



January 2016

Tatjana Debeljački vs. Alan Botsford

Interview

Alan Botsford

Can you tell us something about your hometown and growing up?

From one point of view, I was born in Sharon, Connecticut and grew up in the Maryland suburbs in relative freedom. (From another point of view, I was born in the state of Connect-I-Cut, raised in the state of Mary's Land, came of age by the healing waters of the pool of Bethesda, found illumination in Came-Bridge, Massachusetts... and left it not at all behind for the Land of the Rising Son.)

But... for the record, I was raised with my three older siblings by my mother, Cynthia Schwartz Botsford, a divorcee who worked for the U.S. government. I often used to wander in nearby woods, play 'war games' and such with friends after school, but most of all when I wasn't drawing pictures, which I loved to do, I was reading books, practically anything I could find, ...and eventually, as is not uncommon, one wants to try one's hand at writing. I had a favorite uncle, a former

U.S. diplomat, poet and painter named James D. Hurd living in Washington, D.C. (my father, Richard Van der Zee Botsford whom I saw little of, lived and worked in Europe & Africa.)--this uncle I admired and loved dearly and it was he who inspired me to want to write poetry.

When did you publish your first book and how did the success follow later?

I wrote the initial draft of 'mamaist' in New York in the year 1988, after I quit my then teaching job at Hunter College and my future wife—a Japanese illustrator--and I had begun living together. Later I showed the first incarnation of 'mamaist' to people I knew, among them Derek Walcott who said: "I know what you're trying to do." Stanley Kunitz who said: "You seem to be going through some sort of a growth spurt." Annie Dillard who said: "This is an odd bird." Susan Sontag who said: "I wish you good luck!" Joseph Brodsky who said: "I'd put it in your drawer and leave it there." And Allen Ginsberg who said: "Why did you give me these poems? [Me: I wanted to share my gift with you.] He: "KEEP YOUR GIFT!"

It wasn't until fourteen years later, in 2002 and now living in Japan, that I published the first 'mamaist' book, called "mamaist: learning a new language." It received some good reviews in the U.S. and Japan. The next year, 2003, the second 'mamaist' book co-written with an older poet came out in the U.S., entitled *A Book of Shadows* (Katydid Press). The third 'mamaist' book morphed into *Walt Whitman of Cosmic Folklore*, an essay-dialogue-poetry hybrid collection published in 2010 by Spokane, Washington's Sage Hill Press. The book was a kind of 'song of ourselves' to/with/from Whitman, a poet I'd long had a complicated relationship with. (Anyone writing in the English language or, perhaps for that matter, in contemporary poetry, I believe has to come to terms with him.) I did a modest book tour that took me to points west, in California, Washington and Texas where I gave readings, talks, and radio interviews.

(For more: <http://alanbotsford.com/>)The dialogue on Walt Whitman is, of course, an ongoing one in the U.S., as he is considered, despite his shortcomings, essential to America's view of itself.

Living more than twenty years in Japan,author of several books, including Walt Whitman of Cosmic Folklore, and is editor of Poetry Kanto?

As I mentioned, I moved here with my wife and son from New York. During my early years living in Japan, I naturally was sending poems out for publication, mostly to journals in the U.S. But one established journal I knew of in Japan, *Poetry Kanto*, at the time was being co-edited by Shuntaro Tanikawa. I dared send him some early mamaist poems and was amazed to receive an encouraging reply from him. Needless to say I never dreamed I might one day, many years later, become part of *Poetry Kanto*'s editorial team.

Magazine is dedicated to the poetry based on researching topics; you're an editor? Are you satisfied with the Editorial team and the members of Poetry Kanto?

When I became co-editor in 2004, I was working with Nishihara Katsumasa, who offered invaluable early support and guidance to me as co-editor. When he stepped down as co-editor to devote himself to his writing endeavors in 2012, I became sole editor of *Poetry Kanto*. In 2013 I was able to shepherd *Poetry Kanto* from a print journal to an online journal, where it can now be read by readers worldwide, and where fortunately the traffic is increasing year by year:

<http://poetrykanto.com/>

Professor of American Literature at Kanto Gakuin University and editor of Poetry Kanto?

Yes.

Walt Whitman of Cosmic Folklore will change the way we think not back where we?

