

## Sheyene Foster

### *The Crazy Mirror of Language: An Interview with Stan Sanvel Rubin*

SF: You say in an introduction to your book, *The Post—Confessionals*, “More than anything else, the question that preoccupies these poets and identifies them as post-confessional, is the question of sincerity. The ‘I’ is cast into suspicion.” Do you see this kind of sincerity as a preoccupation of your own work?

SR: I don’t think sincerity is the preoccupation necessarily. I won’t reiterate the argument I made in that book, but I was writing about a generation of writers who were in reaction to something, to the extreme what seemed to be self-revelation of the confessionals. The reason the question gives me pause immediately is that I don’t think of it, and I haven’t thought of it, as a special project of mine to try to be sincere. But, on the other hand, the concept of authenticity goes very deep for me. I want the words to be authentic. I want to say the words I mean to say. I want it to be the exact right word. What relationship that word has to any concept of truth, opens up a lot of other questions. Some of us were talking about this issue this morning at breakfast in terms of what the line is between creative nonfiction and fiction—you can ask that to Judith Kitchen—but I think that question does apply to poets. I will say this: It’s in the discourse right now, the conversation about authenticity and sincerity in poetry. What is poetry for? And I must admit I’m always instantly suspicious when I hear people formulate a question such as, “What is art for? What is it’s purpose?” Though it’s a question which will always be asked and has often been asked very richly, it worries me because it always implies that somebody thinks he or she has a reason, the answer to what art is for, and that always bothers me.

SF: Do you consider yourself a post-confessional?

SR: I think, in all honesty, I am. I actually didn’t think of myself when I was writing that, I was looking at these writers, but I suppose as I historically defined it I am, obviously. I think we need to understand that you can’t easily write the truth of yourself. Language throws back reflections of the self in intricate ways. You have to be open to language, the kind of crazy mirror it is. You have to be open to fragments of truth about yourself and your being in the world that it will present you. And you have to try to see the things language presents you clearly, I think. That is, without distorting it with images of the self you would like to find there or with ideas, or ideologies, or prescriptions of truth that you start out with and hope you can impose on language. I’m one of the kinds of poets who believe that language will show you things if you’re open to it.

And, I believe in puffing the individual imagination and individual voice into writing. I’m not going to be arrogant and say back into writing; it’s certainly there. But I’m on the side, if there is a side, that believes if you can’t write sharply and interestingly out of what the self reveals to you, you probably can’t write interestingly or honestly about other things. I’m not saying everyone should go writing about themselves, but I do tell beginning students, the first thing I want from you is a sentence starting with “I.” If you can’t write an honest, interesting, verbally alive sentence with “I” out of your own life, I really don’t care what you’re going to write about large issues like war, peace, AIDS, ecology. I pretty much know how you feel on those issues. I pretty much feel the same way. Why should I care, unless you can interest me? So I am on this side that wants to put the self in poetry. It doesn’t have to be the “I.” I certainly don’t put the “I” in all my poems, but it’s my inner life, it’s my imaginative life, it’s my interaction with the world and with language. And, to that extent, I am post-confessional in some sense, in that I’m not attempting to

just render my life—not that the confessionals did this either—as the material or to justify why it should matter.

But I am attempting not to evade the self. I'm trying to find my own strategy, as I think the post-confessionals have to, for getting the inner imagination, the inner space of language, the inner space of experience, to be what drives my encounter with poetry and with language. But not to have the facts of my life, or my emotional life, be the center. And that presents a lot of subtle, intricate, and to me very worthy challenges. It's sort of like constantly turning language around and around like a multifaceted ball, and seeing the many reflections it gives you. And you wonder sometimes if there is a center there. Is there a central emotional truth as some of the confessional poems seem to claim? But I don't think you can evade that struggle. You can't just go right through language as if you could permeate it to some important topic, such as, "This isn't me speaking. This is all of the American Indians speaking. This is nature." You can't do that. You can only come to it an inch at a time, angle by angle, as you honestly encounter language.

SF: You've been involved with the Brockport Writers Forum for a number of years and you've interviewed a great number of contemporary poets, as well as writers in other genres. How do you see this consistent dialog affecting your work?

