

*Offhandedly Accompanying a Meal of Other Animals*

Lia Kohl is a musician and artist based in Chicago. Her album, *Too Small to Be a Plain*, is out now on Shinkoyo/Artist Pool

Elizabeth Metzger is a poet and essayist and most recently the author of *Bed*, winner of the Sunken Garden Poetry Prize from Tupelo Press. She is a poetry editor at *The Los Angeles Review of Books*.

They became friends in New York, where they had many in-person conversations about life and creativity, before moving to Los Angeles and Chicago respectively.

This conversation took place via text message in February and March of 2022.

EM: When I listen to *Too Small to Be a Plain*, I literally picture you with a conductive wand catching it rather than producing it. Like a medium, I picture you holding out some instrument that catches and conducts as if with electric charge. I hear a self being internally rearranged by outside world noise.

LK: It does feel like catching — electrical feels right. Less like a vision of angels and more like when you get shocked by the car door. Or like watching a creek current carry sticks past you. I just say, *look, a stick!*

EM: The emotion feels sort of above and outward to me, surrounding rather than emerging from within a self or body. How do you picture or not picture the human when you think of your work?

LK: With this music especially, I feel more like I made myself a house than that I am representing myself, my emotions, or the human in music. And yes, there is this element of being a sort of magician, like no one knows what you are doing or how you are doing it. I feel that way listening to other musicians' work all the time. There is a mystery manifested in making that is really exciting and maybe shouldn't be disturbed, you know?

EM: I totally agree that the mystery is the "sacred" part both about how things get made but also why they matter maybe. Like I love reviews and criticism and analysis of everything but not because it's true! It's just sort of funny to see the brain make up why anything is as it is. The whole world is like this. Math is like this. Without imagination no literal facts would even be learned. Like Wordsworth's *we half-create what we perceive*. I feel this in your creations, like I get to hear what you heard but also you made it up. Is all noise filtered through a self?

LK: I think Wordsworth is especially right in this context – there's so much of my practice that's just listening to the world and filtering in elements that I want to create with, either by literally recording them or by more abstract means. Speaking of world-noise, do you feel really affected by noise and sound in the world?

EM: I think of thought as having a kind of music, and if I can listen inwardly then I can follow the music and have better deeper thoughts that surprise me. If I let sound lead me I can change more and discover more which is what I like about poems: there's a kind of sound alchemy that makes the chaos of what I'm

feeling palpable, sensual, contained and yet still in motion. Outside sound that I “understand” – like construction drilling – seems to interfere, although I’m sure there’s a practice to embracing it.

LK: There definitely is. There used to be a bird outside my window in the summer who would start singing every morning at 4am. Finally I started recording it, because somehow shifting my perspective (embracing it, in a way) helped me not be so annoyed.

Do you feel like you draw things from the world consciously as material?

EM: I’m definitely messy, so even if I want to see things as material they rarely come out that way. They papier-mache with other things I didn’t find poetic at all and come out as a dream jumble. I have to be fooled otherwise there’s no point to writing. There’s got to be a rebellion to it, I think: Most of all against my own desire to control and know anything definitively. I think poetry (even free-verse) loves form because it is made from both the urge for order and the resistance to it.

LK: The kind of messiness or not-knowing-in-advance that you’re describing reminds me of the feeling of being lost; I often wish I was better at getting lost (even literally!) and being messy. I’m thinking about being a child or in general how little we allow to be unknown in a lower case sense — not Unknown as in God or death, but more like *East* or *who is making that sound* or *what is that food* or *what’s behind that wall* and letting the answers be more varied. I tend to do the adult thing of assuming the most likely answer instead of letting it be more mysterious.

EM: It’s such a good point to connect being a child to that lower case unknown because I am not sure how it works—like I don’t think children feel comfortable with not knowing things always but it’s through wanting to know/straining that they make such creative connections, isn’t it? Maybe we can get more comfortable being lost if we let ourselves strain to be found or find the exit or the meaning even as we appreciate the lostness. How is it that kids are both the most literal thinkers yet also natural artists? I think it’s out of that drive to simply understand *what* something is that the wildest leaps and metaphors get made. This blanket is comfort. The dark is scary. This cardboard box is a boat. There aren’t degrees of truth. It’s all about how much you choose to believe. We have to accept that we don’t know and that we want to know. Magic is both together.

