

On making work that matters



Poet Ada Limón on the importance of taking breaks from writing, dealing with confounding edits, how leaving the city helped make her work stronger, and finding real joy in what you do.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3194 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Focus](#), [Success](#).

Your last book, *Bright Dead Things*, was a finalist for the National Book Award. Did that create a certain amount of pressure going forward?

I tend not to think about readership. Instead, I think about a reader, the person I am trying to communicate with, but I don't have the idea that a lot of people are ever going to read anything. Then after *Bright Dead Things*, there is a little bit of a pressure. Like, "Oh, people may read this." There was that. Mostly there was just the sense that I wanted to honor that connection with people who had been drawn to *Bright Dead Things*. But other than that, I really just wanted to do good work. And that's not much different from how I usually feel. I'm competing with my myself, right? I appreciate all the work I've written so far, but I'm always trying to push myself. And so this new book was just me trying to go a little further.

You've always written about personal things in your work, but the poems in *The Carrying* feel even more intimate, particularly the poems about trying to conceive a child. It feels very bold.

Yeah. It was bold. Or terrifying. However you want to look at it. I always want to make work that matters, even if it's just to myself. I didn't know how to really process what I was going through in my own personal life without just writing about it. Writing is how I make sense of the world, so it would be hard *not* to write the poems. I guess I could have chosen not to publish them, but it felt like once I had written them it would be wrong not to share them. There aren't a lot of poems about some of these things I was experiencing—not even a lot of essays or memoirs either. So I thought maybe that meant I was supposed to create this book.

It's easier for me if it's about myself. It's harder for me if it's about anyone else. I want to get permission. I want to make sure that I'm not stepping on anyone's toes. Also, I'm very aware that there are two sides to every story. So I may see something one way, and another person could be like, "That's not at all what happened." Still, the rudest editor is the one that you encounter before a pen even touches the page, right? The one in your mind that says, "No, you can't write about that."

All writers get asked questions like, "How do you work? Do you work in the morning? Do you work at night? Do you use a certain kind of ink pen? Do you have rituals around writing?" As if by answering you're giving them the key that would maybe unlock their own process. I am curious, though, for someone who has been doing this for some time now, has your process changed much over time? Do you always approach making a poem in the same way?

Over the past eight years, one thing that's different is that I take longer breaks. I'll sometimes go months without writing, which is not something I used to do. I used to write every day. I still take a lot of notes, but I think I allow myself more time to be receptive to the world, as opposed to always worrying about saying something.

That has been really important to me. I don't know why, exactly. I wish I could articulate that better. I just feel like I'm going through this stage where I spend more time gathering, instead of always trying to be like, "Okay, I'm going to crank out a poem a day." I feel like it's much more, I don't want to say seasonal, but it feels like when the deluge comes, it *really* comes. And I'm ready for it.

Maybe a lot of that is also because I have built my life in such a way that I now have a little more space and time. I'm a freelancer and someone who works from home. Maybe I'm more comfortable with not writing, because when it does come, I can shut down and go, "Okay, I'm going to write every day." I think it's almost as if, as I've gotten older, my process is now a little bit messier and more unpredictable. And yet, I trust it a little more.

It's hard to make people understand sometimes that taking a walk for 30 minutes can be more productive or generative than sitting down and staring at a piece of paper for 30 minutes. That can be part of the process, too.

Yes, yes, yes. I totally agree. Or sitting in silence. Or reading something. Or doing the dishes. That's when things come to me. A lot of times if I'm in a producing mode, it's because I've been receptive to the world for a long time. Suddenly it's like, "Okay. I've turned something on inside of me. Time to work."

In what form do you receive feedback from people? And how much of it do you take?

I have three or four readers that I share with on a regular basis. As soon as I finish something, and when I feel like it's in a good place, I send it to them. You know, excitedly, hoping for their approval. Those readers will often be very specific and sometimes they're just like, "It's done. Great." Sometimes that's all you need. Sometimes that's why you send it, you just want a pat on the back.

And then other times, they have real critiques. And I take them to heart. Sometimes it's just the act of sending it to them that will make me edit it in a different way. The next step for me is getting feedback from editors of journals. You know, really good editors. They might say, "This is great, but what about this last line? What about this title?" I edited out a last line of a poem for *The New Yorker*. And I also changed a title of a poem for *The New Yorker*. And those were with two different editors. Both times were difficult. I had to really think about it. Both times, they were right.

