

THE SRPR INTERVIEW: LAURA VAN PROOYEN

Joanne Diaz: Thank you so much for being our Featured Illinois Poet in this issue of SRPR.

Laura, we've known each other since 2003, when we met in a biweekly poetry workshop at the Poetry Center of Chicago. Your writing—and the discipline with which you approach your craft—have been constant sources of inspiration for me since then.

As we sit down to talk today about these new poems, I am astonished by how recent events add new layers of meaning to them. As of right now, the waters from Hurricane Harvey are still rising. Thirty-eight people have died, and the governor of Texas anticipates that many thousands of people will be displaced by this storm for years to come. I cannot help but think of this catastrophe when I read your poem, "Flood." How do you see this poem, now that we are witnessing such large-scale catastrophe?

Laura Van Prooyen: The poem is slight in comparison to what is happening, but it speaks to the power of water, especially as we experience it here in South Texas. In San Antonio, rainwater has nowhere to go. So much of the earth has been paved, the exposed ground cannot absorb water quickly, and there is not a drainage system that can handle it. Streets become rivers and the lowest points of the city flood. Floods happen incredibly fast. Yesterday, I saw a photo taken from inside of a nursing home in the Houston area where the elderly residents in wheelchairs were sitting waist-high in water. The image was devastating. It was so terrible people suggested the photo must have been fake. But it wasn't. I understood how the water could rise, and likely at an alarming speed. How help might have been delayed, because of perilous streets. The residents were rescued, but now they begin the unwelcomed journey of displacement. If anything, I think my poem recognizes the dangerous potential of water and raises questions of displacement and place.

JD: In "Flood," I love the juxtaposition between the surfeit of water in the landscape and heat—the heat that rises after the floodwaters have subsided, the heat that "rises in waves," which mirrors the waves of

the water; the frying of bacon, the “late-night fires” of the speaker’s childhood, the childhood itself transformed by the metaphor of “the tip // of a lit cigarette”—one of my favorite figurations in this group of poems. What does that metaphor mean for you? And what does it mean for the speaker to equivocate, suggesting that perhaps the childhood should be “carved on a turtle’s shell / to sink and emerge for the next forty years”?

LVP: Thanks, Joanne. I imagined childhood as small and fleeting, such that it could fit on the tip of a lit cigarette. The childhood years, in the scope of our lives, are so few. They burn up quickly, and by the time I was lighting my first cigarette I had my vision set on getting grown. But then, childhood is also the strange, intense place of experience that shapes us. I find myself returning to images from my deep childhood that surface at unexpected times. That’s what made me think of the turtle’s shell. I also had read a story about a turtle upon whose shell a child had carved his initials. Then, some forty years later, that turtle resurfaced in the man’s backyard or something incredible like that—like a living totem of his past self. When in a slump, I’ll often re-read Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*. There is a passage in which he says that if our imagination fails us, we’ve failed to call forth its riches, and that we have no excuse for that, because we all have our childhoods. Rilke gave me a push, and I’ve been thinking a lot about how that short span of ten to twelve years burned so quickly, but continues to live so vividly.

JD: Many of your newer poems fuse water with powerful memories from the past or as part of a negotiation with a problem in the present. Water appears in “Flood” and “My Brother Defines Success.” In “Gathering,” there’s the powerful allusion to “Dam Lake, // where Uncle Billy threw Phillip to shake his fear / of water.” Even in a poem like “Visit to the Once-Beach, South Texas,” there is the memory of water that no longer exists. Your earlier work examines relationships to water, too, of course—“The Eighth Stage of Love” comes to mind, when the speaker alludes to the threat of water that never quite reaches her; and in “Undertow,” the speaker imagines what the force of the water would do to her own children. How do you revisit the water each time, and differently?

