

Eileen Myles on performance, landscape, and vernacular



January 5, 2021 - Eileen Myles is a poet, playwright, writer, performer, teacher, dog lover, onetime "Openly Female" write-in presidential candidate, instagram user, and artist. Their new book is called [Afterglow: a dog memoir](#).

As told to Amy Rose Spiegel, 3482 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Independence](#), [Focus](#).

I wanted to ask you about persona and voice, and about choosing, in your "dog memoir," [Afterglow](#), to write as Rosie, your dog, or as Bo Jean Harmonica, an alter ego. How do those personas come to be? When do you decide on a certain voice for a certain kind of writing or thinking?

The voice comes first. I'm going along, and suddenly it feels like something or somebody else is occupying this writing. And it's not like I haven't had the feeling before; I just really didn't know who the character was.

What's weird about writing is that, in some ways, you've been sowing what you reap—you just don't know exactly when and how you sowed it. At various points in the '70s or '80s when I would try and go off drugs, I would read books of theosophy. There was a theosophical occult bookstore called [Weiser's](#) on Broadway, and my girlfriend worked there. They had these very special dark-blue books with very plain white font—this whole series on strange discipleship, like post-[Madame Blavatsky](#), early 20th-century [Yates](#), and [Krishnamurti](#), but weirder. It was all those people, from all these different strains of thinking, walking on the beach together and having notions of spirituality. When I would try and not be messed up, I read. I would smoke pot, drink tea, read, and go into these other spaces.

All that knowledge just parked someplace in my brain. I've never been interested in characters, but I started to get a little loose about who else Rosie could be, or what other domains might she be traveling in without her body through space. All the [theosophy] stuff started to come up in the text, and at a certain point, I thought, *Is this me writing, or is this another character?* I slowly started to imagine her as being one of these early 19th century women, and that maybe she would give herself a strange name. It was like, *If I was such a nut, what would I call myself?* Bo Jean Harmonica seemed androgynous, and I love harmonicas.

Renaming and re-identifying makes me think of your famous "[An American Poem](#)", and how you talk about evading what you claim is your family name: Kennedy. Throughout your career, writ large, you've seemed to periodically decide on a different identity. Is that something that you feel is consistently important to you as you write?

There's a part of me that still enjoys lying once in a while, when I realize I can get away with it. I have this quasi-commitment to writing as if I'm present—as if what I'm doing is speech, as if I'm telling you a story, and as if I am I, or me. With the [Kennedy poem](#), I was doing the thing you did when you were a kid. When we used to hitchhike in high school to go to concerts, we would put on these fake British accents or fake French, and it was ridiculous—we were these little girls who were gonna try and ask the person to buy liquor for them.

So I was talking to somebody about my upbringing. I said that I came from a wealthy background and she was like, *[shocked]* "What?" I said, "Yeah, I know, I'm kind of embarrassed by it, but it's something that's really a huge part of me, and I don't talk about." As I was saying it, I was watching her take it in, and I was so excited. Right there, I thought, *This could be a poem, I could run with this*. And I thought—I could be a Kennedy! The whole thing was like a joke. I mean... to me, everything is a joke.

You know, I think of a joke to hold the thing that I'm laboring with or fooling around with, then I can really run with it, 'cause I can see what its boundaries are or what its possibilities are. So Bo Jean was that, and even, finally, Rosie was that. I was at MacDowell and I had written the part about "[My Father came again as a Dog](#)" and people were like, "Is Rosie gonna speak?" I had sworn I'm not that kind of writer, where the dog's gonna speak. But then I was like, *Okay, everything is a joke—or a workshop. What are the circumstances in which she would speak?* I thought, well, certainly if the puppets that I still have from childhood had a talkshow and invited her on, then she would speak.

I especially notice the way that your lines are enjambed, or can lack punctuation. I edited you once, and you were like, "Your notes are too right-brained. This is how I write. It's supposed to be like ringing a bell." Do you write things specifically to support how they sound out loud?

