The *SRPR* Interview: Tara Betts

Bryanna Lee: Before we talk about the work, I wanted to ask you a bit about how you're just existing as a person. We are reading, teaching, learning, making art, and existing in impossible times. How are you caring for yourself these days? How are you finding hope?

Tara Betts: My meditation practice has been a big thing for me. Usually I try to do at least ten minutes when I wake up and when I go to bed. It's been really useful in terms of just trying to maintain a focus, but also trying to relax. I think it's been really useful writing-wise because sometimes I get images and lines that just kind of pop up because I'm letting go of everything else, and I think we don't get to talk about that. It's part of the reason why sometimes writers seem a little bit shiftless; you need some time for your imagination to let things gestate, you know. It looks like you're just sitting there, but no, you're really thinking about something, and that is a different kind of work.

BL: I think that's also why it can be hard to write if you're making yourself too busy. If you're running around, you don't create space for that imagination.

TB: Yeah, I was hopping around so much, and sometimes I wish I wasn't because if I had fewer jobs, I'd have more books done by now. That's what I've been thinking about lately: how can I prioritize the writing while we're kind of stuck at home?

BL: What kind of work have you been doing?

TB: I just finished teaching an introduction to creative writing class at DePaul. I'm getting ready to teach two poetry classes at Northwestern. So it's a teaching semester for me but I didn't expect that. I've been doing some teaching artists work, some reading, some workshops, and I did a big fundraising campaign about a year ago to start my nonprofit, so now we have a bank account for the nonprofit. I'm just trying to figure out how we can start doing programming with nonprofits here in the city until we can get a building because the building that we wanted to get was sold by the time we raised the money, so

I'm just like, Okay we haven't given up on the dream. We're just going to keep plugging ahead and see what happens.

BL: So, Whirlwind Learning Center is your nonprofit. Would you be willing to share a little bit about what that is and how that development is going?

TB: It was an idea that hatched out of having a conversation with Jennifer Steele, who's the executive director at 826CHI, and we're neighbors as well, so we bop and touch base with each other pretty often. But she was like, "You could start your own space." And I said, "Yeah, you know I've been thinking about it." And then when I saw this building, I just got really excited about it because it felt like the right space. That's it. Okay, maybe it's time. So I got a little impulsive and started raising the money after I went to see the building in person. On top of that, I know all these teaching artists and people who already do community work here in Chicago and on the South Side. I said it might be a good clearinghouse to do work and partner with people in some informal ways, but also I wanted to teach stuff that's not usually the purview of a community center like a college essay writing class or a poetry class. But then I was like, well, what if we wanted to go deeper? What would it be like to have a community-based critical race theory class? What would it be like to use a community-based setting to teach some of the literature that we usually push universities to try to include? So I wanted to do some work like that in the space and have it be something that's outside of academia in that way.

BL: There are a lot of barriers, and that removes it from the institution.

TB: Exactly. I'm working with a former student of mine who is a comedian, and he's been curating and hosting a comedy series with up-and-coming Chicago comedians. So we've been thinking about how we can make it grow from a comedy series that features people of color and people who identify as LGBTQ into a space for kids interested in the genre of comedy writing and possibly developing a comedy camp at some point. As you can see, I just want it to be an umbrella space that's flexible so other people can determine what they want to do in that space.

BL: So much of your work is about serving young folks in the community. I love that this space can be so many different things for so many different kinds of people. The first building didn't work out, but it almost feels like the building was the catalyst or sign you needed to start this journey.

One of the things that I admire so much about you is that balancing act you do between your creative work and your teaching and your community work. So I wondered if you could speak about balancing those commitments, or how you've kind of cultivated a life doing these things.

TB: You know, for a long time, I was just working because you have to pay bills. But also, I think part of me really just wanted to learn how to do different things and be more versatile so I wasn't in one lane. I think a lot of smart writers realize the value in that. You know, you can do things that are specifically about you being a writer and a poet, but what else can you do that could supplement what you do as a writer? I think the more confident you become as a writer the easier it gets to negotiate that balancing act.

