

Poetry in the Time of Sampson Starkweather

An interview by
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Reading poet Sampson Starkweather's work is like reading a beautiful, existential text message; a text message that manages to engage in the very minutia of our everyday life—emojis, emails, texts—and the heavier stuff—lack of empathy, the Dakota pipeline, Trump's rhetoric, depression, isolation—all while maintaining a playfully dark tone. Sampson isn't afraid

of being sad, or funny, or weird. He is daring when it comes to language, in both his work and the way he publishes it. An untitled poem in *Until the Joy of Death Hits*, a multi-media chapbook of GIF poems from Spork Press, mixes old with new, technology with philosophy, comedy with apocalypse:

*I text like Dostoyevsky
we fuck
and the internet
does not exist*

Described as a meta-realist poet, 40-year-old Sampson is the author of nine chapbooks and two collections of poetry: *The First Four Books of Sampson Starkweather* (Birds, LLC) and his newest, *PAIN: The Board Game* (Third Man Books). He is a founding editor of Birds, LLC, an independent poetry press, and co-creator of the CUNY Chapbook Festival. Born in North Carolina, he received an MFA in Creative Writing from Sarah Lawrence and lives in Brooklyn.

His Ditmas Park apartment is as full of books and bookcases as one might expect for a poet, and his long brown hair and beard fit the part. But this is where the clichés end. Sampson is a regular Pelé, playing professional soccer for years in New Zealand, where he also used to live.

"People think that it's a little weird that a poet plays soccer," he said, but went on to describe the undeniable connection between sports and poetry. For him, the two connect unconscious movement and freedom. "I have Attention Deficit Disorder—my brain, it just doesn't stop. I have a million ideas,

thoughts, anxieties, fears, hopes, dreams, images, languages, to do lists flashing through my brain...so for me, writing and soccer are this place where all those thoughts silence and I feel like I'm in a more receptive space."

Sitting in his apartment, I realized his living room looked the way I imagined the inside of his head might: wild, vibrant mismatched rugs pile over one another, small bursts of color and texture and pattern, and books everywhere—in bookcases, stacked on each other, on desks, on coffee tables. He offered me a Mason jar of water and didn't bother with coasters. Like his home, Sampson emits an infectious energy of engagement, experimentation, and warmth. He is always pushing boundaries but is never pretentious. He makes the mundane beautiful; he doesn't go looking elsewhere for poetry—he knows how to access it right here and now and how to make it live and sing.

Even at first glance, a common reader knows his poetry is something different. A single poem reveals a little world in an unusual form; the poems cascade and fall into each other. A single-word line creates a breathlessness, a sense of scrolling and discovering. I was excited to learn he actually writes them as texts: "The poems are often long and skinny because I write them as text messages to people. I'm really into this because when you get a text poem, it's like a poem is happening in front of your eyes because you're scrolling and you don't what is going to happen next." To learn that he writes poems on his phone gave a strange validity to my own process. When I write on my phone, I feel most natural and uninhibited, until I hear the echoing of past teachers stressing the importance of pen and paper. I worry about how I look, a disengaged millennial scrolling through Instagram or something. Sampson showed me that every moment, even scrolling through Instagram, can be a space for creativity. Phones are a part of our lives, so of course they can inevitably become vessels for poems. The restraint of a device can affect the poem in a positive way.

Sampson incorporates many striking, humorous, stark and profound hypermodern images in his poems, like "white iPhone lost in snow" and "death-flavored Blow Pop." Emojis appear in a number of his poems. "I write about what matters to me, no matter what it is. I mean, I write my poems on this thing [gesturing to phone] and you're telling me people don't care about it? They do. I heard that comment in grad school—people said, 'don't put coca cola in your poem. What about the future when people won't know the reference?' And I say, first of all, fuck the future. Who knows if we'll even get there at the rate we're going? I'm not writing for the future. I'm writing for now."