SR: I think that, obviously, I must have been affected. I know some of my interviews are better than others. I do the best I can on the spot. I think I'm a pretty good objective interviewer. I keep a framework going in my own mind some distance from the conversation. Some times I know I got to places, and if I feel it was a really good conversation, it may be subjective to a certain extent. The things that were said were things that resonated in me. No~ exactly how this has affected me, I can't say, except quickly to suggest that just as when you are a teacher or judge contests and you see a lot of others' work, you always become chastened because you're aware of how much stuff is out there, how much of it sounds the same, how much of it sounds a lot like you, how much of what you think you're doing might sound uncomfortably like what a lot of other people are doing. So these conversations must have affected me, and hopefully, in broadening my sense of the things that are possible.

SF: Who was the most surprising writer you ever interviewed?

SR: Most surprising writer. You know, I've thought a little bit about that question, but I don't have a pat answer. There were writers who were surprising in terms of acting up in certain ways. Lawrence Ferlinghetti many years ago came into the studio and started throwing leaves around that he had gathered. And we had three cameras, but he really disrupted the director, who was all aghast. There are many surprises in terms of discovering the humanity and inner core of a writer, the generosity of one who maybe has a strongly identified, say political position. And in discussion the totally human basis of that may come out.

Just to take the last first, I think Marilyn Chin, whom we just had through, and I just interviewed, was a very typical surprise in the sense that this is the type of thing that you learn talking to writers. She comes in as a powerful voice for ethnic poetry, political poetry, women's poetry, and she says that the first poem that knocked her socks off was Eliot's "Prufrock." She always wanted to write a poem like "The Wasteland." So that's emblematic of the kind of surprise I have, because in academia, we sometimes talk very rigidly about these issues. We shouldn't. We should know better. But when you encounter writers, you find writers are the ones with fluid

imaginings, open ears and hearts. And you know that Marilyn Chin's political position and personality have very little to do with Eliot. But, as a writer, she learned from and admired Eliot. And if we're sitting around an academic committee meeting we might get into these rigid ideas that nobody of X ethnic background could possibly learn from Y ethnic or gender background, which is not true. The whole point of teaching and the whole point of writing is that we can't imagine until we inhabit and learn about one another's lives—not that we are excluded from one another's lives.

I'll tell you what you do find out that's not a surprise, though. Not only how passionately writers share about what they're doing, but how seriously they take the teaching activity. Even writers who say I'd rather not teach, or I'd rather be independent take very, very seriously what they're doing to and for their students.

SF: What about your responsibilities such as directing the program and the role of teaching in your writing life? Do you see these as enhancing your writing, or are they more of a distraction?

SR: I can tell you this: When I was in graduate school I made a, perhaps, foolish decision, but I made it. That I wasn't going to focus on what interested me most, contemporary poetry, modern poetry. I loved Wallace Stevens's poems, for example. I didn't understand them, still don't, but I had read everything I could, and huge amounts of it I had actually memorized when I was a college student. I remember going to school in Philadelphia, reading Wallace Stevens on the trolley. But, I made a decision that I wouldn't study Wallace Stevens, or write a dissertation on him. I had already written a senior honors thesis as an undergraduate on Wallace Stevens, and so, I decided I would go elsewhere. And I wrote my dissertation on Dickens, something far removed from my own passion. And whatever weird effects this has on your career and development, I won't go into for better or for worse, but I wanted to retain complete space of my own evolving personal response to poetry. As a teacher, I'm very open minded. I have a few preferences. I'll tell my students what my biases tend to be. But I believe there's no one right way. We all have our own methods we work out. But as a writer, and even reader myself, I wanted it not to be professional. I didn't want to have to present, as I knew I would as a teacher, what's good about William Carlos Williams, and what's good about Wallace Stevens, and what their aesthetics are, and how to appreciate them, because I want my students to appreciate things and to find their own favorites. I want to be able to retain my intuitive gut dislike of this poet, even though I know it's a great poet and I have to give lectures about that poet, I want to be able to hate that stuff. So, as a teacher I tried for a long time not to teach the thing that was closest to me, which was contemporary poetry. I've done it now for some years, and it does influence you in a good way, of course, because you're having to present stuff in the classroom to which you also have a powerful, sometimes deep emotional response. It forces you to discover new things about it. And the continual awareness of younger spirits, younger minds, and their encounters with things you may have gotten jaded about...it's wonderful. It keeps you fresh, it keeps you alert, it helps you grow new antennae, it keeps your antennae quivering. So teaching does change you for sure.

