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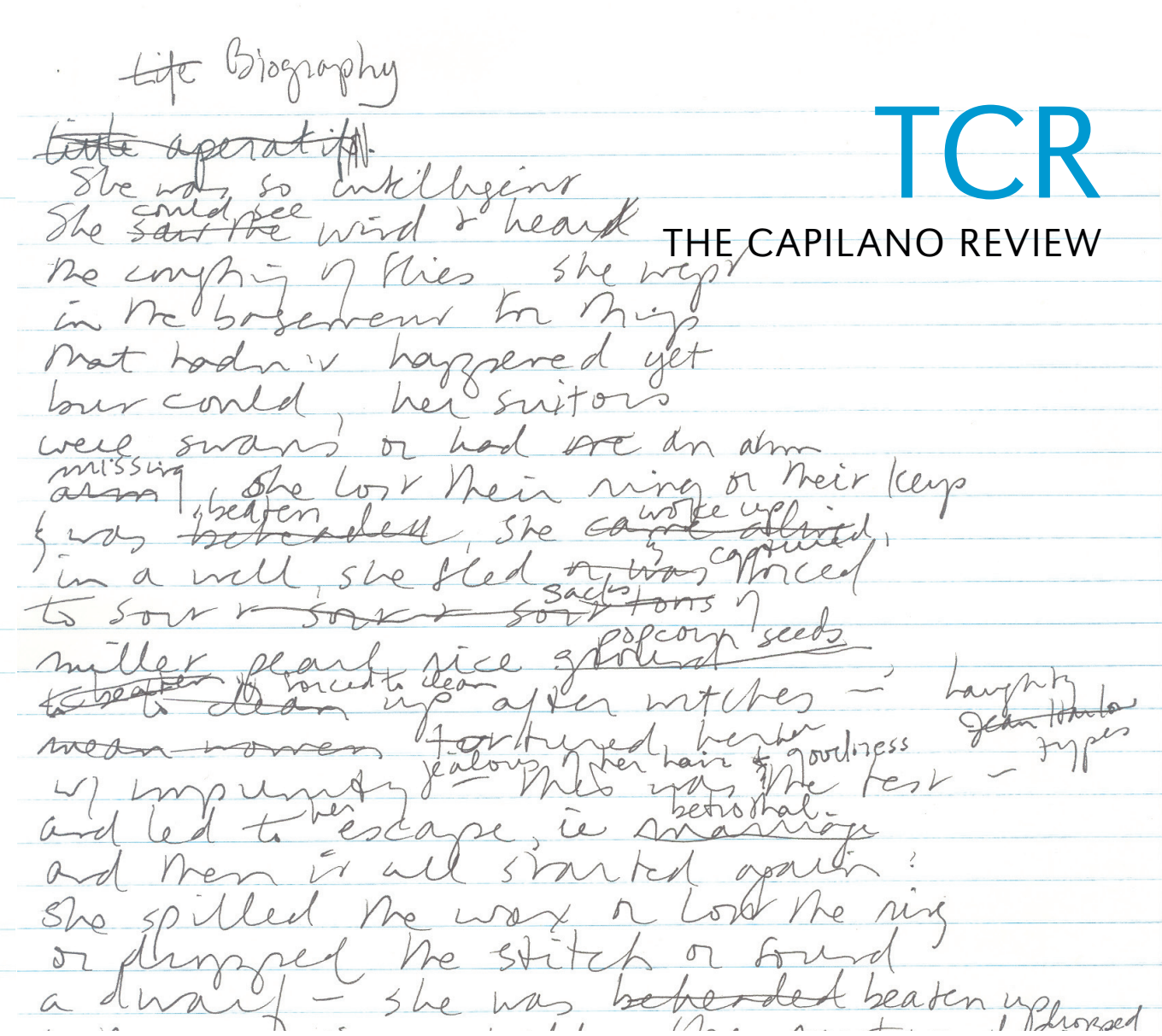
THE CAPILANO REVIEW

The Sharon Thesen Issue



…poetry being the good bacteria of language…

—SHARON THESEN

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The Sharon Thesen Issue

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-

sentation 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 experiental 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 addrss 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 nonsensibcal, 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 orthodontry 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 Bringhurst's Haida translations, foregrounds transmogrification. 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.”

A Lovely Day

It's a perfect summer day. Blue, blue sky; some plump
white clouds; a breeze. Not a scorcher, not one you'd
mind in any way. I found a near-new softball at the park
this morning behind the dugout & holding its white weight
remembered long-ago
days on the diamond for the Cosmic League—
and before that watching my dad pitch for the Royalite team
summer nights at Riverview Park--
the clapping at the home run,
the guy on third base
taking his time trotting in, the talk
on the diamond, my happiness when Dad struck out player
after player as the light in the hills began to
remove itself from the scoreboard and the willows
filled with the night breeze from the river.

Review

Icy steps, a coat
of honey on a wound, voice
warbling and too rich, makes me
want to run away,
the froth and itch, the art—

Occupation

For Tom Cone

I'm still wondering. It's a stallion
of a challenge which I am
unafraid of meeting. To horse
around, though occupied, always
in the middle of something,
a territory I'm taking
up with myself, the occupier,
and my henchmen helicopters,
barbed wire and the watchfulness
the occupied don't like of course
but I believe it belongs to me
anyway or that I am the real
owner and they, misfits and
accidents, stole it from me
earlier.

Occupied, preoccupied, in
the middle of something wild
like a Halloween party where souls
dance cheek to other's cheek.

In the middle of something looking
in all directions. Me the occupier,
and the occupied by continuous
thinking and my soul
or *ba*, whatever rides in the
boat later on. Or occupied by you
my husband, your toes and
feet down there near mine.

“Don’t save anything addressed to
occupant” she said whose mail
I was picking up. If I’m an occupant
should I not keep myself? And return to
being in the middle of something,
the space I occupy all the time,

occipital

my occupation: in the middle of a long thought
which is to live.

The Celebration

Was it a poorly attended event, a celebration
no one felt like celebrating? Was there no
live music? Was there
a table with small empanadas
and cubes of cheese, another with bottles of wine?
Had the winter day subsided into early
evening before the rush hour, white wine
larking in your bloodstream as you
walk to the parking lot? The prawns
had been large and plump, sweet.
Could you have eaten a dozen?
And besides, it turned out
that so and so had been born in
a small Eurasian town. Which of the following
instruments were generally played by popular persons?
(a) accordion
(b) banjo
(c) piano

Was crockery flung at the mantel? Did they dance
with throats proud and uplifted?

Were they enjoined to celebrate some government policy or other?
Daycare day, eat broccoli day, safety day! Apology day! Not worrying
about anything day! Old guys driving vintage cars in the slow lane! Young guys at
the Keg on a big night out! Catholics playing six cards each at
the bingo hall! Insomniacs fretting with camomile in the kitchen!
Old men weeping in the parks! Boys sobbing in armies! Moloch, Moloch,
celebration in Moloch!! Travellers picking at room service chicken pot pies!

Underpaid clerks helpful at the insurance office! Hermaphodite trout!
Box stores with irritable cashiers! Pepsi salesmen analyzing flow charts!
Grandmas eyeing the sherry! Orangutans grieving in zoos! Secretaries!
Undertakers!
Robots on the telephone! Oral hygienists! English professors defeated by poesie!
Celebrate! Celebrate!

The moon keeps me company all the way home, her dark smile and brocade blouse.
We see her coming over the hills and duck into
the collar of our coat. We know perfectly well we could use a little
of her scorn, her glamour.

The Gambling Table

I discarded the five of hearts
He replied with the seven of wands

My clubs were black and heavy
They fit the palm of my hand

In no particular order
They were laid out like a princess in a coma

The sums and the odds were reckoned
Towers of plastic disks shoved here & there

Like history, i.e. bloodlines and factions
Riding horses and trying for a boy

After which gunfire and revised treaties
Eventually follow. But here

In the big casino, in exurbia, in the lurch of cosmos
Nothing means nothing.

Sharon Thesen
Photographer unidentified

Andrea Actis / "alive and watching": Sharon Thesen and the Eighth Type of Ambiguity

In the concluding eighth chapter of his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930, 1956), William Empson, the Close Reader to end (& begin) all twentieth-century close readers, defends his project as follows:

> Most of the ambiguities I have considered here seem to me beautiful; I consider, then, that I have shown by example, in the nature of the ambiguity, the nature of the forces which are adequate to hold it together. It would seem very artificial to do it the other way round, and very tedious to do it both ways at once. (265)

It is a very tedious concluding chapter, but as one Amazon reviewer (one "Word Lover" from New Jersey) has advised, "This is not a book to read before you go to bed, or while you're at the gym. This is a book to read on your day off, when you can shut off all outside distraction." Bringing Empson into my festschrift piece for Sharon Thesen, I'm either setting up an anachronistic "straw-man" or pretending I can engage with the opiated caterpillar of *Alice in Wonderland* who betrays no sense of cultural memory and insists on antagonizing poor Alice by keeping oblivious ("Whoooo…are…you?") to her repeated protestations of subjectivity ("I'm Alice!!"). A creature determined to shut off all "outside distraction" and stick to smoking things beautiful.

But actually I bring in Empson because when so many readers of one poet's work locate a fundamental "ambiguity"—as they do in this issue of *TCR* (which I've had the rather unfair advantage of typesetting)—I think it's worth the work of tracing our reading back to one of the first creatures who had something to say about "the nature of the ambiguity." Something else that I carry in mind is the need to ask what the aesthetic "nature" of anything means in more material terms, and what the material terms might mean for any critical or creative practices we take on (this is the asking, as you may be familiar, of *What's at stake, and how is it to be cooked?*). In her interview, Daphne Marlatt points out to Thesen, "…you have taken the lyric and inflected it with a deeply ironic, even sardonic, voice at times, letting it masquerade as simple de-

scription." Like many readers, Marlatt is drawn to the problems that Thesen's "lyric" sets up for itself—problems of gender, place, and privilege that it never pretends don't exist.

Consistently, the other contributors to this issue have been compelled to document the same aspect or function, that complicated irony or ambiguity, of Thesen's poetics. "As Above, So Below'," Kent Lewis titles his essay on "Parallax in The Good Bacteria." Or, some earlier parallax:

> I drive the car
> while the choir ascends
> toward a far transparency
> these words tap at
> with a show of politeness. ("I Drive the Car," *Aurora* 13)

So it's largely the same thinking we're thinking, the same thing we're liking, about Thesen's poetry. Thea Bowering quotes Fred Wah—"'She balances the geography out there with the heartography within'"; Mary di Michele notes Thesen's tendency "to balance high and low culture references in a poem"; Lewis remarks on how Thesen's "ambiguous syntax helps blur the boundaries between subject and object, the figurative and the literal"; Meredith Quartermain shows how "Thesen's poems…often hold eerie weldings of glossy materialism with spiritual or non-material experience"; and Pete Smith finds himself struck by Thesen's "frequent juxtaposition of the banal and the transcendent."

> o, the fear of life
> stinks—
>
> dirty snow in the dogshit early spring… ("Japanese Movies," *AHR* 11)

Here, in one of her early poems, Thesen oscillates between a classical or romantic impulse to address a metaphysical problem—"the fear of life"—and a starkly unromantic commitment to record (in scatological terms, if need be) the "play-by-play as play-by-play of the day-to-day" (to borrow Gerry Shikatani's description of how Thesen's work works). It's a matter of Olsonian proprioception, as Thea Bowering

suggests; like Olson, Thesen "relies on the much-battered, sensory body to find a new cadence with which to re-write the commodified word-world" (in this case, the reified genre, the gendered paradigms, and a Prince George experience of "Japanese Movies"). But is there some methodology, I want to ask, for sorting out how "the nature of the ambiguity," the situated material body, and the critique of ideology relate to one another—how these build and sustain a poetics in Thesen's work, and maybe even disclose a po*ethics*? By Smith's reading, Thesen "extend[s] the boundaries of lyric poetry." The work is personal, we sense, without being too personal, funny without being too funny, sexy without being too sexy, reverent without being too reverent, irreverent without being too irreverent, and political without being too political. But it's ambiguities such as these that bring me precisely to a confrontation with my own orientations to language, social formations, and the question of taste (the "too much" or "too little"—or the somehow "just enough"—of something in a poem, let's say).

Marlatt does begin to address the more material implications of Thesen's formal ambiguity: "It seems to me 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." Likewise for Quartermain, quoting a definition of "romantic irony" (the kind of "open" irony she gauges in Thesen's "open" poetics), it is "'ethically indeterminate by virtue of the self-reflexiveness and synthetic balancing it enjoins'." For Empson, however, "the nature of the forces" that "hold…together" any one of his seven types of ambiguity are purely aesthetic, linguistic, immanent forces: "*First-type ambiguities arise*," as the chapter summary goes, "*when a detail is effective in several ways at once, e.g. by comparisons with several points of likeness, antithesis with several points of difference, 'comparative' adjectives, subdued metaphors, and extra meanings suggested by rhythm*" (v). Offering "*General discussion of the conditions under which ambiguity is valuable and the means of apprehending it*," plus "*Discussion of how verbal analysis should be carried out and what it can hope to offer*" (vi), Empson ultimately, in his own terrifying words, "want[s] to suggest that the machinery I have been using upon poetry is going to become increasingly necessary if we are to keep the language under control" (268). Unlike the "ethical indeterminacy" of Thesen's poetics, the "machinery" of Empson's imperious reading intentionally delimits a passive, consumptive role for the reader; as he maintains, "It is the business of the critic to extract for his public what it wants; to organize, what he may indeed create, the taste of his period" (277). It's worth noting, then, that only the worst and most blatantly normative of Thesen's readers have

lamented the "random bits, haphazardly sewn together" (Neilson par. 6), of her literary projects. If only Empson's seven types of ambiguity could still be stretched to fit our critical engagements with cultural production, there might be a way for all such English Misters remaining to drape their canons with the Canadian flag!

Of course, Thesen's "random bits, haphazardly sewn together," are exactly what keep her poetry away from the monologic and allow us to read along the three big registers or "determinants" her material evokes: the metaphysical/ontological, the bodily/phenomenological, and the socioeconomic. As she writes in "The Watermelon":

> "My spirit." My size 7 ½ shoe.
> My Canada Life insurance policy. (*Aurora* 37)

Lewis upholds this "fractured, piecemeal, and tentative" mode of writing as the formal precondition to Thesen's being "able to use her metaphysical chops to make pointed political critiques." He adds, however, that "her poems suggest that all events are concurrently creative and destructive, noble and despicable, ordered and chaotic, and so ultimately ambiguous and amoral." But how can "all events," even if ambiguous, be "amoral"? How can the language (signs) that we apply to events, even when that language is ambiguous, be anything less than fraught with competing systems/economies of morality? Perhaps rather than speaking in terms of "morality" when it comes to poetry, we could think in terms of ethics—ethics as recently described by Charles Bernstein as "the dialogic practice of response in civil society" (13) or as earlier figured by Simone de Beauvoir as a process which "appears to existentialism not as the formal respect of eternal and superterrestrial laws, but as the search for a valid foundation of human history, such as it unfolds on our earth" ("What Is" 325). So "Bread, testicles, everything!" (Thesen *Aurora* 17)—ambiguous yes, but signs pointing nevertheless to a social foundation we may very well need to talk about.

It happens that I'm obsessed with using Beauvoir to talk about socially engaged poetics today, and that in fact my obsession began with an Honours paper I wrote on the "existentialist impulse" (Hulcoop 29) of Phyllis Webb's progressively dialogic work (progressive—over the course of her writing and activist vocations—and progressive in the progressive sense too). Unlikely as this project may seem—the existentialists put poetry outside of the realm of *littérature engagée* altogether—I do find it's been worth investigating why they did so. (A possibility is that they saw poetry, as Toril

Moi has theorized, not as "action" but as an "iconic object-language" [150], which much of it in France probably seemed to be, and as much still does seem to be in North America). I've also been trying to imagine how we might revisit the category of "Commitment"—so reproached as an "official" ideology and aesthetic by Theodor Adorno in his 1974 essay—through the work of contemporary poets inheriting much from the investigations of North American language poetry and disclosing what I read as a poetics of *un*official commitment. A touchstone for my thinking is Beauvoir's long essay *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948)—historically the only foundation for an existentialist-materialist ethics (besides Sartre's unfinished *Notebooks for an Ethics* [1983]). Another is "Pyrrhus and Cineas" (1944), an earlier essay in which Beauvoir insists that "[t]he artist cannot lose interest in the situation of the men around him," that "[h]is own flesh is engaged in others" (136). Probably Thesen would agree: "When I hear those warnings on the radio," she tells Marlatt, "that some people may find the following news story upsetting, I'm embarrassed to be a Canadian."

Beauvoir writes in the *Ethics* that "[t]o declare that existence is absurd is to declare that it can never be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must constantly be won" (129). Crucially, this is a formulation that, even as it posits an ontological fact (or some kind of cosmology, as Duncan's or Blaser's writing has been understood to), it also and finally insists on material positions, efforts, and consequences—on actual "meanings"—and the struggles that occur over them every day. A kind of post-structuralism gone not *too* wild is what Beauvoir and Thesen often seem to be getting at. Smith, as mentioned, registers the "frequent juxtaposition of the banal and the transcendent" in Thesen's poetry, and "[i]n keeping with the existentialist tradition, Beauvoir uses the term 'transcendence' to refer to our experience of conceptual detachment from our situation, and…the term 'immanence' to refer to our sense of being inextricably bound to our situation insofar as we are part and parcel of it" (Weiss 282). Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity, then, resonates particularly well with Thesen's ambivalent sense of her own poethics: "Ostentatiously narrative-free poetry may be theoretically virtuous but I tire of it very quickly," she admits. A human "is at the same time a freedom and a thing," Beauvoir elsewhere summarizes, "both unified and scattered, isolated by his subjectivity and nevertheless coexisting at the heart of the world with other[s]" (258). And Thesen's poetry assumes these ambiguities—so often making light of its own formal and thematic situatedness, implicatedness, or (to use *the word*) interpellation—tracing

the logics of a writer who "experiences a conflict between a desire to satisfy a demand for boundedness, for containment and coherence, and a simultaneous desire for free, unhampered access to the world prompting a correspondingly open response to it" (Hejinian 41).

I hesitate to use the adjective "honest," but I do think that Thesen's is a somehow productive assumption of complicity—as much as I've been disturbed to the core by such theses as Johanna Drucker's that in order to appreciate the sensibilities of contemporary fine art we must jettison all those unfashionable "oppositional models of the avant-garde" and bring instead a "sophisticated acknowledgement of complicity" to our engagements with culture (*Sweet Dreams* xiv). But Thesen's middle-class poetics, I'll go ahead and call them, do have a critical sense of what's going on. Instead of letting a full absorption take place, the poems problematize the arrival of such a life(style):

> The silver spoon
> we are not born with
> & the silver tongue
> we die with… ("After Spicer," *AHR* 52)

Here I think of Beauvoir's unwavering ethical attentions to "the concrete and particular thickness of this world" (*Ethics* 106), but also can't help but recall her admitted fetish for American pharmacies and cinema houses (which she'd duck into at every opportunity during her four-month visit there in the late '40s—see *America Day By Day* for her own take on these matters). Then there's the epigraph that Clint Burnham chose for his book on Frederic Jameson and *The Aesthetics of Marxist Theory*:

> *I blew into the Dôme at 8:30, all agog at the idea of reading* Perry Mason and the Lame Canary, *but then who should show up but Merleau-Ponty, and I can't decently take out a detective story under his very nose.*
>
> —Simone de Beauvoir, letter to Jean-Paul Sartre, 13 January 1941

It may be an old story of the "high" versus the "low" that I'm told cultural studies told best a few years ago. But I remain a bit embarrassed and confused about what it means today to be a "critical thinker" *and* a critical organic shopper—"A bunch / of leeks,

huge in the bag" (Thesen *TGB* 43). I think it's fun (i.e., scary) to imagine Immanuel Wallerstein pitching in at this point: "And the ambiguity was that bourgeois was then (as it remains today) both a term of honour and a term of scorn, a compliment and a reproach" (135).

But Thesen's writing—her ambiguous or "ironic" lyric—is nothing if not widely and wildly aware of itself. "Like [John] Newlove," Thesen explains to Marlatt, "I have a tendency to dismiss or dismantle my own poetic insights." I drive my car, you see, maybe even a BMW, in the choric midst of angels and "a far transparency," but in spite of all "meanings, for sure" ("Late Summer," *Aurora* 33) and what I recognize to be the "absurdity" of consumer "consciousness now" ("Echolocation," *AHR* 55), I still do sometimes find myself longing for "the pink jaguar" ("The Fire," *TBG* 78). Thesen consistently helps us admit to things, though, and whatever this "admitting" means, I suspect it must mean something. As in "Hey I Think That's Me":

> Opportunistic. We went to the door with glee
> knowing someone American & good-looking was there
> with books and hashish and news about the concerts and riots. (*TGB* 33)

For a literature of commitment, Beauvoir did assert that the writer must "participate in the same search he has invited his readers on" lest the completed work be merely (and unethically) "an incongruous mystification" ("Literature and Metaphysics" 271) and lest the artist operate as "an engineer or a maniac" (*Ethics* 67). These are terms germane to a cultural critique of capitalism, and it's a positing of a kind of ambiguous phenomenology, versus "simple description" (Marlatt), as a strategy for using "[l]anguage [as] an appeal to the other's freedom" (Beauvoir "Pyrrhus" 133). "I don't think my work is in any intended way 'political'," Thesen explains when interviewed, "though I do think there's a continuing note of protest that life is not only serious, strange, and sad, but also silly and stupid."

> across the inlet—lights presiding
> over who knows what sorts of imports
> and exports. ("Oh, Danny Boy," *TGB* 60)

But at least "I was alive and watching" ("Eating Smarties in the Truck," *Aurora* 53).

And writing always from the position of someone trying to figure out her position—probably hoping to figure out yours too—amongst these nameless "imports / and exports" and the relations of power that their names (*and* their namelessness) create. "A [hu]man is freedom and facticity at the same time," Beauvoir maintains; "He is free, but not with the abstract freedom posited by the stoics; he is free in situation" ("Pyrrhus" 124). Alive and watching, Thesen's poetry never presumes to occupy an "abstract freedom." It seeks instead to disclose the terms of its situation and finally cut through these terms with a sharp and gleaming semi-autonomy: the line.

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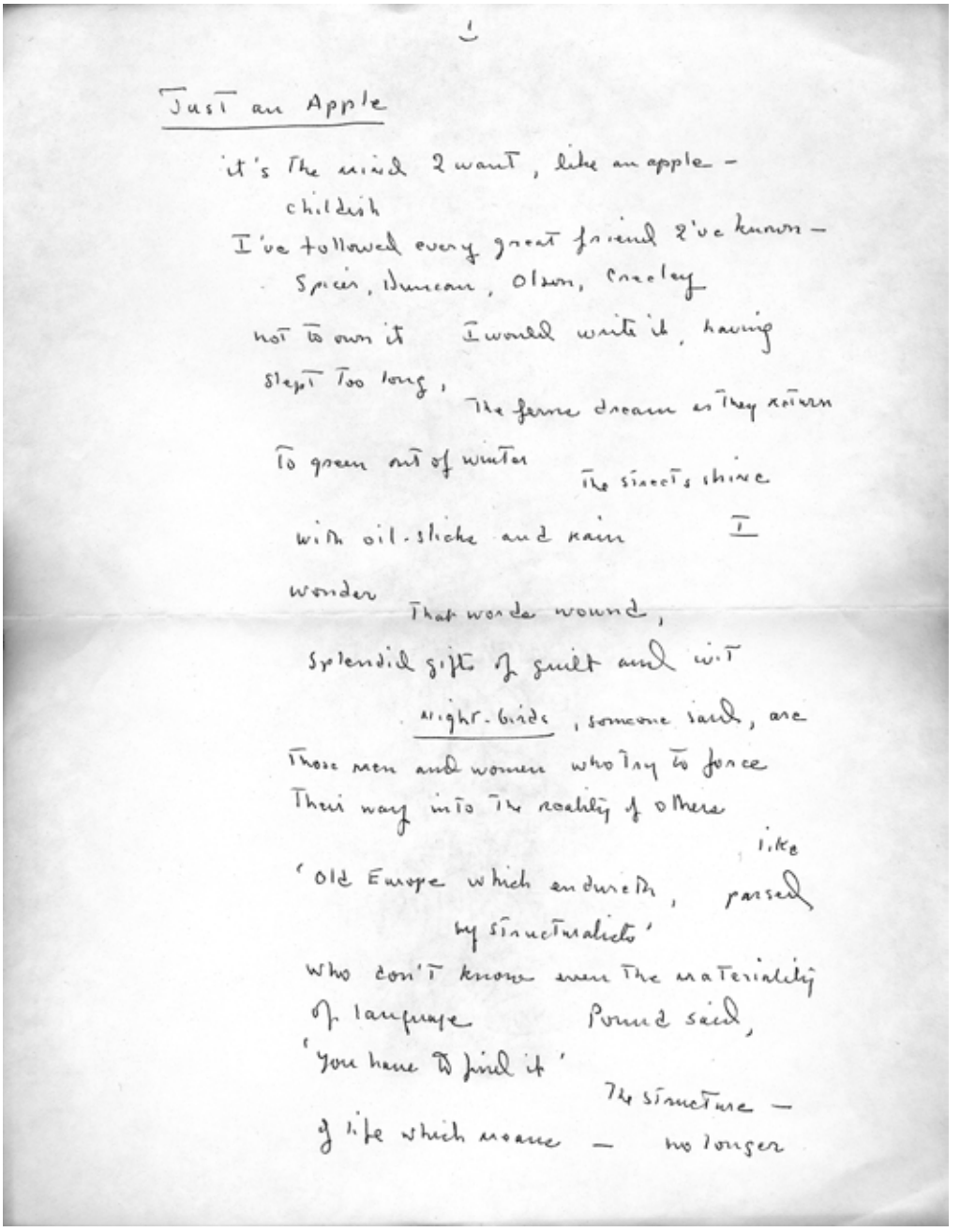
Robin Blaser / Just an Apple



1

Just an Apple

it's the mind I want, like an apple –
childish
I've followed every great friend I've known –
Spicer, Duncan, Olson, Creeley
not to own it I would write it, having
slept too long,
the ferns dream as they return
to green out of winter
the streets shine
with oil-slicks and rain
I
wonder
that words wound,
splendid gift of guilt and wit
night-birds, someone said, are
those men and women who try to force
their way into the reality of others
like
'old Europe which endures, parsed
by structuralists'
who don't know even the materiality
of language Pound said,
'you have to find it'
the structure –
of life which means – no longer

can philosophy find it. The
mental Thing about it —

so we've gone from one Thing
To another

The effort is moral — how
are you?

you can Take it and
bind a rock
(origin of the word nuisance)

you'll wobble
unless you're The exact of it

16 Feb, 1982

for Sharon Theresa

Just an Apple

it's the mind I want, like an apple—
childish
I've followed every great friend I've known—
Spicer, Duncan, Olson, Creeley
not to own it I would write it, having
slept too long,
The ferns dream as they return
to green out of winter
The streets shine
with oil-slick and rain I
wonder
That words wound,
splendid gifts of guilt and wit
night-birds, someone said, are
those men and women who try to force
their way into the reality of others
like
'Old Europe which endureth, parsed
by structuralists'
who don't know even the materiality
of language Pound said,
'you have to find it'
The structure—
of life which means— no longer

can philosophy find it. The
mental thing about it—

        so we've gone from one thing
to another
        the effort is moral—how
are you?
            you can take it and
build a rock
(origins of the word unknown)
                You'll wobble
unless you're the crust
                    of it

Roo Borson / A Chaise for Sharon

It would have been sometime in the 1990s, I think, when I walked with Jane Munro into the house on Kitchener and saw for the first time the elegant chaise longue Sharon had come across in a storefront window in Montreal and (as she said) had to have, and so had shipped all the way to East Vancouver, where its yellow satin brocade shed more light than the sun. And I thought: if only one could lie here…shortly after which a few lines began to form themselves. That this particular piece of furniture has stayed in my mind ever since, and that the words below have never had a home till now, makes me think, watching a robin (now that it is spring) endlessly pick up and drop a piece of tissue half again her size, that there are many forms of patience.

