

Writer Mother Monster: Interviews with Authoresses, hosted by Lara Ehrlich
Guest: Katie Peterson
Interview: November 19, 2020

Katie Peterson is the author of four collections of poetry, including *A Piece of Good News*. Her fable in lyric prose, *Life in a Field*, was selected by Rachel Zucker for the Omnidawn Open Books Prize and will be published in April 2021. She has received fellowships from the Radcliffe Institute, the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She collaborates with her husband, the photographer Young Suh, and they have shown their work at the Mills College Art Museum and the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco. Katie, Young, and their daughter, Emily, live in Berkeley. She directs the MFA program in Creative Writing at UC Davis. She has one daughter, who is 3, and she describes writer-motherhood in three words as “always play first.”

Lara Ehrlich

Hello, and welcome to *Writer Mother Monster*. I'm your host, Lara Ehrlich, and tonight's guest is poet and mother Katie Peterson. Before I introduce Katie, I want to thank you all for tuning in and to let you know that you can now listen to *Writer Mother Monster* as a podcast on all major audio platforms or read the interview transcript at your leisure all on writermothermonster.com.

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Now I'm excited to introduce Katie. Katie Peterson is the author of four collections of poetry, including *A Piece of Good News*. Her fable in lyric prose, *Life in a Field*, was selected by Rachel Zucker for the Omnidawn Open Books Prize and will be published in April 2021. She has received fellowships from the Radcliffe Institute, the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She collaborates with her husband, the photographer Young Suh, and they have shown their work at the Mills College Art Museum and the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco. Katie, Young, and their daughter, Emily, live in Berkeley. She directs the MFA program in Creative Writing at UC Davis. She has one daughter, who is 3, and she describes writer-motherhood in three words as “always play first.” Welcome, Katie.

Katie Peterson

It's good to be here.

Lara Ehrlich

It's good to see you! We knew each other many years ago when you were professor of the practice of poetry at Tufts University. Now you're in Berkeley; tell us who lives in your house with you.

Katie Peterson

The people who live in my house are me, my husband Young Suh, who was born in Korea and came here to do an undergraduate degree at Pratt and then ended up doing a graduate degree at

the Museum School, Boston. He's a photographer. He also teaches at UC Davis. And our daughter, Emily, who was born October 12, 2017. She was born in the middle of the Santa Rosa fires. Since then, we've had a number of fires in California. But the reason why I always remember that is my labor was very long, like four and a half days, and I was already very late, and we could barely go outside because of the smoke. The great thing was we were in a hospital, protected from the smoke, but the bad thing was it was really like being in a dark tunnel for that whole time. And then when we drove Emily home from the hospital, we were driving down one of the streets on the way to our house—a suburban street three blocks away from the highway—and a stag crossed the road. This beautiful stag, right in front of our car. I think it had been driven down from the hills by the fires. We were sitting there in the car with Emily, and this stag crossed the road on this regular, suburban street. It was incredible.

Lara Ehrlich

Talk about metaphors. That's amazing. If you're comfortable with it, can you talk about what you mean by the labor being long? Four days is pretty intense.

Katie Peterson

Yeah, it was. It's fun to talk about. I mean, what an experience. And we haven't domesticated the experience of labor and childbirth enough that we all talk about it all the time. I think I was 41 and a half weeks. They had let me go that long because I was perfectly healthy, and the doctor was indulging my desire for a natural pregnancy. But finally, they induced me. And nothing worked. Like, they did every single intervention under the sun to get Emily to come out. They finally did a C-section at five in the morning or something.

There are probably some other mothers listening who know that the experience of taking a childbirth class is sometimes completely and totally useless to you. That's was true for me. Finally, they did the C-section, and she came out, but the other thing that was true was that my doula kind of went AWOL. And so, it was really my husband there with me. He did not sleep—like ever. I barely slept. He was really, really good at it. And all of the nurses in the ward came through and were like, "Who's your doula? How did you get a male doula?" They all thought he was the doula. So, I think I fell in love with him all over again, through that experience.

Lara Ehrlich

I don't know if you knew Young back when I first met you. Can you talk about how you met and tell us a little bit about him?