LVP: Water is paradoxical, and I'm drawn to that. It is life giving, and it can kill. The river will nourish, but drown you. Sitting in a boat on a lake offers solitude, wonder, reflection, but if a storm were to sneak up on you, you'd face grave danger and fear. We need to protect our water sources, but we are poisoning them. I suppose I visit and revisit lakes, rivers, rain, and even the ocean—which as a native Midwesterner I have little experience with—because there I will never find an easy answer. There will always be simultaneous contradiction, and the tension fuels my exploration.

JD: Birds, like gods, are capable of living in more than just one place—they can penetrate the air and dwell on land—and for that reason feel positively mythological. I've always admired your use of birds in your earlier work. In these new poems, though, I see other magnificent animals: bullfrogs, turtles, ticks, leeches, fish, gnats, dinosaurs. The connotations that come with these creatures creates a whole new range of feeling—reptilian, amphibious, invasive, and sometimes extinct. Can you talk about how you're working with animals in these poems?

LVP: Well, after I wrote my last book, *Our House Was on Fire*, I realized I needed a break away from my recurring images. I feared getting stuck in my usual moves, so I gave myself a mandate: No more husbands, daughters, or birds. You can see that I didn't stick 100% to that. At first, dogs were everywhere in my poems, but then I began paying attention to other creatures of the water and earth. I'm interested in beings that were here before us and have the potential to outlast us, if we stop destroying our natural world. Birds always felt optimistic, in one way or another, offering freedom and flight. The animals that command my attention now ask harder questions.

The dinosaur, known in my poem only by its prints, is one of the most sobering examples. When confronted with tracks of an extinct creature, I felt disquieting awe and was interested in capturing that feeling in "Visit to the Once-Beach, South Texas." It's really something to be in the presence of physical dinosaur tracks and to try to imagine that spot as it existed in that creature's time, also imagining our own fate. But in the poem the child lacks wonder and is so absorbed with the self. I fear this is all of us. I fear that we are caught up in our fleeting concerns and fail to see the long view. I think about what evidence will be left to note our existence, and I see our cast-offs, disposable

things like phones. The dinosaur asks us to consider origins and extinctions. It makes us stop to consider our place in this ecosystem and our responsibility to it.

JD: You've always been deeply attentive to plant life of all kinds in your poetry. In this new group of poems, I see organic matter, yes, but it seems to be more about damage and decay. In "One of Those Days," your poetic speaker sorts through her old belongings in her parents' house, and the "childhoods stiff with mold." In "Norther," she explores "mildew-pocked petticoats" with "elastic waistbands so old // they crumble if touched." Organic growth is dangerous in this context. Where do these poems about aging and decay originate for you?

LVP: These poems originate, quite literally, in my childhood home. My mother has never moved. She and my dad live in the house her father built in the 50s, next to the farmhouse she grew up in, next to the house that was my great-grandmother's. Consequently, their home is filled with seventy-seven years of belongings, spanning five generations. That's a lot of stuff. This summer when I visited, I stayed in a room in the basement, fell ill, and discovered it was from mold. I did what I could to clean up, but my parents will not disrupt their home to get it properly treated. It's complicated. And I can't fix this. Images of decay are one way I grapple and witness. I wonder about danger and resignation. I wonder about the mold claiming its place, about my parents claiming their place.

JD: Yes, I can see that. When I read these poems, I can't help but think of an article I read in *The New York Times* a few weeks ago, called "Aging Parents With Lots of Stuff, and Children Who Don't Want It." That article was the springboard for a lot of conversations that I had with friends in the weeks following its publication, and I saw acquaintances sharing that article widely on social media. You're tapping in to a larger cultural problem, it seems.

