

TITLE

This illustrated mixed-media poetry book uses collage, watercolor and acrylic paint, found images, and photography, to convey the fractured sense of a poem made up of many different memories and experiences. My pictures are somewhat surreal and abstracted, using a chaotic mix of photorealism and abstraction to illustrate the feeling of each poem, rather than the literal events. My poems and art explore these central themes: coming of age as I leave home and explore a new space, gender and expression, and my relationships with others, especially my mom and little sister. Some of these poems, I would describe as “long answers” to questions I think about which don’t have a simple solution. I hope that this project will help people understand the way I think.

Lucy G.
New Hampshire

Poetry And The Power Of Language

Lucy G.



Maybe a picture is worth a thousand words. However, I wonder whether there are some things that language can express with the greatest possible clarity, not achievable through art. Words have power. Is language limiting or liberating? Defining ideas precisely can lead to freedom. While some people feel entrapped by words, I want to propose an alternate narrative. For me, being able to describe the nature of my own environment does not trap me there - it gives me the greatest possible freedom.

In my experience, I always gain confidence from having the vocabulary to talk about my life. Labels have a gravity to them. Rather than being put in a box, I feel like I have been lifted upward into a community. Talking openly and honestly, having clear unmuddled words to describe myself is always - helpful and empowering.

In fifth grade, I had a teacher named Mr. Feuer. I adored him, and while he mostly thought of me as “a good student,” he noticed the difficulty I had paying attention in class. I worked hard, but I was at an obvious disadvantage as I tried to learn around the gaps in my own focus and memory. “Lucy is off in la la land,” he would say, chuckling to himself. Unfortunately, “la-la land”, this cute but dismissive way to refer to my difficulties, was unhelpful and euphemistic. At fourteen, when my ADHD was finally diagnosed and medicated, my doctors seemed surprised that nobody had noticed sooner. After all, my attention problems had a paper trail: Report cards, years back, described me as “a passionate, hard working, and intelligent student, who incongruously had a hard time remaining motivated and focused.” “La la land” was far from utopia - it was a lonely and frustrating experience that kept me isolated from my peers, unable to understand the problems I was having. Suddenly, with a real diagnosis, I had gained the gift of language. That horrible feeling I got in the pit of my stomach when I received criticism was not just thin skin; it was the classical symptom of Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria¹. My struggles with short term memory, my extreme tendencies to procrastinate, the way my eyes glaze over as I drop out of a conversation, all have names and explanations and other people who understood what I was going through. Rebecca Solnit, feminist author, has a particularly apt metaphor where she compares naming a social problem with diagnosing a disease. “Though not all diagnosed diseases are curable,” she writes, “once you know what you’re facing, you’re far better equipped to know what you can do about it”(1). While my symptoms have not gone away, ADHD is now a manageable, not isolating, part of my life. ADHD is just one of my labels, one I did not choose. I have other identities that allow me to define myself.

Creative writing is one of my favorite media in the world. To me it is a hobby, an ambition, and a way to express myself. Over the years as I work to improve my skills, I have read a lot of advice, some good, some bad, on how writing should be done. The ability to tell a story is a gift, but one that has to be worked for. Much advice is given on the simple mechanics of writing: avoid adverbs, passive voice, ‘thought verbs’ and qualifiers, minimize exclamation points, show don’t tell (Blatt). Is it possible to sort out the truth among all these often conflicting strategies? It is not necessary to take authors on their word. The advent of computers has created a simple way to statistically analyze writing, and see what sets great writing apart. The results are in, compiled in Ben Blatt’s book, *Nabokov’s Favorite Word is Mauve: What The Numbers Reveal About the Classics, Bestsellers, And Our Own Writing*. Sure enough, excessive use of adverbs, particularly those ending in the letters ‘ly’, is correlated with sloppy, amateur writing. Both award winning literary fiction and popular bestselling novels use similar low amounts of these adverbs compared

¹ See <http://ncgiadd.org> for studies on how emotions associated with rejection are amplified in people with ADHD.

to typical fanfiction. Within the work, too, of individual authors, books that use fewer adverbs tend to receive wider acclaim than those that use more.

