

NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS

Interview with Kathryn Maris by Simon Collings

Kathryn Maris, a poet from New York who has lived in London since 1999, is the author of *God Loves You* (Seren, 2013) and *The Book of Jobs* (Four Way Books, 2006). Her poems have appeared in *Granta*, *Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry London*, *Slate*, *Poetry*, *The Spectator* and *The Financial Times*, as well as in many anthologies, including *Best British Poetry* and *The Pushcart Prize Anthology*. She teaches at the Poetry School in London.

Kathryn, you're an American poet living in London, someone influenced by both US and British poetry traditions. We'll talk about the two cultures and the trends you observe in contemporary poetry, but let's start with your early influences. You grew up in New York and attended school there. Who first got you interested in writing poetry?

I started writing from a very early age without many models except Dr Seuss and children's poetry. But the first poem I remember making an impact on me was the first of Eliot's 'Preludes' which I read in a school textbook when I was aged 13. I went to the library and found there were more preludes and more poems. I didn't understand a lot of what I read but I wanted to reproduce that kind of music, and that capacity to move the reader. I still feel very moved by the 'Preludes.'

I had stellar English teachers who taught me poetry at Friends Academy, a Quaker school on Long Island, but the first actual poet I studied with was W. N. Herbert at a summer programme in Oxford for American teenagers. I idolised Bill and returned to Long Island imitating his mannerisms minus the Scottish accent. I absentmindedly used his photo for a bookmark once and returned the book to the school library with his photo still inside. I was mortified when my English teacher, Mr Brogan, worked out it was me who last checked out that library book, and handed me back the photo with an impish twinkle.

The following summer I took a class with Mary Ruefle, then a professor at Bennington College who taught poetry to high school students in the summers. In addition to introducing me to Rilke and Gerard Manley Hopkins, she was refreshingly direct that I was writing some pretty bad poems, including a Stephen Crane imitation that had won me \$300 in a dodgy vanity poetry competition.

So an early if unconventional British influence in Bill Herbert. I hadn't expected that. Later you studied with Kenneth Koch, one of the 'New York School' of poets. What did you learn from Koch?

I studied with Kenneth Koch at Columbia University. I learned everything from Koch. To whatever extent I idolised my former teachers, I idolised him still more: I went to every reading and talk he did like a crazed groupie, even for years after I graduated, until I moved to London.

The poets I looked at with him were Whitman, Dickinson, Hopkins, Rimbaud, Yeats, Stein, Rilke, Stevens, Apollinaire, Williams, Lawrence, Pound, Moore, Eliot (though I don't think Koch was a fan), Mayakowsky, Lorca, Auden, O'Hara and Ashbery.

Do you know his famous poem 'Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams'?

Yes, it's very clever, and funny.

He made us to do that kind of thing for homework all the time. Each time we studied a new poet, he required us to write an imitation. He'd read the best imitations out loud. Marianne Moore was the only poet I really managed to crack, and I nearly fainted when he read out my Moore imitation. Of my Apollinaire-inspired love caligramme, he said, 'That's not very passionate!'

I loved that he was urban, eccentric, mischievous, spacey and funny. He had a peculiar combination of guilelessness, irreverence and irony; one finds that combination in his poems too.

My favourite memory of him was when a student pointed out that a bird had made a nest on top of the chalk board in his lecture room. I guess a window was open, and – well – it was Manhattan, and we were far from Central Park. Not many places around to build nests. Koch, who was probably the opposite of a nature poet, said, 'What should we do? Help! Somebody call the biology department!' We laughed so hard we couldn't breathe. I still laugh to think of it.

One very good piece of advice he gave was 'If you feel you don't understand a poem, read everything by that poet.'

I don't hear much of an echo of Koch, Ashbery, O'Hara in your poetry—Louise Glück and Sylvia Plath seem more obvious influences. Who were your major role models?

Well I *feel* more closely aligned with the New York School than to Glück and Plath, but it's hard not to fall under Plath's spell, particularly as a female

poet of my generation. She's one of those poets I have a visceral response to – which, for me, has nothing to do with subject matter but instead with music. Even when I have no idea what she's on about, like in 'Poppies in October', I'm under her spell. Not all of it, mind you, but much of it, certainly all of *Ariel*. Alice Oswald has that effect on me too. So do Eliot, Whitman, Hopkins, Rilke, Stevens and Berryman. I hear them and I go limp.

