

## NANCY HOLMES / Report from the Savage Fields: Sharon Thesen's "The Fire"

In 2003, Sharon Thesen was evacuated from her Kelowna home in the Okanagan Mountain fire of that summer, the fire that destroyed over 200 homes and that raged for weeks around the city. Thesen's home was saved, but the dry land forest around her house was burnt, and miles of land to the south and east of the city became charred and blackened. A significant portion of Thesen's most recent book, *The Good Bacteria*, is devoted to a poetic sequence called "The Fire," a series that has its source in this event.

In the pioneer past, forest fires were threats to both life and livelihood; if the farm burned down, and the family was lucky enough to survive, gone were years of labour, livestock, stockpiles of fodder, food, and fuel. Forest fires that devastate homes have had an interesting, though minor, role in the annals of Canadian literature. Susanna Moodie's prose accounts in *Roughing it in the Bush* and Margaret Atwood's response to Moodie in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* are central texts in the genre. Several 19th and early 20th century poets used the forest fire in pioneer narratives (for example, Alexander MacLachlan's "Fire in the Woods" and Charles G. D. Roberts' "The Forest Fire"); usually the fire, as a force of nature, wins. People die; survivors wearily rebuild or move away. However, after the early 1900s, wildfire suppression became the mantra of forest management and the number of forest fire poems dwindled. The few forest fire poems that did appear usually focussed on wilderness firefighting and the experience of men (rangers and fire crews) confronting powerful fire storms in the bush; rarely do these poems deal with the domestic losses of the earlier poems. Today, forest fire literature is making a comeback. With climate change, decades' worth of combustible material in the forests and more and more people living in rural-urban interface zones, fires that destroy communities and homes have returned to public attention. Thesen's new sequence introduces troubling new elements into the classic Canadian forest fire poetic narrative, specifically, an ambivalence about the very idea of home in our ecologically fraught era.

The fourteen untitled and unnumbered poems of “The Fire” are musically structured into four distinct movements. The opening movement—the first three poems—deals with the public response to the fire, the firefighters and the evacuation; the next five poems move into private bewilderment about what is happening to the central figure’s home; the third group of three poems unites public response and private shock as homes, public forces and the natural world all grapple with the fire storm; the final movement consists of three elegiac poems where grief about the central figure’s home is transferred to the natural world. This structure contrasts and then merges the human and natural domains; it suggests—and this is the first important difference between the 19th century pioneer fire poems and 21st century fire poems—that distinctions made between home and nature are questionable.

Unlike the pioneer fire poems, in Thesen’s the human domain remains superficially unscathed. Neither life nor livelihood is seriously at stake. The only dying people here are on “scorched pages / from a first aid manual” (Thesen 73).<sup>1</sup> The victims of the Kelowna fire are in parking lots listening to weather forecasts and talking on cell phones, the experience of the fire mediated by technology. Survival on an individual or familial level is not the problem here. Thesen points out the oddity that individual lives in our wealthy Canadian society remain remarkably comfortable even though ecosystems are reeling. This paradox of comfort in the midst of threat is Thesen’s territory: in the very first poem of the sequence, the sparks and threats of the forest fire fall among the well-nourished, “among the tongs / and tines of suppertimes” (71). Throughout the poem, Thesen compares the “citizens trying to dine al fresco” (79) on suburban patios to the forest fire’s appetite that “fall[s] ravenous upon a canyon” (79). She sets up competing consumers: Mars the war god, the forest fire itself, and their “nasty little freaky friend / the wind” (79) versus patio dinners, “half-consumed Time / magazines” (73), and “Starbucks” (73). Thesen uses the brand names of products found in kitchen cupboards, “Windex” and “Vim” (74), as verbal jokes to highlight our domestication of the freaky wind and the vigorous fire. Mars and fire, in fact, share their “accoutrements” with suburban dwellers:

Mars  
is more than human.

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<sup>1</sup> All references to “The Fire” are given by page numbers since the individual poems are untitled and unnumbered. All quotes from the poem are from *The Good Bacteria* (Toronto: Anansi, 2006), 69–84.

