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*Susannah Mintz*

## An Interview with Claudia Emerson

MINTZ:

Your work is clearly situated in particular places, in a rural way of life that holds fast to traditions even when the tug of that legacy threatens an individual's ability to choose a different course; as Sister says in *Pinion*, "I was spoken for / long before I was born" (53). What does that cultural geography mean to your sense of yourself as an artist? Do you consider yourself a Southern writer, or is that designation too limiting?

EMERSON:

I suppose I have represented the southern landscape of my childhood and early adulthood as limiting because it was, for me, extremely limiting in every sense of the word. And perhaps because, as an empathetic person and emerging artist, I felt trapped there in southside Virginia, I became extremely sensitive to the ways others were trapped there as well. Of course, farming, working the land, ties people to it. While that's not a bad thing, it's defining—and people live lives more vulnerable to and dependent on weather—rainfall, hail, drought—conditions most of us see as cause for an umbrella or not.

As for the designation, I accept it because we are all of a place, even when we claim to be living the "life of the mind," as though we might live outside of the influence of a geography and a culture, even when that influence is sometimes negative. I was born in 1957 and came into consciousness in a small town still completely segregated, sexist, with power structures completely uninterested in change. While I might

not take on the political tensions and problems head on in my work, I was certainly influenced by those cultural realities—and have been drawn again and again to try and unravel the complicated interweavings of place and consciousness.

MINTZ:

Much of your work exhibits a tension between disappearance and the enduring presence of the past. The snake in the cutlery drawer in “Natural History Exhibits,” for example (from *Late Wife*), leaves nothing of itself behind, and of course many poems are peopled by those who have left or died. But these same poems are fascinated by the artifacts of those lives: a spearpoint, an old ring, a birth certificate, a quilt. Can you tell us more about your relationship to history?

EMERSON:

History is always a function of the present, whether a shared, cultural history or a personal one. Museums are filled with objects, artifacts that imply the narrative of a life, give evidence of the work or joy of a life—and most of us collect the stuff of our own museums, in attics and cellars, the objects that become catalysts for memory, for narrative. My attention to such detail probably comes in part because my father absolutely loved old things—and had an acute and accurate sense of what things would be valuable in the future. I spent many Saturdays as a child accompanying my father as he sought out farm auctions; I couldn’t have known that I was witnessing the end of the small family farm, but he knew—and was training me to have that kind of eye.

MINTZ:

Would you say that your poetry tries to resist the passing of time, or is it, particularly when the forms are quite spare on the page, itself a kind of trace, an ephemeral vestige of former experiences and emotions?

EMERSON:

I am extremely aware of the passing of time, sometimes too aware! I have long thought that the urge people have to photograph and video every experience is borne of that anxiety to stop time and somehow save it, or “capture” it as though it were a wild animal. My lens happens to be language, the highly ordered language of poetry. It’s a slow exposure, though, and a poem can take anywhere from days to years for me to bring it to its finest clarity. My forms have indeed been quite spare but can also become quite language-rich, with long dense lines. This could change, I know—but I sometimes find that the more personal and the more extreme the emotional subject or context, the more spare the form I choose, to distill the emotion, perhaps, and certainly to restrain what could so easily be overwritten.

MINTZ:

Your poems often feature haunting images of the body, especially bodies somehow infiltrated or injured: x-rays, Civil War photographs, daguerreotypes of the dead, Audubon’s drawings of dissected birds, tattoo ink, cancer, the jawbone of a deer. Is your fascination with the porousness of bodies, their vulnerability to being scrutinized? Or is it perhaps the peculiar artistry that can be discovered even in sites of violence and decay?

EMERSON:

I am indeed fascinated by the body and its various beauties and vulnerabilities. As a poet drawn to a variety of forms, the form of the body seems something both set and unreliable, mysterious—and so our methods of understanding the body seem worth scrutiny—from x-rays that attempt to capture the inner workings of the body, to anatomical models designed to educate, to poems.

