

On making sure to prioritize your needs



Poet Maggie Millner discusses finding a form, valuing your free time, why magazines are essential, and the importance of friends.

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As told to Loré Yessuff, 2952 words.

Tags: Poetry, Beginnings, Education, Process, Day jobs, Money.

I'd love to hear about your background, how you got started in poetry, why you decided to start writing, just all those general things.

I have written poems—many of them rhyming!—since I was about four. I grew up in rural upstate New York, in a town of about six hundred people. It was a fairly isolated childhood, during which I wrote constantly. Writing had some escapist function for me, and also probably helped me process some of the social alienation I experienced as a kid—but mostly it was just extremely pleasurable. I did it almost every day.

It was in college that I got sort of serious about poetry. I went to Brown, which has a famously innovative, language-driven writing department. I felt very uncool when I got there with my backpack full of all my little narrative and lyric poems. So I tried to cultivate to a much more exploratory relationship to form—first in order to conform with my peers, and later because I had actually developed my own fascination with the deconstruction of language and narrative.

I had a string of service jobs in California after college; I'd write poems during the day, then serve seafood to tourists at night. A few years later, I ended up doing the MFA at NYU, a program affiliated historically with post-confessional poets, most prominently Sharon Olds, that has perhaps the opposite aesthetic reputation from that of Brown. In some ways, I found my way back to a more lyric poetic mode in grad school, but one still informed by this formally challenging and theory-driven relationship to poetry that I'd cultivated in undergrad.

It's interesting that you started with a more boundary-pushing, avant-garde background because I feel like for a lot of people, it's the opposite. They start with more traditional stuff—and this is with any art form, not just poetry—they start with the traditional, they learn the basics, and then as they figure it out, they start to decide what formal elements they want to keep and what they want to get rid of. You had a kind of reverse development.

Yes, I agree. After undergrad, I became intensely hungry for lessons in prosody and more traditional poetic forms, partly because I had never thoroughly learned them (having grown up attending a not-super-well-resourced rural public school, and then going to a fancy college without distribution requirements where I ended up skipping over most of the basics). I wanted to know about meter and rhyme and syllabics and stanzaic structure—all that nerdy stuff. So I started reading on the side and feeding that appetite on my own. It was really formative, having this training in explicitly boundary-pushing writing, but then feeling the need to go back and do the work of understanding what it was I was pushing against.

That makes me think of Couplets, and the rhyme throughout. A lot of younger poets are scared of rhyme, or they

don't like it. I feel like I've been taught to think it's corny. Actually, when I first started reading your poems, I was skeptical and thought maybe they were saccharine. And then with time, I realized how much I admired them and what you were doing. You said that you've always been playing with rhyme since you were really young. But in this contemporary scene, where people are trying to divorce themselves from older, traditional ideas of meter and rhyme, how did you decide to explore those things?

We seem to be in a moment when poets from a vast range of backgrounds and aesthetics are actually turning to more traditional forms. And that hasn't been the case in recent literary history, certainly not in the MFA era. There's a commonly agreed-upon idea that rhyme is a conservative gesture, both formally and ideologically—that it represents a prescriptive or repressive relationship to literary work because only people with a certain kind of education and class status have had historical access to it.

But I think we're in a moment now where writing in form doesn't necessarily carry the same cultural freight. This might be because formal writing has been so effectively de-centered in writing curricula, particularly within graduate programs, which tend to focus more on contemporary literary production. Or it might be because the Modernists convinced us all that the past is so thoroughly unrelatable to us that none of its artistic modes could possibly speak to our experience. Or it might be just that the status quo—the dominant period style—reflects a particular kind of free verse writing that troublemaking writers want to resist and update and improve upon using whatever tools we find at our disposal.

Divorcing the practice of prosody from the concept of conservatism presents a kind of amazing opportunity for writers of our generation to pick and choose the parts of these traditions that feel generative to us. It might even be reclamatory to describe our experiences, or to critique specific institutions and systems, using forms that were historically predicated on our exclusion. Can there be something radical about coopting or reappropriating constrictive formal traditions in service of a more liberatory aesthetic project?

Of course, there's also the fact that, as you're saying, we often think of rhyme as corny and antiquated and different from how people talk—whereas the job of poetry is to reflect and emulate contemporary speech. But I don't think that has to be the case at all. One of my favorite things about rhyme is that it lets us play and pun, make strange jokes and surprising associations. For me, this is one of the chief delights of writing: to mess around with the raw material of language—not just the semantic parts.

