

An Interview Between Erintrude Pieta and Dasha Bulatova



Dasha Bulatova: It always helps to start at the beginning. How did you get started writing and what was the road that led to poetry in particular?

Erintrude Pieta: So I started writing like everyone, I think, at a young age with an interest in books that led to trying my hand at fiction. And probably, admittedly, wanting to write the next Great American novel or something at age eight. But I started writing poetry seriously in high school, and had the opportunity to attend the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities and receive stellar instruction there from Mamie Morgan that helped shape a voice and a sense of adventure to my writing process. In college I took a step away from writing for my first two years, and then I took an introduction to poetry course with Andrew Grace, and I was set on my track for the time being, of writing poetry and exploring the space of it.

DB: To what extent do you allow or encourage real biographical elements to enter into the landscape of your poems?

EP: I think with this, for me, there are poems that are clearly autobiographical and poems that I had the intent to cast a long fishing line with, into spaces I don't know. But that's typically on a narrative level. When it comes to images, I like to think of that William Carlos Williams' quote "no ideas but in things," and I haven't seen much and I have a lot of ideas. Which presents the autobiographical image dilemma, in that it's limited (like how in dreams you supposedly can only see faces that you've actually seen before, imagine if poetry presented you with only those options?). So, for me, even if narratively a poem situates itself autobiographically, in pursuit of ideas or feelings through images I often leave the notion of autobiographical behind, and just go searching for what feels right.

DB: What do you mean by “I haven’t seen much”? I’m inspired by your inclination to follow the road of imagination. In “Spring and All,” Williams Carlos Williams also (very passionately) sings herald to imagination as a type of God: “The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill. The imagination is supreme. To it all our works forever, from the remotest past to the farthest future, have been, are, and will be dedicated.” How does your imagination arrive at the sort of striking, novel images that we read in your winning poem “Hosanna,” such as “I just want to always see your wings, /stretching from the middle of your breastbone to Idaho,” and “There is some small hole /in the word *spectre* and from it leaks / both visions: the day-star and fiend”?

EP: By I haven’t seen much I guess I mean that my world is only as big as it is. And while it is lush, ripe, and in some ways more than I ever dream it could be most days, poetry doesn’t play by the rules of what I have seen. It’s never limited in that sense. There is so much room for adventure, for not remaining convinced of what can and what cannot. I love that quote you bring up, and I think it answers your next question in part. I feel like imagination and adventuring in art is this incredible thing, but it doesn’t feel, to me, sourced necessarily in an incredible artist. I think the images come through reading widely to see what has been done, what innovations have been made, where artists have said yes to their own pursuits in poetics. To give yourself that permission. To just go for it, and follow the drive, find what is surprising in other work and then go and surprise yourself.

DB: What other literary influences drew your attention in your earlier years? And what are you reading now? I wonder especially about the link “Hosanna” draws between the erotic/ecstatic and the spiritual—are you drawn to any other work that explores this connection? My mind can’t help hearing echoes of Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” in this poem.

EP: In my earlier years, I think my writing did draw a lot of inspiration from music, but also from the cadence and quality of really good prose. I think specifically of David Sedaris’s specific sentence structuring, the arc of the “punchlines” of his stories, that aren’t actually punchlines so much as layered and observant tying-together of lines throughout

a story. Or Junot Diaz's long, gorgeous sentences that are in such close proximity with the harsh and the quotidian.

Lately, I've been reading a lot of Brigit Pegeen Kelly and Philip Levine, which I think are the influences I feel in this poem. I think the general scope/arc of the poem definitely feels like my consumption of Levine's slow timpani revelations, but also the reverence—which is very religious in this poem but also very human, a reverence of nature in its eroticism, I think. So that all feels like my particular internalization of Levine's particular worldly magic. Pegeen Kelly on the other hand, I think influenced the ultimate transcendence of both personal reality and a reality outside of the poem. Like I was saying on the autobiographical level, this is one of those poems that ventures from my personal reality, but it also becomes my rendition of Pegeen Kelly's persona poems that feel like folk tales almost, with the magic of another time. For me that other time, that magic, comes into play with the ethereal and sort of ephemeral (yet somehow everlasting?) nature of religious language. But I wanted to seed it in the reverence that struck me with Levine. Sort of navigating what it means to worship.

DB: In “Hosanna,” I can definitely see the influence of those immensely skilled prose writers you mention. Almost all of the language is housed in a beautiful, complex, winding, but ultimately clear (non-obfuscated) syntactic structure. Whenever I read a poem like this, I am always tempted to ask myself (or the poet, if I'm as lucky as I am now): Why enjamb the lines at all and how did you know when and where a line should be enjambed? I sense that the “answer” (if it is even possible to give one at all—the process of the poet can be mysterious and mystical) might differ from each “part” in the series.

EP: So I'm kind of obsessed with this question. I think about this all the time, and around the time I wrote this poem I was writing a lot of prose poems, and this one felt distinctly not a prose poem. I think enjambment came through the voice reading over the poem in my head mostly, how I thought the sounds wanted to find themselves, but also through what felt surprising on a line level. I found specifically the erotic lines of thought in this poem were hardly ever endstopped, but rather single erotic sentences were spaced over a number of enjambed lines. This, to me, felt related to the lurching of desire, the hanging

onto the next word, the falling feeling that comes with the erotic.

