

On pursuing your own questions

Writer and translator Kate Briggs on slowing down your process, rearranging a project to discover new meaning, and giving yourself permission to pursue your own questions.

August 6, 2024 -

As told to Jancie Creaney, 2949 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Focus](#), [Inspiration](#).

I wanted to start with a sentence from your first book, *This Little Art*. Speaking of translating a sentence or longer work, and the impossibility of practicing for it, you write, "This not knowing, this not knowing ahead of time, ahead of engaging with the actual doing of it, is a source of what? Excitement, I'd call it."

In *This Little Art*, there are instances where you write the words, "Hold on," or "Is that right?" And early in *The Long Form*, your second book, there is this victorious phrase, when the narrator is debating lying down to rest on a mat with her baby: "Actually, I decide."

So I want to ask about slowing down in writing. I wonder, for you, what the effects are of articulating those pauses, those moments of reconsideration? It feels related to the nervous excitement, as a way of hedging or reeling something in.

I've been thinking about this question of excitement, recently, especially nervous excitement. This is because I've started working on new projects, but also on trying to generally approach life with a bit more calm. For myself this feeling of work-to-come, feeling out the possibilities of new work, often makes me want to go fast. I can start feeling urgent about getting to work, finding the shape of a thing—a sort of pressure which risks turning that lovely buzz of excitement into something quite stressful?

Looking back on the process writing *The Long Form* I realize that I inhabited that space of urgent, stressful buzz for really quite a long time—for years, in fact. I wonder if this is just what it feels like to write books? Perhaps excitement is always a bit stressful? Or is there a way of feeling more calmly galvanized? I don't know yet, but I think it must have something to do with pacing, and for me this relates directly to your question, to the way you set excitement, which I associate with speeding up, with the injunction to hold on, to wait for a little bit, and take a moment.

It's true that "I decide" is a kind of refrain that sounds repeatedly through *The Long Form*. And one question I was asking myself in the novel was how far any of us are actually in charge of the ways in which we are paced? By each other? By the rhythms and demands of life? Helen says "I decide," for example—she says this when she's putting her baby down to sleep. But it's clear in that moment that she's not really, fully in charge: the baby also has a strong say in what's happening. Clearly, she can't choose how or where she's being put down, because she's a baby, but on some level she is the one deciding whether or not there will be sleep.

You could say that the most powerful decision-maker in all this is the writer. I can print "Hold on" on a page and in this way try to take charge of the pace of reading—to actively slow the reader down. Though I say that: of course to just have a "Hold on" on the page is actually quite fast to read. Much faster than a dense, thick description! But the broader question is: who decides? Who is pacing the book, the writer or the reader? The

reader or the other demands on their time which might be taking them away from reading? It seems to me that there's always a negotiation, an interesting collaboration, a sort of swapping around of who or what is in charge—I would say the effort of *The Long Form* was to try to write that out, somehow, and make it apparent.

In an interview with Jennifer Hodgson for Fitzcarraldo Editions, you talked about how to carry on once a project is started, how to not ruin it. What's exciting about those moments of reconsideration, of pause, is that they hold the whisper of faltering, almost this brush up against the risk of ruining the thing. I wonder if you discovered that it's not possible to ruin it?

I think it's always possible to ruin the thing! When you've got something that feels very, very fragile, and very unknown. When I'm working on something new, I find I quite deliberately stay away from it, from fear of ruining it.

I do think it's a real risk. Partly the way I experience the risk is through going too fast. This relates to the "Hold on" and the beautiful way you put it: how this might be about hedging, or reeling something in. I think that's it, but I would also put it the opposite way round: how to release what you want to say, but in such a way that it has a chance of being received. This has everything, again, to do with pacing.

For example, in *This Little Art*, there were some things I wanted to say about translation, questions or ideas I'd had experience of articulating too quickly, in a teaching situation, or in a conversation about my work. As a result, I could tell they hadn't landed. I hadn't managed to make them land—I'd made them sound simple, or trivial. In *This Little Art*, I was testing out the paces of argument and story-telling. In *The Long Form*, I was also actively interested in the work of redescription: saying something one way, then saying it again, perhaps with a different emphasis, or a different vocabulary, and what immense difference this can make.

