

JODY ALLEN RANDOLPH Michael Longley in Conversation

JODY ALLEN RANDOLPH: *You are variously described as a nature poet, a love poet, a classical poet, a war poet, a political poet. Do any of these tags feel closer to home than others?*

MICHAEL LONGLEY: I don't care for pigeonholing. I hope there are overlappings, the nature poetry fertilising the war poetry, and so on. Advancing on a number of fronts at the same time looks like a good idea: if there's a freeze-up at points along the line, you can trickle forward somewhere else. Love poetry is at the core of the enterprise - the hub of the wheel from which the other preoccupations radiate like spokes. In my next collection *Snow Water* there will be eleven new love poems. I wouldn't mind being remembered as a love poet, a sexagenarian love poet. I occasionally write poems about war - as a non-combatant. Only the soldier poets I revere such as Wilfred Owen and Keith Douglas produce what I would call proper war poetry. It's presumptuous to call oneself a poet. Anyone who begins a sentence 'As a poet I...' is probably not a poet. It's like calling yourself a saint. It's what I most want to be. Since I favour intensity of utterance and formal compression, you could say that I am trying to be a lyric poet.

*Your parents were English, and you were born and raised in Belfast, where the borders of the suburb met the countryside. Were there elements there that particularly formed you as a poet?*

I was brought up in Ireland by English parents. I lived my first eighteen years in a leafy Belfast suburb where there were big fields and old hedges beyond and even between the houses. From an early age I drifted between Englishness and Irishness, between town and country, between the Lisburn Road with its shops and cinemas and the River Lagan with its beech woods and meadows where I fell in love with wild birds and wild flowers. I am still drifting. Perhaps a certain indeterminacy keeps me impressionable. I would hate to be considered anything other than an Irish poet, but at the same time I remain true to my Britannic side. (Why be confined to just the one cultural allegiance?) Belfast is home, but I also feel at home in the Romney Marshes where my Kentish forebears hailed from - carpenters, blacksmiths, gamekeepers, farm labourers. My English parents introduced me to the western seaboard of Ireland when I was twelve. That changed my life. They too loved Donegal and Connemara.

*Was there a particular point at which you knew you were going to be a poet, a moment when you crossed that bridge from writing poems to feeling you were a poet vocationally?*

Like everyone else I desperately wanted as an adolescent to explore experiences and feelings and share them with others, especially girlfriends. But it wasn't until Trinity that the Muse moved centre stage. My career as a classicist was in serious decline and

perhaps I was looking for something else at which to shine. It is mysterious why some people write good poems and then stop, and mysterious why others persist. Being a poet is different from being a writer. Poetry can't be created to order. You can't write your way out of a poetic block. Yes, it's a vocation rather than a profession. Some poets are writers as well but they are usually protecting a core. I live from poem to poem, from hand to mouth. In 'Pascoli's Portrait' I say 'a poem's little more than a wing and a prayer'.

*Your generation began to come together at Trinity. Each of you writes with great affection for those years. What was it about that environment and time that was so fertile for poetry?*

Trinity was such a lovely place, an oasis in the middle of a capital city. We slumped in our own rooms and played at being grown-ups. Terms were short. You could avoid hard work and make time for daydreaming. Among the small student population there was a healthy proportion of folk who would have been new to us provincials - English public school toffs, an ex-GI or two, students from France, Sweden, colonial Africa, post-Farouk Egypt - very refreshing. We published our juvenilia in the undergraduate literary magazine *Icarus* and even stooped to writing some prose for the campus newspaper *Trinity News* (which Edna [Longley's wife] edited: she gave us our first reviews). Brendan Kennelly and Rudi Holzapfel were the best-known college poets. Of course Mahon and I wanted to be noticed. Mahon was the most accomplished. Eavan Boland swept in later, after we'd left Trinity, and took us by surprise. Exciting times, but I felt edgy and inadequate and not particularly happy. Perhaps the others felt that way too. Poetry obsessed us. We kept an eye on each other like sprinters at the start of a race.

