

# On growing an idea



Writer and visual artist Larissa Pham discusses what makes a good essay, the benefit of having a community of readers, and giving yourself the space you need to complete a project.

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As told to Shy Watson, 2527 words.

Tags: Writing, Art, Process, Focus, Time management.

## **What, to you, makes a good essay?**

I really like essays where I can feel someone thinking. Where I can feel someone working through an idea, or working through an image, or an event, and its implications. And I can feel them reasoning, and I can see an evolution. I don't love reading something that has a point to make. I'm like, "Okay, well then you can just tell me that." But when you see someone evolving, and when you see their logic changing in response to information that they're also uncovering, that is very exciting to me.

**I think you did a really good job at that [in your essay collection, Pop Song]. I could feel your own growth through each essay, and as more information became illuminated you moved through it.**

I was thinking a lot about ways of showing that progression. Although it does make me a little worried. I don't want someone to get halfway through something like "Body of Work" and be like, "Oh, that's where she is still." Like, "This is what is good." It's like, "No. You have to finish it so that you get to the end point." Because I do worry about things getting taken out of context.

## **How do you outline or otherwise prepare before writing an essay?**

I like to have images. I think it depends on whether it's a narrative essay or a more critical or responsive essay. But in any case, I like to have my touchstones, whether they're visual, like scenes from life or a memory, or a work of art. For example, say I'm writing about silence and I'm like, "Okay, well I'm going to use this piece and I'm going to use this piece and I'm going to use this piece." Then I can work through the relationships of those things. But the very first thing, I think, is always a feeling. It's always a sense of wanting to say something, and to speak, and then comes finding, gathering the evidence, etc.

## **How do you know when an essay is complete?**

I feel like it tells you. It's hard to know, but usually there's also an image or a feeling that I'm writing toward. And a lot of the work is just trying to get there. And sometimes by the time I get there, I realize I need to go somewhere else. And there's always this moment when you're writing where you feel the rudder of the essay steering you. And you're like, "Oh, I was trying to figure out what you were about, and now you're going to tell me what is actually happening here."

## **You're doing an MFA in fiction. How's that going?**

It's going okay. I'm in my second term right now and I'm feeling a bit of sophomore slump. Because my first term, I was like, "Vroom vroom! Let's just write a bunch of pages!" And now I'm in a position where I'm working with an instructor who wants to look at what I've written so far. And I'm looking at it and I'm like, "Oh, these pages are not amazing." So I'm in this place of revision. And I think I'm feeling a little stuck. But I'm also just trying to trust in the process and in my own brain. And I think it's interesting to be writing both with revision and quality in mind, but also knowing that so much of this is going to be a first draft.

And I have to be forgiving of that. I have to be like, "Okay, I'm going to make this as good as I can, but I know that it will be revised, and I'm so far out from something that will be publishable." And I just have to let that go. That anxiety of writing the perfect first 30 pages, I have to just let it go. Because otherwise it's just going to consume me. And I've already lost weeks agonizing over an opening sentence. In a way that I don't agonize with nonfiction. I feel like there's something about creating a world, you really have to believe in that world and set it up.

**Have you tried any writing tricks to prevent yourself from looking back?**

Nothing yet. I've been reading a lot and that helps. Whenever I don't read, I feel my brain turning off. It's kind of like when you have a hot pan and there's nothing in the pan and the pan's just burning. That's how I feel when I don't read. So that's important. But you know, when I was feeling really stuck, I was like, "Oh, should I try one of those apps that threatens to delete everything if you stop typing?"

**I didn't even know those existed.**

Oh, have you heard... I don't know what they're called. It's like, it's always something really scary, you know, like Write or Die. Or like The Horror Typewriter, something like that. But yeah, they have these apps that you set a limit of like, "Oh, I want to write for 30 minutes." And then it'll auto-delete everything if you stop typing. It seems really scary, but maybe kind of good.

**What world are you building right now? What are you working on?**

I am working ostensibly on one project, but there's another project that I keep threatening to do. But I will talk about the first project because it's the one that I've been speaking about. I'm working on a historical novel based on my family. Based loosely, very loosely, on my family and events that have happened within my family. It starts in Vietnam in 1954, which is around the end of French colonialism. And then it just spans through the Vietnam War, the American war, and into more or less present day. I was thinking of maybe ending it in 2014. So it's a couple of decades. And it follows three generations of women. I'm interested in inherited trauma. Also the changing language around mental illness and depression or anxiety, and what those things would have looked like for someone like my grandmother. And then what they look like moving through a family, ending in my own knowledge and vocabulary of that. And then how the events of the past affect the process.

**I feel like you mentioned something like *The Body Keeps the Score*, or something about corporeal trauma storing in *Pop Song*. Right?**

Yeah, definitely the way that trauma is lodged in the body, and just the body's response to it. It's something I'm really interested in. It's something that I've had knowledge of, or worked with, in a couple of different contexts now. And I think exploring it in a literary sense is going to be really interesting. I was really happy that some people picked up on the sense of like, epigenetic trauma that informs part of *Pop Song*, but I want to be even more exploratory of what it looks like and how it feels in a fictional sense, which I think, you know, I'm constructing as I'm architecting it. So, it's just going to look different.