As for the parts of the series I think that was a fascinating change for this poem, which was originally one long, single stanza, three-page poem. There was the speaker and “Baby,” but the obsession and idolatry of the speaker’s gaze originally didn’t allow any space for the speaker to really exist. It was all about “Baby.” I thought about how to introduce this idea of the identity of the speaker and the evolution of the speaker’s attachment to “Baby,” and I drafted something along the lines of what would be section four. But it was just an exercise in understanding the speaker at first, until it felt like a necessary part of the poem. It was just essential to me to recognize the dance between love and worship, the religion of the sexual, and how this wasn’t this speaker’s first rodeo. At that point I had to reconsider the rules of the poem—what can and can’t be done in this poem, and how to navigate the reader through a change as stark as the heavy zeroing in on “Baby” and the self-reflection of section four that makes the speaker and the relationship a bit more compelling.

So I went through the process of drafting and redrafting just about any aspect of the relationship I thought would be compelling starting with something along the lines of “There once was Baby” or “There is Baby” or something like that. I probably drafted about fifty different mini sections through the process and a few developed into what the poem is now. That space of free, unconnected drafting allowed for all these different points of view, and matters of address, and formal changes (whether free verse or couplet or something that moves more aggressively around the space of the page). There was so little inhibition as I opened up the spaces of new documents and just went for whatever felt right.

Then as I began the significant redrafting of the piece. I realized if I shifted slowly through sections I could invent new rules to be followed for each section without jarring the reader. Which felt like a good justification for sections that allowed for breathers between perspectives, as well as, of course, the space for new rules. I think the biggest switch to me felt like the switch to directly addressing “Baby” in the final section, and that was a risky switch, that felt like it really needed to justify itself because “Baby” was made into a deity, for “Baby” to be on the level the speaker such that the speaker felt like there could be a monologue to “Baby,” like that was the speaker’s place, seemed really precarious. And thus it was the last thing I really

got to in revisions.

The final section was originally written referring to “Baby” in the third person as is seen in all the other sections, but it felt right on its own when I switched it to directly addressing “Baby.” That sort of unlocked the poem for me because if it felt right for the speaker to address “Baby” directly, then the speaker must know the nature of the deification, the unreliable way in which the speaker had cast “Baby” into something that couldn’t have been real. Which led to a better understanding of the motivation, of why one would wish to keep someone that high. So I redrafted with that idea in mind, so that the speaker grows in awareness as the reader progresses as well.

DB: That tension between the deified and the mortal runs parallel, for me, with your interesting and loaded choice of using “Baby” as the name that serves as both the point of connection between speaker and the loved person, and also as an anchor for the reader to find their bearing within the poem. That pet name evokes so much affection and love, but also ownership and condescension. Because we read it so often in the poem, and because it’s capitalized, it certainly morphs into a God-like sobriquet (a fun word I don’t think I’ve ever used in a sentence before). We don’t ever really get to hear “Baby’s” point of view though. In your imaginative sphere, what do you think the real-world, human “Baby’s” response might be, if it were poetic? (I’m obviously not asking you to write another poem, but I’m wondering what sort of techniques or language “Baby” might gravitate towards...)

EP: I think we get the closest approximation of this in the poem when the speaker talks about their own past lover, but I think that’s in retrospect. The personal exercise of this poem was really meditating on what a relationship with this type of worship would be like, and I think in exploring that, I realized a little that I don’t think anyone can be sure that they are being deified—they just like it maybe. I sense that “Baby” is the kind of person who would like it, celebrate the celebration of themselves, and easily call it love. But never realize it is a form of deification that they are attracted to. I think “Baby,” in the real world, would think that’s what true love looks like, and that ultimately it is, in some sense, earned attention/affection.

DB: The language in “Hosanna” creates a rich, textured, and

mythological landscape where both holiness and viscosity exist on the same plane. Continuing from our discussion on imagination, to what extent does the technique of persona play a role in drawing out so many lyrical possibilities and tensions from this landscape?

EP: I think persona was the whole pursuit of this poem. I hardly ever write persona poems and I started this one as a challenge, or rather exercise to just play in a space I had avoided. And that introduced all these crazy moments, the turns of the speaker, the changing of address, the length. All these things that I rarely do in my work. Which is a faulty idea in and of itself – “what I do in my work” or “how I write.” It becomes a very limiting space that forgets the strength of innovation, the landscape that poetry can inhabit, and the play of the work. Persona allowed for me a distance not necessarily from myself and the “I” of the poem, because for me the “I” of the poem always morphs into something very separate and distant from my actual person. Rather the distance was between the world I exist in and the world the poem could exist in. The further and further I got into this poem the more expansive the world became, the larger its capacity was, if I would allow it, if I would see it through. It was very fun in that way.

DB: I’m fascinated that this poem contains techniques that you don’t usually find yourself engaging in, mostly because of how fine-tuned your use of persona and the serial poem is. Often I find that giving myself new constraints that I’m not accustomed to does invite a richness and curiosity about the poetic architecture that can be lost if I’m writing in the same mode over and over. What new challenges might intrigue you in the future?

EP: I think my next move is diving further into the separation of poetry and the self, writing poems where I’m not the speaker all the time. As well as pushing myself further into magic and the craziness between poetry and reality. I pretty cyclically return to very formal work as well just to jump start some new ideas, so I think I’m due for a month or so of tonkas and sonnets and abecedarians and the like. As for my future plans with poetry, my intention is to just write and study and play. That’s what it’s about for me.