

# On pushing back against the rules you're taught



Poet Susan Alexander discusses the power of a clean desk, tapping into the energy of your work and transforming grief into art

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As told to Lauren Spear, 2874 words.

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

## **Describe your writing desk.**

My writing desk is nice and clean. This did not used to be the case. I used to have a horribly messy writing desk. One time my husband, Ross, said to me, "What would happen if you cleaned off your desk?" And I said, "Well, no. All my creative notes are here. Everything's here." And he said, "Why not try it. Maybe it will change things."

So I went to prove him wrong, and I cleaned off my desk completely. The next day I sat down, and it was a miracle. It sort of freed my brain to go wherever it needed to go that day and I was not stuck on all the junk in front of me.

So now I keep a really clean desk. It is not a fancy one. I always wanted a beautiful wooden one, but I do not have a beautiful wooden one. I do look out at the ocean and the mountains and the sky as I sit there. I have one desk where I write by hand. Then I have my other desk where I type on my laptop. The two desks form a kind of L. I very rarely compose a first draft on a computer. I feel more connected to pen and paper.

## **Where do your poems come from?**

From wherever all poems come from, of course. Wherever that is.

## **Do they start as an image? A word?**

Usually, with me, a poem comes from a feeling. There is some underlying "something" that I want to express. It is not a fully formed idea; it is usually a feeling or even a sensation. Of course, language is continuously offering itself as fodder for poems with its delicious sounds and tacit images. Sometimes poems come in reaction to reading other people's poems. Other people's poetry can be a real inspiration to me, whether it's an image, a series of images, or an idea. It is more like a conversation with them. It is not that I want to copy what they have done; sometimes I want to contradict what they have written or add to it. That conversation can be a real impetus, and a poem can spring out of it.

**I've noticed that! One of my favourite poems is "Cupid's Bow," where you reference Pablo Neruda:**

## CUPID'S BOW

*I want*

*to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees.*

*Pablo Neruda*

It's about the wanting.  
The mouthwatering.  
Fingers pressed against the bakery window.  
Pockets full of holes.

It's about the wanting without the forcing.  
Back in high school, I kidnapped  
my longtime crush.  
A friend's Mustang was the bait car.  
When he panicked on the highway out of town,  
I had to drive him home.

*This* one wants a certain  
someone who doesn't want her.  
She stops eating and sleeping,  
starts running at night.  
Crafts a daily text message.  
Countless unsend drafts.

On the flip side  
of the same equation,  
*that* one is wanted  
by a succession of lovers  
who can't let go  
after she calls it quits.

Yet           when it clicks,  
              when the key fits the lock  
                  and the door swings opens,  
              when the screwdriver fits the head,  
                  and the simple machine chews through solid wood,  
              when in a last ditch bid, the line is cast upon the fish pond,

a cherry blossom shimmers  
and the beloved tugs,

then the wet street explodes in pink confetti,  
then the neighbourhood dogs howl at the rising moon,  
then every night is carnal with frog song,

at least, for the while  
that the having lasts.

Neruda's love poems are favourites of mine. Sometimes a poet's line will just live inside me. That line made me realize I was in love with Ross. I was reading that poem and thought, Oh my God, really?

One of my teachers, Patrick Lane, said, "First thing in the morning, do a finger exercise." He also said, "If you don't know what to do, just look out the window and start describing what you see." I have so many poems that were written in the morning while looking out and taking in the view. More is revealed as I write. It's very mysterious where poems come from. I don't get it.

**You live on Bowen Island, and I see so much of the West Coast being referenced in your writing. Do you see the West Coast as a backdrop, a character or a kind of consciousness in your writing?**

I would definitely say a character. The trees are my buddies, my friends. The ocean has so many moods, and so does the sky. And all those mountains up the sound—they are always there, but they are always changing. That is one thing I love, how variable the elements are. I do think of them as beings I can commune with.

Though I see them as characters, I also see them as a more-than-human consciousness. Humans are such a small part of the bigger consciousness of the natural world. We tend to see only ourselves and our own concerns, but there is so much more going on.

**Your poem "RITES" comes to mind here. There is a line: "Sometimes I try to turn you into something/ you are not. Like the hummingbird that lives/ somewhere close by the house, hangs around/ even though I've never had a feeder." How do you see the hummingbird functioning in the poem?**

I was so happy when that poem came to me even though it was painful. I'm partial to imbuing creatures with spirits. Right after Ross's funeral, I was in Palm Springs, and a hummingbird kept buzzing by. My friend laughed and said, "Ross! Ross!" I even wrote her a poem about a hummingbird falling in love with her. There does happen to be a hummingbird that lives nearby my home, and it's always a surprise when I see it.