MINTZ:

Another type of violence that appears in your work involves animals—such as the calves slaughtered in “Calf Killings” or the pig in “Documentary” (*Secure the Shadow*)—but you also depict scenes of caretaking (a bird restored to health in “Jubilation,” children burying the dead in “Animal Funerals, 1964”). Readers might be struck by the way in which nature is utterly itself in many of your poems: from worms, spiders, bats, turtles, and catfish to logs, fires, roses, and grass, nature is not a metaphor yoked to human needs and attitudes, but a landscape that exists according to its own instincts and rhythms. Can you talk about these shifting involvements between people and the natural world?

EMERSON:

I suppose you can tell that Robert Frost was an early influence and continues to be a lasting one on my view of the natural world and the ways I present it in my poetry. I also lived for many years in a rural landscape, in very old farmhouses that had their own relationship with the critters that wanted in, and then once in, wanted out. And I have all my life been fascinated by animal consciousness and drawn at least to making the effort to understand that consciousness. We share this planet with all sorts of creatures whom we as human beings tend to see as not just *other* but *lesser*, and I have long been concerned with what I saw even as a child as a disharmony with the greater “natural” world of which we are part, and from which we are apart.

In graduate school, I was reprimanded for attributing nobility to animals—and I suppose I still do perceive animals as having valuable purpose and rights to this earth in ways that we don’t respect and increasingly violate.

MINTZ:

Your poetic voice seems a distinctly quiet one, even when articulating intense emotion. Grief, for instance, which might

threaten to overwhelm poems about a dying father, an ex-husband, a lost brother, tends to be channeled through the objects that mediate those relationships and the gestures by which people communicate disaffection or love. We discern profound loss or attachment from something of a distance, through speakers' precise descriptions (the shape of a fisted hand, a figure in a window) rather than loud outburst. The effect of this is rather like the radiological and daguerreotype imagery you portray in recent work—emotion becomes shadowy outline, with white spaces as vital as dark. Is this a conscious effort to avoid sentimentality? Does it coincide with a preoccupation with traces, surfaces, forms?

EMERSON:

Yes! I am aware of the knife-edge we walk as artists when we realize that the compulsion to write the hard emotions refuses to be ignored. I am not alone in telling my students that when emotions are hard and overwhelming, the way to come at them is from the side, the “slant” that Emily Dickinson advocates, and to look “small”—to focus in on the object, the detail that might have just the metaphoric resonance you need. But I have also been accused of coldness for trying to exercise such restraint, and I suppose that will always be the risk, one I am obviously willing to take time and again.

MINTZ:

Enclosures are also prevalent in your poetry: cages, houses, fields, picture frames, a hospital bed, a marriage, an identity. Within these structures—which are themselves subject to dissolution, like the house burning down in “Late April House Fire along Interstate 81”—bodies and relationships have a tendency to come apart. I think of the gorgeous paradox of ice in “First Death” (*Secure the Shadow*), where the speaker is asked to “crush ice” for her dying aunt, and the sound of hammering ice cubes evokes “bones breaking”: “some part / giving way, a finger maybe, a tooth, / / fragile hand, delicate foot” (23). Ice seems perfectly to capture the

liminal quality of life as well as love, always in the process of becoming something else. Does your focus on containment betray a desire to forestall those inevitable transitions, even as you show us how impossible a task that would be?

EMERSON:

Yes, I think I am certainly drawn to enclosures for their figurative intensity, particularly when they are in the process of decay or disintegration. Like Richard Hugo, I am always drawn to a ruin, whether a house, stable, or fence—as the reliquary of memory, and usually the memory of something failed, exhausted, something long gone. The transitions are indeed inevitable, and I worry sometimes that I fail to enjoy the present to its fullest because I am so aware that it is in the process of passing away into memory even as I try to be in the moment for its essential value. And yet there is nothing more thrilling to me as an artist than to immerse myself in the creation of a poetic enclosure, an asylum for a place or object that the world has neglected or abandoned. In that way, poetry is reclamation and restoration—and can be its own present tense.

