

Francesca de Tores opens the Spark! Liquid Amber Poetry Festival, 26 Oct 2024

It's my great honour to speak at the opening of this festival.

We've come here to celebrate Liquid Amber and its role as both a press and poetry hub, since its founding in 2020. Independent presses have for so long been the innovators of the poetry world, doing bold and necessary work. Through Liquid Amber's collections, their prize, and anthologies, the press maintains, in a very material way, that poetry matters, and I'm so grateful to them, particularly Rose and Pauline, for that work.

Liquid Amber's role as a hub, in bringing writers and readers together, is also worth celebrating. Particularly when the press began, during lockdowns, Liquid Amber's online events connected writers as well as lovers of poetry, and provided a showcase not only for the authors of Liquid Amber's list, but also poets and artists beyond it.

Being together in person today is also worth celebrating, now that the press is no longer limited just to Zoom events (though I'm also glad, for the sake of accessibility, that they're continuing to offer these).

So today we celebrate the press's past, and look forward to a future in which Liquid Amber can continue to publish outstanding poetry, and to nurture poets, and to fly the flag for poetry within the broader cultural landscape.

But it's this broader cultural landscape that preoccupies me – because this is also a landscape in which we have to face up to the reality of the climate emergency; of what it means to live on stolen land; or to see a genocide livestreamed on our phone screens. I am thinking of how we must begin to see hope as a verb, and poetry as action... Because all of us are here because we, like Liquid Amber press, are lovers of poetry. And we believe, or I want very badly to believe, that poetry matters – but what can it do, in a burning world?

This has me thinking about how poetry demands of us a unique form of attention - that different way of looking. The kind of fresh eyes, exemplified in Stephanie Powell's book, *Invisible Wasp*, whose launch we also celebrate today. It's a kind of attention that changes the way we see things: so that I will not for a long time think of an eye without thinking of Stephanie's description of how eyelids 'close around their wounds'

The very nature of that attention has an ethical function. Charlotte Wood, paraphrasing Iris Murdoch, states that 'paying attention is a moral act.' She's building here on a line of thinking that we can trace back to Simone Weil, who wrote that 'attention, taken to

its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer.’ So that even if we write in the main about what Stephanie calls “our quiet, unsolved lives’, rather than explicitly political work, we nonetheless rehearse that form of attention.

But here’s the thing: we can’t claim to have mastered attention – not attention of the precision and exactitude that poetry demands - and not also be aware of what is being done in the world, and sometimes in our name. Poetry as a form of attention has to lead to action, or poetry becomes just a circle-jerk, an insular exercise.

So I leave you with a provocation, from Mary Oliver, whom we think of, perhaps unfairly, as a gentle pastoral poet, not necessarily political:

*Because, properly attended to, delight, as well as havoc, is suggestion. Can one be passionate about the just, the ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit to no labor in its cause? I don’t think so. [...] The gospel of light is the crossroads of—
indolence, or action.*

Be ignited, or be gone.

‘Be ignited or be gone’ – which of course brings us back to the name of this festival: *Spark*. So while it’s a joy to gather with you here today, and to celebrate the wonderful work of Liquid Amber Press, I hope that I will meet you not just at poetry festivals but also on the streets, marching. Danez Smith in their new book, *Bluff*, writes: “There is no poem greater than feeding someone.” The best poem you will write today is a letter to your MP demanding climate action, or a ceasefire in Palestine. Poetry does matter – the brilliant work of independent presses such as Liquid Amber does matter - but it remains up to us to turn that poetic attention to the world, which has never needed it more.