



JENNY DONNISON

The Sentinel Literary Quarterly

Monday Writer

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About Jenny Donnison

Jenny Donnison completed an MA in English Literature and Creative Writing at Sheffield University (2012). A retired psychologist she is now studying for a PhD, a creative exploration of the representation of animals in contemporary poetry. Her poems have appeared in several journals and anthologies including *Now Then*, *Route 57*, *The Sheffield Anthology*, *Zoomorphic*, *Riggwelter Press*, *Cicatrice*, *Sentinel Literary Quarterly* and *Bridgwatcher & Other Poems* (SPM Publications). In July 2011 Donnison won the 1st & 3rd prizes in the Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition.

The Monday Writer Interview

Jenny Donnison

in Conversation with **Nnorom Azuonye**



I have been an admirer of your work to which I was introduced when you won the Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition in July 2011. How did you get into poetry writing?

‘Being a poet’ is still something to which I aspire. In my sixties I am further along that path than I ever thought I would be, yet there is still some way to go! But another answer to that question might be that I have always been a poet or a writer, insofar as I started writing creatively early in childhood. Looking back, I took much solace from the imaginary worlds that stories provide, and it was a natural next step to create my own. English was my favourite subject at school and my teacher suggested I might consider writing as a career. However, I also liked science, and in the end chose science A levels. I regard science and poetry as complementary spheres with much in common. For example, both use metaphor, both interrogate accepted truths, and both rely on precision and attention to detail. According to Ruth Padel, ‘vague poetry is bad poetry’, and the same applies to science.

Personally, I vote for accessible poetry, but some people may disagree with vague poetry being bad poetry. Would you disagree that a bit of obscurantism in poetry can lead to a more rigorous study of poems?

This is a fascinating question. For me, there is a difference between obscurantism, and complexity or difficulty, even opacity. As I understand it, obscurantism intentionally places barriers in the way of something becoming known, implying (deliberate) vagueness. I am not a fan of poems that seem to be obscure for obscurity’s sake – though this might simply mean I haven’t spent enough time with them! That said, a good poem draws you back repeatedly because of the beauty of the language and its emotional impact. You return even if it is difficult and complex, for the world is full of complexity and it is important not to flinch from that, in poetry as in life. Successful poems are multi-layered and freighted with ambiguity, raising questions which it is not the poet’s job to answer. As Jeremy Noel-Tod states, poetry ‘bends the bars of the prose cage’, for example, defamiliarising taken-for-granted things so they are seen afresh. I think encountering great poetry can be like spending time with a Rothko painting; the subtle complexities of layered paint are gradually disclosed so that the painting

becomes a portal. Blake summed it up when he wrote of seeing ‘the world in a grain of sand’. This is what a successful poem can accomplish – a world of meaning emerging from finely observed detail.

What do you write about?

I have always been driven by curiosity about the world and a fascination with the behaviour of human – and nonhuman – animals. I think this underpins my interest in literature, as well as leading to my career in clinical psychology.

Since beginning my PhD I have mostly written poems about animals, nature, and the environmental crisis, specifically the twin threats of climate chaos and the loss of wildlife and habitats. Since writing these poems I have discovered that there is great wisdom in Emily Dickinson’s poem ‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant’. As she wrote ‘The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind —’ I am not sure that poetry can change the world but I believe that an effective, emotionally engaging poem can stay with you, altering your perspective, and perhaps leading to making a change. A work to which I often turn for solace and inspiration is Wendell Berry’s beautiful poem ‘The Peace of Wild Things’. This poem seems to have particular resonance at the moment, a time of uncertainty and anxiety about what the future might hold. It is also apposite given how many of us have connected with nature during lockdown. In Berry’s words:

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. [...]

So, what are the triggers of inspiration and ideas for your poems?

Ideas for poems can spring from almost anything – a stray thought, a newspaper article, a work of art, an experience, or from a photograph or memory. I have learned that to write poems I have to be in a receptive state of mind characterised by a sort of open attention. In this state, the world is glimpsed holistically and the subconscious, dreaming mind is not quashed by everyday demands. This might occur when I am out walking in nature, or when I am reading the work of other poets. Sometimes it just happens out of the blue.

From idea to the finished work, what is your creative process like?

