

On disrupting your process



Poet and essayist Elisa Gabbert discusses self-plagiarizing, different kinds of boredom, and distrusting what you get used to doing.

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As told to Maddie Crum, 2341 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Writing](#), [Process](#).

Several of the poems in your latest collection, *Normal Distance*, reflect on boredom. Is boredom an important aspect of your own writing process?

Something I have been thinking about a lot recently is the absence of boredom in my life. It used to be this specter that I feared so much, and I would avoid certain experiences entirely because I was so terrified of deep, prolonged boredom. You know how people always say, "Oh, kids these days with their devices. They don't know what it's like to be bored anymore." I wouldn't agree with that because when I'm alone with my thoughts, even lying in bed alone at night, or on a walk, I don't get bored because that is when I have time and space to think. I love that. Boredom is more like oppression, where external stimuli is preventing me from thinking my own thoughts or making my own thoughts worse and more boring to myself.

Since the pandemic started, I really feel like I've never been bored. I don't know if that's partly just being too anxious to feel boredom or if it's that I haven't had an obligation in my life anymore the way I used to. Maybe that's a positive aspect of the pandemic: I don't experience boredom anymore. In the past, absolutely. It was one of those fringe, outlier experiences where you feel trapped and your mind starts to break a little bit. It's almost a form of suffering, almost. But obviously, the most harmless kind of suffering.

I like what you wrote about not trusting books that aren't a little boring. I'm curious whether you have any favorite books or writers who you consider boring.

W. G. Sebald is the perfect example of a writer who's almost too boring to read, but so brilliant and wonderful. I just find that you have to concentrate twice as much when you're reading Sebald as you do other writers and it's worth it, but he's really trying the mind's patience.

I do like books every now and then that aren't at all boring. I always think of *How Should a Person Be*. It's just like eating a bag of gummy candy. It's intellectual, but it's almost too delicious, and it's hard to stop yourself. When I read books that fast, I don't remember them because I haven't spent enough time with them to have a real experience. A boring book that you have to read really slowly becomes more a part of your existence in a way.

It's closer to the pace of life.

Yes. I love when you can picture the scene from a novel, the way you pictured it when you read it. And it feels like a memory of something you actually experienced.

And that does feel like it has something to do with pacing, with dwelling in boring moments. So, some of your poems feel very aphoristic. One of my favorite aphoristic lines was, "not suffering is a kind of suffering." Do

you feel generally drawn to aphorisms and koans?

So much. I love aphorism. I think poems and essays that don't ever go into the aphoristic mode suffer for that. What I love about them is they're usually generalized to the point that they can't possibly be true. That's a level of provocation that I really enjoy in literature because you can't really do it in real life. If you try to do that in a conversation, people will argue with you. If you try to do that on Twitter, people will quibble you to death. There's this temptation to qualify everything and say, "Well, this is how it seems to me," or, "I can't prove it." When you can just come right out and say something general that couldn't possibly be true 100 percent of the time, it's so powerful.

Do you have a favorite aphorism or koan, your own or someone else's?

I'll think about that. I have a really hard time with favorites. The older I get, the more it seems impossible to choose a favorite anything. Like, "Favorite book? Nope. Way too hard. Favorite food? Nope. Impossible."

You could come up with a good aphorism about not having favorites.

Yes. I should try to write a poem about favorites.

You mentioned you like aphoristic essays, and you write essays in addition to poetry. Do you know right away when an idea is a poem versus an essay?

I do. I tend to approach essays subject-wise, topic-wise, theme-wise. I think, "Oh, I want to spend time researching and thinking about this topic for a couple of months and see what happens." It has to be big in that way. Poems for me start much smaller in scale, a line or even a word or sometimes an image. It's something tiny.

What is your revision process like?

I'll revise a poem if I'm not happy with it, just to get it to a point where I'm like, "Well, I guess this will do." But I always feel like the best poems come out almost exactly right the first time. The kinds of poems that I do more slowly and revise more, they never feel completely finished. I actually feel the same about essays. I really like to write essays all at once. Then I'm only really making small edits from there. I'll just think about them for so long that I feel like, "Okay, now I know exactly how to write this".

Even the poems in *Normal Distance* of yours that I feel have an essayistic quality, also have this searching or conversational quality. I noticed you often use phrases like, "I wonder," and, "I guess." Do you deliberately leave space for uncertainty in your work?

Uncertainty is so important to me. I'm very suspicious of people who seem certain. I'm very suspicious of consensus. I don't want to sound like an anti-vaxxer or something like that. There are just certain forms of consensus where it seems like people say, "Oh, why are we still doing this discourse? Didn't we already solve this?" And, no. Real problems aren't solvable. You have to keep being in the problem forever.

You wrote in a piece for *The New York Times*, "the poetic is not merely beauty in language, but beauty in incoherence, in resistance to common sense." I was curious—and this is another question about having a favorite—about whether you have a favorite source or well of nonsense?

