

Notes for Broadsheet Poets

Patricia McCarthy interviews Gillian Clarke

P McC: *When did you first become interested in poetry and when and why did you start writing it? Or should I simply quote the wonderful first poem, 'First Words' of your new collection, which seems to answer my question!*

G Clarke: I loved nursery rhymes and songs from earliest childhood, then playground games and chants, the morning hymn at school with lines like 'there is a green hill far away'. Even the times table's lovely litany chanted in class gave me a thrill. Also, the sound of Welsh and English in a house of talk. They say that I made up rhymes as soon as I could speak, and poems and stories as soon as I could write.

P McC: *Who are the poets you most admire?*

G Clarke: Shakespeare, John Donne, Keats, all the dead men I studied at school and university. Later, Emily Dickinson, Yeats, R.S. Thomas, Ted Hughes, the marvellous 14th century Welsh poet Dafydd ap Gwilym. Then my contemporaries, Seamus Heaney of course, and a host of younger poets, so many of them women.

P McC: *Your fine career as a poet covers a wide span. What was it like when you first started out, especially as a woman poet?*

G Clarke: The word 'career' sounds odd, because any success there was came poem by poem. There was a time when, at the age of 30, with three small children and my degree and dreams of being a writer a distant memory, I thought my so-called career was down the drain. I wrote in notebooks, kept a journal, but never typed or submitted poems anywhere. Then a few poems were sent – not by me – to *Poetry Wales*, and were accepted. One was called 'The Sundial'. That first 'yes' was very important, as it is to all writers. In my education poets were not women, were not Welsh, were not alive. When my first poems appeared in magazines, the world of London publishing was an exclusive one. For example, the *TLS* reviewed no books from small Welsh publishers, or small publishers anywhere I suppose. In Wales in the '60s all visible poets were male. At my very first reading in the '70s, alongside two distinguished Welsh writers, one told me that the other had sneered at 'women' on the stage. I had, apparently, been better received than he had. That attitude has long been swept away.

P McC: *Do you think there should be any distinctions made between male and female poets? Kathleen Raine, Blakean scholar and poet, let down her own sex, in a way, by asserting that 'women can't write poetry'. Virginia Woolf, in her essay,*

'A Room of One's Own', asked why, for example, there has never been a female Shakespeare, and suggested that this will only happen when women start to write androgynously. How do you react to these two statements?

G Clarke: Each poet is unique, each one has a distinct voice. All that we are, our culture, gender, life experience is in our art. You can't 'make' these distinctions. As a poet I feel a lot closer to, say, Seamus Heaney than to Kathleen Raine, with whose writings, including the remark you quote, I have little in common. As for Virginia Woolf's question, there has been no second male Shakespeare either. There may, however, have been a Virginia Woolf, a female Dafydd ap Gwilym, a Donne, a Keats, and many another woman of letters unseen and unheard. It is history's great silence and our loss. Some may yet be discovered, but most are voices lost forever. I find that thought very moving.

P McC: *I notice that you are a tutor on the M Phil in Creative Writing at the University of Glamorgan and that you are President of the Writers' Centre you founded in North Wales in 1990. Presumably Creative Writing Schools at universities in the UK didn't exist when you were young. What do you think of them? Do you think that poetry can be taught? Would you advise a budding young poet to enrol in one?*

G Clarke: This is a complicated question. The art of poetry cannot be taught, but natural talent can be recognised and nurtured. First, the M Phil at Glamorgan: it is, as far as I know, like no other. All the tutors are published writers, and we individually agree to work with an applicant who is already committed to writing a book: a collection of poems, short stories or a novel. Each year I take only one new poet, whose potential and commitment shine out of the first submitted poems. The poet writes. I encourage, talk poetry, get tough, raise the game. We meet four times, and the rest is by e-mail. Second, Ty Newydd, the equivalent of the Arvon Foundation in England and Scotland, has a different purpose. Fine poets do sometimes arrive out of the blue – I first met the young, unpublished Kathleen Jamie, and Alice Oswald, while tutoring Arvon courses – but the five-day courses have a wider purpose. They are open to all, and do not claim to teach people to write. The workshops prompt new writing, creative discussion and the exchange of ideas. Reading, talking, listening, lively discussion, sharing a love of words, making friendships over a text, and having 'permission' to indulge in time to write away from home, are as important as the tutoring. Finally, I think a budding poet should take every chance to attend readings, and attend a Ty Newydd or Arvon course. There a new poet finds a sympathetic home, and, if the work is ready, some good tips, after which an editor might consider a small pile of poems. I'd prefer a budding poet to study anything but creative writing at BA level. Get educated first!

