Life As It Is
"US Poet Laureate Ada Limón on the Practice of Startlement"
Episode #46 with Ada Limón
September 24, 2025

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Ada Limón: If you spend your life devoted to noticing and to looking, your sense of self begins to dissolve because you're looking outward, and then you recognize that things are looking back at you. There's that whole idea that birds notice us way before we notice them. You know, they've been looking at us this whole time, and then we go, "Oh look, a bird." And I feel like recognizing that comes so naturally once you really start to pay attention. As a poet, that's our job, right, is to look, is to look, is to look, to notice, to witness, and to find language for it and to recognize where language fails for it.

James Shaheen: Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard Ada Limón. Ada is the 24th Poet Laureate of the United States and the author of seven books of poetry. Her latest book, *Startlement: New and Selected Poems*, brings together two decades of her work. In our conversation with Ada, we talk about how poetry can help us decenter ourselves, her daily practice of loving-kindness, the space that curiosity can open up, and how startlement can be a spiritual practice. Plus, Ada reads a few poems from her new collection. So here's our conversation with Ada Limón.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with poet Ada Limón and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi Ada. Hi Sharon. It's great to be with you both.

Ada Limón: Thanks so much for having me. It's such a pleasure.

Sharon Salzberg: Hi.

James Shaheen: So Ada, I understand you're calling us from Glen Ellen in Sonoma County.

Ada Limón: Yeah. I'm home in my office, which was once my childhood bedroom.

James Shaheen: Yeah. So you just bought your childhood home, is that right?

Ada Limón: Correct, yeah.

James Shaheen: So what's it like living in the home you grew up in?

Ada Limón: It is really beautiful and really wild. You know, I've written so many poems about this place and this valley, and when I first moved back, I had this moment where I was driving along Dunbar Road, and I have a poem about Dunbar Road, and I thought, "Oh, I'm now living inside my poems."

James Shaheen: Right.

Ada Limón: So it's not just that I'm living inside the home that I was raised in, but I'm living inside the poems that I wrote about the place that I was raised in. So it's really interesting, and in many ways I'm learning quite a lot from it.

James Shaheen: You mentioned you were living in vertical time. What do you mean by that?

Ada Limón: I feel as if it's all happening at once. Little Ada is reading her first books in this room, and my brother was just here actually, he just left this morning, and he was sleeping in what was once his childhood bedroom. And so it just feels like we are here together with our little selves.

James Shaheen: Yeah. I was just thinking about it when you mentioned it before we started, and I wonder what memories would be triggered if I were back in that home. But I guess that's not going to happen. It's 3000 miles away.

Ada Limón: Yeah. But it is interesting the way in which the mind moves with the sensory aspect of memory and the smell. For me, it's been a long time since I've lived in California, but the smell of the live oak and the bay laurel and the manzanita, it has a different smell, and whereas

that used to feel a little sad because I would miss my home, now it feels like a welcoming, warm place in my heart. So it feels really interesting.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I experienced that when I went to Spirit Rock for a retreat, and I could smell the Pacific, I could smell all the trees that I grew up with, and so I know that feeling. Lots of things came back to me that I hadn't thought about in many years.

Ada Limón: Yeah.

James Shaheen: But anyway, we're here to talk about your new book *Startlement: New and Selected Poems*. So to start off, can you tell us a bit about the book and how it came together?

Ada Limón: Yeah. I didn't expect to do a new and selected. In fact, I was a little resistant to it. I'm not yet 50, and I said, "Oh, I really feel like new and selecteds, you're supposed to do when you're a little older," to which the press replied, "We would like you to do a new and selected." And you know, I have six books of poems out, and so this is the seventh, and putting it together was a really fascinating experience because you're going back and you're reading your old work, and you're seeing who you were and you're seeing the through lines, right? It's not unlike looking through a journal and thinking, oh, I'm still thinking about that. These are the original questions, the original curiosities, the original wonders, and those keep coming back up. And that feels really interesting to me. And so instead of resisting it, I sort of surrendered to the process. And once I started going, and I chose the poems, I put it together myself, and it really became a lesson in gratitude and a way you can look at what you've done and appreciate it in a different way. I think it's easy to look at work you've created if you're an artist in the past and think, "Oh, I would do things differently now," but of course you would. You know, of course you would.

