

## THEA BOWERING / Sharon Thesen: Poem in Memory, and growing up there

Writing with any critical distance about Sharon Thesen's work is hard for me. When I read her poetry the tone and the images are often inseparable from the memories of my life. The rooms in the poems are the rooms I played in, lay around in, got caught in. Her garden where Celeste tosses shadows into tulips, or where the detachment of the rose defeats the poem, is the same one, I imagine, where I collected Easter eggs or splashed in a wading pool with my childhood friend. How much of the energy of the poem, for me, comes from the memories of my childhood spent in the home of the poet? On the other hand, the thing that happens when reading poems about people and places from your life is the same thing that happens when looking at old photographs: one becomes unsure if the memory belongs to the event, or comes from a familiarity with the photograph. Either way, the poem that is in memory of an earlier poem is also a memory of an early childhood occasion; I have to read and write about Sharon with both senses of memory at once.

In a long poem called *Weeping Willow*, an elegy for my mother Angela Bowering, Sharon writes a scenario that my mother also used to recount fondly:

the two of us in a kitchen  
our children in the next room  
playing and murmuring

—primitive philosophers  
she would say

tears welling (19)

Not only do I hear my mother's voice, see her expressive green eyes, I can recall these afternoons in Sharon's Kitsilano home: Sharon's son and I played in his room and, through the door, heard the murmuring of our mothers coming from the kitchen, often going from afternoon late into the night. What kind of reciprocity is/was hap-

pening here? Is this why Sharon's lines find their way straight into my own writing, often unintentionally? Perhaps Daphne Marlatt is right that our language begins with a mutter-language, something pre-conscious or pre-lingual. And is this over-heard murmuring why I am particularly fond of Thesen poems where things happen in the kitchen? I am drawn to "Animals" again and again for its central image of a black and white tile floor:

...and when I dance around  
the kitchen at night wild & feeling  
lovely as Margie Gillis, the animals  
try to dance too, they stagger on  
back legs and open their mouths, pink  
and black and fanged, and I take their paws  
in my hands and bend toward them,  
happy and full of love. (*The Pangs of Sunday* 133)

Below the clicking nails of the animals is an Alice-in-Wonderland checker board. It is the same one that expands around the poet who stands by her slowly heating oven in "Chicken in a Pensive Shell." It sticks in my mind like a white chicken beside a red wheelbarrow ... but it is not in these poems. I do what English instructors told me not to: bring to the poem images that have no business being there. The poem cares no more about your life than does your English teacher. Does it? Why would it matter to you that Sharon's kitchen floor from around 1978 haunts my reading? Maybe you see your own floor, the floor of your grandmother, of an old childhood friend. So maybe there is something about a Thesen poem that asks you to bring your world rushing to it, whether you have seen the poet's floor or not.

This intimate meeting of the reader's world and the poem's probably has a lot to do with Thesen's engagement with both. Sharon has said in an interview: "I have to go into the world first with the poem. The lines have to go into the world. My room, my house, the sound of the neighbour's lawnmower, what's on the radio, or whatever. And then I can move through there and if that original feeling was right, eventually I'll get to something" ("Getting into Heaven" 42).

This experience of coming into a poem through the world, into the world with the poem, is the subject of "Chicken in a Pensive Shell": the 'I' in the kitchen mak-

ing tea misreads, with a sideways glance, a recipe for Chicken in a Pineapple Shell. Language, as an extension of the eye's and the mind's slip-ups, is as slippery as raw chicken. Its sound associations lead us away from our cooking of a chicken to thoughts of Pascal's *Pensées*, Napoleon and his battles—but then "...here it's almost time / to start the chicken"; and the finicky demands of a cooking soufflé pull us away from the place of the mind, the rhythm of the poem, and back to the urgency of real-world place and timing. Soon we are not sure whether the poem is talking about chicken or itself: "I prefer my Poulet ungarnished, / with rice, an easy salad on the side" (*The Pangs of Sunday* 130-31). The style of this Poulet sounds a lot like Sharon's Poesy. This playful movement between recipe and poem, between practical and imaginative life, gestures towards what Fred Wah says about Thesen's treatment of inside and outside: "She balances the geography out there with the heartography within" (116).

Wah focuses on Thesen's cadence; her lyric is successful because "it so cleanly juxtaposes the movement of feeling and the movement of voice." And also because her "perception of the place is overlaid with her feelings about being in it, and the place becomes imbued with images and sensations from inside the poet" (116); Wah is interested in how this outside place makes sense of the inside place of the poet—how that "nebulous" inside place can "be articulated by zeroing in on the visual world" (117). Wah reads Thesen through Charles Olson's process of proprioception: the way the line is made by how one's sensory body processes its precise locale.

I think, tho, that there is a way in which the content (as opposed to the cadence) of Thesen's poems insists on some slightly different process. The outside world is in the poem, but remains somehow separate from the cadence that "desires" it; it retains its mysterious thingness that can't be transformed by the poet's interiority. This dynamic is played out in a theme of longing (the poet in the poem longs to be with a real person, or to bring the reader close), or the theme of geography's harmonious proximity to heartography: "& the car accidents / out on Broadway / so frequent now I rather like/ the sound of a small collision / & don't bother / going out to see" ("Tangling the Day," *The Pangs of Sunday* 67). And yet, it is because geography, and silent nature, remain somehow separate from the interior world of the poet that an ecstatic encounter is possible. The poet bends towards the animal straining to pull itself upright: both are strange to each other, but move towards each other in a dance of love. We, too, rush to meet a Thesen poem with our unarticulated, outside worldly

experience as the poem encourages us to come close; and we believe it loves us as much as we love it.

