On poetry as a spiritual obligation

Poet Dorothea Lasky discusses the relationship between poetry and academia, poetry as a way to speak to and for the dead, and why obsession is the ultimate creative engine.

September 7, 2018 -

As told to Hether Fortune, 3167 words.

Tags: Writing, Poetry, Creative anxiety, Collaboration, Education.

How do you balance the role of being a teacher and an educator with your role as a creator?

When I started MFA school, I immediately started teaching. I went to UMass Amherst and I had the opportunity to teach right alongside of it. I was also teaching a lot in college, little kids in the special school district from St. Louis. I have always seen writing and learning as part of actively teaching and I've never had a time where that wasn't the case. Those things are always in conversation with each other. I think I would be very unhappy if one part wasn't there, especially the teaching part.

Teaching just feels like the more worthwhile endeavor. Maybe because it works against my natural narcissism or whatever—all the bad parts of being an artist. Not to make it moral, but you know, narcissistic things can happen. Teaching is such a great antidote to that. I think if artists sequester themselves and don't get into educational environments, we really can't change those environments, and we are the people who are supposed to change them and be there. It's service work. It's important service. The one obligation I think you have as an artist is to help other artists and be there for them so they don't get in an unfair, unjust system that doesn't want to support them in any way.

All artists should have unlimited time to work on their art. It's important to have large blocks of time when you're not obligated to be anywhere, because that's how the creative process happens. Sometimes people in teaching positions don't necessarily think about how serious it is that they are teaching poets, artists, or any sort of person that's practicing something. They don't think about the fact that they wouldn't be where they are without someone believing in them. It sounds cheesy, obviously, but it's true. I mean, you would just get lost if some teacher didn't do something.

I went to public school, so I really believe in wonderful K-12 public education for everyone, and university-level education, too. I had a high school teacher who I confessed to that I was a poet. Without her, I'm sure I wouldn't have felt empowered to be a poet. I would've been lost. It's important to be those people for others.

You said that you *confessed* to your teacher that you were a poet. There does seem to be a social stigma attached to being "A Poet." I wonder what the experience has been like for you identifying as a poet for so much of your life. Have you felt like there's a stigma against that within the literary world or the art community or the educational world?

Absolutely. Every step of the way. When I was getting my MFA, that felt like a period where it was okay to be a poet. There was support and it was ok. Once I had to talk to people who weren't poets, I always felt that weird embarrassment. Even now I'm sometimes reticent to tell people I'm a poet. Instead, I would just say I'm a professor or something like that. Something that seems more dependable, that can be quantified.

Obviously, it does have to do with money because poetry doesn't tend to make a lot of money. This will always be a struggle for artists and poets in our society as long as we're capitalistic. I think it's also because people are scared of things that have actual power, and capitalistic power structures keep things in line. Poets can access things, words, that are the ultimate manipulator, which gives them a lot of power, so society tries to keep them down as much as it possibly can. Humans tend to do that when we don't want to deal with things that are "magical" because it's too hard to understand and too overwhelming. It's really sad.

Do you have any daily practices that you use for tapping into that metaphysical source that seems to guide such a huge amount of your work?

I don't necessarily do daily rituals in terms of actions or something, but I think that the brain is the most magical thing. "Magic" is a word that has this stigma where when we say it, we feel like we're being silly. But for me, something that I engage in, whether I want to or not, is obsession. Obsession to me is a really important ritual. It's like the kind of thing where I don't actually feel like my … I don't want to use the word "healthy" or whatever, but I don't feel like myself unless I'm truly obsessed with something or someone or just in some sort of enthusiastic zone.

Obsession is something that is really hard to create, obviously. But I think that daily, I try to go and search some things to be obsessed about. When you're truly obsessed with something, you don't have any ego and you would do anything for it, and you are of course devoted enough to it to want to write about it or think about, and turn it over and think of all the possibilities around it. I think that's the thing that's part of my practice.

I read in an interview that you believe that repetition is a type of witchcraft. You do use a lot of repetition in your poems. Is that something that you've discovered accidentally, or that you just started doing naturally? How important is repetition to your work?

My mom was a professor of art history, so I used to go to her classes from a very young age. I really loved classrooms and people teaching and the whole shtick. I learned early on that if you're trying to get a point across, you have to keep repeating it because people don't listen. They're probably not going to listen the one time and they may not listen to you at all, so you sort of have to persuade them by repeating.

