

Tryst Interviews Eleanor Lerman

*Yes, indeed, that is my house that I am carrying around
on my back like a bullet-proof shell, and yes, that sure is
my little dog walking a hard road in hard boots. ~That Sure is My Little Dog*

- Mia:** Your first book, *Armed Love* was met with favorable reviews, earning a nomination for the National Book Award. It was also met with criticism: A reviewer for the New York Times rated it “double X.” Unfortunately I don’t have the book yet, but what would make a book (of poetry no less) rated XX?
- Eleanor:** I didn’t view the “Double X” as a criticism—just a surprise. The book didn’t have an objectionable word in it, nor anything explicitly sexual, but this was more than 30 years ago and perhaps it was unexpected for a young woman—a girl, really—to be writing things like “vampires are happier when they’re homosexual.” I thought that was funny, actually (and cleverly alliterative!) but I guess the reviewer thought otherwise.
- Mia:** I guess what I don’t understand is the book was published in 1973, which was during a time of “free love” and “live and let live” kind of eye-opening experience for Americans; Ginsberg’s “Howl” had already made its splash in 1955 with a subsequent obscenity trial in its wake and we’re talking almost twenty years later, why the backlash?
- Eleanor:** I think what the reviewer was reacting to, as I noted above, was first of all that this book was written by a relatively young woman and it was full of pain and anger and allusions to death. Perhaps that was shocking thirty years ago; perhaps it was some pre-feminist prejudice on the part of the reviewer. At that point in time, sex, drugs and rock-and-roll may have been seen as a male concerns. In any case, it made me seem like a much more interesting person than I actually was.
- Mia:** In one of many articles, the propagandist view is that you did not write another book of poems for 25 years because of the backlash against *Armed Love*. And in your interview with Nickole Brown of Sarabande Books, when she asked about the silence, your response was something along the lines of “you were trying to live a normal life and writing poetry was making you face your sexual identity, making you feel unsafe and raw.” But you had already written the book, *Armed Love* so I’m guessing you weren’t prepared to have your personal life so “exposed”?
- Eleanor:** The older I get, the more the answer to that question—where were you for what is actually closer to thirty years—evolves, because I think about it in (I hope) more mature ways. For example, yes, indeed, I was having some problems with pronouns, meaning, when I was younger, I wrote about love, which meant I had to decide if I was writing about girls or boys, and I hadn’t, at that point, really decided that yet. But also, because of this temporary status I had suddenly achieved as a minor cultural figure, I found myself in the company of a lot of famous and successful writers, most of them novelists, and I thought that was what I was supposed to do next—write a novel. So, I think I had the idea that you were supposed to go through stages as a writer: poetry was the training wheels, then maybe you wrote short stories, and finally, you somehow emerged into the big time as a Novelist, with a capital N. In other words, there were a lot of forces that were working on me and I was too young to make good decisions about myself as a human being or as a writer, so I made some bad ones, like trying to write novels. I was not, at that point in my life, capable of writing anything in long form nor of developing full-fledged characters. In the end, everything has turned out fine though because I did just go ahead and live my life and when it was time to come back to writing poetry, I did.

And I'm a better person now, a more settled person, and, I think, more skilled as a writer, so time has ended up being my friend. As were those writers I met long ago—they were all very nice to me, very helpful. (People like Donald Barthelme and Richard Stern; I owe them great debts.) I was the one who had problems.

Mia: The character of Jack Sears in your story, "Alison's Restaurants," mysteriously disappears off the air for six, seven months, on a "self-imposed exile" from a radio show. I don't want to give the story line away, but one of the things that stood out for me was that Jack's life had become unmanageable due to a major depressive episode that he couldn't account for, and that he didn't want to be labeled "crazy" by his listeners. I know that you revealed in one interview:

I wish I could make my absence from struggling with literature into something romantic (a crippling love affair, a decades-long meditation on the cruel nature of art) but it's much more mundane: I was trying to live what I thought was a normal life, but thankfully, I wasn't equipped for that. What are the most outstanding parallels to the story with your own disappearance?

