On not wasting any time

Writer Tommy Pico on moving from poetry into screenwriting, and what it means to shake off imposter syndrome and have faith in your own abilities.

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As told to Ruby Brunton, 2484 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Beginnings, Adversity, Success, Identity.

You've recently made the move from New York City to Los Angeles. Are you enjoying living in LA? What impact has it had on your work, would you say?

Well, I moved out here partially because my friend had gotten a fellowship at UCLA and was like, "If I move to LA, would you go with me?" And I said yes. I was looking for a change from New York, as I had been there for 15 years. I was working with a production company in New York on a feature-length screenplay, but the producer of the feature moved out to LA. So I moved out here to work on it with him and while I've been here, I've been meeting with agents and managers and I'm kind of making the transition from literary writing to screenwriting.

I feel like I am now writing more with an eye towards plot, dialogue, character, and narrative, which is not something that I was concerned with in poetry, but it's just a new form of writing and I'm really, really excited by it. Because first of all, it pays a living wage. Second of all, I'm learning how to be myself differently in a different language. I don't know if I like Los Angeles just yet. All I know is that whatever difficulty I had in New York was remedied by Los Angeles, but at the same time, all of the things I love are not here at all. I've been calling them "photo negatives" of each other.

You began getting into screenwriting just after the publication of your first book *IRL*. How did that come about?

My first book had come out and the production company liked it. So based on the strength of that book, they were curious what kind of a feature I would write. I didn't have any ambition to be a screenwriter and I didn't have a story ready, but I said yes because they gave me a really nice check. But it's not completely different from the voice of the poems, I mean, the main character's name is Tommy. And you know, there's relationships and sex and punk music, but there's a story and I was so excited to figure out what the story was. But it took me probably a year and a half of working on it before I uncovered what the narrative was.

I had started writing by instinct, but not with any kind of plan. I learned very quickly that having an outline is really necessary, because it cuts down on the riff raff. Outlining, I think, is necessary with screenwriting because it makes the writing easier, whereas outlining a poem would feel too controlling. I don't think you can write a poem by an outline.

Your first book *IRL*, which came out in 2016, was the first of a series of four book-length poems. *Nature Poem* was published 2017, *Junk* came out last year, and this year we get *Feed*. It's interesting that you've written these four book-length poems, but that you weren't writing them with an eye to the overview of the structure, even though they do read quite narratively as books.

I didn't know until I finished the fourth book how they all related to each other. But again, I think, you know, I find my approach to poetry writing is more instinctual, and that I just have to start. If I wrote with an eye for

how it was going to end, it would just be too predictable. I think in poems you always have to surprise yourself, because you're looking to surprise a reader. But as a screenwriter, you're making things very, very obvious and very easy to translate.

You recently tweeted that *IRL* is the crush poem, *Nature Poem* is the relationship poem, *Junk* is the breakup poem, and *Feed* is going to be the reconciliation poem. It's interesting that they fit together in that way without you having that intention when you first started writing *IRL*.

My precedent for writing book-length poems are these indigenous song cycles called "bird songs." Some of my first memories are listening to my father and other people singing them. They're just like epic poems that talk about how people made it into the valley, like travel logs. I feel like that structured my thinking, so I felt clear enough about my intention for writing. As long as I was paying attention to using the most vigorous words and trying to make things as close to what was going on in my head as possible on the page, they ended up making sense because I went into it with an intention.

Is that where you drew the name *Birdsong* for the collective that you ran in Brooklyn for five years?

My Kumeyaay name translates to "bird song." It's weird to talk about this now, but it is my namesake. It doesn't surprise me that I wound up doing the work that I do. If I believed in any type of spirituality, I would say I believe in ancestor worship. I think I knew what the ancestors were doing when they survived, which was for me to eventually be out in the world. And yeah, with the collective that I started, I called it Bird Song because that was my name and, also, it's like the herald of the morning, and I was starting something new out of the ashes of a really intense breakup. It felt almost natural, in a way.

You continued the collective and your own writing for many years, even in the face of being overlooked by the big literary gatekeepers, and you seemed to continue with just such enormous positivity and drive that is so impressive. Where did that come from? Like, the "I'm just gonna keep going, dammit!" attitude?

The people in the collective were all people who were similarly driven to make creative work, but who were from backgrounds that weren't traditionally canonically recognized for contributions to literature and art. I think it was a little bit idealistic, and it was definitely very youthful, but I had faith. I'm not a person of faith necessarily, but I did have faith that if I worked really hard, I would get better and and also get a return on my investment.

The main benefit of having more exposure is having more access to make new work. I started out with very few resources, but a lot of energy. Over the years, the energy is still there, but now I just have more contacts, and also access to people who I wouldn't have had access to before. I also now have more faith in my ability. I initially had faith in my ability to get better—and now I *am* better than I was—so now I have faith in my ability to get things done. If somebody commissions me to write something, there's no longer a little devil on my shoulder telling me I can't do that.

