On Being a Woman Poet

Libby Houston, *On Gender and Writing*, ed. Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora, 1983) 42-50.

I begin with the tablecloth: a red brick estate at the north en of the Piccadilly Line, Oakwood, where c. 1949 my first book, *Little Verses by Libby Houston* appeared – in print; I hadn't by then learned to write cursive. Wholehearted plagiarism it mostly was, of the Flower Fairies, my older brother, anything – which of course I denied. My headmaster, Haydn Perry, and Marjorie Kirtley, my teacher, both published children's poets, encouraged me with glee (I had poems about imaginary rats read on BBC Children's Hour), but I had no vision of Being a Poet. Not any idea of being a woman. I wanted to explore the Mato Grosso, the veld; my best friend, to be a sailor. My father, bomber navigator, had been lost in the war. I was supposed to have his eyes. I was the fattest girl in the school.

My brother had been away at school since he was seven. From the eleven-plus I won a bursary to Westonbirt, a refined and devoutly Protestant girls' boarding school in the Cotswolds. We were lucky in the first year in having to learn a poem by heart every week. I wrote a sonnet ('. . . Thou dog, art thou that bright sphere's watchful guard? . . .') to win a book token (bought Keats) and probably then the expectations of the English mistress. My mother moved to Clevedon, ex-watering place on the Bristol Channel.

I think no one could match my compositions for adjectives. In poetry I secretly became as good at loneliness and death as any teenager – I was good at everything bar games. After O level it was *King Lear*, (Mr) Eliot, Radio Luxembourg. We parodied ourselves in fin-de-siècle aesthetic poses, gazed at the gardener's boy, and I, now attenuated, gave my first solo public performance imitating Elvis –yes! olive oil in [43] my hair and eyeshadow under the lower lip (though in fact singing Marvin crack-voiced Rainwater's *Whole Lotta Woman*). I was being groomed to read English at Oxford. By seventeen I was thoroughly institutionalized; I kept my contrary dreams to myself. I have a calligraphic scrap of paper dated 3.12.58 which states: 'Elizabeth Houston doth hereby pronounce intention to leave her mark upon the world, whether by painting or by writing, by singing or by physical feat.'

I had no preconceptions about Oxford, none whatsoever. The work that became a treadmill of essay-deadliness required analytical argument and thought; my atmospheric descriptions, my photographic memory, counted for little. But it was the constant presence of 'men' that had me reeling, men – who touched me, said they loved me! (Fifteen years later in Kashmir I was just as bewildered, finding that a landscape I had imagined long before and kept as a private reference did actually exist – and thereby redefined me: outsider.) The man (eighteen) who seemed most to embody everything I had ever wanted to be like invited to me – a poetry reading! We hitched – only lorries (he'd already publishes an anti-academic poem in praise of lorry-drivers, 'England's heroes') – to the Partisan café, Soho, where I saw and heard Mike Horovitz, Pete Brown and others, men, actually standing among a loud and laughing audience reading with wild gestures their own words, and their words, jokes, puns, obscenities! My best friend, a good dressmaker, took in my jeans so tight they needed ankle zips and ruined my veins. I was in love, unspeakably. I stole his poems from the bin. I copied his e's. Reader, as you imagine, he backed away as nimbly as possible, leaving me with motive and material, O soul of Maud Gonne, to set me on my way like a tank on a downhill run.

August, first summer vac (holiday), found me a Beatnik. On the Road to the Edinburgh Festival with Pete Brown; among the five of us who dossed down in somebody's kitchen was Mal Dean, working-class art-school drop-out, cartoonist ans sick wit from Widnes whom five

years later I marries. . . . But then – we were all poets, it was the infection, Live New Departures, cellar readings every night; [44] without a ticket licence we passed round a hat which just about provided haggis and chips each a day. Everybody read, their own poems, the Beat heroes', and wrote – pens scratched as you were reading – 'I've got 32haiku I wrote last night!" (Alan Jackson). Adrian Mitchell, Edwin Morgan, Jerome Rothenberg, Louis Lehmann from Holland raised the tone, musicians, bus-conductors, plain-clothes detectives, Icelandic cyclists changed the air, names like Liverpool and Newcastle mingled with Black Mountain, San Francisco, turned magic. There was no criticism, we read our own way through gens and rubbish like earth heavers.