To lie in splendor and decline
on a yellow chaise

and think of nothing
the origins of success and failure

as the rain comes down
though no one watches

and the cool petals
climb out of the twig-tips
into the rain
medallion and trailing vine

thinking: *empires of autumn, the pale pools at Ostia*
filling with silt for a thousand years—

George Bowering / Nechako Spring Morning

Think of blood on the ivory keys, how the fingers continue to play.

Don't imagine the big thump as the elephant fell to the hot dry ground.

Silver imports skedaddle between clumps of cedars along the steep north shore.

She makes the turn and stomps on the gas, bringing a smile to the face of the blind guy in the other seat.

An arpeggio floats over the very north tip of Lake Okanagan, her elbows rise.

Don't walk diagonal across her lawn if you don't want to become a poem.

Poems last longer than a tank of gas, birds sometimes fly with snakes in their beaks.

Look, she grips a pair of scissors too close to everything you love.

She's a saint for five minutes every morning—that's how she gets called lyrical.

If violin players get to wear spike heels during Resphigi's *Fontane*, she gets to slither while she walks.

That was supposed to be something about jukebox music, car radio music, black keys.

I mean laughter you hear in the other room, and don't you wish you were telling *that* one?

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 patterened 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.

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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.

•

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.

•

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 mythtellers 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 Qayahl 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 mythteller 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 Bringhurst'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 Bringhurst'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/Bringhurst's cadences as the "*white lake gull grabbed a breeze*," and, listening closely, she has begun to hear and create the world anew.

•

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.

•

"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

GEORGE BOWERING
DAPHNE MARLATT
MICHAEL ONDAATJE
SHARON THESEN

mon., feb. 23
anza club
3 w. 8th ave.
8:00 pm
$3
bar

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.

...
Emily Dickinson

BRICK a journal of reviews

Clint Burnham / from the Benjamin Sonnets

for Sharon—"with thanks for the conversations and inspiration and laughter"

V.b *(after Ken Loach's* The Wind that Shakes the Barley, *Kreuzberg, 14.1.07)*

Urging Mick on the telephone
Dirk betrays him for a piece of the act

Horse lag, bed'er while
then Mick's M.I.L.F.'s handler grabs "Fault!"
bemused at my ma's tit
sign here, sighs her
give him a drubbin
a diva, Steady Boy
dubbin there'll be clean shoes on your corpse
Pro quid pro, ira(te)
stymied gym shoes, germ girl furls a kerchief
the union jack a botched apron
red medium sad match
Zoo nickel filched

XV

Beware the ears that here no toc!
need welder conning tower
we're, we're grieving black Blackberries
aged well i.e. aged in Zurich
winning winnie's whining
winnie the pooh's pooh-poohing
uh—desist fee liked
Gunther chock-a-block

with dark chalk that festers habit
Varèse (Zappa's)(Zippo)(Zippy)(Ziphead)(Zipes)(Zipped)
London zero now
Sir Store End
DAT's naked brooch
for him auger blink offsh- whoring

XXV

Sin apse shelling
guest off fennel ailing again

radio pizza test soggy like her
outrider gill's glissant
she thwarts a
dervi's Fort Edmonton
language school weeder filter
musta been musty
Dan's stand's whinger
worn knock stem
all classic
fen
erst-
derby

XXVII

Belch music real mensch wensch
spamologist on call
musical milk toast toastmasters
temperance fooled nobody
tempura's the latest snacker
taking us for a temp ride

spaz condor! why click your clique
shag shrug
endorse Shih Te rub & tug
Down these men come pre-lubricated
Rousseau's insulated
Telly Savalas's Pocky's
alter
super

Ted Byrne / PS I Adore You

1

I thought I'd said pretty much everything I could say about Sharon Thesen's work in a piece I wrote a few years ago. However, that piece ended with a brief, insufficient comment on Frances Boldereff. The comment was prompted by her appearance in *A Pair of Scissors*, where she arrives, "88 years old," with a delphic, almost comic, pronouncement, "affection is a very deep thing." In keeping with my thesis at the time, I posed Boldereff as an emblematic absence in Thesen's later writings, a ghost, wrapped in nostalgia, moving toward death, evoking a richness and a fear. Having begun with the "gap" in "Mean Drunk Poem," I conveniently wrapped up with this shade. But in my haste, perhaps I did someone a disservice.

Boldereff's appearances are fleeting, but not as insubstantial or one dimensional as I made them out to be. In the passage just cited, Thesen is "hungry for words / that give me a home somewhere something / I can belong to some real company," and Boldereff's talk, although a memory, provides such sustenance.

> 88 years old, "affection is a very deep thing,"
> she said, she had a brooch on, and a manicure
>
> an inoculation against the pretend *agape*
> of notions and scruples, oh for the real
>
> difficulties of desire and faith, the hard
> thinking, the holy smoke of situations.

Boldereff was familiar with the real, and the real difficulties of desire and faith, with hard thinking, and the holy smoke of situations, and love—*agape* and *mania*. Even at 93, she entered a room "ready to find things / not to her liking" ("The Hat"). And this wasn't just crankiness. From her perspective, it was a reasoned expectation in an age of mediocrity.

Some time after I'd written "The Genial Disconnects," Sharon handed me a typescript of her interviews with Boldereff. I don't remember what she said, but it was like, "Here, maybe you can do something with this." It was as if she wanted rid of it. She made a comment about Boldereff's poisonous remarks, her racism, making its usefulness problematic. This is not a minor difficulty, especially as I came to appreciate this woman's talk. She's old, things are slipping from memory, topics elude her, but she's a charmer, a weaver. She keeps returning to certain moments, not in an obsessive way, but in a way that gives her monologue the coherence of sophisticated narrative. The racism is occasional, banal, and familiar, but more than simply unfortunate. It can't be dismissed as something inessential, accidental. It can't be localized and quarantined. It sounds like unexamined blather, but it's hateful nonetheless. It's also consistent with the ideas she expresses in the correspondence.

2

Boldereff tells Olson she's not a writer. Yet she wrote a half a dozen books, mostly "Baedekers" to *Finnegans Wake*. She comes close to fulfilling Joyce's own notion of his ideal reader. Except that, in her several tours through *Finnegans Wake*, she also manages to further her own program, and to comment substantially on several other pivots in her alternate history. In these books she refers to herself, not as a writer, but as a reader, a compiler.

She herself had no name. Or, "like a deity," she "had many names and situations sacred to her ups and downs" (Thesen, "A Holy Experiment"). It's almost a convention to call her Frances Boldereff. She was christened Frances Brubaker Motz. Her husbands were Boldereff, Ward, Phipps. Her mother's family name was Reighard. She published under all of these names, as well as Anonymous and—go figure—Thomasine Rose.

She uses all of her names in the correspondence. And in the intimacy of the letters she sometimes signs as daughter, sister, and at least twice as Frances Olson. Olson responds almost in kind, as father, brother, and occasionally as sister, or Ð

The curious thing about the Olson/Boldereff correspondence, given her panonymity, and her second billing, is that it comes off as Boldereff's book. This results partly from Thesen's introduction, largely devoted to Boldereff, and partly from the fact that she is initially the more prolific correspondent. The introduction also

bolsters her importance by making large claims for her contribution to Olson's work. While this expands Boldereff's reach—not without evidence—it also fixes her within the indefensible frame she constructed for herself.

In the beginning, Boldereff announces Olson's arrival within her sphere as the fulfillment of her role, and of history as she conceives it. No kidding. At the tactically appropriate moment she sends him her writings, which foreshadow his arrival. And she carries this program through to the end: "I believe you are the greatest man alive today in America" (301); "I recognize you as a world hero" (491). But she also nourishes him with ideas as he works up his writings in the context of the correspondence, not just sending her his poems and essays, but drafting them within the letters, crafting them out of the letters. "Projective Verse" and the first *Maximus* poem, for example, seem to begin in this correspondence.

She gives him Samuel Noel Kramer, Edith Porada, Josef Strzygowski. He gives her Jane Ellen Harrison, L.A. Waddell. They share Lawrence. He readjusts his thinking on Whitman, Blake (not Joyce). At times it becomes difficult to see the boundaries between their ideas, especially when it comes to the larger, fundamental Olson constructs, such as the need to get back behind "Hebraism, Christianity, Greekism, and the Renaissance" (Olson letter, 531). But they don't share the same meanings. For her the task is a clearing away of originary guilt: "I would like in other words to take the whole Sumerian-Semitic myth and cast it out. I think that man has to strive for innocence not because he is sinful but because innocence is the real home of the creative being…" (72). Boldereff is an idealist; Olson is a materialist, or at least a Democrat. Her focus is on the future, no golden past, a lineage perhaps, but always a projection forward out of this hell: "darling baby I cannot speak for myself—you must do it for woman and for man and for future" (294). His focus is on the present, America as a new start, with reference to a previous rupture, but with no heavy forward reaching: "the trouble with the whole damn spirit business is, it's a schitz proposition—and proceeds from dividing life up between now, and the hereafter…the magic, the immortality…is HERE, HERE, where time is…" (361).

She's not tethered, as Olson is, by democratic impulses. He has to shove away some of her notions, while embracing and transforming others. This almost describes their relationship. At a personal level, at the level of sexual politics, her future is him, his now is not her. There meetings, few and far between, are dramatic, and his pull to her is clearly strong and disruptive. But mostly he accepts and works within her

positioning of him ("Women are such ears / to read to…" [351]). Only when pushed to the wall by the intensity of her need, which is for something more than words (309), does he comes running. She wants him to realize her program, but she also wants him, in the flesh, in her household. He wants her as well, but he wants her more as a fire source, which he stokes, but then is terrified by the disruption this creates, of his equilibrium, of his household.

3

After becoming acquainted with Frances Boldereff, I hate to think of her simply as a problem. The problem she poses *for herself* is one of identity: Who am I? Or, more than that, do I exist, does woman have a soul (22), or must she remain "[s]uspended in non-existence"? (542) The publication of the correspondence gives her a public life, as something more than an episode in Olson's biography. Much of the research that goes on in the letters is also, eventually, put to use in her works. But her letters are not the atelier of those works, as Olson's letters are of his. Other than *A Primer of Morals for Medea*, her works come after the conclusion of the affair. In the letters her business is to raise her ideas, and her self, up into his. As much as this is a program, it's also a project, one that has to include him completely in order to succeed, in spite of her tactical withdrawals from this demand. The impediment is that he takes her program at its word, which of course dooms her project.

This problem, her problem, I'd say she works it out. Although the correspondence ends with a device—we're left in suspense—we know that the story has a happy ending: she dumps the guy (xvii). What remains is the problem *for us*. In the context of the correspondence, it's twofold: why would such a "tough female" (314) position herself so thoroughly within this framework of voluntary servitude; and in what way is this framing related to her racism, as it must be?

I think, at the moment, that the only way I can address the second question is to place it in the context of the first. Her internalization of the hatred directed against women, which first becomes a self-loathing, but is then largely superseded by a conscious program, mirrors at least one of the ways that the victim of racism responds. Otherwise, her racism shows no special distinguishing features, even if it appears to be theorized in the notion of the "hebraic," and would have to be dealt with through an extended examination of racism in general.

The first question has been answered repeatedly. But it's worth repeating, if only for the reason that repeating a story may prevent history from repeating itself. And it's especially worth repeating now, when the gains won by women in the public sector are being undone by privatization, and the private sector is becoming an expanding ghetto of bad jobs.

In spite of the gains of first-wave feminism, and the experience of the wars, which brought more women into the workforce, women of the period did not have the same opportunities as men. More often than not, in the absence of solidarity, the situation of women was interiorised, and women struggled within themselves, finding a compromise, working within imposed, and tacitly accepted, constraints, or finding defeat. Those women who achieved success in male dominated fields did not, for the most part, see themselves as other than exceptions to the rule.

Boldereff had a degree in literature and philosophy from Ann Arbor, was a single working mother, learned and worked in the printing trade where women were not welcome, was an accomplished book designer and, by the time of her correspondence with Olson, had justifiable ambitions to obtain a highly responsible position in one of the large New York publishing houses. In the summer of 1950 her hopes were raised very high, but she lost all of the promising positions to men. "I have been absolutely qualified for each of the 4 jobs," she tells Olson, "and until the [Korean] war situation makes things so very bad that they are forced to take me I know, as I knew before I came—this is the treatment I will receive" (505).

Boldereff's conception of herself, and of woman, her compromise, although heavily intellectualized, is in no way unique. In effect, she accepts the role that has been imposed on women for centuries, which is to say "by nature". It's a role within which, in the imaginary, woman can fully exercise her power…but not exceed it, as Medea did. A role within which woman can be equal, but only within difference. As conflicted as it seems, there is no contradiction between Boldereff's strong statements on women's equality and her adoption of voluntary servitude. But what a monumental struggle she has arriving at this juncture! She embraces a commonplace, but she moves it onto an epic stage, just as a man would do.

She sends Olson her writing fairly early on, before they've met, before the bulk of their correspondence. She is perceptive about this writing. Her 1936 "notebook" is immature, full of "young woman errors" (16). *A Primer of Morals for Medea* is a mature condensation of the earlier text. It's probable that she offers these works to him in

a bid for recognition, but she makes the offering more as explanation. He responds with some annotations, but there's little immediate evidence of his interest. However, these writings set the tone for much of what follows. He brought her notions into himself. As late as August 1950, at the end of the published correspondence, he is saying "the heroic raises itself only on the recognition of [woman], of her as the tragic source of joy" (515).

A Primer of Morals for Medea, written in August 1948 (age 43), consists of 30 brief aphorisms, which were composed of a piece, independent of the Michelangelo plates that were chosen to accompany them in their publication. In brief, Boldereff tells Medea that she is a slave to nature, her inescapable enemy, and foretells that she will attempt to escape her lot, exercising a "vehement desire without form," will go through a self-destructive hell, learn to despise her own ability to entrap men, and through its renunciation, arrive at freedom, re-enter the world as a mother, giving without any expectation of recompense, with the knowledge that everything depends on her, but no one will know her name, except for the one who benefits from her indirect relation to all things. Coming through, to this understanding, this contract with oneself, is maturity. (The entire text is included in her letter of March 4 1949 [12].)

Behind this text lies another, secret text written in May 1936 (age 31). Part of this "notebook" is included in the correspondence. It is underwritten by Weininger—and who knows what other monsters of the early twentieth century. She struggles with Weininger, and only partially wins out—she decides that woman does have a soul. Olson, in his annotations to this text, identifies Weininger as "SHIT," and her reference to women's "essential inequality" as "SHIT".

It is clear from the text that her conclusions, however she arrived at them intellectually, resulted from bitter experience: "…woman as a tool, whereby man destroys or saves his own soul. Let no one suppose that I object to this on foolish grounds of 'It ought to have been otherwise'—the *fact* that it has not been otherwise burns a deep hole in me, that is all" (22).

> All of a woman's troubles proceed from the fact that she never admits to herself her fundamental inequality. When I used to torment myself daily with the question, "Why can a woman not create something of the first rate, why are all her

> works not great, but full of immense talent only?" I finally was, in a brief moment, brought face to face with the idea that in woman there is no necessity. (27)

The satisfaction of being a mother, of mothering, is so complete, that there is no necessity to attempt to create, and to fail, as a man does over and over.

And she never lets go of these convictions. Of *Finnegans Wake* she says, thirty years later, "it is because of its greatness that it is so imperfect" (*Hermes to His Son Thoth* 40). With Olson she attempts to put them into practice. There is a strategem here. The task she sets for woman is monumental, and it brings her back into primacy —in the imaginary, not in the real. With this she elevates a commonplace—that poorly kept secret that there's a woman behind every great man. In spite of her failure to bring Olson into her household, and in spite of her proclamations of selflessness, she fully inhabits her position as muse. He, of course, abets her in this, even while frustrating her need. Over and over again he rationalizes his inability to join her, temporarily or finally, as an effect of the situation she has constructed. He is in a "white heat" of writing, forty hours a day, and she is the cause of this frenzy, what more could she want? Isn't this the joyicity she speaks of?

> i've been brooding since [the previous day's letter], trying to figure out how i could have misled you, and i am forced to think it is precisely at this point of language as reality, as the only reality which a man like me can be said to serve (311)

She responds, assuring him she was "misled by joy":

> I accept loving you without any reward of any kind as my privilege
> I hope to see you again but if I do not I shall not consider that you have in any way misled me. (317)

Later, he says that his desire for her, "this belief in what we've got" will last for as long as he lives. At the same time he recognizes that the way he responds to this commitment must seem crazy to her. But, he says, "you do respect that kind of craziness."

It is, he conjectures,

> what we have talked about, what you make the ROOT principal, IS freedom, is *how love can live*.

And, he says, this requires of her the "maximum of, what did we say, COURAGE?"

> And I should guess, that if I have taken up my own ruthlessness, if I have been able to *commit* myself to the fate I think now I was born for, it is because you have proved, you do prove my being, something which was my vision, is my conviction, was what I was born with. (450)

4

Immediately after their first tryst he had written "Epigon" (56), which she nominated as the "only fine love poem in existence" (80). In a sense it's the only unencumbered love lyric she receives. Over the following four or five months he sends her numerous poems. Then in the spring and early summer of 1950, the letters become a furnace of poem making—poems written to, for, in, around or about Boldereff. They are, often, near lyric, but reach toward something more extended. These include, among others, "In Cold Hell, In Thicket" (347) and the first *Maximus* poem (335). There follows an intense period of research—Harrison, Apollonius of Tyana, Kramer, and Waddell—leading up to "The Gate and the Center," but leading on to "Human Universe" and The Maximus Poems.

"I am strangely moved," he writes, "…to wonder very deeply if what is ahead is not either some departure from verse making…or some going-ahead with the creative act which in no way resembles what we have known as such…" (486). This move, away from lyric, as I would read it, is expressed in the small, almost-lyric "Of Mathilde". The poem was sent to Creeley in a letter dated July 22 1950 (Minutes of the Charles Olson Society 18). There is no evidence that it was sent to Boldereff, but it was surgically lifted from a long letter written to her on July 21 (425). In the letter he speaks of her fragrance, "why the smell and the taste of you carried away is always so sweet, so stands in the mind." "I am sorry, if this comes off poetic," he says, but "[t]he analysis of love is, poetic…"

((you prove to me, for example, why Cavalcanti and Dante made, as they did, —and there is no question there was a woman behind it—an image, a Beatrice, a Mathilde, to stand, to stand in a phrase dove sta memora, to stand (I am against their placing of her, in a paradiso—or have been, up to this moment!) as the only proving of love which matters. (428)

The letter, in its address, is another reformulation of the theme outlined above, of the "problem of the poet," which is to "clear himself of…the terrible tendance [sic] to settle for the vision short of the rottenness particulars involve life in…" (430). The phrase "dove sta memora" is taken from the second stanza of Guido Cavalcanti's "Donna me prega."

In the poem, the fragrance comes to stand thoroughly "in the mind". The fragrance becomes love itself, that which takes (its) place ("prende suo stato"), in that part of the mind where memory is located ("dove sta memora"). Olson's translation: "what cannot be put on ("e creato ed a sensato nome"), is raiment spun / of what looks like nothing ("diaffan dal lume, d'una scuritade"), is / what stands strong ("viene e fa dimora") / in a man's mind / is what she gives off, what love / gives off…"

He (Olson) goes on, "but love, what is love but / that only those who obey are fragrant?" I'll try not to paraphrase. But, just for my purposes here, let's say he's still working away at this analysis of love, begun by Guido. Mid point he shifts from Guido to Dante. *Purgatorio*, Canto 28, where the poet, in the earthly paradise, for god's sake, unleashes his lyric passion, makes a little pastoral, like Guido's "In un boschetto trova' pasturella." In this case the un-named lady is already spoken for, loves only God, and Dante can't, by his own volition, even get near her, let alone repeat Guido's luck ("to repeat experience is / sensationalism," Olson says "From which no fragrance cometh / And no web"). She takes him by the hand and leads him to Beatrice, who says (Canto 33), giving her a name, "Geez, Matelda, didn't you explain anything to this guy!"

Olson too has struggled to get to this point. In the end, Boldereff's solution was to leave the relationship. Not that it completely ended there, on page 543. But she did seem to get clear of it. Him, maybe not. Olson's last letter to Boldereff, several months before his death, in its entirety: "My dear sweet Frances – Just in another burst of love for you (they come in such gusts my whole nature at this moment (as I write) bursts on you) / Love / Charles // PS / I adore you" (Collected Letters 421).

5

So, I come back to "Mean Drunk Poem" with a different reading now. In my earlier piece, I saw the "gap" as metaphorical, as something threatening, like the precipice Medea hovers over in Boldereff's first book. But now I think that characterizing the gap as an absence, or a lack, was a misrepresentation, an instance of what the poem mocks. It's hilarious what she says about "the gap."

> …as Robin teaches
> the gap, from which all things emerge. A left
> handed compliment. Bats, houses of parliament, giants, stones.
>
> All things. Everything. That's enough to shut you up.
>
> What woman, witness to such Thought, does not feel
> so described & so impotent
>
> she thinks
> she must speak. 'I will take your linguistic prick & you
> will take my linguistic prick & together we will gap
> this imagined earth together…'

"There's something / else," she says, "big & dark, at the edge of what she knows…." But she's not, after all, hovering around the edge of some mystery, or abstract fear, she's hovering around the edge of a concrete threat. She's been made to feel stupid. "Language all her life is a second language, / the first is mute & exists."

Yes, I get it. It should have been obvious. How could I be so dumb? As if, then, to underline the joke, to drive it home, she capitalizes the word. "I get drunk // to lubricate my brain & all that comes out / of my Gap / is more bloody writing."

"The Gap is real," she concludes, "& there is no such thing as / female intelligence. We're dumber than hell." And proud of it, one could add. Like my friend, Linda Sperling who, when confronted by the boss with the observation "You look like an intelligent woman," famously responded, "Don't make any assumptions, bub." And the butt of the joke here is Dante, who claimed to think that women could explain love, went to women for their "intelligence of love," but then just kept right on talking.

