

# On moving toward a stranger version of yourself



Poet and writer aracelis girmay discusses objects as energy channels, writing after her father's death, poems as protection, and how to keep being alive.

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As told to Diana Arterian, 2436 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Writing](#), [Adversity](#), [Process](#), [Family](#), [Mental health](#).

**I'm going to start out with what is the most stressful question I ever get (usually from somebody who's not a poet). How did you become a creative maker and why poetry?**

That's a difficult question. It just occurred to me that people have misheard me and thought I said "poultry."

**Oh!**

And their responses are often so much more open to poultry than to poetry.

**I feel like it's the equivalent of telling somebody that I'm a mime. "Oh, people still do that?"**

[\*laughs\*] Yes, completely. So, I came to writing poetry because I loved reading. Even in middle school, I just loved reading out loud. But really it was the slowness of the page. It could have momentum, but something was stilled and I could go back and reach the frequency again. Reading felt like a kind of thinking I could exist in. And so by the time I was in high school and trying to figure out some really hard things, it was the slow thinking I could do on a page where I could keep track of things and go back and wonder about them or push against some questions. Now the page is where things are slow enough for me to really think in a way that feels necessary and enlivening.

**Is it about existential internal inquiry? Or greater emotional comprehension?**

All of it. In the beginning, I was often bewildered by the world I was in. With anything that felt painful or difficult, I somehow got the idea that poetry was the place to put it. I didn't come from a family of people who thought of themselves as poets or who read poetry—they read other kinds of things. My dad loved math and history. My mom too. But my idea as a younger person was that poems were small and full of vitality, but I could put my whole hand around the text. There was so much that I was just trying to understand about who I was in the world and certain struggles, family pains. And so it felt like poetry was a small place to work things out. I think differently about that now, but had the idea then that poetry was a place where I could think things out in a way that wouldn't overwhelm.

**As a container.**

Yes, and the ways that [Adrienne Rich talks about form](#) as a younger poet. She says something like, "In those years formalism was part of the strategy—like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn't pick up

barehanded." I'm not sure that it's an essay I'd recommend—I should reread it—but Rich's reflection on her practice and process is interesting and her description of how she thought of received forms then has stayed with me.

**To that end, in your poetry, you write about concerns as varied as the Middle Passage, the death of a parent, your own experiences as a parent, immigration crises. These are painful or fraught topics that are, to me anyway, a bit of a mess. How do you approach material that feels nuclear or impossible to touch?**

I'm interested in making work that is mysterious to me. There's a line or an image that won't let me go or that I can't let go of that I write into asking a series of questions or following its musics. And because everything is everything, I never know where I'll end up. For example, I'm thinking about hearing a neighbor's child crying back when we were in this big building in New York. Hearing this crying through the wall and feeling like, on the one hand, I understood that it was a baby who's just crying—normal crying. And yet, for whatever reason, those weeks when I heard the cry, it felt pierced with traumas of our histories. I was thinking of the Middle Passage and Palestine and other kinds of violences. Those weeks, that collision was made of those real collisions in the world.

I feel so grateful to my friends who are my readers. In the beginning of sharing my work, I think all of us were engaged with these questions. When the poem, which is life, carries so much violence, how do you not reenact that violence—or try not to? What choices do you make in your revisions? Those kinds of questions were really important to me and remain so. I think, now, I'm also interested in: how do you carry these histories, realities, and somehow make a life force, some kind of vital energy?

Two true things can happen at once, which can be like a glitch between two words that feels like an energy that is not consumed by grief, but informed by it. Sometimes it's an image. But it's really about holding onto a kind of fullness of imagination that's not only shaped by brutality, because that is the condition of it all. There are other responses that I'm trying to cultivate which have to do with what gives you breath or takes you by beautiful surprise or allows some measure of music for a moment.

**Because this answer just makes plain your ethics along with your aesthetics and the way that you're approaching these really difficult topics, I'm also curious about what you do to protect yourself in the process.**

As a person who's raising children and sending them to public school, there are things that I'm working through and hearing and caring about no matter what, right? These beauties and powers and terrors and the ways that I feel are differently acquainted with how so much policy squanders the life of people and the lives of children, which is just...it's devastating.

The poems and the life-making elements, however tiny they might seem to somebody else, that is the protection. Or finding a question that makes you reach out to someone (whether that person is alive and thinking about your book or in the pages of a very old text). Those connections in a world that seeks to obliterate connections—the connections that can be made in poems—is the protection.

**I love that answer. At times your poetry is contending with the otherworldly, ancestors, the dead. How do you aim to connect with them, if you aim at all?**

There are some people who I feel I'm often in conversation with throughout the day, like my father. And then there are ways that, in the poems, there's a different kind of concentrated quality of attention. It doesn't feel like I'm necessarily aiming.

**Do you find a poem opens a line of communication?**

I feel like that's true with ancestors, but also with different versions of myself. Maybe even a kind of stranger version of myself... I guess what I'm struggling to articulate is what feels like a poem for me. It's like writing into and towards a part of a communication with people across time, but also myself across a different language

distance.