Have you ever felt like all the arrangements for words have already been made, and if not, what keeps you centered and open to new possibilities for language? How do you stay in this fluid space where you can always perceive new possibilities?

This sounds kind of boring, but I just keep reminding myself to have time to hear the language. Then once I do, once I provide a space for that, then the language is just sitting there. Is this right? Is this waiting right there to be heard? I think practically, there're all kinds of ways you can do that to help other people find that. I think experiential art making or learning is really important in that way.

I'm a big believer in objects in writing. If you just go somewhere and write down all the objects you see, then there's all this language that was just waiting there. Also, there are people who do things like sit and listen to people talking and write down the fourth word they hear. Something like that. There're all kinds of ways to map out different uses of language, but I think for me, it's just about having a second to tap into what's all around.

There are absolutely infinite possibilities for the arrangement of language. I don't know who this paranoid power or whatever that I'm referring to is, but I feel like *they* would want us to believe that all the arrangements are already created, because then we would lose the hope we need to do the thing. But it's totally the opposite. Every person brings to the situation this infinite opportunity and infinite possibilities of things we can write down or say or express in whatever it is that we might be doing. Sometimes people get trapped in that feeling like it's all been done before. Everybody's talked about boats already, or something like that. I think as long as you resist that feeling, then you can see the infinite possibilities.

How much time a day do you spend on average writing? And what time of day do you find is best for you to write during?

The only thing that really helps me write poems is to be alone and for there to be nothing going on, and no obligation and no one talking and just not anything at all. I like to get up early to work, and I love when no one is around and it's just me in the world, between say 5:00 to 9:45 AM. I love that concentrated thing where it's almost like you're the only person in the universe.

I don't think I would want to live in a cabin or something. I like the feeling of knowing there are other people around. Knowing you're not totally the only person there, but that you don't have to talk to anyone else is part of a routine that I really like. But I would never get up at 5:00 and think, "Oh, I have to write a poem." I can't do that. I might be like, "Oh, this person asked me to send them poems and so maybe this would be a good time to figure out which ones," or something. I've been trying to write more prose and I really love prose, but since I'm not really good at it, that is something I might carve out a specific block of time for. It feels different than writing a poem. I don't have any routine for poetry writing.

The first line of your poem "Why Poetry Can Be Hard for Most People" reads: "Because speaking to the dead is not something you want to do." Do you think poetry is a form of mediumship or a calling?

Yes. I would say absolutely. I really think that all art is. We think of mediums as if they only exist in this one specific way, sitting in a room, and then we pay them to put garlic on stuff and call up the dead or whatever, but there are many different ways to be a medium. Some mediums are good at exorcism and that's their thing. They do that thing all the time, so we think of them as the kind of person that would talk to the dead. Or a psychic who is really good at reading tarot cards. I've definitely talked to psychics. Psychics really work their muscles to interact with a particular kind of message coming from another world, and I think that poets absolutely are mediums to channel language from the dead as well. I'm always revising who I think the dead are, or what the dead are. Recently I had this idea that we are all dead. I mean, this isn't a new idea. We're already dead, and so we speak to ourselves from the future all the time. I don't know if poets are always talking to a particular dead person or if it's just us in 300 years coming back to tell ourselves things or give ourselves information and language from the future to document.

Sometimes it can be tricky information, but I do think there are things that the dead are trying to communicate through poets, and that's sort of poets' jobs to write them down. I believe in these spiritual obligations; that we have obligations not only to the dead, but also to the future, and to people who are alive now who we have no way to know we're in conversation with and yet we have to be good friends to them. That's one of the reasons why we have to keep creating. That's the fallacy that happens when we feel bad. We feel like, "Oh, what's the point? Why should I even write this dumb stuff? No one cares," or whatever. But if we're compelled to do it, we at least have to write it down and do whatever we can to get people to see it. That's not actually a selfish career thing—it's a spiritual obligation.

Speaking of obligation, writing is a solitary process. You mentioned earlier that the most important thing for you to write a poem is to be alone, but with Astro Poets, you're one half of a collaborative effort. Has that collaboration impacted your personal process at all?

I have been in some terrible/traumatic collaborations, but I think Astro Poets works because we are Aries-Sagittarius and we know how to give each other the space we need to create together. Alex Dimitrov has been really wonderful at being a driving force of keeping our projects going, and I am so thankful to him for his drive, or I guess I should say, his fire, which is a good match for my own.

