

Gail Sher: Collected Poetry 1982-2007

A Review Essay

by Andrew Schelling

I first met Gail Sher in the early nineteen-eighties when we were both living in Berkeley. I'd already read her earliest published poetry and heard friends speak about her practice of both Buddhism and writing. In a modest way she was a legend among local poets & Zen students. When I actually met her, she was finishing up a book of bread recipes [*From a Baker's Kitchen*, 1984/2004], an activity less surprising in those days than it might seem now.

The story about Gail's poetry was that she'd begun to write her tough, multi-layered, flint-like poems, often in series, while a student at Zen Center's Tassajara Mountain retreat. She had continued to write as a daily discipline after returning to the East Bay where she dwelt on the far fringes of the energetic language poetry crowd. The earliest events she and I appeared at together were conversations about poetry and Buddhist practice—once in San Francisco, once at Green Gulch Zen Center near Muir Beach. To my imagination though, she remained a figure of Tassajara.

Tassajara lies in one of those cañados that in summer visiting season crackles with tough, aromatic brush—as well as manzanita & poison oak—deep in the mountains inland from Monterey. The site, along a boulder strewn creek, was first known to native peoples for its healing hot springs. You can only readily get there during the dry season, & only with a serviceable car, standard transmission, to take you seven miles uphill, then seven precipitous miles down a harrowing dirt road. The road twists along a valley wall held in place by the roots of dwarf oaks. When I'd visit in the seventies and eighties, I went in my big, square '64 Pontiac, which burnt through its brakes the first time down. From then on the car stayed at China Camp, a hilltop site with primitive facilities. Seven miles down to Tassajara by foot—bathe in the creek, drink tea generously provided by the Zen Students, buy a loaf of Tassajara's renowned bread, sit zazen in the zendo—then trudge seven miles back to the clatter of crickets. On one of those trips I heard of a poet who had taken to a daily practice of writing, and did it as a solitary discipline. So different from the gregarious poets I knew in the Bay Area!

When I found Gail's books, I imagined her having stepped from a Japanese Noh play. Her poems, sharpened by rigorous Buddhist discipline—and not to everybody's taste—grabbed me instantly. They were tough, refreshingly hard-edged, full of the natural world—constructed of bits and pieces of mineral, insect, bark, summer grass. They could cry out from the page in several languages at once, with English functioning (I thought) like a piece of steel to strike the spark. They felt classical. Despite their wild turns of phrasing, fox barks & cricket clicks,

under the surface they showed a sensibility that was refined, educated, attentive to natural detail, & enamored of the chipped, the asymmetric, the rustic. They put me in mind of the writers of Japan's Heian court, the best of whom were women. I still hear echoes of Murasaki Shikibu or Ono no Komachi when I open Gail's books.

My ear had been tuned to Modernist rhythms & syntax by Pound's *Cantos* and his haunting translation of Noh plays. I'd been schooled in the compressed poems of Lorine Niedecker and the Objectivists, had started to collect the crisp haiku-inflected translations of American Indian poems done by Frances Densmore, and gotten first-hand know-how of Asian poetry through the mustard-crackling syllables of Sanskrit. When I found Gail's poems, they became instant companions. I knew she was up to something special. (*As on things which (headpiece) touches the Moslem* was probably the book that first showed me how my own generation's often extreme experiments with language—cracking words apart & recombining syllables or sentences in ways that carried ear & mind to completely new realms—could be more than politically radical. They could be ecologically radical, spiritually radical.

I remember many poems by Philip Whalen & Diane di Prima also written at Tassajara, and maybe some by Norman Fischer or Pat Reed. Once on the twisty, uphill walk back to China Camp through burnt-over oaks—frightening wildfire had raced through in '77 or '78—ghost faces leapt out where the firefighter's axes had slashed through scorched trunks and exposed bright inner wood. I composed a lengthy poem (thankfully lost long ago) to capture the California landscape with its Zen center, lizards, and rattlesnakes. Of all the writing Tassajara's inspired, though, Gail Sher's must be the most fully generated out of that canyon, its geothermal forces, its healing hot springs.

Gail has worked with, & been instrumental in naturalizing to our North American continent, several Asian poetic traditions. This is something only a Left Coast or Pacific Rim poet could do with ease, and a direct if invisible lineage runs through her from the Far East. She has worked haiku and its linked-verse cousin renku. She has written an autobiographical account of her Buddhist training in haibun form. More recently, familiarity with yoga practice has drawn her to India's musical tradition, and the outcome of this was the serial poem *RAGA*. In conversation with Tibetan Buddhism, she also wrote *DOHA*, a book modeled on Tibetan songs of devotion and instruction.

Every plant, wild animal, watershed, well-crafted building, every poem or human being, holds a quality that is the root of its life and spirit. This quality is quite sharp, objective, wise. It is also creative and fluid so cannot be caught or described. Matsuo Basho found this spirit to animate haiku, lyric poems, the tea ceremony, archery. It runs through all of Gail Sher's poetry—loose, alive, relaxed, content with imperfection, winding around an inward mystery. Her writing reveals the finely edged relationship between ourselves and our

surroundings. When I go to her poetry I do it the way I hike into the mountains or up a gorge, or for that matter step into a temple or meditation hall. I find things fully alive there. Not opinions, ideas, notions—just the wild spirit of living things.

What is the natural habitat of North American poetry if not the great ecosystem of the Small Press? An ecosystem comprised of energy pathways, migration corridors, nutrient exchanges. It is alive with life & death chases, sweeping unpredictable weather patterns, and acts of breath-taking generosity. Gail's poems saw light here: Rosmarie & Keith Waldrop's Burning Deck Press, Matt & Sarah Correy's Rodent Press, Joey Simas's Moving Letters. But the world of publishing got rougher in the 1990's (absorption of corporate publishing houses into media empires, overthrow of distributors who handle small presses). One response has been for poets to consolidate their resources. Gail's poetry has moved to a new home, Night Crane Press.

Small and micro presses serving the San Francisco Bay Area have taken totem animals for a long time. White Rabbit, Grey Fox, Coyote Books. Turtle Island fits in too. Now Night Crane, with its whiff of transient life, is collecting Gail Sher's poetry into an online edition. This is a wonderful gathering. Much in these books will be rough going, though, even for seasoned readers. Tibetan words, Sanskrit, Hebrew, Japanese. Syllables cobbled into seed-like stanzas that don't easily crack. Of course poetry has always been hard to crack. "Don't follow in the steps of the old masters," said one old master, "seek what they sought." What a hard lesson.

--Naropa University, Boulder, Colorado

Note: This essay was written for a collected edition of Gail Sher's poetry that was never published as a print volume; instead it introduced the online edition of Gail's poetry on her website, gailsher.com.
