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As told to Amanda Inman, 1894 words.

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# On being flexible in your artistic practice

Writer Josephine Rowe discusses the many facets of the writing process, how to keep the spark alive, and the relationship between music, poetry, and fiction.

**One of the things that I really admire about your writing is how lush your sentences are. It is almost as if it prioritizes plot and beauty—on the sentence level—equally.**

Lush! Thank you. I don't know that I'm ever striving for beauty as such. I'm just trying for a sentence that will carry the most essential impression, the greatest felt sense of place and character and weather and momentum in as distilled, organic a form as possible.

**What is your process like?**

I'm kind of fastidious and chaotic at the same time: the same sentence written 17 slightly different ways. A lot of longhand. So I like to think there's some imprint or shadow there from everything that has been left out—all the bodies! All the windfallen, trodden on, broken down stuff in the understory, in the strata... ideally a reader is getting some whiff of that, too. I haven't written a lot of poetry in recent years—I mostly came to writing that way, and through song—but I'm essentially still operating from the same ethos in my fiction. I want it to carry the perceptions, the awarenesses and kinds of communication that fall outside of verbal, human language... Though to somehow manage that in language, on the page. But there are also the quieter, subtler aspects of language—proximity, elision and aversion, silence.

As to how a work unfolds, it depends on the story (or the novel). Some begin as questions, others as dreams, others are anchored in real life experience or observation, and perhaps the last of these (real life) is in the least interesting to speak about because it's less mysterious—it provides a too-tidy answer to that question of: why write? I think the truth is always something less articulable, and rarely satisfying.

But, those that begin as dreams are the most compelling for me. Whether the spark is a vivid or unsettling image, or whether it's more like something overheard, like a snippet of conversation that is still—it seems—lingering in the auditory cortex, like something that has just been spoken aloud in the next room. Some of my stories open with lines that were transcribed more or less verbatim in the first moments of waking, and those lines have held the DNA of the whole scenario.

It's all there, latent in the image or in the overhearing, and your job as a writer is just to find the stamina to keep up, to expose it in full or to deeply listen, to hear it out the whole way through. Everything's being shaped and propelled according to some inner force, inner logic, that doesn't really feel invented, or at least not by you, your conscious self. You're answering to a kind of urgency, so the usual doubts and inhibitions and hand-wringings about plausibility or worthiness don't even register—you're too busy trying to run alongside for as long as it takes to get the story down. (A lot of snacking!)

Maybe it's for the better that it isn't always that way; it feels like a kind of hijacking. Adrenalised in the moment, but also exhausting. Still, I think I'm always holding out for that. Those are the kind that have magic, the anima.

Well, then again there are other quieter stories that accrue glacially, over years, and they don't really feel to me like lesser entities. Maybe those just have a different kind of spirit.

**I love the image of the quiet story that builds slowly like a glacier. How is the process different for**

**that type of work? Are you often working on the ambush ideas and the glacier ideas at the same time?**

Absolutely, I'm always working on several things, whether I mean to be or not. I'm in Zürich at the moment, and I figured I'd devote my time here solely to the current novel-in-progress. I don't know many people in the city, I have no other obligations. Perfect conditions for delving, for just losing myself in the woods and not feeling bad about it, or worrying about anybody worrying. I've come to realize just how much I need lengthy periods of residential stability to properly tend to longer works. I'm very visual, tactile, spatially influenced—I don't like working from screens, I want it all spread out around me, tacked up on the wall, different sections parked in different places around the house. But there hasn't really been the stillness or the practical surfaces to allow for that in the last couple of years. Even during Melbourne's epic lockdown, I was packing up to move to New York. And then New York was something else.

The novel I thought I'd be completely disappearing into, here, of course other things keep springing up, ambushing. Unavoidable, you can't help but be affected by life in a new place. But the novel in question has been with me for nearly 20 years.

**How do you keep the spark alive?**

Some ideas keep themselves alive. Certain ideas require different things to stay alive, some are slower growing. So much of the life of this particular book has seemed subterranean. It kind of breaks surface now and again, flashing up through my notebooks over the years, weaving around other projects, doing its own interrupting. Sometimes I think of it as an underground river, other times as something more plant-like, a vast underground organism with complicated roots, that shoots up feelers to the surface now and then when it needs something more to sustain it—light, air, attention.

