

## Comfort Poetry vs. The Prophetic

Matt Trease calls mainstream poetry, “NPR poetry.” Eileen Myles in a 2015 interview, said:

There is still a lot of power built up around mainstream poetry. People are afraid to give America anything but comfort. It's like an ad for guilt. Even poetry is supposed to support it. Last year I was a judge on the National Book Award's poetry panel and I felt there was a weird regard for readability which struck me as a kind of a regard for normality, the regular stuff. And we're living in extraordinary times so our literary culture needs to wake up.

The poetry I first encountered was what people often hear first. You might hear Allen Ginsberg, John Ashbery, Gwendolyn Brooks, but what is really being sold by the culture still is this big house mainstream poetry. Even though they are telling these personal stories, post-Sexton and post-Lowell, the language has an apartness, it's very middle class white language. It doesn't take any risks, doesn't have any vernacular.

"The prophetic sense is affirming the oldest function of poetry, which is to interrupt the habits of ordinary consciousness by means of more precise and highly charged uses of language and to provide new tools."

— George Quasha in *America: A Prophecy*

### Interlude: The Danger of Language That Feels Too Good

Here we turn to a striking observation by Japanese literary critic **Yōsuke Hamazaki**, who critiques the modern craving for comfort through language:

“Today, people don't seek language for its truth—they seek it for its comfort. They want words that affirm their wounds, that console their suffering. But this isn't a desire for meaning. It's a desire to feel good.”

“And when surrounded only by comforting words, one loses the ability for self-recognition. It leads, ultimately, to inner collapse.”

Hamazaki’s insight is profound: **language, when used to soothe too much, disables us**. It erodes the very tension required for genuine reflection and transformation.

Zen, on the other hand, uses language not to reassure, but to disturb.

**It points, disrupts, and vanishes.** It speaks not to resolve but to awaken.

— Kosho Itagaki

<https://substack.com/home/post/p-166807497>