

“The Poems Are a Part of How I’m Living: A Conversation with Edgar Kunz”

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In his latest collection, *Fixer* (Harper Collins), poet Edgar Kunz seeks answers to questions about the paradoxes of life: can we split grief and joy, or our worth from work of daily survival? Is it possible to hold moments of true love and abject sorrow in the same hand? Kunz’s first collection, *Tap Out* (Harper Collins, 2019), introduced readers to his early years in New England, his journey to understand his working-poor family, and his poetic voice, simultaneously gritty and lyrically narrative. *Fixer* takes us even deeper, into the untimely death of his father, the labor that late capitalism requires, and the wonder of falling in love.

Kunz is a former Wallace Stegner fellow at Stanford. His work has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Academy of American Poets and has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *Poetry*. He teaches at Goucher College in Maryland, of which he is an alum.

Kunz and I had a wondrous in-person conversation in Baltimore, where we discussed the beauty of couplets, the brilliance of Natasha Trethewey, and why his whole collection builds to a poem about an ugly bird in Oakland.

The Rumpus: *Fixer* follows closely on the heels of your first collection, *Tap Out*, which came out in 2019. How did your second collection come about?

Edgar Kunz: I never set out to write a second book. I had a long interim period where I was doing very little writing and feeling awful about it. I was giving myself these pep talks, like “Listen, it’s fine. You’re resting. You’re gathering the necessary materials. You’re storing up your energies, and then a book will happen.” I don’t know if I really believed it. Mostly I was like, “You’re lazy. You’re not working hard enough. You need to get your shoulder to the wheel.”

Then my sweetheart and I were house-sitting for a friend in Vermont in early 2022, and poems just started coming out of me. I wrote the first one about my brother and I breaking into my dad’s apartment with the maintenance guy of the building after our dad died. I had that line of dialogue in my head: “Not my first rodeo,” and then, there was a poem—eighteen lines, nine couplets. I felt this electricity, like, “Ah, I bet there are more of these!” I wrote the whole middle section of *Fixer* in about a week. Once I started writing, I realized I had a subject, and I’d been avoiding

this subject for some time. I felt a kind of freedom I've never felt writing before. I remember thinking, "Well I'm just cranking out these little guys and it's fun and they seem to be cohering, and—oh, there's one that didn't really work. No worries, toss it out and keep going." There's this great [Eamon Grennan poem](#) where a bird is snatched up by a larger bird and carried off. That's what it felt like. Writing is hard and slow, and everybody knows that. But in short bursts, it does happen. It's magic.

Rumpus: You deal with heavy subjects in this collection, like the death of your father, the hustle of capitalism, and low-wage jobs. Do you begin writing your poems by considering the subject matter?

Kunz: Every time I try to write a poem about a big subject, it's a bad poem. I can't go in knowing too much about what it's going to be about. This is tough because I have a lot to say about the state of the country and the world. Because my first book was translated into Italian, a newspaper in Italy recently asked me what I thought about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. What a relief to write straightforwardly, with moral clarity! I would love to be able to write poems that are a little more willful or didactic, poems that try to explain or get at the heart of something.

The only way I've found, to write poems that are any good at all, is to know as little as possible about where they're going. That's a hard lesson for me to learn. I'm a project guy. I'm replacing all the upstairs doors in our house with other, marginally better doors. I'm spending time in the garden, measuring out the plots, thumbing in the seeds. Poetry is one place where that doesn't work for me. I've never been able to make any [poem] worthwhile by plotting it out and being methodical. I have to let the poem steer. It starts with an image or an idea or a little piece of language. Then I just try to see what line comes next and what line comes after that. It's like feeling your way in the dark.

Rumpus: Many of the poems in *Fixer* are written in couplets. How do you consider form in your work?

