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August 31, 2021 -

As told to Jessica Hopper, 2570 words.

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On valuing enthusiasm over perfection

Poet Eloisa Amezcua discusses how she went from reading poetry to writing it, why time is sometimes the best editor, and the importance of being in communion with other writers.

Let's start at the beginning. Can you talk about how you came to do what you do?

I came to poetry as a reader and I never really saw myself as a writer of it until about after about two years of seriously reading poetry. I was in an undergraduate program and I had gone into college with the idea of eventually becoming a doctor, which is the family business.

What kind of a doctor?

My dad's a psychiatrist and so is my sister, and my grandfather was kind of like the town doctor in the town in Mexico that my dad's from. I was really interested in it, too. I was drawn to science and math growing up, particularly because I felt like in those two subjects there are real answers to questions, and that always felt comforting to me. And I think that's kind of what turned me off about something like English or literature, where there are no concrete answer. I think that really scared me.

When you came to poetry then, did you feel relieved in there not being this same sort of exactitude in it?

I felt relieved that I didn't have to be right. That I could go off of an emotion and that was a good enough response to something. And I had never... not that I think you need permission to do the things you do, but I think I needed someone to tell me that it was okay to arrive at an answer emotionally and maybe not know exactly how I got there.

It's not an equation.

Right, it's not an equation and there are no steps you can take. There's not a list of how to get from A to B, you just get there and then can kind of speculate as to how it happened. But even that is just speculation, and not an actual, concrete path.

With poetry, did the satisfaction of it feel different than these other things that had felt so concrete to you?

I thought of poetry, and sometimes still do, as a puzzle where I'm filling in the pieces to get to a certain emotion or idea. So I can't quite turn off the part of my brain that wants to solve a thing, but now I'm using words to get there. And particularly, I'm super interested in form and in syntax, so those are kind of the rules I'm using for myself as to how I can get to an emotion through syntax. "How am I filling in this blank vessel that is the poem to arrive at an emotion?"

How did you go from being a great consumer and reader of poetry to being in it, and then to starting to publish? How do you go from being like, "I just read poems," to a couple years later you are a published poet with your own books?

At first a lot of it was imitation. Like, I see how someone else did this thing and I'm going to figure out how to do the same thing, but for my own experience, or for my own idea that I have.

Can we just detour slightly? Do you think originality is overrated?

Oh yeah. Yes. I think there's room to play. I'm super interested in the way someone can be original in form or syntax, because we're all talking about the same emotions. The topics are the same, but being able to play around with form and syntax allows for some originality. I think that's where originality can come through. Whereas the ideas are kind of repetitive. But I don't think that's a bad thing.

Before, we were talking about how you got from reading poetry to writing it. You said you were basically mimicking people, or that you were almost using their formulas to figure out how to do it yourself.

Yeah, and then it became a matter of finding my own formulas. I very much have rules when I sit down to write a poem. I'm terrible at free writing and I don't journal, because if I sit down without a particular task in mind I find it very hard to write anything. I'm a very slow writer because of that. So in order to trick myself into writing, I'll give myself a prompt or rules that I have to stick by, whether it's a word count, or certain number of syllables per line. Just stupid rules that I make up for myself. But that gets me to writing, because then I do feel like I'm filling things in.

How do you get from there to having a book? Was there something where you felt like you had permission, or did you get a mentor? What was the process here?

Jericho Brown invited me into his writing workshop. I had taken two or three literature courses with him that were poetry specific, and when I was a junior in college I'd showed up to the literature course on my first day and before the class started he walked over to me and said, "Are you in my writing workshop?" And I was like, "No, I'm in an Abnormal Psychology class at that time." He said, "Switch out of the class and take my poetry workshop." Up until that point I'd never written a poem, and it was an advanced poetry writing workshop. And he knew that I had never written poems.

In having somebody else do that for you, what did that endow in you in terms of how you also interact with younger poets, with young writers?

As an editor, I am always keeping an eye out, and even an ear out, for work by young people that I find interesting or exciting. I think it's encouraging that as an editor I can do for other young writers what someone did for me. So at the journal that I edit, I've been really lucky to publish two people's first poems.

One of them is a high school writer. One of them I heard her read this piece at a reading, and I loved it. I went up to her afterwards and asked her to send it to me. And as an editor, I'm not looking for perfect work, I'm looking for exciting work. I think that was something that Jericho perhaps saw in me or encouraged in me—not to write the perfect thing, but to write the thing that was exciting. And the goal wasn't to leave his workshop with one perfect poem, but to leave with 10 ideas that would eventually become poems.

It's much more productive to be excited about the thing rather than sort of endlessly reworking your one perfect poem. That's an idea that sometimes can keep people really held in place, like, "Oh, I have to have this one really fixed, finished product and I can't get there yet." What do you do when you're not feeling enthusiastic?

I don't write regularly. I tend to write in spurts, so a few months at a time, and then nothing for a few months, and then a little bit more here and there. I think one thing that has been very useful for me is stepping away from the work and letting time serve as an editor as well. I sometimes get a little overwhelmed, and for me the threshold for a poem being "done" is if I can't change anything else in it. If I can't find anything else to change, then my job is done. And I used to hammer away at that incessantly in a very short period of time, so I'd work on one draft for a few days in a row. And I've found now that I will write a draft and not look at it for weeks or months, and then return to it.

