

## Taking Pictures with Stephanie Bolster

Part of what brings me to the visual arts is my way of looking at things—that is, I’m a very visual person. My poetry is, I think, packed with images, and has interesting sounds, but is probably less concerned with textures, smells, flavours. . . . I think part of what makes me a poet rather than a fiction writer or a playwright is that I am inspired by what I see, whether that is a landscape [or] a photograph. I’ve always been an observer—socially as well as aesthetically.

Stephanie Bolster<sup>1</sup>

**W**hite Stone: *The Alice Poems*, Stephanie Bolster’s Governor-General’s Award-winning first collection of poems, opens, suitably, eerily, in a Victorian “Dark Room”: “We’re here, the three of us, lit by one candle” (13). The triad transfixed in this flickering light around a developing photograph is composed of the photographer and author of *Alice in Wonderland*, Charles Dodgson (alias Lewis Carroll); his famous young subject, Alice Liddell; and the poet herself, figured here as an unseen third presence and observer: “I’m here, poet on the corner stool, watching” (13). Literally a ghost-writer who records the scene, transcribing this early exchange between Dodgson and his pre-pubescent muse, the “poet on the corner stool, watching,” also inhabits the interior of the picture she is taking down in words. An invisible presence, she is at once the subject who looks and a faint, murky object in the image she reproduces and invites us to look at. Like Alice, who “gasps as she comes into view” in the “dripping” photograph Dodgson hands her, the poet begins as an undeveloped image, a figure first submerged or “steep[ed]” in shadows and depths (13). And if she surfaces or “comes into view” in subsequent poems, she does so only as fleetingly and sporadically as the “real” Alice Liddell whom the poet seeks throughout. This picture-taking poet is as elusive as her object. Now you see her, now you don’t.

The opening “Dark Room” scene of *White Stone* suggests immediately one of the major preoccupations of Bolster’s poetry: namely, its abiding fascination with images, whether photographic or pictorial. Indeed, the strong visual sensibility of her poetry is as readily evident in Bolster’s more recent, second collection, *Two Bowls of Milk*, as it is in *White Stone*. In an opening poem that begins in another poem, *Two Bowls* indirectly signals Bolster’s ongoing attraction to poetry that begins in painting, lifting a line from John Ashbery for its title, “come to the edge of the barn / the property really begins there” (3), the opening sequence of *Two Bowls* not only trespasses tongue-in-cheek on a predecessor’s poetic “property,” but invokes the voice of a poet whose own well-known interests in and influence by art establish an important intertextual referent or marker for mapping the terrain of Bolster’s poetics.<sup>2</sup> Many of the ensuing poems of *Two Bowls*, moreover, turn directly to the pictorial and plastic arts, and occasionally to fine art photography, as a source and sounding board for poetry, an aesthetic focus that is firmly established by the volume’s final two sections, “*Deux personnages dans la nuit*” and “Inside a Tent of Skin,” which consist, respectively, of “poems from paintings by Jean Paul Lemieux,” and “poems [found] in the National Gallery of Canada” (37, 51).<sup>3</sup>

Bolster is, then, an obsessive picture taker, in the sense that her poetry appropriates visual techniques, artefacts and images, re-producing or double-exposing them, and transforming them, in the process, into verbal portraits or “talking pictures.” This subject matter situates her work in a long tradition of ekphrastic poetry,<sup>4</sup> suggesting one appropriate critical framework or lens through which to read her poems. Homer’s descriptive “intermezzo” on Achilles’ shield in Book 18 of the *Iliad* is typically discussed as the classical example of ekphrasis (Edgecombe 103-4; see also Krieger xv, 8; and Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 165-66, 176-81); other canonical examples most frequently invoked include Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and William Carlos Williams, *Pictures from Brueghel*. More specifically in the context of Canadian women’s poetry, Bolster’s poetic practice may be aligned in this regard with the ekphrastic travel poems of P.K. Page and Elizabeth Bishop (Messenger 1994). From Horace and Aristotle onward, theories about *ut pictura poesis*, or the interrelationship between pictorial and linguistic signs, text and image, have debated the generic differences and conjunctions between painting and poetry as analogous though irreducible semiotic realms. Painting (or photography), so the commonplace observation runs, as an art of space, stasis, and arrested motion, constitutes a species of

“mute” poetry. Poetry, by smooth inversion, as a fundamentally temporal art of motion and action, can be conceived of as a form of “speaking” painting. However, as W.J.T. Mitchell emphasizes, the conventional oppositions drawn between poetry and painting “are neither stable nor scientific”:

They do not line up in fixed columns, with temporality, convention, and aurality in one row, and space, nature and visuality in the other. They are best understood as . . . allegories of power and value disguised as a neutral metalanguage. (*Picture Theory* 156-7)

Neither symmetrical nor invariant, the relationships posited between images and text, between visual and verbal modalities, reveal above all, “the social structure of representation as an activity and a relationship of power/knowledge/desire”—a relationship determined by specific institutional and historical contexts (*Picture Theory* 210, 180).

