On challenging your own proces

Poet Matthew Rohrer on continuously shaking up your creative process, the funny business of organizing a collection of poems, and why everyday language—and a healthy sense of humor—are valid sources for poetry.

January 23, 2019 -

As told to Willis Plummer, 3109 words.

Tags: Poetry, Process, Inspiration, First attempts, Education.

In college, I talked to you about how long poems are really hard for me, and you said that your solution to that has always been to find the exit and end the poem.

Totally—after line two I'm looking for the way out.

So to write *The Others*, where the entire book is one poem, seemed really out of character for you. What was your approach to changing up your style so dramatically, and what drew you to the longer format?

I definitely lean towards a short poem and trying to figure out how to end it as quickly as possible, but I also always want to do a different thing. I don't want to keep writing the same poem—I think that's the why. I was wondering what would happen if I tried to write a long poem, and I'd been reading a lot of the classic Romantic poets, and back in England in the early 1800s, that was what you did—you wrote these 50-page poems. There would be narrative poems like Keats and long Shelley poems. I just thought, "What if you could do that in the modern day?"

But originally it wasn't going to be that long. It was going to be one scene that ended up right in the middle. It was just the idea of having a super boring work poem and then to have the character escape that by reading a book so then that would turn into an imaginative poem. I was interested, too, in the fact that everybody works all the time, but no one really writes about work because it's boring. I thought, "What if you wrote a really in-depth poem about work and how boring and terrible it was?"

So I think that was originally it, like, "Yes, I'm going to force myself to write something long," but what I thought was long then was going to be like 10, 20 pages, and it was going to be this dissociation between the boredom of work and a flight into fantasy. Then it was kind of fun and I realized that I had all these old ideas in notebooks for novels that I knew I was never going to write, so I starting thinking that I could just add them on. That's how it grew into this thing that is… like 240 pages long. It wasn't going to be that long originally.

It was exciting to do that. I'm always telling my students not to be so precious about writing—you have to be able to write a poem on the train, you have to be able to write a poem when your kid takes a nap, you have to be able to write a poem when you're on hold—and I still do that all the time. I'll write a poem walking down the street, but I just wanted to try something different; to see what would happen if I forced myself to inhabit a space for longer.

Did you make changes to your process for this book? Did you spend more time at the computer sitting and thinking about what you were going to say?

First of all, I never write on the computer—I always write by hand, and I also almost never know what I'm going to write before I sit down. For this book, that was maybe the big difference. I guess I think of writing like improvisation; I'll start writing something and see where it goes. Often that means that I'll end up having to get rid of the first half of what I've written. I mean, there is the occasional poem where I'm like, "Okay, I saw this thing and I want to write about it," but I usually don't know where it's going to end up.

The original core of the poem that I told you about was going to be just like these two counterpoint things that happen in the middle of the day, and then eventually I realized, "Duh—it should be a day-long thing." So as I started to work out from the middle, I realized I had a plan—I had to start in the morning and then get this guy home and into bed, so then I did have more of a sense of what I was going to do.

Almost every line in the book is seven syllables. Did you find that having a formal constraint was helpful?

Yeah, because otherwise it was just going to be a novel, and I didn't want to write a novel. I needed the form, because as you've seen, part of it has dialogue. It's straight up boring. It's like a novel, and I wanted there to be some tension between that, so I think that's where the idea of, "Okay, I'm going to have characters, they're going to talk, there's going to be dialogue in quotation marks, it's going to be totally a novel," but… How is it not going to be a novel? I think that was why I decided to counterbalance that with this ridiculously tight formal constraint.

Why were you so against writing a novel?

Well, the short answer is once I tried to write some prose and my friend who's a prose writer told me it didn't sound like me. He was like, "That's just not you." And I started to think about it and I realized that he was right. Maybe there are modes where a person fully opens into their voice and into their self, and other modes where they're constrained in some way.

I think for whatever reason, in poetry I can pretty much say what I want and control the tone in the way that I want. And though I think I'm a good sentence writer, in prose I just wasn't. This is an old friend. His name is Todd Hasak-Lowy. He's a great writer. He's written novels and books for kids, and he was just like, "I know you and this doesn't sound like you," so I think part of it is just that I thought I'm not a novelist, but also I think another part of it was back to that idea of the Romantic poets.

