

## MY LIFE IN POETRY by Anne Stevenson



*“I am not a nano-particle being fired through an interferometer; I’m a living person whose outer and inner selves are intimately connected...”*

Where to begin? Well, to be as up-to-date as I can, I’ll start by citing an article that struck me weeks ago, when I was sorting through old copies of *The New Scientist*. On the front cover of the issue of 15 May, 2004, was a headline, ‘Make me Quantum: How to be in two places at once’. Right away it occurred to me that ‘quantum’ or a ‘quantum feeling’ would be a good way to express the weird sense I’ve had as far back as I can remember of being at the same time myself and not myself, both here and not here. When I turned to the article, I was struck by the first paragraph’s likeness to a poem I’d written in the early ’80s. Here is the opening paragraph of the quantum article, followed by the poem:

Anton Zeilinger raps his knuckles on the wooden table in front of him. He thinks the table is there, passively sitting on the floor of his office... But he can’t be sure. ‘Reality seems to be immediate: I can touch this table,’ he says. ‘However, if you think carefully about it, all I have is information getting into my brain.’

### Small Philosophical Poem

Dr Animus, whose philosophy is a table,  
sits down contentedly to a square meal.  
The plates lie there, and there,  
just where they should lie.  
His feet stay just where they should stay,  
between legs and the floor.  
His eyes believe the clean waxed surfaces  
are what they are.

But while he’s eating his un-  
exceptional propositions, his wise  
wife, Anima, sweeping a haze-gold decanter  
from a metaphysical salver,  
pours him a small glass of doubt.  
Just what he needs.  
He smacks his lips and cracks his knuckles.  
The world is the pleasure of thought.

He’d like to stay awake all night,  
(elbows on the table)  
talking of how the table might not be there.  
But Anima, whose philosophy is hunger,  
perceives the plates are void in empty air.  
The floor is void beneath his trusting feet.  
Peeling her glass from its slender cone of fire,  
she fills the room with love. And fear. And fear.<sup>1</sup>

It would be almost as mind-boggling as quantum theory itself if Anton Zeilinger in Vienna had read that poem, but the coincidence of the imagery may not be entirely accidental. Although Zeilinger was experimenting with de Broglie wavelengths and quantum ‘superpositions’ of electrons and photons, and the poem is a parable calling into question how little we know about what we think we know, it seems likely that two contemporary minds were running in similar channels. The scientist’s spirit of inquiry is not all that different from the poet’s. Keeping the biggest, most basic questions open and mysterious is what makes the disciplines of science and literature exciting in this spoiled, rich western world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that can seem so cheap and media-heavy, filled with meaningless chatter. When, at the end of *Small Philosophical Poem*, Dr. Animus’s “wise wife, Anima” perceives the plates and floor are true only in so far as the human brain thinks they are, she fills the room with the fires of love and fear – unquantifiable emotions that give our lives meaning without promising us any kind of spurious public health and safety.

As for being in two places at once, here again I want to call on quantum physics for a metaphor. For although, in a classical sense, my life has proceeded normally from year to year, in a more mysterious way it has oscillated violently, circling around and back on itself between times of insight and creation and times of mental stagnation and misery. The life I have led as a woman, in short, often feels to me the same and yet different from my life as a poet. Like a quantum particle, I can exist in two places at once – though, let me hastily add, I don’t think being conscious of a double state is all that unusual. Nearly everybody dreams. And my ‘quantum’ life, which I think of as my ‘real’ life, certainly has a root in a dreamy state of mind, though I can’t imagine a dream causing me nearly as much hard, conscious labour as the writing of a poem.

What I am saying, of course, has to be understood as a kind of poetry, a figure of speech, as Anton Zeilinger puts it, made wholly ‘out of information getting into my brain.’ I am not a nano-particle being fired through an interferometer; I’m a living person whose outer and inner selves are so intimately connected that I can almost see them ‘superposed’, one in the exact same place and yet in a different place from the other. So, if I am to proceed with an account of my life in poetry I will have to negotiate with this mysterious conundrum to produce something like a coherent story.

