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“Elsbeth Liebowitz: A Life in Brief”
Approx. 1,775 Words

Elsbeth Liebowitz: A Life in Brief

We consult poets’ biographies in vain if we’re seeking the source of their art. At best, the details of a writer’s life offer glimpses, hints, intimations, echoes. This is especially true of those whose lives take place almost in secret — writers like Emily Dickinson, for example, and Stevie Smith. Their poetry is the fruit of solitude, and it often bears the marks of that isolation: a strangeness and authenticity that we find in no one else’s work. Reading the poems of Elsbeth Liebowitz, we see instantly the same kind of solitude at work, showing up as a fierce individuality of tone and form that makes her poetry unique, challenging, and ultimately irreplaceable.

Elsbeth Liebowitz was born in New York City on July 19, 1918, the second of three daughters born to Benjamin and Virginia Liebowitz. Her father was a physicist at Columbia University who, in the late 1930s, patented a lucrative process dubbed “Trubenizing,” which eliminated the need for starching shirt collars. While Trubenizing generated a fair amount of wealth for the family, Benjamin Liebowitz’s business success seems to have been something

of an embarrassment. He preferred to be known as a physicist working at Columbia University, not as a shirt-industry innovator (his children had the same preference). In any case, both parents were prominent in American Jewish intellectual circles and intimately involved in the plight of Jews in Europe — an idealism and sense of communal responsibility that shaped Elsbeth’s views on political and social issues.

There is little information about Elsbeth Liebowitz’s early years. Beyond her own poems, the only surviving evidence consists of photographs, faded black-and-whites of Elsbeth with long, thick pigtails, sitting on a gray lawn in gray pre-war New York weather, or posing (at twelve? thirteen?) on a grass-fringed rock by a rustic cabin, one knee drawn up and held in place with tightly clasped hands. She seems happy, more or less, as all children do (more or less). But it must be that the illness she suffered from for most of her life was already at work. One poem declares that the family thought her “retarded,” although it’s hard to imagine; after all, she graduated on time from senior high at The Riverside School in early June 1936. Socially, however, she surely must have seemed backward: shy yet imperious, overshadowed (so she felt) by her more gregarious older sister Naomi, an observer chronically unable to connect, a holder of grudges. On the other hand, she had a lively, if sometimes caustic, wit. Wordplay and rhyme-play pleased and energized her. If only she could overcome her inability to relate....

We can imagine that Elsbeth’s parents had high hopes of bringing their daughter out of her shell when they planned an extended sojourn in Europe. This was no vacation, though. It was the autumn of 1932, and Benjamin Liebowitz traveled to Germany as an unpaid relief worker. In

Berlin he worked closely with Leo Szilard, whom he'd met when the great physicist had visited Columbia the previous year. (In 1934 Szilard was to take a patent on nuclear fission as an energy source, before becoming a central figure in the Manhattan Project.) Szilard had made all the arrangements for the family's stay at a pension in Berlin. But more important for our concerns is the fact that he found help for young Elsbeth (then fourteen) in the person of a therapist named Gina Philipsborn. In a letter written many years later, Elsbeth wrote that Philipsborn “was the first person who would listen to me with undivided attention and care, without irritation, scorn or ridicule.” These are heartbreaking words, and they imply a searing emotional environment. We can only guess whether that environment was real or imagined, but it's clear that the Liebowitz's found their daughter difficult, which may be one reason why she was sent to stay with the Müntzes, a German Jewish family living not far outside the city. The purpose, Elsbeth wrote in 1989, was “for me to learn German first-hand.”

Elsbeth's psychiatric treatment and immersion in the German language continued well into 1933. She even stayed with the Müntzes when they moved to Denmark to escape the Nazis. For a time she lived with the Philipsborns at their place on the Danish island of Bornholm. Hitler had been named Chancellor in January of that year, and by late summer his Nazi thugs were committing violence in the streets on a daily basis. In September 1933, the Liebowitzes returned to New York.

For Elsbeth the return was debilitating. By her own account, she began to drift, all the while looking for a psychiatrist she could trust. She stayed at home for a few years, then tried studying music at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, but discovered she had “no particular talent.” Then it was back to the New York area, where she “drifted some more without purpose.”

In 1946 she became an in-patient at the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas, where — two years later — she found the person she’d been seeking: a staff psychiatrist named Irving Kartus. Dr. Kartus not only treated Elsbeth, he befriended her. Forty years later she would still refer to him as “my mentor.”

