



## You Make Me Sick, I Love You: On Process

by Catherine Wagner  
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There's something about writing that is like eating my own vomit. It comes out of me, and I have to reabsorb it as I read what I've made. I usually find reading my new work extremely unpleasant and embarrassing—I need to spend a long time revising it into something I can stand to look at. When I write, I know I'm making a lot of work for myself; I'd better get out the ammonia and a rag because there's going to be a lot to clean up.

Why bother writing at all, then, if I don't like what I make? Many reasons: revising is the most intuitive, intellectual, involving thing I do; I (sometimes) get positive feedback from others about my work; I learn about the world and about myself from writing. And I enjoy the actual writing process—it's cathartic, it's exciting, I get a high from it. But because I know I'll probably end up disliking (for awhile) the excretions of said process, I tend to put off writing.

Thus my writing process is all about tricking myself into thinking I'm not really writing, that I'm just having some fun. I'll come up with a game to play, sometimes to do with a particular subject, but more often to do with a formal strategy. For instance, my chapbook *Boxes* contains a series of poem-gifts each written for a different person; the poems contain six lines of six syllables each, and include six "characteristics" of the person: a sound (a phoneme that must repeat six times in the poem), a color, a verb, an emotion, a name, and I forget the last thing. The project was fiddly and fun. An earlier series in my first book *Miss America* tried to record absolutely everything that was going on at the moment of writing—the immediate environment, thoughts, noises. An impossible project, by the way. I then made "notes" to the series, using my social security number to select out particular words from each poem. This numerical game, in my mind, was a way to criticize the tendency of the poems to focus on personal experience: the notes represent a self who is organized and directed by the state, an alternate self that is perhaps even more "real" than the one I live inside.

Motherhood triggered my newest project. Suddenly I was never alone, always with my son, and I struggled to find time to write. Eventually I decided to make a series of poems written only in the presence of others. These poems have a different texture from the others I've written—they're more aggressive, and they include a lot of dialogue. They're also directly political, because when I write with others present, I can't ignore relationships, and when I look carefully at relationships, I see power structures. I've

became more and more attracted to process-based writing as I realized that the writing process itself generates meaning. A process often has its own secret goal, an agenda separate from mine, one I discover as I write.

My focus on process distracts me from the vomit-content of the poems. Instead of feeling disgusted, I have fun looking at the cool shapes I can make with vomit. Hurray for writing!

**Catherine Wagner** spent her early childhood in Asia and grew up in Baltimore. She holds a PhD from the University of Utah and an MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop. Her two books are *Miss America* (Fence, 2001) and *Macular Hole* (Fence, 2004), and her chapbooks include, most recently, *Exercise* (811 Books) and *Imitating* (Leaf Press). Her poems appear regularly in magazines including *American Letters and Commentary*, *Chicago Review*, and many others. She teaches poetry classes at Boise State University.