

Tryst Interviews Cleopatra Mathis

Mia: In one of the articles I read, you were quoted as saying, "I prefer poetry that is luminous in its language and concrete in its references; [not that] the reader has to translate or wade through in order to understand." Would you elaborate on luminous in its language?

Cleopatra: I mean to say that the poem's language should not obscure its meaning but illuminate it through the use of appropriate images. I prefer a poem that uses language to move the poem along emotionally, not stop it in its tracks. The movement of a poem should be clear to the reader; if the reader is sidetracked or distracted by the language of the poem, then the poem is not successful. There are two kinds of language in a poem: the concrete and the emotional: what Stevens called the outer and inner subjects of the poem. The object part is the outer, the concrete, and without it, the poem makes little sense. I want to understand the subject of the poem, just as I want to appreciate the emotional significance of the imagery. Luminous language is memorable; it is the vehicle for the complex emotional life of the poem. For me, the language also must be musical—it should make me want to remember it.

Mia: To follow up, when you say, "not that the reader has to translate or wade through in order to understand" — I'm guessing you mean poetry that is not obscure. But do you think that some of the poem's clarity and experience falls on the reader's shoulders? That perhaps, the readers don't necessarily want to "work" at trying to understand the poem?

Cleopatra: I think my own poems are fairly clear in terms of what is happening, the concrete reference (the outer subject). But my language is fairly dense and textured, and to appreciate all that it evokes, the poem does have to be read more than once. The images should all be consonant in a poem, by which I mean they should work together, they should accumulate into a kind of whole. A good poem requires a patient reader, I think, because all that layering isn't clear on a first reading. But that's why poetry is so rich—it aims to accomplish a lot more with a few words on a page than other writing. I want the poem to challenge me, but I don't want to feel that the poem resists me. I want the language of a poem to illuminate meaning, not obscure it.

Mia: When you feel you have connected with a student, what transpires?

Cleopatra: I know I've made a difference for a student when she is driven to write more, to read more, and to stay with it, regardless of whatever requirement I have on the syllabus. I've been teaching a long time now, and I don't have much patience with self-indulgence or laziness. A lot of undergraduates just want to express themselves or work out certain emotional problems, and those students usually don't continue writing. The serious student is thrilled with the reading I introduce him to, and that is the key for me.

Mia: Let's imagine for a moment that I came to you and said, "I don't like poetry. I don't understand it; it's too beyond me. A lot of poetry is so morbid..." What would you say to me?

Cleopatra: I'd say, "Let's read a poem—let me show you this incredible poem by _____."

I think one of the real joys I still have in my teaching life is bringing students to poetry in a genuine, questioning way. I teach a contemporary American poetry course that attracts students who've only been taught poetry by teachers who are mostly interested in theory. I care most about how a poem is made, how it moves, line by line down the page. The language, the rhythm and music. I am thrilled by the poems I love, and there are so many to get excited about. I make my students learn the poems, not just write about them, but actually know the lines. Some of them are terribly intimidated by this on the first day, but by the end of the class, they can recognize the important poets of the 50's, 60's, and 70's. And they love the work; they are changed by it. It is all just a matter of close reading. If a reader is sensitive at all, he responds. And, well, yes, most poems are sad, or they pick at sad subjects. I don't find most people are bothered by "morbidity," they are bothered by the possibility that death, or despair, might be all there is. I don't think I know any morbid poems that don't illuminate something valuable about how we live our lives. The very act of writing a poem seems to me to be all about hope.

Mia: What are your feelings about MFA programs in writing, or these seminars and conferences given by established poets? Do you feel that writing poetry can't be taught? How does one go about teaching students to appreciate and understand poetry?

Cleopatra: An MFA program can be the best thing to happen to a young writer because it can give her a sense of community at a crucial time. The energy that a good workshop generates and the sense that other writers care about what you are working for can be liberating, challenging, and inspiring. The best programs foster growth and give writers a chance to share that growth. My best friends come from my graduate school program at Columbia; I still rely on them to read my work. Having said that, I will also say that an MFA program can't teach you to write. It can shine a good light on what you're doing; it can provide you with models of other writers, particularly if the teachers are good; it can enrich your reading life and make you articulate aspects of craft that you might not push yourself into doing otherwise; but it will not give you the necessary discipline and desire it takes to become a good writer. The best teacher can't make that happen.

It worries me that students sign up for week-long workshops with such high expectations. They take seminars with poet-teachers thinking a particular poet is going to make them better writers. Mostly, what you get is a glimpse into how that one poet works, which is not to say her method will work for you. Finding one's way as a poet takes a long time, and a week's workshop works mainly as an inspiration to keep going.

I think the only way to teach poetry is to read wonderful poems and examine what is happening in the craft of the poem, line by line. I often have students imitate poems they admire. I encourage them to read as much as possible, looking for the poems that stop them cold. I emphasize how we are drawn to a poem first by its language, not by its meaning, and I encourage them to read for the thrill of the language. And of course, I encourage a regular writing and reading habit: they go together.

