FORWARD ARTS FOUNDATION IN CONVERSATION WITH KAREN MCCARTHY WOOLF

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

KAREN MCCARTHY WOOLF: I liked Ted Hughes’ children’s poems very much when I was little --- I don’t have a single poem etched in my heart, but the whole natural canvas he drew upon made a lasting impression. Perhaps it’s because we lived near Hampstead Heath and I loved the sense of (comparative) wilderness you could experience there. Hughes spoke to that side of me very strongly. As a teenager I loved Pope: I remember reading The Rape of the Lock at school and being very excited to learn the term ‘bathos’! Then I discovered The Last Poets. If I wrote poems at that time, which I did, I’m thankful not to remember them. My mum could write rhyming couplets standing on her head, and she always encouraged my writing. When I was 14 she was a single parent studying English Literature at North London Poly, and we used to write our English essays together round the kitchen table. But what really drew me back to poetry as an adult was actually the Forward Prize 1995. I was in the Kilburn Bookshop, when I picked up the anthology and read Kwame Dawes’ poem ‘Progeny of Air’ about an industrial salmon fishery in Canada. I was profoundly moved by that poem (which was the title poem from his book that won Best Collection) and its approach to its subject matter, where the personal, political and natural worlds coalesce. These thematic co-ordinates are still a strong influence that carries through to my work today. A few weeks later I saw that Kwame was running a poetry workshop ‘Afro Style School’ for an organization called Spread the Word --- and I was determined to be on it. As it turned out, it was on this course that I met many of the poets and writers who are part of my poetry network today and whose work collectively forms part of a wider diasporic and inclusive canon.

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.

KMW: I think that’s a hard question to answer. I wrote poems for a long time without ever feeling I could describe myself as ‘a poet’: I was always doing something else to earn my living and I wasn’t published. Although there are those who question whether we can teach
‘creative writing’ or poetry, I have always attended and enjoyed courses that focus on craft and technique. I wouldn’t expect to learn music simply by listening to it. Going on my first residential course at the Arvon Foundation was a crucial moment: deciding to invest money, and more significantly, time into my work was a major staging post, as was the experience of learning from my peers alongside authors whose writing and teaching I respected. Publishing a pamphlet was also important, both in terms of feeling that my work might be available to readers, and in terms of having to hone the poems to a point where they were suitable for publication. I also started blogging at this time and included photographs in that chapbook. I’ve always believed that every art form has the capacity to communicate with others – visual arts, whether film, photography, sculpture, installation or painting are all subject to similar aesthetic and cultural influences. Nothing exists in isolation. For me, every platform in which poetry might be presented is an extension of form – and that’s part of the appeal. I started my career as an editor, then went on to university – so it was a bit back to front in that regard. However, what that experience gave me was an understanding that writing of all kinds is an iterative process. Editing is often far more holistic than making a few tweaks: you might need to rethink things in ways you are yet to imagine. For many years I have studied under the poet Mimi Khalvati, and she has been instrumental in helping me to be a better editor of my own work – which is quite different to editing other people’s writing, as it requires you to interrogate your process and approach, not just the words that appear on the page. I also worked in radio for a short time, and it’s a medium I love – for its sonic qualities, its intimacy and its simplicity – all linguistic elements that combine very effectively in poetry too.

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

KMW: It is exciting to feel acknowledged by one’s peers and to think that the prize can bring the work to the attention of a wider audience. An Aviary of Small Birds is a very personal book for me, in that it exists not only as a body of work but also as a memorial to my son Otto. I’ve had many people come up to me at readings who have been through similar experiences, and it is always humbling to discover that the poems connect to other people’s stories and grief. That is when I feel the poems are doing their work in the world.

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?

KMW: It’s funny, but every time I hear the old adage ‘writing a book is like giving birth’ I think to myself, ‘no, it’s not, it’s nothing like that’. Writing a book is something you can control and although once it’s finished you can’t influence what people think when they read it, I always find that simile woefully inadequate. Writing a book, and particularly a first
book, is I think an act of self-identity more than anything else; where you discover who you are and what you stand for as a writer. In 2008 I was selected for The Complete Works – a nationwide mentoring scheme that aims to increase cultural diversity in poetry publishing. Having the opportunity to work in-depth with a mentor of my choosing (Michael Symmons Roberts) was a dream scenario and one I shall always treasure. On 1 January 2009 my grandfather died, followed by my mother-in-law later in the spring and then I lost our son in a full-term stillbirth that August. I had been working on a commission right up to the end of the pregnancy called Open Notebooks, an online project exploring the creative process, so I was very prolific at the time. I’d tried to write about being pregnant, about my fears as to how motherhood might impact on my professional life, but with little success. So when I got home from the hospital, I had my notebook by my bed, and I wrote into it almost instantly – those early drafts were raw, but I’m so glad I gave myself permission to write them, otherwise I might never have been able to face it. Although I had been working steadily on a collection populated by many other poems, I reached a point where, as my mentor suggested, the poems I was writing that responded to this maternal loss would bring the balance of the collection as a whole into question. Deciding to focus exclusively on that particular event felt like the right thing to do, although we also discussed the risk, that people might pigeonhole me, but it was one I was willing to take. The poems demanded their place and I wanted to make space for them. In the end it was an easy choice--- not just because it was beneficial to the structure as a whole, but also because those poems were, to put it bluntly, better.