Eleanor: Oh gosh, what an interesting question. I hadn't seen any parallels until you brought that up. So let me first give you the rooted-in-reality answer: the Jack Sears character is based on a man named Art Bell, a famous radio personality whose program focuses on aliens and crop circles and things like that. He actually did disappear for a while and there were all kinds of rumors about why that happened; the truth was that he had some personal problems to deal with (don't we all)? But, to make a connection I hadn't thought of before, there *is* a major disappearance in my past, and it isn't my separation from art. From the time I was a young teenager, I had a stepsister who suffered from schizophrenia; one night about twenty-five years ago (a couple of years before I had my first book published but after I had left home to live on my own), she apparently got up in the middle of the night, walked out of my parents' house, and was never seen or heard from again. The police searched for her, so did private detectives and psychics but not a trace has ever been found. I actually had very ambivalent feelings about all that: my stepsister was extremely difficult to live with, her mother (my stepmother) manipulated her in a way that had caused problems between myself and my father and had made it difficult for my brother and I to maintain the close relationship we had always had (and still have, now) so I felt sorry that my parents had to go through the agony of not knowing what had happened to my stepsister, but I also wasn't too upset that she was gone. (What can I say? I was young and heartless.) So I think the concept of disappearing looms large somewhere in my subconscious. Death, of course, is the final disappearance, so I'm going to have to think about all those connections a little more.

Mia: Do you feel in any way that your writing has been "forced" to change because of the earlier reactions to your work?

Eleanor: Nope. To begin with, I think that my work as a poet mostly exists below the radar of popular culture, so I can't imagine anyone cares about a culture phenomenon that was interesting so long ago but is more of a curiosity now. (The idea that a poet could cause a stir in an age of constant, streaming pornography and violence is almost quaint.) The only pressure on me as a writer comes from me trying to keep pushing myself. For example, poetry is a very selfish and self-involved art; you spend a lot of time thinking and writing about me, me, me. What I am trying to force myself to do is take myself out of my work so that I can use myself as a filter of experience instead of being in a constant mode of confessing that I feel this, I think about that, etc. Doing that is turning out to be a lot harder—but more productive—than worrying about how my work will be reviewed.

Mia: I'd say that's a pretty good summation and attitude about writing. Your writing seems to be doing exactly what you described above, "filtering" your experiences where we begin to see the writer take on the role of a medium. A good example is your poem, "Star Fish" where Life is personified. You've mentioned a lot of famous people, writers, artists, directors you've known, and it must be tempting material to write about, but you're the only real authority of your own life, so I hope you don't take too much of the "me, me, me" out of your work. On that note, when and how did you become interested in writing? What was the most compelling reason that you took up writing?

Eleanor: I have been writing as long as I can remember. I was lucky in that all along the way, the teachers at the public schools I went to in New York opened doors for me to literature. We read Shakespeare in sixth grade and were taken to see Shakespeare performed; also in elementary school we were told to write a novel! The teachers expected us to like to write, to want to—and I did. (I can still remember the "novel" I wrote, by the way: it was about a horse named Distant Call.) In high school, when I had kind of veered off into a different direction than the other students (I was angry and wild) I had an English teacher who read my poetry and told me that while I shouldn't share it with the other students because it might be about subjects that were a little too much for them (I guess he was predicting what the New York Times reviewer would feel some years later), he knew I was going to be a writer and I should never let anyone steer me in another direction.

But when I was around fifteen or sixteen I also had one of those amazing moments that come perhaps once in a lifetime when you deeply, deeply understand what your life is about: it happened to me on a bus, going home from the town I lived in (Far Rockaway, in Queens, NY). I had been in the local drugstore and was glancing at some books for sale on a rack in the front of the drugstore and recognized the name of one of the authors—Leonard Cohen—because he sang a song called "Suzanne" that was playing on the radio at the time. The book was called "The Spice Box of Earth," and I thought it was a book of song lyrics, but when I started reading it on the bus ride home, I realized it was poetry, and for the first time ever I realized that poetry was not all that (to me) mumbo-jumbo of Robert Browning and Wordsworth and Yeats and Auden that teachers were always reading us, or making us read, but that it could be written by people living in the here-and-now, that it could be about eternal things like love and destiny and desire and anger but written in contemporary—and beautiful—language that meant exactly what you thought it meant. (In other words, you didn't have to read the poem and then pick it apart to find "hidden meanings" behind the incomprehensible lines and phrases.) I knew I had met my fate.