Katie Peterson

We met at Yaddo. We had the art colony love affair. I think of him as an introverted personality. When we first met, I really admired the way he took pictures, because there was so much quiet around his person. And there was this combination between being really relaxed and being really precise, which is very much a part of his pictures. He did a series of pictures about the wildfires in California that have been exhibited a number of times—this was all from the 2008, and then the 2013, wildfires—and they're haunting. His eyes were on them, trying to reckon with the fact that he thought they were very beautiful. He tends to find beauty in things that I think feel destructive or dangerous. And his photographs—the California landscape and the American national parks—to me, are very unique, because he finds the whole American nature thing really

terrifying. And for me, it's been such a central thing about my poetry and writing—the American landscape and the West, kind of trying to bring a feminine voice to the West. He loves those landscapes, too, but they're terrifying to him, so there's this aspect of the sublime in his pictures that I really admire.

Lara Ehrlich

You actually hit on the next question I had, because, like you said, your poetry very much deals with the land, nature, and those quiet spaces that can contain deep emotion, like fear or desire. Can you talk a little bit now about your poetry, for those who have not yet had the pleasure of reading your work? What inspires you?

Katie Peterson

It's hard to start with one thing. Sometimes when I look at my own work, it feels like a combination between a classic American nature poet and a sexy, metaphysical John Donne. I think the poems have landed in landscape because I grew up in the West, but by temperament and character, I'm a Bostonian, and I loved living there because I had that fast-paced neurosis.

I talk really fast, much faster than people in California, and here I'm often mistaken for an Easterner, though I know what I am. I remember at some point, at a dinner party in Boston, someone looked at me and said, "Did you know that Massachusetts Avenue is the fastest street in the country?" And I said, "What do you mean?" And this person said, "When I heard you talk, I thought everyone who's walking down Mass Ave. in Boston talks as fast as that—you must be from here." And I looked it up the next day, and it's true that the pace of people walking in Mass Ave. in Cambridge is faster than New York. They've clocked it.

So, I really relate to the intensity of being in your head during a Northeastern winter. And a lot of the poets I love, like Elizabeth Bishop, are so Yankee in some way; they have that Eastern sense of texture and intensity and complexity and depth. And that's all true, but I grew up around the airy landscapes of California and the big vistas at the Sierra Nevadas. So, I think of those things as coming together in the work.

And likewise, I think that, especially in recent work and in the last book, *A Piece of Good News*, I really wanted to bring together things we think of as extremes of the inner life, like desire and fear and contemplation and these irreducible aspects of our public and political existence, like thinking about who the president is or thinking about the future, or what it feels like to be in an urban space, thinking about rural spaces, or vice versa. There are a lot of poems in *A Piece of Good News* that take place in a rural space, but the character is thinking about an urban space. And there's a long poem that takes place in an urban space, which is all about ranging across the rural spaces of the country.

Lara Ehrlich

What was it like moving back from Boston to Berkeley?

Katie Peterson

It was a shock. It was the hardest thing I think I've ever done, besides grieve. I moved because I loved someone and because I wanted to have a child. And because I got a tenure-track job at a

wonderful school with writers that I really admire—all these great reasons. But I left behind the best friends I've ever had and the city where I first became an independent person.

And I think specifically of my best friend, the poet Sandra Lim, who was my everyday person. For the first year that I was in California, I can't tell you how I mourned her not living down the street from me. It was really difficult. And now I think of it and I think, "Wow, what a thing that you could live to love someone that much." But at the time, I thought, "What the hell am I doing? Why did I do this?" It was literally like a feeling of being unmoored.

When I think about it, I think it descended first as a kind of panic, like, "What am I about here? How do I belong here?" And the other thing I realized, as the months went on, was it had so much to do with confronting the person I had been because I grew up in Menlo Park on the peninsula and had lived my whole life there until I went to the East Coast. So now the idea in my life is I'm supposed to live integrated with my childhood self and my relatives, like I'm supposed to live an hour away from my dad and be okay with it. Like, *what?* That was not what I had planned for my life. To be raising a child in, essentially, the place where I grew up was nothing I ever anticipated doing.

Lara Ehrlich

You know, I'm right there with you, having moved back to Connecticut, 15 minutes from where I grew up, with my 4-year-old daughter. It's interesting, and you see people that you went to high school with at the grocery store—or used to, before the pandemic—and it's sort of like, "Oh, I never really wanted this to happen."

Katie Peterson

I was gonna say, I certainly wouldn't be the first writer to move to a new place and gain a new persona, right? And to then sort of have to be the person that I was before I was a writer and the writer self at the same time. Well, that's been weird.

Lara Ehrlich

Tell me about that self before you became the writer self. And then we'll get to the self you became once you became a mother. But who was former Katie? And who was writer Katie? And now who is Berkeley Katie?