When I figured out that I could write as if I was speaking, then I could write. Before that, it was kind of another activity. It was sort of trying to figure out what would be writing, to you. When I realized I could perform as me, [as I sound in] speech, then it flowed. I trust the logic of sound and of vernacular. People are just discovering those things now, in a way. There's a lot of talk about vernacular and writing which hadn't been considered "writing," [including] around race and ethnicity. Like, "People of color can write in vernacular—white people don't." Of course, that's not true. Classism demanded that there be one kind of white speech [in popular writing]. [Now, vernacular] has been slowly kind of authorized, as a way of writing. I consider myself part of that.

I read a long time ago that there was a preschool in the '60s, in the UK, called [Summerhill](#). It was a free school where bad kids would go, and they'd break things and act out. [The founder, [A.S. Neill](#)]'s idea was, with freedom, you'd stop doing that—and same with language. What he discovered, though, was, no matter what kind of language kids came in with and whatever they disposed of, they just liked saying fuck. He concluded that it was the perfect Anglo-Saxon word. English is composed of Latinate, Anglo-Saxon, and lots of other influences, too—but fuck is just those beautiful hard consonants.

The voiceless velar stop—that hard K—is so satisfying.

Even shithead Bannon, when he calls people he doesn't like cucks, it's because sound counts. Those words become important because it was part of how they were tooled to take a place in the language.

I'm a writer—I can make mistakes [in my work]. I can go off, I can do wrong, I can need to be edited at some points. But, mostly, I feel like, if you stick with the sound, then there's a natural line. It's like music. I don't want to stop it. Unless I can jump from [one point] to [another], like in a film, which I'm really interested in as an editing practice. If you know, either visually or sonically, where you are, then you can leap to another equally solid place. [John Ashbery](#) does that. We all learned so much from him.

In [an essay about Ashbery](#), you mention encountering a characterization, by a straight professor, of his work's "evasiveness," when, really, the professor just means "gay," like homosexuality is something he should want to try to hide. Do you see other tropes within how gay poetry is perceived by straight critics?

I'm a victim of it, too. The discomfort is that people would prefer you to be loutish and [Bukowski](#)-like. They would like to read you that way rather than to look for anything more subtle in the work, because that's a way you can dismiss gay people—or any kind of other people. The acceptable way to be gay in literature is to write in metrics and to write, essentially, British poetry in English. For a long time, the only gay poets who were known were people who write in formal verse. It's almost like you have a nice belt on. Like saying, "In a way I'm just like you. It's just gay content, but inside the same body as you have." Which is just a lie. We are different. I mean, everybody's different, and not just because you're gay.

There are subjects you have certain loyalties to and seem to resurrect throughout your career, like your dogs and New York. I feel a similar sense of allegiance in lines like, "[I would die for my country if that included everything, my friends, and my dogs and all the lakes and ponds](#)." What commitments have you kept, subject-wise, as a writer?

In a way, [those lines are] the beginning of my list of what matters. The first time that I spent real time in nature as an adult, I thought, *Oh, it's just like writing in the city. You just use it*. You use what's there, and it becomes urbanized. By looking at it, it becomes art. It moves into the terrain of the poem. Nature becomes cosmopolitan.

Landscape is what's most important. I like nature and the sky. The sky is just always there. It's a big, beautiful, empty place to go up. Clouds come upon you at different times. You could be in the city all the time, and you don't see the sky, then, suddenly, you're in the country and there it is—it's just, like, this creature. Or the ocean, or now, for me, it's

mountains. I was like, "Mountains? What the heck are *mountains*?" It becomes an exploration.

When you read, I feel like you always know when the audience is going to laugh. If they don't, you sometimes will actually say, "It's okay—you can if you want to." And then they're relieved to do it. You talk in the middle of your poems, too. Why did that become something that you started doing?

