

The Library of America Interviews Anne Stevenson

In connection with the publication in April 2008 of [*Anne Stevenson: Selected Poems*](#) (edited by Andrew Motion) in The Library of America's [American Poets Project](#) series, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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You have published 14 books of poems over the past 50 years. U.K. Poet Laureate Andrew Motion has culled from them 80 of your shorter poems and the last 90 pages of Selected Poems are devoted to your acclaimed long poem, Correspondences: A Family History in Letters. Could you describe how the two of you selected which works to include?

Working with Andrew Motion was easy and pleasant. From my large English collection, *Poems 1955–2005*, he selected about 80 poems. I made a selection of my own, and when we compared lists, we found there was a great deal of overlap. I suggested one or two additions/omissions, as did he, and we agreed on a table of contents very quickly. He alone, after consulting with the editor at The Library of America, decided, to my delight, to include the whole of *Correspondences*. I couldn't be more pleased with the appearance of this neat, easy-to-carry little book that I hope will attract readers from outside an exclusive poetry-reading audience. Of course, Andrew made his selection with an American readership in mind. Some of my own favorites are missing, especially poems set in Wales and several inspired by my readings in the natural sciences. The medieval-like "A Lament for the Makers" was simply too long to include. My recent Bloodaxe volumes, however, are in print and obtainable through the Internet by anyone wanting to read a more complete Stevenson [see <http://www.anne-stevenson.co.uk/>].

As you revisit these poems, written over five decades, I wonder how many Anne Stevensons you find in this book. Do you hear one voice changing

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over time, or many voices, each belonging to a distinct period of your life? Could you cite examples of where you find the voice changing?

To tell the truth, although my life has changed course many times over the years, I don't think my voice—or, better, what I think of as my ear—has changed very much at all. I think of the poems, really, as being the one consistent, linked chain that holds those many Anne Stevensons together. When I was collecting poems for the Bloodaxe edition some years ago, I decided, on the advice of my husband, to “hang” them in what he called small thematic galleries rather than in a long chronological corridor. We were both surprised at how many early poems anticipated later ones, both in tone and theme. Certain ideas crop up again and again. There is, for instance, a recurring fascination with time passing (see “The Fiction Makers”) and the brevity of human life—not in a gloomy or even a Romantic sense, more as a field for elegy. The *Selected Poems*, which is arranged chronologically, is chock-a-block with them, apart from the “Elegy” to my piano-playing father: “Dreaming of the Dead,” “Arioso Dolente,” the two poems for Frances Horovitz, “Variations on a Line by Peter Redgrove.” Then, there's a recurring preoccupation, often a suspicious one, with language itself. Can mere words be trustworthy conveyors of the truth? In this respect, an early poem, “The Garden of Intellect” anticipates “The Price” and “Ah Babel.” Finally there is, as Andrew points out in his introduction, a sensuous yet ambiguous attitude towards nature, place, and landscape. Being part of nature, we humans cling to it and fill it with imaginary presences, though in itself nature is indifferent to us. Poems like “Sierra Nevada” (very early) expressing awe and wonder at such splendid indifference share an approach with more recent poems, such as “Trinity at Low Tide” and “Stone Milk.”

In Correspondences: A Family History in Letters you trace the lives of some two dozen members of an American family over 140 years through letters, journal entries, newspaper articles, obituaries, poems, and interior monologues. This certainly marked a dramatic point of departure in your work. What prompted you to embark on this adventure and where did it lead?

When I was living in the States in the summer of 1962, I stayed for some weeks with my sister Diana and her family in White Plains, New York. In her basement I discovered a trunk full of 19th-century family letters I hadn't known existed. Tragically, our young mother (only 54) died of cancer soon after New Year that winter, and I went back to the letters with an idea of writing a tribute to her. Nothing came of that, but the seed of an idea for a long, narrative poem took root in my mind. When later I became a Fellow of the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard, I found in the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History

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of Women in America the private correspondence of a number of New England families, including the Beecher-Stowe family. The mental template of 19th-century Puritanism caught my imagination, and I was soon using a medley of my own family letters together with some I found in the library to bring into existence the Chandler, Boyd, and Arbeiter families in *Correspondences*. I'm afraid I pinched whole sentences from Dr. Beecher, so amazed was I by the way these families' religion affected their lives. It took me years to bring the book up to date; it ends with the spreading hippie movement in 1972, a phenomenon I witnessed with some shock. The book was published by Wesleyan University Press and by Oxford in 1974, but, in a world very different from the present, it made little impact. I assumed it would be forgotten.

