

## *Sandra Alcosser: An Appreciation*

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Sandra Alcosser, Montana's recently named first Poet Laureate, grew up thirty miles from where I did, in South Bend, Indiana. In many ways, our lives have paralleled. We both grew up working class in Midwestern farming/industrial towns. Her father owned a body shop, my parents and grandparents a Polish bar. We both loved and feared our people and found refuge from them in the lilac trees and "fields of wild asparagus" and in books. Alcosser received her M.F.A. in Poetry in 1982 from The University of Montana, where she studied with Richard Hugo. I graduated from there in 1977. We were both influenced by and, in a way adopted by Hugo, unlikely girl poets from the backwoods of America. We both stayed in Montana, went off to California, returned. We have both worked inside and outside the academy as poets in the schools and communities.

I met Sandra Alcosser in April 2000 when she came to the Holter Museum of Art to read in a series Rick Newby and I were curating. I wish I would have known her sooner. Hers is a quicksilver intelligence, generous, wide-ranging, and deeply concerned with our place as humans in the world. Much has been written about her work as an educator and her environmental activism. Yet, it is as a poet that one gets to know her best. Her voice is such an intimate, honest voice that it seems as if a sister speaking in a dream language of memory and image—fields of geese, goats, sugar pear trees, "grass grown crystalline through cracked windshields."

There are many ways to approach the work of Alcosser: through the lens of working class people and the "contemporary

fables" she uses to paint their portraits, through her investigation of the particularities of place, whether it be Louisiana, Montana, or the Midwest, or through her striking use of image, how, as Judith Moore writes in *Poetry Daily*, some poems "serve as tiny museums to store domestic details that otherwise might be lost to us." In this essay, however, I would like to focus on Alcosser's exploration of the erotic—as method, as politic, as battlefield between nature and culture, and, ultimately, as guiding force behind a form.



*A body grows from its erotic entanglement and then is reprimanded as if nature and culture were opposed.*

Thus begins the third and last section of Alcosser's book *Except by Nature*, a highly erotic, disruptive, even wanton collection of poems exploring the relationship between the land and the human. Eros. We know it as the principle of attraction, of movement away from the self toward another, of dis-equalibrium, what another poet, Anne Carson, calls a "reaching out from what is known and present to something else, something different, something desired." As humans, it is through our five senses that we reach: touch, sound, sight, smell, taste. It is through the experience of the body that we know we are alive, through which the world becomes alive to us.

Alcosser's images are intensely sensual. "I have touched everything," she writes in a lovely poem about preparing herself and her rooms for the return of a long-absent husband. The sensuality is honeyed, heightened: "The white hibiscus / hover against the window, / their red stamens craned like candlewicks."

These are poems of knowledge gained, gleaned, gleaming through the body, knowledge of sweat, sex, tingling blood, “a woman’s buttery breast, a man’s of cumin.” This intelligence—the intelligence of the body—is something Alcosser celebrates. It is also, in a culture which has grown increasingly disengaged from the body as a site of knowledge, where daily life has become more and more instrumentalized, a transgressive stance.

Man and nature. Mind and body. The spiritual and the physical. Inherent in any duality, the cultural critic Susan Griffin writes, is an implied hierarchy. Eros inhabits the space between, ungoverning and ungovernable. It bleeds into, over, propelling us beyond the borders of gender, race, religion, even species. “How could I convey that curious and erotic moment when a body is attracted to another body for nothing more than its vitality, its beauty, the intricacy of its ritual,” Alcosser asks in her essay, “The Autumn Courtship of Surface-Feeding Ducks.”

*A body grows.* It is entangled in other bodies, bodies of water, thickets of willow, fields of wild asparagus. Alcosser describes temperature in Louisiana as “heat rising / like wet crepe from silt and muck,” and we can feel that day as something tangible, the stressed one-syllable words hot and crowding the mouth. Azaleas there are “sisters [who] climb the bedroom window, lay themselves on the night table like pink fish, like negligees and soap slivers.” In these poems, eros is a presence and a power, inhabiting the space between woman and man, woman and flower, poet and cougar, duck, cloud, even the weather:

Thirty-one days of rain, like making love again,  
again with no release.

In the poem “Thirst,” one feels the drought as a condition both of the human body and that of the earth’s:

clouds stretch over the tinder forest,  
they flirt and roll their moist shoulders.  
I remember when I had no lover,

how my every motion was thirst.  
I curl beside my husband tonight under the motley sky.  
Our bodies rub together, powder like dirt.