Katie Peterson

I don't know—who was that person? I mean, you know, it's hard for me to say who I was. I guess it's easier to say to talk about what the world felt like at that time. Because I think the world felt different. I grew up in the '80s in California. The California that we think of is a place fueled by the dot-com boom, where it's too expensive to live and where income inequality has torqued out community to mean that billionaires live in the same zip codes as the homeless. There was boom bust here when I was growing up, but it was definitely more of an ordinary place, I'd say, and it felt beautifully far away from other places in the country, like "unique and special" far away, and there were so many open spaces. All these neighborhoods where there are now McMansions were empty lots, or there would be some lady, you know, with chickens in her backyard or things like that. There was still a wildness, even about the most sedate neighborhoods.

I think that has changed. And that sense of smallness has changed. I grew up in a Catholic family and we all went to Catholic schools, and yet, everyone I knew was some form of progressive Democrat. Is there still that world somewhere? I don't know. The world has changed, and we've changed with it. I know that when I went to the East Coast, one of the things that really changed me was living in a city, because even California cities don't really feel like cities, in a way. I think there is something about living in a city that lets you think about being a political self, like living in a community with others really publicly, even if you don't know them, even if they're anonymous to you. Coming back to California, this weird land of faux homesteaders, I see all the cracks in political community here and all the difficulties we have in California coming together on things. There are other things we do really well. But I think about that a lot, why it's so hard for people to come together here and the strange mixture between the rural and the urban.

Lara Ehrlich

You mentioned what you had expected your life to look like. What did you expect your life as a mother would look like?

Katie Peterson

I think it's important to say my mother died in 2008, and I miss her every day. She had cancer. She didn't get as many years as we all would have liked for her to have. And when she died, I was filled with two twin senses: the first, this feeling that I would never be a mother, and the second, this incredible hunger to be a mother.

I lived in that really divided state mentally for like, three years, because I hadn't found the partner. The summer before I met Young, I had basically decided that I was going to have a baby on my own and had made plans to do it. I'd saved the money to do it. I think I was 38 or something like that. And then I met Young, and all of a sudden, this thing that I both thought was impossible and I really wanted became possible in the eyes of another person who also was a man. Like it was so strange that it happened.

I think it's less that I had a fixed idea of my destiny than I had gotten to the point where I didn't think that a traditional life with kids in a house in the suburbs was what I was going to be looking at. I had such good friends, and still do, that my sense of being loved was quite vibrant, and I was already imagining ways in which I could continue to feel loved without being married or having a family. So, no one was more surprised than me. But it was also something I think I really wanted.

Lara Ehrlich

Was there much conversation, or was it something Young wanted, too, and it was sort of like, okay, we found our person—now we'll make this happen.

Katie Peterson

I think he was very surprised at how much wanting to have kids with me was a part of the initial discussion. He's the one who brought it up. That's the way he saw it. He wasn't interested in dating me. He was interested in something grander.

I'm in the middle of trying to decide how honest to be... I think a lot of my women friends at the time, including me, were having disappointing encounters with men of our generation who had complicated feelings about what they called settling down. I think of it as a hallmark of my generation that people felt complicated feelings about those things.

I actually think my students who I'm teaching in their 20s feel something else. They don't always want a traditional life. But I don't think of the men that I teach in their 20s and the men that I've taught as this population of men that me and all my friends seemed to be dating for 10 years. I don't think they meant anything bad by it. I just think we were raised in a generation with a lot of ambivalence about family.

And then I met someone from another country, from Korea, and family is so important there. He was able to sort of combine a really traditional understanding of that with the wholly new self that he had to be in this country. And he's an artist, so he doesn't see boundaries as fixed; he sees them as super complicated. It was not the first time but the most significant time that I was ever able to talk to someone I was in love with about what having a child with them would be like and mean. Then, in the years since, I've talked to all these people I know who are married and have kids, and they were like, "Oh, yeah, we talked about that early on." Especially people I know who are religious. I think that's conditioned as part of it. But those just weren't the people I met when I was doing the poet thing for 10 years. And then I got really lucky and I met the right person.

Lara Ehrlich

No, I've heard that from so many people. You're not alone. I've heard from many of my friends who were dating, in their 20s and 30s, these men who, as you've said, were ambivalent about not just family but career and a future and what a future could look like. It was sort of this sense, "I live in the present, and I don't want to think about 10 years out." To be fair, there are probably a lot of women in our generation who feel that way, too.