When Lord Byron was writing *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* or *The Corsair*, these really long texts, people read those like novels. People would go out and buy them, sit down, and read them as novels. They were adventure stories. They just happened to have rhyme and meter. People read it in the same way that they would now read a Stephen King book, so I thought, can we do that today? Can we write a "poem" that is also digestible as an adventure story?

A lot of people talk about not being afraid to fail as a key element of any creative endeavor, that eventually it will click. It's really cool that beyond having abandoned projects, you were able to revive them. I've always worried that those failures can get lost and dispersed across computers.

Yeah, I have notebooks, but the problem is that after a couple years they go into boxes in the closet where I have sleds and Halloween costumes and then it gets harder to dig them up. Then I really have to know what I'm looking for and go dig through the closet, but for several years, they're just in a drawer and I can go back to them. I'm not saying that that's a purer or a better way to write, but I have trouble composing online, and then I wonder what happens to the old handwritten drafts. I'm tempted to keep a clean hard drive—to just delete and delete and have the newest cleanest thing, and then I think you'd lose those old versions, so I just have a waste of paper everywhere with all those versions.

When you're collecting poems for a more standard poetry collection, do you generally know what you're looking for in the notebooks? What's that process like?

No, I don't—I mean, I can tell you what happened with the last two, *Surrounded by Friends* and *Destroyer and Preserver*. *Destroyer and Preserver* was easier—I had all the poems that I thought were in play, and I was looking through them, trying to order them, thinking you know you want some of the best ones first and some of the best ones at the end

Like a record.

Yeah, exactly. And we miss that. The first song of side two of an LP was always… That's where "Every Breath You Take" appeared. That's the sweet spot to be, so thinking about the rising and falling shape of the book, but I didn't know how to put it together exactly. I was thinking, "Why am I drawn to these poems?" Because I had literally 580 poems—and I remember this number because it was shocking to me—and I got it down to 80 poems, so I really had to ask myself, like, why these? That's a lot of poems to throw away. Why these 80?

And as I was looking through them, I was realizing, "Oh, there is a weird theme to these. They're all about things that are both good for you and bad for you." Lots of stuff about being a parent—being a parent is great, but it also sucks. There was a lot of stuff about alcohol. You know, it's a destroyer and it's a preserver, literally. Alcohol is what led me to realize, like, "Right, *Destroyer and Preserver*." Almost all of the poems had that kind of two-faced thing to them, so that's how I got to that, and once I had that title, I was like, "Right." Because the working title for that manuscript, which I may use some day, was *Army of Giants*, which I just thought was great, but ultimately, that wasn't what was binding it together—I just liked the title *Army of Giants*. So once I had figured out that the poems were about that two-sided thing, the poems just sort of bound themselves together.

When teaching at a big institution like NYU and also writing personal poems, is there ever anxiety that your work and your job will come into conflict even though you're paid to be a poet? Some of your work talks about smoking pot, for example

Not that I think about. I mean, I really don't think—I hope I don't think that way. I wouldn't want to stop saying something because I have bosses. The honest truth is I don't think anyone is looking. That's the thing with poetry—you have all this freedom because no one gives a shit. The deans and the provosts aren't reading to see if I'm a suitable employee. My boss is, but only because she likes me and likes my books. And she also probably has stuff in her books that the provosts wouldn't approve of. I guess these days, you could end up saying something politically that would anger someone, but I think that people are only scouring social media for that. Like, you can get fired for a tweet, but since I don't do that—I don't think anyone's concerned about my poems. You could also argue in a court of literary law that it's just a poem—it's the *speaker*, it's not *me*. That's what you do when you're growing up and your parents read a poem about smoking weed. You're like, "Mom, it's not me—it's the 'I' of the poem. It's like a persona poem, mom. Come on, don't worry."

I wasn't sure if you'd want to talk about this or not, but one piece of advice you gave me while I was in college was to try writing stoned.

Well, I guess I might have said that. I certainly do that. If I can redeem myself a little, what I really strongly believe in is doing anything you can to write differently from what you're normally going to write, because I think we all sit down and basically end up writing the same poem over and over if you're not careful. Because you get good at a certain thing. I definitely have a type of poem that I could write right now while the tape is running. I could write it. It would be fine, but I don't want to do that.

