*Megan Sexton*

# Where Justice and Whimsy Lead: An Interview with Barbara Ras

SEXTON:

In your most recent book, *The Last Skin*, your poetry seems to dress the wounds of your past, but as Faulkner says, and I get the feeling you are saying it too, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Can you talk about the role of memory and history in your work?

RAS:

Memories form the largest critical mass in my conscious and unconscious life. They're the keepers of life's experiences, and, yes, its wounds, and what I've read, heard, learned, and yearned for. Memories elude constancy, each of ours being just one of the Rashomon versions possible. Thus, because memories can play hide-and-seek, shimmer in the half-light, and be too hot to handle, they can be hard to capture, to get right. For me, trying to get as deep into memory's well as possible—to understand, to connect the past to the present, and to figure out how an identity, a sensibility, a person evolves from a bundle of what's happened, and what's remembered—makes for interesting work.

Memories are history. Not just our own, but our collective knowledge and stories. Some of my favorite poets take their power from memory—W. S. Merwin, Larry Levis, Gerald Stern, Philip Levine, to name four of what could be dozens. And then there's a book I admire and want to mention that delves into prehistory, and imagines what painters in the depth of caves felt when they relied on memory to create the first human art on rock walls. Anne Marie Macari's book of

poems *Red Deer* accomplishes the fantastic feat of inhabiting the world of these painters and their dream time, while at the same time weaving their underworld into an idea of the feminine. Recounting that kind of deep cultural memory seems to me to be the important work of poetry.

But any memory that can be captured from the foggy bottom is espionage worth the effort.

Of course, the challenge is to recognize how memories can energize a poem, provide an emotional connection for the reader, and also reach out into some larger sphere. No one wants to hear whether you scrambled, boiled, or coddled your eggs this morning. That's what Facebook is for.

That reminds me, however, that etymology, being the memory of language, gives us a potentially fabulous riff on eggs. Take the origin for the tennis score "love"—meaning "no points made." Though unsubstantiated, it's intriguing to believe that "love" derived from the French word for egg—*l'oeuf*—the visual equivalent of zero. I could imagine someone taking off from there and creating a winning poem about the constellation of love, eggs, and zero. Ultimately it's all in the writing. Pushing it to the limit.

SEXTON:

I admire how you overlay your personal and ancestral history upon larger historical moments—I am thinking here about "The Irises of Krakow." What does intertwining the two do for you?

RAS:

The poem you cite recounts my return from Auschwitz to Krakow to then seek refuge in the city's botanical garden, which was ablaze with irises and color and the potentially healing quality of that beauty. Haunting me was my own Polish immigrant family's anti-Semitism.

Even your mentioning that poem brings up the same alarm I felt while I was writing it. It was painful and awful

to write. I'm not even sure it was appropriate to attempt to write it. To one extent or another, Adorno's declaration that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" cuts deep into a poet's consciousness, especially for a poet having witnessed the physical, grisly ground of the death camps. For me, as a non-Jew, to try to express anything at all, let alone anything worthwhile, raised unanswerable questions. My only recourse, in the end, was to personalize my incomprehension by implicating my family, whose members were to varying degrees—undeniably and intolerably—anti-Semitic.

To generalize from this particular poem to my use of ancestral history, I can say that I spent a lot of time isolated in that culture, and more time distancing myself from it. Like many immigrant groups, my family kept to their own. And in my girlhood and adolescence, I tried to keep as far from that identity as I could. I grew up, went to college, and moved on, and my Polish family and their Old Country culture retreated further and further from my experience.

Despite that, in the past few years, I've felt more inclined to access that immigrant past, to make peace with that heritage, or more generally, my childhood. It means connecting with a lot that feels alien, and potentially hostile, to who I am today. The antagonistic elements have to do with rejecting many of my family's assumptions—their insularity, their fear/shame of being "foreigners," their distrust of other ethnic groups, and their ignorance and intolerance of people outside a known circle. It also means connecting with the silence that pervaded my early years, when the only way to deal with emotions or conflict was to ignore them.

It's kind of outrageous that I came from a family that couldn't talk about anything in the open, and I've become a writer who lets a lot of buried stuff bleed onto the page.

SEXTON:

Can you talk about Philip Levine's influence on your work? Are there others who have shaped your attitude toward writing about family and class?

RAS:

Once, on a trip to San Francisco during grad school, I made the obligatory pilgrimage to City Lights. I spent hours shopping the poetry shelves and brought a big stack up to the cash register. Another customer hanging out near the check-out asked me if I was buying Philip Levine's new book, *1933*. I said no, and that I'd already overspent my limit. He insisted on buying me the book, and in the end it was that title that was the most memorable and transformative. When I discovered that it was possible (and then some) to use working-class content in poems, it was a revelation. Philip Levine sanctioned for me a background and a history that I had not wanted to own. It was a powerful experience. And beyond the thematic material in Levine's work, the sheer power and musicality of his poetry made a huge impact.

Phil and I weren't close, but we exchanged occasional postcards. He was warm and supportive of my work. When he came to San Antonio, I enrolled in a class he was giving at our local writing center, Gemini Ink. By that point, we had met a couple of times, and I just wanted to be in his presence more than anything else. But he picked a couple of my poems to workshop.

Although he responded generously to my work, he told me I hadn't yet gotten down to the deepest metaphors. I think I understand what he meant, but without a yardstick for measuring the depth of metaphors, who can tell? I've wrestled with it endlessly. It is always good to be pushed, even if mysteriously.

Another thing he said in that class made a huge impression. He urged the usage of strong, single-syllable Anglo-Saxon words over more ornate Latinate choices. It's good advice, and something I've thought about consciously in making poems.

