

CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM

Celebrating Lauren Berry's Second Poetry Collection, *The Rented Altar*

UHCWP alum Lauren Berry is the author of *The Lifting Dress* (Penguin, 2011), winner of the National Poetry Series Prize. Her second collection, *The Rented Altar*, won the C&R Press Award in poetry (2020). Below, Lauren describes the backdrop of her manuscript and her time at UH.



Alumni Spotlight

For how long did this manuscript percolate?

I began writing *The Rented Altar* in September of 2013, a month before I got married. I was sitting on my couch drafting my wedding vows, and before I knew it, I had four pages of writing! I just couldn't seem to stop—the ideas, the promises, the settings for those promises, just kept flowing.

For the next couple of months, I wrote wedding vows from different personas and leaned into the idea of writing a book of vows from the points of view of a diverse range of female characters. Yet over the next year or so, as I moved through the first year of marriage, the book moved away from that original idea, grounding itself in a single character who became the driver of *The Rented Altar*. From 2014 to 2019, the collection took a more narrative form and the sections clarified into a linear progression from engagement to marriage.

What was your favorite part of being the poetry editor at *Gulf Coast*?

I loved the sense of community. I have such fond memories of meeting in staff members' apartments around Houston, eating Vietnamese sandwiches, and reading through the slush pile together. I felt so at home sprawled out in various living rooms with fellow writers and piles of poems around me.

To be a writer is to commit to an art which requires long periods of isolation and independent work, yet those afternoons that we shared poring over the possibilities of unpublished work and looking for gems were a great change of pace. That community of readers and editors meant a lot to me and I learned so much from reading hundreds of cover letters and submissions; it was a great education outside of my formal classes.

As poetry editor, it was empowering to be able to shape the creative vision of the magazine and to reach out to poets whom I had admired for years. Before I ever had a poetry collection of my own to hold in my hands, I had editions of *Gulf Coast* with my name on the masthead. I had worked hard to create something tangible out of inspiration and love for the written word. I still have the copies of the editions and I cherish them.

What about your book resonates with our current moment?

Our current moment invites writers to bring into the spotlight that which we might have shied away from even several decades ago. Our zeitgeist is one that encourages unfiltered representation, and I've tried to contribute to this moment with *The Rented Altar*.

It is my hope that my new collection expands the conversation about stepmothers in ways that feature them with more complexity than we've traditionally seen in literature and media. Stepmothers that we've been offered thus far don't have a lot of emotional nuance and ironic tension. They're either grounded in their fear or hatred of their stepchildren, itching to send them away—or they're a sugarcoated, Carol Brady type of portrayal without an honest illustration of the difficulties involved with raising another woman's child. In my work, I wanted to capture the tension of feeling like an outsider as well as the difficulty of unconditionally loving a son who society would struggle to recognize as my own.

Did you get support from specific people at UH? Do you have advice for students in the program?

Tony Hoagland once called the UH CWP a "womb" and that metaphor has always stuck with me. To continue the metaphor—once you're birthed out of the warmth of the program and in the cold world, the most surprising thing I found is that no one is waiting for your work. There are no more deadlines pushing you forward. Many writers fall away from their art without the structure of the program.

I would advise that graduate students use this precious time to find trusted readers whom you can link up with long after you graduate to share work and receive feedback. I have a writing group of CWP alumni that was formed a year after I graduated in 2009, and we still meet to this day. Some poets have come and gone, but the group has remained for a full decade. I owe a lot of my success to the poets in my workshop for keeping me focused on my art and the vision that I have for myself as a creative writer.

The Rented Altar

I suppose I am blessed enough.
Most of what I love finds a way

to love me back. And yet,
the day after our wedding,
the entire town comes down

with fever. I check my forehead
and the path where I stood alone
for portraits. My mother rushed

to adjust the hem of my dress into a circle
as perfect as a wedding band.
That grass is now a ring of yellow blades.

The first morning of my marriage
I found my husband on the floor,
my dress collapsed beneath him.

The delicate glass that we raised
during my father's champagne toast
smashed to pieces on the road
I now wake up on.

I knew this would happen.
Even when I love as well as I can,
I leave a wake of ruin.

Even now the backyard garden gate
where I promised to die
before I'd leave my husband
ensnares in kudzu vines.

The painted sign that directed guests
to our ceremony chokes in thorns,
our names hidden under barbs.

With white cake still glowing
in their stomachs, my sisters whisper
about where the rented altar went,
but I'm afraid to answer.

I can still see my mother lunging
at my feet with her clicking manicure,
how she backed away from me
with her palms covering her face
as though I were on fire.