*You once described Alec Reid as a father figure, as the Philip Hobsbaum to young poets at Trinity. Can you talk a bit about the role he played?*

Alec Reid was large and fat and untidy with a round head and white hair and pink face. He was an albino, nearly blind, with pebble-thick specs which he wore around his neck to catch food in as much as to peer through. One of the founder editors of *Icarus*, he was the literary *genius loci*. We craved the approval which he meted out sparingly. We felt anxious when we learned he was going to review *Icarus* in *Trinity News*. Derek told me, ahead of publication, that Alec had singled out for praise a poem of mine called 'Konzentrationslager'. My remembering all of that shows just how important he was to us. Literary exchanges were *ad hoc* compared to the Belfast group under Philip Hobsbaum. Alec did not proselytise. A very unorthodox academic, he was not treated generously by Trinity. We suffered the slights on his behalf. We were devastated when his young son Michael died in America after undergoing open-heart surgery. Alec and Beatrice had scrimped and saved to take Michael across the Atlantic where the odds were supposed to be better. They were majestic in their sorrow. We all grew up a bit. Because I read Classics I saw less of Alec than the others who would have attended his inspirational lectures. I got to know him in the

pubs and sat quietly while he monologued over his pint. His passions included Edward Thomas and Louis MacNeice. (Edna's and my subsequent work on those poets owes so much to him.) Alec Reid was a comic figure in some ways, but also princely, heroic. He left us in no doubt as to how important poetry is. We adored him.

*Eavan Boland and Derek Mahon talk about poet Brendan Kennelly as another positive presence at Trinity during those years. Were there others?*

Brendan Kennelly seemed to encompass everything I'd been missing. I was overwhelmed and bewildered by him. He was culturally astonishing, a genius in his own way. I pay tribute to him in my last book: 'Already the tubby, rollicking, broken Christ / Talking too much, drowning me in his hurlygush.' He was generous in his praise and encouraged me very early on. But we never locked horns. I don't recall one 'poetry session' with him. Derek and Eavan were in the English / Modern Languages orbit. I wasn't. They would have seen much more of Brendan than I did. The ethos of the Classics Department had a real impact on me, even though I was an idle scholar. It was probably the university's most distinguished humanities department. The Professor of Latin Donald Wormell read aloud from Propertius and Catullus as though they were living poets. I showed him my first Propertius translations and he was marvellously encouraging. I fell in love with the Latin love elegy, thanks to him. W. B. Stanford was a world figure, a great Homeric scholar. He summoned me to his rooms for missing lectures (which were compulsory in those days). He could have failed me my year. I was terrified. He scolded me, then smiled: 'I suppose you think that because you're a poet I'm going to let you off?' 'Of course not, sir.' 'Well, I am. I very much liked those recent poems in the magazine.' Many years later at his retirement dinner he came and sat beside me. 'If I had my life over again, I would choose to be a poet rather than a scholar.' In 1992 Trinity commissioned me to write a poem for their Quatercentenary commemorations. I devoted a section of 'River & Fountain' to Stanford: '... teaching the *Poetics*, / He asked us for definitions, and accepted mine: / "Sir, if prose is a river, then poetry's a fountain.'" I hope I have repaid both great men a little with my Homeric translations and my versions from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The seeds sown all those years ago by Stanford and Wormell did eventually germinate. Likewise, it took a long time for me to absorb the impact of Brendan Kennelly.

*The years after you left Trinity and returned to Belfast were a very exciting time in Ireland - a time of great energy, with a real sense of possibility for poets. People, yourself included, were excited about Irish music and art. What was it like as young poet during those years?*

Edna got a lectureship at Queen's University. I followed her there, followed her home. The Trinity literary friendships had been a blessing. The next godsend was getting to know Seamus Heaney and his fiancée Marie Devlin. Because of the North's invisible apartheid and, in the south, the Church's ban on Catholics attending Trinity, I didn't become friends with any Irish Catholics at school or university (with the possible

exception of Brendan Kennelly whom I didn't get to know all that well). I remember being shocked when I woke up to the realisation that Seamus and Marie were my first Northern Irish Catholic friends. We met at a small party *chez* Hobsbaum. Seamus and I had seen each other's poems in the *Irish Times* and elsewhere. Seamus praised my 'Questionnaire for Walter Mitty' and 'Emily Dickinson', I his 'An Advancement of Learning'. I was charmed, even when he started to sing for me. He has recently reminded me that I called him a stage Irishman. Bursting into song was not part of my cultural background. At school there wasn't a whiff of anything 'Irish', certainly not Irish songs. Marie sang beautifully. I remember her singing at their wedding. So I became aware of what I had been missing. I was all ears. The Heaneys warmed to my love of jazz and we sang Cole Porter songs on excursions in Seamus's Volkswagen. They showed real tenderness towards my stories of my father's Great War experiences. They loaned me a record of Joan Littlewood's *O What a Lovely War* which I think they'd seen in London on their honeymoon. Those songs from the trenches awakened filial emotions that had gone underground. Thanks to that interchange with the Heaneys I wrote 'In Memoriam', the first of a life-long sequence of elegies for my father and the other boy-soldiers. There were many such reciprocities. The brilliant painter Colin Middleton became our friend, possibly the most technically proficient artist Ireland has yet produced. He was thirty years our senior. We loved to please him with new poems. At boozy sessions in his house we would stand up and recite by heart our latest efforts. I wrote my first piece of art criticism about Colin. Derek and Seamus and I all dedicated poems to him in our first volumes. A convection current seemed to be lifting us upwards. We wanted to get better and better. We supported each other but only up to a point. We competed with each other more ferociously than perhaps we now remember.

