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## Why I Write What I Write

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Panel: Note to Self: Why I Write What I Write (1)

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## Why I Write What I Write

Agnes Lam

### My background

Perhaps I should begin with a little note on my background. I was born in Hong Kong and educated in English from primary school. I left Hong Kong at 19 to study in Singapore because they gave me a scholarship. Singapore then sent me to do my Phd in linguistics in America. When I completed that, I taught at the National University of Singapore for some years before I returned to Hong Kong. I now teach at the University of Hong Kong. For the last year, I was also the Acting Director of the Centre for Applied English Studies there with 41 teachers, 12 administrative staff and about 7,000 students. The nature of my job demands that I write a whole range of genres: teaching materials, development plans, budget justifications, staff appraisals, curriculum documents, research grant proposals as well as academic books and articles. Sometimes, I am invited to write newspaper articles about poetry. I have done some translation of poetry from Chinese into English when a friend needs my help. I also write poetry myself. In all my writing, I aim to use as few words as possible to capture what I want to say as accurately and as clearly as possible. I do not always succeed but that is my aim because my readers' time is so precious.

### Why I write poetry

Writing poetry is not a requirement of my job but just something I like to do. Because it is something I just like to do, it is not something that requires a reason or a purpose. Do we ask children why they like to blow soap bubbles into the air? No reason. They just like to see them rise into the air, refracting the spectrum of colours from the sun. Do we ask them why they like swimming? No reason. It just feels good to glide through the water.

I have often been asked why I write poetry. I usually reply carelessly: 'I don't know. I just do. It's like breathing.' If I may quote from the introduction to my first collection, *Woman to Woman and Other Poems* (1997).

... To me, poetry is part of everyday life. I see it and hear it everywhere in everything. I cannot trace how this awareness began. I was a rather quiet child who liked to sit by myself gazing at the sea. I also read a lot from a young age. The death of my father when I was thirteen and the difficulties in my first marriage could have enhanced that sensibility. The times when I could not speak of my own dissolution could have made me more sensitive to similar circumstances in other people's lives. ... Through writing poetry, I reorder my inner dissonance. If I can articulate the fury and the calm, perhaps my words may offer some comfort in resonance to another who does not.

If there must be a reason for my poetry, then that is the reason – to understand, to empathize, to comfort, to create harmony and happiness ...

The first poem I ever wrote was written for my father when he passed away. In many of my teenage poems, mostly not published, I was just trying to understand myself, trying to make sense of the universe around me and within me. When I looked around me, I did not understand why there was so much cruelty in this world. I understood kindness because that made people happy but I did not understand cruelty because it made everyone unhappy. And when I closed my eyes, in the inner

darkness, I saw the stars out there in the galaxy still and I did not understand the vastness of the spaces between them. So I wrote poetry ...

Then I went away from home, first to Singapore and then to America, and I thought constantly of the worlds I left behind. I felt the need to write about those worlds, almost as if I needed to persuade myself that they were there still, perhaps because it was in my connection with those worlds that I could retain my bearings in a strange land. There was a poem I wrote in America which seems to epitomize this existence, at once ephemeral yet with a reality of its own:

### **Petals**

in three countries  
I can grow  
if but a little  
each time  
I transplant

the air  
pollen dusted  
allergic to spring  
dripping with sodas  
in the heat of summer  
a chlorine bath later  
smelling burnt  
and crackling  
on autumn trees  
in the clear winter  
icicles break and bite

extremes in America  
modulated in Hong Kong  
negligible on the Equator  
but always  
petals unfurling  
I thrive  
on the spectrum  
of colours smells noises  
temperatures humidities  
degrees of pollution  
in the pervading air

ready to be  
watered by droplets  
pressed between a child's  
small fingers  
a gift for Father

without roots

I grow

with but the scent  
for a season  
even a moment  
translucent petals  
dancing in a raindrop spectrum

mere petals  
of scent and light  
dissipated and mangled  
in an afternoon storm

as the traffic  
halts on the red light  
and pedestrians  
cross in their umbrellas

28 June 1986, LRDC

I still remember the traffic junction in Pittsburgh when that image overwhelmed me so completely I had to write about it when I reached my apartment to free myself from it so that I could be peaceful again.

Soon I found that my poetry could do something like this for other people around me as well.

