

## MARY DI MICHELE / Your Own Heart a Satire

### How Sweet It Is

It's now sixteen years since Sharon Thesen was writer in residence at Concordia University in Montréal. That's a big chunk of time. What do I remember and how might I remember the pleasure and privilege of having her among us? The meringue looms in my mind. It was huge, the size of a melon. Surely my memory exaggerates! Sharon was living in a furnished apartment near campus and close to Le Faubourg, a kind of indoor market. She had invited me over for dinner and for dessert she served meringues that she had bought at the market. They were so big I suggested we share one. The stiff egg whites make the meringues surprisingly light in spite of their size. Frothy, yet stiff. The caster sugar makes them cloyingly sweet. But Sharon loved them, this woman, this poet of such acerbic wit. I'm not prepared to eat one to see if it will serve as my madeleine, but it's useful as an image to precipitate this meditation on her poetry. And yet there are no food images in her poetry; the images I recall are cars, cads (Honeybunch), clothes, flowers, art, music, shoppers, the office party, the shroud of Turin as a brochure, the moon over Starbucks—the archetypal and the urban(e), beauty and the buyer: “violets such sweet sorrow striates the mind like bar codes” (“Gala Roses”). No food, well I did a search using her most recent selected poems, *News and Smoke*, and found that okay, I'm mostly right, but there are a few: “where dinosaur bones poke out of the badlands/ like toothpicks out of cheese trays”—food prepared and in a social context, the cocktail party and the Jurassic graveyard.

And in art:  
A still life without the knives,  
the gaping exposed oysters  
and sliced lemon, the dead grouse.  
There's nothing to eat  
but images to hunger for  
and how vast & impending the space  
occupied by beauty. (“Joie de Vivre” 101)

## The News That Stays News

Fall 1992 was a dark and wet one. Concordia's English department was housed in the Drummond building, run-down, graffiti decorated walls, trash in the restrooms, campus slum where working students stood a chance to get a university degree without the ivy trimmings of McGill located just up the street. I was in my second year of teaching there, living in an apartment on Sherbrooke St. in Westmount. I remember inviting Sharon over on her birthday and for the author of "On First Watching 'Honeymoon in Vegas'" I had bought an album of Elvis hits. She wanted to listen to them right away so we did: "your kisses lift me higher/ like the sweet song of a choir" ("Burning Love"). I had read and admired the poem that ends with the falling Elvises puncturing "the night sky, silver studs on their white pants/ hot as meteorites." That poem illustrates much of what I admire in Thesen's writing. Sure she's not the only writer to pomo, to balance high and low culture references in a poem, for who can read this poem without the subliminal presence of Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," a sonnet written in 1816, about a work originally published in folio in 1614-1616? "On First Watching Honeymoon in Vegas" vibrates with modern time and the newly minted "classic." Film, the dominant art of the 20th century, can look no further back than decades to the "classics" of the silent and the silver screen. "Classic" is any pop song still played a few years later. Elvis Presley songs are classic rock and roll and he himself is a figure as numinous as Orpheus.

Reading Thesen's poetry you get a sense of what it is to be alive and aware in the latter half of the 20th century and at its turn, the now, the news that is news. Why it stays news is due in part to the depth of field she creates through allusion.

## At the End of All Lyric / Medley, Greatest Hits

Thesen writes in the lyric tradition of Sappho with tonal shifts from tender to tantic. She constantly fights "the sentimental beast" ("Hello Goodbye" 32) in herself, her "endless & intelligent / heart trouble" ("Women and Pigs" 40). Her poetry cuts the epic and the lyric impulse down to size: "vision that makes small things smaller / and

big things absurd” (“Artemis Hates Romance” 18). It’s not nature but human nature that concerns her—if flowers then those growing in a city garden or on sale at the corner store; more often than not, her roses are not red but “made of pink Kleenex.”

Lyric forms are or were musical. If “Po-It-Tree” is an *ars poetica* for Thesen, her music is calypso: “it dances at the wedding party” and her favoured form (like Sappho’s) is the *epithalamium*. But look how she shrinks (the small made smaller) that wedding party:

A wedding crown  
circling the dark O  
where the Frisbee  
used to be (“Long Distance: An Octave, 5” 55)

The O of poetic address, the nothing of nothingness, the elegance, the circle of the wedding crown becomes the flying or circling of the Frisbee, the cheap plastic toy you toss around with your child or your dog in the park. She approaches the allure of art and beauty “reproachfully;” she reproaches herself. Crown her not with laurel, or if you must, and you must, get the bay leaves from her spice shelf in the kitchen. The title of this poem suggests the long distance call, phone technology, and musical structure, the octave—the real and the pragmatic world is always present alongside the poetic. “Beauty & so forth” gets cut down to size.

