

## COLIN BROWNE / “How much of Heaven has gone from Earth?”: Sharon Thesen’s “The Good Bacteria” suite

“What do you suppose creation is?”

—Walt Whitman, “Laws for Creations” (1891-92)

Luminous and angular, there is sound in these poems, words birthing in their own mirrors, fires, cinders, raptors, reddening, mythic circuits and bridges like real bridges in a real place called the Interior, where shapes shift, death waits, and where uneasy dreams are dreamed in its precincts by ghost-swollen pronouns.

Sharon Thesen’s texts have always been informed by playfulness and a generous empathy, which she has delivered with a rare combination of honesty and plain speaking. She’s distrustful of cranks and even the most sincere charlatans. I cherish her work for these qualities. She is, it occurs to me, a very private poet and yet she just can’t find it in herself to be a misanthrope. She’s too aware that the dunghill of the world, with all its tireless and sordid accumulation, grows skyward, toward the angels

How can one ignore the staggering miracle that makes the hill?

In the suite of poems entitled “The Good Bacteria,” Part One of her 2006 collection *The Good Bacteria*, a reader familiar or perhaps even comfortable with Thesen’s poems is quite possibly going to find herself in new territory, literally and metaphysically. The poet’s relocation to the Interior of British Columbia—*upcountry* was the expression my great aunt Tid used, a word that must date back before The Great War—appears to have altered a palette much admired for its wry, down-to-earth, deliciously apposite observations. One of the pleasures of Thesen’s poems has been her ability to juxtapose the ecstatic and the mundane. In the post-colonially smug, rough-edged settler province of British Columbia with its sad towns, cheap buildings and silent, practical men, transcendence might be triggered by a signpost, a street name, a shop or a domestic chore. At the same time, Sharon Thesen is a child of this self-reliant sphere, so she is also the enemy of abstraction; she grounds her knowledge in the world. In her texts a spade is a spade is a spade.

You might say that Thesen has worked hard to create a habitable British Columbia of the imagination. In a familiar Thesen poem, the luminous is often recovered in the anxious inversions of the banal. I'm thinking of the red coat in the SPCA thrift store window across the street from a Thai restaurant in "A Really Delicious Meal at Montri's" (she drove back to try it on the next day), a poem that by its fifth stanza is spilling the beans about a phone conversation with the cantankerous John Newlove ("I hate poetry...I'd rather watch / the hockey game"), and which concludes with a surfeit of silence among poets on Vancouver Island (69). (Of course, who can hardly forget the Prada shoes ruefully sacrificed to practicality and thrift by the River Yarra in the poem "Wish"?)

Perhaps because default is the easiest position on the dial, the lyric poet in English Canada seems condemned for eternity to reproducing the syntaxes of disappointment and decay. Thesen can groan with the best, but in fact she's hungry for marvels. She has evidence that just outside the boundaries defined by resource extraction, impermanency, shoddy short cuts, government mean-spiritedness, R.C.M.P. crimes and hysterical boosterism, a province of ancient and present marvels co-exists. In the dozen poems of "The Good Bacteria," Thesen opens her language to their manifestations.

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For a professional wrestler, Prince Maiava was slight—although in retirement he apparently got up to 285 lbs. He made up for his size with a great ball of frizzy hair. If you'd asked North American audiences of the early cold war period, and in particular the boy wrestlers of the Halifax suburb of Rockingham, they have told you that the Prince spoke no English, although he was born in American Samoa and raised in Hawaii. To our adoring minds, his noble silence—what could he possibly say to us even if he did speak?—only enhanced his claim to royalty. He was, after all, a born aristocrat with a highly tuned, natural, perhaps mystical sensibility. It never occurred to us that he would need to speak, or that he'd pander to the chumps on the floor. His every move was eloquent. In wrestling's fervid history he's remembered as the man who invented the Head-Butt.