P McC: *What words of advice, from your experience, would you give to a young poet? E.g. How do you get going on a poem, do you make many drafts, what about the form (or free expression)?*

G Clarke: First, read, read, read, and write every day, maybe keep a journal, or a notebook. I'll pass on advice I heard from two great poets: R.S.Thomas: 'Read something substantial, then take pen and paper to see what words will do.' Ted Hughes: 'Throw nothing away. Put it in a drawer. When you look at it later it may catch fire.' I usually do three or four pages of drafts before I'm satisfied with a poem, leaving the first scribble alone long enough for it to become a stranger. Overnight is usually enough for you and the poem to reconsider. Never write yourself to exhaustion, or the poem will be exhausted too. A poet needs energy, an excitement for language, and a compulsion to write.

P McC: *What are your pet hates in poetry?*

G Clarke: It's a matter of taste, and I would not belittle any contribution to the world of rhythm and rhyme. Great mountain ranges need foothills. However, I hate puns – boys' toys, I think! – too many adjectives, pomposity, and last lines that flag up the 'Meaning'. But it is easier to say what I love: for me a poem is a rhythmic way of thinking, and all true poetry must have cadence, clarity, with further layers to unwrap after the first reading, and at least one line or phrase that stops the heart and stays in the mind.

P McC: *Do you discipline yourself to write every day, or do you write poetry only when you are inspired?*

G Clarke: I have always kept a journal. I love a fine black pen, a little black Daler-Rowney notebook with acid free paper, and some weather and a view outside the window to get me started. Inspiration is lovely – to be suddenly startled by a kind of passion. However, it is perfectly possible to write a poem on purpose, and sometimes the purposeful poem can be as good as those that just come from the air. They can surprise, can catch fire. You can put yourself in the way of 'inspiration', research the subject, and find that a new lexicon awaits you in a new subject.

P McC: *Your Welshness – how has this influenced your poetry? You do use words in Welsh and phrases between the English in your poems, but do you ever write a whole poem in the Welsh language? In the poem 'Letting the Light In' in your new collection, there is a very vivid image of 'The et cetera of terraces / like paragraphs of longhand / in the old language'. This reminds me of Seamus Heaney's comparison of hedges to scribble. This 'old language', though, 'a line of verse in Welsh from the Age / of Poets', which you elaborate on in the poem 'Welsh Gold' from the same collection, presumably harks back to the Bardic tradition and to Taliesin. How steeped are you in this? What is your attitude also to Welsh mythology which you incorporate into your poetry at times?*

G Clarke: Wales is a bilingual country, with more Welsh in some areas, and in

some families, than others. It's where I have always lived, it's my country, my background, my culture, and I know no other. Welsh is often called 'the old language', (known also as 'British', once the first language of almost the whole of Britain) but it is still spoken and written and was the first language of both my parents. Unfortunately my mother insisted on her daughters speaking only English. Welsh was the familiar language – my father always spoke it to his mother, who lived with us. But stories, rhymes, books and education were in English. Where I use Welsh in a poem it is because the Welsh word seems right. In 'Welsh Gold' the line you quote suggests a vein of gold like a line on an old manuscript, and it does, in that case, refer to the bardic tradition, and to Taliesin and Aneurin. Where I live now I hear Welsh every day. I have acquired Welsh as an adult, read and translate Welsh, and sometimes a Welsh word seems more natural than its English equivalent. Mythology was part of my story-world from the very start. My father placed the stories of the Mabinogion in the topography we inhabited, as if Bendigeidfran had set out that very morning to tow his fleet across the Irish Sea. I believed every word, and still do.

P McC: *You are obviously fascinated by language, 'stirred by song and story' ('A Recipe for Water'), and still, in your latest collection, 'wanting the words fresh' ('Library Chair'). In fact, the whole corpus of your poetry could be said to represent a study of language with its names, its litanies, its sounds, its images, its music. As you say in the new poem, 'The Accompanist', 'So the poem speaks / from the silence of the page'. Do you feel the language, or the singing, in your own poetry has evolved over the years? Has there perhaps been a shift from the more personal to the impersonal and, if so, has this been deliberate?*

G Clarke: Yes, I love language. It is the prime mover in my compulsion to write. It is difficult to speak of change in one's own work - I hope I still have the voice in which I wrote my first published poems. However, I think poets get better with practice, experience, reading and hearing other voices. As for a shift of subject, this is no doubt to do with living in a wider world than I did when I began to write, forty years ago in a house full of children. I travel now, and live in two places.

