

# On being honest about what you create



Author Ruben Quesada discusses writing everyday experiences, the difficulties of making money from creative work, and crafting poems from grief and violence.

October 29, 2024 -

As told to Daniel Sanchez Torres, 2810 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Process](#), [Money](#), [Identity](#), [Success](#).

## **What was the first poem that moved you?**

The first poem that popped into my head is by a poet named James Wright, it's called "[A Blessing](#)." What really moved me was the ending. If I think back on how the poem developed, I probably couldn't tell you exactly, but I can see the movements. These people [in the poem] are on the road. They are driving, pull over, and on the side of the road they see horses so they get out of the car. The speaker touches the horse's ear and describes the softness as, "skin over a girl's wrist." That always struck me as really unusual, just to think of it in that way, like one's own wrist, the skin is so delicate.

But right after that moment in the poem, the line is like, "I would break / Into blossom." What really struck me is that idea that we could be so overwhelmed by joy or we're so moved by something, the feeling inside us would burst out into something even more beautiful. That's how I see it in my head, I imagine the blossoming of a rosebud or a flower. I just never heard that feeling described in that way, I thought "Wow, I want to be able to do something like that with words."

## **Is the first poem that moved you different from the first poem that made you want to write poetry?**

Wright's poem, I think, moves me for its strangeness of that final move. The poem that made me want to like—or that felt like it gave me permission to speak or write about something that I knew about was probably a poem by a poet named Gary Soto. I was introduced to Gary Soto very early on in my study of writing and poetry. The poem I just shared by James Wright—I've never been on a horse, I'm not used to the rural environment being described. I did not connect with the content, but I connected with the description. Gary Soto's work made me feel like the things that I experienced and the things that I was thinking about were okay to write about. It didn't have to be about horses, flowers, beauty and, like, nature. It could be about working; it could be about the labor of just living every day.

Gary Soto has a poem called "[Mexicans Begin Jogging](#)" and it's about being at work. He describes, at the very end, there's a [border patrol] raid and the boss in the poem puts some money into the poet's hands and says, "Okay now go, run." All the people that work there were running from the police, presumably because they were undocumented. Gary Soto wrote about his family's immigrant experience and growing up in that kind of environment of being a day laborer or a field worker. There was this mundane quality to it, just so every day that I thought "Wow, I have a lot of everyday experiences that I've never written about because I just thought *This isn't poetry*." I read Gary's [poetry] about working and being an immigrant and fearing police, you know, like fearing the system that exists. I felt like my world existed in literature and I thought, "Wow if he could do that, I could do that."

**You have written a couple of chapbooks and have done a book length collection of poems before. "Brutal Companions," is your second collection. How do you think about a body of work or a collection of work versus a stand alone poem?**

When I write my poems, I like to handwrite a lot. Eventually I type those up and I have folders of different poems that I've written and I organize them chronologically in my cloud. I'll work on whatever it is I'm writing for a month, and then the new month comes by and I'll type up new stuff I've written and then I'll go back to the old folders and see what poems are there and which ones I feel like I could keep, which ones need more work and I'll move those over to the most recent folder. I did that for years and [that's how "Brutal Companions"] started coming together. I started thinking about the ways in which each individual poem either carried a particular idea, or if there was a particular artifact in the poem-whether it was a color or an image or a symbol. The poems may never have met, they may never have found themselves together in a book; but, what moved me to bring these poems together were those little moments, those little images or ideas that kept popping up.

The poems had their own life, but when I put them side by side I wanted to find a way to make them connect just like people connect. I wanted each poem to have something that the next poem could have, like a bridge. Every poem in ["Brutal Companions"] has something that connects to another one. Typically, that other poem is either next to it or very close to it. I always think of my poems as having their own life and I don't think about them, necessarily, as being in a book unless I know that I'm going to make a book length project. For "Brutal Companions," these poems had their own life on their own and it just happened that they spoke to one another and found each other in the same book.