James Shaheen: It's a little bit like moving back into your old home.

Ada Limón: Yeah, my 23-year-old self wrote different poems than my 43-year-old self, as it should be. And so it's a lesson in that kind of kindness.

James Shaheen: Yeah. So I wonder if you can tell us about the title *Startlement*. The last time you were on the podcast, you talked about what it means to be creatures of constant awe. So it seems like awe and wonder are recurring themes in your book and your work. Do you think about startlement as a spiritual or meditative practice?

Ada Limón: I do. I love to be amazed, and it's easy. Life is really weird. Life is really, really weird, and I don't understand why we don't talk about that enough. I mean, I think it's because we don't have the capacity to talk about all the strangeness all the time. But I am bewildered by existence on a regular minute-by-minute basis. I mean, I was just taking the dog out before we gathered here, and I kept thinking about how little I know about this little dog and yet how close we are and how we inhabit this whole time together. I mean, we're animals that wear clothes. That's bizarre. So startlement is really just a way of naming amazement and bewilderment. I also started thinking of it as a collective noun. You know how we have collective nouns for birds, like a murmuration of starlings or a murder of crows or rafter of turkeys? I kept thinking of it as a startlement of poems.

James Shaheen: I see.

Ada Limón: So that felt like the collection. That's the title.

James Shaheen: You know, the last time we had you on the podcast, you talked about what first brought you to spiritual practice, and you mentioned going to classes with Sharon at Tibet House. Now that Sharon is joining us for the conversation, can you tell us about that experience again? How does loving-kindness continue to influence your approach to poetry?Loving-kindness, of course, being something that Sharon has taught for decades now.

Ada Limón: Yeah. At the risk of embarrassing you, Sharon, I'll just say you changed my life. You continue to change my life. You're with me daily. Loving-kindness is still the main meditation that I go to. I just did it this morning. I do it every day. There have been times where I've had difficult relationships with it and times where it's come back.

When I first started meditating, I was sort of desperate to find something, and I looked up and saw you were teaching at the Tibet House. I went for the free classes there, and it just became a practice. In fact, I brought my teacher, Marie Howe, there once, and we practiced together. I think that one of the great lessons I took away all of that was the idea of having some humor as you practice, and you, as you taught, had so much humor and humanity that I really related to the way you approached the practice, and it allowed for such a welcoming doorway that I could walk through. I'm still very, very grateful to you and your work and the way you brought loving-kindness into my world and continue to do for so many people. It's still my main practice.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, thank you so much. It's really beautiful, and you're inspiring me at this moment. I want to ask you about awe. When I was trying to research awe, especially that quality of elevation that comes with awe, the only thing I had read in terms of research was people going off to the redwood forest and the majestic trees and feeling the sense of awe, and to my amazement, as I studied a little further, it turned out that the greatest source of awe for people in life tended to be seeing human goodness. It was seeing the goodness within people as we try to take care of one another or reach out to one another and that actually is such a generator of the feeling of awe. So I'm wondering if that makes sense to you in your experience?

Ada Limón: Yeah, I think that especially right now, there are so many times when people will ask, "Where are you finding hope," or "Where are you finding any kind of resilience or a sense of ease," and I go back to that Fred Rogers statement about looking for the helpers. I think about that a ton. There's a reason why it makes us cry. And I think when I was making my work and poems, if I was feeling particularly untethered or ill at ease, I would write a poem about a time when someone helped me, or I'd write a gratitude poem and I'd think, "Oh, this is a poem I want

to write for my mom just to say thank you," or "This is a poem I want write for animals or for trees," just to say thank you. It was a way of being in a reciprocal relationship with that gift of awe, that gift of generosity, that sometimes we don't know what to do with. As a poet, being able to give something back in that way has always allowed me to be in relationship with that feeling.

