

“The Subconscious Repository of Weird Things: A Conversation with Ananda Lima”
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In Ananda Lima’s debut collection *Mother/land*, language crosses cultural landscapes effortlessly, full of the musical rhythms and family lore that have shaped the poet’s life. Lima plaits English and her native Portuguese in luscious verses that span a range of emotions as she tells us about the terrors and joys of motherhood, her new life in the United States, and being a human in a world that is slipping through our fingers.

Mother/land (Black Lawrence Press, 2021) won the Hudson Prize and was shortlisted for the *Chicago Review of Books* CHIRBy Awards. Lima is also the author of four chapbooks: *Vigil* (Get Fresh Books, 2021); *Tropicália* (Newfound, 2021), winner of the Newfound Prose Prize; *Amblyopia* (Bull City Press, 2020); and *Translation* (Paper Nautilus, 2019), winner of the Vella Chapbook Prize. Her work has appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Poets.org*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *Gulf Coast*, *Colorado Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Pleiades*, and elsewhere. Lima has written in multiple genres, recently winning the inaugural Work-In-Progress Fellowship by Latinx-in-Publishing, sponsored by Macmillan Publishers, for her short story collection-in-progress.

During our conversation this winter, Lima and I discussed the magic that occurs when trusting the writing process, why Lima finds it difficult to write nonfiction, and what knowledge motherhood has brought her.

The Rumpus: What struck me so much about *Mother/land* was this hovering feeling of never being grounded. That seems to resonate with your experience as an immigrant, the idea that the place where you are living is not completely your home, and amplifies what so many of us have felt during the pandemic. Putting together a collection amid such turbulence seems like a feat. How did you balance those emotions and create something concrete?

Ananda Lima: One thing that really helped me, and I think this is common for many first collections, is that I wrote over such a long period of time that I had the opportunity to do a lot of the work before COVID-19 happened. My next collection will definitely be more affected by this time. There was some work that I did at the end on *Mother/land* during the pandemic that actually helped me bridge this book and what I’m currently working on. But *Mother/land* did capture a lot of emotions that are similar to what I’ve felt during the pandemic.

Rumpus: I’m sure it brings such a different context to look at it from this present moment. It’s probably not a happy headspace to be connecting that time to your previous work.

Lima: It's good in the way that having things that bother you put into words helps. It gives understanding, and also a way to put it away for a little bit. The thing itself might not be so happy, but it's always good to just have it said. Sometimes it's nice to have it said by your own self, sometimes by someone else, because it's like, "Oh yes, now I have words."

Rumpus: You have your MFA in fiction, and I'm curious about the conversation that happens internally, whether to write poetry or fiction. Is poetry's power for you that you can be more declarative and, in that way, capture and obtain perspective?

Lima: I love what you said about being declarative. I can't write nonfiction, though I'm so admiring of those who do. I find it very hard. Fiction is also challenging for me, and I have to be in a very specific headspace. Poetry allows me to say the thing without a million conjectures. It leaves a lot of space and allows words to resonate and connect without me having to take you there. There are amazing people who write nonfiction and make all this magic, but for me, it's very hard to say something in prose and it feels true, because almost nothing is just that. With poetry, I can say it, and because of the conventions of poetry, I can say things that are understood as a gate to the truth. It's a declarative statement, but there's so much space and connection reverberating throughout the poem. Because you're not expected to take the reader where you want them to go so precisely, I can say something and feel reassured that all the other things around it have space to happen in the reader's mind. I feel much more comfortable in poetry, especially with things that are bigger and have many faces, though I love reading prose.

Rumpus: I appreciate your view on poetry and the idea of doing so much work with such a small amount of words, or, like you said, more space. I'm wondering about how that pertains to your collection, which is so varied, full of poems that are descriptive and detailed with luscious language, as well as those with sparser language that play more with form. How do you decide the style of your poems?