P McC: *Relating to the above, music of composers, of instruments and especially of garden birds that 'ring like a tambourine' such as the blackbird seems to be woven, like polyphonic strands, into your own poetic music. Can you explain in greater detail your love of music?*

G Clarke: This question takes me by surprise. Certainly I love sound, especially birdsong. Perhaps because my two sons are musicians, and my husband's ear for music is exceptionally alert, they allow me to be the family wordsmith, and I leave musical ability and taste to them. I hate background music and prefer silence or the ordinary sounds of daily life while writing: voices, birdsong, a tractor working

in the field over the hedge. However, sometimes at a live concert, or hearing the wind sing in a gate, I can be overwhelmed and all words are lost. I write radio plays, and dream of writing a play for radio with no words, only sounds. Well! Maybe just a few words!

P McC: *You write a lot about the rural life, and especially about sheep. Your moving sequence 'Making the Beds for the Dead' in the collection of that name about the foot and mouth virus in 2001 shows that you are still, as an adult, an integral part of that life, no outsider. This makes a change from poets such as Heaney, Montague, who use their childhood memories of being brought up on small Irish farms, but no longer live that rural life.*

G Clarke: My experience of the rural versus the city differs from Heaney's and Montague's. Their lives divided a rural childhood from a sophisticated, urban adulthood. My two lives ran concurrently. I was born and raised in and around Cardiff and brought up my children there, but spent my childhood reading about children running wild in the countryside, and all holidays 'at home' on my paternal and maternal grandparents' farms in north and west Wales. Thus I postponed my total commitment to the countryside until middle age. As the children left home, I gradually shifted my life west to a small long-house in Ceredigion we had owned since the '70s. Heaney was raised on a farm. I wasn't. In my childhood we 'went home' on holiday to Pembrokeshire, and as a young child I was dispatched to the heaven of my grandmother's farm by the sea to escape the bombs. For this reason I have always had inside me both the country and the city. I wrote 'Making the Beds for the Dead' in reaction to something that is uniquely British within Europe: the dichotomy between the country and the city. I wanted to tell the story of the bad handling of a terrible episode in our history. The situation was far better managed in Wales, where even in Cardiff most Welsh people have a link with the north and west of Wales, and the countryside remains a part of people's family history. My new book, *A Recipe for Water*, has much more of the city in it. There is another reason for the difference you mention: famous male poets are weaned from the life of their roots by academic life and prestigious university posts. Women with children must usually stay at home. I have never had a full-time job. I could not take a fellowship away from my children's home and school until they grew up, when I accepted the post of poet-in-residence at Lampeter, 15 miles from Blaen Cwrt, then our ruinous cottage, now our habitable home. We have a pad in Cardiff now too. I need the city and the country.

P McC: *Linking to the previous question, I notice the 'city' features, like a person, in A Recipe for Water. I also notice that the modern life with its headphones, computers etc. is creeping more and more into your poetry. You write a very witty poem, 'A T-Mail to Keats', saying that poets never die, for 'The old poetry drums in the living tongue'.*

G Clarke: The city sequence began when I was Capital poet for Cardiff in 2005-6, the city's centenary year. It evolved as a radio play. The City was the narrator in the drama. I love radio drama because it has the potential to be poetry. You can do anything on radio because the listener is your collaborator. It leaves space for the listener's imagination, as poetry does. As for headphones and computers: I'm the daughter of a BBC radio engineer, and have always loved the latest gadgets of communication: computers, mobile phones, dongles and digital radios. I had one of the first mobile phones, a car-phone, a monstrous box with a curly wire, kept in the car boot and plugged in when needed. I owned an early Amstrad, and used its language in a poem about the legendary Olwen, who left her white footprints where she walked. And yes, I long for science to untangle string theory and crack the mystery of time, so that we can send T-mails to dead poets, just as they still send their lovely lines across the centuries to us.

P McC: *There is a lovely balance, in your poetry, with your 'quicksilver tongue', between the elegiac and the celebratory. What special powers do you think poetry has in our present age?*

G Clarke: I have said elsewhere that a poem needs just one howl or halleluiah. I like to think that poetry can still catch the heart. What we call poetry first arose from spells and chants. The Bards had jobs as genealogists, remembrancers, and elegy and celebration held the tribe together. Poetry is natural. It's like song. People love rhythm and rhyme, are moved by language. They just need to be receptive and to listen in the right circumstances. You should hear the roars of approval a thousand teenagers make at Poetry Live, for example. If message and sound sing and the audience is open-hearted, it works. I just wish it could reach everyone.

Kites

A gilded initial. A pair. Four
following the combine over the barley,
a flaunt of raptors flexing tail and wings.
Flamboyance. Flames on air.

Sky and field are an open book
of land and light, flux and flair,
of air uttering the updraughts
and slipstreams of inflexion,

of flesh-hungry angels cleaning the field
after harvest, eyes arrowing earth
for the crushed and the bloody,
for the stopped heart.

