

Lidija Dimkovska (Macedonia)

What and why

Before coming to Iowa I decided to organize myself better, so I wanted to order visit-cards (business cards) for the people I would meet here. I went to a printer in Ljubljana and told the employee there to write my name, address, telephone and e-mail on the cards. He asked me: Don't you have any profession? I felt my face growing red and, embarrassed, I told him that I was a writer but that such a profession couldn't be put on visit-cards. He wondered why not, but because clients are always right, he finally said: "OK, but please allow me to put a sign of a writer on them." So of course he put a quill in an inkwell beside my name. I had no choice but to accept his vision of a writer and took my fifty visit-cards with fifty quills in inkwells with me overseas. I cannot write with any of the quills but they are, as are many other things, symbolic of my embarrassment at claiming to be a writer. It was easier when I was younger. When I was ten years old my father bought me a small red accordion. I took it, put it horizontally on the table, tore a page from my notebook, put the page in the accordion and used the accordion as a typewriter. I never played on it; I used it only as a typewriter until I got my first real typewriter, which my mother brought to me from her office. In socialist times it was possible that many things from parents' offices could be brought home and stay there forever, so besides my typewriter I also got from my mother's office paper, envelopes and stamps in order to send my poems to children's magazines—so I used socialistic benefits to become a writer. I called my typewriter Ljubinka, which can mean Beloved, and for many years she has been my best friend. It cannot be coincidental that four years ago I moved to Slovenia, to Ljubljana, which also can mean Beloved. Even in the name Slovenia there is the word Love. I realized that I was a poet at twelve years-old when I published my first poem in a children's magazine and a classmate wrote with chalk on the table: Lidija – poet. I was so red in my face and so hot and my heart so throbbed that I ran to the toilet and stayed in there for forty-five minutes—so I missed the lesson about my favourite Macedonian poet Blaze Koneski.

I wonder where are the roots of my writing, how did it happen that I began to write and why? And like many other writers I realize that those beginnings are in my childhood. I spent my childhood in a small village in Macedonia, called Slegovo, with my grandparents. My parents had to stay in Skopje, in my place of birth, and work, so they left me with my grandparents and visited me every national holiday. I loved the holiday of the first Macedonian struggle against the German occupation, the holiday of the Yugoslav Army, the holiday of the Yugoslav State and the first of May, because all these holidays brought my parents to me. My grandparents were simple, hardworking country people, illiterate but wise and with open hearts and minds. In the evenings we stayed in the only room with a fireplace, ate baked apples and my grandma told me stories about daughters and mothers-in-law, sisters and brothers-in-law. They were terrible stories about complicated relationships, jealousy, and the Oedipal complex, but also about love and respect. Outside, in the streets of the village, women gossiped about unbelievable events and I ate these stories as a hungry child. For me these stories were the first sign that the world is very complicated and full of all sorts of connections, and I explore those connections in my writing more and more as I get older. Or better said, I vomit them in verses and sentences.

For long time I wrote only poetry—a kind of lyrical, abstract, metaphysical short poetry with many metaphors and symbols, with emphasis on the poetic language and poetic

form. It seemed to me that I wanted to escape from the real world, so my poetry was an answer to my inner questions without many connections with the world outside of my room. My generation of writers has had in a way a similar poetics. When we were seventeen, eighteen and nineteen we had a literary club in Skopje called The Little Prince, and every Saturday we met there, drank red wine and read our works. I loved and I still love the literature of my generation. Everyone had his/her own poetics but in a way we were writing similarly and our literary father at that time was the Macedonian poet Radovan Pavlovski, the so-called “prince of metaphor” according to the Macedonian critics. We recited his poems and tried to write like him but fortunately we soon understood that we had to write like ourselves. Macedonian critics called my generation “the sixth generation in Macedonian literature” and because of the number six we were supposed to be the generation that would bring evil, sex, much more liberty or even anarchy to Macedonian literature and in a way struggle with the tradition of Macedonian literature which is based on mythology, rural experiences, poetic images, and abstract forms. My generation vigorously brought the metonymy and urbanity to Macedonian literature.

My writing actually changed a lot when I moved to Romania as a twenty-two year-old graduate student in Comparative Literature. In Bucharest, Romania I took a Ph.D. degree in Romanian literature and I taught Macedonian literature and language at the University of Bucharest. For the first time I was completely free, if it can be called freedom—from my country, my family, my friends, Macedonian literature and all the expectations of any of them. I learned Romanian and I began to dream in both Macedonian and Romanian. I met my husband, who was from Slovenia, and for many years we talked in Romanian. I had enough carriage to tell him that I was a poet. He also was but at that time had not yet published anything. We also fell in love with Romanian literature and culture and our lives changed a lot in Romania—a country where there is no middle ground and everything is white or black. I lived there for seven years and not one day was boring or similar to another. It was a life of high excitement and of course my writing changed a lot. I began to write long, narrative poems inspired by everyday life and everyday life in Romania is at the same time real and unreal. I touched the bottom and the top of life and I could write about this. I finally could explore all real, unreal and surreal experiences, folkloric, mystical, religious and political images collected since my childhood in the vertical line in my being. Romania opened my being as a surgeon opens a patient’s heart. However, after seven years of Romanian life I moved to Slovenia and there I wrote my first novel. My husband started to write more and to publish poetry, so I had to change my writing from poetry to prose because there was no place anymore in our small studio for two poets. Of course, I am joking. Maybe there is no other happiness for a writer but to know that he or she has in a way opened the being of the other, the beloved one, so that the other can become or be able to call him or herself a writer. We each opened the other’s being to the literature beyond literature and beyond life. This is the biggest prize in a writer’s life. However, when I won the award for my novel, my mother bought a box of chocolates and went to every neighbour in our twelve-family building in Skopje and offered them a chocolate in honour of my award. Exactly as she did for my wedding. To hide my red face I had to use a thick layer of powder L’Oreal. Because I am worth it.