**What is something you wish someone told you about the craft of writing poetry before you first started writing poetry?**

I wish someone would tell me what I tell my students now and that's just to write. Write everything and don't worry about publishing. Don't worry about revising. Don't worry about editing yourself. Don't worry about what it is you're writing. Just write. It can be about anything, whether it's something very universal or something very intimate and personal that only you know. The thing that I've learned over the years is that the more vulnerable you're willing to be in your poems, the more impactful it is. It kind of seems a bit contradictory to say my very personal, very specific experience is going to resonate with someone else, but it does and it's almost like it's magical. The more specific I think an experience is the more someone seems to connect. I think it's because it just mirrors our daily life when we see someone going through something, it resonates with us on an emotional level. Obviously, the situation isn't happening to us, but just the mere observation of it, to just witness another human being going through an experience resonates emotionally with us. So that's what I would tell myself, don't stop yourself in any way. Don't edit yourself in any way while you're writing. You can worry about that later.

**I've been particularly drawn to your poem "Shadows" and "Watching Daniel V. Jones." They are both heavy with grief and violence. How do you try to articulate grief and death in a poem? What goes into building that into a poem?**

That poem "Shadows" is about a young girl who gets hit by a car. That actually really happened. I was a child, it happened along the busy street just in front of the house that I lived in. I remember being on the street playing with friends. We hear the screeching [and] a car hits something. My mother helped this young girl out of the street while everyone was just kind of scared and watched. Today, we would say don't move anyone after an accident. But this was a long time ago, I just remember my mother wanting to console this girl who'd been hit by a car. I remember her looking so pale and so scared. The violence that I was directly witness to had a sense of compassion to it. Not only from my mother but from the people around. Even though this violent incident happened, these people came together to care for this person.

I think about huge tragedies that happen on a global or national scale and how people rally together and console each other. People often describe it as humanity at its best. When I wrote that poem I wrote it from a more complete place of compassion, or a desire for compassion. The poem ends thinking about the death of Rock Hudson. He was so loved for decades, the way people love, like, Taylor Swift. People feel like they genuinely [have] a

sense of connection and love for the artist and their work. If they were to die everyone would know about it and everyone would feel a sense of loss. But, when Rock Hudson died, he came out as being gay and having AIDS in the 80s. When that happened so many people turned away. When he died they cremated his body and that was it. That sense of abandonment for someone who was so beloved just seems so inhumane.

The compassion in that poem that I see my mother express towards someone who's been injured, that's the compassion that Rock Hudson deserved and a lot of people that died of AIDS in that time deserved. The Daniel V. Jones poem—and there's another one about R. Budd Dwyer, "Live Broadcast"—those were deaths that I witnessed on television. I didn't want to necessarily glorify [those] deaths, I wanted to draw attention to their deaths because their deaths were avoidable. Both were suicides broadcasted on live television with no delay. Jones died because his health care was denied. He had HIV and cancer and this was at a time when a "pre-existing condition" wouldn't get you health coverage. He was just going to die because his health insurance wasn't going to cover anything. There's this compassion that I feel about people who are marginalized or disenfranchised. Dwyer [was the treasurer of Pennsylvania] and had been indicted for bribery, so before he was going to get sentenced he was technically still employed. He decided to kill himself so that his wife and children would have his insurance and his pension. He was afraid that his wife and family were going to be destitute. He had always sworn his innocence. It just upsets me that we treat people so poorly when we're all on the same planet, we're all in the same boat.

**According to the Poetry Foundation, an ekphrastic poem is defined as "a vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art. Through the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the "action" of a painting or sculpture, the poet may amplify and expand its meaning." You wrote "East of Wyoming, I Remember Matthew Shepard" as a response to "The Deposition, or the Entombment," by the painter Raphael completed in the 16th century. You've also said that this poem is intended to draw attention to the hate crimes in history that continue to persist in the LGBTQ community. From my understanding, the poem is a twist of what the typical ekphrastic poem does. How did this poem come to be? Why was playing with the ekphrastic poem the path you chose to write this poem?**

The painting is really where it began. I learned that the painting was actually commissioned by a mother whose son had been violently killed. She commissioned Raphael to make a painting of her son so she could remember him. I couldn't help but think about this connection to Matthew Shepard. His mother took this moment of tragedy and created a foundation and became an advocate for the LGBTQ+ community. There's so many parallels. I remember when this incident happened with Matthew Shepard, I was probably a teenager and I couldn't get it out of my head. Particularly, it happened at a time when I knew I was going to be traveling to Wyoming for the first time ever.