Mia: I like your answer: "I encourage them to read as much as possible, looking for the poems that stop them cold." On that note, the poem of yours that stopped me cold in my tracks and inspired me to write to you the very next day was, "The Horse"

from *What to Tip the Boatman?* and consequently led me to pursue this interview (four years later). Here is the poem:

THE HORSE

In those days, she woke only
to reach the stable, the saddle.
Broken racehorse, tethered to his own hell,
he was the only one she'd ride.
She had him tamed on the lunge line
in the indoor ring, where he trusted
the calm circle around her, fixed on course.
That frozen afternoon, who knows what crack
he heard when she dropped the line?
Maybe her body scrambling to retrieve it
jogged his stubborn terror and turned him
crashing through the corridor of closed doors,
splintering each gate, the attached line
flying like a whip at his head, all the way
into the snow, where she followed
his twisting bloody trail. Three icy hours
the mercury dropped, the vet sewed,
steam rising from open flesh, the gaping
shoulder and neck, while in the horse's ear
she whispered him back -- mother then
to his misery, rescued and changed.

Mia (cont): Every time I read this poem, I get chills down my spine. It clearly establishes a direct relationship between the broken horse and the daughter, the issue of trust, and the beginning of the healing process at the end. It's a very symbolic as well a symbiotic relationship. I don't know how you were able to get so close and precise with your imagery and metaphor. For instance, "Three icy hours/the mercury dropped, the vet sewed/steam rising from open flesh, the gaping/shoulder and neck."

Cleopatra: The poem is based on a real event, like so much else in that book. And though I was not physically there when my daughter's horse panicked and crashed through three barn doors, my daughter told me every detail. She is a wonderful writer herself, and at one point she even wrote about the steam rising out of the horse's neck, but in far more detail than I wrote in my poem. In a sense, I stole the poem from her. And her involvement with that particular horse was motherly in every way. She nurtured him endlessly, even when it became apparent that he was emotionally incapable of the three-day event we brought him for. Interesting that you say how "close" I was, how "precise." It was my daughter who gave me that precision, and her description of the event was so evocative that even now, I picture it as clearly as if I'd been there. I was actually three hours away. I suppose that my way into the poem had to do with my intense identification with my daughter—and many times having seen the role of her horse in her recovery from her friend's death. The drama of the occasion called to me, as well as her incredibly detailed memory of the event. So I owe the poem to her, completely.

Mia: In your interview with Sarabande, the publisher of your sixth book, *White Sea*, due to be released July 2005, you discussed some of the helplessness and terror centered on parenting your daughter:

What to Tip the Boatman? was written out of sheer terror of the fact that I'd almost lost my daughter to depression and suicide after the suicide of her close friend. I'd never before written a book that was so much in response to a life situation. . .

When my daughter became ill, it was as if the girl I knew had disappeared. But the biggest parallel, in which the self-identifying figure of Demeter initially came to me, even before I started writing the poems, has to do with my own refusal to write until I knew my daughter was safe, that she had come back. My first response, curiously, was not gratitude, but what seemed to be recognition of the terrible knowledge of parenting: the child will leave and the parent is helpless. I don't think I ever felt I had the power to save her; I could only respond to her absence by refusing my own self. Demeter's "self" is the land she nurtures, and she is willing to let everything she creates there die if she can not have her daughter back. The mother's power is a self-negating one, all sacrifice of the self, which is the reason mother-love is so complicated. It's a power struggle in which the mother threatens to obliterate herself to get what she is desperate to have.

I had done everything I could, furiously, and what was left me? I had given everything of myself up in the process.

Mia (cont.): I don't feel as if you've answered the question that you, yourself posed, "what was left of me?" The question intrigues me because that kind of mother-daughter struggle implies a loss of self that can never be regained, thus an all-consuming sacrifice. Is there a part of you that has accepted sadness for your own loss and will mark you in such a manner that will affect your writing?

Cleopatra: Yes, I think my new book is all about being marked by that loss. I felt for a long time that I would never write again, then after I wrote What to Tip the Boatman? I felt I had nothing creative in me left. That book seemed to be a report, not an imagining. The sentient writing self had closed up. Later, I had other things to deal with as well, particularly the deaths of close friends. The question of how to speak, how to create poems around and through the self's despair, was my way into the new book. But in the end, I feel far more open in my responses to the outside world.

Mia: Is there any kind of formula or approach to poetry? Are there any trade secrets of writing poetry that you'd be willing to share?

Cleopatra: There is no formula for me. I go outside and look around. I never get tired of looking and I can't believe how everything changes from day to day or day to night. I want to show on paper what I see, and I want to see it clearly. The inside of my head is blank until I find something worth watching.

I have no idea where poems come from, except that I know for me, they depend on silence and emptiness, a receptivity in me, that my life mostly lacks. For that reason, I tend to write first drafts when I am away from home and my daily life. I can revise the way I clean house or perform any other task, but the first draft of a poem is an

unpredictable and blessed circumstance. It comes when I am completely open, as if I am just blank and waiting. When I do have that visitation, I write quickly and without any self-critic looking over my shoulder. I think it's really important to go wherever the poem takes me, and sometimes that is a complete surprise. I don't want to interrupt the process before it finishes with me. Later, revision is a completely different, completely conscious thing, with me in control.

