

Hello Moniza

My name's Graeme Ryan and you kindly sent me two of your books as the basis for an 'interview', in advance of your Zoom reading for us at Fire River Poets in May. Thank you so much for sending them, and for being happy to answer a few questions.

Firstly, having just read both **Blackbird, Bye Bye** and **At the Time of Partition** I feel as if I know you!

I must confess the only other poem I had previously read of yours was 'Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan', from when I was an English and Drama teacher. I really like that poem, but having read the two collections you sent I can see whole new worlds in it - and now what a wonderful gift to come across such a stunning, compelling poet and have more collections of hers to explore.

'If need be, to shake off this hardened sadness,  
I'll hail, on the threshold of hidden forests,  
a haphazard flock of red and green parrots  
to crack open my soul in sparks of light.'

*To The Birds (after Jules Supervielle)*

Love that!

You write beautifully. I sat in our cabin at the bottom of the garden this morning and read nearly half of '**In the Time of Partition**' out loud to my wife because I so needed to share it.

So...my first question is

**G: Moniza, having been so moved and completely captivated by At the Time of Partition, I would love to know a bit about your childhood and your parents; when you first came to UK - and where (Bridlington?) Do you have any memories of early childhood in Lahore - and what are your first memories of the UK?**

**M:** Thank you for the message. I'm so glad you enjoyed the poems so much. I'm delighted! It's really great that you quoted from a Supervielle version as attempting these has meant a lot to me... Thank you for your opening question.

I first came to the UK with my parents when I was just a few months old, so I have no real memories of Pakistan from then. Actually we came to Hatfield in Hertfordshire where my English mother had grown up. (The Bridlington of the poem was where my father went to visit a friend soon after coming to England some years earlier and experienced the cold climate here in a big way!) Actually my parents met in England. My Pakistani father came here as an apprentice in the 1940s. They married here, and then went to live, in the end only for a short time, in Pakistan where I was born. Much of what I've written that relates to Pakistan

and India is based on my imaginings, family stories, and whatever else I've gleaned since childhood.... When I was growing up in Hatfield in the 1950s and 60s, Pakistan seemed so exotic, like a fantasy, somewhere unattainable, that I might never even visit. People didn't travel abroad so much then.

**G: When do you first remember poetry having an impact on you?**

**M:** I did have, as a small child, a poetry book that had been my mother's when she was a child – given to her, I see now, in 1941. It's called *A Joyful Book of Verse for Children*. It doesn't have a publication date inside it, but I've just googled it and it's thought to have been published in the 1920s. I think this was my first encounter with actual poetry and it did have an impact. The way you put it, 'made an impact' is a good one, like a slight shock. There was an excitement about these poems that weren't modern at all, but seemed as old as fairy tales. There were poems by Blake, Tennyson, Lewis Carroll and Robert Graves, for instance. Not particularly joyful poems, but enchanting. The illustrations are small, black and white, perhaps woodcuts. Each poem was a like a little world entire, which wasn't really small at all, but suggested a huge one, and each of these worlds was very different. I think many of the poems did appeal to me strongly and with openings such as 'Break, break, break, / On thy cold grey stones, O Sea!' or 'Faster than fairies, faster than witches' they made a claim on me – I couldn't ignore them. They were all rather urgent, adventurous, rousing poems. I remember liking the drama of Tennyson's 'Echo Song': 'The splendour falls on castle walls / And snowy summits old in story' and 'The long light shakes across the lakes, / And the wild cataract leaps in glory.' This was a place I wanted to be, in my imagination anyway.

**G: When did first you start writing, and do you remember any of your early poems - or lines from them?**

**M:** I thought all poetry sounded like this poetry from the past. This did make it hard to write anything that sounded like my own! We didn't read poetry in primary school at all as far as remember. I did write one once, of my own volition, as part of a project on the planets. I think this was my earliest attempt. The first lines were: 'On Mars I would meet some terrible creature / and because of her spikes be unable to reach her.' I definitely thought a poem had to rhyme. I can't remember the rest of the poem. I did feel very pleased that I'd rhymed 'creature' with 'reach her', and was a bit disappointed when I gave it to my teacher and he didn't say anything at all, as far as I remember!