Mia: Would you consider adding some of the poems from, *Armed Love* in a future book, or in a best-of-collection?

Eleanor: Oh, I think I'd put in the "vampires are happier when they're homosexual" poem, because I still think that's funny. And probably true.

Mia: How do you feel about this sudden resurgent interest in your work - all this attention?

Eleanor: As I admitted above, I'm selfish. And a bit of a ham. The more attention the better!

Mia: In your book, *The Mystery of Meteors*, there's a poem, "Flora Street" that you dedicated to T.E. Lawrence; your bio also mentions that you did a whole series on Lawrence. Is this the Lawrence of "Lawrence of Arabia" and why did he interest you?

Eleanor: Let me explain about T.E. Lawrence: I was always interested in him because he was a person who appeared to be one thing (a hero in the guise of a romantic soldier who had led a people to victory over their oppressors) but in fact, had a many-layered hidden life characterized by guilt about his work (he felt he had actually betrayed the people he led), guilt about his sexual desires (he was raped once, when he was captured by Turks during the Arab uprising he led and probably, to his horror, liked it; later in life he hired someone to beat him, probably in part to assuage his guilt and probably also, because he took some pleasure in the pain), abandoned his identity and re-enlisted in the army as a private named T.E. Shaw, was a remarkable writer (*The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, his book about the Arab uprising, is sheer poetry) who managed to lose his 1,000-plus page manuscript on a train and had to rewrite the whole thing, etc. etc. He was extraordinary and lost and confused—all the things that made me feel a kinship with him when I was younger, and as I got older, I realized the burden of carrying around all those lost desires and all that guilt, so I related to that, too. And on top of that, he was a visionary who thought the Arabs and Jews were going to have to find a way to not only live together but bond together in the Middle East; he was an early supporter of what became Israel and carried on a long correspondence with Chaim Weizman, the first president of Israel. Truly a fascinating character. He also put together a collection of poems others had written that meant something to him and I have a copy of it; I had never heard of some of these poets (probably late 19th and early 20th century) but I just love them.

Mia: Unlike Harper Lee who went into permanent retirement after her first book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we as readers, editors and publishers are relieved and elated to have you writing again with the release of your two recent books, *The Mystery of Meteors* and *Our Post-Soviet History Unfolds* both published by Sarabande Books. Here is an example of what they're saying about the books, paraphrased:

[Lerman] silent for so long, has released award-winning books from the vantage point of middle age, and the view from there is angry, rueful, and politically charged. ~Claire Dederer

It could just be my disposition, but not only am I amused, I heartedly disagree: "Politically charged?" - possibly; "rueful" - where?; and "angry" – doubtful.

I find your writing to be playful, sure-footed, tongue-in-cheek sarcastic, realistic and reflective (e.g., *That Eons Pass* and *I Still Remember, We Are Lucky, How We Become the People That We Are*) but hardly angry. Of course, there's the *Ha!* attitude that needs to be reckoned with, but anger is an emotion that's closely related to frustration and I don't sense it in your work:

I guess the music fooled you: you thought we'd keep
the party going even to the edge of the abyss. Well,
too bad. It's all yours now... Have a good day. ~ That Sure is My Little Dog

This is what life does. It lets you walk up to
the store to buy breakfast and the paper, on a
stiff knee ... And then life suggests that you remember the
years ... Upon reflection, you are / genuinely surprised
to find how quiet you have / become. ~ Starfish

What I also sense is your ability to *still* feel awe and bewilderment and that in itself is the beauty of your work. You also seem to have an interest in everything, and have tried just about everything. What are your thoughts about your own writing, now that I've taken up a better part of this interview to impose my own views?