Katie Peterson

I think that's true. I think I was one. I didn't always date people with a future in mind. But I do remember the time it changed for me. I was dating somebody, and we were talking about what the future would look like, and this person was like, "Well, I don't really want to think about the future." And I remember it coming to my head as a statement: *This is really boring. Really boring.* I think I said to the person, "I think that would be really boring for me to keep dating you without talking about the future."

I think about my daughter when I think about this, because my mother didn't talk to me enough about this kind of stuff. My parents were so much in love, and they were so generous with each other's foibles. It was both a great model and a terrible one, because I think marriage is for real. I have this great marriage in my imagination. But my mother had no other advice than like, deal. I could have used more advice.

Lara Ehrlich

Was it because she passed away that you then felt such a hunger to become a mother yourself? Or was that something that had been brewing for a while and came to a head?

Katie Peterson

I literally didn't think about it until she died. And then I had to talk to my therapist about that, and my therapist was like, "You didn't ever think about it?" And I was like, "Yeah. I really, really didn't." I think I thought I'd think about it later, and then all of a sudden it is later. But you don't realize it's becoming later.

I think at first I just felt a sorrow that my mother was going to die and she was never going to see children that I was going to have, and that was an experience I wasn't going to get to have. But I didn't think about it consciously like that. I actually think it came to me. I remember waking up, when my mother was really at the end, at four in the morning and thinking, "I need to have a child immediately, with anyone." I think of it as the first biological feeling I had, too.

Something that I've thought about a lot in the last year is whether to have another baby. I don't know whether you had this experience, but it was like as soon as Emily was two and a half and getting really oppositional, everything in me was like, obviously, I need to have another baby. It almost felt biological. I actually love being the parent of one child. But it seemed to come into my dreams and into my thinking and into all these other aspects of my life—as a thought and as a conversation, almost without me even. I didn't think about it rationally. I think it came from my body.

Lara Ehrlich

I love that, and I want to talk about that more. Maybe you and I are alike, in that I am very much an intellectual person who doesn't pay attention to my body, pretty regularly. So, motherhood was never a biological thing for me either. I never sort of felt the urge to become a mother. It was a lot of conversation and thinking and talking to my husband and my therapist. What are the pros and cons of becoming a mother? And finally, it was like, okay, well, either we're going to do it or not. So, we'll just do it, and hopefully, it'll turn out okay. So, to hear you talking about this biological hunger for motherhood is so fascinating, and I wonder if you could talk about that and how it works in tandem or against the intellectual side of you, the side that creates, that parses words and creates structures within language.

Katie Peterson

The thing that's coming to my mind is that during the nine months of pregnancy and the month right after it, all these things happen in your body that you can't refuse. You can't refuse the heartburn, you can't refuse contractions, you can't refuse back pain. And then you have a baby, and you're supposed to breastfeed that thing, which is so crazy. Talk about an experience that's both biological and intellectual! There are all these biological things happening, but your brain can't help but reflect on the strangeness of the experience.

And also, so much of it is about whether it works or not. As soon as you're involved in something that may or may not work, you're involved in your intellect in some way. And also the way you're hungry. You're really hungry while you're pregnant, and then you have the baby, and when you're breastfeeding, you're really hungry. I remember some Berkeley person said to me, "Well, it must be really nice to feel so close to your body." And I said to the person, "I live

here [points to forehead]. When this is over, I'm coming back here." And the person looked at me like I was a horse.

I feel like I want to go back and kind of correct or edit myself and say I know that people talk about a biological clock ticking, and just to be clear, I was 42 when I had Emily, and I think that surely was part of it. But I think that the part of us that dreams is also the part of us that uses language, and I think that language is all mixed up not just in our subjective responses but in everything else we do. We use it for everything. We use it for politics, we use it for religion, we use it for family, we use it for our work, the way you do one thing is the way you do everything.

There was no way I was going to carry a baby and then give birth to it without being ruminative, conceptual, philosophical, desiring of making generalizations about the experience, kind of idiosyncratically obsessed with what was most conceptual at the root of the experience. In my poems, I like to play around with abstractions. The other day, I wrote a poem in which I talked about God, money, and power. And I looked back at it, and I thought, I really have come into my own, if I've let myself write a 12-line poem, in which I use the words God, money, and power.

