

A Face to Meet the Faces

A Face to Meet the Faces

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An Anthology of Contemporary Persona Poetry

Edited by Stacey Lynn Brown and Oliver de la Paz



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Introduction

Speaking of Masks

The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power.

—Toni Morrison

Like many things, it began with a need, an absence, a lack. A noticeable omission from the spines on our bookshelves. Somewhere between *The New Anthology of This* and *The Modern Anthology of That*, there should be an anthology of persona poetry. Not the definitive anything. Not a comprehensive, historical collection, with “My Last Duchess” as its centerpiece, but one that reflects both the literary tradition of persona poetry as well as its current manifestations, the ways in which this generation of poets practices it. Where was this anthology? Why didn’t it already exist?

As educators, we know the value of having such a resource at our fingertips. Students learn best by example, by seeing the ways in which concepts are enacted in practice. And we know the value of persona as a teaching tool, as a way of gently guiding students away from the “write what you know” directive, prying them loose from their own stories, and encouraging them to experience the world from a different point of view. As teachers, we needed it. And as poets, we knew this was the kind of book we’d want to read. So we set about making it.

The term *persona* is derived from the Latin and was used to describe the masks that ancient Greek actors wore to exaggerate their features, allowing their characters to be more fully known and understood by their audience. The psychologist Carl Jung further adapted the definition of persona to refer to the public

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mask one presents to others. It is the version of ourselves we want other people to see, one that does not necessarily reflect the inner-life of the wearer. (Not coincidentally, “persona” is also the basis of the word “personality.”) The persona poem is a self-contained conversation, or *dramatic monologue*, in which the subject matter is filtered through the perspective of a speaker who is distinctly different from the poet-author. The persona poem bridges the various definitions by both amplifying the features of the created character while also revealing a good deal about the poet who wrote it.

Persona has a wide-ranging and far-reaching role in the literary tradition. Early in its history, poetry operated as an oral chronicle of important cultural and historical events, a way of both “knowing” and “remembering,” of handing down stories to future generations. Because the subject matter largely consisted of vainglorious accounts of battles and defeats, the point of view of the storyteller was one of witness, or scribe, and poems were very rarely written in the first-person narrative “I.” In the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* introduced a series of poetic monologues in the voices of very different characters, pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. These types of monologues and varied personae remained contextualized within epic poetry, but in the mid-nineteenth century, the dramatic monologue as a stand-alone poem was popularized by Robert Browning, which is why “My Last Duchess” is so widely studied and anthologized as representative of the form.

More modernist versions of persona emerged in the twentieth century, with poets such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot utilizing personae as both poetic alter-egos and foils to their own narrative perspectives. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” from which this anthology takes its title, is an excellent example of persona as alter-ego, allowing the poet to voice the unspeakable and think the unthinkable without direct ownership, consequence, or reproach. In this way, the idea of “hiding behind a mask” can be utterly revealing and liberating. The playful aspect of persona is also apparent in the work of more contemporary poets like Norman Dubie and Ai, who, in their careers, broke the genre wide open by trying on a number of outfits, perspectives, and characters, and creating a rich body of work that cemented the importance—and limitless possibilities—of writing beyond one’s self.

The poets in this anthology were chosen because their work best represented, in our opinion, the intersection of tradition and possibility. They range

in age and accolade and draw their inspiration from sources that are as disparate as the ways in which information is disseminated in our multimedia world. From ancient mythology to popular culture, from fairy tales to tabloids, the voices in these poems address a wide range of issues that are historical, contemporary, and ultimately timeless.

In curating the submissions, we were struck by how many poets chose to occupy the voices of “minor” characters from more major, well-known narratives—perspectives that were, until now, largely unspoken or unsung. Since our overarching sense of history comes primarily from the major narratives, from the “official versions” that are often politically motivated and subsequently biased, it has long been held that a more reliable way of “knowing” can come from the diaries, letters, and writings of everyday people living their lives during a given time. This certainly seems to be an alluring prospect for poetry, as many poets were led to imagine what the lives of unknown, “unimportant” characters might have been like—and what they might have to tell us about our own.

We were also struck by how truly disparate the subject matter was. Our goal in constructing this anthology was to make it as intuitive and user-friendly as possible so that it is easy to access as a teaching tool and also as a text. To that end, we divided the poems and arranged them into categories by subject, content, and theme. Some of these divisions were easier than others. Some poets seemed naturally drawn toward writing about certain subjects, like mythology or religion; other poems could have easily fit into more than one category. The end result is nine sections that cover thousands of years and demonstrate a range of expression and understanding about our histories, our lives today, and our futures.

Our story begins with the stories, people, and events that have come before. In the first section, “That Was Then,” some major and minor characters from history reappear, with well-known figures like Calamity Jane sharing the pages with Galileo, Frederick Douglass, bootleggers, and physicists. The second section, “Releasing the Kraken,” is based on the varied characters from mythology and folklore, including recognizable names like Penelope, Leda, Prometheus, and Icarus, as well as more esoteric characters like the wives of *The Odyssey*’s lotus-eaters, hybrid “carriers” (part ancient Greek Muse, part Christian angel), and the chimera.

The third section, “Fifteen Easy Minutes,” contains characters from popular culture, an expansive category that holds Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, Anna

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Nicole Smith, Beetle Bailey, and bluegrass legend Bill Monroe in the first four poems alone. This section is followed by “It Kept on Burning,” which takes its title from “He Kept on Burning” by Ai and contains poems of heightened social and political consciousness. While many of the anthology’s poems could have fit into this category, as the motion of speaking from another’s perspective is often a socio-political move, we found that these particular poems held these issues at their core, with personae that included political prisoners and protestors, soldiers and their casualties, and abolitionists and segregationists.