MINTZ:

Poems themselves, of course, are the ultimate enclosures. But your forms, particularly in later books, tend toward airiness and light rather than density or heft. *Secure the Shadow* clearly favors couplets, and all thirty-three poems, from couplets to octets, indent every other line. Does that alternating rhythm—like breathing, perhaps, or a tension between stasis and motion, presence and absence—connect to the poems' concern with how we organize and collect ourselves in physical space? Is the indenting form like the woman doing flip-turns in a pool in "Lifeguard," "pushing, invisible, / to reenter [her] own wake, reverse it" (69)? Or perhaps like the birds in "Flocking Theory," "moving by space measured and kept— / strict distances—between the bodies" (70)?

EMERSON:

I did choose to step the lines in an effort to create breathing space—and to give the hint of the couplet I often favor for its airy integrity. The couplet is not the most roomy “stanza” and can invite the kind of close scrutiny the line itself invites. The couplet also does not offer a reader much space to hang around in—and my love of harsh enjambment can help move the reader through some fairly long sentences made up of several couplets. That tension between line, couplet, and sentence challenges me and gives me some of the greatest pleasure I experience as a poet. The “flip-turn” between lines is a place of heightened meaning for me as reader and writer.

MINTZ:

One of the epigraphs to *Late Wife* is from Ralph Waldo Emerson: “All the forms are fugitive, but the substances survive.” But many of the poems in both *Late Wife* and *Secure the Shadow* suggest the opposite, that substances are fleeting, leaving only traces and shadows behind, while form, especially poetic form, is meticulously exact and considered. How do you understand that dialectic?

EMERSON:

I wanted to argue with Emerson—and yet the form of the human body is indeed fugitive, and the substances of memory, love, and grief certainly do survive, even when we don’t want them to! Sure, those are emotions, not really substance, but if you have ever felt acute grief, there is nothing more substantial, no greater, irresistible centering, than an all-defining emotion that becomes the context for everything else you might experience.

MINTZ:

Perhaps you could also talk about a more conventional form like elegy. *Pinion*, of course, is identified as a book-length



elegy, though its particular brand of nostalgia is cut with the grittier facts of lives defined by hard work and loneliness. One might describe most of your poems as elegies in their delicate mournfulness about loss. How do you approach writing in an elegiac mode? Rose says, in the prologue to the fourth part of *Pinion*, “*I have become the house they keep*” (45). Is the elegist an architect of sorts, constructing rooms in which the dead might be resurrected?

EMERSON:

I don't know that I have written many poems outside the loose category we can consider elegy. I remember Dave Smith, my editor for all six of my books, noticing when he read my very first book that the poems were uniformly elegiac in tone and asked to see others. I sent him some, all also elegiac in tone! I agree with you that the elegist is an architect, the sort who constructs rooms and who constructs memory—and memorial.

MINTZ:

Your poems do not seem overtly feminist in a political or theoretical sense, yet they pay tribute (perhaps especially in *Pinion* and *Pharaoh, Pharaoh*) to a certain kind of woman: psychologically tough, physically strong, unafraid of giving birth or witnessing—even causing—death. These are women who inhabit their bodies and their roles with an intriguing pragmatism; their lives may be circumscribed by habit or expectation, but they seem grounded by a powerful trust in their own capabilities and released by flights of poetic imagination. And they're not alone: alongside their efforts to survive are those of nesting birds, a cranky hen, cows and deer. Could you tell us about the women in your books, what matters most to you in their portrayal?

EMERSON:

I think I was alarmed when I first noticed my artistic pairing of women figures in my early work with beasts of burden,

with creatures bound by their fertility as much as they could be bound by anything. And yet I was witness to women's lives in a place and time when one's gender could completely define and defy one's life choices. I think I took the subject as far as I could at the time when I wrote *Figure Studies*—using part of the book as a lyric sequence that traces girls as they become “schooled” in expectations. But the rest of that book looks pretty hard at women who have “opted out” of behaving according to such schooling, though mostly such an option is one of retreat, of becoming—if one has the luxury—a recluse. I seem not to have exhausted the focus on women figures, however, and have again created a number of portraits of isolated women in the newest book *The Opposite House*. What matters most to me in their portrayal overall is that I create something believable and honest without becoming overly sentimental or, conversely, harsh. My mother, at 88, uses the term all the time “it is what it is,” and I think I heard her voice while writing many of these poems centering on female figures.