Lima: Something I find lovely about writing poetry is that we have more space for that. When I'm writing, I don't have any sort of verbal thought. It's kind of like I have an itch about something. Sometimes a poem is started by a very specific physical thing that I saw or a tiny occurrence and if I'm more interested in the visual aspect of that thing, the seed of the poem begins that way. Sometimes it's a more formal itch. With translation poems, the ones that use repeating forms, for example, the form was there very early and it was very helpful in generating the poem. It's not a super conscious process, especially when it begins. After I have maybe four or five lines, I'm more conscious, and can say, "Oh, this is that type of poem for me," and then they do feel different.

The fun I have when I'm writing is a different kind of fun. After I have a few poems, especially the formal ones, I realize it would be neat to have two of these with the same structure. Or to do something that is not this form but is doing something that this poem is doing in a different way. By the time I had a few bilingual poems, I thought I should try more on that level. Image, content, and form float around in my head for a while. For example, the idea of binocular vision

in humans: Goats have eyes on the side, lions have eyes facing the front. So front-facing eyes, like ours, are for predators. That was bugging me for such a long time, months, years. I wrote so many poems where it didn't come up, but that was what I was thinking about before I started. When I sit down to write, I'm not thinking, "I'm going to write about this today," but many times, what has been floating around for months manifests. It's kind of mysterious.

Rumpus: When you sit down to write, do you have an idea of what you're writing that day?

Lima: Most often, I don't know what I'm going to do, but I have the subconscious repository of weird things floating around in my head. Sometimes, I have a very precise feeling, like, I don't know what this is. I don't have words, but it's going to be in this poem. It's not that I don't think on a high-level about my work—I do—just not when I'm writing. When I'm taking walks, that's when I have more big-picture thoughts.

Revision for me happens when I'm procrastinating, when I'm nervous and I think I have nothing, or when I have a submission deadline. Writers are so different in terms of what motivates them, and I'm very lucky to be positively motivated. If something is scaring me, I shut down. If I want to submit to a place that is amazing, I get excited. I think, "I'm going to send my little poem and no one's going to know if they reject me." That really works for me. Often, the deadline goes by and I haven't submitted my work, but at least I've revised it. With revision, I can work in place more easily. I'm much more productive during the days when I do feel like I have something to write, but it's good for me to write when I don't feel like I have something to write, too.

Rumpus: In terms of your process, do you find you can get a poem where you need it to be in a couple of drafts, or do you come back to it months later?

Lima: Both happen. It really depends. I do have some that come out so close and some of them take a long time. Especially because of my kid, I've learned to be a big note taker. Sometimes I work on a poem for a long time without knowing it's a poem; I'm just taking notes. Then I'll look at notes from different days and realize, "Oh, they actually belong together! I was actually working on a single poem!" When it's like that, it feels very fast, but that's just because the realization came late. I have also found that I need a lot of space between drafts. I'll write a poem and it just doesn't feel right. Then I take a break, I'll come back to it in a month. Sometimes the notes I took in between help me change it.

Rumpus: It sounds like a big part of it for you is trusting the process.

Lima: Yes. A lot of the work I really end up liking happens like that. You know how people talk about having a dream after which they wake up and write? That's happened to me a couple of times and it was just magical. I think I've also had images and words floating around for a while.

I have to figure it out in my own way. Poetry makes it easier because it is not as commercial. You'll have a small audience, but you'll have more space. You have more freedom.

Rumpus: Are there constraints, theoretically? Guidelines or rules that shape your work? How do you view your dual-language poems, the ones that blend English and Portuguese?

Lima: The form or constraints are a little bit like modes you can build around. I don't write in form for a lot of the time, but constraints are very helpful for particular scenarios. One is where the excitement comes from the form; another is when you get stuck. Just having the form guide you, to say, "I need a line, and then I need a line over here that does this." It's one small task at a time, even if the whole thing is big. Or when you're doing a specific project, like if you have a recurring theme that you want to connect. It's surprising and fascinating how the form helps you generate. I've also had many times when I intended to write in a form but ended up not. But it still got me to write a new poem.

Rumpus: Are there any poems in *Mother/land* where that happened?

Lima: "[Translation](#)" and "[Moving Sale](#)" are two. Some of the others aren't in a certain repeating form, but they have the Nathaniel Mackey-inspired aspect where you have a coda, and one word hangs on a separate line. When you do that, you have a kind of imposed line break, which is the same thing that happens in a traditional form where there's a certain number of beats before a line break. For me, the line break is very productive. It gives all these resonant readings that are not the main reading that you have. The coda to me is so generous, because the lonely word hanging out there really helps me with the next line and also the rhythm of the poem. It has a beat almost like running, *dum dum, dum dum*.

