Shadowy, mopey figures who hang about in the dark: an interview with Anna Cathenka

**Poet Anna Cathenka, who took her MA at the University of East Anglia, has seen two new publications of her poetry this year: *Dead Man Walking* (New Fire Tree Press) and *They Are Really Molluscs* (Salo Press). She recently read at Poetry Presents in Falmouth.**

Rupert Loydell: *Congratulations on the new books. Tell me about the poems, each a poem about a part of David Bowie's body, that are in* Dead Man Walking*. You spoke at your reading about how moved you were by his death.*

Anna Cathenka: Thank you Rupert! It’s been strange to revisit the poems again. I wrote them in 2016, fairly soon after Bowie died, and coming back to them now I’m surprised at how grief-stricken they are. I didn’t realise that so much at the time, I just needed to write something to figure out how I was feeling about Bowie dying. The book is dedicated to my friend Emily, who I discovered Bowie with when I was about fifteen and with whom I later saw Bowie play live. After his death Emily said that she couldn’t believe he had been cremated, couldn’t get over his body not existing any more, and that was the thing that became the focal point for these poems. The strange thing when an idol dies, and I remember it too when Joe Strummer passed away, is feeling grief for a person who has had such a big influence on your life, but who you’ve never had a person-to-person relationship with. In one of my poems the speaker, a crazed Bowie fan called Simon, dissects Bowie’s body but finds that his fingers can still play the piano. He writes ‘how can he be dead if he can sing Dancing in the Streets at my command?’ So it’s hard to know how to grieve for a pop idol, because although you’re devastated they aren’t on this planet anymore, you still have the music that means everything to you.

RL: *That kind of obsession and really going into subject for a group of poems came through in some of the other poems you read in Falmouth. You managed to weave sexuality and biological references together to produce sensual, erotic, and occasionally rather forthright, texts. They seemed rooted in lists and juxtaposition – is that fair?*

AC: Yes, I’ve got another book coming out in December with Salo Press called *They Are Really Molluscs* which uses the pseudo-scientific language of the old Warne Observer’s Books natural history series to explore personal identity. I think our desire to categorise plants, animals and rocks is concurrent with the problematic desire to categorise each other and ourselves, which was a neat little metaphor for me to work with. In terms of the more sensual and erotic side of the poems, well of course that naturally goes hand in hand with ideas about identity, but it’s also my own little joke about natural observation. There’s something incredibly voyeuristic about the entomologist or the zoologist, I think. One of the poems I read is called ‘Moths’ and begins ‘I am going to use moths in this poem as a metaphor for my prevailing sexualities...’ well, I just think moths are very sexy. People who are like moths are very sexy too: those shadowy, mopey figures who hang about in the dark but are always striving for the light. I think that’s why moths get used in poetic metaphors all the time, poets appreciate them especially.

RL: *How do you feel about foregrounding desire and lust, the human body? I think some listeners at the reading were a little taken aback in places!*

AC: Oh good, I’m glad. Shock is a fast-track to a memorable reaction and a memorable reaction is, as an artist, something you’re always hoping to give to your audience. Although you obviously want there to be more to it than that. I do wonder what remains shocking about desire, lust and the human body though? I think it might be something to do with vulnerability. I don’t find it shocking when I’m in control of it but when I’m on the audience’s side I too find it a little uncomfortable sometimes. And how do I feel about foregrounding that? A bit embarrassed, actually! Physicality and sexuality are things which I’m confident about in my writing but not in my day-to-day life, so when I have to talk about it as me, and not as poet-me, I blush a little. But I’m pleased I am able to write about it in my poetry, because it’s important and human and honest, and I think Bowie would approve.

RL: *I don't want to overdo the obsessional side, there's a playful side to your work too, isn't there? The Bowie book is not only downright surreal in places but also includes a poem where you present the rules for an impossible game, with lots of references to the body parts of other well-known musicians. It's one of my favourites.*

AC: Thanks, it’s one of my favourites too! Yes, my work is incredibly playful, and I think poetry audiences often struggle with that. Is it OK to laugh at a poem? I think people are increasingly realising that it is, but some audiences still feel uncomfortable with it, still feel they should be nodding their heads and looking wistful. Comedy is often overlooked as shallow but, in fact, I think it’s one of the most profound aspects and outlets of the human condition. Not just human, actually, my dog had a brilliant sense of humour. I also thought it was very important to be funny in a book about Bowie, because he was, by all accounts, a very funny man. I think that humour is there in his work too and, like poetry, is often overlooked.

RL: *And later in the Bowie sequence, although you present it as excerpts of abstract sounds and utterances rather than meaningful lyrics from his songs (or 'Bronchopulmonary Segments'), there's a sound poem, very akin to some of your previous work? I remember at one point you got very excited by sound poetry! Is that area still of interest to you?*

AC: Yes, and again it interests me because it’s funny. It makes an absurdity of language, and I like to make an absurdity of the things I love. I think absurdity is the outcome of deep interrogation. I’m a big fan of Bob Cobbing, who influenced the sound poetry I previously did. I like him because he’s hilarious and deadly serious all at once. Just like life. I’ve played with sound poetry less, recently, but we’re doing a ‘dada disco’ for my launch of the Salo Press pamphlet next month so maybe I’ll read ‘David Bowie’s Bronchopulmonary Segments’ at that.

