

Introduction: *167 Miles of Poems*

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Think about it this way: at last count, there were more than 200 graduate programs in creative writing in the United States. If these programs graduate, on average, about eight poetry students per year, then more than 1,600 graduate degrees in poetry writing are distributed by universities annually. It stands to reason, then, that if every one of these alumni had to write a more-or-less serious book to receive his or her degree, there are perhaps 1,600 new books of poetry saved on hard drives every year by graduate students alone. Every decade, therefore, young poet-students produce roughly 16,000 collections or (assuming a conservative 60 pages per collection) 960,000 pages of carefully considered, fussed-over poems. And this doesn't even take into account the even greater number of serious poets who did not go to graduate school.

Print these poems out and line the pages up end to end, and you have 167 miles of poems. Fold each into a paper airplane—at the rate of, say, one airplane per minute—and you'll be working for almost two years. Send them to literary presses, and you'll keep the editors busy for many lifetimes.

And what of the young poets who write them? All—and I was recently a grad student myself, so I speak from harsh experience—all dream of winning one of the twenty or so most coveted annual book prizes dished out by small and university presses. Every month, these aspirants print out three or four copies of their book—see how the poems multiply?—and mail them, along with checks for \$20, to three or four competitions or presses where, in exchange for said lucre, they are read, considered, and almost always rejected.

Occasionally, though, the unexpected comes to pass. The Yale Series of Younger Poets—one of the most coveted of all book prizes—selects each year (except for those years when the editors claim to receive no worthy volume) a single collection from the thousands of entries for publication, in the process heaping laurels and the prospect of an actual poetic career on the startled winner. The Sarabande Prize, the Gerald Cable Prize, the Slope Prize, the Verse Prize—each hands out an award and a contract so that every year another platoon of young, ambitious poets joins the

ranks of the published.

One would expect, given these odds, that this would be a crack force indeed—a veritable Navy SEALS of young, strong, fearsome poets. But, first books will mostly be first books, no matter the odds, no matter the sweat. Their authors stumble and fall, get mud on their faces and bang their shins, and when they get the job done at all, it's often despite themselves. It is the rare and *unfortunate* poet whose first book is also his best, because first books, more often than not, only hint at the writer's talents, at the poet that writer will become.

Reviewing first books is a delicate business. Poets develop differently from other kinds of writers. Because a typical first book usually contains somewhere between 30 and 50 poems, poets have more opportunity to test their voices, experiment with different styles and aesthetics, sort things out. The typical first book—and much vitriol has been heaped on it in the literary press—may contain a handful of poems in traditional forms, a few confessional pieces, one or two short lyrics, a few that are obviously the result of one grad school assignment or another. Only the few—I'm thinking of D. A. Powell's *Tea* (1998), Robert Hass's *Field Guide* (1973), or John Ashbery's *Some Trees* (1956)—cohere, feel mature and complete. And, to be honest, it's unreasonable to expect anything different, for the first book can seem a genre unto itself—at its best, raw and exciting, hinting of the genius to come.

It is in their second and third collections—after they've had time to focus, to work things out, to start fresh—that most poets' true voices and talents emerge. But the first-book reviewer doesn't have the advantage of clear vision and, so, must take into consideration her own myopia and do her best with it. She must try to see through the haze of the workshop, the early mentors, the emerging fashion of the day, and figure out what shape of writer we have here. Where is she coming from? What seem to be her concerns? At what is she most successful and where, on the other hand, does she fail? What, the first-book reviewers wonder, might we expect of this writer in the future, and where should she focus her efforts?

Thus, the reviewer has a delicate balancing act to perform, for just one or two really good poems in a first book can hint at a stellar poet in the making. Take Carl Phillips, for instance, who is one of the most gifted poets writing in English today. His first book, *In the Blood* (1992), seemed a more-or-less strong debut, though its importance—and the ambition and scope of the three or four best poems in that collection—became apparent to me only a few years later, with the publication of the dazzling *Cortège* (1995) and *From the Devotions* (1998). Only then did the complex syntax, cluttered mythology, and halting music of *In the Blood* seem predictive of the power of his newer work

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or the influence it would have over so many writers of yet (because that is the sad state of poetry reviewing) their books are unlikely to see more than a handful of reviews, even if they're lucky. Nevertheless, each review describes a new poet in the making, a possibly important voice emerging from the hard drives, the MFA programs, the little presses, the sweat of the freshman class of American poets.

Kevin Prufer's first collection of poems won a book award. His second got better reviews. His third is now in press. He lives in rural Missouri and edits Pleiades: A Journal of New Writing.