

On writing, editing, and living in the wilderness



Poet Cody-Rose Clevidence discusses living in rural Arkansas, the pleasures of abandoning a project that isn't working, and the ways in which editing a poem is like building your own house from the ground up.

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As told to Elaine Kahn, 2476 words.

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You grew up mostly in New York City, but now live in Northwest Arkansas. Can you say a little bit about what that's like and why you moved there?

I was traveling across the country one time and I was lying in the back of the truck while my friend drove. We passed a horrible Oklahoma plain (no offense) and then all of a sudden, it's the most beautiful rolling hills, with the most beautiful trees and I was like, "I'm moving here. Where are we?" And my friend who was driving was like, "We're in Arkansas." And I was like, "I'm moving to Arkansas." And then the next time I went there, I bought four acres.

Can you talk a bit about what the actual property is like?

Yeah, so it's in the Ozark National Forest and you can't really get there in a two-wheel drive. When I first came, it didn't have anything there except a light. It has a light post, which is pretty weird, like some Narnia shit—like deep in the middle of the fucking woods, just woods. And I built a little cabin and timber framed an outdoor kitchen and I have a garden. I tried to have chickens but I am not a fucking farmer at all and so... it's rough in a lot of ways. We just ran a system to pump water like, 700 feet up from a spring. But until then, I spent the last six years filling up gallons of water at a spring three miles away and hauling it back in the truck. I could be out there for weeks and never see anybody or occasionally hear a four-wheeler go by, or in the distance, hear hunters or something.

Do you have plumbing?

No, we have an outhouse.

What made you decide to move from the city to someplace relatively remote?

I guess I think of New York City as kind of a wilderness, and then I also think of the actual wilderness as a wilderness, but any place that's not one of those two extremes is not somewhere that feels good for me. Before I moved to Arkansas, I was just being a mess and floating around, which was its own internal wilderness. That was what I wanted and that is what I have and that is what I was looking for, I think. The only place I could live except for deep in the woods is New York City.

How has where you live affected your work?

One thing that's happening right now in my work, which I'm feeling very conflicted about because I've always been like really anti-god, and specifically and ethically against using biblical references and stuff, even though it's part of the Western canon of mythology or whatever—but recently I'm writing this stuff that's super god, and

grace, and mercy. And I'm like, "Is that because I live in the rural south, and so part of my mind is steeped in this culture where people talk about living in god's country?" Even people who know I'm an atheist are still like that, because they see things like that, and I do know what they mean in some sense. It's different from the "rah rah god's country, patriotism" bullshit, you know? So that's been really interesting, watching this happen in my current project.

I feel like grace and mercy shouldn't just belong to Christians and religious people though...

No, for sure. But the words that we use carry the weight of the culture around them. I think that they shouldn't belong to religious people either. However, I'm now even referencing biblical stuff that definitely does belong to Christianity. I don't know. It's like, I'm using some sort of godless theology or theism or something. But, maybe this is the time where we're like, "Bitches, you guys don't even own god anymore."

What does your curiosity look like and how do you explore things?

I think I sort of break things. If I'm trying to learn about mushrooms, or say, plants, I'm always just like... why did I have to tear it up and carry home the parts? I could have just taken a picture of it. But, yeah, I break things. That's how my curiosity works. I think that's true in poetry, too. If I'm studying something that I'm not understanding—like that whole HD book, I kept reading it and reading it and being like, "How the fuck did she do that? That's just a stupid little word, how did she build it in such a way that all that weight lands right there on the word 'the' or some shit?"

Do you think HD knew how she did it?

I don't know. There's things that come easy to us and then there's things that we have to learn. You often don't know how you do the things that come easy, but in order to learn the things that you don't know already, you have to articulate them to yourself.

Do you maintain a routine and, if so, what is it?

I do not. Well I do, but not really in my creative life. Except last winter I was like, "All right, you can either do your back exercises or you can write." And so whichever one I really wanted to do least, then I would do the other one. That ended up being somewhat generative for me and probably not very good for my back.

I understand that, I always feel like I get the most work done when I feel like I'm getting away with it as opposed to fulfilling an obligation... like, I get so much more done if I'm shirking something else I was supposed to do.

Yeah. Procrastination is probably one of my most powerful tools for getting stuff done.

How do you approach digital spaces, and what's your relationship like with social media, email, et cetera?

Well, I live alone, so I'm by myself all the time. I'm pretty much cut off from my queer community and all of my best friends, except one, and so I think I have an Instagram problem. That is in part because it is the only commons that I have! I don't know how good that is psychologically, but also I don't think my relationship with it is bad. I'm not one of those people who is tortured by social media. Mostly I just really like to look at memes.

How did you know that you wanted to be a writer, and when did you know it?

Well, I still do not know. I do remember when I got to Iowa and being like, "How on earth did I get here? I have never liked poetry before." And right at that point someone gave me Ronald Johnson and I just, like, threw the book across the room and was like, "What the fuck have I been reading my whole life? How on earth did it end me here, all of it was crap and I never even liked it!" Finally I had been given something that I actually did like and it made me realize that I had only ever before thought I liked things that were bad, that I didn't like, and

that I didn't even know the experience of liking something. So... I don't know. I thought I was going to be a cognitive philosopher or something.

