

## POETRY MEDIA SERVICE

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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “so I could write the essay.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact [media@poetryfoundation.org](mailto:media@poetryfoundation.org) for the correct version.)

### UNPAVED TERRAIN

Poet Lucia Perillo talks about her poetry, her disability, and her changing relationship with nature.

By Maria McLeod

Poetry Media Service

Maria McLeod: Lucia, your background and early training doesn't include writing. I wonder, as someone who has taken a more nontraditional route, how did you enter the field?

Lucia Perrillo: In 1980, I had just gotten a job at the Denver Wildlife Research Center. I believe that place is closed now, but it was an animal damage control facility, meaning that it researched ways to kill animals to keep them from destroying livestock or agricultural crops.

We killed coyotes; we killed birds. I killed lots of things. So I graduated with this degree in wildlife biology to go off and study wildlife, and I end up killing wildlife. So it was really a weird time, a troubling year in my life.

But how I got into writing was this way: I was a single woman living in this strange city, and I didn't have any friends. I didn't want to go to a bar alone, but I discovered that I could go to plays alone, and it wasn't weird, or I could go to poetry readings alone. So, it was just a way to have places to go at night that would be safe. And that's how I came to poetry, too, by going to open mics, and just kind of stumbling into them, because it was something you could do.

Also, when I lived in Denver, I saw Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg read in Boulder. Ginsberg played with the band, and Gregory Corso's wife was drunk and got bounced from the bar. The whole thing was very surreal. I remember that Gregory Corso's wife

stood up on a chair and then started screaming, “Where’s mah man? Where’s mah man?” [laughter] And I remember that he said something about her. “My wife just got bounced!”

MM: When you left Denver, what did you do after that?

LP: I went to California in 1981. I got a job at the San Francisco Bay Wildlife Refuge. I did a variety of things, but I led a lot of nature walks around southern San Francisco Bay. Again, I didn’t know very many people. I lived in Palo Alto, and I was writing a lot, and one day I pedaled my bike over to this writing workshop at the local community college. I saw this man give a talk, and I don’t even remember what the talk was about, but he had a captivating presence. I learned that he was giving a class at San Jose State, a night class, a poetry-writing workshop. That was Bob Hass. So I went and enrolled in his workshop.

MM: When I read *Dangerous Life* [Perillo’s first book, published in 1989] again in preparation for this interview, I looked for repeated themes. In the end, I decided it was a book about victimization, about calling attention to the victimizers and the victim. What was that book about for you?

LP: I don’t know why I was so interested in victimization, or I felt that I had been victimized as a woman. Certainly I was a person of privilege. I’ve never been a victim of a violent crime. I’ve never been raped, never had an abortion. I mean, I’ve lived sort of in a bubble. Maybe I felt like I had to create that myth for myself, or these violent events, because I hadn’t had one. . . . But I will say that I became less interested in women’s issues when my identity as a woman was subsumed by my identity as a person who was sick. It was in ‘88 that I was diagnosed with MS [multiple sclerosis]. Then that identity overtook these earlier concerns because they paled. My earlier feminist concerns, my feelings of discrimination, were small potatoes compared to what I was up against subsequent to that. I acquired a new identity. Now, you know, I don’t even feel like a woman anymore. I don’t feel that’s my primary identity. It stopped being my concern. I felt that: Oh, I’m this other thing now.

MM: So in 1988, was *Dangerous Life* completed as a manuscript at the time you were diagnosed?

LP: It was already complete, and it was already in [with the publisher]. The funny thing is that it has an epigraph from Nietzsche at the beginning of the book, “I sometimes think that I lead a highly dangerous life since I’m one of those machines that can burst apart!” But when the book came out, Tess Gallagher pointed it out to me. She said, “Oh, you’ve got this epigraph. Were you already diagnosed with MS?” But no, the book was already created before that. So it was a little prophecy from Nietzsche.

MM: Your book of essays, *I’ve Heard the Vultures Singing: Field Notes on Poetry, Illness, and Nature*, was published by Trinity University Press in 2007. It seems that your work as a researcher is especially evident in that book. In fact, you mention conducting research in the essay “Knowledge Game: Gulls.” You call a person from Audubon and

you ask what kind of gulls you are seeing. But you also really study them, read about them. Can you tell me what brought this book of essays about for you?

LP: A friend of mine, a nonfiction writer and journalist, said, “Well, you should write about your life,” prose about my life. So I wrote some prose about my life. There was not too much to say about having a terrible disease. I hadn’t really figured out what I would say about it except it sucks, you know. But that’s not a very profound statement. So I decided that I would write about the kind of interactions you can still have with nature as a disabled person. It’s hard because you don’t have the ability to go on unpaved terrain anymore. I lost that thing that I really loved, and what could I still do? It was a way of making little projects for myself. I had to write the essays, so I had to go look at the gull so I could write the essay.

Maria McLeod is a Bellingham, Washington-based poet, freelance writer and documentarian. She authored a history of the Washington state Department of Ecology, which was published in 2005. This article first appeared on [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org). Learn more about Lucia Perillo, and her poetry, at [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).

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