This feeling of slowing down, and taking your time, opens up a lot of possibility and space. Did you find a guiding principle, or develop a boundary or pathway amid the openness of the novel? I'm thinking about the container of *The Long Form*, the story unfolding over a single day, as a possible delimitation.

I think in order to write anything, there is that necessity, to have some kind of pathway, some borders or edges. Perhaps especially in a space like the novel where in principle you can do anything, go anywhere, but also in the essay. For once you adopt a form of associative thinking, then where will you stop? What will be the parameters of the project, so that for it all its openness it still has the potential to hold together, to achieve some form, and some satisfaction?

That is very important to me: cultivating some form of reader-ly satisfaction-bearing in mind that of course not all readers will find a novel like *The Long Form* satisfying! But I did hope for the sense that when we've reached the end, or when you've reached the end with me, with the composition, you feel we've arrived somewhere. It could go on, but at some deep level it's important—both the novel and the reader feel it's important and necessary—that we leave it there.

And certainly, deciding that the story would just move from morning to bedtime was really important. I knew that really early on. I knew it within the first year of working on the project, but then it took me four more years to figure out how to get through the day! But I think without that, I'd still be in there. I would be totally untethered.

It's so interesting how sometimes the smaller the container, like a story happening within a small apartment or inside one room or over the course of one day, strangely, the more spaciousness can be felt.

Yes, I think it definitely does something to the attention. Once I'd decided, "Okay, I'm really going to pay attention to the window, and to the carpet, and to the plant," these things, these live things, started to feel inexhaustible. I realized there was so much to discover about the plant's behavior in relation to the window, so much to say about the odd space of a playmat and what it does to the layout of a room. Although, you could imagine that might get tiresome for a reader eventually. But I think that's definitely what constraint does: it forces you to attend closely or differently to what's in there with you.

You talked about finding that space of the single day early on, and then taking four years or so to write. In a conversation with Renee Gladman for [The Yale Review](#), you compared the opening pages of a manuscript to a lift or elevator. You said, "the desire to be absolutely sure that I had everything the book required in there, with me, before heading to the next floor, the place where you begin unpacking." You spoke also, in that interview, about the process: "How slow my progress can be. How many times I need to collapse the whole thing, in order to start building it and rhythm-ing a way through it again." Could you talk about collapsing as a means of progressing?

I think a lot for me happens at the level of... well, I was going to say sequence. For me, a book remains mobile and potentially re-shuffle-able, changeable, until very late. I mean, worryingly late in the process, in a way that's almost quite distressing to me. To be in the final stages of the novel and thinking, "Can I really be here, working out whether we go from the window pages to the kitchen pages?" "Can I really be taking this apart all over again?" But I find those moments of collapse are necessary, for me. I don't like them, but I can sort of bring myself to do it: to dismantle everything.

I notice it's not necessarily something all writers go through, in the sense that for some the right sequence seems to be established early on, the writing unfolded in a certain order, and the idea of messing around with it can then be difficult to receive or contemplate. But I realize I am always contemplating that—that a new collapse might be needed. And indeed, whenever I did start laying everything out on the floor again, and moving it around, I would discover something new about it. In response to your question of progress, it would definitely move the book forward, I'd learn something more about my intentions, or what mattered, or where I wanted the emphasis to fall.

That idea of collapsing, it made me think of starting over, and then starting over again, and again, and finding you're saying the same thing. I thought of collapsing in this way too: "if I'm saying the same thing, how do I get it into one?" Speaking about having all your pages out, I am interested in how you get organized? What does your actual document, or documents, look like when you're working on a manuscript? What system do you have?

In relation to repeatedly starting over, I do think that there can be this magic moment when you find a phrase, a sentence that somehow holds your project for you. For a long time, I might say, "I'm working on a book about this," but somehow it doesn't quite sound right: it doesn't sound true, or ample enough. A month or two later, I might try a different phrasing of it, and it still makes you feel ashamed somehow, or embarrassed, like somehow you've squashed it, you've crushed what you are dealing with. The time it takes to arrive at the phrasing that actually holds the work open for you is not something to be underestimated, I don't think.