I did a poem for the Highline Park in New York. They asked me to do it last February. If it had happened a year or two years ago, I probably would've been paralyzed by my fear of being unable to complete the task, but I ended up making something really cool. It was called "Feed" and it ended up being the basic skeletal structure for the fourth book. I feel like the thing that's missing now is that I no longer have imposter syndrome. I'm like, "Okay. Look. I'm a professional writer. That's what I get paid to do. It pays my rent. Give me projects. I'll get it done."

That's interesting, because I was also reading this interview where you said that after you finished a project, to you it resembled a steaming pile of feces. Do you think there is still some tension between that imposter syndrome, or just not being able to be your own biggest fan or your own biggest cheerleader?

I think it comes down to: it's not very good until it's okay. Even with this commission work, most often I feel like it's not as good as something that I would maybe sit down and spend my own time working on, because by virtue of it being a commission it's like, "You have six weeks or a month." The thing is, it's not that I have

faith in my ability to like what I do, because that's different. I don't really. But I have faith in my ability to meet the standard of the employer, let's say.

You've always seemed like an incredibly diligent and disciplined writer. And that's been impressive to me as someone who wishes they could have that same discipline.

The thing that I have to sacrifice is I don't have a social life. I don't have a man.

I was just gonna ask you that! From the outside it appears like you do have a very active social life. Your poetry is so full of your dating life, and going to other poet's readings, and your friends. Karaoke. Is there a kind of strategy for balancing it all out?

It's not that I'm not gonna be going on dates, but there is a consistency of attention and time and just being physically in a space that you need in order to build the momentum of a relationship. I feel like I leave so often that that momentum kind of builds up, and then I'm gone for a week and then I come back and it's kind of dithered a little bit. This is gonna sound so jerky, but I don't know if I have the energy to spend on a partner the same way I spend on my writing. If the goal is to date and to be with somebody, then something would have to take a backseat.

I think you probably want five things, and if you live a really great life, you get three of them. I have a thriving career, and I am grateful for that every single day. It takes me all over the country, and I get to meet so many people who like the work and who find themselves represented by or spoken to by what I do—how many people in their lifetime get that kind of affirmation? I never wanted to be posthumously recognized. I've always wanted to be recognized *now*. That's why I write so fast and put out as much as I possibly can. I wouldn't call it an admiration, but I would call it a respect. And I have that.

I don't have fucking hobbies. I don't fucking go hiking or go to tennis or have social clubs or book clubs or whatever. I don't have that, and I don't have romance. If I were to do a person justice by partnering with them in the ways that I think a good partner should be, that's not a responsibility that I think I want right now. Maybe somebody's gonna come along and make me rethink everything. What I don't think we realize is that, when we have friends who are fantastic and there's a certain standard for the friendship that we have, the romantic partner has to reap that.

You were talking about community just now, and it's interesting, because writing is a much more solitary process. We do spend a lot of time in our rooms not talking to anyone. On the flip side, you do a lot of work collaboratively. You and Morgan Parker, another amazing poet, host "Poets with Attitude." You're one of the co-hosts on the podcast Food 4 Thot with three other people too, right?

My friends are all making rad shit, too. So that community of friends, or the chosen family in different media that I work in, and just the community of writers as a whole, is very uplifting to be around. Also, I'm just discovering this new scene in Los Angeles, and I have already been able to meet some really incredible people who are writing television or they're writing feature films. I feel really taken care of in all different forms of writing and publishing that I've had the privilege of participating in.

I remember this tweet that you wrote saying that people were reacting to your upcoming publication announcement of *Feed* with this idea that you should somehow space out your publication a bit and do things with a bit more time in between, and you were saying, "I don't necessarily have time to sit around spacing out these books." Time in this context is a privilege for those who live that long of a life and who have that financial support maybe early on as well. Not just financial, but also familial and societal support earlier on and also later in life.

I think in a traditional literary sense, it's like giving something air to breathe. I understand that people need time to accumulate their work or their material. The average age of death on my reservation is 40.7 years old. I'm 35, you know what I mean? If I was still living back home, I'd probably have five years left. So I don't have time. I'm not gonna spend three years in between publishing a book, because I don't know if I'm gonna be alive at

the end of those three years. That is real talk.

But also, I do push myself to work and write everyday. I want to see it out in the world. It doesn't seem so satisfying to me to wait, I guess, because I came up making zines and stuff, which was like making things and then putting them out there. That's what I'm used to.

Tommy Pico Recommends:

Circe by Madeline Miller. I just finished it yesterday afternoon and I want to talk about it with everyone and anyone.

American Spy by Lauren Wilkinson. I might be biased because she's my best friend but it's thrilling without sacrificing its literariness.

The Great Believers by Rebecca Makkai. It was a low-key sob ride the whole time, but those last 100 pages? I got dehydrated from crying.

Any cover by Kelly Clarkson ever, but especially this one of "Fix You" by Coldplay because it did something I didn't know could be done and that is make me like a Coldplay song.

I've been on tour a lot and something that relaxes and soothes me is this song "Numb" by Cassie, though I'm not thrilled at the Rick Ross feature tbh.

Speaking of chill jams, everyone talked about "Royals" and shit but I thought "Ribs" was the best song on that Lorde album
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Name
Tommy Pico

Vocation
Poet, Screenwriter

Photo credit: Niqui Carter