

On giving yourself permission



Poet and musician Elaine Kahn on the power of language, unpacking the idea of professionalism in poetry, and why having a sense of humor is an important discipline.

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As told to Leah Mandel, 3203 words.

Tags: Poetry, Process, Income, Inspiration, Identity, Adversity.

What is it about poetry? What drew you to this medium?

I pretty much always wrote poetry. I have journals going back to when I was in second grade. They're filled with very bad poetry. I always read a lot, so it was natural for language to become a medium for me. I am a poet, for sure, but I consider myself, first and foremost, an artist. Language is just a medium I have the most mastery over.

I'm really interested in language and its flexibility. Especially as I've grown more aware of how the world is structured, and understand how language can really be weaponized, it feels important to me to investigate that, understand it, learn about it, and talk about it. How language is manipulated and misused by people in power. That it's important to question. Like anything else, it's not fixed, it's not a stable medium.

People tend to approach language like it's truth. An example I use when I'm teaching is the word "peace." We call police "officers of the 'peace.'" Protesters get charged for disturbing the "peace." It's important to our culture to "keep the 'peace.'" But what we call "peace" is not a state of egalitarian tranquility. What they mean by "peace" is just the status quo. I think it can be instinctive to hear "peace" and assume that because it's something that was assigned, that that's what it means, and that's a positive thing. But they just named it that. That is the power that language has that I want to be able to use. And I want other people, who aren't sociopathic fascists, to be able to use it as well.

Tell me more about "trash." You use that word a lot, and talk about "throwing away" frequently, especially in *Women In Public*. In the poem "Sixty Five Percent Of What I Throw Away Is Compost," you write, "writing is a form of / throwing out." And "Trash is power / trash is open," in "Clown, Grimacer, Floormat, Yesman, Entertainer." And the book ends with, "I throw the book away."

Anything I say concerning why I make decisions in poetry is a little bit of a fiction, because it's like me trying to approximate something that is, honestly, more mysterious to me. But, in general, I'm interested in what is rejected or discarded. Most of the objects that populate my life are from the trash. Like, the chair I'm sitting in right now, which is this beautiful leather chaise lounge that I found on the street. My computer, right now, is balanced on a water stand I got at Goodwill. I really like things that are very specific and beautiful. But I don't have very much money, so I have to be creative to have a lot of stuff.

I think I'm also just interested in waste and garbage. Refuse as a process, a byproduct of a behemoth system. I became very interested in it especially when I lived on a sailboat when I was in my late teens. It was a 132-foot Staysail Schooner, one of the tall ships. It was a working science research vessel. I was on it for two months and because we were at sea, on the open ocean, you kept all your trash with you. I became very, very aware of how

much waste I created.

My friend Tatiana Luboviski-Acosta, a really incredible poet, sends Christmas presents every year that are trash that they've found, and they're very beautiful.

Speaking of money, a while ago you tweeted, "I'm against the professionalization of poetry." But then, you are a professional poet, right?

It's really wild. I am a professional poet in the sense that that's how I make my living. I feel surprised and glad in many ways that I am able to support myself as a poet. I never thought I'd be able to—and to say I support myself as a poet is pretty arguable. I don't support myself as a poet, I support myself teaching poetry.

But I'm not professional in the sense that I think professionalization and doing something in order to support yourself are different. I'm not interested in engaging the parts of the poetry world that are like, "Get my poems published in the right places." I'm not really interested in respectability.

I don't want poets to become normal people. I don't want poetry to become something where you play a political game and try to position yourself right. I don't want poetry and poets to become smoothed over into some field where there is pressure to be appropriate, or to "pay your dues." I want poetry to be something that is on the margins of the art world, the literature world, and the academic world. Because there's freedom there, even as much as there is precarity.

The idea that people would be assholes in order to succeed at poetry makes no sense to me. From what I can tell, the only thing poetry can give you is the satisfaction of feeling excited by your work. If you're motivated by something other than that, I don't really understand it, and I don't think you're going to get what you want. People, I guess, do get a certain amount of fame or social capital as poets, but nobody I know.

The idea of getting what you want is very interesting to me. I don't know what I want, ever. Are you doing what you want to be doing, as a "professional poet"?

It's so exciting when you are able to identify what you want. I love teaching poetry. I would love to teach a few classes a year. I'm able to support myself, barely, by teaching poetry. There is a lot of instability in my life that is difficult for me. It's cool that it's taken off a bit. But I also wish that it was more possible to have a safe and healthy life as a person without very much money.

