



essay

A central image of a plant with a thin, vertical stem and several dark, elongated leaves. One leaf at the top is white and resembles a flag or a sail. The background is a light grey gradient.

Poem = Work of Art:

*The Future of Digital Poetry or
Digital Poetry as Future*

Ana María Caballero

During my first meeting as a student in the poetry MFA program at Florida International University, I asked my soon-to-be mentor, Julie Marie Wade, if I could pursue a joint major in art. She was flummoxed. *I'm not even sure whom to call*, she ultimately confessed.

The lack of communication between the English department and the fine arts department at a major state university surprised me. I'd been writing poetry since I was a child, and, by the time I entered the program, I had a few significant publications under my belt. I applied hoping to grow as a poet but, more so, to explore new ways to present my poetry to the world.

I felt that the life of a published poem was too short, too quiet, too insular. Having grown up in Miami, I witnessed how Miami Beach Art Basel transformed my city and thought that poems (not just pithy, selfie-friendly painted or neon signs) belonged at the fair. I considered myself not only a poet, but an artist, too, and longed to see poems like the ones I and other poets around me were writing represented meaningfully in the world of art.

I wanted poetry to change my life.

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When I read about Web3 and blockchain technology, I'd already been turning my published work into spoken-word video poems that I shared on social media, hoping to extend my poems' lives. The jump from Web2 (the Internet of free content creation) to Web3 (the Internet of content ownership) was a natural one. In the marrow of my bones, I knew this technology would prove revolutionary for writers, allowing us to transact our words directly with an audience in a way that honors our craft and contribution to culture.

I bought the domain for theVERSEverse, an NFT (non-fungible token) poetry gallery that I cofounded, in the spring of 2021 in a supermarket parking lot, instantly enamored with the name when it came to me. I was convinced that poems needed to trade in the same way that art trades,

and an online poetry gallery seemed like a good place to start. Still, dot-com-domain in hand, I had more questions than answers, first among them: did I truly understand what "Web3" meant?

Web3 boils down to digital provenance—the power to certify the ownership of digital assets via a decentralized ledger, also known as a blockchain. If you bought a digital artwork ten years ago, you'd likely receive a USB in a box. If you buy a digital artwork today, you are likely to purchase it using crypto currency via a digital wallet with a unique digital address, which will be linked to your acquisition in a publicly verifiable way.

No matter how many views the work you own receives on the Web, no matter how many times you email the file to your students, you can certify that you own it. Because you own it, you can also sell it. Behold, a market is born.

Once you digest that the basic premise and promise of the blockchain is like a turbo-boosted, decentralized file storage system that supports the exchange of digital documents, the rest is a matter of vocabulary. Poets are good at vocabulary.

Blockchain provenance has sparked a resurgence in digital art that many liken to a renaissance. Some headlines differ, focusing on the rise and fall of collectibles, which represent only one corner of art transacted via crypto currencies. Don't let the negativity around certain NFTs or crypto volatility blanket the reality of what's happening: a new generation of artists, curators, gallerists, collectors and even poets are actively building a thriving ecosystem.

What does this mean for poetry, specifically? Digitally native audiences and collectors typically encounter art formatted as MP4s or JPGs, rather than text files. If a spoken-word poem is presented as an MP4, then a curator, a collector, an art lover will engage with it in the same way that they would engage with a non-text based artwork. This means poets can put their words in front of millions of eyes hungry for digital artifacts, eyes that might not normally engage with poetry—connecting verse to a massive, culturally minded audience and to potentially life-changing



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While selling poems as digital artworks is by no means easy, it is now possible, reasserting this ancient craft's cultural agency. Perhaps poetry has a logistical problem. Why can't poets make a living from their poems? Because poets create poetry books, which don't transact in a way that reflects the work that goes into them, forcing their writers to supplement their livelihood with other means. For a recent exhibition, I worked with a bespoke binder to print a book as an edition of one and included a single poem in its pages, repeated 197 times. I presented (and priced) this book, called *The Wish*, as a sculpture to question how society values poetry books. Is it scarcity that governs such (de)valuation? Or are we simply not trained to view poems as objets d'art?

One of my mentors, the celebrated poet Denise Duhamel, tells me: "We were taught to think of the poem as the reward. So, we all looked for jobs to support our writing habit." In Web3, a new path—one that does not rely solely on book sales, teaching jobs, or editing gigs—is emerging, one in which writers can build a market for their work and exchange directly with their audience. This ownership economy represents a powerful evolution of the page, one of humanity's most transformational and ancient file storage technologies.

I've spoken at numerous venues across the world on this topic and often share an anecdote: theVERSEverse paired a poem by the Pulitzer Prize-finalist Campbell McGrath with the work of ROBNESS, a notable digital artist. The work sold well, and when I sought to transfer the funds to McGrath, he wrote: *That doesn't seem fair*. I didn't understand what he meant, so he explained: *I hardly did any of the work*. I assured him he'd been doing the work for decades.

Another question I like to bring up when I speak is this: *When will the massive publishing houses embrace Web3?* It's a small psychological

patronage. This also means poets might exhibit their stanzas in venues such as museums, galleries, and public art festivals.

I once wanted poetry to change my life. Now I want digital poetry to change the life of other poets.