Sharon Salzberg: It's beautiful. One of the other themes that was very striking to me that emerges in your collection in particular is an awareness of our interconnectedness with all beings, which is certainly something that a loving-kindness practice can bring attention to. So I'm wondering if you feel like poetry can cultivate greater awareness of interdependence and interconnection.

Ada Limón: I think so because I think poetry, at its core, is paying attention. When you're deeply looking at something, you're loving it. And I think that when you do that, whether it's with a person or a nonhuman animal or a plant or a tree or whatever it is, it is a way of witnessing and being witnessed and recognizing that we are in this together. And I find that so interesting. I think that it's so strange to me that we feel alone. It's a common feeling, and sometimes I feel so isolated in this emotion. But then if you really look around you, there's no way to be alone. We are on this planet together—I mean, really together. And to me, I think my work is always interested in that. That is a curiosity that comes up a lot, which is how can we constantly feel isolated when without a doubt we are working and living in tandem with all living beings.

Sharon Salzberg: As just one poem that gets as a theme, would you be willing to read "Startlement"? It's on page 196.

Ada Limón: Oh yeah. This is a poem that I originally was asked to write for the National Climate Assessment, and I met with all these scientists and ecologists and people who study creeks and rivers and tell us exactly how we're doing as a nation in terms of the climate. And as I was writing it, one woman came out and said, "I know you're going to write this poem for the

front matter of this enormous report," but she said, "Do me a favor, don't make it nostalgic. It can't be about going backwards." And it really hit me. And so this is the poem that came out of that.

Startlement

It is a forgotten pleasure, the pleasure
of the unexpected blue-bellied lizard

skittering off his sun spot rock, the flicker
of an unknown bird by the bus stop.

To think, perhaps, we are not distinguishable
and therefore no loneliness can exist here.

Species to species in the same blue air, smoke—
wing flutter buzzing, a car horn coming.

So many unknown languages, to think we have
only honored this strange human tongue.

If you sit by the riverside, you see a culmination
of all things upstream. We know now,

we were never at the circle's center, instead
all around us something is living or trying to live.

The world says, What we are becoming, we are

becoming together.

The world says, One type of dream has ended
and another has just begun.

The world says, Once we were separate,
and now we must move in unison.

Sharon Salzberg: That's so beautiful.

Ada Limón: Thank you.

Sharon Salzberg: I love the line, "We know now we were never at the circle's center." It reminds me so much of the story I tell endlessly about driving in a car with a friend. We got stuck in this terrible, horrible, awful traffic, and we were complaining bitterly about it. and then at one point my friend turned to me and said, "Well, we are the traffic too. You know, they're probably complaining about us." And I had exactly the experience that that line portrays. It was almost like before she said that there was a center, like I'm in the center. There was a sense like I'm the center of the universe. People are on the margins and you're in my way. You're holding me back. When she said that, it was like the center dropped out and we were just all the traffic. You put it so beautifully, and I'm wondering how you feel poetry helps us to decenter ourselves and notice all the other life forms living alongside us.

Ada Limón: You know, I think that there is sometimes a misconception that poetry, because it deals with self and often autobiography, it's about the artist's gaze, the poet's gaze, how we look at things, all of these things. But if you spend your life devoted to noticing and to looking, your sense of self begins to dissolve because you're looking outward, and then you recognize that things are looking back at you, right? There's the whole idea that birds notice us way before we notice them. And I feel like recognizing that comes so naturally once you really start to pay

attention. As poets, that's our job, is to look, to notice, to witness, and to find language for it—and to recognize where language fails for it.

I think that the practice of it is not unlike meditation, where it does allow us to recognize that we're not at the story's center. You know, we're not the hero. We're part of a journey, and so many people are on that journey. And I think for me, there's a surrender there that I resisted when I was younger. It gets easier as I age.

You know, I was thinking in the shower this morning, "Oh, I need some new clothes, because I'm going to go on book tour." And then I said, "Well, maybe it's not my clothes that are the problem. Maybe it's my body." And then my mind said, "Or maybe the body's not the problem. Maybe it's your mind." And then of course I started laughing, that this is so funny. This is a funny conversation with the self. But I do think that the more you pay attention even to your own thoughts, the more absurd it all seems. Just like you have always done in your teachings, Sharon, you have that sense of humor about it, like this is so funny. So, yeah, I think that paying attention offers us much more than we think. It turns out it really helps.