*It seems remarkable that your generation were all earnest Irish poets at the age of twenty to twenty three, with a considerable amount of sustained thinking and talking about poetry. How did that evolve?*

Derek and I had lived poetry very intensely at Trinity and then for a year in a slum in Merrion Square. Some of the poems in my first book respond to work by him. My 'No Continuing City' owes much to his 'Girls in their Seasons'. My 'Elegy for Fats Waller' is a response to his 'Death of a Film Star' (which in turn takes off from MacNeice's 'Death of an Actress'). Without his friendship my first book would have been much less ambitious. I travelled quickly, without taking a breath, from my rather wan juvenilia to the aspiring shapes of my first reasonable poems. I arrived back in Belfast feeling a bit punch-drunk, shell-shocked - unable to tune in to another authentic new voice. At first I couldn't hear Seamus's lovely early poems, 'Churning Day', 'Death of a Naturalist'. Was I a bit high-handed with him? Hobsbaum's hot advocacy didn't help. But Seamus held his ground. He stood up to Derek and me one evening when we were being bossy. He said, 'I'd love to write like you boys but I've got to go on my own and write my kind of poems.' Wonderful. I sense, though, that his move from big blocks to the shapely quatrains of 'Follower' and 'Personal Helicon' owes something to Derek and me. There was anxiety and pain in the air as well as excitement. In 1964 Derek brought Eavan Boland to Belfast to meet Edna and me (she engaged hardly at all with the Heaneys). She held forth about poetry with extraordinary flair and authority. She challenged me. She scared the shit out of me.

She could make me feel worthless. I have never been much good in intellectual debate. Eavan noticed how few opinions I have. My brainwork goes into poems. In answer to her questioning I wrote my formally most ambitious poem 'The Hebrides'. I recited it to Eavan by heart in a Dublin pub. I meant it to be both gift and confrontation. The subtext was: 'This is as brilliant as I shall ever be.' Perhaps Eavan and I should have been close friends for longer. Perhaps we could only meet on the Hebrides.

*There were a variety of influences in play in Irish poetry at the time that you were first publishing - the Irish lyric, the British 'Movement' poem, some of the American formalists and 'confessionals'. Could you talk a bit about poetry as you came to it and intersected with it at that time?*

At Trinity I hopped all over the canon. As a classicist much of it was new to me. I read George Herbert as though he'd been published the previous week. (And I never had to answer an exam question on him!) From Britain the three contemporary volumes that meant most to me were Philip Larkin's *The Less Deceived*, Ted Hughes' *Lupercal* and Geoffrey Hill's *For the Unfallen*. I can hear echoes of all three in *No Continuing City*. Likewise Richard Wilbur. A matchless virtuoso. I bruised my brain trying to write Wilburese. I never cared for what you call confessional poetry or for prissy anal-retentive formalism. Lowell's *Life Studies* is much too fine to be thought of as confessional, just as Wilbur soars above most of the other formalists. *Life Studies* lurks behind my 'In Memoriam', which was a breakthrough poem for me. I fell under the spell of e.e.cummings and went all twee and lower-case for a while. (I even encouraged Edna to write an essay on him for *Icarus*.) Derek liked Ginsberg and the Beats more than I did. We read bits of *Howl* aloud. We were interested in how to be rhetorical without sounding ridiculous. In my Trinity rooms we listened again and again to a recording of Wallace Stevens reading 'The Idea of Order at Key West' (still my favourite reader). We studied Lowell, Roethke, Crane. My poem 'The Hebrides' takes its bearings from 'The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket' and mixes George Herbert with Hart Crane. And of course Yeats and Hardy, Auden and MacNeice, Frost and Lawrence were there too. The Great War poets came a little later. A friend gave me Patrick Kavanagh's *Come Dance with Kitty Stobling* for my twenty-first birthday. There was no pattern to my reading. It was all hand-to-mouth.