LVP: I read that article too! And yes, it struck a nerve. It does seem that this is a larger cultural problem. I don't think it's new, but maybe it's magnified by the younger generation's urge to simplify. Isn't it amazing that there's a best-selling book called *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*? The

author, Marie Kondo, says we should only keep things that “spark joy.” It’s a wonderful and freeing idea, especially when I consider that my mother’s insistence to keep so many things stems from personal loss. Looking at the guest book from her father’s funeral in 1960 does not “spark joy.” Hanging on to baby-sized mildew-laced wool coats that she was photographed in in 1942 does not “spark joy.” Going home is like walking through a museum of my mother’s life and the lives of her children—my school papers and those of my siblings burst out of file cabinets. My dad quietly tolerates this state of affairs. Closets jammed with 1980s dresses and shoeboxes filled with ceramic pumpkins? No. No sparking of joy there. The only fight I ever had with my mother was over a box of old *Reader’s Digest* magazines that I wanted to throw out. It almost got physical, her blocking my path. The scene ended in tears. The high emotion on both of our parts felt ridiculous, sad, comic, and confusing. She insisted the box had to stay, “because you never know what you might find in there.” I’ve given up being frustrated by the fact of this stuff, and I’ve moved into fascination. That’s the place I’m writing from now. There are losses and absences my mother will never get over, and I’m trying to understand this. The article you mention was actually reassuring to me as I keep returning to this subject in my poems. I know I am not alone in trying to figure this out.

JD: In two of these poems—“Matter” and “Jewel”—you grapple with whiteness and white privilege. What spurred you into utterance in these poems? Also, I wonder if you could say something about the formal properties of these poems. What effect are you creating with the arrangement of these lines?

LVP: Anger, frustration, and owning up to my own silence spurred me to write these poems. In my lifetime, my hometown of South Holland, Illinois, changed from a Dutch farming community to subdivisions of split-levels filled with Polish families to a predominantly African American working- to middle-class community. People, their biases, and attitudes shifted, all against the backdrop of this place—often in ugly and subtle ways. These poems try to deal with that, with race in the context of this community. Regarding structure, in “Jewel” the lines are not uniform, and sometimes the line breaks are disjointed, like the speaker’s thoughts. Sometimes the stanzas are in couplets, tercets,

single lines. The form is not a predictable pattern. It's destabilizing. Two poems that I continue to turn to are Tarfia Faizullah's "En Route to Bangladesh, Another Crisis of Faith" from her book *Seam* and Roger Reeve's poem "Pledge" from his book *King Me*. In Faizullah's poem the speaker feels displaced; she is both American and Bangladeshi but does not identify wholly with either distinction. In Faizullah's work, we also find a speaker who grapples with her relationship to her family's Muslim religion and traditions. I understand this tension. I grew up in the Christian Reformed Church, a conservative Protestant denomination that adheres to strict Calvinist doctrines. I went to Calvinist schools, and even the laws of my town were influenced by this system of faith (South Holland today remains a dry town with blue laws where most businesses closed on Sunday). In "Matter" I'm interested in how religion is part of the conversation on race. Dr. Martin Luther King once stated, "It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning." At the end of this poem the white father and black friend, who both take a colorblind stance to race, still go to their separate churches, reinforcing division. When I'm flailing around on these topics, trying to find my voice, I find courage in the sure and certain voice in Roger Reeve's poem, "Pledge." Reeves names himself as the speaker and pledges to leave his city. I love this bold position. I love the anaphoric chant "I leave" and the lists of images specific to the place, acting as homage to it. As a woman who chose to leave the community where my family's roots go so deep, this poem resonates with me. Reeve's poem encourages me to write about the place I left and to write about whiteness, privilege, and religion as experienced through that place.

JD: As you know, the Illinois Poet feature is meant to showcase the work of a poet with an Illinois connection. How does your connection to Illinois inform your work?

