

Reading between the lines:

Interview with Elizabeth Geoghegan

by Gutiera Berdian

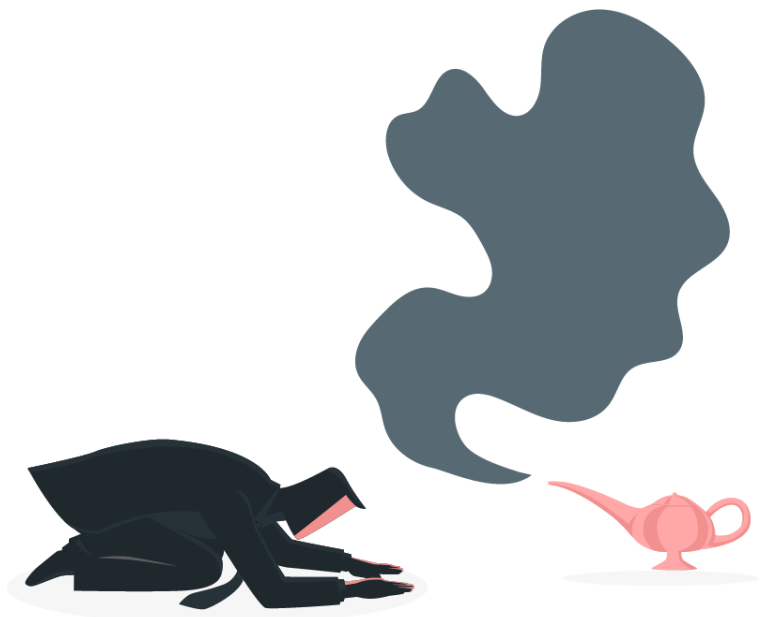
Questions:



Do you think that art in general requires some kind of loss, of discomfort and suffering? Does the artist need to suffer in order to be able to create art?



Getting lost is the only remedy to overcome suffering. Is this an extension of your idea from the essay *"Uncharted: Walking and Writing of The Map"* where you say "by choosing not to use a map it was inevitable that I would get lost, but in getting lost I also got found."?



In *Natural Disasters* it feels like the idea of desire is capable of reducing a strong person to being acquiescent and submissive.

- Was it intentional to elicit this reflection in your readers?



Pura Goa Lawah and *The Violet Hour* apart from being set in South-East Asian Countries, these stories are strewn with elements of Buddhism. Are these choices dictated by a particular interest in this culture and in Buddhism?

Are these elements supposed to have an influence on the main characters' search for self?

Is writing about women a way of picking up where Lucia Berlin-your mentor had left? What is behind this focus on women?





"I needed to get completely lost in the story, move away from the known, from autobiography and trust that my characters would show me the way back out"

Elizabeth Geoghegan nasce a New York, cresce nel Midwest e viene adottata da Roma 15 anni fa. E' l'autrice di due raccolte di racconti: *Eightball* e il bestseller memoir *The Marco Chronicles*, così come dei saggi "Smoking with Lucia" e "Uncharted: Walking and Writing of The Map". Il suo lavoro è apparso su *The Paris Review*, *Time*, *The Best Travel Writing*, *El Pais*, *Words Without Borders*, *BOMB*, *Poets & Writers* e altrove.

Le 8 storie in *Eightball* racchiudono e trattano con semplicità ed eloquenza problemi esistenziali che caratterizzano l'essere umano, difficoltà con le quali tutti noi ci possiamo identificare nonostante non vengano mai nominate esplicitamente: senso di inappartenenza, desiderio, fallimento di relazioni, effimerità delle connessioni con gli altri che siano amici, famiglia o partner e, non ultimo, l'urgenza di ritrovare sé stessi.

L'abilità della scrittrice sta nel suo modo di trattare questi argomenti complessi con una semplicità sorprendente, nulla togliendo tuttavia al valore del testo e alla sua forza di indurre riflessione.

E' utile osservare che questa semplicità non è associabile al non sapere o al tralasciare, bensì ad una forma diversa, se non elevata, di sapere e comunicare, che è più discreta ed implicita. Nel dire poco, Geoghegan riesce a trasmettere tanto. Questa è la genialità del suo testo.

Ammirevole anche la forza quasi ipnotica di queste storie ad assorbirti dentro e catapultarti da un lato del mondo all'altro: da Bangkok a Parigi, per finire poi su un'isola dell'Indonesia e, inavvertitamente, ancora a Roma. Tutto in maniera impercettibile.