In those moments, do you feel like you have agency to say, "No. I'd rather you not publish it unless you publish it with that line."

Oh, yeah. Absolutely. There's a particular editor that has come to me with changes, and each time I have said no. And I've actually never published with him. There's just people that you trust and you know that their eye and their voice and their ear is similar to what you're doing. Or at least they know what you're doing. And then there are other editors who are seeing it from their perspective so wholly that they're not allowing your own creative, artistic drive into their world. I've pulled poems because of that in the past. There is a poem in my new book called "Mastering," which takes place at a bar where I'm meeting with a friend who doesn't drink anymore. There was an editor who would have published it if I had changed the ending to not be so harsh. And I wouldn't do it.

I know the poem. It was supposed to be harsh, right? That's the point.

That's what I said! I told him that I had sent this to the person it was about. We're still great friends. He told me I should publish it. Also, it's just an honest description of how the speaker in the poem, me, felt at the moment. Right? It's not necessarily that this person feels this way *all* the time. It's capturing a moment. Which is the best thing poets do, right? So, you know, I tend to be a little stubborn about changes.

Is it true that you are you working on a novel now?

I always say that *Bright Dead Things* was the byproduct of a failed novel. I was writing a novel and then, in between working on chapters, I would write these poems that were really

personal. It was a break from writing the fiction. I think the novel is okay. You know? I think it's fine. I think it's very much a poet's novel, which means it's basically—a woman stands out in a field thinking about other times she stood out in a field.

I also wrote a young adult novel, a draft of one at least, but that was just sheer fun. And it's sort of a magical realism thing. The thing about young adult novels is that they move really quickly, which is fun to write. I don't know what will happen with it. I love writing fiction but I don't know if I'm necessarily good at it. But I also don't mind that. It's kind of like drawing or painting. They're things that I love to do, but I'm not super talented at them in any serious way. I'm not saying my attempts at fiction are terrible. I learn a lot from them. But I don't know if they necessarily need to be in other people's hands.

Does the economy of language that comes with writing poetry lend itself in a helpful or non-helpful way to trying to write prose?

I always think poets actually tend to switch over genres better than other kinds of writers. We start out so little. Right? We start with a sound and a syllable. So, that attention to language is there, which I think is the hardest part to teach. The musicality of language. But musicality of language can only take you so far. Turns out there's other things, too. Like plot.

You are also a freelance writer for a variety of magazines. Being able to work in other genres, doing other kinds of writing, feels very healthy. I'm guessing that all of these kinds of writing inform each other in interesting ways.

I agree. I was a copywriter for a long time and occasionally I still do that kind of work. Someone asked me once if, as a copywriter, it felt like I was giving all of my best lines away to advertising. I just started laughing.

Advertising doesn't want your good lines. It wants your bad lines.

Yeah, I was like, "Absolutely not!" It is an entirely different part of the brain, which is what makes it great. There's no aspect to this that's poetry, other than the fun of playing with words. It's funny, when you are a freelance writer and a poet... if someone wants to cut some of your copy or change something it's like, "Ok. It's not like my soul is at stake or anything. Wanna cut the first paragraph? Change the intro? Go for it. I don't really care that much." But if someone were to do that with one of my poems... it would be like losing a limb.

For young poets who are trying to share their work—or just trying to get their work seen—what do you tell them?

It's interesting. I experience this with younger writers in a couple of different ways. I think that there are a lot of younger poets who want to be better writers. And then there are a lot of younger poets who just want to be better known. Those two things are very different. And sometimes divergent. For me, as long as they're focusing on the work, and actually creating something interesting, then I feel like I can say to them, "Okay. I think it's going to happen for you." Because the real joy for them is in creating something.

I remember when I was teaching in New York and this wonderful young man came up to me. My new book was just coming out at the time and he was like, "Wow, now you get to go on tour and do all these great things. This is the fun part, right?" I looked at him and I was like, "Is it?" For me, the fun part is just being at home and writing in my sweatpants. And then being like, "I wrote a poem and I like it." There's nothing that compares to that. Nothing. Not *The New Yorker*, not *The New York Times*. I feel like that's something that sometimes gets lost in our culture, where everything's about building a brand before you even have an established creative process. Please, don't be a poet unless the number one thing you like to do is write poems. And read poems.