*One of the things that really struck me about your generation of Irish poets is the strong 'we', even though you were a very diverse group of poets from different backgrounds. I have heard American poets speak of their poetic communities as primarily vertical, but your generation had a very strong horizontal dynamic. How important was that to your developing sense of yourself as a poet?*

Belfast has been called 'the armpit of Europe', 'a cultural Siberia': not somewhere you would expect to produce a flurry of poetry. Perhaps 'we' registers the relief of embattled aesthetes who have come through. 'We' also implies that imagination and

creativity dissolve what is called here 'the sectarian divide'. 'We' embraces Catholic and Protestant. 'We' acknowledges friendly rivalry. But not for one moment did we think in terms of school or coterie. There were no manifestoes. We never hunted in a pack. 'We' in my book now includes the astonishing next generation of Muldoon, Carson, McGuckian, Ormsby and brilliant younger poets such as Sinéad Morrissey and Leontia Flynn.

*In the mid 1960s, you married and settled down in Belfast, teaching and writing, and your poetry began turning in a different direction, away from the rhyming couplets of your earlier work into the livelier, more relaxed work of *An Exploded View*. This brings us to the early 1970s - can you talk about the changes occurring in your work at that point?*

In 1966 I wrote some poems in rhyming couplets - 'Gathering Mushrooms', 'Narcissus' and, one of my best, 'Persephone'. I think of that kind of enclosed couplet as the ultimate stanza. My poems were getting tighter and tighter. Eventually I left myself no room. I wrote only one six-line poem in 1967, a couplet in 1968 and hardly any in 1969. This was my first long silence, my first crisis. Was I trying too hard? I usually have problems with rhythm and form rather than subject matter. I needed to loosen up. I left my teaching job and for a while retired to snowy solitude in the Wicklow Hills. When you go on holiday the Muse does not necessarily accompany you. I couldn't write there and I had no alibis. Things got worse. The only bright spot was a surprise visit from Mahon who announced his arrival with a snowball launched through the half-door. The last poem I wrote for *No Continuing City* in the summer of 1968, 'Journey out of Essex', explores John Clare's psychological crisis. Despite the theme its relaxed movement suggested a way out of the woods. But I didn't take the hint and went on to produce more knotty wee poems which are placed towards the start of *An Exploded View*. So the thaw was glimpsed in the John Clare poem, but didn't get underway until later with 'Caravan' (at the very end of 1970).

*'Caravan' was a breakthrough poem for you?*

I wrote 'Caravan' in a happy trance, the words melting down the page, the quatrains and the rhymes easy-going. 1971 was a good year. I was composing in my head, on trains, on buses, out walking, at my office desk, at staff meetings, in the middle of conversations. I would scribble lines down higgledy-piggledy. When I typed them out to see what they looked like, the forms were already there. Problems had been solved at a subconscious level. I'm fond of those pieces and grateful for them. I remember each happy delivery, where I was and what I was doing: 'The Rope-makers' which came on the heels of 'Caravan'; 'Casualty' and 'Skara Brae' which flew onto my desk in the Arts Council; 'Options' which I completed in my head while a colleague enthused to me about theatrical matters. In the autumn of 1971 I wrote two verse letters in Marvellian octosyllabics to Heaney and Mahon, explorations of poetic sodality at a time of political crisis. These released into conversational cadences the

rhyming couplets I had carved into marble in the sixties. The surge continued through 1972 and beyond. There was no sign of further trouble until 1979.

*And what was happening then?*

There was a gradual running down. In the seven years between 1979 and 1986 I wrote only a dozen or so poems - just one in 1982, one in 1984. I have no idea where poetry comes from and why it goes away. There may, though, be a number of reasons for my second crisis. Firstly, I was beginning to dislike my job in the Arts Council. I have the insights of a politician but not the temperament. Office politics corroded my soul - my own fault to some degree, but in retrospect I cannot regret speaking out and refusing to eat shit. Perhaps the poems that emerged later, after my retirement, were toughened in that crucible. Secondly, I was depressed and drinking too much - the male menopause and all that. 'This middle stretch is bad for poets', to quote MacNeice. Thirdly, I published in 1985 *Poems 1963-1983*. I worked on that collection obsessively. I got to know my own work and workings too well. I became self-conscious, then anxious. That's when the juggler drops his balls. Fourthly, my rhythms were faltering. I was writing tight wee poems again. I took a sabbatical in 1986 and lived on my own in the Mayo cottage at Carrigskeewaun for two long stretches in the spring and the autumn. The harvest was nearly thirty new poems. I returned to the office cleansed and clear-eyed. But almost immediately I was sucked into a corrupt situation. I just had to fight. In so doing I helped to protect the sanity of a valued colleague and flush two scoundrels round the U-bend, but I produced only one poem that year, 'Jug Band', an elegy for Philip Larkin. By the end of the 1980s I was writing again with some insouciance. I had grown utterly disenchanted with arts bureaucracy. I applied for early retirement and got it. They were glad to get rid of me. As I made my exit I was able to expose the director designate as a fraud. It was exhilarating to grab my freedom and slay a dragon in one graceful movement. And I had produced in fits and starts the poems for *Gorse Fires*, my first collection in twelve years. Its publication coincided almost to the day with my escape.