BL: How has the pandemic impacted the way in which you exist as an artist? I feel like we've all been changed. How does it impact your writing, your teaching, your work in the community?

TB: Well, at least for a year and a half, I did not really leave my house, so it kind of put me in this weird social isolation mindset that I'm breaking out of. It's been tough. I mean I did some reading. I watched a bunch of movies. I grew little plants, had squirrels eat them, will probably grow some more plants and figure out a way to stop the squirrels from eating them. I've been meditating a lot. I wrote, but I didn't write as much, and I think it's because I was so used to writing being a social experience. Now I have written a lot for at least the past year, but I think my brain has been gestating; how can I do some new projects that are different from what I've done in the past? So I've been slowly taking stuff in because I used to go to the coffee shop and stay there for most of the day and write. Or I could go write on campus if I was teaching somewhere, or go write outside on the bench and feel comfortable. But for a long time, I didn't feel that way. I just felt like staying in my house and away from people. And now

I'm just slowly getting back into that. It makes me miss the old way I used to write—with other people or outside of my house. So, yeah, it's been an adjustment; even though I've done a lot of writing here at my house, it doesn't feel the same.

BL: Was most of your newest book written during the pandemic, or was a lot of it written before?

TB: I wrote that book before the pandemic. There's a prose project or two I've been thinking about, but they won't be pandemic-era books. It's not necessarily talking about the pandemic. I think I have a couple of pandemic poems, but those poems are going to dissipate really quickly I think. I don't think people are going to want to talk about them as much.

BL: Do you think it's because people want more hope?

TB: We have to remember that sometimes you want a poem that says this happened, and what can we do to keep from going back? Or you realize something about yourself. That's why I like poets like Larry Levis or a Lynda Hull. They walk you through a scenario, then you realize something about yourself while you're in this scenario that really doesn't have anything to do with it. I had this one poem where I'm talking in the first person, and it's about me sitting on my couch during the pandemic and how dead quiet my neighborhood got—you couldn't hear anything. There's no cars, no nothing. So there was this period where it was so quiet that I heard glass breaking out in front of my apartment. I got really nervous because whenever you hear glass breaking that means something's about to happen. So the poem is about that feeling of tension and then when you go out, or rather, when I go out on the porch, I see it's a girl with these potted plants. And she's really embarrassed trying to pick up the plant that has a broken pot. And then she's calling her friend on the phone to come get her. And I was just like, "You alright?" It's a very small, mundane interaction, but the whole interaction in my head was a lot more complicated. I think we do that all the time. Poets will start to see a situation, and then it gets skewed a little bit, and suddenly what that situation makes you think about becomes very clear.

So the things I wrote about the pandemic, which was really only a couple of poems, that was what came out for me: how is this changing who we are in this moment, or how is it coloring this moment?

BL: Can you expand on something that you said in a couple different places about how you tell your students to just write and then figure out what it is later?

TB: I think we get these implied rules about what we can and can't do on the page, and I don't think that's helpful for anyone. I've worked with enough students to know that more often than not, the thing they need is to feel like they have permission to write. That's one of the things that blocks you from writing: feeling like you need to have permission. Everybody told you that you're doing it wrong or that you're not doing this particular type of writing correctly. If you can get past that hurdle of just getting the idea out, then you can figure out if you want to put it in a different shape. Just get the idea out. We can figure out all the other stuff later. And maybe even if you get more comfortable with form or with doing things that are more like a puzzle, then you can start saying, Okay, I want to try and see if I can write a series of sonnets. I can do sestinas, or I can do this, or I can do that. But more often than that, you need that initial opening salvo where people let you know it's okay to write what comes out. You can't work with an empty page. You just can't. I've seen that once you give them that permission, they just go off and running.

BL: In what directions are you running right now? What kinds of genres are you working with, or what projects are you working on?