You must love to write poems and read poems. Because, if you're a poet, you're going to have to have another job. And that job, whatever it is, is going to be your main job. And it's going to be the thing that puts food on the table and pays your rent and makes sure you have healthcare occasionally. You know? Hopefully you'll be writing all along, and doing things and creating. And that is going to bring joy into every part of your life. If it's just about what you can get published, then I think that's when it kind of falls apart.

I know how that probably sounds. I know it's easy for someone who has published a lot of things to say that. I know I've had a lot of success and I am grateful for that. When I graduated from my MFA program, almost everyone in my class had books out before me. I had to get really comfortable with just working. I had to just keep working at it. It was the pleasure of actually doing the work that sustained me.

You left city life and moved to the country. Did that have an effect on your writing?

Yeah, I think so. I think some people are built for New York in a way, that New York sustains them. I did New York for 12 years. I think that was maybe two years too long. I've been out of the city now for almost exactly eight years and I love it. The hardest part is finding your people. In New York it was easy, all the weirdos are there. And, you know, poets are weird. We need our weirdos. So you have to look for the writers, and you have to kind of make that connection, because it's not as easy. You can't just walk into a bar, order a Guinness, and find yourself with two Irish poets and a musician. It's not going to happen if you are living out in the woods somewhere.

Aside from that, I think that allowing myself to work from home was really important. I can turn on the extrovert when I need to, but I think that I am a natural introvert. And I think a lot of my energy when living in the city was going towards the performance of being human. That idea of "Hello! Look, I got dressed today. Ta-da!"

I also think that allowing myself to be a little more vulnerable, and maybe a little more tender, has really allowed me to open up in my own writing. And I don't think that would have happened if I had stayed in New York. I think there's a self-preservation and a self-protection that happens in any big city that's necessary. You can build up this armor that can be prohibitive when you're trying to create. Some people really flourish in that world, and it's not a problem at all. But you know, everyone's different. I think I flourish with a little more space and time, and a little more fluidity.

I think your work speaks to that. I know several people who don't typically read poetry who happen to really love your books. It feels accessible in the best, most open kind of way.

It's funny. Often when I'm giving a reading somewhere, someone will come up to me and say something like, "I don't even like poetry. I never read poetry. But I like yours." And I never know quite what to do with that, because part of me is like, "Oh, that's so wonderful. I'm happy to be a gateway drug for you." But the other part of me is like, "Maybe you should just read some more poetry."

Being a gateway drug is good.

Yeah, right? Why not? The poet [Matthew Zapruder](#), who is my friend, was saying that we should come up with a poetry anthology that's called *Gateway Drug* and it's just the stuff you would hand to someone who has never liked poetry or never read it. And you'd be like, "Okay, pick a page, any page." And then they're hooked.

Ada Limón recommends:

[Aretha Franklin](#) has always been a huge influence on me, ever since I was a kid. When she passed away, I got all my old albums out and I've been working nonstop to her. So she's been my soundtrack for the last couple weeks, which has been great, but she's really the soundtrack to my life.

It's hard for me to say if *The Carrying* would have been the same book if it wasn't for this book, [Braiding Sweetgrass](#) by Robin Wall Kimmerer. She's a Native American writer and botanist and she talks a lot about our relationship with the earth. That book has really shifted me in terms of how I think about things. I panic a lot about the state of our earth, and she gave me some ways of processing that. It's a book I go back to again and again.

Poets I love. [Lucille Clifton](#). I read her collected work all the time. I can't get enough. If I'm searching for something, I go back to her. I think that sometimes she is under-appreciated, or people think of her as simple. Her work is really so much more complex than people give her credit for. [Muriel Rukeyser](#) is another one that I adore. She had a big influence on me, especially her use of repetition and the power she puts on that. [Nikky Finney](#) is someone whose work I always return to as well. I admire her so much, and I just can't wait for her new book.

Even though he can be somewhat problematic, I return to [Pablo Neruda](#) a lot. We spend a lot of time in South America, and I've been to all of Neruda's homes. And his grave. And it's

just, I don't know, he's completely a weirdo, but I just love him. It wasn't even his love poems that first drew me in, it was his *Odes to Common Things*. That idea of writing to things like salt shakers or socks... like, what? I love it so much.

Name

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Vocation

Poet



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