Musical strains run through all her writing: “the music / remembers. It hath a soft / & dying fall” (“Hello Goodbye” 32) sampling from the likes of Shakespeare and Marty Robbins (“a white sports coat and a pink carnation”). The Robbins refrain is so Thesen: “all dressed up for the dance, / all alone in romance.” She hates it (romance) because she loves it so:

Imagine a white sport-coat, and a  
blue carnation—all dressed up  
for the dance. And how would you know  
if the blood-red blossoms  
are the genuine article  
or whether pink strains toward beauty harder. (“Blue Carnations” 45)

If Artemis hates romance, maybe she, or Thesen, her devotee, loves artifice, as the closing lines of this poem suggest albeit through unstable ironies. The blood-red, the vital and natural, is quickly undercut by the pastel, “pink.” It’s a given that there is no straining in the natural, and what seems to be posited as genuine or true is undercut by the commodified “article.”

## The Banal and the Beautiful

“No longer can she (the woman writer) disguise / her preoccupation with beauty and truth” (“Joie de Vivre” 98).

Beauty is admired and at the same time undercut, art and the real in constant ironic tension: “beauty eclipsed...the juxtaposition of the real / What shall I make for dinner and / where is my kid...” (“Blue Carnations” 45). Reality is layered and can be viewed through the rearview mirror of cultural history: “making a Rome / of McKenzie Heights and the Sublime / of a Nissan wax job parked on the street” (“My Favorite Science” 74).

She might lament that in the lyric she’s “fumbling for matches, trying / to do something with language” but she lights fires under everything she loves: “your own heart a satire / upon the soon-to-be-eclipsed / innocent moon—the old girl” (“Eclipse Calypso” 90).

In “words” find “sword”—“words to a sword” (“After Spicer” 52). Yes, there’s wordplay in the anagram, and there’s also rewriting or parody on the proverb, “the pen is mightier than the sword.” Thesen’s pen / words are her swords and her own heart is often their target: “the slop of felt life.” Lest you mistakenly believe that she fully embraces the proverb, look at how she renders ludicrous her own writing process, if “fumbling with matches” hasn’t convinced you, “The poem of a monkey: / random & sincere: / smart monkey!” (“Dangerous” 115) just might.

The big themes of the epic are eschewed. Reflecting on what’s important in writing, Thesen chooses the fragmented world of daily life:

what happens to the big topics—  
topics not tropics where suffering is

the daily basis & not  
about taking a moment out to relax,  
the magazine's advice on how to survive  
Christmas. In the beauty salon... ("Joie de Vivre" 99)

## The Broken Cup

Think of T. S. Eliot and the "heap of broken images" in *The Waste Land* and observe how Thesen echoes but mocks his lament, his celebration of the beauty of the fragmented world. She uses a broken cup, a small and domestic image to meditate on modern life and art. "Like certain music / refuses transcendence (that strange vulgarity)"—Thesen refuses the lie of high art though its ghosts occupy the poems. Written in terza rima, "The Broken Cup" (120) alludes to Dante and his "spiritual lessons" using his "bits of prosody" and at the same time resisting his transcendent vision. At the end of the poem she throws the broken cup out, synecdoche for our fragmented cultural heritage because to hang on to it as to the "hope for clarity" it represents, the clear endings and beginnings, is "just to lie." But in a sense she throws herself away too in this poem, the self who feels "so broken."

Sharon Thesen left after her brief stint in Montréal before the winter hit. Let's watch with me as she rides away into the west on a horse. In "My Horse and I" (80)—she rides into Eaton's department store and through the perfume section. The poetry in the names of the perfumes—"oceans of Eternity / and Opium, Infinitude and Beautiful"—is diminished by the price-tag; poetic conventions and tropes suffer in postmodern consumer society too. Although this is a surreal dream poem, or because of it, the poem conveys the absurdity of modern life.

"We tried not to break anything"—in the department store of culture, things are presented intact. The poem ends as it begins: "I rode my lovely horse / into the perfume department / at Eaton's," the refrain, the circularity of the dream-poem makes it a whole. Here's the song unbroken in a broken world where the poet too feels broken. It's not a sentimental cowboy poem despite the "lonely" word in "it was lightning purple weather / & my horse was lonely for Wyoming." The horse is nostalgic, not the rider. Bring out the symbolic reading here: the horse represents the body and affec-

tive feeling, the poet-rider, the mind. This kind of division seems natural here and she's a good horsewoman; she "kicks his sides gently" with her heels when she prods the horse. I can easily see her on that horse and the way I imagine it she carries a satchel on the saddle with snacks: meringues for herself, carrots for her horse.

#### Works Cited

Thesen, Sharon. *News & Smoke: Selected Poems*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1999.