

Transcript of post-reading question and answer session with Visiting Writer's Series poet
Meghan O'Rourke, author of *Halflife*
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Q: As you're both an editor and writer of poetry, as a poet what do you want from someone who edits your work and as an editor what do you want to see in the poetry you edit?

MOR: That's a great question. So, on the first question, as a poet what do I want from an editor. It's always sort of an internal battle with yourself whether you want someone to make suggestions or whether you just want them to say great, go ahead. And in fact with my book what happened was my editor did have some suggestions, particularly in the series. She had a lot of cuts that she suggested and at first I... you know I had lived with this series for quite a long time, I also was struggling with it – it was the one that had taken the most revision over time, the one that had been most recently revised. So, at first I resisted her changes but over time came to see that they were really judicious cuts and I pretty much took all of them. So, you know I guess what you want as a poet is to feel that you have an editor who is reading your work attentively and taking the poems on their own terms, not trying to adjust them in any aesthetic sense that might have to do with their reading or what they prefer but really understanding the demands each poem exerts on itself. And I would say I did want someone who was going to make suggestions, I did want someone who was not afraid to say “cut these five poems” and in fact I ended up asking her for more over time, saying, you know, which poems should I cut? Because you really lose perspective over time as you work on the book, and it evolves, and certain new poems get added in. At one point it was shorter, and it was a little too short, it needed to have a few more poems in it, and I having had a period of not being able to write at all, wrote a whole batch of poems and I thought oh great, I can just put all these in the book. I was very excited, because that kind of prolificness is not usual for me. And I put them all in the manuscript and all the sudden it was just a disaster – it was like all the air went out of the room, you put too many plants in there. So what you want is the person who will say to you at that point “You've got to cut some of these, they really don't work.” Luckily I kind of could see it and then I went to her and said I really think I've put too much in, which are the two that you would keep? And she offered some great suggestions. So you want someone who's both not afraid to make line suggestions but has a very good sense for what the book should be as a whole, can intuit something for the structure of the book.

As an editor what I want from poetry is to be surprised, and delighted, and to encounter something totally strange, totally new, totally arresting. And I don't have a prescribed aesthetic I am a bit Catholic in my tastes... What I really just want is to be held in the grips of something that I've not been expecting. And you know you sit down with a stack this big and there's a lot of really great poetry in there but the thing that's really going to rock you back on your heels or do what Emily Dickinson said a poem should do, which take the top of your head off, that's what you really want. It doesn't happen that often, and it's also important to say that's to some degree personal, the poem that takes the top of my head off might not take the top of your head off, and vice versa.

Q: You brought color into your poems a lot with the Vincent van Gogh quote and the gold, red. I was wondering if you do that consciously or if it just kind of sneaks its way in there?

MOR: I think initially I wasn't doing it consciously, I think initially it was my sort of subconscious desire to be a photographer or a filmmaker. What I can say was conscious was a desire to try to wrest into the poem as much of the sensory experience of living as I could. At some point I read the manuscript, actually I gave it to a friend, and she was like "What's with the color?" I mean there was even more, it was everywhere, it was like rainbow room, it was terrible, so I actually had to scale back, if you can believe it, embarrassingly enough. And then you try to get to a point where you feel like there's just enough and not too much.

One thing I wanted the poems in this book to do was speak to one other. I wanted this to be a book, I didn't want it to be just an assortment of poems. One way to do that is to have sort of motifs going through it, and that was one of them. But also, I just really like color.

Q: I have two questions that are kind of related. The first one is do you find through writing poetry do you feel like you can learn truths about yourself, and about life in general?

MOR: So I have to answer that now? Hmm. (Pauses) Um, yeah, except that the self always changes. So the truth you learn about yourself at one moment becomes the lie you tell yourself the next day, I suppose. That's a really good question, I don't have a good answer. I feel like I discover things I don't discover anywhere else. I feel as though I discover truths about experience and just what it's like to be alive and about certain things that are crucial to me as a person about being alive that have to do with just the physicality of the world that if you asked me before writing the book I might not have said those things are really crucial, that the act of noticing what the sky looks like is crucial. But I guess after writing the book I felt when I was able to get some distance from it and look at it, what was there surprised me, I didn't know there was all that color or that there were these other things. I didn't notice that there were so many imperatives in the book. So in that sense I discovered things about myself, that I'm always making demands on myself, little imperatives and things like that. I don't know... I'll keep thinking about that.

Q: Sorry for another philosophical question. In writing poetry do you find it can serve as a stress relief or when you kind of access a deeper part of your personality do you feel that that can reveal uncertainties about life and it's really overwhelming to be engaged in such a mysterious part of yourself?

MOR: (Jokingly) So are you a philosophy major or a psychology major? Is this some sort of experiment? These are good, I've never been asked these questions before, you get a lot of repeat questions, which are all good questions too...

