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As told to Loré Yessuff, 2063 words.

Tags: Poetry, Writing, Process, Inspiration, Beginnings.

On keeping memories alive in your work

Author Natasha Rao discusses poetry as a chance to slow down, fossilize feelings, and as a site of transformation. To start, I wanted to know about your background and how you got started writing poetry.

I grew up in suburban New Jersey, a very green grass, bike ride, cul-de-sac childhood. I spent a lot of time outside and always loved reading and writing. I would fill up composition notebooks with short stories about my brother for fun. Then I think in high school is when I started to seriously consider writing and literature as my path. I had a really amazing teacher in my sophomore year of high school who took us to the Dodge Poetry Festival in Newark. We saw all these real-life poets, and it seemed so glamorous. That's the first time I was like, "Oh, you could be a Capital P Poet? That's a real thing to be?" That was a moment where something clicked. Later, in college, I decided to study literary arts as well as environmental science, pursuing that same early combination of writing and the outdoors. I was very lucky to be nudged by excellent, enthusiastic professors all the way who told me "You can and should keep doing this."

What has been the most surprising thing you've encountered so far?

I didn't realize how many people in how many different places actually enjoy and care about poetry. I had thought, "Even within this little sector that I'm in, it's such a small niche." Then, after the book came out, once I could do events in-person, I did a lot of traveling. A couple of months ago, I was in Indianapolis and then Portland and Las Vegas for poetry events. I'm always struck by how many random people will take the time to drive to a reading for someone who they don't know personally. That feels really surprising in a good way.

We tend to think that poetry is only admired in the coastal cities where all the big magazines are, but it's beloved everywhere. I'm sure that you saw the article that *The New York Times* published a while ago about the death of poetry...Why do you think poetry is still worthwhile?

That article was upsetting. But then the bright side of that was seeing everyone's pushback on Twitter and the conversations it sparked. First of all, poetry is such an old, timeless art form and I don't see how that would ever go away because it's lasted for so long. It's not like this quick fad. There's this alchemy that happens when you're reading a poem. You can change the way that you're thinking and the way that you're seeing, even just for a second. That's so valuable.

Even if there are different directions that some contemporary poetry is going toward, I don't think any of that is less valid or detracts from what poetry is. You can read a contemporary poem, and you can read a poem from the 1800s, and they're in conversation with each other still. That link, I think, will go forward in the future as well.

I loved what you said about its timelessness. It's not just a fad. Especially in current times with all cultural fads that come in and out within, like, two weeks.

Yeah. I think there's something, too. It feels like, to me at least, things are getting increasingly more chaotic. There are so many different points of stimulation. A poem is a chance to slow down and enter this timeless space where you're away from all of that for a second. I think that's important because there are

always a million things happening. For me, poetry is definitely a way to slow down, recenter, tune out everything for a moment.

You mentioned that you wrote short stories and fiction when you were younger. Is there something about poetry versus longer-form prose?

After *Latitude* came out, I had this period where I was like, "I'll never write a poem again. I can't do it. I'm lost." So I started writing more prose and getting back to that because I felt like I was exercising a different muscle. By doing that, I noticed what the actual process was doing for me. I always think of poetry as a little site of transformation. I always enter a poem—either as a reader or a writer—not knowing where I'll end up, and then I exit in a completely different place. The movement and change that happens are different because they can happen in such a condensed space. It feels a bit like falling in love—you blink and suddenly the whole world is new.

With a novel, sure, you'll end up in a different place, but it takes a lot longer, and there's a lot more going on. Whereas, a poem feels like an instantaneous encounter that you have, and then you leave changed. While writing it, I feel like I'm doing something different. Whereas, when I'm writing prose, I can be less precise and go in a million directions and be more capacious in my thinking. That's fun, also.

To me, they feel quite different, but then, of course, as I say that, I'm thinking, "Well, there's prose poetry and things like that." That nebulous space is really exciting. I think that's probably where I'll start going in new work because I want to see what can I do with long lines and sentences, and how that changes things.

Your collection really embodied the essence of impermanence and the wistful, bittersweet nature of time and having to see things pass as you're experiencing them. I'm wondering if there were any questions—whether artistic or personal—that you sought to grapple with while writing *Latitude*.