The critical legacy of *ut pictura poesis* and the intellectual debates to which it has given rise are worth invoking in relation to Bolster’s work, if only because they prompt a recognition, *pace* Mitchell, that Bolster’s concerns with seemingly arrested visual registers of experience necessarily entail a concomitant, and equally pervasive, preoccupation with relations in and across time. Bolster’s poetry is as integrally engaged with problems of time—biographical, historical, aesthetic—as it is with image and space. Moreover, as a woman writer working a genre traditionally overdetermined by a gender division that assumes a masculine poetic perspective on the “feminine” art work—paintings and women alike being ideally silent and beautiful in Western culture—Bolster evinces in her work a distinctive sensitivity to those social and historical relations of “power/knowledge/desire” that theorists have shown come into play in the ekphrastic dialectic (see Mitchell, *Iconology* 95-115; Williams 24-28). In this regard, Bolster’s pictorial poetry reminds us that representation is always “something done to something [or someone], with something, by someone, for someone” (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 180). As I will try to show, this effect is particularly true of the Alice poems in *White Stone*.

While the translation of images into words or pictures to texts raises complicated theoretical questions for semioticians and philosophers, the ekphrastic impulse also entails certain immediate, technical challenges for the poet. Bolster elaborates some of these challenges:

Initially, my “painting poems” were attempts to translate into words my experience of looking at the paintings. I soon realized the limitations of this ([the result] doesn’t necessarily mean much to one who hasn’t seen the painting), and the

superficiality. With the Lemieux poems, and the ones I wrote about art in the National Gallery, I was much more trying to use the art as a leaping off point to explore something deeper and more personal.

Rather than attempting faithfully to reproduce the aesthetic objects or external referents she takes as her subjects, Bolster's work thus throws its emphasis upon the essentially transformative nature of the encounter between viewer and viewed, poet and painting, self and other. Her poems about pictures and paintings are sites of metamorphosis: in them, we witness dialogues between art and life which effect complete re-creations of the reality from which they proceed in the first place.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, reality and identity are premises themselves thrown into question by Bolster's work, as concepts most frequently aligned with the insubstantiality and ephemerality of a perspective point inadequate before an already fading moment in time: "Each shadow my profile casts on page / or yours on canvas," as the poet of "Interieur" says to the painter, Lemieux, "makes another face / to live within. Until tonight" (*Two Bowls* 39).

Of course, the referential touchstone imaginatively revisited in the *White Stone* poems is as much symbolic, historical, and textual as it is visual or iconic; and Bolster is one of the more recent in a long line of readers who have been captivated by the brilliant magic of Lewis Carroll's tales, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). Margaret Atwood, in *The Edible Woman* (1969), is a relatively remote precursor here; Alberto Manguel, in his essay collection, *Into the Looking-Glass Wood* (1998), is a contemporary instance. The sketchy biographical details of the actual Charles Dodgson's intense (and, in 1863, abruptly severed) relationship with the actual Alice Liddell have also generated a great deal of critical attention, a body of literary and historical scholarship that is as much a culture industry in itself as that which has grown up around Lewis Carroll's *Adventures*. Dodgson first met Alice in 1856, when he was a mathematics don at Oxford, and she a four-year-old child. Historical records hint at a seemingly irresistible mix of innocence and prurience at work in Dodgson's penchant for child companions to photograph and listen to his tales. In *White Stone*, the poet wryly acknowledges both the enduring salacious thirst for the "facts" of Dodgson's potentially pedophilic predispositions, and the elusiveness of the historical "truth," which remains indeterminate.<sup>6</sup> Speaking from the "Dark Room," "the poet on the corner stool" ventures this much: "Although it's dim, I think I can

say with near / assurance he does not attempt / to unlatch her collar" (13-14). For Bolster, then, the nature of Dodgson's relationship with Alice Liddell remains suggestively ambiguous. Certainly, his responses to Alice as a child and adolescent are sometimes depicted as erotically charged; he is acutely aware of "[h]er foot just an inch / from his," for instance, or of "her breasts / the figure of an 8 turned / sideways, rising infinitely slowly" (*White Stone* 21, 17). Ultimately, however, if it is evidence of perversion the reader is looking for, then it is perhaps primarily the perversity of the camera as a "fantasy machine" (Sontag 13) that both heightens and thwarts Dodgson's sexual desire that Bolster's work explores.<sup>7</sup>

Alberto Manguel's recent reflections on his own readings of Carroll's tales afford, I think, an especially instructive comparison to Bolster's poetic treatment of the Alice stories and legends. Speaking of the formative influence of *Alice in Wonderland* in the context of his own (extensive) history as a reader, Manguel writes:

The intimate sense of kinship established so many years ago with my first Alice hasn't weakened; every time I re-read her, the bonds strengthen in very private and unexpected ways. I know bits of her by heart. My children (my eldest daughter is, of course, called Alice) tell me to shut up when I burst, yet again, into the mournful strains of "The Walrus and the Carpenter." And for almost every new experience, I find a premonitory or nostalgic echo in her pages, telling me once again, "This is what lies ahead of you" or "You have been here before." (11)

As Carroll's *Alice* narratives continue to offer Manguel a symbolic template by which to measure, assess, and name personal experience, so too do they function for Bolster. But there are crucial differences here as well.