His attributes ours, his  
accoutrements also:

pool  
chariot  
barbecue  
wrath (81)

She explicitly connects our hyper-consumption with the cosmic and natural forces that destroy. We are all caught in a system of rapacious consumption.

Yet the fire is more than a symbol of Western greed and consumer frenzy. The people in the poems, particularly Thesen's lyric "I", are in shock and mourning for their houses and for the forest itself. She reminds us that even while people were struggling to save their homes, countless birds and animals lost their homes permanently: "empty scorched treetops / where for weeks no bird had / or now would / ever sing" (82). Thesen alludes to an extinction of culture and civilization in the opening poem with its archaeological images: the "terracotta smoke" and burnt leaves that are like "Etruscan artefacts" (71). Throughout the sequence, Thesen aligns the extinction of home and culture with ecological crisis.

In Atwood's "The Two Fires" from *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, both homes and nature are burnt. There are two fires: a home that is threatened by forest fire and a house fire where the bitterly cold forest outside is temporarily the safer place, as "(each refuge fails / us; each danger / becomes a haven)" (Atwood 23). What is safe and what is dangerous is not easy to figure out, not in a wilderness. With Thesen, this problem of refuge is also evident; however, the evacuation is "orderly" (73) and refuge is found in mall parking lots, in transits over roads, at Starbucks (73), in urban zones of commerce and transportation. Susanna Moodie had nowhere to go when home and nature were both unstable and dangerous, but 21st century forest fire victims have the safety of mobility in a placeless, global culture. We can leave, skirt over things, relocate. Even our memories of origin and tradition are formed on the move, on the "canyon road to the railway trestles" (83) on Sunday trips with family. Modern nomadism has adjusted the idea of home so that we are barely affected by ecological crisis. "Home" as a place of protection is mocked by capitalist consumer culture that builds McMansions filled with people like "Mars / who sits by the pool with maidens either side / buffing his nails in bikinis / ...[and] a sycophant with

an iPod,” guys who love “[s]pecial effects”, who want to raze the world and “do the totally vaporized” (80).

Thesen’s sequence is overseen by Mars, a warlord enjoying the invasion and destruction of the Okanagan valley. The poetic sequence opens with, “Mars glared / in the firmament” (71), lines that cast a glow over the whole series: the word “red” imbedded in the verb “glared” imbues what follows with “seeing red” or wrath. With her invocation of the classical god, Thesen acknowledges the epic trace in the contemporary long poem and invokes wrath as the dominant mood. However, the reader is quickly disabused of any notion of genre-glam as the figure of the god develops, comically,<sup>2</sup> first into a comic book 19th century capitalist with his “stogie . . . / held out at arm’s length in order to hear better / the appeals of the widows” (75) and then into a Hollywood 21st century gangster executive with his barbecues, bikinis and sycophants. During the Okanagan Mountain blaze of 2003, Mars—the astronomical planet—was close to earth and was consequently huge and bright. All superstition associated with the fiery planet seemed justified. The planets seemed to be revenging Earth, their sorry human-infested sister planet, and justly so, since human beings have such contempt for life in general, Thesen seems to say when she gives us an image of people looking at Mars through binoculars and discussing the “likelihood / of ‘life,’ what, some weird- / looking worm or germ” (74). When Mars disappears altogether in the last three poems and only an empty landscape remains, it seems Earth has become Mars-like, a dead planet. The poem ends with an apocalyptic vision of the end of nature (“broiled branchless poles / . . . shocked humps of hills / self-conscious and sad, evicted / from their leafy life” [82]) and the end of a civilization (“the transit of ghosts and giants” [84]). The poem is no longer glowing red but ends in the colours of ash and soot.