1.

Gutiera Berdian:

In your essay “Uncharted: Walking and Writing of The Map” the core idea seems to be represented by the belief that being lost is the *conditio sine qua non* for writing.

In fact, in this essay you argue that getting lost and wandering the streets of unknown cities like Florence, Verona, Roma, Paris will help you eventually write because these places, the experiences that you’ve had in each of them and finally the emotions associated to these places will be stored somewhere in your subconscious and they will reveal themselves to you at the right moment. You say that “*although there is never a guarantee the effect will be immediate, the prose will arrive, nearly audible as if you were listening to a recording and transcribing it to the page*”.

So, it seems as if accepting the fact of being lost and resigning yourself to this not only has a direct healing effect, but it also gives you inspiration. It lies at the foundation of creativity, of art, in your case- writing.

I would dare to take this idea to another level by asking you:

Do you think that art in general requires some kind of loss, of discomfort and suffering? Does the artist need to suffer in order to be able to create art?



Elizabeth Geoghegan:

That's an excellent question and thank you for reading the essay so closely. I don't know if writers/artists need to suffer but I do think loss, the quality of being lost is a kind of loss of control, and maybe in some ways we have to give up a little bit of our desire to control the outcome of things for us to tap into a creative space. For me, for sure loss is a theme in my writing and when I wrote that essay, I wanted to explore this idea of the parallel between loss and being lost. I find a certain freedom in getting lost even if in the moment it can be anxiety inducing. There is something about that moving away from the known into the unknown that allows us to go deeper into our most creative and central selves.

So, I can't speak for other artists and I don't know if suffering has helped me become a writer or a better one, but I do think that we can use the unknown, this concept of rubbing up against, confronting those things that make us feel uncomfortable. For me, unfortunately, it takes a long time for the process to work, as I wrote in the essay. The story that I was referring to in that essay was *The Mother's Day* which came out of the experience of having a very frustrating summer of walking in the rain in Paris but not being able to write. But when the story came, it was almost like I wrote it just automatically. I didn't know I had the story in my head until it came out. It surprised even me because I didn't know what was going to happen to my character and that she would have a miscarriage or any of those things. It just came together that way.

In my experience, I'm surrounded by many artists: my sister is a painter, my closest friends are poets and sculptures, painters and writers and I teach creative writing, so I'm facilitating writing for people and, you know, I don't believe in writing as therapy. So, whether or not we suffer, have little consequence; what is important is what we create from that suffering and I see many "happy" people, or people who maybe suffered less or people who have been through less trauma still be excellent artists, excellent writers.

So, I guess if to answer the question, I don't necessarily think you have to suffer but I do think experience is embodied within us and is a very subtle thing that if we're lucky we can tap into it- to drop back out onto the page.



2.

Gutiera Berdian:

Staying on the concept of “getting lost”, this theme is common in your stories, especially in stories such as *The Violet Hour* and *Pura Goa Lawah*. In *The Violet Hour* the protagonist almost forces herself to leave the hotel in which she has been miserable for days and take the streets of Bangkok. Getting lost is the only remedy to overcome suffering. The same mechanism can be perceived in *Mother’s Day* and *Pura Goa Lawah*. Although set in different parts of the world, these stories seem to focus on the importance and benefits that the condition of being lost geographically has on our mind and soul.

I was curious to know if this is an extension of your idea from the essay “*Uncharted: Walking and Writing of The Map*” where you say “by choosing not to use a map it was inevitable that I would get lost, but in getting lost I also got found.”?



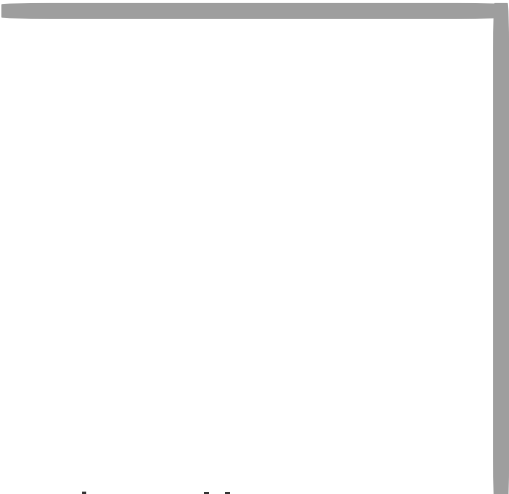
2.

