

Poetry, Photography, Painting: Stephanie Bolster's World

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY ANNE COMPTON

STEPHANIE BOLSTER is the author of *White Stone: The Alice Poems* (1998) and *Two Bowls of Milk* (1999). *White Stone*, winner of the Governor-General's Award for Poetry in 1998, is based upon the life of Alice Liddell, the Victorian girl who inspired Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) to write *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. The Vancouver-born poet is the winner, as well, of the Bronwen Wallace Award for Poetry (1996), the *Malahat* Long Poem Prize (1997), and the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award (1999). Bolster, who now lives in Ottawa, is an editor at the National Gallery. At the time of this interview, May 1999, Bolster was in St. John's, Newfoundland, at the start of an Atlantic reading tour. The interview was conducted by phone.

AC *White Stone* reads as if it were effortlessly composed, yet there is a formidable bibliography at the back, and one poem refers to a trip to Oxford (Alice Liddell's home). Was the book written quickly or over a long period of time?

SB Definitely over a long period of time, probably six years. The manuscript as a whole changed a lot. An early version of it was my thesis for my MFA at UBC in '94. Since then, I added poems and revised individual poems extensively, and I did a lot of research.

AC You have won four major prizes, including the Governor-General's, in three years (Bronwen Wallace prize, 1996; *Malahat* Long Poem Prize, 1997, and Gerald Lampert Memorial Award, 1999). Did a period of apprenticeship precede this excellence?

SB I have been writing fairly seriously since high school so there are a lot of poems that are shoved away in boxes and books that no one has

ever seen. Many of the poems in *White Stone* were published in literary journals, and many of those that were published, I didn't use in *White Stone*. It was a long apprenticeship. If I had jumped the gun, I would have published a very different book. I'm glad I didn't.

AC Did you consciously hold back from publishing a book?

SB I started sending the *White Stone* manuscript out in late '94 when it was in quite a different form. It was accepted by Signal Editions at the end of '95, but they couldn't publish it till the spring of '98. What seemed an obstacle ended up being a gift. I outgrew the poems and took the opportunity to add a lot of new poems and made the book more current with who I am now.

AC In "Portrait of the Poet," you say, "I've been wedged a long time in the sad narrows / between her and me" (44). Did *White Stone* come out of a lifelong preoccupation with Alice Liddell?

SB I didn't actually read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* until I was about sixteen, but the ideas of the Alice story — the transformations from large to small and the journey down the rabbit hole — were familiar to me. I was able to write about her as an adult because I came to the books without the conventional expectations. I took Alice out of *Wonderland* and tried all these different things, which if it had been a beloved childhood story, I wouldn't have done. I remember seeing a picture of the real Alice at twenty-one and being so startled. I wondered why she looked so angry. That haunted me for a while.

AC As you worked on *White Stone*, was there a particular photograph of Alice by Dodgson that was uppermost in your mind?

SB There were a few. The photograph of her as *The Beggar Maid* has a bizarre, slightly creepy, combination of the sensual and the childlike. Her gaze in his photographs informed my book. There is a solemnity in some of his photographs of her, and the last photograph that he took of her, when she was an adult, is incredibly dismal. That informed my sense of her unhappiness at having been transformed into a character. Actually, the first photograph I saw of her was one by Julia Margaret Cameron. All of those together formed a composite portrait of her.

AC In *White Stone*, are you, in some sense, recovering the historical Alice Liddell from what Dodgson made of her in the books and further from the "weight of archives" that has accumulated around the Alice books?

SB That was my motivation. I wanted to try and free her, but at the same time, I am aware that I am adding to that “archive.” Those were the sources I had to rely on, those and my own imagination. If Alice herself came back and read this book, she might be horrified. She might say it was nothing like her life and that I hadn’t gotten any of it right. *White Stone* is an attempt, but it is not the definitive liberation of Alice from either her life or her story.

AC In *White Stone*, there seem to be three Alices — the historical Alice, Dodgson’s Alice, and your Alice.

SB Towards the end, it is much more my Alice. The reason I presented so many different versions of her is because I didn’t feel there was one definitive Alice, even in how I saw her. For me, she exists simultaneously as the child, the woman, the old woman, and as the character in the book.

AC The relationship between Alice and Dodgson, which extended over ten years, came to an abrupt halt in 1863. Did Dodgson abandon Alice or she him? Or was it biology, as the poem “The Curse” suggests, that sabotaged the relationship?