I'm always looking for ways to get away from that. The class I'm going to teach in an hour is all about that—it's called The Generative Project Workshop. It's about looking at these fairly extreme ways—like using form to force you to write in a way that you wouldn't have normally written. Take Jon Woodward's *Rain*—I think that what's so great about that book is the formal constraints (no punctuation and having to write five words per line and exactly 15 lines). It's not much of a constraint, but it does force you to write differently than you would otherwise.

I'm also always looking for something that will make me write a poem I wouldn't have written that day normally,

so drugs is a great way to do it. I think another thing is writing fast and not looking back. Only looking back in like a month—I think that's really useful. I guess my question is: Did you try it? Did it work?

Oh, yeah, totally. I guess that was the takeaway for me. It was a combination of writing by hand, writing in a notebook, and then later picking it up to transcribe and being surprised not to remember writing those poems. It's a cool feeling, and that distance lets you be more objective with the editing. You can cut stuff more.

If you can get some distance from it and truly achieve that feeling of, "I don't remember writing this," then you can approach it like it's anyone's poem. Then it's so much easier to edit, because you're like, "What does this line mean?," and you don't have an attachment to it.

There's this great little book by Ron Padgett called *Poems I guess I wrote*, and it's so great because that's exactly the idea behind it. He's just looking back at notebooks from the early '60s to the 2000s like, "I truly don't remember writing this," so he compiled that feeling of poems into this tiny little book, and it's totally fun and some of them are actually some of his really great poems, but they just weren't part of a project, they weren't part of his thing, they never made it out of the notebook. He'd just totally forgotten about them.

A thing you've always been defensive of is being funny in poetry.

I think my thing about being funny in poems is just that it seems like that's one of the things that a whole coterie of people have decided is gauche. And why? Why that? Why is that tonal register in a poem tacky or gauche whereas pathos or self-aggrandizement is not? There's room for all of it.

It's not like my poems are a laugh riot—but there are moments in them that are funny. I've been thinking about humor, like the way you go home and talk to your friends, or even someone in the store. Pretty much every encounter you have with a human involves a little bit of humor. It's how we connect. It doesn't have to be you tell them a joke, but there's always something—even when you go to the post office, you know, and they're like, "Hot one out there," and you say some sort of slightly humorous thing back.

You don't get together with your friends and instantly start talking about Kafka and Derrida. The way you make connections is with a tiny bit of humor. It's so ubiquitous, so why would you *not* put that in your poems? I get a little weirded out when you read someone's work and it never, ever, ever deals with that. Then you know they're suppressing it, because of course they're funny with their friends, or they use humor to bridge social gaps, they use humor to connect with loved ones, or with strangers even.

Do you think of poetry and conversation as the same almost?

I think they can be. Basho is famous for working on his haiku and then slipping them into conversations with his friends. If anyone knew it was a haiku then he had to go back and keep working on it, but if he could say a haiku that he was working on and his friends were like, "Yeah man, you're right," then he was like, "Got it. I nailed it." And I think that's a thing that people have been trying to do for a long time: to try to write poems in a demotic voice that can be shared between people.

It's not the only way—and I don't always want to write that way—but I think it's valid. There's this great Lew Welch essay called "Language is Speech" where he's making basically the same point. It all comes from speech. It's not like humans appeared on earth and there were these books and we read them and from there we intuited speaking. It's the other way around—books come from speech, so why not make that field of play in your writing?

My friends who are writing novels—when I finally see their drafts, I realize that they've told me all these stories before, almost like they've been practicing the book on me forever.

It's kind of fun, right? The novels by the people you don't know, that's probably what they were doing, too.

These five things relate to the world of *The Others*:

The Great Beast: The Life and Magick of Aleister Crowley by John Symonds

The Catacombs of Paris. Abandon hope all ye who are claustrophobic

Gilles de Rays, who was a mass-murderer of children for black magic purposes, fought alongside Joan of Arc. I'm sure they got along fine.

LORCA: A Dream of Life by Leslie Stainton, was the inspiration for the landscape, and perhaps the homosexuality, of the section of *The Others* called THEY ALL SEEMED ASLEEP

The dream recounted at the end of *The Others* is actually a true story—children in Michigan spoke of a boogie-man figure called Black Leather. There were eerie similarities in the Leather Man and other supernatural tales in other parts of the world. How do kids find out about this stuff?

Name
Matthew Rohrer

Vocation
Poet