

ON WRITING AND WOMANHOOD: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIE HOWE

BY

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I met Marie Howe on a cool fall day in her hotel room before the start of the 13th annual Writing by Degrees Conference, where she was to deliver a keynote address. It is no surprise that I was immediately taken with her. Not easily star struck, I found Howe's quiet charm and warmth disarming. Her daughter Inan played on an iPad with an old friend of Marie's while we sat in the corner huddled up with my questions. We pulled our chairs closely together, so much so that our legs were almost touching, and set out to learn more about Marie Howe's work and how she navigates this often difficult world as a writer, a mother, and a woman.

MS: In some ways your books seem to exist in very different realms. For example, *The Good Thief* uses biblical and mythical allusions while *What the Living Do* uses real and personal names. Do you see your work shifting again with the most recent publication, *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*?

MH: Well, there are certainly biblical things in *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* too. There's the whole life of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in there. But I believe we don't think about this when we're writing, as you know. You're just trying to be receptive to what might want to come through you. *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* was a much different book from *What the Living Do*, as *What*

the Living Do is almost cinematic. I wanted it to be without any photographer's thumb in the way of the pictures and have there be very clear narratives. But *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* I think is a little funnier. I hope it's funnier.

MS: Oh, it definitely is.

MH: It was written during the Bush-Cheney years, and that was a horrible time in our country's life and terrible things were happening. Of course, terrible things are still happening always in our world. But our country was overtly doing so many things that were illegal in my opinion. So there was all that going on, and this immense despair and fear. My marriage had broken up, and I was trying to find myself again. And also, trying to understand what it means to live a meaningful life as one gets older and older. It's so stunning to grow older. We hear all the people older than us laughing, falling down laughing and holding their stomachs, but as your life changes, your aesthetic changes. I felt myself nosing into another kind of voice in that book. Again, it's not always that conscious.

MS: In many ways *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* seems to be about learning how to breathe again, or a moving outward away from yourself. As your work has progressed, it also seems that, especially with your most recent book, you have been speaking more directly with your audience. I'm curious, since you were saying that this wasn't a conscious decision, how did this interest present itself to you?

MH: Well, I think that the speaking to the audience really began in *What the Living Do*. There was a crucial poem that I was trying to write out about my brother John being afraid of sharp things, being afraid of something in his eye, and then having to get these needles in his eye. Over many weeks I kept trying to write into that story, and finally I realized I wasn't telling John, he already knew, and I

wasn't telling myself; I was speaking to you guys who I hadn't met yet. And I feel very much in discourse with everybody when writing. My first book was much more hermetic. I felt afraid as a beginning writer. It was frightening to begin to write into one's experiences. It was also a deliverance. So I feel more and more that this discourse can't happen unless there's a sense of everybody else being there when it's happening. Maybe that's what you're experiencing.

MS: It does seem that you pull your audience into your work and ask them what it means to be part of this time now and this culture.

MH: We live in a very challenging culture in a very challenging time in our world's history. This desire for a common conversation is very deep in me as it is in many people, in many artists. But I keep thinking of Adrienne's [Rich] *Dream of a Common Language*—how do we speak about these things that matter so much to us as a culture without alienating each other or without ranting? As a poet, how do we speak about these things in conversation and still come to discovery?

MS: These are important questions, and one of the things about your work that I greatly admire is how it continues to struggle with the concept of being female in our culture and also, more particularly, the transition between girlhood and womanhood. I'm curious about your feelings about this focus?

MH: I think it's still one of the most important questions to ask, and I'm so happy to hear you say that because, just the other day, I was thinking there are these voices, and you as a woman, I'm sure you have them, that say: "Why don't you just be quiet?" It is still there. For example, that one girl was just shot in Pakistan in the head. Melala.

MS: Yes, Malala Yousafza.

MH: I mean, how does one speak about the patriarchy's violence to women without alienating the world? How does one speak into that? Because it is the most profound problem. You know, the feminine is still hated by the patriarchy. I don't mean by men, but by the patriarchy itself. It's clear in this year's election. It's clear with what's happening with the rise of the Taliban again. It's clear with the backlash against women in this country.