I initially capture something quite raw and unformed on paper but then comes the hard work of editing and re-drafting. I find giving and receiving feedback enormously helpful, and I am fortunate to belong to three poetry groups in Sheffield, though COVID-19 has put paid, for now, to meeting in person. I am

particularly interested in poetic form and how form can enhance the impact of a poem. I enjoy experimenting – sometimes a sonnet or sestina, at other times free verse or prose poetry. Sometimes I write a poem quite rapidly, at other times an idea lies dormant for weeks or months. For example, I saw Joseph Wright of Derby's painting 'An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump' and wanted to write a poem about the suffering, air-starved bird. It was only after having severe pneumonia in 2016 that I understood, viscerally, what it meant to be unable to breathe and while I was recovering in hospital it occurred to me that the cage-like constraints of a sestina might work to enact the bird's experience – and my own. The poem was eventually written almost a year after the initial idea.

I like to have a theme or focus in my writing. Before starting my PhD I began a series of poems loosely based around mortality, and prior to that my focus was on the sea and shore. While I try not to be too constrained by whatever the current theme is, the process of having a focus is helpful to me because it facilitates a depth of research that probably wouldn't occur otherwise. Having a theme means that I pay attention to what is going on around me in a way that is framed by my subject and my world becomes a richer place for that.

What challenges have spurred you on or dampened your career?

During my twenties I carried on writing, albeit sporadically. Then, during my final year of clinical psychology training I developed a rare neurological illness, spasmodic torticollis, a form of dystonia which was probably triggered by a whiplash-type injury. As a result of the condition I have painful spasms in my neck which are partially controlled with Botox treatment. Having this chronic problem has been a significant challenge since 1986. But although it is ever-present (though fortunately neither life-threatening nor progressive) I have tried not to let it dominate my life – I live with it and around it, trying to manage it so that, as far as possible, it doesn't stop me from doing what I want to do. Having said that, I found it difficult to make time to write once I had the condition, as well as a demanding career and a family. While I didn't forget about writing, I wanted to focus on other things.

Although I didn't write creatively during my thirties and early forties, this changed when I had to take a leave of absence from work due to my dystonia. Having to take sick leave was frustrating but I decided to use the time positively. The novel I wrote during those months was a form of therapy for me – it was completely absorbing and distracting and by the time I was able to return to work I had a manuscript. It probably goes without saying that my first attempt after all those years wasn't up to much, but I enjoyed it and was determined to keep up some form of writing. Trying to write another novel was not practical once I returned to work, but I started to write poetry. Ideas began to bubble up as they

once had; often when I was out walking a phrase or observation would come to mind and, like the grit in an oyster, sometimes this was the kernel around which a poem would coalesce. Most of my poems were far from pearls but re-connecting with writing made me want to learn more so I enrolled in evening classes in at Sheffield University which, after two years, led to a Certificate in Creative Writing. I learned so much on this course about poetry, short stories, travel writing and even writing scripts. I overcame my nerves about performing in public and, perhaps the most important lesson of all, I learned that if I wanted to write contemporary poetry, I had to read it! The course introduced me to many wonderful poets including Elizabeth Bishop whose work continues to inspire me.

After the Certificate course I was accepted onto the University of Sheffield's Creative Writing MA. I studied part-time and graduated from the course in 2012 after I had retired from my NHS job. I had my first poem published while on the MA and this gave me the confidence to enter some competitions. I was delighted to win first and third places in the July 2011 Sentinel Literary Quarterly poetry competition and since then I have had my work published in *Now Then*, *Route 57*, *The Sheffield Anthology*, *Zoomorphic*, *Riggwelter*, *Cicatrice* and elsewhere.

Who are your literary heroes and influences?

Where to begin?! I have always been an avid and eclectic reader of fiction, non-fiction and, latterly, poetry. My earliest influences at school were Dylan Thomas and Ted Hughes and I still return to these poets. I also loved John Steinbeck as a teenager, as well as being a fan of science fiction. From time to time I revisit the Brontës, Thomas Hardy, Wilkie Collins, George Elliot, Jane Austen and other classic authors, as well as reading a range of contemporary literary fiction. I recently read Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* which was profoundly moving and beautifully written, and I am currently reading Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals In That Country*, an innovative fictional exploration of animal talk.

Regarding poetry, I would say my influences include Elizabeth Bishop, Alice Oswald, Les Murray, John Burnside, Michael Symmons Roberts, Seamus Heaney, Ágnes Lehoczky, Simon Armitage and Vahni Capildeo, but there are always new poets to discover. I also love performance poetry including the work of Linton Kwesi Johnson, Kate Tempest, Benjamin Zephaniah and John Cooper Clarke. Probably my favourite poetry performance is Maya Angelou's 'Still I Rise'. I believe poetry should be as mesmerising on stage as it is on the page, and these poets and others have much to teach any poet who wishes to perform their work.

