

Michele Pollock

AN INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN LUDVIGSON

Susan Ludvigson is the author of seven collections of poetry, all published by Louisiana State University Press: Northern Lights (1981), The Swimmer (1984), The Beautiful Noon of No Shadow (1986), To Find the Gold (1990), Everything Winged Must Be Dreaming (1993), Trinity (1996), and her most recent book of new and selected poems, Sweet Confluence. She has received fellowships from the Guggenheim, Rockefeller, Fulbright, and Witter Byner foundations, and from the NEA. She has represented the U. S. at writers' congresses in France, Belgium, Canada, and Yugoslavia. She teaches at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina, where she lives with her husband, novelist and short story writer Scott Ely.

This interview was conducted via e-mail throughout March of 2002.

Pollock: You have been teaching English and writing at many levels (junior high, high school, and college) for a number of years. How important is a writing community to your work? Do you find that community mainly inside or outside the university setting?

Ludvigson: Yes, I taught in secondary schools in Wisconsin and Michigan in the '60's. I've been teaching at Winthrop University (called Winthrop College until recently) since 1975. A writing community is important to me. There's a group of women writers I meet with once a week: four other poets and a fiction writer. We're good critics for each other, and we're mutually supportive. I also occasionally meet with some of my colleagues at Winthrop who write poetry. And there are two former students I work with on a semi-regular basis, getting criticism from

them as well as the other way around. I depend most on the first group I mentioned. While the membership has changed over time, two of us who started the group have been part of it for nearly thirty years.

Pollock: Talk about your education as a writer. Also, how does your teaching affect your writing?

Ludvigson: My education in writing poetry has come primarily through these informal associations (mentioned before) and my own reading. In 1975 I entered the University of South Carolina to work with James Dickey, whose poems I admired, but I arrived at an unpropitious time. Dickey's novel, *Deliverance*, had recently come out as a blockbuster movie. [He] didn't spend much time looking at student poems. I think it must have been hard to concentrate on teaching in the midst of such a heady time, and I understand it better now than I did then. But I do wish I'd encountered him earlier. And I did take away from his workshop an effective exercise that I use as an assignment in my own classes. It involves using dream images as the basis for a poem. Jim Dickey was, as I am, a great believer in the importance of the unconscious, and in accessing the unconscious through dreams.

Sitting on the other side of the table, I find that teaching, because it keeps me immersed in the things I care about, and because it's fun to nurture talent, is entirely compatible with writing. It is, from my point of view, the best job a poet could have. The only problem with teaching and writing is time. There's simply never enough.

Pollock: The three poems included in this issue of *Water~Stone* are a deviation in form from the more traditional free verse poems you have published previously. These poems are comprised of fragments floating in white space – but the lines seem tied together in a visceral

manner. How did this form come about?

Ludvigson: The radical shift in my poems has come about over the last year and a half or so, and I can only speculate about what caused it. My new and selected, *Sweet Confluence*, was published in 2000. That book represents the last twenty years of my poems. Not only did it come out as the century turned, but reviewers referred to it in ways that sounded to me like the summing up of a career. It made me feel old (never mind that I am officially old; I turned sixty last month), and I felt (I don't remember making any conscious decision) I'd probably done all I could do in a certain vein. Also, about three years ago I started a book manuscript contest at Winthrop. The first winner was Kevin Prufer, with a first book titled *Strange Wood*. When Kevin came to our campus to give a reading, we talked poetry, of course, and he mentioned several poets he considered well-known, whom I'd never heard of. I realized how out of touch I was with what younger poets were doing – aside from my own students, who were influenced by my biases. So I began reading some of the poets Kevin admired. The direction my poems have taken lately bears no real resemblance to what those young poets are writing, but I think some of my old assumptions got dislodged.

During this same period I read Alice Fulton's collection of essays, *Feeling As a Foreign Language*. In two of the essays she proposes a new approach to poetry that she calls "fractal." What I'm doing isn't what she describes, but there are some correspondences. She advocates bringing randomness into poems in ways that are quite different from mine, sometimes using it to initiate formal elements. But the lack of linearity and the acceptance of a kind of dissonance, if I can put it that way, feel similar, and her ideas fueled my sense that this might be a productive direction. Encountering her essays when I did seemed fortuitous; I felt reassured, even though we weren't on exactly the same track.

Pollock: As I read these poems, the white space is as important as the words. It allows me to enter the poem, hear echoes, even unconsciously "respond" while still in the poem. What do you feel or hope the white space accomplishes or "says" in the poem?