LVP: I have the dirt of South Holland, Illinois, under my fingernails. My feet are wet with mud from the banks of Thorn Creek. Onions. Did you know that South Holland was the Onion Set Capital of the World? (An onion set is a dry bulb grown the previous year and planted to produce onions.) Did you know that Edna Ferber's Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *So Big*, was inspired by South Holland? Her Widow Paarlberg was based on the real life Widow Paarlberg whose

historic house was three blocks from mine. My grandma gave tours of it for the South Holland Historical Society on Saturdays. Like it or not, Illinois soil is mixed with my blood and permeates my psyche (and my poems). My most recent work, in particular, is rooted in or in reaction to this place. No only South Holland, but the whole of The Calumet Region. People from “The Region,” the agrarian-turned-rust-belt-corridor of northeast Illinois and northwest Indiana at the bottom edge of Lake Michigan, are a hearty and stubborn bunch. “Regionites” have blue-collar sensibility, are hard working, loyal, and are completely and utterly unimpressed with anything highfalutin. My father grew up in Highland, Indiana, and he is The Region through and through. The beloved San Antonio Spurs coach, Gregg Popovich, is from The Region, and it shows. He is reliable, demands humility and excellence of his players, and has little regard for fanfare or the press. South Holland, The Calumet Region, all of Chicagoland, really—yes, that’s a real word—are home, even as San Antonio feels like my second hometown.

JD: Can you say a bit about the final question in “Chronic” (“What is left to do?”)? Why does the group of poems land on this question?

LVP: The question opens to irresolution. *What is left to do?* It is not a resignation, but a query that seeks an answer, even when there may be no answer. What is left to do when dealing with memory, decay, frustration, injustice, or loss? Sometimes the “doing” is the asking, then fumbling toward clarity, leaning toward insight.

JD: Yes, absolutely. Sometimes the bearing witness, and the asking, is enough. For a while now, you’ve been facilitating poetry workshops for veterans with PTSD; and in the past year, you’ve become a new faculty member in the low-residency program at Miami University of Ohio, so I imagine that the purpose of poetry is a question that you must constantly address. How does your work as a teacher affect your own writing projects?

LVP: I love teaching, because the best way to learn anything is to teach it. The soldiers I worked with were all active-duty service members in an intensive outpatient program, and all of them were suffering from combat-related trauma. It’s impossible not to be changed from hearing the horrific details of their experiences. Some of the images

will never leave my head. Image is where we began. The poems I discussed with the soldiers—most often non-readers and resisters of poetry—were image-rich texts, because I believe it's the fastest and most effective way to translate universal and complex emotion. We read Jack Gilbert's "A Brief for the Defense," Richard Hugo's "Letter to [Charles] Simic from Boulder," Naomi Shihab Nye's "Kindness," and Mary Oliver's "The Journey." We read other poems, too, but these all have evocative images that elicited strong and memorable responses. Our discussions were frank and illuminating.

In my own work, I've become more aware of the power of bluntness, of no bullshit, of throwing down an image or statement without adornment and letting it be what it is. I want my poems to be bolder and to take on harder subjects. Teaching in the low-res MFA program broadens the scope of my work, too. My students at Miami University are great, and I'm always learning through our exchange of ideas. As I prepare academic lectures, widen my reading, and think more deeply about aesthetic; I feel enlivened and motivated to dive in to my current projects. Also, being in conversation with the fiction faculty reminds me that I've dismissed for years my desire to write fiction, and it might be time to attend to that.

JD: What are you working on now? How are these poems part of a larger project? If so, what is the shape of that project, its preoccupations?

LVP: I'm working on my third manuscript that includes these poems. This past spring I yanked out a big section of the book that I discovered functioned better as a chapbook called *The Frances Poems*, and I'm looking for a home for that right now. The character of Frances is loosely based on a relative, but in the poems she is hard to pin down. Frances is ethereal. She is part of the landscape. She resides in the elements but is equally real as a person and spirit. *The Frances Poems* are not linear, and if there is a narrative, it defies time. Truthfully, Frances remains a bit of a mystery, and I like it like that. Those poems were a big departure, and they opened me to new possibilities. Now that Frances is out of my book-length manuscript, I'm reshaping that series. The poems of my book-in-progress deal with several of the themes you find in this group of poems, but also touch on illness, adolescence, siblinghood, always somehow circling back to loss.