Manguel's delight at the slippage of art into life is charming, but it is also predicated upon the fundamental assumption that "my first Alice" exists only in and as a fiction. For Bolster, on the other hand, who in numerous poems of *White Stone* inserts herself into the historical Alice Liddell's subject position—the life *behind* Carroll's art—this same slippage of fiction into fact seems appalling, nothing short, indeed, of a nightmare, as Carroll's fictional character overtakes the "real" Alice Liddell's life, constructing and defining others' expectations of her appearance, age, behaviour, and meaning:

The critics overwrote each other  
till all their words were tattooed black  
upon her. *Have mercy*, she cried as they came  
with the thousand-volumed weight of archives,

but those words were not hers either.  
("Portrait of Alice, Annotated" 43)

In other words, what Bolster's work recognizes and registers about Carroll's use of Alice as a "model"—for his fictions, no less than for his photographic portraits of her—is the pathos of the historical Alice's status as a "subject in representation," a subject who becomes, in effect, "the quasi-anonymous bearer" of various allegorical, narrative and critical meanings projected (or, in Bolster's word, "tattooed") onto her (Berger 100).

For the woman writer, then, the identification with the figure of Alice is at once far more extensive and far more self-critical. What in Manguel's prose is offered as a gently self-mocking anecdote of personal susceptibility to a particular symbolic fiction (Carroll's text), appears in Bolster's work as a trenchant critique of cultural susceptibility to the power of symbolic fictions in the broader sense of the fantasies structuring and guaranteeing the coherence of social reality. Such fantasies include, first and foremost, the symbolic fiction of naming as a male prerogative. "[M]y eldest daughter is, of course, called Alice," Manguel quips. He can afford to quip precisely because, "of course," he is not speaking from the perspective of a girl/woman, like Alice Liddell. Liddell's experience, as Bolster's work reveals, is named, defined and commodified by those—primarily, though not exclusively—male figures who represent her (Dodgson, her husband, reporters, critics, other photographers).<sup>8</sup> By contrast, the basis of Bolster's own identification with the figure of Alice—the woman as much as the character—is not so entirely fictional. Her own imaginary relationship with Alice is thus ultimately less a source of amusement for the poet than it is the catalyst of a sobering recognition for the need to resist internalized fantasies in the naming of an other. The concluding miniaturist portrait of "The Poet As Nine Portraits of Alice" tersely suggests as much: "If I had a daughter, I would like / to name her Alice, but I would not." (55) From the aesthetic and philosophical question of the relationship between fact and fiction, art and life, history and literature, *White Stone* thus extrapolates further questions about the ethics and politics of representation as an act done—to reprise Mitchell—"to something, with something, by someone, for someone" (*Picture Theory* 180).<sup>9</sup>

Unsurprisingly, then, whereas Manguel finds that his private "sense of kinship" with "my first Alice" strengthens over time, the obverse is true for Bolster, who, in *White Stone*, begins by looking for "the real Alice," but finds only complicated layers of male desire and mass-produced fantasy in which

she herself is strangely implicated. “And me: where do I fit?” the poet asks in “Thames,” once again observing Dodgson and Alice, as the former begins to tell the child his tales. One possible answer: “I am his need / to make a story good enough to hold her / like no photograph” (21). Paradoxically, Bolster’s quest for the Alice beyond Dodgson’s looking-glass Alice suggests that she is, at once, everywhere and nowhere. Reborn through the ages, Bolster’s Alice is a legend as “antique” as the mythical Persephone (“Portrait of Alice With Persephone” 45), and as hip as Elvis—with whom she is pictured as exchanging the occasional “argumen[t] over fame” (“Portrait of Alice With Elvis” 49). She is a Victorian girl, then matron, whose aging body belies Dodgson’s fixed and fictive constructions of her as a child, an “idea of her” that is offered as an item for mass consumption, an “idea of her” that is as suffocating as being “kept under glass, scalloped like a fancy cake” (“Visitor From Overseas” 59).

“Visitor From Overseas” opens the final section of *White Stone*, which is entitled “Hide and Seek,” “in which Alice discovers the New World and eludes the poet” (57). In a companion piece, “Visitor From Overseas, Reprise,” the poet and Alice exchange positions as the “visitor,” the poet in this latter instance having made the requisite pilgrimage to Alice’s old world home, Oxford. She has come in order to finally find her, but, amidst the kitsch of over-priced souvenir shops, she is forced to conclude: “She is / nowhere. If I’m not getting warmer here, / then where? Who did I dream I’d find?” She buys a “thimble in her fictional image” (68). The trinket facsimile of the fictional character is about as close as the poet will get. The real identity of Alice Liddell eludes her still.

