

Aimee Nezhukumatathil: A Practice of Wonder

Writer Aimee Nezhukumatathil on staying curious about the world around her



Aimee Nezhukumatathil writes with a distinct kind of wonder that invites readers to look closer and listen longer to the world around them teeming with life. In this conversation, she reflects on what it means to stay astonished, her upcoming book of poetry *Night Owl*, and the mesmerizing migration of hummingbirds.

Jessica Gomez Ferrer: Your poems often evoke a deep sense of wonder with the natural world. How did your upbringing shape your relationship to nature and the language you use to describe it?

Aimee Nezhukumatathil: Oh, I love this question. I was not one of those writers whose parents doted on them and wrote down everything they said, like, "Oh, this is going to be a poem," or something like that. It was quite the opposite — I say that laughing — my parents often left me alone outdoors or in the science section of our local library.

I consider my parents naturalists as well. We moved around a lot, but before they would leave me alone, they would make sure that I knew my surroundings always, whether it be Kansas, or Iowa, or Arizona. They taught me the names of different cacti, how to identify stars wherever I was, the different flowers, trees, and what bird songs were around just by hearing them. I think that is so special, looking back on it, because my parents are immigrants and they made it a point to get to know each part of this country that didn't always love them back. But they loved it so much and would say, "Look at this catalpa tree! Look at this ocotillo cactus." I never really felt lonesome, even though I was often alone or with my friends, I guess. It was the '80s, so we were just out all day long.

My vocabulary, for as long as I can remember, has been filled with words from science and the outdoors. I always say Mother Nature is the best poet. All I'm doing is taking notes. Oftentimes I feel the vocabulary from nature and science are so much more suited to describe human emotions and feelings. So far it's worked.

Jessica: When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

Aimee: I was always doodling, drawing, and journaling. I had little diary entries that I would never consider poems by any means. I did not know there were any living poets until my junior year of college. I knew Emily Dickinson, I knew Robert Frost, and I could appreciate them, but I fell in love with poetry by reading living poets like Rita Dove, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Lucille Clifton at the time. Those were the poets that electrified me. When I found out there were classes that could help you write your own poems, again, it wasn't until late in my college life, but junior year is when I said, "This is it for me. I'll do whatever it takes as long as I can still find time to write."

Jessica: How do you maintain a practice of astonishment and wonder today?

Aimee: All you need to do is open up your laptop and see the trash fire of events on the news. One of my favorite memes is that little cartoon dog who's sitting on a chair drinking a cup of coffee and there's flames all around. The caption is like, "This is fine," while they drink coffee. That's what I feel like any given day. I say that not to make light of what's going on, but to affirm wonder is absolutely a practice. It doesn't mean putting your head in the sand and not paying attention, but I feel like on those days where I just want to stay covered up in my weighted blanket, there's always a curiosity about how things work, different types of animals, or different ways of growing plants. There are so many things that I'm curious about that there hasn't been an end point. I've never reached a day where I've thought, "Okay, that's it. I've done all the reading or learning about this planet possible."

So, to me, wonder is curiosity with a smile: what is that knowledge that you just delight in learning? Once you get your first couple of answers, it becomes contagious. You want to share it with someone. That sharing begets more curiosity. When we lose wonder, we lose the ability to imagine lives besides our own. So even on the darkest days, I'm always still curious. How exactly is the Cock's Comb Flower making an extra wrinkle if I put it in this kind of light? That's a

plant that I'm growing in my garden. How exactly can I harvest the seeds from my persimmon tree so that I can have a bunch of seedlings to give out at my next dinner party? Things like that. I never understand the people who are bored. I don't get it. I cannot relate. I cannot understand not being curious about things. I get the question, for sure, but I think the easy answer is I saw it modeled with my parents, and they gave me access to books. So it is an endless source of not just entertainment, but food. It's food for my heart.

Jessica: You also have a new book of poetry coming out next spring. Could you talk about what *Night Owl* is about and how it's an outgrowth of your previous work?

Aimee: This is my first collection of poems since 2018. I've been in essay mode for a while so I'm very excited. It'll be out in March 2026 with Ecco. It whips up into a controlled frenzy all of the astonishment, wonder, grief, and overwhelming love I have for the planet and for my beloveds. I'm a mother of two teen boys, and one of them became an adult and went off to college in the course of writing this book, so that is covered there, too.

I don't know how other people do it, but for me, I always write double or triple of what I need, and then I cull back. *Night Owl* is the greatest hits of eight years. There were over 200 poems. I whittled it down to around sixty-five. How I did that is I wanted to encompass a couple of things. I wanted to include astonishment and wonder with the night sky. I wanted to showcase that the night is not something to be afraid of, that it could be a place of transformation and wonder. That's what the ancient Greeks viewed it as before it became associated with criminal activity and scariness. It was actually a place where magic happens.

My poems in *Night Owl* circle around what it means to be a woman, a mother, a daughter, and someone who loves the outdoors, especially at night. I also never saw too many poems about the outdoors featuring a mother who actually enjoys spending time with their children and/or with their husband. I want there to be something positive shown about these relationships. We see so often publishers churn out these books featuring awful family members, and those are important, but it's also important to show goodness, happiness, and contentment as well. The USA Fellowship has been so instrumental in giving that extra bit of push and time to be able to compile these together. I work in a different mindset with essays. With poems, I need so much more concentration. It's a different way of thinking about the world as I'm putting it together. Not to be too precious or anything, that's just how I work. I work a lot slower with poems.

Jessica: What's currently feeding your creative practice?

Aimee: Well, I'm here coming to you from Oxford, Mississippi. It is the frenzied hummingbird season right now. In case you don't know, this northern part of Mississippi is the last rest stop for all the eastern seaboard of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. It's the last chance to frenzy, drink up, and gain as much weight as possible to make this giant trip across the Gulf of Mexico and into Central America. Oxford is the edge of it. The real nucleus of where the hummingbirds are

frenzying is about forty minutes away in a place called Holly Springs. It's hummingbird central there.

We have about five feeders. What's filling me up is watching them frenzy and be possessive of certain feeders, seeing battles, and maybe some courting dances. If you haven't seen more than one hummingbird at a time, let alone twelve or thirteen, it's astonishing. I was just doing that this morning, actually. I was having a cup of coffee; I have a lot of grading to do, but I got lost in observing the hummingbirds.