When I left Oxford, went down, and received a s.a. postcard rubber-stamped "CLASS 2' (in green), the prologue ends. Nobody told me what do do next. All this believe me, is relevant.

We sank like sediment to London, who met in Edinburgh, and lived their, cut off from our roots whether uneducated working-class or genteel, in a heap that sustained and simultaneously hobbled us, Pete Brown, Londoner, at the centre. Being acceptable company, the company, praise, the inspiration we sparked off in each other like the front-line jazz musicians who swapped choruses on the same platforms, kept me writing and giving readings. I'm glad of that apprenticeship: before happenings happened, acid, light shows, electronic blasting and performance art, words on tatty paper were the props, the patter harked back to the Music not the lecture Hall – and we did entertain.

In that immediate scene I was the only woman I met reading – was it just because I was living in the thick of it? – though there were some in e.g. Liverpool or others published in *New Departures* up-market of myself. But I always identified with the boys. I could flash a smile, dress up, being a woman, part of the act which belonged there. When Horovitz and Brown set about starting a reading agency, *Poetry in Motion*, forerunner of the London and National Poetry Secretariats, eyebrows were raised at me, the woman (apart from Stevie Smith, outside the heap), to run it. I felt the unfairness of the assumption but simply refused in the certainty of being incapable.

Mal and I, being together, gave each other certain [45] disadvantages: I ruined his changes of beds, meals and drinks at the hands of 'rich women', fans (dis my best as a typist, £7 pw starting, two years of it, *Woman's Own*, but it wasn't the same, and I expected hardworking art in return, not tousled breakfasts at my suppertime); would there have been an equivalent rich man at all if I'd been less faithful? We were wretchedly, stupidly poor. It was far beyond my confidence, conditioning, imagining, to initiate, organise anytjing myself; I joined in gratefully if I was asked and felt peeved if I wasn't.

We married in 1966, and sometime the I was introduced to Clive Allison who was looking for an 'underground' poet to launch himself with Margaret Busby as publishers of cheap-priced poetry paperbacks. I was – an oddity, a potential personality, a woman; a poet. My first book, *A Stained Glass Raree Show*, came out in 1967.

It begins to be a long time ago. I remember facts as if I'd read them in some ambling novel. I try to remember what I thought about writing then.

Ashamed from my first draft of the Beat scene of my rarified background, I became most deeply ashamed of the idea of poetry I had, the adjective, bones, gloom, secrecy, poetical language, It came so *easily* to me wallow solemnly in wool – the sort of wool you find on a dead sheep down a mineshaft. Beat poetry challenged it on the one hand, Eliot's attacks on William Morris's vagueness, Hugh McDiarmid's preposterous plea for an absolutely precise world language, *In Memoriam James Joyce*, on the other. I took their point, made it my aim to

scrutinise the implications of every word I used and in performing to entertain. By which of course I am not just referring to the jokes, patter, dead-pan parodies. I learned at Oxford to love Anglo-Saxon poetry, the rhythm and sound of it, and perhaps by that I came to a musical idea of poetic structure where syllables might scurry past, for instance, as quavers against a crotchet beat – by that and Laurie Morgan's drumming. It's something that does belong to oral literature of a kind, pace is almost impossible to indicate in print. Tennyson found it a problem; Hopkins's accents look uncomfortable on the page.

While I followed fashionable prejudices as the wind blew, [46] nothing prejudiced me against the the narrative poetry, ballads, I'd learned as a child. I found Sidney's praise of story-telling in the *Defense of Poetry* and put my money on it. Being primarily a performer, I felt weary of 'confessional' poetry, found disturbing the thought of doling out in public intimate details about someone who might be dumbly listening with their own version, or worse, absent without redress. Besides, when I wrote about Myself, a rather humorless poetic voice took over, whose honesty I couldn't trust; or I would anticipate the poem with idea and pat conclusion ready, en never liked door neatly closed. I trusted invented unanalysed personae and wordplay to tell truths, and to myself, better than my consciousness.