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Everything, at once, flows through “The Good Bacteria” suite: the good, the bad, the dangerous, the beautiful, the righted, and the inverted. The myth world has penetrated the consumer world; ghosts, dreams, and blood sacrifices haunt those who think they’re awake. Death stalks in from the hills, or from the sky, quickly, violently, from circling raptors. Dreams in these surreal poems draw from memory and memory from dream. Language steps on the gas and bursts through semantic checkpoints. “Titanium” becomes “Queen of the Fairies.” A “simile” becomes a “smile.” Artemis reappears. A woman with a sheepdog’s face finds the poet calling, “Anubis, anubis, what a heck of a proboscis!”—a line reminiscent of the exuberant child-man voice in James Reaney’s *Twelve Letters to a Small Town*, a suite of poems with which “The Good Bacteria” can claim a poetic kinship. In the geographies represented in the two suites, the myth world and the everyday world are indivisible; poetry uncovers the beating heart of the whole.

In both suites one finds merriment, surprise, a little darkness and the deliberate pressing of colloquial expressions in their well-worn waitress uniforms against the rhetorical expectations of well-tuned, drearily appropriate turns of phrase. Deflations are juxtapositions. In the third poem of “The Good Bacteria,” for instance, a duck appears, “swimming by, really hauling.” The surprise and pleasure provoked by the semi-trailer terminology is matched by the rhythm, the rippling consonance and the vowel shifts (the rhymes form a V with the comma as its fulcrum). The real delight is the sly, invisible, inaudible rhyme shared by “duck” and the unwritten, unuttered, invisible “truck.”

And there’s another thread to pull, the one that leads to the turtle in Emily Dickinson’s wondrous 1871 poem beginning “So much of Heaven has gone from Earth.” The poem is Dickinson’s rebuttal to those who’d use rational means to question faith. Just because science cannot measure the existence of Heaven, she complains, does not mean it’s no longer with us. “Too much of Proof affronts Belief,” she writes, which is to say that it’s an insult to subject Heaven’s ways to reason. She calls to mind the turtle, which hunkers in its shell, no matter how impatient one is to watch it move or stick its head out—maybe even *because* one’s so impatient to see what the poor beast is so reluctant to reveal. “The Turtle will not try / Unless you leave him,” Dickinson writes. But, return later, “And he has hauled away” (487). That verb again. An apparently colloquial verb, with a metaphysical pedigree. Emily Dickinson might call that proof enough.

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In keeping with his noble lineage, Prince Maiava wrestled with decency and honour, and was often pinned to the mat by larger, stronger wrestlers who cheated when the referee wasn't looking. His manager, Coconut Willy, would look on palely from the sidelines, draped in a Hawaiian shirt, shaking his head as the Prince staggered around the ring with his neck being torqued by a full nelson after receiving a battery of illegal eye gouges. Just as it seemed that all was lost, Coconut Willy would begin tapping the skin on his bongo drums, quietly at first, as if to induce a trance. Pinned between the hairy legs and arms of a man the calibre of Hard Boiled Haggerty, the Prince would begin trembling, then twisting like a snake. Willy kept on drumming. Undulating, squirming, and rippling like a cobra, the Prince—in a *fair* fight he could easily whip the likes of Killer Kowalski or Gene Kiniski—would weave from side to side and, inch by desperate inch, slither, like a moth from its pupa, out of his opponent's iron grip. He'd leap to his feet, light and rubbery, deal a few supernatural blows to the stunned and swollen body of his foe, pin the coward's shoulders to the mat and raise his arms in victory to the roaring approval of the crowd.