I take the view that literature, like many of the arts, involves talking to the spirits. The host—in this instance Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*-- as ghostly, ghost-ridden, the haunting from beyond the grave, from beyond the pale, from the afterlife of the poet Walt Whitman that we, as readers, can continue to live in, and to live out of. To the extent that Whitman's spirit lives long in his writings, is long-lived, to that extent I tried to bear him in my mind, my heart, and was touched by the body of work that he struggled over the course of his adult life to bear into the world. Similarly each of us can thus be moved in our encounters with the arts, poetry being one, in unique, unexpected, and sometimes profoundly reinvigorating ways.

Poetry. Distinguished poet-translator William I. Elliott and his colleague at Kanto Gakuin University, Alan Botsford Saitoh, both residents of Japan?

After *mamaist* came out, Bill Elliott asked me to publish a book of poems with him, which we called *A Book of Shadows*. Shortly afterwards, Bill retired as editor of *Poetry Kanto* and generously passed the baton as (co-)editor to me in 2004. For further info on Bill's role as founder of *Poetry Kanto*, please read here: <http://poetrykanto.com/>

Mamaist for 2015's Best Books of the Year in fiction, nonfiction, mysteries?

(From the annals of "Object lessons"-- I once sent a former teacher of mine a 20-page letter with poems and I got a one-sentence reply. It took me a year to get over it. But I've never forgotten the sentence. It taught me, among other things, that humility and hell must go together, to preserve good humor, if not, at times, one's very life.)

“Poetry is a thing that emerges upwards out of silence.” ?

The unconscious in its revealing aspect, is love; the unconscious in its concealing aspect, is love; the unconscious in all its manifesting aspects, is love. The hidden, invisible, innermost depths of the world, our world, reflecting our own unconscious depths, past all our fears or demons or monsters—as dangerously, painfully real as they are imagined, to be sure-- is love. This all true art shows us, as the true substance of emptiness, or silence, or death.

What are your plans for the future creative work?

Whatever the next incarnation of ‘mamaist’ brings, I hope to be up to the task.

Do you think you have outwitted the expectations?

Not wishing to tempt fate, I am happy to meet ‘expectations’, for now.

How do you manage all that with so much work that you do? Do you have time for yourself?

As a college professor, the classroom is at best where renewal can take place, for all concerned. I am lucky to be able to teach language and literature, areas where I am continually seeking to learn new things, both with and from my students.

Is there anything that you could pinpoint and tell us about yourself between dreams and reality?

There is a pool described in the Gospels called "the pool of Bethesda", which was said to become a healing water when stirred by an angel. Such stirrings may not be for everyone, for there will always be disbelief, if not outright rejection, of angelic stirrings from the otherworld. But as for myself, for my part, I HAVE made it my

life's work -- for the sake of ongoing healing in my life and in the lives of others, that will always remain in some sense unfinished business -- to try to keep one ear attuned to THE ANGEL'S STIRRINGS.

Have you achieved everything you have ever wanted to and if you could live your life again would you be an artist again?

Whenever I hear this sort of question, what first comes to mind is my memory of the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky in his Morton Street apartment in Greenwich Village, smoking cigarettes and talking with us students. He insisted that if he could live his life over he would never become a poet. He would want, instead, to become a airplane pilot. I was stunned to hear him say that. Anyway, as for me I am happy to continue writing and publishing mamaist works, in this life or the next.

Is there anything you would like to say that you think is important and that I haven't asked you ?

What's it like living as a foreigner in Japan? Living as a foreigner has reinforced my sense of self as the composite, the patchwork, the custom-made person that I am, and to be accepting of it, to be solely oneself or to be souly the other-- rupturing as well as healing... To live wholly in the world to see the Holy of the world, in which whatever appears before you, whatever enters your field of vision or consciousness-- is love at first sight, reminding us that we can't change the world but we can change the way we relate to the world.

Alan Botsford's career in a few years?

As well as a career, I see poetry as a pilgrimage, a calling where old realities die, new realities come into being, the pattern must be re-discovered, or, at the very least admitted, as energies flowing through the human being, and the poet is one who through nature and for culture channels, or better still, serves those energies.

For me poet William Blake said it beautifully: The poet's task is "To open the eternal worlds, to open the immortal eyes Of man inwards into the worlds of thought." To the extent that I am able, I hope to be playing my part, however small, in this, poetry's task, and to have the opportunity to share it with others. Thank you, Tatjana.

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