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Stephen Collis / Aristaeus Mourning the Loss of His Bees

For Sharon Thesen

Were the bees…
…or where the hive?
the drive home
to the honey of place
no trace
to return to die singly
far from home the
buzz buzz of cell
phones form the
absence the empty hives
along this untravelled apian
way calling *have you*
seen him small and
mottled like a cinder he
died alone though many
shared a similar fate
stung and silvered at
their electric ears

•

Out over the water a
cell phone's silver
wings beat faster than
the eye can see the swarm
turns in the arc of air

ruptured by container ships
coursing east / west
each small cell its
capital sweet to gather
to keep to
lose your way home
to the hive
where there are no bees but
a silver cell
phone sits humming (on
vibrate) in blue light
encased in grey
papers coiled

•

Bees are interrupted
transmissions dropped
calls to the colony
like did you hear me
when I said *we*
are in a good deal of
trouble (globally) and the
night set the sea above
mountains blue with
flowered fields and
your cell was the only
light left to light the
way back out of
whatever it was we

were left with
shuttling commodities

•

Whir the bees or the
pollen fallen the
honey pours from the
mouths of dead poets
there are cells in every city
(terror stricken)
the locus is links
chains of communication
the bees have gone
inactive as the
fields have turned
electric the pulses
beat against the heads of
poppies and puppet
regimes in fields of
force I meet a bee
exhausted and far
from its hive
weak it gasps
hold my calls

•

I call but the bees I
know aren't there their
accounts emptied

small hollow bodies
found far from their
hives along highways
containers pass
on the backs of trucks
sick with chemical
and bacteria born
a single hole
in each tiny head
execution style their
cell phones checked for
any final calls I
get home just after
the truck leaves too
late our home is
no longer ours a cipher of
no place or
my bees have left me
with a bitter pill to swallow

•

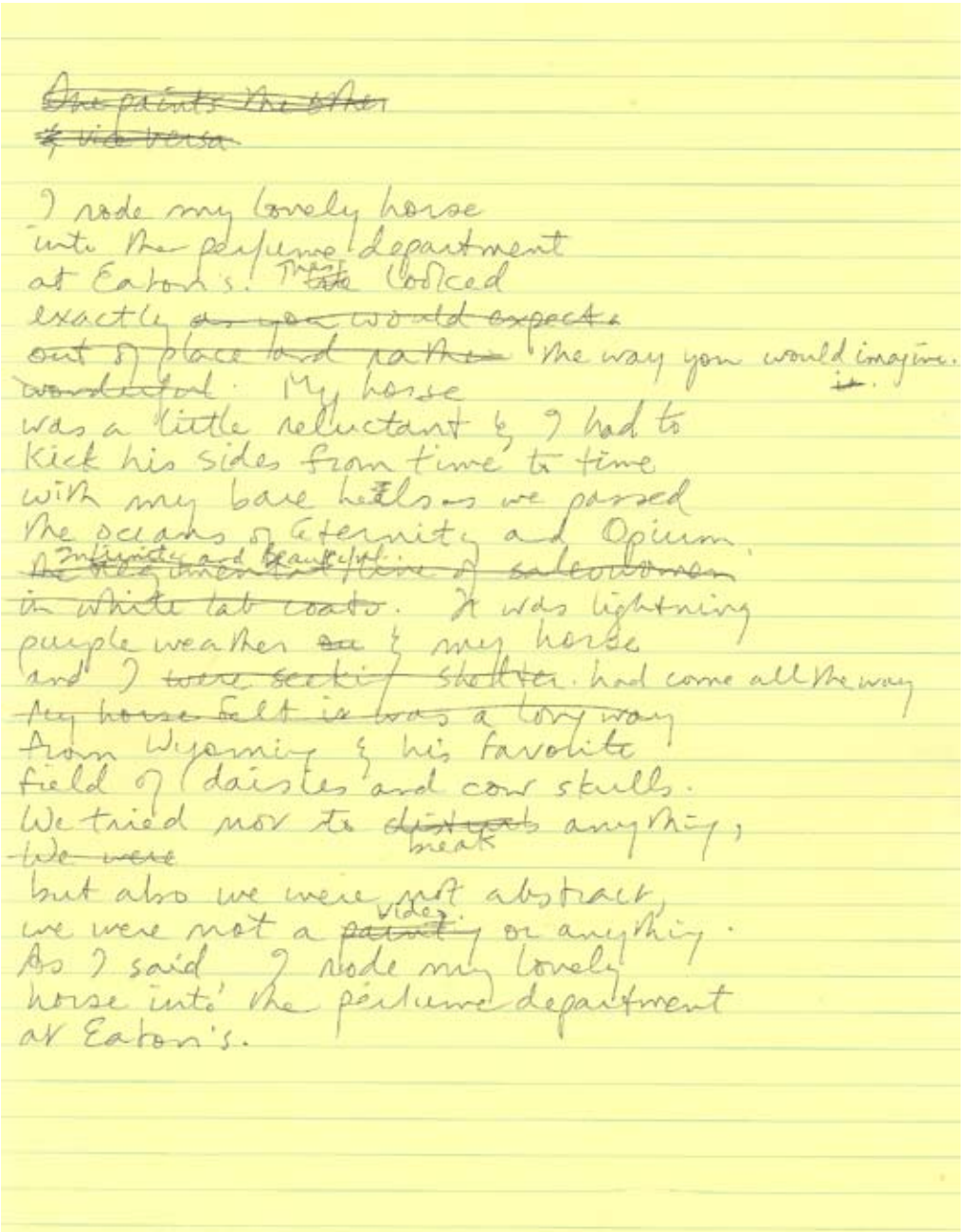
I have seen them
swarm or singly
falter along a dusty
window ledge
alone is nothing
the bee buzz keeps
coming my solitude
is bundled and has

a camera built into it
keeping you connected
means receive this alone
unable to raise
a host of foragers
they die somewhere
flying all night and
dropping one by one
as exhausted pellets
upon petals that
closed with the dew

•

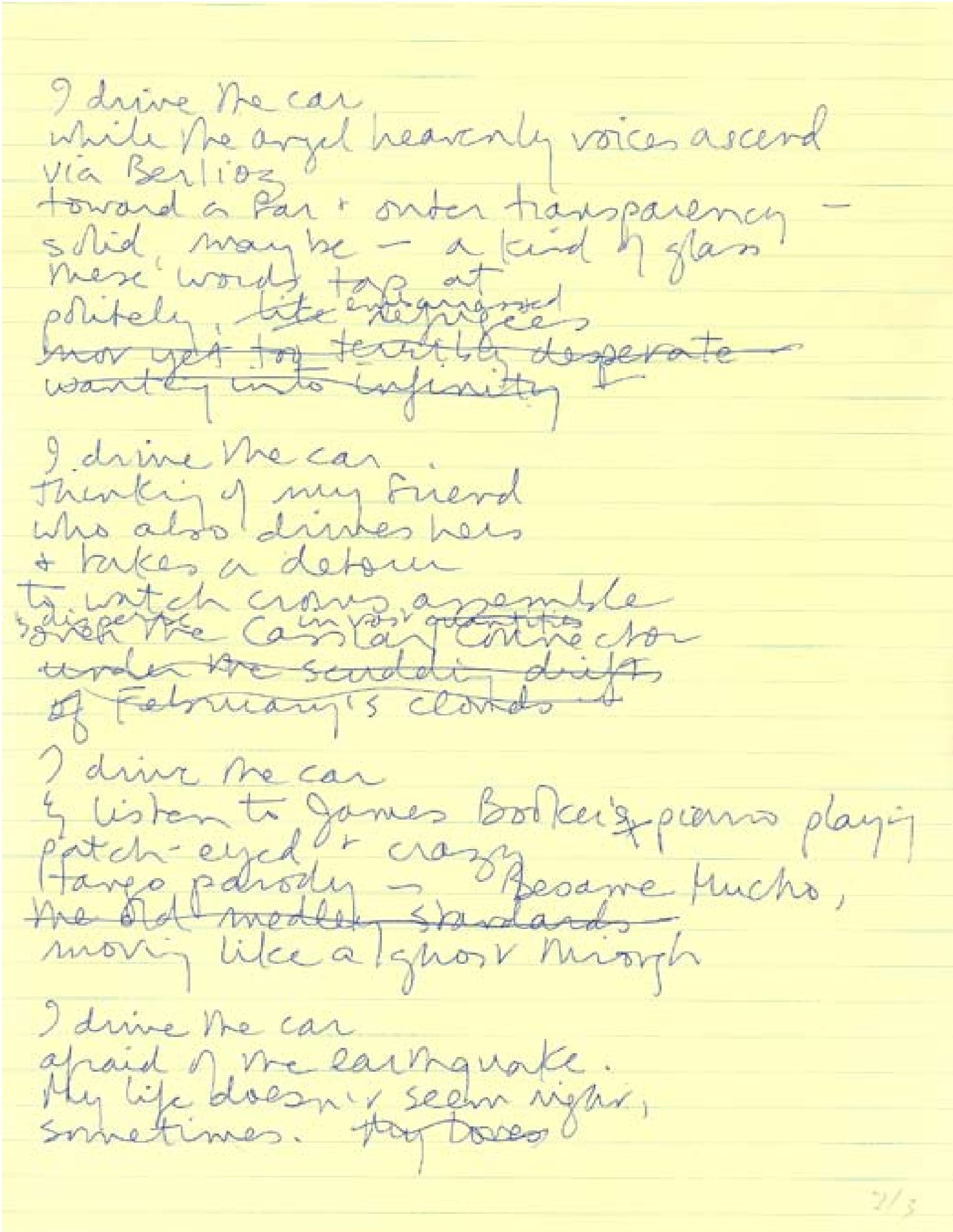
But the bees are
not math a memory
no photograph
the calipers used to
remove the corpse or
set the chip in place
are covered with honey
a meadow remains
a bee sting on the
bride's foot a river
with a severed head
still talking into its
orphic cell floating
down to the sea
singing its plaintive
ring tone to which
no bees respond

For Sharon
Photographer: Renee Rodin



I rode my lovely horse
into the perfume department
at Eaton's. It looked
exactly the way you would imagine it.
My horse
was a little reluctant & I had to
kick his sides from time to time
with my bare heels as we passed
the oceans of Eternity and Opium.
in white lab coats. It was lightning
purple weather & my horse
and I had come all the way
from Wyoming & his favorite
field of daisies and cow skulls.
We tried not to break anything,
but also we were not abstract,
we were not a video or anything.
As I said I rode my lovely
horse into the perfume department
at Eaton's.

Early MS for "I rode my lovely horse"
Thesen Archive, Contemporary Literature Collection, Simon Fraser University


I drive the car
while the ~~angel~~ heavenly voices ascend
via Berlioz
toward a far + outer transparency —
solid, maybe — a kind of glass
these words tap at
politely, ~~like~~ estranged ~~refugees~~
~~not yet too terribly desperate~~
wanting ~~into infinity~~

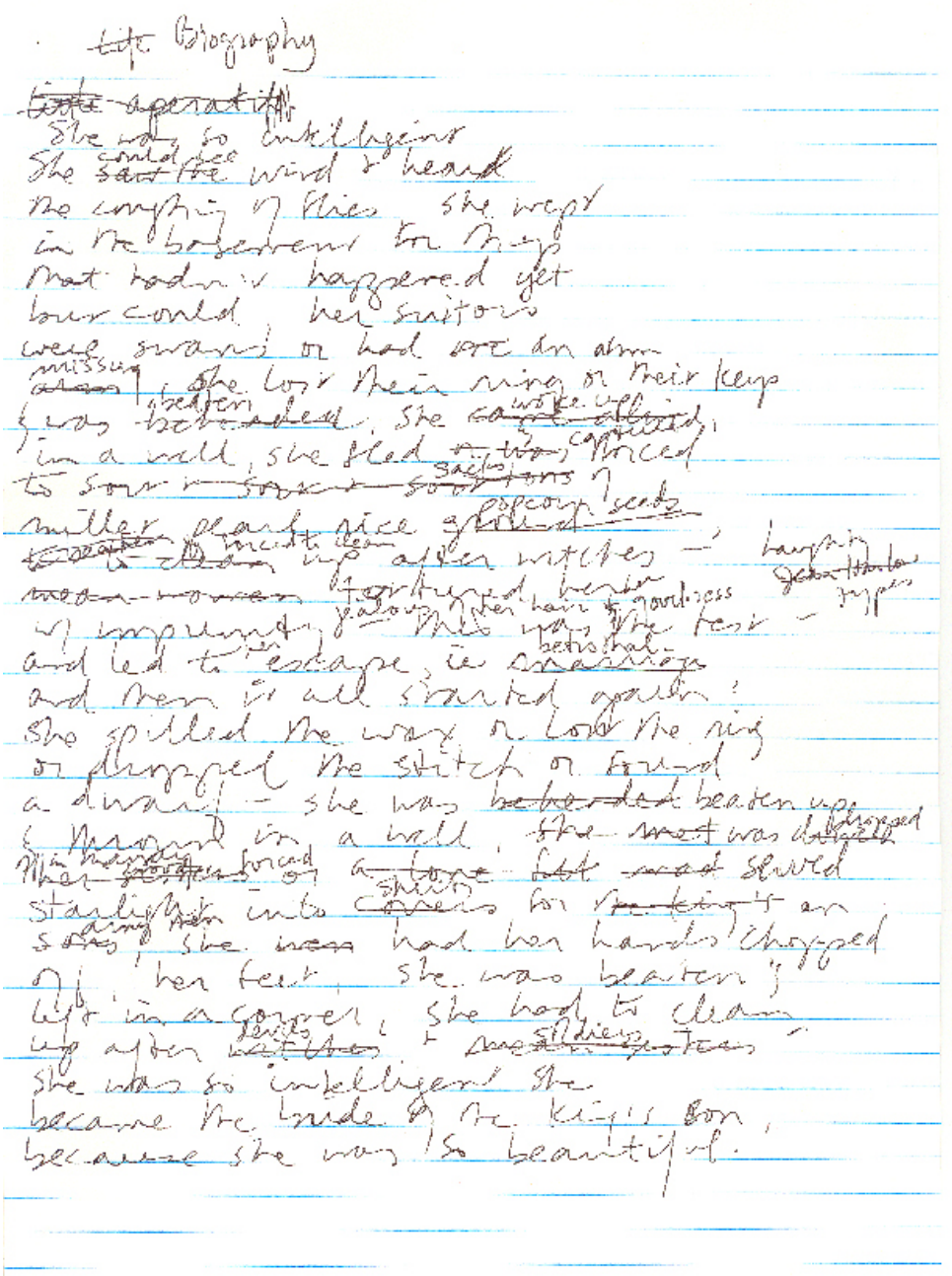
I drive the car
thinking of my friend
who also drives hers
+ takes a detour
~~to watch crows assemble~~
disperse in vast ~~quantities~~
over the constant connector
~~under the scudding drifts~~
~~of February's clouds~~

I drive the car
+ listen to James Booker's piano playing
patch-eyed + crazy
tango parody — Besame Mucho,
~~the old medley standards~~
moving like a ghost through

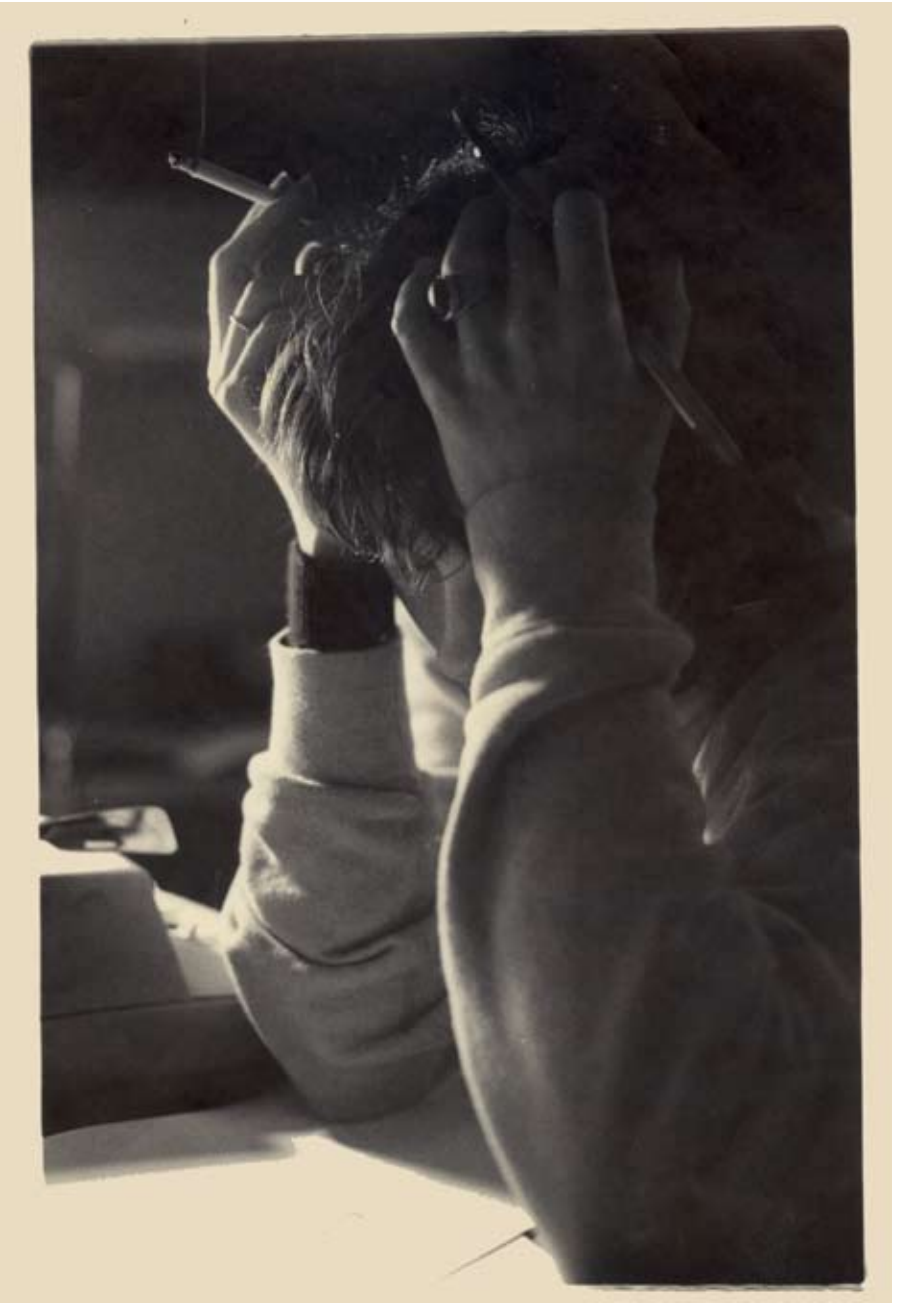
I drive the car
afraid of the earthquake.
My life doesn't seem right,
sometimes. ~~Toy boxes~~

2/3

Early MS for “I drive the car”
Thesen Archive, Contemporary Literature Collection, Simon Fraser University



Early MS for "Biography"
Thesen Archive, Contemporary Literature Collection, Simon Fraser University



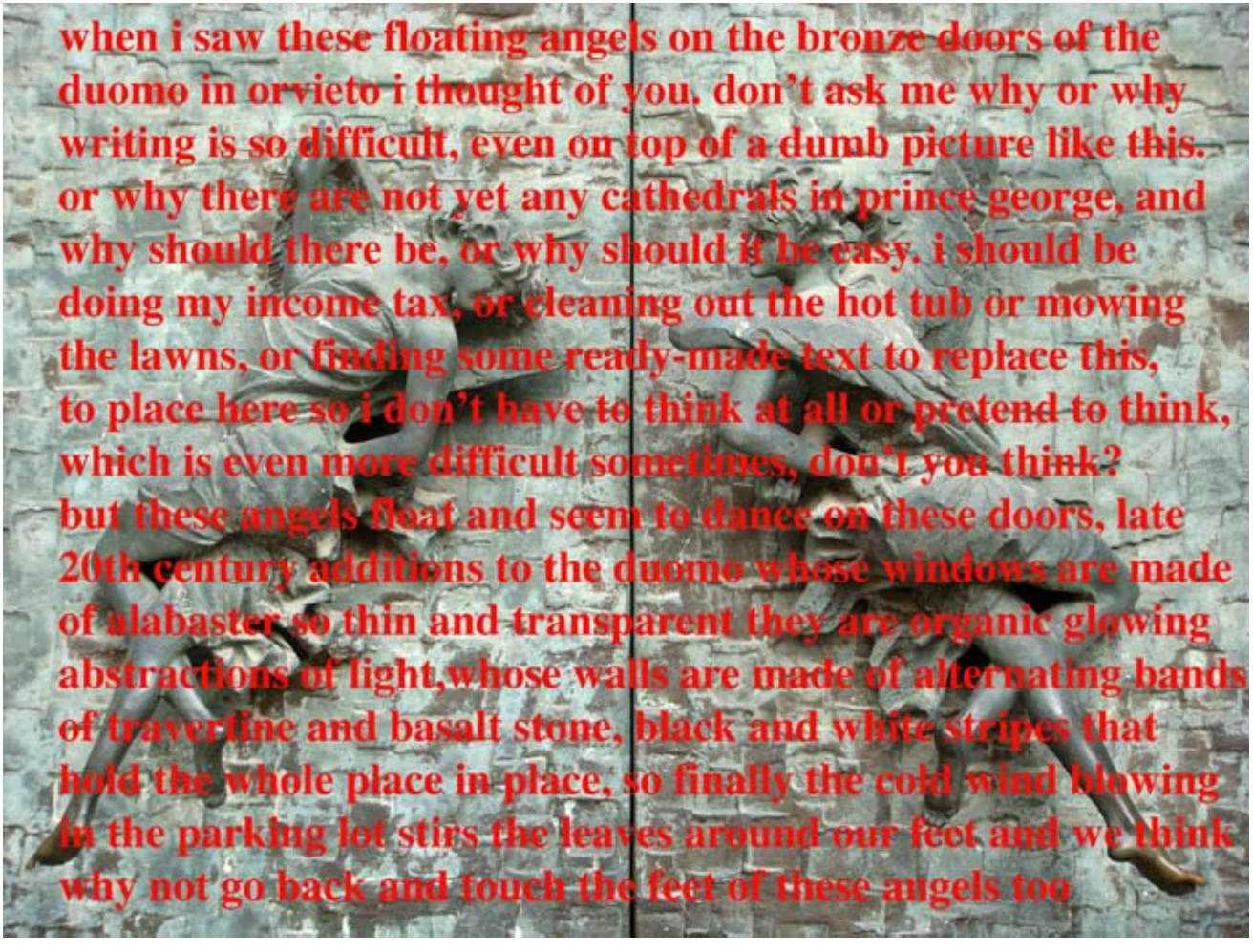
Portrait of Sharon Thesen
Photographer: Denis Ruon

Sharon Thesen & Penny Connell dancing
Photographer: Bob Sherrin

Sharon and her animals (Stella & Rufus)
Photographer: Paul Mier

Two Angels for Sharon

Pierre Coupey



Brian Fawcett / Why Sharon Thesen Doesn't Win Poetry Prizes

Sharon Thesen doesn't win poetry prizes. She's been nominated for several, but she doesn't win. How come?

It isn't lack of talent. She's among a very small group of Canadian poets who is genuinely interesting every time her pen hits the paper. She was very good 35 years ago when we were married, and she's better today, *sharper*, one of those unusual poets who has gotten better as the hormones have cleared the system. That slight Virgilian twilight that blurred some of her early poems has lifted, leaving full-colour silhouettes, fine wood grain on the incoming bludgeon, or like those sword victims from the Japanese Samurai movies, severed heads sitting on necks as if nothing and no one had been touched by the blade's sweeping arc. Not a single one of her poems has ever sounded like a machine, or like she set out to write it in the face of more practical things to be doing.

I'm tempted to think she doesn't win poetry prizes for the same reason I married her: she's a smart-alec, a woman without an earnest bone in her body, a poet whose poems spend no energy at all sanctifying this or that parcel of sentimental nonsense because they are too busy executing the many prisoners they take. Thesen herself is also intelligent, sensitive, well-read within the trade, can read her poems aloud without having to interject a "you-know" or a not-really-interrogative "eh" every 3-5 words, etc. But so are at least 200 other prize-sniffing poets across the land, not a goddamned one of whom I'd have married even if I were dead-drunk and they were proffering certified cheques for $100 grand. She's unique, and her grasp on the ironies of human life are sublime.

I'm sometimes tempted to think that she doesn't win poetry prizes because she grew up in Northern B.C, and that this is where the smart-alec gift/curse comes from. Then I remember that I fell in love with her because she was the only competent female smart-alec I encountered while we were growing up there, the only one whose brain made music in my head. She was as unique up there as she is today at a sit-down dinner for the Writer's Development Trust: the only one in the room willing to shoot everybody. I'd like to think she fell in love with me for my smart-

alec tendencies—I didn't own a pickup truck, after all, and what else was there aside from wanting to get the hell out and be somewhere else? Was I tall or impossibly handsome? Could I play the cello, and make green ceilings turn purple? No, but I wanted to get out of town as badly as she did, and I guess that made me good enough.

We had about six years together, through most of which I behaved like a poetry-writing mandrill: I wrote lots of self-declarative verse while she typed the stencils for *Iron*, the magazine we edited together (and I took all the credit for). All the while, she was thinking carefully about what sort of poems she wanted to write.

I'm not heaping these compliments on her because I secretly think I had something important to do with her smart-alec genius. Nah. She bulldozed her way through what I knew about poetry and could do with it like a D-9 cat harvesting a stand of poplar trees. Certainly, her poems haven't spared me. She's documented, in about a half-dozen lines, what a shithead I was while I was a young man (which I don't dispute) and what a crappy marriage we had (which in my view had its more-than-good-moments despite episodes of lousy behavior from both child-bride and child-groom. After I read the lines she wrote about me I tugged gently on my topknot to see if my head was still attached to my body. It wasn't, but then it wasn't supposed to be, right?

And anyway, all of these private reminiscences beg the looming question of what exactly it is that makes a prize-winning poet, which is what will explain why Sharon Thesen doesn't win prizes for her poetry much more accurately than any of this cultural history. So let's see: to win poetry prizes in Canada, your poems must deploy the following properties, and you, as poet, must exhibit the following personality traits:

a) Both poems and poet must exhibit a powerful and recurring streak of earnestness. I list this first because it might actually be the most important component to prize-worthiness, given that there are several hundred prize-capable poets running around the country sincerely declaring their allegiance to whatever generalities are wafting on the Zeitgeist that day, mothers milk, equality of the sexes, the Armed Forces, the Prime Minister's fat behind. It's enough to make a man decide that irony and prize-winning poets are natural enemies. At the core of a prize-winning poem is unspoken abstraction: the nation; the national literature; love of god or one's loved ones; poetry itself, all in flamboyant upper case. Sharon Thesen's poems put up with none of these, or with any other

abstraction that dictates the nouns and verbs of the poem, even silently. Her verse is what poetry ought to be: utterly unpredictable; each thing present on its own terms, each action never to occur again.

b) The prize-winning poet must treat her or himself as illustrative of repetitious tropes. If female, her heavy thighs must quiver only with archetypical desire. If male, his bony throb must be that of Zeus, Maurice Richard, or Stockwell Day. There is a required shamelessness, in other words, a presumption that, well, Carl Jung would be fascinated. One's lips must remain firmly glued to the ass of the Sacred. You don't get a moment of this in Thesen's poems.

c) The prize-winning poet must campaign patiently for awards: treat all prospective jurors as if they were as interesting as Jackie Kennedy; fawn over every arts bureaucrat as if he/she were the federal Heritage minister or the Queen
of Diamonds; attend every poetry launch, cocktail party; sit through—with head cocked attentively and without losing consciousness—the interminable semi-public outbursts of hubris and self-declarative puke we call poetry readings. Thesen has never been very good at these tricks, never a woman to suffer fools without grumbling, and even today she seems to be unable to bite her lip for longer than a few seconds, whether she's inside or outside a poem.

d) The Prize-winning poet must crave public recognition, and be willing to sacrifice love, liberty and first-born children, shirk public and private sense and crawl-along-belly like-a-reptile to win prizes. Thesen has seldom shown interest in prizes and prizewinning, and at this point I see no evidence that she'd walk across the street to win a poetry prize.

Sharon Thesen doesn't win poetry prizes because the judges can't trust her not to turn on them and what they find palatable to get a better, sharper poem next time. She is the poet whose books of poems are never found lying atop the face or chest of a sleeping person.

In this country, that might be the only poetry prize worth winning.

Patrick Friesen / Two Poems for Sharon

window

you smell wet dirt
in the morning shade
along the foundation

and the window won't open
enough for the horizon
to slide in across the sill

an old woman's drunk
lurching through a funeral
of a sly river in july

grasshoppers and gophers
in the wheat and dust
a dead car in the slough

and she doesn't belong
no one's seen her before
nor her sky-blue shawl

lorca

heard water in the aqueduct
before dawn in la colonia

and if there had been light
could have seen childhood

water flowing is the shortest time
eternity is a poor word for this

what can be done about a dream
of black veils and a crucifix

what can be done when you've
forgotten your mother's prayer

and only death listens to fear
only his body hangs on to him

smelling the road's dust
hearing the rifle's bolt

Diana Hartog / The Yellow Chair

Last night I dreamt of your yellow chair. A jazz musician set his keyboard on its floral cushion and pounded away. He ignored the matching hassock; the hassock did not figure into his musical variation of being there. A flowered yellow vase shared the stage, shared a shelf with other props. I woke listening to Bach, the first movement of a Brandenburg Concerto, and perhaps his notes played on the memory: of your living room, the yellow chair, a pile of old *New Yorkers*, and time.