I have always had this anticipatory grief, so it's hard to hone in on the present sometimes because I can already see, as you said, that moment leaving. So much of why I write poetry is to combat that. Not that a poem is freezing a moment in time, per se, but it is keeping that version of me alive. That particular time still feels elevated somehow, and I can't forget it because I've turned it into a poem. In the opening poem of the book, I ask how to fossilize a feeling and sustain it in amber. I didn't write that poem thinking it would be the first poem in the book, but when I was organizing it, I looked at that line and realized, "Oh, that's what the whole book is trying to do—fossilize this feeling."

Sometimes I write poetry for self-interrogation and try to discover those revelations. But I think the driving force behind this book, which you picked up on perfectly, was just trying to save all these things and keep them somewhere. I might move away from a place or end a relationship, or people in my life may leave, but I can always return to that precise moment of how I was feeling at that time in the poem. The book was born out of that impulse. I guess the leading question, as you asked, was just: What do I do with all these memories, and how do I preserve them in one place?

Wow, that's so beautiful. I don't know if I'd ever encountered a whole collection that really interrogated that question and made light of the mixed emotions that come with being like, "Oh, no, I'm having such a lovely time, but also, all of this is ending." That's why I was so floored by it. I feel like you did a really excellent job.

Thank you.

Are those questions still guiding your current writing projects, or do you feel like you have—not answered them—but come to peace with them, I guess?

I've been thinking about that, too, because again, when I was writing that first collection, I wasn't really thinking about any guiding ideas. Then, afterward, I was able to look at the manuscript and say, "Oh, this is what I'm thinking about. This is what is important to me."

If the initial book is dealing more with time and interiority and the past, then my [current project] is dealing more with place and newness. I found that opening myself up more to experience and to encountering the world in ways that maybe I wouldn't have done before, like driving across the country and talking to strangers and saying yes to different opportunities has led to me writing more in a way that I don't usually.

****If a lot of my past poems were more a poetics of watchfulness, now I feel like I've stepped over the line. **I'm trying to become a poet of being in a moment, in a place, and capturing that. **That's loosely what I'm doing. But, we'll see how it goes. It feels fun to write from a different impulse, about desire and pleasure. **It's nice, once the debut collection is out, to have this uncharted freedom to play around and see what happens.**

Have you read the book *A Hundred Lovers* by Richie Hofmann?

I have.

I instantly thought of that book as you were talking because I feel like he did such a great job illustrating the sensuality of a place.

I want to revisit that book because I loved it. Now that you said that, I'm like, "Oh, yeah. That's what I'm trying to do."

Speaking of books, what are some books that you've enjoyed in the past few months or years, and what did you adore about them?

One thing that I've really tried to do recently after having my book come out is to read the books of my peers and my friends and promote them widely because I think it's so important.

Another book that deals with place like this is *Earth Room* by Rachel Mannheimer, who is a friend of mine. It's so brilliant. She does a similar thing, playing with those longer lines, and it feels like the whole book is one poem. That's very cool to me, working on more of a project book.

Right now I'm working through the diaries of Anaïs Nin. It's really fascinating to read. Once you've read more polished work by someone, then go to their diary and see, I guess, almost the blueprint for what became poems later.

I just read Ada Limón's new book, *The Hurting Kind*, which is really good. I loved Sandra Lim's *The Curious Thing* a lot. And I'm a huge Bhanu Kapil fan, so I reread her collection *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* probably once every four months.

Those are some good suggestions. I also love what you were saying about the *Diaries of Anaïs Nin*—the idea of taking these raw passages of emotion—it reminded me of the Sheila Heti series in *The New York Times* a while ago.

Oh, yeah. That was amazing. I loved that.

What do you think are the most underrated and overrated tools for writers and poets?

Yeah. I mean, anytime I hear a rule or some kind of generic statement that's like, "Never start a poem with a question," or "Always end on an image," that is a red flag to me because I think the beauty of poetry is that you have the freedom to break all the rules. For instance, I love adjectives. I feel like, during the process of writing, people will always say, "Oh, my god. Why are there so many adjectives?" But I love them. I think anytime someone says, "Never do something," or "Always do something," that is not valuable advice because you can always find an instance where that's actually done well.

I think going outside is underrated. Whenever I've been stuck on a poem I just leave wherever I am, step outside, go for a walk, and I feel like my brain starts to work again or, work differently. People say to do all these elaborate things for writer's block: Read this, read that. Talk to these people. Go to this workshop. But I think, just going outside and getting fresh air, for me, has always done the trick.

Natasha Rao Recommends:

The Sopranos

Growing plants from seed

Putting anchovies on almost anything

Getting lost on hikes or walks

Handwritten notes and letters

Name

Natasha Rao

Vocation

poet

Fact

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