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Abstract
Lawrence Raab is Morris Professor of Rhetoric at Williams College and the author of seven books of poetry. He has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Bess Hokin prize from Poetry magazine. What We Don’t Know about Each Other won the National Poetry Series and was a finalist for the National Book Award. His latest collection, The History of Forgetting, explores both intimate and universal subjects with a depth and beauty wrought from clear language.

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Amanda Fagan: You’ve said that almost all your poems begin with the desire to
write a poem. Could you describe what this process looks like? Do you do writing exercises, do you go through journals, do you free-write to see what happens... or something else?

Lawrence Raab: I believe that the desire to make a poem usually precedes the content of the poem itself. There have been occasions, for example, after the death of my mother or the birth of my daughter, when I felt the need to write a poem about those particular events. But almost always I have no idea what the poem I hope to write is going to be about when I sit down to try to put some words together.

So what do I do to get started? I usually read other people’s poems, and I have a notebook that has stuff I’ve jotted down or quotations that might lure me into a poem. But reading poets whom I admire leads me toward the state of wanting to do it myself. I remember when Mark Strand, who was an enormous influence on my early work, published his book Darker. As I was buying that book I thought, ‘I have to find the right moment to read this, because this book is going to make me want to write.’ So there are certain poets who can press me toward the act of composition, usually—certainly with someone like Mark—with the recognition that he’s arranged a poem in a new way, or written a particular kind of sentence I would like to be able to write. Then I’d try doing that. It wouldn’t be an act of imitation so much as an initial kind of inspiration.

AF: You had mentioned that at some point you had to forbid yourself from doubling up the last lines. Is that still a rule of yours and are there any steadfast rules you keep in your writing or that you think other writers should keep?

LR: That would not be a rule that I’ve been able to keep myself, or that I’d wish to enforce on anyone else, since doubling a last line, rhetorically, is often a very nifty way of getting a poem to end. The problem is, if you do it too often, then it seems like an affectation rather than a gesture that comes naturally out of the material. So that’s what I meant by saying that I might want to resist using that strategy too much. On the other hand I can push myself in the opposite direction by making demands—trying to use an unfamiliar vocabulary or syntax, for example, to surprise myself into an interesting way of thinking.

I remember when my first book came out a good friend of mine wrote to me praising it, praising it probably more than it deserved, and he noted that I used certain words a lot, words like “wind.” He, in fact, pointed out that often my poems ended with some gesture involving the wind, which I was completely unaware of. And when I went back to check this out I was appalled at how often the wind would sweep in at the end of a poem. Why hadn’t I noticed this? Wind, silence, stone (that was a big word when I started writing). . . And my friend Jonathan Aaron, who’s a wonderful poet himself, said, “You might want to try using words that you’ve never used in a poem before. For example,” he wrote, “how about ‘machine gun’?”
And I realized with a shock, and I suppose even a kind of a thrill, that not only had I never written a poem with a machine gun in it, I’d never written a poem in which a machine gun could conceivably have appeared. So it seemed exciting to do that. Actually the poem that arose—"Attack of the Crab Monsters"—has a flamethrower rather than a machine gun.

That led to other aspects of a poem that I had been avoiding without my knowing it, like using dialogue. The first time I did that I thought, ‘Gee, you can really have people talk just as though this were a short story.” It surprised me. Of course, there are lots of poems where that happens, and I had read many of them, but I’d never done it. Conversation also led to a certain kind of humor that started to find its way into my poems.

AF: So maybe your rule, if there was a rule, would be to challenge your habits?

LR: Yes. I think it’s useful to be aware of your habits after you’ve had the time to acquire them. At first, you want to just let anything happen. But pretty soon habits set in. Students in my advanced writing workshop have acquired certain habits without even knowing it. The first assignment I gave them this year was to reread their work and write an assignment that would acknowledge and challenge those habits. And one person, whose poems had been very much located in single places, gave himself the assignment of writing a poem in which at least four different places had to appear: two of them physical, one of them remembered, and one of them imagined. This forced him to move away from the moment that he first got hold of, and I think he discovered a great deal by doing that. It was a terrific assignment; it’s one that I try to give to myself as I’m working: Don’t stay where you are if you can’t think of anything more interesting to say. Just go somewhere else. It’s a poem; you can do anything you want.

AF: What are your best habits as a writer and worst habits as a writer?

LR: It would be easy to start with the worst, which I think is the inclination to postpone sitting down to write. It’s a lot easier not to write than it is to write. And the world offers us so many opportunities not to do those things that are important and pleasurable, but also difficult.

