

ROBERTO RODRIGUEZ

# AN INTERVIEW WITH LISA FAY COUTLEY



Photo credit Stacey Shrontz

Lisa Fay Coutley is the author of *Errata* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2015), winner of the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition Award, and *In the Carnival of Breathing* (Black Lawrence Press, 2011), winner of the Black River Chapbook Competition. Her poetry has been awarded a fellowship from the National Endowment for Arts, scholarships from Bread Loaf and Sewanee Writers' Conferences, and an Academy of American Poets Levis Prize. Recent prose and poetry publications include *Prairie Schooner*, *Kenyon Review*, *Gulf Coast*, and *Poets & Writers*. She is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing–Poetry at Snow College.

Lisa Fay Coutley is not only an esteemed writer, but also a 2004 UW-Green Bay alumna who helped resurrect the *Sheepshead Review* in 2002, and served as poetry editor. She was interviewed via e-mail by Roberto Rodriguez after her campus visit this Fall.

RR: First off, I just want to thank you for your time and to congratulate you on your recently published poetry collection, *Errata*. I want you to know that I inhaled your work. Every line and every word felt so expertly placed and crafted and I loved reading your poetry.

To begin, can you talk about how *Errata's* epigraph—"I am no more your mother / than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / effacement at the wind's hand" (Sylvia Plath, "Morning Song")—relates to you and to your work as a whole?

LFC: Thanks for the kind words. I'm so glad to know that you enjoyed *Errata*. Plath's poem "Morning Song" is lovely and complex, and people often read it as either hopeful or bleak, much in the way that readers perceive Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" as either abusive or harmless (if drunken) fun, depending on their life experiences. I see in Plath's and Roethke's poems an exquisite duality, wherein the language and imagery make room for terror and beauty. Through the figure in the epigraph, Plath suggests that her speaker feels eclipsed by motherhood in the same way that the cloud rains, birthing a surface that reflects its own passing (or inevitable death and ephemeral nature) while acknowledging a loss of control as well as a sense of connection. She, like the cloud, is at the whim of the elements. She is at once a vessel emptied and erased by reproduction and made to face the end of herself as a woman (now defined by motherhood) and as a human, yet she also sees her relationship to her child and to the universe.

In *Errata*, I examine difficult familial relationships and spend a great deal of time focusing on the speaker's experience as a daughter and as a mother, and I use landmasses and natural elements (mountains, clouds, etc.) to convey the emotional landscapes in the book. This excerpt from Plath's poem resonates on both of those levels. I'm also interested in paradoxes and binaries, such as the autobiographical versus the constructed self, bravado versus vulnerability, hope versus despair, etc., so in many ways *Errata* nods to Plath's exploration of the confessional, the paradoxical, the elemental, and the figurative.

RR: Excellently put! I'd actually like to ask about the "emotional landscapes" of your book. At a reading you gave recently on the UW-Green Bay campus, you described the movement through *Errata* as a "journey." Can you further explain this feeling?

LFC: Well, the book is about survival—about plodding on despite all. If there's a narrative arc, it focuses on the expected journey from childhood into adulthood and the looking back. For the speaker in *Errata*, this journey is largely dictated by loss, addiction, and dysfunction, so these are the mile markers by which the

speaker maps experiences and digs at errors in an attempt to unearth corresponding corrections. There's also a literal journey—from lake to desert—that conveys a sense of loss all its own, as the speaker's identity is bound in these landscapes. I use the external landscape to convey the internal tensions. In “My Lake,” for example, I personify Lake Superior, beginning in a place of bravado and moving into tenderness. “Self-Portrait as Mountains Surrounding a Dry Lakebed,” which is built from the facts about and history of the mountains surrounding Utah's Salt Lake valley, expresses the loneliness of such unforgiving land and the deception of the size and perceived strength in land that is actually quite fragile. These bodies seem to me as fraught with (or enriched by) paradox as the human heart. Who can say where my emotional projection and their metaphorical implications end or begin?

