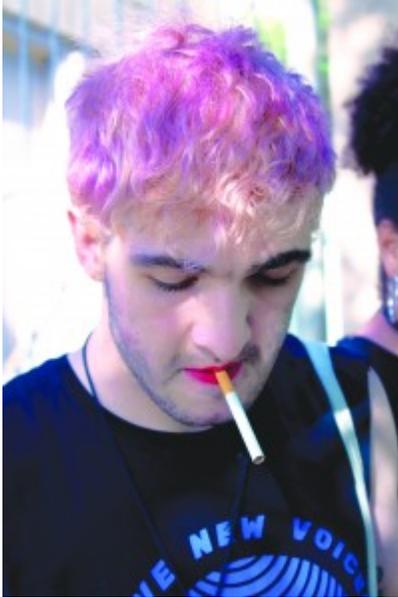


Honest Lies: Ilyus talks about getting to the truth through her poetry



“When I was 14, my therapist told me that I should write a poem about my feelings and immediately I was like, ‘Absolutely not.’ Eventually I did it, and I was like, ‘Oh, this is just therapy that doesn’t cost me an hourly rate.’ So I stopped going to therapy and just started writing poems instead.”

Ilyus Evander is a 23-year-old poet from Coventry, Rhode Island. I first met Ilyus five years ago at a poetry workshop in New Urban Arts. After doing some freewriting, Ilyus volunteered to share what they wrote, and I’ll never forget the way their words made me feel. I thought Ilyus must have been some big-shot poet around town, but I was completely wrong. Ilyus was as new to the scene as I was, but her words were of someone who had been doing poetry their whole life. This was five years ago, but Ilyus today remains humble and unaware of the talent they possess.

Like many Providence poets, Ilyus found their way into the slam poetry scene through Providence Slam at As220. Providence Slam, more commonly known as ProvSlam, is an open mic and slam poetry event that takes place every first and third Thursday of the month at As220. “I didn’t know ProvSlam existed,” said Ilyus. “I was walking to go hang out with my friend and there was the A-frame outside that said Providence Poetry Slam. I called my friend and was like, ‘Hey listen, I’m two minutes away, but also I’m not coming.’”

From there, Ilyus went on to be part of the 2014 youth slam poetry team, representing Providence at the international youth poetry slam, Brave New Voices. “My team as a unit introduced me to the idea of a chosen family. When I first came out as queer, my [biological] family was just not about it. Providence Poetry Slam immediately was like, ‘That’s my child now.’ ProvSlam essentially raised me in my queerhood.”

Ilyus was brought up in a born-again Christian household. When she first started writing, most of her poems tackled gender and the feelings behind existing in a space where you’re not accepted or understood. Ilyus said that throughout the years, she used “poems as a tool to explore” herself.

"I really love poetry because I can dig at my feelings and my identity without ever actually talking about my feelings or my identity. I can pick an object image or metaphor to represent what I'm thinking or feeling, and manipulate that instead." For Ilyus, the art of manipulating an object in lieu of herself is an act of protection. It gives her the distance she needs to talk about a potentially painful topic, without putting herself in jeopardy. "I never really include me in my images. I talk a lot about other people directly. But I'm always a thing and not me, and that is like my safe space. To me, poetry means honesty through lies. Poetry is where I'm the most vulnerable, but also the most distant."

Ilyus has started writing about things "other than gender." She's tackled her battle with mental illness and the relationship she has acquired with the mental health industry. She's in the midst of a project that stabs "at the [mental health] industry and how they treat us in a way that keeps us sick so they can keep draining money." Ilyus is also working on a book titled, *Heavier Than Wait*.

"Wait is that stretch of time where you know something is coming, but it's not here yet and that's all you can think about. In the book, wait is death. The idea that death is inevitable, and we're all just waiting for it to happen, is the heaviest thought I can think of," she said of her book.

In her book, Ilyus also talks of the weight of other emotions. "Heaviness is or can be described as anything that is a lot of something," said Ilyus. "So anything can be heavy. There's such a thing as heavy joy. Like yeah, I'm super fucking happy, but it's also really overwhelming how happy I am right now."

Ilyus is starting a new chapter of life by relocating to Boston, and is reminiscing about all the things the Providence poetry scene has taught her. "Providence taught me everything I know about poetry, slam and myself. Providence taught me what writing and image is. Providence taught me what manipulating that image is. Providence taught me how to love teaching more than I love poetry." Not only has poetry made Ilyus realize her love for teaching, but it has helped her realize her purpose in life, too. "My mission in life is to bring people as much joy and success as possible, but it's really a selfish motive because that makes me feel happy too."

Ilyus said she spends a lot of time "thinking about love languages, about how people are capable of both giving and receiving love and how sometimes they don't look the same. I consider myself a mother first and foremost, and learning how to care about other people in a way that they're comfortable with is what I think motherhood is."

Ilyus is touring for her upcoming book, Heavier Than Wait, which she hopes to have finished by the end of the year. You can see her featuring at Emerson College on March 25 or participate in the workshop she's leading in Allston on April 1. If you will like to contact Ilyus for features, workshops or discussions, you can reach her on Facebook at Ilyus Evander Poetry.