As for Glück, I had hoped to interview her in 2004. Although she didn't give interviews at that time, and perhaps still avoids them, she seemed on the brink of acquiescing, so I did weeks of research, read all her books, then read them all again. I came up with a list of questions that she generously deemed 'good questions', but she wouldn't go through with the interview. She did speak to me on the phone, though, for about an hour, answering the questions privately, with the understanding I not publish them. Given her anxieties about interviews, it was a kind gesture.

As my own first book was published in 2006, Glück's music must have attached itself to me, so to speak. And, anyway, how can a line like, 'At the end of my suffering there was a door' leave your head once it gets there? That hyper-lyrical voice-of-God kind of voice, that almost biblical voice, is so seductive to me.

You moved to London in 1999 though you visit the US regularly. How does British poetic practice differ from that in the US?

If by 'poetic practice' you mean 'aesthetics,' I actually tried to answer that question in an essay for *AGNI* magazine, published by Boston University, in 2008 when Maurice Riordan and I co-edited a 'British and Irish poetry supplement'. But seven years on, my answer would be completely different. Although historically there has been quite a lot of cross-cultural flow between British and American poetry, the two poetic worlds seemed hermetically sealed from each other when I first moved here. But now, once again, there's a great deal of communication between the poetic cultures. That said, most of it goes one way: British poets seem more interested in American poetry than the reverse, although editors like Don Share at *Poetry* in Chicago are doing their part to improve this. I find this American insularity deeply ironic given that England was the land of Chaucer, Wordsworth and Shakespeare.

Over the last 50 years American poetry seems to me to have been far more adventurous than British poetry – to have pushed the boundaries of form, addressing a wider canvas of concerns. Is that a fair judgement? How do you see the two traditions?

I think American poetry really started to push boundaries with the Modernists. So in my opinion it would actually be 100 years ago, not 50 years ago, when American poetry began to surpass British poetry in scope and freshness.

Yes I agree. I was just thinking of the more recent past.

You're right: 50 years ago one started to see a 'wider canvas of concerns', particularly with the so-called Confessional school, who tried to write 'authentically' and autobiographically in ways that were very direct and often unsettling.

Are the traditions moving closer? Kai Miller studied creative writing in the US before moving to Britain. Emily Berry and Luke Kennard are US influenced and Sam Riviere seems to deliberately write in a transatlantic style. Is British poetry becoming more 'American'?

I would say there is a noticeable US influence on some of the younger British voices that are getting attention now – the poets you mention for example. Of course there are diverse currents within contemporary poetry on both sides of the Atlantic and it's hard to generalise, and I can only talk about the poets whose work I know.

Roddy Lumsden deserves particular credit for introducing younger British writers to contemporary American poetry. He's taken a very active interest in what's happening in the States and, through his teaching here, has had considerable influence. He has introduced US poets liked Chelsey Minnis, Matthea Harvey, DA Powell, Brenda Shaughnessy, Noelle Kocot, Kathellen Ossip and Dorothea Lasky to a wider audience in Britain. Social media and the internet have also helped to reduce barriers to communication between the cultures.

I hear echoes of Jorie Graham in some of Alice Oswald's work.

I love thinking about poetic lineage – I'm always thinking about it – but I confess that you've stumped me with the Jorie Graham and Alice Oswald comparison! And I love that you stumped me; you've made me think. I suppose I see Graham as part of the Wallace Stevens lineage and Oswald, who, let's face it, mainly does her own thing, more of the Walt Whitman lineage, via Ted Hughes and, before him, D. H. Lawrence. Though I see Graham as part of the Stevens lineage, Graham nonetheless has that vastness on the page that recalls Whitman. So I think it's Whitman who

probably links them. But Whitman links everyone. Whitman *is* everyone – or thought he was.

Yes I was thinking of the way both poets are able to bring the whole universe into a poem through focusing on something very specific – like Oswald’s poem ‘Field’. Maybe it’s just that I’ve been reading both of them recently.

Whitman could be the link.

Your first collection *The Book of Jobs* was published in 2006, in New York. Do you see this as predominantly influenced by US poetic practice?

Yes. A number of the poems were written when I was getting my MA from Boston University.

Many of the poems deal with sadness, alienation, loss. ‘Transference’ for example starts ‘I am a cold girl/I prefer a ghost in shoes to a man.’ I think this is why I hear echoes of Plath’s voice rather than Koch.