RL: *What has academic study been like for you, especially the move to specialism in your MA?*

AC: Before I took my degree I worked in social support and wrote promotional film scripts. Any poetry I wrote stayed in my bedroom, and was very badly informed. My undergraduate degree changed my life immeasurably, and I couldn’t list any single thing about it that was solely responsible for supporting me on my MA. I learnt to consider my audience, and that has been incredibly important for me. I also learnt how wonderful it is to have a community of writers around you, to influence and support you, and I also discovered critical theory, which has had a big impact on what I write, and a whole world of avant-garde, process-driven, 'experimental' writing that has impacted on *how* I write. What changed my life though, and what has kept me moving forward in my work, was thinking of myself, and being thought of by others, as a writer. Getting a place on an undergraduate degree in Creative Writing gave me permission to do the thing I loved.

RL: *How do you feel about giving poetry readings? Do you simply voice what you have previously written, or perform what's on the page?*

AC: I love it. Although actually, I was feeling particularly fragile at the reading you saw in Falmouth and definitely had to work against that in my performance. I think the way a poet reads is vitally important. The poet Andrew Fentham, who I believe read at the Poetry Presents series a few weeks ago, was the first person to make that clear to me. He’s a magnificent reader. We should be teaching poets how to read on Creative Writing courses. I think it’s as important as how it’s structured on the page – it’s how the audience encounters the work! I went to a Steiner school so reciting verse and singing were all part and parcel of my school education, which has probably helped. My friend Cai Draper, who I studied with at UEA and who is a wonderful performer, told me I was ‘master of the dramatic pause’ and I’d be happy to have that on my headstone.

RL: *Could you tell us about what you are doing for your doctorate? Creatively and academically.*

AC: I’m not actually doing a doctorate. I was all set to, and had my supervisors lined up and my proposal ready to go, but I realised I was just doing it because I thought I should, and not because I really wanted to. I was going to write about queer ekphrasis academically, and object-focussed processes creatively, but now I don’t know. I might still do that but I want to give myself some time to get a good project together. Also, I need to work for a year or two. I’m the only person that supports me financially, so sometimes I have to take things a bit slower than I’d like to.

RL: *And away from your research what are you currently reading and writing for pleasure?*

AC: To be honest, I’m a little exhausted after just finishing my MA. I am still writing, nearly every day, but I’m not working on a specific project. I’m trying to incorporate the more confessional, personal work I experimented with during my MA with the more process-based work that interested me before coming to UEA. Which is quite a nice thing to be doing, actually. In terms of reading: everything and nothing. I got really into Gertrude Stein on the MA and am still dipping in and out of her. I recently went to the launch of Sophie Robinson’s book *Rabbit.* Robinson taught me on the MA so I may be biased but her reading of the final poem in the book, ‘Art in America’, blew me away. I’ve been savouring the rest of *Rabbit* and enjoying it immensely. I recently read *Pond* by Claire-Louise Bennett and I thought it was fucking brilliant. If my desk is anything to go by I’m currently reading Allen Ginsberg (who I’m teaching to sixth formers at the moment), Chris Kraus’s *Social Practices*, Audre Lorde’s ‘mythobiography’, *Poemland* by Chelsea Minnis and several issues of Calvin and Hobbes. In fact, yes I am working on a project at the moment, that’s what the Calvin and Hobbes is for – watch this space! I thought Sarah Cave’s *Like Fragile Clay* which came out recently was beautiful, and I’m looking forward to discovering new authors in *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem*, which came out today. I enjoyed seeing Sean O’Brien read at the Cornwall Contemporary Poetry Festival while I was in Falmouth and have been reading him a bit more as a result of that. I loved his poem ‘The Chase’ in his most recent book *Europa*, which tirades on the abandoned, wasteland pubs of my native West Midlands. It’s masterful and accurately describes the Midlands as ‘the excluded middle’. I could go on about my recent reading pleasures, but I’ll stop now.

RL: *And finally, any words of wisdom for creative writers?*

AC: When I was studying at Falmouth University the comedian Stewart Lee came and gave a talk about writing. He suggested finding something that you love, working out how they do that, and then applying that process to your writing. In his instance it was jazz, how the musicians start off a piece extremely tightly and then appear to lose control before bringing it all back together at the end – messing with the trust of the audience, I suppose. I still haven’t quite worked that out in terms of my own writing yet but I thought it was an interesting way to go about things.

RL: Thank you for allowing me to interrogate you.

AC: You let me talk about myself for five whole pages – the pleasure is entirely mine.

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