



# Fathom Journal

## Issue 21

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## 'ARS POETICA WAS THE EXPLOSION OF ME WRITING POETRY': AN INTERVIEW WITH ADI KEISSAR

ADI KEISSAR

Haaretz called Adi Keissar the most influential poet working in Israel today. Her first book of poetry, *Black on Black* was released in 2013 and she has subsequently published two additional collections. Fathom Deputy Editor Calev Ben-Dor met Keissar in a small café close to the Machane Yehuda market in Jerusalem to discuss her Yemenite roots, her poetry and the inspirations behind it, why she created the *Ars Poetica* poetry nights, and why she thinks that Israel's future lies in becoming a real mixture of East and West.

### Jerusalem, my home

**Calev Ben-Dor:** *We are sitting in a café in Jerusalem, the city you grew up in and have written about. What is your relationship with the city?*

**Adi Keissar:** Sometimes I consider Jerusalem to be like an additional parent. Growing up here was a real privilege, because I feel Jerusalem exposed me to so many things. I've lived in Tel Aviv for the last few years and I feel it is very homogenous; you only see people who are like you, whereas Jerusalem is so diverse. You grow up surrounded by many cultures and different kinds of people. Being liberal and pluralistic are often just big words that people say, but in Jerusalem you are forced to confront challenges and tensions. It's the real deal here.

Jerusalem, with its history and all those big stones taught me to be humble. But it's a good type of humility. When I was in Rome I experienced something similar. The tensions between old and new, between holy and secular, create a type of electricity.

### Shaama, my Yemenite Grandmother

**CB-D:** *Your grandmother is present in many of your poems and seems to have been a very strong influence on you. Your first book, *Black on Black* is dedicated to her, and you write that she 'taught me more than she could ever know'. In what ways do you think you were influenced by her?*

**AK:** My grandmother passed away when I was seven years old so I never got to talk to her. But when I was searching for my identity and went through a process of trying to understand myself, she was the real 'gateway' to my Yemeni roots. Whereas my father's family came to Israel from Yemen in 1882, settling in the Shaarei Chesed neighbourhood in Jerusalem and becoming the only Yemenite family in an Ashkenazi area, my mum's family came more recently, in the 1950s. My

grandmother was the only part of the family to be represented 'Yemen'.

When I began searching for my Yemenite roots, everything was connected in some way to her and to women. I discovered that Yemeni women poetry was very different to the male poetry of that time – which was generally connected to *diwan* [a collection of poems related to religion]. The poetry by women – who didn't know how to read or write – was passed down orally and was often connected to rites of passage such as birth, marriage, death etc. Parts would be taken out or added, so it became quite freestyle. These women were singers and performers, like today's spoken word artists. Some of their poems were quite radical – for example, one woman talks about her husband's other wives and how much she hates them. Many of the poems are humorous. Through these female characters I discovered so much about my heritage.

**CB-D:** *In one of your poems you write about how children laughed when you said that your grandmother's name was Shamaa. Growing up, how much awareness did you have of your heritage and how was it different to those around you?*

**AK:** In Jerusalem the general vibe is Mizrachi, so I grew up feeling everyone was like me. But I was also aware that my skin tone was not good. In my poem '*I am the Mizrachit*' I write that when people would insult me they would call me '*cushit*' [a derogatory term for those with black skin]. And I accepted it as I felt something was wrong with my skin colour. I was very proud of being Yemenite, and I liked the food and the music as a kid, but other children made me very aware of my skin colour.

Only when I grew up and went through this journey of understanding my cultural roots did I understand that Israeli society considers my family culture exotic measures it differently to Western culture. So-called 'Eastern culture' will never be measured with the same academic tools or wider context that Western culture is measured by, but will rather be considered in the realm of the exotic or the folklore, as if the most important component about it is the fact it is non-Western.

When I realised this, I began to understand power structures and who gets to define who. When I was studying in Tel Aviv University people would tell me I wasn't a 'classic Yemenite' and I thought to myself – what is a classic Yemenite? Do they live in Rosh HaAyin and cook *jakhnun*? The subtext was that I didn't fit into their stereotype because I was studying for a Masters.

The tragedy is that people are ignorant of history and culture and grow up in a world where the immediate connotation of 'culture' is something white or Western. When I was studying script writing and learning about plays, all of them were from America or the UK. And everyone felt it was so natural and acceptable. Do they not write plays in Iran, India or Morocco?

After I went through this process I became an autodidact. I tried to learn everything that I had not been taught about literature, taking from Africa and other parts of the world. I still don't understand how someone can consider themselves an intellectual if they don't know the literature from other areas of the world, or how Israelis can think of themselves as radical or 'alternative' if they

are only being taught things through a Western lens, or if they cannot name one Lebanese author.

I touch on this in the poem *I am the Mizrachit*. But when I suggest this cultural perspective some people feel threatened, asking me, ‘What do you want from me? Do you want Israel to become Yemen?’ Of course I don’t. In the poem I specifically write ‘I am neither here nor there’ to show that I’m suggesting a third option. I grew up here and Israel is my home. We need to make a real mixture of East and West, rather than just saying it’s a melting pot when it’s not. We need an Israel that can cope with a diversity of narratives and is not threatened by the idea of a meeting between cultures.

