

CONSIDER *the* LILLIES

One of poetry's most distinguished prizes — the Lilly Fellowship — has gone to UT students two years in a row. How Malachi Black and Roger Reeves are making an ancient art relevant and fresh
by Mike Agresta

NO ONE GETS INTO POETRY FOR THE MONEY. Young MFA candidates in poetry are taught to expect a career of teaching gigs, rejection letters from small-circulation literary journals, and jeers from friends who chose law school or business school instead. It takes a strong will and great faith in one's literary ambitions to persevere. Of course, a major prize here and there can't hurt. UT poets Malachi Black and Roger Reeves, close friends and back-to-back winners of the elite national Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship, have every reason to feel good about the future.

Lilly, the heiress of a major pharmaceutical fortune, shocked the world in 2002 when she gave \$200 million to a then-small magazine called *Poetry*. The magazine quickly evolved into a foundation that seeks "to raise poetry to a more visible and influential position in American culture." Part of that mission is fostering a new generation of poets like Black and Reeves. The Lilly Fellowships, among the most competitive in the country for emerging poets, offer a \$15,000 lump sum prize to support continued writing and study.

"I couldn't believe it," Reeves says. "I had never really won anything before." His experiences growing up in a deeply religious family in southern New Jersey led him to develop a unique voice that is at the same time visionary and obliquely political. "Growing up Holiness, or Pentecostal, was particularly influential in how I understand poems and the page in that it taught me

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Black was raised just up I-95 from Reeves, in the northern suburbs of New Jersey. His poetry, however, couldn't be more different. It's metrically taut, endlessly toying with the sounds of words and even employing rhyme. "I believe that many writers avoid it due to a fear of appearing anachronistic," Black says of rhyme. "Ironically, it's been in relative disuse for so long that its present-day occurrences, when well-executed, at least, often seem surprisingly innovative." Indeed, Black's poetry often feels at the same time both old and entirely new — a hallmark, perhaps, of lasting art.

Both writers credit Dean Young, the Pulitzer Prize-finalist poet who joined the UT faculty in 2008, with helping them succeed. "He told me to write whatever I wanted," Reeves says. "That might sound simple, but I have always grappled with feeling like I should be writing a certain type of poem as opposed to writing the poem I want to write. Is this poem black enough? Or, does this poem transcend race? Or is this poem overly smart, or not smart enough? Dean told me to write whatever I wanted."

Black and Reeves both finished their MFAs this May. The road ahead won't be easy — it never is for young poets in America. But with Ruth Lilly Fellowships under their belts and several thousand dollars in their pockets, they're getting a first taste of sweet success.

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