Maria Hindmarch / On Sharon

Sharon and I met sometime in the mid-sixties through my sister Leni, brother-in-law Neap, Sharon's first husband, Brian Fawcett, and my then husband, Cliff Andstein. I don't recall the moment, but she was suddenly there with those sky blue eyes, sharp wit, and swinging dark hair. She worked as a secretary while Brian went to SFU, but after two or three semesters she enrolled too.

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Sharon and Brian were always on the move—it seemed every six months or so—and Cliff and Neap and others drove out to Port Moody or walked over to their new pad in Kitsilano to paint their walls, white of course. Every rented place was quickly transformed from salmon pink and institutional green (landlords' colours those days) to white.

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Shortly after everyone moved them into a place in Fairview, she and Brian started a Shakespeare reading group. Various of us, including Stan Persky, Brian DeBeck, Tom Grieve, Michael Boughn, Dennis Wheeler, Alban and Julia Goulden took parts in whatever play we were assigned. We read through rainy winter Sunday afternoons to backyard balmy Midsummer's Eves.

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I have known Sharon through her various husbands, cats, dogs, and son Jesse, as she has known me through my various men, dogs, and son Lars. We even managed to escape to Parksville one weekend when the boys were under two; but when we returned Brian and Sharon got in a fight about essays they had both written on Coleridge—who had done the best one.

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In 1974 and in 1975, I and then Sharon joined Capilano College where we both worked into the 2000s. Over the years we've discussed what works in the classroom or how we escaped from a dreadful class—with both of us laughing at our fumbles and foibles.

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Sharon and I participated in a women's group for two years or so and, later on, a New French Feminisms reading group that ended abruptly. We read Simone de Beauvoir, Benoîte Groult, Annie Leclerc, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Marguerite Duras, Julia Kristeva. Other members of the group were Daphne Marlatt and Kathy Mezei, maybe Percilla Groves too, maybe even Betsy Warland. Daphne and Sharon were always at the center of the argument.

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In the mid-70s, when I just couldn't face retyping my *Peter Stories* for bpNichol at Coach House, Sharon did it for me. In 1987, after Coach House published *The Beginning of the Long Dash*, I wrote a review that was published in *Brick* and republished elsewhere, and she wrote a comment on my *Watery Part of the World*. Neither of us read what the other had written until it was in print.

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Until she left for Kelowna, we'd drink tea in each other's kitchens, and eat suppers at each other's tables. Sharon can make a cherry pie or chocolate cake without a recipe and do each faster than anyone else I know. We would talk as she cooked or as I made a salad in my kitchen on Parker where I've lived for 28 years—just a few blocks from her last Vancouver place on Kitchener Street near Commercial Drive.

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Since we both had dogs, we often walked them together. Our walk/talks took in the whole range from Writers and Company to vet visits, from GG and BC Book Awards to breast cancer treatments, from hair dos and good cuts to Charles Olson and Frances Bodereff's relationship.

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).[1] 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.

1 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,[2] 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

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.

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Andrew Klobucar / She Who Destroys Light: Sharon Thesen's *The Good Bacteria* and the Organic Imagination

Legion are the myths of springtime, more
Legion myths of springtime's cusp with winter.

Even readers unaccustomed to North Vancouver's peculiar micro-climate, where factors like altitude and the city's proximity to ocean often converge to produce uniquely unstable winter weather patterns, can easily appreciate Thesen's sharply composed couplet (above), concluding "February Morning, North Vancouver." Its tight construction and the poignantly wide array of cultural references informing it expertly link the poem's prosaic, opening image of a suburban parking lot first to Hellenic fertility myths and, as we see above, one of modernism's most significant aesthetic statements on nature and the human imagination. That the line break constructing the couplet can hardly be rendered more abruptly only emphasizes the acute rawness informing the work's overall vision. In deed, especially given contemporary culture's fixation on climate change, "more / legion myths of springtime's cusp with winter;" the near monosyllabic, irregular flow of words do not arrest meaning, so much as they castrate it, suggesting the tenuous surge of a stream just emerging from winter's elements, part ice, part water, neither one season, nor the other.

Even beyond the expected cataclysmic changes in global climate systems, Vancouver's February remains a notoriously unstable time of year—that time where crocuses signal tenuous promises of spring alongside regular bursts of arctic air. Thesen's description of her city during this month is both evocative and exact:

> Arched cobras of last year's newborn ferns
> & slight undressed crocuses huddle in a bunch by the fence. (48)

In the poem, the crocuses have already appeared, yet still they "huddle" for protection from the constant threat of late frosts. The parking lot itself remains icy—though incompletely so, as the sun competes with the city's lush rain forests for influence. Such are the interstitial moments in both time and language that direct the primary

aesthetic aims of *The Good Bacteria*, consistent with key issues concerning modernity's larger ideologico-historical conflicts with individual human experience and the construction of stable knowledge systems. In this context, the myths of springtime echo first T. S. Eliot's ontological despair in "The Waste Land" over these new, but increasingly relevant discontinuities in western culture and thought, and second William Carlos Williams's more optimistic response to "springtime's cusps" in "Spring and All," published only one year later in 1923. Where, for Eliot, early spring's somewhat fickle attachments to the contrary climates of summer and winter symbolised modernity's capricious rejection of history's hard won intellectual traditions, the same tenuous aspects of western culture invoked qualities of politico-ontological sovereignty in Williams's work.

Both instances of modernity's uniquely indistinct appreciation of human experience appear earliest in the critical and creative experiments of Coleridge, a writer crucial to Thesen's poetics. His best known poetic works excel in connecting moments of epiphany and wisdom with sudden ambiguous shifts in personal perspective or abrupt encounters with the unfamiliar or undefined. The Xanadu of "Kubla Khan," for example, presents a thoroughly terrifying encounter with enlightenment principles as architectural splendour set amidst scenes of violent, natural chaos—an extended meditation, most likely, on the innate aggressiveness and antagonism of the act of creation itself. To compose an image of natural accordance from opposing tensions is not unique to Coleridge's aesthetics, as remains evident in western culture's consistent penchant for binaric symmetry and proportion in thought. However, the traditional post-Socratic emphasis on dialectical examination tends to subordinate the tension of opposing partitions to a higher unified resolution. The process of understanding through opposition may be dynamic; certainly it is chaotic, perhaps violently so, but decision arrives only with the termination of movement.

Coleridge's vision does not seek to resolve its conflicts; rather it heralds the very notion of opposition as a primary force of creation. "To drink of the milk of paradise," Coleridge declares at the end of the poem, to understand the decisive truths of nature and being, invokes a stance of "dread" (albeit "holy"), not delight, for the ultimate insight has arrived only with the parallel loss of any sense of conviction or even certainty. Just as a person feeling a sudden bout of dizziness will look down or away from the world to try to regain some sense of equilibrium between the body and its surroundings, Coleridge's revelation demands the reader to "close [their] eyes," acknowledging

the vision's disquieting imagery. At the same time, Coleridge makes it clear that this loss of equilibrium is fundamental to understanding the overwhelming nature of the world behind such inspirations. The truth of Xanadu arrives before the reader at the expense of "clarity" in the midst of a confusing maelstrom of blurring processes and ongoing tensions. On a more structural level, this hurricane-like image, where caves of ice meet vaporous chasms "measureless to man" signifies well the aesthetics of the modern literary imagination, whereby meaning evolves via the process of semantic relationships breaking down and fragmenting to reveal entirely new arrays of language use. But to obtain this language, to arrive at these images, and presumably the ideas or references behind them, requires first an act of destruction. Perception, Coleridge tells us, must be pulled apart—in other words, uprooted, contrasted and disbelieved—if it is to be understood. Few scientists even today would disagree, noting the similarity between such precepts and basic empiricist-derived theories of knowledge and reasoning. The parallels in themselves are not surprising as both modern scientific methods and romantic aesthetics share roots in late 18th century German philosophies of "organic" learning and knowledge, where concepts of nature as a collection of internally driven forces were deliberately advanced against more traditional mechanistic views of the universe. Schiller's influential 1795 investigation into perception and interpretation as natural, i.e. "organic," processes in their own right introduced terms like "internal necessity" into theories of cognition, as well as poetry. Coleridge's "organicist" aesthetics thus neatly abandons most prior neo-Aristotelian emphases on mimesis and form to re-conceive art as an active, infinitely ongoing investigation into the very foundations of knowledge. It was then, and to some extent remains, a consistently troubling epistemological shift to consider, subordinating, as it does, any preview of fixed concepts of knowledge to ideas of process and change. That said, the paradisiacal "milk" to be gained from these decidedly less ordered views of the natural world reveals an especial value not easily discounted.

Coleridge's triumphantly chaotic, even terrifying, relationship to knowledge pays due respect (as does romanticist culture in general) to the Greek figure of Persephone —so-called "Queen of the Underworld," and tragic daughter of Demeter, the goddess of spring. So powerfully evocative she was in Greek mythology, Hellenic society considered the very mention of her name taboo, opting instead for the decidedly less personal term "Kore" or the maiden. The very name Persephone translates to "she who destroys light." That she inhabited (and, in fact, jointly ruled) the other side of

the river Styx with all the dead might be considered reason enough to fear her, but, in fact, the truly empowering quality of this figure derives, not from her place of reign, but rather her unique relationship to nature as both a force of influence in human life and a particular mode of knowledge. The underworld itself, together with its original ruler, Hades, signified for the Greeks more than just the final destination of the human soul. Its role as repository for the dead bestowed upon it an especial significance as a space of profound knowledge and wisdom. How could one expect less of a place populated by so many different, individual spirits, each one a unique vessel shaped by a lifetime's experience and interaction with the world. One might even consider it the true model of the modern metropolis—a cosmopolitan hive of human achievement, sorrow, failure, and desire drawn from every corner of the known world. To speak to the dead was (somewhat ironically) to commune with the most complete and vital source of life itself. In fact, one might note here that T. S. Eliot actually does the Hellenic underworld a bit of a disservice in works like "Prufrock" and "The Waste Land," habitually associating the more industrialised and technocratic attributes of urban life with traditional images of Hell. Eliot's "unreal city" of London, labouring under "brown fog" and colourless crowds of aimless wanderers follows closely Dante's epic vision of eternal damnation; at the same time, these characteristics bear little resemblance to the underworld of classical Greek culture. Persephone's residence there endowed her with qualities considered anything but "unreal" or lost amidst faceless crowds - in other words, how the British working class likely appeared to Eliot in the early 20th century. Rather, she remains uniquely dynamic in both a physical and metaphysical sense, embodying the mythological origins of life as a process in and of itself. As Demeter's daughter by Zeus, she conveys an implicit relationship to notions of fertility, birth and renewal; yet her marriage to Hades simultaneously invokes a contrary affiliation with death, decay and hopelessness. This contradiction dominates their relationship right from their first meeting. Entranced by her beauty, Hades forgoes the conventions of courtship, opting instead to kidnap the young goddess and bring her back to the underground. When Demeter learns of his affront, so great is her pain and anger, the entire world is forced to suffer through an interminable winter. To end her sorrow and restore Greece's climate, Zeus must order Hades to return Persephone to the world of the living, but not before Hades coerces her into consuming a special fruit associated with the underworld. In some versions of the myth the fruit is a pomegranate, in others, merely its seeds, but in all variations, the

act of consumption irrevocably condemns the goddess to remain with Hades for at least part of the year. To ingest the fruit of the underworld is to forge an unbreakable bond between visitor and place, as if the act of consumption has somehow changed the very nature of the consumer, prohibiting her exit. For Judeo-Christians, the metaphysical risks of ingesting forbidden fruit are hardly unfamiliar; even more importantly, the parallels between the act of consumption and acquiring a kind of illicit knowledge emphasize the same moral dilemma that pervades all experiential knowledge. Comprehending one's surrounding world is never a transparent action; to gain knowledge is, on one level, to exchange ignorance for experience, but at the same time, such a transition cannot occur without a fundamental cognitive and physical transformation.

Even avoiding the obvious sexual parallels that emerge between the loss of innocence and the loss of virginity, several epistemological problems specific to the modern experience of the natural world emerge alongside Persephone's celebrated annual return to the earth's surface. As a result, Persephone's primary role in Greek mythology remains still, compared to many other figures, one of the most difficult to summarize categorically. If anything, her identity conveys first and foremost the fundamental paradox of humanity's material existence, where consciousness is free —in fact, compelled—to learn from birth onward of its own instability, demise, and inevitable negation. Such complexities certainly contribute to the forbidding quality of her name.

Symbolic of life's equal attachment to events of death as well as to birth, the natural continuity, in other words, between decay and growth, Persephone acquired a unique importance within romanticist thought and culture. To understand and value knowledge as the end result of the natural cycle of life in all its inconsistencies and ironies was to attain valuable insights into both experience and imagination (and, of course, any epistemological contradictions therein implied). Hence, as is apparent in Coleridge's poetics, romanticism's innovative appreciation for this mode of learning summons an aesthetics of significant epistemological and cultural import.

The radical aims of this aesthetic response remain significant to the more revisionist margins of modern poetry, including specific progressive streams in contemporary writing, and, as is well demonstrated in much of Thesen's work, Coleridge's transformative perspective proves to be an inspiring framework. The first sections of the title poem literally abduct readers as new Persephones into settings simulta-

neously familiar and threatening. The opening stanzas presentKelowna, the poet's home, part Xanadu, a "twinkling city," one of BC's fast growing metropolitan areas, part underworld,

> Car lights were a ribbon along the shape of the bridge.
> No one was there: they were all ghosts in coats. (11)

At first, it is certainly Eliot's unreal city.Kelowna's contemporary success as a new urban centre has also placed it perpetually on the edge of disaster; with its phenomenal growth comes the price of deforestation, and consequently the threat of rampaging summer fires. We are in Kelowna in the early 21st century watching the city burn almost seasonally, much as the suburban sprawls of southern California have for the last two decades. The city is twinkling because it is on fire.

> No more bloody ghazals! one ghost shouted to another.
> In the morning they ate again, and took their penicillin pills.
> The penicillin killed the good bacteria as well as the bad.
> …
> He could see anything that way on the way to Kamloops.
> A known ghost. The trees burned all the way to the sky.
> His stomach burned when he took the penicillin. (11)

The accord in imagery and motion emerges through opposition and contrast. Urbanisation brings a strange and ironic primitivism to the culture ofKelowna, reducing the quality of life to a point where anti-bacterial medicines become part of everyday consumption. Just as the technological wonder of the modern suburb both improves and reduces lifestyle choices, the penicillin cannot distinguish between good and bad bacteria. All is obliterated; modernity burns trees and stomachs with the same zeal to build, to produce, to amaze. Yet, more akin to Williams's sense of organic conflict than Eliot's moral vision, Thesen's perspective is constantly shifting. True, the penicillin "killed all the bacteria, good and bad, like death or God. / Though death, being a matter of bacteria, is also life." As Thesen realises, modernity has appropriated many of its supposed opposites, and therein lies its power. It gives us the capacity to domesticate almost any natural setting, yet simultaneously makes

us nomads. One nomad in the poem, the "known ghost," watching the trees burn, seems less concerned about the loss of land than the loss of information: "He lugged his own laptop; it was easier that way. / On his lap sat the known universe." We are nomads, yet we have the world in our lap. We have destroyed our cities, only to make them more wondrous.

It's difficult to imagine a more fitting introduction to Thesen's latest collection, for the book's central themes are masterly demonstrated in the five triplets that compose the opening poem. On one level, the collection strives to signify the important loss of good bacteria in our contemporary lives, whether it takes the form of life-long friends ("Weeping Willow," a cycle of poignant reflections on the death of Angela Bowering) or single, unrepeatable moments of sensual observation ("Relative to History"). It is exactly this loss, however, that is responsible for the "burn" driving modern aesthetics. Most of the poems in *The Good Bacteria* ably penetrate these core issues, often interplaying Coleridgean imagery with specific experiments in voice and line reminiscent of Williams, as we see, for example, "Please Note":

> Please note
> The very well-designed Magpie,
> Shiaparellis of the sky.
>
> It's the teal blue that amazes,
> That hat. (47)

The Good Bacteria, as a Vancouver book, deliberately reaches into Thesen's incredibly sensual history of place. Yet, consistent with both Williams's and Coleridge's art, the book also accepts this same history's inevitable transformation through experience: "I for one," exclaims the poet, in another consideration of season and state of mind, "am glad of these mood lifting changes," walking "untoward anything" ("How to Stay Sane" 41). Thesen knows only through the toxic capacity of contradiction and chaos is it possible to forge new languages, new perspectives.

Works Cited

Thesen, Sharon. *The Good Bacteria*. Toronto: Anansi, 2006.

Michele Leggott / gala apples

somewhere in Canada Sharon Thesen
is driving a car has she found the festival
with the best shopping in the world
or is she on top of the one that begins
Red head of rose partitions the vase lip
how neatly it falls into place
Vancouver on the east side palais de danse
on the other she could drive between them
entranced by the light on Oriental Parade
as she speeds around the bays *one wants*
beginnings to burn big holes behind
the stadium a pile of dead horses
shot through their exhausted hearts

it's an old pattern Lucy Jordan
rearranged the flowers Tamara de Lempicka
monogrammed the Bugati *green machine*
beyond the ruby dahlias Eliza Hannay
went off the road near Spirits Bay
pink and silver voices on the last page
of the autobiographical novel first version

when they tell you the pure products
are crazy get your chrysanthemums
light your own way through hell
and don't be afraid to pour red wine
over your auto portrait

does she remember the long drive
to find Frances Boldereff an old lady
an architect of morning herself
red rocket tips violet surrender who filled
every margin of Finnegans Wake
with pencil notes and gave it to the latecomer
for safekeeping it is this book
that sits in the back seat as the car
turns off West 16th into Waterloo a grandma
come to sit under the roses and drink tea
with the marginalia girls that summer

Sharon Thesen swaps the tea party
for her late summer appearance
at the festival where she has to talk about
poetry wars when there is shopping
to be done did she make it
to Island Bay did she see for herself
sheer pearl of breakers in moonlight

by the Red Rocks *immense and eternal*
the weighty matter of old discussions
under the roses and the moment
right now when she's headed home
to Kelowna and The Good Bacteria sits
beside her on the front seat as good
as a bag of apples from a roadside stall
somewhere between Otaki and the Okanagan
wars and clearances tragic laughter
& meanings, for sure it's ok Canada
Sharon Thesen is driving the car

Kent Lewis / As Above, So Below: Parallax in Sharon Thesen's *The Good Bacteria*

Samuel Johnson once disparaged the poetry of John Donne as "The most heterogeneous ideas…yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons and allusions." Two centuries later, T. S. Eliot reappraised the metaphysical poets, admiring their ability to wed image, thought, and feeling in what he termed a "unified sensibility." Unlike the curmudgeon Johnson, Eliot respected their alchemical blends of hostile elements: wit and passion, sex and spirituality, violence and the holy. Or as Bruno of Nola (who was at one time Donne's teacher) famously said, "In sublimity, filth; in filth, sublimity." The metaphysical tendency to think in contradictions disturbs and delights, as cherished cultural oppositions dissolve. And it has a long history, from William Blake ("Excess of sorrow laughs; excess of joy weeps"), to Lenny Bruce ("Every day people are leaving the church and going back to God"). Another poet in this tradition, I would argue, is Sharon Thesen, whose latest collection of poetry, *The Good Bacteria*, exudes a woeful joy.

The collection opens, William S. Burroughs style, with a stark contrast between two unrelated scenarios. In the first, a nameless couple pops "penicillin pills" to battle an infection. In the second situation, a man walks to Kamloops, shortly after the 2003 fires devastated the Okanagan valley. On his way, he passes through the desolate "trees burned all the way to the sky" (11). The juxtaposition contrasts two antagonistic images: the healing qualities of medicine on the one hand; the brittle skeletons of a charred forest, on the other. Throughout the collection, Thesen repeatedly pairs together such opposites. In poem 4, for example, a young couple meets and falls in love at a clinic, brought together over "a terrible insect bite that would not go down" (14).

Tender love, indeed.

Yet from the start, Thesen begins to show her metaphysical stripes, for she emphasizes similarities between these opposites. Consider the first poem again. Although penicillin is a curative, it also plays search and destroy with our internal flora, killing "the good bacteria as well as the bad." Once within the digestive tract,

it slaughters germs indiscriminately, as blind as "death or God." Although potentially lifesaving, the antibiotics behave as a small forest fire within the gut. In this manner, Thesen establishes a connection between fire and medicine, noting one man's stomach "*burned* when he took the penicillin" (11, emphasis mine). The penicillin benefits us, at the cost of a microorganism holocaust. The Yin is in the Yang, it seems.

And John Donne said something similar on the connection between insect bites and love.

The first poem does not spell out the opposite insight, the consolation that fire is also a form of rebirth and regeneration, although that hackneyed implication is certainly present by proxy (and such saccharine is better left unstated). No, Thesen's vision is subtler, more complex, and ultimately more interesting. Repeatedly, her poems suggest that all events are concurrently creative and destructive, noble and despicable, ordered and chaotic, and so ultimately ambiguous and amoral. Medicine saves lives by committing a kind of bacterial genocide; fire annihilates entire ecosystems that ultimately benefit from the high nutrient ash (some trees, such as the Bishop Pine, rely on fire in its reproductive cycle). Thesen's poetic vision follows what Jacques Derrida calls the "logic of the pharmakon"—a transgressional writing that disrupts simplistic binaries. One meaning that Derrida outlines for the pharmakon is particularly relevant to Thesen's poem: in Greek, the word (which gives us the modern "pharmacy") means both medicine and toxin; it cures by poisoning.

Thesen's poems make a similar double gesture, breaking down fundamental contradictions, even ones as basic as the difference between the living and the dead. The first poem reminds us, "death, being a matter of bacteria, is also life." And so a human corpse is also a microbial buffet. In poem 4, Thesen describes a book, which offers a useful reflection of her own poetic method:

> …The book—
> a novel—was set in the Arizona desert where no
> apparent difference obtained
> between life and death, taxidermy came up often
> as a metaphor or a simile, a smile
>
> often lurking on its countenance (14)

And if taxidermy is the science of mimicking life, then some living people imitate the dead. I have seen them at the malls, in Conservative Party meetings, watching CNN.

The paradoxical nature of such poetry makes it a bitter pill to swallow, for it will offer no easy answers or comforting truisms. Biotechnology gives us the power to destroy colonies of bacteria, but one carelessly dropped match sends thousands of people scuttling on foot from their lakeside mansions, humanity purged from the gorgeous Okanagan by a sanitizing fire. And above man and nature sits God, who feels no remorse in dispatching us by the billions, bacteria compared to his omnipotence. In this poet's eyes, we are simultaneously Lord and subject, host and guest, colonizer and the colonized, God and the God-damned. In this way, Thesen's project is no less ambitious than Milton's attempt to "justify the ways of God to Man." Unlike Milton, however, Thesen doesn't promise a glorious heaven to offset all our hells. She remains, provocatively, in the flicker.

Thesen's poetics reminds us, contra logic, that the microcosm often contains macrocosm. The collection repeatedly draws attention to the way the big is contained by the small (and vice versa). In the opening poem, a man lugs a computer, a burden since the laptop contains "the known universe / When he sat down, the universe sat on his lap." Thanks to wireless Internet (and quantum entanglement), this is more than mere hyperbole. Portable computers do contain a version of the universe (which means the portable contains an image of itself, mise-en-abyme style). The technique is reminiscent of William Blake's mystical vision of "a world in a grain of sand."

What is remarkable about Thesen's poetry is the variety of methods she has for inducing this rhapsodic state (a worthy project for any graduate student looking for a thesis topic). There is the good old-fashioned oxymoron and paradox:

> "What I do is make gleam / that which already gleams enough." (50)

She regularly reverses the vehicle and tenor in her figures of speech, as she does in poem 5 of the collection, where she describes two passengers in a truck:

> A woman with a face of a sheepdog
> or a sheepdog with the face of a woman
> was sitting beside the driver (12)

Such playful inversions become a rhythm within the poetry:

> A stone is a mountain, a mountain a stone (37)

At times the reversals coax out new meanings, as the shifting placement of a word generates multiple meanings.

> plain of grass a grass
> of prairie plain
> as an attitude" (44)

The grass becomes both plain (a field) and plain (in the sense of ordinary), a zeugma which is really quite remarkable (not plain). Such ambiguous syntax helps blur the boundaries between subject and object, the figurative and the literal. Thesen further undermines the rigid distinction between the fact and the fancy, by placing mythic characters in highly realistic settings: riding alongside the sheepdog-woman, the Egyptian God Annubis is taunted "Annubis! annubis, what a heck of a proboscis!" (15); Titania, Queen of the Faeries, ponders politics and calls for "a change in the government" (12). Indeed, Thesen peoples Peachland with ghosts, deities, revenants, monsters, and monster homes, in a way that insists on the presence of the past. Her use of myth and history doesn't aspire to the over-arching modernist allegories of Joyce or Eliot; her vision is more fractured, piecemeal, and tentative.

If there is a danger to metaphysical poetry, it lies in its failure to recognize important differences, and so lose political relevance. Buddhists and Sufis, after all, seem quite comfortable in either democratic or totalitarian states. And George Orwell's slogan from 1984 reads perfectly well as a metaphysical conceit: "WAR IS PEACE. FREEDOM IS SLAVERY. IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH." Yet in *The Good Bacteria*, Thesen is able to use her metaphysical chops to make pointed political critiques (perhaps dissolving one last binary between the poet and the propagandist, the mystic and the rabble rouser). An attentive reader will find dozens of political insights in this collection, but I will focus on my favorite poem, "Scenes from the Missing Picture." In it, two divorced women sit in a favorite haunt and notice the absence of a cheesy painting called "The Great Outdoors." They speculate that the painting has been purloined. The canvass begins to take on a double significance,

both as a piece of art (named "The Great Outdoors") but also as the heartrending loss of wilderness, crown land, and forests, the symbolic Great Outdoors. On at least one level, the following lines attack the neoconservative heist of public lands:

> It was obvious "The Great Outdoors" was part
> Of a world of crime and deception of gasping proportions....
>
> ..."The
> Great Outdoors" was just a pawn in a much larger grab for
> Hydro and hegemony, and it wasn't just about forests.
> It was water, it was oil, it was natural gas...
> ...Whole rivers
> could be diverted to squeeze themselves over dams
> so teenagers could download porn off the net. (64)

This is a hilarious comment for two tipsy divorcees to make about the loss of one tacky painting; it is also a comment on the erosion of the commons and wild spaces. Is Thesen funny? Yes. Is she bemoaning a tragic loss? Yes. Is that a rare and valuable fusion in a poet? Sorry, Dr. Johnson, but yes, yes, oh god, yes.