**There's this section in *Pop Song* about your time on Tumblr, which I was very familiar with. I was wondering if that has influenced your writing at all?**

I think stylistically, a confessional quality came from writing there. The sense of writing for a very intimate

audience is something that I was able to experience writing there. And having a really close-knit, at times parasocial, but also just social, community of writers and readers. That felt very special to me.

There are people who my work has really resonated with and who have been reading me ever since I was basically 17. And that is so special, and I feel really, really grateful for that. Because I know that if I do something, my readers will find me and I'm not really interested in trying to adapt myself to a market or try to fit a certain kind of niche or way of being. I feel comfortable being like, "Well, I've just been me for so long, and people have been okay with that, so I can just keep being me." So I think that's been the biggest thing that I've learned from that experience. I was never really trying to write to sell. I feel fortunate for that.

**It's important to get a lot of validation for your own voice, especially early on, as one starts to become a writer. I feel like it would make someone less malleable, especially in an MFA program or something, where people fear that their voice is going to change, or they're going to adjust to what other people want from them. That's really great that you have that.**

I think something that is important about just creative writing in general is, I don't think that anyone has to have a particularly interesting life, or a particularly crazy story in order to write an essay. It's just like, "Well, you're the person who can tell your story best."

**You're pretty active on Twitter. I saw recently you tweeted about wanting to deactivate for a bit to finish your novel. And it made me wonder how you balance time between social media and writing.**

The fact that you were like, "You're pretty active," I was like, "Oh no, that means I need to tweet less."

**No, I love your Twitter. You have a great Twitter.**

Aw, thank you. So, I left Twitter to write *Pop Song*, which I think was an important decision. Because there's no way I could have written the book while being online. I think there just would've been too much input. And it would have caused me to focus on the wrong thing. So I had to go offline for that. And then I've been back on, sort of to be a shill, but also to shitpost.

**Important.**

Yeah. But also, I don't think that social media is good for me. I think that there was a time that I really enjoyed social media and I was really good at it. And I was making fairly good use of it back in the day. And it is how I got work, and how I became part of a known quantity, or like kind of a known quantity. But now I don't know if it's so useful for me. So I really have been trying to step back. I'm not really on Instagram anymore. I'm on Twitter, but every day I'm like, "I will be on it less." And I think the thing that's really keeping me on is, I do want to promote the book.

But I think I do work best when I'm not on it. And I think that's because when you're online, on social media, unless you're in some very specific spaces that you've created for yourself and protected, a lot of the conversation that's happening is critique of things that are already made. And when you're making something, that's such a vulnerable place to be.

Because it's fresh, it's raw. It's not polished. It's still forming. It's still discovering what it is. And I think if you're like on Twitter and everyone's slagging on the new Sally Rooney novel and you're just like, "I wish I could just finish this thing," it's not helpful, I think, to be in a space of criticism. And not artistic criticism, but just regular criticism, about things that are already existing. I'm not one of those people who stops reading when I write. Like I said before, I really need to read. I think engaging with made things that you think are good is very healthy when one is in a space of making. But engaging too much with the chatter is not always conducive to going into your little cave and making something beautiful.

**I'm jealous of Otessa Moshfegh and Mitski. I feel like the goal is to get to that point where you don't have to**

**self-promote and use the platforms yourself—the zeitgeist just does it for you.**

Yeah, totally. If I could get off Twitter tomorrow, I would. I feel like I shouldn't. I should wait maybe a couple more weeks. And I mean, I don't think that social media is completely useless. I just think that also, especially if you're a writer, it can trick you into thinking you're getting stuff done. Because you know, you write something funny, it pops off, everyone's in your mentions. You're like, "Wow, so much dopamine."

But in your other tab, what have you written? Nothing. That's distracting, you know? Because, I don't know, writers are really good at Twitter because we're word people.

**How long were you offline for *Pop Song*?**

I think I was off from about January to through the summer.

**Wow. So what's next for you?**

Well, if I ever get my shit together, hopefully I'll have a draft of this novel in a couple of years. But I think what's immediately next is hopefully putting together some short stories. I would like to start maybe publishing some short fiction. I'm still very new to it. And I want to write some essays again. I'm almost ready to come back. It's funny because I wrote *Pop Song* last year, and I've loved talking about it because everyone has so generously read it and has engaged very deeply with it. So that's very meaningful to me. But the work, for me, has kind of cooled. So I'm excited to get back in that space of coming up with ideas. I would love to have an idea.

**Yeah, wouldn't we all.**

Maybe that should be the answer. "What's next for you?" "I would love to have an idea."

**Larissa Pham Recommends:**

*The Seas*, by Samantha Hunt. My friend Hannah recommended it to me, and I've been foisting it on everyone in turn. It's a startling and absorbing read that does wonderful things with language.

A portable bluetooth speaker for your bike. There's nothing better than being the person at the stoplight blasting "Bizarre Love Triangle."

Cold noodles. I don't have A/C, so I've been making lots of cold udon. Cocoron, on Kenmare, also has an incredible cold soba I love.

This Annie Dillard quote has been sustaining me during revision: "One of the things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water."

Keeping a swimsuit in your bag so the beach is always an option.

Name

Larissa Pham

Vocation

Writer and visual artist

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Adalena Kavanagh