Eleanor: What happened to me was that one day about ten years ago I was out walking my dog and it occurred to me that I had reached an age that made me older than my mother was when she died in her early forties. It was like the arrow of mortality had just been shot through my brain and the consequences of that moment still reverberate. I am aware that life is going on on at least two levels (probably a million levels, but I'll just focus on two): the temporal, where you have to worry about typos in your letters and paying your property taxes, and then some other mysterious level where the Big Questions live—why am I here, what am I supposed to be doing, do I have a soul, what did the Egyptians know that I don't understand? That's what my writing feels like to me: the only tool I have to find my halting way along on both levels at once. I'm better at cleaning up the typos, but it's more interesting to think about the Egyptians.

Mia: I'm not a psychic or a prognosticator, nor have any desire to be either, but it feels to me as if your work is fated to become the social voice of our times; for instance Ginsberg's *Howl* is now considered "one of the principle works of the Beat Generation." Though much of your writing is written in retrospect, it speaks to the generation who lived in your time and to the new generation of poets who seem to be fumbling around for a perspective on the *Zeitgeist*, your work must be a sextant for them. There's such clarity and aplomb in your writing, and yet it is the mark of great writing when you can leave it open-ended, without answers.

Do you mind sharing your personal/political views about what poets, poetry, and why you might think today's poetry is missing its mark?

Eleanor: To be honest with you, I don't read a lot of poetry, so I don't think I'm in a position to comment on the quality or relevance of what's being written today or not. That may have something to do with the fact that younger poets are writing from a perspective that doesn't mean much to me anymore—that doesn't suggest their perspective isn't absolutely valid, it just means that I'm somewhere else. (Remember, that arrow of mortality is still zinging through my thoughts.) Personally, I always go back to Leonard Cohen (as I alluded to earlier) and James Tate, two poets whose work I used to teach myself to write. I remember I would read Cohen, for example, for the sheer pleasure of listening to him sing through the words on a page, and then reread his poems over and over again, like a scientist, trying to figure out how he was putting words together, creating images, to make me feel so much when I read his work.

I also go back, time and time again, to Flannery O'Connor. She was vicious and funny—now there's a role model. When I get anywhere near writing about anything political, vicious and funny is a good approach. I have noticed that a lot of generational politics has been creeping into my work, but that's because I am both saddened and amused by how much we—the psychedelic generation—thought we were going to accomplish and didn't. We had the best of intentions, we tried very, very hard to be humanistic, to do the right thing by our fellow men and women but in fact, we may have helped to push open the lid of Pandora's box just another crack. What's in that box is nothing like what we expected: the violence, the disregard of each other's humanity, the ethnic and religious hatred—where did all that come from? What happened to the human revolution where we were all going to live off the land and dance under the stars? We meant well, but went wrong somewhere. So what's a person to do? Keep your eyes open, watch what's going on. Try to help somewhere, if you can. And then, of course, write about all this.