I think it was William Stafford who said, to the annoyance of a lot of other writers, that there’s no such thing as writer’s block. All you have to do is lower your standards. This is really very useful to think about, because your standards shouldn’t be low for the final poem that you decide to deliver to the world (as Stafford knew), but they may need to be ratcheted down simply to get yourself started. And that can be surprisingly hard to do.
I often like to give myself, when I’m beginning to write, the option of taking a nap instead. It seems useful to allow sleep to be the alternative to writing. Then I can wake up and say ‘Well, I haven’t written anything—Okay, now I will.’ And then I usually do. This isn’t even going to be a poem, I can tell myself, by way of consolation and reassurance. This is just going to be some phrases on a page. And then I often think, ‘Oh, that’s not so bad. I can do something with that. I can take that somewhere.’

I guess it would be hard for me to claim anything as my best habit. Maybe I would want to point to a certain kind of attentiveness, an awareness that I can try to assemble these disparate pieces into something that might be meaningful. The habit of arrangement in a way follows my childhood inclination to collect things, put them in boxes, or paste them into scrapbooks. Or else, maybe my worst habits are about the same as my best. Sometimes I just sleep. Sometimes I wake up and work. Sometimes my dog wants to go for a walk, and that makes the difference.

AF: You’ve said that inspiration is earned rather than bestowed—

LR: I do believe that.

AF: Do you think that there are things that you do in order to earn inspiration or are there other things that you would do daily to kind of generate momentum?

LR: I’m thinking of the process of composition rather than the activity of living, which is more complicated and about which I would probably not want to make any pronouncements. I believe, again thinking of my students and of myself when I started out, it’s easy to imagine that if you put yourself in the right moment inspiration comes to you. The poem is out there, and a god breathes it into you, and you’re only the vessel that accepts it.

It’s a grand mythic notion and certainly one that persists, if not in a purely religious way. “I couldn’t write anything because I wasn’t inspired” is a common complaint. Well, I don’t think that’s a good excuse, even if I’ve said it often to myself. There are ways of creating inspiration, just as there are exercises you have to do regularly if you want to be a good athlete. You can’t expect that if you just go out on the field you’ll make the right play. You have to train to do it. And then show up.

So when I said that inspiration is earned I meant you write your way toward it. And you do that by risking the embarrassment of writing badly. Because when you sit down to write, how can you expect to write really well at that first moment? Shouldn’t you expect that the first thing you put down is going to be dull, if not stupid, if not in fact horribly humiliating? And all that means is that you can write your way away from that material. But if you refuse to put down
the first word or phrase that comes to you, then your imagination may not offer you anything better. You have to trick yourself into consequential thinking. You have to accept the ordinary before you can discover what might be rich and strange inside it, that moment when sentences come to you out of a sense of a continuous voice, even if you don’t know where that voice is taking you, or what kind of shape or pattern you may be following.

AF: You seem to be describing writing as a pretty rigorous process, a lot of hard work, and I think anybody who’s really dedicated some time to doing it would probably agree. So, why write? What’s your personal motivation to keep writing?

LR: Well, actually, I would wish to see the earlier stages of writing a poem as a way of fooling around, as playfulness. “Hard work” suggests a kind of determination and it implies a certain awareness of the aim of that work. That is something that you need to get to in the process of writing any given poem, but it’s probably not the best place to begin.

Once you have a poem that looks like a poem, once, in some ways, you know the poem has assumed a shape with a sense of content, and therefore a set of limitations as well, then you start to think about how you can make the best poem out of this material, and how you can make it work for the reader. And that’s hard work. And that can go on for a long time, even years for an individual poem. But before that it’s play, what Wallace Stevens calls “the gaiety of language.” And that’s one of the pleasurable parts.

So why do I want to write? Playing around with language—trying to get a sentence right—is fun. When I sit down with nothing on my mind except the desire to write a poem or to read some poems and then perhaps write one, it’s with the anticipation of certain kinds of pleasures which I know will mingle with other kinds of limitations, disappointments, and inevitable failures—all those poems that I never got to work well enough to send them out into the world. But I also write poems because I’d done it for a long time and that activity has come to define my life.

AF: You’ve also said that you want the poem to sound like somebody talking, somebody like you, and not a poetical contrivance. In The History of Forgetting your language is very accessible. Why is this kind of voice so important to you and, at the same time while maintaining that voice, how do you keep the poem alive and interesting?