James Shaheen: You know, you just mentioned earlier Marie Howe, and I was very happy to hear her name, and I didn't realize that you considered Marie Howe your teacher.

Ada Limón: Yeah.

James Shaheen: Yeah. I love Marie.

Ada Limón: She's amazing.

James Shaheen: Yeah, absolutely, I think so too, and people respond to her very well. She talks about how writing poetry is a way of opening up space to listen to the natural world, and I wonder if that resonates with your experience as a writer.

Ada Limón: Yeah, what an exceptional teacher and poet and human being. I think that opening up to the natural world is of course the idea that we are nature. There's a thing that happens where my initial reaction to the natural world is to name and identify. Having been raised in northern California and having incredible naturalists as teachers, including my first grade teacher, who I still run into all the time on my hikes, Mr. Mike. In first grade, we had to sit in a little square outside, and we had to describe and name all the things that we could name inside the square: the types of plants, types of bugs, everything you saw in this little square. And so I think sometimes I have that relationship. I go, What's this? What's this? What is the name of this? I need to know it. And then there are times where I am having the experience where I don't want to know the name that we've given it. I want to see if the plant tells me its name, or no, I don't even want to have anything to do with language. I just want to have an experience with this creek, and I just want to be part of it. And so I think that poetry is that doorway, because even though we value language as this signifier and we value image and metaphor and symbols and all of that, poetry really recognizes where language fails, where it falls apart. And that's where the breath is, right? That's the line breaks and the caesuras and the stanzas. That's where we breathe. And that's that place where we don't have the language for it. There's so much of my experience with nature that goes beyond words, and I think poetry makes space for that.

James Shaheen: Yeah, Marie talked about avoiding metaphor, which I really appreciated.

Ada Limón: Yeah. She does that so well in her work. She's quick not to change something into another thing, which I think is really unique and exceptional about the way she witnesses the world.

James Shaheen: Right, I asked her if the dog drenched with the moon was a metaphor, and then before she could answer, I said, no, the dog was drenched with the moon.

Ada Limón: Absolutely.

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James Shaheen: So would you mind reading "The Endlessness" on page 165?

Ada Limón: Someone brought this poem up to me just the other day, and I wrote this poem before I moved back into this home, and I thought, "Oh, this happened here."

The Endlessness

At first I was lonely, but then I was
curious. The original fault was that I could
not see the lines of things. My mother could.
She could see shapes and lines and shadows,
but all I could see was memory, what had been
done to the object before it was placed on
the coffee table or the nightstand. I could sense
that it had a life underneath it. Because
of this, I thought I was perhaps bad at seeing. Even
color was not color, but a mood. The lamp was
sullen, a candlestick brooding and rude with its old
wax crumbling at its edges, not flame, not a promise
of flame. How was I supposed to feel then? About
moving in the world? How could I touch anything
or anyone without the weight of all of time shifting
through us? I was not, or I did not think I was, making
up stories; it was how the world was, or rather it is how
the world is. I've only now become better at pretending
that there are edges, boundaries, that if I touch
something it cannot always touch me back.

James Shaheen: Thank you so much for reading that. That's so nice. You know, I don't know if it was Joseph Goldstein or Sharon who suggested this to me once, but there was a situation I was very uncomfortable with ,and one or the other of them asked me if I could get curious about it. It might've been you, Sharon, just the role of curiosity, or maybe it was Joseph.

Sharon Salzberg: It was Joseph.

James Shaheen: So can you tell us about this poem and the space that curiosity can open up?