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In her acknowledgments to *The Good Bacteria*, Thesen thanks poet Robert Bringhurst, “whose translations of Haida epic poetry, *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, inspired the cadences of ‘The Good Bacteria’ sequence.” *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* is the first volume of a trilogy of remarkable narrative poems by Haida myhtellers dictated in 1900-1901 to linguist and ethnographer John Reed Swanton, who, like Gertrude Stein, had been a student of William James. The translation that appears in *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* introduced English-speaking readers to the poetic intelligence of a blind Haida storyteller named Ghandl of the Qayahll Llaanas. In his introduction to one of Ghandl's Sea Lion Hunter narratives in *Voices from Four Directions: Contemporary Translations of the Native Literatures of North America*, Bringhurst explains that the Haida myhteller unfolds his story “in tight clusters of clauses and sentences—threes and fives more often than twos and fours—which grow together into little scenes or sections. These grow together in their turn, primarily in threes and fives, to form the acts or movements of the story. These kinds of patterns

are widespread and probably universal in Native American oral literature . . . Surface features such as timbre, pause and intonation, which we usually use to identify a voice, are missing from the record. So, though Ghandl did not write (and no one, so far as I know, has ever written a story in Haida), the legacy he leaves is like the legacy of a writer" (106).

Here is part of a scene from a story by Ghandl, translated into writing by Robert Bringhurst, from *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*:

*Going through the pines,  
just to where the ponds lay,  
he heard geese calling.  
Then he went in that direction.*

*There were two women bathing in a lake.  
Something lay there on the shore.  
Two goose skins were thrown over it.  
Under their tails were patches of white.*

*After watching for a while,  
he swooped in.  
He sat on the two skins.  
The women asked to have them back.*

*He asked the better-looking one to marry him.  
The other one replied.  
"Don't marry my younger sister.  
I am smarter. Marry me."  
"No. I will marry your younger sister."*

*And she said that she accepted him, they say.*

*"Well then! Marry my younger sister.  
You caught us bathing in a lake*

*that belongs to our father.*

Now give me my skin.” (33)

Here are the clustered cadences to which Thesen refers, produced by a polyphony of interwoven voices—I should note here that Bringhurst celebrates polyphonies—involving narration, dialogue, and the repetitive phrase “they say,” which, with its rhythmic/cultural charge, reminds the listener that the story has been passed down from myth times. That is to say, the story is legitimized; the teller is but a conduit. The language is accomplished, strategic, deceptively simple, and moves with the intelligence and economy of Joseph Roth’s prose, although it conceals as much as the storyteller conceals beneath the two skins the young man plunks himself down on, in doing so usurping and controlling the destiny of the two sisters. And although the events related involve supernatural beings in contact with human beings, the story is told matter-of-factly, without self-consciousness. As in all myths, this is the account of a transition, of a time of emergency for supernatural beings confronted by human potency and desire. Ghandl’s genius was to have found a narrative form in which to reveal the prolific and the devouring energies of what Bringhurst would call the “what-is.”

Now look at this excerpt from the third poem in “The Good Bacteria,” composed in similar clusters of clauses and sentences, employing threes and fives, and all matter-of-factly:

*A white lake gull grabbed a breeze.*

*Me and my sister were lying on the rocky beach.*

*A duck went swimming by, really hauling.*

*Seeing my sister he married her and she married him.*

*Down they went to an underwater house*

*whose chimney comes out where*

*the smoke bush grows.*

*Beside the smoke bush the electricity inspector*

*peers at a gauge on the house wall and writes*

*in his book.*

*My sister comes up for air and shakes herself  
somewhat dry although her rump—so quick  
to propel her downward to her happy home—  
leaves a damp imprint on the car seat.*

There is much to appreciate in these lines in which the mythworld and the so-called everyday world are revealed to be one and the same, a condition we have only to open our eyes and ears and skin to perceive, and it makes me wonder all over again why we've lined up so many guards at the border. Here too is a quintessentially Thesen-esque interruption: the appearance of a cheeky, slightly passé Middle English word like "rump" followed by the exquisite, sensual summer holiday consonance of the "damp imprint on the car seat." And here too is another kind of polyphony, for Thesen has borrowed the idea of the cadences and patterns of Bringham's translation of the Haida storyteller to track the veracity and legitimacy of what might be a dream—or memory, or both.