E. B. White, author of such books as *Stuart Little* and *The Trumpet of the Swan*, advised against using qualifiers. "Rather, very, little, pretty -- these are the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words." However, this advice is not followed by most other popular or 'great' authors, including White himself. But a different pattern is apparent. The use of qualifiers in best-selling fiction has decreased steadily from over 200 per 100,000 words in 1900 to just over one hundred in 1999 (Blatt 100). Overall, prose is getting simpler. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Test is a simple equation that determines the reading level of any text based on the lengths of words and sentences. All sorts of writing and speech, from State of the Union addresses to best-selling novels, have decreased steadily and dramatically in difficulty scores for the last fifty years. Maybe this is a sign that we as readers are becoming stupider or more impatient. However, I think it points to a different phenomenon. As reading becomes more accessible to everyone, as books are treated as entertainment instead of strict academic business, more streamlined, relatable books are flourishing. Modern writing is more concise than ever before as it does away with excess words.

One kind of writing has always taken this strategy to its farthest extreme. While prose attempts to place words in the best order, poetry places extra attention on the words themselves. Like art, grammar, syntax, and tradition are less important than the sound and feeling of a piece. Poetry uses a variety of literary techniques. Sentence structure can either be repeated to create a lyrical, powerful pattern, even to the point of anaphora, or varied widely. Metaphor is crucial in poetry, used not only to create simple imagery, but also to deliver a message - bringing a poem beyond the level of simple description, and creating a new interpretation of the world. Anyone can see a sunset, but maybe only one person will see it and be reminded of a specific memory. That story is their gift to the world, which, if shared, can enrich sunsets for everybody.

Poetry is difficult to define. Because it covers such a wide range, from sonnets to children's books to epics to rap, it can't be defined just as its component parts - but by what it *does*. Poetry uses language in unique ways that pay attention not only to the literal meaning of the words used, but the metaphorical or double meanings, what they mean to the reader, how they sound, and how they interact. A poem is contained and self-referential - while prose describes something literally, poetry exists only in relation to itself and derives meaning from its own structure. A poem has multiple meanings - each person who reads it will actually contribute a new meaning based on how it relates to their own experiences. Even the way the reader processes what they have read inside their own mind is part of the poem.

Poetry is an ancient form of writing. Early poetry was rhyming and rhythmic, meant to be chanted or sung. It was not used as art or literature at first, but for business receipts and law codes, anything that needed to be easily memorized and recited. Poetry, most out of any form of writing, is open-ended and open to interpretation. Keats believed that this lack of a concrete meaning was something that should be embraced. He called it "Negative capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reaching." (*Selected Letters*). Poetry carries vagueness that should be embraced whenever possible. Poems can be hard to understand at first - not because they are obfuscating ideas but because they are at the outer boundaries of what ideas can be expressed through words. They communicate something abstract, such as an emotion, allowing it to jump the gap between one person and another.

Poetry has three qualities in addition to its literal meaning that are rarely found in prose. One important thing is the way the poem looks. The placement of the line breaks, the lengths of

the line, and the shape of a poem affect the way it is read. Taken to an extreme, this can be concrete poetry, a poem that is physically shaped as its subject. A poem also has sound. Words are taken not just for their meaning, but for their own construction. A poem can be made rich with end or internal rhyme, perfect, slant, or half rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and consonance. It flows with the rhythm of meter and repetition. Whether working within a tight structure of feet and rhyme scheme, or completely free form, the sound of a poem influences the way it is read. Although free verse poetry is becoming more popular in recent years, there is still value to writing in stricter forms. These poetic templates call for a poet who has great control over their language, and relates to the rich tradition of a historical form. Finally, perhaps most important, poetry has a sense - the way it makes the reader feel. This is constructed through figurative language, as well as concrete and abstract imagery. Connotation can be used to create subtle metaphors. In Lucille Clifton's poem *at last we killed the roaches*, she describes how she was briefly haunted by the deaths of those insects - "murder murder all over the place." By using the word *murder* instead of *kill*, she compares the roaches to people. Extended metaphor, symbol, and allusion all contribute to the sense of a poem.

