

An Interview with Elijah Burrell

by Lauren Davis



Elijah Burrell

At Bennington, Elijah Burrell was among the most genial of my peers. It became obvious, shortly after our introduction there, that he is a father. He has the demeanor of man who has been forced, by love, to remain open and receptive to every movement in his surroundings. This disposition proves itself in his poetry. I am honored to ask about his experience with the publication of his debut book. He is the author of *The Skin of the River* (Aldrich Press, 2014) and teaches creative writing and literature at Lincoln University. He holds an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars, where I first met him.

Lauren Davis: What was it like when the one-year anniversary of your debut poetry collection, *The Skin of the River* passed? How has your life changed after publication?

Elijah Burrell: I pick my daughters up from school every day. A few weeks back, a teacher came running out to the car and

told me my daughter had announced in class she wanted to write books like her dad. “Isn’t that wonderful?” she said. I smiled politely—that was a nice thing for her to have told me—and thanked her for making the effort to let me know. As we drove off, I asked my daughter if the story was true. “Kind of,” she said, “but I’m not sure I’ll write poems because I want people to read my stuff.” She’s a quick study.

The Skin of the River has helped me connect with people in new and different ways. I’ve met so many wonderful people at readings, and reconnected with so many old friends I’d let slip away. It’s been a great experience.

LD: Do you have any new feelings toward your book now that it has been in the world?

EB: Absolutely! I constantly see things I’d like to change—a line here, a word there. I change those things when I do readings. Why not? Many of those poems have been with me for a long time, though, so I guess their complexions change like old friendships might. I see new things in them. I recognize who I was when I wrote them with greater clarity. I’m really proud of the response the book has gotten, so that also was a relief.

LD: Did you find that promoting your book came naturally, or was it a skill that needed some refining?

EB: My experience is if one tries to be an active member of the literary community, as someone who truly supports other writers in kindness and encouragement, self-promotion is a bit less important. I’ve been overwhelmed with the support the book has gotten from folks I’ve met all over the country. It seems to be something they want to share with others. I also have two or three friends on social media I’ve asked to let me know when I self-promote

too much. I'm very careful not to overwhelm people with the sales pitch.

LD: What is a book tour like? Did you learn anything about your relationship to your writing while you were on the road?

EB: A very established poet once told me not to expect to sell a lot of books every time I read someplace. She said she once drove four hours to read for two people and neither of them bought a book. That was a crazy thing to be told just before I was slated to start the line of dates I'd agreed to. This was good advice because, honestly, it doesn't get more disappointing than that. Another way I've learned to always feel a reading is successful is to travel to a place near a friend. This makes a reading feel like a vacation where you catch up with folks you love.

When on the road, or in the air, I love to just think about new lines and sounds and images. What's strange is that I think about these things day to day, but not at the same level as when I travel. Sometimes I'll go fifty miles of highway just rolling a couple slant rhymes around in my mouth. I'll even build phrases around them and devise enjambments that might look interesting. Many of the poems in the next book came as a result of travel.

LD: What was it like putting together a manuscript? Is it similar to creating a single poem, or is it a completely different process?

EB: I always think of it as similar to trying to figure out the order of songs on an album. We live in an age of singles, downloads. I hope the experience of listening to "the album" isn't lost to us. A less successful album front-loads all its hits to the first few tracks, and pushes any "filler" to the back end. A successful album spaces all its good songs out and progresses in movements. I always have this weird thing about tracks seven and eight on an album. The bold quality of these tracks has to convince a listener to

keep going, to keep exploring what comes next. If you look at your own favorite albums, you'll probably see what I'm talking about—bridges from one movement to the next. With *Revolver* it's "Good Day Sunshine"; with *Blonde on Blonde* "Just Like a Woman." With *Kid A*, a shorter album, you'll find the sixth track working as the bridge with "Optimistic." Great albums finish strong, too. They leave a lasting impression. End on an image, I tell my students when they write poems. Would *Nevermind* be the same without the final "Something in the Way"? Think about this whole idea in terms of a book of poetry. An album is to a song what a book is to a poem. If all the best poems are right up front, there's less joy for your reader as she works her way to the end. My manuscript needed to have movements. I wanted it to feel like music. You don't want to think of any of the poems as filler. Each poem needs to stand on its own strengths. The trick is finding where those poems' strengths happen to fit best within the arc of the book.