Basically how Astro Poets works is that we each write our own thing and fuse it together. We don't say, "Should we put this here," or whatever. We write columns together and are working on a book, but what's especially cool about the Twitter [we write together] is you kind of don't know who's doing what. But then maybe someone would know. I mean, I can tell, obviously, although in the past I've looked through our feed and been like, "Did I write that or did he?" There are some moments where I can't figure it out, but then with our book, we are each writing our own chapters, and so that makes it better because I don't think I could write something creative with someone and be like, "Should we change this sentence?" mid-thought. I've tried to do that and it really bothers me. I mean, it's one thing if one person writes one line or something, but once you start doing it together in that very intimate way, it's just too much. You know? I can't give up that much control. There's just so much to think about.

Do you enjoy performing poetry in front of an audience? Do you think that the reception of a poem changes when it's delivered orally versus when someone reads it?

I think of performing poetry live as an absolutely important part of it, because when you're dead, you really can't do that anymore. The body you have is here now and you have to do that for the poem as much as you can to try to help it or bolster it. I also am kind of a frustrated actress. I like the feeling of people looking at me in that context and not in other contexts, so I love every aspect of it. I love clothes and I love colors and things like that. The whole thing is very exciting to me and important to poetry, I think. It's also related to what we were talking about in terms of spells and incantations or whatever. When you're delivering words out of your actual mouth, then you're really affecting change in a way that goes beyond the page. It's like this extra layer of magic.

Last night I gave a reading from *Milk*. I was doing a modulated, louder voice into the microphone. It's something that I always do. There was a handful of women in the audience that got upset and were like, "You're hurting my ears! Please, stop that!"

One said, "I really like your poetry, but I can't hear it. You're so loud." My first instinct was to say, "Well, you can get up and leave if you want." I didn't say that, so I had to modulate my voice and talk quieter. There were not a lot of options for me because they were like, "Oh my god. It's so loud. I'm going to die," or something. So I had to make my voice be quieter into the microphone, and it just felt so wrong. It was so depressing not to be allowed to be myself.I've been thinking a lot about that. Like, what does it matter? If I was reading the poem to somebody in the room, obviously I'm not going to scream in their face. I don't know why it bothered me so much, but it just did. Everybody should have the space to do their thing as they want to, I think.

How does a poet survive under capitalism?

Not well. Or in really awful ways. I mean, I'm extraordinarily privileged and lucky. I have a steady job and it was really awful until I got that job. It's awful for a lot of artists. In the moment in history that we're in right now, where everything seems so, so horrible, being an artist can feel even more futile. Like, how could we possibly be thinking about funding for the arts during a time like this? But I think this is exactly the moment when we have to keep going, because finding

funding for the arts and education is also connected to equality and free healthcare and free school and all that stuff. There should be ways that artists and poets can make money.

I've had this dream for a long time. I think there's so much space for poets and artists to be in schools and to change the culture of schools. It would be a perfect way to make it less hard for us to survive and fund ourselves. I would love to have some sort of pipeline for poets to get teaching jobs in public schools. Artists, too. Don't get me wrong, there are artists and poets that go into schools and do lessons for free and that is a wonderful gesture. But I mean actually having solid jobs in schools and being teachers. That needs to happen. That's a perfect space for artists to be in. It could just be a win/win all around.

Dorothea Lasky recommends:

Things that are giving me life this Summer, 2018:

1. Gwendolyn Brooks's *Blacks*
2. Ari Aster's *Hereditary*
3. Clarice Lispector's *Near to the Wild Heart*
4. Doodad + Fandango's earrings
5. Anelise Chen's *So Many Olympic Exertions*
6. Devendra Banhart's *Mala*
7. Rose perfumes
8. Wayne Koestenbaum's *Camp Marmalade*
9. Drake's *Scorpion*
10. Natalie Eilbert's *Indictus*
11. Nina Simone's "I Put A Spell On You"
12. Chase Berggrun's *RED*
13. Anaïs Duplan's *Take this Stallion*
14. Eileen Myles's *The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays in Art*
15. Lamy's Neon Orange Pen
16. Red nail polish and kale
17. Jess Gladwish's FatPomPoms
18. 1980's Interviews of Jack Nicholson

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Vocation
Poet

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