Peter Carpenter interviews Zoë Brigley

Zoë Brigley was born in 1981 and was brought up in Caerphilly in the Rhymney Valley; she studied English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Warwick where she later became a postgraduate fellow, obtaining an MA (Gender and Literature). She is currently a lecturer in English and Creative Writing at the University of Northampton. Her poetry has been widely acclaimed; she won an Eric Gregory Award in 2003 and an Academi Bursary in 2005. Her first collection, *The Secret* was published by Bloodaxe in 2007; as Deryn Rees-Jones noted, this marked the arrival 'of a glittering and ambitious new voice'.

Peter Carpenter is the co-director of Worples Press (www.worplespress.co.uk; authors include two distinguished Welsh poets, Iain Sinclair and John Freeman); he has had four collections of poetry published, most recently *Catch* with Shoestring. He is a regular essayist and reviewer for *Poetry Ireland Review*, *London Magazine* and *Use of English*. He was the University of Reading writer-in-residence for 2007-08 and he has been a Visiting Arts Council Fellow at the University of Warwick since 2000; it was here that he first came across Zoë's work.

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Peter Carpenter: *When and how did your life as a writer begin? Were there particular contexts that helped to foster your writing?*

Zoë Brigley: My writing life began out of two things: a desire to please and a need to work out problems. It began when I was a child growing up in a single-parent family in South Wales. My mother and I were very close. She had written all her life. She was an organiser, a creative person who used to turn out feminist magazines on a rickety old printer in the 70s and 80s. She wrote two novels that have never been seen by anyone except me. Something held her back – maybe her working class roots and the feeling of uncertainty that gave her. But she has always been indomitable and passed on her love of poetry through performance and the teaching of hundreds of students including me. She wanted me to write and I did. The other side of things is perhaps a sense of loss that came inevitably from my mother and father divorcing and I tend to think that writing poetry in particular became a way of exploring my feelings. Things weren't easy in the 80s, but we came through it together and writing helped.

PC: *You are obviously fascinated by language as a thing in itself and you thank your mother specifically for imbuing a 'love of language'. Two questions. First: Welsh and/or English?*

ZB: That 'love of language' statement is more political than it might first appear. It is in fact a kind of joke that I was having with my mother and it originates from

the film version of Alan Bennett's play, *The History Boys*. There's a scene in the film where Hector, the flamboyant teacher of the 'history boys', describes how he didn't want to create students who would talk about 'the lure of language and their love of words. 'Words' said in that reverential way that is somehow Welsh.' In the film, the line is said with some distaste and I was quite shocked by the offhand prejudice of it. Many of the reviewers quoted this line, but I haven't seen any that challenged it. So many implications here about the Welsh – about their relation to language. The feeling that to describe a 'love of words' is somehow false and pretentious rather than genuine and serious and that this is all somehow bound up with Welsh 'reverence'. When I was thanking people, I knew that my mother would appreciate the gesture of mentioning 'a love of language', a gesture that captures not the idea of being a Welsh windbag, but the pleasure in continuing word-games begun in childhood.

Having said all this, perhaps there is some anxiety for the Welsh in writing in English: having to engage with the immense English poetic tradition, yet seeking something rather different. The English language is always most prominent for me though as my first language. More and more, *Cymraeg* is something that I really only know in snatches and clumps: half-remembered words, lines from poems, refrains from *Cymraeg* hymns and overheard conversation. I think that *Cymraeg* to me has often represented something beyond, something not quite lost but distant, certainly a kind of secret.

PC: *Second: has it remained a matter of 'love' or is it sometimes, as an artist, a love/hate relationship, something more like Eliot's account of the poet's wrangle with words in 'East Coker', every attempt a 'wholly new start', a 'different kind of failure'?*

ZB: I like the word 'failure' and I dislike the word 'perfection'. A friend of mine who writes poetry once told me that he was aiming for perfection in his work. But that idea gives me an odd feeling. It makes me think of Tennyson when he describes the quality of being 'Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null, / Dead perfection, no more.' I was thinking to myself, 'Aren't many wonderful things less than perfect?' Take for example, the armlessness of the Venus de Milo, Marilyn Monroe's mole or the unfinished manuscript of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'. I'm not trying for perfection, because, for me, some of the best poetry is flawed, incomplete or broken. Thinking about Eliot too, it's interesting that quite a few people have compared me to him. He certainly was a big influence. I love the incompleteness and fragmented aspect of his poetry and it's in these difficult moments where language is under strain that his poetry is at its best for me.

PC: *In The Secret there is a great deal to admire both in the craft and the design of the book. It is incredibly poised and accomplished. How long was it in the making?*

ZB: The book took five years to write. Until recently, I have felt quite annoyed

with myself for not working more quickly, because if you join a Creative Writing degree, as I did at Warwick University, you produce so much work as a student, that the normal pace of writing outside an institution seems intolerably slow.