The concluding sequences of *White Stone* are, moreover, marked by a further movement and epiphany:

Since I began  
to seek her, I’ve found  
love, moved to a land  
white as a page. I rarely stop  
to think of her these days.  
(“Still Life” 66)

Ultimately, the object of the search, little Alice Liddell, is subsumed by the poet’s confrontation with the larger abstract question of identity, subjectivity as such. In one sense, that is, the object of the search has been the subject—the poet’s own self—all along. In the final poem, “The Open Door,” a phone rings. The sleeping poet wakes, walks through a dream-like “open

door” into a “winter field.” A solitary figure against a vast, empty space, she is left with the terrible question of the meaning of an individual life as it appears against the immensity of such space. “What do these footprints mean? / They are mine,” she reminds herself. Footprints, shadows: these ephemeral traces are all that the poet can point to as what she calls “evidence of being” (“Portrait of Alice as Spirit” 62). Identity, her own existence, is something so precarious it has to be inferred from “those spaces where my weight / has pressed the snow.” It is this final “thought of weight” that precipitates perhaps the first and last genuinely real discovery of *White Stone*: “This is fear, this is here, / this is me” (“The Open Door” 69).

**A**s I intimated earlier, if we fast-forward from “The Open Door” at the end of *White Stone* to the opening of *Two Bowls of Milk*, we find the poet contemplating “property” (3). In the broadest sense, *Two Bowls* is a collection about “property,” about physical and psychical boundaries, borders, edges, and what it means to recognize and respect those limits—or not, as the case may be. “See those two bowls of milk, just there / on the other side of the property line [?]” the poet asks. “[T]hey’re for the cats / that sometimes cross over and are seized by a thirst” (3). “Seized” by thirst or plain old curiosity, cats will not recognize any “property line,” just as poets, seized by thirsts and curiosities of their own, may deliberately “cross over” into the “property line[s]” of other poets and artists, as Bolster does here with due acknowledgement to John Ashbery. This act of poetic border-crossing reminds us that the ekphrastic poet, as Bryan Wolf remarks, is fundamentally “revisionary in [her] impulses”: “[she] refuses the myth of the artwork’s autonomy and insists instead on the intertextual and miscegenating quality that links artwork to artwork and both to criticism” (186). *Two Bowls* probes aspects of “property,” asking us to think about everything from what is so “real” about real estate, to what it means to own a body—or, more uncomfortably, even to assume we can or do own (and thus control) our physical being. As the trace of an ekphrastic imagination, however, *Two Bowls* should also be regarded as a sustained meditation on the properties of art, in all its various media.

*Two Bowls of Milk* places the image of two bowls of milk before us, first, in the creamy cover photograph by Adriene Veninger, and second, in the opening poem, in which the two bowls are explicitly figured as invitations to transgression. Indeed, the entire lyric, “come to the edge. . .,” reinforces this invitation. We are promised the taste of milk, and more: “Lick each



finger afterwards. That will be / your first taste, and my finger tracing your lips will be the second” (3). Third, the title poem itself concludes the first section of *Two Bowls*. It bears citing in full:

**Two Bowls of Milk**

Are two bowls of milk. They are round  
and white and have nothing to do  
with the moon. They have no implications  
of blindness, or sight. They wait  
on the doorstep like bowls  
or like things that closely resemble  
bowls in their stillness. The bowls do not  
foreshadow cats. There are two  
because two hands set them out  
and each wanted to hold something.  
Milk because not water. The curve of  
milk against the curve of bowl. (19)

Though Bolster may well have been drawing on the archive of her visual memory in thus recurring to the image, it is worth noting that “Two Bowls of Milk” does not proceed from any particular artwork, as many of the other poems in this collection do.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the poet’s foregrounding of the bowls as objects for aesthetic contemplation represents an extension of the ekphrastic focus of her work, from art to artefact.<sup>11</sup>