Rumpus: Along with Nathaniel Mackey, who do you consider your influences?

Lima: Like the ideas that float in my mind, it's so hard to keep track. Except for the ones whose poems I write after. Some of the influences, like the musician Caetano Veloso, are such a big part of my life, and because the theme of the book and the themes of his lyrics connect very well, that was very strong when I was writing that book. Now that I'm not writing it any longer, I'm sure he's still a huge influence, but it's not as present at the forefront. A lot of my teachers—Rigoberto González, Cathy Park Hong. I love reading Erika Sánchez. I love reading the work of children of immigrants—the person who has the parent who came to the US, who would be in the same position as my son. It's such a different perspective from mine. Because I was writing so much from my perspective and I didn't want to write from his perspective, it was lovely to have that as a counterpoint.

Rumpus: Hearing you talk about modes and codas, I can see that music is such a huge part of your work.

Lima: In Brazil, music was how a lot of people got poetry, even if they didn't read poetry. The music that I grew up with has gorgeous lyrics. Since it was popular music, those musicians would perform on TV, and it was very accessible to everyone. I especially loved the music from the 1960s and 70s, which was still popular during my childhood in the 80s and 90s. Some of it was written during the dictatorship, and there is some trickery, or double meaning and encoding to the words. Because I went to school as the country came out of the dictatorship, we studied these songs. We analyzed the lyrics for what they could mean. It was a very present part of my discovery of loving words. I also think the rhythms gave me an understanding of the space created for non-verbal beauty and meaning. Just because a musician isn't using lyrics doesn't mean they aren't saying something beautiful and true.

Rumpus: I love how the tension of the emotions comes through in your collection, so deftly and clearly. As rewarding as it is to be vulnerable, I can imagine that it would also be quite difficult. What is the process of writing through those emotions like for you?

Lima: Poetry lets you say the thing and gives you the space for you to understand it. It allows you to discover what you are feeling as you put it down, which is nice because then you didn't even have as much time to be afraid of the emotion behind it. It helps sometimes that I don't always know what is going to come out. Those poetic discoveries are very helpful to keep me going. Since I've gone through bouts of not writing, now I'm less anxious when it happens because I'm like, "No, no, it's going to come back, it's fine." And once it happens again, it's so helpful to keep you coming for more.

Rumpus: That's the beauty of maturity and being committed to writing for years. You can have more faith. I wonder about that with you and motherhood. I'm not a mom, but it does seem like there's an inherent faith you have to have as a mother.

Lima: Oh yes. As a mom and a writer, there's a connection between writing and being the person who has to prepare the meal and has to do stuff because if you don't, everything is going to fall apart. You don't think you can do it, but then you do, even though it's hard. That part of motherhood helped me not be too precious about how I write and the results. So did the scattering of time, of having very random times to write. Being a parent of a very young child, that was very present. Now, my son is ten and it's so much easier. Now he reads a book or whatever. Many other things give you that experience, too, like if you work a weird job or you're just overwhelmed with life. Some days I would just write a two-line note that wasn't verses or anything and that was fine. Looking back, I realize, "Oh, that was helpful, that was productive."

Rumpus: When you are writing, how do you handle linking your work to issues facing the world today?

Lima: I love people who choose, deliberately, to write about climate or refugees. I love work that's very explicit. Subtlety is lovely, but there's such a place for not being subtle as well. I have

a very hard time doing that. It's somewhat related to my problem with writing nonfiction. All of a sudden, it feels like I have to be the authority, and I feel a lot of pressure about whether I'm up to the task. Instead, I have to think about things as a human first, someone who just happens to write. I just write about stuff that I feel more authoritative about, which is usually what's affecting me directly on a personal level. Many times, those bigger themes come up, because I think about them a lot. Then I'm comfortable with it because it's just part of the mass of things being said. In order for me to write about them, I have to think, "This is just my poem that I am writing."