



To help you grow your creative practice, our website is available as an email.

Subscribe

March 28, 2022 -

As told to Shelby Hinte, 2435 words.

Tags: Writing, Education, Money, Success, Process, Multi-tasking, Day jobs, Focus.

On choosing personal growth over careerism

Writer and critic Rebecca van Laer on overcoming setbacks, creativity as luxury, and why you should always save your work. In your novella, *How to Adjust to the Dark*, there's this sense of the poet as an illustrious figure. There's a line that struck me when the protagonist is referring to gaining a man's interest by her role as a poet. She says, "He had not yet read my poetry, but it had begun to serve its purpose. The fact that I wrote it spoke volumes about who I was before I opened my mouth." What do you think is so alluring about being perceived as a poet?

That's something I thought about a lot while writing the book—what attracted me so much to that particular identity as opposed to say an essayist or a novelist. There are a few things that go into it. One is that poetry just seems a little bit more impractical than so many other forms of the literary arts. Making a career as a poet is incredibly difficult. For me, the idea that poetry was special, not necessarily useful, in fact, is unconcerned with careerism or money, made it seem an enticing identity.

There's not a guise that you can get rich being a poet in the same way there is with other types of writing. Even though we know, I think, that the majority of novelists also have day jobs and there is a very rare breed that get to make their living solely off of writing. How much do you feel the pressure of capitalism or commercialism in your writing practice?

When I was first writing *How to Adjust to the Dark*, I was in many ways quite naive to the way that publishing and the industry works and that gave me a certain amount of freedom. Now it does affect my artistic practice more. Once you get a little bit of success—or have a close call with it—I think that it can really tempt you to shape your next work so that it has the potential to be more marketable. As much as possible now, I'm trying to remind myself that the enjoyment and the freedom is when I'm with the work. I try to figure out what the work wants to be in its truest form before thinking about the commercial.

How do you quiet that voice of "others are going to see this," or "this might be in some ways tied to my stream of income?" How do you just enjoy the work and explore it when it's early days?

It can be hard to do at times, but when I am in a project and it's going well, and I'm feeling immersed in it, it just takes me out of my day-to-day life and my job and the ways that I make money. I feel very motivated to stay there when I'm in those generative stages before editing. I definitely like to share my enthusiasm in those early stages as well. I know that some people can be phobic about talking about a project that's not quite done, but having conversations with my partner and other close friends about the possibilities can be another way to invigorate my practice and feel less pressure. I try to stay in that space through the first draft before the world comes crashing in.

Do you find that you're willing to talk about a project you're working on before you're willing to show the pages to someone else?

Talking about the big ideas is something that can be really exciting and invigorating for me. Then actually showing the prose can make me self-conscious about typos and inconsistencies, but more than that, I can begin to feel like, "Oh god, what if this was all a mistake?" That can happen when someone sees the draft, but not in talking through the ideas. The fear just begins to creep in when people see the manuscript.

When do you know that a draft is ready to share with someone?

I think that I have sent things out too early before, and I guess what too early is the moment when I have not been able to bring myself to the point of a reread and I'm looking for someone else's voice or validation. I think that I need to have at least read through it and felt I've resolved my own questions to the best of my ability before I learn what someone else's questions are.

You have a Ph.D. from Brown in English. I'm curious, especially because your novella is a hybrid of both fiction, poetry and also serves as a sort of criticism, how do you think your academic training impacts your creative writing?

That academic lens was essential to becoming a prose writer. I think a part of me knew that I always wanted to write a novel, and in fact, when I was writing poetry, I was very drawn to these novels in verse, some of which I mention in the book, but I just felt I didn't know how to make things up. Then I read Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, which is a really long poem accompanied by a narrative that unfolds completely through footnotes. I was like, "Oh, I could do that. Criticism has a narrative in it." Perhaps that's the way that I got myself to write this book—by applying a critical lens to poetry and beginning to think about what stories these poems from my own life would tell in a narrative arc that was more coherent than the actuality of my life.

Beyond that, I do think that as a writer I am driven by thesis and by specific ideas that I want to communicate. I don't think that's the only way to write fiction or even the best way to write fiction, but when I am writing I'm always thinking about what my argument is.

You write both fiction and critical works and what I've found interesting about, *How to Adjust to the Dark*, is that the criticism is embedded into the fiction itself. I wondered what you think of the idea of criticism as an art form. Do you distinguish between art and criticism?

I think that there are so many works that blur the lines now. I think that criticism is inherently a creative act. There's no true objectivity to it. It's always done from a subjective position. But beyond that, any work of art, be it visual or written or sound, has an infinite number of potential interpretations and to apply a critical lens is to create one possible way of looking at or seeing that work of art. Good criticism goes beneath summary. It is always taking out or exposing something deeper. I think that's also what we try to do in our creative works.

You were mentioning earlier that writing is a way to escape the everyday. I've been drawn to this phrase lately, and I don't know exactly where I heard it, but it's something like *artists are always working to make time to make more art*. What kind of labor have you found that's been most beneficial to buying you time to create? Whether it's fiction or poetry or criticism, what's bought you the time to be artistic?