This knowledge, an intimacy with nature and our place within it (“Sometimes I don’t know who I am— / my age, my sex, my species— / only that I am an animal who will love / and die,” Alcosser writes in the poem “By the Nape.”), seems crucial in a time when warnings come from our wounded earth, waters, skies, bodies, speaking of mutual alienation. Everything seems suddenly at stake: “If human consciousness can be rejoined not only with the human body but with the body of earth,” Griffin writes, “what seems incipient in the reunion is the recovery of meaning. . . .”



*A body grows from its erotic entanglement and then it is reprimanded.* Eros disrupts. Lush, overripe, “wispy, drooping, damp,” it speaks of the body and the body’s needs. Therefore, though eros is pleasant, it is also dangerous, a threat to what has been established, a threat to peace. “It was for me, a very troubling place,” Alcosser says of Louisiana in the previously mentioned interview

with Judith Moore. “I felt really uncomfortable, almost ashamed, that I had that information, that I witnessed it.” In the section of Louisiana poems, entitled “Sugary Heat,” the heat, the swamps with their “potential for evil and irrational growth,” her friends who “cultivated a madness of operatic proportion” threaten her physical as well as mental safety. At the same time, she is lured into its otherness, its strangeness. “I want to be brave, to bathe / myself in the humid night / . . . to let the air penetrate at last,” the poet writes, and admits, “But I am afraid.”

Lure and hesitation, the draw and drawing back from the foreign or strange are intrinsic to the movement of eros. There is, of course, real danger—“I have placed / a hand on blind branches, / felt it flame with fire ants”—and there is the punishment we imagine we will incur when we venture past the boundaries of self and culture, what Alcosser, in another poem, refers to as “the space defined by taboo.” In “Azaleas,” two women drift through the streets of New Orleans “eating buttery pastry and oysters,” “dressed in white gauze.” It is obvious that they are drawn to each other. “Tell me about a lover,” one says, “causing a lip of wine to sing under her index finger.” Though their desire for one another is not enacted, it simmers and surfaces in the images they share—“sugared heat,” “opulent clouds of steam,” “black coffee with thick cream”—and the extended metaphor the poet uses to link the women to the azaleas which are “flagrant and profuse.”

Illicit fantasies serve as subject of many poems in this book. In “Taboo,” a stranger enters a woman’s home to watch her and her lover while they sleep, sweaty and exhausted “like a pair of white summer shoes.” The potential danger is explicit: “I knew if I moved, I would jeopardize my lover’s life, the stranger’s, mine.” Yet, when

the intruder leaves, the woman follows him out to the front stoop. Though she cannot see him, she knows he is there, perhaps on the other side of the fence, breathing the same scent of spider lily. “I can see you,” the woman whispers into the dark.

In “Maximum Security,” a woman hears on the radio news of an escaped prisoner and fantasizes his intrusion, “unraveling / the lace—pink / like crepe myrtle, pink / like raspberry sorbet” of the lingerie she is wearing and that we are given to understand plays its part in the fantasy of his arrival. “Who does not pray,” the narrator asks, “for the deadly dangerous?” In “Wildcat Path,” a woman who has barely escaped death by a cougar who followed her home, tearing her nylon dress to shreds, is fueled by the idea that the cat wanted her. In “Sweat,” the author remembers the men who worked in her father’s bodyshop, how they would “line the shop sink, naked / to the waist, scour down with Ajax, spray water / across their necks and up into their arms.”

The poems in *Except by Nature* tell again and again stories of people and animals refusing to be reasonable, refusing to be safe or saved, risking all. A boy is caught on an ice floe and when Search and Rescue arrive, he tells them he wants to be left alone. An abandoned mallard would “rather freeze than take grain” from the speaker’s hand, though it probably means certain death. In “Woodpecker,” Alcosser asks:

After all, have you never wanted  
to drive top speed,  
to slam into a tree or dive  
from a ledge or catch fire  
or slit your wrists

and let the fluids geyser?

Not suicide, but its burning.

To even voice these desires is to risk reprimand—from the culture, from the family, from the self. As readers, we are shocked at this voicing, discomforted, uneasy. We are shocked into a recognition of ourselves.