My ancestry's Celtic (Scottish). I loved Yeats; I found in Scottish poetry all kinds of passion peculiarly absent south of the Border. I didn't come across Sylvia Plath until Alvarez's *Savage God* was in the paper. In Ariel I found herself rather than her poems speaking to me, like a desperate person. Stevie Smith I consciously avoided, being still an ace mimic; I was afraid, having heard her once (and liked her) and reckoning myself on a slightly different road, of catching her style inappropriately too easily.

I thought of myself as a person and a poet; never as a woman poet, seldom as a woman.

In 1967, New Year's Eve, our son was born, our daughter in 1970, soon after which my second book *Plain Clothes* also appeared. Without the books and therefore a name occasionally chased I should probably have stopped writing. Well! You can't shrug your shoulders in print either.

Read Dr Spock till you can recite him sideways, but out there on your own as a mother you need all the intuition you can muster. If you had it earmarked for writing, it's still requisitioned, must, maybe for good, do double service. That's one thing. And when a baby cries for food, can you say, 'Not this week, I've got a deadline, sorry'? Those demands are commonplace, they can't be put aside; writing can. That's another. Mal, now in the position of having to be an earner, didn't compromise, it had to be art or jazz. It wasn't so much that I bowed before Woman's Role; fatherless, I had never had a close-up picture of divided labour. Rather, from school [47] particularly, I had swallowed the precepts of Christianity to my bones – 'Whoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain', etc., etc. Which all seemed fair enough. And I hoped that if I – no, I think, more realistically, I felt I couldn't expect, let alone, ask anything I wasn't willing to give. Willing becoming the operative word.

The first nappy lost me the freewheeling road, the company. Babysitters? We lived in Inner Urban Deprived Area Holloway, my best friends now women like myself, potentially creative (including the first one, who never did make it to sea), hung about with our infants, poor, endlessly poor, ex-tomboys who no longer could identify with blokes who drank the money, didn't come home; but we weren't inclined to active politics, we were tired. And liked the company of men, a man, and the pleasure of irrelevant irreverent conversations, anecdotes, jokes. We didn't realise that our men treated us bad because being artists (of all kinds) they had some sensitivity and couldn't cope with it, and holding out confusedly against compromise tried to

drown the value of support to an artist, we were trying like mad to be good supportive wives – we must have engendered so much guilt.

Mal developed cancer in 1972; early in 1974 he died.

I didn't stop writing for two reasons.

First, Paddy Bechely, professor of the BBC Schools Radio series *Stories and Rhymes* (now *Pictures in Your Mind*), asked me on spec to write eight poems about insect metamorphosis for seven-to-eight-year-olds. It just so happened I was keeping an eye on an elephant hawkmoth chrysalis at the time – but writing for an outlet whose sky was never darkened by the spectres of opinionated critics was a pleasure I'd forgotten, no need to wrestle at source with the eager hordes of words only waiting for a chance to prove themselves. Bless her, she asked me to contribute programmes ever since.

I name names in gratitude: Emma Tennant, then editing the first issue of *Bananas*, asked me for a poem, hounded me to the deadline. I hadn't written a word for a year, turned up an old bitter fragment and working on it found it beginning to work on itself, until it presented me – amazed me – with a vision [48] of forgiveness, even Nirvana; she asked me for another. Rockclimbing without a camera I tried words, which settled into a statement on chance and faith. . . . Carol Burns gave me deadline for *Matrix*, Alan Brownjohn for the Globe Playhouse. . . . Two poems a year, or three.

Required to write, reminded like that to write, I knew I also had to write about Mal's death; being there and finding the experience, well, miraculously sweet, I felt it as an obligation to spread good news about something so generally dreaded; if I was a poet then it had to be a poem, above all 'confessional', else the whole point would have been lost. I had *Lycidas* across my path, all my own arguments to meet; it was hard, two years and more labour.

It's because my poems since that watershed have been about myself, or, if not directly, I have been pretty well aware of their implications from the start, that to make them, finish them, has become an exhausting battle – not only in the tricky metaphysical ground to trap the right words, but keep my analysing conscious self at arm's length while the poem looks for its own conclusion, when I am too weary to hit true first go. And I've thought, if only I could shut myself away for a week. . . .

Before my children, if they could ever read this, feel a rising tide of guilt for existing at all, let me thank them too.