It might end up being—or appearing to be—a very slender, simple thing in the end (the above-ground part, I mean). Who knows. Writing, for me, is only partly about the finished, published work. It's just as much about how the work shapes your thinking, your orientation to the world, the questions it helps you to form along the way. The ideas it opens you to, and the people, and places.

I know these things aren't commodifiable, but that's not what I showed up for. If I can get a novel-sized idea into the space of a short story, or a novella—without it feeling artificially compressed or restricted—I will. Even though these forms are deemed as somehow less valuable, less commercially viable. In a way this just makes me want to resist, to side with the underdog. But really the divide is kind of baffling. I especially love books that elude categorization.

**You mentioned that you came to writing fiction through poetry and song, could you elaborate on that?**

I suppose I grew up in circumstances that necessitated some means of processing, a very real need for some kind of imaginative agency, escape, grace—connection and faith in a world outside the limits of my own at the time. Music and books were the first of these portals. Films, too, though the materials for filmmaking were completely out of the question.

My older sister and brother-in-law bought me a guitar for my 14th birthday, a few weeks after my mother died. Mum had talked about getting me one for years, but there was never enough money for even the basic things. This guitar—a nylon string acoustic with a slight crack at the heel—I was totally inseparable from it for years. As in, literally strapped to it, all the time, carrying it everywhere. Even if I was too shy to actually play in front of people for quite a while.

Around the same time I was reading Leonard Cohen's poetry—somewhere I still have sheets of hand copied poems from a collection that I'd borrowed from the local, suburban library, and was a bit gutted about having to return. Lines about a desire so big it made you want to burn your desk... what could I know about that at age 14? But I did. And I fell in love with an imagined Montreal, though I'd never seen snow falling.

His music came to me after his poems. One of the first songs I learned to play and sing along with was "One of Us Cannot Be Wrong." There's a convenient, visible model in Cohen, as to how poetry and song are intrinsically linked but it's not a given that there'll always be a natural transposition. When I started writing songs, playing in bands, I would often use strange, unconventional tunings, and weird picking styles. Thinking about this now... it carries into how I treat time and structure in fiction, always trying to reshape the form to better home the content. I never cared about the rule of three or Freytag.

Music was at the center of my social and creative world through my later teens and into my early 20s. But by around 19 or 20 there was a shift. Maybe it was as simple as: my guitar... a different guitar by then, an Epiphone... was stolen from my apartment, and my laptop and notebooks were not. It's not really that simple, but the timing lines up, and it's tempting to analogize.

**What was that transition like?**

I just gradually realized that I had a more natural capacity with the literal part of composition. Too often I was using music as a structure or vehicle for words, and that skewed balance felt...not insincere, exactly, but not sincere *enough*.

For a long time I still wrote works with a view to them being performed or spoken aloud. Maybe the music's still in there, in this sense. Listening is still a major part of writing, for me; there's always an ear

to rhythm and cadence. It probably has a lot to do with my instinct toward concision. In music the necessary role of silence as substance is more obvious. On the page, we still need space for an idea or an image to ring into, just as we do with sound.

I wonder now and again how I might have evolved as a songwriter, over a couple of decades. But the contemporary songwriters I admire the most—say, Adrianne Lenker, Tamara Lindeman—what they do remains astonishing to me. The relationship between the music and the lyrics feels inevitable, drawn from the same place or force. Their songs feel deeply connected to and cognizant of the natural world. It's probably no coincidence that both seem so attuned to interdependence, lyrically. Also, timeframes outside of that of solely human time. On a similar plane, in my mind, as poets like W. S. Merwin. I think these are people truly in love with the world. In love, while not glossing or shying from the reality of its darkness, or from entropy.

When I say that I wonder, though, it's just that: a curiosity, not a regret. It's enough to love it from this side. It's more than enough to listen, to sing or whistle along. Realistically, I don't think I could have built a life and a living around music in the way I have writing; I'm too much of a hermit at heart.

Josephine Rowe Recommends:

Transmissions: The Music of Beverly Glenn-Copeland, especially "La Vita," especially when walking around a new city

Older friends

Sumac on pretty much anything

Olivia Laing's BBC radio documentary on the sublime, uncategorizable genius of Arthur Russell

Woody Guthrie's 1943 New Years Rulin's

Name

Josephine Rowe

Vocation

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Fact

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