# On remaining patient when your day job takes all your time

## Writer and literary translator Ani Gjika discusses filing away memories, following your intuition, and finding liberation through writing.

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As told to Rebecca van Laer, 2250 words.

Tags: Writing, Poetry, Inspiration, Day jobs, Independence.

**Your latest book, *An Unruled Body*, is subtitled "A Poet's Memoir." What does it mean to you to write prose as a poet—to bring a poetic sensibility to other genres of writing?**

I always think of myself as a writer; I don't identify as a poet. Writing in one genre gives me tools; when I write in another one, I bring those tools there. I've taught fiction, and the tools I learned by reading or teaching it helped me in writing this book. But the memoir also has these poetic fragments interspersed throughout the text. I think it's important to mix things up and allow the qualities of one style to challenge me as I write in another genre. The result is a blend or a hybrid of sorts, and the subtitle gives this other layer of definition to the memoir genre.

**You also call this particular project "a story about listening to the language of your body." I imagine that writing from this embodied place—and about your body—might require that you draw on lots of different toolkits. How did you learn to listen to your body and do that work?**

I pay a lot of attention through my five senses. I sometimes feel that I can write better if I sit on the floor, which somehow helps me literally sink in with the moment and the thing that I'm writing about.

A lot of what I write comes from memory. As I go through my daily life, there are a couple of moments where something happens that I know is going to make it into future writing. Maybe there's something I notice in nature or in a particular room, a gesture, or something someone says that really clicks. I can always tell: "Oh, this is something I'm going to write about." I don't write it down then and there, but I do file it away in this memory well. The process of writing from the body, I think, is this fishing back into that well and finding what I needed to write about and the moment in the piece where it belongs.

**How do you know when you've hooked the right memory—when you're on the right track for a given project? Or when you need to replenish the well, as it were?**

I try to follow my curiosity. If I'm thinking of a few different moments, I might be curious to go a little bit further into one of them. I'm always handwriting first, and there's always an energy when I'm handwriting. In the beginning, there isn't much of it. I'm just scribbling and free writing until I get into a space where things move faster. My hand has to keep up with my thoughts. That lets me know that I'm writing something that will probably make it—that will be done one day, will be something worth sharing. After that, I follow my imagination—so it's a journey of memory, curiosity, imagination.

When I need, I'll put the writing away and throw my attention somewhere else, maybe watch a film or an episode or

a documentary or read a book. I see if I can find common threads with what I've been writing and what I'm being exposed to. It's a process of keeping myself open to what's filtering in through the world in all those different forms of media, and the connections I have with people.

**How do you know when enough material has filtered in? When do you decide that a handwritten draft is done and ready to be typed up?**

If I tap into that energy [while handwriting], I know that when it cools down, I'm done. Then, I need to go back and think about word choice or form or developing a particular line differently or a character more. I have to go through several revisions, and those revisions are done both by hand and after I put it all on the computer. It takes a long time, and sometimes I have things that I don't use for years. My memoir was written in the last eight years, but there are parts that I wrote twenty years ago. Like I said, things that I file in the back of my mind, and suddenly think, "Oh, they belong in this paragraph."

**In your book you say, "I'm a shape-shifter by choice, and translation is part of my identity." Can you tell me what else you've learned about your own writing from your work as a translator?**

As a translator, I've learned a lot about listening; listening for the right word that would convey the same message in the target language, English, that would be reflective of what that author originally intended. Maybe because I also write in a second language, I'm constantly feeling in the dark for words that I hope convey what I'm trying to say in my own writing.

I also translate different kinds of writers. Somebody might be very good at writing argumentatively, someone else might be very good at writing in this lyrical voice. So I think that has helped in not being satisfied with one thing—in searching for ways to make my own writing new. Obviously, I have my own voice. But I also feel that it's important to stretch yourself or push yourself in your writing and not be content with writing the same way, and maybe that's why, going back to that first question, why not play with different genres or mixing, blending the two when you can?

**On the topic of translation, I know that your mother is a poet, which you write about in your memoir, and you've translated her work. And your father is a writer, too. What did you learn from your literary inheritance?**

I grew up seeing both of them with a lot of books in the house: my mother writing and printing pages and pages and workshopping with her friends. So I've always been around their paperwork and their books, and I think that has made me realize that writing is hard work. It's a long process. I've seen this from my dad especially, who works for years and years on a book. My mother is different, in the sense that I think she typically revises on the spot as she's writing. And then she doesn't really touch her poems as much afterward. We have very different revision processes.

She's also never studied literature formally or writing formally. Seeing her writing, and translating her work later, has been important in realizing we need to spend more time reading the work of people who haven't had any formal education in creative writing and who didn't have the means to pay for workshops or MFA programs. What can we gain from exploring everyone, the diverse voices that come from all walks of life and all schools of writing?