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For this to happen, digital poetry must transact, which might make some squirm. But I think "transaction" is a good word. When we transact, we exchange, we share, we give, we receive, we assign value. I believe Web3 will prove groundbreaking for poetry by expanding the ways in which we transact it. Via expansive transactions, poems can live fuller lives, allowing more people to connect with their sorcery.

Next year, I will publish a book called *Mammal*. I revised it with the incredible poet Jan Beatty, who suggested I submit a few of the poems to specific literary journals at the end of our time working together. I asked her where I should submit the longest poem in the book, "Vasectomy: An Incision in Parts." She said: "Oh Ana, I don't think anyone will publish it. It's too long and not many print or online journals are publishing long poems these days." I sent a digital version of this poem to an open call on the themes of gender and sexuality, hosted by *Playboy* and the Sevens Foundation. My poem won. "Vasectomy: An Incision in Parts" was published, as a non-fungible token, by *Playboy*.

leap from an audiobook or a Kindle to an NFT book. But this jump gives publishing houses and authors the powerful knowledge of who has purchased the text. Transactions on the blockchain are openly recorded and each collector has a forward-facing digital wallet address. Many users link their digital wallets to their social media profiles, making it possible to reach out to them. I don't know who purchased my books on Amazon, but I know exactly which digital wallets have purchased *TRYST*, a collection of short stories I released as an NFT book with Web3 publishing house Alexandria Labs. I recently finalized an audio version of *TRYST* to give to holders of the first edition. I can send these gifts seamlessly to my collectors' digital wallets, continuing a conversation with my readers that began when they first purchased my book over a year ago.

Web3 technology has real potential to change the financial lives of poets. But what about the life of poetry itself?

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The real power of Web3 is connection.

Indeed, for most poets active in the NFT space, the potential to transact their work is secondary to forming part of a network of avant-garde writers who, together, are reimagining the relationship between text and image within the context of our increasingly digitized world. One literary journal leading the way in recognizing the potential of Web3's community of poets is *Rattle*. Its editor, Tim Green, even devoted an edition to uplifting the voices that are paving the way, like Katie Dozier, Pierre Gervois, Justin Tagg, and Sarah Ridgley.

"*Rattle* is always pushing against our boundaries and assumptions as we work to make poetry a more important part of more people's lives," Green told me. "By reversing the economic model from one of scarcity to one of abundance, NFTs might become the backbone of a new literary community that's more vibrant, active, and diverse than anything the roadblocks of traditional publishing have allowed."

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Being active in Web3 also affords poets exposure to cutting-edge creative technologies, such as computer coding and artificial intelligence. Experimentation is part and parcel to the blockchain—and very contagious.

I recently released *Paperwork*, a collection of AI-generated digital paper sculptures that materialize moments of private connection to my performed poetry. This collection, released in partnership with the digital art gallery Bright Moments, asserts the corporeality of the virtual, presenting it as a medium capable of distilling ephemeral moments of meaning generated by that most ancient artform: spoken-word verse. I would've never created these artworks had I not been wading deep in Web3.

Remarkably, digital spoken-word poems also bring us closer to the tangible body of the writer. I'm influenced by poets such as Lucille Clifton, Louise Glück, and Sharon Olds—authors with unmistakable poetic voices. Beyond the form and diction of a poem, the soul of the poet must be palpable for the work to elicit an emotional response from the reader. At the same time, few things are as intimate and suggestive as the sound of our physical voices. By adding recordings to

digital poems, poets can manifest desired accents and intonations, combining poetic and physical voices to create deeply immersive and personal experiences.

Imagine collecting a poem by your all-time favorite poet, read by them, as they wished you to hear it. Imagine knowing that this poem could live out freely in the world, enjoyed by all who wished to read or listen to it but that you held the title to its digital file, allowing you to one day leave it to your loved ones—to hold forever or to sell. Imagine investing in your favorite sequence of lyrical words and meaningfully supporting their creator.

Masters of Fine Arts programs need to address new possibilities for poets. Students should be given the option of learning the history of visual poetry and the tools of the trade—Photoshop, artificial intelligence, computer-programming languages and other technologies that are still to come. Classes on publishing should teach students how to write a good cover letter, yes, but also how to record poems on the Ethereum, Bitcoin, Solana, or Tezos protocols.

After all, we, the poets, deserve to live off our poems and, likewise, to see our words live in the world. We've done the work. ★

Poem by **Ana María Caballero**

Milk

At first, infants love us for our colostrum.

A few days later and perhaps for months, our milk.

Eventually, though, children love us for nothing.

My children love me for nothing.

Define nothing: the breadth between caregiving and caretaking.

I never forget to call my mother whom I remember to never forgive.

My children cry when I leave their sight, though I invent alleyways through which to depart.

And yet: I'm most myself when I'm alone, pressing hard against my sleeping child.

Define alone: a mass of uncut bread.

Or else: the bellow of a cow at dawn.

Meanwhile, my children's range, their capacity, expands.

I hold pictures of them as babies and cannot recall their size upon my breast.

Was I there?

As a youth, I scuttled through alleyways to escape my mother's hearth.

I hurt from loving too much and not enough.

Time leaves my sight.

What I cannot stand about my mother is the way she reminds me of myself.

Am I here?

I have never been this old.

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