**G: Did you resolve to be a poet, or did poetry come to you in another way - what would you say are some formative experiences - or poems - that made you into a poet?**

**M:** I didn't resolve to be a poet any stage at all. It's hard to think of myself as a poet. I think of myself as someone who writes. I did, as a teenager, wonder, very

fleetingly, if I could be 'a writer' because I always loved writing, any kind of writing stories, poems, writing about books. I had no idea how you became one, so I soon left the idea behind. I think I must have been subliminally influenced by all the poetry we read at school. We were lucky because we were introduced to a wide variety from Hopkins, D.H. Lawrence, Dylan Thomas, Edward Thomas to Adrian Mitchell, to name a few. I was interested in the example of Chinese poetry we read where the language was very simple and conversational. It gave me the idea that poetry was something I could experiment with. I don't remember reading women poets then, but that didn't stop me thinking I could try because we were encouraged to write poems by our teacher at secondary school.

When I was sixteen I joined a local poetry group. I found this exciting, especially as there were writers of all ages and it was really welcoming. They also had a printing press and that was a whole new world. I didn't write poems in my twenties. Then later on, looking at my dreams, I became interested in the unconscious, my imagination and where poems could come from. This made me think writing could be an adventure and catch that which was at the back of your mind.

**G: Thanks for these vivid and fascinating responses about your early encounters with poetry!**

**My next question moves on to At the Time of Partition, a collection which I find a haunting, compelling benchmark for writing about family history and the personal consequences of historical events, in this case the formation of Pakistan, carved out of the Indian sub-continent, in 1947 : the shockwaves of displacement and resettlement for your grandmother. You evoke this with immense power, fidelity and moral courage, not least when facing the conflict and bloodshed it engendered.**

**M:** At first I wrote a short poem about Partition. About 12 lines long. But then I realised that Partition probably did need more than 12 lines. So I then went to the other extreme and thought 'what about book-length?'

First of all I'd like to say that I didn't know until comparatively recently, maybe a year or so before I began writing the poem, about the existence of this uncle of mine, the young brain-damaged man (Athar in the poem) who was lost at the time of Partition and was never found again. It was as if, for me, he had been written out of family history. There were some programmes about Partition on television and radio, and this prompted conversations with my mother and she told me about this lost brother of my father's. I think I was really shocked to hear this and that I hadn't previously been told of his existence. I could only conclude that it had been too painful to talk about. In the poem I changed the names of relatives so as to allow for the fictional. With the name Athar, I only changed the spelling.

**G: Your evocation of him is so vivid and what happened to cause your uncle's brain injury is so powerful and movingly written Moniza. May I quote from The Line:**

Such a bright boy, they said.  
But playing outside in the dust,

pushing a wheel in the dust one day.  
One day - that sliver of time

In which anything can happen  
and often doesn't,

but sometimes time takes one day  
by the hand, or the scruff of the neck.

That day when any story  
takes a deep breath

and begins –

\*

The sun with his personal brightness  
could only witness

the gay painted lorry  
that struck him.

Quiet lunchtime, the shutters drawn  
and it roared up

not in anger or indifference,  
and dealt the small boy a blow

that blew him into another world.  
A part of him had gone –

nobody wanted it  
and yet it had been taken.

His father, himself a doctor  
Travelled

Far and wide,

took him to the best physicians –

\*

In an exodus, such a child  
grown up and not grown up

was ripe for being lost.

**M:** In reflection it feels a bold step to have tried to imagine this, but I think I felt quite driven at the time. I'm very glad to have your response, Graham.

**G:** I hadn't realised that when you wrote your much anthologised poem Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan you did not know anything about that aspect of your family history. If you felt OK about it, it would be so interesting to hear more about your learning of this... In other words how you arrived at the impetus for writing the book.

**Which poem(s) in the collection do you remember writing first?**

**M:** I started at the beginning and went on to the end, following a timeline in my head.

There were major difficulties. Did I have a right to write about this? How could I deal with, and even incorporate, this moral issue? How could I find out more about what Partition was like for ordinary people, and how did they live then? The history books were full of the political aspects. Was there a point in trying to recreate the story of Partition when I didn't have first hand experience?

The hardest part was beginning. At first I wrote lots of little poems as a sequence, but I soon realised that they were of variable quality and that the form wasn't working very well. Then I had the idea of longer sections, which were really smaller pieces woven together and this seemed to work much better. It was probably about a year from writing the short poem to the idea of expanding the poem to book-length. Once I had this idea, I spent about 6 months on the preliminary shorter poems that weren't really working. I think it's often the need to write the poem that eventually brings about a way of doing it. Sometimes it's best to let go, and then the poem itself may communicate its wishes (if that doesn't sound too strange). Sometimes it's that moment of giving up that can then be a moment of finding a solution. The surrendering of control. The poems that don't ever work out may be those that weren't quite so urgent.