Ludvigson: I think the white space functions as an indication of small (sometimes not so small) breaks in consciousness, the hesitations that occur as we grope our way toward discovery, toward what we think and feel. It seems to me that it gives a sense of how consciousness and the unconscious come together – jaggedly, sometimes without transition. And it slows things down so that each phrase gets more emphasis, so that we pause a little longer over the meanings of particular words or combinations of words, some of them units of sense or breath, some unnatural hesitations that create the awkwardness of thought that hasn't quite come into meaning but is on its way there.

I had an e-mail yesterday from my friend Al Young, to whom I'd sent one of these poems some months ago. What he said about it (more vividly than I have) seems worth quoting: "Your current technique allows you to simulate visually, textually, the way we really take in information. Language processes one word at a time, while of a moment you note a craving for fish, how much you hate what the government's plotted, the passing thrill of a poem-idea, the need to pee, the humidity. By working in visualized line clusters, you can work at different levels simultaneously and give yourself time to blink or clear your throat."

Pollock: Has choosing this new form affected the way you write poetry? For example, has the physical act of writing, the generation of ideas, or the editing process changed for you?

Ludvigson: Even before all this, I had started writing prose poems that began with dream fragments, usually an image or a pair of bizarre combinations of words. I'd wake up with these

odd pieces of language, having no memory of the dream that produced them. Here are a few examples: "Teutonic beaks," "petite infinity," "onerous singing," even "Eve Arden." These kept coming for a couple of months. I was in France at the time, and I decided, arbitrarily, as a kind of experiment, to attach each of these fragments to the name of a nearby village, and to write a poem using real and imagined details about that village together with the seemingly nonsensical pairings of words. It was a deliberate challenge to myself to create metaphor out of these disparate parts.

I've always used dreams as starting points or as material for poems. I am attentive to dreams and keep dream journals. But often, as anyone who does this knows, the dream slips away before you can get it recorded. It occurred to me that it might be more efficient to leave my computer on – my study is just across the hall from our bedroom – and go straight to the computer to write the dream. So I started doing that. Then early one morning I got up, marginally awake, went to the computer, and instead of writing the dream, I started a poem directly. Now I know that many poets compose on the computer, but I never had. Other things – letters, essays – yes. But not poems. I was so sleepy that I wrote with my eyes closed. And in the morning, when I saw what I'd done, I was intrigued by it. There were things I thought were interesting, completely different from any poem I'd ever written. I started playing with the lines, moving them around – the spacing was already jagged and the language fragmented. So that's how it started.

Since then I've taken this process a step further. I write drafts of two versions of the same poem, sometimes in that half-dream state, sometimes more consciously. Or I write drafts of two different poems that have some relationship to each other. And then I splice the two. Usually a

few of those lines will play nicely off each other, or create odd and interesting connections.

Many won't. But the exciting part is the revision, when most of what I do is to cut. I find that this is where the unconscious material rises to the surface in ways it never did before. Something about these unmatched pieces of language and the intuitive cuts I start making in them leads to a poem that is often totally different from either of the two starting drafts and says things I never could have predicted or understood otherwise. Sometimes I do add a word here and there, or I shift the lines further, but probably 90% of the editing (I can't even say re-writing, really) is cutting.

Pollock: These poems seem the most intensely personal of all your work. Did the subject matter dictate the form, or does your use of this form open up new areas of subject matter for you?

Ludvigson: It amazes me that they reveal more than any of my old poems did, are more intimate, somehow, and emotionally true in startling ways. No, I don't think subject matter dictated form at all. It's much more that this approach allowed me to slide deeper into areas I've dealt with before, but now, because the process bypasses rationality to a great extent, and even the editing draws "meaning" up out of the dark in similar ways, my usual inhibitions are not at work in them. I think the defenses against self-knowledge are probably great in most of us, however much we think we're in pursuit of it, and that somehow I've stumbled on a way of tricking my defenses into napping while the poem steals onto the page.

Pollock: Even after having published eleven books of poetry, does it feel like a risk to make such drastic form changes and throw that new work out into the world? How do the emotions that accompany sending this work out compare to those of sending, let's say, *Trinity*:

Poems and Sweet Confluence, New and Selected Poems into the world?

