Prism Review Interview: *Stephanie Ellis Schlaifer*

by Genevieve Kaplan

Stephanie Ellis Schlaifer and I have known each other--as friends and poets and confidantes and co-commiserators—for over 15 years. In that time, we've written and published poems, we've drafted and attempted even more poems that were never published, we've hatched plots to take over the literary (and figurative) landscape, we've skyped into each other's homes and offices and classrooms, we've wandered gardens and capitols, we've paid too much for tacos, we've eaten liquid olives, and we've toasted in rooftop bars across the country, celebrating each other's work. In recent good news, Stephanie's first book Cleavemark *was selected by Shane McCrae during BOAAT Press's open reading period and was published in 2016. Happily, I get to continue celebrating Stephanie's poetry by asking the author some questions about writing, inspiration, and her new book here in* Prism Review. *Read on:*

Can you tell us a little bit about the process of creating Cleavemark*? Reading a completed book like this, we sometimes forget the journey from manuscript to book, from poem to manuscript, from idea to poem…. What was your process like?*

I actually wrote the first poem in *Cleavemark* for a series of poems and photographs I made in college. It was a collection of portraits of real and imaginary women, and one of them, "Susanne Cawood" was a portrait of my mother before she was my mother. It was based on stories she'd told me, but also pictures and old letters and things I'd seen—some of which I wasn't supposed to have seen. I borrowed an album of small Polaroids of my mother's that she made after college in the 60s—mostly photographs of and by my mom at my age, then. Some of the photographs are of my mom's brothers and Nan and Pop and at their house—the same house where most of *Cleavemark* is set—and they're all very telling, in a way. My Nan was killed by a drunk semi-truck driver when I was 10, and my Pop died when I was thirteen. I was really losing my memory of their house. I started writing poems based on these

Polaroids as a way to put the house back together again, in my head. So, most of them are really ekphrastic pieces. I finished most of the poems in grad school, and wrote a few more after that to fill in the holes in the narrative and in the architecture. I wanted to make sure I gave a complete portrait of the house and a portrait of my grief.

I'm particularly curious about the relationship of the title of the final poem "Cleavemark Drive" (57) and the title of the book. Say more?

First, the book originally had a different name, but Shane McCrae rightly encouraged me to change it, and we eventually settled on *Cleavemark*. Cleavemark Drive is the real name of my grandparent's street—how that came to be I'll probably never understand, but there it is. Cleave is one of those beautiful words that also means its opposite—both cutting away and clinging fast to, and there probably isn't a closer metaphor for grief than that on any US road map. I wrote that poem after having a strange doubling experience in my kitchen in the old house I lived in in grad school. It was springtime and the air was full of oaks, like it was at my grandparents' house, and I was trying to joint a chicken while I was talking to my mother on the phone. My mother comes from a long line of very stoic people, so talking directly about emotional things didn't happen very often. I mean, there's the acknowledgement of the loss, but it's very contained. I'm not good at this, but my mother is. And we started talking about Pop by way of the chicken liver, and all the while this aroma of the oaks was so redolent in the kitchen, and I'm holding this inept knife, struggling to hack this bird apart, and I was just kind of overwhelmed by the two conversations we were having. So, it seemed fitting to have this poem anchor the book. More than any other, it's a portrait of the situation, with all its terrible beauty, humor, and bluntness—all the ways of getting around death.

You're also a visual artist and sculptor, so it makes perfect sense that you mention ekphrasis and writing from Polaroids. Could you speak to your poetic relationship with the visual, which seems key both in the conception of the book and the later realization of it? In particular: for your collaborative multimedia installation Cleavemark Drive *(in 2013, with Cheryl Wassenaar), did all the poems exist before the art? Do you think of the installation as a realization of the poems, an interaction with them, or a new separate creation?*

I started working on the poems and art at the same time, but I really struggled with what I wanted to do with the sculpture. No wait—I actually really struggled with both, but I had the support of a graduate program to help get me through the writing. I had a lot of technical difficulties with the materials I was working with—salt, sugar, ceramic dishes—and I just never felt that what I was making was what I really needed to be doing with the materials. Ultimately, I lacked the discipline to work through the failure on my own without an external deadline. When Cheryl Wassenaar approached me about working with my poems again for *Cleavemark Drive* at Fort Gondo, she said this time she wanted me to make objects, too, which was terrifying. But, you know, there's your deadline—you have exactly one year to figure this out and make it happen. It turns out that making failed experiments for years while making the poems was incredibly useful, and together we figured out how to make those materials work with the cut vinyl lettering to transform the space. I must also take a moment to thank Jessica Baran for accepting our proposal for the Fort Gondo gallery, and having faith that we would be able to make it work. I think of the installation as a separate incarnation of the same work. You see the same materials, the same language in both. I guess I'm happiest thinking about the writing with the visual art—that's really always been what I've been after.

