Poetry is dead. Yes, it has been said many times and before you get defensive, there is plenty of proof. *Newsweek* announced poetry’s death in 2003. Although the statement outraged Western poets, it was correct. Poetry has fallen into the cracks. And poets and poetry readers are left asking, “what the hell happened?”

After the *Newsweek* article was released, poets were spitting and growling with anger. They channeled all that anger into well-thought-out articles about the death of poetry, which no one read. Why didn’t anyone read them? Because we were busy watching a miniseries on TV, updating our Facebook status or enjoying the latest video on YouTube. In a world of pervasive ads, fast cars, perpetual unfriending, poetry has officially lost its appeal. Now the only time you will see poetry in the mainstream is when it’s used to sell products.

Some argue that poetry is thriving these days, and they may be right to an extent. Poetry is all around us, but it appears in ways that counter its meditative quality. A recent Levi’s campaign, for example, features the line “All I need is all I got” neatly placed next to an image of a woman running through a field. Walt Whitman’s words – once evoked to encourage thought and perspective – are now used sell jeans.

Some poets will tell you that there is more poetry being written today than ever before. Peter Pereira said in an interview with *Poetry Is Dead*, “There is everything from personal lyric and historical narrative and formal poetry, to language poetry and non-conceptual poetry and flarf. There are books of poems from doctors, Iraq war veterans and ex-mutual fund managers. Hundreds of years from now people are going to be looking back and saying, wow—what an abundance of riches here.” Poetry is being written, but for the future. The “abundance” of great poetry Pereira is referring to isn’t meant to be read in the present, but stored for the future. Poetry is thriving in a documentary sense rather than a cultural sense. Poetry is dead.

Poetry books in Canada today sell around 300 to 500 copies on average. A huge success sells around a thousand copies or more. The stats get worse: In 1999 close to 1,000 poetry titles were printed every year, two years later that number dropped to around 600. And past 2001 poetry is simply slotted in the “arts” category, which isn’t doing so well either. Poetry books are given less and less space on bookstore shelves, and so naturally less are being produced. The last time you asked a sales clerk at Chapters for the poetry section, he giggled. Not only is the internet poet. Readers of poetry have now been given the awful job of managing the sludge pile. Do you follow poetry on Twitter? Then you too are bombarded with irrelevant, awkward 140-character haikus. Found a poetry blog? Well, then you’ve read thousands of self-published poems that haven’t made it past the editing stage. Instant publication also begs the question of instant production: Are these twaiiku well-thought-out pieces, or just something that came to mind? And even when you find a poem online, the quick pace of the internet has you skimming it, rather than indulging in its intricacies. An advertisement or link often has you clicking off the page just as soon as you’ve clicked on.

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The current culture of instant memes, meaning and 30-second bites of information is forcing readers to abandon anything that involves several reads. Poetry needs to simmer, and today’s society only accommodates thing that can be thrown into the microwave for a few seconds and then consumed on the drive to work. We have mobile phones, social networking sites and a lot of other distractions to fill our time. All that is left of poetry in the mainstream media is pop music, which can be overly stylized. Poetry has a meditative aspect to it. It’s about taking a poem and going somewhere quiet to mull it over. People are no longer interested in that, their attention spans crave constant stimulation.

Simon Fraser University communications teacher Norbert Ruebsaat claims that, “the culture of advertising has killed poetry.” We are fed one-liners and outstanding imagery to sell a product. The advertising itself has become the message (Marshall McLuhan would be so proud). Our society is based on selling products, whether it’s our books or ourselves is irrelevant. Poetry doesn’t fit in this culture of sell. It lacks consumer value. Ask a poet how much their poems are worth and you will never receive a dollar value. And this is a good...
thing. As Adrienne Rich has noted,

“...And perhaps this is the hope: that poetry can keep its mechanical need simple, its head clear of the fumes of how ‘success’ is concocted in the capitals of promotion, marketing, consumerism and in particular of the competition [...] that makes people want stardom rather than participation, association, exchange and improvisation with others. Perhaps this is the hope: that poetry, by its natures, will never become leashed to profit, marketing, consumerism.” —What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics.

The oversaturated stale microcosm we call poetry is being suffocated with a pillow and no one can hear it. Or everyone left the house. But everything must die to be reborn. In fact, advertising is now finding itself on its last breath as consumer blogs, social networking sites and citizen approval are increasingly driving product sales. This is a good sign for the future of poetry. Advertisers are running away from commercial time and ad space in magazines. We, as a society, are rejecting the obvious simplicity of “you see it, you buy it.” We are no longer interested in what someone has to sell us. We have to see the purpose and use. We have to see the value. And this is hope, for poetry is all value without the monetary connection.

So poetry is dead but, like Elvis, there are sighting of it all around. Poetry has a future—we live in a world of cycles and poetry will come back with a vengeance … just like the 80s did. Billy Collins said it best, “I knew that the audience for poetry was relatively small but that there were many readers out there who had been driven away from poetry and were ready to find a way back.” And this is where we stand: in a world where there is no rest. We are constantly moving, updating, adding, poking and working, so taking the time to meditate and reflect with a poem is more necessary than ever. Poetry is ready to dig itself out of its grave. It’s just a matter of how … and when. Either way, I am waiting for the zombie poetry to come back and seek revenge on the world that killed it.