

**Interview with Jacqueline Saphra for Fire River Poets**  
**Jacqueline reads as our guest poet on Zoom on Thurs Feb 17<sup>th</sup> 2022**

**Graeme Ryan:** Could I maybe jump straight in and ask you about the process of writing **One Hundred Lockdown Sonnets**? They are a very impressive achievement. Did you sometimes work on more than one different version of each day? How easily did each come to you? I find their trains of thought articulate many things I felt at the time and sometimes didn't know I was feeling - very sobering to be taken back to the height of the first lockdown and the dread apprehension we all felt. The sonnet form works perfectly as a container for all this.

**Jacqueline Saphra:** The hundred sonnet project was not planned in advance and I was definitely not aiming for publication. I wanted to find something to keep me busy, to anchor and process the situation of lockdown and I did try a couple of days of journal writing but it was heavy and dull. I'd done some sonnet challenges before - starting with a facebook group set up by Seraphima Kennedy where we were invited to write a sonnet a day for Lent, so I knew I could turn out something every day. I just grabbed whatever was to hand on any given day, often something in the newspapers but quite frequently a feeling or a personal circumstance. Sometimes I really had to scabble around for material - the ekphrastic work came in handy there. It was often frustrating and agonising; so some sonnets came super-quickly but most were hard-won. I got to fifty and nearly stopped, but the thought of being without them was quite frightening. I didn't rework any until after they were all written and then I spent about six months going through them, trying not to use the benefit of hindsight and keep to what I understood and knew at the time each one was written. That was challenging. A lot of time revising was spent on the final couplets of the Shakespearean sonnets; that for me is always the hardest part - finishing the poem but making it convincing and natural somehow, like it's the only two lines that could possibly end the poem, growing it out of whatever came before. That can take days. Kind of aaaagh and grrrrr days. I love the way the sonnet can help you give shape to a feeling and/or a thought (ideally both) and that there is more than one type of sonnet, and you can create your own version. But the sonnet as container helps to give structure to the un-structurable (is that a word?) Obviously I'm happier with some than others but I always accepted this book would be highly imperfect because of its genesis. I'm often surprised when I re-read some of the sonnets that remind of times I had forgotten altogether.

You probably know that originally the book was published as a limited edition hardback - 1000 copies - and we raised over £2000 for The Trussell Trust. That is probably what I am most proud of.

**GR:** Thanks again for your illuminating responses to my first question about **One Hundred Lockdown Sonnets**, they provide fascinating insights.

I wonder if you would mind my quoting one in its entirety to give readers an idea of your approach and the way your material is so memorably held by the sonnet form. I was thinking of Sonnet V. Would that be OK?

**Sonnet V            27<sup>th</sup> March 2020**

*'Global cases pass 500,000. Health secretary and Prime Minister test positive for coronavirus' BBC News*

What can a poem do? What use are words?  
The glassy river barely speaks today,  
Undisturbed by human vessels, left to the birds.  
Even the muse has nothing left to say.  
O, winged and wayward creature: open, shut  
By turns, depending on the weight of air,  
The dredge of dreams, the long lurch of the heart,  
I need your song to tell me where you are.  
Give me a lift! Throw me a line! Let me out!  
I swear I'll keep my distance from the others,  
Grim and grounded in the library of doubt.  
Find me in the stacks among the feathers  
Searching for a cure where there is none,  
Pacing the white shelves of my lexicon.

Secondly, I'm struck by the political rage about our leaders that you channel in some of these sonnets, eg Sonnet XLIX 10th May 2020 about the government slogan: Stay Alert. Control the Virus. Save Lives, or Sonnet LXIV 25th May 2020 about Dominic Cummings, plus the ones about Trump and Johnson. These seem to me to work really well - it's refreshing to read such well-written political poetry ! Did the sonnet form and the rhyme scheme, the sheer craft that is required to write them, help to frame these and to guard against straying into polemic? By the way, I love Sonnet XCIII where you parody the escapist jingoistic mood as lockdown is relaxed on 23rd June 2020:

*Truss up the doomish gong,  
whizzo to the markets, dodgit clink and deal,  
make moony! what could irkily go wrong?*

I think you weave together in a very unforced and seamless way domestic details, environmental concerns, vulnerability, fragments of biography and great humanity in these poems. As Van Morrison sang: *If my heart could do the thinking and my head begin to feel*. You do this beautifully in **One Hundred Lockdown Sonnets**. They are a wonderful achievement.

Now onto **Dad, Remember You are Dead**. This book seems to me a monumental achievement and I find myself hesitating at its threshold. Its unflinching and excoriating exploration of your relationship with your father stopped me in my tracks more than once.

From **Offal**

...My father claimed he'd only strayed  
because he wasn't getting laid.  
He tweaked his squeaky hearing aid  
and groped his wife again  
His recent ex – a lifelong prude  
Refused to screw him in the nude  
He sighed while getting slowly stewed  
On gin in Seething lane ...

My father coughed *I'm not so young  
but look, at last I've found the One!*  
He didn't see the devilled tongue  
go flaccid with disdain  
nor spy my mother decades dead  
her halo pale her lipstick red  
crash in and hover overhead  
to gloat at Seething Lane...