TB: I've been thinking a lot about short stories and nonfiction and what a novel would look like. I have an idea for a novel. I think the poems are always going to come. That's just one of the things I'm very comfortable with. But I think I really want to expand out. I've written some essays, and I have some essays coming out soon. There are a lot of writers who started as poets, or they do both genres. I don't want to be somebody who kind of reintroduces this whole binary of poets and not-poets—like page poets and stage poets—because they're really worn out. It's a really exciting time for us. You can take some of the skills that you've learned as a poet and make them transferable to writing stories, children's books, novels, and so on. And if you tell

someone they're doing it wrong before they even get it down, then they're never going to write it.

BL: We don't do this with athletes. We don't tell a child learning to play soccer: oh, you can't make a goal, so maybe you shouldn't do this.

TB: Exactly, that's absurd. We would never do that. I did this one workshop where it was all adult writers. I basically said the same thing because people were being really hard on their first drafts. I said, "What do we say when a baby takes his first step? We never tell a baby, that's a shitty walk." It kind of helps them. You can make people laugh.

BL: Music is so entwined in your work. Could you speak about that relationship and how it takes shape? Do you listen to something and it makes you think of a poem? Are you writing a poem and it makes you think of a music artist?

TB: The music can give you ideas, but I think a lot of times music, regardless of where it comes from, is your soundtrack. I think a lot about that. How have songs been really integral to a moment, or how do they evoke a moment or a feeling? And what do you do with that, once you're processing the music that way? You respond to it, or you kind of feel something because it's on. What do you do when that feeling hits? I feel like I take in a lot of stuff. I'll read, and I'll listen to music, and then I can't help but respond to that. That's what really speaks to me.

BL: When I think of you, I think of Gwendolyn Brooks, who you speak of often, Lucille Clifton (with your tattoo on your arm, which I've always loved), Lauryn Hill, and others you've referenced in your poems, essays, and interviews. How have the people, things, and ideas you love—whether musical, literary, or other—informed the construction of your work?

TB: Early on in my career I knew I wanted to focus on the work of women writers and in particular Black women. There's a lot of short shrift in terms of scholarship. Now we've seen stuff on Brooks, some things on Clifton. But there's still room for more. I think that's true for a lot of Black writers—they're still this wide-open vista of work to analyze and talk about its impact in the same ways that we've

done with people who are considered canonical at this point, which are often not Black writers. There's something problematic in that; we have all different kinds of people who are part of the American experience, but they're not considered part of the American canon. We're seeing an interesting moment where that could start to be more viable, right? Which also makes me wonder if that's why universities are not pushing for diverse faculty in the way that they could, because that means everything is going to start to change.

BL: And that's why there's all these white supremacist movements backed by our government to call anything critical race theory if it approaches diversity in any way—because there is growing representation and they don't like it.

TB: That's the funny thing: critical race theory—people are bending that term around. It's not history; it's not indoctrination. It's just saying there are these types of people and common misconceptions about them, and what about people who have overlapping identities? They're just introducing you to terms like *intersectionality* that help you understand how people want to be represented in the world. That's what the bulk of CRT is. How do we talk to each other? How do we make things more equitable? We can tell stories and have books like *The 1619 Project* or have stories where we start including all the stories and all the perspectives in a more thoughtful way. But teaching Black history isn't critical race theory. That's a very surface, unexamined way of talking about something without understanding it in order to make people hate it.

I was planning to do a CRT class last fall, and I got so much interest that I was like, I don't know if I can do this. This is really a lot. Or maybe I need to do it and make it one of those classes that you can set up online where you just do videos and give people time. I may do one like that.

A lot of these ideas apply to writing. If you hang out with artists, you know it's going to be a ragtag bunch of people from all these different cultures, all these different communities, different parts of wherever, and different experiences from your own. So for me, this is all pretty normal. But for some people, if you don't leave your comfort zone, it's not going to seem normal.

BL: Could you tell us a bit more about some of your current projects?

