

Spit, Poet!: An interview with Anthony DiPietro

Anthony DiPietro is a prose poet from Rhode Island, who currently lives in Massachusetts and teaches prose poetry at Frequency Writers. His poetry prose has been accepted into multiple magazines. In a recent interview, we spoke about his methods of writing and poetry's importance.

Damont Combs (*Motif*): When did you fall in love with poetry?

Anthony DiPietro: There are many ways I could answer this question, but I'll say that I started out trying to be a songwriter. Michael Jackson's *Thriller* and Madonna's first albums came out when I was a tiny kid, and I would carry around a cassette player. When I was 14, I tried to teach myself how to play keyboard, but I wasn't very good, and I also tried to write song lyrics. They became my first poems. At 15, someone gave me a massive anthology of all the best-loved poems in the English language, and I still have that original copy of that book, with playing cards bookmarking my favorite 40 or so poems. That was the beginning of my love of poetry. It took me much longer to admit it was a lifelong love and to consider myself a poet.

DC: Who your favorite poet and why?

AD: The one who always jumps to mind is Sylvia Plath. She was always taking on a powerful voice, but with a certain kind of restraint. And once you start learning about the sonics of a poem, she's hard to beat. She loved her hard consonants and knew how to marry them together in a way that added a whole other layer to a poem's meaning. It even affects the way her poems feel in your mouth when you read them out loud. She just had it all.

For contemporary poets writing today, Sam Sax is the one I most admire. He's a queer Jewish writer who first got recognition in the slam poetry scene, what's now called spoken word. He's prolific. He's younger than me and has four chapbooks and two full-length books. His poems take sexuality and identity as their base, but they grow out from there and become about so much more — psychology, history, insanity, oppression. I try to read everything he writes. I think it's good to know what poet you're comparing yourself against. It keeps you pushing yourself forward. What's also great is that the poetry world is so small that you can easily meet your heroes. I've gotten to meet Sam and hear him read in person a few times.

DC: I know you live in Massachusetts, but Providence is your home. What are you doing for the Providence community?

AD: I love Providence. I'm so proud that it's my hometown, and because I've traveled and lived and met people from all over, I know that it's a city that has a great reputation. People know that Providence has a historic feel and good food and a vibrant arts scene and down to earth people.

At the same time, I feel that I got to know the city as a community really well because my career started there. For 10 years I worked in the nonprofit sector, including areas such as nonviolence and affordable housing. So I understand how Providence can be a tough place to grow up, how hard it is to get ahead financially and career-wise.

When I worked in Providence, I was writing grant proposals as part of my work, and to do that well, I

had to know the city both on an anecdotal way, the feel of it, knowing what it's like to grow up there and be raised there, and also had to know it on the level of demographics, history, and economics. So I feel really intimate with the city of Providence. It's where my roots are, and it's still very much part of me, and I'm excited to be coming back to teach a course in the spring through Frequency Writers.

DC: Why choose prose as your main form of expression?

AD: Prose poetry is one of many forms I use to express myself. I'm also working on writing a screenplay, which is a totally different way of thinking and writing and has a different kind of power than poetry. In a screenplay I can write, "Mars crashes into Earth," and let the film director figure out later how to show that, but the audience has to accept that it just happened. As a writer, sitting at my desk, I just made planets collide.

Prose poetry is really a hybrid form, and I don't think that I appreciated that before I got to know it well. Many people would look prose poems as, "Oh a poet was trying to be cute" or "They wrote a paragraph and were too lazy to break it up into lines and stanzas." But it's more intentional than that. Some of my poems are definitely poems with lines, and others are definitely prose poems. They're different animals.

With prose poems, I still use all the other tools at my disposal as a poet, other than lines and stanzas. And at the same time, I get to pull in some different things. I get a different pace, a different voice. And in a way, prose poems can be more unexpected. Because the form isn't going to vary, it's going to stay in that boring looking prose block all lined up like a newspaper column, it means that within the text, I can take wild leaps of logic and content that I might have to control more if I were trying to fit that in a stanza with just so many lines. And the control would not serve the piece.

DC: Why is poetry even relevant in today's society?

AD: Often the public debate is, "Why do we even need poetry?" or "Is poetry dead?" But the fact is that studies came out in the past couple years showing that poetry readership has been way up in the last decade. Poetry right now has its biggest audience maybe of all time.