Ada Limón: To me, curiosity is a really natural state of being. If I am suffering from anxiety or depression, I am not curious about things—I know things for certain and things are bad. And so I think that the most poetic state of mind for me is the state of curiosity, where instead of feeling as if I am separate from everyone or that my brain works in a different way, I can ask myself, *How does it work? How does their brain work? What do they see? How do I see what is?* And once I do that, I can have a much more interesting experience of how I move in the world. And I can be overwhelmed by that sometimes because I am a very sensory person, and I also do have quite a good memory, and so I remember a lot and there are times where I'm holding onto memories very deeply, even good memories, but tightly. And so there are times where I need to understand the porousness of things as opposed to the grasping of things.

Sharon Salzberg: I wonder if you could say more about porousness, which I find a really great word and one I don't often use, but I like it so much I'm going to start using it, because it also points to, as the poem does in a way, the slipperiness of the self or the ways that the boundaries of the self are blurred. So I wonder if you could say a little bit more about porousness.

Ada Limón: Yeah, I think that there's so much that we deal with that has to do with selfhood. We spend a lot of time trying to figure out who we are, and I'm just as interested in who we are not, at where maybe the boundaries don't stop but where my skin stops and other things begin. You know, there was a comedian once who said, "I love this sky, but what's right here? What do

we call this, below the sky? What is this called?" And that's so funny to me, the idea that we look up for the sky, but what is this place that we live in right here? Are we living in sky? And I think that that is really interesting to me.

It's not just connectedness, but the part of self that isn't real, that is in many ways just a being moving in air with everything else. I think as a child I saw that, and I think there were times I thought it made me, for lack of a more nuanced word, crazy. I was lucky enough to be raised by artists that witnessed that and said, "No, I feel that same way sometimes, and here's what we do with it. We transform things. We make things." And that to me was such a gift, to have people that encouraged me to do that, because I do think you're moving through the world as a child and everyone has this idea that they know their reality, and little Ada was like, What? How do you know your reality? How do we know this is real? And so I find that it's less scary now, and it's more freedom. So I think of that porousness as that idea of letting it move through you, letting the wind move through you, letting the part of you that's not you but still alive and vibrant move through the world.

Sharon Salzberg: So one poem where this dynamic comes up is "Strange Refuge," which is a great phrase. I'm wondering if you can read that one.

Ada Limón: I would be happy to.

Strange Refuge

Above the low and pillared Mississippi skyline,
    some blue, blue twilight and one star is blinking back

at this hotel window. I am in the window's reflection,
    so I am also in the sky, a fake blue blouse under

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the real blue, the singular star fading under
a contrail or a cloud, I am figuring out my face:

it is me, and it is not me. A reconfiguration of all
my faces. Blank cynical glare of the brooding

girl who couldn't keep all the stones she thumbed
until she wished not to part with the gray,

the one with the rivulet of chert, sweet greed between
the eyes. And here now, I'm out of focus

and blinking and it feels better than any clarity,
nothing sticks on a movement, a gesture

from a distance. Under the star, one tall pine. You
are far away from home, something says

when the hotel heat comes on. I play a song
and sing along. The star is gone, everything

has faded, now it's more me in the glass, too much
of me and even the song is ending.

What if this one in the window—huzzah,
spells and such—is who I am, not the mind

in the pine needles or the pitch changes,

not even the stones I couldn't keep,

or what if I did keep them, all this time, here

in this reflection where I am opening my hand?

Sharon Salzberg: It's wonderful. I wonder if you could say more about this in-between space of me and not me.

Ada Limón: Yeah. I've discovered recently that I don't recognize myself in photos. I've learned to acknowledge that that is me, but I don't often think, "Oh, that is who I am." And I find it a disconnect in many ways, the image and the self that doesn't have an image. And so I think this poem is an attempt to describe that, which is who is this person that is this body? And then who is this person underneath?

As poets, we're always looking to write from the voice underneath the voice, and that is the part of myself that I trust the most. Oftentimes when I am writing or when I've been alone for a long time, I will see myself in a reflection, or I'll see myself in the mirror, and I don't recognize her. And I think, "Huh, that's interesting. Look at that person." And it's with gentleness, it's not in a bad way. It's just that the voice underneath the voice, the person underneath the person, is much more than the reflection of self. And, you know, we live in a world where this is what you see. And so with poetry, you get that opportunity to crack open the geode and show the real self. And I've always thought my poems are much more me than the body I've been gifted and get to move through the world with. Does that make sense?