As a poet who is also fascinated by hypermodern relics—emojis, GIFs, Tinder, etc.—I wanted to know how to insert these images in my poems in a meaningful way that didn't seem too heavy handed and self-conscious. Sampson's new book *PAIN: The Board Game* has scan-able barcodes that reflect a GIF for each poem. His virtual chapbook, *Until The Joy of Death Hits*—a collaboration between Sampson and Croatian poet and artist Ana Božičević—is a wild, disorientating movement through audio, visual, and text. From GIFs of women endlessly fading into each other, to a pigeon with a surveillance camera for a

head, the chapbook keeps the reader investigating how the poems and GIFs speak to one another. “Poetry is always meant to be at some level a documentation of what it’s like to be alive at any given time and iPhones and GIFs are part of what it’s like to be alive now. Everything can be sacred, everything can be profane. Does an emoji come up in your life? Then let it come up in your poems, but don’t force it.” He calls GIFs “little infinities.”

Sampson is not precious about his process. One bookcase in his apartment is lined with notebooks, filled with chicken scratch, drawings, magic. But he primarily writes on his phone. “I write whenever I have free time—mostly on the train. My process is an accumulation of little moments that I have to myself. Sometimes it’s just a line, image or idea. I write it down as soon as possible and then when I have free time, I sit down to write. The process is like a mixture of collage and cutting away. If given time, good lines sit inside me. I tend to sweat when I write, so I have writing shirts—shirts that I can foul up.”

An important part of Sampson’s process is misreading. As stated in his poem “love in the time of gentrification,” “I often mis-/read poetry/ as poverty.” The power of his poems comes from not only their content, but also their shape and how the shape allows for misreading and multiple meanings. “Misreading and mishearing are gifts. What’s cool about having fourth grade handwriting is I can’t read my own poems sometimes. A normal sentence will turn into some magical weird thing. Sometimes when I write on my phone, autocorrect is wrong and I keep the mistake—like, whoa, that’s oddly beautiful. I drove on Saturn instead of Saturday—that’s way cooler, that’s poetry. I like the element of mistakes.”

Sampson’s publishing practice is as radical as his poetry; he is one of the founders and editors of Birds, LLC, an inventive, artist-run publishing collective. “Ten years ago, the way to be published tended to be contests. The contest system, similar to the MFA, creates a certain kind of book. I think there should be all kind of books: 300-page books, 40-page books, vulgar books, books that represent young people and their world. Contests were judged by older people that were looking for stuff that matched their own style and legacy. The only way poetry moves forward is by murdering your masters. I helped create Birds, LLC to find new ways to capture our lives and what it’s like.” For him, this meant focusing on publishing voices and styles from the edge.

Being a young poet feels like constantly negotiating the line between speeding up and slowing down. As an MFA student myself, with the daily swirl of anxiety about publishing and succeeding, I feel like my fellow poets and I are somehow living in one of his poems, engaging with all this hypermodernity while still trying to maintain gravity, to create something beautiful.

“Be skeptical and always trust your instincts. Find writing that isn’t taught in the program. To be a poet you have to know what’s going on in the world, not just America. I think workshops create a certain kind of poem and students should push against that. Write poems that don’t feel like other students’ poems. My MFA taught me I want to write in ways that are sort of go

against the way my teachers write.” Sampson stressed the importance of thinking for yourself and questioning everything—the same way his poems question their own writer, their own masters, and the world that surrounds them.

Ultimately, Sampson is a scribe of the human experience and has a vision for a more empathetic, connected world. For him, the dark political reality of 2017 is a kind of creative call to arms. “I think poetry is more important than ever. Writing poetry is an act of resistance. It is choosing art and beauty and truth over disengagement. It’s almost a form of protest in itself. You can’t think writing poems alone is going to solve our problems but poetry is a form of prayer...it’s a form of magic.”


