Posit(ion)ing the Poet:  
An Interview with Lynne Thompson

*Tabula Poetica* was pleased to host poet Lynne Thompson during the annual Poetry Reading Series. She visited Chapman University for a reading and a poetry talk on October 10, 2010.

**Scott Bloemker and Cheryl Steele:** Was there a specific moment when you realized you wanted to be a serious poet or was it a gradual process?

**Lynne Thompson:** It was both a gradual process and a specific moment. My sister-in-law reminds me that I’ve been "scribbling" since I was ten years old, always playing around with language through my teen years and early college. Once I went to law school, however, that creative urge was suppressed. Fourteen plus years into the practice of law, I realized how much I missed it and committed myself to becoming a so-called serious poet.

**Bloemker and Steele:** How does your legal training influence your verse or are these two separate spheres in your life?

**Thompson:** The legal arena really is a separate sphere of my life except insofar as the practice of law and the craft of poetry both involve language that hopefully moves the listener. However, I think the training has provided me with a certain discipline that’s been useful in addressing issues of craft.

**Bloemker and Steele:** Many female poets, especially late twentieth-century confessional poets, have had painful personal lives. Some of them use this personal material in their work, others don’t. Could you share your thoughts
about the intersection of poetry and autobiography, especially when the personal may be painful?

**Thompson:** Although I don’t think it need be the case, for me personally, the intersection of autobiography and poetry is unavoidable, although not always in a painful way. "Song for Two Immigrants," for example, was inspired by an old photograph of my parents and older brothers. The facts of one’s biography need not overwhelm the poetry, however; but it seems inevitable that some of it is going to leak through.

**Bloemker and Steele:** Was *Beg No Pardon* always the title of your book? How did you come to that title? How does it work in relation to the poems themselves?

**Thompson:** Ah, the secret is out! When I submitted the manuscript, the title was *The Open Hydrangea Box*. Perugia Press’ wonderful Director and Editor Susan Kan convinced me that it really didn’t make any sense within the context of the work. She and I considered several titles, but *Beg No Pardon* was the one that made the most sense, given that the poems ultimately describe the trajectory of a woman who has survived life’s hits and misses without apology. Also, we both liked the idea that the title was taken from what would be the last poem in the book, giving it a somewhat circular thrust: *to beg no pardon, then begin*.

**Bloemker and Steele:** How did you go about dividing *Beg No Pardon* into its three sections and deciding on the order of the poems?

**Thompson:** Ordering the poems in a manuscript remains, for me, one of the most difficult aspects of what some call po-biz. Lucille Clifton once said her poems seemed to know how they wanted to come together; mine definitely aren’t as smart! *The Open Hydrangea Box* was originally divided into four sections. By the time Perugia Press had accepted the
manuscript for publication, I had written new poems that I thought were stronger. With Susan’s help, we integrated that new work and completely re-ordered the manuscript and reduced the number of sections to three.

**Bloemker and Steele:** When writing "Purgatorio," did you set out to create a prose poem? Or did it evolve from an idea into the form?

**Thompson:** That’s an interesting question. "Purgatorio" always seemed to have more of a prose-like character, so even though I didn’t have much experience writing prose poems, "Purgatorio" insisted that she was that kind of lady. For a reason I have to yet to divine, the poems I write that seem to arise from a more dream-like or surreal state want to be prose poems.

**Bloemker and Steele:** You often use words from languages other than English. What effects are you trying to achieve through this technique?

**Thompson:** Well, again, I find a particular musicality in words and phrases from other languages. Recently, I’ve been reading a wonderful book, *Poetry in Person*, and, in his interview, Derek Walcott describes New York City as "multi-tongued, tonally diverse, tonally contradictory in ideas." As a native of Los Angeles, I think the same concepts apply. The exposure to the smorgasbord of languages that are part of L.A.’s fabric has had a great influence on my writing.

**Bloemker and Steele:** In "The Unworshipped Woman," you place spaces within some of the lines: "break her down" or "reek so." What is your intention by doing this? Are there other formal choices you make that are similar, or are made for very different reasons?

**Thompson:** It occurred to me writing this poem that I wanted to break—break apart—the more traditional form of couplets or quatrains and have the poem reflect on the page
what it was conveying language. In other words, to mirror a woman who had been damaged and had to fight to come through as a survivor. I had a similar but less-developed impulse in writing "A Found Art Between Razors and the Blues."

**Bloemker and Steele:** You frequently reference the Caribbean in your work. Who are some of the region’s poets that you find particularly compelling?

**Thompson:** This question is always difficult because you know you’re going to omit someone you shouldn’t. I’ve already mentioned Derek Walcott whose work I admire, but I’m also a follower of Edwidge Danticat, Lorna Goodison, Grace Nichols, Kwame Dawes, and Fred D’Aguiar. I also want to give a shout out to Marlon James for his amazing achievement in *The Book of Night Women*. I’ve been recommending that novel to everyone!

**Bloemker and Steele:** What are your thoughts on the state of poetry in America today? Do you think there exists a so-called American poetry, or various strains or schools of American poetry? Where do you see your own work in relation to such a category or categories?

**Thompson:** Your question reminds me of David St. John’s introduction to *American Hybrid*, which he co-edited with Cole Swenson; he says "We are at a time in our poetry when the notion of the `poetic school’ is an anachronism, an archaic critical artifact of times long gone by. The most compelling new poets today draw from a vast and wildly varied reservoir of resources."

A review of any number of literary journals and online zines are evidence that this view is accurate, and I find it no less true in my own work. The more information I can draw from cartography, cookbooks, an old glossary about the railroad (which provided the language for "Short Stack with Switch
Monkey"—[the] "world of slow train, hotshot, piggyback") or any other information I can get my hands on, the richer and more textured the work has the potential to become.

**Bloemker and Steele:** You have a compelling reading style (a video of your reading can be viewed on the Tabula Poetica website). How does your physical voice influence your writing? What poems in *Beg No Pardon* do you think read particularly well aloud? Do you have a favorite poem for readings?

**Thompson:** My favorite poems for readings are those for which I’ve received the most favorable feedback and I’ve worked on the delivery of those poems in particular: "How I Learned Where We Come From," "Seed of Mango, Seed of Maize," "Highway 61 Blues," and "Elegy for the Red Dress."

I don’t consider a poem to be finished until I’ve read it aloud several times as I’m revising. That process allows me to find the music or lack of music in a particular line. The music is an important component to my work.