Sharon Salzberg: It makes total sense.

James Shaheen: It makes perfect sense. Yeah.

Sharon Salzberg: It's beautifully put.

James Shaheen: Ada, your poems explore the limits of language, which you mentioned earlier. Language can sometimes get between us and what is, and we attempt to capture what feels ineffable, or poetry does. So can you say more about how poetry can press against the limits of language?

Ada Limón: Yeah, I think because in many ways poetry is music, right? It's sonic; it's lyrical. And so often when we can't get at an image or we can't get at the exactness of language, we can produce a music that is paying homage to the memory or paying homage to the idea or thought or thread that the poem is representing. And so the music becomes equally as important, and the words sometimes aren't necessarily the thing, but it's the hearing. It's that musicality.

In the poem I just read where I have "when the hotel heat comes on. I play a song / and sing along. The star is gone," there's a rhyme there, and each time I'm wanting the reader to hear a unification and a sense-making that is just musical. It's not necessarily about the words themselves, but the way that I mention a song in the poem, and so the poem has to produce a song, which is that ear looking for its rhyme. OIt's looking for its closure. And so in many ways, when we let go of language in its meaning, we are leaning into the sonics and the song-like quality of poetry.

James Shaheen: You know, somewhere you say that words are of the air and we are of the earth. I thought that was a really nice way of putting it too. But to get at this theme, would you be willing to read "Literary Theory" on page 184? My first reaction to seeing literary theory was I thought, "Oh no, it's going to wreck it all now. Literary theory is going to get in the way of my enjoyment of these poems," but in fact, I ended up really loving it.

Ada Limón: I am so glad you had that relationship with the title because of course I named it after I'd written the poem, and I was trying to think of what would be a way to describe what this poem was about. And then I thought of this sort of lofty title.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it worked on me great.

Ada Limón: Good.

Literary Theory

Somehow the word
allow is in the word
swallow and in *swallow*
two wholly different meanings:
one to take in through
the mouth and another
what we call the common
winged gnat hunter who
is, in all probability,
somewhere near us now.
Once, I thought
if I knew all the words
I would say the right thing
in the right way,
instead language becomes
more brutish: blink twice
for the bird, blink once
for tender annihilation. Who
knows what we are doing as

we go about our days lazily
choosing our languages. Some
days my life is held together
by definitions, some days
I read the word *swallow*
and all my feathers show.

James Shaheen: Thank you. Sharon?

Sharon Salzberg: So as we've referenced earlier, that theme of connection to the natural world runs through so many of your poems, and I wonder if you could read "What It Looks Like to Us and the Words We Use," which is on page 92.

Ada Limón:

What It Looks Like to Us and the Words We Use

All these great barns out here in the outskirts,
black creosote boards knee-deep in the bluegrass.
They look so artfully abandoned, even in use.
You say they look like arks after the sea's
dried up, I say they look like pirate ships,
and I think of that walk in my valley where
J said, *You don't believe in God?* And I said,
No. I believe in this connection we all have
to nature, to each other, to the universe.
And she said, *Yeah, God.* And how we stood there,
low beasts among the white oaks, Spanish moss,
and spider webs, obsidian shards stuck in our pockets,

woodpecker flurry, and I refused to call it so.
So instead, we looked up at the unruly sky,
its clouds in simple animal shapes we could name
though we knew they were really just clouds—
disorderly, and marvelous, and ours.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you so much for reading that. I wonder if you could tell us a bit about that poem and how you view that connection to nature in the universe.

Ada Limón: Yeah. You know, the poem really came out of that conversation and the way that we name things and, again, that curiosity I have about how others see things—you know, when we look and say, "Oh, there's a rabbit in the moon," or "Oh, there's a man in the moon," or "Oh, doesn't it look like this is in the moon?" And so I think that we're doing that all the time with everything, and one of the things that I love about nature is that we are all going to have a different experience with it. Some people are frightened of it, and some people are engaged with it, and some people know every little plant name and everything you could eat and everything that would have a medicinal quality and everything that might bloom in a different season or in a different spot. And that to me is so fascinating that we're all having this relationship with it. To me, it is that thing that connects us because we can disagree on a lot of things, we can disagree on the naming of a lot of things, and yet we can also stand and wonder.

