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Bellingham slam poet Ryler Dustin working on next chapter in his life

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Poet Ryler Dustin in downtown Bellingham, April 29, 2013.

PHILIP A. DWYER — THE BELLINGHAM HERALD [Buy Photo](#)

By DEAN KAHN — THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Ryler Dustin managed to morph from being a socially awkward, daydreaming kid into a successful slam poet with a book of poems to his credit and a \$10,000 prize under his belt.

Likewise, he navigated graduate school in Houston, Texas, far from his temperate, green hometown of Bellingham. Now he faces a new challenge - figuring out his future, post-M.F.A.

Dustin describes a poem as "clearing a space with the intention of saying something that matters."

For him, writing poetry, as well as the young-adult novel he has started, requires clearing out time to think and to write. Like many people with a master's degree in fine arts, Dustin is seeking a balance between paying the bills and focusing on his creative work.

Dustin, 29, was a young child when his family moved to Whatcom County from Portland, Ore. He grew up in two households after his parents divorced.

Early on, he found more satisfaction drawing pictures and writing short stories - "I created a lot of myths about other planets and alien beings" - than in doing his schoolwork or socializing with classmates. He credits a fifth-grade teacher with kick-starting him by urging him to make friends and by treating him with respect as she patiently explained the consequences of not doing his homework.

While in middle school and at Squalicum High, Dustin tried his hand at science-fiction novels, but his stream-of-consciousness writing floundered. He finally found his niche after watching poets read aloud at "poetrynight," the Monday evening gatherings in downtown Bellingham.

Until then, he considered poets to be naturalists from an earlier age, not contemporaries with something fresh to say. It dawned on him that the best of his own writing was close to poetry.

He found that people who like and write poetry thought about the same things he thought about. They liked his poetry, too.

"Poetry was a real relief," Dustin said. "I'm not alone."

He thought about becoming a counselor, but decided that would leave too little time and energy for writing. He thought about becoming a dental hygienist, so he would work part-time and write the rest of the time. Instead, he earned a degree in English at Western Washington University.

He also honed the art of reading poetry aloud with pizzazz. He competed twice in the National Poetry Slam, and while a student at Western he placed eighth at the Individual World Poetry Slam in Vancouver, B.C.

Slam poetry is performance poetry, where showmanship wins points along with the poem itself.

"It's been called the democratization of verse," Dustin said. "They're poets who are reading for people, not for professors."

It's rare to find poems that succeed both on the stage and one the page, but Dustin has done it. His poem "My Old Man" (online with this story), wowed me when I came across it in an anthology. Then, at a recent reading at Village Books, he transfixed the audience when he recited it from memory.

Two years ago, Dustin graduated with his master's degree from the University of Houston, where he won a \$10,000 student poetry competition and taught classes, including poetry to children.

He returned to Bellingham in December. Since then, he has taught classes and workshops, read in public and kept busy writing. With money tight for grants, prizes and teaching jobs, he's pondering his options.

"I've got a lot brewing right now," he said.

MORE DETAILS

- "Heavy Lead Birdsong," Ryler Dustin's \$15 book of poems, is available at bookstores and from Write Bloody Publishing.

- Dustin will be an instructor at a teen writer's conference June 23. The inaugural "Write On 2013: Teen Writing Conference," will be 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at Village Books and the Fairhaven Village. Details: WriteOnConference.com.

- For more about poetrynight, the Monday night poetry readings in Bellingham, go to poetrynight.org.

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