Ludvigson: It does feel like a risk, and I've been very nervous about them, hesitant to send them out, apologetic even to editors who've liked and published my work before. I feel much less sure of myself with these than with more traditional or "mainstream" poems. I had become comfortable with the craft of the previous work, so that when I sent poems out I had reasonable confidence in them even if particular editors didn't take them. But with these I'm on shakier ground. I had some anxiety about *Trinity* because I expected criticism for the ways I took liberties with Christian myth. But, in fact, only a couple of times did I encounter hostility about that, and never in print. I discovered, surprisingly, that some of the most enthusiastic responses came from clergy – several Episcopal priests and even a bishop. *Sweet Confluence* didn't feel risky at all, because, as a "new and selected," most of it came from previous books, and the new poems weren't so dramatically different. I'm getting ready to put together the manuscript for the next book, which I hope to have at LSU Press by June 1, and I am quite anxious about it. The tentative title is *Escaping the House of Certainty*, which is the title of one of the poems and I think tells the story! Some of the poems, the ones I envision as coming at the beginning, are less experimental than the ones we've been talking about. Then there will be the prose poems, which are transitional, but the largest part of the manuscript will be the very new ones.

Pollock: *To Know What Takes Us* seems to come from a place of loss, the kind of loss whose magnitude might not look the same to the person suffering the loss as to an outside observer. Is this poem an act of grieving?

Ludvigson: I hadn't thought of it that way exactly, but yes, I think you're right, it is a kind of grieving – for youth, for the assumption of health, those things in particular, and maybe a

more general feeling of loss that comes with the knowledge that all that once seemed possible is diminished.

Pollock: *Grassfire* feels very narrative despite its sparse, fragmented form. It reminds me, as all of these poems do, of dreaming. What was your inspiration for this poem – mostly life or mostly imagination?

Ludvigson: Yes, *Grassfire* is the most connected narrative of the three, and is made partly from dream, partly from life. The dream was the source for the "red brush painting over green" and the "something rose," and I think the jump rope came from the dream, but I'm not positive. The dream itself is gone. By this time I had started writing the poems directly rather than recording the dream first and going back to it.

More of this poem is from waking life than is the case in some of these new ones. There was such a grass fire when I was a teenager in Wisconsin. We lived in a house on a hill, with forty acres of land where we grazed horses. One breezy day, something caught my attention from behind. I turned and saw flames sweeping toward me. Terrified, I started running. At first the fire held low to the ground, but it quickly spread, spikes of flame blowing fast, wider and higher, leaving everything in its wake singed. I kept checking over my shoulder, and of course it kept gaining. I began to feel the heat at my heels. But somehow the line of the fire leapt passed me and I wasn't burned. Maybe I jumped when it got close, maybe it slipped around me – I'm not sure – but it didn't touch me. Meanwhile, my father and brothers and a couple of neighbors were yelling and beating the fire out with gunny-sacks as it came toward them up the hill. By then fire trucks had arrived, and the crisis was over. And I did, carelessly, when I was a teenager, ram the car into the garage post, one of many reckless small accidents I caused that could have been dangerous. I think those images in the poem are connected by color – rose, red, rust – and

their associations with blood and death. How that led to the ending of the poem I can't say precisely, but it has to do with being young and lucky, and how death does of course catch up – here it's my father's death from prostate cancer, and my brother' ongoing battle with the same disease, which wasn't diagnosed until it had metastasized.

Pollock: You said that you believe "one of the best outcomes of poems is that they offer connections we would not make in any other way." I have found special comfort in these new poems, in particular *To Know What Takes Us*. With whose poetry in particular do you connect and find comfort?

Ludvigson: I find comfort in Emily Dickinson, whose grief I have felt I understood and experienced. And – this will surprise you I think – in T. S. Eliot, in ways I can't altogether explain. I feel some kind of spiritual connection to him, some sense of him as a poetic father. One of the best dreams of my life was about Eliot, and I have never successfully written about it, though I've tried many times. The dream was of Eliot carrying me down the basement stairs of my childhood house. The occasion felt momentous even while I was still immersed in the dream. But this dream seems determined not to be translated into poem! I would add Rilke to that list, and among contemporaries, Margaret Gibson, Judson Mitchem, Rita Dove, Peter Meinke, Larry Levis. These come quickly to mind, and a poet I've just discovered, Valerie Martinez.

Pollock: I think we connect with particular poets because of what they teach us about ourselves. I also believe that the act of writing poetry is itself a great teacher. What has writing these particular poems taught you?

Ludvigson: I think these new poems have taught me more about how to let go, how to trust intuition more and consciousness less. I have always advocated a reliance on the

unconscious in writing poems, and I think I did that in the earlier poems to the degree I could, but not nearly as much as now. I think these new poems are teaching me to take new kinds of risks, and I'm grateful for that.

Pollock: Well, I'm also grateful that you are taking the risks, writing these poems. And I'm grateful too that you so graciously agreed to this interview. Thank you.