An Interview with American Poet Laressa Dickey

Dr Caroline Edwards
Born in Tennessee in 1973, Laressa Dickey grew up on a tobacco farm and currently lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota with her partner—the playwright and author Ali Gharavi. In addition to writing and teaching poetry, Dickey is a dancer and the suggestion of improvised movement and choreography can visibly be felt in the rhythms, patterns and repetitions she crafts in her poetry. Her search for new ways of poetic expression has seen Dickey write in the form of the prose poem, as well as incorporating nonverbal methods of communication into the fabric and process of her work: including dance practices, painting and horticultural techniques. We caught up with her for a chat about her forthcoming workshops at I am an American Poet. This is American Poetry.

What is your understanding of American poetry in its broadest sense? How do you feel your writing takes part in that?

I'm not an expert on American poetry, but I'd say two aspects that come to mind are size of voice and sense of place. I grew up reading Emily Dickinson—thanks to my mother who gave me a book of her poems for my 10th birthday. In a broad sense, for me, the voice of American poetry ranges from Dickinson's quiet, "nobody" voice to Whitman's "let me take up all the space" voice. You realize this is a gross generalization. Somehow voice and place/space are related. But it's possible this connection is also true in other countries. Turns out I'm not an expert on those either.

Give a general overview of your work. What are your main concerns? What images do you find yourself using over and over?

My concerns are myriad, and they are interwoven: place, land, farming, familial relationships, migration, internal and external boundaries, land rights, movement, gesture, the energy of the line or phrase, travel, foreignness—more specifically, I return to tobacco leaves, the body, bones, hands, feet, various bits of conversation or story, memory carried inside us, misunderstanding, mishearing, wilderness, magnolia, the smell of hickory trees, clicking joints. Things like that.

How does your regional or local identity feed into your writing? (Or not?)

I grew up in Tennessee. The influence of that place in my work is large but not overwhelming, I hope. I am not convinced my poems are necessarily Southern. Some of the images may be—tobacco harvest, for example. I have noticed Southern writers tend to use the past perfect progressive tense—which emphasizes the duration of an event, and I find myself unconsciously doing that in first drafts and then editing it out. I think it must be the way we tell stories...using language to convey a continuous action in the past.

Who do you think your audience is, and why?

Good question. It depends. I'm still experimenting a lot with style and form, so sometimes my audience is other poets, and sometimes, it's the folks I grew up knowing in Campbellsville, TN. All this to say, I'm not sure what to tell you. What I know for sure is that my thoughts about my audience have changed since I began teaching poetry and movement to young people and adults with disabilities. In those classes, we write group poems, taking ideas and lines from every participant and creating a poem together. Then we take that poem and make it into a dance, or a song. The poem is not an end in itself; it is integral in the process to finding a way to express what is inside us.

What interests you about the prose poem, and why? Can you recommend any particular practitioners of the form?

The prose poem is a lovely little animal. It can be very wry and very fast moving. As a reader, you are moving moving through the prose and KAPOW!, there's the poem punching you in the gut. Lyn Hejinian's My Life catapulted me into prose poem reading and writing. There's Baudelaire. Rimbaud. Charles Simic is well known for prose poems, what with the Pulitzer Prize for The World Doesn't End. Gary Young's prose poems will break your heart. The Turkish poet Ílhan Berk. Ray Gonzalez. Kathleen Jesme's The Plum-Stone Game. Stephanie Johnson also writes a mean prose poem.

Who are your favourite poets writing now, and what do you admire about their work?

How do you understand your own relationship to the speakers in your poems? Are these speakers specifically American? Is that even something you consider?

Maybe I’m naïve, but I don’t want the speakers in my poems to be specifically American. I’m trying to find other ways into language and expression—outside of culture, if that’s possible—which is why other forms, such as dance or painting or gardening, are really useful for my process. I love nonverbal communication and wish I could write poems using it alone. I also purposely find and study the work of international poets (in translation, mostly). Last year, I was really taken with İlhan Berk’s work. While visiting Istanbul, a bookshop keeper recommended him, but said he didn’t like him because his poems were too opaque and nonlinear. I found A Leaf About to Fall really fascinating, and I did all sorts of emulation experiments trying to figure out what his poems were doing.

How does your work as a dancer affect your life as a writer? Does one practice change the other?

I think a lot about patterns, movement, and repetition. How the energy of a line flows. Whether the lines gesture or pause. How sounds accrete. I would like to direct mini dances on paper. Writing a poem from watching improvised movement is one of my favorite exercises.

What are you looking forward to about your four days in the UK?

Being with poets, being with poets with different concerns, being with poets and people with different ideas and images. I am interested in how we see the world uniquely or differently. I love listening to an English accent (she says, unapologetically). I’m looking forward to fish and chips. I’m looking forward to the English summer.

What is your approach to teaching, and what will your workshops be like?

Tactile, experiential, meditative. I’m really convinced that stimulating other senses is a fast track to the mind/body working at a deeper level in the poems. I hope they are playful workshops. You’ll notice there’s a repeating trope here: I am not an expert. These workshops are really places to explore ideas and create experiences and wisdom together; hopefully we will write a few poems in the process. I’m teaching these things because I too want to know about the mystery of poems.