**You're expressing something that I've never thought of myself but rings true. I have many people in life who read my poems and say, "This is really dark." They're surprised because I seem like an easygoing, happy person, which I think is true. But it's also both/and.**

That resonates with me too. A kind of attunement to a depth. I think I'm joyous and laugh easily. And there's this...I don't know if it's a privacy of mind, maybe.

**We're so lucky as poets because we feel permission to probe. Writing gives something we usually ignore or push away space to breathe. I want to ask about the visual details in your poems. In your new book, I loved the gold foil around a cube of butter, the cracked leather chair. Do you make a special project of evoking the particular in your poetry?**

I was taught by my family to be interested in everyday objects as energy channels. But I'm also thinking about Linda Gregg's idea of resonant sources. These details, especially of objects, feel like resonant sources. They carry so much time and memory. Like, how to describe being rich with something luxurious that might also be seen as nothing? That gold foil on the butter is it. There's not much that feels richer to me in that way. So I hold onto images. I collect them in my mind. And when I'm looking to say it exactly or truly, often it's a detail of an object that that holds all of that best for me.

**The charge of it is palpable when you're reading your poems. Objects are portals or talismans or emit Benjaminian aura. I feel like my next question may be connected to this idea. The mystery of our parents often hounds us, generally. Did writing poems about your father in your latest collection, GREEN OF ALL HEADS, change your sense of him at all? Did the veil of mystery lift or did it become thicker?**

It's so interesting because I would expect that it would've changed my sense of him. I mostly write in hopes that the poem or text will change my sense of the story and of people and things, or open it more or complicate it. But I don't think it changed my sense of my dad as much as it feels like I just have more questions. I feel less certain about my interpretation of certain family stories.

My strategy for dealing with those uncertainties has been, in some cases, I've grounded it in the context of my memory. And then there are other parts where I've tried to loosen my grip and open up or question narrative in a way that's maybe different from my second and first book—to try to show some of that instability.

**There is a lingering question in your recent collection: "But now what? What are you going to do now with all that feeling?" Have you found an answer?**

A tiny part of an answer is to keep feeling, to keep being alive, to try to give my love away. Somehow feeling and love as capacities that generate each other—even if some of the feelings are devastating...Just keep trying to feel. Right after my dad passed, I thought I was done because I couldn't feel. I was raising little kids, and so there's a way that I also was feeling with them. But there was so much that I had depended on for the making of the poems that I just couldn't access anymore. One of the things I think to do with all that feeling is to make love in the way that Ama Codjoe writes about in her gorgeous book Bluest Nude. The making of love, the fashioning, the work of it.

**That's such a beautiful and intimate answer. It's been several years between your two most recent books. And I'm not implying that this is "bad" or makes you a slow writer—it was almost a decade between my two books. Can you talk about that time between publishing for you?**

My life, my world, my family, what I thought even the immediate future would be—all of it changed quite drastically these years. And because writing is a way for me to think, I was taking notes. But I wasn't thinking of those as poems. That spaciousness gave me a new relationship to language and to what I needed to make. I didn't realize that the structures of my poems became... "more open systems" was the phrase I was going to say, but really

more spacious. I became really interested in how to pull a circuit of thinking or a channel of feeling and let it fall away and just become a trace. What I wanted and needed from poems was a different life force that believes less in coherence and stability. Like when you make a work that is interested in losing a thought and then finding another one or changing its mind. Those kinds of fugitive states became much more interesting to me, even as a text that looks stable. How to play in that flickering.

**Were there any particular writers or books that really helped you in this process?**

Jean Valentine. How I began to think about her work changed for me—Break the Glass in particular. Kamau Brathwaite is another person who I've been reading for, I don't know, for 20 years. But I learned so much reading his Zea Mexican Diary again, and Elegguas. How I heard his work when I felt really far from my poems totally changed my sense of his communications across time. His attention. They're both people who, when they put a word down, it's like they're opening it up. They're returning it to the energies of other words in that line. There's something wild about both of them that I've always loved, but heard them differently these last ten years. Also Robin Coste Lewis—her second book in particular, To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness. Her poem "Navel": "And now / I've turned my face into this page / so we could sit here together again." The material as part of what we can move in and out of.

**aracelis girmay recommends:**

Stray Books. Recently launched by writers Claire Schwartz and Jos Charles.

"Who would behold the colorings of a cloud / and legislate its shadows / legislate its shine?" I recommend experiencing June Jordan's "Poem of Commitment" in her own voice if possible. You can find audio and video of a reading she did at the Kelly Writers House in 2001. "Poem of Commitment" is at about the 28:21-minute mark.

Sarah Nsikak's emotive and spare cloth+thread collages on handkerchiefs and handkerchief-sized textiles, for example: "A cliff becomes a meadow".

"Clube da Esquina No 2" by Lô Borges, Márcio Borges, and Milton Nascimento. The song is only instrumental on their 1972 album and then they recorded other gorgeous versions with lyrics and voices after. I love how repetition works in these versions, how repetition feels like a word letting itself go, pronouncing distance, like they're making their voices rivers. Persistence. The recordings I've heard are so very different, including one by Nascimento on Angelus (1994) and another live one. My favorite is the one on Borges's A Via-Láctea (1979), mainly because of the bare feet of Solange Borges's voice.

Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa's mangrovic and inexhaustible INDEX 2025.

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