

Writers Who Have Inspired You

Will Harris

Both my parents left school early, and both ended up in London – one via Jakarta, the other via Plymouth – where they met at a disco in Leicester Square. My mum’s secretarial course had just finished, she was about to fly home, but then she met my dad by chance and ended up staying in London for the next four decades.

I grew up with a sense of things being contingent, a feeling that only increased with time. And my own choices had that same sense of randomness to them. I don’t know why I got obsessed with books. Maybe it was because I’d spent a year in Beijing when I was small, and it took me until I was ten to grasp the Latin alphabet. Everyone else seemed to be quicker, to do things more naturally. But I was slow and determined. I didn’t care if it took me twice as long to understand half as much.

The poet M. NourbeSe Philip writes about ‘the anguish that is english in colonial societies’. I grew up in the land of the coloniser, but I felt the anguish. Years before I

thought about writing poems or stories, I remember the physical sensation of looking at words and sentences on a page, running my finger over them like indecipherable runes. I think that feeling is where the poems began for me, on the outside of language.

My mum used to order things from catalogues dropped through the letterbox; one day she ordered a thesaurus, a pocket dictionary, and, for some reason, *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (1999). That was the first poetry book I owned, excluding Michael Rosen or *Rupert Bear*.

Later, I got into other poetry anthologies as a way of consuming as many different poets and poems as possible. I loved the range of *The Penguin Book of American Verse* (1959) edited by Geoffrey Moore. Almost nothing seemed to link the rhyming couplets of Anne Bradstreet to the splayed and jagged forms of Allen Ginsburg, Amiri Baraka or Ai, except that they were all making poems. It was in that anthology I found a Robert Creeley poem using the word 'faucet', which made an ordinary 'tap' sound like some kind of magical headdress.

Christopher Ricks edited *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, its Bible-thin pages giving the contents a devotional quality. But Ricks made the radical choice of including multiple versions of several poems, like W. B. Yeats's 'The Sorrow of Love'. The

earlier version, published in 1892, ended: 'the unquiet leaves, / Are shaken with earth's old and weary cry.' The latter, from 1925, ended: 'And all that lamentation of the leaves, / Could but compose man's image and his cry.' The idea that a writer was still looking at the same short poem they'd written thirty-three years before – swapping pronouns, deleting adjectives, adjusting the tone – seemed perverse and exciting.

You could spend a whole life inside the shifting columns of a poem; no sense was final. The words, like the person, were contingent.

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Will Harris is a London-based writer. He is the author of the poetry books *RENDANG* (2020) and *Brother Poem* (2023), both published by Granta in the UK and by Wesleyan University Press in the US, and the essay 'Mixed-Race Superman' (Peninsula) which came out in 2018.

He has won the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and been shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize. He co-translated Habib Tengour's *Consolatio* (Poetry Translation Centre) with Delaina Haslam in 2022, and helps facilitate the Southbank New Poets Collective with Vanessa Kisuule.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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