

On enlarging your consciousness through art



Poet Ariana Reines discusses the significance of structure, feeding your imagination, and honing your craft.

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As told to Emily Wood, 2519 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Education](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

I want to ask you about your origin story, and the moment when you knew that you were going to become a poet. How and when did that happen?

I was really obsessed with ballet and music as a child. Those were my obsessions. And for some reason, I didn't get interested in poetry until my parents got divorced. And I remember, and it was super cliché, I remember I was seven years old, maybe eight, and I saw the curtains billowing in the window and it gave me a poetic feeling. And I wrote a poem about the curtains billowing in the window and I showed it to my mother. I have the kind of Jewish mother who thought everything I did was super genius. When I played the piano as a baby she just was super into it.

When I showed my mother my poem and I asked her if it was good and she said, "No," and I was so confused. I wasn't even pissed, I was just like, "Wait, you always like the stuff I do..." She wasn't mean, but she was like, "No, that's not a good poem." My mom's a doctor, she's not an artist, but I was so fascinated by that and I think that's why I became a poet.

That feels like a lot of the poetic impulse, this desire to overcome inadequacy and failure, and connect across the chasm of bad poetry with something "more." Could you talk about your relationship to failure in your own practice, such as writing a bad poem, what that's like, and how you deal with it?

I mean, to return to that original impulse, that feeling when the gorgeousness and fullness of life is first gripping you and there's a lust, there's an urge to do it justice or to preserve it somehow, there's something that rises up in the heart when beauty is overtaking you or the moment feels magical, it's a child-like feeling... And of course what could be more cliché than the wind billowing the curtains?

I think that what I'm attracted to is something related to failure because it has to do with breakdown or has to do with what the deconstructionist will call an aporia, something unsayable, something unthinkable, something uncrossable or impossible. I'm very attracted to that and I'm attracted to writing poetry in that space. And I think that space attracts poetry because on some level, poetry is an instrument of the enlargement of consciousness. Because it's measured by your human breath and yet it's language, which can come from anywhere. It doesn't really come from inside me. I didn't invent English, I didn't invent this culture, but it's being measured out by the rhythm in my body and that produces melody in these spaces that make no sense to me. And so it's a cousin to failure but I hesitate to say it's failure.

I'm constantly thinking about the idea of "inspiration" and how it's become unfashionable, likely because of the MFA, and its emphasis on discipline and craft and showing up to poetry "like it's your job." Something that

you've talked about before [in *Invisible College*] is a state of surrender and reception while making art, that is present when it feels like what you're creating is out of your control, or coming from a source outside of your own consciousness. But the catch about being able to work that way is that you have to have enough control over your artistic skill to actually let go and achieve that state of surrender. Can you talk about that? What do you mean by that and what that process is like?

I like the way you set this up because in a way it's the preparedness for surrender as an alternative to the capitalistic language of like, "Show up to poetry like it's your job." Because discipline does play a role. There's a time and a space where you need to learn your craft and develop a relationship with it and your muscles need to learn it and your heart and your soul and your spirit need to develop that relationship so that then you can together go anywhere.

And there is something classical about me. I do believe in that relationship. But there's something about poetry that's mysterious because you can't just try at it and get better necessarily. Trying won't guarantee that you'll get better. You can try at other things, but if you just try really hard, you can murder your poetry. It's not the same. You could show up to your stupid job and you could never go anywhere. So effort alone, it's a mistake to say that that would do it for us. But it's something more along the lines, I think, of a meditative practice. You're cultivating on some basic level a respect for life and for yourself. And after some years of doing that, it prepares you for nothingness because, and that's what is so radical about the art of poetry, is once you've prepared yourself for nothingness, you'll never be alone again. You can face anything and you can find hidden treasure anywhere through that practice. And I think that's more important than writing, than publishing a poem or book.

It's more important to be able to know that you could find yourself anywhere in the universe in the weirdest possible or most awful possible circumstances, and also the most exultant and wonderful possible circumstances. And you would have this frequency that you could enter that would reveal to you more than what you could see with the naked eye. It is partly a product of discipline and reading and training and studying, so, yeah, that's why in the MFA program, they're like, "Well, you're doing your reps." It's like you're in gym class basically. Maybe if I did an MFA program, it would literally happen in a gym and I would have a whistle, I don't know. Human beings do need training. We need training and we need to develop a relationship to the thing. And then almost more, even more important than that, we can create amazing art or whatever is-your soul is equipped with something to help carry it into spaces that people don't know about or understand yet. And that's really real. That's not an esoteric idea.

That brings me to what you've talked about as well, which is the starvation for myth in American culture and the atrophy of the collective imagination. I was wondering if you could talk about the penetrating capabilities of poetry and what it can do within and to a particular political climate and public sphere.

On some level, there's a truism/ an altruism about great literature: it invents the soul, it somehow creates consciousness on our behalf, and helps us to understand it. And I actually think that that's true. If you think about Shakespeare or Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, there's a way in which they also forged what we are, they created it. They took the raw ore of experience and then created a space in which we who come after them have this enlarged terrain in which to move. And art on the highest level enlarges our experience of the soul, of soulfulness of living, of what it means to be human. And that's really wild, wild that an artwork can live and do that.