In addition to writing poems, you have written two books about Elizabeth Bishop (about 30 years apart) and Bitter Fame, a controversial biography of Sylvia Plath that led to your being one of the principal characters in Janet Malcolm's book, The Silent Woman. Selected Poems includes "Letter to Sylvia Plath" and "Waving to Elizabeth." Those two poets will strike many as being poles apart in their sensibilities. Did they influence you in different ways?

I never feel, you know, that Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath are poles apart *as poets*. They each had a superb ear, for one thing. And they both created impeccable works of art . . . on different themes, of course, and in wholly different ways. But as artists, neither one of them ever forgot that a painter-like vision and sound (rhythm) contribute as much to poetry as subject matter.

Are Bishop and Plath the writers who have influenced you the most or are there others? Do you see your work as having an affinity with the work of other living poets? Which ones and in what ways?

I don't much like the critics' pet term "influence"—as if poets alone could influence poets. If anything, I feel I owe a debt to the entire English tradition, but that would have to include Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, not to speak of Tolstoy and Chekov—in fact an entire lifetime's reading in European literature and history. In some ways I hold the modern poets I admire at a distance. I was bowled over, for example, when I first read Sylvia Plath, but my "Letter" to her [see *Selected Poems*, pg. 59] deliberately makes use of rhyming couplets and formal stanzas so as not to copy her spare, fierce style. I read *Ariel* at a time when I was corresponding with Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil, and Bishop's "accuracy, spontaneity and mystery" seemed to me to set a better, or at least more "followable" example. But I wouldn't say that any modern or contemporary

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poet has as deep a grip on my soul as Yeats, say, or Frost, many of whose poems I knew by heart when I was in high school. At Michigan, I prided myself on my modernism, preferring Eliot, Pound, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore. Today I more often return to George Herbert, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Hopkins, and, of course, Shakespeare, endless Shakespeare, and also medieval poets, like Dunbar, Langland, and Chaucer.

You were born to American parents in Cambridge, England, and grew up in the academic environs of Harvard, Yale, and Ann Arbor, yet since 1954 you've chosen to live in Great Britain (except, for a four-year stint in the 60s). Why? This seems particularly curious since you entitled your first collection "Living in America," and most of those poems were written during or just after that four-year interval. How has choice of domicile affected your sense of identity? Of home?

Choice of domicile? No, I'm afraid I attribute most of my movements back and forth across the Atlantic to the winds of passion. Having been born in Cambridge, I wanted to see what it was like after I'd graduated from Michigan, but I wouldn't have gone all that way had I not been in love with the young Englishman whose family had merged with mine in New Haven during the war. My first husband, Robin, had been more or less an English brother in those New Haven years; when we met later, it was easy to complete the love story and get married. We lived in England, Northern Ireland, and the American South, where the marriage broke up in 1959. With a small daughter, I returned to my parents in Ann Arbor to take an MA degree in English, and there I met and was taught by Donald Hall, without whose encouragement I might not have thought of publishing my poems. After a year of teaching school in Harvard's Cambridge, however, I met and married an English Fulbright Scholar, the sinologist Mark Elvin, so back I went to Cambridge, England (where I produced a son) then to Glasgow, Scotland (where I produced another). For the past 20 years I have been the wife of a benevolent English lawyer, Peter Lucas, who after retiring early, now absorbs himself in Darwin, geology, and history. As for my sense of identity, I'm sure I lost any sense of belonging either to the United States or to Britain long ago. I suppose my dependence on books and music places me in what you might call Academia, but I've somehow managed to avoid becoming an academic myself. Most of the earlier poems in *Selected Poems*—up through, say, "Small Philosophical Poem"—were written on the hoof between American and English academic environments: Cambridge, Ann Arbor, Harvard, Oxford.

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Your father was C. L. Stevenson, a philosopher and a musician. Musical themes ring through your poems. Music and logic are both fields in which the practitioner pursues truth or beauty—or both—while observing rather formal rules. Does poetry represent something of a happy medium between logic and music, where some of the same rules apply?

Yes, music and—if not logic, at least clear-thinking—beauty and truth. I think of Emily Dickinson's "I died for Beauty—but was scarce / Adjusted in the Tomb / When One who died for Truth, was lain / In an adjoining Room—." It's terribly difficult these days to make a case for anything in art that isn't, for some theoretical reason, confused and ugly, or else angry and politically correct. Even in the 1950s, when I was an undergraduate at Michigan, my sophisticated peers took me to task for writing Shelley-like lyrics. If I had been a more gifted musician and succeeded as a cellist or a pianist, I might not have written poems—though I always knew, in my heart, that my plan to become a musician was wishful thinking, and that writing poems (not even prose) was what I had to do. Poetry is a vocation, after all, not a career.

