

# On art as an antidote to loneliness



Poet and visual artist Daniela Naomi Molnar discusses writing through the difficult things in life, the transformation from saying yes to saying no, and how delegating leaves more room for art

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As told to Caroline Kessler, 2175 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Writing](#), [Focus](#), [Income](#), [Mental health](#), [Time management](#).

**You have this beautiful through-line of transformation in your poetry and your visual art—using found materials and then making them into something new. How did this process begin? How has it evolved?**

The things that I'm transforming range from rocks, flowers, and water, to language that already exists in the world. I did a bunch of that in my first book CHORUS, where I was integrating people's words into my own and finding ways to think with their thoughts. Doing so was, for me, a form of company. It was the lockdown portion of the pandemic and I was very alone. The voices in my books were excellent company. As I began to integrate their words into my own, they became my collaborators. It felt like magic to collaborate with people I'd never met, some who'd died many years ago. I then did this again in a different way with my second book, which was recently published, PROTOCOLS: An Erasure. In that book, it's an erasure poem and an essay, and the erasure poem is obviously using an existing text and excising a poem from that text.

In my visual art practice, I'm often transforming the natural world into pigments that I create from rocks, and plants, and wild waters, which I then turn into paintings, sculptures, and installations. The reason I started working that way—it wasn't conscious. It has evolved that way as a way of being in contact with the world, and with the world through time. Everything that I do creatively is an antidote to loneliness, and not just the kind of loneliness that we might experience on a day-to-day basis at periods in our lives, but existential loneliness. This sense of, who am I in the context of the world, and how do I build a connection with the web of life?

It's a spiritual endeavor as well as a political endeavor. The spiritual and the political overlap in my work, manifesting in that desire to interact with what already exists, to communicate with it and learn from it, to really allow my curiosity to drive the practice. I've always been a little bored by looking inside—I'd rather direct my gaze outside.

**How do you think about toggling between those different forms and materials?**

It's a daily circuit for me, and there's no metronome. It's very irregular from day to day, except that I always start with writing because I need my critical brain to not be very loud. For years I just thought I wasn't a morning person, and then I figured out that it takes me a long time to come out of dreams and to come out of that dream space. I've found that the blurry critical mind is really helpful for me in terms of being able to write without the internal editor shutting me down. Then I move to some sort of visual work, and then I'll move back into writing, and then I'll move to visual work. It's a physical, emotional, and psychological circuit that I make in my studio. It's set up that way so that I'm physically and energetically moving between the two. They're both integrated and separate.

**How do you sustain both of these practices?**

I'm a very nonlinear thinker, and I'm not great at planning. I've never had a plan for my life, so I feel really lucky that it was basically just grit, determination, stubbornness, and luck that led me to where I am now. I was just incredibly committed to being an artist. I didn't always have that commitment. I think it grew in me. I didn't have a lot of support as a child or teenager. My parents are immigrants and they were like, "You are not studying art."

I established myself publicly as a visual artist before I did so as a poet, and I didn't get my MFA in poetry until I was 41. I had been writing poems my whole life, but I didn't believe that I could do it publicly. I think that there's a lot less cultural support for being a poet than being a [visual] artist in American culture. Poetry does not make me any money pretty much, except when I teach, and that's really sad.

So, I've found ways to support myself through visual art, and various forms of teaching and grants. But I think, more than anything else, I said yes to absolutely every opportunity that came along in my life for a long time, and I'm glad I did that. When I got a little bit older and realized the real finitude of my life, which is cliché but true, I was like, "I need to stop saying yes to everything, and I need to say yes to the things that I really, really love." And the rest fell into place from there.

**How do you handle the solitude that, at least to me, seems necessary for these practices of writing and art-making?**

I am intensely introverted, and if I don't have that time away from other humans, I don't make a damn thing. So it's solitude from other human beings, but I say it that way because it's not solitude, exactly. I feel like I'm constantly in conversation with the rocks, and the bones, and the water, and the language. I don't feel alone at all when I'm making things. I feel like I am responding to so many voices at any given moment, and it's an active conversation. What I need is solitude from other humans, from other interruptions and noise, so that I can hear those voices and respond in the ways that feel honest.

**Can you describe how that works for you, hearing those voices?**

With *PROTOCOLS*, I never really wanted to write that book. And I did it because I had to. I say it that way because so much of that book was me looking at really difficult inheritances and memories that were inhabiting my body but I knew were not my own. They had the emotional resonance as if I had lived them, and were in my consciousness as if I had lived them, but I hadn't.