I love what I do, but I don't love the stress of worrying about making rent every month. That's the most honest thing I can say. I get a ton out of teaching poetry. I love my students tremendously. I hope it's made my writing better. It has changed my writing. It's made me a lot more capable when it comes to talking about writing, something I really wasn't very good at before. I have so many beliefs and opinions about language that I had never pushed myself to articulate before. It's been really important for me.

How long does it usually take you to write a poem?

I'm a very slow writer. Every once in a while I write a poem quickly, but my process of writing usually isn't very straightforward. I tend to take a lot of notes and compile a bunch of language that I then approach as material that I can use in whatever way I want. Going from when I start taking notes that become a poem, to it actually appearing as a poem—it takes four to six months, I would say. I have poems that I've been trying to finish for years. Sometimes I write in a form called a sestina. You have to labor over the language and it takes many, many hours of very direct working on the poem. I'm finishing up a new manuscript right now, and there's a poem in it that that took me the largest number of hours that I've ever spent on a poem.

How do you know when a poem is done? How do you decide?

There's a sense of resolution. Usually, when I'm working on a poem, I have a sensation that it's there, underneath

all this stuff, and I'm trying to work it into a place where it feels true. Where the music is right. Maybe not that I've answered my question, but that I've gotten some new insight into my question.

One of the things that I've been able to articulate to myself since teaching so much over the past few years, is that the way I approach writing poems has a lot to do with trying to understand. And I have various questions or various things that I am trying to understand. Often, a poem is a written reflection of some sort of psychological or intellectual process I'm undergoing, trying to make sense out of things that are very difficult for me to make sense of.

I'm just meeting you. But, I follow you on social media, I read your poetry, et cetera. You seem to have this intense confidence. In your body, in your writing—you have this totally concrete sense of self. But then, also in your poetry, you discuss how you're not really sure. Like, "What is true?" about yourself. Do you think you know who you are?

There's not a platonic realm where my ideal self exists, untouched. I know who I am. People describe me as confident. It's not exactly that I feel confident, so much as I love to have fun. I try to find humor and fun in all different elements. I've always been a bit of a ham in a certain way. Part of it is, this is who I am. I don't want to be afraid of who I am. It seems best to just embrace it, and find the pleasure in it, and try to take the things that I'm good at, and the things that I'm curious about and satisfied by, and figure out how much I can do with them. Anything I'm interested in, I'm like, "What can I do with it? How can I turn this interest and this skill into something? How far can I take it? Can I get better at it? Can I combine it with other things?"

There have been these horrible fires in California recently. Specifically the fire in Paradise, California, which is devastating. I was reading about the response of our government, and the implications of these fires, and I felt so awful, and powerless, and sad. I was like, "All I've really got is poems. Maybe I will make a little fundraiser." And I put this post on the internet: "Anyone who wants a handwritten print of any of my poems, donate to this fundraiser. And for more money, I will write you your own poem." Within a couple of days I had raised almost \$1,000. That's so much more money than I could have donated myself, and so much more than I thought I could raise. It was, "This is the thing I have that I can do, and I want to make that into something that isn't just about myself." That way of looking at the things I like about myself or just feel like are "me," is something I try to do, more often than not.

Mostly I just think I'm funny. That's the main way I'm confident. I just laugh my ass off, all the time, constantly cracking up at my life, even when it sucks.

How do you keep that humor going, when everything is so dark all the time?

It's a discipline, to some extent. Like anything else, you have to choose. I was not always able to be this way. When I was younger, I got really, really overwhelmed to the point of paralysis. It was not a healthy way to live. "I'm not gonna kill myself, so how can I keep loving to be alive?" Which I do. I do love to be alive. A lot of it is about laughing, and following my own weird delight, and giving myself permission to pursue the things I want, even if they are idiotic.

I try not to think about it too much. If I were to ask, "Is this dumb? Should I not do this?" I wouldn't do a lot of the things that I am most proud of, because they're so stupid. It's true. I've had a loose rule for a long time, that if I had an idea, and I can't think of a way that it will hurt anyone or make their world materially worse, I have to pursue it. I have to realize it. I have to just do it. And so I do. Sometimes, it will be some weird outfit I've come up with. Or it will be, "Walk into that wall. Just to do it. It's just right there, you thought of it." Other times it will be like, "Make a puppet show," or, "Make a song."

Do you still make music? Are you still interested in Horsebladder?