I do remember, when I was pregnant, an abiding interest in all of those conceptual matters kind of mapped on to the experience. Don't worry, I was also just super sleepy all the time. Biological reactions. I remember having terrible contractions in the hospital and trying to write in my journal and Young took it away from me, and he's like, "You're not supposed to be lying on your back while you have contractions." I was like, "Oh, sorry." I relied on him a lot.

Lara Ehrlich

I've heard other moms, including myself, say that they had grand plans of cataloguing the experiences of both pregnancy and childbirth, those early days breastfeeding. I had the grandest plans of documenting it all in my journal, so I could come back to it later in literature. I did not write a single word probably until my daughter was a couple weeks or maybe even a few months old. Were you able to write when you were pregnant and during those first early weeks?

Katie Peterson

I'm trying to think. I wrote two or three poems that I bet will find their way into a next book, if it happens. But for the most part, I wrote notes and things in my journal that I'm glad I wrote down but that were not in the form of poetry.

I have a first-year poetry student right now who's a mom with two kids, and she's been writing these poems that are very interrupted, like, they have lots of backslash, slashes, and dashes and everything. She just wrote one, and I didn't think it was very successful, and then we talked about it. I said to her, "There's an idealism sometimes around motherhood—everything about it—that you could write poems about pregnancy while you're pregnant, that you could write poems about childbirth while you're having the baby." One person can: Rachel Zucker did in *The Last Clear Narrative*, a wonderful book, but for the most part, that's not how my mind works.

I need distance from the experience to talk about the experience. And the thing about being pregnant and having a baby is, I wasn't interested in thinking about another time in my life.

When I think about it, I think it was the time in my life that I was most interested in thinking about the time right before me. Now I wonder whether what I'm trying to say is that the writing of poetry sometimes relies on being in one time, thinking about another. And there was something utterly present about a lot of that time that I was experiencing.

I think that when Emily was asleep as a baby, I really longed for that to be a wonderful time to write poems. And I sometimes sat with a notebook and tried and really wanted to be in the moment of the poem, but I wasn't. I'd still like to write about those things, as that happened, but I'd like to write about them tumbled into my other experiences. I'd be interested in 10 years to write a poem about the day I had Emily and try to remember and reconstruct that day. I think it might get interesting to me later.

Lara Ehrlich

That's so fascinating. I think, like you said, not just with poetry but in fiction as well, the distance from those important events can make for stronger writing, rather than being in the midst of it and trying to piece together a narrative. I did the same thing. I sat with my notebook and tried to write while my daughter was sleeping, and then you kind of fall asleep or that's your one chance to take a shower, and writing doesn't really take the precedence.

Katie Peterson

And I think it still happens to me. I've been trying to write an essay about the Republican senators and why they're so evil, basically. I wanted to write something about self-respect. I look at them and think, "Well, you've lost your self-respect." I think with prose, I really feel it, and I wanted to talk to you about this. Poetry can sometimes be a fragment, but when you're trying to write a piece of prose, say it's 5,000 words, and you lose track of something, there could be a thought there, and you can lose it. Like motherhood can actually make you lose it. And the thing that I've been trying to tell myself is, "But it's here somewhere." So, I may just have to jog the thought back by doing something like washing my hands or taking a shower or doing laundry or doing something else.

There are two places that I think right now: one is in the shower, and one is after dropping Emily off at daycare, driving home on my own. Right now, I work at home. In those two moments, there is usually a thought that has to do with the thing I'm trying to write. Just the other day, I lost a thought when I came home because their teacher called me because I'd forgotten something that she needed at school. And I spent the next hour trying to get the thought back. I couldn't get it back. I finally gave up and went to put a little laundry in, and it came back.

Right after Emily had been born, I felt like that constantly, like I'd have a thought and lose it completely, and the thoughts were a wandering around somewhere in me, but I couldn't find them. It really drove me crazy.

Lara Ehrlich

I definitely felt that way, too. And I still feel that way. Like when I'm driving or showering, those are the two times I think, because you can't do anything else. Your brain is occupied with this task, and then, in the background, you can be thinking about something else, and that's when it rises up to the surface.

We have a question here from Brittany O’Duffy: “I would love to hear you all expound on the animal. There’s a visceral element of these primal experiences, but how does or did that inform your creative narratives?” That’s a great question.