I think the reason why they were stronger was twofold: having had a year in which to experiment under the guidance of a mentor gave me the technical capacity to cope with an intensely visceral experience. But it was also because I was a hundred per cent committed to making them as accurate and truthful as I could – they meant so much to me on many different levels, not least as a means by which the creative act can bring about its own healing and transformations. I was reading Czeslaw Milosz, Pablo Neruda, Pascale Petit, Toi Derricote, Carolyn Forché amongst others, and I realised that there are many different forms of literary testimony and witness.

The title poem is emblematic, I think, of my love for the lyric, and it is influenced by and in awe of the links between music and nature – as well as Neruda’s small bird that flies in to it, the octobrine. Then there are prose poems like Of August, where I wanted to push against what our definition of a poem might be. If you take away the image as your principal semantic device, what’s left? It’s being able to play with these kind of ideas that keep me locked in to poetry as a form. I think when you go through a traumatic experience it tests one’s faith – whether spiritual, philosophical or otherwise – and I think that some of the tensions I enjoyed exploring in the work relate to that – even in death there is beauty, humanity and awe.
FAF: Which poets do you admire most and what do you value in their work?

KMW: Louise Glück will always be a stand out poet for me. I admire the simultaneous coexistence of complexity and simplicity in her work hugely. She uses narrative structure and syntax in a way that allows her language to be spare – and then when she does deploy a metaphor or a simile its power is amplified. There’s a mystery to her work too, but not an opacity. I also like Selima Hill very much – you wouldn’t think of her as a poet who is particularly similar to Glück, but actually she’s equally intense about syntax and how it interacts with the structure of a collection as an extended and interconnected body of work. She’s also very funny, in a bleak, razor-sharp manner, that reminds us of how flawed we all are in our own very particular ways. Charles Simic has always intrigued and mesmerized me; his poems are like expressionist renditions of imaginary folk tales, and he understands the power of brevity. Moniza Alvi is another poet whose register is not dissimilar to Simic, and she can do a lot in a small space with a very light touch. Bernardine Evaristo’s novel in verse The Emperor’s Babe is delicious in its richly evocative language that manages to do some serious work in terms of reconfiguring Britain’s multicultural history while also being fantastically irreverent. Malika Booker is a British Caribbean poet who is on a similar mission – her monologue and person poems in particular give voice to those who might not otherwise be heard in a manner that pushes emotion to the fore. Hers is not a poetry of polite restraint – and I love it for that. Of recent collections, Kei Miller’s ‘The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion’ appealed to me greatly – not least for its insistence that there is a need for a new kind of political and poetic rhetoric. Liz Berry is also a poet who I find delightful, for her engagement with language, dialect and our sense of self and how that maps to a very particular place.

FAF: What’s next for you as a poet?

KMW: I’m currently at Royal Holloway doing a PhD with Jo Shapcott looking at new ways of writing about nature in the face of climate change and how we integrate the sacred into a contemporary aesthetic. In An Aviary of Small Birds I was concerned with how I might make a very intimate experience universal. In my next book I’m exploring how to take on big, macropolitical issues and render them somehow personally affecting. Imagine what Brecht might have written about the environment if he were alive today! I’m interested in how a poetry of protest can also be infused with awe.

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

KMW: Read and write as much and as widely as you can. Don’t be afraid to make mistakes, to experiment. To cut, slash and burn when you edit (the original will always be there – in
another saved Word document!). And be true to yourself. If workshops work for you, do workshops. If you’d rather write while walking the Yorkshire moors then go for it! If you feel isolated, remember, that there are a lot of online communities available now. The Poetry Society has stanza groups all across the country, and there are often literature groups that meet in local libraries. Going out to hear poetry is a great way of meeting other poets and also keeping up with what’s being written. Reading poems in translation is a great way of getting a sense of what’s happening beyond the UK – check out Modern Poetry in Translation or the Poetry Library online portal.