

FORWARD ARTS FOUNDATION IN CONVERSATION WITH CLAIRE HARMAN

FAF: Please tell us about the genesis of this poem. Is it part of a collection or sequence? Where can a reader find more by you?

CLAIRE HARMAN: This poem had a very specific genesis. In the first or second year when I started commuting to New York, a medievalist colleague took us on a weekend drive upstate to admire the fall foliage. On the way, we stopped in a lay-by along the Palisades overlooking the Hudson river and our host became quite lyrical: 'I am immensely fond of this river he said, with a sweeping gesture; 'It is a magnificent river. Some call it "The Mighty Hudson"'. I thought what a great name for a strong man that would be, and I suppose that and the place-names along the drive and the look of the blazing autumn leaves all lodged in my mind somehow.

The story of the poem emerged quite effortlessly but is entirely made up. I was very impressed by how plausible it seemed, so made up the epigraph from the newspaper – and the newspaper – to give it some actual credibility. And I had a sense of the rhythm before any of the story, even: that long thrumming line seemed to be there in advance; appropriate and anticipatory. There's something inherently deadpan about it.

FAF: What advice would you give to anyone starting out in poetry today?

CH: I'm peculiarly badly qualified to give advice 'to anyone starting out in poetry today', because I haven't done it myself yet. I've felt compelled to write poems all my adult life, but rarely do anything with them. When one comes along that I feel might pass muster and interest anyone, I've sent it along for consideration, always to the same place, the TLS. That has only happened four times, so you can see it has been an almost entirely private area of activity for me. My reticence about publication is probably the result of having been married to a poetry publisher in the deep past and working in the offices of a literary magazine: seeing poetry as a professionalized activity is quite sobering.

FORWARD ARTS FOUNDATION: *When did you start writing poetry and what drew you into it?*

CH: I suppose what I would conclude from my own experience is that you don't have to be seen 'starting out'. I feel very calm about being an unpublished poem-writer. You can write what you like - formal, comic, personal, profound or really fleeting, and not have to account for any of it, or make it cohere into a career, or any of that stuff. You don't have to be any good at all! Ages pass when I don't write anything, and no one minds a bit. Many of my poems are worked on for years, affording the chance to make tiny tinkering to them which are the joy of my life. Thinking about a rhythm and fiddling with words are wonderful recreations, and feel urgently important to get right, however private the results remain.

FAF: *Which poets do you admire most and what do you value in their work?*

CH: I was completely obsessed with contemporary poetry when I was young and used to read everything that came out. Individual poems remain essential props in my life, routes through into other minds – escape routes. And on the whole, the more a poem affects you, the less easy it is to explain the effect. It's all there on the page, sometimes very simply expressed indeed, and utterly self-contained.

That's the thrill of writing as much as reading poems: being surprised by something outside and beyond your everyday self.