SF: In *Lost*, on the back cover you have this statement about poetry, you say, "It comes to me often out of brooding or despair, moodiness, lostness....that's it...I guess lostness...breeds poems." And it seems as though there is this feeling of confusion and loss and sort of suppressed pain in some of your poems, both in *Lost* and *Midnight* as well, I think. How does "lostness" breed poems? Or, do you feel you were writing from that sense necessarily?

SR: Well, I mean, that's exactly right, but that book, unfortunately, is a decade plus a couple of years old and I don't think I'm writing from that exact place anymore. But I do think that vagueness was a kind of place I came from. A kind of existential uncertainty. In existentialism, "existence precedes essence" is a kind of slogan out of Sartre, so that you exist before you define yourself. And I think I was coming roughly from that place during those first books. Language would show you what you were and who you were more truly, so I wanted to stay open. And I did have some personal pain, although certainly the first book preceded it. But somewhere in there I ran into a kind of nasty divorce and that kind of thing helps you feel pain of various sorts. But I think it was just more an awareness of the loose edges of being that was informing my encounter with words. And I think what I wanted then out of words was at least two-fold. One thing I wanted out of words was to kind of feel that the word was right. The word was grounding being. That was the word in the moment, the word around which possibilities of meaning could cohere and arise. This is the true word that is given to me now; at this instant of time, so that I could be more honest about myself to myself than I ever knew I was. (Though, maybe only I would realize that because I'm not being confessional.) And secondly, I think I wanted a kind of aesthetic that I hope I still have in my work, that the words radiate possibilities. This does not mean language poetry, and it doesn't mean vagueness. But it does mean that there's not just one meaning for the word. That the word in the line catches up levels of possibilities that go along with it, like many tails connecting to a many-tailed tadpole, going this way and that way under the surface. So that if you feel more from the word than just its surface contextual meaning, you're supposed to feel that. It's supposed to ripple. When you get to the end of a poem, it sends you back to the beginning. That centers of energy radiate from some places in the poem, and that you can't get to the end and have it and you're finished.

This is why I quarrel somewhat with the overwhelmingly prevailing notion of open-ended form. It seems to me that the artist's job is to give some form to things. Now many writers, including those who think they're open-process writers, obviously do that. I mean, even an oral performance in a bar starts somewhere and ends somewhere. The person doesn't just keep going; it would kill you. And, it doesn't usually stop short. There's a place that it stops. So I don't mean anything in terms of fixed forms necessarily. However, I do mean think that language itself has so many possibilities at all times. Being and self have so many possibilities at all times for true, and then false, and imaginative relationships to language. There are so many possibilities that I think the writer's job is to give a kind of form. I mean, I'd like the reader to experience something that feels formed enough that they want to go back and re-inhabit those places.

I used to very much think of poems as spaces. I had a line somewhere that "poems are rooms we travel through." They are a kind of place. Maybe I once used to think of it as kind of a sacred grove or ritual space, and that it shouldn't just be co-equal to life. That your job is to realize the sound body of a poem, the visual body of a poem, the experience of those words and possible meanings, so that the reader can experience it again and again in new ways. And if you just let the reader pass through, back into his or her own life, you may not have done much that's worthy in the name of art. So, that was the kind of challenge that I set for myself.

SF: So, do you see yourself as using a very conscious application of poetic tools to provide this sort of multiplicity?

SR: Not really. I mean, in truth, I know I'm using a lot of tools. I hope I've learned a lot of tools and I hope I'm good at them. And sometimes, like all writers, I will purposely play. You

always play with a stanza, with line breaks. But what I hope I'm doing when I'm doing something right, feels whole, feels like it's coming from a center. As so many poets have said, it feels like it isn't quite me. My consciousness is involved and I'm playing with it consciously. But I'm not saying, "Maybe I'll use a metaphor here."

SF: It's interesting that you mention metaphor.

SR: I'm highly metaphoric in that book particularly. But I've actually tried to move away from that. There was a wonderful profusion of metaphors in there which I love. I still like reading those poems, but...