### **Ars Poetica, and my anger**

**CB-D:** *There is a tone of anger and rebellion in some of your poetry. For example the poem ‘I don’t know how to read poetry’ seems to suggest that poetry should be full of emotion, perhaps even aggression? Is that a component of your writing and politics? In January 2013 you established Ars Poetica, a new kind of poetry evening held once a month in PLACE – was that also an expression of your anger at the poetry establishment?*

**AK:** Yes, there is an anger in my poetry and in me. It’s a natural feeling among people who feel the system discriminates against them. That poem was an expression of my feelings before I established *Ars Poetica*. Yes, it expresses anger, sarcasm and humour. When I read poetry, I want to *feel* something and be surprised. And I want to *believe* what I’m hearing. It has to be real, even if it’s ugly, like making a huge smile even if you don’t have teeth. When I wrote that poem, I felt this wasn’t what I was getting when I heard others read poetry – so much reading was mannered performance. I think I also wanted to place myself as an outsider to the poetry world. I still feel I am that, to a certain extent – though that may surprise some people. I have always felt that I come more from the music world than from the poetry world.

**CB-D:** *You once described how you put together Ars Poetica as a reaction against poetry nights that were male dominated and full of people who took themselves too seriously, so you decided to create your own night for your friends. As it became more popular the media described it as an alternative, Mizrahi night. Do you accept the symbolism other people place on the things you do? And how do you move between the personal and the symbolic?*

**AK:** From the beginning *Ars Poetica* had an agenda. Mind you, as a poetry night it was so different that it would always have been considered as a ‘rebellion’ by the media, which always tries to ‘brand’ things. *Ars Poetica* was the explosion at the end of these two processes – my writing of poetry and the path of discovering my roots and culture. It was also an attempt to create a space for people to feel at home in poetry. Too often people in this genre try and make it elitist – only *some* people can understand it, only *some* people can write it etc. I wanted it to be for everyone, for people to feel at home; I wanted the poetry night to be like a party: edgy, multi-sensory, connected to music and a mix of so-called ‘high and low’ cultures.

But after it started, *Ars Poetica* became something I never expected it to be: a monthly event attended by hundreds of people. It created a space where a diverse group of people can say something about politics, gender, and sexual orientation, and also about love and loneliness.

**CB-D:** *Was choosing to use the word Ars an effort at reclaiming that word, which in Israel is used to insult?*

**AK:** Yes. Ars in Israel is shorthand for vulgar, streetwise, uneducated, no manners, up-front. I wanted to say that if you use this term to insult what I consider to be my family, then cool, you can call me ars. But that word is a symptom of your racism and you should be ashamed of pouring this type of negative content into words. So yes, it was a reclaiming. And it was also a play on the Latin words *ars poetica*, from the art world. So it was an attempt to mix 'street' and 'culture' which, as I say, go together for me. I wanted to the night to be a *shchuna* ('hood') with something for everyone.

### **'Everyone marries everyone these days': The Mizrachim and Israel**

**CB-D:** *To return to the poem 'I am the Mizrachit' – there is a line 'everyone marries everyone these days, we play Mizrachi music at weddings' suggesting people are merely making excuses to not talk about ongoing racism and inequality. But do you not think that things are changing in Israel in terms of greater integration and 'intermarriage' between Ashkenazim and Mizrachim etc?*

**AK:** When people start discussions about social issues in Israel many use phrases like 'everyone marries everyone these days' or my 'grandparents were also in a tent camp' etc. Everyone's story matters, of course, but if you look at the big picture we as a society are far away from where we want to be – or even where we say we are. When you look at power structures – higher education, media, government – you won't find many of the 'others' – Mizrachim, Ethiopians or Palestinian citizens of Israel, or even women. This is not a coincidence.

The system works for some groups in society. If there hasn't been one Mizrachi prime minister in all its years of the state then you can't say that is simply a coincidence. If you look at who sits on the courts you won't find these 'others,' and in the most recent 'Israel Prize' awards almost all the candidates were Ashkenazi men – I said it might as well be called The 'Ashkenazi men give other Ashkenazi men prizes' Prize. If an alien came down they would think that only white males live in Israel. It's bleak.

In the 1950s, a lot of North African immigrants were placed in the periphery of the country and it's very hard to get out, even for second and third generation Mizrachim. Things are getting better, but the pace is very slow and we are far from where we need to be. It is important to say that, and not just say 'everyone marries everyone these days'. And when I talk about equality I don't just mean for Mizrachi Jews, but for women, Palestinian citizens of Israel, everyone who isn't represented in the power centres. We're not there. And these changes take a long time. No hegemony ever gives up its power easily.

Adi Keissar | Black on Black

**I Don't Know how to Read Poetry**

I went to a poetry reading  
this guy stood there  
read words  
in a serious tone  
so I know his words are important.  
Then this woman got up  
read words  
in a somber tone  
so I know her words are moving.  
Then another guy got up  
read words  
in a tone like a play  
so I know that he knows  
He knows  
how to read poetry.

And all I wanted was  
for them to read like  
they are taking me to a family dinner  
at their parents  
and in the middle of everyone eating  
lift  
the table cloth off the table  
and fling it  
up in the air  
with all the dishes.

Because what is reading poetry if not  
spreading your legs  
shitting in the middle of the street  
yelling at someone who cuts in line  
placing pots on the stove and burning the food  
hunting little moments of happiness  
then executing them in the town square  
dialling a random number,  
asking: do you have water running from the tap?  
Yes  
What did you expect, Coca Cola?  
and hanging up

pissing into your plant  
smiling huge when you have no teeth  
asking someone to spread their hand flat on the table  
pull out a knife  
and stab quickly between their fingers  
one two three  
inviting people over for coffee  
pour salt in their coffee  
tell them I ran out of milk  
tell them  
Get out of my house  
I don't know you

(Translated from Hebrew by Ayelet Tsabari)