In music do you have to have some sense of where you’re going when you begin? Is there a journey or arc or shape a piece must take? Can you wander the space your music makes without already knowing its every dimension? All this to say Lia, maybe you’re more lost than you think?

LK: Maybe I’m looking for lost? And I think when it works I am somehow in between lost and childlike searching. Because you’re right, it’s not that children are comfortable with not knowing, it’s more that there are more possible answers to *what is that*, *where are we*, *why why why*. And I think magic is real for all of us – sometimes we just decide that it’s not. Which sounds trite, but I mean that if you let the thing behind the wall be anything, it can be. If you imagine that the construction workers are actually large bees, something inside you is more open, maybe.

Oh and also yes it is about straining. That electricity lies in the tension of unknowing, not just sitting on a couch in the fog. If I try to know where I’m going, that creates the most horrible whirlpool of doubt! I

always think I should know! Should we know? What is this music *about*? I feel more like a plumber than that — like, here I am, I have a wrench. The wrench is about being a person with a wrench and doing a task. Maybe I mean that the music is about being a person looking for something, using certain tools.

EM: Oh my, this wrench is everything. Being a person looking for something, using certain tools.

LK: Yes! Like it feels less about *here I am making these grand decisions* and more like *someone gave me these crayons and I have to draw*.

Sometimes it's also like feeling for the space that I can fit into or for something that isn't present. Sometimes it's an open space, like a blankness, sometimes more like helping a large animal give birth, reaching into a big womb with your hands. Did you ever read *All Creatures Great and Small* about the country vet? He's always describing being elbow deep in some sheep, feeling for babies.

EM: No, I love that. It also suggests that the actual creation process isn't your own entirely. You get to be part of the mess of one thing coming out of another. Music is another species. Sometimes writing feels like a birth scene to me, but other times, it's more like the shyest person on earth trying to flirt, across time and distance. A truly blind date.

LK: Oh yes, giving birth and being given birth to at the same time, it is like that.

EM: A lot of artists make concrete things mean but some artists make abstract things feel concrete like Emily Dickinson's "white sustenance Despair." I feel that direction of things in your work. Or more simply, I think of you as building a house around yourself in your work?

LK: Yes it's not so much the feeling of making a space for me, but as you say, more like being the space and building around it. I think the question of what the art is *about* implies a certain kind of answer. What's it about means you can say a sentence and then be finished with the thing and I don't want to be finished. Maybe if there was another way of saying it, like *what does it sit on?* Or like *which direction does it come from?*

EM: Oh I love that idea of alternative questions! I think the whole pleasure of art is that it can't be finished. It's always there, and while life is still finite, in music or poetry I can feel like I get another chance at experience, not just another chance to reflect on my own.

Does the work you're making ever say No to you? Is it ideal to let the music take over, "have its way with you," or do you need to stay in control? Is it better never to will things?

LK: I sometimes will things, and usually they say no. They have their way. This is a thing I like about working with found sound, that the being is already inside -- a recording of a bird or a person or a space has so much being-ness and will to say yes to. But it's true of everything, even the most pure sine wave has a way of balancing you out, I think. I try to never will things but sometimes I feel like I should have more will and so I try. I think I'm also wary of the vision-from-God version of art making. Like when people talk about just going into a trance and coming out with a piece. I hardly ever feel that – I'm just like, crawling through tunnels. Although, it's both isn't it? Everything is always both.

EM: I hate the idea of *needing to be flexible* (people often talk about this when reconciling one's role as artist and new parent) but more and more, I want living to feel more like making and maybe making to feel more like living? So that making happens in every way possible. I just want all kinds of experience and all feelings about it.

LK: I wonder if there's a way of being present that allows for making with this kind of flexibility.