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Nicole Markotić / Sunday Morning, Making a Break, September

For Sharon Thesen

I share your "daily effort to solve / the puzzled heart"
the heart
puzzled and contracting
bursting
away in a 747
mumbling without another word
another word

holds its mouth in my palm, the reflection another perfect memory
another purr

another knot
practicing
its ugly fatigue
tempers, carries, blooms

"(branches for arms, bark for skin) / tap a little more love"
speak the one-eyed, one-tongued
into
the cringed body
I, too, believe and
don't believe
long distance love that
music yearns

and you—unaspirated glide—yearn and pronouce

my pulse quickens

my pulse
cold and pure and swollen
        a pang in the belly, a bruise of looking and telling
        the mouth has become a long ache——a longer dash

Ralph Maud / Charles Olson's First Poem

The nail of the Cross
Bit of Constantine's horse
—action was bred
motion was dead
the body bled

Man can live by bread alone
Flesh be no crone,
Not the Divine in Man
but the Man in Man
the Dream be known

Who can speak
When in the throat
Angels squeak?

What image shall float
When, at ship's peak,
Waves Christ's coat?

Cross and Charger beat man down
But Blood again shall be man's crown
That "fabulous formless darkness" raise
Before the Past and the Dream's amaze.

Transcribed by Ralph Maud from the endpapers of Olson's copy of Yeats' A Vision.

The following note is offered to Sharon Thesen as a memento of our many hours at the computer on Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff: A Modern Correspondence. *Those were heady days (and years) not only because of the editorial problems involved in a 550-page volume of 328 letters whose chronology had to be determined, but also because of the subject matter of the Olson-Boldereff "riot," which stretched our minds. Such congruences of intellectual life are rare.*

Olson always spoke of his "first poems" as written along with an "essay on myth" during the time he was boarding at a house on Kent Circle, West Gloucester. That would be in March 1940, when he was aged thirty. No doubt there were poems from his adolescence which he did not retain in the folder "1949-8—and back" in the Olson Archive at Storrs. None of the earlier typescripts is dated; so we have been inclined to take him at his word that there was a sudden affluence of poetic activity associated with his particular life experience in that house on the Annisquam River.

However, one poem can be separated from the rest as almost certainly earlier, at least by a year. On the basis of the typescript in the Storrs file, "Crown of Nails" was included among the rest of the March 1940 poems in *A Nation of Nothing But Poetry* (1989). Olson's copy of *A Vision* by W.B. Yeats was not available to George Butterick at the time he was editing that collection. It arrived at Storrs later, and we can now see that the poem in question, but without a title, was written out on the endpaper, and that the poem was directly derived from Olson's reading of the volume.

It seems quite natural that Yeats would be the poet to start Olson off. He had written a long term essay on "The Poetry of William Butler Yeats" in his freshman year. His professor, Wilbert Snow, who later supervised Olson's M.A. thesis, kept this A+ paper through the years and deposited it in the archives of Wesleyan University. It is indeed thorough, taking up the Celtic background and marshalling many Irish myth poems to give evidence to its hypothesis, a hypothesis so charmingly strange today that Yeats's youthful poems of reverie were superior to the tougher poems of his old age. This was 1930, and Olson had time to change his mind by March 1939 when he wrote to Van Wyck Brooks (in an unpublished letter at the University of Pennsylvania) mourning the death of Yeats the previous January and quoting Yeats's "The Bronze Head" ("gangling stocks grow great, great stocks run dry") as summarizing "this daily more difficult world."

Olson had probably picked up and read *A Vision* just about this time. In his freshman paper he makes mention of the rare 1921 printing, but he could not have purchased his Macmillan edition until its first publication in 1938, and probably did not do so until he heard on 18 March 1939 that his Guggenheim fellowship had been awarded, when he undoubtedly walked into Grolier Bookshop near Harvard Square and splurged. These circumstances give us the conjectural date for the poem as March 1939, a year before the other "first poems."

When we look at the beginning of the holograph n the endpaper we see immediately what Olson was doing:

The nail of the cross
Bit of Constantine's nose

These lines are derived directly from page 278 of the text, where Yeats mentions that Emperor Constantine "makes the bit of his war-horse from a nail of the True Cross," and Olson writes in the margin: "where a nail of the Cross became the bit of Constantine's horse." On the same page, Yeats quotes a phrase from his own "Two Songs from a Play" ("that fabulous formless darkness"), which Olson before the end brings right into his poem, quotation marks and all.

Olson also incorporates in lines 8-9 of the poem his marginal comment on page 274: "Not the Divine in man, but the Man in man." He attaches the word "Xty" to this, though I think he means it is the reverse of Christianity.

It is not within the scope of this note to take up any of the problems of explication associated with "Crown of Nails," but only to distinguish it as probably Olson's first extant poem. Olson acknowledges its derivative nature by not sending it out to periodicals as he did the others, and by not listing it anywhere in his corpus of poems.

Barry McKinnon / Prince George Core (Part 2: unfinished notes

For Sharon Thesen

•

city, mind—body.

the mind disintegrates. the body now a shell

"everything must go" . so the shell is left—its last punch thru the wall—broken

windows

empty *for lease* /
for sale

the city
core /

Saturday Jan12: up 3rd, sense this: *not followed* but what's ahead / to the thrift store, my fear: I cannot easily pass thru
/ crack heads /
desperate predation & no sense of *what*
they cld ever care

: the city as body—began, arked, disintegrated. garbage strewn, lumps of clothes / single shoes / bags of needles / thrift store moved or bankrupt tho the goods they sold were free

to my right, natives clumped, stoned and grinning, once dispossessed, to be dispossessed again / not mingling, but *clumped* by the abandoned *Food Teller* door way / wait for crack, booze and heroin

what it is, *is*. cruel that body and mind sense their own demise. the city is organ. it sees itself. disintegrated. its body and mind its own demise

turning left, sense *nothings left*. "closed / staff shortage"

give shake of head,

fucked / without a voice.

•

the heart did not break / became homeless: we stood boneless in a heap / stunned then drunk, *not seen as the map*, the city, the larger world—emptied of resource. no re-course to the map that once led / to the wilderness back to the path it once was. in this heap, stolen bikes thru snow—the grinning homeless lad either in legitimacy says *hello sir*, the friendly light of human greeting or as sardonic gesture: *fuck you*.

garbage, demise—butts, puke, sand & gravel, the snowy streets. slush to mud by the Ramada / *everywhere*—the opera as backdrop, the screeching of a high human voice to keep these humans away—bums on George. what wealth / squeezed, burned, horded as the world went / everywhere else but here. so as I, city at last with out illusion or dream or grandeur—or friendly face / sincerity—is it the care of David Petrescu I miss who saw the pleasures and treasures of the dump, the beer as source for possibility, the Cottonwood flood, a sign to move. there is no choice when of a place it is the place you'll be

metaphors of recognition / value of what is seen, exposed. the body, raw, open, sexy in its arc, ugly in demise, aging to know body and soul are *one*. the mind disintegrates / is the heap of clothes, dumped as the he / she walked out into snow & cold, no light ahead on the dark road beyond

here. decay, cliché—in the shit of the city / of city fathers, I look for…*vision care. mind care. heart care. body care*—all that's lost but cheery thot / foolish reminiscence to ask / names of all gone, the toxicity is age itself not knowing how to turn. John Harris wld ask for a vision, the alternate. I can't find the grammar machine—make no proposal.

give thanks /

grumble in the arc and demise. sense it always here, *that* beginning illusion. I so lost in whatever task sought—sense of work, to do good & in the face of a force sent out to beat it, but *that* that gave resolve and strength—my endurance in the face of such shallow delights they sought by removing what little delight we had. many will not see:

the imported force, their source unknown, the conspiracy, piracy of those in charge

a world is made—of mud / become bone, sinewed road / a habitat of beauty, raw rivers to meet. the confluent / myth / abundance—dance of possibility—imagined before global demand became a line / or time, split & frayed by industrial demand no locals cld fight or resist, driven to slick and simple rhetoric - that abundance as goal became its own & pure objective goal. *the trees*. paradise ahead like history

swaths / rectangles / some messy cuts in the contours I saw in '69. sometimes sense, *much still left*. the mind disintegrates, the body arches & all the more such strength to require faith, some sense of decency in whatever mistake was made. I build a fire, I see it—call it— / the aging body drawn by last wish, not to think: *what's deserved / not deserved*. the fire burns. regret, all not done / what done gone

the old city / core

disintegrates—simultaneously evolves / to malls / outsourced plenitude—the perpetual motion of returned goods—an isolation once sensed defines us being here without

when I saw the dark—became pulp myself / in the glimmer of the dark winter snow

Joy says *let it go*—as if some other force must be known / defeat the past & open an opening brief to future light: *you decide*

in the body's arc / demise—

the mind as habitat. city gone, overtaken —divided: those who enter
the bank / those who wait—beg spare change. slush & snow, the diesel
air—sense of a shitkick to the soul. some *thing* battered in front of us. the body
disintegrates. the mind some final habitat

the city hates itself

peeled back / no false surface, in the surfeit—wealth can falsely bring

3rd & George. no children on these streets, is true, yet so large this recognition / simple
eyes open to what is seen: *no children on these streets*

old days? maybe nothings changed—no sense of going on / to question the ebb and flow
of social energies that the biggest thing cannot be seen: the drivers in the growing economies / talking heads cough slogans / toxic cliché and denial. what
was I going to say given this window of opportunity in the 24/7/365—this thinking a complex mask, or heard as specious airy thot?—no one expelled from paradise is *irony*

in the 30 below. I'm on the streets again—list the close-outs, pawn shops belly-up, tho cheer the mainstays—the tenacious: Morrisons, Prudentes, Moffats, McGinnis—the German bakers / the shops on 4th—outsourced to College Heights, Hgwy 16, box store clerks mumbling *have a nice day*

what is left. brooding, ravaged landscape. trees—in many places gone. logging. bugs. stock piles—sense of world fast tracked for the last grab / *this is eco nomics*
sun, bright to my left, south rays intensified. 35 below. chill factor. the tenacious north

what we become

/ this sense of home / the desire to leave

—time and *life*, a river (eddies, swirls / floods / the digital earth

•

Notes:

The descriptions/images in this poem in progress, for the most part, are a result of walks from the Millar Addition to and thru the Prince George downtown city core—its centre at 3rd and George.

The Food Teller is an abandoned restaurant on the corner of 5th and George, across from the Ramada Hotel. It is a street of bars, a decaying cabaret, drop in centres, a thrift store, a second-hand book store, a cold beer and wine store, etc. Opera blasts daily from the Ramada, presumably as an aural abrasive to drive away lingerers, dope dealers, hookers, and transients, etc.

David Petrescu was a friend who died too young, but taught me the pleasures of the downtown in earlier days (buns and meatballs from the German bakery, beers at the old Astoria, and the Canada hotels)—and developed my eye for eccentric thrift store junk.

Cottonwood (Island) at the confluence of the Nechako and Fraser rivers has been flooded many times over the years, and eventually forced the inhabitants of the Island Cache to move to higher ground in the 70s. Houses and shacks were abandoned and later bulldozed. The present ice jam/ flood, the worst in fifty years, has backed up the Nechako 26 km and into the suburbs.

The Moffats, the Morrisons, the Prudentes, and the McGinnis family, among a few others, are longtime family store owners in the downtown core. They stay and survive despite the heavy competition from the box stores and malls that have killed much of their business.

John Harris is a friend, writer, and intellect of large proportions who inspires much of what I have come to see and believe about place, politics, and literature.

Joy, my wife—impatient/laconic who gives clear-headed advice in disturbing contexts.

the city hates itself—is a line from my friend and colleague Anna Djuric.

Prince George is *peeled back*—a line of observation from the poet Melissa Wolsak.

life is like a river is a line from Robert Creeley's poem "A Full Cup" in his last book *On Earth*.

This work is also for these north writers: Ken Belford, Greg Lainsbury, Rob Budde.

Postscript

I can't remember when I first met Sharon, but I do remember seeing an issue of *Iron* in the early 70s (edited by Brian Fawcett and other students at SFU)—with a cover photo of the *Iron* group. They looked posed—a pre-punk literary cadre that meant serious business with editorial warnings like this: "THIS IS GOING TO BE / A SERIOUS ISSUE / BY GOD."

There was only one woman in the photo as I remember; she was thin, wearing granny glasses, her hair in a bun; she was very attractive & looked out of place and therefore a presence more obvious than anyone else in this clump of long-haired young men. It had to be Sharon Thesen. She was then married to Fawcett, worked on the magazine with mostly secretarial and production functions I think—but also writing poems that wouldn't be seen or published for some time. When they did surface—Wow! A strong, clear, no-nonsense voice sans literary device or pretense that tackled the truths of whatever situation prompted the poems' content: kids, marriage, relationships, work—the disappointments, hardships, and pleasures of a woman living fully in the complex of a modern/post-modern world.

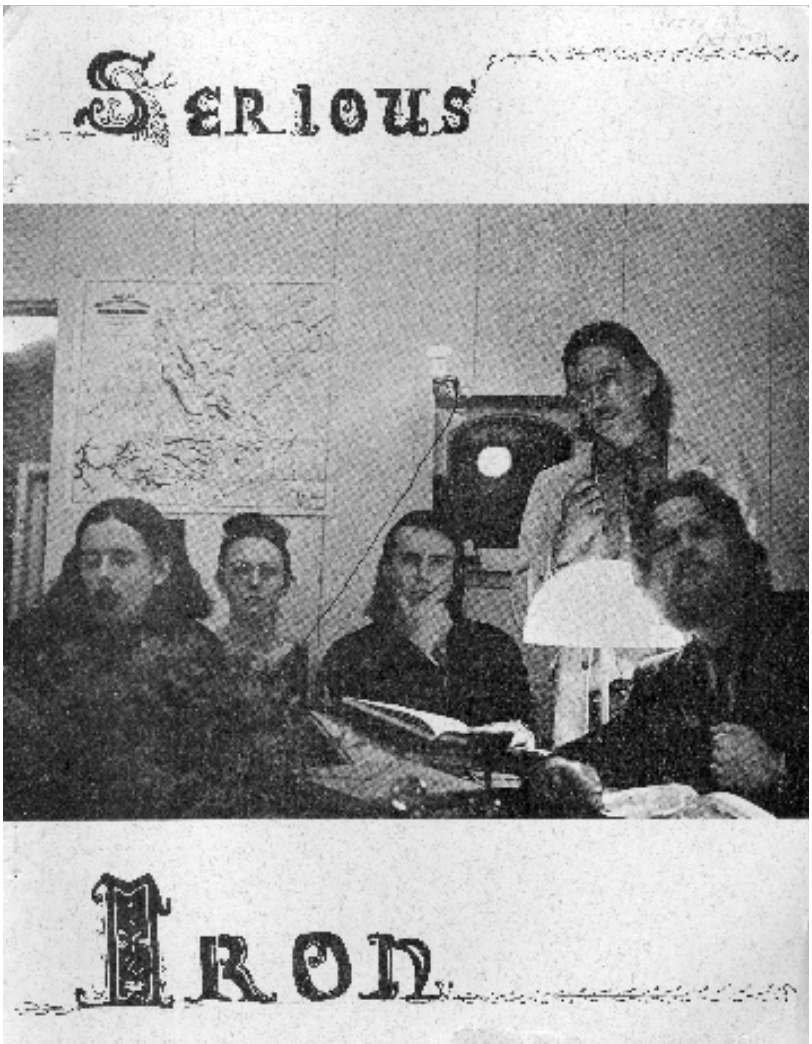
My sense is, as I wrote in a review of her book *Aurora*[1]:

> She writes so that each poem is only "successful" if it dismantles itself, (as self dismantles self)—until the tattered truth about her attitude to life at that moment is fully revealed. She leaves herself no time to turn back. No time to invent googaws and ornament. No time for fear *or* courage. The poems triumph because they no longer feel like "poems"; they become ways of thinking about living that an attentive reader can immediately share and recognize. My theory is that Thesen's sensibility is partly a result of growing up in the industrial detritus of Prince George, a context and backdrop that gave her the necessary tools for perception early on. It was here that Thesen, the high school Queen Aurora, I've been told, probably with a little metaphorical mud on her size 7&1/2 shoes, learned to see the various dimensions and ironies of whatever context she might later find herself in. In Prince George, there is no possibility of not knowing

1 "Car and Driver," *The Vancouver Review* (Fall/Winter 1995): 20-21.

where you are; this is a good thing for a writer, and a good place from which to start the writer's journey).

And all good for the poem's long road ahead and for us that Sharon is on it.



Photographer: Ron Verzuh. Vancouver seriousness from left to right: Tom McGauley ("Robert Lowell"), Sharon Thesen ("Marianne Moore"), Brett Enemark ("Richard Wilbur"), Brian Fawcett ("Karl Shapiro"), Karl Siegler ("W. S. Merwin").
Thesen Archive, Contemporary Literature Collection, Simon Fraser University

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 tanic. 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.

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Erín Moure: / You Just Let Her Dance There

She's meditative with whoops, coasts the social with a barbed hook, ecstasy of realization; She's a wry look on ourselves at the brink of disaster, falling into it but not quite, refusing its discouragements and revelling in the dailiness that makes us human; She's a poetry that mocks without mockery, surges onward in zany diction's dictability that beckons to Jack Spicer (in my ear) but is purely ST, that is always (it seems) in a car, our nemesis and casque; And ever the ability to laugh and lunge, to say: *this image*, to race out of school and laugh in the parking lot, in the parking lot; She drives the car; Is that my car?

She mocks the self without first inflating a huge self; Is wild raucous gentle at the same time; Is the present tense absolutely; And the work has a whimsy that heartens us, readers of her lines and me, too, reader of her lines to the extent that they usurp my own poem at a crucial moment, my poem talking about citizenship, talking about the harm and harm's of human proximity, in which none of us are "out of harm's way" ever;

It still stands, this page from ten years ago in Yorkshire, England, the dancing dancing Sharon Thesen, or the poetry called "Sharon Thesen," and that's why she's here, in *O Cidadán*[1]; When meditating the extensibility of the human body into the world, she shows up, dancing;

When Thesen walks into your poem in mid-composition you just let her dance there, you do.

1 Erín Moure, "Catalogue of the Harms," *O Cidadán* (Toronto: Anansi, 2002), 6.

Catalogue of the Harms

29 September 1998, Huddersfield, W. Yorkshire

Harmonic splendour, she thought.
Her armistice day that line across a field or path.
To mean is to weigh *before that fret enactment*

such harm, to weigh the least of

Harm's imagery. "It was there I remembered" a
clue (to be turned from . . .)

To whom harm was done it may concern

Debt's harm
Depth'

Debit (a ditch where they buried the shot children) who is human

Her torn muscle in the arm
's shoulder that makes "shaking hands" difficult
An extensibility of the body into a world

It starts soon

It wings up and down it wears roses on its crown it play a merry maid it rest
breathless where it laid, it takes Paris's feint tower

At that moment, she remembered "Sharon Thesen"
Hermetic lines of such fraught discursibility

to imagine why this is: her resistible wound
is harm's rubric
a fleuve no why can entertain
harsh entry make, into a private integument

"to rend"
"harmless"

Jenny Penberthy / Canine Kin: Sharon Thesen's "Animals"

I like dogs well enough though wouldn't own to being a dog person. Even so, I keep returning to Sharon Thesen's poem "Animals" with its compact and rich depiction of co-existence between species. And so, a "token" for Sharon.

Animals

When I come out of the bathroom
animals are waiting in the hall
and when I settle down to read
an animal comes between me
and my book and when I put on
a fancy dinner, a few animals
are under the table staring at the guests,
and when I mail a letter
or go to the Safeway there's always
an animal tagging along
or crying left at home and when I get
home from work animals leap joyously
around my old red car so I feel like
an avatar with flowers & presents all over
her body 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 towards them,
happy and full of love.

It occurs to me that "Animals" may be a reply to the following well-known section of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself":

> I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contained,
> I stand and look at them sometimes half the day long.
> They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
> They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
> They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
> Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
> Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
> Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth.
> So they show their relations to me, and I accept them,
> They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their possession.

This is from the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The 1855 version, "I think I could turn and live awhile with the animals…," is revised in the 1856 version to "I think I could turn and live with animals." Curiously, the drafts of Thesen's poem record a similar revision. An early version of the poem[1] is titled "The Animals" with lines 1-2 reading, "When I come out of the bathroom / the animals are waiting in the hall"; a subsequent draft shows the article in the title and in line 2 scored through. The definite article—*the* animals—particularizes, exceptionalizes, refers to those special animals, the speaker's pets; "animals" on its own de-familiarizes and invokes a larger, wilder category—species, families, kingdom. Thesen weighed the difference as Whitman did before her and made the critical deletion.

Her poem offers a gloss on Whitman's—a sample of human life actually lived with animals, fanged and in the kitchen. Several of Thesen's poems document her perception of a peopled and 'animal-ed' urban landscape, sites of co-habitation, home to companion species: the dogs that "bark from behind fences / or from a spot on the sofa / with good visibility between the drapes" ("The Shroud of Turin," *Beginning of the Long Dash* 55); the "leashed falsettos / of an urban dogfight" ("Sitting Around at Night Trying to Watch TV," *A Pair of Scissors* 17); "The animal [that] puzzles / over

1 Thanks to Tony Power for help with the Sharon Thesen Archive in the Contemporary Literature Collection at the SFU Library (Burnaby, BC).

an unfamiliar thing. Made of foam rubber" ("The Drift," *The Beginning of the Long Dash* 47); the "paddling / old and sandy muzzled sneezing wagging creature" ("gala roses," *Aurora* 69): etc. Animals are an integral part of the landscape.

> Walking home after supper at Maria's
> Our sons are men
> Our dogs plod slowly on uncertain hips
> Our mothers need to move from one sort of place
> to another ("Night Falling," *A Pair of Scissors* 16)

Both Whitman and Thesen propose kinship between human and animal species. Animals are in our DNA, our dreams, our fates, our poems. Whitman's poem, written before the publication of *The Origin of the Species* (1859), suggests an instinctive recognition of the co-evolution of species. Both he and Thesen offer figures of ancestry.

We recognize Thesen's animals as dogs, but the poem wants us to remember they are animals. Her interviews and poems allude to a necessary relationship between wildness and sanity:

> …it's the direction in which the mind of our culture is headed….Kill those wolves! Build those mega-malls! Meantime everyone goes crazier, day by day, in front of their TV sets. (Rooke 17)

> …I believe sanity is the social and psychological equivalent of what [Gary] 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.
> (Marlatt 13)

Thesen would surely echo dog-crazy Donna Haraway's assertion in *The Companion Species Manifesto*, that "beings constitute each other and themselves. Beings do not pre-exist their relatings" (6). Relationship is co-constitutive. "Co-habiting does not mean fuzzy and touchy-feely…Relationship is multiform, at stake, unfinished, consequential" (Haraway 30).

"Animals" resists nostalgia for an untamed wilderness that preceded the decline into culture. It's a poem about the ongoing and extraordinary fact of species-dependence and co-habitation. Animals and people "are bonded in significant otherness" (Haraway 16). The reader of Thesen's disarming poem watches rapt as the speaker, holding the paws of animals dancing clumsily on two legs, bends towards them with frank and simple emotion. The moment is "[d]iverse, ancient, and full of information" (Snyder qtd. in Thesen xxx) and recalls lines from other poems: "The animals ring us / in our sleep" ("What life awaits us," *Beginning of the Long Dash* 62), "Citizens asleep in bedrooms / try to kill snakes in dreams" "Calendar Picture for the Month of June," *A Pair of Scissors* 5), and "Faces nearly human / in the woods" ("Dangerous," *Aurora* 21). Scenes of myth and transformation crowd the kitchen where domesticated dogs mimic their former selves (the "wild" dance) and play the role of the responsive dance partner of fairy tales. The speaker of another poem "tell[s] the dog he is a good boy" ("Clematis Montana Rubus," *A Pair of Scissors* 25). Beauty and the Beast. The "avatar" (line 14) is the Hindu deity transformed and manifested in human form. Transmogrification is in the air, but there's no literary deployment of metaphors yoking the species. It's the literal that reverberates, generating mythic echoes. Traces of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—relationships full of fraud and subterfuge—are substituted with images of domestic routine and rapport.

Thesen avoids Creeley's device in "The Dogs of Auckland," for instance, where observed dogs, kicked and abused, make way for his arch use of an inevitable metaphor: "I am the Dog." Animals have long played a service role for poets. Eliot Weinberger could be speaking for any number of literary animals when he notes that "William Blake's 'tyger,' according to the exegetes, stands for wrath, revolution, untamed energy and beauty, the romantic revolt of imagination against reason" (50). Donna Haraway protests, "Dogs are not surrogates for theory; they are not here just to think with…" (5). In Thesen's poems, dogs are dogs.

Whitman's experience of animals affirms the bond between humans and animals. He knows himself better for knowing them: "They bring [him] tokens / of [him]self." Thesen's relation to animals is self-affirming in quite different ways. She may be enjoying the joke of offering "tokens of [her]self" to her ecstatic dogs—"Like / an avatar with flowers & presents all over / her body"—but there is no feigned knowledge of the other in her poem. Gertrude Stein's identity investigation comes to mind:

> I am I because my little dog knows me, even if the little dog is a big one, and yet the little dog knowing me does not really make me be I no not really because after all being I I am I has really nothing to do with the little dog knowing me…. No one knowing me knows me. (593)

The dog's recognition does little to crack the code of otherness. Difference survives love. Thesen's poem boldly tackles what Donna Haraway calls "relations of significant otherness" (8). "Animals" tells it as it is without irony, ambiguity, or conceit. "I take their paws / in my hands and bend towards them, / happy and full of love"—no infantilized relationship here or cloying allusion to an economy of "unconditional love." The poem is an unsentimental document that evokes spontaneous celebration and awe.

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Sharon and Oreo
Photographer unidentified

Meredith Quartermain / Irony's Rhyme

"Irony: Do not let yourself be governed by it, especially in uncreative moments," Rilke warned in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, seeming to suggest that it might be a bad habit which the poet ought to keep in check. Yet Rilke recognized, as Sharon Thesen has, that irony not only is a rich terrain for poetry but also may be at the core of a poet's sensibility. "In creative moments," Rilke advised,

> try to make use of it as one more means of grasping life. Cleanly used, it too is clean, and one need not be ashamed of it; and if you feel you are getting too familiar with it, if you fear this growing intimacy with it, then turn to great and serious objects, before which it becomes small and helpless. Seek the depth of things: thither irony never descends – and when you come thus close to the edge of greatness, test out at the same time whether this ironic attitude springs from a necessity of your nature. For under the influence of serious things either it will fall from you (if it is something fortuitous), or else it will (if it really innately belongs to you) strengthen into a stern instrument and take its place in the series of tools with which you will have to shape your art. (24)

In Greek comedy we find the *eiron*, a clever underdog, who like Socrates maintains a naive dissembling come-on, but who triumphs over the boastful, earnest or confidently unaware *alazon*, an irony designed to correct the foolish ("Irony" *Encyclopedia* Princeton). But this is not the irony that moves Thesen's poetry. Hers is a romantic irony—"ironically"—for she who writes *Artemis Hates Romance*—a clean, deft, witty irony innately hers—a stern instrument in Rilke's sense—in the sense that it is uncompromising, but also a movement of mind of the broadest vision generously holding the daily and light with the most serious of matters.