Are you glad you're a poet at this point?

I don't find it to be a source of joy in my life. But, when I am proud of something that I've written, I do find something that feels good in that.

What makes you feel proud of your writing?

I don't know. Working through it to the point where it's complete and you're like, "Damn. That feels good."

Is there a different kind of satisfaction that you get from completing a poem than you get from completing one of your other projects, like metalworking?

I definitely get more satisfaction from completing a knife because it's such a concrete and beautiful object that you don't have to argue with anyone about why it deserves to be made. You know what I'm saying?

But, one thing thing that I like about writing is that there are conversations happening—in all kinds of art, in every discipline, of course. I want to be part of whatever conversation we're having about whatever it is. Like, what can poetry do? When there are things that you're interested in that other people are also interested in, you get to make this creative and intellectual space where you are in conversation with each other through your work—that is something that I care about.

What can poetry do?

Nothing. I don't know.

Speaking of not knowing what poetry does, is it okay to abandon a project?

I kind of always think that my projects are just percolating and changing and mutating and growing in the back of my mind. But, I can think of one project that I abandoned, and I guess it was just because the project of my life changed and so the project, which was the recording of that life and those thoughts, became no longer relevant to me. But I didn't think of it as abandoning it. I just thought of it as no longer what I was working on.

But there's also a thing where you're like, "Hey, I thought this was going to be good and it turns out it's not. So let's fucking pull the plug." And I feel really proud of myself when I make that call, when I don't feel pressure about my work so that I'm trying to fight for something that's actually not working or not interesting. Then I'm just like, "Hey, let's fucking scrap that whole thing." Take all the pieces back out. Put them in the back end of the brain. Let them do their evolutionary, morphology thing where they're recombined in different ways that might hang together in an interesting or useful way at some point in the future. So yeah, I think it's good to abandon a project.

There are poets who just do the same thing over and over and over again and you feel—or I sometimes feel—like they're just not good at cutting. And that cutting could be thought of as abandoning the poem or the line or whatever. That's probably the most important thing.

Is editing separate from writing for you? Are you first like, "I'm writing the poem," and then later, "I'm editing the poem?"

Man, I don't know anymore... I write and then I edit it while I'm writing and then later I'll go back and edit it more. But mostly I just cut. Mostly I just wholesale cut. Like, by the time I'm actually writing something down, it usually is pretty done.

What do you mean by "writing something down?"

Well, I'll have all my notes, and then at the point at which I'm gathering it all together and moving it into a Word document, what I normally do is look at it and be like, "That's bad. Let's delete this whole file." Or I'll be like, "That's bad. But then save only that one line that I started with, and the rest I wrote when I was drunk and I shouldn't have done that, so just cut it." You know? But I don't tinker very much, I guess.

I cut almost everything. I'm a super minimal writer. A poem that's half a page comes out of literally 20 pages of writing or something. I will often obsess over line breaks or I'll stare at something for two hours and then just move one word down a line. You don't do this?

Yeah. That's not what I do. If it's bothering me and I'm obsessing about it and I can't figure out if I should break it here or should I break it there, I just delete it. If it's bothering me, it means it wasn't right. Like it wasn't formed right.

There are people who are like, "I wouldn't want to build my own cabin from scratch. I'd want to move into someplace and fix it up," and I was always like, that sounds so much fucking harder. If the place is all off kilter, you got to get it square. You gotta deal with all the old rotten stuff. Hell no. It's much easier to build something true to form from the ground up than it is to mess with all the pieces that are not in the right places. That's how I think about editing.

Is the house you built true to form?

One of the roofs is off by an inch and a half and when I do my low back exercises, one of them—this is why they're so boring—is lying on the floor for fucking 15 minutes and that's all. And you're so bored and you're not allowed to use your hands because they have to be in a certain position in order to get your back muscles to release. And so I stare up at those rafters and it's just that I marked it and... it's just a bit off. It used to bother me and now I feel a sort of sweetness about it.

What advice would you give to young writers?

Vary your line length and vary your beat structure per line. There's this thing where it's like, every fucking line is the same and the end stops are the same and it's like, "Duh, Dah, Dah, Dah, Dah, Dah, Dah, Dah, Dah, Dah." Dah."

That's iambic pentameter, Cody! You once told me everything sounds good in iambic pentameter.

Okay. Well, that's true. If you're a young poet and can get away with writing perfect iambic pentameter, more power to you.

Cody-Rose Clevidence Recommends:

1. *The Big Picture: On the Origins of Life, Meaning, and the Universe Itself* by Sean Carroll. My dad said I should read it and that it would piss me off and then when he died I was like okay, and I read it and it pissed me off so much and now it's one of the most important books to me.

1. Dogs
2. Examining why you feel a sensation of grossness or disgust and moving through or past that.
3. 5-Htp
4. If you live in the north and you give money to different organizations, consider splitting those donations with a similar organization in the rural south. My heart breaks for how much better resources wealthier states have when I see what's available around here.

Name

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Vocation

poet

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