RR: I think the idea of tension is something I get a lot from your work, and this all goes back to your idea of opposing forces and binaries. One of your pieces that I keep finding myself coming back to is “Researchers Find Mice Pass On Trauma to Subsequent Generations,” and I feel this motif is reflected beautifully in this poem. How did the idea for this poem come to you, and what, if anything, did it mean for you to write it?

LFC: As I think I mentioned during my campus visit, some of the situations in the book are rooted in truth and pushed into fictional territory. I do have a choking phobia. I have a narrow esophagus, so I'm unable to swallow large pills, etc. My dad always told me that it was a mind game, and that if I wanted to swallow the pills I could—the only thing in my way was my own fear. When I was nine, my uncle tried to teach me how to take a pill. We did this together, using M&Ms. He swallowed a handful (a handful!) of peanut M&Ms at once while I choked on a regular, tiny M&M. For years I'd been mulling a poem in which a man tries to drown his pregnant wife (based on a story my mother told me), and while I'd written about it in an essay I had never been able to find my way into the poem version. A few years ago, a friend posted on Facebook a link to an article outlining the results of a recent study proving mice pass trauma through genetic imprints. From there I mined and combined all of the above in order to come to “Researchers Find Mice Pass On Trauma to Subsequent Generations,” and I'm glad to know that it's haunting you a bit—or resonating with you.

RR: I'm surprised that you were able to fit the idea of a man drowning his pregnant wife, a choking phobia, and even still an article about mice trauma all into one poem! That's pretty impressive, and it works so well!

LFC: Certain memories, language, events, facts, ideas, and details are like barbed hooks that refuse to let go and insist on being included in an essay or a poem. I think most writers carry and tumble around obsessions until the right moment presents itself. Sometimes it takes years before all of the pieces come together. All of the facts

and memories are related to one another, so it worked to push them all into the same space. I'm a fan of concision, density, and impact.

RR: I want to switch gears a bit and talk about your writing process. How do you find that you become the most involved in your writing? How do you approach writing when you may or may not be inspired to begin?

LFC: I become most involved when one of those barbed hooks tugs at me, so when I'm not inspired, I push my brain and/or body in other directions until something piques my interest. Sometimes I'll do that by reading creative work, though more often I'll read unrelated sources, hunting for intriguing concepts, facts, language, etc. Other times I'll go for a walk/hike with my needy, oversized puppy and take in everything, or I'll go shoot pool, which is my meditation. My biggest challenge is holding myself accountable to search for inspiration, given my busy schedule, and when that happens I'll ask a fellow poet to do a daily poem exchange with me.

RR: Now, taking this into consideration, has your approach to writing changed at all since your time as an undergraduate? How so? Have you taken on new habits or "rituals," so to speak?

LFC: My approach has changed quite a bit over the years. When I started studying at UWGB, I was brand new to reading poetry, to writing poetry, and to thinking critically about language. I suppose by misspending my youth I had built up a tremendous desire for something that felt truer, and in the classroom I finally felt a sense of belonging—around likeminded others, as well as inside myself. I devoured creative work because I was in crazy, new love. Unintentionally, then, I absorbed syntax, rhythms, and rhetorical devices. I was laying the foundation of my writing landscape and learning new ways to read the world around me. It was the most exciting time of my life, really, and I wrote constantly and with amazing urgency. I'd write thirty shitty pieces just to get one workable poem, which I'd only consider workable after about twenty drafts. That's changed over the years. I no longer have to do that work. These days, when I do write, the poems often come out more easily and closer to finished in fewer drafts. Then, I write far less frequently, so I'm likely drafting in my head. The one constant has been my physical process. I must be at my computer in the quiet of my space. I handwrite notes but very rarely handwrite whole poems. Often there's a cat coiled on my lap.

RR: The use of poetry to discover identity is something I saw a lot in *Errata* as well. In fact, a lot of your writing felt like reading a personal exposition. How much of your own self do you think is in your poetry, and how do you balance the desire to create heartfelt poetry while still keeping the need for privacy?