Sampson’s poetry clearly strikes a chord in its readers. *PAIN: The Board Game* heavily deals with depression and Sampson received many letters about how the book gave its readers hope. “I get really depressed. When it seems overwhelming, I think of memories. For instance, I thought about how my mom used to cut my hair outside. Just writing it down and documenting it...that little act of beauty and care is almost like a way of survival. It’s excavating from the archive of your own life. In this time where history is terrifying, it’s nice to make counter-history with little personal moments.”

how to enjoy your new ghost

the first thing you'll notice
when you tear open
the packaging
is your ghost
is just like you
(white and bound
to disappoint)
imagine everything
you've ever lost

love  money  people  

opportunities  time 

memories  blah blah blah
all repackaged
and marketed to you
and your customized damage
finally you have something
you can't lose
for best results
you should die



now lie back
and watch
your ghost
go





LOVE IS THE
SHIT

attention deficit disorder

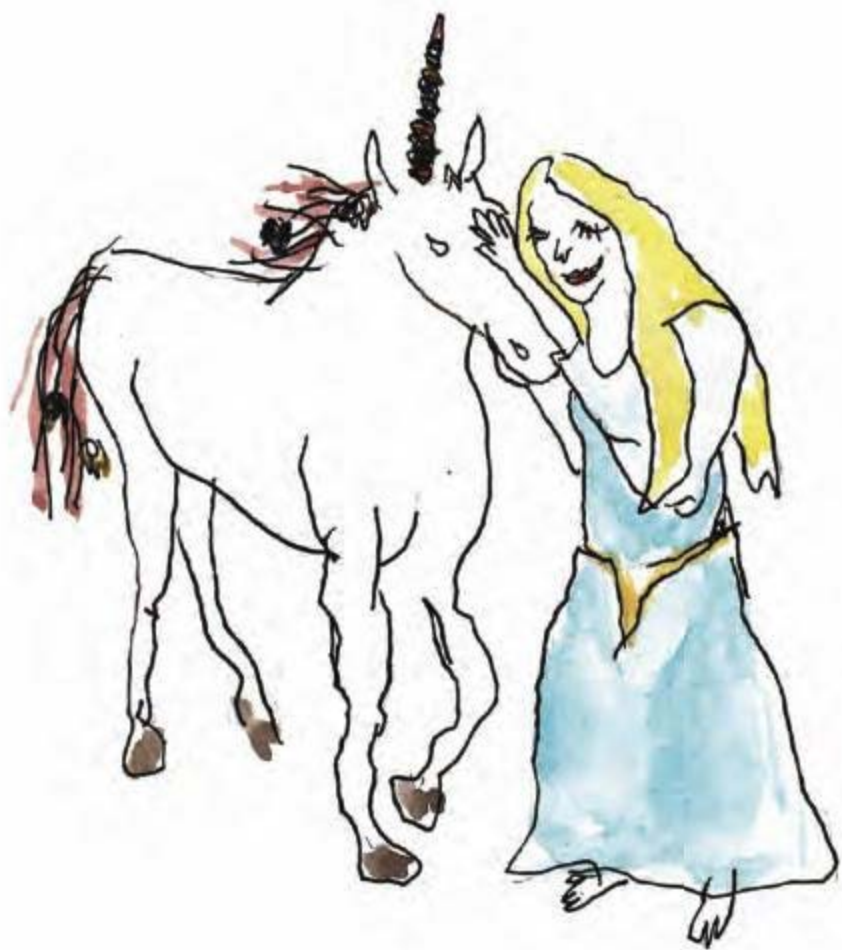
I'm struggling
to focus
like a hand-held
home-movie
of a dead
loved one
in the woods
naked in front
of a waterfall
doing something
impossible
to describe
all true ghosts
go straight to
VHS 📼
why can't
be kind 😊
rewind
apply to life
or death
who didn't crush
on a shy gangly
employee
of a video store
renting
Wild @ Heart
religiously
as a message
always
remember love
is the shit
and nobody
has to die
in a poem



A MUTE PROTEST
AGAINST DEATH

legalese, baby, legalese

language is not
to be
trusted
floating ocean
sky beach
gloryhole of snow
I want
to say
so I do
wounded with flowers
I crawl
from the \$ store
to the hovel
I pay 1700 a month for
to die in
comfortably
surrounded by
bright & broken
things
I have collected
(a mute protest
against death)
a spiritual ritual
practiced by
the miserable animals
of this period
otherwise known
as
now