On pages 118-9, *Poetry for Beginners* lists questions that should be addressed when reading or writing a poem. First, one should pay attention to the narrator of the poem. How prominent are they, and is their perspective the same as that of the author? Who does the poem address? This can be vague or specific - an individual that the author knows, and group of people, an archetype of a person, or just the world at large. Remember, the poem always has a second audience - the reader. What does the reader glean when they eavesdrop on this conversation between narrator and subject? Pay attention to the action of the poem, and what it might be a metaphor for. Sometimes a poem's title will clarify what is really going on. Think about what poems the emotion evokes, and how. What about the language of the poem makes the reader feel something? Does it remind them of their own experiences. How does the poem choose to express itself? What metaphors does it use? Are there extended metaphors, allusions? What about the poem is most important? Sound, internal and end rhyme, and line breaks can be used to emphasize certain parts of the poem. Also, what are the first and last lines? Check whether a word is ever isolated in its own line. Finally, ask what message the poem is trying to send. What questions is it asking. Can they be answered, or is the meaning of the poem about the questions themselves? (Chapman)

Poetry is more than just an artistic literary form. It can be used to accomplish real social change. I believe that naming a problem is the first step to solving it, and describing a concept is the first step in understanding it. Solnit describes a fairytale archetype wherein "a mysterious or threatening helper is defeated when the hero or heroine discovers his name"(1). Similarly, to tell a story in a clear and concise way can unmask a metaphorical Rumpelstiltskin and solve real, tangible problems. Poetry has long been on the forefront of cultural change. Being counterculture and experimental, poetry is often used by marginalized groups before their movements gain popular traction. To an extent, poetry exists outside of history. It is timeless, and can have different meanings according to the time in which it is being read, regardless of when it was written. However, it also has "symbiotic relationship" (Chapman, 73) with history. Poets create new language and cliché. Fighting censorship, it is often used in activism. As a product of its time, it can look different through the lens of modern politics and social change. The work of Phyllis Wheatley, an African American woman who published poetry while enslaved, seems dated now in the way she accepts her own mistreatment, but it was radical when it was originally written in 1772. The history of poetry is full of identity-based movements. The Black Arts movement celebrated African American culture, creating poems that used Black language and symbol to

explore politics and personal identity. Poetry has also been used in Feminist, Native American, and LGBTQ activism. (Chapman)

Not all stories are comfortable to write. Not all stories are easy. Sometimes writing feels too honest. Laying bare my thoughts and emotions puts you in a uniquely vulnerable and sensitive position, where I can be hurt and embarrassed. It can be difficult to decide whether or not to sacrifice safety and privacy so that I can use my absolute richest subject matter. Some experiences are too painful to write about - at least right away. There must be a period of necessary separation between the event and writing about it. This is time to process and work through primary emotions enough that I can write about the overall experience. It is difficult to write about sadness while one is still crying, or injustice when one is still vividly, physically angry. It is even possible that by writing about an experience, one loses something. One's memories of the experience are forever intertwined with your memories of writing (Ephron). The stories, now refined, no longer exist in their raw unprocessed form, and there is no way to get them back. Finally, some stories are left unwritten precisely because of the powerful messages they send. Authors are put in the difficult position of wanting to be honest, but not wanting to send a message that will be misinterpreted and used against them. I have personal experience with this fear of living up to stereotypes. When I was four, my favorite colors were purple and pink. Then the other kids told me, pink is "a girl color." I was a girl, so then I liked blue. I've never wanted to fit in the societal box for my gender, my sexuality, my neurotype. In my writing, I try to balance an honest description of my experiences while also representing myself to the world in the way I want to be seen.

As I've recently begun writing poetry, I've sought out advice from experts. One tip is to use memory as inspiration. A good poem, like any piece of writing, should have a clear narrative. Even though poetry is creative and can push the boundaries of storytelling, clear, lucid language should still be prioritized over flowery words. Like prose, a poem should tell a story, even a simple or short one - still including conflict and suspense. Details are particularly important, and should be shown rather than told (Hirschfield). In a way, writing is like art. To create a realistic piece, you should portray what you really see, not what you think you see. Sometimes poems provide a safe way to tell a difficult narrative that would be hard to put into prose. A poem can be used to subtly allude to a painful memory, framing a larger story and its message inside a description of a small moment. Poems should prioritize emotional truth over literal truth. The actual events that took place do not matter nearly as much as the feelings. Details should be rich but sparse - include only the ones that are necessary. The appropriate tone for a poem depends on its theme, but there are different ways to tell the same story. You can tell one story more than once. It may take dozens of pieces, circling around a difficult idea, to fully encompass or arrive at the right words (Hirschfield).