I found myself returning to the first poem. A man, perhaps a central character in the poem, "A known ghost," she suggests—an echo of Wallace Stevens' rabbit?—is apparently walking into Kamloops. He sees the bridge in the distance and/or on his laptop, which may or may not be a dream, and if it is a dream, or not, or a memory, or not, the plain truth of the poem is that hierarchical categories of vision are not sought out or tolerated by the poet, nor are they invoked. In the poet's consciousness, and its trace, the text—through which all times and dimensions are invited to rush simultaneously—*potential is actual*. The braiding of these dimensions—dream, myth, quotidian reality, text and analogy—represents a radical departure, or return, setting "The Good Bacteria" apart from Thesen's previous work. It's as if she has been liberated. The duck (or drake?) that marries the poet's sister and takes her home to his underwater nest is and is not a bird, and he is and is not a supernatural ancestor. He is a transformer, an agent of change, on whose back the poet can flow between dimensions. The barriers are down. I can begin to sense in these texts the lineaments of an Interior that is not to be found on confining tourist maps but in the heart of a vast, comprehensive universe where the waking life is staged by a tumultuous cast of names and verbs that in turn are staged by something nameless and much more ancient. Dear reader, you are not on a tramp steamer; you are at home.



Should we be asking if Thesen's borrowing from Bringham's English rendering of certain Haida cadences might represent a form of cultural appropriation? Is it different from using the Shakespearean sonnet form to develop a contemporary lover's argument? Ezra Pound borrowed the cadences of Anglo-Saxon to compose "The Seafarer," which is a retelling of an epic tale that in its Homeric avatar flowed from the cadences of the dactylic hexameter. (In his own day, Homer's words were sung; the ear was arbiter.) Most of us will never hear Ghandl's words in his Haida dialect, or *The Odyssey* in Homer's archaic Ionian dialect, although Alexander Pope wants us to hear Homer's cadences in his translation of the *Odyssey*:

The man for wisdom's various arts renown'd,  
Long exercised in woes, O Muse! resound;  
Who, when his arms had wrought the destined fall  
Of sacred Troy, and razed her heaven-built wall,  
Wandering from clime to clime, observant stray'd,  
Their manners noted, and their states survey'd,  
On stormy seas unnumber'd toils he bore,  
Safe with his friends to gain his natal shore... (Book I)

Acknowledging the inspiration for the cadences in "The Good Bacteria," Thesen makes no attempt to reproduce elements of Haida myths, nor is she trying to retell them or allude to them out of context. She does not exploit Haida songs or narratives in order to invest her texts with a patina of Aboriginal Otherness. Her central project in "The Good Bacteria" is, in fact, to insist that in the world she is writing there is no Other. Subjectivity, which depends on an object, a past, and a future, has collapsed. She has grabbed onto Ghandl/Bringham's cadences as the "*white lake gull grabbed a breeze*," and, listening closely, she has begun to hear and create the world anew.

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Prince Maiava remained silent throughout his professional career. He was, of course, not who he appeared to be—this was pro wrestling, after all—but he was a compelling and sympathetic showman, and in our minds he wrestled honourably. With



Coconut Willy as his foil, he winningly played the innocent, guileless child of nature. He was, in a way, our Parsifal, and he stood for something pure and good that might still be alive in the world. For these reasons it's said that he was always forgiven if he chanced to rub himself against the legs of women in the audience while getting to his feet after being tossed out of the ring.

