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As told to Lauren Spear, 2886 words.

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# On finding the shape of what you want to say

Poet Emily Zuberec discusses how her environment influences her work and why it matters to tell your story.  
**Can we start with an introduction? I want to know a bit about your background in writing.**

I'm living in Montreal, Quebec. I'm originally from Vancouver, a place that I think about all the time. Even though I'm not there, it filters into my writing constantly. It's funny because the fact that I ended up in Montreal is random and the fact that I started writing is also random. But I guess I've always liked a story. I often think, "In what ways do we need to create narrative to make it through certain phases of our lives? Or to fully enjoy it?" I think this impulse to narrativize is not just out of a necessity, but also out of pleasure, that we can revisit positive experiences.

I did school for writing twice. Both times I felt slightly let down, in some ways. But I was also really inspired by having a concrete community of other writers. Because so many creative practices are materially and mentally so private, as soon as you end up in a room with other writers you're like, "Whoa, this is happening everywhere in the city. People are working away so diligently and thinking such radical, interesting thoughts." That's my favorite part about going to school for art, that practices are made visible and generously shared.

**In school, you go through class critiques where your classmates dissect each other's work. How important is criticism to you in that context? How important is it to you in the professional realm?**

I don't write professionally. My day job isn't editing or writing or doing copy so it's still this private habit that exists in a pre-critical realm I've developed for myself. In regards to criticism, I would say it's so valuable when someone actually takes the time to see who you are and why you've chosen to arrive with a certain idea, right now, at this point in time. But then it's also refreshing when someone's like, "I don't actually get this."

In my poetry, the main focus is on the unit of the image. I work a lot in images in my poetry. Images are fascinating to me because of their mechanics and how they ultimately function as an outwardly-pointing reference. Often, a poetic image makes sense to the writer only because they've carried around the words, or the feeling attached to the words, for so long. Often they're personal or political concerns that I've thought about as I walk around, and then these intuitive associations solidify and metabolize together. So when someone is like, "Um, I don't get what this crazy image of a puddle that smells like blood is about." I'm like, "True, because you weren't there when I was walking around feeling broke," or something. I think that's what makes poetry so beautiful. To read something that's personal where you're like, "Okay, that's your economy of sense and meaning."

**In your writing, I often see this theme of the city coming up. In your thesis, you write, "As a subject of adoration, the city infrequently returns the affection." Can you talk about this idea?**

I love the city. I miss Vancouver, but I don't think there's any debate that it's impossible to live there. In many ways it's inhospitable and everything is aestheticized and so tightly packaged. What many of us are looking for in a city is space to experiment and to be creative in an un-curated way—creative in a liberated way. Whereas the trajectory of virtually all major cities is that inhabitants must be committed and financially certain about everything. When we can share space without the stakes of crushing bureaucracy, eviction, and no unplanned-land we share it in such different ways. I'm drawn to the city because I feel like I personally need the plurality and randomness, but it often feels like the city doesn't need us. Like within a larger operation or architecture of planning and municipal government, it

feels like the city doesn't need us a lot of the time.

I feel it when I'm taking the bus or waiting in line. Though there is some sort of glory in that, I also feel I'm shrinking in some ways. I just think that there's so much to write about as the Romantics did when they looked at the city and were like, "What's going on there?" They had to extract themselves from it. If we think of the city as an architecture, to then think about the natural environment as another kind of architecture has been generative for me.

**One of my favorite parts of your writing is seeing this dance between your internal and external world. You are so good at honoring little moments of your day and putting them into writing. Can you speak about this?**

A commitment of mine is to how emotions and our embodied experiences of moving the world can be treated as a necessary, imminent knowledge. I want to say "What I'm feeling, it's quantitative, it's fact." And then in reverse, how scientific, larger systems or mechanisms or infrastructures can be treated as emotionally necessary, participating in qualitative systems of knowledge.

Both my parents are engineers and I've always been curious about math and science, but from more of a conceptual perspective. Experimental math in particular, at a certain point, evolves into philosophy, verging on poetry—if we think about poetry as comprising units in negotiation with each other. But that's one system of making sense of the world. For example, I'm fascinated by the drive to understand the Big Bang. Because for me, in my daily life, I know where I came from, it's a palpable undercurrent of how I move through the world. So then a collision occurs between these larger systems making sense of collective origins, and the substantial, robust narratives we have for explaining our lives to ourselves.