SB It was all of the above although I wouldn’t say that she abandoned him. The historical record has it that her mother forbade him from visiting the children. None of the research yields the reason — whether it was something very serious or some matter of propriety. When that happened, he probably made attempts to visit, but Alice must have felt betrayed because her parents wouldn’t have told her that he was forbidden from coming. The point about biology is definitely important because in all of his friendships with children, when the children were about twelve, the friendships stopped. It seems to have been a mutual thing. The children, by then, found his stories less charming, and his attention less interesting and less comfortable. Also, he didn’t like their changing attitude or the changes in their bodies. He preferred young children. Had the rift [with the Liddells] not happened, the friendship would have gone in the same direction anyway.

AC So Alice’s mother imposed separation, but biology and psychology would have led to a rift sooner or later. Dodgson guaranteed himself failure in these relationships, didn’t he?

SB It probably didn’t seem that way to him because there were always new young children coming along so he always had these friends.

Some of them did maintain some kind of contact as adults. Alice didn't, which is interesting because you would have thought of all the children, she would have been the one most faithful as a friend. But it was exactly *because* she was the favourite, and *because* of the fame of the books, she didn't want to maintain contact.

AC One poem says that Dodgson "taxidermied" (65) her and another that "he kept her under glass, scalloped like a fancy cake" (59). Does *White Stone* rebuke Dodgson for his exploitation of Alice?

SB That was my gut reaction as I started getting into all of this material and found her anger. Through photographing her, through writing about her, he tried to fix her at a certain age, but the more that I read about Dodgson, the more I realized the great human complexity of this person, and I thought he was a very unhappy soul, destined to failure or despair in his relationships. The reason that I wrote the poem "Portrait of Dodgson as *The Beggar Maid*" was to turn that [blaming] on its head and look at who he was in all of this. I hope that I am not presenting a one-sided portrayal of the relationship. For me as a writer, there is a natural identification with Dodgson. At certain points, I question why I am identifying with Alice when I have an equal identification with Dodgson.

AC What is your sense of the Dodgson-Alice relationship? Was there a violation?

SB I suspected from the start I would not find anything conclusive. Ultimately, nothing can be known about what actually happened. After doing the research and exploring this issue in the poems, my feeling is that the violation that occurred — and there was a certain kind of violation — was a taking away of Alice's individuality by making her into a character. And of course the photographs in their expressions are somewhat disturbing to me, but there aren't any nude photographs of Alice as there were of other children, and those are very disturbing. Regardless of what was considered appropriate at the time, and what his intentions were, there is, for me, something profoundly inappropriate in those photographs, but I think that he was the type of person who would not have taken it beyond art. He would not have physically abused the children. It is more subtle and complicated in a sense.

AC The title of the book (*White Stone: The Alice Poems*), as a matter of fact, splits attention between Alice and Dodgson, and the speaker, as in the poem "The Thames," seems sometimes to express empathy with Alice, sometimes with Dodgson: "I am *her* eyes," but also "I am *his* need /

to make a story good enough to hold her” (italics added; 21). As you worked on this book, how did you feel about this shy, stammering, sheltered man?

SB Having been shy as a child, I can identify with his shyness and his desire to be in the company of children, which increased his confidence in himself. I can understand why he pursued those kinds of connections. There is a similarity of temperament.

AC *White Stone* is about fictional characters and about real people, but it is also about photography. Was photography in the nineteenth century, as practised by people such as Dodgson and Julia Margaret Cameron, much closer to literature than it is today?

SB Yes, definitely. In Cameron’s photographs, she was posing her subjects in costumes and as figures from plays. There’s one story of her locking one of her maids into a closet, so she’d have an anguished expression for the photograph. I suppose there are art photographers now who do that sort of thing, but photography as practised by most people now is just a sort of common pastime, or it is much more [an effort] to document rather than to dramatize. I think it was much closer to literature back then. Also, because the camera simply wasn’t available to most people, it really required a very specialized knowledge which most wouldn’t have.

AC In part two of your book, there are three poems about Alice’s posing for Julia Margaret Cameron. Is the grown-up Alice hoping for some sort of transformation, some magic, through those Pre-Raphaelite-like photographs?

