

An Interview with Lisa Grunberger
For *Krytyka Literacka*

How would you describe what is at work in your poems?

Rather than my own description, I can better refer to a subtle, perceptive reading and reception of my poems by Alexandra Sasha, a Russian poet and author of *Antibodies*. She wrote:

“...in the poems...[there is] a total freedom from patterns...the subjugation of patterns; a re-channeling, re-shaping of a destructive power into a creative force. She makes me think, immediately, of Sylvia Plath, of her wild and cruel and beautiful imagination, and her similarly "cutting" use of language.

[Her] poetics is juggling with the extreme sides of things, with their most hidden and most exposed sides, those which are most difficult (and most dangerous) to be perceived, to be conscious of... her poems remind one of Paul Valery's definitions of poetry, of a poem, where he speaks of *un objet et sa vie* [an object and its life]. For her, language (or, for that matter, color and shape, sound, thought, etc.), and therefore the poem, is not a means of expression, but the provenance itself of the artistic work.”

In fact, Sylvia Plath is not within my lineages of writers whose work I read and study, but I appreciate Alexandra's reading of my poems as organic entities, things that live and breathe in the world.

*Tell me about the poems in your first published collection, **Born Knowing**.*

These poems “put on a body,” to use Virginia Woolf's felicitous phrase, in which memory comes alive; a body that is individual, millennial, generational, gestational, mother and father both.

In this collection, there are many poems about family, especially my mother and father and my grandmother, who lived with us in our house in Long Island, New York. The poem “Butterflies and Beauty” meditates on women aging, “Monster” reflects on dreams, which are important to my process.

In the title poem “Born Knowing,” you write:

Every morning I come down the stairs to find Oma
Dressed in stockings and shoes, a silk blouse and tweed skirt,
Drinking schwarzer kaffe, black coffee, facing the sun, looking
Out at the bay. Never once did I think to ask her of what
She dreamed, but sometimes, when I was very young,

I would go to her, sit at the edge of her bed that
Smelled of over-ripe fruit, yarn, and Nivea cream,
And press my small hand on her forehead,
Wet with Hitler's sweat.

You are a first generation Jewish American. How does the memory of the Khurbn and your parents' lives in Israel, prior to coming to the United States, affect your work?

Well, I often don't think of myself as an American poet. I feel very much in between worlds, European and American and Israeli. As a first generation American, with a grandmother who was born in 1897 in Vienna, and my Father, born in Vienna in 1920, my mother born in 1925 in British mandate Palestine--I contain all of this in my body, and most of it is actually what I call the "history of silence." As we know, those who lived through the "catastrophe" rarely, if ever, spoke of it. So, I feel I have to listen to the silence, to reconstruct it somehow, to fill in the stories in my poetry.

In "Preservation" (also in *Born Knowing*), you write:

There is a spring silence when the tulips tango.
A summer silence of low tide watermelon buzz.
A fall silence of roadside pumpkins.
A winter silence of discarded Christmas trees
Like corpses lying on curbsides.

....

If you stir silence it turns
To mud or lace or grass
Depending on the time
Of day and the color of your eyes.

Yes, that's right, the silence, re-envisioned from so many views.

I think the line that ends "One Thing" aptly describes how I feel about my cultural inheritance, a feeling of immense longing: "I want to gather my tears in Coke bottles/ pour them into the Grand Canyon at dawn and listen to the echo of longing." I'm always trying to listen to that echo. Both my parents have passed away now, so I have to mine--to newly inhabit, really--my experiences, my dreams, history, study, to re-imagine lost worlds.

What is your subject matter and your process? Do you write every day?

Oh, the usual suspects: love, loss, sex, memory. But I'm more interested in the rhythm of language, how it sounds. When I teach Creative Writing and Poetry I have the students memorize poems, an old-fashioned exercise these days. But I feel this is so important for the writer, to ingest the poems inside the body.