Elizabeth Geoghegan:

That's another great question! Thank you. To be honest, I wrote those 3 particular stories over a disparate period of years. The first one that I wrote was *Mother's Day*, the second one was *The Violet Hour* and the last one *Pura Goa Lawah* but much later than the other 2. I don't think when I wrote them that I was conscious of this idea of getting lost to be found until I got to Bali's story- *Pura Goa Lawah*, where I finally understood that this was something that really drove my writing forward. And that was kind of a key theme for me because writers don't often think "what's my theme?". Other people project a theme onto our work, but we are just trying to tell a good story, however it comes to us.

However, I find it really interesting that you've picked up on this because it's been true in my own life that stepping outside my comfort zone was instrumental for me as a writer. Moving to Italy was the first big change. Just packing two bags, didn't know anybody, didn't speak the language, didn't know what I was doing, thought I would stay for three months, stayed for 20 years...

In 2015 I took a solo journey around South-east Asia and I chose very carefully how I wanted to navigate which is to say I didn't want to navigate. I didn't use Google Maps or Tripadvisor. I had this concept that Tripadvisor is the death of experience and that I would much rather ask someone on the street for direction than look at my phone. I made a conscious effort to leave my six months journey open. So, I had a starting point which was Bangkok and I didn't know where I would go. I wanted to test myself to see if I can get back to that person who I was twenty years earlier at that point when I first moved to Italy and I was able to embrace the unknown, the uncharted and to get lost and to be willing to get lost, and to be willing to risk what that might mean.



I don't mean to say that I wanted to endanger myself or that I took silly risks, but I just wanted it to flow. For me was a kind of spiritual journey as well as a creative journey and I think it had a remarkable impact on the way I write and what I write about, my subject matter. For example, I would have never been able to write Bali's story if I hadn't gone on that trip.

For *Mother's Day* instead, the architecture of Paris with its arrondissements that go in a spiral intrigued me very much because I think that memory is a bit like a spiral, it's not linear, it's more circular and we come round to the things in the process of our lives. I had this idea that my character was walking across Paris and just as the arrondissements are out of order, her memories would come to her out of order. So, she would go further back and then jump ahead and go further back and so on. And as she traverses the city and walks across it, she would begin to remember these things that she had tried very hard not to remember about her relationships and all these things that have caused her sorrow.

So, it was really my idea to write the story a little bit like a spiral and very interesting things begin to happen.

Gutiera Berdian:

It is really interesting. The process of writing and how these ideas come to your mind...

Elizabeth Geoghegan:

In that story I never name the protagonists and I didn't want to, but the other characters, the minor ones are named, like the guys in the car; or they are very sharply described. But this person who she has longed for so long, who may or may not be on the street when she runs into him in Paris all those years later, he's a kind of shadowy figure. This is also kind of the idea of playing with memory and loss and how short details are about insignificant things but the things that are so important to us are actually hard to describe.

3.

Gutiera Berdian:

In the stories of *Natural Disasters* the protagonists are two strong, smart and independent women. Depicting a woman with these qualities and seeing later in the story how this image will be compromised by this obsessive love for the wrong guy is pretty disturbing and disappointing. The mood that accompanied me during the reading was that of incredulity and of refusal of the idea that the desire might have such a power on us humans, and how this morbid desire is capable of reducing a strong person to being acquiescent and submissive.

I wanted to know if arousing this reflection in your readers was something intentional.



3.

Elizabeth Geoghegan:

With *Tree Boy* which is one of the stories, I absolutely wanted to explore the way that obsession can dismantle a person. I certainly don't want to make women look weak by any means. I was trying to recreate a time in some women's life or some people's life because I really don't think it's gender based. I think obsession is obsession regardless of whether its heterosexual or otherwise. But we sometimes turn our power over to people and that can have very difficult and dark consequences. I was trying to explore that. I totally understand being disappointed by it, but I also wanted to create something very beautiful. So, it's a kind of balance between the images of the story, the lyricism of it and the actual plotline and the story itself with the theme.

Violet has a much different ending than our character in *Tree Boy*. *Tree Boy* ends in a very dark note where she says: "I'm shade where there should be light". Is also a coming to an understanding of where she has gone wrong. So, one could always hope for her a different future after this particular encounter. For Violet, the story ends with a very unclear trajectory for her future. But my intention was that you are to assume that she will go on a Silk Road by herself and she will travel alone, and she will conquer her fear and she won't need Billy. And even if he is alive and he comes back, it doesn't matter. That story was meant to be a novel and I had the whole story in my head of what would happen to those 2 characters and whether or not he was alive, but I was asked to shrink the chapters that I had into a story and I kind of dismantled the larger story to write the shorter story, so I never returned to it as a novel. But I like Violet, she seems to be a favorite character of many people who read the book.

