

Interview with LeeAnn

closing thoughts from the outgoing Poet Laureate

interview by Taylor Spence

You have been South Dakota’s Poet Laureate since 2015. What has been the most memorable or significant experience for you while serving in this role?

I think that, collectively, it’s been reading or presenting in small, community venues and events and being made to feel so warmly welcomed by kind and generously-engaged rural South Dakota audiences. It’s been absolutely lovely!

You have written five poetry collections! Amazing! Which work is closest to your heart, if any, and why?

All of my books hold a special place for me in terms of being representative of the time in my life I was writing them, and the kind of writer/poet I was at the time. In that sense, they all feel like important personal and artistic touchstones for me. Of course, my first book holds a special place in that it was the manifestation of a long-held dream come true, and it proved to me that it was possible for me to write and publish a book. I remember that I was working as a legal secretary at the time the book was accepted for publication as a winner in the National Poetry Series, and when it went into production they sent me a cardboard mock-up of the cover, and I just wept. I carried it to work with me everyday in my shoulder bag, and if I was feeling tired or down, or if one of the lawyers was being extra shouty, I’d take it out in my cubicle and look at it, and feel that it had changed everything for me. Writers also frequently, I think—maybe due to proximity—feel very close to their most recent books. Perhaps it’s a similar phenomenon, in that the newest book represents a vision, a dream, finally manifesting itself in the real world. And so, at the moment, I feel very close to and invested in my most recent book, *tsunami vs. the fukushima 50*, which has just been released with Milkweed Editions.

Which work, if any, do you have a love hate relationship with? Why?

Although I wouldn’t call it a love/hate relationship in that I love and am proud of *Dandarians*, and love the job that Milkweed did with the book, I will say that this book was so intensely personal in places, so mollusk-without-a-shell making, that it’s a book that makes me feel very vulnerable, in certain respects.

Can you give us the theme(s) of your current work?

My most recent book, *tsunami vs. the fukushima 50*, is a project that emerged in response to the 2011 Tohoku earthquake/tsunami and subsequent Fukushima disaster in Japan. It’s a book in which I wanted to honor and commemorate Fukushima, as well as focus attention on Fukushima’s ongoing legacies—particularly with respect to environmental crises. My strategy within this volume was to turn to tropes of otherness/difference alongside questions of mutation and radioactivity as employed within comic books (*X-Men* or *Godzilla*, for example) as a means of confronting issues raised by the Fukushima disaster.

In addition to providing a vehicle by which to consider the ecocritical and cultural implications of the Fukushima disaster, the project also ended up blossoming into a canvas that worked with aspects of personal and cultural psychological trauma, gender performance and queer identities, the taboo of female rage, and ideas of the monstrous/grotesque.

The book is composed of poems exploring the character of tsunami as a force of nature— a feral supervillainess, rising from the seismic trauma of earthquakes in the ocean floor much in the same way that the character of the X-men’s Magneto was forged within the trauma of the Holocaust. These tsunami poems are contrasted by a fictional cadre of first-person monologues in the voices of survivors and victims of Fukushima—loosely threaded through associations with comic book superheroes.

What is an early memory you have where you learned that language has power?

This is a great question, and my fourth volume of poetry, *Dandarians*, is—in many respects— all about language, and the power of language: communication and/or miscommunication, signification, and symbols, intertwined with issues of diaspora, immigration, and hybrid identities. In many respects, I think this volume of poetry conceived of language as a sort of yearning—the illusory and ephemeral thread that attempts to connect (and never quite succeeds in connecting) self and other, self and the sensual world, self and not-self.

The heart, or core, of *Dandarians* included a nested series of memoiristic prose poems/lyric essays that explored the slipperiness in language I experienced early on as the second-generation (Nisei) daughter of a first-generation (Issei) Japanese immigrant mother. These prose poems/lyric essays took on the form of what I came to think of as “word betrayals”—English words that I misunderstood in transmission from my Japanese mother, that took on complex symbolic ramifications of their own in the hybridized, liminal space of our household. While these “word betrayals” also spoke poignantly to some of the cultural misunderstandings between myself and my mother, they also spoke to the sense of a lost self or identity—a Japanese-speaking self. My mother spoke Japanese to me when I was an infant and a toddler, but when I first began to talk, I spoke a cryptic form of Japanglish apparently indecipherable to everyone but myself. Afraid that I wasn’t going to turn out speaking proper English, my mother immediately ceased speaking to me in Japanese. I’ve carried with me for a number of years now a marvelous discussion from an on-line Asian American writer’s group about how many of us, as children, experienced some type of early “thorniness” with a missing or lost second language. We went on to speculate that perhaps this was one of the things that informed, at least in part, our need to write. I love this notion of a second “lost” self—a Japanese-speaking self, a “ghostly double” self—that I might be trying to recover through my writing. A second self ironically recovered only through a mastery of the English language.

Have you ever censored your own writing? If so, would you do it again? If not, why?

