

# FORWARD ARTS FOUNDATION IN CONVERSATION WITH ANDREW MCMILLAN

*FORWARD ARTS FOUNDATION: When did you start writing poetry and what drew you into it?*

**ANDREW MCMILLAN:** I first started writing poetry as a child, when I guess everyone first writes; and then I picked it up again, seriously, when I was about 16. I was lucky to grow up in a house with lots of poetry books, which helped - but when I was sixteen I found poets like Larkin and Gunn, and really admired the way they looked at the world. All the other jobs I wanted to do, actor, politician, all seemed to come back to wanting to do some sort of writing and to communicate with people.

*FAF: Please talk about your development as a writer of poetry. Tell us when you first felt you were a poet and how it went from there.*

**AM:** I don't know if you ever feel like a poet, certainly it's a process of continuous development- I started thinking it was maybe something I could do when I was about 17 or 18 and then went through a phase of reading lots and copying people, so I had a phase where I was trying to emulate Larkin, and then Thom Gunn, and then Ginsberg, and then I got pulled in by this great anthology called 'The Children of Albion' and started to try and write like a mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Underground British poet- I think I was trying lots of different voices on, appearing in lots of different costumes and I was lucky enough that I was able to do that in a series of three pamphlets which Red Squirrel Press published from 2009 to 2013- there was never a coherence in voice though, or in subject really. When I broke up with my first long-term boyfriend, and when Barnsley was feeling the worst of the 2008 recession, something in me switched- I went on a course tutored by Michael Symmons Roberts and Mimi Khalvati about the 'long poem'; something in what was happening to me on a personal level, and to Barnsley on an economic and social level, felt like it needed the attention of something longer- so the central poem of this collection was born. I realized in the writing of that, and in the poems which came after it, that I could write confessional, personal poetry that could resonate with other people, that might have an impact on them, and that's the strand I've been continuing to develop.

***FAF: What does being shortlisted for the Forward Prizes mean for you?***

**AM:** It feels thrilling, and humbling and slightly ridiculous that it could happen to me; I've admired and revered so many of the poets shortlisted for the first collection award over the last few years that it really means an awful lot to be considered in the same category as them; also considering how many great first collections came out this year.

***FAF: Please tell us about the creation of your shortlisted collection, from first words to final book. Does it mark a departure or change from your earlier work? Which poems in this collection are most important to you?***

**AM:** This is, like most first collections, a collage of different stages; the long poem in the middle of the collection took two years to write and was started after I came out of my first long term relationship and the country was just sinking into the recession of 2008. A lot of earlier work which I thought might one day end up in a first collection just didn't fit with this new direction; then I wrote 'urination'- the first line just came to me whilst I was stood on a train station (possibly Crewe), weighed down with bags, I decided it needed some sort of informal control in the language, in the syllables, I wanted to create something quite tight, quite muscular- that became the mode for much of the first section of the book, and a lot of the third section as well. All the poems are important, if that's not too glib a thing to say, but the ones that I feel really shaped the book are ones like 'Yoga', 'urination' 'Choke'; they put the book on its course of physical, tight, muscular poems which would look unemotionally at things which had happened, and attempt to come to some sort of redemption from them.

***FAF: Which poets do you admire most and what do you value in their work?***

**AM:** Thom Gunn is the obvious one, his work appears in a 'broken cento' in this collection, but he's also the first poet who I read who I thought represented something of my own experience, which I think is vital for anyone starting out to write. At first I just read him for the content but then the more I went back to him I began to admire his syllabics, his tight control of lines, and the way in which he saw the sexual encounter as something which could almost be Sublime. Larkin, whom I encountered around the same age, is someone who I admire because he can say very profound things about the state of the world, or civilization, and somehow you feel like he's earned them- he does the mundane very well, but the big stuff as well. Geoff Hattersley is someone who many more people should be reading; he has a way of spinning beauty and poignancy out of the everyday. The late John Riley, the wonderful Selima Hill and Americans like Doty, Kenneth Patchen and Allen Ginsberg are up there as well.

*FAF: What's next for you as a poet?*

**AM:** A celebratory glass of wine! And then keep working on poems, keep striving to get closer to the balance of plainness and poetry; I'm interested in ideas of 'icons' both in the broad sense of people or objects we might worship, but also the idea of 'gay icons', who is making these decisions about the women that (young) gay men should revere; if this collection was about the male gaze on the male body, I'm interested in exploring the idea of the gay male gaze on the female body.

*FAF: What advice would you give to anyone starting out in poetry today?*

**AM:** Read. Read all the time- read things you don't like as well; I think there's a massive anxiety in poetry that you have to like everything you read, all the time. Read things you don't like, think about why you don't like them, think what you might do differently to the poet. Never let anyone make you feel unworthy either, never let anyone act as though they've read more than you- they probably haven't, and they're probably lying, so just get on with your own work.