I write mostly when I am happy or, better said, only when I feel strong energy that can explode in my blood, in my mind, in my being. I cannot write when I am unhappy or depressed. I cannot cry on paper, for this I use a handkerchief. I cannot be happy all the time, or I am not happy often, because there are so many things in the world that make

me unhappy. So logically I write very little, but when I have a period of strong energy I write a lot. And when I write I am extremely happy. From my all-time beloved poet Marina Tsvetaeva I learned that art is the atrophy of the conscience. Thanks to her I have opened my being and my writing as much as I can. I have a very special relationship with her that is also beyond literature and beyond life and is difficult to explain. My interest in writing in the last few years has been growing wider: I have written poetry, a novel, a screenplay and a lot of translations from Romanian and Slovenian literature into Macedonian.

In the last decade the most influence on my writing has been my frequent moves and my constant position as a foreigner. For a decade I haven't lived in my country, and even if my exile is voluntary and because of love, I must recognize that the life of a foreigner sometimes is not easy. Especially for a writer. In a way I became a writer-in-translation. Sometimes lost, sometimes wanted. I write only in Macedonian, even if I dream also in Romanian and Slovenian. When you dream in other languages you can also write in these languages but I decided to write in my mother tongue. In a way I have constant problems with all of these three identities, or with the complexity of my identity. I constantly ask myself where I am, who I am. Sometimes I have the impression that if I open the door of the Ljubljana apartment I will step onto the boulevard Dimitrie Cantemir in Bucharest or onto my street in Skopje. Sometimes I am confused when I wake up in my bed in Skopje and feel as I wake up as if I am in Ljubljana or in Bucharest. Even more: every single trip for me is a move so every place I have stayed in for some days or some months is my home and is added to my list of confused streets, beds, houses. I simply cannot leave my life at home (and where exactly is my true home?) and go somewhere on a trip, or be a tourist. I must live everywhere I am so that my life goes with me, so now I live in Iowa, for three days I will live in Chicago, for two weeks in New York, after that in Ljubljana, in Skopje etc. When you live somewhere you participate in all things that happen there, you are not a tourist with a camera, you are not an outsider. Unfortunately or not, I feel I am an insider everywhere I am, so this feeling has a great role in my writing and influences it best. My writing expresses the spirit of the thin soles of nomadism and my life's destiny became a kind of nomadism. I must mention that mostly in my life I travel as a writer. Since 1991 when Macedonia became a country independent from Yugoslavia, almost all the world required visas from Macedonian citizens, so I had to change three passports because they were full of visas. Three months ago I obtained Slovenian citizenship and I don't need visas anymore for my trips as a writer, and especially as a human being, but I still also carry with me my Macedonian passport with hope that in the end the world, and especially Greece, will accept the name of my country and let it be Macedonia as I let people be John, Vasilis, Clara, etc... and do not change their names. In my travels I meet many other people, destinies and life stories and I cannot be indifferent to them. I am among them and they are among the different parts of my being; this opposite perspective is my inner poetics. Maybe because of it I can enjoy my inner solitude and my external social connections and also feel the humour and the irony of the world. Humour is certainly the most powerful weapon against the evil in the world.

One of the things that most recently inspired me was the gift of the Chinese Association of Writers to all participating writers at the literary festival Close View of Writers in Zhejiang. All of us got silk pyjamas as gift: male writers got brown pyjamas, female writers got rose pyjamas. I laughed very much at this gift but at the same time I could cry because the metaphor and the message was very clear: "Sleep, don't look at what is happening around you. Forget to ask about censorship, writers in prison, dissidents.

Sleep!” Life is full of absurd moments, of strange stories, of real unbelievable events. I cannot be indifferent to them. I cannot and I don’t want to escape from the reality around me. It doesn’t mean that I immediately can write about the events that worry or amaze me—sometimes I need years to come back to the shadow of a memory, of a forgotten land. Sometimes I feel that I have too many memories, as if I have lived three lives. They come to me as a river and fill my being with energy so I can write. I must write. Sometimes I feel as if I live in a virtual space where I am not a foreigner and where I don’t need any citizenship, nationality, literary canon or history, anything that complicates life so much. I want to be able to say only that I am a writer. Only a writer, nothing else. But I know that this moment will never come and I am not unhappy about it. Maybe because of that I write what I write and the way I write.