SF: Well, the first poem, "Fog" for example, is just filled with metaphors.

SR: Right. I think that shows you something about it. I did metaphor after metaphor, not because I was naive, I hope, but because the sense that was driving me was that there isn't any truth but metaphor. Now, I also have always tried, even back then, to work against what used to be called deep image poetry. I don't think there's any one deep true image that you can realize through a metaphor, or set of metaphors. So I always tried to see if I could write a statement-oriented poetry. A poetry devoid of techniques. Bill Stafford talked about this in our first video with him back in '69, to try to write without metaphor, something that always interested me because you're always aware of the falsifying power of those things. But, unlike some writers who say that, I never believe that there is a truth you could say more truly if you didn't have metaphor. I don't believe that at all. But I would try to experiment with statement, as if the statement were a metaphor. Can you write a sharp unadorned line which itself is only a metaphor for truths that don't lie in any way behind that? Truths you can't get to any other way, instead of getting to the truth by saying it cleanly. And, after all, art is play in part. And the truths of art come out of play because of the openness and honesty and vulnerability play allows you to experience. And metaphor is a main way we play. Without metaphor, we have no language.

But I think I went far afield from your question. Of course, my technician's mind is working. I do a lot of revision. But I really believe—and teachers probably shouldn't say this—I really believe that you want to be in a state. Sometimes I help myself be ready, as we all do, by doing my own kinds of exercises. Just to keep myself writing. But I do this to try to remain in a state where I believe that when I'm working right, I might get a whole poem perfectly that doesn't need revision. And it has sometimes happened, though you'll almost always need some revision. But I would say some of my best work, even fairly complex work, has come to me in shockingly whole form. I think that's the great gift of poetry. I mean, that's the great glory that poets have always talked about, the great secret, though it's somewhat disreputable to say it today. But it's the belief that if you're keeping yourself attuned, ready, and alert, if you're practicing your skills and you're reading, sometimes by surprise, a whole wonderful work can come to you. It may need very little revision, just a little nudging here and there. Or, it might be mostly whole and then you're going to kill yourself for three months trying to get that next little part to complete it. But regardless, something like a gift came to you because you were ready. You were attuned and your skills were ready. And sometimes the mind comes in, in the revision process.

But again, what I try to do in revision—and I think many poets would agree—is to get back in touch with an inevitably later place and a different self. To reconnect with the flow that the poem created that goes beyond its moment of creation, but not to come at it from the outside, with forks

and spoons and daggers, chain saws and hacking. I always tell my students you will never be able to hack, beat, or prod a line or an image into a good poem. It just isn't going to happen. But you need to do all of this work and fruitless labor so you can internalize and synthesize a lot of skills. I tell them, don't think you're going to take this good line I told you to save, and throw the rest of the poem away. Save that image and you'll never beat it or force it into something important. But, if you keep that line, the whole thing may come to you later. And, of course, I stress the importance of revision. I don't tell them to walk around expecting poems to fall like plums into their hands. I'm just talking about that wonderful receptive state that you long for, where something smarter, richer, more rhythmically right, more complete and complex than you think you are has come to you. And that's that feeling writers have always talked about. I'm not a mystic about it, but I realize it's semi-mystical as one talks about it, as a kind of gift which comes to a writer. We recognize it isn't just a gift, but I think we recognize it's not just my life. Maybe that's another separation from the confessionals, though if one knows the confessionals one knows that they didn't really just write their life. They used their life and imaginings of what could be their life as a new source of material. They found a way to get new attention by writing about certain things. If Anne Sexton writes about her uterus, she knows there's a tension there. And I think it's more important what she does with that attention than whether the facts of the poem really could be related to her life.