I have another poem titled "Rufus" in which God is the hummingbird and so "I don't have a feeder / because that would be manipulation." Hummingbirds, like God, need to be wild. That said, I do use personification, which is dodgy in the poetry world and not always well-received, but I try not to make it sentimental. It is never meant to diminish the animal or the creature.

**Do you have any personal writing rules, like things you never do or no-nos? For example, words you would never use or techniques you avoid?**

I've had so many teachers say, "No, you can't do this. You can't do that." I got deeply shat on once in my writing group for personifying trees. My friend looked skeptically at me and said, "Susan, trees don't speak."

**Boring.**

I know. Some people say you shouldn't use words like soul or heart, or that there are too many poems about the moon. "Trite, trite, trite." But I think the job of poetry is to try to make something new and fresh. The fact is, I love hummingbirds. I love the moon. I love the stars. I love the natural world, and I'm not going to stop writing about it. I can't. One thing I do is go through and pull out extra words, especially adverbs and adjectives. Take things out, and see what the poem does without them. In the editing process, I try to remove anything that doesn't belong in the poem.

**You once told me, "When writing, don't ever waste a word." I feel like in poetry, the form itself gives you only so much room to explain something. I'd love to hear about your editing process.**

I think of it as a distillation process. You want to keep the essence of everything you've got, and in distilling it, it kind of strengthens it, right? It creates something more potent. I tend to overwrite and then distill. It's much harder to start with something small and grow it a bit bigger. Sometimes I end up with little micro poems. When I was first starting, I always overshot the end, and that's something I tend not to do anymore. One thing I watch for is whether I'm saying too much at the end of a poem.

I also want to see what the poem looks like visually on the page. I'll play with the stanzas, the line breaks. Does it want to be in couplets, this poem, or quatrains or does it need space to move and breathe? I heard someone say that the white space is silence and the poem is coming out of the silence. Once I get to a certain point, I have to read it out loud to myself again and again to hear the music of the poem and catch the rhythm. Rhythm and the mouth feel of the words is mostly deeply intuitive. I don't like to force it.

**Is there a piece of yours that needs the cadence of your voice to become itself?**

Every single one! [Laughs] No, I actually do like hearing other people read my poems. It's fun and I hear it differently. Some poems are a bit harder to read. There's one in *Nothing You Can Carry*, it's called "Clamavi," and it's a rant about global warming and the oil and gas industry. That one, I would be happy if an actor read it because it has to be performed a bit.

**When you finish a poem, do you have specific people that you share it with first or test it on?**

Well, not so much anymore. It used to be Ross. I would show him my work, and if he said nothing, I knew he did not like it. If he liked it, he would tell me. He was a litmus test, though he wasn't very good at judging poems about himself!

I have a friend in Michigan, [Laura Apol](#), who is wonderful to workshop poetry with. The rare times we get together, we share stacks of poems back and forth, and it works because it is mutual. She likes hearing my thoughts on her poems, which is amazing because I think she is a better poet than I am.

[Seán Virgo](#) is another. He is a novelist, a poet, and an editor, and I love working with him because he wants me to have my own voice. He is not trying to change me, but to be the best I can be. He'll zero in on lazy word choices or stanzas that are a bit out of focus-need sharpening up. He is deeply interested in the natural rhythm of a poem. I trust him.

I've done many generative poetry retreats with [Lorna Crozier](#), with the late [Patrick Lane](#), with Laura Apol. I think of them as Master Classes. In this setting, I read my fresh poems and see how people react to them. I can often tell if something has really landed, and it's a real privilege to have that. At the same time, I can slip into this almost intoxicated state, where I think something is better than it is, just because I'm caught up in the excitement of the poetry.

**Your chapbook *Berberitzen* is written for your late husband, Ross. In the endnotes, you say "his companionship remains a deep vein that I hope I will mine for the rest of my days." When grief enters a poem, do you feel you're**

**writing from it, through it, or toward something beyond it?**

Definitely from it. There was a lot of grief before he died because he was sick for so long, and writing was a place to put my grief and turn it into something else. Poetry really helped me hold it. I have a surfeit of grief poems, and some, the best ones I think, have made it into a new full-length manuscript I am shopping around to publishers. Not an easy sell, I think, grief!