"There is a lion in your mouth" wall installation detail. Vinyl lettering, bed frame, cups and saucers, egg, conduit. Photograph by Jessica Baran.

Closet installation detail. Wooden spools, needles, soap. Photograph by Stephanie Ellis Schlaifer.

I remember you mentioning, in your Skype visit with my students last fall, a soap closet in the installation, and how that smell (this smell: "why do you keep it with you / the scent is bitter purser on said doorkeepers / said soap" (3)?) really captured the memory of the house for you. If the poems in Cleavemark *are in some ways you putting the house on Cleavemark Drive back together again,—a portrait of the house, and of grief, as you said earlier—is the installation perhaps building an additional, alternative memory house? Could there be endless iterations of such memories, in literary, visual, and sculptural forms? I'm fascinated by the way your writing—and other art—expands the idea of what memory is, and could be, and perhaps should be.*

I love that phrase! Alternative Memory House. Like where KellyAnne Conway summers or something. Yes—the work deals overtly with memory and nostalgia, but more in terms of the pain and corruption of, than of the longing to go back. Because the installation and the poems are a lament, the objects and materials we used both conjure the warm nostalgic feelings and then refuse them. All the vintage stuff—the rotary phone, the mechanical egg beater, the thousands of spools, the La-Z-Boy, all of it's ruined by another domestic material. But you can't really separate the loveliness from the danger. It was important to Cheryl that the installation resonate with some sort of collective memory, and I think (I hope!) that it did. Nearly everybody that mentioned the smell of the soap said, "It smells just like my grandmother's house!" There were other scents we wanted to incorporate—the gasoline & dryer sheets from "Elevation: East," but the perfumerie we were working with wasn't able to get their gasoline scent right in time for the show. I'm not kidding. I contacted the owner of Demeter about it, and he said they'd been trying to do gasoline for years but couldn't stabilize it. This is why I love making things. I hope that we'll have a chance to do another iteration of this installation, and that maybe we'll be able to use some of the ideas and elements that didn't make it into the Gondo show.

That gasoline anecdote is seriously amazing! It makes me want to make things, too—or at least think harder about how *to make things, and what kinds of things have the potential to be made.*

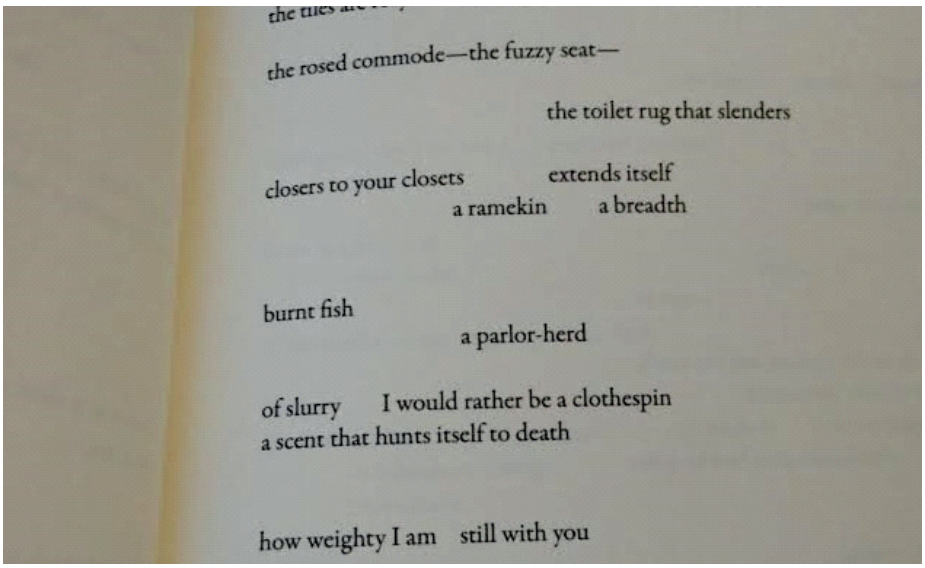
Let's move our focus back to poetry: who are some of your all-time favorite poets? What have you read lately that has made an impression? Are there certain titles or poets that you particularly recommend?

