1950s or ‘60s, and some American children raised during that period can also remember being encouraged to memorize and present poetry for special family occasions.

Rock and Word

— Steven Zeitlin, Executive Director, City Lore

Digo da pedra, “E uma pedra.”
Of the stone I say, “It’s a stone.”

— Alberto Caeiro (Fernando Pessoa)

For decades, ever since college, I have begun my days sitting in an armchair with a typewriter or a laptop on my knees, writing poetry. I consider it a form of centering, looking into a different kind of mirror, not to comb my hair, but to remind myself of who I am.

Yet, when I turned fifty, I felt the need for a new avocation. I decided to forego poems for a while and spend mornings building a stone wall with my two hands in the backyard. Poems, I reasoned, are just a few coded chicken scratches on papyrus, or dots on an electronic screen. A stone has weight and mass, and exists as an object in the real world. My poems kept me at my computer, while finding stones for the wall necessitated a journey.

The journey led me on a pilgrimage back to boyhood. As we grow older we forget how a rock rests in our hands, how a boulder feels beneath our feet. Searching for stones took me into crooked streams and vacant lots in Hastings, and down to the rock beaches in North Yonkers that run along the train tracks. It took me back to my boyhood, and restored me to the position of hero in my own life story — Steve Zeitlin, Master of Creek Beds.

And it brought me back to poetry. I soon discovered that stones, like words, are everywhere. The trick to building a stone wall is to find the perfect rock and build a structure that holds together and does not collapse from its own weight. A poem is a dry stone wall, bearing only a passing resemblance to a wet wall, whose concrete is like the music that holds a song together. My dry wall, like a poem, relies solely on rocks — words and their placement.

A rock-strewn vacant lot triggers childhood sensations — the way the bottoms of your feet take the shape of the uneven stones, and the way your torso assumes the shape of the boulders as you climb over them. Writing a poem has some of that same joy — the words taking their own shape as you wander through creek beds of syllables, with your own life rolling over them. I discovered the thrill of unearthing the right rock for a particular spot on the wall, just as I would sometimes come upon the perfect word or line for a poem. I marveled at the way a stone wall — made of one of the heaviest objects on the planet (rocks) — had a lightness and delicacy about it as the stones touched and balanced; conversely, the best poems — made of the lightest things on the planet (words) — demonstrate a sturdiness, coupled together so perfectly that they cannot be pulled apart.

Soon after I finished my motley 15-foot wall and the flowers my wife planted grew over it, I learned that the artist Andrew Goldsworthy had built a 2,278-foot stone wall at the Storm King Art Center in upstate New York, a sculpture garden that celebrates the relationship of art to nature. Having built a wall myself, I paid a pilgrimage.

I discovered a grand epic poem rolling across the countryside, at one point bending down into a river and appearing to rise out of it on the other side. The wall, five feet high, was built with the help of five master stone masons from England and Scotland, masons who (unlike me) knew how to split a rock along the grain, the way a good poet knows how to break the lines. Goldsworthy’s stone masterpiece wraps around every tree it passes so that it appears to alternately wall them in and openly embrace them.

For a soul who tinkers with stone walls, encountering Goldsworthy’s majestic structure made me feel a little like the poet Keats when a schoolteacher introduced him to Chapman’s translation of Homer. He stayed up all night reading with his teacher, went home at dawn, and composed a sonnet, some argue his first great poem, comparing the experience to “...stout Cortez when with eagle eyes / He stared at the Pacific — and all his men / Looked at each other with a wild surmise — / Silent, upon a peak in Darien.”

Poetry is the most participatory of the arts; our legacy of language leaves the possibility of artful communication open to all of us. In creating the People’s Poetry Gathering, we bring together some of the great masters of the art — Stanley Kunitz, Galway Kinnell, Robert Bly, Yusef Komunyakaa, Anne Waldman, Brenda Hillman — master masons of the poet’s craft. But the Gathering, which hosts a vast array of open mic sessions, writing workshops, and even an Action Writing Dance Party, asserts that careful attention can be paid to artistic quality while at the same time valuing an open, active participation in the popular traditions of poetic expression. Just as fussing with stones fosters admiration for the mason’s craft, messing with words on a page builds appreciation for the poet’s art. Three days of wall-to-wall poems, the Gathering encourages us to go out in the backyard to build our own.

And the poems that we write will speak to the ultimate reality. Ursula Le Guin writes of discovering a 12th-century church in Wales with the words “Tolfin was here” scraped in runes on the stone. The words, she suggests, carry this message, “Life is short, the material was intractable, someone was here.” The individual poem remains like the stone wall, immutable: chicken scratches on the stone prison wall that say, “I was here.”