

MiPOesias REVISTA LITERARIA

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Lori Quillen Interviews Corie Feiner



I have an origins problem, always obsessing over where things come from. The produce on my plate, the cotton in my camisole, the junco outside my window, the words on the page/screen... I can't really separate product from place, bird from bones, poem from person. And I know it is a limitation, that I am probably using 5% of my brain and that part is dangerously root-bound, but here I am, wanting to do an interview to satisfy it.

All of the writers in this issue are new to me. Which probably means I don't get out much. Yesterday morning I read all the poems, yours stuck with me until I fell asleep on the train ride home. There was an emotional honesty, a lack of gloss, a mother-love that I identified with. *Ok, for starters, where were you when you wrote the poem featured in this issue?*

I have been trying to remember where I was, physically, when I wrote, "Excess," but even when I look at my first draft, I draw a blank. I do know that I was traveling back and forth from New York to Florida to visit my grandmother, Maw-Maw. She had been diagnosed with uterine cancer and underwent a hysterectomy, which was very difficult for her since she was well over three hundred pounds and chronically ill. Maw-Maw was quite a character, and in the time of her sickness, all of her habits and idiosyncrasies were illuminated. I wanted to connect with her, and learn more of her past. I wanted to make sure all of her stories were passed on. I wanted to ingest them.

Did early exposure, via a teacher, mentor, or parent, shape your path to poetry?

As a child, my favorite book was, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, by Shel Silverstein. My first poem was an imitation of "I'm Making a List." I wrote my age, 11 1/2, my height, 4' 3/4" and the color of my eyes, green hazel. However, I don't think I got real irony of the poem. In the fourth grade, a poet visited my classroom and what she said changed my life. "Poetry is not good or bad or right or wrong. The point of poetry is to touch someone's heart." Now this is arguable, but it released me from judgment and fear of failure. By the time I was in high school, I kept a journal, and wrote what I considered to be poems. One afternoon, in the halls of my large high school, I discovered a small room with the sign "Poet's House." The staff let me sit and read in their library during my lunch period. This is where I discovered Anne Sexton! Exposure to Poet's House helped me realize poetry was a living profession that being a poet was viable. It's funny to think that this is the same Poet's House that eventually moved

to Spring Street, and that now work for them as one of their resident poets.

We held our first reading at Teachers & Writers, courtesy of Jordan Davis. I have a lot of respect for the poetic outreach performed by the collaborative. As a writer in residence, you are a part of this. How do you make poetry relevant to the population you interact with? Which poets or artists have been good "gateways" to getting people engaged? Right now there is a lot of hip-hop that is amazingly poetic, do you draw on this resource?

I love being a poet-in-residence for Teachers & Writer Collaborative. I work mostly with students with special needs, whether they are diagnosed as emotionally disturbed, learning disabled, autistic, or multiply handicapped. I teach my students that poetry is made of "music, story, and song." Most people are drawn to one form of music or another, and are attracted to rhythm and sound. Most are also interested in stories, whether other people's or their own, and most either love to sing, or listen to others sing, which is our attraction to voice. When I break down poetry to this level, the students relate to it and are more interested. I also teach them that writing poetry is a powerful act. It can convey how they feel, teach others about the life they live, relieve the pressure of being inside their heads, and create something beautiful to share with others.

As far as gateway poets, I use the poetry of Nikki Giovanni, Willie Perdomo, Langston Hughes, Pablo Neruda, Myra Cohen Livingston, Jane Kenyon, Eloise Greenfield, Walt Whitman, Hafiz, William Carlos Williams, e.e. cummings, Basho, and many others, to get engage young people.

I also use a lot of music, especially with hard-to-reach youth. Some of my favorite artists are Mary J. Blige, Nas, DMX, Eric Sermon, Grand Master Flash, Talib Kweli and Tupac Shakur. It is amazing to see what happens to a classroom when a song with a good beat comes on! Smiling, dancing, and yes, reading and writing too!

Through words, students can explore their world and voice. I found your Quintet exercise on-line. (Maybe we could link to it?) I am going to encourage an educator I work with to use it in our ecology education curriculum. What is one valuable thing that you learned while implementing this lesson plan?

I learned that form can be liberating. The students I work with in the schools, on the most part, have very difficult lives, and have a very hard time learning. It is important to create obtainable goals. There are five lines in a quintet, with a total of eleven words. Within this structure, students can be as creative as they want. When they are done, they know they are done, and that they have accomplished something concrete.