**That's really beautiful.**

Right! Because particle science and particle physics doesn't affect my daily life, but it's cool when I force it to. It's also cool if we say our emotions, or our narratives or our affective response to the world, can be treated as fact—only if it's not harming other people, of course. It's important to remember that we matter. We as little people really matter.

**We do matter. Our little stories!**

I think if space is made for us in these cities to matter individually and express our divergent stories that would change a lot.

**Something I often think about is how the hyper personal can become universal. I find the more detailed a book or a song or a poem is, the more I feel I understand it. Do you feel this?**

Totally. I think as soon as we want to be general and encompass everyone, it's hard to find resonance in the same way. People want to know, "Why am I listening to you? Who are you? What do you have to say?" Not in a skeptical way, but in an open way. In writing, you're prompted to cultivate a voice which then defines your work. It's this weird blending of modes. There's language, there's tone, and then there's actual sound in rhyme and repetition and lineation, all encompassed into a singular voice. I think it's important to be like, "How do I say what I say?"

**What is your relationship to your voice like when you're giving readings? Do your words change when you speak them?**

There are people that are always checking the meter of their lines, but I don't do that—I wish I did! Every time I have to read, I'm like, "Oh shit, this sounds bad out loud." When I start practicing for a reading, I'm changing words immediately. I'm always changing words. I used to read off paper because I'm a nerd, but I'd make so many notes and I couldn't even see what I was reading anymore. So now I have to just read off my phone so I can edit it on the go at the event.

I wouldn't say I'm naturally someone who gravitates towards reading, but I'm liking it more and more because of how close it brings me to my own work. People who are good readers are just so amazing to watch. They honestly are hypnotizing. I love that feeling where you're not necessarily following word for word, but you're getting this textured air coming towards you. Being soothed or stimulated.

**The last reading that I saw you do, you read a poem that starts with the line, "And so what if?" I was immediately hooked and it got me thinking: Do you think all lines are created equal?**

No, I don't think that all lines are not created equal. I spend a lot of time on opening and ending lines. I think there's two modes with ending lines in particular. When ending a poem, I think "Are we wrapping it up or are we sending the reader elsewhere?" Both work for different kinds of poems. I'm trying to learn how to send it elsewhere and send it outside the poem instead of folding back into what I've just said. I find that often when I start a poem, the first line ends up being something that was way further down and I have to bring it up to the beginning. It's funny how hard it is to get around to say what you want to say.

**You end one of your poems with, "May you build an opening and allow yourself to pass." One of my favorite lines. I feel like that is an example of "sending it out." Can you talk a bit about that line?**

I also love that line. I mean, spoiler, I wrote that during the worst four months where I was super

stressed out all the time. I was thinking, "There must be a way to let ourselves pass through things and time ourselves." Not in an individualized way, but more so picturing how I could orchestrate the passing through of a moment for myself with my relationship to language and relationship to myself. I really was picturing an archway. Something I could build and clearly see.

You put all this work in and then suddenly an opening appears for you to move on to the next part of your life or move on to this next project or move out of an apartment that hasn't been serving you, or whatever. It's that daily labor, or the daily creative labor, just reminding yourself that you're doing the right thing. It forms your escape into the next moment. Even though in the moment it doesn't feel like you're getting anywhere. I think it's the repetition.

Right now, I'm obsessed with repetition and symmetry and how we're constantly repeating the action of building, and how rarely we encounter something that is perfectly symmetrical. Repetition will never be the same because the moment's passed or the voice has changed slightly. And that's my new kind of obsession with the city and with writing. Which again, kind of came from that line.

**Can you build an opening for yourself through writing?**

A hundred percent. If I didn't write I don't really know who I would be. For sure it's needed. I think it's highly radical and political to spend your time doing this thing that amounts to pure text. In the same way that you sing a song and it doesn't get recorded, it still was sung. Where does it go? Maybe nowhere, but that is what is beautiful. In writing I have made space for myself to think. It takes a practice having some sort of practice, to make space to think it through. For me, writing is the best tool for processing and distancing. I extract things from my body so I don't have to hold onto them in the same way.

