

DAPHNE MARLATT / “masquerading as simple description”: A Conversation with Sharon Thesen

This interview took place out of place and not in person, by e-mail during the first three months of 2008. It was interrupted by bouts of flu on both sides, bad weather, and other commitments, and was accompanied by seasonal chatter as well as comments we made to one another about the disadvantages, as well as the advantages (second-thought), of doing an interview long-distance. As such, it doesn't replace a conversation in each other's presence, but it tries to. DM

DM: Sharon, a recent issue of *The Capilano Review* [3:1&2, Winter/Spring 2007] included a wonderful new sequence from you, “The Consumptives at Tranquille Sanatorium, 1953.” I was intrigued by this because it seems a departure from much of your previous work in that the poem is set in your childhood and is apparently about your mother—although only a few brief lines reveal this and most of the poem vividly evokes the general atmosphere of the sanatorium and its 1950s treatment of TB patients. Is this the first time you have written about your parents, and if so, why now?

ST: Being back in the landscape of the Southern Interior has provoked in detail certain memories of childhood. When my mother was diagnosed with TB (I was six or seven years old) my brother and I went to live with a foster family in Vernon, very kind, very religious people. My favorite way of tormenting my foster parents was to pretend to be smoking, using as a cigarette the top, whitish-grey section of a reed, that had the ashy tip. I see that now as a protestation of solidarity with my parents, who smoked, drank, played cards, sang suggestive song lyrics, danced, told jokes, wore each other's clothes, and more or less ignored us. My foster parents, on the other hand, forbade me to read anything but Christian-themed books (such as the terrifying *Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories*) and there was no drinking, no dancing, no cross-dressing, and no card-playing in their house, since those sorts of things led to Hell. My teacher in Grade Two, Mrs. Humphreys, violently yanked my glossy, perfectly-plaited white-satin-bowed pigtails because I couldn't properly draw a bird in Art class. I just couldn't do it. I was a good pupil and was trying like crazy, so out

of frustration, she finally gave me a picture of a robin and said, copy this! So I did, successfully enough. I mention that in the poem. It was such a pleasure to be able to draw the robin properly! After my mother was discharged, we returned to our sinful parents in Kamloops, and lived there in relative poverty for about six years before we moved to Prince George in 1960. Winters meant school but the summers I would spend all day out of doors alone or with my brother, roaming around in the gullies and setting up little camps and forts alongside the North Thompson River where we played and swam. We couldn't play all day like that with other kids because they were expected to be at home most of the time.

It's true I haven't written much if anything about my family. The instability (one of the over-rated virtues of postmodernism) I experienced probably left me feeling unrooted. I have a sense of my parents as characters in a play. The sanatorium poem observes my mother from a distance, in an elsewhere, which was how I experienced her absence at the time. I have a project in mind concerning my mother's upbringing on the Queen Charlotte Islands, where her stepfather died of tuberculosis.

DM: Your comment that you have a sense of your parents as characters in a play reminds me that elsewhere you've indicated that you'd like to write a play. This is not surprising given your longstanding interest in the conversational voice with its wry asides and idioms. So now I'm wondering whether staging that voice or voices is a direction you might be moving in with that project?

ST: I don't like writing about private things—relationships, family, sex, etc.—although I realize the stories we don't tell pervade the ones we do—and don't particularly like reading about them either, except in fiction. But the world in which my mother grew up, Masset, on Haida G'Waii (Queen Charlotte Islands) in the 1930s (she was born in 1926), and the context of the remnants of Haida culture still alive in Old Masset, the whaling boats at the dock, her grandfather's store (which supplied, by a barge called *The Bobolink*, groceries to the fishermen who worked off Langara Island), and her mother and her stepfather's musical soirees of piano and violin duets (I still have some of the sheet music; both were accomplished musicians, he, trained in Germany; she, conservatory-trained, one of the silent movie pianists/organists at the Orpheum) among many other scenes, seems to require a three-dimensional pre-

sensation of some sort. When I read Robert Bringhurst's translations of Haida epic poetry I learned that the first transcriptions were being made around the same time that my Irish great-grandfather had arrived and attempted to incorporate a vilage called Queenstown where the present Port Clements sits. The possibility that the Haida poet Skaay may have encountered my great-grandfather James Martin in Masset is just too intriguing.