I sometimes worry that I have more Candide in me than Che Guevara. Besides making me physically fir enough to take up rockclimbing well past thirty – besidess being themselves, for heaven's sake – and giving me, as any parent has, a second chance at growing up, my children brought me two gifts unexpectedly to my writing. The more obvious was a reacquaintance with legends, fairytales, fables. I've been able to read astoundingly little since they were born – time and habit; or, since I set out into metaphysical regions (Jung's 'land that is not created'?)., I've not yet wished to risk picking up anyone else's perceptions lest they falsify my own; or, my head's been cramped like an old coffee filter by too much real life to take in more but seldom. The short, simply-written stories I read aloud gave me clear images to focus on through fog and clutter like coastwise lights.

The second was a new kind of awareness of language. [49] The greater part of my conversation after Mal died was with small children. I remember my embarrassment at university poetry reading being confronted by an intellectual question with a whose currency included no abstract conceptual terminology at all – I couldn't understand it, let alone answer it. But it was a matter of difference, not absolute inadequacy. Any parent should be grateful for the intellectual

challenge of explaining God in terms accessible to a three-year-old. Who else is so constantly bombarded with requirements to examine, re-examine, define, explain? 'What's a black hole?' 'Who's Hitler?' etc. – my children – anyone's are – were as unsparing as Socrates, and the answers had to be concrete. When I sat down to write, which was when I was beginning to tackle Great Questions head on, the same language gave me a sure footing. Take such scorned monosyllabic verbs as get, pick, put, etc. and start juggling with the prepositions, possibilities begin to pour.

They grow older; I hope that gift won't wear out.

Well, it became something of a long sentence of isolation. Poetry reading thinned out; or I'd be reading alone, a different matter. And I was writing of necessity for my own needs of elucidation – with an audience or reader still in mind, but not so conjurable as known persons. Back in Holloway, my friends kept moving on until my nearest relationship was with the streets themselves, a neighbourhood that longed, it seemed to me, for the recognised unity-in-diversity of the theoretically ideal (maybe real) village; if it needed poetry, it wasn't the kind I was capable of writing – besides, the place had something of the feel of a UN rehabilitation camp; I think I only never came across a German. I sat on, fell asleep in, every kind of community committee as hand, hoping such a mute expression of naive solidarity might somehow be better than nothing.

My third book, *At the Mercy*, twenty-three poems, ten years' work, came out in 1981.

The Women Live Month in 1982 brought me to meet the Women's Movement for the first time close to. I find its terminology as foreign to me as that of Structuralism, myself as if running in parallel with it, like I do with the established church; I am still tired, still hold an idea of community in [50] immediate streets (Bristol now), my children still the unknown job in hand. I think of the strangeness of my school again, how it not only gave me enough religious questions for life, bit being so dedicatedly academic taught me nothing whatsoever about being a housewife, running a home – I would have made such a good irresponsible man poet!

And what does Being a Poet signify? Having by now left some more or less erasable scratches on the world by painting, writing, etc. etc., what pronouncement might I now scribble defiantly about myself? I've had my nose rubbed, over the years, in every single cheerful judgment, whether on persons or literature, I ever made. And since I continue passing judgments I may as well expect a deathbed nose like leather. From the moment I left Oxford and direction disappeared, I've simply been confronting the question of how to live – not (yet), perhaps unfortunately, how to make money to live on, but, under (unforeseen) circumstances, how should a person act?

And in this roughly-potted territory where snatches of ethics, moral and metaphysics mingle like cloud-shadows, bringing up children and writing poetry interchangeably provide exercises in trying out answers. Out of my unformulated working hypotheses (yes, you can tell, my children are no longer the little pestering kiddies who only ate concrete), the clamour of a deadline will give me the chance of, force me reluctantly into, nailing a perception via poetry. So that it is more than a vehicle of thought; it has become a means of thinking, a route towards understanding. Which I offer to the general pool of literature I use myself; and as I find the work of other writers, odd lines, phrases even, turn up from forgotten corners of my head to illuminate a situation of my own, I'd be glad if mine were able to do the same for other people.

Isolation plays tricks with one's sense of proportion. I clear the table, wash halve the plates, notice it's late again, wonder what on earth to cook tomorrow.