Kunz: Early on in my writing life, I fell in love with Natasha Trethewey's [Native Guard](#). She's amazing with the couplet, she's a wizard with the line break, and she's patient in how she constructs her poems. They're musical without feeling overwrought. I feel the same way about Claudia Emerson's collection [Late Wife](#). It was the first book I pulled off the shelf when I transferred from community college to Goucher, where I teach now. I had just started taking poetry more seriously, and I was discovering there was a contemporary scene—poets were alive and making poems. Those poets helped me beyond measure. I became obsessed with line breaks, what I could get the line to do, and what individual lines could do in isolation. The brain stalls out and gives you time to consider the paring that the poet has just made. What I love about both of those poets, too, is that their poems just happen to you. You're lost in the dream of the poem. That's something that I've been trying to do in my own work, where the reader of the poem doesn't feel like, "I'm reading a book of poems right now." Instead it's a wash of pure experience, a series of tiny pleasurable synapses firing.

Rumpus: Do you write your drafts in couplets?

Kunz: I do, sometimes. Sometimes I write in prose and break it up later, or I try out a six-syllable line or something. The poem eventually finds its shape through drafting and drafting, twenty, thirty, forty drafts, sometimes more. I'm not a high-volume writer. Most poems I start I either abandon early or turn into something I at least try to publish. I'm obsessive, and if I feel there's something there, I'll cancel everything, be late to everything. I shut myself away and work. In the times that I'm not working, I'm really *not* working. It's taken a long time to accept that about my process, to understand that it's not healthy for me to always be cranking at one hundred percent. I've internalized something about what work is. I'm sure that comes partly from growing up working class. The type of people I came of age around had demands from the systems they lived under: "Unless you're putting in your shift every day, you're useless." I'm having to unlearn some of that. It takes time.

Rumpus: You are frequently the speaker of the poems in *Fixer*, who seems to chronicle interstitial periods in your life, where you're in process of developing or on the way somewhere.

Kunz: I've always been interested in the in-between times. That weird directionless messiness, the undefinable period between departing and arriving. The period of life I dig into here was extremely painful and life-affirming and joyful to live through. Through trying to write about it, I can get at that simultaneity in a way that's not possible when you're living it.

Like most people, I'm unsparing of my own behavior. I judge my past self harshly. The poems help me to see that, for the most part, I'm just doing my best, even when my best isn't very good and I'm confused and flailing around. That has always been true for me in my work: writing poems is a chance for me to come to a more nuanced, empathetic view of other people and of myself. And those interstitial periods are so potent because you're unmoored, you're untethered from routine, from support.

Crisis is clarifying. Interviewers used to ask Jack Gilbert, "Why did you move to this isolated Greek island? Why do you live like this? Is it so you can write poems about it?" He found that line of thinking insane. He was just living the life that made sense to him and writing poems that felt urgent. I feel the same way. I'm not mining my life for poems. The poems are a part of how I'm living.

Even more so than in my first book, the speaker of the poems in this book is me. I'm coming in after an irreparable loss, to bear witness and try to make sense of it.

Rumpus: In that way, you inhabit the title, as the one who has come in to clean up or put it all back together, but we also learn that your dad was also a tinkerer, another "fixer." Your brothers

have a role in this collection as well, especially the poem about the last time your brother saw your father alive. What was it like to showcase your family this way?

Kunz: My brothers are amazing. It has always bummed me out that they didn't get a lot of airtime in the first book. In this one, they get to talk more, and they give a lot of life and energy to the poems. The section you're talking about starts with, "René and I were doing some limb work." I've never told anyone this, officially, but my brother, Noah, spoke that poem to me over the phone. I was in Vermont, in the thick of it. I texted him, "Do you have a minute? I've got some poems that feel pretty hot right now." I felt more like a journalist than I ever have. My brother fact-checked a couple of things about other sections, and then we got talking. I asked him about the last time he ever saw our dad. He said that poem out loud, almost verbatim. I was typing, typing, typing, and I said, "Wait. Stop. Can you say that last thing again?" It felt cosmic. It gives me chills to talk about.

Rumpus: In the middle section of the collection, you switch to a second-person point of view. What was behind that switch?

Kunz: That middle section is written to my dad, even though I didn't know that at the time. The poems are always smarter than us. Then you realize, "Oh right, that's what I was doing." Obviously I'm not expecting a response, but somehow it's important to reach out. To offer something, without the hope of being offered something in return, is important for my spirit, my well-being. That first poem I wrote in the collection came out in second person. I tried it in third and in first—as with most poems I write, I try it every way I can in terms of point of view, tense, lineation, and so on—and nothing felt as intimate as second person. It was like I was writing these little postcards to him. The poem is tucking the reader in really close and saying, "Stick with me, I'm taking you somewhere."