And there's so much hypnosis in our culture. Pop music has a certain hypnotic rhythm, social media has a certain hypnotic rhythm, even scrolling down has a hypnotic rhythm. There is a way that it pulls on the imagination, and I do think that spiritual hunger or mythological starvation leads to these desperate stories. In *Invisible College*, we talked sometime last year about how I really felt that a lot of the fabulation of QAnon is heartbreaking because the human imagination needs food. We need story and we need invention. And there's this way that if it's been stifled or you're only given five materials, it's like writing a bad sestina or something. It's like, "Here's six words, make a myth."

It's bizarre, because theoretically we have access to more story, myth, and raw material collectively than we ever have on the face of the earth. At the touch of a button you can have all the great works of literature of

all the world and all the religious texts of all the world, but there's so much. Our psyche is so bombarded with so much other garbage that it's like, "what kind of myth can we produce?" And when we produce these kind of miserable miracles and these Pizzagates and this and that, whatever, I'm not disgusted, I'm more heartbroken. We need food.

The imagination is clearly starved, hungry, distorted and weird. I think that I'm looking for the places that release me from my own lizard brain, because we all have a miserable corner that we can be driven into. And whatever that corner is, the algorithms know it. I'll scroll my way out of that corner or scroll my way back in. So, I have to look for those spaces, and I'm always hunting for them, whether in a work of art or in a piece of music or in a meditative space that releases me from that prison. And that lets some juice flow back into my inner myth maker, my imagination.

The last thing I want to ask about is the form of the book. I don't think of your books as collections. They're a cohesive unit. There's an interview where you talk about your book Mercury, through its form, as being meant to harmonize the chakras and affect the physical state of the reader. How do you begin containing a book, creating its form, and figuring out how to work with it as a live entity?

Thank you. Yeah, I don't write collections. Maybe someday that will happen, but Mercury is based on the Goldberg Variations and so it's riffing off of that and that Baroque mode of theme and variations. And it is very much structured.

I probably put the most effort into structure when I make a book. I think with *A Sand Book*, I must have done a hundred drafts, maybe more. The orchestration is what really fascinates me with bookmaking, because I'm not a classical musician, but I'm fascinated by the kind of thinking that goes into structuring music and energy and so that you have different movements. It's moving emotion, moving energy.

I think that a book, just like a poem or a sentence, structurally is where I'm the weakest. I'm a very sloppy disorganized person, which is why I work so hard at structure in my writing and bookmaking, because it's fascinating to think about how I can create a structure that can hold all of this energy, so that energy can really resonate across time and space, without me. There's always going to be people who say, "that was too long," or, "you shouldn't have put that in," but I really, especially with Mercury and then with *A Sand Book*, tried to take it even further. I'm fascinated by what I consider valid material or not.

Because so much of *A Sand Book* is about, not even failure, but catastrophe, devastation, breakdown, trauma, silence, the unsayable, and how do you create a structure that will hold that with dignity? I'm really interested in that. I definitely haven't figured it out, but that's what I put so much energy into. I always felt like I wasn't attracted to the idea of a collection ever. And I thought, "Poets are so musical. Why don't more poets pay attention to the structure of the book?"

And a book is a very interesting technology. It doesn't have to be this limited thing, and you can hold really, really crazy energy in that space. But we don't tend to think about that or we aren't taught that way. And I think that without being a formalist, because I'm not, I'm kind of more New York school style. I'm not writing sonnets, but I'm interested in these wild forms that then I'm interested in creating container for them that will keep them going. Does that make sense?

Yeah, totally. It becomes like a talisman. It's charged in a very specific way.

You carry it and it doesn't need a battery. It runs on its own juice, and that juice does not run out. If you can get the form right, you could contain really crazy energy and keep it going. And if you don't have the form right, that energy is just going to burn the building down. Maybe on some level I'm interested in that as a person, because we all have crazy shit inside us that ruins the world and ruins our lives, and I'm curious about finding other things to do with it.

Ariana Reines Recommends:

The Nag Hammadi Library, James Robinson (ed.). This is my favorite book of all time. I don't know why, but only metal dudes seem to be into it. Basically all the ideas "Western" culture repressed for the last two thousand years are in here. Also things that will literally give you chills and make you feel like you are in contact with the secrets of the universe. Which admittedly is kind of metal.

Kundalini Yoga. This stuff saved my life. I have no idea if the man who brought it to the world really was a sexual predator and a con man, but purity of origins isn't of much value to me anyway. The practice is incredibly healing and transformative, and if you have anything you have been struggling to overcome, and you're the type who's willing to work for change, I recommend the stuff wholeheartedly.

Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer by Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer. Some of the oldest written poetry on planet Earth, and it's a myth that in the next five hundred years will become as cherished as the Iliad and the Odyssey etc. Every human being can benefit from the wisdom and beauty and strange precision and deep humor in these poems.

"In Between the Notes: A Portrait of Pandit Pran Nath": I watch this documentary whenever I get a little bunched up or crispy in my soul. It's a gorgeous little film about a very unusual and strangely seductive style of music, a great artist-teacher, and a current of beauty flowing through artists and souls across cultures.

The audiobook of A Sand Book: I hope it's not a dick move to recommend something I made. I felt really lucky to get to record this, and it taught me so much—I think it's an even better book aloud than on the page, so if you're new to it I'd start there.

Name

Ariana Reines

Vocation

poet

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