For *The Skin of the River*, the "album" didn't feel right until I pushed the poems called "Plague Songs" to where they are. Those poems provide a new way to look at sorrow and unrelenting fear. Imagine the biblical plagues of Exodus exacted today on a small town in the Midwest. I tried to make the poems horrifying and sad and jubilant and funny all at once. Of course, they were about my mother and her illness, and of course, I wrote them to try to find something positive in the entire situation. But I had to remove her from them, and remove myself, as well. I never wanted to mention the cancer by name. The speaker, instead, is unlucky Randy Fairlow, a made-up man. I think this section of poems is my track seven or eight. It's the thing—the "Good Day Sunshine"—that keeps the reader moving forward.

LD: What was the submission process like before you found your publisher?

EB: Lengthy. I submitted the manuscript to several publishers and contests, over

more than a few years, with varying degrees of failure. Editors occasionally said nice things as they responded “no.” Submitting to prizes over a few seasons gets to be expensive, but I believed in the book. I knew it had to catch on, so I kept submitting. I’m one of many, many writers who have learned to deal with rejection, so I won’t ever complain about it.

LD: What are you working on now?

EB: I’m *almost* done with the second book. I’ve been writing it, rewriting it, scrapping stuff, and patching stuff back together. It’s somewhat different from *The Skin of the River*. The theme of the book is going to be how human beings adapt to dramatic change. It’s not all depressing. I think it’ll end up being an interesting mix of new ways to say old things and old ways to say new things.

LD: You are married with children. How do you communicate to your family that you need time or space to write?

EB: Rarely do I try to romanticize the act of writing or being a writer. Much of the time, when I’ve rattled something around in my head for a week or two, I wait until everyone in the house is asleep, then shut myself off from them and write. We are a busy family. I teach a 4/4 load at Lincoln University, so my students are like a second family to take care of. The time for writing comes whenever I can get it. Here’s the romanticized part, and it’s true: Sometimes I walk out into the woods and write. I have a creek I like to sit by. I live right near some rivers, so I like to go and watch them while I write. I have a dog, and there are some cows just off my backyard to keep me company if I’m lonely. I like to write like this for the obvious reasons, but also because I don’t have much distraction while I’m in these spaces.

LD: Who is your biggest cheerleader?

EB: I have a lot of support. I’m truly lucky that way. Before my mother passed, she was certainly at the top of that list. It’s hard for me to do wrong in the eyes of my wife and kids, of course. My dad and I have gotten even closer since Mom died. He still wants to buy handfuls of my books to give to people. I have several friends (writers and not) who have done the same.

LD: You have mentioned, in another interview with *The Clarion News*, that you wanted your book published before your mother passed away. What was it like to share the acceptance of your manuscript with her?

EB: It meant everything. I can still remember what her hug felt like, and the precise way she phrased how proud she was of me. It was a beautiful moment. She was always interested in the details, so she wanted to look at the letter and the contract. It makes me smile to think about how she looked out for me through that kind of curiosity. Dad read the poems to her when she lay in a hospital bed for weeks, delirious from a terrible reaction to treatment. When she came to, she let me know how beautiful she thought they were. I knew she was close to the end, at that point, and the book became the least important thing in my entire life.

LD: Have you made any moves or choices in your career as a writer that you ended up regretting, and that have taught you invaluable lessons?

EB: That’s a difficult question to answer. I have all kinds of regrets, but very few of them have to do with writing. The ones that do—that I might have learned invaluable lessons from—I can’t call mistakes. I can’t bring myself to regret much that taught me something.

LD: What do you think of the term "writer's block"?

EB: For me, it doesn't exist. I tell my students the same. I think writing is like any industrious activity. You either make time for it, or you don't. If the next line won't come, find something to make your mind open up: take a shower, mow the lawn, take a walk or run, drive down the road a ways. The words will come—you just have to want them to.

LD: Do you read widely or do you focus on reading poetry?

EB: I'll read just about anything. I'm no different from anybody else—I like to read a lot at one time. Right now I'm reading a book about the rock singer Alex Chilton and a bunch of old Greil Marcus essays. I started reading Melville again a few months back. I need to pick that back up. The list never ends.

LD: Do you have a resource or ritual you consider indispensable to your writing?

EB: Music is my answer to everything. I love to listen to music just before I write. I'm sure it has something to do with the rhythm in it, the instruments' sonic textures, the way the voices sound, the comfort in knowing it's always there waiting for me.

LD: What would you say to writers who are sitting on a manuscript, too scared to send it out and face possible rejection?

EB: Get your work out into the world. I hear this kind of fear all the time. I don't understand it. Rejection can be difficult, especially when you believe in your work. A writer just needs to remember that the more editors reject a manuscript—or even a single poem—the closer, statistically, that thing gets to being accepted. Actually, I'm not a math person. That might not be true.