



Compass Rose

Literature and Art Journal

Compass Rose interviews Patricia Smith

Compass Rose: *When did you discover poetry?*

Patricia Smith: It was a two level thing. I grew up listening to Motown music—they always tell stories and they always rhyme—and I used to write the lyrics out in notebooks and read them as poems. Also, my father moved to Chicago from Arkansas and was very much a southern man, very much a storyteller. He would recreate his day and it was very entertaining. Pretty early on I came to think of my world in terms of the stories you could tell. That was kind of the beginning of it though I didn't have a name for it; I just naturally thought that way.

Actually getting introduced to [poetry] wasn't until I was about 30 years old, I think. I wasn't really writing anything—I was working for newspapers—but in terms of my creative writing, I'd been writing all along for recreation but nothing that would make me call myself a 'creative writer.' I was living in Chicago and I had gone to a poetry festival—it was a big festival that was supposed to bring together street poets and academic poets on neutral turf—and I thought 'wow, five hours in a bar making fun of poets; this is going to be really fun.' I discovered that there was this very vibrant literary community in Chicago. My idea of what I thought poetry was going to be was different from what I saw: high school and college students and Gwendolyn Brooks. I learned the language was accessible. I got enamored with [poetry], hunted down the people in charge [of the festival] and asked what else was going on. They said "we'd be glad to take you around" and we just went from there. One of the places he took me was the Green Mill where a slam was going on.

CR: *So you don't consider yourself strictly a 'poet?'*

Smith: If you are passionate about writing you should write as many ways as you can. The cages we put ourselves in are our fault. Once you have a story you can pour that story into any form you want.

CR: *How does a poem usually present itself to you?*

Smith: It usually starts with a story I can't shake. It's easy to write off of things that make you angry or make you sad, but instead of writing purely off that emotion I spend time looking for an unexpected entry point into that story. You want to do something that is going to make your take different. When we write only from emotion we don't think, 'how is this different from anyone else writing from their emotions?' I start with the detail and then widen it into the story. It may start with a conversation, or like right now [during the

interview she receives a link to a website that lists people's final words] I go to this page where there are these last words and I'm just staring at this page and I think I could do a series of poems—there are 20 lines here—starting with the line that was spoken. Real people get lost; they get whittled down to their last word or where they were when they lost their lives. I would be trying to resurrect the person.

This conjures the whole story. It may not be what actually happened but it sparks your imagination. In everything, if you are truly seeing everything with a poet's eye, there are stories hurtling at you all the time. It really is like being bombarded every day.

CR: *One cannot help notice the rhythm in your poems. Do you listen to music while you are writing or do the rhythms come to you in silence?*

Smith: I can't listen to music when I write; it's too distracting. I talk when I write. I'll come up with a line and say that line, then say that second line. There is constant sound going on so I'm very aware of how the poem feels in my mouth. I think that all of the music and patterns of speech I admire stay with me—a lot of it becomes engrained. If you listen to a lot of music your internal rhythm adjusts itself to be in tune with the music. I figure out which type of rhythm a topic is asking for.

CR: *How are you finding your recent study of traditional meter?*

Smith: Everything is new and I'm trying to make them part of my toolbox so they will stop being new. Before, a poem could have been begging to be a sonnet, but I didn't see it. Now there is more room for the poems to ask me for what they need. Now I even feel my free verse straining to become something else. I read my old poems aloud and I can hear what they were straining to be.

CR: *Other than your MFA, what are you working on now?*

Smith: I just handed in a book of poems about Hurricane Katrina that has got to get in front of anything else I'm working on. It started with one poem about the 34 nursing home residents who were abandoned and died in the nursing home. I heard about that and every time I would see a story there would be no names. I wrote the poem in 34 stanzas, 34 individual voices. That was all I was going to do but I was reading it and somebody said to me that it was really good that I was doing it because pretty soon people are going to forget Katrina. So then I thought maybe I'd make it a section in the manuscript and once I did that I just kind of kept going. There were so many other stories and pretty soon I had about 72 pages of poetry. I would like to get it out there into the world and do some benefit readings but I don't know what's going to happen. I make it a big part of every reading I do now.

CR: *Both your written work and your performance poetry is quite renown. Do you see yourself balancing between different forms or rather that your work is able to serve two purposes?*

Smith: There shouldn't be a difference. I just started out reading and working my way up to slam. You can get to a point where you know what works in a slam and you write that way; a lot of people involved in the slam will stick their noses up at academic poetry. It's easy to say

we're rebels. At the bottom of that we really, at some point, didn't think what we were doing was legitimate in the cannon. I think sometimes we were afraid that was true.

CR: *But isn't there a difference between spoken word and poetry on the page?*

Smith: On stage you only have one go. It has to be very immediate and in your face. You have to really make yourself pay attention to the poetry on a page. Once a poem was out there it was sacred and there wasn't a lot of revision. Every time you do a piece on stage you should remember what sparked the writing in the first place; if you can't you need to put it away. The key is to remember you are trying to get someone in the audience to say 'I can do that.' A lot of slam veers in the other direction. The bottom line is you really want someone to go home that night and write all night long because something you've said has lit a fire under them.

I haven't participated in a slam in over 10 years but the things I write would still be okay for slam and I'm really, really paying attention to craft because I'm in school. One of the most instructional things I do now is I take the stuff I was performing then, look at it with my new knowledge, and do revising and re-editing. It's real eye opening. I have come to realize, and this realization comes with time, we're all doing the same thing. The barrier is starting to come down.

CR: *Don't you think you and your work played a part in this?*

Smith: People are always writing about how I've spanned some sort of chasm. I was doing what I do and then, all of sudden, Sharon Olds is on the stage too. Or I was somewhere teaching and all of a sudden I'm teaching with Billy Collins and Tom Lutz. I didn't give these other poets an excuse to say what I was doing wasn't legitimate. If you realize you can't take your poetry anywhere outside of the slam there's a problem. You have to be able to travel. Then it cannot be attacked as something less than a poem.

What I'm indebted to the slam for is that confidence. Nothing stops you from doing what you need to do to get your poem across, that's invaluable. I'm so glad I did it in the order I did it: slam first and then school. There are a lot of people who are waiting for school to give them a voice.

CR: *So, you are enjoying grad school?*

Smith: I've been pointing out poems I like and my instructors are showing what was done technically to enhance that. I've made it my goal to read poetry on those two levels: the emotional arc it had (or drama—I'm always looking for narrative and story); and then the technical. If written well, you don't hear the form, but you hear something. This is the perfect time for me to be studying that.

CR: *In your poem "Stop the Presses" from Teahouse of the Almighty you write "My job is to draw pictures no one can voice, / to soothe and bellow toward the numbed heart, / to breathe in your chronicles, discuss them out / in lines weak enough for you to read and swallow." Does this offer a bit of insight into what you believe the state of poetry and the poet to be today?*

Smith: At some point every poet needs to define what the hell they're doing. For most people it starts out as a recreational exercise. At some point it becomes, if you're going to stick with it, how you move your life forward. Once you move outside of yourself, you realize you have a task, and it's not something to be taken lightly. When somebody says 'I started writing because of you,' then you realize you are saddled with something that is much larger than yourself. You realize that while you can do real good you can do real harm. You have to craft a credo for yourself: this is what I'm doing with this, this is what it's doing for me, and this is what I hope it's doing for others.

But you can't take yourself too seriously. You are just putting words on a page but you do have to understand the power of those words. We're so used to having those words to fall back on and we don't think there are a lot of people who don't have that outlet. It's up to you to let them know they have that option. That's a really important task.