LFC: As I said, I write about things that nag me and that feel most urgent. *Errata* contains several poems that are rooted in truth but that I've pushed into fictional territory. When I want to write the whole truth, I write an essay (though even then I still imagine what I can't know for the sake of the story's emotional trajectory). When I want the freedom to lie and to use the imagery that will best convey a particular emotion within an imagined landscape, I write poems. I think it's important to remember that first-person poems can and do deviate from a poet's lived experience, and while the poems in *Errata* often employ actual events out of context, I am always imagining, exaggerating, or tweaking details for the sake of understanding something about the situations or the people who inhabit them. My second book, which I've just finished, is rarely about me or anyone I know. Through various personae I'm exploring distance, cosmic forces, and identification via language. It's definitely a departure from *Errata*.

RR: I'm looking forward to seeing a second book from you! I can't wait to see how you deviate from *Errata's* formula.

Finally, I'd like to ask just a few things about your time as Poetry Editor of *Sheepshead Review*. What was it like working on the resurrection of our campus's literary journal? Can you describe the process you and other Editors underwent in essentially starting from scratch?

LFC: Working on *Sheepshead's* resurrection was like most things I undertook during my undergraduate studies—new and important and therefore exciting despite obstacles and time constraints. A handful of us worked together (under Dr. Meacham's direction. Dr. Rebecca Meacham took over as the journal's advisor in 2002). to decide on all of the details. We didn't have the practicum that first year, so we met in our spare time to whittle submissions and to discuss ideas. I recall many nights that my co-editor and I read submissions at my house once my sons were asleep. We put in the time because we loved it and believed in what we were doing. We all became friends in a way that would be meaningful long after UWGB. I still talk to most of those people. Maybe that's because we all knew that together we were a part of something really important, and we stumbled through the motions as a group. Dr. M helped us to become a team, and she impressed upon us the import of our work. I learned a tremendous amount from her and from my peers just by going through the motions, and it's informed the way that I oversee the student-run literary journal, *Weeds*, here at Snow College. I'm very fortunate to have had the experiences and mentors that I did at UWGB.

RR: It's safe to say that *Sheepshead Review* is definitely a large factor of the way you oversee production of *Weeds*! But what other skills and knowledge did you take from working as an Editor for *Sheepshead Review* that have helped you in other areas of your literary career? What do you wish you had learned more of during your Editorship?

LFC: Beyond learning the ins-and-outs of publication, production, and the editorial process, working on *Sheepshead* was an honor and a real responsibility. I was a gatekeeper, so to speak, trusted to judge the worth of other people's creative writing. In every writing workshop and every editorship, reading means honing your aesthetic while trying to understand and to find the worth in other aesthetics, as well. I learned to articulate what I felt were the effective/ineffective elements in a variety of styles and techniques, which helped me to become a stronger editor and writer.

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What do I wish I'd learned more of during my editorship? I may be too far removed to really know that. I absorbed so much at UWGB because I asked questions constantly, so it's difficult for me to recognize what I was lacking. My position with *Sheepshead* helped me to build a foundation for what I would do during graduate school—in workshops and in editing *Passages North*—though the journal was still very small, and there was a great deal that I didn't know about editing a nationally-recognized journal, which is something that you all get to experience now that *Sheepshead* is growing and expanding in such amazing ways. Beyond that I feel that I came away with a real understanding of the process and of the sort of editor I would be. I was fortunate to work with mentors who helped to prepare me for the next thing. I felt very nourished post-UWGB. I couldn't have asked for a better start to my career.

RR: Alright, last question! What advice would you offer to current and future staffs of *Sheepshead Review*?

LFC: Know that your job is so important. You decide which poems, stories, and visual art will uphold the standard of *Sheepshead* and of current writing. Don't abuse that position, and be aware of the literary landscape. Read a variety of other literary journals to get a sense of how others approach the task of editing and to enrich your understanding of writing so as to be the best reader/editor you can be. Work together, but don't be afraid to stand alone when you feel strongly about a piece of writing or art. Fight for what moves you because it will move others. Writing can change our lives if we let it. Have so much fun, and keep up the good work!