



BARRELHOUSE PRESENTS THE AUTHORS OF ELJ EDITIONS: NINA BANNETT

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NINA BANNETT INTERVIEWED BY AMBER EDMONDSON

Last week, the literary community learned that small press publisher, ELJ Editions, is closing up shop. Barrelhouse wants to help make sure the voices of their authors are still being heard and so will be hosting interviews with ELJ authors on the blog for the next little while. Thanks for reading and buying and otherwise loving small press authors!

1. In what ways did your previous works prepare you to write *These Acts of Water*?

In 2011, I published my chapbook, *Lithium Witness*, with Finishing Line Press. About ten of these poems are also in *These Acts of Water*, but here, I was able to shape a longer narrative and include poems that touch on a wider range of events and emotions.

2. What is the origin story of *These Acts of Water*? What brought this collection to you?

These Acts of Water is autobiographical, and so I guess you could say my own life brought these poems to me. I have always written poetry, but I wrote only for me, as a private activity. I had no plans to publish my poems at all. When my mother passed away unexpectedly in 2004, I needed another way to handle my immense grief, and to capture the experiences she and I had been through in her struggle with mental illness. From that need came *Lithium Witness*. With *These Acts of Water*, I wanted to share more of my own story as the child of someone who is mentally ill, and part of that story is my experience with therapy, the layers of understanding that constitute healing.

3. You are a writer and a professor. How do these two parts of your life inform each other?

I think they inform each other more and more. My academic area of specialization is nineteenth and early twentieth-century American women writers, and a course I teach regularly is Introduction to Women Writers. In this course, we read fiction and poetry, and we explore themes that include the mind and body, voice and voicelessness, personal and public history, mother-daughter relationships, and the female artist. So I'm constantly reading and considering these themes in an academic context, and then again in a creative context when I write my poems.

4. The mother-daughter relationship is at once so universal and so personal, and it is much explored. What do you think makes it such a complex relationship?

Hard question. I guess my take on it is that the relationship is being formed before we are even born, and the mother/daughter dynamic involves so many conscious and unconscious thoughts, feelings, and actions.

5. What writers did you find most influential in developing your voice as a writer?

I've always loved poems by Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath because of their sparse imagery and mysterious language. More recently, poets whose work has helped shape my writing style are Rita Dove, Natasha Trethewey, and Frank Bidart. Dove and Trethewey have written many powerful poems about mothers and daughters, separation and reunion. Frank Bidart's existential poem "Writing Ellen West" was a real revelation for me, the connections he makes between his own mind and body to his mother's, and to Ellen West's.

6. *These Acts of Water* is such a tightly woven collection. What was your process for creating a collection with such interconnectedness?

Once I made the decision to bring together poems I had written on the mother/daughter relationship with poems about the patient/therapist relationship, I realized how much more I had to say about each, and the ways in which these relationships are interconnected.

7. What environment do you find you do your best work in?

I like to write at home, where it's quiet, especially if I'm drafting something new. Sometimes, I find time to revise or tweak a poem when I'm on campus, and those edits can actually be better because I don't wind up staring at the page for a long time.

8. What is the best and worst writing advice you have ever received?

I recently read Elizabeth Strout's novel *My Name is Lucy Barton*, and I was really struck by the advice on writing that one female character offers another: "You'll write your one story many ways. Don't ever worry about story. You only have one." This rings true for me; it's ok to spend a lifetime working with one central set of ideas.

The best advice I've gotten about publishing is from friends of mine who also write poetry: send out as much work as you can. Usually I would rather spend the limited time I have writing rather than submitting work, but I've realized that I can make time for both, and that getting more work published adds momentum to continue writing.

9. What do you plan for future projects?

Right now, I'm working on two different books of poems. The first, *If Friendship Were A Cathedral*, explores a close friendship between two women, the dynamic between them, and how this relationship

changes and collapses over a long period of time. I've had some poems from this project published in [the fem](#), [Silver Birch Press](#), [Snapdragon](#), and more are forthcoming in [Broad!](#)

Body and Eye returns to the themes I have written about in *These Acts of Water* but considers them differently. These poems are confessional but don't form a cohesive narrative the way that *These Acts of Water* does. They are poems that concern the mind and body, mothers and daughters, children and caretakers, the present and the past, poems that make connections between moments. Some poems from this project are featured in [Amygdala](#) and [Topology](#).

10. Do you have a current favorite genre to work in?

Poetry.

Amber Edmondson is a poet and book artist living in Upper Michigan whose work has appeared in publications such as *Autostraddle*, *Freeze Ray Poetry*, and *Menacing Hedge*. She is the author of two chapbooks: *Darling Girl* (dancing girl press) and *Lost Birds of the Iron Range* (Porkbelly Press).

Nina Bannett is department chair and associate professor of English at New York City College of Technology, City University of New York (CUNY). Her chapbook, *Lithium Witness*, was published by *Finishing Line Press* in 2011. Her poetry has also appeared in *Open Minds Quarterly*, *Bellevue Literary Review* and *CALYX*. For more information about *These Acts of Water* visit [here](#).

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