

# On assembling a collection of poems



Writer Eileen Myles on how their new collection of poems came to be, the often repulsive chore of sending out work for publication, why NYC is still better than an iPhone, and what it means to be an outsider even 20 books into your career.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3383 words.

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**Your last book, *Afterglow*, was a “dog memoir.” Your latest book, *Evolution*, is a new collection of poems. How did you move from one book to the other? How did *Evolution*, or any collection of poems, come together?**

Well, it’s a couple things. Once you get this rhythm going of making books of poetry, it just becomes that every three or four years, generally, there’s another one. Still, I don’t think in terms of “books” with poetry so much, at least as an ongoing practice. It’s kind of like I’ll be writing things for six months or a year or something and there’s suddenly a poem that starts to seem like a cluster of poems, or a type of poem emerges, like some new groove is occurring, it almost feels like a season or something. Often, it’s just the texture of the poems, and the way they’re going about things. It feels different. And so when I know I’m in a mode, then I start to think about the book and the poems all start to hit against that idea.

As for organizing the book, that’s also a tricky thing. I’ve never usually done that thing of putting the title poem up front in the book, but I talked to people about it this time around. It gets harder to find people who I’m comfortable with who will actually read an entire manuscript in an, “Okay, I’ll read it tonight” kind of way. And I think it partly is age-related. Everybody was willing to do that when I was in my 20s and 30s and virtually nobody is willing to do that now. Luckily I have poet friends who are willing to have late-night phone calls and neighborhood meet ups to talk about stuff like this, which has been really valuable.

The poems in the book reflect certain rhythms and changes in my own life. I had been in a relationship for about four years. I had gone to Europe and finished my previous book, or had written a bit part of it, and then my relationship ended and by the fall of 2014 I was back in New York, but in a very different way.

Suddenly things were very open. I don’t know what it was that I expected to be doing, but there I was. I wasn’t teaching, I didn’t have any commitments. And it was just really funny to be in this position where, at least for a time, I was experiencing New York City in an ideal way in my 60s that very much resembles me in my 20s, except that these days nobody else is living this way. But for this window of time, I was very free. I kind of had no schedule. I don’t remember being particularly broke. And I just wasn’t under any pressure. I was just in this expanse of time that not anybody I knew was in... and I was in the city. And it was funny. I wrote the poem “Evolution” out of that kind of lengthy, loose feeling. That characterized a lot of this work. I think that I write kind of seasonally in some way, and my poems always make me know about the curve of time.

And weirdly, *Aterglow* was written without a dog, and almost as soon as I wrote it, I accidentally got a dog that’s been reshaping my life, you know? I rescued the dog, didn’t need to keep the dog, kept the dog, and then

suddenly, I'm in that open season with a very young, highly energetic, unknown-feeling dog that forced me to walk like crazy. I really got to see New York again in a new way, because it was just the two of us going over all these bridges and down streets that I'd maybe never even walked on, even after all these years. I started using Instagram a lot and taking pictures, too. All of this stuff informed the poems and, in turn, the way this book came together in a lot of ways.

**It's hard to explain the *how* and *why* when it comes to talking about how a book is organized—or why a poem does or doesn't work—so often it's some kind of intangible organizing principle based on feeling. As the poet, you either feel whether it works or when it doesn't.**

Yes, though I do have a slightly chronological view of organizing books of poems, but I'm also very film-y. It had been a long time since my last book of new poems, *Snowflake*, and my *Selected Poems* had 20 new poems that could have gone to a new book, so that really fucked me up in a way.

When you're putting a poetry book together, there are poems that just can't work sometimes. It's not that they're not good poems, they just don't fucking fit. You can't make it go in that book. And so I had a handful of poems from, say, 2011 to 2014, that were referring to the relationship that was no more, so that meant that I was gonna have a little flashback cluster. The stream of the book felt fairly choppy, because I knew that there was a new physical location in the poems, plus there was a new relationship that was already over. It's really funny to talk about, because I already knew what the last poem in the book was and I don't usually know that. "Sweetheart" had to be the end because if you write a poem that says, "Why must I die?" then you've got to end the book with that, you know? And so that made the end a little tricky, too. It was funny that I knew where I was going.

So there were all these kind of funny, juggling rhythms to think about when organizing the book, plus I had an essay and another piece of prose to deal with. I've never put two pieces of prose in a poetry book. It felt like such a different kind of book for me, but also familiar. Ultimately I felt like I had so many books under my belt at this point in time that it was OK to be like, "Fuck it, I can do anything." I'm really interested in redefining what a poet is, so why not try and break poetry's rules as much as possible.