From **My Father's Parts**

...Two twigs of legs with feet attached  
stamp in the hall. They are stronger  
than they look.

One head suspended in midair  
floats about the house. It can spin  
on its axis three hundred and sixty  
degrees at infinite speed.

One mouth suck-sucks down the  
on the hunt for contact, wet  
lips pinking and putting to the wish  
of a kiss on the lips, not on the cheek...

From **The Hinges Are Broken**

...I'm longing to run but I flinch and I grovel.  
You think that this poem  
will make you immortal?

It isn't for you. My door isn't open –  
don't crash in again with one of your rages.  
The hinges are broken

but here you are blotting these pages  
again. Stop looking stop groping  
there aren't any poems in Hades  
if that's what you're hoping.

**From you don't have to be wise you do not have to be kind you don't have to be right you do not have to be good**

& that revelation is like a cold shower after  
you've been stuck in the pot for years after boiling  
your loveable self to death until you notice  
there's a ladder for climbing out & out you climb...

What a journey of rage and liberation you take the reader on. This is what poetry is for!

The poems are obviously a lifetime in the making, but did you write them in their final form in the past few years?

- Could you share a little of the book's genesis in its present form?
- Have you found it healing to write them? The purity and integrity of the rage blazes through, the wounds also.
- Misogyny, fathering and male entitlement are threads that run through the book. You also write about the female Italian Renaissance painter Artemisia Gentileschi and use her painting *Lot and His Daughters* as your front cover image. Could you share a few thoughts with us about these things in relation to the poems?
- I'm struck by the variety of forms in the book and your command of them. It's an exhilarating ride! Do the forms suggest themselves to you as you write or in advance? Is it often about the particular voice the poem speaks with?

I feel these questions don't quite measure up to the heft power of the book and may be intrusive, but hopefully they are a way in for our readers.

Immense thanks for agreeing to this 'interview.' I hope it's not too onerous - I can imagine there are many demands on your time.

So looking forward to your reading! I'd love to hear Offal as well - there are loads I'd love to hear, including some of the lockdown sonnets mentioned too.

**JS:** I always find it fascinating the way that different people choose different sonnets in the collection. When I organised the launch, I had five poets reading their own work and asked each to choose one of my sonnets to read, and there were no

overlaps in the choices at all. Thanks for your very kind and thoughtful response to the book.

**Dad, Remember You Are Dead** has many people hesitating at its threshold, especially men, and some never really make it through the door! Many have said the book scares them and some have been at pains to tell me they are not like that (!). It's a tough read and a bit of a marmite book I think.

To answer your really brilliant questions:

I had written quite a few of the poems before my Dad died in 2016, and there remaining ones came about in a rush between 2016 and 2019. In May 2016, about a month after my father died, I went on a walking retreat at The Hurst, one of the Arvon houses and had a couple of mentoring sessions with David Morley, who gave me - I suppose - permission to be angry and transgressive - but more crucially suggested that the poem '**Burial**' which I wrote during long walks (you can probably hear the walking rhythm) on that retreat, would be a good model to use intermittently through the book - you'll probably have noted the metre recurring in different poems, which came later.

'The father is fallen his flesh turns to grass  
and the bones in the barrow lie silent and still

but death is a liar and phantoms live long  
and they die and they don't and they gurn in our guts

as we dream in the dust and we suck up the scum  
where the pen will not mend the end will not come -'

I had a three week retreat in Suffolk completely alone in the summer of 2018 where I had a list of tasks, revisions and new poems I'd set myself to write. It was a very intense, very fruitful time - I long for that kind of experience again, where it is clear what the work needs to do, so it's just a case of getting on and doing it. That comes along so rarely!

I often say the book was an exorcism. After my father died, leaving his financial and personal affairs in disarray, pairing me with some difficult people to deal with all that - there were a couple of very challenging years of coming to terms with him and his life. The poetry probably saved me! I feel thoroughly purged of pain and rage when I think of him now, which is a pretty good result. Do bear in mind though, that the poems are not memoir, they are poems, and I am concerned only with emotional, as opposed to literal truth or facts. That's true of all my poetry.

I realised, after I'd started pulling the book together that it was definitely more than just a book about my father, as you say. I wanted to widen it out, looking at the historical, political, systemic misogyny we all know has been around for, well,

Millennia. How could I do that? One way was definitely ekphrasis. I've always enjoyed responding to art (hence my book about Lee Miller, **A Bargain with the Light** and also some of the poems in 100 sonnets) and I thought about Lot and his daughters, remembering a painting by Artemisia Gentileschi. I began to look at her and her life, and in particular her depiction, and other depictions, of that scene in the cave that of course goes all the way back to the Old Testament which is one of the roots of our problems IMO. There are some really disturbing and explicit images on the internet of that - all by male painters of course, who are still exploring it right up to present day. And then just as I'd taken issue with Epstein in my poem '**Spunk**' in **All My Mad Mothers**, I decided to take issue with Yeats because I've always hated 'Leda and the Swan'. This felt very transgressive indeed; arguing with the great William Butler Yeats whose poetry I admire so much. I've blogged about both these poems.