PC: *Would you talk a little about the collection's tri-partite structure?*

ZB: The structure was really important. I like the feeling that each poem has its place and together, there is a kind of accumulation of meaning. The first section to emerge was 'The Lesser Secrets,' which includes what I call my 'European' poems that focus particularly on Western culture. Later, 'The Greater Secrets' developed which includes many poems that I wrote when travelling around Mexico and Guatemala. These poems are thinking more about what the West did beyond its own borders and the terrible legacy that remains. The third sequence continues this line of thought, but it has probably been the most controversial. Its title, 'The Curse of the Long-tailed Bird,' refers to the Aztec emperor, Montezuma, who according to the Mexicans had a premonition of the Spanish conquest when he was visited by a bird with a mirror in its crest. In the mirror, Montezuma saw troops marching towards Mexico. So there is this mythical story, but the bird came to represent the wealth and riches of Latin America. I was thinking of Eduardo Galeano's book, *The Open Veins of Latin America*, in which he outlines the pillaging of a continent and suggests that the exploitation of Latin America will only stop when the wealth of its natural resources are utterly depleted. The sequence itself melds the Western story of Bluebeard with the history of the Spanish conquest featuring Hernan Cortés as another bearded villain.

PC: *You make full use of the 'myth kitty' at your disposal – a re-working of the story of Blodeuwedd from 'The Mabinogion' (from the cover and opening epigraph onwards) rubbing shoulders with Julia Kristeva and Michel Foucault, for example. This not only fuses the ancient and modern (along the lines of Eliot's mythic method), but also embroils archetypal tropes, figures and narratives with commentators upon cultures and cultural inheritances. Thus you demand a lot of your readers in such dramas of simultaneous considerations. Would you talk a little about your 'method' and also expand a little upon your statement in the notes to the collection that 'as a writer, you are interested in intertextuality'?*

ZB: It's true. Intertextuality is important for me. I definitely see the world through every story that I've ever read. Mythology, folklore and the fairy-tale are particularly important to me, though not necessarily because I want to rewrite the old stories with a new political slant as many writers have done very successfully. What I want to do is take the symbolism of a story and use it to apply to a situation where it is particularly relevant. In *The Secret*, the stories that were important were the Welsh myth of Blodeuwedd, a woman of flowers who plots to murder her husband, and the story of La Malinche, an indigenous Mexican woman who joined Hernan

Cortés' ranks during the Spanish Conquest. There is a sense that the women in the book, who live in a contemporary world, are simply replaying these old stories of supposedly deceitful women who survive nevertheless.

The theorists used are usually telling stories of one kind or another. In *The Secret*, I quote Foucault to complement a narrative about sacrifice and pleasure, while a quotation from Freud is used to frame a poem about sexuality. I also use other sources: Mexican folksongs, a variety of other poets, a medical dictionary, a book on Parkinson's Disease, the Bhagavad-Gita and the Bible. I have always been interested in bringing things together that at first glance seem to be unrelated. It reminds me of Magritte's painting, *The Key to Dreams*, which features what seems to be a child's reading primer, except that the word does not match the picture. An image of a bowler hat is brought together with the word, 'Snow'; a portrait of a candle is subtitled with the word, 'Ceiling'; and so on. I remember seeing that painting and others like it and wondering whether it might be possible to create a poem where disparate objects were brought together. The result was the poem, 'Lonesome City Dweller'.

PC: *David Jones talks in his Preface to The Anathémata about the inevitability of an artist showing forth an 'inheritance' in any created work, yet he also makes it clear that such a work is never directly a product of the conscious will: 'Part of my task has been to allow myself to be directed by motifs gathered together from such sources as have by accident been available to me and to make a work out of those mixed data'. How far do you 'allow yourself to be directed' by the 'accident' of sources made available to you?*

ZB: I agree with this in a way. What I would say is that the unconscious sometimes directs us to things that we don't consciously know we are looking for. There is a kind of uncanniness sometimes in finding some motif, some lines or a description that plug in to the very thing that has been preoccupying you. I don't think that it is serendipity. Even when you think that you have found something by accident, you were seeking it all along.

PC: *Does it make a difference to you that readers have even a fleeting acquaintance with your source material? David Jones again: 'If one is making a painting of daffodils what is not instantly involved? Will it make any difference whether or no we have heard of Persephone or Flora or Blodeuedd?'*

ZB: I am in total agreement with Jones. Each of my poems is designed to stand alone. Some people who've read the collection become a bit obsessed with the intertextuality, but that extra layer of complexity that comes with using sources was never my primary concern in writing the poems but only a veneer.