All-time favorites/biggest influences: Marianne Moore is the poet from the canon of my youth that still influences me the most. She's originally from Kirkwood, MO, and because that's not far from here, I actively pursue her haunting. I'm pretty sure one day she'll just show up and give me what for. Celan is the poet I turn to when I think I'm losing my way. He always manages a sublime rhetorical grief, even in the smallest verses. Newer book: I read Robyn Schiff's latest book *A Woman of Property* last fall and it knocked my freaking socks off. Bridget Lowe's *At the Autopsy of Vaslav Nijinsky* is still one of my favorite contemporary works—it's so weird, so arrestingly, hauntingly beautiful. And when I'm trying to assess the validity of my own work, I conjure the voices of the poets I've been fortunate enough to work with in person, and whose actual reading voices I find transfixing—Claudia Rankine, Cole Swensen, James Galvin (my thesis advisors), the poets in my reading group in St. Louis, and friends like you, whose work I admire so much.

Aw, thanks! What a fabulous group of poets to be mentioned among. :) And, I feel like I can certainly see your work on a spectrum with these poems—Marianne Moore, for sure, in the way almost clinical attention to language and image and detail, and the others, too, in the way your poems don't shy away from difficulty.

The title of your book—Cleavemark—*seems apt, as the poems here are often fissured/split. There's the physical fragmenting of language in these poems, especially in the open forms in "The tiles are pink the tiles are black" or "Upwards," where the gaps and pauses are given so much weight. As well, there's the tension in*

the content, as the poems here are often simultaneously homey ("a cake there, rising," in the oven (5), "casseroles" and "a chicken-in-the-pot" (17)) and ominous ("there is / a lion / in your mouth" (29), "you need a pair of scissors / that can cut through bone" (57)). There are weddings (10, 13) and home haircuts (7) and birthday parties (31), but these are countered by rape (23) and death and cataracts and "pinworms and // an itchy anus" (20). The poems are often beautiful snapshots punctured by the (smaller and larger) horrors of reality. You successfully delve into scenes of daily domestic life and "women's issues" by making these subjects weighty, difficult, snarky, or dangerous.


the rosed commode—the fuzzy seat—

the toilet rug that slenders

closers to your closets extends itself
a ramekin a breadth

burnt fish
a parlor-herd

of slurry I would rather be a clothespin
a scent that hunts itself to death

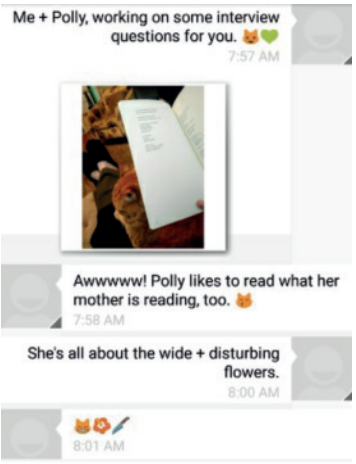
how weighty I am still with you

From "The tiles are pink the tiles are black" (p.3)

Can you speak to the type of balance you're aiming for / have achieved in these poems, or in the book as a whole? Why is it important to you for move the poem—in form or in content—beyond what readers might initially expect?

Overall, I think I tend to see things in terms of their disruptions. So, whether it's a domestic scene, a landscape, or a story, I go straight for the cracks. I what to see what things admit to when they're breaking. I

want the frankness of image and language, and I'm glad that you read them as "punctures." I really like that. Because I'm also a visual artist, this fissuring sometimes manifests itself literally on the page, and the visual element is always part of a poem's tone. It also helps me guide the reader's reading—at least I think it does—where I hear the pauses, the full stops, and the run-ons. It's a musical arrangement, so it's really no different than rest notes in sheet music, except poets aren't allowed anything half as convenient as rest notes. I did have to balance the more narrative poems with the more atmospheric ones. At first, my inclination was to isolate the two, but when I showed the first draft of the manuscript to James Galvin, who was one of my thesis advisors [at the Iowa Writer's Workshop], he said, "Oh, no—these need to alternate," and he was totally right. Let the narrative poems function as armature. The more fragmented pieces needed to do on the book scale what the smaller punctures were doing at the level of the line.



