

On why creative blocks aren't always a bad thing

Artist and poet Precious Okoyomon discusses their Frankenstein approach to writing, taking productive breaks, and how everything is one great big poem.

April 14, 2022 - [Precious Okoyomon](#) is a Brooklyn-based poet and artist. They are the author of [Ajebofa](#) (Bottlecap Press, 2016). Their writing has been performed and exhibited at the [Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati](#), [Exo Exo](#) in Paris, and [ChertLüdde](#) in Berlin. Their writing has been published in [Lit Magazine](#), [The Fanzine](#), [New York Tyrant](#), and elsewhere.

As told to Willis Plummer, 1455 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Writing](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#).

How do you interact with what you read? How do you interpolate new influences into your work?

Reading books is the only way I can learn things. I read like 20 books at once, and a big part of my writing is just reading. I learn new forms, new structures; how I want to sound. Just breaking down ideas of poetics for me. Then I integrate it into my poetry; things I love, things I'm particularly inspired by in that moment.

My new book is, in a lot of ways, my influences broken down. I'm inspired by my friends, being around my friends, experiencing their work. That malleable form. I can't imagine writing, or thinking at all, without my friendships. They perpetuate the space for my work... I discover things through people I love.

Do you ever sit down and try to imitate work that you like?

It's more natural than that. I read something or I'll hear something in my mind; it'll distill it down into something that I've been thinking about. I'm always falling in love with everyone's work, but I can't write in anyone's form but my own. I find inspiration in everything; it's like this sensation of staring into the sun. I'm trying to be possessed by everything—trying to meet myself at the place I'm at—but that's always changing.

A lot of people who are younger and just starting to write don't feel confident about their own voice or style.

I feel like I'm pretty confident in my style and in sounding like me, but you can look at my work and see a lot of [Dana Ward's](#) influence or [Bhanu Kabil](#) and [Ben Fama](#). I value their work, but it's still intrinsically me. I can't create in a vacuum: My work is more of a conversation and my process reflects that.

When you sit down to write how do you start?

I write mostly in my bedroom. I don't have a desk. I have at least 10 or 12 books that I'm reading at the time around me and I flip through different things. I have poems that I'm reading on my computer and I flip through those. I usually start by journaling. I journal every night, and that's where most of my poems come from. Or notes in my phone that I pick through and Frankenstein morph into poems. In the end, it's just me trying to boil down my gibberish and self-recriminations into some destruction and rebirth of me trying to give flesh to my memories.

So you don't sit down and write a poem start to finish?

No, I've actually never done that before. I'm not the kind of person who can sit down and say, "Today I'm going to sit down and write a great poem, and it's going to be beautiful." That's impossible for me to do. Writing a poem is like a huge journey. I have all these fragments like, "Okay, this is something I was writing while walking in the street the other day."

I've started doing a thing where I walk around and talk to myself a lot and that's how most of my work gets done. Me walking around and recording it. I've started recording it on my phone voice notes: that's me sitting down to write a poem. Me walking in the streets analyzing what's going on in my head... that's where most of my poems come from.

Are you working on one poem at a time or a lot at once?

It's a lot of poems at once. And then these small fragments at once. This book I've been working on—I'll think a poem belongs in one thing, and I sit down to write it and transcribe it, and that's not where it should be at all, and it's a whole different poem. The other day, in sitting down to write a poem I think is a poem, I accidentally wrote a short story.

How do you know when a poem is done when you're piecing things together?

For a long time, I didn't think a lot of my poems could be finished. I'm always going back and deleting things and editing them. But I think I know when it's done when I look at it and I feel satisfied. It's something I can read and feel weirdly at peace about. Most of my poems are me working through something. And it's not done until I feel like, "Oh, I understand now. I get what was going on in that place." I can't afford therapy so I write poetry.

It's really nice to watch you read because it's so clear that you're speaking in your own voice. You make it seem so easy and casual like, "Of course Precious' poetry would come out like this." Do you talk while you write?

I talk to myself all the time... it's a litany of my madness. I'm reading my poems back and forth to myself and striking through things and realizing that's what I was trying to say. A lot of my poems are a mad woman having a conversation with herself. That's essentially what I am.

Do you get stuck?

Um, yes.

How do you unblock yourself?

I moved to New York and I live in this place. I find myself getting frustrated with the space that I'm in. For a while I couldn't finish my manuscript. I was stuck on page 45 for a couple months. "Back on my bullshit" or something along those lines. I couldn't write at all. There was a lot going on in my life and I was really stressed out. I felt like I didn't have the time or the mental capacity to give myself creative space or freedom. I started trying to do things to make myself happier. I've started cooking a lot, teaching my dog tricks. I spent a lot of time teaching Rainbow to walk on ledges. (On my roof there's a lot of telephone wires—not like "Oh my dog, push him off the roof.") It gave me a lot of clarity trying to teach my dog to do impossible things. Like, "Oh, maybe I can go back to writing now."

Sometimes I think I just have to give myself leniency to not feel like I have to be producing things. I feel like if you are stuck maybe you're stuck for a reason, because maybe you need to be doing something else in that time and not forcing yourself. I think that as an artist, people are prone to force themselves to create. A lot of time that can be good—forcing yourself to create out of a necessity to survive—but sometimes maybe you just need to chill.

Your last book ends with a poem that's like text messages between two people. I'm curious what you feel like is the relationship between your work and the internet and cell phones.

I'm on the internet quite a bit. It almost makes me insane. Ben [Fama] has this line in a poem, "The internet is my home/ where it's easy to be beautiful." I agree with that like to the max. I'm constantly on my phone. I read my poems off my phone. I write on my phone. My phone is constantly in my hand. Being a contemporary poet and being on the internet go hand in hand. A tweet is a little poem. I send my friend a text—that's a love poem! I want literature that's not made from literature, like let's destroy this idea of a pure form... everything is cross mutation of particles that merge with one another.

Some people feel like tweeting or texting friends can steal the energy that would otherwise get put to their work.

No. That's all my writing. You can't steal something that's a part of everything, if it's all connected and it's all the same thing. What makes it different? I write it on paper so it's more holy than if it's on my phone or in a tweet or a text to a friend? No. The space your words are in shouldn't matter more than your words. Some of my best lines will come from a manic Facebook post when I'm pissed off at someone. Little things that I don't even think about, and I go back like, "Oh, that is a good line." Everything is one big great poem. Why pretend otherwise?

Precious Okoyomon recommends:

Raw milk
Fred Moten & Fresh Baked Bread with roasted garlic
Dating urban farmers
Eating dirt
Apricot Toy poodles

Name

Precious Okoyomon

Vocation

artist and poet

Fact

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Photo by Kevin Michael Briggs