My friend Jen, who that poem is for, is a fellow poet, Jen Knox. She's wonderful. And I love that moment where she said, "Yeah, God," and I really am uncomfortable with the word God. I always have been. And so I tried to think, is there another way that I would name it? And then instead I just let it sort of slip through my fingers and let her have her definition and keep her word and me sort of keep my uncomfortability with that word, and instead just turn to the sky and look at the clouds. And that to me feels like such a gift that we can have. You know, we can look up and do that and share those moments together. And some of my best friends in the world,

we have those experiences where it's OK to not feel or name things exactly the same, and yet we are willing to stand in wonder together.

James Shaheen: That's so nicely put. You know, the poem that you just read reminds me of one of your more recent poems, "Hell or High Water." Would you be willing to read that poem too? It's on page 166.

Ada Limón:

Hell or High Water

Not churchgoers or joiners, still my people sang,
up Highway 12 or Arnold Drive, depending
on the traffic. "Blue Moon, you saw me standing
alone," my maternal grandfather would croon
in a big put-on cowboy voice like Marty Robbins
as we barrelled up the 79 from Julian to Calimesa
after all their money disappeared in a savings-
and-loan scam and they lost everything they
thought was safe come hell or high water. On
the other side, el otro lado, my grandfather would
sing Lydia Mendoza rancheras and "Mal Hombre,"
songs about la frontera, on our way from Oceanside
to Laguna Beach. Also here, in the mountains,
I remember driving up from Glen Ellen, the drive
interminable, my brother's pugilistic tendencies bruising
me on the back seat's sticky vinyl; even then, we
could be swayed to sing. At the campsite, my
father would pull out his guitar, and we'd beg

him for "A Cat Came Back" or "500 Miles," something
with a chorus we could sing along to, sometimes
we'd even like the sad songs. Drifting to black
between the flames of the fire, and the aspen
and the pines all flickering in the distance. What
was the difference between a song sung on
the journey and a song sung once you got there,
one was about passing the time, the other about
bellowing your presence to the rocks and stones,
I don't know. I know that we sang, and here in this
valley I can't help but think of how my father pulled
out his guitar at my stepmother's deathbed, which
was just their bed really, at home up north and on a cold
clear day he sang "500 Miles," and she was already
almost gone and I wept and his voice sounded so strong
so when the hospice nurse came and said, "You
have no religion, right?," I didn't know how to answer,
because we did, it was this, it was all those years
tied together on the road, singing at the top of our
lungs, harmonious and inharmonious both, and with gusto,
our voices meshed together like tree roots, not for any
good reason other than the sheer pleasure of it,
something to pass the time, like beauty, like going
to the mountaintop just to go, it's the old way,
it's the only way I know, a mountain, an echo,
a coming back and coming back, a chorus.

James Shaheen: You know, I have to say, Ada, I love so much hearing place names that were so familiar to me growing up, and that caught me first before I read it again. But it reminds me how the last time you were on the podcast, you talked about the role of poetry in times of grief, especially how poetry can hold multiple conflicting energies at once. Can you say more about this?

Ada Limón: Yeah, I always find it very bizarre that we can continue. I think it's so brave that we can continue when we've lost someone or when we've gone through something incredibly hard or in the face of global suffering. I find that there's that sort of pat way of talking about it, which is being brave and resilient and putting your best foot forward and all of these things that don't really make sense. I'm always like, which one is my best foot? But I think that poetry makes space for this idea of recognizing suffering and loss and recognizing beauty and recognizing the mess of everything, you know? My stepmother died when she was 51, and it was one of those moments in my life that changed everything, and it made me really focus on what it was to have a life. And I think about her all the time. And this poem in particular is a place of placing that, because I remember the wonderful hospice nurse, she was incredible, but when she said sort of dismissively, "Oh, you have no religion," I kept thinking the way she said it struck me as wrong, because we do have traditions and connections, and we do have a thread of care, and I didn't want that to be unnoticed or unsung. And so even though my stepmother died in 2010 and I wrote this poem in 2022, so it takes a long time sometimes for a poem to come out of a memory, but it meant to bear witness, I think, in many ways, to that complicated feeling of what you want to name and what you want to sing.