DM: Marvelous cultural interactions and contrasts to work with. How do you see the Haida sense of epic poetry via Robert Bringhurst's translations interacting with your own poetic voice and concerns?

ST: Bringhurst's Haida translations introduced me to the presence of an unknown mythic world that is geographically nearby, and which is so different from the heroic/lyric imagination of the Western tradition I was born into. What I love about the epics is the utter absence of concepts of good and evil, the way physical and visual perspectives on events are insisted upon ("from high up in the town they saw" etc.—we had a house in Kelowna that overlooked the town), the magical and transformational nature of life it takes for granted, and the completely unfamiliar rhetorical sense of what is important. These are much stranger and wilder to me than the most strenuous of western experimentalisms. Masset is not a forest-bound fjord sort of harbour—it's low-lying, swampy, populated by water fowl and swans; and not far north of the town, at the end of a road that goes along beside a long sandy beach is Rose Spit, where according to Haida legend the first human beings appeared in the world.

The translations opened to me an experiential perspective from which to write. To just go for the mythic and the transformational. To turn people into animals and to stress water and underwater, fire and clouds, as vital elements in the narrative of existence. I tried to transpose that sensibility to contemporary, everyday life here: "Everything moving and dropping" [*The Good Bacteria* 20].

Narrative forms accumulate to form a sort of meta-story that everyone thinks is reality. And this meta- or mega-story has a life of its own that presses down on our psyches all the time. Some might call it ideology or false consciousness or whatever, but it's spiritual too, and I like to entertain the fantasy that somehow something of the Haida im-

age world was transmitted to my Irish relatives on my mother's side, just as the spirit of the classical/romantic piano and violin duets was possibly transmitted to the Haida who listened in the living room of the Martin house on musical evenings. That house burned down and the only thing that was managed to be saved was my great-grandmother Lulu-Mae's false teeth. All the Haida artefacts the family had collected or been given—baskets, carvings, etc.—went up in smoke. They had a small museum's worth of artefacts, according to my mother, who was named Dawn as a consequence of her mother's Rosicrucian enthusiasms.

My mother once told me that she thought that her stepfather contracted tuberculosis from the Haida; and that she had caught it from him. He died in the 1940's from TB, after undergoing in Switzerland a treatment involving injections of gold, which did in fact cure him for several years. Needless to say, the Haida themselves were initially infected by Europeans, and tuberculosis was one of the diseases that had severely decimated the population. The extent to which the Haida population was ravaged by disease is shocking: barely one tenth of the initial population was alive at the beginning of the twentieth century. The villages my great grandfather visited by boat would mostly have been ghost towns. Because I was exposed and then inoculated, I still test positive for TB. The breath, the voice, the lungs—these were the modes of morbid transmission, and these are the physiological media of the speaker, the poet, the singer, the storyteller.

So, yes, these scenes are theatrical, but at the moment I have no idea how or even if I will approach this material, I mean explicitly, as subject matter. Maybe it's enough that it constitutes a personal or familial imaginary, a ground.

DM: Historical narrative and the familial imaginary—that's a generative intersection. But going back to "The Consumptives [at Tranquille Sanatorium, 1953]", it seems to me there's a cinematic quality to that poem. It constantly alters its field of vision, zooming in on still-life details and then pulling back for larger sociocultural observation. This is echoed by the shifts between past tense and present tense, which I think of as shifts between narrative pull and lyric moment. In the marvelous title sequence of *A Pair of Scissors*, you flirt quite a bit with narrative, both your own and Virginia

Woolf's. Actually, the tension between narrative pull and lyric image seems to mark much of your poetry. How do you negotiate this tension in the process of writing?