To answer the second part of your question about influence, Gerald Stern looms large as a model of everything I hold dear. I look to the work of Edward Hirsch, Robert Hass, C. K. Williams, so many others, for so many things. Ellen

Doré Watson, my best friend in poetry for more decades than I should say, has been a terrific force in helping me honor the gift, and she has always been one of my best readers.

SEXTON:

Your work has been described as "morally serious." Is this something you strive for in your work and in poetry in general?

RAS:

Wow. Is it possible to *strive* to be "morally serious"? The only answer I can offer is that I always want to push poems beyond the self, beyond the moment, beyond the occasion, to involve the wider world—whether political, historical, philosophical, natural. My education has been pretty scattershot, so I'm not as confident in any realm beyond the intuitive, and I follow where my sense of justice (and often whimsy) leads me.

SEXTON:

Many of your poems explore a feeling of self-indictment ("Town of Orphaned Teeth"), where you are taking yourself to task for failing to do what might make a difference. Is writing the poem your way of trying to make amends?

RAS:

I'm not sure it's a sense of self-indictment as much as an attempt to acknowledge self-doubt and insecurity in writing as an outsider in a foreign country.

I've written quite a bit when I travel, because for one thing, I'm not consumed by the demands of running a press. Thus I have time to ruminate on experiences and take notes and cultivate a spirit of openness and receptivity. In other countries there is so much surprise, so much that is new—all

that stimulation provokes thinking and offers up material and metaphors.

The poem you refer to—"Town of Orphaned Teeth"—comes from a group of poems I wrote after being at Lake Titicaca. Going there I had low expectations, and I was completely blown away by the lake and its peoples, the beauty and intensity of the place. I ended up writing a series of poems about my experiences there, which, for me, was unprecedented.

Often, travel images drift in and out of poems, or a single poem will emerge years after one trip or another. For some reason, Lake Titicaca enthralled me in almost a mystical way.

SEXTON:

Travel is such a staple ingredient in all of your books. You chronicle the mundane experience of the tourist ("Manager of the Empty Hotel") as well as moments of total immersion when you are subsumed by the landscape ("Why the Lake"). I love how you honor both experiences, lending such authenticity to your work. Is it tempting to avoid those less transcendent moments? Have you been traveling lately?

RAS:

Last year, I went as an advisor with the International Writing Program to explore writing and culture of the Silk Road countries. We met in the Maldives with writers from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Kyrgyzstan. It was a spectacular experience to share ideas and issues of writing and literary programs. Making writer friends abroad, learning about their work and about new cultures—all of it is priceless!

I took the opportunity of being on that side of the planet to add on a week in Sri Lanka. I traveled with an old friend who was my roommate when I lived in Cali, Colombia, for a year in the mid-seventies. It was terrific to be traveling with

her again in such a wildly different culture, and in a significantly different style. We weren't seeking out $3/night hotel rooms as we did back on the Gringo Trail.

I loved Sri Lanka. The kindness and openness of the people. The majestic ruins of ancient cities. Buddhist sites that were breathtakingly beautiful. Seeing elephants in the wild has to be one of the peak experiences of my life.

SEXTON:

With globalism in mind, I wonder if you could touch on Pope Francis's call to action concerning climate change and our stewardship of the planet. What do you feel is the poet's responsibility when faced with such a directive?

RAS:

I think everyone on the planet shares a responsibility to take action in response to climate change, species extinction, and environmental degradation. People who run corporations have the biggest responsibility of all.

How that responsibility filters down into a poet's work on the page is ultimately a personal choice. In my day job at Trinity University Press, I publish books on nature and the environment that I hope contribute positively to increase knowledge of, and appreciation for, both the beauty of nature and its fragile state.

*Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*, edited by Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson, is a collection of visionaries who—from a wide variety of scientific, philosophical, and religious perspectives—make the same points that the Pope made in his encyclical. *Moral Ground* is a brilliant book, both provocative and instructive. The editors give concrete action points on what each of us can do to act morally and responsibly to leave a planet fit for future generations.

SEXTON:

How do poetry and editing coexist for you?

RAS:

The two are always in competition. Poetry loses to the paycheck.

SEXTON:

Can you discuss how your sense of the line has developed since your first book, *Bite Every Sorrow*, which featured a longer line and stichic structure? Your most recent collection, *The Last Skin*, is more stanzaic, with shorter lines. Do you consciously challenge yourself to modulate form, or has it evolved over time?

RAS:

In *Bite Every Sorrow*, there were rhythmic patterns in the longer lines that started to feel too comfortable, too easy to fall into, so yes, I consciously tried to move away from certain devices—long catalogs and repetition. I intentionally moved toward a cleaner style, especially in *The Last Skin*, where I worked more with stanzas. But I confess that my consciousness tends toward the single long pour down the page. I do like to vary line lengths and use enjambed lines in favor of end-stopped lines—to keep the pace in the poem moving in big breaths. I think I'm moving into what is a natural balance for me in my latest work. But again, I can't say that I'm in control when I'm writing; so much depends on the unconscious and letting the poem lead the dance.

SEXTON:

What are you working on now?

RAS:

I'm working to finish a book manuscript that's about half or two-thirds finished, or maybe three-eighths, depending on the day. Progress on that has been complicated by work I've begun for the book of poems that will follow next, which is a project that was funded by a grant from the Artist Foundation of San Antonio. I'm running on two trails, which, for a poet like me who writes slowly, is a bit foolhardy. At least the trails are reasonably parallel, so I don't think I'm at risk of losing my way or my mind.