FORWARD ARTS FOUNDATION IN CONVERSATION WITH CIARAN CARSON

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

CIARAN CARSON: I have a fond recollection of my school poetry anthology, A Galaxy of Poems Old and New, which I first opened in September 1964. I was almost sixteen and it made a great impression on me. It was here that I first encountered the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Robert Frost, Dylan Thomas, Edward Thomas and T. S. Eliot., for example. Spurred by nostalgia, I bought a copy on the Internet a while back, and I still get a palpable frisson when I open it: apart from anything else, it’s a beautifully designed book, with little woodcuts (‘decorations by Edward Nolan’) interspersed between the poems. I was talking to Frank Ormsby recently and it appears he had an identical experience: the shock of the new, the feeling that you had been empowered and enabled by the language. I was encouraged in my appreciation of the poetry by our English teacher, Brother Hickey, but I didn’t write anything of substance until I went to university in 1967: Queen’s University Belfast, that is, where I found myself a member of the Group (as it was known) that included Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon, and Frank Ormsby, who edited the magazine The Honest Ulsterman, and who encouraged me by printing the first poems I sent him. So I was drawn to poetry by poetry and the people who wrote it and read it.

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.

CC: One always hesitates to call oneself a poet. Writing poetry is a work continually in progress. Nevertheless I was gratified when in 1972 Frank Ormsby published my pamphlet The Insular Celts. I was reared bilingually, Irish being the language of the home and English that of the outside world; and many of the poems in the pamphlet derived from my reading of Early Irish verse, whose prosody obsessed me at the time. Often it seems that the ghost of Irish resides in everything I do in English. Recently I contributed to an anthology of translations from the Early Irish, The Finest Music; and so my work seems to have come full circle. Over the years translation, whether from Dante, Baudelaire or Merriman, among others, seems to have engaged me; and certainly, translation encourages one to be more alert to the possibilities of one’s ‘own’ language, whatever that might be. I think it has been said that the act of writing poetry is an act of translation: taking things and putting them
into words, or rather being taken elsewhere by the language, seeing how words might lead to things other than what one thought one had in mind.

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

**CC:** Writing poetry is a lonely business in which the self has to face up to language and come to terms with it. To have that activity, with all its uncertainties and pitfalls, recognised by one’s peers is a great honour. The Forward Prizes in particular play an important role in the cultural life of these islands, giving exposure to work which would have gone generally unnoticed, and it’s great to have one’s book emerging into the world from the small back room where it was dreamed and written.

**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?**

**CC:** Unusually for a book of poetry, mine has an introduction, or ‘apropos’, called ‘L’autre: The Other’. Let me quote a little from it:

> This book consists of translations from the French poet Jean Follain, faced by ‘original’ poems inspired by those translations: spins or takes on them in other words. Translations of the translations as it were.

> I came upon Follain by chance. Some time ago, while working on translating some of the prose poems of Francis Ponge into verse, I discovered that Ponge was a friend of a Jean Follain, whom I’d never heard of until then. When I looked him up on the internet one of the first things I found was a version of the first poem in this present book, ‘Soulier renouée: Shoelace Tied’. Such a humble poem, yet how resonant, how mysterious. I was immediately taken by it, and proceeded to immerse myself in Follain’s work.

I had translated a good few of his poems when the notion of the ‘spin’ or counterpart occurred to me. Then I thought of doing a whole book in that manner. Perhaps this doubling has something to do with the format of my book *For All We Know* (2008), which is divided into two parts, the titles of the poems in Part Two repeating the titles of the poems in Part One, in the same order, each of the titles thus being revisited from a different point of view by the two lovers who speak the poems, as if they and the poems were translations of each other. And I wonder how far all this double-dealing comes from my bilingual background, as embodied in my name, Ciaran the Catholic Irish, Carson the Protestant Ulsterman. At any rate I relish the ambiguity.
From Elsewhere, then, is more of a structured book than a collection of relatively unrelated poems, and it’s difficult to say which of the poems are most important to me; but without the happenstance of that first poem about a boy tying his shoelace I never would have embarked on the journey.

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

**CC:** There are so many, each with their different attributes. Among others, and in no particular order: John Donne, George Herbert, Robert Frost, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Derek Mahon, Edward Thomas, Walt Whitman, Fanny Howe, Paul Muldoon, Emily Dickinson, Seamus Heaney, Elizabeth Bishop, John Clare, Michael Longley, Wallace Stevens...really, the list is endless, and I haven’t even mentioned poets from languages other than English.

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

**CC:** After finishing a book I never know where I am. Often I continue to write poems in the manner of the finished book, and almost always these turn out to be false starts, pastiches of the real thing, whatever that might be, for it’s hard to put your finger on the difference between the real and the fake. Having said that, I’m tempted to do something more with Follain. There’s about a hundred translations I didn’t include in From Elsewhere, and some of these keep nagging at me. Quite what I might do with them, I don’t know. Whatever does come next, I hope it’s a surprise.

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

**CC:** Reading is the counterpart of writing. Read as much and as widely as you can. Then write. Then read some more. Sometimes when I say this to aspiring writers, they say that they don’t want to read too much for fear it might influence their style. But of course reading should influence you. Poetry is meant to affect you, if not to infect you, to get into your bloodstream, and it is only by absorbing the voice of others that you find your own.