With Dr. Kartus’s encouragement, Elsbeth Liebowitz enrolled in Topeka’s Washburn University, where she earned her B.A. degree in English in 1954. She also started writing privately at Washburn, beginning to develop what she would later describe as “the unique mixture of imagination and original thinking” that characterizes all of her verse. She went on to earn a Master of Arts degree in Library Science from The University of Denver in 1956, but refrained from looking for a job in order to spend the summer working on her writing. Although she would land what she called “a small library job” a few months later, she had begun to think of herself as a poet, albeit a “late bloomer.” She was thirty-eight years old.

Over the next forty years Elsbeth Liebowitz struggled to work, to write, and to heal her spirit. She joined the Unitarian Church (an act her “anti-church” father found somewhat perplexing) and continued her therapy. She also pursued her long-time interest in photography,

inspired by the landscape of the American West, especially the mountains of Colorado; Indian Peaks, Maroon Bells, Crested Butte, and the jagged walls of Black Canyon of the Gunnison all appealed to her photographer’s eye. She also became an active member of the Sierra Club, donating money and time to protect the environment she loved and which — perhaps more than anything else — brought her periods of calm.

Her writing developed slowly. “I’ve always been a low-energy person,” she once admitted. But it would be truer to say that she viewed herself and her activities hypercritically. She filled hundreds of notebooks with fragments of poems, prose sketches and stories, random thoughts, and she revised tirelessly. But only a small number of poems ever seemed truly right to her; there were always rough edges, infelicities. In one unfinished poem entitled “Thoughts,” she wrote:

Whirlpool of water,
whirlpool of mind,
tossing and turning,
captive and blind.

Against this sense of swamping chaos Elsbeth wielded her love of language and her considerable wit. She composed scathing satires on social and political themes, searching philosophical poems, and dark, unsparing portraits drawn from childhood experiences. Tellingly, she identified with the black maid, Ethel, who had cared for her and her sisters when she was five; the feeling of being “crushed” by outside pressures was something she had lived with nearly all of her life. We can scarcely wonder at her writing so furtively over the years, especially given the painful nature of the material she was dealing with.

Over the next many years, Elsbeth Liebowitz came to think of her poems on serious subjects as her weakest. (Her readers, of course, need not agree.) In the early 1970s she turned her hand to childrens verse, and these were ultimately the poems she came to consider her best. The self-judgment is ironic because Elsbeth never married or had children, perhaps never even had a serious relationship, and certainly spent little time with children. But her own childhood was never far from her mind, and besides, childrens verse gave her the freedom to indulge in wordplay. She took unbridled joy in inventing names for imaginary worlds, imaginary creatures. Her child characters proved to be convenient actors in what amounts to a drama of idealized innocence. Her childrens verse is exuberant, funny, clever and colorful — everything that Elsbeth’s daily life was not.

It may be precisely because they were light and detached from her personal life that these were the first poems she decided to share beyond the circle of her family and close friends. In the late 1970s she began attending writers conferences and workshops. Unfortunately, childrens verse isn’t the normal fare for “serious” poets, so Elsbeth never found the support among peers that she hoped for. By the mid-1980s, having achieved just a few appearances in scattered periodicals, Elsbeth nearly gave up on finding an audience for her work. But she never stopped writing.

Eventually, Overboard Press took up her first book, *The Tomorrow Book of Verse*, and in 1993 issued it in a colorful, whimsically illustrated edition with artwork by Roger Curley. Over the next six years, three more collections of Elsbeth’s poetry appeared: *A Mixed Fare*, *Twigs*

Bent Under God (a gathering of new and selected poems), and *Moon That Would Be The Sun*, all with beautiful illustrations by John C. Ransom. Because the author’s health had begun an irreversible decline, her final volume was drawn from manuscripts, assembled by the Overboard Press editors in the summer of 1999, and released early that September. The editors read from the book at the author’s bedside, and although it wasn’t clear if she understood, she did seem pleased. And maybe she’d been waiting for it.

Less than two weeks later, Elsbeth Liebowitz died at the age of eighty-one. Her parents and sisters — everyone who’d known her as a child — had long since passed on. The Unitarian memorial service was simple: around a table bearing copies of her books, a few photographs, a couple of flickering candles, friends gathered and spoke kind words. Those presiding read several of Elsbeth’s poems aloud — all of which brought to mind some lines from that unfinished poem, “Thoughts”:

Deep in the center
of darkness and calm,
a lost dream is hiding ...

In poem after poem, book after book, Elsbeth Liebowitz grants her readers glimpses of that hidden dream — for which the only adequate response is gratitude.