INTERVIEW WITH LIA PURPURA

Lia Purpura is a celebrated poet and essayist. Her writing frequently focuses on things that either seem mundane or that generally instill disgust, exalting them with her vivid language into the realm of the beautiful. Her published works include, among others, *It Shouldn’t Have Been Beautiful* and *Rough Likeness*. She is currently the Writer in Residence at the University of Maryland.

INSCAPE: How do you feel your upbringing in Long Island has affected you as a writer? What landscapes have influenced you?

LIA PURPURA: The landscape that any writer grows up in will absolutely affect her work in one way or another, whether they’re resisting that landscape, or embracing it, or developing a complex relationship with it. The landscape of Long Island was a real mixed bag for me, and I think that mixed bag is represented all over my work. The natural parts of Long Island, meaning for me primarily the ocean and the beach, were like companions. I felt really comfortable there, and I wanted to be out at the beach walking the dunes as much as humanly possible. The other built-up, suburban parts of Long Island were completely deadening for me and really awful. I felt like my soul was cauterized by that landscape. I lived in a really nice neighborhood, and by nice I mean it was full of older immigrants
and people who had settled down in that area. It wasn’t in any way
a wealthy area, and there was a little scrap of woods that I spent a
whole lot of time in. I spent a lot of time trying to stay away from the
brightly lit, overly-built suburban ugliness since it was really kind
of soul killing. But, then there were the soul sustaining parts. So I
mostly just wanted to get out—I wanted out of there. We were close
to NYC, which was about a forty-minute train ride away, and I did
spend a lot of time in NYC because I had really good friends there,
and it was incredibly exciting. We did a lot of great stuff. We went
to museums and concerts. At that time you could go to the opera if
you were a student for five dollars and stand way up in the nosebleed
section, and that was really rich and exciting.

INSCAPE: In your essay, “There are Things Awry Here,” you write
about the body in relation to its environment: “I can’t figure out how
to get my body to land in a land where the present’s not speaking.
Where stories won’t take, and walking is sliding.” How do you find
inspiration in places that seem monotonous and mundane?

LP: That essay, “There are Things Awry Here” takes place in Tuscaloosa.
The parking lot, the giant, endless parking lot of whatever hotel I
was staying at, was surrounded by these awful big-box stores. I’m a
walker: I have to walk at least three, four, sometimes five times a day
with my dog. It doesn’t really feel like it, but a lot of work goes on
while I’m walking. I was trying to find a place to walk in Tuscaloosa,
and that was the only place I could get to. As I walked this parking
lot, which was a kind of crazy thing to do, I kept thinking, “There are
stories here, and I can’t hear those stories. I don’t know what they
are; they’re not able to speak. They’ve been asphalted and capped, and there’s no way I can even feel my way into this land.” I went to the special collections and asked to read the history of what went on in that area and they came back with really great literature about the history of that area. So I was able to write into that and think about being there and think more deeply now that I had the history. I thought about what had been there, what was missing, and the gap between the two. In that sense, going into that environment with a sense of hunger was what kickstarted that essay. I couldn’t find anything; I couldn’t hear anything—and I very much needed to.

INSCAPE: In the collection One Word, in which you appear, you discuss the significance of the verb. How is the verb, or action, an integral part of your writing? How does this coincide with the physicality, or “musculature,” of writing?

LP: Verbs are so important and interesting, and when they’re flat, they just drag a sentence down. But when they’re surprising, they lift the whole image; they lift the concept and motion of that moment right out of the mundane and into the stratospheric. A surprising verb almost works like a little window into the life of whatever character, dog, cloud, human is under surveillance by the writer. Almost better than any sort of image, the verb shows the musculature. It often shows a really surprising aspect of this creature’s relationship to the world. Active verbs for any student are so important.

INSCAPE: In your childhood, you say you kept a “book of quotes” where you collected poems, song lyrics, and words that you liked. Do
you have a similar book now? What is your journaling process like?

LP: I absolutely collect words. Every region has a set of words, so I'm always listening for those words. Already, I can tell you the words “mission” and “sister,” used to describe a companion, are unique to this area, and this was just in the car ride over here. Those are completely different from my points of reference. They are not Baltimore regional words—you'll never hear that. You’ll hear “sista” but it’s more like, “hey sista, hands off!” The regionality of words is completely thrilling to me. We have a friend who’s a contractor, and he’s an older guy who uses language so brilliantly. He used the word “muster,” like to muster your energy. He’s from the Eastern shore of Maryland where people still use the word muster, a very old word. I do keep lists of words. I have pages and pages of words. Sometimes they’re drawn from my readings, sometimes they’re overheard, whatever’s interesting. These words often suggest scenes, they suggest ideas—just the words alone. It’s kind of a different concept than writing something and trying to find a word. It’s almost like starting with a word and seeing what the word exfoliates, what it blossoms forth for you. They’re very alive like that for me.