TB: I started writing these haiku and tanka about Alice Coltrane. And then I have another one, where I'm writing in this very compact poetic form called the 4-1-1. I probably have about a dozen of those, thirty haiku and tanka, and I want to write at least thirty more. Then I want to do some interstitial prose, so to speak, in between those poems. So I know what I want to do but I'm also trying to just be open. I think the form is the closed-circuit that I needed—a little short form—so I can just write. That's all you need: if you overdo it, and you give yourself too many constraints, it's obvious it's a formula.

BL: *Arc and Hue* was really important to how I looked at form.

TB: There's at least a sonnet or two, there's a sestina, a villanelle, and a canzone, which people never write. The poem is called "A Corner Canzone." It's an old Italian form. I probably will never write one again, but I wanted to challenge the idea that forms have to inhabit the time and the culture they were created in. What if they don't? The canzone form is traditionally written for a warrior who dies on a journey or a quest, and I thought about that a lot more when I was thinking about writing my canzone because there was this area where I grew up where people went to buy drugs and there was a boy who had gotten shot over there, and I thought, Well, if his trajectory had been different, whose warrior would he be? So I was thinking about that story and then that led me to writing the poem. Not that I want to be an advocate for war in any sense of the word, but I do think we all have different trajectories. We could have been somewhere else and that's really what I was thinking about. And how do you put that in a poem?

I love Marilyn Hacker for this. She would talk about her book, *Winter Numbers*, which is about all these people who died during the height of the AIDS epidemic. Hacker said the only way she could write about losing all of her friends was through a poetic form because it gave her a container to put those feelings in so she didn't just say the same kind of emotional cliché stuff that would be easy to say when you lose somebody. I always think of Marilyn Hacker and Marilyn Nelson and what they've done with poetic form to shake it up and make you say, look, you don't have to write that poem that way. Thankfully I had those poets as examples to make me think about it that way, and

I think now there's a lot more. I think about the work Tyehimba Jess and Terrance Hayes have been doing to implode the form, and how Wanda Coleman blew up the form when she was doing the sonnets. And because of Hayes's work, we're seeing people recognize that a little bit more. I think about what Afaa Michael Weaver did with the bop. There are a couple of bop poems in *Arc and Hue* that are there because of him. Or I think about Erica Dawson or Allison Joseph. Those people are all writing in poetic form, but the variety is so rich, the voices are so different. That's the beauty of it. You have to find new language to say the thing that you would say.

BL: How has the writing process been different for *Refuse to Disappear* vs. *Break the Habit* and *Arc and Hue*?

TB: Well, I wrote *Break the Habit* really quickly. *Arc and Hue* was the book that I wrote in my MFA. And when that got done, I showed it to a couple people to get more feedback on it. I didn't do that as much with *Break the Habit*—I think because it's talking about a lot of personal and intimate loss. It was one of those books that just kind of poured out. I had to go to workshops where I was writing, and no matter what I wrote about, that kind of came out—this feeling of loss that comes out across the book. Now there are moments where the poems are joyful or they're talking about something else. But it came really quickly, in about a year. I didn't expect to get a book that quickly. I just didn't try to get it published until after I was out of my PhD.

It's so strange that they're all so different. So for *Refuse to Disappear*, I was writing one-off poems, and I started to see patterns where I could kind of group them together. Actually, I had an editor friend, Jill Petty, who used to be at a press, and she was telling me "I think you've got a book. Just rearrange these. See what happens." It kind of became a book organically. So I started rearranging them and editing them. I took a bunch of poems and put them into a Word doc and looked at them a bit more closely. Then you can see what your themes are and what you've been thinking about without deliberation. It was kind of freeing to think about it that way.

Now, the stuff I'm writing now may not be that way. It may be more controlled, but I think it's good to be open to changing it. Just write.

Life is short enough. We need to just write. You only get so much time and so many books in you.

BL: What can we expect to see in *Refuse to Disappear*?

TB: *Refuse to Disappear* is the June selection for the *Rumpus* Poetry Book Club. I'm super excited. They're doing another Chicago poet—C. Russell Price—in May.