When you read a poem, there are pauses built into it. Everything we write, we also *don't* write. There are moments where you slow down for a second, and you're like a little machine that's still running, then you say something else. When you read, do you acknowledge those moments? For a long time, I didn't, because I didn't want to seem pretentious. Being female, too, I didn't want to be stopped—you anticipate interruption. Slowly, I started to give myself permission, the more completely secure I became with reading.

Also, [the more secure I became] with being ugly. For a long time, I'd be minimal [in my expression], 'cause you're reading, and you're aware everybody's looking at you. I thought, *What I'm working with is probably okay. I don't know what else to look like*. But sometimes you're really trying to exude the language. There's a name for it: embouchure. I had an amazing conversation with a composer recently. We got into talking about when bass players make faces: They are letting themselves be completely in service to the instrument. When I first came to New York, I worked at the [West End Bar](#). I was in the Jazz Room, and I watched guys do all that stuff night after night. Their perfect comfort with not wondering about whether they were funny-looking was interesting. I started to realize that part of my unwillingness [to read the way I wanted to] was to let things look the way they sound—to squeeze the sounds out of me the way I had to, to make it sound the way I heard it, would make me contort and distort. At a certain point, I thought, *I don't care if I look ugly. I'm playing my instrument here*.

Doing performance, I went through a whole thing of memorizing poems, standing there reciting, realizing I had no body language, then starting to improvise. I realized that, when I talked [in conversation], I moved my hands. I slowly imported that into reading, 'cause I thought, *If I were telling you a story, I would be moving my hands*. I did a reading last night, and I saw myself miming what I was saying. I thought, *Man, I would be so afraid that this would be so corny if I was in my twenties or thirties*. Because poets were intellectuals. You wanted to be taken seriously, and the second you used your body, you started to get labeled differently. I thought, *Let's be honest: the writing is a performance. Why shouldn't the reading be a performance?* So I'm just allowing the body in.

As an editor, as on [The New Fuck You](#), the collection of work by lesbian writers, and the director of [The Poetry Project](#) in the East Village, you bring people together to make important, discrete works. What appeals to you about that, and why does it feel necessary?

That we become a collection—that we become a community that you would invite others to. Every community invites another community. And that we find peace in a community where we didn't imagine these people together, once they are together. I did a series where [Lia Gangitano](#) invited me to curate a series. I called it "Scout." The idea was to always mix up the genres a bit and have a filmmaker and a poet, or a musician, or two poets, and a performer. I thought, *These people don't know these people, and they should*. What you're really organizing is not the front of the room, but the other side of the room. You're pushing buttons: *If I bring this person, these people will come*. If I want to find somebody in New York, I know, when I look at an event, they'll probably go to it if they're in town. That's the whole nature-knowing [a room's] content by being here long enough.

Do you feel that's happening in newer, burgeoning spaces and communities?

My friend [Adam Fitzgerald](#), who does the [Ashbery Home School](#), is very good at organizing people through readings, teachings, and always another art form, whether it's a dancer or somebody getting invited through yoga or drawing. He's curating beautifully, and in a nonwhite way, which is great. Why are we in America all white people? Only white people were asked to weigh in on [John Ashbery](#). I was like, "What the fuck?" I don't get it. Any black poet who wanted to say what they had to say about John Ashbery had to do it alone. They had to do it individually. I read [John Keane](#); I read [Rickey Laurentiis](#). I'm sure there are more.

The same with females. MoMA contacted me and said that [Abbi Jacobson](#) of [Broad City](#) was doing this thing—they had curated a pile of works that they thought people didn't see much, and she would go with one other person and talk about the work and be videotaped. And I was like, "Great. Why me?" They said, "Well, we thought you would do [Carolee Schneemann](#)," and I go, "Oh no." I was like, "I mean, I like their work, but what else do you got? Let me see what the list is." And then they showed me the list and 15 out of 19 were guys. I said, "Well, this is strange. I feel uncomfortable with your project." And they were like, "Well, that's why we want you." To co-sign. I said, "I'm busy."