Did you always imagine that you'd be writing in couplets, or was that something that came later?

It came later! I started out by writing a one-page poem in couplets. I really thought that was it. And then I showed it to my friend, the poet Rachel Mannheimer, and she said, "Oh, that's cool, but it could be longer." So then I thought, "Oh yeah, it could be maybe three or four pages long!" Then I wrote a couple more pages and showed them to another friend, the poet Daniel Poppick, who said, "Yeah, you're onto something, but I think it still needs to be much longer." Even a year into the project, I still hadn't really entertained the idea that the whole book would be in this rhyming form.

But the form itself also had a momentum all its own. Constraint, for me, is generative. During the time in my life that the book was written, I felt a conspicuous lack of structure in many different areas; I was casting off of a lot of inherited ideas and frameworks. Opting into a set of prescriptive forms during this time of personal chaos actually felt really comforting and helpful. I also realized partway through that there was something kind of beautifully symbiotic about the way the couplets spoke to the poem's themes: partnership and romance and severance and erotic love.

That's really lovely that your friends prompted you to keep going.

Yeah, thank god for friends. That was the primary thing that the MFA did for me: put me in contact with people who understood what I was doing and who could read my work. It's been one of the greatest gifts of my life. I didn't have many poet-friends before grad school, though I craved those relationships so much. And then finally, when these people came into my life, they totally changed the way I felt about my work.

This is kind of a gloomy question, but I feel like it would be silly not to talk about this. With the closure of magazines like Astra and Bookforum, how are you processing the fragile state of the publishing world? Do you have hope for the future?

It's such a good question. I work at a literary magazine, and I feel acutely the precarity of this industry and the pain of seeing places like *Bookforum* and *Astra* close. Magazines are the lifeblood of literary culture—I really believe this. Books usually have one author, and high sticker prices, and very particular modes of circulation. Magazines are different; they're snapshots of what's happening cross-sectionally in literature at a given moment, and they're irreplicable venues for dialogue between writers. So it's pretty upsetting to see these places close.

I have some vague hope for the future. There are smaller magazines cropping up and people forging exciting new venues for literary curation and anthologizing. I'm cautiously excited to see what folks do in the vacuum left by these institutions. But really, it's hard to even have a conversation about literary publishing without having a larger conversation about capitalism. The things that need to happen in order to have a sustainable literary culture are the same things that need to happen in order for people to get healthcare and make a living wage and have a social safety net and maintain housing and avoid incarceration. No industry is separable from the bigger systems.

Yeah, it's all interconnected.

Yeah. *Astra*, for example, was a magazine that was really at the whim of one specific donor. Clearly we need different communitarian models. Ideally, people are well compensated enough in their professional lives that they can create literary magazines as cooperatively-owned and cooperatively-run institutions that also receive public funding and support. Unfortunately, writers don't make money and editors don't make money, so that's a sort of pie-in-the-sky proposition at this point. But I do think we are hopefully going to start moving toward some of those models simply because we don't really have a choice.

I would even argue that even for the continuation of writing books, we need magazines.

Absolutely.

How can we even be inspired to figure out what kind of work we want to write? What kind of individual collections do we want to put out if we're not seeing what else other people are doing? We need each other. And sometimes, I think of the strikes that are going on with Harper Collins and The New School and stuff, and it makes me feel a little nervous and anxious, but then it also makes me think—maybe naively—that something better is coming.

It's true that we're seeing the beginnings of a long-overdue resurgence of the labor movement in this country. Just the fact that there have been four high-profile strikes at big institutions in the past two weeks is a testament to the organizing happening across industries. This is a symptom of a deeply fucked-up system where compensation and labor conditions are generally abysmal, but it also feels like a sign that people are realizing the power they hold as workers and starting to say that enough is enough.

I agree. It seems like more people are starting to become proactive and demand better conditions. You were saying earlier, in order to have more cooperative magazines or presses, we need more money. Something I couldn't help but think of is we also need more time. Sometimes my friends will be like, "Oh yeah, let's start our own magazine." And I'm like, "Baby, with what time?" We need money, but we also need time. We need time for ourselves. We need time to think. Time-off.

Yes. And to your point, I was only able to write *Couplets* because I was given the gift of two consecutive year-long writing fellowships, at Bucknell and Colgate. That's where this book was written.