Working through this, putting different potential words to what you think you're doing, and having the courage to discard them, and try new ones, that's all part of it.

In terms of process, at a certain point it can get quite unwieldy. I do have one draft of the novel which is all sticky, because I was sticking half pages together with masking tape, then sticking them to the wall, then taking them down again. At a certain point, I try to divide the work into smaller parts, and then try to connect the smaller parts back to each other. But sometimes of course you have to step back and look at the whole and think about larger questions of momentum and shape and energy, and for me that involves setting everything out on the floor again. I've been thinking about this again recently, because of that sense of beginning again, starting work on new things, and I'm aware of how disorganized and messy the process is for me. I dream of having clean versions, beautiful steady pages early on—but it's never like that.

Is it different now, when you go into a new project, versus the first book, or the second? What's the feeling of entering that space? How is it different with two books behind you?

So far, in my experience, it's never not been bewildering. With each project, it feels like I'm beginning a whole new process of learning—which starts with figuring out who and what I need to learn from. That said, I feel that what the two first books do now is suggest the contours of a body of work, if that makes sense. Which actually feels like a new kind of freedom. In the translation book, it was important to me that it should feel compendious. I wanted the book to touch, at least, on every facet, every dimension of this practice as I had experienced it. But I don't feel that same urge to put absolutely everything into a book anymore. Because I have

published those two books, and together they form a sort of ground or territory of interest, I feel I can now produce something that's much slighter, maybe, but will exist in relation to the work that is already in the world, and extend it or offset it—and that feels exciting.

It's interesting, I think, what prior work allows you to do. What you have done previously is what allows you to do what you're doing now. The desire, and also that sense of permission that can come—which is not easily achieved, and it's never a steady sense—of being enabled to pursue your own questions. For the novel, as a form, I think it will always remain an open question. There's so much possibility there. It's bewildering, but also energizing. I know it's a really obvious point: to say, "Look, the novel is just so much more capacious than we give it credit for." But I feel it, it's true.

I'm realizing that yes, the novel will fit anything. Your books have really helped me see that.

I find it so interesting how permission gets assigned.

For myself, I trained as an academic. I thought I would be a lecturer in French studies, or something like that, and then there was this process of slowly giving myself permission to call myself a translator, and then a writer of essays. And now, perhaps, a novelist. It can be immensely nerve-wracking: to claim the right to enter into a field of practice. There is often this feeling like, "No, you over there, do that, and, I over here, do this." I think of how that sense of boundedness can get reinforced by tutors, by colleagues, by friends, or whatever.

I try telling myself that novel writing is in the novel writing, and is in the naming of the practice as novel writing, if that's the name that makes most sense to you and your work. There's no further secret to it—apart from the doing of it. How do poets self-authorize as poets? Sometimes I think, "Oh, of course. They write poems, then they name what they've written poems." It sounds so simple when you put it like that, and without wanting to reduce how long it can take, and how much thinking and testing and learning is involved in finding a form for your work, I do think it's worth remembering that it can be that simple, and we all have the right to just get to work.

I've also thought about poetry, to create something that is often brief or viewed as short, and to say it's done. I want to shed this idea of the long form or long novels as in part this need to prove something, like "Look how long it took me to do this."

Yes. Look at the work that went into this, register the labor. That's it, totally it. And I don't think it's wrong, because there are things that you can achieve with length that you can't in other ways. I mean, do I fully believe that! *The Long Form* is in a way all about the difference that duration can make, that length can make, both in written composition and also in life. But I'm just as interested in what you describe: the potentials of short form, and what it is to trust that it's enough: three lines on a page is also a way of making something happen.

This comes back to the ways different elements of your practice can start to offset each other. It might be that after you publish your long form work, you'll feel this strong desire for the short, for the pamphlet, or for something else entirely.

Kate Briggs Recommends:

Helen Garner, *The Spare Room* (novel)

drawingisfree.org (drawing workshops and activism)

Else Alfelt, "Eeuwigheid van de maan" (exhibition of paintings at Stedelijk Museum Schiedam 6 april to 15 september 2024)

[Close Readings with Kamran Javadizadeh](#) (podcast)

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Vocation

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