

Get to Know Ada Limón

by Abby Wheeler

Welcome to our monthly series, *Get to Know!* Here, we'll turn the spotlight on contemporary Black and Brown poets and writers, with the goal of amplifying under-represented voices in literature. These writers' books are currently available in the Women Writing for (a) Change library.



Photo by Lucas Marquardt, courtesy of www.adalimon.com

Ada Limón's most recent, award-winning collection, *The Carrying*, begins with "A Name":

When Eve walked among
the animals and named them—
nightingale, red-shouldered hawk,
fiddler crab, fallow deer—
I wonder if she ever wanted
them to speak back, looked into
their wide wonderful eyes and
whispered, *Name me, name me.*

This poem very nearly encapsulates the essence of Limón's writing: womanhood; the desire to be seen; the sense of longing, grief; a kinship not just with nature, but with the reader; and a playful, inviting curiosity and appreciation.

Which is not easy to do in a book—her fifth—that largely deals with personal struggles both physical and otherwise: infertility, chronic pain, personal identity as a wife and child-free/child-less woman.

But Limón, born in California and now living just down the road in Lexington, KY, succeeds in part because she does not presume to have answers. Rather, she writes towards her questions. In [The Poetry of Perseverance: An Interview With Ada Limón](#), she explains, "I feel like some part of me has lost interest in play, in poetry for the sake of play, and now I want only to get to the root of things. This book feels driven by a serious engine... I suppose the main thing that I mean by "the root of things" is that I am most interested in the process of writing poems as questions, as a troubling of the water, sending down the echo sounder and seeing what comes back."

The title poem, "Carrying," demonstrates as much:

It's Kentucky, late fall, and any / mare worth her
salt is carrying the next / potential stakes winner.
Ours, her coat / thicker with the season's muck,
leans against / the black fence and this image is
heavy / within me. How my own body, empty, /
clean of secrets, knows how to carry her, / knows
we were all meant for something.

Part of the genius of Limón's poetry is that her speaker's quite specific challenges become universal; these poems are for everyone. In the same interview, she says, "I don't know if I have an ideal reader, but I know that with *The Carrying*, I'm writing for someone who perhaps has gone through the same things as I have, or similar things. Perhaps the older you get, you realize that so many people are suffering in so many ways and you get tired of privileging your own pain, or imagining your own isolation. I suppose, if this book is for anyone, it's for those who have both struggled and searched for a way back into the world."

While not all of us will ask what our bodies may or may not carry, our place in the world is almost certainly a relatable exploration. And yet, there is a singular comfort in knowing that someone else shares your particular pain. She goes on, "I think poetry is a way of carrying grief, but it's also a way of putting it somewhere so I don't always have to heave it onto my back or in my body. The more I put grief in a poem, the more I am able to move freely through the world because I have named it, spoken it, and thrown it out into the sky... The thing that I've found that helps is knowing we are all in this, someone has gone or is going through the

same thing... As James Baldwin said, ‘You think your pain and heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, and then you read.’”

It would be incorrect and unfair, though, to focus only on the suffering of Limón’s poetry. In [*Bomb Magazine*](#), she acknowledges the power and necessity of joy: “It’s as important to infuse my poetry with joy as it is to infuse my life with joy. They are the same thing. My life. My poems. I lose joy sometimes. It makes me feel hopeless and it’s not a livable space. I need to point out the things that are good, that are worth living for, that make me laugh, the dog sleeping on my face in the morning, the smell of garlic and onions on the stove, the friend’s text that makes you laugh, the robin poking his head into the sprinkler, food and shelter, safety.”

Take, for example, “The Conditional,” from Limon’s book, *Bright Dead Things*:

Say tomorrow doesn’t come. / Say the moon becomes an icy pit. / Say the sweet-gum tree is petrified. / Say the sun’s a foul black tire fire. / Say the raccoon’s a hot tar stain. / Say the shirt’s plastic ditch-litter. / Say the kitchen’s a cow’s corpse. / Say we never get to see it: bright / future, stuck like a bum star, never / coming close, never dazzling. / Say we never meet her. Never him. / Say we spend our last moments staring / at each other, hands knotted together, / clutching the dog, watching the sky burn. / Say, *It doesn’t matter*. Say, *That would be / enough*. Say you’d still want this: us alive, / right here, feeling lucky.

Even when compelled by a shared grief to keep turning the pages of Limón’s poetry, one can’t help but feel lucky simply that her words exist to be received. In *Poets & Writers*, she says, “on a good day, I just work on being a real person who wants to make real living things and give them to the world.”

Ada Limón, a current Guggenheim fellow, is the author of five poetry collections, including *The Carrying*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry. Her fourth book, *Bright Dead Things*, was named a finalist for the National Book Award, a finalist for the Kingsley Tufts

Poetry Award, and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She serves on the faculty of Queens University of Charlotte Low Residency M.F.A program and lives in Lexington, Kentucky.

More information can be found here:
www.adalimon.com

[Poetry Unbound](#): Pádraig Ó Tuama discusses Ada’s poem, “Wonder Woman,” and asks, “What poems or stories bring you strength?”

[Poetry Foundation VS Podcast](#): Ada talks about resisting epiphany and writing towards the unknown, with hosts Franny Choi and Danez Smith. Plus: Cardinal happy hour!

[Aspen Words Presents](#): Ada in conversation with Jericho Brown. The pair discusses the function of poetry in their lives, writing about personal topics, and more.

[Hugo House Word Works](#): Ada’s gorgeous deep dive into “Poetry as Elegy”