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"How many things seek their voice in us?" (James Reaney, "The Congress Café")

As the first sentence of his "*Creative Credo*" of 1920, Paul Klee famously wrote: "Art does not render the visible, but renders visible." Growing up in Nova Scotia in the 1950s, in a muddy subdivision, in the only house on our street, 1 Meadow Lane, I was troubled by the invisible world. As visible as we told each other we were, we seemed to be created out of invisible elements. Everything that determined our fate seemed to come from an invisible source. It was a little like the girl with the grass snake in her shirt; you could track its movements, but you could not see the thing itself. On family drives into the country, I was struck by the number of families living underground in basements without houses. We'd pass a field and the dirt track leading from the highway would end in a concrete bunker sealed with tarpaper, with another next door. Perhaps, when times were better, a house would be framed in on top of these foundations, and steps would rise to a door, but as I watched the torn strips of tarpaper flapping in the cold wind I was unable to imagine that anyone's fortunes would ever improve. Unaware that poverty and war had sentenced these families to invisibility, I was nevertheless indignant, wondering why the invisible forces that determined our lives were unwilling to make their lives better.

We'd drive to Sunnyside for ice cream. In the back seat, I was Maiava, flexible and vulnerable, then Coconut Willy, beating the armrest to extricate the Prince from the crushing thighs of Gorgeous George. I also had a secret. Wrestling had given me something profound: a way to understand the world. For when I found out that wrestling was a performance, its function became instantly clear. The wrestlers I loved and hated, playing out their dramas on the mat with such wily repertoires of moves and holds, were shadows projected by the cosmic forces of Good struggling to hold the line against the cosmic forces of Evil. Invisible as they were, these forces were

real, and this was a fight to the finish. Thus it was that in our Saturday afternoon wrestling matches in Donnie Conner's basement, my pals and I took pains to render visible this dynamic, indispensable model of the cosmos. It was a way to enter the world.

In his poem "The Congress Café," provoked by a visit to Austin, Texas, James Reaney asks:

How many things seek their voice in us?  
Unsuspected demons & angels  
Wait for the arrangement we provide  
Of gut, enzyme, funny bone, nervous system, mind. (47)

In "The Good Bacteria," Sharon Thesen has opened up the text to allow everything that seeks its voice in her to be heard. The dynamic model she creates is a poem through which time and space, past and future, visible and invisible course simultaneously. Geese, bears, seagulls, children, machinery, lovers, a swordsman, truck drivers, fish boats, hawks, and dogs and more are given voice in these pages. "All the crying / and the carrying on," she writes, "agencies like you wouldn't / believe, all helpless. Infinite worlds." Flames speak throughout, looming in the background, or are they in the future, or are they everywhere, all the time? In the final poem of the suite,

He saw some smoke then some helicopters  
And airplanes casting orange smoke.

It was lunchtime just before the sawdust pile  
Ignited from within.

In "The Fire," Part Four of *The Good Bacteria*, the poet recalls the Okanagan Mountain Park fire of August–September 2003. Kindled by a lightning strike, an entire mountainside burned out of control for weeks, burning up 25,000 hectares of forest and park land south and east of Kelowna, forcing the evacuation of more than 27,000 people. In these poems, the element follows her around, sir.

In "The Good Bacteria"—the reference is to penicillin, which kills good and bad bacteria indiscriminately—danger is pervasive, both in and out of dreams,

whether prophetic, absurd, or impenetrable. And so it's startling when the suite ends movingly, unexpectedly, with these lines:

In the dream we had, a mountain fell down.

I was calling the name of my son.

This is the first mention of the poet's son, and it sends a ripple back through every line, remaking each one. To call out the name of this satellite of her own body, brought by the poet, in an act of faith, into the perilous, burning world carrying her genes, her gut, her enzyme, her funny bone, her nervous system, and her mind, brings a reader into the fierce, inescapable cellular heart of things. It brings her to love, and to what can never be broken. "So much of Heaven has gone from Earth," wrote Emily Dickinson, "That there must be a Heaven..." If there is one, it is made of what is indestructible, and that, if one is lucky, is love.

The suite ends on this note, which may be proof enough.

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reading

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We like March.  
His Shoes are Purple-  
He is new and high-  
Makes he Mud for Dog and Peddler,  
Makes he Forests dry.  
Knows the Adder Tongue his coming  
And presents her Spot-  
Stands the Sun so close and mighty  
That our Minds are hot.

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