I wanted to do a book that celebrated the voices and gifts of Black women in particular, and I also wanted it to be a book centered on the idea of what the title is talking about—*Refuse to Disappear*—because I know it's a catchphrase generationally for women of a certain age, and I fall into that age bracket, that once a woman is over forty you disappear, people don't pay attention to you. There's been this whole saying around that phrase. But I think, too, if you're a marginalized person, that's something that happens a lot; it's not just that you're on the periphery, it's that you're erased from the picture altogether, or people refuse to see or acknowledge that you've been there all along and you're still there. So if that's the case, what does it mean to refuse and rebut all of that? I wanted that idea to be the underpinning of the book. What does it look like if we celebrate some people and put them in the center?

BL: It sounds like it would be a project book, but you described it like writing poems and letting them come together. It's interesting to think about process and what goes into creating a book like this and how it can come together.

TB: For poets, sometimes you don't realize you're really writing about a theme or an obsession or a fascination. Or you're writing about this thing that seems very central to your own thinking. It may not even be something you're consciously aware of until after you've done the writing. Then you go, "Oh, snap, I keep talking about this." If that's the case, even if you do it deliberately or unconsciously, you're still doing it. It's almost like when you look at something on a microlevel, you're writing and you're getting it done. You may not be able to zoom out and look at it until you've actually finished it. Some people can think big like that from the jump, and then there's other people who look at it poem by poem. And then once you've got thirty, forty poems,

then you see where it's going. I think people make that so difficult for themselves sometimes when really it's not that difficult. If you're a person who works out and you jog every day, or if you put pennies in the bank, a lot of pennies can add up over time. It's an accruing of things that occurs gradually, I guess.

BL: It also made me think of therapy. You show up to therapy, and you talk about stuff, but you might not know that what you're actually getting at are those issues with your father or whatever that deep-seated thing is that you were talking around for six months.

TB: Yeah, or it just takes that long to work its way out like a little splinter that takes forever to work out.

BL: But you need to do that work or take that time for it to be encouraged to come out.

TB: Sometimes people think my poems are probably too accessible, or they're not doing something strange enough, but why do we need to be strange? Why can't we just work from the associations that come to us? You don't need to be over-the-top experimental all the time to write a good poem. I love experimental poems because they make you think about doing things that are kind of out of the norm on the page. But not all poems have to be like that either.

BL: Not all poems need to make someone work to be able to understand or access them; I think that can be a barrier.

TB: That's kind of how I've looked at it. Sometimes it feels like the barrier, or like it's intentionally leaving people out of the poem. I mean, if that's what you want the poem to do, that makes sense. But I'm not particularly interested in writing those kinds of poems all the time.

BL: Exactly. Sometimes I think, who are those poems for? Just for other poets?

TB: Right? If it's something I just write for me and I want to play around, then maybe, but I also want people to read it and get something from it even if they aren't a poet.

BL: There's a lot of value in creating accessible poems that are just as skilled and just as rich with imagination and possibility and truth right? They are still getting at that kind of truth, and you reach a

wider audience and make people feel invited in—not like they have to break down the wall.

TB: For me, that's a huge thing. Even if we're going to go back and look at some of these folks who are considered the classics—like, I got invited to do a talk about William Carlos Williams in June. I haven't read William Carlos Williams in years, but I do think we have to come back sometimes to these old poets with new eyes. What are the things that we think people can find value in in 2022, decades after a poet has been gone? Sometimes you strike upon something that nobody has talked about. I don't often hear people talk about William Carlos Williams and his Latino identity. People don't talk about his translations. I've been thinking a lot about Adrienne Rich's essay collection *What Is Found There*. Of course the title is taken from William Carlos Williams's short snippet in *Spring and All* where he's talking about the newspapers, and how people die for "lack of what is found there." So you know that's where she got the title from. Just the fact that there are these little nods that poets usually give to people who came before them, and the fact that Adrienne Rich gave this nod to William Carlos Williams was interesting to me. We forget that those happen—those little cues—or that there's the potential for those little cues, even if it's not directly stated.