EM: Today I started with a note on my phone that gave me a feeling and then lots of unrelated ideas and images I didn't even know I was holding onto seemed to spread their tethers and I thought it would all come out if I put this note onto the computer, this first image or line. But when I did I had the best/worst/strangest feeling: the random line breaks of the note typed on my phone looked on the computer to be the poem, the whole thing. It was a whole poem and said something I didn't even mean to say!

Often it's the changing of moods/feelings that makes me sure I am alive more than any joy or fear or sadness. Any feeling that stays the same too long could be death, I think. The mind changing is such a gift, really, even if it's also the cause of much of my creative anxiety. I am interested in attention but I rarely want to just "be."

LK: This is wonderful. That the changing is the aliveness! Not the sort of idealized presence where you sit in one emotion. I also think there is a version of this presence that's a kind of absence. Like I'm not wiggling my nose in pleasure, smelling. I just have a nose.

EM: I also like forgetting I have a nose sometimes.

LK: Ha!

I am reading Annie Dillard's *Writing Life* and one of the first things she says is that "the path is not the work, the process is nothing." Is the process nothing? Is it everything? I know this is sort of a basic bitch artist question but it makes me think back to our plumber with the wrench — is there plumbing that's about process? Like can both be true?

Speaking of process, I have so much trouble with editing. For most of my making life I have wanted the final product to be present in the first draft, the video to be complete without editing. I have trouble seeing a form that's been transformed from its Athena-leap from my mind. I'm also thinking about your first meetings with Richard Howard at Columbia, where he would take your poems and utterly dismember them and then ask what you were actually trying to say. What brutality! But I wonder if it taught you and how.

I never had anyone ask me what I meant to say, so learning to edit has been a recent thing.

EM: I think wanting someone to edit me used to be my way of writing for someone, feeling the poem be completed or at least understood by a reader. Learning from Richard how to edit a poem was really about learning to write the next one. And of course these teachers modeled the life of the writer which was as important to me: to sit there and be seen, on the page—but also my hands shaking on the page—to have

them seen! Listening to writers I imagined first via their poems, and being listened to by them in a real room in a real moment. It was more like becoming the poem than editing. Editing is just part of writing, sometimes simultaneous, sometimes after a pause. We reckon, reflect, and reconsider things all the time. Maybe when you say you don't edit, you mean you've already done that.

For me, there is great satisfaction when cutting a single line opens up a greater possible meaning or I have the feeling that the poem is writing me, or leaving room for someone to enter and join minds, the invitation we talked about. Does music require such compression, cutting, whittling?

LK: I think the way I work is very much like whittling or like having pieces of paper that I'm rearranging. I make things and then they exist as pieces and then I find ways to arrange them and tweak them into a whole. I think there is often a moment where two or three elements sort of click together and they take on their own life — maybe it takes them becoming their own community to create breath in the work.

EM: The work becomes itself without you. Are humans ever in such a state, becoming their truest self because of a clicking together or a coincidence. Maybe falling in love or finding the right glasses?

LK: I always thought that falling in love would feel like that! But it never has for me, more like noticing something that's already there, like noticing a smell that you've been smelling — more of an identification than an arrival.

I like this non-distinction between writing and editing. I was thinking more generally about the process of feedback and the growing end of the thing, and maybe the false idea that someone else can help you know how to make stuff. But I think you're right, actually what we mostly need are readers, listeners, not mirrors exactly but some resonant body or mind who helps see the thing more clearly as it is.

Speaking of editing, there's a small child in front of me playing an iPad game where she can style hair, and she's just brushing, brushing and then erasing all the hair and cackling. Pleasure in erasure.

What do you drink on airplanes? I had a moment with tomato juice.

EM: Cranberry juice, more for the color than the taste. I hate tomato juice because my father used to drink Bloody Bulls on Christmas and Thanksgiving. It's a Bloody Mary with beef broth in it.

LK: Oh dear.

EM: I'm not a vegetarian, but it disgusted (nearly enraged!) me that this drink (disgusting enough on its own) was offhandedly accompanying a meal of other animals. How's your flight?