In another respect, however, the title poem of *Two Bowls* signifies not only an extension, but also a modification, of the ekphrastic impulse in Bolster’s work to a new level of self-conscious scrutiny. Indeed, as W.J.T. Mitchell remarks of Wallace Steven’s “Anecdote of a Jar,” so might we say of Bolster’s “Two Bowls” that the poem “provides an allegory and a critique of its own generic identity and might . . . be seen as a parody of the classical ekphrastic object” (*Picture Theory* 166).<sup>12</sup> The bowls are set before us, full, only to have the manifold “implications” for meaning the poet evokes, revoked. They “have nothing to do / with the moon.” Or with “blindness, or sight.” Nor do the bowls “foreshadow cats” (the cats, alas, have already come and gone). And the only reason for the milk, a negative definition: “because not water.”<sup>13</sup> Like Wallace Steven’s jar, Bolster’s bowls mobilize “the generic expectations of ekphrasis”—to reanimate the meanings of the inanimate object—only to strip them away, as though the poet is “testing the limits of the genre, offering us a blank space where we expect a picture,

a cipher in the place of a striking figure" (*Picture Theory* 166). Yet in the end, there is still the lovely "curve of / milk against the curve of bowl." The emphasis of the poem on the sensual shape and perfect "stillness" of the bowls and their contents makes it clear that, as with Steven's jar, these are "no 'mere' object[s], but a highly charged *form*, and a representational form at that" (*Picture Theory* 167, emphasis original). Paradoxically, then, it is not, as one might expect from the series of impassive negations through which the poem proceeds, an emptiness of meaning that marks the final couplet, but rather a sense of plentitude, or what Bolster elsewhere terms an "inrush" (70) of sensual appreciation that accompanies the final image. Still milk shaped by sculpted solid: the simple fact of their being, for the moment, seems meaning more than enough.

In Bolster's vision, though, the properties of substances such as bowls or milk are ultimately no more stable than the oppositions conventionally posited between the pictorial and poetic realms; tranquil moments of aesthetic containment, therefore, moments "held" as though "under a bell jar" (64), alternate with an emphasis on flux, mutability, and transformation. In "Chemistry," for instance, a "drop of water" transforms a "bowl of shallow milk," much as a "blot of half-and-half" cream causes a "hurricane" in a cup of coffee (28). Solid substances, too, are subject to similar sorts of compositional change. Thus, the firmly proprietorial "stake with the flap of orange plastic that marks / the beginning of the real" in the opening poem's survey of the land (3), soon gives way in subsequent sequences, such as "Poems for the Flood" and "Fargo in Flood," to dream-like, diluvial visions which chart land formations weirdly surreal: "This valley / was once a lake, until we made it land. See how the rain / against the windshield turns to fishes" (16). A space once liquid, made solid, threatens to dissolve again before our eyes, just as Manitoba, in flood, "grows heavy, / towel darkening with spill" (33).

As with land formations, so also with the human form. In "Dog-Woman," a poet's response to an Inuit carving, the sculptor's obviously arresting realization of "the idea of dog- / woman" in "greyish green stone" prompts the speaker to question: "Who's to say I'm not / that dog, that small / woman low to the ground"? (59). Fear and fascination with the prospect of the body's incipient transmogrification especially mark the final section of the collection, the "found" poems loosely based on art works in the National Gallery of Canada.<sup>14</sup> In this section, "Two Bowls of Milk" are displaced by bodies, especially by women's bodies, as objects of aesthetic

regard and anatomical scrutiny. Here, one of the bowls placed before us is of “Ancient Roman” vintage, and “embellished with a maiden” who is “bare to naked gazes” (68); in another instance, the half-sphere of the bowl’s shape is completed in the “impossible” “taut globe” of a pregnant belly: “What does it *not* contain?” (74, emphasis added). Representations of femininity—from erotic photographs of women bathing (“Stop Motion,” 69-70) to a medical engraving (“Still Life With Braid” 55), or an oil painting of Venus (“Three Goddesses” 72)—afford Bolster the visual bases from which she works through themes of desire and fear: desire and fear of fertility and sterility, of birth and death, of the body itself as a powerfully autonomous, yet temporary and fragile shelter of “bones pitched inside a tent of skin” (56).

**B**ut it is to the penultimate section of *Two Bowls*, “*Deux personnages dans la nuit*,” that I want to turn, finally. As an interrelated suite of poems inspired by a single French Canadian painter’s life and work, “*Deux personnages*” arguably represents Bolster’s most ambitious, technically disciplined and cohesive ekphrastic project. A series arising from the poet’s move, in August, 1995, from her West Coast home to Quebec City, “*Deux personnages dans la nuit*” is in part a meditation on loss and coming to terms with cultural, geographic, and linguistic dislocation. “I think,” Bolster has said, “I began looking at art,” Lemieux’s paintings in particular, “partly as a way of finding new material to write from, in the absence of a landscape with which I could connect—though I realized this only in retrospect.” Wintery vistas of the sort captured by Lemieux’s “Le Train de Midi” (1956) were particularly arresting for the Vancouver-born Bolster:

On first entering the white  
field, I think I’m dead, and this  
  
no heaven. Aftertaste of sacrifice:  
I’ve left coast, crossed Rockies,  
  
plains and shield to sleep beside  
my love and learn his tongue. (40)

In its depiction of an individual dwarfed against—yet somehow persevering amidst—an immense landscape of “white / field,” Bolster’s text creates the verbal equivalent of a leitmotif discernible in many of the landscape paintings of Jean Paul Lemieux. It is a scene that also clearly recalls the open-ended closure of *White Stone* in “The Open Door.”<sup>15</sup> Compounding the unease caused by the “absence of landscape with which [she] could connect”

is the unease—especially profound, for the writer—caused by the absence of a familiar language. The poet must now “learn” the lover’s “tongue.”