*Looking back at those difficult years now, do you feel that the silent stretches were detrimental to your work?*

If I hadn't been fighting battles on other fronts, I might have been scribbling boring middle-aged verse - like MacNeice who twittered on for a decade until the miraculous final poems. It seems that the Muse favours the young and then, if you can weather the 'middle stretch', the pensioners. Silence is part of the enterprise. Most poets write and publish far too much. They forget the agricultural good sense of the fallow period. The Muse despises whingers who bellyache about 'writer's block' and related ailments. One of the best things ever said to me about poetry was John Hewitt's off-hand remark: 'If you write poetry, it's your own fault.'

*Going back to your years in the Arts Council, were there accomplishments you were particularly happy with?*

I'm proud of quite a lot. I helped the finest general publisher in Ireland, the Blackstaff Press, to survive and kept a few magazines going against the odds. The poetry reading tours I organised featured some starry duets - Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon and James Simmons. *The Planter and the Gael* with John Montague and John Hewitt was called by the historian Roy Foster 'a landmark affirmation of creative cultural diversity'. With the tours and the Queen's University English Society's programme of visiting distinguished writers (with which I've been involved now for thirty years) I wanted to bring to our benighted province what William Carlos Williams calls 'the news from poems'. I hoped that the interaction between artist and community would provide new sources of creative energy. I fought hard for more money for the individual artist. I was the first arts administrator in the entire archipelago to support traditional music, a programme that Ciaran Carson took over from me. I used to ask two simple questions. How much of our programme will posterity thank us for? How much of what we are doing differentiates us from Bolton or Wolverhampton? It was a huge privilege to work with the community's life-enhancers and help to deny the deathdealers.

*You've always had friends who were painters, and over the years you have written frequently about painting. Have paintings, or the questions asked by painters, been important to your work?*

I've already mentioned Colin Middleton. I wrote a review of a Gerard Dillon show for the *Irish Times*. I called him 'the poet of Irish painting'. Colin was quite miffed. Painters can be as touchy as poets. Gerry brought a lovely little painting of a Falls Road christening to the Arts Council as a gift for me. He didn't have Colin's technical facility, but his best work is, in my opinion, the best. I so admire that generation of northern artists - Middleton, Dillon, George Campbell, Dan O'Neill - autodidacts, free spirits, warriors. Today their paintings fetch huge sums. For most of their lives they didn't have the price of a pint. Gerry once offered me five large canvases for £100. He died in 1971 when he was only fifty-five. There's an elegy for him in *An Exploded View*. I've never met anyone funnier, subtler, more refined. I loved him dearly and think of him often. My next collection contains a celebration of one of his masterpieces *Yellow Bungalow*. I've had my portrait painted many times. I'm supposed to be a good sitter. Edna says that my beard makes it easy and that I'm the next best thing to a still life. I enjoy the sort of zenlike conversation that keeps a session going. Writing about painting is terribly difficult. I produce every couple of years a catalogue introduction for a fellow spirit - Felim Egan, David Crone, Brian Ferran, Jeffrey Morgan. The challenge is to find metaphors and to avoid jargon. For me few places are more exciting than an artist's studio. I ask technical questions about the processes - also simple but difficult questions: 'Why's it that size? Why's it that shape?' My younger daughter Sarah is building up a reputation as an artist. She draws and paints beautifully. The prospect of her next solo show in Dublin excites me more than my forthcoming slim volume. I wish Dillon and Middleton could see her work.

*By 1975 the era in which you came of age as a poet had vanished into the complex reawakening and terrible convulsions of national issues. I*

*am interested in the position of fierce independence as lyric poets your generation argued for in response to the political situation - a strong reinterpretation of vocation under pressure. Can you talk about your own transition as a poet during those years, and how some of those pressures surfaced for you?*