And I'll say something else about that. There's an interesting Ted Kooser piece which was in the *Prairie Schooner* recently where Ted's kind of complaining about poets who seem to write about any kind of dramatic or melodramatic kind of occurrence and present it as if it happened to them for the sake of getting the audience's sympathy or respect. He doesn't like that because it's false, and I understand that. I know what he means. But, it seems to me, the way our culture and our credentialing come together—and this is such an American thing—we have produced this sense that if you're not some sort of celebrity; you're not real. So therefore, there may be this tendency that Ted Koo set might have been responding to, for writers young or old to have a sense that this is my life and what I'm producing shows you how much I've suffered or how fine I am. And, of course, though most of us love readings and we love to put our words out there, the predominance of readings tends to do this too. It's a one-on-one confrontation with the audience; you want them to like you or be amazed by you. You want to play them. But what I'm getting at and haven't said is this: A sense that what you're really presenting is your life for audience approval or identification may be inevitable in performance situations to some extent, but I think we should be teaching our students to read another way. Possibly closer to something like the modernist way of reading where you know you're not reading directly the life of the writer. That doesn't mean the writer can hide. If your work is full of something somebody would consider misogyny, I don't think it makes the writer a misogynist. But certainly, it raises questions. People might then look into your life, but, I mean, that's real life. I don't think the themes that are in your work are you, but they seem to be fascinating to you. And I'm not judging you for that, but they seem to have a real connection to you. But, on the other hand, I think we have to realize that there is the mediation of language and tradition in what we do. I mean, I want you to like me, but this poem is not there to say, "Stan Rubin is SO sensitive. Stan Rubin is something so much." I'm putting the poem there for you to experience the words and meanings of the poem, to internalize them, to make them your own. And so, I think right flow there's a kind of pressure where that little space—which to me is the space of art, the space of craft—gets crushed.

If I'm not being too abstract and going on too much about this, I'd like to say one other thing

about that. It seems to me that we're in great danger of substituting an idea or image of the life for the truth of the work. I've just acknowledged that the two are closely bound, especially in great writers. You can't say Faulkner's life had nothing to do with his work. On the other hand, what Wallace Stevens's work had to do with facts of his life is much more by opposition or inversion. So, it seems to me that if you want to say important things about the world, there's a lot of ways to say it. You know, if you want to write about ecology, write a book about ecology. If you're doing Ecological poems, you've got to respect the fact that you are handling language in some way that poets handle language, whatever that is. That form and craft and the tradition of poetry have something to do with the act you're in. Otherwise, you know, you're borrowing a false glory. You're saying, "It's just so important to save the first-growth forests that my poems must therefore be important." And we understand this phenomenon, this borrowed importance phenomenon. But that's a cheap shot in a way for me to take. I mean something more serious as a teacher. Letting students think that they can borrow significance, forget that they almost never say anything new about the environment, but they think it's more important than their own lives—that practice, I think is a terrible way of keeping students from encountering their own lives. From discovering the ways language, and other writers living and dead, can help you rediscover your own life and build on that as a base from which you might say something from your own personal point of view about the environment, or another cause. In other words, we leave out a key term of encountering the craft and the language as the necessary mediator, the kind of crazy mirror that shows you truths about being that aren't just your truths. You have to trust that the truths you discover out of your own sometimes messy, indeterminate life, are in fact, in some way, truths anyone else could inhabit and you could inhabit theirs. Otherwise, why write? If women could write only for women, or people of color could write only for people of color, there would be no communication possible. And, if what you want to say is something important about the world, but you can't say it through an honest encounter with your own being in the world, then maybe you should go research and write a documentary book, and not try to write poems.

SF: It's interesting—what you made me think of in part when you were speaking just now was Richard Hugo. "You want to risk sentimentality without being sentimental." Again, not using the poem to glorify your own life or beg sympathy, but to use your individual encounter.

SR: Right. And he had his material. He certainly had his sociological and geographical material, but he understood that he only made the material real by putting himself there. He's in his towns. He's in his landscapes. And, kind of on the side, I really think I have a view of the lyric poem. I think it is the voice of being, whatever that is. I don't mean it has to be abstract, I don't mean it has to be elitist or obscure. But, in some sense, the lyric poem makes a certain demand. It makes the demand for an inner life, an interior experience with language. It's what I call the sounding word. A word that is meant to be sounded silently in the head, fill the empty space of the body cavity, fill the being. You can utter it and then it fills air. It's between the audience and me when I utter it. It's not me talking to the audience. It's not me directing the audience on some issue. All kinds of poetry are possible, but I think you see why I say that long ago I wanted to separate my professional teaching of poetry from my own artistic encounter with poetry. So, my sense of the lyric poet is that he or she is the one who keeps alive the unitary voice of being. And it's not there for solitary or exclusive purposes. When the original Greeks would sing, there'd be a lyre, there might be a chorus, and the topics that were sung weren't just personal private topics, but it was the individual voice. And the modern version of the lyric as overheard is not overheard the way a