**Even as someone who studied poetry, I still find the notion of "poetry rules" kind of funny. It's a form that, one would think, just naturally rejects rules.**

I think the thing that's really interesting about poetry right now is that, in a way, the revolution is not necessarily even in the poem. The revolution is in the world, and how the world perceives what a poet is and how we enact that. You know? The reference I keep making lately is The Beatles. How the fuck did The Beatles happen? You know, these five so-so musicians got together and became *that*. How? I think everybody's striving for that kind of moment in a book, in a film, in a theater company—to accidentally to create chemistry that goes boing!

I'm a weirdo, which is fine. Great, even. You know, over the past few years, I've gotten a bunch of attention, so supposedly I'm in this *other* place now professionally. In reality, I'm still completely off the charts. Even by getting recognition, I become *more* off the charts, you know? I was lucky to find this editor who was willing to take a risk with me. I was still considered, even as a 60-something person with 20 books behind me, a total risk. Nobody wanted that dog book. It was so weird, I was like, "I don't understand the rules." But that probably is just inherently what's true about a lot of writers. You think you're *this*. Nope, you're still *that*.

**There's a quote from *Evolution* that I really love: "I never realized how outside I was until I realized they wouldn't let me in. I didn't know, I just thought I was weird." That seems to speak to what it feels like to be 20 books into a career and still have the feeling that people don't know what to do with you.**

Yeah. And I think it's gotta be finally a good thing. It's just funny. There are certain poets that are read more by people in the art world than by people in the poetry world. It's not that the poetry world doesn't read you, it's sort of like they don't think of you as a poet because you also do these other things. *Not Me* is probably my most well-known book of poetry and I basically couldn't get it published. Nobody wanted it. Ultimately, I didn't publish my most well-known book of poetry inside the poetry world. And I think the poetry world liked the book. But it's still like I'm not theirs in some weird way. It's so strange, because I'm nothing but a poet.

But that's poetry for you as an institution—it's like its inside and its outside are just always reversing positions. I think it's probably really great to be befuddling in a way. But you know, at certain points, you just want the average thing. And it's like, "I can't have the average thing?" And the response is, "No, you can't. That's not what you are."

**Most of the poems in *Evolution* were first published in other places, which is also the hard work of trying to be a successful poet. You must not only be writing poems continuously, but sending them out, which is its own kind of torture. Do you have a routine for submitting things for publication? Are you constantly sending things out?**

I'd say that is totally in the "it gets easier" file. But then not, because it continues to be repulsive as a practice. Thankfully, people ask me for work all the time. Smaller publications constantly ask for work. And I only send out so much because I only have so many new poems, and I don't want to publish poems that I think are bullshit, because I have a lot of those.

Of course, there are places that I would sort of jump at if they asked. You know, if somebody editing at *Harpers* wants a poem, or the *New York Times* wants a poem, then I'd think, "Of course." I never tend to send to those people much, but sometimes somebody's editing there who might know my work, and so I would give them something. I have to admit, it's sort of like I've been sending poems to the *New Yorker* since forever. When I was in my 20s, I guess before I knew anything, I would send poems there, because everybody does that stupid thing, you know? Poets I knew and respected got poems in there, so I sent poems there for years, my best poems, and they would never get accepted.

Paul Muldoon, the famed poetry editor there, and I had an email battle for ages. Then we met each other, and I think enjoyed each other personally, and then through that, he accepted a poem of mine. And it was the most unlikely *New Yorker* poem. It was really funny. Everything I ever thought about the *New Yorker* was flipped on its side. It was a complaining poem that contained a swear. And I was like, "Oh. That's interesting that they would publish that now."

Obviously, it's fun to have that cache, to be able to get a poem in the *New Yorker*, but I'm not sure what it really means. People ask me for work and I tend to just give it to them. If I write something and I know it's a great poem, and I happen to love this person, or I think, "Fuck everything," sometimes I'll send a really great poem to a really obscure publication. I like that too. You know, by the time a book of poetry goes to print, everything has been dead to the world. Things like first serial right and things like that can seem so irrelevant. It's just nice to send things and share them. Why would I save my best poem for five years until I have a book ready? Poetry lives so much more in the present.

**One of the things I like in *Evolution* are the poems that reference the act of writing itself. For someone who might be juggling many things at once, including different versions of poems in progress, how do you stay organized?**

Yeah. Less and less. It's just a nightmare. I feel like computers have just struck such a blow to the organization of this poet, for sure, because I just had so many very simple ways of organizing things when there were no computers. And since the computer hit, it just became so many drafts of poems.

And then, you know, I've lost computers and hard drives. I can't help feeling like there are entire poems that were lost that way. Poems almost always start out on a piece of paper that is usually inside of a notebook, but they also happen on scraps of paper, and so I have multiple upright files where scraps of paper go in.