LK: The flight attendants just did this whole theater piece where they turned up the lights (which had been dimmed) and gave us a spiel about the frontier airlines MasterCard and then walked around with applications and then dimmed the lights again.

Stay with me here: because it really did feel like theater (lights, movement, a script, costumes), I was thinking about what makes a discipline itself (what is theater, what is music, what is poetry?) and it seems

to me that music is mostly a way of moving through time, maybe at its best stopping or reorganizing time. What is your relationship to time in poetry?

EM: Sometimes the effects of travel on my work are more present once I'm back home, but the destabilizing is so important, the shaken perspective. I often think of the form of poetry as a space/time axis, often also an I/you axis. A poem moves both vertically and horizontally. Really all poems are three-dimensional, the third dimension being the voice. Less abstractly, poetry is all about rhythm and cadence (whether metrical or free verse). And rhythm is time plus stress, I guess? It has to fail though, just as time fails us. We exist in it until we don't. That's actually as freeing as it is terrifying. Is music about the failure of something? Do you believe in failure?

LK: First I agree that the best poems/music/everything contain or express a both-ness, the roundness of something. And failure has to be part of that, or maybe the purpose of making or experiencing art is for those moments of balance, where you can see both sides of the hill, the pain and the beauty etc. There is a particularly transient quality that music has, helps you realize time as it passes, even especially when you miss it. I think I generally have more trouble missing a poem as it goes by.

EM We've talked a lot about the mind, but your body seems to be an important part of your work as an artist: movement, physical interaction, play. What relationship do you have to your body as an artist? Is it a constant ingredient you're aware of?

LK: I'm glad you bring up bodies — I think it's all more body than mind for me anyway. That's partly why I keep talking about space when I talk about music. But, it's been interesting to work with some instruments that are not body at all — synthesizers are like little brains that you poke and they make sound. The cello is a body, and we dance together. I have been playing a lot of kazoo, which is a body because it vibrates, and talks back to me. The radio, which I use as an instrument, is a body, maybe because it contains human voices, and this element of chance.

About synthesizers — I was talking to a friend recently who makes very physical music, very deep music, and he uses synthesizers sometimes. I asked him how he keeps the flesh in them, the humanness, and he said something like, the synth wants to be a human. So you try to coax it out, you try to let it be more imperfect than it can on its own. I've been playing this little keyboard with my feet while I play cello, banging on the keys. It starts to bring out the body.

EM: Letting it be more imperfect than it can on its own, yes.

As a kid were you troubled by the idea that any choice you make means everything that happens afterward is different? It's silly and universal but that element of will in the midst of randomness seems to have a real relation to what we were talking about with lowercase unknown and not forcing things, too.

LK: Yes I absolutely had that fear! And I think also the fear of non-choice. Like I often forgot that I could choose things and would be afraid that, for example, a friendship would die. Instead of realizing that I had agency in things like that. I used to have a reoccurring dream that I was marrying the wrong person, usually not someone that I actually had any romantic relation to. I think it was a dream about being afraid to make a wrong choice — because in the dream I could never take it back, it was somehow a forever thing that couldn't be changed.

EM: O (my son) sometimes has trouble making choices or adjusting to a change of plans (he's 4) so we try to limit things to plan A and plan B. Now whenever he wants to do something he chooses a backup plan he also wants to do, or most recently we took him for ice cream and he announced unprompted that his plan A was cookies and cream and his plan B was rainbow sherbet. I think he enjoys this because he imaginatively gets to consume both. Either actual flavor is probably great, of course, but it also ends, and maybe it's nice to never be completely satisfied. Is this why we make things, to relive the moment a different way, to have a double scoop?

LK: Oh I love that, in all its futility – as though plans A-Z could ever be what we expect or imagine. Sometimes I want everything to be in piles like that though. So I can mourn them, or have joy in them. But also I remember when I realized that you can't have a favorite color because they only look good next to each other. A sunset, or the blue of water and the grey of concrete, soup in a bowl.