Thesen’s poetic sequence, in spite of its occasional dark comedy, is almost relentlessly bleak, even in its depiction of attempts to “save” the forest. Gary Snyder, in his book *Back on the Fire*, says that firefighting “ideologies” are often disturbing: “the language of forest firefighting for years ran parallel to the language of the Cold War—clearly militaristic, and speaking of forest fires as though they were Godless Communist armies” (Snyder 15). Thesen’s second poem gives us the image of “the

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2 One problem trying to come to terms with what’s serious and complex in this poetic sequence is that I have little room to acknowledge how funny it can be, but its black humour and wry comic touches are part of its pleasure.

Armed Forces” setting up camp “in city parks” (72). In Thesen’s sequence, every action, whether destructive or helpful, has a hint of damage. One only has to think of the massive dumping of chemical fire retardants on the land during firefighting to see how toxic rescue can be.

Reading through Thesen’s fire poems, I am reminded of Dennis Lee’s 30-year old essay “Savage Fields” where he says, “the basic fact about our planet... is that it is now convulsed by civil war between world and earth” (Lee 7). For Lee, “world” is the expression of human perception and action on the planet, whereas “earth” is the expression of the physicality and forces of the planet—what Gary Snyder calls “deep world” (Snyder 34). These are overlapping forces. Lee’s “world” is what people create out of the physical earth, as well as their minds, language, and world views; “earth” similarly includes everything human-made, as well as all matter and energy. Since human culture is not in a dichotomous relation to earth / nature—culture arises out of nature—the conflict between them is a “civil war,” kin against kin. Thesen’s “The Fire” looks hard at that civil war. The Kelowna city park (a park being both a nature and a culture trope) is occupied by soldiers and their “gear” (72). Profound disorder is the new world order: “Airplanes lumber / upward, unfold white silk sheets / of lake upon the woods” (72). Lumber—a fused nature / culture word, as well—becomes perversely associated with the sky, as does a lake, as do silk sheets (again a nature / culture fusion) as if beds and homes are being jettisoned. In one of most frighteningly hopeless lines of the whole sequence, Thesen says that home is a place where “[w]e shouldn’t be living... / anyway” (81).

In the midst of this crisis, Thesen does offer what seems to be a hopeful alternate vision. The second movement of the sequence consists of five poems that show the soon-to-be evacuated woman washing floors of her home, mourning “an innocent cushion” (74) she must leave behind, and sewing a button on a garment. The moon becomes linked to the button she is mending: “A half moon wears out the night sky, / buttonhole of a jean jacket / worried to thinness / while Mars / lounges among his rights” (75). Male and female principles are evoked—the female aligned with buttons and male aligned with power and triumph. Traditionally feminine acts of washing, mending and propitiation (74) are opposed to armies and airplanes. Sewing, in particular, is offered as an anti-violence, anti-civil-war symbol. However, Thesen is never simplistic and although this vision could have been offered as an eco-feminist manifesto, she does not end this movement so hopefully:

The thread moves to the right  
or to the left like a barker's booth  
at the circus where you throw softballs  
at the passing ducks, it looks so easy

and you really want to win the large pink jaguar (78)

The act of mending disturbingly transforms into a pseudo-violent game, a “pretend” killing of ducks, a desire to “win,” and a consumer’s lust for an utterly fake toy animal.

Throughout her poetry, Thesen has been aware of the potential for failure in all human endeavours. Here, tidying and mending ultimately seem inadequate in such an advanced state of ecological civil war. Our technologies are too primitive (mere buttons); the preference of everyone is for war and comfortable denial rather than repair and propitiation. Thesen predicts terrible consequences. In the final poems of the sequence, the image of pine needles blends into the image of “extinct matchsticks.” Both the natural world and the foundations of homemaking—needles to sew and matchsticks to light the hearth fire—are gone forever, “extinct.” The “magpies fly / try to settle” (84) but nothing is left except “miles of roots that smoulder / still in molten maze” (84). Thesen, with her usual remarkable command of idiom—I don’t think any poet in Canada uses “etc.” as adeptly as she—has watched the civil war destroy everything:

the dear historic

what was lovely

the firs and the pines, etc. (83)

That “etc.” demolishes nature, beauty, history, and language all at once, a truly terrifying vision of loss.

## Works Cited

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