I supported the civil rights movement. My English parents were completely innocent of sectarianism. My education at Inst and Trinity had been liberal Protestant, but very complacent. I had not attended to the tawdry shortcomings of Unionist government. So I began by feeling guilty, embarrassed, apologetic, especially in the company of my Catholic friends. When the Bogside erupted in 1969 and West Belfast went up in flames, I was flabbergasted by the ferocity of it all. Derek Mahon and I walked through the wreckage of the Falls Road. (I describe that in my verse letter to him.) Part of me felt like an appalled outsider: another part, the anti-Unionist, anti-establishment part, felt exhilarated. The rest of me wanted to understand and explain what I had hitherto ignored, the darkness and violence in my own community. Marie Heaney said to me: 'You're learning fast', a double-edged remark, a compliment and a rebuke. From journalists and broadcasters there came echoes of the Second World War cry: 'Where are the war poets?' and ivory-tower charges of fiddling while the Falls Road burns. From the beginning my friends and I resisted the temptation to hitch a ride on yesterday's headlines and write, to paraphrase John Hume, the poetry of the latest atrocity. We learned from each other how complex the situation was, and how inadequate the political certainties - Green Ireland, Orange Ulster. We knew there was no point in versifying opinion and giving people what they wanted to hear. We believed that poetry, the opposite of propaganda, should encourage people to think and feel for themselves: it should appeal to their generous instincts (MacNeice's lovely phrase). We hated what we now call 'Troubles trash'. We believed that, even when generated by the best of intentions, bad poetry about the sufferings of fellow citizens would be impertinence: as part of an agenda it would be a blasphemy. We disliked the notion that civic unrest might be good for poetry, and poetry a solace for the bereaved and brokenhearted. We were none of us in the front line. So far as I can recall, we never discussed these dilemmas. We had no plans to face up to the crisis as a group, or to speak to the outside world about it. It was crucial to remain true to ourselves. We continued to write the poems that presented themselves, no doubt hoping that one day we might be able to produce something adequate about the Troubles. I have long sensed that it takes time for experience to settle to an imaginative depth where it can be transformed into art. We took our time. All of these judgements are in retrospect. I speak out of my own recollections and my reading of my friends' poems. I can't speak for them. I still find desperately moving the allembreing tender-heartedness of such poems as Heaney's 'The Other Side' and Mahon's 'Afterlives'.

*Did it make a difference that MacNeice and Kavanagh, and indeed most of an older generation of Irish poets (Rodgers, Colum, Clarke), died within a short time span, pushing your generation into more senior positions while still quite young? I know that Hewitt, Kinsella and Montague remained steady presences, but what effect, if any, did the absence of elders have?*

I'm not really into this generational stuff. I find it all a bit authoritarian and patriarchal. I have never thought in Irish dynastic terms and don't see myself in some kind of Irish succession. I dislike the graveyard view of poetry, literary necrophilia, ancestor worship. I'm pretty sure MacNeice and Kavanagh would also disapprove. Mind you, Derek and Seamus and I drove to Kavanagh's funeral, and the three of us visited Carrowdore Churchyard together to pay our respects to MacNeice's ashes. Their poetry is still with us. That's what matters.

*With the painful eruption of national issues, came these early statements of young poets writing in a time of identity and change. 'Wounds' quickly became one of the central poems of this time, and remains so. Can you talk about the way you located yourself and your time through the theme of the father? Was your integration of those particular strands of your father's past into the poem partly a need to clarify your own identity in Irish poetry?*

I remember standing in The Crown with John Hewitt watching the news soon after an IRA atrocity. A British Army officer was dismissing the perpetrators as subhuman animals. John, who was vehemently opposed to the IRA's campaign (as was I) turned to me and said: 'That young man is talking about *our* terrorists.' They were just as much products of our society as we were. They were not complete strangers. When I wrote the last two lines of 'Wounds' ('To the children, to a bewildered wife / I think "Sorry Missus" was what he said') I was empathising with the paramilitary killer. Marie Heaney told me the awful story. I had been wondering for some time what my father, an old soldier and an old-fashioned patriot, would have had to say about the Troubles. Marie's story sparked off the poem and released my memories of my father's memories of the trenches. He appears in poems throughout my career, but mainly when I am contemplating the catastrophe of the Great War (though I see my Great War poems as oblique comments on the Troubles). I think 'The Linen Workers' is the only other poem where I enlist his aid explicitly in the context of our grim little civil war. He helps me to face into the horror of the Kingsmills massacre. There is plenty of room in Irish poetry for my English father. When I read that line in Seamus's 'The Toome Road' ('O charioteers, above your dormant guns'), I want to say - and perhaps one day in a poem I *shall* say - that in a time-warp one of those squaddies might be my father. Not everyone can boast an 'invisible, untoppled omphalos'. In 1972 Seamus and I drove to Newry to walk in the banned march in protest against Bloody Sunday. Army and police had blocked the main road and most of the side roads. It was a long nervy circuitous drive. We had plenty of time to talk. What would we say if we were stopped by paramilitaries and guns were pointed at us and we were asked 'What religion are you?' (Four years later the ten workmen murdered at Kingsmills were to give the wrong answer.) We agreed we would sink or swim by what we were - in our eyes not so much Catholic and Protestant as honest and brave.