<https://ninearchespress.blogspot.com/2019/09/in-conversation-jacqueline-saphra.html>

<https://jacquelinesaphra.wordpress.com/in-which-i-tell-a-tale-of-spunk-and-reclaim-the-word-vulgar/>

**GR:** Yes, **Spunk** and **Leda and the Swan** are both incredible, essential works – they have the absolute force of truth in them – a moral authority and laser-focused necessary rage – it would be fantastic to hear you read them both on Feb 17<sup>th</sup>.

**JS:** This all led to a sequence of poems about Artemisia's work, '**Veritas: Poems after Artemisia**' which was published by Hercules Editions. I'm always on the lookout for collaborators, dead or alive!

You could read '**Access all Areas: Form and Revolution**' published by Hercules Editions which is the transcript of the annual lecture I gave for StAnza last year, which addresses your question about form. But in a nutshell, I can't see why we wouldn't want to explore every possible way into poetry, from fixed forms to open forms and prose poems and hybrids. Usually the form suggests itself somewhere in the writing process, unless - as in 100 Lockdown Sonnets, or Veritas, I have set out to use it. I personally find given forms both liberating and containing and as you've probably gathered, the sonnet is my favourite because it is a kind of template that gives shape to both thought and feeling at the same time but you can also mess with it - tighten or loosen as required, stick to the rules or break them, as long as you understand what you are messing with, and why you are messing with it. (At the moment I'm writing a triolet a day for January: most of them are terrible, but the ongoing practice is a great way to learn about the form from the inside and understand its mechanics).

**GR:** Thanks for all your thoughts on this. I've now received **Access all Areas** (thank you!) and you make a compelling case for exploration of as many poetic

forms as possible and the imaginative territories they can open up; they way they often take the writing into new places, which is where the poetry happens. I can see the fruits of this in abundance in **Dad, Remember You are Dead**. I also love the Robert Frost quote you give: 'No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader' – that is a touchstone.

I haven't even touched on **All My Mad Mothers** – another whirlwind, blazing incredibly inventive and just wonderful ride. I've opened it at random on **My Friend Juliet's Icelandic Lover**

'...came back to find you

topless, glowing, perched  
on that blue, blue glacier wide enough  
to span the narrow hall,  
and the flat filled with the smell of him:  
putrified shark, sulphur, crowberry and ice.'

Every page has such imaginative treasures. And great wit too! You have such a listenable-to voice and a knack of creating wonderful worlds of meaning - I'm in awe of your craft, not least because it is seamlessly integrated into what you are saying. A poem like **Mother. Son. Sack of Salt** does what Heaney talks about in that famous essay of his about the incident in *The Prelude* when Wordsworth imitates an owl call and an owl calls back - and then the silence comes, when the mountains speak beyond both poet and owl.

I'd love to explore it at more length with you but I suppose we need to wrap this interview up shortly. All I would say to anyone is: read Jacqueline Saphra's work!

**JS:** Thanks so much; it's not often that I get to respond to such thoughtful questions from someone who's really paid close attention to the poetry and it's been a real pleasure to answer you.

**GR:** To conclude, I wonder if you might venture some short replies to these questions?

**What's one of the first poems that spoke to you?** As a adult returning to poetry a couple of decades ago, I was immensely moved by the intense and evocative 'Eden Rock' by Charles Causley. This is a metric, rhyming poem but you wouldn't necessarily notice that. About loss, grief, death but also life!

**When did you first realise poetry was your calling?** Probably when I was a small child, four or five, if I'd listened properly. I loved to read to it and also to write it. But it took me several decades of film and theatre writing to come back around to it.

**Do you still write plays?** My most recent play, **The Noises**, was a one-woman play - written in the voice of a dog (!) - that was on at The Old Red Lion in London in 2019 and nominated for a Standing Ovation award. My daughter Tamar directed it - a

great honour and pleasure - and it was funded by ACE and the TS Eliot Foundation. I loved returning to theatre of course but not sure I have the time to devote to scripts that may not ever see a theatre now that I am more conscious of my own mortality - it all takes so long!. The great thing about poetry is that it is alive once it is on the page and requires no money, permission or infrastructure to fully exist.

**Who would you invite to your dream dinner party?** Well, I've never been the sort of person who wants to meet my famous idols - the art may be great but the people may not be. So it'd have to be my family and my closest friends because they are all inspiring, interesting, engaged and empathic people and I love them.

**If you could spare the works of only three Desert Island poets from the waves, who would they be?** (I know, impossible question...) It is impossible and I might say something different tomorrow, but for now: Lucille Clifton, Edna St Vincent Millay and Tony Hoagland.

**GR:** Thanks doesn't really do justice to your generosity with this interview, Jacqueline. It has been an absolute privilege. Our readers are immensely grateful to you for all you have shared with us.

Can't wait for your reading on **February 17<sup>th</sup> at 7.30pm!**

**More details on the Fire River Poets website. The Zoom link will be sent a day or so before.**