> Language all her life is a second language,
> the first is mute and exists. ("Mean Drunk Poem" 19)

In her first collection, *Artemis Hates Romance*, Thesen playfully invokes the huntress Artemis, playfully steps back from her anti-romantic stance (bemusedly writing about hunters piercing the hearts of bears with arrows, then cuddling their dead teddy-bears). She draws a frame around that activity, as though to say that's just one of many ways of this world. René Wellek has written that romantic irony, particularly that defined by the German Romantic Friedrich Schlegel, is the "recognition of the fact that the world in its essence is paradoxical and that an ambivalent attitude alone can grasp its contradictory totality" (14). "All you have to do is / pick up your daily newspaper," Thesen writes in "Usage," "there they are, / the same old stories." "Dear reader," she warns us, "take heed &/ by the way, / will you marry me?" (48) Here is the sudden shift in tone or sentiment characteristic of romantic irony—the interruption designed to shatter congealing narrative illusion. This irony is not merely a matter of meaning contrary to words, in a joke or sarcastic remark which separates insiders from outsiders, or establishes a correct view of the world. Rather it is a "situational irony" or "observable irony" (Muecke)—a rhyming of events, characters, circumstances or ideas. For example, in the following fragment, non-Christian Indians rhyme with Christmas, poverty with rich dogs on sofas, materialist advertising with the spiritual:

> Poor men from India deliver Christmas
> flyers up and down the street.
> Dogs bark from behind fences
> or from a spot on the sofa
> with good visibility between the drapes.
> The men don't look up. The bright
> flyers are glossy in the sun, they speak
> of charge cards and microwaves,
> nightgowns and jewels. ("The Shroud of Turin," *The Beginning of the Long Dash* 55)

Thesen's poems, as here, often hold eerie weldings of glossy materialism with spiritual or non-material experience. Placing the sanctity of the shroud of Turin beside the sordid daily grind of flyer delivery-men calls into question, in the most compact, ironic and punchy way, both the idealism of material wealth and the idealism of the Christian church.

It doesn't do, however, to try to pin down the nature of irony too far—to understand what is ironic, what is not—for earnest understanding will always be undone again by irony's infinite playfulness (de Man 166-167). Writing about his imaginary child poet/philosopher, Wilhelmine, romantic ironist Friedrich Schlegel comments: "Poetry braids the blossoms of all things into an airy wreath, and so too Wilhelmine names and rhymes together places, times, events, people, playthings, and foods, with everything mixed up in a Romantic confusion" (51). The ironic vision, then, has the widest possible compass. The poet is free to create ironic contrasts from any material at all, rhyming whatever is available to her consciousness—"an activity that demands, besides a wide experience of life and a degree of worldly wisdom, a skill, allied to wit, that involves seeing resemblances,… and being alert to connotations and verbal echoes" (Muecke 42).

Thus, in "The Bikers at Lund, July Long Weekend," Thesen rhymes the string of lights at night running up the west coast of the Americas from Tierra del Fuego to Lund BC with bikers' bonfires on the beach and neurotransmitters operating synapses in our nervous systems. "A Tooth in the Cupboard" links crystals in Lush bath bombs, "incisors of titans," with the Rocky Mountains while simultaneously linking sleeping and dreaming to death and space travel (*A Pair of Scissors* 19). In "Clematis Montana Rubus," the rubus rhymes with a red traffic signal. Here she tells "the dog he is a good boy" against a backdrop of post-apocalypse earth where Nazi-like police shine flashlights on faces in cars, city hall is corrupted by gangsters and "nighttime or twilight, plus rain, was all there was" (*A Pair of Scissors* 25).

Romantic irony is characterized by a "curious special feeling of paradox, of the ambivalent and the ambiguous, of the impossible made actual, of a double contradictory reality" and by a sense of liberation and comedy (Muecke 45-46). This "Open Irony" reflects an open-ended view of reality and is echoed in open-form poetics which enters a field of interplay held free of absolute meanings or definitions. "Closed Irony…points to the 'reality' that definitively unmasks the appearance" and is "characterized emotionally by feelings of superiority, freedom and amusement and symbolically as looking down from a position of superior power or knowledge" (Muecke 46-47). Romantic irony, on the other hand, does not seek to establish norms; it is "ethically indeterminate by virtue of the self-reflexiveness and synthetic balancing it enjoins" ("Irony" *Encyclopedia* Toronto). Romantic irony "is a way of writing designed to leave open the question of what the literal meaning might signify: there is a per-

petual deferment of significance"; it is a way of "saying something…that activates not one but an endless series of subversive interpretations" (Muecke 31).

The shrubbery might be a disguise,

a wall may speak. Falling Elvises may puncture
the night sky, their bodies outlined in flashing
lightbulbs. ("On First Watching 'Honeymoon in Vegas'," *Aurora* 58)

Many of Thesen's most powerful poems access this open field through the surreal structure of dreams or dreamlike inventions. "The Parrot" describes a bird escaped from its cage who meets wild crows in the fir trees and tries out her limited vocabulary. The parrot "prayed & sang"; then after one night out, it flies back to applauding humans, "the undisputed champion / of the air."

The vet said it was
a bit like the cave scene
in A Passage to India—something
to do with language, the dark &
existence. Stupendous!
the parrot kept saying for years
after & the crows invented a red dream. (*The Pangs of Sunday* 107)

The poem is filled with the eerie feeling, the "double contradictory reality," of the human as parrot, uttering its limited vocabulary in the face of an infinite and wild universe, where humans, earnest and confidently unaware, applaud their tiny ventures—language and utterance itself forever caught in this paradox, forever finding itself undoing its own earnestness.

She always has the feeling she is translating into
Broken english. ("Mean Drunk Poem," *Artemis Hates Romance* 19)

Thesen also builds irony through the surreal and dreamlike in "Biography of a Woman." "She was so intelligent," the piece begins, noting that "she could…hear / the

coughing of flies" (*Aurora* 25). The poem then narrates the life of a heroine whose suitors were swans, a heroine who had to sort through tons of millet and so on, a "she" who is a fantastic concatenation of all the myths of womanhood. Thesen highlights the ridiculousness of these notions while at the same time acknowledging how actual women, who lose car keys, must struggle inside them.

Snipping and collaging in dreamlike crosscuts, "A Pair of Scissors" imagines an encounter with Mrs. Dalloway's Mr. Walsh who is morphed into a gardener and also the poet's hairdresser who in turn thinks of himself as a gypsy. The poems in this 20-poem series playfully, gypsy-like ("Suit jackets worn in the back of a truck" [30]), recontextualize phrases or images from other poems, creating multiple ironic shifts, overtones and resonances. The "real" (apparently a sojourn in a rural woodsy setting) is haunted by the borrowing from Woolf's fiction, by the myths of Persephone, Phoebus and Sisyphus, and by other daily fictions of common parlance. Fictions indeed are the only vocabulary we have for the "real." Mr. Walsh and the poet are held in an alchemical crucible, "a charred yellow bathtub / in the forest" (42). Then in the next poem,

> The shadow of Mr. Walsh
> cuts the shadow of
> my hair on the ground beside us
>
> like an old play acted upon a sheet. (43)

Layer upon layer of ironic resonance permeates the series—not a comic irony but a deeply thoughtful one. Mr. Walsh's penknife becomes the penknife of the past. Mrs. Dalloway's green dress, always needing mending, becomes the love-life of discarded women. Phoebus, the sun god, modulates to a "puffy tenor singing 'O Sole Mio'… / the sun on my face" (41) which reappears in the next poem as "*solutio*, the dissolution" (42). The sound of the blow-dryer, "the sigh of the soul / in a soulless world" (33), is echoed in a later poem by "the graves of tall persons":

> The boat of their souls gently unmoored
> amid a white smoke of sighs
> in some billionth galaxy by a bending,
> untying constellation. (37)

Irony, Schlegel said,

> should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden. It originates in the union of *savoir vivre* and scientific spirit, in the conjunction of a perfectly instinctive and a perfectly conscious philosophy. It contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication. (156)

Writers such as Thesen who are imbued with this paradox of language, the "real" hinged to a multitude of fictions, give us some of the most poignant literary works. "Philosophy is the real homeland of irony," Schlegel thought, "Only poetry can also reach the heights of philosophy in this way…pervaded by the divine breath of irony throughout and informed by a truly transcendental buffoonery. Internally: the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations" (148). Like Robin Blaser, Thesen's vision takes in the whole range of history and human thought as if consciousness within humanity were unified for all time. Thesen's poems remind us repeatedly of the smallness of human endeavour in the face of vast possibility.

> Huge fat guys hunched
> in the driver's seat taking forever
> to turn a corner—forever predatory
> we watch with our big eyes, big eye
> teeth. Rump roast. Business proposition.
>
> Pressed into witlessness yet
> wishing something real would happen. ("The Saved," *Aurora* 17)

Something on the order of the divine, something much larger than the human, is invoked by the irony of the world's contradictory totality. Thesen's poems like Blaser's seem haunted by an awareness of this.

> …I'm afraid
> we have become television sets.
> I fear the distortion as Creeley says
> and heavy sleepwalk slavery chained by neck
> to corn chips, golf, carpeting, car payments.
> Tim Hortons like the arms of Jesus. ("The Plane Ride," *A Pair of Scissors* 51)

The poem neatly evokes humanity on its plane ride through its materialist universe, a crucifixion by Tim Hortons.

In her most recent book, *The Good Bacteria*, Thesen continues to develop sets of interlocking poems full of playful ironic shifts, reversals and resonances, all the more poignant for their underlying concern with human finitude and death (including the death of her friend Angela Bowering, and the death of Frances Boldereff whose letters to Charles Olson she edited). The 12-poem title sequence dances around the good and the bad as these ghostly notions appear to us (infect us?) in the form of bacteria. The opening poem presents a scene of decay: "they were all ghosts in coats" (11) dining while watching night-time city lights and later taking penicillin which kills all the bacteria, good and bad. "No more bloody ghazals! one ghost shouted to another" (11), somewhat in the manner of penicillin to bacteria. But the ghazal keeps creeping back in, in terse two- or three-line verses leaping quixotically in seemingly disjunctive directions throughout this series of poems.

Pauline Butling tells us the Arabic ghazal is usually made of couplets each of which is an independent poem linked to others in the series by rhyme. They may not share a common subject matter. It "typically…moves by associative leaps and a 'free flow of images.'" Its form "facilitates an…image-making process that often leads to surprising semantic and thematic resonances" (61). Interestingly (ironically?), Friedrich Schlegel, the German romantic ironist, was one of the first westerners to write poetry in ghazals ("Ghasel"), perhaps attracted to the form because of its disjunctive quality.

In an astonishing and tightly interlocked network of ironic reversals, Thesen's bacteria poem considers how good knowledge may be bad and how knowledge or knowns infect us or, like gods, hang over us as (holy?) rather tyrannical ghosts. The "Good Bacteria" series then continues to explore, through echoes, rhymes, surreal disjuncts and recontextualization, the nature of knowledge as it infects us or inspires us in dreams, myths or scientific narratives—which may take the form of metaphors' or similes' smiles.

> Enter a real guy in a pleated skirt with a sword
> Sunk in a scabbard, ten oxen
> Couldn't drag him away from fighting.
>
> Inside his myth he's very busy too.
> Polishing his scabbard with Silvo, staunching
> His cuts and abrasions he goes through tubes of Polysporin. (21)

Thesen's ironic stance offers potent criticism of contemporary greed-ridden society. Yet it also speaks of love, big enough for life *and* death, the good *and* the bad.

Paul de Man argues that what's at stake in romantic irony—what got Kierkegaard so upset that he had to "invent…a whole theory of history to…get rid of Friedrich Schlegel"—is "always the question of whether it is possible to understand or not to understand" (166). We want to pin things down absolutely, to say and know once and for all that this is what some experience means—it's good, or it's bad. We seek to establish total understanding, imagining we have control; but total understanding is death.

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Lisa Robertson / The Dogs of Dirk Bogarde

For Sharon Thesen

What if I present myself to them
to quietly and agreeably confer
with happiness subtle, fingers fretted with gold wired
minimum theorization of minimal approach
or tired openly fighting
following low tufty path through the apartment-hedge
I do not continue in truth adrift
without any effortful existence
I do continue
then make it scarcely
of their play and their avoidance

In wood and feld and dale and dun, in woods
and to fields, both in field and forest, from
all directions, like a tilework
what I saw was their beau dictation
where parts grouped together at the faucet
like a shadow divine neutral
coloration work at the larynx drowsing

I spoke then as a dog that with the pale flowers groweth in the meadows
and into the game of speech
They are stretched in every street
tumescent splay-foot poodles
Pradaesque-asked: do you have
—like Sir Osbert—
gout? (in the baroque)
or rather mannerist

brought in the earnest olden
and familial atomic
blues

for a pint of honey
pours out
a gallon of gall
for a dram of pleasure
weighs as
a pound of pain
for an inch of mirth
enters
an ell of moan
shakes its collar
as ivy doth an oak
for a man to look for happiness
as fetch it
for whatever laurel is not different
sports a puffed helmet
or what happened to animals in a Europe
philosophically dying what happened
to the animals of Europe

(I
with obscurity, meditation, perfume, etcetera
with slowness and prudence, with seriousness
and accuracy and success industrially with complicity
and glut them with irremedial love while you were dying
and dryness, with disinterest and seduction and despoilment and
obscurity
with resplendence and accuracy
with reality
with accuracy
address

the byproducts
as an object clinamen

They are the twenty-seventh of twenty-nine Lucretian proofs of the
mortality of the soul;
Techniques are stylistic.

This query meanwhile
with intervals loosened my jail-breaking sensation
without any effortful bothering
no Marxian sequence
what if I present to you—flick
the love
philosophically the sexual congress with men's languages
to the maybe there is no such things as a female situation
I won't get used to it
being embellishment illusions
laughing

One of the humans said in his summer
You are not
The emergency of money.
A human said do you do Topiary?
As another absurdist-farcial-tragical
I did this gravely.

It was the spring of my 35th year

of raising a transnational believing class
said raising the imagining animal
or how not to break
after the ghostly simultaneous last ragged
manifesto in breath preens
flat tires of old American cars

and change breaks my heart.
The key-print of a dignity
The key-print of a dignity

Cassavetes in seventy-five describes the pact of caritas
as the natural history of the idea of guts
its trodden coloured bits
in broken asphalt alleys running creeklike
what is world but its screen tightly laced by
a hunger become worthy of turning
founded blame or sparkling befriended feminine
stray Roman dogs
the dogs of Dirk Bogarde
—what I'll call this—
understand
some slackened war

That the sense of the personal
permitting maximal referential variability
a nerve or less
enters poems using, so familiar and scandalous
utopia
chaotically histo-
arcadia
mimetically
there was scented sauntering
Homeric flowers, privilege legendary next
excellent tender
—into two equal portions—
botanical writings —their leaves slightly drying—

II

The animals of Europe went into a movie by Visconti and became people.

You have to hate them and their beauty also, their
Maquillage and bias-cut
thinking.

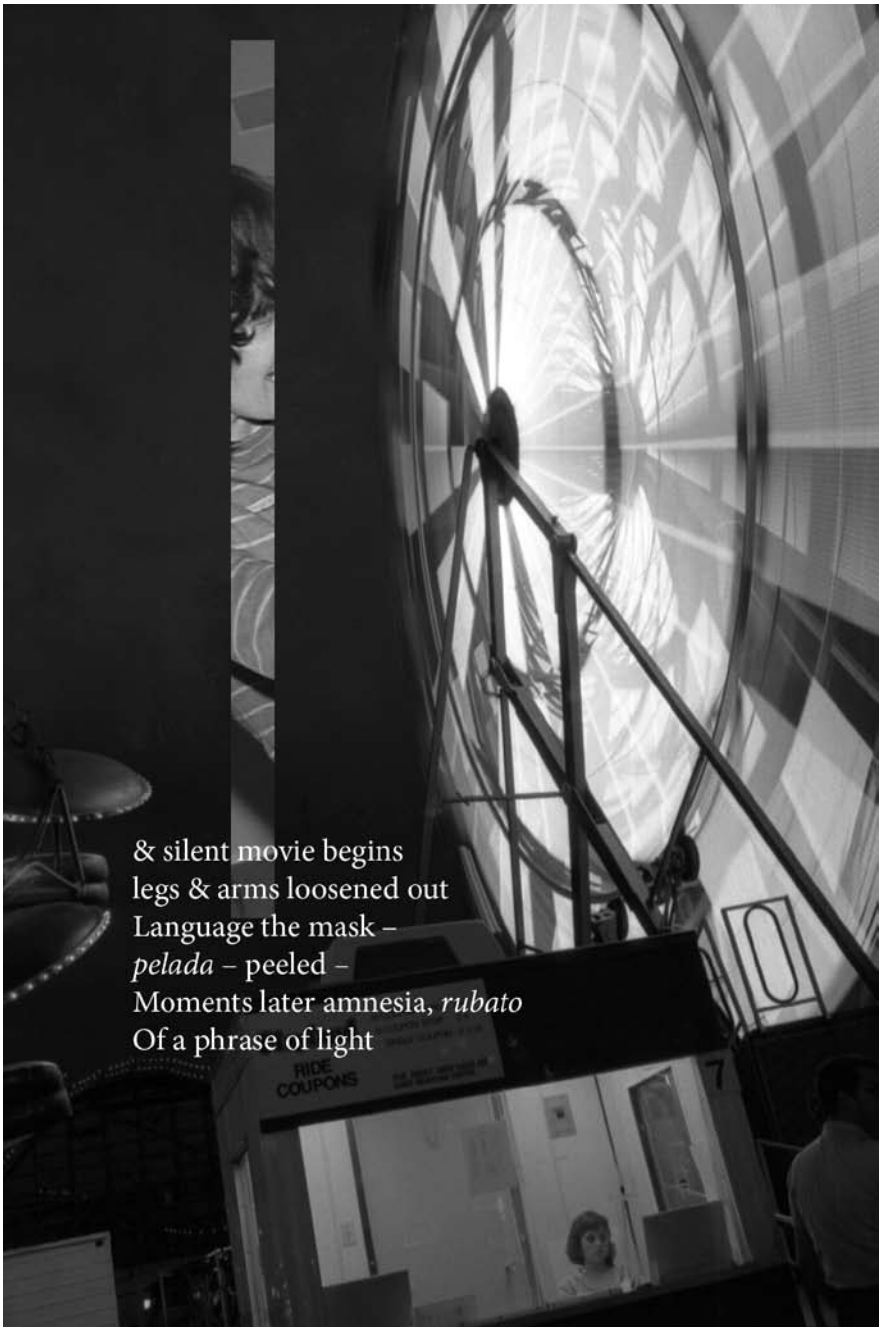
The wood is out. We're burning
Bark. O please send the animals back. I will put them
In a band dessine
Read on the train
By a boy in a red sweater
Smelling of griffons.

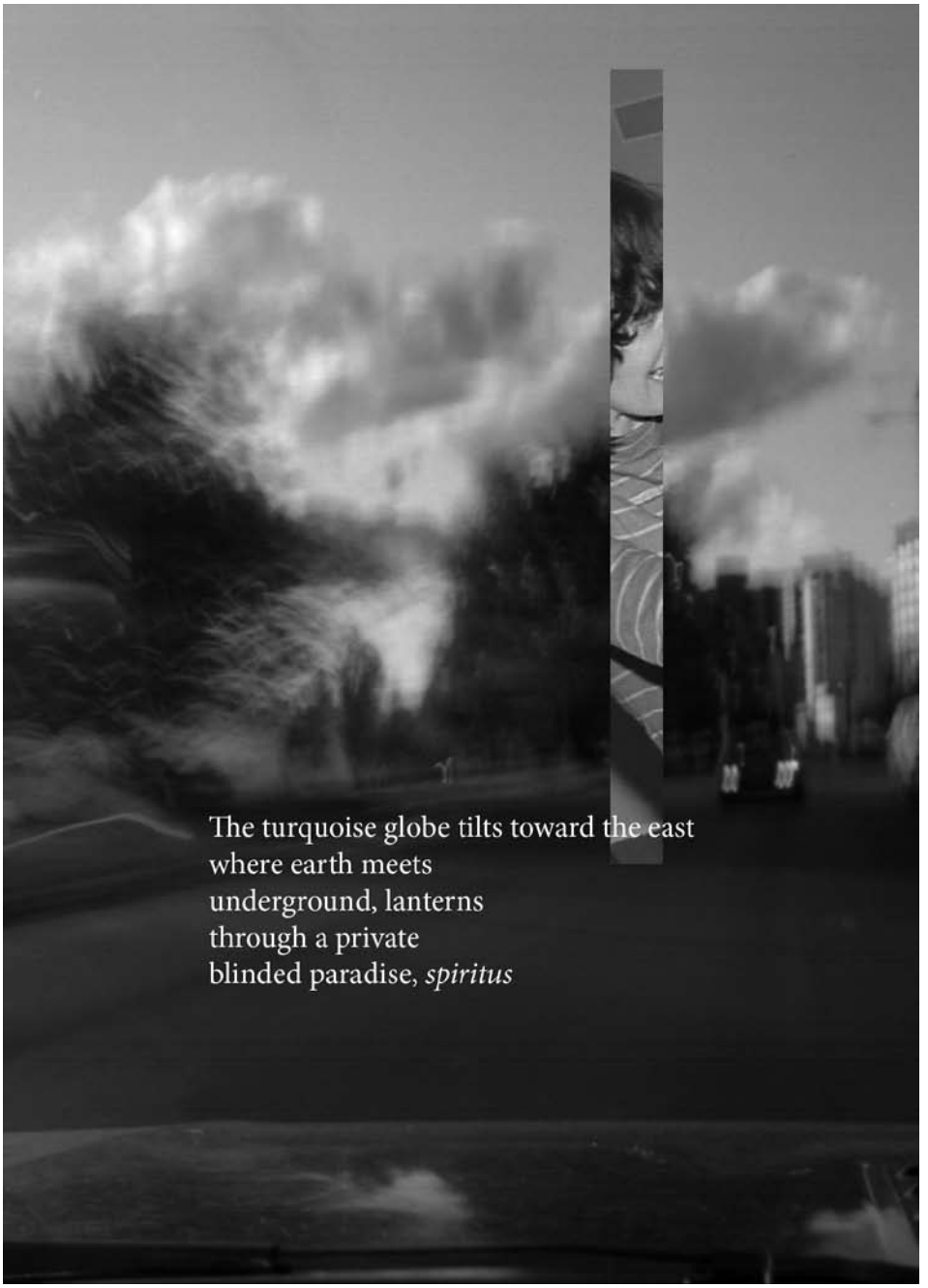
They are living in their rotting chateaux like we lived in wood cabins. Piranesi drew them living this way but some of them don't know Piranesi. They have no water and where do they wash their dishes. Their animals are delirious with all the suppressed philosophy of fascism. They roll over on their wirey backs, on their short chains, they roll in their scraps they grovel with humour and they can open the kitchen door when they smell meat. They simply hopped into the truck. The animals of Europe no longer desire synthesis.