*Sometimes there is wistfulness in your writing about earlier years and relationships, before the Troubles brought such enormous changes. I am thinking here of your autobiographical essays in Tuppenny Stung.*

*Do you ever think you would have been different as a poet if those thirty years of violence hadn't intervened?*

No, I mourn the thousands that died.

*Peter MacDonald has written about love's challenge to the epic in your lyrics. Other critics have suggested that your nature poems counter the violence that surfaces in your political poems. Do you agree that these tensions exist in your work? Are your meticulous descriptions of the natural world counters to the long shadows of history that are your context as a poet?*

In my love poems, I brush against the epic only in my borrowings from Homer and Ovid's great ragbag *Metamorphoses*. Inside epics such as the *Iliad* there are lots of little works of art waiting to be set free. The *Iliad* is a page-turner. You go on reading it to find out what happens next. I wade in against the narrative flow and freeze-frame telling moments to make what I hope are self-contained lyric poems. Painters do the same thing. The most urgent political problems are ecological: how we share the planet with the plants and the other animals. My nature writing is my most political. In my Mayo poems I am not trying to escape from political violence. I want the light from Carrigskeewaun to irradiate the northern darkness. Describing the world in a meticulous way is a consecration and a stay against damaging dogmatism.

*I am also curious about the use of catalogues in your poems. In 'Laertes' you say 'the whole story is one catalogue and then another'. Is the catalogue an anti-narrative device in your work? Or something else entirely? How did cataloguing as a poetic strategy begin to interest you?*

Since my early twenties some of my favourite lines have been Edward Thomas's 'If I should ever by chance grow rich / I'll buy Codham, Cockridden, and Childerditch, / Roses, Pyrgo, and Lapwater, / And let them all to my elder daughter.' Alec Reid first quoted them to me. Then there's the catalogue of the ships in the *Iliad*, all of the vast tragedy already implicated there. Poetry's origins are in ceremony. Poetry commemorates. At memorial services after September Eleven the heart of each ceremony was the recitation of victims' names. I've sensed this in Ireland too. Names are what we're left with. 'The whole story is one catalogue and then another.' In my elegies 'The Ice-cream Man' and 'The Fishing Party' I make long lists of flower names and the names of artificial flies and imply that each catalogue should go on forever.

*By the late 1980s, you were writing the poems that became Gorse Fires. There was a lightness and flexibility that began to appear in these poems that wasn't always there in your earlier work. Part of this*

*accomplishment seems to have come from experimenting with a longer, more flexible line. Can you talk about the changes you were making technically?*

The longer line helped - hexameters and alexandrines. From the beginning I have relished making poems out of single long sentences. Drawn-out syntax generates too many prepositions, conjunctions and present participles to fit comfortably into the pentameter where, even in Shakespeare, unimportant words like 'and' or 'of' often attract something very close to a stress to help the line along. These inconvenient syllables ripple out more peacefully in the longer line. And there's more room for strange sound effects - the sort of clashes and remote harmonies you get in Homer. Iambic pentameters can be too euphonious, especially if you've been composing them for most of your life. Although the process is mostly intuitive, I do occasionally ask myself: 'Why does the line end there?' If the whip is too long you can't crack it. If the shoelace is too short you can't tie it.

*You mentioned your interest in the poem consisting of a single long sentence. Can you talk about the form a bit more - your history with it, why it interests you, what it's good for, its properties or challenges?*

The first poem of mine to survive, 'Epithalamion', I wrote in the summer of 1963. It contains two very long sentences weaving in and out of a knotty little stanza-shape of my own invention, for twenty-five lines and then for thirty - an attempt to generate energy by restricting the flow. For forty years I have regularly aimed for what Yeats calls 'a coincidence between period and stanza' or, more boldly, between period and poem - like splitting a log from top to bottom along the grain with a single axe-blow. So much contemporary verse lacks propulsion. It's a tedium of staccato stutters - oblivious to the complexities that can be created by angled clauses. In poetry a sentence can be made to do far more than in prose. A long sentence need not be a mere container. Rather, its facets and angles imply everything that cannot be contained. This is what fired Edward Thomas and Robert Frost - in their poems and in their brilliant correspondence about syntax and measure. The resplendent opening sentence of *Paradise Lost* should be inhaled regularly as an antidote to much contemporary practice. Yeats said: 'As I altered my syntax, I altered my thought.'