The fifth section is entitled “As It Was Written” and contains poems inspired by the Bible and other religious texts. This section includes the perspectives of more minor Biblical characters, like the wives of Noah, Abraham, and Pilate, who shed a different kind of light on the familiar stories and lessons. In “After *Happily Ever After*,” well-known fairy tales, and their characters, are re-envisioned: Little Red Riding Hood tries on the perspective of her predator, Pinocchio eulogizes his former life, and werewolves retract their claws long enough to ruminate about their anger issues.

In the seventh section, “From the Page to the Pen,” poets take their place in the ongoing literary conversation by responding to the authors and characters of other literary texts. In these pages, you’ll find a love poem from *Beloved*’s Paul D, afterthoughts by Hamlet and Ophelia, and musings from Walt Whitman and Li Po. The poems in the eighth section, “The Muse Talks Back,” give voice to famous artists and their equally famous subjects, with narratives from the perspectives of Frida Kahlo, Picasso’s immortalized models and lovers, and “His Coy Mistress,” to name a few.

The final section, “Not the Poet, Not Me,” takes its title from John Berryman’s preface to his collection *The Dream Songs*, in which he emphatically identified the speaker of the poems as someone distinctly different from himself. This final category consists of poems that largely defy categorization and is a kind of catch-all for “everything else.” Ever wonder what a knife might think about the violence it enacts? What about the inner lives of misogynistic kings? The characters in these poems continually surprise by virtue of the varied nature of their voices and the perspectives they engender.

As disparate as these poems and poets are, they all share one thing in common: the desire to step outside of oneself and imaginatively inhabit the world of someone, or something, else. In a world that is so saturated by, and obsessed

with, “reality” and the minutiae of private lives, the motion away from the limitations and constraints of literal truth can be exhilarating and fruitful for a poet. And in the post-confessional landscape of contemporary poetics, where the modern audience tends to read for the (auto)biographical in a poem, these poems are equally refreshing for the reader in their clear-cut boundaries of assumed identity.

Because these poems reference both real and imaginary characters and span thousands of years, and because there are as many reasons to write in persona as there are poets who practice it, we have asked each author to provide a contextual note that will help identify the speaker of each poem, as well as the reasons why that poet was moved to write from that perspective. These contextual notes appear in addition to the biographical notes of the poets themselves and are placed at the end of the volume so as not to interfere with or impede the reader’s experience of the actual poem on the page. It is our hope that these notes will function as windows into both the world of the poem as well as the process of the poet who crafted it.

In all of these poems, we were struck by how well the poets navigated and maximized the potential inherent in using masks. Playful and political, practical and polemical, there is a certain freedom of expression that is unhindered by direct ownership or consequence and a kind of joyful exuberance in divorcing oneself from one’s *self*. From the moment we are children pretending to be our parents, to shamans pretending to inhabit elements of the natural world, to actors and actresses assuming the roles of the famous and infamous, there is something primal about the act of donning the mask, an urgent connection that demands to be made. And in the world of literature, this urgency makes persona a vital poetic act because of a poem’s emotional immediacy and its ability to articulate the nature of the “other” in economical and profound measures.

This project may have begun with our need, as teachers, to fill a perceived absence and address our questions about persona poems and how or why poets write them, but the anthology itself became a whole lot more. What rose to our consciousness as we collected and assembled these poems was the understanding that persona poetry is, at its heart, an act of empathy, of walking that mile in someone else’s shoes to determine not only what the view is like from there, but what those shoes, and that body, *feel* like. Truly inhabiting the consciousness of someone else heightens our own and makes us more aware of our own pre-

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dispositions, prejudices, and predilections. And in this world of fracture and fragmentation, where ignorance and prejudice and bigotry and hatred threaten to rip apart the very fabric of our humanity, empathy remains one of the most important tools we have to help us realign ourselves with each other and rediscover what it is we have in common, what binds us together rather than what separates.

Our hope is that you'll find a place for this anthology among the spines on your shelves and that the stories being told will remind you again and again of the value of empathy—and the ways in which imagining the world through someone else's eyes can show us what it means to be both human and humane.

Stacey Lynn Brown
Edwardsville, IL

Oliver de la Paz
Bellingham, WA

That Was Then

.....

Voices from Our Historical Pasts

Aubuchon Creek

Angie Macri

When the violets walked
the forest floor with birdsfeet,
I left my sons.

Céledon cut the bars
of the room, the chains
the Widow Aubuchon bought
to keep me there.

Louis, Baptiste—I could
only take one of them
with me, and the older
wouldn't leave the younger.

I will come back, I promised,
with every one of our tribe
to set you free. I took
their faces in my hands.

When they were babies, I drew
my fingertips across their eyes
to help them fall asleep. I kissed
their feet as if they were kings

or the fathers, and they laughed
and held their feet back up
to me again. I didn't know
the tribes were gone.

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The otters we trap and skin,
the furs we sleep in at night
and trade by day, Céledon's
musket and the oil for traps,

the way the ducks raise
off the water and fly, reaching
forward in violet as the dawn—
I can't go back. The Widow

has sold one of my sons
to her brother. We were worth
two thousand livres.
The coureurs de bois won't

surrender us, although they speak
of my sadness. Hunters and trappers
relay my message: my sons must pray
to our mother who held her son

one last time against her, to the son
bound in thorns. We feel the free circles
of the rain even when water bears their name.