Yes, ‘Transference’ probably has a Plathian feel to it. It was written just after 9/11 when, coincidentally, I had been visiting New York with my son, then a toddler. I returned to London feeling both sad and anxious. In attempt to distract me, my husband took my son and me to Dover, where I projected dead bodies everywhere, even on the buoys in the sea. I didn’t specifically reference the 9/11 context because I didn’t think it was necessary.

In the poem ‘The Factory’ you talk about the moment you realised poetry was not ‘dressing for dinner’ but work. What is the background here?

That poem is a dialogue with myself. I work quite slowly. I imagined the Muse as a kind of production-line manager demanding output, and me in the factory trying on outfits rather than working.

Your second collection *God Loves You* was published here by Seren in 2013. I’m struck comparing the two volumes by the far greater degree of formal experimentation in the more recent book. There are prose poems, and epigrammatic forms sitting alongside quasi-sonnets. There’s even a sestina. Did British poetry have any part in these stylistic developments?

Yes absolutely.

Say more.

In the US if someone writes a poem in unrhymed tercets, it's described as 'formal,' which is certainly not the case here, where 'formal' refers to the 'received forms.' Poetry written in traditional forms and metres is somewhat stigmatized in the States: it's seen as somewhat reactionary, which is of course ridiculous because you can infuse any form or style with energy and inventiveness. You don't seem to have that same kind of stigma here in the UK. British poetry makes more use of received form and often in interesting ways. In so many of Jamie McKendrick's poems, for example, the sonnet form is a kind of default. But then he touts the form: clumsifies the metre and makes the rhymes sound like very distant music, hardly discernible. And there's a quasi villanelle, 'Unfaded', in *Crocodiles and Obelisks* where he has just one repeating line.

When I first moved here I confess I found a lot of British poetry very boring to read. British verse is generally quieter than American verse – less flashy. It took a while for my ear to become attuned to what was going on in the poems. Later I became fascinated by what poets like Alice Oswald, Nick Laird, Leontia Flynn, Michael Symmons Roberts, Jamie McKendrick and Simon Armitage were doing – poets whom Maurice and I included in our 2006 AGNI feature. The Flynn poem is a sestina. One of Jamie's pieces is a sonnet. So, yes, form started to interest me and, as you've already noted, some of the poems in *God Loves You* are written in received forms. That's a result of my moving here and not a development in my writing I had anticipated.

'Angel with Book' is I think a particularly beautiful poem. I love the idea of the angel keeping you out of the book by 'guile' and not recognising this as 'generosity'. What was the inspiration here?

Thank you. It was a sort of platonic love poem for a poet-friend, a love poem both to the poet and his poems. The 'angel' character – who I imagined to be a sort of anti angel of death – is such a stylised and abstracted version of my friend that it doesn't actually resemble him.

This is Jamie McKendrick, the dedicatee, presumably?

That's right. You can probably see Jamie's influence in my sonnets like 'Last Supper' or 'Lord Forgive Me.' The slightly dishevelled form is something

I learned partly from reading Jamie, although he's not the only poet who does it.

But the result doesn't sound 'British.'

I tried to project an American inflection into the poems, emulating someone like Frost. For example 'Will You Be My Friend, Kate Moss?' though written in blank verse, has a somewhat ditzy American speaker.

'The Sun's Lecture Notes on Itself, You and God' is another poem I admire. What was the genesis of this piece?

Simon Barraclough's solar-system class at the Poetry School. I thought that doing a course on the solar system might help with the God theme. In this exercise we had to write a poem from the perspective of the sun. This poem was a late inclusion in the book and in some ways represents a transition away from the other material. I wanted to try something in a fragmentary style.

The use of biblical analogies to provide a kind of linking thread through the collection is clever. At what point did this way of structuring the poems occur to you?

Very early on. All of my poems had the word God in them. It just kept reappearing. And I'm susceptible to certain registers of language. The King James Bible has a powerful and seductive register.

You're working on a third collection. What are your current preoccupations and influences? How do American and British traditions bear on your work now?

Recently someone introduced me at a reading as a 'disturbing poet'. I liked this description; it felt accurate because indeed my recent poems seem to be exploring dark, primal territory, aspects of ourselves that no one wants to talk about. I would say that these poems are neither particularly British nor particularly American. I think the two traditions are beginning to merge, and soon I expect it will be harder to distinguish between what is 'British' and what is 'American.' That's certainly true of my own work.