ST: I agree that there's a strong narrative line in some of my poems, especially the longer ones that want to consolidate a number of experiences on a number of levels—eros, landscape, anxieties, fictions, etc. "A Pair of Scissors" was written after I'd quit my job at Capilano College, quit Vancouver, quit everything, and had gone to live in a small hand-made house in a forest clearing in the West Kootenays. These longer poems have been openly intertextual, interdependent (language is not "mine")—an ecology. When I need help or inspiration to write, I read, I don't gaze at the sunset. Those poems are restlessly discovering, or trying to discover, the meaning of my experience (and therefore, maybe, the experience of others) in literature, nature, social life, eros, relationships, and artifice.

There's also the picturesque of this or that moment, and also at times something cartoonishly one-dimensional about my poems. I love sketches and cartoons—the way the tiniest piece of a line can indicate character or emotion.

Narrative—and this is a banal observation—is embedded even in image. We can't get away from it, nor do I see the point in trying to. Ostentatiously narrative-free poetry may be theoretically virtuous but I tire of it very quickly. By narrative I mean events in time, cause and effect, associative connections, whether intrapsychic or historical. The language of poems should "leap" but not to a fatuous extent. There's a great deal of beauty and pleasure to be found in clear, carefully calibrated lines that are grappling with life and death, the biggest cause and effect there is. I'm thinking of Louise Glück's marvelous book *Averno*, about getting old and facing death. She invokes the Persephone myth, the underworld, and so on, but on the surface is the most genuinely searching voice, contemporary and idiosyncratic, embedded in the perverse innocence of family and social life.

DM: Well, you have taken the lyric and inflected it with a deeply ironic, even sardonic, voice at times, letting it masquerade as simple description. It seems to me that this allows the political to enter the poem in oblique ways similar to the way the political impacts our daily lives and then continues to resonate. I'm thinking of a poem like

“The Rooftop of Opposite” in *The Good Bacteria*, with its wonderful slides in and out of the “jaded.” When you begin with an image like those “Large white seabirds” cuddling and cooing, do you have a sense of the darkness underlying those white feathers or do a series of circumstances (line breaks, image-to-metaphor connections) take you to that darkness?

ST: “The Rooftop [of] Opposite” was written when Paul and I were in transition from Vancouver to Kelowna and I was still teaching at Capilano College. I was living for a time in a small apartment off lower Lonsdale in North Vancouver. The incessant ambulance sirens lent an air of perpetual catastrophe to the real estate/condo/lifestyle pretensions of the area. Whenever I go to Vancouver, I realize how much I miss the sound of the gulls. It’s the one thing guaranteed to make me homesick. Our family moved dozens of times throughout my childhood, but I was always happiest in certain landscapes: willowy creeks, smallish rivers, blue lakes, sagebrush and Ponderosa pine, dry sunny weather. And I still am—either that or just about any big city but Vancouver, where I find the damp, chilly climate and the absence of ambient light almost unbearable. I moved to Vancouver after high school in Prince George, and lived in the West End and worked at a radio station and read poetry, wrote poems, and went to readings at the coffee houses on Robson Street. I adored the Beats and John Newlove. Maybe that’s where I picked up the sardonic tone. Like Newlove, I have a tendency to dismiss or dismantle my own poetic insights.

DM: But the caustic tone of those dark moods makes a wonderful contrast with what you called “the picturesque.” And it registers a wider social critique, your concern with what’s going down in our world. Speaking of which, let me ask you, what role do you think poetry can play in our general culture that is now so product-focused and consumer-oriented?

ST: Poets shouldn’t have to concern themselves with the role poetry should or can play in society, although of course we do, almost obsessively. Although a minority art, poetry has always been with us and always will be. I don’t think it’s a great time for poetry right now, but maybe in a few decades, or centuries, there will be a revitalization. It seems that much poetry is unable to avoid some essential emptiness or sense of its own uselessness. And that should not be surprising, given what poetry

is up against: the usual indifference plus the imposition of so many commandments against what poetry has historically liked to do and was good at. It's as if every poem you read these days comes with an invisible disclaimer.

