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As told to Grashina Gabelmann, 2061 words.

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On giving yourself the permission to create

Poet and spoken word artist Tanasgol Sabbagh on the fear of permanence, the need to perform, being a writer with a mistrust for words, and forgetting oneself in order to create.

What are the subjects that ignite your need for words?

The subject that ignites my need for words...is not having the right words. I've realized in the last years that I'm not good at explaining how I feel. I never complete sentences when I speak to a person. One reason for writing is having a huge mistrust in words and language. I hope that thinking about words, writing them down and arranging them will help me hit the spot.

Do you have a mistrust in words while writing?

Yes. I have a disbelief in a lot of things. When we have a word, when we have a sentence and we when we have a text, it acts as though we can now know the thing we were trying to say and I don't trust that feeling of release. That feeling of "Now that I've put this into words, I understand it fully," and that's mainly what I mean, when I say mistrust words. That's the reason I think so much about what I do and why I've been writing poetry for so long and I think it's also the reason why I don't publish my work in the written form.

Spoken word as a form comes as close to what I believe I can do with words, which is that I can utter them in one moment in time, I can work with a range of sounds or with emphasis. Your voice can put all the brutality and tragedy, but also lightness into words, and then they're gone, they are fleeting. Sometimes, I think it's the only way to utter a poem. I love reading and the moment I read words, I believe them but I just I can't allow myself to work like this.

Is there something scary about the permanence of you putting your words down to be read by others?

Yes, there's the fear of permanence, the fear of people being able to point out what I wrote years after I wrote it. It feels dogmatic. It's as if by writing down the sentence, I am saying that what I have written is true. I'm also afraid of that dogma. I don't know. It's weird, right? Because when you're on stage, you also force people to look at you and you force them to believe you but it's just for that moment, then you leave the stage and the audience knows that it was an act.

Performance.

Exactly.

You once said "very early on writing meant writing a script for myself to perform; my voice, my body involved: it became about me." Can you elaborate on that?

I have to believe my parents when they tell me about me being a kid and entertaining groups of people coming over for dinner. That was back in Iran. I acted as though I could read books. I saw the adults reacting to me and I saw how I could make people happy. Then we came to Germany and I felt my family there react differently to me than my family in Iran. I felt the need to perform. I think my writing comes from this performance. It started with my body and then the words followed because there is no satisfaction in

waiting for someone to give you a script. It wasn't enough. I needed to articulate my own words.

Did you take acting classes before starting spoken word?

I never took classes but did plays in school and outside of school. I actually wanted to become an actress but I never went to acting school. I never applied because I began to fear dominance. I felt it was a perverted way to live, you know what I mean, to stand in front of people, perform for them and wait for them to choose you for a role. I mean the following in the least naive way possible, but what I do right now is the freest possible thing I could be doing. I know which words to put in my own mouth and I know when to change them and I know how to speak them.

I found this quote by a writer called Richard Hugo and he writes: "Your way of writing locates, even creates your inner life," and I was wondering what you think of that in correlation to your own writing process?

Yes, that resonates a lot with what I think about writing.

The things you write and perform are political and about the "external" world but at the same time you use it to explore yourself.

Yeah definitely. I can't appropriate every pain and every horror of the world but the only way to understand and to know is through my own experience. I have all these instruments to understand so much. So much that has nothing to do with me so it has everything to do with me.

Growing up, being very close to family, I felt there were already so many things planted inside me that have nothing to do with me but have everything to do with me because they're inside of me and that's how I go about in the world. I just think that if I see something bad and feel the horror of it then the horror must already exist within me. Surely just looking at something doesn't make me feel the horror. I don't know, but yes, to simultaneously locating and creating your inner life. Definitely.

While you were speaking the word "permission" popped into my mind. Do you ever struggle with the feeling that you lack the permission to write?

Yes, I think it is one of the most present words in my mind when I try to write or when I end up not writing. I think it's really hard to allow yourself to write. I feel that you have to lie to yourself in such a way that gives you the permission, that makes you feel that what you will write will be worthy of being written. "You are allowed, you have the permission to write." I don't think I do. Why would I? I have to put myself in a state of trance where I forget myself to then be able to write because otherwise who the fuck are you? Who the fuck are you to think you can do this? Not because it is such a hard thing to do but to think that what you do is worth anything or that what you think could even scratch the monstrosity of life.