SB That’s certainly how I saw it and how I presented it in the poems. Again, I can’t ultimately know what she *felt*, but I have to think that someone who posed as a child and had this excitement at seeing herself dressed in different clothes and becoming different people would probably feel no different as an adult. Early adulthood is such a complicated time, and especially for her with all of the pressures of marrying a person of the appropriate class and all of those expectations. In posing as these characters, there was, in some sense, a trying on of different identities, and a hoping that she would somehow be saved by one of them.

AC Upon this telling, Alice is a fairly sad woman, isn’t she?

SB That was drawn from everything that I read about her. Her younger sister Edith died when she was very young, and people said that

was the reason why Alice was forever sad. Certainly she looked sad in all the photographs of her, even those in her old age. Even in the 1930s, just before her death, when she received the honorary doctorate, she didn't look very happy either. There was really nothing that I read — except for the recollections of her as a very spirited and intelligent child — that contradicted that sadness, that loss.

AC Including the loss of two sons. There were a lot of dreadful things in her life.

SB Towards the end, she treated her servants badly. She was living in a house that couldn't be hers because it had been passed on to her son when her husband died. When her son came back from London on the weekends, they had arguments and slammed doors. I think that she wanted to have more control than she was allowed as a woman at that time.

AC The last section of the book, "Hide and Seek," tracks Alice through the twentieth century to various North American sites, but Alice is always elusive, out of reach. What is it the poet-seeker hopes to find?

SB That was a question to be asked rather than something I ever expected to find. The search is more important than an answer or any destination. In writing *White Stone*, the main motive was to explore Alice, discover who she was, and to tell another version of the story. But it was also to find out more about myself, my fascination with photographs. My desire in writing a poem is to capture a moment in time. I don't think that I was expecting to find anything clear at the end of it. There was no defining moment — even at Oxford — when I thought this is it. Here she is. I've found what I was looking for. Now I can move on.

AC Most often the poem comes up against absence or finds the ordinary where the extraordinary is expected, as in "Alice Lake" where the swimmer is after all pretty ordinary and the speaker is only herself, and that is it.

SB I think that the ordinary is juxtaposed against the wonderful fantasy of the Alice books. That is the reason that Alice herself liked them. This fantasy that was not part of her life.

AC Alice's life in *White Stone* extends over a hundred years. Were you influenced by Margaret Atwood's *Journals of Susanna Moodie* where a similar imagining of an extended life occurs? Was that work a kind of permission to do what you were doing?

SB I think it was a kind of permission. I read *The Journals* about ten years ago. It was one of the first complete books of Canadian poetry that I read. I was fascinated by what Atwood had done. It set a model in a sense. By the time I was writing *White Stone*, I was quite unconscious of that model, but I didn't want to do anything that was too similar. For example, I had a poem, "Alice at Pacific Rim National Park," that I took out of the book. It was a little bit too much the English woman finding herself in the forest and not recognizing places. I refrained from doing anything that was too obvious — a kind of tribute. Of course, it is impossible to say, but had I not read that book, would I have constructed *White Stone* in this way? *The Journals* did set a model and, as you say, gave a kind of permission. I refrained from rereading it for the past five years because I didn't want that influence to creep in.

AC In *Headhunter*, Timothy Findley brings back characters from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Urquhart's *Changing Heaven* features Emily Brontë. Do you have a theory as to why the late twentieth century is resurrecting the characters and creators of the nineteenth?

SB The present seems to be a constant referring back. The moment that the 'eighties were over, schools were throwing 'eighties dances. Everything becomes a commodity. The present doesn't have the same kind of originality that it used to have.

AC You mean that there is a kind of poverty in the present?

SB It's not something that I experience as such in my daily life, but when I think about the kinds of things that are being written now, the films being made, I wonder if they'll have the same kind of resonance in a hundred years that the Victorian works have for us now. For me, the fascination with the Victorian world lies in the fact that it is apparently so different from what we're living in now, and yet it seems to be an era fraught with contradictions that weren't really explored. Also, for me, part of the interest in the Victorian era is looking back to where I came from. My maternal grandparents came from England not long after Alice's time. When I went to England, it was strange because I had almost expected to go to Victorian England. To understand where we are now, it would help to have an understanding of where we came from.

AC *White Stone* is a lyric sequence with a strong narrative line. Do you think of yourself as a narrative poet?

SB I think of myself as a lyric poet, but it is important to me that

there be links between the poems. *Two Bowls of Milk* is not nearly as cohesively linked as *White Stone*. I wanted *White Stone* to be a book that could be read from cover to cover, and would tell a kind of story. The poems in themselves do not tend to be that long. I think of myself as an episodic poet.