**In your memoir, you also talk a little bit about seeing your parents after they've immigrated and making time for writing in a new reality, even if their daily life isn't really constructed to support it. You teach ESL (English as a Second Language) at a high school. How do you balance your job with your creative work?**

I teach at a public high school and the fall semester is very intense. My students are mostly from South and Central America. It's important for me to work with that population, because I was an ESL student myself once. They're at the stage where they're trying to figure out what they want to do later in life, and all of them have to do all of these things in a second language.

In the fall, I'm trying to get used to the course load and getting to know all the students and all the names. I

feel like I don't write at all. During the academic year, I do less writing, but I'm paying attention and filing things in my mind. In the summer, I'll have the time to recharge and do some of the work.

**There are so many parts to a career. There's the writing, there's the editing, and there's the submitting. And as you've said, it takes a long time. What's your relationship to all of that waiting that it takes to be read and heard?**

I should be honest about this. There are times when, obviously, I'm thinking, "Wow, I haven't done anything. I'm X years old." You get into this funk. I think like everybody who creates anything, I'm very self-critical. So there's that voice of, "I haven't done anything. I'm getting only rejections." It helps to have a community of people who have done all this, too.

But the most important thing is to just keep following the work. The publication will come once I've shown up for my work. The work is all that I'm in control of. You also need to have some courage to send it out. I've had some feedback by friends: "Wow, you've written something really brave." I've always thought that there was nothing brave in the writing. I've felt that I was lucky, and I experienced all kinds of emotions writing it, but it never felt like a brave thing to do. I think the bravest thing, for me, has been to publish it one day, let it go, send it out.

**I have two feelings as a writer: "Oh, shit. This is never going to be published," and "Oh, shit. This is going to be published." And your newest book is about topics that might be considered brave to write about: sexual violence, really living in rape culture in Albania, and coming into your sexuality later in life. How you navigate those "Oh, shit, it's being published," moments? Do you worry about being too honest, too vulnerable or putting too much of yourself out into the public sphere?**

You said it exactly, this feeling of, "Oh, shit. It's coming out"—that's exactly how it has been feeling a few times, recently. But throughout the writing process of this book, I had mostly joy in being able to finally name things. For the longest time, this book's title was *By its Right Name*, because I was trying to name different things about my experiences. And throughout the time that I wrote it, I didn't tell anybody that I was writing, especially people that are in the book, because my writing gave me freedom to tell this story. The main feeling I have is *free*.

I think the honesty and the vulnerability are just my way of feeling free to do my work, because maybe, for the longest time, growing up in communist and post-communist Albania, I didn't feel that sense of freedom. In social situations, I don't talk very much; I'm usually a quiet person. In writing, I can say what I really mean. Is there such a thing as being too honest? Maybe there is, but for this particular book, I feel like I had to be. I had to be vulnerable. My vulnerability was my path to freedom.

**While we're talking about what we have under control and what we don't, how do you define success in your creative work?**

I came to this country when I was 18, and I hadn't really read any American poetry until I became an English major. Then I would go to bookstores and pull these books out of the shelves and I remember discovering Stanley Kunitz, Ai, Lee Young Li, E.E. Cummings. Another is Joe Salerno, who is not very famous, but I picked up his book one day in a used bookstore and I was leafing through it and, wow, the poems really spoke to me, they changed my perception of what poetry can do, or taught me, in mere seconds, how to pay attention. Every time this happens, I pick up the book, buy it, and take it with me and I feel on top of the world, discovering this poet or this writer.

So, for me, success would be a reader picking up my book from a shelf and taking it with them. That would be the definition of success for me: that this reader took me home because the writing shifted something inside them. It's that simple, I think.

**How do you generally go about starting a new project?**

I don’t think I start with a project in mind. It goes back to that thing of filing things in my head, the back of my mind. I’m thinking of a fisherman. I don’t fish, but I know that if you’re throwing the bait in the water, you have to wait and listen. I have this well of experiences and I just need to pay attention to what’s rising up. If I was a fisherman right now, I would see the shape of the fish or see the water move. Whatever shape or form it will manifest, I don’t know. We’ll see.

**Ani Gjika recommends:**

Planning a trip somewhere and then make room to abandon the plans here and there and follow your curiosity

Making this shakshuka on a rainy autumn or cold winter evening. DO ADD crumbled feta, coriander, and avocado!

Listening to music from languages you don’t speak and don’t understand at all

*The Spirit of the Beehive*

The birch bark pottery by Shari Zabriskie

Name
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Vocation
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