Writing inside grief can lead me through it, but I do not think that is the intent of the poem. The poem is always for itself. But the process is a kind of talking to myself in a way, often turning to the natural world to find deep consolation and companionship. That tree in particular [*points out the window*], and this one here, they are really good listeners. They stay quiet and tall, and in a way, they are Ross-like, just there, solid.

Grief has been a theme throughout all my work. Often, it is grief for the world, the climate and the earth, not always for another person. I have also had a lot of death in my life, my nieces and other dear people who died way too young, and that just rips my heart out. Turning deep emotion into art can be really transformative. So many people feel these things, and even though a poem is difficult, it can be deeply connecting. I know it sounds sort of clichéd. The personal is universal, blah, blah, blah, but it's true. We're human beings, we share emotions.

**When I read your work about Ross, I can picture him so clearly. It is a rare and beautiful thing to hold someone you love so deeply and place them fully into your work.**

Well, it keeps them alive in a way, right? Ross was a man of few words, and he didn't leave any writing behind. I mean, we used to teasingly call him Mr. Delete, because you would send him a text or an email and he'd read it and then hit delete and it'd be gone. The final poem in my new manuscript is one of the last texts of his that he sent me, and I wrote a poem based on it because it was so interesting syntactically.

My therapist said to me, "You're going to be drawing on this relationship for a long time, even though Ross isn't here anymore." I think we carry people with us. There's an interesting line in one of Rilke's letters, where he talks about never truly losing someone without also taking on some of the work they left undone. I like the idea of carrying on with what was left unfinished.

**Oh God, that's so beautiful.**

It's kind of daunting too.

**Can you talk a little bit about the novel that you're working on?**

Let's call it what it is—a first draft. That is, an attempt! It's an historical story, true, about a medieval woman who wrote a book and ultimately came to a bad end. I've been gripped by her story because it feels so modern in a way. She lived in a community of women who were beginning to write in the vernacular, at a time when most writing was academic and done in Latin by men. I'm fascinated by her. I've taken many runs at this project and failed miserably, and now I'm trying again.

I keep asking myself how she had the guts to do what she did. How did she withstand it? She doesn't feel real to me yet, and I want her to feel real. That's what I'm working on. I have lots of ideas about the political and theological arguments, the misogyny, and the historical context, but at the heart of it is a simpler question. How did she do it, and why did she make the decisions she did? I don't know if I would have been that brave. I think I would have kept under the radar and tried to stay alive.

**What's been drawing you deeper into this project, or keeping you engaged with it?**

Honestly, she's been haunting me. Ever since I learned about her, she hasn't left me alone. I'm also interested in the antagonists. What was driving them? When they were busy burning the Knights Templar, why would they bother

with this woman from northern France? That question has really gotten under my skin. What made her such a threat?

I tried to make it a series of poems, then a short story, then a screenplay. Now I'm hoping it might become a novella or something longer. It's a real departure for me and a big stretch.

**I find it interesting that you feel such a strong pull toward her, and yet you don't see yourself in her. It seems like so many writers create characters that mirror parts of themselves.**

Well, maybe I've got to find the part of myself that's in her.

**Okay, so that's your homework.**

Yes. To find myself in this incredibly brave, articulate, spiritually innovative person.

**What do you hope stays with readers after they leave one of your poems, and eventually, your novel?**

With my poems, I hope readers leave with an image that stays with them, and that the image carries a feeling. I think images can hold so much. Especially with more environmentally themed poems, I hope they change hearts, or at least shift the way someone sees the world and how they engage with it. Maybe that change affects how they live, in some small way. Even though I don't believe poetry has to do anything, I do think it can create small transformations. With my grief poems, I hope whoever reads them will know they are not alone.

With my story, I want it to be a page turner. I want it to be genuinely entertaining. I'm really interested in how, despite hundreds of years of women being treated as second-class citizens or worse, there was this remarkable flowering, a kind of feminism, and it was crushed. I want to explore and preserve that moment and this remarkable woman.

**It seems like the theme of preservation reaches across all your writing.**

I think it was Anaïs Nin who said, "We write to taste life twice." I've always loved that. I feel like a lot of my writing, especially my poetry, has been about reliving experiences, seeing them again, and understanding them differently.

**Susan Alexander recommends:**

Don't underestimate a clean desk.

Go outside every day, walk on dirt paths under trees if possible.

Read for pleasure. Reread your favorite books from time to time.

Novels I've enjoyed recently: *What We Can Know* by Ian McEwan and *Raising Hare* by Chloe Dalton.

Spend time with folks from other generations.

Name

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Vocation

poet

□

Dyan Spear