confessional is overheard. It's overheard because other people can take it in, make it real. I believe the poet in this way keeps alive the individual voice of inner being without which who knows who we will become? I mean, maybe our destiny is to become a huge anthill all connected through wonderful electronic systems, and actually, in spite of that description, I don't quite dread that—all we've done is evolve. But I do know that the kind of poetry I relate to and my sense of language comes from the era where the word, the syllable, matters. And if that era is gone, and maybe it is, and if we're being replaced by large systems that appear to offer us new realms of freedom, but can only give us choices as the system allows, if that's what is replacing what I think of as the interior word, the era of literacy of maybe 1,000 years, then I do wonder about what the political organization will be then. It's a matter of that screen reflecting back to you the form in some hyper space or some virtual space. And you can certainly do everything there you can do on the page. That's not my issue. I'm not naive about that at all. The internet may save books in that sense. All books can go internet, nobody has to pay for a rental place to save the books as they deteriorate physically. What I'm considering is what the status of the word is. I mean the lyric word to me is a word that can be internalized in the body, not a word that's flattened on a screen that doesn't promise or seem to demand interiority~ And many of us around this conference are worrying about our students who seem to be less and less able to take words in and pay the intense inner attention to words that we'd like them to be able to. Maybe we're all idealizing our own school days. Not everyone was destined to be an English professor in our English classes either. We were the guys who did it, so we paid more attention. You know, self-selection. But you do wonder whether the very excitement of the flattened screen word—the way you can link and link anywhere, hit a highlighted thing and go there, do your own home page—whether that in some way radically cuts away the individual word from the long era of literary interior literacy that I'm talking about.

SF: I'd like to talk about your more current work.

SR: I've been doing some fiction recently—just writing it. I haven't published it yet. But I have found what I've always known to be true. That if you're doing fiction, the sustained attention it requires is a certain kind of labor that you darn well better have and make the time for. Such as your Steve Heller out there does early in the morning. I think a poet is a little luckier. Not that you don't work; you work hard. I don't mean to say I walk around and wait for a poem to be inspired. Sometimes when I get this inspiration and I realize that it's real, I might write a hundred drafts of it before it's done. But I felt there was something real there when it came to me. At least I have found that I can write poems at all kinds of odd times. You might get up and walk out of here, and I might suddenly scribble. I tend to be someone who's often grabbing little things to write stuff on. I write on a napkin while I'm driving a car. I always have these little pads that I'm scribbling on. No, it's not a very neat way to do it—on these tiny little Post-Its all scribbled up, I can't even read my own handwriting—but the lines are constantly coming to you. That voice is there, and you can dip into it. The craft of fiction requires enough structural sense that I think you've got to have more sustained attention.

SF: Speaking of structure, I'd like to talk again about this idea of writing the poem as a whole. Do you see that as happening more for you now than it did in years previous?

SR: No, no, no. I go through phases from time to time. Like right now I've been thinking I'm dry. I was just really writing well and suddenly in the last couple of weeks, I just suddenly realized I haven't. And part of that is the attention that goes to other things. We've been doing grant writing,

committees, hiring. But I'm always re-encountering that life of language now, in me, that's real and true. Whether it's permanent or shaping, time will tell. The short answer is I go by fits and starts, but I think some of my very best poems feel as if they've almost come whole. It's something alive. You know it's alive and you want to connect to its life and work with it until it is what it's supposed to be. Not force it, but discover what it's supposed to be. And it may end up being six months until you get the last two lines. Or you may open it up and discover, hey, I could do a whole lot more with this, and really pull things together. But also, sometimes it is feeling I don't have that life in me. It isn't here. So I will force myself to sit down and play I'll take the first thing I can think of. Or, I'll force myself to start what might be a poem. And sometimes something minor will grow out of your playful work. Sometimes it will promise more if I come back to it. Very often I'll trash or delete that stuff. I always just try to force myself to keep going. You can't just walk around waiting for inspiration. That's the key rule. All writers know the gift and the inspiration comes as the sweet reward for having kept your skills ready and your attention sharp.