Prageeta Sharma on writing through grief

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As told to Thora Siemsen, 2454 words.

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Do factors in your life compete with your ability to be a poet, or are you always a poet?

I believe I'm always a poet. I believe poetry has functioned as a filter of seeing the world, the way it allows me to understand my brain and my thinking patterns. I do like to think about being a poet all the time, because I think it's a liberating feeling to think that I have a filter that allows me, through language, to see the world in a certain way.

Do you write every day?

I wish I did. Two years ago, I was keeping a dream diary of every time my late husband, Dale, appeared in a dream. I would write it down. That is something that I did, but then I took the book and put it in a safety deposit box. I think I made it mysterious for myself, and I made it inaccessible, so that I can actually mark time. After Dale died, I couldn't remember our marriage at all for three months. People say that's common, that you don't remember anything when you're in shock. I wanted to leave it in its own space. I think I have a little chapbook out of that. I wanted some time to pass, so that I had some distance from what that looked like.

Right now, I'm in a different stage of healing. I don't know the person I was two years ago. I do and I don't. I miss the protection of my feelings I had then. Now I've got the old bad habits back. That's really the truth of it. You know you're getting better when your bad habits are back. All my anxiety is back and maybe my judgment is back. I realize that I have the luxury of having a full range of responses to things the way I did four years ago. I think about poems. They really do mark our significant periods.

Where in your space do you find yourself writing the most often?

I'm getting out of my space, because this house has been really hard. Dale was dying in it, and I can't write in here anymore. He bought me a desk a week before he lost consciousness. He had his daughter buy me a desk and he said, "If I'm not going to be here, you need the proper writing desk to write." I have this desk, and I can't write at it yet, but I'm moving into the new space and it's going to be where I write. It's heartbreaking that he was trying to look out for me and my writing.

Where does writing new poems factor into your daily routine?

I think that in the past I was trying to look at what in literary tradition allowed me to feel liberated or free. But in the last three years I've just been working through ideas of grieving. I am writing through ideas of grief and trauma and exploring how the obvious cliché that life is for the living has really been depressing and yet important. Poetry has allowed me to go deeper into thinking about what it means to grieve, and love, and to make difficult choices that are about will.

Poetry can will certain senses into my daily life. I'm trying to will ideas of my noble self. At any age we can experience a lot of death, but I think you start to lose your mentors and you start to lose your loved ones. That can happen to people at any age, but it's just been a little shocking to me lately. I've just been examining what it means to have poetry document our ideas of ourselves and how that shifts. If you don't work through documenting that moment, you may lose it. You lose something precious about a self that you understand in a moment.

Non-writers would say things to me, particularly in support groups with widows and other grievers, like, "When you're raw, you can only be around people who understand your rawness around trauma." I didn't understand that. I didn't understand that there are expiration dates around what people can tolerate, about what you are doing or what you are going through. Poetry seems to be a mediated space where people accept the content. It's a fair place for the content that is both raw or explored. Whereas in your quotidian life you have to prove you're at certain stages of wellness. The poem is a timeless place where you can go into the spaces that you may not be able to socially or emotionally.

What have been some of the responses to your poems which deal explicitly with grief?

People are really supportive. I'm grateful to have a community. When there's a love poem, there's relief that I'm okay, which I think is really interesting. You have to account for your well-being in your poems. For so many of us, there are traumas as well as really hopeful spaces that the poem allows you to think through. The new poems have more prose and more expository angles than I've ever done before.

What are some other ways that you grapple with the institution of poetry as an educator?

I think it is this idea that craft is a way to gatekeep. We were talking about Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*. It talks about post-war fiction, the MFA program, and the dominant trends of Realism that are the prescriptive model of teaching prose. We're also talking about, in light of all the sexual harassment right now in institutions, the self-love of the professor in teaching. Often times it is this toxic masculinity and self-love that is just reproduced, and taught through, and it has consequences. The problem of craft being muddled in that relationship. Many students from underrepresented groups don't feel included. They feel invisible. They don't get to participate and therefore, when they write a poem that is crafted, they feel fraudulent or like they're performing to conform rather than to get to be in a freeing space. Craft sometimes perpetuates a normative model where the self doesn't get to be in there. We've been talking about that idea of craft.

Did you struggle with the decision to take a teaching position in a place like Montana?

I was here for a year as a visitor and I loved it. It's always different when you visit a place than when you live there. But I came back and directed a program for four years. I started to realize, as a woman of color trying to lead without tenure at that time, I was just going to be annihilated or dismissed. Misogyny, racism and sexual harassment are all the things that happen to a lot of women, a lot of underrepresented groups. You can't have enough authority when you don't have tenure. That's what made it more challenging. Montana is complicated, but it came out of neoliberal sites. That's why I can't quite blame it on Montana always.

When I'm talking about Montana, what I'm not addressing enough of, is that it's not all white. I feel richly connected to a lot of Native American writers and scholars and artists. The legacy of Jim Welch here has taught me so much. I think realigning with place has been really useful for me. I learned a lot about the radicalism of Montana that I would not have learned anywhere else. It has changed me. I don't know if I would have been able to produce so many responses if I didn't have a place that nurtured autonomy.

You're the president and founder of the conference/board *Thinking Its Presence: Race, Creative Writing, and Literary Studies*. How did this project begin for you?