I like to write, and read, a poetry that engages what Gary Snyder calls "the wild." Wildness and sanity are the two sources, and outcomes, of poetry that I trust, respect, read, love, and would like to write. That "wild" I conceive of as sanity. Sanity is a rare and under-appreciated condition, usually and mistakenly allied with repression. Whereas I believe sanity is the social and psychological equivalent of what Snyder calls "the wild": as Snyder says, "interconnected, interdependent, incredibly complex. Diverse, ancient, and full of information." Snyder says a poem is a "creature of the wild mind." By "wild" and "sane" I mean elegant, complex, subtle, and clear as a bell even as it must muddy the waters of the given. Continuing ecological destruction is possible only when there is widespread psychopathology, itself a consequence of the grief and guilt we must feel at some level about participating to such an extent in our own demise. An Okanagan chief gave an address recently here at UBCO in which he said that nature tells us the truth about ourselves. If it is poisoned and barren, so are we. As much as we pay lip service to the notion that we need wilderness (now called "preserves") for our human mental, spiritual, and physical health, we don't really know how to, except as another form of consumerism. We could hardly be more infantilized and obsessed with our own comfort and safety and with protecting ourselves from what all of previous life has understood as experience. When I hear those warnings on the radio that some people may find the following news story upsetting, I'm embarrassed to be a Canadian. We won't even drink the safe water that comes out of our taps, while half of the rest of the world, and their crops, are dying of thirst. It's this truly nonsensical, upside-down valuation of what matters that poetic language cannot interrupt.

I don't think my work is in any intended way "political," though I do think there's a continuing note of protest and a sense that life is not only serious, strange, and sad, but also silly and stupid. The openly satirical might be a place for me to go in terms of writing. I did some work once like that, read it at the Eden Mills festival, and someone came up to me afterwards and said "I feel really sorry for you that you see the

world that way.” Later I had dinner with Anne Carson who was like a queen. Her stuff is pretty sardonic too, but I doubt anyone thought to offer their condolences.

DM: Something I’m curious about, is, let’s call it the large view, as opposed to the narrowness of our usual daily, worldly concerns—in the 70s we spoke of it as vision. Your comments on the transformational aspect of Haida mythology, coupled with your comments on meta- or mega-story as being not only ideology but a form of the spiritual as well, and then what you say about a good poem restoring both wildness and sanity—all that makes me want to ask you to say more about how you situate the ironic and even the satirical within vision?

ST: The small picture is as usual adorable, surprising, charming—the birds in the trees, the young in one another’s arms. But the larger picture indicates that almost everything worthwhile is being replaced by everything that is not. (Someone wrote that somewhere, and I latched onto it.) Everything from wetlands and topsoil-rich arable land to the precious linguistic and somatic intricacies of private life is up for grabs. For example, the integrity of pregnancy has been replaced by the public fetus. The plethora of life forms by monocultures and extinctions. Poetry by dullness and fear. Beauty and value by materialist ultra-rationalism, the trickle-down of academic poststructuralism. And the somatic soul-endowed body by an iatrogenic result of “the medical system,” from in-vitro fertilization to orthodonty to hip replacement to chemotherapy to organ harvest. The mask of “care” covers all of this like some ghastly invisible blanket out of a fairytale. Of course, it is possible to be buoyed by news of creativity on any front, and we should all be grateful for the genuinely helping professions (largely made up of underpaid women).

My critique, which is really at the feeling level when I’m writing poems, is sometimes satire, sometimes irony, sometimes parody, sometimes direct, sometimes masked. In *The Good Bacteria* (poetry being the good bacteria of language) there’s a range of tone and diction, a wider range than in any of my other books. But the title sequence, inspired by the cadences of Bringham’s Haida translations, foregrounds transmutation. Another text in the back of my mind at that time would have been Ted Hughes’ *Tales from Ovid*, a terrifying account of human and environmental metamorphoses. My poems suggest trivial and local examples. It’s not the forceful engagement

that, say, George Stanley's work is. But I think that like George, my response to the senseless and the witless co-exists with a lyric sensuality and a sense of humor.