PC: *The use of embroiled allusions makes you a kind of cultural guardian by default. Do you see yourself as such or is there something more playful at work too?*

ZB: I wouldn't cast myself in the role of cultural guardian, more as someone who takes joy in exploring cultures and their stories.

PC: *Many of your poems seem to have affinities to dreams (in sources, an interest in the irrational and the workings of the unconscious, motifs that work across sequences, narrative devices). This creates an artful tension given your powers of formal control. Would you care to talk about this?*

ZB: Dreams have been and are very important for my work. A significant time for me was when I studied psychoanalysis and read Freud's work on dreams and dream language. I read how Lacan described the strategy of dreamwork as being simply another form of metaphor and metonymy. What I try to do in my poems is encode 'reality' through dream language: a series of messages, images, symbols to be decoded. Dreams have inspired the content of poems too, like 'Our Lady of Snows' where a great white arm becomes a frozen river and in the paradoxical triplet of albino twins in 'Ten Fingers, Ten Thumbs'. Interestingly, a careful use of poetic form can lend itself very well to representing the dreams, so in 'Our Lady of Snows', the river/arm metaphor asserts itself again and again in the repetition of a broken villanelle like a recurring dream and 'Ten Fingers, Ten Thumbs' is dominated by a 20 syllable line that represents the disembodied digits. After all, dreams have forms and narratives even if they are unpredictable.

PC: *I thought that one of the collection's major ideas seemed to be some notion of the 'stranger within', ranging from Piaget's 'stranger experience' to Heaney's version of the 'inner émigré'. Thus the otherness of personal experience is often registered via defamiliarisation (political, cultural and linguistic). Does any of this ring true?*

ZB: You are right about the stranger, but the book that most influenced me most was Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*. The book is really about Western culture and how we deal with strangeness or foreignness in others and in ourselves. I like the book because Kristeva rejects the platitude, 'We're all human', which suggests we're all the same. We're *not* all the same and most of the time, we don't even know ourselves. Kristeva says that we can only reach a better understanding by accepting this strangeness and realising that we can't ever know each other fully and totally, just as we don't always understand our own selves and our motives for doing things. Kristeva says, 'If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners'.

PC: *How did the poems emerge in relation to the sequences we now find them in? Did the concepts for the sequences attract material or did the individual poems develop more organically into the structures?*

ZB: Having a structure is useful for me. Like solving a jigsaw or putting the chess pieces in the right place to find checkmate. Sometimes the poems are dictated by

the symbol and its place in the over-arching structure, but at other times poems simply emerge and fit in a more organic way. Having a double impetus to write though can be more generative.

PC: *I have many favourites among the three sequences, poems that stand alone however enmeshed in the contextual forces of the surrounding poems. I have chosen three, one from each section: 'Lonesome City-Dweller', 'The Serpent' and 'The Far Country'. All of them seem to be dealing with forces of violation, threat or isolation and ways of fending these off or accommodating them somehow. Would you like to talk a little about them?*

Lonesome City Dweller

*How poor are they that ha' not patience.
What wound did ever heal but by degrees?*

–William Shakespeare

She is the plain, the eclipse and ruined city
where we walk at dusk through these riverbank tunnels;
that rose in her buttonhole: a tomb for wrestlers.

On the skyline, the dome swells over flatter roofs,
tug-boats on the river and bright windows:
she is the moon and the pavement and stepping shoes.

The riverside cluttered with stalls selling books;
that puppet show features a wooden gentleman
with a bowler hat (from here darkness blooms).

She walks with me in the emptiness of crowds,
while I read that stranger's smile, this woman's frown:
I am the eye and the window and outstretched palm.

Earlier in the café we overheard talk
of her home country, more gossip of strife and death
and she stirred her long drink into a thunderstorm.

Under the bridge she is thinking of her mother:
that crossing in the ruins, that city pocked by gunshot.
She is the dark and desert and memory:
its walls invisible, its boundaries the sky.

ZB: OK, I'll start with 'Lonesome City Dweller'. As I mentioned, it began with an

exercise that I set myself to bring into association pairs of symbols that seemed to have nothing in common: a rose and a tomb, a bowler hat and darkness, a cold drink in a glass and a thunderstorm, a closed room and the sky. These symbols were then projected onto a story of a day spent in London with a friend. We were walking along beside the Thames on our way to an event, when she stopped under a bridge and told me how during World War Two, her mother had sheltered from gunfire under just such a bridge. So, yes, the poem is about fending off different kinds of threats and the form (originally a villanelle but now broken) circles around them: the threat that her mother faced, the threat of a memory that returned to my friend and a feeling that somehow it was my fault because of something I said that might have reminded her. Perhaps it is this sense of guilt that made me use Iago's words in Shakespeare's *Othello* for the epigraph, which are meant both ironically and sincerely. The writing of the poem was a way to make up for my mistakes. It was for this reason that I placed the poem tenth in the sequence to represent the Tarot symbol of Temperance. The poem overall admires the self-control of the woman depicted.

