

Doe Songs: Letting the Landscape Speak Through the Truest Language, Poetry

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ANN-MARGARET LIM Your book *Doe Songs* communicates to the world where you are in life. You are now a mother, a daughter, a visual artist, a poet, a wife and a very good friend to Shivanee Ramlochan. Based on what the poems relate, friend would be an understatement, you two are sisters in poetry.

Your poem “Reader Beware” in its entirety below is just one example of how your friendship shines through.

“Reader, Beware”

For Shivanee Ramlochan

The poet is a flambeau.
The poet is a cutlass, a spear whittled
from the tallest cedar, sharpened to a fine point.
The poet cuts you without you even knowing it.
Yes, you are hurt but my God, it is beautiful.
You are tumbling outside yourself in wet handfuls now.
Nothing will hold. A field of cedar springs up
in the yawning where you once stood.

Why are you in tears?

The poems are hard to read
and it is even harder to breathe. Something burns
the back of your eyes, tickles your throat.
Someone offers you food, offers you wine
but you have no stomach for it.
The poem wants to find you hungry, hollow
trembling inside your good shoes.

You might already be gone.

You might have left the reading some time ago,
but can't really be sure.
Nothing looks familiar except the poet's red dress.
It holds you steady in the dark room like high pitch oil flame.
You leave the reading walking behind yourself
alone in the streetlight, dissolving in your own shadow.
Reader, trust me when I tell you:
only the haunting remains.

A.-M.L. How does this friendship with Shivanee influence your poetry?
Do you both attend workshop together or workshop each other's poems?

DANIELLE BOODOO-FORTUNÉ I met Shivanee in 2009 at the Cropper Foundation Caribbean Writers' Residential Workshop. A group of us spent three weeks in Toco, Trinidad writing and being workshopped by Funso Aiyejina and Merle Hodge. The workshop resulted in lasting, meaningful friendships with the other writers, and most of us still keep in touch. With Shivanee, what started as a mutual admiration for each other's work evolved into a kind of recognition of something in each other, a deep kinship that has grown over the years. We don't workshop or even read each other's work before publication, which I think comes from an understanding that the work needs to be what it will be. I respect her writing immensely and prefer to come to it with open hands when she is ready for it to be seen. She's my writing partner, and my poem-sister.

A.-M.L. Your poetry embraces the phenomenal in things. For want of a better word, it embraces the 'magical' in things. It keeps that child-like wonder, wherein things have that unexplainable element that is magic-making. The very first poem "To Enter My Mother's House" tells us that this poet lives simultaneously in reality and that spiritual realm associated with it, but it does not seem to be Christianity; it seems older. Will you be brave enough to finally name the phrase that this writing and awareness represents, if we are to say we are rejecting the Anglo Saxon term "Magic Realism"?

Excerpt from "To Enter My Mother's House"

*The Heron god created daughter
on the last day. Not knowing
what to do with the longing
left over from creation, he poured it
into her open mouth, still warm
and echoing with earth.*

To enter my mother's house
I must walk backward with
smoke in my mouth.

To pass through the keyhole
I must become a spout
of water, a single hair
from an ocelot's back.

I must go back thirty years
to recreate myself, carve
my face on the unburnt tip
of a match, strike my teeth
thrice against her name.

D.B.-F. In the late stages of writing the poems in *Doe Songs*, I realised that all along I had been trying to build a kind of cosmology, a body of belief comprised of bits and pieces of things I had gathered growing up in rural northeast Trinidad, domestic rituals, submerged family histories, forest magic, things like that. I don't think I can give this a name without trying too hard to hold it too tight, but the poems do come from a place of belief that the natural world is a repository of memory and spirit, and that all this can be accessed by letting the landscape speak, which is what I try to do in *Doe Songs*, in my own way. To "Enter My Mother's House" is a poem about memory, walking backward, gathering the pieces. It is also a poem about letting the spirit in things speak, in people, places, objects, creatures. It is actually one of the later poems in the collection, in terms of the chronology of writing. There are the poems I agonised over, edited for months, and then there are the poems that just happened... "To Enter" was one that just happened.

A.-M.L. As "Coronary 11" and other poems illustrate, you are able to make objects of body parts and humans. For example, your heart becomes an object that can be put on the windowsill, like American pie, left to cool. Do you think this skill comes from the visual artist? Is this what happens when you are both poet and visual artist, or am I clutching at straws?

"Coronary II"

After a while, the words
mean nothing. What
is muscle, is vein, is needle

is better than worse than

What can you bear

to live / not live
with?