One of my favorite poems in Cleavemark *is "Childproofing." I love the way it is so incredibly mundane—"in between pages 57 & 58, / there is a tiny yellow sticky" (19), "A* Special Issue */ of* Martha Stewart Living */ lying underneath the nightstand / near the Better Homes and Gardens /* Family Medical Guide*."*

(19)—while also disturbing, loving, personal, and still distant. It embodies so many of the moods in the book. I also remember reading a section of a draft of this poem many years ago when we were in grad school. It was the "Stephanie," the naming of the self (19,21), that I remember—I was awed by your ability to include—and explicitly name—your 'real' self in the poem.

How did this poem evolve as it become part of Cleavemark*? Were all four parts of the poem there initially, or did they cohere later on? The evolution of reading (mother's book (19)) to writing (at the desk (22)), and the reflection of the narrator in part iii ("I ruined it, I think") implies some large amount of time and distance, and I wonder how the drafting, revising, and/or editing of the poem relates to the timeframe of its content.*

"Childproofing" evolved very little from the initial draft—I cleaned things up here and there, took out things that were just too unreachable to readers, but it was always in those four sections, addressing those four scenes and events. I usually don't do major overhauls. It either comes out largely right or embarrassingly wrong. So, I either struggle with some very difficult and essential fine-tuning, or I'll scrap it for parts. In "Childproofing," I wanted to examine the roots of neuroses that persist into adulthood, so I just naturally addressed different stages of my youth—from 10-16 or so, and so the tone of the narrator shifts accordingly to a more mature self-reflection that's more self-condemning.

Most of the poems in *Cleavemark* are that old—getting this book published was a long time coming. I'm so grateful that Shane McCrae took it for BOAAT.

Me too! I'm so glad everyone can read your wonderful poems now.

*Here's my second question: how literally do you hope readers will take the "I" in your poems (like in "Childproofing," "I can make a doily from a tourniquet / from the queen Charisma sheets" (20) or "*My mother kept us there / when we were little. / I turned out okay.*" (21))? The speaker in* Cleavemark *is quite*

consistent, and is, in my mind at least, consistently Stephanie. Which I hope is how you'll hope I read this narrator! How do you see the "I" evolving in current projects?

Readers may take the I as literally as they want in *Cleavemark*. It's certainly me, and while a poem or a story will always create a constructed I or constructed others, I'm aiming at a non-fictional construction, generally, I guess. There's only one poem where I really play with that representation, and that's in "Tender," where people's real names are changed and two characters get compressed into one. That poem was initially very difficult for folks to follow, and even more difficult for me to manage—it's unwieldy in length and scope—and ultimately it made more sense to shrug off an adherence to hard facts in favor of meaningful conveyance. I know at least one person recommended that approach to me, and I initially recoiled (because, facts!), but it allowed me to maneuver inside and outside of my head within the poem—what's happening externally, on the boat, in "Tender" and this ridiculous grief, prompting the mind to wander—all at a wedding, for heaven's sake. "Childproofing" meanders in the same way, and I suppose the reliability of the narrator throughout can and should be questioned, but in the same way you'd question anything I told you to your face or sent in an email—it's a retelling, and it's subjective, human, and considered.

My current work really plays with the idea of persona—the poems imagine the mind as a collection of governing bodies, and explore the internal bureaucracy of the psyche through a series of portraits of and monologues from various cabinet ministers, departments, and officials. So, in these, the Is and the Yous are all me, but, you know, different Mes, some much more dominant than others.

Your new work sounds fascinating! I'll be keeping my fingers crossed that I get to read some of these new poems soon! Thanks again for taking the time to talk with me—and give Prism Review *readers a little behind-the-scenes into your process—about* Cleavemark. *Here's to more poetry, in all of its forms.*