

Index Card Poetry: An Experiment in Imperfection

Morgan H. Slough

Abstract

Do not let my title trick you into thinking I have anything to say about poetry. To be honest I'm not even quite sure what poetry is. This project considers the messiness and authenticity of in the moment writing. It explores the idea of what writing can be when the pressure of quality and aesthetic is removed. It is merely the story of how I (quite by accident) realized that the need for perfection was slowing down my writing, and how I attempted to overcome the block that comes with writing for an audience.

Quarantine hit us all pretty hard, something I realized last April, only a month in. Last minute planned out zoom classes were in full swing, and I was losing patience. And there I was again, sitting at my desk in a writing class, trying my very best to pay attention to a lengthy presentation on Fictionality (don't ask me what that means, I was not doing a good job of paying attention). My desk, as per usual, was cluttered with notebooks, textbooks, pens, random pieces of paper, and the like. In an attempt to keep my wandering focus in the moment I grabbed a stray index card and a pen and started writing down things the presenter was saying that sounded important. It probably wasn't of any value, especially not noted in the way I had chosen to, messily and disconnected. "Maybe she values his friendship" was scrawled next to the question "which comes first, the life or the work?" (if anyone knows what that question is even asking, please come find

me), below which, in neat cursive, reads "he writes this novel".

I was just taking notes essentially (and not even coherent ones), but it felt like more than that. And that whole story isn't technically important, nor does that particular index card have any real literary value, but it started something. Having found that way of connecting myself to a moment in time enjoyable, I started doing it all the time in class. Sometimes I copied quotes, other times I scribbled sentence fragments, sometimes a card would carry a complete thought or even two, while others were simply scribbles or doodles with a word or two attached to them. Soon I was carrying index cards with me wherever I went, hoping to capture stray thoughts and moments throughout my day. By the time I was writing, maybe not "poems" in the classical sense but little pieces of writing, I had coined the term "index card poetry" for my little distracting habit.

I have a writer's journal; it was meant to be a place for me to put all my thoughts and ideas. But it quickly became a stiff and formal, albeit very beautiful space where I copy down carefully what I consider to be my best work. It's no good for actual writing. But what I had discovered in my silly little index cards was something much different than that. After all, it was just a 3x5 scrap of paper. If, whenever I was done with it, I found it to be silly or ugly or completely useless, I could simply throw it away, and no one but myself would be the wiser of its existence. In my journal, attempting to relay, to myself more than anyone else, what I enjoyed so much about it, I wrote: "Don't let the title of it fool you into thinking that it's entirely poetry. Maybe none of it is. After all, since I began creative writing, the definition of poetry has eluded me all together. 'Poetry' in this instance is merely a name to what I write, a title for a strange collection of words, used for lack of a better descriptor. Index card poetry is a moment in time, unworried about how it is being perceived. It's brief, honest, impermanent. There's nothing to lose and everything to gain. The use of index cards acts to remove the pressure of quality or aesthetic. It is not good or bad, it simply is. It exists, a portrait, a poem, a list, an idea. The brevity invites clarity, the impermanence

invites honesty. The beauty is in its existence."

In that same writing class a few weeks later, Kenneth Goldsmith was invited into my little world of impromptu experimentation. In an essay read for class entitled "Poetry is Not Public Policy" he said "In 1964 Jasper Johns wrote, 'Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it.' What we are supposed to do with it is not specified. Instead, the act of doing in and of itself is sufficiently transformative. What happens to the object might be irrelevant in comparison to what happens to us by transforming it." (Goldsmith, 2016, p. 114) And this was what I had been looking for: this idea that there was use and value in simply doing something. That by taking a small piece of paper and turning it into whatever I felt like, a poem, a doodle, a memory, I was changing myself.

So I won't claim that my (now very tall) stack of index cards is anything worth reading, in fact quite the opposite. Maybe there's bits of good writing amongst it all, but that isn't the point. The point is that it exists, and that it has, in some way or another, freed my writing from the need to be aesthetic, or deep, or valuable. My claim is simply that until we find out how to write everything, we cannot write anything good.

References

Goldsmith, K. (2016). Poetry is not public policy. In EXPERIMENTAL LITERATURE: A collection of statements. S.l.: JEF BOOKS.

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