*A body grows from its erotic entanglement and then is reprimanded as if nature and culture were opposed. And could this not be said, too, of a poem? What form, then, might a poem take that grows from its entanglements, that acts (enacts) a reconciliation of nature and culture?*

In the aforementioned essay, Alcosser relates a discussion with poet Pattiann Rogers wherein they “considered ways that one could apply the laws and patterns of nature (random branching, explosions, meanders) to the creation of form.” Form in English poetry is usually described as either traditional (with rules of meter and/or rhyme imposed by culture) or variously as open, free, organic, meaning a form that grows out of the poem’s own necessities. Is it, I wonder, possible to speak of erotic form? And if so, what is the form eros takes when it is reprimanded, stilted, silenced, repressed? And what form might possibly free it?

One might argue that the forms of postmodern literature—disjunction of image, sudden turns and reversals, syntactic displacement, the dispersal and accumulation of various and

conflicting voices—are efforts to circumvent, rupture, subvert the structures of being and thinking that have alienated us from the body and thus, from the earth. “The alienation of human society from nature has led to many different kinds of destruction,” Griffin writes, “not the least of which has been the fragmentation of consciousness.”

In many of Alcosser’s poems—and I would like to look particularly at “Skiing in Moonlight,” the poem from which the title of the collection is taken—the movement of the lines and images are themselves erotic, by which I mean ungoverned by logical expectations. One might call this kind of writing free association, but that would limit the knowledge gained to the mind’s. One might call it surrealistic in its juxtaposition of what at first seem discontinuous images. Although Alcosser acknowledges the importance to her of surrealistic method, she also states that “reality is slippery and whimsical enough.”

The poem begins with an image of the fading day and a moon occluded by clouds “like a sweater pulled over the heart of the moon.” Right away, the moon and cloud are humanized and, if one considers that one pulls a sweater over one’s breast rather than heart, eroticized. The next image is disembodied, seemingly dislocated: “Why are so many friends / Leaving or getting left behind?” What precipitated this turn? Is the line the sounding of a thought generated by seeing the light withheld? Is it a comment on the moon leaving, the clouds being left behind and thus a kind of metaphor of perpetual arrival and departure? In the next stanza there is a statement: “Mao’s anti-sparrow campaign: to kill and eat the birds / that were eating the grain.” The poem has jumped ship—country, century, tone. It will do so again, later, speaking of

Mother Theresa. There is no effort by the poet to connect the dots. Yet, in between the evening light continues, the skier continues, the moon and clouds continue. The landscape is not a backdrop but an unstable force.

“The word landscape itself becomes problematic,” Rebecca Solnit argues in *As Eve Said to the Serpent*, her collection of essays on landscape, gender, and art. “A landscape is scenery, scenery is stage decoration, and stage decorations are static backdrops for a human drama.” In “Skiing in Moonlight,” the individual human drama is subsumed, reflected, occluded, and re-emerging in relationship with the non-human dramas unfolding. What inhabits this landscape, and thus, the landscape of the poem? A fox “walks over hoarfrost not breaking / morning’s delicate lace.” Is this a metaphor for the woman skiing or a fox that exists in its own right, who happens to share this landscape? Later, she will ask, “What is the bearing weight of an ice crystal?” Is she speaking of the fox now or herself or the moonlight shed on the snow?

In this poem, everything is drifting away. The words “leaves or leaving” occur three times in the first three stanzas. Sparrows, Mother Theresa, the moon, friends, the fox who leaves no trace, the winter sun that drifts away—absence inscribes the world. The trouble with eros is that it is slippery, it slides, it will not be governed by traditional form or linear patterns of thought. It makes its own patterns—the lace with its absence, an x-ray held to the light, vole tracks under the snow—then disregards them.

“That godlike silk, never known before, now comes into focus and vanishes again in one quick shift of view,” writes Anne Carson. “To feel its current pass through her is what the lover wants.”

“Eros is the wound,” the poet answers to the question “Why will a person freezing to death / Inch into the false warmth of the moon?” Does it answer the question? Is the speaker starving? Starving for what? Is eros the wound or the salving of the wound? Is eros the symptom of our disconnection from the body’s experience or the cure for it? In many of Alcosser’s poems, the procession of images often resists discursiveness. Nothing is pinned down: “Except by nature—as a woman, I will be ungovernable.” The poem ends with this remarkable syntactical inversion, a line that enacts reconciliation. Here, there is no division between the woman’s nature and the earth’s, and the possibility of a government we might place our trust in.

### Works Cited

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