About a decade ago, one of my friends lost her baby. She was a foreigner in Hong Kong; when I visited her, she told me she could not bring herself to tell her relatives and friends back home she had lost her baby. That night, as I prayed for her, I seemed to see a happy baby floating in the air, not physically of course, but I felt her presence. And I wrote this poem.

### **To Sonia**

Tonight I think of you,  
a child that should have been born  
to your mother in a foreign land.

I would have held your little hand,  
nails trimmed by your Chinese grandmother  
with the baby clipper she brought

all the way from Canada for you,  
her first grandchild so longed for  
from her first daughter-in-law.

You were to be your mother's first born,  
first loved, first bathed, clothed and fed,  
showered with presents from relatives and friends

on the other Pacific shore. You were with her

when she got onto the plane. Did you leave quietly  
over the ocean water? Did you walk

through the window onto the clouds? She could not  
hold you to say goodbye. She could not  
look into your eyes, kiss your cheeks

for the last and first time. She did not know  
you were leaving. She does not know  
where to find you now.

I saw the tears in her eyes, her dark lashes wet,  
her chestnut hair tied in a short pony-tail,  
a child left alone, away from home.

Sonia, Sonia, your mother's first conceived,  
is it possible for you to visit her?  
Tell her you are well

where you are. You are still alive,  
more so than before. On the other shore,  
you need not be fed or clothed.

You are grown and need no care.  
You are loved by many radiant  
as you are, light, complete, pure.

You, her first, know and love her so.

*1 November 1997, Rodrigues Court  
for my Canadian friend married to a Chinese immigrant to Toronto now living in Hong Kong*

Actually, my friend was not Canadian but, to protect the privacy of the people I write about, I might change a few details here and there in a poem and, before I publish any poem of this sort, I always seek permission from the people involved. In this instance, my friend took my poem and sent it to her relatives and friends and that helped her recover from the loss of her baby. A few years later, a young pastor in an English-speaking church in Hong Kong also had to counsel a young couple who lost their baby and he told me later he gave them this poem and it comforted them.

Not all my poems are gentle like these two. I have written some poems about the political situation in Hong Kong and China and, occasionally, even about China's relations with the West. I always write for peace but two or three of my poems have been misunderstood as poems to incite people to war. Perhaps I should take that as a compliment but I was grateful to read Peter Nazareth's review of my second collection, *Water Wood Pure Splendour* (2001), in *World Literature Today*, in which he observes that my poems are "fighting poems that seek to heal". Readers like him understand that my intention, even if I write about political circumstances, is to enhance understanding for greater empathy between different ethnicities and nationalities.

## These eighty days

At this juncture of my writing, I seem to be going through a different phase. I might be returning in some way to some of the concerns in my younger days, though with a different idiom, I hope. It is not as if I have ever lost those themes, which might range from pure joy in a certain lyrical moment to metaphysical sadness. Some of my recent poems go somewhat beyond home, country, culture or ethnicity to an appreciation of beauty and philosophical explorations but I will not quote from them. There are a few samples on the International Writing Program web: <http://iwp.uiowa.edu/writers/index.htm/>, if you are interested.

My revisiting these themes might have something to do with my age. Under a normal life span in Hong Kong, I have fewer than 10,000 days left to write. Eighty of these days are being spent in Iowa. Someone could go around the world in eighty days. I only seek to write part of a collection of poetry. Three weeks have already gone by. But I am now well adjusted to life in Iowa. I love my little apartment decorated all in white and green on a hardwood floor in a house exactly a century old. I now have a satellite vision of the grid of streets in this patch of America – Fairchild to my north, Prentiss to my south, Van Buren to my east and Madison to my west. I have acquired a mini rice cooker. I have also discovered I can remove tea stains on a mug with toothpaste and have learnt to hang up my laundry with such art I only have to do minimal ironing. And I have at last completed a chapter for an academic book on China for two forbearing editors. So finally I am free, temporally and emotionally, to walk along the river, to think, to write poetry ... These eighty days are very precious to me. When they are over, I will have to write the next development plan for my Centre and all the associated genres again ...

For these eighty days of poetic freedom, I am most grateful to everyone at IWP for making life so easy for me here in Iowa. I also wish to thank my fellow IWP participants for being so inspiring and collegial and you, our dear audience, for being so supportive. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.