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Breaking In, Breaking Out

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Panel: Breaking In, Breaking Out

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Breaking in, Breaking out By Andra Rotaru (Romania)

How can you be prepared for writing a masterpiece and how can you recognize one when you have not yet developed yourself well enough to write one? As a child, I experienced the sense of smell: it was the only one that could help me understand anything. Even before I knew how to read or write, I was fascinated by the smell of books in my grandparents' library. At one point, I took Virginia Wolf's "To the Lighthouse" from the shelf, and the smell of this book urged me to put my tongue on the pages. That's when I knew I wanted to become a writer. It takes a whole life to become one, but only several minutes to know you want to be one!

When I was only about 17 years old I received a catalogue with Frida Kahlo's paintings but I couldn't like her work at that time: in her paintings one can find themes relating to the alienation of femininity and maternity, along with many symbols, blood, deformations, operations, arid and industrial landscapes, portraits with Stalin and Trotsky, and a whole new world that was unfamiliar to me at the time.

But my second encounter with her paintings was not primarily through her paintings, in the visual sense, but through her own words: "They thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality." This made me realize that my own search and my own reality were like burdens I had carried for too long, and that it was time to let them go.

But why is Frida Kahlo a good subject for a book? Frida Kahlo's paintings largely explore her own life. By looking at her paintings I could translate the images into poetry, helped by the story behind the images. I conducted research for my poetry book entitled "In a bed under the white sheet", Vinea Publishing House (2005), by watching Amy Stechler's documentary movie, "The Time and Lives of Frida Kahlo", by reading the novel "Frida" by Barbara Mujica, by watching the movie "Frida" by Julie Taymor, by reading catalogues about Frida Kahlo etc. It was a lot of work for a poetry book, but I did it because I needed to identify with her and to write in the same way she used colors on her canvas. Inspired by another's domain instruments, I succeeded in writing a book that gave me a lot of happiness and that has changed my life.

Because of this book, I was able to go (several years after its launch) to Mexico and see Blue House, the place where Frida Kahlo was born and where she died, and the Diego Rivera Museum...One of the questions I was asked after the publication of the book was: How could you write about Frida's paintings without having seen her exhibitions? As if reality and poetry cannot exist one without the other, or as if any of our experiences has to involve reality! But many of the things I imagined at some point turned into reality, so I hope my imagination will remain just as vivid in the future.

All I know is that my first book has opened a path for me, one that I am now walking, trying not to disappoint Frida Kahlo, or myself.

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