

1. An 2. Interview 3. with 4. Christine Stewart

by Malcolm Sutton

Christine Stewart is the author of *from Taxonomy* (West House 2003) and *Pessoa's July: or the months of astonishments* (Nomados 2006). She also teaches creative writing at the University of Alberta.

Answers, by Number (Refer to Question Tree on page 5)

1. Local influences: They are the writers that I have grown up with—writers that live down the road, across the city, on the other side of the lake. These writers are always, somehow, with me, you know. Writers who become the invisible portable forces you speak with—no matter where you are. Catronia Strang, Lisa Robertson, Ted Byrne, Susan Clark, Lissa Wolsak, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Maxine Gadd. Horses of Perspex.
 Distant influences: These are the dead writers who, as Lisa says, we make our contemporaries: Proba, Giambattista Vico, Baruch Spinoza, Gertrude Stein, Jacques Derrida, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Mary Shelley, Jack Spicer, Alighieri Dante. I also find conversation with Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir. And then there is Nathanaël Stephens, who I met this Spring. She is very much alive and somewhere in Chicago.
6. Yes, or rather, no, or rather, I feel that many of the poets I read *are* philosophers. That is, they are poets for whom writing is a method of inquiry, and poetry an ideal site for an investigation of language with language. That is, these writers engage language to investigate the real (understanding language *as* the site of the real). And many of the philosophers that I read engage language poetically / politically ZZ/ philosophically in order to conduct these same processes of inquiry.
16. No. To enter into a poem the way you would a pool or a fog or a frozen meat locker.
 This works.
2. Yes, the “I” must be re-imagined. The pronoun indicating the first person, the human subject has to be one of the most crucial and most cruel parts of speech. Bearing such strong lines and given so much weight. It configures us; it destroys us. And we say parts of speech? What part of speech am I if I have no speech? What if interests that are never mine mutilate my “I”?

In “Language Consciousness and Society” (*Poetics Journal* 9, 1991), Felix Guattari claimed that the most important work we can do is to continually reinvent the subject, to refashion it in a constant and attentive response to the shifting world. He argues that poetry is the best medium for this action. To me this is an interesting proposal.

- 15.** Working with the idea of reason and rationality and delirium. I am proposing that reason and our attitude toward reason is highly unreasonable, extremely irrational. We make connections (this with that). We make boxes in order to order the wild mind, in order to ram unruly matter into neat and discernible shapes. And from our present vantage point, it seems that we don’t have much choice, that we are bound to engage in this endless process of categorization.

Francis Bacon writes in “The unsatisfactory state of science, “men's [sic] fair meditations, speculations and reasoning are a kind of insanity, only there is no one standing by to notice it.” What if we noticed it? What if we considered what else we might do? What would we be if we didn’t endlessly order, define and name? What else is there? It’s a good question. And if defining is a delirium then maybe it is delirious to be human—delirium: *delirare*, to rave, to turn the furrow awry in plowing < *de-*, from + *lira*, a line, furrow. Maybe our most regular, quotidian response to the world is right off the wall or line, all askew. The project of categorization that takes place in *from Taxonomy* works to reveal the arbitrary and delusional nature of such a response. And certainly this work is also delusional. Can we actually stand by and notice? Can we separate ourselves from ourselves to that extent? I don’t think so. But perhaps we can ask if the damage that naming can inflict is unavoidable? If naming, describing, categorizing is a compulsive, delirious response to the matter of the world then maybe language is an endless, terrible turning, beautiful, toxic attraction and distraction. But a distraction from what? Turning (away, awry) from chaos or maybe from our unbearable unknowing? Asquint from the matter of what is? Or maybe from our intimacy with that unknowable matter, our intimacy with each other and each thing: rain, edge, iron, sandwich, cloud, planet, or ear. Maybe language distracts us from the fact that it is all fleshy matter pressed against itself and the close breath from another mouth, too close. Maybe it distracts us from the fact that there is no right box. Maybe language distracts us from the fact that categorization makes us and cripples us. The image here is compelling, a figure, staccato something moving and yet always pinched back, maimed, limping. What harm have we done here? What harm have we not done here? Socially, environmentally, politically, personally. What else can we do now or ever but make different connections, other boxes to write, to speak ourselves into over and over and over again? Hoping for a way out of the terrible places and states we word ourselves into.

My focus on things and their surfaces in this poem both acknowledges the shifting edges of our own outward shape and the force of those perceived shapes upon the matter of what is. It tries to look beyond the press of things to observe the affects of our orders, their little draughts and prints. And so, the project is both of and against itself, inherited from the Renaissance project of order (to name one—you see, I cannot not name). The Renaissance project of order was directly involved in the work of colonialism: the old world, new world. This arrogance, the audacity of the names (my world is old (legitimate) and mine, your world is new (because I just found it) and mine (because I just found it). These histories are the very wounds we make, are made by, are wounded by.