Some, although definitely not all, of my work has been autobiographical—and some poems could clearly be classified as confessional, even—and as such, I’ve never censored my work for personal reasons, although I certainly make choices about what to disclose, and how, and when, for aesthetic reasons. That said, there are sometimes significant costs to writing in a deeply personal vein. Following the publication of my fourth book, *Dandarians*, for example, my elderly parents refused to speak to me for three full years. Going into the publication of this book, I knew that they might not respond well to some of the pieces, but I also felt very strongly about the importance of not silencing or censoring myself, and although the familial backlash was difficult, I have no regrets about the book. My feeling is that self-censorship is antithetical to the creative writing process. My advice to myself, and to writers that I work with, has always been to go ahead and write the difficult things, and then make a decision about if and when to publish it later.

You studied music –piano in particular – as an undergrad. How do music and language overlap in your mind, and in your work? Do you have any particular music you like to listen to while writing?

I like to think of poetry as a form of spoken song, and so I listen to and intuit, and read lines out loud, as if they were phrases of music. Because lyrics can occasionally be distracting when I’m writing, I frequently like to listen to jazz while I’m writing, but other times I just listen to music that I love, lyrics or not, because it provides me with a sense of well being that I find useful. Music has also, on occasion, been almost Pavlovian for me, in that I slowly begin to associate certain albums, groups, or musicians with certain projects, to the point that when I begin playing the music it immediately draws me into the landscape of the project and helps me begin to write. In that sense, my neighbors probably hate me, because when that happens, I’ve been known to obsessively play the same group/album over and over and over and over again.

Do you have any quirky habits that are essential to your writing process?

Sometimes, if I'm really, really stuck or struggling I will don a quirky hat. The dorkier the hat the better. It's possible that I may have written myself out of tough corners while wearing a felt hat in the shape of a Canada maple leaf, a safety orange Big Cock Country hat, and/or a Pokemon Pikachu hat? I'm just saying . . .

What are your favorite literary journals?

I think it's a really exciting time for literary journals! In terms of online journals, a small sampling of some of my favorites might include diode, Waxwing, Adroit Journal, Crab Orchard Review, Terrain, and The Account. In terms of print journals, a small sampling of some of my favorites might include Sugar House Review, North American Review, Crazyhorse, Alaska Quarterly Review, Cream City Review, jubilat, and Hotel Amerika. Seriously, though, I could go on and on! Also, I serve as Editor-in-Chief of the national quarterly journal, South Dakota Review, and I feel we're privileged to publish so many amazing writers, and for me, it's very exciting to be able to assemble exactly the type of culturally and aesthetically diverse journal that I myself would love to read.

What was your favorite book as a child? Why did you love it?

One of my favorite books as a child was a translation of traditional Japanese fairy tales, illustrated by a Japanese artist, that contained stories such as "Little Peach Boy," or "The Tongue-Cut Sparrow." It pointed toward a different type of narrative sensibility, and articulated cultural archetypes that I found very resonant. These were stories that I returned to and incorporated in my second book, *Year of the Snake*.

Do you remember the very first poem you ever wrote? How old were you?

I wrote my first poem when I was five years old. It was about a cat!

What is an interest or hobby you have outside of writing?

The poet Elizabeth Bishop once famously said that the best way to learn to become a better poet was to take harpsichord lessons. While I think she was being witty, I also think she was seriously talking about the Buddhist concept of "beginner's mind." For me, one of the ways I like to explore "beginner's mind" is through photography. By engaging in another artistic medium for pleasure, I feel that I can (re)access the spontaneity and joyousness I felt as a new, learning writer. In part, there's a sense of permission. A willingness to take risks and just "play" around that I think can inadvertently get lost by the wayside as one becomes an increasingly serious and committed artist. Because if one is functioning in the space of "beginner's mind," there's nothing to lose. This has been indispensable to me as a writer, because with each new project, or even each new poem/essay/story, I feel much more open to possibility if I'm able to give myself permission to approach the work with "beginner's mind." For me, experience, instinct, and years of working on craft can come into play when I enter into the process of revision.

You teach creative writing. What is your favorite piece of advice to give your students?

My favorite piece of advice is to read as voraciously and as widely as possible. Figure out the kind of work that you love and read more of it. Read work you think you might not like and—at the very least—develop a sense of healthy respect for it. As a writer, there were poets whose work I initially didn't particularly care for that became very important and/or beloved to me at later/different points in my life. Read outside your genre. Read non-literary texts. Read outside your comfort zone. Reading, I think, is the easiest way by which a writer can widen their intellectual, emotional, and artistic aperture to take in more of the world. Be hungry.



Lee Ann Roripaugh is the author of five volumes of poetry: *tsunami vs. the fukushima 50* (Milkweed Editions, 2019), *Dandarians* (Milkweed, Editions, 2014), *On the Cusp of a Dangerous Year* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), *Year of the Snake* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), and *Beyond Heart Mountain* (Penguin, 1999). She was named winner of the Association of Asian American Studies Book Award in Poetry/Prose for 2004, and a 1998 winner of the National Poetry Series. The current South Dakota State Poet Laureate, Roripaugh is a Professor of English at the University of South Dakota, where she serves as Director of Creative Writing and Editor-in-Chief of *South Dakota Review*.