That Bolster should, while practising this new tongue—as she does in the French bits of “*Deux personnages*”—turn to the pictorial language of Jean Paul Lemieux for help and inspiration is, perhaps, no random coincidence. The gentle ironist at work in such bilingually titled pieces as “Le Far West” (1955) obviously knew a thing or two about the challenges of encountering and attempting to translate difference. In part, it is the pronounced and abiding concerns of Lemieux’s life’s work (in both his paintings and his prolific writings) with the preservation and celebration of indigenous Quebec scenery, folk life, art forms, and customs that make him an ideal guide for the anglophone poet struggling to interpret her new life and surroundings (see Robert 1975, 1978). To the degree that Lemieux’s mature work also, however, comes to evince an “enormous nostalgia” for lost childhood—his “deepest source of inspiration,” according to Guy Robert (66-67)—his thematic concerns clearly intersect with those of the author of *White Stone: The Alice Poems*.<sup>16</sup>

It is, however, rather to childhood as the focal point or “deepest source” of the adult artist’s insecurities that Bolster seems to be responding in such poems as “*L’Orpheline* (1956)” (44) and “1910 Remembered (1962)” (47). In the latter poem, she reflects upon a self-portrait of Lemieux as a “boy, aged / six, striped into a sailor suit” (47). The painting seems to her pervaded by an air of apprehension—“that cloud a stone above your head”—as though the sky is about to fall: a version of Lemieux as Chicken Little (47). Bolster is perhaps responding to the compositional ambiguity of Lemieux’s “1910 Remembered,” which, like many of his portraits of children in family groupings, physically separates the child at some distance from the parental figures, who are often cast as shadows or inverted reflections of one another. In the case of Lemieux’s “1910 Remembered,” the artist-as-child is, indeed, figured, as Bolster notes, “alone / between two figures,” positioned squarely before the viewer’s gaze between parents, in profile, who stare over the child’s head at each other, seemingly indifferent to his presence: an orphan in effect, if not in fact. It appears to be an anxious sense of solitude and childish vulnerability, then, that the newly uprooted poet perceives and with which she clearly connects, prompting this attempt at reassurance from the poet contemplating the artist’s art: “Listen . . . / We’re loved. Your wife sitting in the garden, / my love calling me in his magic accent. Our mothers / never leave us”(47). The security of that first, unconditional “mother[’s]” love:

that is the “promise” to which the poet attempts to cling—but falteringly, as the last line of the poem suggests, with “doubt” intact (47).

There is, then, a marked affinity between poet and painter, who share a melancholic awareness of the separateness of human existence: “Whatever makes you and me believe / ourselves *tout seul* has got her too,” as the poet observes of the haunting “grey” face of Lemieux’s “*L’Orpheline*” (44). In Lemieux’s paintings, such a melancholy often seems to manifest itself through the signature style the painter developed during the 1950s—significantly, a style he captured only after he left his home in Quebec City for an extended period of time.<sup>17</sup> Spare, stark, and uncluttered, his canvases tend to “weed out” any distracting details, to reduce the content of the picture “to its most simple and concentrated form” (Robert 90-91). Where human figures are portrayed, the paintings are also often “cropped in an unusual manner, such that occasionally, figures are cut in half vertically [or horizontally] by the edge of the painting,” as though his subjects were “victims of some assault, some amputation” (Robert 90-91, 182). In “*Deux personnages*,” by contrast, it is, rather, the *addition* of sharp visual and sensory details—ice, white, blue, the snow, the biting sun—that convey a similarly austere impression of a painfully harsh physical world in which survival and self-preservation may at times—even on “Fine Days”—compromise that “promise” of love:

Love bends me in more resistant shapes;  
my neck cracks like ice. I would not  
give you a shred of my blue, my own too few and far.  
(“*Les Beaux Jours, 1937*” 42)

In a sense, Bolster’s verbal portraits are also oddly “cropped” fragments of the poet’s ongoing imaginary dialogue with Lemieux: “This is only part of it,” as the title poem announces, “Red smear / of her lips at the left, his at the right” (48). Each encounter is also a missed encounter. What is left out? Details of the histories of the figures in the paintings, and of the relationships of the old lovers (Lemieux and his wife) and the young lovers (the poet and her lover) are only lightly sketched in, evocative vignettes. Interestingly, what emerges from the poet’s serial re-encounters with the work of the male artist is ultimately, as in *White Stone*, a relationship triangulated by the presence of a second female figure: in this case, Madeleine Lemieux. As often as not, it is the artist’s wife with whom the poet aligns