I haven't written songs over the last couple of years, and it is something that I would really, really love to do again. But I just honestly don't have time. It's very difficult for me to put time into things that are unpaid

forms of creativity, which really sucks. But it's all I can do to keep up with my writing. It's really too bad, because the truth is my writing and my music really nourish each other. I miss that relationship.

Time is such an issue.

And also space. That's a big part of it. I made music most when I was living in Iowa. I had a whole basement I could play in. When I lived in Western Mass, I lived with musicians and there was a whole practice space. It's been hard since then. I've never had a lot of space while living on my own. But I would really love to—and I think I will, at some point—have a space that's more conducive to that.

That's the thing about writing, right? You don't need gear for it.

It's the most portable medium. You can do it anywhere. No matter where I am, I can be writing stuff down. Language is everywhere. And if you just record it, you're working. For someone who is absolutely obsessed with being productive at all times, it's appealing. I'm a very lazy person in a lot of ways. I like that I can be working when I'm lying in bed with my laptop.

Where does that desire to be productive come from?

My mother. She used to wake me up on weekends with, "Get out of bed. I can't stand this. Be productive!" In my family, the literal worst thing you could do was watch television during the day. There's an entire rubric of which activities are productive, and which are unproductive. I am totally unable to relax. It's all my mother's fault. I would get in trouble a lot for reading when I was young. I would read novels all the time. My mom would get frustrated. She loved that I read, but she's very Midwestern. She wanted me to be outside, cleaning up the yard.

Reading doesn't count as being productive?

I think it would have if I hadn't done it so much. I'm still like this. I have to be careful about reading novels because I find them so truly absorbing that I literally stop paying attention to the rest of the world. To this day, if I let myself, I just won't do anything else. I won't even eat. I won't pee. I will just read and forget about everything. I'll stop caring about the world very quickly. I've never found another escape that's so total. Maybe falling in love. Falling in love, like reading novels, is like the most absolute disappearance.

In the essay you did for Frieze in June, you wrote, "Sometimes working on a poem feels like trying to explain a dream to someone; halfway through you realize you don't really know where any of it is leading or why you started talking about it in the first place, yet you are compelled to carry on." What compels you?

If I'm going to continue with my own metaphor—which, perhaps, I should discard—I think when you have a dream, you have this profound sense that there was something significant about it. Like, "Trust me, there's something here." I think it's a similar feeling of wanting to understand something that is incomprehensible.

I think poems can feel like that, especially when you're in the middle of them and you're like, "What is this even about?" I have all this text and this is idiotic. But I often have this sense of, "I want to understand it." I know that if I just keep working, I'll find the right thing to push on, and all of a sudden it will fall into place. It will make sense and I will understand what it is that has been hovering in the corner of my mind, and that is true.

That is what happens. I just keep working, keep working, and keep working and all of a sudden I'm like, "That's what it is. That's what I've been trying to say. That's why I was following this. It was to arrive here, at this moment. Now I've learned something I either didn't know, or didn't know I knew." That's a really incredible feeling. It's a moment where—talk about peace—I feel genuine peace and excitement in the moments after I finish a poem that feels real to me.

Elaine Kahn recommends:

Donating to Books Through Bars

My friend, the writer Emma Borges-Scott once sent me a transcript of a graduation speech given by Marilynne Robinson in 2011. It changed the way I think of literature, of its power. Here is an excerpt: *A few years ago I did a reading and question and answer at a women's prison in Pocatello, Idaho. At the end of it all, a woman said, "Tell your students to write good books. They are all we live for," and all the other women nodded. Nothing more seriously, even gravely, meant has ever been said to me in my life. I have thought of what that woman said any number of times. If I have not repeated it to all my students, this is an omission for which I sincerely repent. I will do better in the future.*

The new Wonder Press magazine

Cedar blocks for your closet. I don't care if they are ineffective at killing moths...they smell so good.
Orchids

I was having trouble coming up with #5 so I looked on twitter to see what I have "recommended" and here are the search results:

Lately I've taken to working on sestinas over breakfast—highly recommend. It's like a crossword puzzle but more fun

if u pay taxes and are an artist and u are not currently filing a schedule c, allow me to strongly recommend that u start

If yr looking for a foolproof method of stealing neighbors' garden stones I recommend: broad daylight, in yr underwear

If you've never stared yourself right in the eyes as you fainted, I recommend it

I recommend altering the garment until no longer wearable

I've never given a wedding present in my life. Wld recommend

Also recommend not wearing a bra or underwear

Name

Elaine Kahn

Vocation

Poet, Musician

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