It's maybe a bit of an obvious answer, but John Ashbery is so great. It's this trickster syntax that he uses, where it seems superficially very sensical. It's these very clean sentences and they form these clean paragraphs. The jumps are so sly; it's this moving walkway. It's just very much like how in a dream, everything makes sense, but then when you think about it, when you're awake, you realize it doesn't make sense at all. It's a good reminder of what's possible. I've written about this before too, but the next line, the next word could always be anything. Sometimes we forget that when we're writing, we feel really stuck and there are very few options. He's really great for getting back into that place where you realize how free you are.

I want to ask about your relationship to social media, to Twitter in particular. Do you feel like your use of the platform or just the existence of the platform influences your writing

This book in particular, *Normal Distance*, is more intertwined with my Tweets than anything I've ever written. It basically came about when I was doing readings for my last poetry book. This was in 2016 and I wanted some new work to read, so it would seem fresher and more interesting to me personally, because I was so sick of the other book. By the time a book comes out, you're totally sick of it. I wanted some newer work and also some funnier, sillier work because that book, *L'Heure Bleue*, is kind of dark and sad. It's nice when you're giving readings to hear the audience laugh. Otherwise, it feels very lonely up there.

What I did, just as a fun exercise, actually-I wasn't even thinking of them as poems at all-was just read some of my tweets. I would read a bunch of Tweets that had the word "love" in them or the word "hate" in them. I arranged them a little bit, just lightly so that there was a funny flow to them. I wasn't thinking of publishing them at all. And I just started doing that more. What I would do is I would just use a Tweet, or a few Tweets, as a starting place and then try to write more lines that had that same aphoristic but conversational tone.

This collection draws from all over, from Reddit and Baudelaire. To what extent do these poems feel like collages?

Some more than others, the ones that have more sourced material. When I say sourced, some of it is from Wikipedia articles or whatever. I love Wikipedia. I always have one or two Wikipedia tabs open. Or sourced from my own past material. People who think self-plagiarism is a real thing, they might get upset. I definitely pulled from both my social media and just my other writing often to get to the next step or to fill a space in the tessellation.

The self-plagiarism question is interesting.

To me, it's more like a Warhol-type engagement where it's repetition and I'm borrowing and building on a thought that I already had that I'm still thinking about or find worthwhile in one way or another. I do wonder if people are going to think, "That sounds familiar," and Google it and find that, "Oh yeah, I Tweeted that in 2014," or whatever.

I found a lot of these poems really funny. What's your relationship to humor in your reading and writing life? Is it something you consciously seek out?

I love funny poetry. It's something that I miss, because trends change. We're in a period where poetry is less funny than it was when I was in grad school in 2004, 2005. That was just a little bit more of an irreverent period in poetry. It imprinted on me really early when I was a kid, that poems should be absurd. I like poems that are both funny and sad. Or both funny and a little scary, even.

It feels like humor is a way to resist certainty, like you were saying earlier. Or if not certainty, then consensus or a strident tone.

I agree. I don't feel like it's in opposition at all to seriousness or political engagement. [June Jordan](#) is super funny and couldn't be more political in her subject matter. [Wanda Coleman](#) is very political but also very funny.

How do you know when a project is finished?

With something short, like a poem or an essay, there's this very specific feeling of, "Oh, I didn't know I was going to do that." I have to reach a move or some new combination or step past the ideas that I thought I was going to be writing about. If I don't get there, it doesn't feel done.

For book-length projects, I have no idea. I think it's just getting sick of them. The scale of a book, I can never make it feel perfect, it always feels like I could keep changing small things forever, but there's going to be some element of the book that I dislike and that doesn't feel quite right. You know when you build a piece of furniture and it's just a little bit janky and you just can't get it any better than that? I feel like a book is a

slightly janky piece of furniture, always.

What's one writing habit that you always have to fight against, and how do you do it?

I guess there's a tendency for any writer, once you've gotten really good at something, to just keep doing it. I guess it's that: trying not to do things that make me realize, "Oh, that's one of my little signature moves. That's one of those things that I always do." I guess that's a version of killing your darlings. Part of the way that I try to work around that is by setting out to approach a piece of writing with a new form. It can be as simple as one of the essays that I wrote in this past year. I just decided, "I want to write a really long essay, but with no section breaks at all." I had read this Donald Antrim book that had no section breaks or chapters or anything like that. It was just paragraph, paragraph, paragraph until he was done and he would change the subject, sometimes radically. That was the next paragraph. There were never any breaks. I was like, "Oh my god, in a way that's so radical".

People say, "Trust the process," but you can start to trust the process too much. You know what I mean? I was trying to disrupt the process so that I didn't trust it anymore so I could have that feeling of, "I don't know if this is going to work out. I'm winging it." I had gotten too used to thinking, "I know this is going to work out because I've done it 10 times and it always worked out."

I like that a lot. It feels like it could be turned into an aphorism-

Distrust the process.

Elisa Gabbert Recommends:

"Taking a Walk with You" by Kenneth Koch

Poets in Their Youth by Eileen Simpson

The Paris Review Interviews

Journey by Moonlight by Antal Szerb

Semikolon sticky page markers

Getting a little bit drunk and listening to music alone

Name

Elisa Gabbert

Vocation

writer

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