

FORWARD ARTS FOUNDATION IN CONVERSATION WITH MATTHEW SIEGEL

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

MATTHEW SIEGEL: I started writing poetry when I was fourteen years old, in a writers' workshop in my school. I had an incredibly supportive teacher who would send our poems out to all the teen poetry magazines. One morning I found a copy of a magazine on my desk with one of my poems in it. Up until that point I hadn't excelled at very much academically or athletically, but I knew I loved poetry and that small publication really meant something to me.

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.

MS: As a teenager writing poetry, having a workshop space where I could interact with a great teacher and other young writers was an incredible privilege. Seeing the work of my peers motivated and shaped me in the sense that it made it all seem possible and accessible. I would say by the time I was sixteen years old I knew I loved writing poetry more than anything else in my life and that I would do whatever it took to keep it at the center. I decided I would study writing in university and become a teacher myself one day. I attached myself to song lyrics (I was not reading seriously yet). I dyed my hair blue and joined a punk band. I signed up for workshop each year, even attending the freshman class when I was a senior to help them with their work. When I reached university I realized I would have to start reading seriously if I wanted to write seriously and so I threw myself into books. I also knew I wanted to hang around other poets and did everything I could to immerse myself in poetry itself. I also knew by the time I was 19 or 20 that if I wanted this I was going to have to not only want it more than anyone else, but also work harder. I read the entire *Poet's Market* and sent my work everywhere. I papered my walls with rejection slips and got in deeper. I started reading the magazines like my dad reads the sports page. I got involved with poetry slam. I memorized poems. I would stay up all night with friends, smoking, drinking wine, and reading to one another. I would also stay up all night alone writing into the morning, my eyes and mouth all dried up then knock out through the day

only to wake up and ask my roommate what he was working on. These were magical years, despite the state of my health, which I was also writing about plenty (and which helped give my suffering some semblance of meaning). I always made the excuse that my need for healthcare made me rush into grad school, but the truth was that I knew I would get my MFA before I was even diagnosed. I wanted immersion, I wanted the whole thing: the mentors, the peers, the books, the *knowledge* that could only be achieved through dedicated study. I got into the program I wanted and spent three years learning not only how to be a writer-in-the-world but also a teacher of writing, which had a profound effect on the way I spoke about literature, which, of course, in turn affected how writing sat in my body.

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

MS: Finding out that I am being shortlisted for the Forward Prizes made my stomach do about a hundred flips. You always feel like you're alone in this work. I talk with my students about this all the time when they ask me questions about who might read them, when they want to know my thoughts on audience. All I can say is that writing poetry keeps us alive, helps us see the world, and what separates us from the rest is that we can't not do it. It clarifies, in some way, our existence. It is difficult to tell a student that prizes, books, attention, ultimately won't make them *happy*. Writing itself makes us happy, making meaning, connecting with others. Everything else we have to take with humility because one day we are going to die and what will matter most won't be the things we have won but the truths we have told and silences we have broken. What this honor means to me is that several highly intelligent and accomplished artists believe that my book has said something true. To have that is the kind of support that makes the next work possible, that helps to silence some of the lesser questions we sometimes find ourselves with. The fact of this prize being in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland means that my work could reach an audience that before was much less accessible, which also means a great deal to me.

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?

MS: There are two or three poems in *Blood Work* are from my last year of university (2005-2006) when I was 21 years old. I did not think of myself as necessarily writing a book at this point, just writing poems I thought that I could someday publish in magazines. I started thinking about the book in graduate school, which was temporarily paralyzing. I hated the idea of making a product, of making a *thing*. I liked to think of the book at that point as an abstract. I knew my work wasn't ready but I put a manuscript together and graduated.

When I moved out to California I chopped it down from 50 to 19 pages and worked my way back up over the next four and a half years. By April of 2014 it was totally done. The whole process from oldest poem to when it was done was about eight years. I don't know if I can say which are most important to me. They are all important in different ways. I suppose I know which are particularly *less* important, but that is not as productive to talk about. I probably think of the one I worked longest on, "The Electric Body", which I thought might be a book-length poem, and the poem I worked least on "Matthew you're leaving again so soon" which came to me like a bolt of lightening through my body as I was leaving the house. I heard my mother speak it to me in my head and it was the only time that has ever happened to me.

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

MS: The poets I most admire are Walt Whitman and Rainer Maria Rilke. There is something very real about their work. It makes me think about the larger things poems can do. I believe these writers got as close as anyone ever can to talking to "All That Is And All That Will Be", the Creator, the Earth — but what they were talking to most was their own spirit which is the spirit of all of all people. Maybe I'm oversimplifying them. Maybe. But they have taught me the meaning of courage in writing, the meaning of truth. I think about them both all the time, perhaps every day. When Whitman writes "Be it as if I were with you. (Be not too certain but I am now with you.)" I do believe he is talking to me personally. And to you.

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

MS: What's next is a hard question, one that's hard to talk about without actual insight to what my life is like, but I'll try. At the moment, I'm just scribbling things down here and there, not really editing or typing much. I'd like to get into a space where I'm writing and finishing poems I like, but I'm not putting any pressure on myself. I'm very slowly writing a semi-autobiographical novel about a sick teenager.

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

MS: To a person starting out in poetry today, I would say that it is very important to develop a healthy relationship to this important work. What that means is both treating yourself well along with your writing. It means being a sympathetic reader to anything you look at, regardless of what anyone might say. Find what you love to read and what gets you excited about writing poetry. This I cannot emphasize enough. This is where everything comes from. You have to be an active, hungry reader and you have to be willing to not look for reasons to dismiss work too quickly. Be ruthless only with your own truth. Know when

you're saying something that isn't true. Know that truth is difficult and that this is not delicate work, despite the gentleness we must have to guide ourselves into our most unlit places. Our job is to break silences, to say what is felt. To quote Rilke: "describe your sorrows and desires, passing thoughts and the belief in some sort of beauty—describe all these with loving, quiet, humble sincerity" and I would emphasize those last four words. Trust your teachers but know that sometimes you must dismantle them. To quote Whitman: "He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher". Read Whitman. Read Rilke. Read the great dead and the less-great living. Read and be generous to others and gentle with those who will never understand. Be relentless. Live your life. Be kind. That's all we can do for one another.