Facts first. Born in January, 1933, I was the oldest of three American daughters born to Charles and Louise Stevenson, both Midwesterners from Ohio. They were highly intelligent and well educated. My mother, who surely would have become a writer or teacher had she lived a generation later, was passionately fond of literature, and the fiction she read aloud to us as children – mostly novels by Kipling, Dickens, Mark Twain, R L Stevenson, and, especially dear to me, Jane Austen – are books that I still can’t open without hearing her lively, wonderfully expressive voice. My father, though a university professor by profession, was at home an amateur pianist and chamber-music player who gave his daughters violins or cellos every Christmas (with a view to forming a family trio), and entertained us in the evening by reading us Shakespeare and Yeats and long narrative poems by the likes of Walter Scott and Mathew Arnold. He had surprised his Cincinnati business family by going to Yale to study English, but after marrying my mother and crossing the Atlantic to Cambridge, England, he switched his field to philosophy. He hardly noticed when I was born, my mother told me (though his letters at the time don’t bear this out) he was so absorbed in writing a paper on vagueness while preparing to submit a PhD thesis on Ethical Values to Harvard. At the age of six months, I was whisked out of the English Cambridge to start my life in the American one. The next move was to New Haven, where, throughout World War II, Steve (as everyone called him) taught at Yale. In 1946 he was invited to join the University of Michigan’s philosophy department in Ann Arbor. He was a professor there until he retired, and that is where I went to high school and university.

Now, it is no exaggeration to say that during those eight or nine years when I was growing up in Ann Arbor, I lived in an imaginary world of my own invention. And in this pretended world (which was pure fantasy and not at all the ‘quantum’ world referred to earlier) I was, according to what I was reading or seeing, Mozart the Wonder Child, Joan of Arc, Cleopatra played by Katherine Cornell, Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, Natasha Rostov in *War and Peace*, but most often a reincarnation of Emily Dickinson or Edna St. Vincent Millay – when I wasn’t being a female

reincarnation of William Shakespeare or John Keats. Later, as a university student and member of an organization called The Inter-Arts Union, I became an ardent modernist, writing Eliot-like poems and reviews for student publications, poetic plays in the manner of Yeats, even a rather Tom Stoppard-like libretto for a short opera. Then, in my final year, I won a Major Hopwood Prize for poetry, a very generous amount of money, and spent it immediately on a one-way air ticket to England. A year later, after passing myself off as a teacher in a boarding school in Kent, I threw away all my ambitions in the arts to marry a handsome Rugby-playing Englishman just down from Cambridge. My parents and fellow artists in Ann Arbor were puzzled and disappointed, particularly my mother, who, over the years, had transferred to me her own ambitions to become a writer. To me, though, England (the country of my birth, after all) had always been a kind of Mecca. Drab, cold and poor in 1955, still critically wounded by the war, it nonetheless seemed the perfect setting for the Henry James-like fiction I was writing continually in my imagination, in which I featured both as author and heroine.

It must have been four or five years after my marriage that I first became aware of soul-destroying frustrations. I was not living in a novel; I was living a box with a false bottom. On the surface I was happily partnered with a suitably adventurous hero. In 1957, I gave birth to a daughter in London, having already followed my husband to Norwich and to Belfast while he tried on different management consultancy jobs. By 1958–59, we were living in New York City, and from thence my husband's business took us south to Mississippi. With every move, I was at first interested and stimulated, then later – completely unable to write – downcast, anorexic and helplessly tearful. My husband couldn't understand what was wrong with me. Finally, in Atlanta, Georgia, we decided to part. Divorced and back at Michigan with my small daughter in the autumn of 1960, I began studying for an MA in English. Living again in my parents' house of pianos and cellos and readings-aloud in the evening, I tried to take up the life I had lost in marriage, but that was, of course, impossible. My mother was dying of cancer, and she and my father knew it. Then, the academic discipline of English (and indeed of everything else) seemed to me sterile until I met the poet, Donald Hall, and through him was introduced to the work of modern poets I had never heard of: Wallace Stevens, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and – miracle of miracles – Elizabeth Bishop.