You know, 90 percent of the time you're trying to write it's incredibly stressful, and not a stress relief at all. It's sort of this act of being at your desk and trying to generate work and just having this stubborn mundanity of life intrude upon you. And it's incredibly frustrating and you feel self loathing and despair and you're like I don't make any money from this, I don't get any glory from this... so a lot of writing is just frustration with yourself. Which used to be much

more frustrating for me until I started to realize it was kind of like exercise or yoga or religious practice or something you had to do. And some days you would have more access to those mysterious overwhelming parts of yourself than others... When it's good, it's good and it can be a stress relief, absolutely, especially if you're kind of subconsciously working over something you don't know about, you know, it's like a dream you want to have but you didn't know you wanted to have the dream. And to have that can be incredibly... It can also be kind of upsetting. I think dreams are what it's the most like what it's like in that sense.

There are times when it's a stress relief and there are times absolutely when it's distressing somehow. But not... there's so much distress you don't want in your life but this isn't like that, it's like a distress you kind of need. It feels like truth I suppose, it feels like... I keep coming back to the word access it feels like access to something you kind of need. I hope that tries to answer your question.

Q: Since so many of your poems seem autobiographical, is there anything you would not write about?

MOR: ...No, I mean, I was just having this conversation with somebody, I gave a reading last week at NYU and we were out with some poets afterward and we got on the topic of "the poem that you can't write." And there's some poet, probably one of you knows, who once talked about the poems you can't write until so-and-so dies. That we all have this like trove of poems that we can't write until our mother dies, or our father dies, which seems like a very morbid trove. But it is true probably nonetheless that there are poems you're not ready to write at a certain point in time.

The second long poem in the book which is about the murder and rape of another woman named Meghan O'Rourke who is a real person... That was a poem I wanted to write for many many years and did not feel I could write, I was very nervous about it. Its being an act of appropriation, I was very nervous about it being sensationalistic, or just written for the wrong reasons. So there is material sometimes that you do want to make use of and you can feel quite tentative about it for all those reasons. There's nothing right now that I'm... nothing I'm going to tell you about right now (laughs). But yeah sure there is, there comes a time when you want to do it. 44

Sometimes you change little details, as a way of distancing... but something I do and I don't know if this is just – you could make the argument that it's sort of cowardly – is I often kind of... when I *am* writing to some degree autobiographically I often make composites. To me it's also just more interesting somehow.

Q: You said in an interview that you wanted to get beyond the self in poetry - how do you believe you accomplish that – using speakers, multiple forms, something in the creative process...?

MOR: Yeah, part of what I was referring to there was that I was not interested in psychological excavations of my personal traumas on a day to day level. You know, I spend way too much time already there, I don't need to do it in my poetry. Also, the art that I like most, the art that to me is the most startling – again, provides access to something about existence that we don't get anywhere else – is art that is... not antipsychological, but is about form in some sense, is about

how style is its own experience, it's not just filigree, it is itself experience. The experience of style is something that can kind of change your world. So, technically I guess the way I tried to do that is to use a speaker who is not technically me, so the "I" in the poems is not really the "I" that's speaking now. And that "I" sometimes wanted to register the world in ways that weren't exactly linear or logical and more, again, from my own life or from some corner of the imagination.

Q: I read an interview where you said that women aren't usually sent on quests for transcendence because their sexuality gets in the way and that you wanted this book to tackle the tension and comment on that. I was wondering with that said why you chose to include the poem "Peep Show" and how that fits into the theme of transcendence?

MOR: That's a good question... well, you know, I did want the book to be about that tension somehow, the tension between female sexuality and sort of female spiritual quest. The book is also very much about... we live in an age of spectacle, we live in a visual age, we live in an age where we look at the world constantly, and we're bombarded with visual stimulus that is outside of our control and I very much wanted to set that up in the beginning of the book, this world of spectatorship and spectacle, some of which is resolutely not transcendent... But I wanted to aestheticize it a little bit and so it seemed to me that doing that with a poem about a peep show was kind of the perfect way, for me the only way I could think of, of starting.

I wasn't quite as conscious of all of this at the time, but peep show was probably one of the few poems I wrote in this book pretty conservatively as a kind of exercise, sort of a little essay on my take on American civilization in the late 1990s or post 2001. It was written after 911 and I was trying to write a whole series of 911 poems that were just really bad and that was in a weird way my 911 poem. But yeah, I wanted to begin by really being rooted in the body.

Q: As an editor of poetry do you feel that it inspires you to go on and write your own poetry or does it make it harder to write by pointing out examples of things other people have done that you shouldn't do?

MOR: You guys have good questions, probably the best questions I've ever gotten.

It's kind of you know again both, there are times when it's really stimulating and really exciting and you encounter a batch of work that you're kind of jazzed up by, someone does some cool thing and you're like wow I want to do that. It's kind of like if you've ever played sports or did things like skateboarding or something, you're hanging out and someone does something and you're like that's really neat I want to do that too. But then there are times when you just think...both, there are so many good poems and good poets out there, who am I to keep trying to do this? And wow, there are so many kind of okay poems out there that aren't doing anything really new, how in the world am I going to do something new or worthwhile? I guess for me I try to get away from those questions by just thinking, I like to write poetry, on a good day, so let's try to go back there.

It can be really... I go through kind of a manic relationship with it. I'll write really intensively for a while and then I'll have a period where I just read stuff and I just think I can't write, I can't do anything.