LR: That’s a whole bunch of questions together—all of which are interesting, some of which would be hard to answer without thinking of a particular poem. Let me begin with “accessible,” which is a word I both like and dread insofar as it’s applied to my work. I think it’s often intended to be either the slightest of compliments, or a disguised condemnation, meaning that the work is
insufficiently complicated.

Certainly a poet who is often branded with that word is Billy Collins. I like Billy Collins’s poems; I like some of them a lot. People find them engaging and funny and they can share the ideas that are being entertained in the poems. I don’t think that’s bad. Why should they feel baffled and unhappy? But I wouldn’t want accessibility to suggest lack of complexity, and Collins is often surprisingly, cunningly complicated. But maybe an even better example would be Robert Frost. He’s a poet who seems to be enormously accessible when compared with, say, Wallace Stevens or T. S. Eliot, his contemporaries. But I think Frost is no less important than either of those poets, and in many ways no less complicated, rich, or profound.

Look at a poem like “Home Burial,” which is one of the great American poems of the past several centuries and perhaps the greatest poem about marriage that I can think of. Everything counts in that poem, and every little gesture is worth paying attention to. It’s enormously rewarding to return to, over and over again, the way Shakespeare is.

There are poems of Frost’s that pretend to be accessible in ways that it turns out they’re not, poems like “The Road Not Taken,” which people read, or I might say misread, as pieces of inspirational Yankee wisdom. But I believe those poems are designed to turn on those people if they read them carefully enough, and assert feelings and ideas darker, more complicated, and much more worrisome than the reader at first believes—but also more exciting, more genuinely satisfying, and, yes, more beautiful.

So, I want to think of accessibility as a tactic, a strategy rather than an end in itself. I would like to think of my poems as accessible in that they invite a reader into their worlds. If a poem’s invitation is successfully alluring you should want to read it again. You shouldn’t feel you’ve exhausted it, but been provoked, as if you have much more to discover.

AF: For you, what is the stuff that makes good poetry?

LR: Wow, that’s a hard question. Well, I’ve already cited Frost. I’ve mentioned “Home Burial.” I would certainly stand behind that as a great poem. I think it’s a great poem in the way that I think Keats’s odes are great poems. They reward and continue to reward the most careful attention possible. That may be as good a definition as I can come up with for what makes good poetry. It draws you back in. In its own precision it repays your attentiveness, and may end up challenging your deepest assumptions.

Frost’s “Mending Wall,” for example, begins “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” and it includes that sentence again in the poem as well as the
opposite, or what seems like the counter-claim: “Good fences make good
neighbors.” So, how do these two statements play off each other? It’s Frost’s
pleasure to work that out—to make us work it out, if we accept his challenge.

I want to feel that the poem is doing a lot more than urging us to choose one
side or the other. It may be enticing us into a situation where we at first feel
that the poem is going to offer a right and a wrong answer. Eventually I think
the poem uses our desire for certainty to challenge the way we think about the
world, so that its stakes are much larger than they at first appear. I think Frost,
among many other great and good poets, does want to change our minds, but
not necessarily about what we at first think he’s up to.

AF: When did you get interested in writing?

LR: Probably in high school. There was a while when I was more interested in
writing short stories. Then I started writing poems. I can’t remember if there
was anything significant that caused me to write poems rather than stories. I
think I made all of the kinds of mistakes and was self-indulgent in all the ways
that I try to recognize in my students. I would rarely revise. Not revising is a
certain kind of romantic self-indulgence in the young writer. I remember
thinking: ‘Oh, I wrote it. It’s pretty much perfect. And of course I can’t go back
to the moment of inspiration that produced this great work.’

But you need to be yourself in many different ways as a poem evolves. Writing
a poem is a way of discovering how to be yourself—the self that is capable of
writing that particular poem. Revising is a way of redefining your sensibility,
not just correcting stray moments in individual sentences.

What precedes the poem may be just a fragment—a phrase, a word or two, a
sense of a voice. It could be an idea, but I think it is rarely an elaborate,
abstract idea. It could be a seemingly indefinable emotion, a memory, a
yearning, a loss—but whatever it is, it’s there to take you somewhere. It’s the
discovery that makes the process exciting as well as difficult, and makes the
difficulty rewarding, and revelatory.

Amanda Fagan is a Butler University MFA student of poetry. She has
received no awards, grants, nor fellowships and has been published
nowhere. She co-edits poetry for Booth and makes coffee for a living.