herself throughout this series; indeed, the “*deux personnages*” featured in the title poem are the two women, waiting “in the kitchen” for the absent artist and clinking “glasses of red wine” in solidarity (48). Madeleine Lemieux, as “*Les Beaux Jours*” indicates, was herself a formally trained artist, whose own career appears to have taken a back seat to the caretaker role she assumed in relation to her increasingly prominent husband. Thus, as the poet observes, “This morning she laid aside / her brush to make you lunch / and has not picked it up again” (42). The two women are united in the “sacrifices” that each makes for love. Madeleine sets aside her brush to tend to her husband, still the artist-as-child. Before he dies, “she’ll speak / of sacrifice as though it were a pool, / blood-warm” (42). Bolster leaves the coast to be with her lover, and remarks, similarly, upon the bitter “Aftertaste of sacrifice” (40). At what cost, art? At what cost, love? And how does the woman artist, socialized to nurture others, to make everybody else’s lunch, balance the dual demands of love and art? These concerns complicate and add an element of tension to the poetry’s exploration of the relationship between the female poet and the male painter.

Nor should we, however, lose sight of the fact that it is *out* of the poet’s “sacrifice” in the name of love that poems are born, poems which, no less, record and make visible the “sacrifice” of the earlier, effaced woman artist, Madeleine Lemieux. There is “promise” and purpose yet for the displaced Anglophone poet, struggling to counter both a personal and existential sense of the barriers between people, places, languages—all those more or less intangible border lines Bolster explores in *Two Bowls*. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa Dalloway says the “supreme mystery” is “simply this: here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?” (127). Well, no. And that’s no reason for utter despair, as the concluding poem of the suite, “*Les Beaux Jours, Reprise*,” delicately intimates through its multiple ambiguities. With the faces of Lemieux’s lonely orphans “still loom[ing]” before her eyes, under her very feet as she crosses a frozen river, the poet recognizes that the same ice which traps them sustains her, keeping her safe. Thus, “I do not bend / to crack open breath-holes / I could fall into” (49). Clearly, some barriers are about self-preservation, and this woman artist is determined to respect the integrity of those boundaries, even if she must also mourn their existence.

And as for “home”? That’s something for the “*deux personnages*” or double “I’s” of this picture-taking poet/lover to work out as best they can, in the untranslatable interstice between body and shadow:

Home is my feet

laying a path I'll follow back.  
Sun streams through a buoyant

sky to dazzle snow. My shadow  
flits, so quick it can't be fixed. (49)

## NOTES

- 1 Remarks by Stephanie Bolster cited throughout this article are taken from personal correspondence, February 2, 1999 and September 1, 1999. An earlier version of this essay, translated into French by Charly Bouchara, appeared as "Stephanie Bolster au pays des images" in *Ellipse* 61 (Spring 1999): 57-70.
- 2 John Ashbery, author of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), a long poem inspired by the anamorphic self-portrait of the Italian Renaissance painter, Girolamo Francesco Mazzola (1503-40), has been also deeply influenced by contemporary American abstract art, and—gauging from his comments on poetics—possibly by photography as well: "I think that any one of my poems might be considered to be a snapshot of whatever is going on in my mind at the time" (qtd. in Baym *et al.*, 2645).
- 3 "*Deux personnages dans la nuit*," the suite of poems inspired by the paintings of the late Québécois artist, Jean Paul Lemieux, was one of two winners of *The Malahat Review's* 1997 long poem competition; some of the poems from the fourth and final section of the collection, "Inside a Tent of Skin," based on art works at the National Gallery, won first prize in the 1998 (M)Other Tongue Press Chapbook Contest.
- 4 According to W.J.T. Mitchell, "the narrowest meanings of the word ekphrasis as a poetic mode" relate to that genre of "literary pictorialism" which strives to "giv[e] voice to a mute art object" or offer "a rhetorical description of a work of art" (*Picture Theory* 153). As Mitchell and others note, however, the notion of ekphrasis as "a minor poetic genre" also gives way to "a more general application that includes any 'set description intended to bring . . . [a] picture . . . before the mind's eye'" (*Picture Theory* 153; Mitchell is quoting *Saintsbury* 491); not only is ekphrasis in this regard "a universal principle of poetics," but "[i]nsofar as art history is a verbal representation of visual representation, it is an elevation of ekphrasis to a disciplinary principle" (*Picture Theory* 156-57).
- 5 As Shimon Sandbank notes, in this regard the "relationship between poems and paintings" may be usefully conceived of "in terms of absence and supersession": ekphrastic poets do not so much attempt to "transpose . . . visual forms into their own verbal medium" as they do "exploit the lacunae of the visual medium to assert the power of their own" (226).
- 6 The extent to which *White Stone* interrogates the relativity and indeterminacy of the "truth" surrounding the historical circumstances of the Dodgson-Liddell relationship, and the poet's own participation in the sensationalism she exposes and explores, is seriously underestimated by one recent reviewer, who scolds the author for "cast[ing] a very lurid light on Dodgson," and "appropriating" the voices of "the silenced," even as she also, grudgingly, admits that Bolster "acknowledges the complexity of the moral ground" she is examining. I refer to Mary di Michele.
- 7 Sontag asks: "What exactly is the perverse aspect of picture taking? If . . . photographers often have sexual fantasies when they are behind the camera, perhaps the perversion lies in the fact

