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As told to Loré Yessuff, 2794 words.

Tags: Poetry, Writing, Process, Inspiration, Beginnings.

On giving yourself time to find your voice

Poet Tomás Q. Morín discusses the value of surprises, moving away from ideas of perfection, trusting your friends and mentors, and speaking your truth.
Is there any poetry or films or pieces of visual art that inspired your new body of work, Machete?

Oh, wow. Yeah. I've always been a fan of Wes Anderson's movies, like many people. It feels like he is so himself in these films and you're getting one person's unique, quirky vision.

For me, it felt like, to go back to that idea of possibility models, I had always written with a little bit of an absurdist bent. What is different about this book is that, compared to my past books, there aren't any [absurdist poems], aside from one persona poem, which is in the voice of Jessica Alba's character from the Machete movies. I'm not really writing through masks, I'm just writing as myself.

I started my MFA program in 2000. It took me 21 years and three books to feel like I'm finally writing poems that are very, very close on the page to how I sound and how I think. Part of that was, like with Wes Anderson, just leaning into the strangeness. But it's really only strange to others. To me, this is just how I think. I just really leaned into it and trusted that other people would respond in a positive way.

You were saying that it's taken you a while to reveal yourself in your work. Does that feel vulnerable or scary?

Yeah, yeah. I think it's a mix of feeling vulnerable, but also feeling empowered, feeling like this is who I am. This is who I am, and also getting to a place where I feel like I don't have to please everyone. Whoever wants to show up for who I am, great. And whoever doesn't, and it's not for them, hey, that's great too. It just feels really liberating.

And at the same time, it feels kind of scary too, because I think, if there was no social media, it would feel less scary, but—we've both seen the ways in which trolls gang up on people. That hasn't happened to me, but I can't imagine when you're getting hundreds of DMs coming in telling you the most awful things. When you're out there as an artist, that's kind of part of the package. Part of the package is that some people are going to feel threatened by your mere existence. In my case, just being a brown man, speaking truth to power in some of the poems, some people are going to be like, who do you think you are? Don't you know your place, your role, blah, blah, blah? I obviously have no time for those people. But at the same time, I'm a human being, and I can be hurt. That whole, sticks and stones and words will never hurt me. It's like, it's such a crock. Like of course words will hurt you. I would almost rather take the stick, because that bruise will go away. But that internal bruise from someone's words, man, they can have some staying power.

On the flip side of the trolls and the negativity and people being really threatened, is the people who are really excited about your work and want to celebrate you. With that being said, I'm wondering about how you go about forming a community with people in the literary world. Has it been difficult for you?

I think my sort of core literary family started with attending the Breadloaf Writers Conference. A lot of the people that I went to that conference with, I still text them. Every couple days, we send texts and emails and share work and stuff. It's been really beautiful to see them evolve as artists and grow and

celebrate their work as it comes out. And also going to the AWP Conference, doing book readings in person. Even if there's only two people in attendance and one person is the person who works at the bookstore. Reading to that person as if they're the most important person in the world, and actually connecting with people face to face. I love Zoom. I had my book launch last night. It was on Zoom and there were friends who were able to attend from all over the country. That was fantastic and beautiful and uplifting, but I also miss just sharing energy in person with people.

There are friends, other writers and fans of poetry that I'm friends with on social media and that I've had all these conversations with for years, and we've never met in person. When I was a kid, I always wanted a pen pal. I never got a pen pal and I just thought, God, that must be so cool to be exchanging letters across distance with these people. Then the internet is created and social media is created. That's kind of how it is. We're part of the most enormous pen pal group ever.

As your career has evolved and as you've evolved as a person and as a writer, how has your approach to revision changed?

Early on, my revision process looked like what I think is sort of the standard model. You write a first draft fairly quickly and then move from that first draft to editing and revising a second draft and then so on. That was my process for probably about 10 years. Then I hit a moment where it suddenly changed. As I was composing a first draft, I wouldn't move on, let's say I had two lines, I wouldn't move on to line three until I had already edited and revised lines one and two, and they felt set. Then I would do that for three before I would move on to line four. Sometimes a couple of lines would come in, but it was always this process where suddenly my composition process for the first draft and my revision process became smashed together and I was doing both at the same time. I don't know why that happened. It was one of those things where I was just like, well, I'm just going to go with it.

One thing that I noticed was that the physical act of writing changed as well. Whenever I would sit down to compose a poem and follow this process, I would get really hot. I would feel like I was overheating. So I had to set up a little fan near my desk. I would get super hungry. For my writing time, I would set up the fan, a basket of snacks beside me. It was almost like I was writing in some sort of fever.

I don't know if it's because I was compressing weeks and weeks of a process down into like a day or two, but physiologically, I felt the difference. That's how it's been, and I feel like probably at some point it's going to change again. I think my advice to anyone would be: it's good to know why you do what you do to a certain extent, but I think there's also some things that we don't know. If it feels right, it is right. We don't need to have all the magic of it explained to us if it feels right.

After all these years, why are you still invested in the practice of poetry?

When I was an undergrad, I took poetry writing workshops. It was for fun. It fulfilled the requirements of my minor. But then, when I got into grad school for a PhD in Spanish, I was super depressed. I was super depressed, and I turned to reading poetry and writing poetry almost as a therapeutic practice. It was something that gave me and still does give me joy. That gave me the confidence to try an MFA program. I had a few pieces published while I was in my MFA program. But afterwards, I had about four or five years of rejections where I didn't have a single thing accepted. I had to ask myself, can I keep doing this even if I don't have any success publishing? The answer was a very quick yes.