BL: I think that that's also an important part of historicizing folks and their work and their ideas, especially if you share about an experience that happened to someone in the community—maybe an experience of violence—and the way that gets brushed out over media. That's historicizing. Or referencing part of a song that people aren't still talking about.

TB: Yeah, you know those nods are important. Then also, too, not just looking back, but are we looking forward? I think that's been my big challenge: making a conscious effort to read new poets. So I have a short stack on my bed of new poets.

BL: To end on something joyful: what are you reading?

TB: I just finished reading Kemi Alabi's *Against Heaven.* Then I went back to look at a book that she co-edited called *The Echoing Ida Collection*, which is really interesting. It's about a cadre of Black women

who got training and collectively wrote together to start publishing op-eds in different venues. They wrote about so many different things. Kemi has several pieces in the book, so I wanted to check that out before I read *Against Heaven*. She's writing prose and you can see the flourishes that are more like poetry.

BL: I really love prose written by poets. Like Benjamin Alire Sáenz: he's this phenomenal poet, and then he wrote this YA book *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. The language is so rich, and with the descriptions, you know it's a poet writing it.

TB: Yeah, Benjamin is a wonderful poet. I think things started taking off for him as a YA writer.

I've been reading *Vibration Cooking* by Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, who was a contemporary of Alice Walker and June Jordan. Her book is the forerunner for a lot of scholarship in Black food ways that people do now, like Bryant Terry's *Black Food,* which references her. *Vibration Cooking* is kind of cool because it's this book of recipes but it's also a memoir. She will be like, "in '68, I was in Paris, and we went to the store and this woman was selling cans of the pumpkin stuff that we would normally put in a pie, and she says 'No, we use that to make soup,'" and she just can't believe that. Then she gives you the recipe before going back into the story. She makes these political and cultural asides. It's very conversational, and I've been enjoying it.

I like Octavia Raheem's book *Pause. Rest. Be.* It's about meditative practices, restorative yoga poses, and rest practices, particularly for marginalized women.

The Poetry Stack:

- *Little Girl Blue* by Sequoia Maner
- *Small Altars* by Keli Stewart
- *Letters to a Young Brown Girl* by Barbara Jane Reyes
- *Dark Testament and Other Poems* by Pauli Murray
- *Negotiations* by Destiny Birdsong
- *Fire Is Not a Country* by Cynthia Dewi Oka
- *Ossuaries* by Dionne Brand
- *Breath Better Spent: Living Black Girlhood* by DaMaris Hill

- *Daughters of Harriet* by Cynthia Parker-Ohene
- *Dear Memory* by Victoria Chang
- *Gumbo Ya Ya* by Aurielle Marie
- *White Blood* by Kiki Petrosino
- *What Noise Against the Cane* by Desiree C. Bailey
- *Ghost in a Black Girl's Throat* by Khalisa Rae
- *Water Street* by Crystal Wilkinson

That could keep me busy for about two months.

I think you read some things that are simply for healing and for affirmation. You read some stuff because it has information in it; you're not reading it because you're looking for art.

Octavia Raheem wrote this book about race-based trauma, and she worked with Gail Parker. So the book is kind of talking about how do we deal with feeling like we have to be productive all the time as a way of dealing with our trauma. I hadn't seen a book that kind of articulated that quite in that way. Sometimes you need something to recalibrate your thinking about where you're at in your life.

I've talked to a lot of my students about *The Deepest Well* by Nadine Burke Harris. She did this thing called the ACEs Scale. Everybody has a number on this scale because everybody has had some kind of trauma, but she talks about how trauma impacts your health, your well-being, how you communicate with people, and how you don't communicate with people. I talk to my students about how your obstacles can be real, but now you have to think about how you want to deal with them. How do you acknowledge these problems? How will you manage it? Who will support you in fixing it? It's not so much about writing, but it's very much about figuring out how to stay on the planet as long as you can in a healthy way and write a lot. Writers aren't always good at balance, but we should get better.