What are you working on at the moment?

I am currently undertaking a PhD which explores how animals are represented in contemporary poetry. The project comprises a thesis and a collection of my own poems, and is integrative, drawing on science, for example the fields of ethology, biology, and comparative psychology, as well as literature.

Do you have an idea when your collection will be published?

I'm not sure at the moment. A key outcome of my PhD is to have a book length collection and I'm on track with that. My plan is to complete the doctorate, hopefully in the next few months, and after that I will focus on publication.

Thank you, Jenny, for your time today.

Thank you for inviting me!

The pollinators of Maoxian, Sichuān Province, China

*When the ruler wants a plank, his ministers cut down a tree,
When the ruler wants a fish, his ministers dry up a valley.*
Huainanzi 淮南子 (second century BC).¹

The pear and apple orchards blossom.
Diligent pollinators move

among the slender boughs,
their fine brushes dipped in harvested pollen

from earlier blooms, a mix of pistils, stamens,
dusty yellow grains.

Delicately they stroke each flower,
the process painstaking, an art

that human hands now master,
thousands labouring so trees may bear fruit.

Spring orchards are silent. Breezes shiver branches
but air no longer

hums and buzzes. Gone the whirr of wings;
butterflies, bees, all the insects

eradicated, a triumph of efficiency.
Cameras capture

happy farmers perched in trees in drifts of flowers.
Here a smiling girl

her national dress carnelian red,
richly embroidered, her cap

a shade of azure. Her timeless pose implies
it was always this way.

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¹ My thanks to Professor Roel Sterckx of Cambridge University for supplying this quote.

Anax imperator

wing slivers of condensed air veined glass
chitinous distillate of aeons blue against dark green
acid green against copper depths of pool

winged viper Devil's coach-horse or darning needle
lit taper vivid against lichenous fountain
water-patter surface reforms without trace

she pays you no heed
will not stitch your eyes lips shut
nor weigh your soul's worth

helmet eyes mantle the head
drink the light wide bowl of visible world
the spectrum stretches into vibrant multiplicities

wings are elongated tears strengthened by fine trceries
each slight weight senses vibration of birdsong
earth's faint tremors transmitted element to element

dart soar reverse hover stall
pause time
all else blurs

dragonfly cleaves the air
defying awareness of air's thickness
defining its substance

penetrate loop back leave traceless threads

flight

a joy
a patterning
making
remaking
meaning

To be a heron

hone the art of stillness,
balance on limb-stem in green shallows,

at the margins of minnowed rivers,
silvered estuaries, stickleback streams.

Stand in timeless pose on stone
or on whalebone struts of abandoned boats,

a ghost the colour of cut flint
clouded in sun-sparked *Ephemera*.

Shade-cloak water with outspread wings.
Reprise primeval origins in kink-necked flight.

Stir silt with splayed feet
panning for invertebrate glints.

Focus gold and sloe eyes
on dart and glide in trailing weed

and having by heart the laws of refraction,
pierce surface deception with sabre beak.

Cave dance

Leopards shrug their spots.
Turtles unshell.
Lizards peel cool skins.

Pelts pile up –
mink, fox, ermine, ocelot.
A python unslithers her scales.

Lions shed rough gold coats,
sheep unfleece,
cattle shake free from honey-coloured hide.

Here come parakeets in verdant green,
toucan, puffin, peacock, wren. An Arctic tern
scimitar sleek in black and white.

A blizzard of rainbow feathers
falls, interleaved with drab.
Dragonflies lose their filigree wings.

Polar bears slough fur which folds
in heaps like soft-spun glass.
Horses clatter stone,

release from grey, roan, chestnut, black.
Enamel-bright casings in shimmering drifts.
Motes of butterfly colours cloud the air.

A blur of souls carousels.
I creep inside, unskin,
join the dance.

‘Three Boys and a Pigeon’, 1974, Daniel Meadows

Framed by the grey of low-rise flats,
a bird cupped in the nest of your hands.
Who taught you to hold it safe and still,
love its graceful wing and racing heart?

You gently cradle its apple-round breast
two fingers secure the scaly feet
fan-tail circled by index and thumb
poised on the cusp of the wild.

Released an odyssey away,
snow of feathers softly falls
as birds lift in a flurry of flight
heading for the home loft.

Your steady gaze into the lens
a way of life light in your palms.

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