Katie Peterson

I think you should answer first. You wrote a book called *Animal Wife!*

Lara Ehrlich 37:34

Well, I’ll give you a short answer, because I really want to go back to you, Katie. But yes, I’m very interested in the animal and the visceral, bodily aspect of being not just a mother but a woman. I feel like as we grow up, we are afraid of—or taught to ignore—the parts of our bodies that are animal. We shave the hair from our armpits and our legs. And we’re ashamed of, and hide, our menstrual cycle—all of these things that animals in the wild experience but that we as women are taught to tamp down.

When you become a mother, it’s the most vulnerable I’ve ever felt, being immobilized on a table with pain and with this very animal experience of giving birth, when all the things we’re taught not to talk about are suddenly laid bare, and torn open in a very animalistic way. That definitely impacted my writing. After becoming a mother, I found this new interest in bodies and in the physical and the animal parts of our being. I want to turn it back to Katie and ask you that same question. It’s a great one.

Katie Peterson

It’s interesting, because these things are hard to look at in ourselves. And then you’re looking at a child, and I think they’re easier to look at in the child. I don’t know whether your child is like this, but I bet they are. Like, Emily is really fascinated with animals. All children are, right? And for her, the world of animals is daily. It’s moment by moment, constantly checking in with what animal does she feel like, what animal does she want to be, which animals are around? She likes to call us animals. She’ll say, “I’m a baby alpaca. Are you a mama alpaca?” And she goes through the animals.

I think it’s kind of interesting. I think that’s true. I think we have all these reserved feelings about thinking about ourselves as animals, but never in my life have I thought more about another person as an animal than having a little girl.

Right now, she’s in what I read in the books is a stage that a lot of kids go through, which is really wanting to reunite with my body. And I don’t mean to say that idealistically. There’s something that sounds really sanctified about that; I don’t mean that. When she was a little baby, I always found her very independent. She didn’t love breastfeeding. Since the beginning, she has been just as attached to her father as to me. She wasn’t that cuddly of a baby to me, almost like she likes to examine things from a distance. But in the last two or three months, she goes to sleep in her own bed, and then she wakes up at three or four in the morning and comes into ours and literally wants to sleep on top of me every single night and wants to be in my lap all the time. She wants to just be here all the time. It’s so mammalian. It’s so intense. And I also can feel or think that she wants that because it’s going away. So, she always says, “I’m a baby alpaca.

You're the mom alpaca?" Well, she's also a little girl. Now she's 3. She can do letters—like almost, you know. She's becoming a grownup. The animal in her is in time. It's moving forward in time.

And I'm so glad we're talking about animals because my next book, *Life in a Field*, is dedicated to my friend Bridget and her dog, Violet, and also to animals and girls because Bridget has been my good friend for so long and also because she's the person who's shown me what a relationship with an animal in its most beautiful form can look like. I've been really educated by that, not really being a dog person myself. I wanted to dedicate it to animals and girls because there's a kind of vision in the book of "what would the world be, if we divided it up into animals and girls and not into men and women?" What if we sort of redrew the lines and instead thought, "Okay, who in a situation is an animal and who in a situation is a girl?"

The vulnerability in animals and girls is accompanied in both cases, I think, by what I would call aggression. Like really being able to see the aggression of other creatures. In the story that I wrote, a girl and a donkey become very good friends, but then they have to marry time. The last section of the book is the marriage ceremony in which the girl and the donkey each decide to marry time. Both characters have a kind of aggressive part of themselves that they have to find a way to deal with.

It strikes me that one of the things animals model for us is dealing with the consequences of our impulses, as opposed to hiding the idea that we ever had them, living not at one with ourselves but living always in struggle. I've grown to love dogs because they're so attuned to the moment. All of their hungers—for people, for order, for food—they experience without shame. And that's an interesting way of coping with being mortal. Not our way, but an interesting way.

Lara Ehrlich

I wonder when all of that kicks in with small children. Everything you've described with dogs and with animals is very similar to my experience with my daughter, that there's that lack of shame early on, about bodies and about wanting to be in your lap and wanting to be close to skin and not curbing impulses and so on. We teach kids how to curb those impulses and hopefully not in a damaging way, but that's tricky in and of itself. I'm interested in this because my daughter, who is a year older, four, went through that stage, and then she became independent again and slept in her own bed for a good long time. But then recently, in the last month or so, she has insisted on sleeping in our bed again. In part, she says it's because she's lonely, and she doesn't want to sleep alone. And how do you tell a four-year-old during a pandemic that she has to sleep alone? So, we've sort of gotten back to all sleeping together in the same bed, which feels, again, very much like she's trying to recapture something that she's moving away from. With girls, particularly, and trying to instill a sense of boundaries and ownership of your body, how are you thinking about that with Emily and with her desire to be close to you and to be in your lap? With my daughter, I'm starting to have to have those conversations like, "No, this is Mommy's body. Please respect my space."