Having more leisure time that I am not working for wages doesn't necessarily help me. In graduate school, I was very, very lucky to have many fellowship years. I was not teaching. I was just working on my dissertation and my creative projects. But my output is actually a lot greater now. I think because I have less of a feeling of precarity and I am no longer in the academic industry in which there are no jobs and you're always encountering that horizon.

I spent a few years as a freelancer, which can allow a lot of flexibility in your schedule, but always requires that you are looking forward and pitching your next project. Despite the flexibility and time that it seems to offer, I felt I never had any. I've found that security is what enables me to create a sustainable artistic schedule. Even if there are fewer hours, and there certainly are fewer hours, those hours are more of a luxury, something that I've made and created for myself and that I enjoy going to. It's more difficult to fill them with anxiety or at least the anxieties of money than in previous jobs.

In my experience, freelance work means always looking for a lead. There is something stable about knowing there's money coming in, so you don't have to expend all of this creative energy thinking about how to put this paycheck and that paycheck together and also somehow get insurance.

I'm curious, what's your schedule like? Do you keep a writing routine or is it a little sporadic?

I try my best to keep a writing routine, or I intend to have a writing routine where I wake up early at 6:30 and then my time before I start working at 9:00 is my writing time. It doesn't usually turn out that way. That's best-case scenario. Sometimes I'm sticking to it. Sometimes it means that I have a lot of energy and I'm not just using that time, but also my weekends and evenings and cannot stop. Sometimes I'm depleted or have no ideas. I try not to let it go more than a few months without trying to return to that writing routine and look at old work and see if it can be remade or tinker with the projects that I have in progress.

Do you think having breaks between projects is important to your process? Or is it a point of anxiety for you?

When I was very young and I was writing poetry, I did have a sense that there might be a finite number of poems in me and that I needed to pull them out. There was always the fear that there wouldn't be another one. Gradually I learned that any writing can be resuscitated or remade into something else. Every piece of writing has the potential for another project within it. The poems became a novella, a short story can become a novel, a novel draft that was really bad can have the grain of a different novel in it. It can be frustrating that it takes time to figure out what these pieces can be or what the best way for them to be

is, but at the same time, it has alleviated the pressure that I need some big new idea. Part of my process is returning to the old, remaking it, and figuring out how my perspective has shifted as I change over time. Sometimes even a line can become the basis of something else.

Do you ever feel something is dead in the water and like you're not going to return to, or do you always save your darlings?

I don't know if I have anything that I've written thus far that I really think is dead in the water. I have a pandemic novel draft that I think is pretty terrible and is outside the scope of what I was capable of writing. Some of those characters made their way into the novel I've been working on more recently, which you've read, but the overall character structure and plot of that novel seems horrible to me now. At the same time, I still have it in the back of my mind that maybe in a long time from now, I might want to go back to that frenzied, pandemic draft written in 200-word increments with no thinking or rereading between them and see if there's anything in there worthwhile.

How to Adjust to the Dark had been slated to be published with the now defunct, *Curbside Splendor*. I imagine that not working out had to come as a big blow. How do you stay motivated and keep persisting on either a single project or just writing in general when you face setbacks?

With this particular project, the version of the book that was originally slated to come out, honestly, there are parts of it that I had deep doubts about and now those are gone. Sometimes something doesn't work out and it just sucks. I don't think that I am the most hopeful person or a huge *silver lining's* person, but I have the perspective that if you believe in something about your story, then you can figure out what to do with it.

I find a lot of freedom in my writing process and sometimes I think to myself, "Oh, it would be so much better if I just did it for myself and enjoyed it for the love of it." But there is a part of me that wants to get it out there, that is just a strong part of me that I cannot be detached from or disentangled from. I think that you need that. You can have success, but without that urge you might not be able to repeat it or find that you don't even want to. The urge might be necessary to producing many works or going back to works and weathering all that one does have to weather as an artist.

How do you stay motivated when you maybe are not getting that validation as quickly as you wanted?

It never comes as quickly as you want. That's one thing I've learned. I wanted things to happen very quickly for myself and that led to things being rushed, to trying to put things out in the world before I was happy with them, before they were even ready to be published. I have learned that to keep myself motivated, I have to trust that if I've begun a project for a reason. I have to trust that the process of taking the work to completion will have a net positive benefit for me in terms of self-growth regardless of the outcome. That doesn't mean that the outcome can be ignored forever, but there has to be at least some trust that it's not all for naught, and I'm doing it for personal reasons, in addition to external reasons.

Rebecca van Laer Recommends:

Butterfly pea lemongrass tea from Arbor Teas (in backyard compostable packaging)

Meow Meow Tweet's lip balm (compostable tube)

Shopping on Depop instead of buying new

The Freedom app for blocking unhelpful websites and apps during creative time

Buying a carbon steel wok

Name

Rebecca van Laer

Vocation

writer

Fact

Cameron Blaylock

Related to Writer and critic Rebecca van Laer on choosing personal growth over careerism:

■ Author Ocean Vuong on being generous in your work

■ Poet Cody-Rose Clevidence on writing, editing, and living in the wilderness

■ Writer and performer Shanekia McIntosh on the power of creating the story you don't see

The Creative Independent is ad-free and published by [Kickstarter](#), PBC. See also: [Terms](#), [Privacy Policy](#).



↑