I've been keeping a journal since I was 9 years old. It's a good habit I find, to have it with me, so if a line comes to me, I can write it down. I like to write off of other writers, whether they are poets, or op-ed columnists, or song-writers. I used to be more disciplined about writing every day, but now that I am a mother, it's much more difficult to maintain that kind of structured commitment. But one finds other ways.

You studied philosophy and religious studies at the University of Chicago and you received a doctorate in Comparative Religion. Do you regret not attending an MFA program? Was this a conscious decision, not to get an MFA?

I studied literature and religion as an undergraduate and became deeply interested in the religious roots of theatrical performance. For me, graduate school was a space for reading and thinking, almost a monastic space, in my twenties, a space of devotion. I made a conscious decision not to pursue an MFA as I, frankly, find the professionalization of creative writing, the "McPoem," to be an unhealthy development for literature. It's far more preferable for writers to be less institutionalized, less beholden to the bureaucracy and career of making poems, and more devoted to reading promiscuously.

You became a mother in your 40's. How has this affected your work? In your poem "To My Unborn Child" you write: "I wanted you more than I wanted another kind of love." Can you comment on this line?

I cannot remember not writing, and I cannot remember not wanting to have a child. These two imperatives of creation are, in many ways, in dispute with each other. They have contended inside me for decades. O.k., they are at war.

For many years, in my 20s and 30s I wondered, as many women do, how will I balance motherhood with writing? I want to have a child. I want to be published and successful. I want a room of my own. I want a partner, I want to remain single. I am divided against myself. What does this all mean?

And I waited a long time to take the plunge. I almost waited too long, as I had to go through three years of IVF treatments before I could get pregnant. "I wanted you more than I wanted another kind of love" might mean more than romantic love, more than erotic love, more than self-love, more than success. But motherhood has not been an impediment to my creativity; on the contrary, the past 4 years have been extremely fecund.

I read your prose poem "When I Was A Woman" as a political poem. In fact, many of your narrative poems can be read as political poems. Do you consider yourself a political poet?

Storytelling, whether in poems, stories, theater, novels, is always already a political act. The critical thinker Deleuze said "life is not personal." I like this statement, for I think even in the most autobiographical poem, there is the shifting "I" that still has to be read, to be interpreted against the grain of culture. Likewise, in an interesting echo of Deleuze, Wallace Stevens said in Adagia, "poetry is not personal."

Writing means to be “split at the root,” in Adrienne Rich’s oft-invoked phrase. Because she is so split, the writer lives a counterlife; she uses all her wit and cunning to constantly elude the seeming finality and self-sufficiency of her and others’ carefully guarded identities. Elias Canetti said the writer is the privileged and necessary “keeper of metamorphosis.” The writing life is one of constant metamorphosis, perhaps also of hide-and-seek. The word and the world become all allusion and allegory, lapsing and flowing into each other, irrespective of place, time, or sex.

The writer alchemically changes the word into world, and world into word. And this can be a political act.

For you, then, writing is primordial, the root and foundation of your activity?

Yes, what Philip Roth called “the struggle with writing.” Reading and writing together. The Jewish French writer Stéphane Zagdanski says: “The writer does not live in the world and read books. She reads the world through the books in which she lives.” Writing is the womb, and the room, of my own existential question.

The writer, Zagdanski also says, “is at war against reality” (that is, against the collective, consensual illusion of ‘what is’). When I write, I go to war, carrying out, what Thomas Merton called, “raids on the unspeakable”. Zbigniew Herbert has his alter ego, Mr. Cogito, proclaim he “wants to remain faithful to uncertain clarity,” which, for the writer, is also to abide in what Keats called “negative capability.” In all this, writing, as Adrienne Rich taught us, is to dive “into the Wreck,” a way to recover lost time, but a way also into terror and the labyrinthine coincidence of life and death.

Whether I’m working in prose on the page or for the stage, the poetic line remains. The rigor of poetry, the playful associations, the promiscuous coupling and re-coupling of words, the sound, this continues to inform all of my work, as does a love for language, for precision, for the sensuality of words in the world.