At a certain point, my organization started to be visual, rather than actual. Meaning I just couldn't stand for my apartment to be looking like this stuffed pig, so I just started to buy little archival boxes and put the random pieces of paper in them. And then I would stack them on top of the dresser. So it looks like there's an order, but in fact, there isn't at all. I used to do a very mindful archiving of things, but that stopped back in the '80s or '90s. I recently sold all of my papers to Yale and the only thing that comforted me was the thought that maybe these boxes of unorganized papers and notes will be sort of like Andy Warhol's Time Capsules. There's stuff in there and maybe somebody will eventually find it.

But in general, it's a mess, and it's chaotic. And I have absolutely lost things. I mean, the things I've lost, I can't even say out loud in this conversation, it's so astonishing. And this is coming from a person who tried really hard to be really organized, and really was for a very long time. But I think travel and technology got the better of me.

**You write so wonderfully about New York City. The rhythms and mechanics of the city seem to also really inform the pacing and organization of this new book. It feels very intimate.**

Yeah, I think the city was a big piece of the apparatus of the book, like being in the city and looking at the city and feeling it. What you said is really true, the intimacy was with that in a way.

**There's a line in *Evolution*, in regards to New York City, that says: "It fulfills this desire to want to be in every place at once." As alive as the city is, the poems also point out all the ways that the city is simultaneously dying. It's really poignant. And so complicated.**

Yeah. And if it's dying, I'm dying, too. You know? And so you can't help feeling the sweetness of that. One of my favorite jokes—actually, one of the funniest things I've ever heard—was something the poet Joe Brainard said when he was dying. He said, "One good thing about dying is you don't have to go to any more poetry readings."

He was so beloved by the poetry world, but spoke so hilariously about it. He said that what's good about dying is talking about all these things that you've lost, but I was like, "Wait a second. Do not bother about that." To me, the thing that is great about thinking, "Well, I'll be dying sooner, rather than later," is that who gives a fuck if I've lost 50% of my poems, considering that I still have this other 50%, you know?

The other thing about the city though and being inside of it—particularly in regards to the part of it that is dying—just has to do with technology and phones. When they first advertised the iPhone and said, "It does everything," you'd be like, "Who wants something that does everything?" But then it turns out that everybody does.

And so everybody has one. I remember it was shocking to see people walking down the street or riding their bikes in NYC while they were looking at their phones. And I thought, "What is this, LA?" And now, as we know, every time you look up, everybody within eyeshot is on their phone. It just becomes a practice to try to remember to *not* be on your phone all the time. The thing is, the phone has replaced the city. And yet the city, in this kind of broken, dying state, is still the better iPhone. You're in it, and it does everything, and it has everything. And you are walking through everything. And yet I think the riddle of our moment is that people feel and are indeed walking *through* their iPhones.

One of the things gentrification has done is spread out the realm of the art world across many boroughs. It used to be that if you lived in Manhattan, the hot new thing was always happening just a few blocks away. It was easier to stay current, because the current was closer.

**Now you kind of have to chase the current.**

Yeah, I think part of being in the city now is about being a little bit more athletic and picking your battles. It's about deciding when I, as someone who still lives in Manhattan, will go to Brooklyn. And when it's absolutely okay not to, you know?

**You split your time between NYC and Texas now. That must also have a funny ripple effect through your writing.**

Yeah, it does. This will be a funny year. I'll be going to Argentina for a festival, which is exciting since I've never been to South America, and then later on I'm gonna have a show of my Instagram photos. That also feels very connected to this book. I wanted the book party to be an art opening, since so many of the poems in the book were also connected to these images.

I'll continue to go back and forth. I have a handful of things happening next spring, but then I'm really kind of

off the hook. I'm gonna teach a class at NYU, which is something that I haven't done in years. It's just a graduate class about the poet. It will be poetry, but the class will be thinking about who the poet is, what they do, how they occupy the city and the world. I'm excited about that. It's gonna be my hometown year and I feel glad about that.

I'll probably be in Marfa for parts of November, December, and January. And there's that part of my life, too, which I really love, and my dog, mostly. Though I want to bring her here, make sure she's in New York for the spring, because I miss her when she's in a different city. You know, we have opposite schedules, it's ridiculous. My dog spends probably nine months in Marfa, and three months in New York, and I probably spend three months in Marfa, and nine months in New York. It's really funny. It's kind of like there's a dog house in Marfa that I sometimes stay in. I should write more about that.

**Essential Poetry by Eileen Myles:**

*Evolution*

*I Must Be Living Twice*

*Snowflake / Different Streets*

*Not Me*

*Inferno (A Poet's Novel)*

*Skies: Poems*

*Sorry, Tree*

*School of Fish*

*Name*

Eileen Myles

*Vocation*

Writer