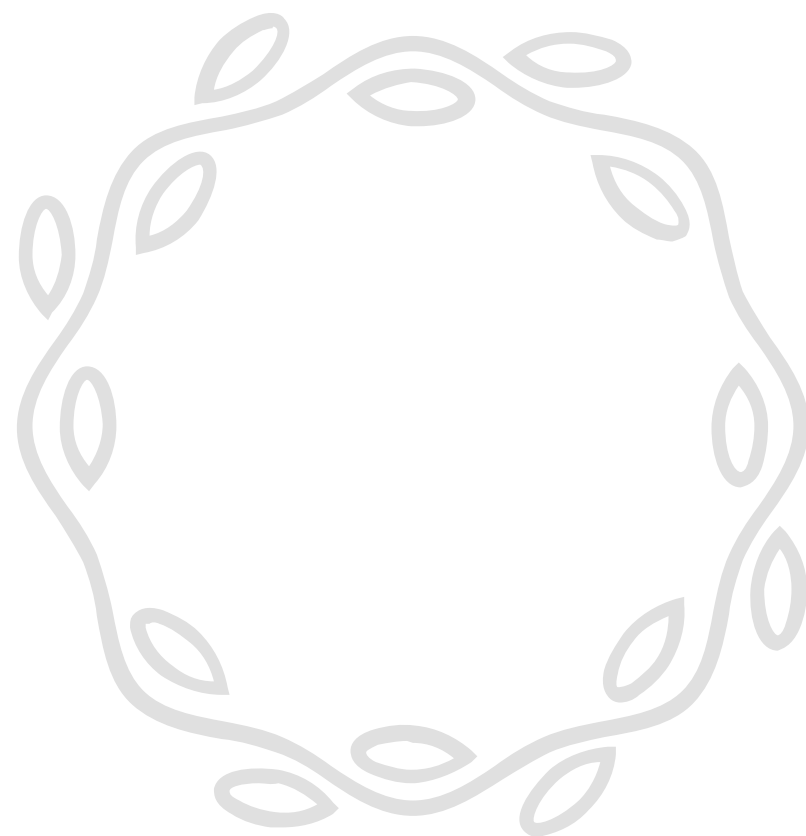
Gutiera Berdian:

As you said, it seemed to me that the story ends on a positive note also because she finds in her bag this little totem of Buddha and for me it was like a sign of future and hope.

Elizabeth Geoghegan:

Yeah, and she's not afraid. You know, fear was upon words and you know fear and she definitely knows what fear is because she is afraid of everything. Part of her is very strong but part of her has fears about certain things.

You know, the story is a black comedy. Is very hard to write something funny with a story where there is this disaster and people are dying from the tsunami. So, it was a delicate balance, but I did want to show that she worried a little bit about everybody who died in the tsunami and she mostly was thinking about herself. And I wanted to see if I can make a character who was seemingly self-absorbed, grow and change and be likeable in spite of it, because I think we all have moments when we are like that.



Gutiera Berdian:

Two of your stories in *Eightball* are set in south-Asian countries: *The Violet Hour* in Thailand and *Pura Goa Lawah* on the island of Indonesia. More than that, these stories are strewn with elements of Buddhism and Sanskrit words like: “yoga nidra”, “abhaya mudra”, “om namah shivaya” and so on. Furthermore, the title of the story *Pura Goa Lawah* refers to an Hindu temple and the protagonist’s moniker is Drishti, which is a Buddhist technique.

Are these choices dictated by a particular interest in this culture and in Buddhism? Are these elements supposed to have an influence on the main characters’ searching for self?



Elizabeth Geoghegan:

Another good question! You're such an astute reader!

The brief answer is yes. I'm absolutely and completely enamored and intrigued with Hinduism, Buddhism and with South-east Asia. As I said, I went on a long trip by myself and I spent those months there and I think it was really an instrumental place for me that allowed me to grow and change as a writer and to reflect back on my time in Europe from a distance. That was a really important trip for me. I have been on my own sort of slow spiritual path and I do meditate and actually this summer I did teacher training for yoga, so I had to learn a lot of Sanskrit.