There is little point in setting down many further details of my personal life after Donald Hall had helped to revive the poetry in me and arranged for me to write a short study of Elizabeth Bishop. This commission led to a correspondence with her that immensely affected the poems I wrote thereafter. But if my life as a poet began about then, my life as a woman still went on, and in oddly repetitive ways. After I left Michigan a second time, I taught at a progressive school in Massachusetts. In 1962, I married again – a young historian (famous today) who was studying Chinese and Japanese at Harvard. Shortly after New Year, 1963, my mother died, aged 54 – a blow from which I never recovered, except as I was later able to express my complicated dependence on her love and example in my book-length epistolary poem, *Correspondences* (1974). Throughout the 1960s and '70s, living (on and off) with my husband in Cambridge, England (again!) and then in Glasgow, I continued to try on and rebel against contradictory roles that I thought appropriate to an academic's independent wife: mother (my sons, were born in 1965 and '66) amateur musician, literary critic, free-wheeling lover, bookseller, broadcaster, fellow in writing at several universities. None of these roles were absolutely false, but none were fulfilling, either. All I really wanted to do was write poems I could believe in, get them published, and have them fairly reviewed. What with moves back and forth from Scotland to Oxford, and from Oxford to Hay on Wye to found a Poetry Book Shop, it gradually became clear to me that the only life I was fit for, without lying or apologising even to myself for my blatant selfishness, would have to concede a lot of 'niceness' to some undeniable compulsion I had inherited – from where? From the extraordinary upbringing my parents had given me in the very best classical music and literature? Well, yes, but there was no way I could turn the clock back, even if I'd wanted to. Which, of course, I didn't; I'd had quite enough of what at the time (not now) I condemned as 'academic stuffiness' and 'middle-class morality'. The poets and artists I knew, worked and drank with in the 1970s and '80s were exciting and fun to be with. And yet, some amalgam of language, music and rhythm that my ear had picked up in childhood remained with me all through this period. I couldn't let it go. Call it, if you like, the English verse tradition, once strongly championed by radical

modernists, Eliot, Pound and Stevens, but neglected in the 1980s, as today, by the apostles of post-modernism.

In the middle '80s, when I had calmed down a good deal and finally found the right man to marry, just as I was beginning to have confidence in my own voice and ear, I became seriously deaf and could no longer hear music or performed poetry without a tone-distorting hearing aid. At first, I considered this a great disaster, but as it turned out, physical deafness helped me to see how the split simultaneity of my personal and 'quantum' lives could be an advantage.

I've lost a sense. Why should I care?  
Searching myself, I find a spare.  
I keep that sixth sense in repair  
And set it deftly, like a snare.<sup>2</sup>

Since 1969, when *Reversals* appeared from Welseyian University Press in Connecticut, I have published many slim volumes, but to understand the shape of 'my life in poetry', a reader would do well to consult *Poems 1955–2005*, the fat collection Bloodaxe Books brought out in 2006. When I put it together, instead of arranging the poems chronologically by date written, I tried to trace occurring and recurring themes that ran through them like variously coloured threads in a Turkish rug. Getting the tone, meaning and form of every one of those poems right cost me a good deal in time and nervous energy. It has cost even more to my husbands, partners and especially to my children, to whom my 'quantum' life, while they were growing up, was, of course, incomprehensible. I could say much about my personal life that would reflect negatively on my ambition, for ambition and professional jealousy naturally make up an ungenerous part of every poet's drive to make a name and find readers in the present and future. Just the same, I consider that everything to do with my desire to succeed, strong as it has been, derives from my Mr. Animus self, not from the parallel Anima to whom I owe the poems I judge to matter. In the end, I will have to leave it to my poems to tell the story of my life, although I never know quite when that weird "Other House" of poetry is going to appear, or how in the world I ever find my way in and out of it.

### **The Other House**

In the house of childhood  
I looked up to my mother's face.  
The sturdy roofbeam of her smile  
Buckled the rooms in place.  
A shape of the unchangeable  
taught me the word, 'gone'.

In the house of growing up  
I lined my prison wall  
With lives I worshipped as I read.  
If I chose one, I chose all,  
Such paper clothes I coveted  
and ached to try on.

The house of youth has a grand door,  
A ruin the other side  
Where Death Watch & Company  
Compete with groom and bride.  
Nothing was what seemed to be  
in that charged dawn...

/...

My angry house was a word house,  
A city of the brain,  
Where buried heads and salt gods  
Struggled to breathe again.  
Into those echoing, sealed arcades  
I hurled a song...

I drove my mind to a strange house,  
Infinitely huge and small,  
The cone to which this dew drop earth  
Leeches, invisible.  
Infinite steps of death and birth  
lead up and down.

Beneath me, infinitely deep,  
Solidity dissolves.  
Above me, infinitely wide,  
Galactic winter sprawls.  
That house of the utterly outside  
became my home.

In it, the house of childhood  
Safeguards my mother's face.  
A lifted eyebrow's 'Yes, and so?'  
Latches the room in place.  
I tell my children all I know  
of the word 'gone'.<sup>3</sup>

### **Anne Stevenson**

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Anne Stevenson, "Small Philosophical Poem" in *Poems 1955–2005*, (Tarnet, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2006), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Stevenson, "On Going Deaf", *ibid*, 351.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Stevenson, "The Other House", *ibid*, 153.