

FORWARD ARTS FOUNDATION IN CONVERSATION WITH MONA ARSHI

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

MONA ARSHI: I was a relatively late starter. I started off in law and trained as a Human Rights lawyer.

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.*

MA: I don't think I can identify a Eureka moment when I suddenly felt like a poet. I have always read poetry and felt connected with it. When I feel like I am inside a poem and there is an energy of writing it, I suppose I feel like a poet... See below.

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

MA: It's huge - I felt very emotional when I found out. Over the years I've attended the ceremonies, and read the anthologies. There was always something of a thrill about opening a new anthology which seems to take the pulse of contemporary poetry and discovering a new voices alongside more established poets at the height of their powers.

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?*

MA: I have been writing the book, my debut collection for six years. I think the work is very varied. I love form so there's a Terza-Rima, and Ghazals and even a Ballad. But I also love the prose poem and like to play with language. At the heart of the book are several poems that address the death of my younger brother, who died three years ago. I feel that rather unfairly early in my poetic career I was confronted with asking myself the question how do you grieve in writing? Writing the poems around the death of my brother, observing the anguish of a family trying to come to terms and survive was a difficult task, but one I felt I had to negotiate especially if you believe that one of the functions of poetry is to make the unbearable, bearable.

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

MA: I love Sylvia Plath and read her in my twenties, but she is too much of a pull for me and I daren't read her at the moment, but I am sure that will change. I have such an eclectic mix of poets I love such as Sujata Bhatt, Medbh McGuckian, Heaney, Ghazals by Ghalib, Agha Shahid Ali and Mimi Khalvati.

There are certain poets I always go to for poetic nourishment, Mimi Khalvati, Charles Simic, Jorie Graham and Elisabeth Bishop.

FAF: *What kind of poetry excites you? How do you begin a poem?*

MA: I like the idea 'attentive daydreaming'. I don't think I am the kind of poet that approaches an idea or subject matter directly. Instead I prefer the oblique glance-if subject matter was a house I prefer to go around the back with a step ladder to the attic window, not through the front door...When I am thinking of writing a poem I never really have a handle on what it's going to be like-its trajectory. If I did it would be really depressing. Very often a word/an image/a memory, but something concrete ignites something and sometimes I will have a line that drops in and I will quickly write on my notebook, phone or very often the back of my hand. Then I try to forget about it. When I think about it more closely it's the poetry of avoidance I write. I don't wish to approach subject matter head on, I cant write like that. Instead a poem for me is like a creature that you stalk you know that there is something at the corner of your eye that needs your attention but you have to be careful not to frighten it away with sudden jerky movements, you whisper your way around it. At some point you will have captured the contours of something, and it's a complete mystery what you'll find, initially it's a bit like a baggy cloud and then the real work begins. This is the part of the joy of witting a poem discovering it.

FAF: *What is the most difficult part of writing?*

MA: Once you have got the threshold of the poem, what is most difficult is to keep yourself the poet, out of the poem. I mean not imposing your will on the poem, I think that's the most important piece of advice I would give to a new poet, once the impulse to write has set in to give the poem time to tell you what it wants to be-listen to the poem.

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

MA: I am trying to write something around myths. Indian myths but very female centered.

I am not putting any pressure on myself, I have been writing fairly intensively for over five years.

FAF: Any thing else?

MA: Yes, it really annoys me when you hear that poetry can only be appreciated by certain people and that poets that's are overly sensitive and that enables them to become poets. It's simply not true. Writers and poets in particular are pathologically inquisitive about the physical world around them and poetry is simply the world we live in, translated into language.

I love Emily Dickinson's response when she was asked what poetry was; 'If I feel that physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know its poetry-What other way is there?'

I know what she means entirely, I like my poetry served to me the temperature of blood. A good poem will get under your skin, and change you just a little when you read it.

If there is a poem you really love, learn it by heart (which is different from committing it to memory) put it in your body, let it become your talisman.