I also allow myself all my excesses in the first draft. Anything is permissible, but when I start revising, I am very hard on myself. I push hard at all my boundaries and I don't let up. I make myself go to the hardest part of the poem, by which I mean the most ambiguous and coded, and I try to dig there. I also tend not to write everyday or even every month. There is a pressure that builds up in me, which results in a group of poems all at once, an urgent release. Then I revise those poems for months. It's taken me my whole writing life to not feel uncomfortable about this tendency to wait awhile for poems, rather than working steadily everyday. I've finally accepted that I can't write all the time, even if I had the time. I believe in the poem as a crucial utterance, not random or incidental.

Mia: How important is it to being published? Online as opposed to Print?

Cleopatra: I don't think poets ought to be thinking about getting published. They should be thinking about getting better. They should be putting their energy into their writing, into thinking about writing, and reading as much as they can. Thinking about pleasing an audience is not important and it can derail the very important process of learning your craft. An audience is not going to teach you how to write, and an editor is not going to make you a better writer by accepting or rejecting your work. If I didn't have a commitment to a university, which requires that I publish a good amount of work each year, I would not send work out except to possibly two or three journals. It's just not that important to me anymore. I know the poems will appear in a book eventually, and that's enough. As it is, I am so reluctant to send work out before I feel confident that it is (as much as I can guess) finished that I often have trouble getting it into magazines or journals before the new book comes out.

I am not a huge fan of the computer, and I really dislike reading the screen. I have to print things out to enjoy them. But I realize that I am more and more in the minority, and I'm trying to accept the inevitable! I'm sure there will be more and more on-line publication; I can see how it is even a good thing in terms of making poetry more easily available. I know people who go to poetry sites on the web who before the advent of the computer would not have sought out poetry in journals.

Mia: If you don't mind, I'd like to talk a little bit more about your background, where you grew up and what influenced you to write. From the same interview by Sarabande you wrote:

I think the most significant thing about my childhood was my Greek family's isolation in north Louisiana. We were set apart in ways that Greeks in large urban centers were not: they could form their own community and keep their culture intact. (This was true in Birmingham, Alabama, where my mother and her brothers were raised.) In some ways we were no different from other uneducated rural people. No one expected anything of me, and my family didn't have the means, the educational background, or knowledge of English to introduce me to literature or any of the arts. In that sense, we weren't

unlike lots of other lower middle class people whose primary concern has to do with making a living. We didn't have many magazines or books in the house early on, though that changed as I went through school.

I understand your love of language and a hunger for books is what drove you to become an avid reader, but what compelled you to pursue your education to go on and become a writer, then a teacher? (I'm assuming that's the order).

Cleopatra: No, that's not the order. I wanted to be a teacher all my life. I saw teaching as one of the respectable professions a woman could have. All the women I knew were either waitresses, teachers, or nurses. I was ambitious. I wanted to get out of rural Louisiana as soon as I could, and getting an education was the way to do that. I began to think of writing poetry when I was teaching contemporary poets as a high school English teacher, starting at the age of twenty. I began to keep a journal and my daily jotting turned into poems. Eventually, I thought that the only way to get a college teaching job (which would allow time to write) was to go to graduate school.

Mia: You also revealed that in third grade you had an amazing teacher, Mary Caroline Wilson, whom you still refer to as Miss Wilson, the person most influential in encouraging you to read. The part about being a "terrible liar but an avid reader" struck me as humorous, but I believe they make up the ingredients of a good writer. Do you mind sharing that story here?

Cleopatra: Miss Wilson, who had a Ph.D, was an anomaly in our town. No one knew what to make of her. She left a prestigious job at L.S.U. to come back to Ruston to take care of her widowed father, and out of boredom, I suspect, became a third grade teacher. She noticed those of us who weren't like the others, I think, and she encouraged us. I was a terrible liar, but she never punished me, or even called me on it. Instead, she created a "writing nook" in the back of the classroom and told me that whenever I felt the need to tell one of my "experiences," I should just go there and write it down. I confused her with Laura Ingalls Wilder, the popular children's book writer, because she read all the Wilder books to us. I wanted to be a writer because Miss Wilson had such a love of books, and confused, I thought that meant you had to write. We also had very few books in the school, and I'd read everything by the end of third grade. We had no town library. I really didn't think many books existed. By all counts, it was my duty and obligation to bring more books into the world.

Mia: The late Hunter Thompson in his interview with Salon once said, "Telling the truth is the easiest way; it saves a lot of time. I've found that the truth is weirder than any fiction I've seen." Then, how much of your writing is "fiction" and how much of it is truth?

Cleopatra: Everything I write is true. I wouldn't know any other way. But saying it's true doesn't mean it actually happened in exactly the way the poem details! Being true in spirit is a constant search, one in which I am forever seeking a direction.