

[Home](#) > [Features](#) > [Entertainment](#) > [Books](#)

Poetry: We draw from ourselves, and in this season of giving, give

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Special to the Journal

It is two days before Thanksgiving — what my colleague Jenna at Brown University is calling “Thankskahgiving” this year because of the odd convergence of secular and religious holidays — and New Urban Arts is celebrating its annual Arts Giving, the sweetest gift-exchange imaginable.

As young and older people enter the studio they drop their folded names into a hat. It’s just a month into the studio year, our first large gathering as a group of high-school-age artists and other, older artists fortunate enough to work with them, and some of us are still getting to know each other.

After a few introductory ice-breakers, we draw names, receive simple instructions: in no more than 45 minutes, make something for the person named on the folded-up piece of paper. The studio is immediately abuzz — to be honest, this is also what it feels like here any other day — and some are sewing, and some are drawing and some are making soft sculptures or graffiti art. All of it is being made with someone else in mind, by the way, and thoughtfully so, even among strangers.

I sit before my manual typewriter, pull out the paper I’ve brought with Jess X. Chen’s beautiful line-drawing on the back, scroll old-school into the carriage and begin to write a poem for Brianna, an accomplished young visual and language artist whose mix of anime technique and comic-strip-like writing is compelling on many levels.

Brianna’s quiet, considered, and I want to write a poem that reflects that. As I take my first percussive strokes, I can hear elsewhere in the studio sewing machines, the chatter and conversation of a drawing circle, the excitement of making together in the same space.

Later we give, and get from each other, our modest gifts, with public acknowledgment for each offering. It is that time of year — “Thankskahgiving.” It is most festive and light when we give away what we make.

Poetry also has a generous spirit, wanting to make something of everything and/or nothing. I love Emily Dickinson’s lyric about this subject, both titled and numbered “1755” among her poems:

“To make a prairie/it takes a clover and one bee./One clover, and a bee./And revery./The revery alone will do,/If bees are few.”

As Dickinson suggests, imagination is primary, especially in the face of diminished natural states. Creative impulses hum with abundance. I grew up, like the poet Kevin Young, in a hot and dry climate, so I know what it feels like to want to make it rain after days upon days of drought. “How to Make Rain” is from Kevin’s first book, “Most Way Home,” a National Poetry Series award winner:

Start with the sun

piled weeks on your back after

you haven’t heard rain for an entire

growing season and making sure to face

due north spit twice into the red clay

stomp your silent feet waiting rain

rain to bring the washing in rain

of reaping rusty tubs of rain...

I love how this poem is all unpunctuated lines, broken up only by the occasional three spaces, like a small hand cupping water. It’s a particularly incantatory sound, this longing for rain, one long refrain and hymn for water as both a life-affirming

and love-affirming force of nature:

...slow courting rain rain

that falls forever rain which keeps

folks inside and makes late afternoon

babies...

Making rain, like making a prairie, takes work, and this poet is not shy about making a little noise, making a little music in order to call out moisture. It's a very seductive poem that also ends on a very tender note:

rain of forgetting rain that asks for

more rain rain that can't help but

answer what you are looking for

must fall what you are looking for is

deep among clouds what you want to see

is a girl selling kisses beneath cotton

wood is a boy drowning inside the earth

"Now where did they come from?" I can hear, say, my grandmother asking, "that boy and girl," and it feels like rain, like rain is making and giving them up in some kind of reciprocal gesture, so that "how to make rain," is also how to make what's human. How lucky when we give and we get equally.

Also today, in my poetry class at the Rhode Island School of Design, Josh Shiau said this poem by Kevin Young in its entirety and from memory, giving voice generously, insuring that these good words will continue to circulate. And here is one of Josh's own poems, called "Home," inspired by Young's:

With a wood pencil

draw a box

With three strokes

define your walls.

If you hesitate

start over.

Twenty-one hundred times.

Until your hands know

what your mind will forget.

Bury the lead in the fiber,

stand in the empty mouth,

and look at the space you have created.

Next to the lush, dense thicket of language that Young offers up, Josh's lines are spacious, as if designed for maximum light. But there is still a lot of room here for repetitive creative practice — architecture boot camp: "twenty-one hundred times" — for the kind of training that accomplished artists routinely engage in and receive. A "home" begins to emerge on paper as if from directly out of rigorous imaginative impulses.

I hope, at the very least, that this is a season of gratitude: for what we have and what we have made together. For poetry, it is in the words, in percussive sounds from typewriters or rain or from the lines themselves. Today Brianna got a poem; she, herself, in turn offered up two lovely drawings. It was Arts Giving.

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