AC Many poets want to put a distance between themselves and the speaker in their poems, but from the very first poem, "Dark Room," you place yourself squarely in the unfolding story. Was the process of writing *White Stone* a way of discovering an image of yourself?

SB Yes, and part of the reason why I use the phrase "the poet" in so many of those poems is because I realize it is only part of myself that speaks there. I wanted to be conscious of that. In a sense, I am creating a self in the poems in the same way that I am creating an Alice. When I first started writing the poems, they were much more just about Alice and the poems were in third person. In the first few months of writing, I played around with point of view. People in my workshop said that there needed to be more "I" in there, and by becoming Alice, by writing in the first-person point of view, I could get that. I didn't find that it made the poems any more interesting. In fact, I found that it felt false because I felt that I as a writer needed to be in there exploring why I was writing about this.

AC So by putting yourself in there as witness, you chose a way that fell halfway between first person and third person?

SB That's right, and by speaking to Alice as "you" in the poems, it established a connection. If I had written them using "she," I wouldn't have had the same sense that I was speaking to her.

AC Is writing like the photographer's darkroom solution? You immerse a negative and an image appears?

SB That's a model that works for me, but it differs in the sense that the writing is worked on and worked on. But because I see things as moments rather than as stories, and because I look at close-up details, I think that writing is like photographing something. Most of my poems are an attempt to capture emotionally a certain moment, not just document it. That's the same impulse that inspires me to take photographs: [the desire] never to lose that moment. It's an attempt to keep, but it is destined to fail, and that is part of the melancholy that creeps through many of my poems.

AC If photography is central to *White Stone*, painting appears as a

chief subject in *Two Bowls of Milk*. Are you a visual artist as well as a writer?

SB The photography that I do is an amateur point-and-shoot kind of photography. It is nothing like art for me, and the reason that I write about painting is that I can't paint. It's something that does not come naturally, and I've always wanted it to. In writing about visual art, I'm not trying to replicate with words what the visual artist did. I've tried that, and it's not very interesting. I'm much more interested in using the painting as a trigger for something that I want to explore. I'm making it my own in that sense. I'm not just trying to be an imitation painter through words.

AC In *Two Bowls of Milk*, you have a section of poems from Jean Paul Lemieux's paintings. What is it about his work that so interests you?

SB When I moved to Quebec City, I didn't have a sense of belonging there at all, and I didn't know how to relate to the landscape. I was writing a lot, but I wasn't happy with what I was writing. I felt that I had left the source of my inspiration, which is in British Columbia. Lemieux seemed to have had the same problem, but in his case it was only in Quebec that he could really paint. It started me thinking about how much creativity is tied to one particular place. Also, I was exploring how one's mood or emotional state comes through in the work. I find Lemieux's paintings very desolate and despairing. My boyfriend, who grew up in Quebec, finds them very comforting. I wondered how much of this despair I was projecting onto these works and how much it was Lemieux's own despair. I came to the conclusion that there were two despairs going on when I looked at those works. As I started pursuing the research, my response was confirmed because he spoke about his desire to capture loneliness. And time, as well. He had a profound nostalgia for his childhood and a desire to paint the passing of time. As a tangential interest, there was the fact that his wife was also a painter, but gave up her art. I wondered, could I create an understanding for what she had done, rather than express a contemporary horror at what she had given up?

AC In *Two Bowls*, there are poems as well on Vermeer (25) and Colville (65), and these are linked in the Colville poem "To Dolly." What is the common denominator in their work that draws your attention?

SB I wasn't deliberately trying to create a link, but Vermeer's image of the girl turning her head haunted me for a long time. What is similar in their work has to do with the moment. There is always something

mysterious about that moment. Vermeer's woman is reading a letter, but you don't know what the contents are, or someone is looking out a window, but there is a sense that something has been kept back. In Colville's paintings, one figure will be obscuring the head of another, or a bird is flying in front of someone's face. In the case of the sheep, there is the sense that you have interrupted a moment, or a moment is just about to happen, but the painting is never about that one moment. It suggests a mystery, and those are the kinds of works that it is interesting to write about because there is so much room for speculation.

AC Vermeer, of all painters, fascinates people who write. Is it something that he does with time?

SB It's time, but, for me, a lot of it is his light. It's his precision, the attention to detail. It is also the windows and doorways. You're looking off into a space where there are all these rooms, and because it is painted with such detail, you almost sense that you could walk into the painting and find out what is going on in those rooms.