It may be partly because of the Instagram poets, and some people reject them as "not real poetry." I think that anything that exposes people to poetry and creativity is a good thing. I think our lives are more emotionally based than we like to think, and usually emotions make us struggle for the right words, and really that is what poetry is all about. How did you struggle to articulate that feeling, and how did you both succeed and fail in the same piece? That's why you can still have people writing poems about love and loss, which may be two oldest and simplest subjects out there, and they've been written about for thousands of years. You can write a poem about those things today and make the feelings new, because you're grappling with your own individual way of expressing something that's relatable to everyone.

More broadly speaking, the arts and creativity are basically under attack in 2020. I know all about this because I work in a museum. Public arts funding is always on the chopping block, and every year thousands of organizations have to advocate and mobilize and prove why we have the right to exist, and that we're adding some value to society. And that has to be stated in terms of what we really value as a society, education, jobs, money. All you hear about education nowadays is STEM, science, technology, engineering and mathematics. It turns out that creativity is equally as important to every person's education and development, as much as knowing math. And that makes sense, right? You can

understand math and science, but you can't really make a new discovery or design something new without having the creativity to solve a problem outside the box, or to take a risk. The arts help teach those things.

And beyond education and just as important, I think, self-expression is something I value very highly, as well as aesthetic experiences, the kind I have when I look at art, watch a play, or hear music or read poetry. It expands my soul, it teaches me empathy, it helps me understand how I feel and think about things I encounter, as well as things I will never encounter firsthand myself. We need more of that in this world. It's a way of building bridges and understanding each other.

DC: What people can expect in your class at frequency writers?

AD: It's a creative writing workshop, so anyone who is looking for practice or writing prompts or feedback from other writers will find that. I want people to find their way to being comfortable in the form and write new material in the course of the class, whether they use class time to do that or just take inspiration from it. The way I'm designing the class is to balance three major elements: reading and discussing great examples of short prose poems, practicing our own writing, and sharing our writing to get useful feedback. I love discussing the great examples of the form as a way to learn, so that as writers we can play and imitate and apply the principles that are at work in these short pieces. I know some people will want more of one element of the class or another, so I'm planning to be flexible. When I meet the class members and find out more about what they need and their preferences, I can lean more in one direction or another.

I've been in many community-based workshops, because that's all I did for 10 years before going to graduate school. In those workshops where everybody is at a different experience level, inevitably it's somebody's first time ever sharing their work and getting feedback. So I'll start by setting expectations and modeling respectful, appreciative feedback so that everyone feels comfortable to share and can respond in a way that builds people up. I think it's useful to read and listen to each other's work for appreciation first. I've learned a lot about writing workshops over the years and what makes them successful, and I'm excited to bring that to Frequency's audience and people who may be trying it for the first time.

DC: Can you give us a short prose using the words orange, Providence, and historical?

AD: Here's a try!

the dream is always the same. it has a ground zero where red brick turns orange in sunlight, the place where my mother left me to find my own providence. I was eighteen and didn't know I had no history yet. this was benefit street and the dream is really a memory. when I was twenty-three I met my destiny one rainy day. the day I go back to most often. or maybe the day is what can't escape me. it's just a useless thought experiment. what if I stayed home instead? would he and I have eventually still met? would we have fallen in love the same way? how long would it take? how many days of drinking in that surreal version of his life would wither his liver? his liver that melted and bled through his skin like wet brick.

I usually title my pieces last and often throw away the first title. So keep in mind this is a first draft. Right now I would want to title this piece "high noon in the desert womb of pleasure."

DC: How do you inspire the next generation of young poets?

AD: Thank you for the opportunity to geek out on my favorite topics!

I think that I inspire people by helping them realize the power of aesthetic experiences. When I was teaching college courses, I would always build in what I called “favorite media day.” I would have students bring in examples of any art or media they found compelling, that resonated for them, and they would introduce it and share it with everyone else in class. They showed them on their laptops or tablets, and some brought an image of their favorite painting, or a page of their favorite novel. Some brought a song. Some even brought a video game they’re obsessed with and played the intro to it.

The point is that understanding what is compelling to you about these aesthetic experiences helps unlock the creativity that’s already in you. And also, these experiences bring us together. There is something to appreciate in absolutely any art form, and when you’re sitting there just looking or listening for what you appreciate, rather than what you want to judge, you’ll find something. Or if not, at least you’ll understand that person better who brought and shared that. And it brings everyone in the room a little closer. I like to think I’m building a community of writers on a micro level, and I like to think it creates a better world outside the classroom as well.