Katie Peterson

I mean, I haven't had to do that yet! I just let her do whatever she wants, within reason. But I didn't breastfeed for that long, so there are things she doesn't do. Will there be a point in which

she's too clingy? So far, Emily has been pretty independent, and I kind of wonder whether she will direct her attentions towards that independence again, when it's appropriate.

You asked me how I was thinking about it. One way in which I'm helped in thinking about it is that she goes to a really great Montessori daycare where they talk to them about the integrity of their bodies and not letting other people into their spaces if they don't feel comfortable. It's incredible how much she knows about that. All the stuff she knows about it, I didn't know until I was like, 25. I think she is being raised in a different time, in a different world. I think she has a different sense of her body. I think I probably lived without an independent sense of my body from my mother's for longer than she's going to.

Lara Ehrlich

How has becoming a mother changed your work? We talked about having that narrative distance from the actual act of giving birth, but how have you seen Emily and the experience of being a mother changing your poetry and your prose?

Katie Peterson

I don't think we have a great sense in our culture right now about what it means to grow up. We underrate growing up. Many of us don't want to grow up. I'm sure as soon as I'm saying that, there are people listening who are like, "Ew, gross grownups, I hate them," right? And definitely, that's how I felt and still feel, like being a grown up is fundamentally kind of a bad thing. Who are the models for really good grownups—Obama? That's it. It's hard to think of that many more. Dolly Parton and Obama are really good grownups.

Lara Ehrlich

Those are good ones!

Katie Peterson

Yeah, there aren't that many. I do think there's something about parenthood, and I wouldn't confine it to motherhood, which has to do with putting someone else in front of you, that you have to. I was raised a Catholic, and the spiritual work of selflessness is at the center of many monastic and religious traditions, and I think it changes you because it gives you some authority over life experience and also over things that you can't always tell to somebody.

You can't always tell the truth to everyone all at once. That's something I think about all the time about being a mother. I can't tell Emily the truth. I can't reason with Emily about everything. Emily and I can't stand in the rational truth of things when she doesn't want me to park in a certain place and throws a temper tantrum. Dickinson said, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant—success in circuit lies." The truth is something that cannot be dropped on the page unceremoniously, but is its own difficult animal that needs to be cajoled and sometimes restrained.

I think of that as being something that motherhood has made me think about a lot, how many of my own feelings, I now must repress, how many of the things I'd like to say, I have to repress. That wisdom, when I think about the history of it from literature, is not from a woman but Odysseus from the *Odyssey*, who, more than once, sat and, through tears, listened to a story that

he couldn't react to. And nothing has made me think about that more than this pandemic and also the political situation. The week of the election, Young and I were both on our phones and going crazy and texting people, and Emily was also going crazy and was unmanageable, by the day after the election. And of course she was! Her parents were completely out to lunch. We weren't good enough or selfless enough to put aside that to just be with her. I'm sure there are other parents who are much better than us than that.

That proved my point, in a way, to myself, which was as soon as something comes into you, as a parent, it's part of your child's life, too.

So when I think about being a mother, I think about being a grownup, and when I think about being a grownup, I think about being so attached to others that what you do and say and eat and feel matters in such an embodied way to somebody else. Of course, that's true if you're not a mother, but it's come into relief for me as a result of being one.

Lara Ehrlich

That leads into another question I had for you about taking the time to write and how you balance motherhood with the logistics of writing. I've heard others say the same thing that you were just talking about, that being present with their child is so important but sometimes impossible. Like during the election, my husband and I were also similarly consumed with the news. So, writing is another time in which you need to be consumed with something other than your child, and how do you balance those two, all-consuming things in your life?

Katie Peterson

You don't balance them. You unravel. You do it by any means necessary. I feel like I'm constantly letting my ideas go, my idea of how the day is supposed to go, in light of how the day really is. And you have to be educated by that. If there's something more at stake than writing, you have to be with the fact that there's something more at stake than writing, and sometimes there is.

I am good at making use of small bits of time and always have been. I'm glad I have that. But it's also true that at this point in my life, I don't think I'm interested in being type A or neurotic about getting my writing time in. I'm not sure what we'll see—the jury's still out—but I don't know that I'm the kind of person who could get up to finish a project every morning early, but maybe I will be, at a certain point. It just hasn't worked for me that way.