- that these fantasies are both plausible and so inappropriate. . . . In fact, using a camera is not a good way of getting at someone sexually. Between photographer and subject, there has to be distance" (13).
- 8 "In Which Alice Poses For Julia Margaret Cameron, 1872" reinscribes Alice's dilemma as an object of representation in the hands of the pioneering female photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron, who is shown using Alice in an even more histrionic and stylized way than Dodgson. For Cameron, Alice poses as the model of various "types" of iconic femininity: dutiful daughter, goddess of fertility, virgin (*White Stone* 25-27).
- 9 On the broad question of "the relationship between representation and responsibility" in contemporary art and culture, see Mitchell *Picture Theory* 421-25.
- 10 Bolster does mention Pierre Bonnard's "The Bowl of Milk" (oil on canvas, c. 1919) as a visual referent which came to mind at the time she began thinking of the book's cover design (personal correspondence, September 1, 1999).
- 11 Indeed, as Mitchell points out, "the earliest examples of ekphrastic poetry are not . . . principally focused on painting, but on utilitarian objects that happen to have . . . symbolic visual representations attached to them. Goblets, urns, vases, . . . reliefs, frescos and statues *in situ* provide the first objects of ekphrastic description, probably because the detachment of painting as an isolated, autonomous, and moveable object of aesthetic contemplation is a relatively late development in the visual arts" (*Picture Theory* 165)
- 12 Alternatively, one might regard the self-reflexive procedures of "Two Bowls" in terms of the sort of "heuristic ekphrasis" Edgecombe discusses in relation to William Carlos Williams' *Pictures from Brueghel*, in which poetic form contributes as a comment on modes of perceiving visual art forms (112-13).
- 13 In this way, "Two Bowls of Milk" returns (mischievously) to questions *White Stone* raises about the grounds for interpretation, that very "symbolic logic" that Bolster's Dodgson, and all readers of signs, iconic or indexical, necessarily depend upon (*White Stone* 17).
- 14 Bolster, that is, invites us to think of these poems as "found" poems, insofar as they are subtitled "poems *in* the National Gallery of Canada" (51, emphasis added).
- 15 Readers will note that subtle, overlapping echoes of and to the "poems from paintings" by Lemieux mark the final segments of *White Stone*; Bolster was to some extent working concurrently on both projects, beginning the Lemieux suite while completing the Alice manuscript.
- 16 Moreover, to the extent that "ekphrasis is a way of ordering experience," it is, as Cynthia Messenger notes, "a particularly important strategy when it is employed in travel literature, for it acts as an intervention—and an intercession—between traveller/poet and place" (103). Bolster is not a "traveller" in the same sense as Page or Bishop, but the relationship between deracination and poetic technique is, nevertheless, comparable.
- 17 Guy Robert quotes Lemieux on this turning point in his career: "I had to leave Quebec before I really discovered things about myself" (82).

#### WORKS CITED

- Baym, Nina, et al. eds. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Vol. 2. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989.
- Berger, Harry. "Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze of Early Modern Portraiture." *Representations* 46 (Spring 1994): 87-120.



- Bolster, Stephanie. *White Stone: The Alice Poems*. Montreal: Véhicule, 1998.
- . *Two Bowls of Milk*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1999.
- Edgecombe, Rodney S. "A Typology of Ecphrases." *Classical and Modern Literature* 13.2 (1993): 103-16.
- Krieger, Murray. *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992.
- Manguel, Alberto. *In the Looking-Glass Wood*. New York: Knopf, 1998.
- Messenger, Cynthia. "'But How Do You Write a Chagall?': Ekphrasis and the Brazilian Poetry of P.K. Page and Elizabeth Bishop." *Canadian Literature* 142/143 (1994): 102-17.
- Michele, Mary di. "Under Celebrity Skin." Rev. of *White Stone*. *Books in Canada* 28. 1 (February, 1999). 7-8.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.
- . *Picture Theory*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994.
- Robert, Guy. *Lemieux*. Montréal: Alain Stanké, 1975.
- . *Lemieux*. Trans. John David Allan. Toronto: Gale, 1978.
- Saintsbury, George. *History of Criticism and Literary Taste*. Vol. 1. New York: n.p. 1902.
- Sandbank, Shimon. "Poetic Speech and the Silence of Art." *Comparative Literature* 46.3 (1994): 225-39.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Dell, 1973.
- Williams, Susan S. *Confounding Images*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997.
- Wolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925.