I don't know if it is a key to understanding the stories, but it is certainly something that interests me because it's very fashionable now to do yoga, to seek your best self and to meditate, and I'm glad that we all have been able to access this wonderful culture, but I don't think as Westerners we really treat it with the due respect.

It's not exercise, it's not fashion, it's not an app on your phone, it's something deeply rooted in compassion, especially Buddhism. So, these are just things that I'm exploring individually, and they found their way into my writing.

For what concerns Drishti, Sanskrit is a really tricky language, so when you go to a yoga class they will always say: "find your drishti" and they mean the gazing point, so you don't fall over when you're in pose or whatever. But Drishti if you look it up in Sanskrit, there are so many definitions for it. It's not just focus, it's not just vision, it's not just a gazing point as it is in Westerners' point of view, like we have with Drishti who takes the word as her name and we never find out her real name, we only know that she didn't like it and she has Drishti as her name and name is always important, right? And so, she's trying to adapt a focus and a sense of self and a groundedness that she really doesn't possess but by rechristening herself with this name even though it sounds kind of cheeky and funny, she means it. She is happy to start a new life with this new identity.

The Violet hour I wrote it earlier, so I wasn't so focused on Sanskrit, but I've been to Asia several times and Buddha is everywhere. *Pura Goa Lawah* is set in Bali, which is the only Hindu island in 17,000 islands in the Indonesian Archipelago. It is a particular place, surrounded by largely a Muslim culture. In the *Pura Goa Lawah* story I try to address this clash between what is fashionable and what is real. So, while I'm making fun of all these stereotypes or archetypes, I also hope in that story that the magic that exists in Bali is very real in spite of this veneer of commercialism and tourism and people taking advantage of a false spiritualism, like the character Kenneth Love Billings who is false healer, a charlatan.

Gutiera Berman:

I remember that in one of the interviews you gave, you say that you almost refused the idea of being a tourist and being among tourists.

Elizabeth Geoghegan:

I did, I hurt my back when I was in Bali so I ended up staying with a Balinese family who took care of me and I had a very different experience because of my injury, and you know how these terrible things can happen, but they can have a good result. If that hadn't happened, I wouldn't have stayed in Bali because I was really almost disgusted by how commercial and touristic it was because I came straight from Myanmar and tourism there because of the repressive regime that's taking over Myanmar, is very new again. The borders have been shut for many years so it's a country that has only had sim cards for a couple of years and has barely had internet and doesn't have any westerner influence: you don't see Coca-Cola, McDonalds or any of these things

So, Bali was a shock to me because I was expecting something more like India or Myanmar, but it was very Western in its way but beneath it, at its core, the Balinese people are incredible and they have a very deep connection to Mother Earth. Their belief system is really fascinating to me. I was trying to navigate this sort of clash of culture and what we want when we go travel versus what we get, and it's ok to be a tourist but we all seem to be embarrassed to be one, right? Myself included. We always want to be an insider, but we are not, and it runs counter to this idea of getting lost. You have to actually be an outsider to have that experience that I crave which is not knowing and then once you know the place well, then you have a different relationship to it.



Gutiera Berdian:

In *Smoking with Lucia* which is about your mentor and close friend, you point out that her protagonists are almost exclusively female. Reading your story collection *Eightball* it is hard not to notice that in your stories the protagonists are all women as well with exception of *A Roman Story*. Is this a way of picking up where she had left? What is behind this focus on women?

Elizabeth Geoghegan:

I'm honored to even think that I could pick up where Lucia left off with female protagonists. She occasionally herself had male ones but very rarely and as you have noted in *Eightball*, the story *A Roman Story* is almost an aberration. It kind of goes off like a bomb in the middle of that collection because it's so very different and it's a crime story.

I don't know if I'm picking up the button from her but if I could, I would be honored. I guess it's just what I feel comfortable writing, I don't really sit down and decide: "Oh, I'm going to write from a female point of view". I just almost naturally do so. And in fact, *The Roman story* was kind of a test for me to see if I could write from not only a male point of view but from an Italian man point of view. These are things that are good to know you can do, that you're flexible enough as a writer and as a creative person. The characters in my stories are not me, they are certainly refracted versions of things I've absorbed in myself or people close to me. So, in that sense I guess I'm just more interested in women's stories.

I'm just interested in women's lives, women at different ages in their lives, so *Eightball* collection tries to show a progression: Queen who's young, the character in *Tree Boy* who's probably in her twenties, Violet and the character in *Mother's Day* they are probably in their thirties and then Drishti is around forty. I was trying to move through a progression of time.