Young and I were like, "We're living one life together," and for both of us to be right with our work, we have to be right with each other. It's like a whole system. I know it works differently for different people, but for me, that's been really crucial.

I would say the second thing is you mentioned driving and the shower. I really had kind of given up hope this spring of really writing any poems this year, and then I started going for walks. On these walks, this poem kind of came. And then it was like, I had to go on the same walk every day. I still go on it, because there might be a poem on the walk. And I become very rigid about this walk that I go on, because there might be a poem on the walk. And I don't have that many non-negotiables. But that has become this kind of weird non-negotiable thing. Young and I get

together and talk about our non-negotiable things that we need to do in order to feel like we're still working.

Also, I was lucky to have Emily late because I had tenure when I had her. There are things that I didn't have to worry about, and that's just fortune that gave me that.

So, like I was saying, I'll be writing a poem—like, I was standing in the bathroom, writing a poem on my note function on my phone, and Young and Emily came in, and they were like, "What are you doing?" And I was like, "I'm writing a poem." And they were like, "Why?" And I was like, "You guys are supposed to know me better than anyone. Get out of the bathroom."

When you asked me for three words, I said, "always play first." That's something that I've also discovered this year. If I'm not right in my relationship with Emily, then it's pretty hard for me to write a poem that I care about. Doesn't mean that I have to be freaked out about my relationship with Emily—I think I'm actually a pretty chill parent—but it's not like I have yet to have the experience that I know a lot of mothers have, which is having to sacrifice something with their child in order to get their work done.

Poets are lucky. We don't get anything done. We just don't. I think writing a novel must feel very different, or a book of essays or an academic book. We're wasters. We're the wasters of culture. We beautifully waste time, and it comes out and it does the work of justice. But it's a mysterious and weird thing. The life of a poet is a lifelong dare. And I'm just in the middle of that big dare, like I jumped out of a plane and I'm still in the jump. I just have really cute company, this little goblin Emily.

Lara Ehrlich

I had other questions lined up, but that is just the perfect place, I think, for us to end, because we're at an hour. Katie, this has been such a pleasure. And it's so great to talk to you again, after all this time.

Katie Peterson

It's good to talk to you, too.

Lara Ehrlich

I hope you'll come back when your new book comes out. Tell us a little bit, before we go, about the new book.

Katie Peterson

It's called *Life in a Field*, and the cool thing about the book is it was selected by Rachel Zucker, the poet I mentioned earlier who is one of the poets of my generation who's written beautifully about motherhood. So has Katie Ford, who was written into the chat. And as a very long-time friend of mine, Katie has also written beautiful poems about motherhood.

Rachel chose the book for the Omnidawn Open Books Prize, and the publication date is April 1, 2021, when I'm sure we're all still going to be living in our houses. We'll probably have a virtual book launch. And the cool thing about this book is, I wrote it in the aftermath of a pregnancy that

I lost in 2015. But it's a fable; it doesn't directly treat that topic. I wrote it as a consolation to myself, feeling like I was living in a world that I didn't want to live in, that was my sense. The question that echoes through it is, "What do you do with the world you didn't wish for?" It's a story written in these small, prose-poem paragraphs, and it's accompanied by four folios of photographs taken by Young. As you move through the four sections of the book, you also move through these folios of photographs taken by Young and arranged by both of us. And there are these two characters, a girl and a donkey, and it's just about them learning to understand each other

Lara Ehrlich

That sounds beautiful. I want to read that right away. I will be pre-ordering. When will it be available for preorder?

Katie Peterson

You can pre-order it now on Bookshop and lots of other places where books are sold, and they've done a beautiful job with it at Omnidawn. The book layout is stunning. And Young's photos are in full color, which is unexpected and wonderful. So please do.

Lara Ehrlich

Yes, everyone, please. Go buy it now, and we'll be at your launch party, and will have you back when it comes out. Thank you so much again for joining me tonight and for your honest and thoughtful conversation.

Katie Peterson 1:00:50

And so great to talk to you about animals, and congratulations on all the attention your book is receiving. I loved reading it myself.

Lara Ehrlich 1:00:51

Thank you, Katie. You know I'm a fan of your work too. And thank you all for tuning in. We don't have an episode next week for Thanksgiving, so enjoy Thanksgiving, and you as well, Katie—have a good holiday and we'll see you again soon.