Rumpus: How did it feel to have your father and his death come through so strongly in this collection?

Kunz: After my first book, I wasn't going to write about my dad anymore. I was tired of going back to the same handful of subjects, the same colors on the palette. Working on the first book was like being in a small room and moving furniture around in the dark. I felt limited, hemmed in, because the book was so firmly established in my imagination. I wanted the second book to show my range, to be funny and tender, to get away from childhood, for my dad to have nothing to do with it. Then of course, who shows up? Our subjects are our subjects. We don't get to choose them. They choose us, and we hold on for dear life. So while this book is a big step forward for me, tonally and formally, it's also inevitably linked to the first book and to my life.

Rumpus: You also write about love in this collection. One of the poems that resonated most for me was the one that detailed what was going on in your life the day that your father died.

Kunz: I realized only after that, the poem [“Myth”](#) by Natasha Trethewey (from *Native Guard*) influenced that poem, especially her great first line: “I was asleep while you were dying.” In the deep recesses of my brain, it was churning the first line of my poem: “I think I was in California when you died”—it’s a mirror of that Trethewey line, and it took off from there.

In that poem, I got to describe a little bit of Katie’s and my life in California, which was such a weird mix of suffering and joy. We were newly in love, newly living together, just completely blissed out. We were also hustling for work, hustling for better rent, getting priced out by the relentless Bay Area market and having to compromise to make it work. We moved away and then came back to visit, to knock around with friends who still lived there, partying at our old spots. That’s when my dad died. It gets at something true about grief: it’s almost always accompanied by joy and by love.

Rumpus: Your poem “Night Heron” also digs into that territory.

Kunz: Yes! That poem is a shout-out to this sorta ugly bird that we used to see everywhere. We lived by Lake Merritt in Oakland, and it became kind of a symbol for us. At the end of that poem, K and I are walking around my mom’s basement, and she finds that Harry Belafonte record. She says a line from one of the songs: “Jump in the line, rock your body in time,” and I answer her—I sing back softly—“Okay, I believe you.” Katie’s own dad died when she was a teenager, also from depression, addiction, so she knew in a real way what I was going through. By saying that lyric, she was saying, “Join me here.” In this dancing, in the afterward. I was saying, “Okay, I trust you.” I feel like the whole book is just trying to get to that poem.

Rumpus: What does it mean for you to be a male poet writing about love, about deep emotions?

Kunz: I grew up as most boys do, internalizing a lot of toxic ideas about what it is to be a man, to become one, to maintain the image you’re given. What behaviors are allowed, what you’ll be scorned for, and so on. I was lucky to realize early in my life that the men I connected with best seemed completely unaffected by all of that—a teacher here, a friend’s dad there. They didn’t seem to be afraid of ridicule, and they carried themselves as if being a sensitive, kind, purposeful person was the most natural thing in the world, like it would be ridiculous to live any other way.

I’ve done plenty of toxically masculine things, and I’ve allowed myself to harbor all kinds of ideas that I understood later to be a product of an absurd, dangerous system. But I was lucky to have men in my life early on who were modeling something different for me, who allowed me to see another way. In writing this book, I wanted to try and do a very difficult thing, which is to talk about the fact that I’m in love, that I’m making a beautiful, equitable life with another human being, and to do that without fear of being called sentimental or corny. In a way, it’s easy for me to talk about damage. It’s much harder to talk about acceptance, healing.

Rumpus: What's next for you?

Kunz: I'm gearing up to go on tour with *Fixer*, both here in the United States and abroad. I've been telling people I'm writing a novel. I've written a handful of pages that may or may not be anything at all, but it just feels good to say it! I love fiction. I love reading novels. They're all about duration, losing time. The idea that I might try to do something like that is daunting and thrilling. The truth is I have a terrible attention span. Poems work so well for me because they're on one page. I hold them in my head all at once and I can make radical changes quickly. If I had to really sit down at the desk every day and work, I think I would revolt. I don't know if I have it in me. Maybe we'll find out.