As far as a vision goes, even a redemptive one, we can hardly do better than to follow Ezra Pound's dictum toward the end of the *Cantos*: "to be men, not destroyers."

DM: In your process of writing, how do you approach revision? Do you have moments of, as Adrienne Rich termed it, re-seeing what you have on the page, or do you lean more towards the "first thought is best thought" pole?

ST: Sometimes, you know how it is, you get into a flow of writing, and a poem is pretty much there in the first draft, which is really heavenly. But the older I get, the less and less often that happens. A poem will usually go through three to six revisions after I first write it down on paper or directly onto the computer. I can write the most appalling bad first draft, but if I don't give up too soon, sometimes something can "catch"—a word, a rhythm. The poem can start once I get the sound of it. I revise for speed, rhythm, melody (both sonic and cognitive), and general absence of b.s. and bog. Then I let it sit for a few weeks and revise again. Then maybe I read it at a reading—more revisions! And sometimes I continue revising for subsequent readings of the poem. Sometimes it just hasn't been a very good from the get-go, or, in the end, I return to the earliest draft, realizing the revisions are what have ruined the poem! I'm finding it more and more difficult to write a single, individual poem. It has something to do with energy, or lack of it. Plus, it's really difficult to write a lyric poem that works, that isn't embarrassing. No wonder everybody gave up on lyric poems back in the 80's. I have yet to work with procedural techniques or whole-book subjects, and fiction is completely beyond me, so about all I can do is make space for whatever new thing to unfurl that needs to.

I'm quite fascinated by my first books, and the degree to which their voice (constricted) is inflected by those of the male poets I'd studied before and at university—Jack Spicer, especially. The alcoholic male poet was my main muse and influence for many many years. My third book was a long poem about Malcolm Lowry, in parts of which I voiced Lowry as a persona. Eavan Boland writes about the psychosexual crisis undergone by women poets coming out of a similar, though much more exalted, tradi-

tion in Ireland. The crisis occurs when a woman claims to be a poet, not someone (a woman) who writes poems.

DM: Since that third book, you have brought out six more collections including *News and Smoke*, a selected. You have also made a significant contribution through your work as an editor, both on Phyllis Webb's selected poems [*The Vision Tree*, 1982] and on the Olson-Boldereff correspondence [*Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff: A Modern Correspondence*, 1999], as well as two editions of *The New Long Poem Anthology* [1991 and 2001] and *The Capilano Review* which you edited from 2001-2005. What is it about the activity of editing that attracts you?

ST: I've always enjoyed editing and have done a lot of it, if you consider marking English essays a form of editing! But when you're an editor of a magazine, an anthology, an edition of someone's work—you inevitably cause pain to some degree or another: hurt feelings, alienated affections, even scandal and outrage about whom and what you have included and whom and what you have excluded. This is my very least-enjoyed part of editing. I'm not immune to feeling these humiliations myself: I've felt awkward about not being included in this or that anthology, and was quite crushed at not being included in the recent encyclopedia of BC writers.

It's especially gratifying to be involved in publishing new and/or young writers. You know how much that publication credit can mean to a young writer working on a manuscript, but you also believe that the work you've brought to public attention is worthwhile, maybe even important in the long run. And you realize also that you can make some pretty major mistakes. The canon-formation role of the editor is an enormous burden imposed on but not necessarily assumed by the editor. One hopes posterity will be glad of one's efforts. I'm now co-editing with Nancy Holmes a new magazine out of UBC Okanagan called *Lake: a journal of arts and environment*. Our logo is the *I Ching* hexagram called "Lake, the joyous."