What is this body
if not a map of punctures,
a glossary of bruises

What is this heart,
dull, spongy and hot
waiting too long now,
left on the windowsill,
left to dry, left empty
left with nothing to do but tick?

D.B.-F. For me, visual art and writing feed each other in very important ways. They do operate on different wavelengths, and I try to give each practice its separate space when the need is there, but I do think that because I do both, I am always thinking very visually. Making body parts into objects is something I've been doing in my art of late as well, hipbones, ribs and hearts stand out on their own, become both body parts and sacred objects.

A.-M.L. Are you the doe in *Doe Songs*? Following up on your answer to question 1, did you see yourself as doe and also dove while growing up, as in the poem "Sombra"? Is this part of letting the spirit in things and, in some cases, the spirit in you speak? You may be a doe now and a dove later?

D.B.-F. I don't think I ever really thought of myself as the doe in terms of a straightforward relationship, but the doe is a symbol that kept coming back to me during the process of writing these poems. The doe is both wild and vulnerable, a symbol of the feminine and the feral. I started drawing upon childhood memories of seeing the carcasses of red brocket deer brought home by hunters, and their own children attempting to raise the wild and terrified orphaned fawn. The fawn would almost always lose its will to live completely. The hunter and the doe, the hunter's child and the fawn, are all bound together, such as in the three part poem "Doe". This struck me even then as part of the very complicated relationship between people and place. We are more wild than not. By hurting, we are also hurt. Everything is in balance, and has its own cycle. Growing up on the periphery of the forest, it's



Figure 1. Cover of: Boodoo-Fortuné, Danielle. *Does Songs*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2018

something I've always known, and been truly fascinated by, especially now as I have become more aware of myself as mammal and mother. This is also true of the dove and all the other creatures in the book.

- A.-M.L. In both "Sombra" and "To Enter My Mother's House" smoke is used effectively and to represent different things. Explain how it is used differently in both and what smoke represents for you. Also, is this part of the joy of poetry, where you explore different lives, strengths and characters of words?
- D.B.-F. Smoke is a kind of veil between the 'real' world and the spiritual world. It's a marker of passage, or that a process is taking place, healing, birth, death or destruction. It is also ritual. Definitely this is part of the joy of poetry, the different lives of the word, and exploring the different dimensions and ways it affects the senses. "Sombra" explores that womb/shadow space between death and birth. I've actually never pointed this out before, but the title of the poem has its genesis in email correspondence with Loretta Collins Klobah, where, in a typo, she uses the Spanish word 'sombra' to refer to the womb, as

I was pregnant at the time, and then adjusts it to English in a follow-up email. Upon first skimming the email, my first thought was that the word meant 'shadow'.

Excerpt from "Sombra"

If grief is bitter smoke,
the sting of ash
at the back of the throat,
then joy is a taste of honey,
warm rainwater, the quickening
of sugar on the tongue.

My mourning dove's heart
must find a way
to hold both.

Oh grandfather,
will you know each other
In the way that roots reach out
dreaming in the earth's deep sleep,
or meet in the middle of the bridge,
the endless, the *sombra*, resting space
between shadows?

A.-M.L. You actually seem to play with fire, smoke and ashes a lot. In the first poem "To Enter My Mother's House", you have to *walk backward with smoke in your mouth*. In "On Being Burnt", where it seems heartbreak is represented by fire and being burnt, *nothing is left from your eaten self, but smoke*. In "Praise Song in Carbon", *there are arteries of fire under each taut surface, and all bodies burn*. It seems, fire for you is really consuming. It harms; it cleanses, it seems to be in you. I could be wrong though. What exactly is fire for you in your world view? I share the third to last stanza from "A Poem on the World's Last Night" below.

It is late, and I am tired
of sweeping brimstone
beneath the bed,
pretending fires don't start
in quiet rooms.

D.B.-F. Fire is both ending and beginning, with smoke in the middle as a symbol of transition. Destruction, but newness, as in many religious



Figure 2. Danielle Boodoo-Fortuné,
photo credit: Reynold Kevin Hacksaw,
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beliefs, and also in agricultural practice. It is also power, and connection to spirit.

A.-M.L. “Tangerines”, set in Venezuela has special meaning for me. In that poem you are somewhat stranded in a strange place in Venezuela, and your mind travels to your mother. You see a tangerine vendor, and you think of your mother’s crop of ‘barren white citrus’ the year before. You end the poem by asking your mother to gather her maps and run. We were both in Venezuela participating in the 12th World Poetry Festival that year, but I was not on that bus with you traveling to that location. It is also special for me, because I thought of my mother constantly in Venezuela, hoping I would find her there, the last place I was told she was. Like you, I wrote to my mother whilst in Venezuela.