James Shaheen: You know, there's something, maybe I'm reading into it, you'll have to tell me, but it seems to happen in many of the poems you refer to how at first the deathbed, but really was just their bed. There's a just this-ness about it, a "just this" that pulls us up and grounds us

again. Rather than drifting off the deathbed, well, actually it was just their bed. Can you say something about that? Maybe I made that up.

Ada Limón: No, I love that. I love that. This was one of the things that struck me when I lost my stepmother to cancer. It was a home death, and my father and I were there. We were all there. It was our job to help her go. One of the things that struck me was that I felt so profoundly changed, and then I realized that everybody was losing someone all the time or had lost someone, and that seemed really wild. I was like, How do you go on? This is the strangest, most bizarre event I've ever witnessed. This person is no longer here, and then you go back to work and everyone's like, "Oh yeah, when my father died," and I'm like, oh, right, of course. Not only has everyone lost someone, everyone will lose someone, and then we will lose ourselves.

And so I think I keep wanting to recognize that when we say "deathbed," there's this sort of Victorian language to that, and I wanted to bring it back to earth for everyone that I know who's gone through that same thing, that it was just their bed, right? I need that language. I need the commonality of language for me to also recognize that my experience, even though it profoundly shifted me, is not unique. It is life.

James Shaheen: Yeah, that's how I understood it, and that was helpful to me. So we've picked all these poems and we put you through your paces. We've made you read them all. I wonder if there's a poem that you really want to read before we close.

Ada Limón: Yeah, that's a great question. You know, I was thinking about this poem the other day actually, and this idea of when we were talking about when language fails us, right? There's that moment where we think, is it failing us, or are we just making room for something else? And right now all of these flowers are blooming here, and they're called naked ladies. And so I have always loved them. They're these beautiful lilies. They're pink lilies, they're wild, and they're

native to here. And when I was a kid, I didn't know that a naked lady was another thing. I thought it was just a flower. So this is a poem called "Every Blooming Thing."

Shot out in the sun, those pink
blooms mouth the fall air
like needy fiends brightening
with desire. Long ago, before
I knew the difference between
skin sack and petal, I told my
parents, I wanted to be a naked
lady. Those flamingo flowers
standing tall along the highways,
and backroads. Even when all
the grass was gold and crisp
with flame danger, those lilies,
they never seemed to tire. Never
lost their surprise or their softness.
I didn't know then it was wrong
to wish to be a naked lady, wronger
even to wish to be a flower.

James Shaheen: Ada Limón, thanks so much for joining us. It's been a great pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Startlement* available for pre-order now. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation, so of course I'll turn it over to Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you, and thank you for this beautiful, beautiful conversation, which I will listen to many times. So let's sit together just for a few minutes. If you'd like to close your eyes or just lower your gaze, be comfortable, and I'd like to start just by listening to sound. Maybe the sound of my voice or sounds around you, even sounds within you. It's a way of

relaxing deep inside, having our experience come and go in a bigger sense of space and bring your attention to the feeling of your body sitting, whatever sensations come alive for you. Then see if you can touch space. Most people, when they hear that, think about picking up a finger and poking it in the air, but space is already touching us. It's always touching us. We just need to receive it. We need to feel it. And then bring your attention to the feeling of your breath, just the natural in- and out-breath, which is actually life itself. So thank you.

James Shaheen: Thank you Sharon, and thank you Ada. That was wonderful.

Ada Limón: Thank you so much. It was such an honor.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Ada Limón. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at tricycle.org/donate. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* and *Life As It Is* is produced by Sarah Fleming and the Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!