**What is something that you wish someone had told you about the business of being a writer when you first started trying to make a living off of your work?**

I would have liked a clearer sense of different types of jobs. Money is always important, I would have loved to have learned how to be a better independent freelance person. Throughout my academic career and professional relationships, they all revolve around teaching, readings, appearances, events. But almost none have dealt with, *Well, how do you make money if you're not teaching? How do you deal with taxes? How do you deal with all the legal stuff, all the paperwork? How do you create a network so you're able to be a better freelance writer?* I think that is something that I feel like I've had to learn along the way. I wish I had somebody to guide me a little more.

**I'm always interested in the logistics of how creatives make money and how they manage to create within our economy. From what I was able to gather from your website and your presence online, you're a poet with several chapbooks and books under your belt, you've done some editing work, you founded and run the non-profit literary arts organization Mercy St, you're a faculty at Antioch University-Los Angeles, you have a substack with a paid subscriber section, and you've won a handful of poetry and literary prizes. You don't have to share hard numbers if you're not comfortable with that—though I know many other writers would really appreciate that kind of information—but what is the general breakdown in time spent on and income received for each of those areas of your work?**

I don't make a lot of money, it's really difficult for me to save. I think, for the last couple of years I've owed money to taxes, so there's that. But, you know, if I didn't love what I was doing I probably would have stopped doing it a long time ago because I'm always broke. I grew up poor and I feel like I'm a poor adult because the income isn't steady. I do a lot, but they're all confined within certain periods of time within the year. So the income isn't coming in throughout the year. This year, for instance, I stopped teaching in May; so, from May up until July, three months, I had zero income. I had to rely on savings, on credit cards, I had to borrow money. It's hard. I have student loan debt and being a freelance writer is not going to get me out of it. But that's okay, because I enjoy what I do and I enjoy the people I meet and I try to lean into what brings me joy. Money is not bringing me any joy because I'm not getting a lot of it.

#### **Ruben Quesada Recommends:**

*Y Tu Mamá También*. It's a cinematic masterpiece. Alfonso Cuarón's direction, along with the brilliant performances by Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna, captures the complexities of youth, desire, and the passage of time. It's a film I return to whenever I want to explore the intersection of personal and private narratives in my work.

*Borderland Apocrypha* by Anthony Cody. This collection speaks to me on a personal level. Cody recasts documented history through his familial relationship with the U.S.-Mexico border in poetic form is nothing short of breathtaking. His work reminds me of the power of poetry to confront difficult truths and forge new understandings, much like Claudia Rankine, Mai Der Vang, and Robin Coste Lewis, whose works center on historical documentation.

*Magical/Realism: Essays on Music, Memory, Fantasy, and Borders* by Vanessa Angélica Villarreal is a collection of lyrical and fragmentary styles that blends personal narrative with broader cultural reflections. These essays reflect on intergenerational legitimacy and identity through reflection on music, pop culture, and spiritualism. These are remarkable, well-researched essays that establish Villarreal as one of the most important scholars and critics of Latinx literature and culture.

Ziggy Stardust feels like the perfect musical counterpart to vulnerability and self-discovery. The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars album by David Bowie. These songs haunt me. I listened to this album through my teens, 20s, and 30s. Bowie's drag was an omniseual alien rock star sent to Earth as a messenger. Ziggy Stardust changed how performers could create larger-than-life personas and bring existential themes to popular music.

Writing past midnight. There's something magical about the quiet hours when the world sleeps. It's when my mind feels most alive, free from distractions. Some of my most honest and raw poems have emerged during these nocturnal sessions, illuminated only by the glow of my desktop.

#### Name

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#### Vocation

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