This slight shift in emphasis from cadence to content, which is a shift in how the poet treats the outside, can be seen if we read Thesen's "Usage"(from "Parts of Speech") next to Charles Olson's "Song 1" of the "The Songs of Maximus." "Song 1" begins: "colored pictures / of all things to eat: dirty / postcards / And words, words, words / all over everything / No eyes or ears left / to do their own doings (all / invaded, appropriated, outraged" (230). Thesen, like Olson, relies on the much-battered, sensory body to find a new cadence with which to re-write the commodified word-world. But Thesen also reaches out to the reader and her world without Olson's bitterness of history that has driven him back into his body: to begin again, make a world, a city, in the body's own cadence—its breath and line.

In "Usage" the speaker hopes to unite with the world out there: reaching out of the poem in a gesture of blind love that surprises and redeems the reader. Thesen says, "Words everywhere. A trillion / trillion words laid end to end would stretch around the globe / a hundred times. Equators / of words, ropes / tying the world up tight, / creasing the oceans & strangling you / in your bed at night. / Dear reader, take heed & / by the way, / will you marry me?" (*The Pangs of Sunday* 12). The poem's last sentence seems to work against its line breaks in an awkwardness that matches the discord between how one idealizes the moment of a proposal, and how such moments usually seem to go down. At any rate, the poem reaches out to us and we are touched by it—quite different from Olson's perfect cadence that works on our ear but suggests, at the same time, that the speaker is recoiling from us, from the world:

SONG...

all

wrong (230)

Sharon's poems always let us know that despite what the body makes of poetry, there is an outside there to contend with, and that it has its own magic: even if "the enchanted body sings" and "No birds in flight / are equal to this sound" the birds still "fly / silently anyway & make love / in the brightening trees" ("Long Distance," *The Pangs of Sunday* 38-39); and even if Rilke felt separated from his angels, "he was

wrong / not to go to his daughter's wedding / & hurting people's feelings" ("The Landlord's Tiger Lilies," *The Pangs of Sunday* 70).

When I think of Sharon's marriage of home in the world to a home in the poem, I go back, again, to my own life models: someone wrote "If I describe my house / I may at last describe myself / but I will surely lie / about the house" (Bowering 31). This was my father, the poet. My mother responded by running a stencil of this poem "The House" in illuminated gold letters along the ceiling of our living-room, a room she always wished was inhabited more often by her family. My mother believed in the material manifestations of the mind and love: her study was painted in the reds and oranges of her favorite Matisse painting; her bedroom was a lithe pattern of leaves—Rousseau's creatures peered out from the upholstered armchairs. She said if she was going to be stuck in bed she wanted a garden around her. Out of love for us my mother circled the walls of our home with my father's poem but, as with all her transformations of the house, it had to be done while my father was away. The poem lies about the house, the house has to deceive the poem (or the poet/husband at least). In between is love. Sharon's poems are involved with this loving deception. When reading a poem by Sharon one becomes wholly involved in the poem's enactment of an enchantment with the material world. As with love and marriage, recurring tropes in Thesen's poems, one encounters the outside as a familiar intimate other that is never completely processed or assimilated.

I am always swayed by Sharon's cadence; the song of the poem is the important thing. Wah says, "Pulse and flow, from inside to outside to inside, rhythm, dance, and finally the poem's own pace of word picture, line, syllable, cadence" (118). But it isn't final for me. I always drift away again, back to my own life, where the poem leads me. Growing up in poems, and reading ones written by and about family, and the people I love, I find poems often point me back to the world, or call it up. What I pay most attention to in a Thesen poem, then, is not the poem's own pace, though I know it works on me, but the numerous times the poem celebrates its meeting with, longing for, the world. To the world, like to an old lover, the poem "wants to say something more / like, hey, how's your life been lately / or how is your broken heart. / It is a beating thing at the typewriter / with the sound of traffic going by / and you are, we are, wedded to it" ("Season of No Bungling," *Holding the Pose* 23). Or the poem reaches out to a new lover: "There are words that would introduce me, / could be advanced like

flowers / held out with both hands" ("Long Distance" 57). The "music remembers" & the poet "wish[es] you were here anyway" ("Hello Goodbye" 16).

I got the beautiful Nomados chapbook of *Weeping Willow* sent to me and I put on a nice blouse and went to a European-style café to read it. When I opened the envelope I held my breath because the cover was the William Morris pattern of leaves that had patterned my mother's bedspread; inside was my mum:

Thinking pours from her hair,  
head-to-toe silk on the way to her car,  
white cigarette in ivory holder  
clenched to one side  
when she reached back into coat arms—

perfume floating, rainy day, time to go (27)

The poem says "I wish Angela were here" (23), and, called up in me for the first time in a long time, she is.

#### Works Cited

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