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An Interview with Sonya Bilocerkowycz

Sonya Bilocerkowycz is the author of *On Our Way Home from the Revolution* which was the winner of the Gournay Prize. Her nonfiction and poetry have appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Guernica*, *Ninth Letter*, *Image*, *Lit Hub*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and elsewhere. Before completing her MFA at Ohio State, she served as a Fulbright Fellow in Belarus, an educational recruiter in the Republic of Georgia, and an instructor at Ukrainian Catholic University in L'viv. In 2019, she joined the English department at SUNY Geneseo. She is the Managing Editor of *Speculative Nonfiction*.

Gandy Dancer: *On Our Way Home from the Revolution* is very much about history—personal, cultural, and political. It's clear that a lot of research was done. Can you talk about your research? Besides the texts listed at the back of the book, what other forms of research informed your collection?

Sonya Bilocerkowycz: As a nonfiction writer, I absolutely love research and talking about research, so thank you for this question! Archival research was critical for the book, as I was able to locate Soviet-era documentation about my family members, and the information in those NKVD documents altered the course of the book project. I'm really grateful to my Ukrainian friend Marianna who assisted in finding them. It wouldn't have been the same book if we hadn't discovered those few brittle and yellowing pages from the archives.

I returned to Ukraine twice while I was writing the book, in 2017 and 2018, and those trips were also a form of research. There are a series of essays in the book called "The Village," which document excursions to my family's

village in western Ukraine over the years. As a personal essayist, I tend to document everything—snippets of conversation, which flowers are in bloom, the shoes I’m wearing, what the politicians are saying on the radio—and these observations sometimes find their way into the essays. So, I knew when I visited in 2017 and 2018 that it wasn’t just for pleasure, that I needed to see what had changed and how I had changed. Being in the village again was important for the manuscript.

GD: Several of the essays, such as “On Our Way Home from the Revolution” and “Duck and Cover,” feature structures separated by different acts. “Samizdat” also has several acts, and you also add side notes of important reflections. What is the significance of the side notes? How do you think this act-like structure lends itself to the themes of identity, history, and memory across the collection?

SB: I like this word “act” you’re using, as it reminds me of theater, and I sometimes think of the essays that way. The act-like structure helps me to visualize what each section is accomplishing in terms of emotions and stakes, and then to arrange them in a way that creates maximum tension and revelation for the characters.

“Samizdat,”—a term for banned writing that was circulated underground—is about literature and the political implications of words. I use five books to organize the five acts of the essay, and the side notes you’re referring to are actually quotes pulled directly from each of those five books. My vision for the quotes is that they serve as a kind of “underground” text that exists just below the surface of the essay’s main text. A few of those five books—Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* and Miłosz’s *The Captive Mind*—first appeared underground as samizdat, in fact, since they contained ideas viewed as oppositional by the Communist state. My hope is that the mysterious voices in the pull quotes will raise further questions about who is allowed to write and under what circumstances, and also remind us of the resiliency of words. As Bulgakov tells us, “manuscripts don’t burn.”

GD: Can you talk about the order and sequencing of the essays? How did you decide where to begin and which should follow?

SB: *On Our Way Home from the Revolution* begins with the narrator in Ukraine during the 2013–14 Maidan revolution. The events of that year cause a kind of identity crisis for the narrator and prompt her return home, both literally and figuratively. After the revolution, she seeks to better understand what her diaspora family had experienced in Ukraine during the first half of the twentieth century, and the book proceeds in a vaguely chronological manner back to the present day. The penultimate essay in the collection is about the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, which Mikhail Gorbachev said was “perhaps the real cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union.” I liked the idea of ending the

book on a precipitating event for a different revolution. After all, revolution is a circular word.

GD: I also wanted to touch on the more experimental structure of “Word Portrait,” “Article 54 of the Criminal Code of the Ukrainian SSR,” and “Encyclopedia of Earthly Things.” To me, these essays provide a brief break in the overall narrative structure, while still informing the reader about important cultural and historical moments. Was this your intention for these essays?

SB: I think that’s a helpful characterization. The first two listed are documents-as-essays, and while they are involved in the narrative plot, the reader doesn’t really understand that until the end of the book. I planted them earlier, however, hoping readers would revisit and view them differently once they learned about the accusations against the narrator’s great-grandfather.

“Encyclopedia of Earthly Things” explores the process of cultural mythmaking. Despite the fact that much of the book is invested in deconstructing idealized myths, the narrator still feels some urge to participate in mythmaking. Perhaps because she is an artist—she can’t help herself. It’s a really indulgent essay, full of cultural shorthand, references, superstition, and it was written with a Ukrainian reader in mind. In that sense, it is a respite from the larger narrative plot, though its themes are still very much entwined.