That was the moment where I separated writing from publishing. I realized that they were not just two very different things, but two things that required a different kind of energy and a different kind of attention. So then I started looking at submitting my work out as well, this is where I take off my poet hat and I put on my professional hat, and I have to have to be my own agent. If I had an agent, I told myself at the time, rejections would be coming in and there would be no personal feelings involved. It would be just like, okay, send it on to the next place. It's just business. That really helped a lot, and it also helped keep my writing practice in a sacred bubble, and whatever happens in the professional world of writing out there, it doesn't touch my practice on the inside.

Absolutely. It's really admirable that you were so resilient and steadfast. It seems like in some ways it wasn't even a choice. You were going to keep writing, even if you were not finding literary success.

Yeah, [I've always been] following my curiosity. I have a novel I'm going to try to write next year. I never thought I would say that. A few years ago, I got an idea for a novel and I've been taking notes for it for like three years now, without having written a single sentence, just letting it marinate.

In terms of my writing practice, it's just been one surprise after another, which I hope stays that way, because it makes it fun. You just never know. You just never know what you're going to write next.

I understand what you mean, the marinating. There is this idea or this question that's sort of perplexing you and then it never goes away. It just keeps forming and forming. How is the process or the feeling of writing nonfiction or marinating on this idea that you have for your novel, how does that differ from writing a collection of poetry?

I've gotten to a place now where I can get pretty close. I can start a poem and get pretty close to a final draft probably within about a week. But then I let it sit for six months. I'll share it with some friends and then, after six months, I'll go back and I'll look at it some more. But I'm not tinkering with it every single day. Whereas, when I was working on the memoir, that was before I had a family, before I had kids, and I lived alone. I would get up in the morning and do the traditional bang out 500 words in

the morning, and then go off and have the rest of my day. It was like showing up for work, happy work, but it was also hard work. When a project is big, it needs that consistency so that you can accomplish that really hard task of trying to hold it all in your brain at once, so that you can see it as an organism and not just the pages that are in front of you that day. I like both processes because I don't write many poems a year. I average about four to five. So whenever they do come, it's like a holiday. It's Christmas in July. But I also loved that consistency of having that memoir to always return to every day. It was always waiting.

Poetry can be so... it can catch you so spontaneously sometimes, which is also part of the thrill of it, I think. Earlier you spoke about how part of your work is speaking truth to power and digging deep into the lineage of pain and suffering in this country, especially the pain of marginalized people. There's been a lot of conversation, forever, but especially in the past year and a half, about imagining a new world, imagining a new society specifically in America. So I'm wondering what kind of world you're imagining for the literary community. What hopes do you have and what changes do you want to see?

Oh wow. I was having a conversation with a poet friend about this a while back, and this is not just in the poetry world, but just as you were saying, the whole literary world. I wish we could have a more honest conversation around awards and prizes and what they really mean. We have these awards, but just because something wins a certain award, it doesn't mean it's really the best book of the year.

Yes, that's true.

It just means that of the five people who chose it, it was the book they liked the most and they thought was the strongest. I think there should be more clarity around that. The people who invite writers to judge the awards should be more mindful about what awards those judges have already been judging.

I get the impulse behind inviting someone who won the National Book Award last year to judge for another award. But then that person also gets invited to judge three other awards. That's weird. That's kind of weird. There are so many poets. There's so many poets, and I get the idea of having someone who's so recently been minted as a big name. But we just need more... diversity isn't even quite the right word, but just more thoughtfulness. More thoughtfulness around how we choose the people who are giving the awards and the fellowships, because all of these things they're so important to supporting the work that writers are doing. I don't mean silly stuff like fame or notoriety or anything like that. But someone wins an award and they use it to be able to take some time off from work, so that they can pursue their creative projects. I would hope that we would start to have some conversations about that and to move away from language like "the best," because what does that even mean?

It's so subjective. I completely agree. Even like the term "emerging writer." What counts as an emerging writer?

Right. Also, how do we support writers after the first book? I think this is a problem with our country that trickles down into the literary world, where there's such a fetishizing of youth. How do we support the writer who's on their third book, their fourth book, their fifth book, the writer who we celebrated and paraded through the streets for their first book and then we've gone silent right after that. What are we doing for them? I know the LA Review of Books started a second book review column. Where they only review the second books of poets in order to, again, try to push back against that tide of only paying attention to debuts. The National Book Award Foundation has the 5 under 35. Where's the five over 35? Those people are doing important work too.

Yeah. It's an immense pressure to put on younger people, all people, but it's so much pressure to expect someone who is so young to create some genius body of work. Toni Morrison didn't release her first book, I believe, until she was late thirties or early forties. Yeah, I'm 25 and I haven't written a book. I want to, but I'm really trying to not force myself to write something quickly just for the sake of being a 25 year old novelist or whatever.

Right. I was 36 when my first book came out.

And that's amazing.

A long time ago, a mentor told me that sometimes, if a writer publishes too early and people love their work and then later on [the writer] disavows that early work, it's because they did some growing up in public. You just have to trust that when something is ready, it's ready. Trust your friends, trust your teachers, trust your mentors. Sometimes it happens at 25. Sometimes it happens at 35 or 45. We as writers, we're in the enviable position where, for us, it's like the opposite of athletes where, if you're a LeBron James, you get to 34, 35, it's almost time to retire. I know there are people that he started in the league with who have already retired. Whereas, for us as writers, we're just getting started.

Tomás Q. Morín Recommends:

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Rowing machines

Ghetto Claustrophobia by Shanta Lee

Everyone needs a nice pair shoes

Name

Tomás Q. Morin

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