And what has that time done for you?

I think it's made me a more generous editor of my own work, because obviously there are things I can change in a piece of writing. You can always move a comma or cut a line differently. If you've been staring at something for five hours, then it's really easy to chop it up. If I take a break, I feel like I'm returning to it with fresh eyes. I'm returning to it as if I hadn't written it, as if someone else had written it. And I can come back to it and be more generous and not chop it up. Or chop it up, but do it in a way that I'm more certain about.

I've started to be able to do that with my writing—and I come back to it more sweetly, but also it's less hard. I can be less precious about it. In some ways it's so much more satisfying to edit after time away from the work, in part because I feel like I'm truly seeing the strengths of the writing.

It's doing it out of love and not out of a need for perfection.

You're not in it with the hammer and tongs.

Right, right. But sometimes the most generous thing you can do for yourself is cut a paragraph or cut a line, or trash everything except for a line.

When I was a younger writer, I thought just being able to shoot something out of my brain and being like,

"Voila I'm done, one take!" was some sort of totem signifying I was really a writer. That I could have some fully formed thing. And now I think I see the fallacy of that, and instead I approach it like, "Is this writing I can really live with?"

When I think of writing and the practice of writing, I think it's 50% reading, 40% editing, and 10% writing.

That's a really good equation.

And I think a lot of people think of writing as 90% writing and 10% the other stuff.

When you talk about having this space in between drafts, is that, for you, sort of like lying fallow? Is it like gathering up other things? Is it clearing your mind? What happens in that between space?

Sometimes it's just forgetting that I wrote the thing. Which is the best thing that can happen.

You have to lie fallow. You can't plant season, after season, after season. What is the most satisfying thing to you about all of this, of the process?

I think it's returning after the lying fallow period, returning to something I wrote and being like, "This doesn't suck." That's maybe my favorite part. That's better than publishing, when you return to something and you almost forget that you wrote it. And you read it back to yourself and you're like, "Damn, I did that." And it's not terrible, or it's not *entirely* terrible.

****How do you talk to the writer within you that's creeping in there and being like, "This shit is terrible, you're not a real writer!" How do you battle that doubt?**

When I'm having doubts like that I read contemporary writing, I'll read journals. Sometimes I just need to remind myself of the kind of stuff that is being published right now—in a, "Oh, I think my work could stand up to this" kind of way. Like, what are my friends writing? What are people whose work I love working on? And so I'll search through journals for stuff they're writing and I'm like, "Oh, cool."

You feel like a part of it?

Right, I feel like a part of it. And I feel like we're all in it together. I'll read something and I'm like, "At some point this was a shitty draft," I hope, or I can pretend it was, and feel better about where my shitty draft is at.

I mean, you work with a lot of really—

Intimidating.

You work with a professional community but also a spiritual cabal with a lot of really—I mean, I don't think it's a stretch to say some of the greatest talents in contemporary poetry.

Terrifyingly great poets.

Highly decorated and recognized poets, not just "good for our crew"—

Like a Poet Laureate.

Yeah, so that's, like, a real thing.

Yeah, which is very intimidating. But then it's also encouraging in a way, too.

Can we talk a little bit about that, in terms of your poetry but also your poetry business? What does that community do for you?

The funny thing is that there's a sense of accountability. It's not competitive, but it's just that you see friends and they ask you what you're working on. And not in a judgmental way. I feel comfortable saying "nothing" if I'm working on nothing. But it kind of forces you to have to talk about your work in a way that makes you take it seriously. I think that's maybe the best part of being in community with writers, is that they take writing seriously. If I'm out with a group of my friends who are not writers, no one's asking me what I'm working on. And even if they did, they wouldn't understand it per se. Other writers take your writing seriously, and they're also genuinely interested in it, which is really nice. That doesn't happen often. Also just learning from the people I get to be around is exciting. I'll be talking about a project I'm working on or a piece I'm trying to write, and they'll be like, "Oh, this reminds me of this," or, "Have you read this?" I feel like I'm constantly learning.

Can we talk about community, and what sort of role that played in you starting up your business?

I have worked in some sort of administrative position for the past six years. And when it came time to move, when I moved from Phoenix to Columbus, I was kind of at a loss as for what I was gonna do when I arrived. I have been working with the poet Natalie Diaz for over a year as her assistant. When it came time to decide what I was gonna do when I moved, I thought—"What if I did this sort of work for a number of people?" It became evident that being able to do this full-time as a representative for people could be

doable.

And so from there it was a matter of reaching out to folks whose work I admire, and people I trust and respect. That's really important to me, because at the end of the day it's both of our livelihoods at stake. And so I do take that really seriously. It is wonderful to be in community with all of these people, but I don't take for granted the fact that both my rent check and theirs possibly are coming from this. And I love all of their work, which is lucky for me.

Eloisa Amezcua recommends:

Costco hot dogs

Reading MEAN by Myriam Gurba and Fade Into You by Nikki Darling one right after the other

Law & Order: SVU marathons

Donating to the Trans Women of Color Collective

Name

Eloisa Amezcua

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