AC Although *Two Bowls of Milk* was published after *White Stone*, were you working on both books at once? There's a family connection between them via Julia Margaret Cameron whose work appears in the poem "Virginia Woolf's Mother in the Blurred Garden" (*Two Bowls* 31).

SB I was working on them both at the same time. There was a certain point where *White Stone* was finished, and I was moving on to *Two Bowls of Milk*, and then I went back to *White Stone*. It really was a lot of back and forth. Actually, I wrote about Cameron's photograph of Virginia Woolf's mother quite a long time before I wrote about her Alice photographs. My mother found a book of Cameron's photographs and thought I would be interested. And I don't think at first I knew that the photographs of Alice were in there. There have been quite a few of those strange kinds of connections. Even when I saw the photograph of Virginia Woolf's mother, I was quite taken by it even before I realized who it was. Cameron was one of those photographers who was tied to so many people in so many different ways. And she has served us, as Vermeer has, as a wonderful kind of muse.

AC *White Stone* chronicles a life over an expanse of time and space. Does *Two Bowls*, by contrast, opt for a contemplative stillness?

SB In *Two Bowls*, there is a sense of chronicling a life on a much smaller scale in terms of my move from Vancouver to Quebec City and

then to Ottawa. That's the only chronicling that's really happening. I think of it as a much more meditative book. It doesn't have those narrative connections, and the links that are being made from one poem to the next are much more subtle and emotional, rather than narrative or thematic.

AC "Perspective" is a word that recurs in the two books. Does the poet have a perspective on the world that is different from other people's?

SB Poets are as different from each other as any poet is different from any other person, but I've realized over the years that perspective is what is most important for me in writing: whether it is my perspective in looking at a painting or photograph, or the difference between Alice's and Dodgson's perspectives. I don't know if that will always be true but, for now, it is. I think for other poets, there are other things which are much more important. The other senses are more important to them whereas I am a very visual writer. I look at my poems and there is not a lot of the other senses in them. It is mostly the sounds of words themselves and then what I have seen. Because these two books were written concurrently, the concerns are similar, but the voices are rather different although I was very aware that the final poem in *White Stone* — "The Open Door" — is in the voice of *Two Bowls*. It is in couplets, and the starkness of it fits much more in the second book. I was attempting to open a door into the second book.

AC Although your poetic forms are varied, the two-line verse and the three-line verse seem to be your preferred form, especially in the second book. What is it about these short stanzas that suits your way of seeing the world?

SB They help me focus. I work on the computer, and seeing just two or three lines sitting there alone draws my attention to any words that feel extra. I find it much easier to revise when that kind of attention is drawn to each word. It is easier in a prose poem or in poems with longer stanzas to get away with having excess words. By using shorter stanzas, the reader's attention and the writer's attention are drawn to each word. It also forces me to be very precise, and although I don't write sonnets or other specific forms, it is a way of focusing what I want to say rather than rambling on in stanzas of various lengths until something has been achieved. Once I have set up a poem in couplets, it forces me to be more inventive. It's an additional challenge. It makes me work harder and so it makes the poem stronger.

AC So it disciplines language?

SB It's about having control. Many of the earlier poems in *White Stone* were written in loose stanzas, uncounted lines, and as I revised, I made them more uniform. But there is a danger in writing in the same form too often. It tends to create a similarity in the voice. I write differently when I am writing in couplets then when I am writing five-line stanzas. In the "Three Goddesses" poems, at the end of *Two Bowls*, it was very clear from the start that I wanted to write each section in a different form. Deciding on the form gave me the voice.

AC In *Two Bowls*, there is a Colville poem, a Fred Ross poem ("The Beheld," 67) and a Fredericton poem ("Edge of the River," 15). What is your connection with the Maritimes?

SB This is only my second time out here. I travelled in the Maritimes in '94, around the time that I was working on *Two Bowls of Milk*. That was when I was still living in Vancouver. I am drawn to coasts, much more than to the centre. It has something to do with edges. There is something to be gained from growing up on the edge or moving to an edge. The kind of people that gravitate towards edges have different things in mind than just making it in Toronto.

NOTE

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WORKS BY STEPHANIE BOLSTER

Two Bowls of Milk. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1999.

White Stone: The Alice Poems. Montreal: Signal Editions: Vehicule, 1998.