PRETEND TO LIVE IN
A WORLD WITHOUT
MONEY

what if we call this *Tenderness*

some corporation
or collection agency
calls me
3 or 4 times
a day
maybe they are kind
of another mother
or ex-lover
genderless
& savagely patient
either way
they are after me
I'm convinced
they want
my poetry
I take it
wizard-level
at dodging
incoming calls
go invisible
at the grocery store
pretend
to live
in a world
without
money
my answer
ing machine
is me crying
(in French, oui)
call me
914-573-9721
please
leave me
something
tender



THE BLACK SWIMMING
POOL OF MY FUCK
UPS

life event

I tried
to interview myself
but it's hard
to transcribe crying
besides who needs
another white dude's
mumblecore dreams
I am terrible
with Excel
spreadsheets of peace
consume me
the soul
the sole
contestant
of the ache sweepstakes
so I hoard the spoils
kick back
do some laps
in the black
swimming pool
of my fuck ups
heated to perfection
by these jets
of living-death
conveniently recorded
on my timeline



HOPE

your tattoo says
in a dead
language
I can't read
(translated by Bing)
all I know
is the want to know
is the @ealst desire
let's get old-school
like fingerbanging
in the park
u kiss like a Goya painting
locked in a basement
the biographer of your dreams
bursts into flames
so we can see
our drugs
gracias dream-scholar
our band would be
The I Don't Knows
touring our apartment
to sold out shows
of die-hard *Nothings*
(follow them on Facebook)
our problems are not real
you are right
life IS
everything
we hail
a Death Taxi
from the reading
you flick the ash
from your cigarette
and smile
and the rain
rains

goth kids on the golf course

I Shazamed
your orgasm
which found a match
in a Prince song
that didn't exist
until that exact moment
you're welcome world
sometimes I swell
with a weird mix
of nostalgia & mischiefness
thinking about
our matching
toothbrushes
writhing with electricity
instruments of
intimacy
like we're in a band
called Secret Pain
and you are the drummer
and me a roadie
with ridiculous dreams
no ideas
but in sings
see even my sadness
has steez
like a peacock
lost
on a golf course
at dusk
pining for
the rush
and famished ache
the rough magic
of bodies
illuminating
the lack
of any
limitation
when one

Life Without Devices

A One-act Play for Your Face

Sunlight: (speaks inaudibly)

The End.

The Life of a Wave 🌊

(The sea is cruel and endless and too too blue.)

Wave: Why was I born?

Wave: I was born to break. Unless!!...unless you think I may never break, I may be the exception, I may make it, I may move on past the sand, past the beach, over the dunes, across roads, through traffic, past parking lots, through fields and forests, across lawns and cities, over mountains, through deserts, to the edge of the world, through the ether, past the moon, moving through space, infinitely, forever, the wave which never breaks...

(The curtain falls. The wave takes a bow, then breaks.)

Sampson Starkweather is the author of *PAIN: The Board Game* (Third Man Books, 2015) and *The First Four Books of Sampson Starkweather* (Birds, LLC, 2013). He is a founding editor of Birds, LLC, an independent poetry press. He is also the author of nine chapbooks, most recently *Until the Joy of Death Hits*, pop/love audio-visual GIF poems from Spork Press, and *Flux Capacitor*, a collaborative audio poetry album from Black Cake Records. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Jon-Michael Frank created the illustrations found in this section. He is the author of the chapbook *Nostalgia Flower* (Sad Spell Press) and a book of poetic comics, *How's Everything Going? Not Good* (Ohio Edit / Cuneiform Press). He is an assistant editor for Birds, LLC, and lives between Austin, TX, and the Puget Sound.

The poems and illustrations included in this section were selected from Sampson Starkweather's *PAIN: The Board Game* (Third Man Book, 2016).

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