And maybe, as we reconfigure the I, as Guattari suggests, it is also necessary to note the arbitrary, turning nature of the real. Maybe we must know that our lines, our names, are motile edges determined by our delirium.

- 13.** Is. Yes a critique of presence, of epistemology, of its transcendence. And a celebration of what we smack in to, shift against. Also amazement—not that we exist but that we endlessly configured existence: hilarious, lewd, mean and gorgeous.
- 10.** Are the languages of poetry and science at war with each other? No. Not really.
Good science always notes its limits, its theory. It is the same with good poetry. It must, at some moment, point to itself as words, as language, as that that makes, breaks and refuses meaning. But, I would suggest that traditionally science comes with a set and cemented form of subjectivity: Euro-centric, male, logical, righteous, truth seeking. And we are as religious about science as we are about religion. To suggest that the scientific is objective, without subjectivity is odd.
- 11.** I think the we speaks to the we that makes the I, that makes the world. *Sensus communis*. There is no *one* that works. There is no human before society. It's all (inexorably) entangled.
- 8.** Minding the gap. Mining the gap. To move forward or perhaps to fall in and maybe (or maybe not) crawl out. I like these questions. Right now I am considering them on a ferry in the Pacific Ocean. Islands and waves outside. There are many questions. But I like these (branching) questions. They access the work of the poem. Thank you.
- 7.** I was taught to mistrust the metaphor as if it promised me something it could not keep. Now I love its false promise, its ridiculous leap. It offers nothing--only itself. Why should it be true? These metaphors do not mind the gap. They point it out. Falling, crashing into it. I hoped to make this visible, this constitutive failure.
- 10.** Dickering with meanings of words. Playing with the common meaning. Playing with the idea of the common. If truth exists anywhere, it is there—in the *sensus communis*. We make a common sense; we make a truth. Meaning is a collective act, an art. Like Gadamer argues in *Truth and Method*, humans do not exist outside relation. Language is shared meaning. So our deliriums, our meanings are shared. And sometimes our common sense articulates a truth that narrows around the ankles, or the throat, ice truth and tight polyester socks. Then what? What is shared? An agony, an absence, an abjection, an addiction. A numbness. Rustling the woven threads of a common real might just realign the common and present delirium toward a different form, another colour, another word, uncommon, turning. Perhaps. A new delirium—slanting, haywire. Maybe happily. Maybe not. *from Taxonomy* reconsiders our profound unknowing, to see what else might turn, converge, reconfigure, reconvene.



Now I am on a bus. The island (Vancouver Island) highway is in a valley of blue lupines, yellow broom. The lupines, indigenous. The broom, invasive. Here, one is wary of names. Much of the land, the towns in British Columbia are named after rich white men—lumber barons, mine owners etc. What other histories that lie here are mostly ignored. This is painful. This ignorance causes great pain. Georgia

Strait. Sproat Lake. Denman Island. Langara. Vancouver. All men. All white and with wealth. A thin film of capitalist and imperial time over someone else's deep and different history. It's rude. The colonial project of naming was synonymous with the colonial mindset. Naming as conquering, owning, stealing and bloody uncivil. Names. We use them to mean and exist, to control and annihilate.

9. I am drawn to its delirium. To our delirium—that we can't really fully acknowledge. If we did acknowledge it where would we be? Looking straight into the hole, horror, giddy, gap— us rushing home, some place that is nowhere, making it up, making an outrageous mess. Like we do, endlessly. My question re. delirium (derangement *délire delirium tremens*) leaves me speechless, tremulous. And what if, finally, there is nothing to say. This is uncomfortable.
3. If there is no (delirious) human without society there can be no awry I without we. The I merges (shaken and shaking) from the we and returns there. I am interested in how it is that we make the world and its troubled, deranged I. And what are the consequences of this making to our selves, to the idea of the human, nature, to the matter of the world that encounters us and is inexorably changed by the encounter.
5. Is the we the voice of the poet? Yes, in so far as the poet is the voice of a shared community of language. Often we are making that community as we go. Sometimes small tendril gestures are recognized. Sometimes this is miraculous.
14. The movement from the customary traces the known and the so-called truth into the obviously constructed. These terms are abstractions imposed on matter. Which is an abstraction itself—but this is not true of its weight, its damp press and mineral heft. Sometimes the matter survives the imposition, our impositions. Often it does not. Often we do not. Here, I would wish it otherwise.

Questions

