

They Actually Paid Me to Write  
Cynthia Morris

Everyone knows that poetry, that most frivolous of writing, doesn't make anyone any money. Yet in the summer of 1997, whilst in the throes of a love affair with poems, I proved that axiom wrong.

I pored over the grants and awards section of Poets and Writers, devouring the photos of poets who had won thousands of dollars for their lyrical efforts. Residencies abroad, promises to publish books, and cash money were given to these poets who wrote to the edge of truth and with great emotion.

Encouraged by my yo-yo pro busker boyfriend, I took to the streets with poetry. Natalie Goldberg had suggested that aspiring writers set up at their local church bazaar, like she did, and scribble words for a buck. I could do the same with poetry.

Armed with folding chair and table, I set up on the 16<sup>th</sup> street mall during Denver's Buskerfest. My sign promised 'Poems on the Spot'. Passersby would stop and ask what I was doing. Give me a topic, I'd say, and I'll write you a poem. How much, they'd ask, suspicious that the cost of poetry would be too high for them. A buck, or whatever you want to pay me.

There's a strange tension between a paid pen and the person paying. With topics such as grass, love, friendship, I was challenged to dig past the Hallmark clichés. More obscure subjects – Moose Cock, Pere Ubu, Tightly Whities – delighted me. These people didn't know that truth is a poet's currency and that I delighted in stretching the boundaries of politesse.

They'd stand awkwardly in front of me, chatting with their friends or basking in the pride of being a patron of the arts, *their* poet penning *their* poem, on *their* topic. The gaggle of girls who gave me the tightly whitey prompt clustered in front of me, blushing and tittering. I delivered a poem evoking the fresh, round firmness of grapefruit or male buttocks. I wrote fast, as taught by Natalie, letting the words come, no censoring, no pausing to count syllables. It usually took a minute or two, then I'd rip the yellow sheet from its green notebook and stand to deliver. I'd read the poem aloud, with flourish, as a good street performer does, expounding on Alexandra, Blake, Motor Cross and the Corporate World. I'd gush forth on 'perseverance and tenacity', PMS and the Denver Broncos. It was fun to find something interesting to say about topics that held no interest for me. My most famous customer was news anchor Anne Trujillo, who requested a poem about the Buskerfest. I whipped one out and hammed it up for the cameraman that accompanied her. I don't know how good my poems were, but in the moment, produced on the spot like that and read with enthusiasm, they seemed brilliant.

Word got out about my poems and I was invited to set up at the LoDo Music Festival. This was good – I was legitimate. I set up my tiny table and folding camping chair alongside a roped-off parking lot. Dwarfed by the surging crowds of music fans, I baked in the Colorado sun, exposed and waiting for customers. I passed the time penning rambling free writes and making lists of essentials for writers. I had some customers, but not as many as at the Buskerfest, and not as many as my boyfriend, who made hundreds of dollars impressing crowds with his charm and twirling yo-yos. Poetry on the street, while a novelty, is not the show-stopper I'd like to think it was. The quiet rhythms of poetry can't compete with swirling flames, reeling yo-yos and towering unicyclists.

But I ended these days with money in my pocket and the satisfaction that I had lived out June Jordan's vision of 'Poetry for the People'. I take these early payments for my writing as signs of the absurdly possible impossible, that making money from creative writing can be done, with enthusiasm, brio and faith in the outrageous. I've found that these traits are necessary for making money at any endeavor, and especially writing.