

First introduced in the latter part of the 19th century, postcards (or souvenir cards as they were called when the U.S. government held a brief copyright on the word) provided a cheap and convenient alternative to letters (honey, have you seen my sealing wax?), reaching their peak popularity-wise in 1908 when 677 million were handled by the post office. The Portsmouth Poet Laureate Program thinks their moment has come once again. Only this time with a bit of a twist. *Wish You Were Where?/The Postcard Project* encourages poets of all ages and abilities to send one of their poems (along with a stamp and return address) to an artist of their choice (as many as they'd like as long as each written piece is different) who will then respond to the work by providing an illustration of some sort. And then drop it in a mailbox.

While this unique correspondence (what poet since Baudelaire has not referred to their undertaking as such?) lends itself to multiple readings and themes—the ekphrastic poem, where one's task is to tap-into the artist's work, and the homage, where one pays tribute, heartily back-patting them, as well as those inherent in the postcards long connection with travel: desire to escape or get outside-one's-self, take-up with a dream; pause and reflection, navigating and charting that space between home and away; disorientation and displacement; as well as tried-and-true adventure, the trek or the pilgrimage--the participating poets are free to approach the project however they'd like.

Yes, there is risk. Your artist might snub or brush-aside your flattery. Or your postcard might be mistreated or even lost. But as collagist Charles Farrell has observed about his own exchanges with poet Sebastian Matthew—[t]he US postal service...becomes an unwitting collaborator in the process" thus further extending and reshaping it/them. And, yes, conformity. Being restricted to the space limitations (all postcards must ascribe to a rather standard 4 ¼" x 6" format). But while a haiku would seem to be one's best option (Fluxus, a neo-Dada art movement launched in the 60's was drawn to "mail art" because it pressured the artist to be not only short but simple) why not a sonnet or heck even a tiny-typed epic? And the pay-off, reward, could be out-of-this-world (besides it probably being the last place we're ever invited to put pen-to-paper when communicating with another!)—not only a distinctive work-of-art but quite possibly a lifetime acquaintance or (as Robert Dunne was fond of saying) co-"conspirator."

Once we have the first installments we'll meet in the spring and share our postcards/ experiences and celebrate. But for now get yourself a blank postcard. And write someone a poem. There's no telling where it will all end (up)!