So you mentioned lying to yourself and forgetting yourself. Are those two methods you use to give yourself the permission to write?

Yeah. Maybe forgetting myself in a sense because I also need to look at myself a lot. I have three mirrors in my room. I constantly look at myself. Lots of people don't like watching or listening to themselves but I don't mind this, and I mean this in the least arrogant way possible, I just need to do this in order to remind myself that I do in fact exist. But at the same time I have to forget what I said two hours ago because it will stop me from writing. It makes me question every sentence. So in this sense I have to kind of forget myself. I guess it goes back to me mistrusting words. I also, of course, mistrust the way I look at myself and the perception I have of myself so I have to create a space where I can see through that. Lately I've been comparing writing and understanding and actually everything I do with the sensation of looking at a 3D book.

Where you have to cross your eyes?

Yeah. You have to place the book so closely in front of your face that you are not able to see it. Then you move it away slowly while intensely looking at the image as if you are seeing through it. You don't see any image until, at a certain distance, the 3D image appears. Creating this kind of tension between yourself and the thing you are looking at and then seeing something else pop up...I think that is what I try to do when I write.

That's a really fascinating way to describe the writing process. You get so close to it and maybe it is in this closeness that the forgetting of oneself occurs and this gives you the space to even do what you are doing.

Yeah. Damn I should buy one now. It's strange talking about writing. I know a lot of people feel like this but I feel like such a fraud talking about writing because I feel that that I don't do it enough. Yesterday I said "no" to a magazine wanting to publish my poems because, after all these years, I still don't want people to look at my writing. As in, it's not for your eyes, it's only for your ears. It's so erratic the way I go about with writing. I will write on a note and put it on my wall for people to see when they visit me. I will put my writing in Instagram captions or stories, but I will not put it in a document. Sometimes it feels lazy, but I don't think it is. It's a fear but, wow, what a boring and long fear to have? Just let it go, man.

It's interesting to hear because I could never imagine performing spoken word like you do and to me the written word seems a lot safer.

Really? But you have to imagine that when you're on stage, there is lighting, the microphone, the distance to the audience. So much stuff that veils you. I don't like to show people my spoken word poems. It feels like a zoom-in. It feels like someone were to look at my fingers to discover bitten off skin and chipped away nail polish. It feels too close. On stage, it can be scary beforehand, but then you just get this unusual kind of courage and then you might as well go through with it. It's so easy to go on stage and be one thing and make everybody believe that one thing or make yourself believe that one thing, it's such a tempting thing to do. It's almost erotic to think about it. It's like role play with yourself. I can't allow myself to believe myself, you know what I mean? It would blind me...

Do you ever write something and shortly after you won't know anymore what you meant? You don't understand your own writing.

Yeah. And do you like that moment?

I'm not sure. What if someone were to ask me the meaning of a sentence I have written and I can't give an answer. Isn't that bad?

Yeah. I know what you mean.

But maybe it's really beautiful because it came from within me but has a life of its own. I'm not entirely sure of its meaning but it can stay where it appeared. You can trust it.

It came from a place that isn't controlled by you and that's what I actually meant: I feel so many things are controlled by me. I know it's a very egocentric way to go about the world but when you write and create you're kind of egocentric. You think that you are creating everything that is happening to you, not in a spiritual way, but because you are writing a narrative in your head so I have this mistrust with everything that I write. Did I actually want to write that? Creating moments where you can actually lose that control is very important for me. Honestly, that's the biggest reason for me to continue doing live performances.

These moments where you lose control?

Yeah it rarely happens but when it does, it is almost like a holy moment.

Tanasgol Sabbagh Recommends:

Moyra Davey - Index Cards

Kendrick Lamar - "Sing About Me, I'm Dying Of Thirst"

Claudia Rankine - Don't let me be lonely

Aria Aber - Hard Damage

Sevdaliza - "That Other Girl"

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