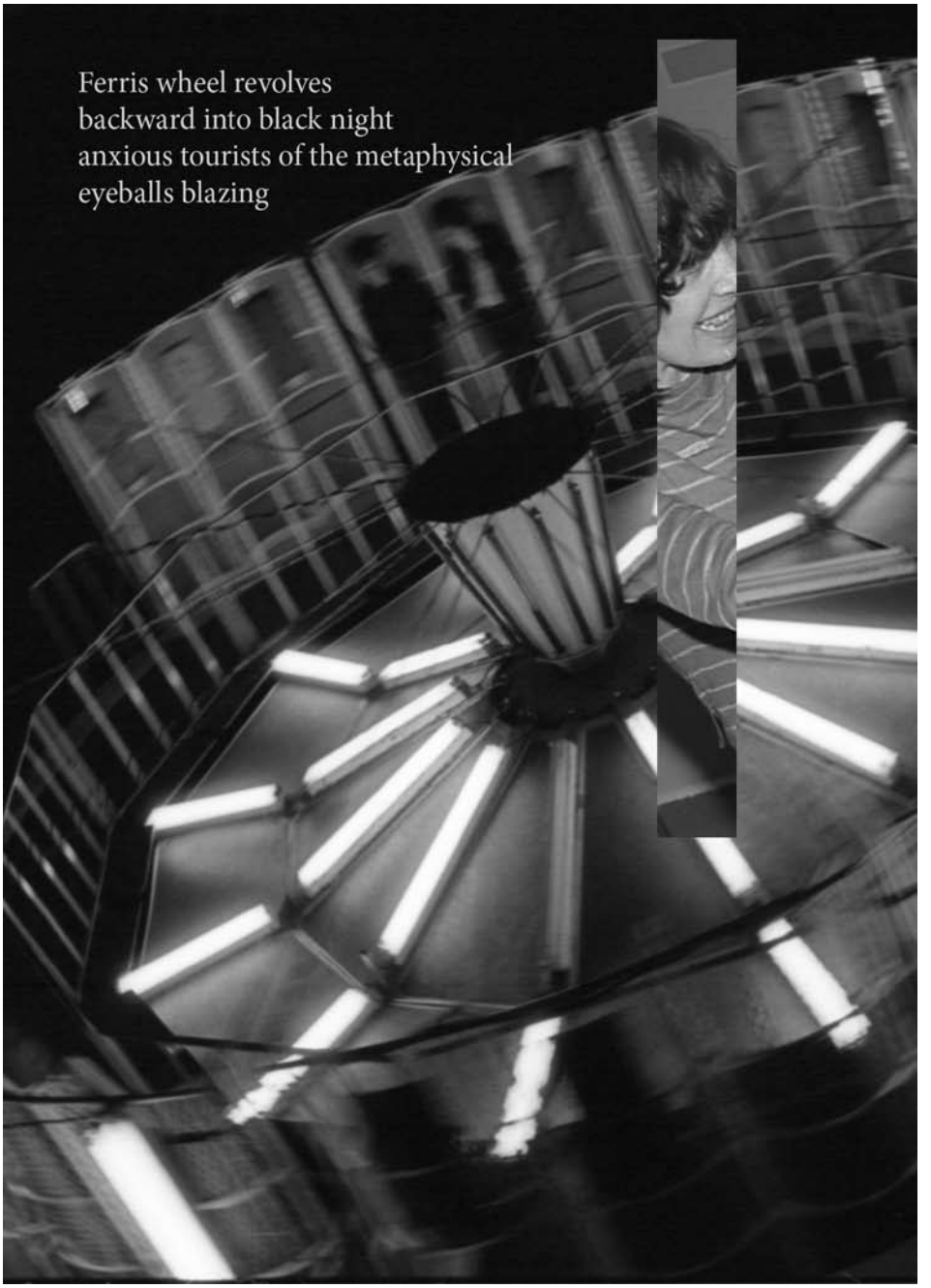
They, antithetical, die in the heat in their kennels on their chains in
the draped salons of over-budget art films
Earnestly
And I plant upon them the fruit trees of the châteaux
Like anyone else
And I have simply stopped reading

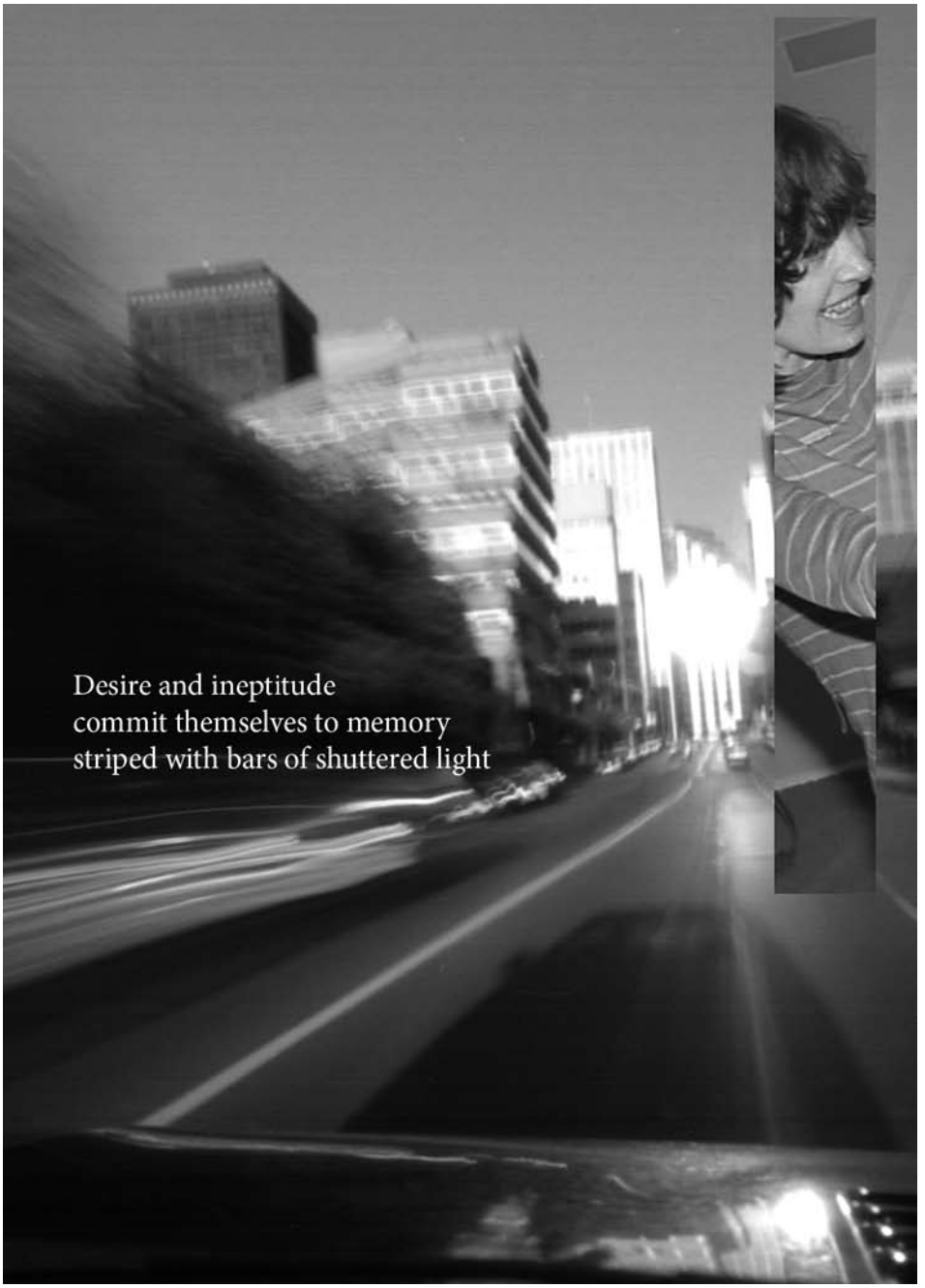
One animal says to another animal it is not safe you must not return I love you. Another says to her sister animal when you go you will never return then she dies in a camp. Another is a child and she stops living because of deceit. The animals in their velvety dressing gowns have thought bubbles. They break the incest taboo during a long cruel close-up and you can't help but watch. The father animal is not an animal he is a person and he is confused about money. They keep trying to return. They are only animals. They have titles and meanings. They ride trains. Dirk.

Bob Sherrin / ReVerb & Echo




The turquoise globe tilts toward the east
where earth meets
underground, lanterns
through a private
blinded paradise, *spiritus*


Ferris wheel revolves
backward into black night
anxious tourists of the metaphysical
eyeballs blazing


Desire and ineptitude
commit themselves to memory
striped with bars of shuttered light

Gerry Shikatani / purse, porch, light

To look out the window, head slanted to the side, this feeling in the neck, the look outward angled ahead through glass.

I ride the bus & as often as I have through the decades, in the city or across province, state or country, the ride has inspired thinking, musing. Occasional notebook entries, a flurry of writing, a concept that develops.

Today I've pulled out reading material as the Greyhound pulls onto Charlotte Street and then out of Peterborough where I live:

Sharon Thesen's *The Pangs of Sunday* (1990), her volume of poems selected from past books plus new work. I flip through then land on page 89, a poem taken from her *The Beginning of the Long Dash* (1987). It begins:

You go to the Planetarium
and do some shopping
& then you have a coffee.

The close of the poem down to its end-word is something that has remained with me:

You take a dress to the cleaners
& then you catch the bus
and look out the window with your purse.

She brings a special allure to the single word, a particular, locating quotidian stuff of the material world on the page in the poem's music, tone, tempo. It astonishes—this ending on the word 'purse', this gesturing to what's held—money, chores, bother, and identity that is the purse.

It's a simple undramatic matter-of-fact phrase, no different in tone from those lines that precede it in the build of the poem. But that act of looking shimmers as stillpoint.

It's one of many quiet poems that keep instructing me how to look, how to attend to life. It's an engagement with our world of material wants and sometimes fulfillments, of leisure activity and attachment to the object-world of sensory gratification, sensory distress. Such engagement makes her one of a handful of poets whose books I choose to take with me on extended travels.

From book to book her language—phrasing and utterance—has a clarity and purity, unburdened as she in-scribes report, takes inventory of the daily action, the day's events. There is subtle dramatic movement in her naming and recounting.

How could I not live the attentions of the definite and indefinite articles of "A, an, the"—the brilliant title to this poem I'm talking about. Sharon gives great love and heed to each individual component of language—her listing of things conjoined by *and*, the soft regulated percussion of *and* presented alternatively with perfect timing revealing the nature of conjunction, addition, the further.

The title is also beautiful to behold. Naturally, I reference up north to Prince George and the exquisite *The the*—Barry McKinnon's book that constantly teaches me.

Back in this southbound bus on Highway 115, the same Thesen page, the compositional symmetry at head and tail with both *and* (and) ampersand on the page before me.

There's no Thesen grandstand speech on spotlit stage but instead my ol' friend engaged with the any ol' day sending out a steadfast glow that is deeply spiritual. I'm gripped by this, seduced by this. Here's no self-important expert colour commentator but the play-by-play as play-by-play of the day-to-day. These attentions turn on the porch light that enlightens the path with hospitality.

She's effortless with colloquial talk both outwards and internally, checking the self out. This is music to my ear, makes me her buddy—shopping, having a drink, or coming over to her place on a dinner invitation. Her diction comes in a voice that easily inspires and influences me: "*heck*" ("*who the heck am I anyway?*") is that feeling I'll steal for my own work.

I've seen Sharon in Montreal when I used to live there—and in Vancouver when she used to live there.

"*Gerry come with me to take a look at the [very pretty] yellow chaise [she's eventually to buy] at a smart interiors shop on René Levesque.*"

Or

"*Sharon, do you know that fabulous boutique in Westmount Square…is having a really good sale?*"

On my trips to Vancouver we'd meet. There was a Saturday, just after she'd bought a Hamilton watch, I think on Robson ("NEW HAMILTON WATCH 09/07/94"). In *Aurora*, where gesture, angle, regard, stills…

And when I tilt my new wristband

Preceding this, such phrasing as

The dial of Being…
……
impinging

like Spirit. I heard the Past Life…

In Vancouver some years ago, we meet for coffee at a Kits café, outside in the morning sun—to Sharon, her poems are "small poems"—but I know how large a world she allows me to enter, how her luminous pieces, their exquisitely fine attention

to the tactile life, dwarfs the scope of the poems of many of us with our grandstand subjects and themes.

When Roy Kiyooka died, I felt stranded—in the east, far from the funeral and celebrations in his honour held in Vancouver. I imagined my friends, the gathering of the Vancouver arts community for whom Roy was a giant.

Then came *After Roy Kiyooka's Funeral*, first published if I recall correctly in a selection of writing by many of us in an issue of *Brick*, edited by Michael Ondaatje. Here it is in *Aurora*, in fourteen short lines, a perfect example of the gestural, the world of inanimate phenomena, everyday touching, grasping. The poem is an eloquent testimony to two words that Kiyooka would use in talk and writing: attention and astonishment.

I take a kitchen chair out to the front porch
and….

Further on,

…The screws are brass,
stiff, unused to suffering Then the…

Further on again,

a 100 watt bulb. The amber casing
back on with its old cheap bracing
screws. Now
my visitors. Now the path
is lit farther out—and
the way in brighter,
bigger.

Again the conjunction *and* (line 2) is perfectly positioned after going out to the limit of the front porch; again she invites her readers to respect the conjunction.

Or, notation in sync with intonation,

the screws are brass
stiff…

Sharon reminds us of the integrity of all types of words (*Then the*), her typographic composition sonically exacting in its repetition of *Now*.

Such attention is also the path to honour by naming (*My visitors*) that speaks of the spirit or radiance that is hospitality.

All the above and more are gloriously present in *gala roses*.

There is a majesty in the music through *gala roses*—it stuns me at each reading—as arriving on these pages, still down Highway 115, in Greyhound transit:
gala, moving with its wonderful momentum, never strides into strident pitch or unnecessary percussion.

Such movement, intonation that we ride page after page, is remarkably fanfared before its first note and phrase: the facing left-hand page, the concluding words of the preceding poem: the spacious, expansive, and finely measured *Billie Holliday's Nylons*…

utter lyric, minimalist composition

nooses loop down

gather up the overflow

We carry this *overflow*'s oh into *gala* as we do *purse* as we do *a 100 watt bulb*.

Pete Smith / "margarine in the aisles of hope": towards a thinking about Sharon Thesen's writings

I

Sharon Thesen's poems move through the world in a knowing yet guarded way. Some strut and shout, some dance an edgy tease, some whisper in the corner of the room. Some retain flavours of poems brushed up against, but none kiss ass. They stand or fall by their gestures and postures—including the gestures not made and the postures abandoned.

She writes long sequences and short occasioned poems. Often within a given book, the short lyrics will connect by image and content with others directly adjacent or at a further remove, making those poems also a sort of serial poem. Wallace Stevens' remark fits her well: "The collecting of poetry from one's experience as one goes along is not the same as merely writing poetry." Thesen is a fine lyric poet by virtue of her musical intelligence, but her probing critique of the social and poetic culture that surrounds her, and restlessness born of a mixture of scepticism and hope, extend the boundaries of lyric poetry.

Thesen needs the poem to be true (not to carry Truth, but to be honest), to be vital, to burst any bubbles of pretension the poem may flirt with, to write as woman without the warp of a prescribed ideology, to assert her poetic place, and to write from a position of mature sanity rather than a perpetually defended fortress-self. Such a contingent poetics calls for personal openness and vulnerability, not simply mastery of a set of poetic techniques.

Thesen's poetics is mined from various strata of objectivism, projective verse, romanticism, confessional verse, and language-led writing. She has written in company with others: Olson, Creeley, and Spicer when the "American boys" came to Vancouver; Webb, Marlatt, McKinnon as Canadian kin; and the long-term friendships with those transplanted Americans, Blaser, and Stanley. Given her disregard for geographical or individual dominations it is unsurprising that, after the initial exposure to the big names of Black Mountain and the San Francisco renaissance, Thesen found herself drawn rather more to such as Gilbert Sorrentino and Duncan McNaughton. She remains open to new voicings and the company of others contin-

ues to mark her work: Michele Leggott, Bringhurst's Skaay and Ghandl. Her poetics and readings may be described as generally opportunistic in the service of experience, and at her most experimental edge ("gala roses") language seems primarily the experience. Thesen continues to explore ways of approaching the work and the life. She remains wary of the glib and the trendy and of any attempt to prescribe an exclusive way of writing poetry.

II

Reading through Thesen's books of poetry I was struck by her frequent juxtaposition of the banal and the transcendent. At first I thought of this as binary thinking, but have come to regard it as working within a continuum. Miriam Nichols, in her essay "Love Will Eat the Empire," usefully describes a similar phenomenon in Robin Blaser's work. Describing some "pairs," personal-cosmic, public-private, inside-outside, self-other, she writes:

> These pairs are not identical to the binaries so handily deconstructed by poststructuralists…What polarity means in the context of Blaser's essays and poems is a Mobius-like relationship between the perceiving self and the world. The "flowing boundary" as Blaser calls it, is a twisting of inside and outside into porous, mobile forms… (371)

Such pairings in Thesen's works include past-present, scepticism-hope, inside-outside, repressed-liberated, ludic-serious, and banal-transcendent. The last pairing is the focus of this brief appreciation. It is present in Thesen's work from the beginning. In "Mean Drunk Poem" she writes the imperative:

> Sing Om as you take the sausage rolls out of the oven (*ARH* 19)

The offsetting of banality and transcendence has become more complex and integrated as the work has developed.

The practice of polarity includes her uses of speech-figures such as simile, metonymy, chiasm. She uses these tools, not simply for purposes of comparison, but in order to hold at least two realities in mind at once, a version of

Keats' negative capability. An example from the past-present polarity is in the brief poem "Bike Ride to the Rib House" (*The Good Bacteria* 55), where we note that the poem takes place within a changing mind, perception replacing perception, and ends back at its first wrong perception.

More than one pairing will appear in a single poem, as in this brief section of "The Fire":

> 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 (*TGB* 78)

The simple simile puts you in both the present (threading a button back onto a garment while under threat from a huge wildfire, seeking the comfort of that mundane act) and a past place of safety, the comfort of that soft toy (and the poetic risk of that banal image). Arguably, safety as a transcendent emotion (trust is the first stage of psychological growth in infancy and undergirds our adult patterns of emotional well-being) is stitched into the memory of the banal (even sentimental) soft toy.

Banality and transcendence may also occur alongside the inside-outside pairing. In "Wish" there is a ghost-poem within. The outside is the girl whose image, an action, & the flickering pedestrian traffic sign, trigger the poet's mind with concern about making her hair appointment on time, but this is still the outside. The hairdresser's use of the word "skull" ignites the 'second' poem, and links it back to the "wing bones" image of the first stanza, sending the poet deep inside her coffin. This is the opening for transcendence, woman totally aware of mortality preparing to share her last thoughts, "wishing"—'I'd spent more time with…', 'had written The Great Canadian whatever…', 'not done such & such', but no:

> "I'd bought those brown Prada shoes…" (36)

How absurd, real & right—in terms of the artifice of the poem.

Sometimes Thesen's imagination is briefly sparked by dynamic polarity (Blaser, qtd. in Nichols 383),[1] but sometimes the whole poem is built on a polarity. I read the strange "How Post 9-11 The Mystery of Love Became The Mysterious Mr Love" as such a poem. Without "Post 9-11" it would be 'merely' a film-noir poem as flagged by the poem itself, "Like about ten movies / she's a woman alone" (*TGB* 52): a mundane isolated set, chores are done, the rug hangs on the clothes-line or porch rail, her stove is shiny clean, and there is the ominous undercurrent. But what we're reading, we slowly see, is more than that: the woman is playing with words in her head, "tongue, tounge, tonuge, tong" (52), in a banal yet reaching manner. (Ludic poet at work.) Details step out of the mundane: the "old crop-duster in the barn" and the city car "looking for something." In the shadow of 9-11, the plodding investigation has been going on. The banality of it all belies the terror unleashed in New York. Terror is the transcendent other-side of the banal which had been present only in brief detail, the title's emphasis and by means of polarity: banality containing terror.

So, returning to the strange title: we find we have Love personified in the investigative agent in the poem. The word-journey from "tongue" to "tong" in the woman's mind is as short as the journey from Love to Evil would be in the title. "Evil Personified" became the rallying cry for parts of the western world. The very polarity that makes the poem's quietness work as a statement of horror also undergirds the fundamentalist opponents, both of whom can present the God of Love as their calling card. Banality generates the transcendent terror through the Love-Evil polarity (Paz 88).[2]

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1 Blaser writes: "Coleridge's argument then in a few phrases: 'polarity is dynamic, not abstract'—'a living and generative interpenetration'—'where logical opposites are contradictory, polar opposites are generative of each other'—'the apprehension of polarity is itself the basic act of imagination'—'it is not a matter of 'pictures of bodies already formed'."

2 Paz writes: "As if he were making an advance commentary on certain contemporary speculations, Chuang-Tzu explains the functional and relative character of opposites thus: 'There is nothing that is not this; there is nothing that is not that. This lives in relation to that. Such is the doctrine of the interdependence of this and that. Life is life in relation to death. And vice versa. Affirmation is affirmation in relation to negation…'"

In a review of *The Beginning of the Long Dash*, & in the context of certain poems there, Stephen Scobie suggests we should read the banal as ironic. His reading, however, of the banal last three lines of "The Landlord's Tiger-Lilies" as a target of satire can be contested: "Even so, he [Rilke] was wrong / not to go to his daughter's wedding / & hurting people's feelings." The day's shine, on the gilded lilies & the sun-caught jet-trail, might have been expected to come from more aesthetically-pleasing sources than dog-piss and a plane's excreta: Rilke's angels may have spoken to him through the presence of his daughters if he'd paid more attention to the living than to perfecting his thought. The banality undercuts the desire for ecstatic experience at the expense of human contact: banality is the weapon, not the target.

In a recent poem, "How to Stay Sane" (*TGB* 51-52), Thesen's poem-I is in a department store: quasi- religious language satirising the advertising world occurs, with some irony no doubt; but when the line reads, "I for one am glad of these mood-lifting changes!" is that irony or can it not be an amused acceptance of some of the world's ludicrous ways, or both simultaneously? Or, may it be read as an inclusive satire given the frequency with which self-deprecation occurs in the poems? The male reader may require irony, where the female writer proposes interdependence and nurture. There are differences beyond the genitalia.

With her belief in the poem's "capacity to carry truth and vitality . . . as a matter of process," Thesen's poetry is working out a sane place in a crazed world. The dailiness-of-living provides the context for the work's life. The great abstracts work themselves into concrete images that can shift and argue with themselves from poem to poem as different life-events call forth different responses. A contingent poetics, indeed, that can produce much pleasure. The banality-transcendence polarity produces lines of sheer delight:

"Waiting For Telescope Time" concludes:

> The otherwise mostly hopeless astronomers &
> lonesome denizens of the Milky Way stir like women
> stirring good soup a fire-blackened cauldron's
> starry distillate. They
> wear alpaca overcoats and at 75 elegantly know

how to bargain for the ineffable. (*Aurora* 57)

Astronomers on CBC's prime time intellectual program *Ideas* morph into these marvellous women, and although a mere simile, they have the last word. In "How To Stay Sane" again,

you talk about volition and overcoming
I, margarine
in the aisles of hope… (*TGB* 41)

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George Stanley / After Akhmatova

for Sharon

He shows up in my dreams less often now.
I don't run into him everywhere I go.
A low white fog has settled along the road.
Shadows start to race across the lake.

All day the ringing did not stop,
ringing over the wide, ploughed fields,
deafening ringing of bells from St. John's
Monastery bell towers over the fields.

I was pruning the lilac bushes,
snipping off twigs that had lost their blossoms.
Out on the disused military embankment
I watched two monks stroll by.

World, familiar, understandable, tangible,
come back to life for senseless me!
The Tsar of Heaven has healed my soul
with the icy calm of non-love.

1912

Yes, I loved them, those late nights at the pub—
the little round tables with beige terrycloth covers
a-tinkle with glasses of cold to lukewarm draft.
The pub overheated, winter blowing outside,
sarcastic laughter at a literary joke,
and my love's quick glance—helpless, shattering me.

1917

Everything looted, privatised, sold.
Death's black wing strobed ahead.
Everything chewed up by ravenous boredom.
Why, then, for us, this lovely light?

By day, cherry-scented breezes waft
from a hidden grove in the suburbs.
By night, ever novel constellations glitter
in the deep, clear July skies.

Something miraculous approaches
our filthy, decrepit houses.
No one (no one!) knows what it is,
but we have expected it for centuries.

1921

Sharon
Photographer: Nancy Boyd

Christine Anne Stewart / The Urging Surface

Before we were narrative, we were boots and vertigo. (Majzels 18b)

I read *The Good Bacteria* as an urgent and peripheral articulation of surface. Its view is horizontal, ranging over planes of shifting exteriors. Its subjects, shining and not shining, each anticipating an encounter, moving towards (in desire) and away (in ruination) from the catastrophic, claustrophobic, ebullient, frayed edges of being, from the endless stuff that makes us, devours us. Here, "*[c]orpus meum and interior intimo meo*…the subject is its exteriority and its excessiveness: its infinite exposition" (Nancy 42).

Meaning, its moat and its ruin. Nothing unusual.

He who has kissed
a leaf

need look no further—
I ascend

through
a canopy of leaves

and at the same time
I descend

for I do nothing
unusual…

—W. C. Williams, *Spring and All*, 1923 (*The Good Bacteria* 5)

To "do nothing unusual." Kiss a leaf. Engage surface with surface: an oscular act. A non-teleological physics, a field of bodies finding no final place.

I saw him coming down the street in the sunshine
eating an apple he'd bought at the grocery store.
The sea, the sea
glinted and humped behind him
devoid of any but anchored boats (18)

The street, the man, the light, the apple: not significant except each in its particularity and of itself (and its exteriors).

Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody (Zukofsky 12).

devoid of any but anchored boats

The space in "*devoid*" echoes in "*of*" evoking the space and sound of *o* as it runs through the *anchored boats*. The word void (in devoid) doubles the ruin. The repeated "*a*" in *any* and *anchored*, situates, locates, hooks a second of sound—an anchoring of nothing: usual aural striking.

"[F]or the ears drink in the air which has been set into motion by other bodies" (Vico 706).

The cadence of a work sets the space of a page into motion by word bodies: the ears drink in the rhythms of their relations.[1] Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness (Zukofsky 12).

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1 Thesen identifies Robert Bringhurst's *A Story As Sharp As A Knife* as the inspiration for the cadences in the first section of poems, and thus evokes the Haida stories that Bringhurst translates—ones that attend to the surfaces of the world in precise and rippling ways. While the Haida stories attend to particular past, present and future necessities, the cadences in "The Good Bacteria" evoke for me the urgent need in North America to increase attentiveness to aboriginal philosophical, religious, cosmological frameworks that formed outside of the Western European context. This urgency also necessitates the acknowledgment of the complex and problematic impact of Bringhurst's translations within a contemporary aboriginal context.

•

"The order of all poetry is to approach a state of music…" (Zukofsky 18)

Attending to the music of words attends to the surface and the sonics of the letter on its page. The visual corresponds graphically to the acoustics. There is music to the structure and ink of exteriors.

"The experience of being within an outside." (Agamben 69)

Bacteria ghosts are cells with their DNA removed, used to fool and fight death.

Cells without design, used in the scientific search for purity, disease-free immortality. No more elegies.

No more bloody ghazals! one ghost shouted to another. (Thesen 11)

Eating, driving, bridges, blasted cells for microbiological experiments. The traffic. The consumption.

In the morning they ate again, and took their penicillin pills. (11)

You can try penicillin to clean things up, but that just speeds us towards another end, another stillness: a cleaner death.

It killed all the bacteria, good and bad, like death or God.
Though death, being a matter of bacteria, is also life. (11)

Is this writing *anti* anti-bacterial? Populating, coating the linings and layers of the reading gut? Illuminating the life of the aspect?

It was easier to walk to Kamloops. (11)

The traffic of technology is teleological. Or it would like to think it is.

He lugged his own laptop; it was easier that way.
On his lap sat the known universe.
When he sat down, the known universe sat in his lap. (11)

The known universe sat on his lap. He owned the known when he sat it sat

on his lap. What is the chain of events at the end of which sits a laptop? Is the laptop a new phallus? Just wondering.

A known ghost. The trees burned all the way to the sky.
His stomach burned when he took the penicillin. (11)

Penicillin, or fire, or titanium.

She pressed upon the part of her mind
that was titanium, Queen of Faeries. (12)

The lines touch, are touched and touching on all sides—oscular (pressing stomachs against fire, metal against story, plates against brain). The lines have an immediate logic. And the logics of these relations keep a world (momentarily) whole within a particular cadence.

We drink the air with our ears that (our air and our ears) have been set into motion by other bodies.

And this post-bacterial world is ours—wherein the "real" is cleansed: "*…like a movie / or a corpse*" (22). The fire in Kamloops is fallout from the real we have made (too clean, too bare, too hot). In the destruction the strange scaffoldings are visible: "*an island kitchen, and killer ensuite*" (22). In the hollow left by the burned (murdered and murdering) "*killer ensuite*," the mind reaches across desperate for new relations: it finds catastrophe.

In the dream we had, a mountain fell down.