There were other major difficulties too, apart from getting started. Did I have a right to write about this? Could I 'deal with' this moral issue? Could I approach and incorporate it in the poem? How could I find out more about what Partition was like for ordinary people, and how did they live then? The history books were full of the political aspects rather than all the ordinary lives affected. I built on the little I knew of the family story and those of family friends, and I looked at some oral history for ideas, where people had told of their experiences online. I read an extremely vivid novel set in Lahore at that time - Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*. Another useful book was *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* by Urvashi Butalia

which was full of people's memories and experiences. Was there a point in trying to recreate the story of Partition when I didn't have first hand experience, I asked myself? Once I'd properly got started, the book took about 4 years to write.

**How painful and/or cathartic were the poems to write? I'm thinking of the scenes you describe when your family and friends had to leave their homes after the line was drawn across the country and their homeland was now no longer theirs.**

### **Must We Go?**

To move house is one thing.  
To leave your country another.

But to leave it  
because it no longer wishes

to attach itself to you...

\*

Pakistan is what it amounted to  
Pakistan.

In the salting of lassi  
in the knuckledents in dough  
Pakistan.

In the pleating of a sari  
in the sweeping of the hallway  
Pakistan.

Between the question and its answer  
Pakistan.

**The details you give about the honour burnings and the ninety women who jumped in the well are completely searing. Also, the silences between the lines, the spaces you give for the reader to imagine, the absences you conjure.**

**M:** When I was writing I was thinking that it was extremely painful, but I was also very much preoccupied with 'getting it right', attempting to get some good lines of poetry. I was also preoccupied with authenticity, hoping to achieve a degree of it. When I read from *At the Time of Partition* in Italy (the book has been translated into Italian) most of the audience were crying. I found that difficult because of not wanting to upset people. I did feel it was gratifying, in a way, to have made the invisible more visible and to have honoured, in my own way, a family member. I tried to portray people sympathetically.

The parts I enjoyed writing most were those with 'the line', especially the final section. The parts I dreaded doing most were 'So They Took the Bus' and 'The Camp', because of the necessity of imagining those difficult and important scenarios.

**G: Thank you so much for your very detailed and generous replies, so interesting and heartfelt to read. I'm aware of how powerful and utterly resonant this material is - an incredible, moral feat of empathy.**

**I can see why the sections about the bus journey your family took:**

It groaned and rattled

And smelled of pressed-in bodies  
And garum masala and incense.

Did it smell more strongly  
Of the future or the past?

Would there ever be another day  
As bland as a chapatti?

Would a day ever sing?

**and then the camp they found themselves outside Lahore – which was to be their new home – are ones which you most dreaded writing. I'm wary of quoting from The Camp out of context, particularly the lines where your grandmother is desperate to find her missing son Athar, your uncle, and we realise the awful pain and harrowing mystery of his absence, but with your permission, here are a few:**

And at dusk  
His name sounded  
In the mile-long roll call of the missing:

brothers  
sons  
aunts

fathers  
daughters,  
especially daughters

missing.

Deebas, Daras,  
Kasheebas, Kalsooms,  
Bakhiras, Mairas, Baheras,

Yasmeen, Mahrun...

Daughters missing.

And Athar – missing.

**It was a humbling privilege to read In the Time of Partition. I think it should be required reading for everyone – especially every politician – in order to understand something of what it feels like to be displaced from one's homeland. It needs to be studied in every UK school. The world needs poetry like this!**

Thank you so much, Graham. But I feel humbled myself because I didn't actually go through this, only imagined it. I was extremely relieved that the book was well-received in Pakistan by Muneeza Shamsie who reviewed it for *Dawn*, the English language newspaper. Sometimes it's surprising what the imagination can do. It can't do everything and that has to be acknowledged - I did try to say this in the poem.

**I'd love to find out which poem(s) you started with in your wonderful next collection *Blackbird, Bye Bye* (Bloodaxe 2018)- and more about its genesis.**

**What particularly resonated for you or felt imaginatively right about the avian focus in its early stages and as the collection evolved? Was it something that emerged in process, or an over-arching theme you had at the outset? Any thoughts on your creative process would be fascinating for us to read.**

**M:** I was visiting my mother in the care home in the countryside and her room is quite high up with a good vantage point. A treetop idea came into my head, and at the same time, perhaps, the name Motherbird. I felt a bit as if I was the mother for the purposes of the visit, tending Motherbird, her room a bit like a nest, and our roles reversed. So the poem 'Motherbird' came first. I'd been 'stuck' for at least a few months and this felt like a small breakthrough. I then wondered if I could write a few more such pieces. I tried to convey flight in the visual form of the poems where I could. I enjoyed this oblique way in to writing about my parents. The wing-shapes could be tricky, but helped in the writing too. The final poem in the book 'Less, much less' was also an early one.