While working on this project, I had the opportunity to interview the artist Patricia Sazani. Sazani works in a combination of writing and visual art. She has recently been writing a lengthy fictional piece about a dystopian religious society. Her poems and art take place in this universe she has created; she describes them as something that a character from her story might create. I asked her whether she considered herself to be a poet or a prose writer. She said that she thinks of her writing more as a script, dictating a scene, but she identifies strongly with the world of poetry. Because her work is nontraditional, she believes that if it were ever published, it would be through a poetry press. I asked Sazani about her process for writing. She likes to begin with warmups, simple exercises that help get her in the creative mood to create a final piece. She begins each project with an idea of the concepts she wants to explore, something that may change during the creation of the piece. She once wrote a series of poems about wanting to merge with another person, only to decide that she was misinterpreting her own feelings. She then wrote a more

successful poem about wanting to combine her personhood with a storm. We also talked about tone and voice, and agreed that some kinds of writing are suited to poetry in a way that is surprising. For example, great richness can be found in the glossary of a children's science book. Defining a simple word creates an eerie contrast between denotation and connotation. The completely objective tone of a dictionary can be juxtaposed with personal writing to great effect. I experimented with this in one of my poems, "Science Fiction", writing my own simple glossary of words taken from a vocabulary list in my biology class. I incorporated words and phrases from this piece, along with some from more personal narratives, to write a dystopian poem.

In my writing, I have been most inspired by the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E movement. This group of modern poems plays with the "connection between sound and meaning and expectation," (Chapman, Welton, Negrón, 112). The meaning of the poem has as much to do with the sound and physicality of the chosen words as with their literal definitions. It is an interesting, almost artistic way to write a poem. I enjoy the work of famous L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets such as Lyn Hejinian, whose experimentalist poetry focuses on her own everyday life and experiences. She focuses on how language can be used politically (Graham). I also read poetry by Rae Armantrout, who writes short-line pieces which deconstruct lyricism and rhythm into its bare essentials (Auge). I love writing because I want to tell my own stories, create a new narrative. I want to take advantage of the power given to me to use my voice, something that is simple, easy, and important.

References

- Auge, A. (2019). Rae Armantrout. Retrieved May 3, 2019, from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/rae-armantrout>
- Burt, S., Millar, P., & Price, C. (Eds.). (n.d.). *Poetry: Poetry, February 2018* (Vol. 211). Chicago, IL, USA: Cenvo Publisher Services.
- Chapman, M., Welton, K., & Negrón, R. (2010). *Poetry for Beginners*. Hanover, NH, USA: Steerforth Press.
- Dodson, W. W. (2000, September/October). ADHD and Bipolar Disorder. *ADDvance Magazine*. Retrieved from http://ncgiadd.org/pdf/adhd_bipolar_disorder.pdf
- Ephron, N. (2011). *I Remember Nothing: And Other Reflections*. Vintage.
- Graham, G. (2019). Lyn Hejinian. Retrieved May 3, 2019, from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lyn-hejinian>
- Hirschfield, J. (2015). *Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World*. New York City, NY, USA: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Pass, M. K. (2016). *The Relationship Between the Written Word and Visual Art* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY, USA). Retrieved from https://repository.uwyo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&https_redir=1&article=1089&context=honors_theses_15-16
- Roorbach, B., & Keckler, K. (2008). *Writing Life Stories* (2nd, Rev. ed.). Cincinnati, OH, USA: Writer's Digest Books.
- Sazani, P. (2016, June). The Sacred Categories. Retrieved April 29, 2019, from Wolfman Books website: <http://wolfmanhomerepair.com/past-the-sacred-categories/>
- Sazani, P. (2019, April 21). [Personal interview by the author].
- Solnit, R. (2018). *Call Them by Their True Names: American Crises (and Essays)*. Chicago, IL, USA: Haymarket Books.