Now I work full-time. It's an ongoing challenge to balance the life of a writer with the responsibilities I have to my job and my colleagues and my students. It's not a balance that is easy to strike by any means.

Yeah, I think it's impossible. Speaking of time, I'm wondering, what is your relationship to time? How do you work against it? How do you work with it? How do you—despite the impossibility—make time for everything?

I have this dream of making a needlepoint for my bedroom that says, "Body / people / art / work," in that order, as my list of priorities. It's like Maslow's Hierarchy for the contemporary writer: I have to take care of my body in order to live; then I have to take care of the people I love and the broader communities I'm part of; then I have to prioritize making and engaging with art; and then, obviously, I have to do the work that allows me to pay my bills. Even though it's not always possible to keep those values in their proper order, I do think that that's the ideal hierarchy for me.

Again, though, I'll never actually have time to make that needlepoint. I'm thankful for the academic calendar, I'll say that. And for summers and winters where I have a lighter load and where I can recover and take care of myself. And for stable, life-sustaining relationships and friendships.

I also just moved into an apartment where I'm living by myself for the first time. Part of the idea here is that I'd like to be more intentional about how I structure my time. When I'm engaging with people, I'd like to be able to be the most generous and attentive version of myself. But in order to do that (and it took me until age thirty-one to realize this), I actually need a lot of alone time. It's what makes everything else possible.

Still, I do fall into a trap, as a lot of people do, of treating even my free time as something to optimize or structure in a way that is maximally efficient—so I can have the most amount of fun or experience the highest degree of relaxation or see the biggest number of friends. I'm trying to get out of that framework.

It's hard.

Yeah. I think the key is actually allowing myself to let go of those tendencies and anxieties, whatever the cost to my productivity. Just catching myself in the act of those self-defeating habits, noticing what I'm doing, and saying, "Not today."

Yeah, there's something about having to accept that not everything will get done. Hopefully, as our conditions get better, we won't have to sacrifice so much, but it's just a dream. I don't know.

Knock on wood!

A few months ago, I went to a reading with the poet Ross Gay. He had just come out with his latest book, Inciting Joy, which is an essay collection. And someone in the audience asked him how he decides that something that he's grappling with needs to take shape in an essay versus a poem. And he said something like, "I don't really know. All I can say is that with poetry, I feel like there's usually some mysterious thing that's haunting me, and it feels like poetry is the only way I can dive into that mystery." Something to that effect. And so, I'm wondering for you, how do you decide to write a poem? I mean, I could easily see Couplets being a memoir or book of essays. This sort of coming of age, discovering your queerness tale very easily could manifest into different forms, but how did you land on poetry?

I love Ross Gay's mind. I agree that poetry has a different relationship to argumentation from that of prose writing. I edit nonfiction and fiction in addition to poetry, and I teach college-level nonfiction writing. So I'm actually often coaching writers and students to assert their ideas in the most salient and gripping ways. But poetry allows for a different set of concerns.

Specifically, I think poetry clears a space to linger—to swim in the experience or obsession—without necessarily expecting some kind of rational or valiative payoff. That's part of what feels so exciting to me about poetry: it can be a place for mere noticing. To return to our favorite subject, *time*: the lyric poem, in the classic sense of the phrase, often describes the dilation of a single moment. A poem by Wordsworth might take half an hour to read, but the events described in the poem occurred in a split second. In that way, poetry is often working to arrest and manipulate time. I think that's part of its joy: stopping the flow of life to allow for fine-grained

observation, for sensory immersion, for endlessly recursive levels of analysis. It opens up a space in which to feel, but also a space in which to catch oneself in the act of feeling.

Maggie Millner Recommends:

The novel Dykette by Jenny Fran Davis. I'm reading it slowly on purpose because I'm savoring every page so much. It's full of hilarious lesbian gossip and campy self-analysis, and it's absolutely delicious.

Living alone! One of the best decisions I've recently made.

The Cuban band, Los Zafiros. I just set up my record player in my new place and I've been playing their self-titled album nonstop while I decorate.

The writer Maya Binyam has a debut novel coming out this summer called *Hangman*, an startlingly good excerpt of which appeared in the fall issue of *The Paris Review*. I can't wait to read the rest—it's going to be major.

Expensive butter, maybe my most extravagant indulgence. Lately I've been getting the salted kind from Ronnybrook Farm in Ancramdale, New York. A note to all the creameries out there: I would 100% do spon-con for butter.

Name

Maggie Millner

Vocation

poet

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