

Regional

Poetry still has the power to carry the day

Poetry is seen by many as a forgotten art, but the fact of the matter is that poems can be as powerful forms of expression as anything we can imagine. From the works of Shakespeare to poetry readings at presidential inaugurations, we have learned how this lyrical art can carry the day.

Someone who practices and teaches poetry is Dr. Joshua Kryah. A native of St. Louis, Missouri, he obtained his bachelor's in English from the University of Missouri, his Master of Fine Arts from the University of Iowa and his doctorate in English from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Today he is an assistant professor in the department of English language and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

But how does anyone choose writing poetry as a profession? "I never thought I would be a poet," Kryah said. "It never occurred to me. I'm a failed musician; I thought I was going to be a rock star," he said. "I was in a band in high school. I couldn't play an instrument, so they made me the singer," Kryah said. "And I wasn't very good at that, so they made me just write the lyrics to the songs. I did that for a while, and then the band kicked me out and said that they didn't want me anymore."

Yet, that experience helped Kryah realize that by writing lyrics he was engaging in a form of poetry. "In the absence of the band and my band mates, I realized I wanted to keep going and the more hermetic space of being a poet was already available to me since they didn't want to be my friends," he said. "I could fill that empty space with just myself."

After finding out what his real passion was, Kryah found a venue to spread the word about the importance of poetry by becoming a college professor. "I decided I should go back to school and get my master's degree and study poetry," he explained. "When I got there, I was lucky enough to have some really incredible professors; poets that were teaching me in workshops," he said. "I have to say, when I saw these men and women standing up there, expounding on the virtues of poetry, sharing their favorite poems with us, telling us to write, and write, and write, . . . I realized that's what I wanted to do," Kryah said.

He went on to obtain a doctorate after realizing that



Dr. Joshua Kryah and his book, "We Are Starved."

he needed that in order to obtain an academic position in teaching poetry. Many of his published poems can be found at <http://joshuakryah.com/poems>.

Although poetry often appears to be brief, it may take a considerable amount of time to write it. Kryah explained that the creative process behind writing in this lyrical form is motivated by personal experiences and reflections upon their larger meaning. In referring to his poem "We Are Starved," Kryah explained that such a poem came fairly quick to him. "I was spending a lot of time remembering my childhood in St. Louis. There is a meat packing plant at the top of the street where I grew up and outside that plant, they use to dump ice used to pack animals," he said. "Often that

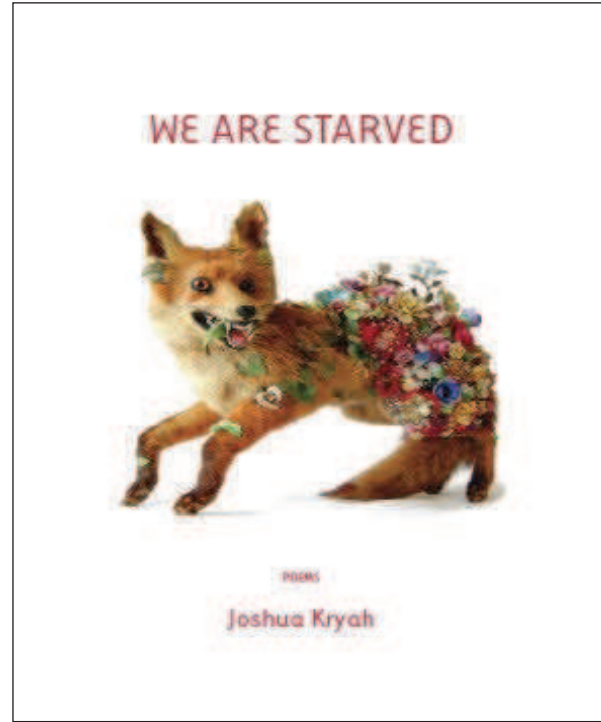


Photo by Amber Withycombe

ice would be flecked and spotted with the blood of the animals. That image really occurred to me and I thought it was very unique and extraordinary to my experience and important to capture," Kryah continued. "It is a very grotesque and desperate and kind of unsettling image, but it is one that I think is important, for me, to write about and see how readers respond to it."

Among his favorite poets is Larry Levis, a poet who passed away in the late 1990s, when he was probably in his late 40s or early 50s. "Levis is an incredible poet, very talented, but his strength is that he allows a lot into his poems," Kryah said. "His poems tend to be somewhat fragmented and a little all over the place.

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

They are sometimes very sloppy and yet, in the end, everything tends to work out and come together," Kryah explained.

One interesting fact about poetry is that when one reads a poem, it sounds very differently than when one hears it being read by the author him or herself. "I think for me, in particular, the writing process necessarily involves reading poems out loud," Kryah said, explaining his phenomenon. "So when I draft, I draft by hand and by computer, but I also draft with my voice. So when I'm rewriting a poem and revising and working on it, every step of the way I am just reading it back to myself," he said.

Kryah thinks that such a process allows for building familiarity as well as what he calls "solidity." "As I am revising and shaping it [the poem], the oral quality of just relaying it back to myself with my own voice makes it really take shape," he explained. "This allows it to really settle into the place or the shape that it needs to be."

Finding one's own voice is extremely important for anyone interested in becoming a writer. "After doing that fifty to sixty times, it [the poem] assumes its own, to me, sort of sonic or musical quality," Kryah said. "That will obviously be very different for someone who just comes to it and reads it once or twice. We attempt direction with line breaks and stanzas and other techniques like that, but the great thing about listening to poets read their own poetry, whether it is myself, Robert Frost, W.B. Yates, or whomever, is that they have a very specific approach to it that typically isn't something you would expect from having read it yourself," Kryah explained.

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.