**Does your writing ever reveal hidden things that you weren't expecting?**

Totally, it's like you're speaking to yourself in tongues. In the moment you're like, "Ew, what am I going on about?" and then like, "Oh no, I wasn't blabbering. I actually needed to communicate something." I can think of a poem called "LHC" from my thesis that was about two things at once, but initially I was so lost as to what I was trying to say. It was about particle physics while also about a relationship that I didn't understand. Both the subjects evaded me so I brought them together, subconsciously. It's so interesting because now both of them, I can understand better.

**Can you talk a bit about *Commo*, your magazine? When you're reading people's submissions for it, what are you looking for in their writing?**

People having fun and doing something for themselves. With *Commo*, there's no genre separation. I'm like, if it's with text, do it. I'm so attracted to hybridity and other interdisciplinary modes. I like to see people pushing what they can come up with. It provokes the question: "What form do you need to say what you need to say?"

**What are you looking for in your own writing?**

A piece that is working towards the interconnection I feel in daily life. I've been thinking about all that I don't feel separate from. How can I possibly be separate from the tree that hangs in front of my window as I write when I've looked at it all day? That becomes part of my writing. In the same way, I don't feel separate from most things. We can let ourselves be stimulated by everything and I just want to express the power in interconnection and make space for either meditation or a moment of reflection. And that feeling of dependency, interdependency, and interconnection.

**What does your writing space look like?**

I have this huge desk that I'm obsessed with. It was so heavy to get into the apartment and I love it. I have my Baba's little doll in traditional Slovak clothes. It's so cute. I have a calendar that my coworker's mom made, which is great for knowing where I am. When I'm like, "What day is it? What's due when?" And then I have my aspirational list of things to work towards that I just write on paper and tape to the wall.

**Whats on it?**

There's a lot right now. I want to make a pamphlet zine with my partner Terrance. I want to get better at InDesign. There's magazines to submit to, things to submit to. There's a lot of submission deadlines or application deadlines. I live on a busy street, which has really affected my writing this year and the way that I'm thinking about sound architectures in the city. There's this huge tree outside my window and it feels like this weird collision of two experiences being under the foliage with crazy traffic going by. When I sit down to write a poem, I find I don't write for a long time. My sessions are kind of like bursts.

**Do you collect words and ideas as you go?**

I've got scraps everywhere. The beginning is usually the transcription of all the bits that I've written down. They're in my phone, in my journal, on my notepad that's on my desk. In email and other correspondence, too. Sometimes I'm like, "Oh, that's actually what I meant to say or I've been trying to think about."

My process includes transcribing, collecting all those little crumbs, and then a lot of moving stuff around. I would say in my writing, I'm working towards an idea or experience as opposed to a clear story. So for me, each poem is trying to elicit the same experience or the same feeling.

**Do you feel like your work is all in conversation with each other? Or continuous?**

For sure, except for some really old stuff where I was trying irony. I'm just not ironic. Honestly, my partner will use irony with me and I'm like, "I don't get." I get confused, I'm so literal a lot of the time that I just get lost. So yeah, I think now it's pretty much all on conversations with each other. Because how could it not be? It's me, right?

**Literally. It's your life You're adding to it.**

That's it. It's not going to stop happening. It makes so much sense to me to feel compelled to work through ideas, or work towards ideas, for so long.

**Do you have any closing remarks?**

Give poetry a chance. You're all scared, you don't have to be. You don't have to understand it, just let it be. The poet already did the thinking. You get to enjoy it, enjoy what you hear. I listen to so many songs with lyrics that I don't understand or can't fully hear, but I still love the sound and I listen anyway.

Emily Zuberec recommends:

Double Trio by Nathaniel Mackey. Read it twice, read it three times.

The Last Samurai by Helen DeWitt.

The poetry of Bhanu Kapil.

The poetry of Lisa Robertson.

Walking as much as you can, everyday.

Name

Emily Zuberec

Vocation

poet


Fact


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Emily Zuberec

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1