It came out of feeling like the institution really had some problem with its whiteness. Students and faculty and literature would talk about how there are so many writers that you can teach who are not participating in the dominant white male realism. It was hard, and also with poetry. As much as I respect Richard Hugo, and respect The Triggering Town, it seemed like the one formula for the poem. Or if it wasn't this one formula, it might be another formula, which is the lyric witness. I wanted to think about all the other traditions and innovations that were happening in my community, say in New York, or internationally. It's really changed in the last 10 years, but that's what it felt like the first five years. I couldn't quite gauge where I was.

When I went into the classroom, it was really interesting writing, not bad writing because it was different. That was the complaint that I had that I needed to articulate and figure out. I was reading Dorothy Wang's *Thinking Its Presence* and started a conversation with her. I was able to get a pocket of money for diversity and they said, "Well, you can just bring somebody and they can represent diversity." It depressed the hell out of me to think about bringing one person in, and not having a community to understand the significance of the person. It would just be a self-selected club like it always is. That's why I built the conference.

I wanted to infiltrate and to think dynamically about what I admired, specifically around innovations and the avant-garde in the work of people of color and indigenous writers. Also intersectionality and thinking about queerness and class and disability and ableism and how writing was working to honor these spaces and really innovate these spaces. Also scholarship and theory. It wasn't just creative writing. I wanted it to be really cross-disciplinary.

The title of your debut collection, *Bliss To Fill*, comes from an Emily Dickinson line: "Our blank in bliss to fill/ Our blank in scorning." How does writing help you address this blank?

C.D. Wright helped me title that, and we were looking at that poem together. I remember sitting on her sofa in Barrington. I was in my 20s having a lot of feeling, a lot of anxiety, and blankness around feeling. I loved Dickinson's spirit, allowing the nature of strong feelings to almost annihilate you with their blankness; with their deepness; with their strength. Not that I'm not like that now, but I miss that person.

The title of your last collection, *Undergloom*, suggests a chthonic bent, and in it you wrote of "an insoluble dunk my brain has toward the dark." How often do you find yourself working against this dunk?

I think that maybe it's permitting yourself to absorb more dark feelings in order to write through them. It might be more productive than I realize. Not therapeutic productive, but just productive cognitively.

My dad and I have had this rich conversation over the years. He's a mathematician and a cognitive scientist. He really has pioneered the field of dyscalculia, math dyslexia. He would say in his very sort of dad way, "Art really stimulates your neocortex, your reptilian complex, and your limbic mode." I started to think about that idea that we have an intellectual place, an emotional place, and a place of belonging. How does the poem actively build itself around these three spaces so that it almost chemically satisfies you?

You can have a cognitive experience with the poem even symbolically moving through those categories. Sometimes a poem doesn't work, or actually may work. I don't want to say it doesn't work, because I'm against capitalist labor of the poem. But I think that makes a poem maybe more hermetic if it stimulates one of three. Let's say it's over-intellectualized, because of its structuralist angles or points. I started to think about poems that way, like, what do they stimulate in my brain? What words are coded ideas of belonging or speak to a community? Or they have emotional registers that stimulate the limbic mode.

In the notes of your last collection, you cite influences ranging from Wallace Stevens to Peggy McIntosh's work on white privilege. Which influences can you reveal related to your forthcoming book?

Roland Barthes's *Mourning Diary*. I've really been looking at the way in which there are brief notes, and that diary really works through the death of his mother. That need to document the rawness is there. All the range of difficult feelings are captured in that diary in really interesting brevity. I was examining the brevity there.

It's the cheesiest thing ever, but '70s Lite on Pandora. I got really obsessed with how '70s narrative over-explains. The exposition of Bob Welch's "Sentimental Lady". The syntax is so bizarre, "I come so together where you are." That was a line. I found it really healing to listen to 70s Lite. That was the only thing I could listen to.

It was days and days, and months and months, and friends would come over and be forced to listen to Olivia Newton John. It's really soothing. That over-explanation of feelings in '70s narrative was fascinating. Even in the Pina Colada song, which is totally problematic and creepy, is an over-explanation. I just started to become obsessed with this idea that the poem had to over-explain its feelings.

Prageeta Sharma recommends:

Currently working through its pedagogy:

Beast of Burden by Sunaura Taylor

Arbitrary Power by William Keach

Disidentifications by José Esteban Muñoz

For my book:

Mourning Diary by Roland Barthes

Pandora 70s Lite:

Air Supply, America, The Commodores, David Gates, Gladys Knight (Fleetwood Mac, Bob Welch ("Sentimental Lady"), and Olivia Newton John.

But then there's also Magnetic Field's *69 Love Songs* and The 6ths' *Hyacinths and Thistles* ("Give Me Back My Dreams")

That terribly cheesy 1981 song by Marty Balin "Hearts"

By my bed:

Our Aesthetic Categories by Sianne Ngai

Unexplained Presence by Tisa Bryant (rereading this right now to teach.)

recombinant by Ching-In Chen

from unincorporated territory [guma'] by Craig Santos Perez

Mapping Indigenous Presence: North Scandanavian and North American Perspectives - Editors Kathryn Shanley and Bjorg Evjen. With a Foreword by S. James Anaya, U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. University of Arizona, 2015.

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Vocation
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