Maybe it is the war in Iraq, or the result of too much press consumption in an election year, or the violence in Sudan, or the violence in the Middle East, or my age catching up to my inaction- but lately I find politics hard to hide from. How does the political climate inform your writing?

The current climate effects my writing tremendously. I feel a stronger sense of urgency to witness and to write. I also feel compelled to perform as much as possible. I know there is a big argument about politics and poetry and the muck of political poetry, but it has never been such an issue for me. I grew up in a very community oriented family. We were involved in things such as soup kitchens, but also massive protests. I learned that being political is not just about the large things, but the things close to home, what you eat, what you buy, how you get to work, what you do for a living, etc. I write about all of these things. I also have poems

about Ronald Reagan (on www.poetz.com) because that tribute week after he passed away was intolerable! I have also written many poems about my students, who are highly effected by the injustice of our system. The key, for me, is to not write like I am regurgitating the news. The key is to be connected, personally, to my subject, whether through experience or empathy.



You choreograph poems, turning words into physical movement/action. Can you explain this process and what drew you to it? Are performances still happening and, if so, how can someone go about seeing one?

I knew the choreographer, Astrid Von Ussar, through a friend. After hearing me perform my poetry at Club 13, now the home of The LouderArts Project, she approached me about doing a collaboration. Five years later, when she formed her own company, Von Ussar Danceworks, she commissioned me to write and perform a poem with one of her dancers. It was fascinating to interview her and from that, create a poem. The poem centered on her experience as a successful, but unhappy dancer in Slovenia who immigrated to New York and struggled with poverty, language, and self worth. She pushes to get ahead, but the aggression makes her life unsatisfying too. Ultimately, she meets someone who helps her, and this love makes her want to be more present. I was drawn to this process because I love stories. I also studied dance here and there and still have a fantasy about being a modern dancer. We got some great reviews from *The New Times* and *Backstage Magazine*. We have not done a show this year, but I hope to work with her on a new project in the future.

As someone without an academic background in English or creative writing, MFA programs look alluring. Structured writing time, potential collaborations, dialogue, mentorship, etc. But I've encountered some skepticism about the utility of these programs. What made you decided to pursue an MFA in creative writing? And, perhaps more importantly, what did you take from the experience?

Pursuing an MFA was a coin toss for me. I had already had my first book published and was running a fairly successful spoken word venue. I had a job in a small arts publishing company which was fun and had a lot of potential. However, I felt that I didn't know enough about poetry, and that even though my undergraduate degree was in English, I felt uneducated and untrained. The idea of going back to school started to emerge, but it germinated for a while. I paid for almost my entire undergraduate education, working two to three jobs at a time, and then working like crazy after graduation to pay off all of my loans. I was not fond of the idea of getting into debt again.

However, after writing to NYU about my spoken word venue, and having Phil Levine write me a personal note back, something happened. I thought to myself, I should go talk with them. After meeting the Director, Meslissa Hammerlee, I was taken with the program. It seemed small and personal, something I had not experienced.

I told myself that if I got into NYU, I would study and become an educator, in some capacity or another. If I didn't, then I would continue my path and work in publishing. It was the only graduate program I enrolled in, and I got in. I loved my classes, teaching fellowships, running the reading series, and being an editor for the Washington Square Review. I still had to work part-time in another field to make ends meet, but it was a good balance.

Ultimately, my MFA was a right of passage for me. A symbol that I was going to dedicate myself to the field of creative writing. I changed fields, and have been teaching ever since. I still had to work hard to rediscover my post-MFA voice and find the path that works for me. There is a lot of pressure to do it all a certain way. The main problem, I think, with MFA programs is that people think its going to solve their problem of getting from point A to point B and that they've made it somehow because of the exposure to successful writers. Ultimately up to you what type of writer and what type of citizen you are going to be.

Ok, a really light question. Someone has offered to cook you any meal you want any place you want. In addition to culinary skills, your host has a little plane and a fancy tent. What are you eating and where are you eating it?

The cook would be my husband. He would be making me a meal of vegetarian stew full of seitan, soba noodles, and mushrooms. We would set up the tent in our small living room and eat it on our rug. Afterwards we could take the little plane to visit his grandmother in Tel Aviv. Once there, I would want to eat a falafel on the beach.

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