We moved to rural Norfolk about 10 years ago. Practically the first thing we did was bury a pigeon. I hadn't realised quite how large they were. As I wrote more of the small poems I was surprised how many analogies there were with birds and human life, our longings too, and migration. I didn't have a plan, but the poems built up gradually.

**I agree. The extended metaphor of both *Motherbird* and *Fatherbird* works extremely well to show your feelings for them and your observations as the**

**child/parent roles are reversed. The shapes and rhythms of many of the poems on the page are effective too. I'll quote from one in full:**

### **Motherbird Sings**

Though she no longer soars  
to France or Spain  
She carries in her bones

The memory of flight  
the long enchantment of it.  
Haltingly she sings

in those other languages –  
French is her sun  
Spanish, her moon.

She practises each note.  
A tentative joy  
These flights of song –

each phrase  
a little succulence  
In her head, her throat.

**The section of the book titled The Afterlife of Fatherbird is a marvellous and moving sequence addressed to your father, here's the whole of section 13:**

Now that you're dead, Fatherbird, I hesitate to bring you  
news of the world – but what else is our world made of  
and where else is there for your thoughts to fly?

Maybe you know the worst already -  
You bow your head.

Don't think about this now.  
You don't need to – I can bring you happier news  
of little things. It's been a hot week, we're active

in the evenings. The rose is blooming, the rambling one  
your favourite, milky white with a yellow heart.  
So many flower-heads! We want it to bloom forever.

*Bring me news!* You cry.  
*More news of the world!*

**Tell us about your particular connections with and appreciation of Jules Supervielle (great name!), Saint-John Perse and Remedios Varo. Versions of their work - and poems 'after' the latter's paintings - form a powerful conclusion to the book – a springboard into further wingbeats of flight and migration.**

Actually, it's Jules Supervielle (spelling). Everyone makes that mistake, and, initially, I did too! So it's pronounced as two syllables 'vi-elle'. When I was a teenager a Swiss friend of my family gave me a book of Supervielle's poems in French. Much later I found that a book of his selected poems had been translated by George Bogin. It made me wonder if I could produce my own versions. Over some years (and with invaluable advice from a poet friend Susan Wicks who is a scholar in French and a translator) these built up to a book *Homesick for the Earth*. I felt an affinity with Supervielle's gently fantastical style and with his dual heritage. He was born in 1884 in Montevideo to French parents and grew up in Uruguay and France. Both his parents died before he was a year old. Until the age of nine Jules was unaware of this, thinking his aunt and uncle who brought him up were his birth parents. I sent my Swiss friend a copy of *Homesick for the Earth*, and she sent me a book of Saint-John Perse. He was born in 1887 and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1960. I was attracted to his poems *Oiseaux* which had been translated by Derek Mahon in a more literal version. I loved the way the poems soared so majestically. Originally they seem to be 'prose poems' (although Saint-John Perse didn't like this term). I've made versions in a slightly different form. Looking at Remedios Varo's surrealist paintings featuring birds, I wondered if they could add another dimension to the work as I have sometimes found paintings an inspiration for writing.

**I'd like to finish with the penultimate verse from The Bird And The Artist (After Saint-John Perse)**

I'm the lightning flash of the artist, predator  
and prey, piercing, direct, then achieving my goal  
with a sideways or, better still, a circling motion.  
And so I perform my long, determined search.  
My reward? I'm at peace with my guest.  
This is the shared secret of artist and bird!  
Stopped in flight, I'm hurled down  
on the lithographer's plate to live  
in a mutating cycle: metamorphosis,  
shifts of key, a series of birdshapes  
leading to a full revelation.

**M:** Saint-John Perse was inspired partly by Braque's prints. 'Piercing, direct', a 'sideways' or a 'circling motion' – these can speak for poetry too.

Thank you so much Moniza, for agreeing to this fascinating interview, and responding so openly and generously to share your two most recent collections with

us- we are immensely grateful and so pleased you can read for us on May 6<sup>th</sup> with Fire River Poets. We can't wait!

**M:** Thank you very much, Graham. You have really helped me to revisit the work.