*In the single-sentence poem 'Horses' (from The Weather in Japan), there is a kind of traffic between the human and nature - the horses weep hot tears for their killed charioteer. This happens in other poems as well. In an image from 'Two Skunks' (from Snow Water), 'A cardinal flusters at the bedroom window/Like the soul of a little girl/who hands over/ All of the red things her short life recalls.' In images like these, nature is used to tell a human story. What do you think the distance between the poet and nature is or should be?*

None. The poet is part of nature. Language is part of nature.

*Carrigskeewaun has been the setting for many of your nature poems, although your poems are set in many other locations as well. In your mid twenties, you interviewed painter Colin Middleton, pressing him about the importance of place to his work. He replied, 'There's got to be some sort of place - particular places, holy places. Once you get there, you know you're kith and kin. The stones start to talk.' Has Carrigskeewaun been that sort place for you? How important is place to your work?*

About one third of my poetry is set in west Mayo, thanks to David Cabot the great Irish ornithologist who allows me to stay in his remote cottage and open my mind to the endless intricacies of the landscape. I fell in love with Carrigskeewaun the first time I saw it more than thirty years ago from the turn in the road above Thallabaun - the great sandy arena with its meandering channel, the dunes, the duach, the cottage and its stony fields against the backdrop of Mweelrea. I'm still only scratching the surface. Carrigskeewaun provides me with the template for experiencing all other places and keeps me sensitive, I hope, to the nuances of locality. I couldn't have written about Tuscany without years of trying to read and represent the townland. The human habitat in that part of Mayo is precarious, isolated and vulnerable, its history complex. The landscape is haunted by grown-over potato-drills, the ghosts of lazybeds abandoned during the Famine. The bones of the landscape make me feel in my own bones how provisional dwelling and home are. I am not writing about a cosy community. In 'Remembering Carrigskeewaun' I say: 'Home is a hollow between the waves, / A clump of nettles, feathery winds...'

*Irish nature poetry over the past century has been a series of dialogues with and revisions of the pastoral. It is tempting to read your work as part of that dialogue. The poems that attach specific birds or animals to humans I used to think of as a kind of magic pastoral. But when I read 'Heron', the elegy for Kenneth Koch from your new book Snow Water, I thought maybe I had that wrong - that perhaps you weren't a nature poet in dialogue with the pastoral tradition so much as a poet of metamorphosis. 'Because you are so tall and skinny, I shall conscript a heron...Tuck your head in like a heron and trail behind you/Your long legs, take to the air above a townland/ That encloses Carrigskeewaun and Central Park.' Looking back at earlier poems like 'The Dry Cleaners' from The Ghost Orchid, I wonder has the concept of metamorphosis been important to your work?*

Irish nature poetry has only recently got under way - compared with the English tradition. What we have mostly had here is more the poetry of rural community, poetry with a more social or communitarian dimension. I don't see myself as a realist in that way. Perhaps I'm more of a symbolist? Poetry is metaphor and metamorphosis - 'All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all.' (I chose Yeats's 'High Talk' for my anthology *Twentieth-Century Irish Poems*.) There are several translations from the *Metamorphoses* in my collection *The Ghost Orchid*. That clearly makes it my most

Ovidian book, but really all it did was emphasise a tendency that was always there. Ever since the cave paintings all art involves human consciousness with the natural world.

*In Snow Water I see a different kind of lyric reach and daring. For instance, in 'Norwegian Wedding' in sudden lines like 'How few friends anyone has. I'm glad we came' and 'Oh, his sore hands' referring to the crucifixion depicted by the narrow window above the wedding party. Something similar happens in the last stanza of your long poem 'Woodsmoke' with the lines 'Are there people here who are not your friends? / A mother who doesn't understand, a sister? / I am with you. From among the shadowy/Mystifying voices I pick out yours. /We have to imagine one another/ Quickly, and then go home...' Do you see differences between the work you were doing in The Weather in Japan and this new work?*

Not huge differences. New poems respond to old ones. As I grow older I think I probably become simpler and more insouciant. I'm interested in a lighter utterance that can somehow accommodate everything. I love the seemingly casual note in Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, the way he makes it the core of their meaning. Recently I've been greatly moved by the war poems of Apollinaire (in Robert Chandler's translations). He finds connections in a bombardment of distractions and manages to be all embracing in a world that is being blown apart. He attempts love poetry in the shadow of death. I don't want to be thinking of myself as an older poet, and I don't want to be too conscious of my own processes. Wherever I'm going, I hope I'm still headed there, still travelling to Ithaca.