If I'm getting upscaled in the literary world, then I'm gonna use that to say stuff. What's interesting is, it still gets erased. The [Louisiana Literature Festival](#) in Denmark wanted the famous people who came to do an audio tour of some part of their sculpture garden. And every single piece was by a guy. There was one British sound artist who was a woman. There was a piece of hers there. Of course, it's *invisible*. I said, "No, I can't do this." And, again: "Well, that's why we want..." Always, they say that. "We thought your participation would change that—so you could put a spin on it." No.

I was in Marfa and I was invited to dinner and Abbi Jacobson was there. We met and we liked each other so much, and she told me they didn't tell her that I *refused*. I don't know what she thought the reason was—that I was busy, I couldn't do it. It was really great to meet her and tell her, but I thought, *How interesting, that they would hide my protest*. It's not enough to say no, you've got to say no and do it in a public thought forum, because they will hide it [otherwise].

Many people of color are doing this when they're asked to be the only person of color on a panel—they're like, "No." I'm taking a page from people of color now.

Certain people think diversity means a white woman. "Just one white lady—we don't have to worry about it otherwise."

Yeah. Or one woman of color. Get it all.

What are the consistencies in your process as a writer? Where and when do you write?

Afterglow took 10 years to write. It's not because I was nose to the grindstone for 10 years. I thought about it vaguely for years, and it wasn't until Rosie was dying eight years later that I began to write the book.

I write in a very floaty way. I write in a very modular way. I wrote it and published *Cool for You* in five years, and that was amazing for me. Part of the fantasy of that book was that laptops were new then. You could have a computer that was not a big monitor. It was like, "You're kidding." That was wild. So I decided I would write this book all over the world. I traveled a huge amount—I was in Poland. I was having a manic year, and I just wrote fast as hell, all the time. I was writing two books at the same time, so it had something to do with my pacing at that moment in time.

Whether it was a five year act of dispersed creation or an intense one, there's still a moment where, it's like, *Okay, now it has to coalesce*. In that period, I go to an artist colony or I really set up some borders for time like, "I have a month," or, "I have two months and I'm going here, and I want to schedule."

I did this with my new screenplay. I went to Marfa, and I had no obligations that month. I got up in the morning, drank coffee, took my dog for a run, and I meditated. It's just like, "I have one habit." And then I began to work. That's the best me. That person can finish a book. I suppose, talking about persona and all this, there's a ritual that I need in order to be the person who can complete things. The person who digs—the doggy character who digs up stuff and finds a bone. It's all over the place. There are bones everywhere.

How brave do you have to be to be an artist? Do you have to leave other, straighter kinds of life behind and scrap for years? What level of commitment does it take?

I don't know what the *not-being* is. If you decided that this kind of writing life, this art life, this trying to do it and your own way at your own pace is not what you're gonna do, then what is it you're thinking to do? I feel like I'm like this because I'm no other way. I'm kind of a crazy person. I don't think I would be alive if I stayed in the suburbs and drank myself to death. To like high school? I mean, what was the plan? I'm here because this makes sense. And every poem made me more secure in the space that I was making.

Do you find provision and communion in publishing your writing? Do you feel like that is responsible for the relationships you're able to have?

Absolutely. Everything you put out becomes a magnet. Making stuff is an editing tool. You're gonna draw people to you, and you're gonna repel people.

Essential Eileen Myles:

[Cool For You](#)

[Chelsea Girls](#)

[I Must be Living Twice: New and Selected Poems](#)

[Inferno: A Poet's Novel](#)

[Afterglow: a dog memoir](#)

Name

Eileen Myles

Vocation

Writer

Fact

Eileen Myles is a poet, playwright, writer, performer, teacher, dog lover, onetime "Openly Female" write-in presidential candidate, instagram user, and artist. Their new book is called *Afterglow: a dog memoir*.



Photo by Samantha Marble