GD: I noticed you use a lot of repetition—certain words, phrases, and ideas. The first phrases that stood out to me are “I was a tourist in the revolution” and “we fought for two years.” Also, there is the rainbow—or *veselka*—and the way it creates a full circle in more than one essay. I believe that these images served to emphasize important ideas throughout the text. For example, *veselka*, or a rainbow, is described as a “full circle,” which I think is important because it signifies how the narrator goes through a cycle in discovering who they are. The narrator starts in one place, and while she does learn new things about herself and her history, she ends up in the same place of love for Ukraine. Was this your intention?

SB: Absolutely. As I said earlier, revolution is a circular word. The state will continue to disappoint, the people will continue to rise up, etc. I knew the collection was going to have many recurring elements, though I believe there is still growth and change, specifically for the narrator. While the circumstances in the beginning are really similar to the circumstances at the end, it’s not totally cynical because the narrator herself is not the same. In repeating words and phrases, I sought to mimic this larger truth on the level of the sentence. Ideally, the reader experiences the repeated image differently with each encounter, even if it’s just a slight variation. The word (or the world) may be the same, but you are not. The narrator still loves Ukraine, but that love is

matured and nuanced because she has had to grapple with Ukraine as both victim and perpetrator.

GD: In “Samizdat,” you mention that you “take it for granted that writing is an art and not politics.” Later in that essay, you also mention how writing is not just “safe” or “expressive.” When and how did you come to this realization about writing? Was it a gradual realization or a particular moment like your essay being republished during your time in Belarus?

SB: Experiencing political pressure in Belarus because of something I wrote was perhaps my first personal encounter—and a relatively minor one—with this phenomenon, though it continues to ring truer and truer. In the decade since I lived in Belarus, I’ve become obsessed with the work of Anna Politkovskaya, a Russian journalist who was murdered in 2006 for her reporting. I’ve become obsessed with the work of James Baldwin, a Black American writer surveilled by the FBI in the 1960s and 70s. (The bureau’s Baldwin file was 1,884 pages total.) Writing is dangerous, though of course these are only the most dramatic examples. There are many who face quieter forms of repression for their words which challenge the status quo. I now understand that all writing is political, even if it does not explicitly address politics.

GD: The essays titled “The Village” seem to serve as turning points in the collection, especially if you look at the rest of their titles: “Fugue,” “Interlude,” “Reprise,” and “Da Copa.” There is generally a return to Ukraine—to Marina and Yarosh—and a discovery of information that affects you, such as knowledge of Marina’s death or the guilt of what your great-grandfather may have done. They seem to serve as an emotional arc, kind of like a circle, of the narrator realizing that she has discovered what the revolution means to her, especially in the end when she tells her granddaughter it is okay to go. How do these essays serve the emotional arc of the narrative?

SB: Interestingly, I’ve never had an interviewer ask about all of the “The Village” essays at once, and so I really appreciate your question. For the narrator, the rural village where her grandmother was born and raised is a touchstone for her own Ukrainian identity. It seemed appropriate then, in a book trying to sort through the complexities of that identity, to use the village as a physical stage for the tensions and questions the narrator is working through. The narrator wants so desperately to belong to this place that was her grandmother’s and yet she learns that true belonging comes with incredible trauma and guilt, things that she had been sheltered from to some extent. This is really the emotional climax of the book.

The book also has a lyrical bent and the village essays lean heavily into poetic symbolism. The river Ikva, the eggshell-blue headstones, the storks on the telephone pole, last year’s pig, this year’s poppies—the village images

are established in these essays, and they form their own emotional thread through the text.

GD: Several times through the text, you come back to the phrase, “a reflection of a reflection” in regard to the idea of memory. Memory is just one the major themes, along with identity and history, that consistently appear throughout the collection. In the titular essay, you write, “I still do not know who I am to this revolution, so I do not write my name on a brick.” Since completing this collection and having time to reflect since its publication, how would you answer this question today. Who are you within this ongoing revolution? What do you hope your collection teaches readers from around the world?

SB: I hope readers will be urged to examine their own complicity in unjust systems. I think that’s what I know now that I didn’t know before writing the book: that I am personally implicated in evil. Historian Timothy Snyder, who studies Nazism and Stalinism, instructs us to take responsibility for the face of the world because “the symbols of today enable the realities of tomorrow.” Today, I am trying to take responsibility for words and through words.

GD: It has been difficult for many writers to find inspiration for their work during these turbulent times. How has the state of the world affected your writing? What are you currently working on?

SB: It’s been a really hard year, hasn’t it? I’ve found myself reading a lot of Black feminist writers and abolitionists, and their ideas are having a huge impact on my work. For example, an essay draft I started two years ago about a prison in Ohio, and which I never really knew what to do with, is now revealing itself to be an essay about prison abolition. This fall I wrote an essay about police arresting jaywalkers in Belarus (sometimes called Europe’s last dictatorship) and about U.S. police arresting Black Americans for jaywalking. My current writing is deeply preoccupied with police power, what Walter Benjamin calls an “all-pervasive, ghostly presence in the life of civilized states.” This is a logical development in my work, since *On Our Way Home from the Revolution* was invested in the question of why people become agents of state violence.