I was calling the name of my son. (22)

•

Frances Boldereff, Charles Olson's lover, a driving force in his writing. La Motz. A woman of many names.[2] A "Holy Experiment" focuses on Frances' funeral, or rather it does nothing of the kind. The peripheric is maintained. The poem, in part, takes place during the time of Frances' funeral, in Jerry Geiger's house (a friend of Boldereff), after the funeral. The death, the life of Boldereff, is noted on its rim, on the edge of an occasion. No glance is given to the centre, only the corners are illuminated: the cider, the homemade medicines ("*reddish-brown & / dark green*" [26]). This piece displays what Thesen calls, in a reference to Olson, "a [particular] stance toward reality" (xvi). "[H]abit[s] of thought being also habits of action" (xvi). Or habits of seeing. The subject is not central but disparate—extending into the peripheries, the exteriors of the objects that surround, entangle, and encounter. The subject becomes one of the many things and their narratives: "*Science magazines in stacks / . . . kitchen table, radio antennas / at several different angles . . .*" (27). The embarrassment of returning for "*tickets and passport*" (28). We are moving with the present into the past that we have already (never) left behind. The Susquehanna: "*pouring . . . new to my tongue*" (25). William Penn. The purple car: "*Galanta*" (29). The afternoon, "*frightened, like a commercial for insurance*" (29). And there alongside, Frances is mentioned in a slight slant way—"*ashes . . . beneath a fresh pile of dirt*" (25). Looking at the moon, without a decent hairbrush. Frances. Mattering on the edges, materializing in the anticipation of an encounter.

•

In "Relative to History," subjects as objects range in an particulate architecture of shoes, nostalgia, homunculus, time, Sweet Marie, hair, grief, Scratch and Win, fire, bills, cigarettes, sky, mist. They are all that that comprise us: "*You are abducted by aliens from outer space / who remove the steel pin from your hip and the silver hoop / from your sidekick's left earlobe.*" (61). We are our carapaces, hinged, pinned—not whole. Absurd and mundane. Where we alight manifests meaning and being. The matter,

2 Thesen edited Boldereff and Olson's correspondences with Ralph Maude: *Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff: A Modern Correspondence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1999).

"*those brown Prada shoes*" (36), is fragile, and the relation (connection) is questionable: "*the green and red leaves appliquéd*" (36). Hamlet holds the skull of Yorrick in a contemplation of existence. Here, consider shoes: expensive glued shoes (the desire, horror, and embarrassment of being). Infinity abates. Existence is bared. In the excess choices are made. We desire the exteriors and we are exteriorized, mortalized, compostable, absurd, aghast: the "*cowlick*," "*the skull / skyll*," "*shorn and bare, / aghast under the coffin lid*" (36).

But it is not over (ever). The text is inexhaustible, the reader "turn[s] on embroglioed pivot" (Robertson ll. 549).

I noticed everything— (59)

Our proximity, the excessiveness of the uncontainable contained which grazes our surfaces, is desire (Levinas 58): "*Legion are the myths of springtime, more / legion myths of springtime's cusp with winter*" (Thesen 48). The subject's relation to itself, *to springtime's cusp*, to its surroundings, is fragile and ecstatic. Subjectivity is the result of a compelled upsurging of the subject's exteriority. This exteriority is comprised in the subject's extended edges alongside which it greets the world: "*[t]hrough the blue / recycling bags you can see the news / of yesterday, the smeared faces, / juice boxes, sheets of instructions*" (40). The repeated daily longings of the subject to note, to relate, to encounter allows the un-free subject moments of astonishment and address:

Suddenly through trees ahead
a gleam of blue, the lake! (55)

But the gleam is no lake:

Nope. A blue tin roof.
Actually
a blue awning.

Actually the blue and white striped
awning over the back patio
of the Creekside Pub and Rib House—

domicile and breathing cage… (55)

Only awning, patio, and Rib House: "*domicile and breathing cage*" (55). The awning dims the view. Exteriors deny depth; humour ducks the serious. The inexplicable human world, the circumferences of the integumental body: we are not free. The destination is meat, sucked bones, entrapment, sauce. And yet, the subject remains fascinated with itself, its imprisonment, its unceasing (ludicrous) relations:

> "*His face behind the screen door smooth and handsome, / his hair is grey and so is his moustache. Behind his right ear / he displays a card with his face on it: Mr. Love.*" (52)

Production based in a desire that no satisfaction can abate: "*Things come up on the screen in throbbing turquoise…Their cards throbbed in slots*" (57). These are the veneers we know: smooth and plastic (inane, obscene), extending the planes and spaces of our desire.

•

The Fire

"*[T]hreading / even the largest needle / I tremble and miss the eye.*" (76)

Sew while Kamloops is burning: "*helicopters above the roof*" (77).

Sew and "a barker's booth / at the circus where you throw softballs / at the passing ducks…" (78). Terror and the materials of diversion, the odd banal associations the mind makes when the world ends:

> "*and you really want to win the large pink jaguar.*" (78)

As the burning bleeds—"*red resin plasma*" (82)—the subject dissipates into the blasted ashes of its surroundings:

extinct matchsticks leaning
tip to tip (84)

On the charred edges we reread a beginning and then the elegies of its ruin. And "Weeping Willow" is an elegy, to Angela. Even here (or most poignantly here) the expectation of depth is thwarted. The exteriors of death, of the narrator, of Angela and the reader are revealed. The desired exquisite surface does not fulfill desire; it deepens it. There is a catharsis in the Aristotelian sense, a collective action of mourning, in this reading: "*Thinking pours from her hair, / head-to-toe silk on the way to the car, / fresh cigarette in ivory holder / clenched to one side / as she reached back into coat arms— / perfume floating, rainy day, time to go*" (98).

The small, daily, fragile phrase, "*time to go*." The subjects and their textures dissolve. There is no transcendent progression toward a final destination; there is no decline to meaninglessness, there is no cure—only carefully noted movements, bodies moving aghast toward endings and longing toward beginning. "*Angela*" the speaker laments, "*I can't write love poems*." "*That's alright, she says*" (97). And it is all right. And these are love poems.

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John Webb / Petulant Sonnet for Sharon

Weep now for the grand life you might have known
if, long ago, on that wasted party night
when you ended up with two men in tow,
you'd picked the right one, but you were too tight

and ooh-la-la to make the wiser choice—
you made your doomed bed and lay down in it,
determined to be a bruised sacrifice.
Well, what could I expect from a poet?

Cockeyed romances were your stock in trade;
the muse a higher cause than simple bliss;
the spurned and broken hearted can't complain;
this is all ancient news—we both know this.

Attend now to this whisper in your ear:
I'm still your snubbed but doting fan my dear.

Phyllis Webb / Selected Poem

"SELECTED POEM" from Confabulations: Poems for Malcolm Lowry
by Sharon Thesen

The writing body can't hold a pen or pencil anymore--the
shakes so bad

that last night at the cantina the glasses of mescal appear
and disappear as if drunk by a ghost

they are looking for me yet where they threw
the Consul's body.

Where I am it is dark.

The only books in the house my immense imagination.

Now it takes me up to a whole afternoon to find the
word I need--
la mordida
correspondences

(the butterfly caught in the jaws of the cat)

Dear Albert forgive the tone of injured innocence but
I was locked in this world:

the distant tequilla the key to the day, sweet short-
cut to quote unquote hell, The Voyage That Never Ends.

YOU NO WRIDER YOU AN ESPIDER

MEA CULPA

Bix Beiderbecke, the five attractive gartersnakes
assembled for the concert. Malcolm, Margerie

considered having the lobotomy to increase
the horror effect, the final cure--

sheep in the pastures grazing, Wordsworth's daffodils.

Where am I? It is dark, alone
in the garden, sucking mother night.

Phyllis Webb via ST
October, 2007

"SELECTED POEM" p. 2

Dear Sharon:

If I could have I would have written one of my own poems, but you know that gift eludes me now. Can I even ask you to forgive the appropriation, the dressing-down, the theft? I filched some of George's Kerrisdale Elegies for a similar occasion of celebration. And since you did my Selected Poems perhaps I can do just one "Selected Poem" of yours?

Putting my paws into your marvellous poem is not a critique or an attempt to be an editor but a last resort out of my own poetic failure. You create miracles of shifts and shades and glides. And how you glide with your narrative and other procedures. In music "a glide is a succession of sounds made in passing from one note to another without silencing voice or instrument". I just happened on that word, glide, and knocked on the dictionary.

Forgive me if you can this de- and re-construction which brought me so close to your beautiful work.

Love,

Phyllis

Salt Spring Island, October 21, 2007

Contributors' Notes

Andrea Actis has lived in Vancouver for ten years, studied English at SFU, was briefly a member of the Kootenay School of Writing, had a bad winter, and is soon to begin her Ph.D. in Providence, RI. Regretfully, she has never met Sharon Thesen.

Robin Blaser, celebrated Vancouver poet, was Sharon Thesen's teacher at SFU in the 70s. His lengthy correspondence with her—conducted by fax—is now held in both the Blaser and Thesen archives at the Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU.

Roo Borson and Sharon Thesen shared a writer-in-residence position at Concordia University for the academic year 1992-93.

George Bowering: "In 2006 I wrote twelve chapbooks, a page a day for the whole year. All but one have been published, and are hard to find. My first association with Sharon came about when she transcribed the long long tapes I did for a book of interviews of Vancouver writers. This happened in 1975. I had no idea that she would turn out to be a top notch poet!"

Thea Bowering recently graduated with an MA in Comparative Literature from the University of Alberta. Her stories "How To Read Your Lover's Favourite Russian Novel" and "The Monster, or The Deferred Subject" have appeared in previous issues of *The Capilano Review*. Sharon Thesen is her second favourite Canadian poet.

Nancy Boyd teaches drawing and painting at Capilano College. She has a large collection of photographs of her friend Sharon.

Colin Browne's latest book, *The Shovel*, is published by Talonbooks.He is working on a new film that explores the Surrealists' fascination with Northwest Coast and Yup'ik masks and the surprising impact of this fascination on western culture. He is also writing the text for a new opera, *The Kingfisher*.

Clint Burnham taught at Capilano College from 2003-05, during which time his office was across the hall from Sharon Thesen (which he knew to pronounce at tee-sin, not thee-sin).

Ted Byrne lives in Vancouver and works as a researcher in the trade union movement. He is also a poet and has been associated with the Kootenay School of Writing since the early nineties. With Charles Watts he edited *The Recovery of the Public World* (Talonbooks, 1998), a collection of writings concerning Robin Blaser and his sphere of activity. Recent work has been published in *TCR*, *WCL*, and *The Gig*.

Stephen Collis is the author of three books of poetry, most recently *The Commons* (Talonbooks, 2008), and two studies of contemporary poetry, including *Phyllis Webb and the Common Good—Poetry/Anarchy/Abstraction* (2007). He teaches at SFU, where he first met Sharon in the late 1990s, at a reading at which she wore leather.

Pierre Coupey, founding editor of *The Capilano Review*, is a writer, printmaker, and painter. He taught in the Capilano English Department for over three decades and worked closely with Sharon on various committees, on *The Capilano Review*, and most memorably as department co-ordinators. Pierre's most recent solo show took place at Gallery Jones, which represents his work in Vancouver and the Pacific Northwest.

Mary di Michele is a poet and novelist. Her latest book is *Tenor of Love, a novel* (Simon & Schuster, 2005). She teaches at Concordia University where she was very pleased to meet and get to know Sharon Thesen when Sharon was writer-in-residence there in the '90s. Mary felt very lucky to be given *The Beginning of the Long Dash* when it came out to review for *Books in Canada*. She has been a big fan ever since.

Brian Fawcett is a founding editor of the internationally-followed Internet news service, www.dooneyscafe.com. His latest works, part of a 12-year project, are *Virtual Clearcut: Or, The Way Things Are In My Home Town* (Thomas Allen & Sons, 2003), which won the 2004 Pearson Prize for non-fiction, and *Local Matters: A Defense of Dooney's Café and Other Non-globalized Places, People and Ideas* (New Star, 2003). He lives in Toronto with his wife, Leanna Crouch, and ten year-old daughter Hartlea. He writes full time, gardens, and plays more sandlot baseball than is healthy or wise.

Born in Manitoba, Patrick Friesen teaches at Kwantlen University College. In addition to poetry, essays, and plays, he has collaborated with improv pianist Marilyn Lerner. His most recent works are *calling the dog home* (CD), *Interim: Essays & Mediations*, and *earth's crude gravities*.

Maria Hindmarch races dragonboats. She misses her neighborhood walks and talks with Sharon and has to settle for phone and email conversations.

Diana Hartog is a poet and novelist. Brick Books published *Ink Monkey*, her most recent volume of poetry, in 2006.

Nancy Holmes has written four books of poetry, most recently *Mandorla* (Ronsdale, 2005). She is the editor of a forthcoming anthology, *Open Wide a Wilderness: Canadian Nature Poems* (Wilfrid Laurier UP), and with Sharon Thesen edits the new journal *Lake: A Journal of Arts and Environment*. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia Okanagan and lives in Kelowna BC.

Andrew Klobucar has taught at Capilano for the past eight years, the first five of which were lucky enough include Sharon Thesen as a colleague and much admired mentor. Thesen's poetry literally helped define the West coast, for Klobucar, as an important Canadian literary centre, onward from the 1980s.

Michele Leggott has published six books of poetry, including *Milk & Honey* (2005, 2006) and *Journey to Portugal* (2007). She is co-editor of *Big Smoke: New Zealand Poems 1960-1975* (2000) with Alan Brunton and Murray Edmond, and editor of Robin Hyde's long poem *The Book of Nadath* (1999) and *Young Knowledge: The Poems of Robin Hyde* (2003). A major project since 2001 has been the development of the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre (nzepc) at the University of Auckland where Leggott is an Associate Professor of English. She was recently appointed inaugural New Zealand Poet Laureate 2007-09. See also <www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/leggott/index.asp>.

Kent Lewis worked along side Sharon Thesen as an Instructor at Capilano College for nearly a decade, until Sharon left to teach at UBC Okanagan. He immediately moved into Sharon's vacated office, which he thinks makes him especially qualified to comment on her poetry.

Nicole Markotić is a poet, critic, and fiction writer who teaches English Literature, Creative Writing, and Disability Studies at the University of Windsor. She has published two books of poetry: *Connect the Dots* and *Minotaurs & Other Alphabets* (Wolsak & Wynn), and her chapbook, *more excess*, won the 1998 bpNichol Poetry Chapbook

Award. Her novel *Scrapbook of My Years as a Zealot* is forthcoming this fall (Arsenal Pulp Press). She has been a big fan of Sharon Thesen's poetry since first reading *Artemis Hates Romance* in the 1980s.

Ralph Maud edited Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff's letters with Sharon Thesen. His *Charles Olson at the Harbour*, a biography of Olson, has just been released by Talonbooks.

Barry McKinnon lives in Prince George—a northern BC city and his sometime muse—and continues to work on "In the Millenium," a sequence of poems begun in 2000. After a long stint teaching college he now has time to rejuvenate Gorse Press: Sharon Thesen's *Toledo* is the first title in the new chapbook series and George Bowering's *There Then* the second. He is also writing prose assemblages inspired by Ken Belford, Robert Creeley, and Al Purdy.

Daphne Marlatt's new long poem in prose fragments, *The Given* (McClelland & Stewart, 2008), reads like a novel and was written as the third in her trilogy beginning with *Ana Historic* and *Taken*. She is currently collaborating with book designer Frances Hunter on *Between Brush Strokes*, a limited-edition chapbook poem about the life and work of the BC painter and poet Sveva Caetani, forthcoming from JackPine Press (Saskatoon).

Erín Moure is a Montreal poet and translator who first encountered Sharon Thesen's work—*Artemis Hates Romance*—in a bookstore on West Broadway in Vancouver in 1980. She's been an avid fan of Sharon Thesen ever since.

Jenny Penberthy is the current editor of *The Capilano Review*.

Meredith Quartermain's *Vancouver Walking* won the BC Book Award for Poetry in 2006. Two new books are coming out in 2008: *Matter* from Bookthug, and *Nightmarker* from NeWest. Her work has appeared in *The Walrus*, *CV2*, *Prism International*, *The Capilano Review*, *West Coast Line*, the *Windsor Review*, *Canadian Literature* and many other literary magazines. She is the co-founder of Nomados Literary Publishers that published Sharon Thesen's chapbook *Weeping Willow*.

Lisa Robertson first heard Sharon Thesen read at the Western Front, in approximately 1982. Then Sharon visited a poetry class taught by Rob Dunham at SFU,

around 1984. They actually met around 1990 at Proprioception Books. They ate tapas prepared by Gerry Shikatani on East 2nd around 2001. Now Lisa's in Oakland thinking it over. She's Artist in Residence at California College of the Arts until 2009. She'll have a new book from Coach House next year.

Renee Rodin is a Vancouver writer. She ran R2B2 Books along with its weekly reading series from 1986-94. Some of Sharon's books were launched there. Renee's own books are *Bread and Salt* (Talonbooks) and *Ready for Freddy* (Nomados). Over the years she and Sharon have shared a few tears and a lot of laughter.

Bob Sherrin is a writer, visual artist, and educator. His works have been published or exhibited in Canada, the USA, Scotland, Switzerland, Italy, and India. He teaches in the Humanities Division at Capilano College in North Vancouver, BC.

> Note: "'ReVerb & Echo' is made with background images from those I shot for the cover of Sharon Thesen's *Confabulations* and *The Beginning of the Long Dash*. Each text is created from lines excerpted from both publications; the repeating, narrow-but-expanding images are details from a photo of Thesen dancing."

Gerry Shikatani has authored several books of poetry and a collection of stories. He is also a text-sound performance artist and has worked in experimental film collaborating with filmmaker Phillip Hoffman. Their recent *ever present going past* is based on texts from *mortar rake glove broom basin sansui* and *First Book, Three Gardens of Andalucía* that was published as a special *TCR* project while Sharon was editor. He is currently working on *Second Book, niwa* (texts and images created in Japanese gardens) as well as *Learning To Eat*, a book of memoirs and essays in gastronomy. He is based in Peterborough, Ontario.

Pete Smith's most recent publication is *Strum of Unseen* (above/ground press, 2008). "Sharon and I share geographies—Kamloops, Tranquille, sage & Ponderosa countries—and histories—our generation, the wildfires of 2003. When we were evacuated from the Strawberry Hills Fire (a case of Premature Evacuation, as hindsight indicates), Sharon kindly invited Lyn & I to stay with her and Paul, for 'safe refuge'. We declined and were quietly back home when the apocalyptic Okanagan Mountain

Park Fire fingered 20 feet from Sharon's front door. Her generosity exceeded her prescience by three weeks & two hundred kilometres."

George Stanley's new book of poetry is *Vancouver: A Poem* (New Star, 2008). With Sharon Thesen and Ryan Knighton, he was part of the late '90s the Aboutism movement in poetry.

Christine Anne Stewart is from Vancouver and currently writes, teaches, and researches poetry and poetics in the English and Film Department at the University of Alberta. Selected publications: "This Then Would Be the Conversation," in *Antiphonies: Essays on Women's Experimental Poetries in Canada*, (The Gig, 2008); *The Trees of Periphery* (above/ground press, 2007); *Pessoa's July: or the months of astonishments* (Nomados, 2006).

Sharon Thesen is author of eleven books of poems: *Artemis Hates Romance* (Coach House, 1980), *Radio New France Radio* (Slug Press, 1981), *Holding the Pose* (Coach House, 1983), *Confabulations* (Oolichan, 1984), *The Beginning of the Long Dash* (Coach House, 1984), *The Pangs of Sunday* (McClelland & Stewart, 1990), *Aurora* (Coach House, 1995), *News & Smoke* (Talonbooks, 1999), *A Pair of Scissors* (Anansi, 2000), *Weeping Willow* (Nomados, 2005), and *The Good Bacteria* (Anansi, 2006). *Confabulation*s and *The Good Bacteria* have both been short-listed for the Governor General's Award. *A Pair of Scissors* won the Pat Lowther Memorial Award. In 2002 Thesen was a member of the jury for the Griffin Prize for Excellence in Poetry. She is a former editor of *The Capilano Review* (2001-05). She has also published two editions of *The New Long Poem Anthology* and the Governor-General's Award-winning edition of Phyllis Webb's selected poems, *The Vision Tree*. With Ralph Maud, she co-edited the correspondence between Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff (Wesleyan UP, 1999).

John Webb teaches English at Langara College and has published poems in *Grain*, *Queen's Quarterly*, and *The Antigonish Review*.

Phyllis Webb was born in Victoria, BC, in 1927. A former producer at CBC radio, she is the author of more than ten books of poetry and prose, including the Governor General's Award winning *The Vision Tree*, which long-time friend Sharon Thesen edited in 1982. She continues to live on Salt Spring Island where she paints and thinks.

Many thanks to Paul Mier and Tony Power for their help with this issue.

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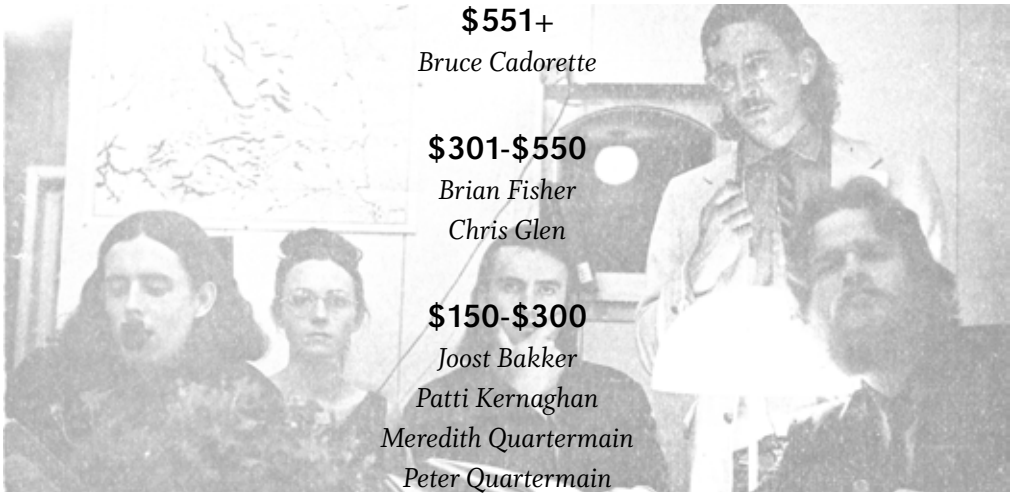

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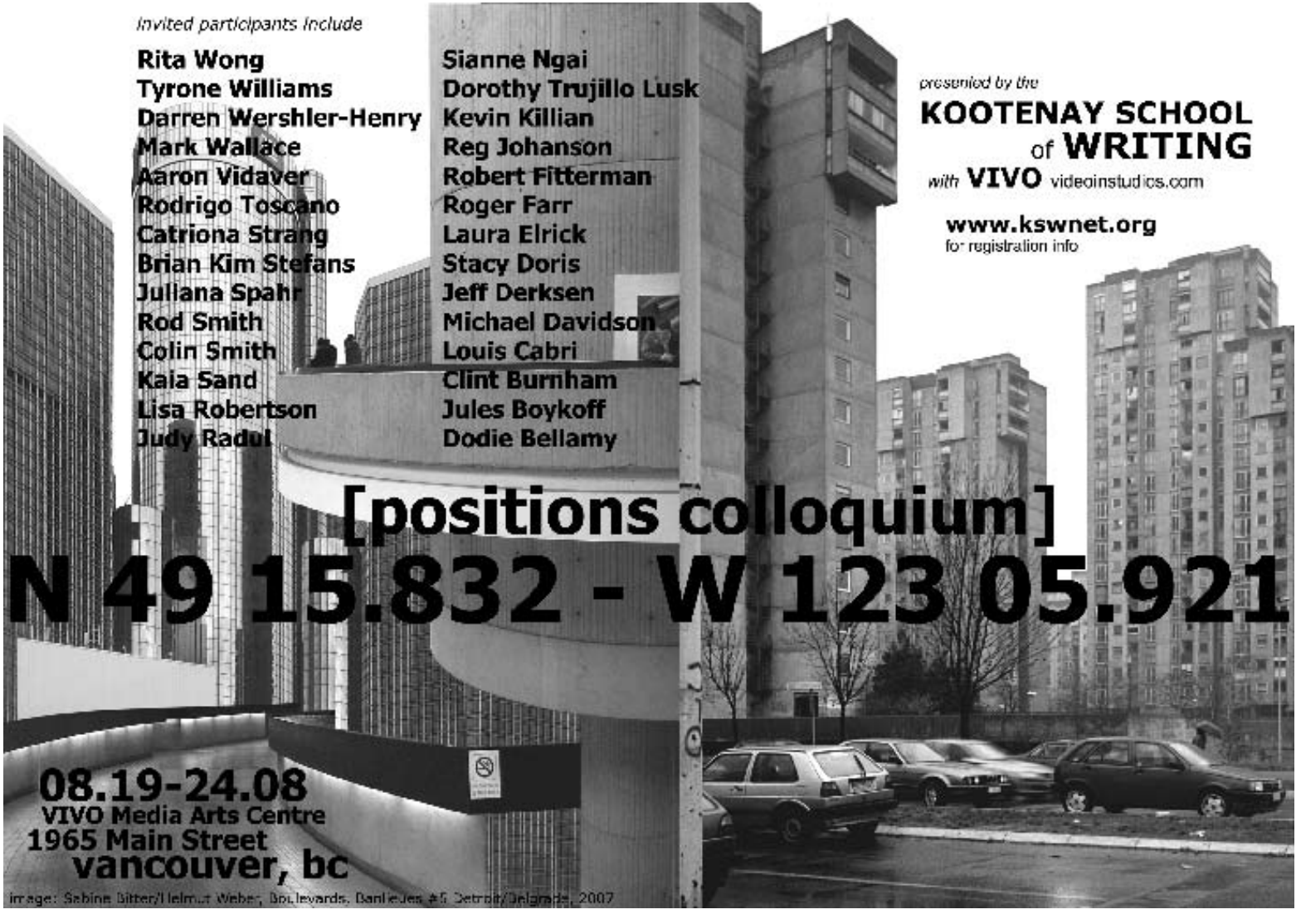
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THE CAPILANO REVIEW

The Capilano Review has, for over thirty years, provided a measure to the innovative and contemporary and a productive site for a generation of literary and artistic boundary walkers. Its editors have provoked and sustained imagination and possibility for a wide range of writers and artists. TCR is a crucial voice to the continuing surge of west coast and Canadian culture.

—Fred Wah (February 2006)

Yr mail jarred me back to 1974 to Peregrine Books, where the first "books" I bought on moving to Vancouver were 3 issues or so of The Cap Review. Exciting, cover to cover reading, not the usual mag snoresville….I thought life had changed utterly!

—Erín Moure (March 2006)

I have never felt so satisfied with the appearance of my work in a magazine. It has been beautifully laid out on the page, the page itself is beautiful (the paper), the typeface is beautiful. The company my poems keep in this issue is beautiful. For some reason, publishing these poems in The Capilano Review feels as enlivening as publishing an entire book of poems.

—John Barton

An image of the world as of now. Beautiful….I can see the extraordinary care with which each issue is handled, obviously a labour of love.

—Warren Tallman