I felt like there were these spirits—predominantly my maternal grandmother but other people as well. They were being really loud, and were basically asking me, in an indirect way, to do something with these memories that they hadn't been able to work through in their own lifetimes. In the past few years, there's been a bit more cultural language around this: epigenetic memory, or post-memory, or inherited trauma, or whatever you want to call it.

But at the time I didn't know what was happening, and I really didn't know what to do with it. All I've ever known to do with difficult things in my life is make art. So I started doing that, and my grandmother, Rosalie, was the loudest voice in me. That's probably because I was really close with her growing up. She's been gone for many years, but she was very present in me. She was a poet. She had a sixth-grade education so her poetry was not sophisticated, but she had a poet's soul, and she had a poet's drive, and she wrote poetry in Auschwitz—in her head—to stay alive. So, when I started to try to do something creatively with these memories, what happened was poetry. It took me a long time to figure out how to transform those memories into something that was actually about love, and joy, and connection—something that felt like anti-loneliness.

In my visual art, I'll hold a rock in my hand and just think with it for a while. It's an intuitive process, but there's a lot of structure and rigor and dedication involved in it. It's not all loosey-goosey. It's also about not pretending when something's not there and not allowing your own imagination to take over. There's a lot of

very strict attentiveness involved. So, it's a balance between those two, and it's something I'm still learning.

**What have you found helpful in that vein of rigor and structure?**

One of the reasons I was drawn to poetry from a very early age is that it is a blend of a kind of ridiculous attention to structure, alongside a tremendous amount of rigor and control. But if you write a poem only from that vantage, it's not going to feel like anything.

So, there's this balance between the control, the rigor, the obsessive attention to detail, and a complete release into everything else, into the silence, the void. That recipe exists in all art forms. To be a dancer, you train for many years to allow your body to do certain things, and then you need to give in to the music, or that's how I imagine it would be.

There's a demand of the form. You need to know how to paint to be a painter, but then you also need to allow the painting to move through you.

**How does this dynamic play out in your life?**

I said earlier that I'm not much of a planner, and I don't work very well when I'm scheduled so I need a lot of non-structure in my days. But I'm also a really focused person. I always have been. I work really hard every single day, and if I don't, then I'm antsy. I keep things really organized for the most part.

Sometimes I'll make an enormous mess, but then it'll be organized again. So, I think my entire creative life is this sine wave, like a tide chart of order, abandonment of order, order, abandonment of order. It's this constant back and forth. It took me a while to figure that out. There were times in my life where I went too much towards the abandonment of order, and then there were times where I went too much towards attachment to order, and I feel like I'm just beginning, in the last ten years or so, to understand that dynamic interplay between the two.

**I know you have two books coming out in the next several years. How do you keep projects moving without feeling totally scattered?**

To be honest, it doesn't all balance every day. If you talk to my partner, I think they'd say I'm sometimes a total mess when it comes to time management, and that would be accurate. I'm sometimes really overwhelmed, and I don't actually feel at all creative when I'm overwhelmed, but I think I'm getting better at not doing that to myself.

Again, I'm being more careful lately about what I say yes to, and I'm trying to be a little bit more of a planner even though it doesn't come naturally to me to think, "Okay, if I have this class or this reading or this exhibit coming up, what will that thing require of me in advance? What are the steps that I'm going to need to do, to do that?"

I regularly make lists and calendars for myself, which is not something I did a few years ago. If we're getting into the nitty-gritty, I've also gotten better at delegating. I recently hired someone on a very short-term basis to help me with very specific things around *PROTOCOLS*. It wasn't a huge amount of money, but it was money so well-spent.

One of the problems I run into, which I think is common to creative work, is that I can't do emails and make art on the same day. I just can't. If I do one, I don't do the other. So, I've started to try to allocate a day or half a day when I'm going to do more of the administrative side of the art practice, and then just not respond to the emails immediately on the other days. My signature on my email says, "I get back to people within one to four days. If you need to get in touch with me quicker, here's my number. You can call me."

I feel like there's this urgency that we've all internalized around how communication should work. I try really hard on a daily basis to talk myself out of that urgency and just operate at my own timescale, because my own

timescale is so slow compared to the timescales we are taught are efficient or acceptable. Every single day, I need to remind myself that that's okay.

**Daniela Naomi Molnar recommends:**

See what changes if you stop using the word "environment" and instead say "the living world" or "home" or, like poet Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, "beloved": "There's an intimate plasticity with place, which some call environment, but I call the beloved."

David Naimon's podcast "Between the Covers." His interviews with Jorie Graham changed my life.

Solitude, silence, sleep.

Music by Emahoy Tsegué-Maryam Guèbrou

Allow gaps. See what sprouts there.

Name

Daniela Naomi Molnar

Vocation

poet, writer, visual artist

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