The biggest editing job I've done so far is the correspondence between Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff. I transcribed every one of the letters onto the word processor with Ralph Maud at my side. It took years. Ralph and I would puzzle over words, dates, intentions, and nuances, argue, have lunch and a cup of tea, puzzle and argue

some more, and I would type and type and type. Finally it was done and Wesleyan University Press accepted the manuscript. However, at some point they decided they couldn't print the whole thing, and so a truncated version was published. The published volume of letters terminates at a crisis point from which the relationship never really recovered. Tom Clark's biography of Olson (*The Allegory of a Poet's Life*) had come out during the process of transcribing the letters—a peculiarly *ad hominem* biography. You'd think Olson was Hitler. But Clark cited Frances Boldereff as someone of interest in the development of Olson's practice. And this was clear to me as well, though Ralph maintains her influence was slight-to-moderate. A lot of gorgeous letters were written by each of them, but Olson is working out his poetics and his "stance toward reality," while Frances worries about money and jobs and keeps sending Olson reading suggestions and critiques of his poems and ideas. She was a very bright, attractive woman, a self-published Joyce scholar and book designer, and a single mother in the late 1940's living with her young daughter in a small village in Pennsylvania. She worked at Pennsylvania State College designing all their books and promotional materials, and this is where she came across *Call Me Ishmael*—at the State College library—a book that, as we used to say, blew her mind. So she wrote to Olson at his publisher's and that's how it all began.

I met with Frances at her house in Urbana, Illinois, on three occasions, spoke with her, took notes, and on the third and last occasion, taped some of our (mostly her) conversation. But by then dementia was beginning to take hold and it was sad to hear her conflating what she wasn't forgetting. I wrote from my notes of our first meeting some of her talk about her life as poems and prose poems and called it *Book of Motz*. (Motz was her maiden name—and she had several other noms de plume as well.) She passed away about four years ago. I went to her funeral in Pennsylvania and wrote about it in a sequence called "A Holy Experiment" in *The Good Bacteria*.

I also talked with Robin Blaser quite a bit about one of his poetry collections. We'd been discussing the poems for a few weeks, and one night he phoned quite late, and quite elated, to tell me he'd just figured out what the title would be: *Pell Mell*. Robin is an extraordinary person. I'm still amazed by my luck in having known him for so long. He was my first poetry teacher, at SFU in 1966. Poetry I'd written and read on my own for many years, but it was Robin who showed me that poems were essentially

a sort of counter-intelligence, and that I could rely on myself and my experience as a young woman from the working poor and from Prince George, to provide me with all I needed as a young poet. Robin talked about growing up in the middle of practically nowhere in Idaho and how he went to San Francisco and Harvard, and there he was, in all that elegance and brilliance. I'd stopped writing for six years, partly because I was so intimidated, and because I had introjected so much misogyny through the gay-or-straight masculinist poetry I'd been reading and studying. It took a while to sort that out. It wasn't until I discovered Phyllis Webb's work that I felt a connection with a Canadian woman poet who was writing out of an interesting and complex aesthetic. I did eventually start reading Lowther and McEwen and Avison and Page—who were separate from the Tish writers whose work I was already familiar with. But Robert Creeley remains my touchstone, as far as poetry goes. I also read Louise Glück with great interest. That's the thing: there are dozens of poets whose work I deeply admire, but I return to the few who help me write when I need a bit of a push, and they include everybody from Duncan McNaughton to W.C. Williams to Elizabeth Bishop.

One early spring morning in Kitsilano in about 1968 when Brian (my then husband) and I had just gotten up, there was a knock at the apartment door, and there was Robin, with a huge bouquet of branches of cherry blossoms. I still have the glass vase he gave us one Christmas, and I think of him every time I fill it with branches of spring blossoms. Robin is my son Jesse's godfather. He's been a significant influence in my life and my writing. He encourages beauty, and laughter and the vitality of truth, as the best poetry also does.



Inscribed on back: "Sharon Thesen / 8 yrs old / 1955 / Powers Add. /
Kamloops / B.C."