Day 5: Serpent

*I was angry with my foe
I told it not, my wrath did grow*
—William Blake

So we spent that first month near an orchard
where the fruit fell down for us to skin;
with teeth, fingers and knives we burrowed in,
we tunnelled in to be hated and tarred.
For women did not know our faces
and tension was keener in villages:
the elders all dead, young men prone to rages
tender and fearful for their birthplaces.
The grudge in them grew till it burst flower
and for us to pick that fig from the tree
was sunlight and cut glass, its trickery
setting the fruit trees ablaze, the tongue sour.
The apple and gun in these hands are mine
and dead is the foe who sees them shine.

'Serpent' is less personal than 'Lonesome City Dweller', because I was trying to work my way into a feeling rather than a personal experience. I was thinking about how most human cultures fear difference and the war in Iraq must have had some influence: the content describes a Western person in a foreign land. The poem is paired with 'Fish-eye' and both are versions of the sonnet, but where as 'Fish-eye' considers the viewpoint of someone being rejected,

hurt, spurned, 'Serpent' takes the perspective of the person who acts out the rejection, aggression, hostility. While 'Fish-eye' was a rewriting of the 'Hath not a Jew eyes' speech in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, 'Serpent' tries to recreate the feeling of 'The Poison Tree' by William Blake. Blake's poem is a very clever discussion of antagonism and I echo it in the final lines of 'Serpent': 'The apple and gun in these hands are mine / and dead is the foe who sees them shine.' The apple and gun work to suggest a different kind of original sin, where the crime is a lack of tolerance for difference, strangeness, foreignness. Yet this Biblical reading of intolerance is merged with Aztec mythology as the poem is positioned in day five of twenty day round in the Mayan/Aztec calendar. It is a day associated with the serpent, *coatl*, which also recalls the feathered serpent, Quetzalcoatl, for whom Cortés was mistaken on first arriving on his colonizing mission in Central America.

The Far Country

We had to get rid of a Communist government which had taken over.

Under the mountain were four thousand shafts,
now empty: the mossed peak slumps to dead stone,
abundant crags decline and topple.
Inside, they sweep out the seams with long brooms.

The blocked temple – its ambit from servitude to dynamo,
from powerhouse to slums –
exits flattened: a cathedral springs up in its place,
hanging gardens swell in its stead.

Dumb palm trees raise their heads at the prospect of cities;
sunflowers root themselves with cable,
the swift exchange between plant and bulb:
a letter sent to keep the bloodlines joined.

The spade founders, strikes the busy motor
entreating the dead earth. Flags raise their ruddy faces.
Sulphur gives way to frangipani, a loudspeaker opposes
her cupped hand.

'The Far Country' is in the same vein as 'Serpent', because I was writing at a time when I had been reading about US government interference in Latin America (again via Eduardo Galeano). It is part of 'The Curse of the Long Tailed Bird', which merges Cortés with Bluebeard and La Malinche with Judith. In writing this version, of the Bluebeard story, I draw on Béla Bartók's opera, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, where the heroine has to open not one but seven doors. This

door is the fifth and shows La Malinche the far country and the past and present of colonisation and imperialism. The epigraph is an explanation by Dwight D. Eisenhower for interference in the politics of Guatemala, but the admission was only made many years after the violence had happened. The poem was inspired too by a painting: *Self-portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* by the Mexican artist, Frida Kahlo. The painting shows Kahlo standing between symbols of Mexican and American culture; the sun and moon, a temple and indigenous sculptures represent Mexico, while the US is symbolised by the skyscraper, the factory and the light-bulb. In the earth under Kahlo's feet, the roots of the lush and velvety plants from the Mexican side connect with the wires that run the US's complex technology. This poem tries to explore the exploitation implied in the luscious Mexican plants that feed US industry. The threat in this poem is that of cultural decimation enacted by imperialist cultures and I don't really find a way of solving it, of accommodating it in the poem, because it is still carrying on even today.

PC: *The tale of Blodeuwedd mixes blessing and curse. Do you for example find that your writing practice is radically different when you are writing critical prose or reviews? Does the workaday stuff get in the way – I'm thinking of Ted Hughes, for example, for whom critical prose was a matter of murderous dissection, that he found very destructive in terms of his muse.*

ZB: I do quite a lot of the other kind of writing. I enjoy writing reviews, but I prefer the detail of in-depth critical prose. There is something a little unsatisfying about the cramped space and time of a review. Like trying to pack an elephant in your suitcase as quickly as possible. Writing in more detail can be very satisfying and although aspects of academia can be deadening, there are opportunities to create worthwhile projects. I am co-editing (with Sorcha Gunne) a collection of essays at the moment called *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives* to be published by Routledge. This is a project that taps into many of the themes in my poetry: gender, power, resistance, violence and antagonism for example.