What does traveling, particularly with fellow creatives, do for your poetry? Also how does that space away from your mother and other loved ones affect or influence your work?

D.B.-F. Yes, we were both in Venezuela that year! I know it was very special for you as well, though we were in different places. I travelled to Yaracuy where I was immediately attracted to the figure of Maria

Lionza and the influence of the wild, fierce divine feminine that came through so strongly in the landscape and in the whole energy of the place. Returning to Caracas we actually missed the plane, and took a series of buses to get back, two of which broke down along the way. My guide's mother kept calling her while on the bus, and checking in on her, and checking in on me as well. While in Yaracuy, especially while around Sorte Mountain, I kept thinking of daughters and mothers and grandmothers, the powerful chain of birth and ancestry, how we were tucked away in our grandmother's hipbones from birth... the things we pass on, the things that go unhealed for generations. When I came back home from that short trip, I wrote intensely for months. It gave me a little breathing room to think, and infused my whole process with new life. We find the most familiar things in the strangest places, it seems.

A.-M.L. To say Emily Dickinson didn't travel much is an understatement, as she was indeed a homebody, yet she wrote copiously and excellent poems at that. Contrasting with her though, we have the diplomat Pablo Neruda, and others like him who travel a lot, including you, for example. Do we need to see the world to write?

D.B.-F. I don't think it affects whether we write, but perhaps how we write. The writing of women who didn't travel and had no choice in the matter is tremendously important, for instance. Motherhood has made it more difficult to commit to writing, but I've learned to write anywhere, if I need to. There are poems I wrote in my brief time in Venezuela or England, but there are also poems I wrote in the difficult final month of pregnancy, or housebound with my sleepless newborn. It's funny, the more intimate poems seem to be the ones written away from home. Some of the more ambitious ones were written in their first draft on my phone in the car, then refined afterwards.

A.-M.L. God, I am tired of being young
Upon this dead earth.
I am so tired of being
someone's daughter.

As you know the above is the last stanza from your poem "Letters from New Grace". There seems to be communication with your mother throughout the book. Her presence is a constant, and she is referenced often. For me she is a haunting. How would you say your mother's life and your life with her have influenced Danielle, the visual artist and poet?

D.B.-F. I am writing to my mother in many of my poems, perhaps my entire book. But I am also filling the gaps, raising different stories from

the earth of my memory and hers, telling the stories my grandmother couldn't bear to tell, writing letters to the daughter I might have had, mining our collective memories for the whole of the things we cannot speak about. There is much a mother does not say to a daughter, yet still the daughter knows, in her very bones. There is a lot that women do not say. A good deal of my work is memory, and this starts with my mother and grandmother and their stories. It is also my memory.

A.-M.L. What for you, is the purpose of poetry?

D.B.-F. This is very hard! I tell people often that poetry saved my life, and it probably sounds quite ridiculous, but it's true. I found Lorna Goodison when I was younger, along with Jennifer Rahim, Olive Senior and many other phenomenal poets. It felt like a light had been switched on, and so much became illuminated. There was suddenly a way... many ways... to say things I'd always wanted to say. I still feel like this. Last week found me reading Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* and crying my heart out in the corner while at an event with family members, not from sadness, but familiarity and recognition and the sheer power and beauty of it. Poetry is a language that feels truer than any other, for me.

A.-M.L. In addition to Shivane Ramlochan's, whose poetry moves or inspires you to write?

D.B.-F. My first influences were Jennifer Rahim, Lorna Goodison, Olive Senior... so many phenomenal writers, but these remain my touchstones. Among my current favourites are Loretta Collins Klobah, Richard Georges, Andre Bagoo and Shara McCallum. Also currently in love with Warsan Shire, Ocean Vuong, Sarah Howe and quite a few others. I also adore the poetry of Louise Erdrich, who is primarily a novelist, but who writes about motherhood so beautifully and originally.

A.-M.L. The last question asks you to tell someone who has never read your work, what *Doe Songs* is about, giving an idea of the range of poems and techniques, styles and forms employed.

D.B.-F. *Doe Songs* is about memory, myth, magic and landscape. These poems are about women, about birth, motherhood, love and loss, but truly they are also about everything. I experiment with form, shape and music here, trying to feel out the inner sound of the poems, the rhythms, incantations and sense of them. It's a book that has been nine years in the making, and one I am deeply proud of.