The hardest accomplishment for any poet is to develop a distinctive voice. How did you come to develop yours? (Or if that's not a fair question: Do you have any advice for aspiring poets on how to discover their own distinctive voices?)

You know, I'm sure you can never develop a distinctive voice or an ear for poetry by taking anybody's advice. Or even by taking courses in Creative Writing. Like a musician, like a painter, if you don't find you have "the gift" by the age of eight or so, you probably will never find a voice of your own, though you may indeed learn to write popular poems. After all, it's never very comfortable to be burdened with the sense that you *have* to write poems of a certain kind, even if they are not popular.

You are often referred to as a lyric poet, yet many of your poems about relationships can be startlingly unsentimental. I'm thinking of "Poem for a Daughter" or "The Mother." Would you say that these are representative of your distinctive voice?

I suppose so, it's hard to say. I have always resisted what is known as confessional poetry. Though naturally I am fond of my children, and I have repeatedly fallen in and out of love, as subjects for poems my loved ones have to be part of the general tapestry I keep trying to make of the world. "When we belong to the world / We become what we are." [See *SP*, "Poem for a Daughter," pg. 11.] I do sometimes write comic verses for family occasions, for weddings

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and births and other celebrations, but these are invariably vaudeville—just fun and games.

Your poems display a deep and intimate familiarity with British and sometimes even more exotic flora. Nature seems at times to be a salve as in “Willow Song.” At other times it’s quite ominously threatening, as in “Path.” Then in a poem like “Himalayan Balsam” I find myself getting a bit entangled parsing the meaning of “Love, it was you who said, ‘Murder the killer / we have to call life and we’d be a bare planet under a dead sun.’” Can you help me get untangled?

Would it help if I suggested that “Himalayan Balsam” has to be read as a sort of up-to-date “Ode to Melancholy”? Himalayan Balsam is not an exotic flower, by the way, but an imported weed that flourishes all over the wetlands of England, with a peach-like scent and (not mentioned in my poem) seed pods like little jumping beans that explode when you press them. My poem was conceived by the river Wye in the Welsh borders, and is more romantic than I usually allow myself to be. The idea expressed at the end is something like this: if seasonal flowers didn’t die—if beauty, or if “joy’s hand,” as Keats wrote, wasn’t “ever at his lips, bidding adieu”—there would be no reason to create new life. Death is a condition of life; nature kills in order to recreate—as is celebrated in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions more than in the Judeo-Christian one. Something of the same idea is behind the thinking in “Before Eden” [*SP*, pg. 92]. “Love” in “Himalayan Balsam” could address a lover, but it might be better taken as the abstract idea of Love as a creator. For George Herbert, Love was God or Christ in action in the world. You can take it in any way you like.

Thanks. Yes, that’s very helpful. There was a letter you wrote to The New York Review of Books in 1989 in response to Al Alvarez’s critical review of your biography of Sylvia Plath. You end the letter with this spirited exhortation:

“I believe that artists today can no longer afford the luxury of splendid aloofness or untouchably tender self-indulgence. Willy-nilly we’ve got to accept with the rest of society that all ‘selves’ are minute parts of a living culture, and that the human species is a precious, precarious flowering in an interdependent ecological chain. Nature owes us nothing, and the world, uncultivated and unattended, will turn us out into the universe in an uncaring flash if we

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do not work together, in W. H. Auden's phrase, unglamorously to rebuild the walls of the polis."

Do you still hold to this credo and do you see it as informing your poetry?

Yes, I do. I would not express myself any less forcefully today. In a very recent poem, "Alien Angels," based on Rilke's first *Duino Elegy*, I try to enlarge upon the idea of a final conflagration. (Or will it all end in a whimper, as Eliot suggested?) But these days we need more than poetry. As Jared Diamond has made clear in *Collapse*, his important study of failed civilizations, we have nothing worse to fear in nature than ourselves, and our overweening greed, stupidity, and short-sightedness. I also keep well in mind the geologist Richard Fortey's reminder in his wonderful book *The Earth* that *homo sapiens* has existed as a species "only in the last few milliseconds of geological time." My poems, indeed all the poems that have meant so much to me over the years, are invisible on such a time scale, but just the same I am delighted to see them published in this beautiful little Library of America edition—where, with luck, they will last a good deal longer than I will.