PC: *Where do you see yourself in relation to 'Anglo-Welsh' poetic traditions? You seem to go right back to the notion of a Bard in your writing.*

ZB: Sorry to be awkward, but I don't like the term 'Anglo-Welsh'. It's too ambiguous and in the past, it was sometimes used as a stick to beat English language speakers in Wales. You only have to read Ned Thomas' *The Welsh Extremist* to see what I mean.

PC: *I wasn't advocating re-drawing the critical lines with a row of castles on the border. I was thinking more of any affiliations between you and figures such as Edward Thomas thus classified.*

ZB: Fair enough, but thinking about the role of what the Welsh would call a *bardd*, I'm not sure how I feel. If you go back to history of these court poets, their role was to 'sing' to the king about God or the monarchy, to provide heartening battles-songs and to generally entertain. I'm not sure that I'd like to be directed to such a narrow channel. Thinking about Welsh writing in English more generally though, there are many poets that I admire. From the well known poets, I enjoy R.S. Thomas' melancholic self-consciousness, Dylan Thomas for his use of joyful mourning and Gillian Clarke for the sense of oceanic feeling or interconnectedness in her poems. Many of the new Welsh poets are writing as they are now because of these three greats.

PC: *Who have been and are your biggest influences? This might extend to a discussion of the arts in general given the prevalence of visual and musical notation and sources in your writing.*

ZB: In terms of poets, I started as a child with Romantic and Victorian poetry (Coleridge, Keats, Rossetti, Hardy) and then moved on to the Welsh poets I mentioned. As a teenager, I enjoyed Afro-American women poets for their confidence and their rejection of the passive voice and at university, I discovered intensity of metaphor and language (Marina Tsvetaeva, Mina Loy, Rainer Maria Rilke). More recently, I returned to Welsh poetry, having written my PhD thesis on Gwyneth Lewis, Pascale Petit and Deryn Rees-Jones, who are all poets with an interest in overcoming gendered and/or cultural differences.

I can be quite a visual poet and this probably stems from my interest in art and my love of film. In terms of art, I've mentioned Magritte and Kahlo, but film in particular has been such an influence that I wonder whether I should devote some poems to the films that have influenced me most. Flavours of certain films do colour poems from *The Secret*, so that the monotones of Andrew Grieve's *On the Black Hill* and Danny Boyle's *Mr Wroe's Virgins* emerge in 'Blodeuwedd', 'Our Lady of Snows' has icy shades of David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* and 'Lonesome City Dweller' is bound up with a dizzy intensity and eccentricity that is not unlike the films of Powell and Pressburger, in particular those in colour such as *The Red Shoes* or *Black Narcissus*.

Popular culture in general is a source of inspiration for me, because it has a kind of brutal energy and liveliness. I love detective novels, especially the hard-boiled variety (Chandler, Hammett, McBain and Spillane), for their wit and for the powerful self-assurance of the protagonists. I also enjoy tales of the American West, a favourite of mine being *True Grit* by Charles Portis, in which a young slip of a girl, Mattie Ross, dominates the adults of the book with her indomitable personality. Some Westerns also seem to be about survival and the acceptance of death and loss. Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing* and the story of a young man's journey with a pregnant wolf was one of the most moving novels that I have ever read. Other types of novels of interest are those that reinvigorate the Arabian myth of Scheherezade and the act of telling a tale every night to survive. Isabel Allende's *House of the*

Spirits is a novel in this vein that has particularly influenced me especially with regard to how Allende deals with the themes of family, violence and gender.

PC: *Where is your work going? Another concept album? Or a series of hit singles? What's next for your readers?*

ZB: It's continuing in the same direction. I'm still trying to work out how to overcome that fear of difference, of the unknown, but more recently I have been working it out more in terms of gender than culture. My current project has been working with the Brontë Parsonage in Haworth to create some poems inspired by belongings of the three Brontë sisters kept in the museum archives. The nineteenth-century is particularly interesting to me as a period of British Empire, of the struggle for the rights of women and the working class. I hope at some point to write some poems using archive material from the wonderful Warwickshire archives, where they have some fascinating documents such as the admittance book for Hatton Asylum and a 'Known Thieves' book from the Birmingham constabulary.

I would also like to write some poems that recycle the symbolism of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales. I have been re-reading them recently and the bleak resignation of his stories never fails to move me.