- Mia:** Your line breaks in your new work published in *Tryst* for the first time are completely different, shortened dramatically. I know one of the possible answers you're going to give me is that the poem demands its form, but why the shorter lines?
- Eleanor:** Again, you're being a lot more perceptive about my work than I am! But you're probably right: my last book had a lot of mid-life culture shock in it. What I'm working on now is—I hope—focused on those larger questions I mentioned earlier. Everyone's life involves a lot of time sitting around someplace like an office discussing why the last order of widgets was defective and who should be blamed for it. Years can go by when that all seems very interesting and punishing each other for the defective widget shipments seems satisfying. But you do reach a point when—to go back to my idea of life being lived on two levels—it gets harder and harder to participate in those discussions because the realization is dawning on you that the office you're in is in a building on a planet in a solar system tucked inside a galaxy spinning around in a universe that no one understands. Who cares about the damn widgets? So maybe as my work shifts from one set of issues to another, the lines shift as well. It's an interesting idea.
- Mia:** I love that you admitted in one interview, you never used to edit any of your poems and now you do. Why have you changed your practice – when it seemed to be working well for you in the past?
- Eleanor:** When I was younger, I was much too full of myself. I thought something like well, *I wrote this poem so it must be brilliant, wonderful*. I now recognize that I am a workman, and I need to build my house with care. Sometimes you pick up the wrong tool, use the wrong part so you have to start over again. Also, while I have always been disciplined about the act of writing—I write every day—I was not always disciplined in my thinking or able to calmly and quietly conduct an internal dialogue with myself about what I thought I was trying to say in a particular poem. Now I am, and I take great pleasure in applying the same scientific investigation I practiced on poor Leonard Cohen (*What is he doing? What does he mean?*) to my own work. There's the selfish poet again: I'm apparently very interested in my own thoughts, so don't mind rambling around in them at any given opportunity. But there has to be an outcome to that kind of indulgence, and that's where it's useful to apply discipline, otherwise you just end up daydreaming. I'm very, very serious about my work; it deserves my full attention, and that means not just whatever skill I have as a writer but also whatever capacity I've developed as an adult to *think*—and to think deeply.
- Mia:** Can you sort of summarize, or theorize how writing poetry is different than writing prose for you?
- Eleanor:** When you're writing a story, you can push a character out on stage to substitute for you—your problems, your secret desires, your neuroses. As I alluded to earlier, it's harder to do that when you're writing poetry. In poetry, that *me, me, me* thing looms large. I'm constantly trying to quiet it down.
- Mia:** What other types of writing have you pursued; I mean how about plays, film scripts, biographies, journalism, translations...etc
- Eleanor:** Years ago I did some comedy writing. (As filler for a drive-time radio show featuring a now-well-known comedian, I wrote what has to be one of the worst jokes in comedic history. Question: "What is the cereal America fears the most?" Answer: "Dreaded wheat." I actually wrote about that in a poem called "Hot Town Sukiyaki") I also worked with my brother on two true-crime books that resulted from the television show *America's Most Wanted*, which he produced for about fifteen years. A couple of years ago I also wrote a book of short stories, *Observers and Other Stories* and I plan to continue writing short fiction.

Mia: Do you feel that you have found your voice and is it likely to change?

Oh, I hope I've found my voice but I hope it keeps changing, too. That would mean I'm getting smarter, learning more. But I hope that "vicious and funny" stays around. It's very useful!

Mia: Where do you work and what is the most interesting thing about your job? Or perhaps, a better question to ask, what is the most interesting thing that has happened in your life and do you plan to ever write an autobiography?

Eleanor: I work as an editor, but I keep that life as separate as I can from my life as a writer. In almost every other respect, my life is really very quiet. I like that nothing very interesting happens, except once in a while, so there's not much material for an autobiography. Ideas are now the most exciting things I encounter, along with finding ways to access my memory. I don't know if this is true for everyone, but I find that the further away I get from experiences I've had—years away, even decades—the more I can look back on them in a clear-eyed way and use them to inform and enrich my writing. And there I go being heartless again, even about myself: the best thing about my memories is that I can use them as building blocks for my work.

Mia: How do you know Sarah Gorham of Sarabande? I sense that the two of you may go back a ways.

Eleanor: It was Sarah Gorham and her husband, Jeffrey Skinner, who brought me back into poetry. I had never met either of them but they had read my early books and wrote to me, out of the clear blue sky, to ask if I was still writing poetry. Of course I wasn't, but it was their letter that changed my life. I can still remember holding it in my hand and thinking, *Can I do this again? And if I do, I will have to change every single thing about my life.*

Mia: Do you have interest in teaching a workshop, seminar or as an honorary professor?

Eleanor: I'm easy to engage in just about anything having to do with literature—and, as I mentioned earlier, I'm a terrible ham. I'll more or less do anything anyone asks me to do. Last month, New York City held a one-day event called "Poem in Your Pocket" day, and one of the activities involved having poets go to different schools in the city and read poetry. I was asked to read in a school in the Bronx, near where I spent most of my childhood. One of the things I mentioned to the kids was that Edgar Allen Poe had once lived nearby, in a little house that is now a museum. They asked me if I'd ever met Poe and though true, I am getting to be a lot older than even I can imagine, I had to admit that sadly, no, I'd never had the pleasure.

Eleanor, thank you for granting us this interview and for the opportunity to showcase your poetry. It's been truly delightful experience and a treat to get to know you.