INSCAPE: I love the honesty and beauty in “On Coming Back as a Buzzard.” What drew you to writing about the buzzard? What’s the story behind the essay? What is the value of writing about typically-overlooked or neglected and complicated subjects?

LP: The buzzard’s work, in my mind, is a kind of holy work—undersung, full of care, part of a working system, and necessary. I’ve
thought about that for a long while. Without that work, demeaned as it is, or scoffed at as it is, we would be living in a very messy place, and I believe so deeply in using up our leftovers and not wasting things. It’s a spiritual endeavor to not waste and to use something fully and wholly, completely. The bird and its habits mean something to me, ecologically and spiritually. In that one creature, all of this came together.

INSCAPE: How does your spirituality play into your alignment with anything outside of yourself?

LP: The act of creating metaphors is a spiritual act: it is an act of empathy and insight and surprise and curiosity. It allows us to step into another’s body and feel from within, and it makes connections that are unseen until they are made. There are so many silent, invisible tethers between people, between people and objects, between objects and ideas, and metaphors uncover all the invisible ways we are connected and all the invisible ways that surprise us. They force you to see things in others or in “the other” that you had not seen. That act of rebirth is exactly what metaphors are working on, constant rebirth of attention, of recognition, constant rebirth of your capacity for aligning yourself with another creature, another person.

INSCAPE: Do you feel like you go through an aligning process continually, or is it separate moments of alignment?

LP: I think it’s a way of walking through the world that makes a person porous and attentive to the body. Driving in here and seeing
the mountains was a physical experience. Coming from Baltimore, it’s a physical experience. It’s dry and they’re imposing and they’re gentle and they fold, and they exert. To be open to the sensations of a mountain is at first a really wordless feeling. That’s why I want to write. I want to find how language approaches that feeling. It’s a way of living. This isn’t an act of sitting down to the paper or the computer; it’s a way of living.

**INSCAPE:** What is the appeal of maintaining the mystery of the lyric essay and why is it necessary for this genre?

**LP:** If I were to assert that I wanted to maintain the mystery of the lyric essay, it would probably be because I don’t really see a need to pin down the attributes of a subgenre. I call what I do the essay. I don’t subgenre my essay; it has been subgenred. There’s a difference between what I do and what an essayist who works in journalism does. For the purposes of study and discussion, we can make these nuanced divisions. I prefer to call it the essay. I started my writing life as a poet, and it’s clear that poetry influences my prose. When I’m reading the essays, they normally sound like long poems to me. The lyric essay is a prose branch of poetry.

**INSCAPE:** Are poetry and prose more related and integrated genres than they’re often made out to be?

**LP:** I think the best prose is completely attentive to all sorts of poetic elements, like sound, rhythm, and breath, and inflection. Poems shape themselves very differently: they use space and lines. Sometimes prose
uses space and sometimes lines. In that sense, there are some very serious and identifiable crossovers. Some poems are highly narrative and read like stories, and some prose reads like a long poem. Great prose writers have an ear that’s poetic.

**INSCAPE:** You began your career as a poet but, after your pregnancy, began writing prose. How did becoming a mother evolve your writing and writing process?

**LP:** It’s hard to make that call, to see how being a mother in some way informed my life as a writer. In certain essays, [my son] makes little cameos. I don’t have long essays dedicated to him. Sometimes we’ve had conversations that fit into some idea I’m writing about, or I need to refer to his friends for some reason. Those are the most practical ways he fits in. I’m sure it’s made me see the world in a different way, but I’m not sure what claims I can make about that. I don’t think it’s an event or a way of being that’s made me more alert or compassionate or ferocious. Probably something on the ferocious scale. I’ve had to figure out how to stay on a schedule, how to write and have a family. I was always interruptible and my son never interrupted me much, so we had a good vibe going. I’ve had my eye on certain subjects in certain essays, as a mother, that I wouldn’t have had access to before. There are definitely essays in which I’ve called myself out as a mother, and that’s been very clear.

**INSCAPE:** Several of your poems, such as “Design” and “First Leaf,” have to do with fall. What about this season is so evocative and inspirational for you?
LP: That’s so true! I’m not a person who has favorites, just, in life. Whenever adults ask kids, “What’s your favorite season?” I think that’s the most boring question. You’re asking them to rank things, and evaluate. But I’m going to go against all of that and say that fall is pretty much my favorite season. Everything being on that cusp of decay, there’s something so poignant and ferocious about the season-- and bold. I realized when I put this last collection of poems together, It Shouldn’t Have Been Beautiful, how many poems took place in fall, and I had to take a few out because it was so unbalanced. That book was originally arranged by season, and there was a huge fall section. But I do feel quickened in fall--very alert, very alive. The colors are brighter because they’re about to crash. My dog is happier.