

Visiting a place where poetry is vibrantly alive

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At the Poetry Project's 49th Annual New Year's Day Marathon, no one thinks that poetry is dead

By Diana Hamilton

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NEW YORK — Looking out at the hundreds of listeners packed into St. Mark's Church on New Year's Day, Patricia Spears Jones reads a poem for the new year: "I wanted to write a song of affirmation for poets living and writing, but some fool wrote that poetry died with T.S. Eliot. Even Eliot wouldn't write that ... " Poets are more liberal with expletives than newspapers, and hers blends into laughter at this [recent argument](#) by Matthew Walther in the New York Times.

Before heading to the stage herself, Jameson Fitzpatrick tells me she is "here to bear witness to poetry's being alive. Reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated." We're all here for The Poetry Project's 49th Annual New Year's Day Marathon, the first in-person edition since 2020. From 2 p.m. to 1 a.m., poets, novelists, singers, pianists, dancers, performance artists and others take over the sanctuary's stage, in three-minute increments, in front of a steady crowd. The marathon raises money for The Poetry Project's year-round programming, which includes a vibrant array of reading series, workshops, two publications and lectures.

If poetry is ghostly, Fitzpatrick helps set off the collective effort toward its resurrection with "Turning Around (With Angels)" — a poem dedicated to the recently deceased singer Q Lazzarus, best known for the phantasmic "Goodbye Horses" — in which her speaker, "no less a woman / than Christ was a crossmaker," is flanked by angels. We are at church, after all, celebrating the minor miracle that artists are, somehow, still living and working. "Of course poetry is dead," Jasmine Sanders concedes in conversation, "but it's always been dead, and people love graveyards. I believe in resurrection." Sanders is among the performers who lead with an insistence they are *not poets* — she tells stories — only to go on to read a great poem.

In his book "[Unforbidden Pleasures](#)," psychoanalyst Adam Phillips lists poetry readings among the places that — unlike "schools, or religious orders, or prisons, or even families" — don't require obedience. The poet is, among other things, the permanent child, in the best way: the one who keeps playing, who does not lose access to their creativity.

Perhaps that's why there's so much talk of mothering or being mothered on this long day and night of poetry. Eileen Myles, in their performance with Ryan Sawyer, becomes a mother standing in the kitchen for centuries, "the baby's head growing large and small my dress growing flowered." In the same hour, as Sanders recounts persuading her mother to consider therapy, the crowd joins with hopeful, cheering enthusiasm, only to collapse in laughter as it becomes clear she thought *going* meant going only once: "I told her everything! What else is there to say?"

Nuar Alsadir — the psychoanalyst and poet whose most recent book, "Animal Joy," takes up the question of "how poetry can wake us up" — could not make it, but her daughter Isadora reads in her stead. It is a poem, "Invertebrate," that, Isadora explains, she used to ask her mom to read after school: "The moment is invertebrate no narrative / you're naked with feelings you don't / understand they bend around you like water."

To love poetry is to be cool with these invertebrate moments, with not always understanding, with resurrecting the child, for whom the world is thrilling *because* it is sometimes baffling. In her poem, Kimberly Alidio invites us to go looking for the child: "In my poem, an abstraction of my voice, you may search out my childhood hearing." Lucy Sante plays a language game, reading in a repeated joke structure — I call my baby X because Y: "I call my baby Appendix, because no one really knows what she does." Stine An reads an experimental translation of a Korean children's song, "Bomb of My Hometown Sings the Balm of My Hometown."

The crowd is not eager to consider poetry's supposed death: The argument, here, feels silly. Stacy Szymaszek, The Poetry Project's former director, tells me she has already said plenty about the cyclical announcements of poetry's death in her book, "A Year From Today," and resents being asked to repeat aloud what she wrote. I consult that verse record, where she recounts "an Al-Jazeera article the old 'poetry / is dead' thing." In this poem — if I read it right — poets and gay people alike "fall in and out / of favor / hatred repeats itself." Here she suggests that the opponents of contemporary poetry get off on picturing verse on its deathbed. Later in the same book, Szymaszek notes that "there is nothing harder / to raise money for than poetry." The current executive director, Kyle Dacuyan, took pains to remind the audience that this was, after all, a fundraiser.

I talk to those who are here for the first time, coming up from Virginia or down from Upstate, or New Yorkers who happened to stop by. Rebecca Teich echoes a common refrain, arguing that poetry cannot die precisely because there is no money in it, which frees it up to be purely social. "There will be poetry," she says, "as long as there are people who want to be in a room together." Anselm Berrigan, also a former director, dedicates his reading "to the New York Times op-ed page." Later, he wants to know, "If Eliot killed poetry, why is Frank O'Hara 5,000 times more famous?"

For me, the best moment of the marathon — which comes sometimes one hour in, sometimes seven — always arrives when I feel myself focus, losing the impulse to fidget or whisper to a neighbor. But no one stays the whole time, and in the Parish Hall — a smaller room in the back of the sanctuary with donated books, food and drink up for sale, next to the passage to the church’s garden (meaning, the room where you can talk) — the mood is gay. Writers try to spit out the expected responses to poetry’s death notice: “We need it *now more than ever*,” “in these *trying times*,” but no one can keep a straight face. Some gush over “DAYS,” a collaboration between singer Ned Riseley and cellist Ethan Philbrick, and their eerie refrain: “We are former child actors / What if your house was made of you.” Musicians are the true friends of poets, their more likable double, and the marathon’s singers often help build that attentional strength that sustains a long day of listening. The room swoons again when Anthony Ross Constanza performs “The Man I Love.”

Volunteering at the books table, Matt Longabucco suggests reading Tim Dlugos instead of the newspaper. Dlugos, too, worked at The Poetry Project and planned to become an episcopal priest; he would be here, surely, had he not died of AIDS-related complications 32 years ago. I ask which poem, knowing already he’ll say “Ordinary Time,” which opens by suggesting that the question of poetry’s life depends, at least in part, on our ability to receive it:

Which are the magic
moments in ordinary
time? All of them,
for those who can see.

The marathon attracts not just poets but a broader set of people (by the end, 1,000 have come and gone) searching for that ordinary magic. More than by the performers, even, I’m moved by the crowd’s desire to be moved, and by this collective effort to be receptive to an art that, however alive it may be, usually makes the papers only in obituaries.

Diana Hamilton is the author of two books of poetry: “God Was Right” and “The Awful Truth.”