And I am stumped because poetry is always a wrestling with one's self. And a wrestling with silence and language, and not knowing what can happen. But more and more I'm hungry for a visionary art that will show us a way through. Like Adrienne. I mean, Adrienne Rich changed the world. And she wrote into subjects so silent that nobody even knew they were there. I remember reading her books when I was thirty and going "What is she talking about?" I couldn't understand them; they were too grown up for me. I was so steeped in the way things are, that I couldn't see the way things are. And she wrote visionary poetry that shined a light into the room. Well, we need that. I don't know who the poets will be, but more and more I feel like let's do that, let's begin to imagine. Let's begin to envision a world where this cyclical, damaging impulse or compulsion stops. See, these are political things to say—where do we find the intersection where poetry and the deep concerns can wrestle it out into something that's compelling to listen to? And also, that we can engage in. There are poets that have done it, but it's difficult. Who are some poets who you think have done it?

MS: Definitely Adrienne Rich. Besides *Dream of a Common Language* and *Driving into the Wreck*, her *Twenty-One Love Poems* managed to mesh together the personal with the political while asking ourselves to envision where we see ourselves in all of this complication. Marge Piercy is another example, though she doesn't seem to be as recognized as I would like her to be in the academic world.

MH: No, she's not.

MS: Especially due to the way that she challenged and still is finding ways to challenge all that we know.

MH: Maxine Hong Kingston is another example. Or Alice Walker. These are some of the great women, the great spirits. These women will not shut up.

MS: I think that this is something close to both of our hearts.

MH: I just think about that girl. That man walking on that bus. And walking in front of everybody. Terrorizing everyone, and shooting that girl in the head because she wants to be educated.

MS: As we're speaking about this, do you think that poetry should inherently be productive to the world that we inhabit?

MH: The writing I love has been poetry that opens doors, or shines a light, that makes a vision possible. Whether it's Emily Dickinson, or Walt Whitman. Look at his vision. Or Dickinson—she described states that no one had ever described before, and when she did so she domesticated them for us. And when we felt that kind of despair, or that kind of ecstasy, we weren't going to be alone anymore. Also, Lucile Clifton.

I think that Brenda Hillman is a poet who is profoundly political, spiritual, and feminist. She insists always on wrestling through these difficult things with brilliant, hilarious, and profound lyricism. I adore Brenda's work; I couldn't live without it. I think that together we could name about fifty people. But the whole idea that poetry makes nothing happens comes from Auden who wrote the most political poems of the twentieth century. I think that in some ways that idea coming from him is almost as if that is his argument with himself. Because ultimately he went ahead and did it. He wrote them, and I

am grateful to him for that.

MS: We're listing these great poets, and at times the work of great poets can seem to speak to each other. More specifically, every now and again it seems that two books might benefit from being read in conjunction. Doing this offers a texture or an additional depth in the reading. How would you respond to my stating that *What the Living Do* and Donald Hall's *Without* are two books of such a fashion?

MH: Well, that makes me very happy. Jane [Kenyon] was a friend of mine, and Jane is all through *What the Living Do*. I love her so much, and her poems changed my life. I didn't leave the house without her book *The Boat of Quiet Hours* for about two years. First, Jane wasn't afraid to be a spiritual person and I was. She helped me to become less embarrassed. And she had great faith, and there was such luminosity and simplicity with her work. She just means the world to me, and I adore Don and I love how he loved her. She just flooded that whole book. And in fact when Johnny, my brother, was dying—he was living and dying—I went home to Rochester for his last eight weeks. I was staying with my mom and I would go down to the basement, go to the typewriter, and just type and smoke. I smoked in those days; yuck. And I couldn't write anything but I would just sit down there and smoke. But Jane wrote me these couple of letters and one of them I remember being down there in the dinky little family room of my mother's last house. After all the kids had left she had moved to a smaller house. And I opened this letter from Jane, and Jane said, "I just wrote this poem and I want you to have it." And the poem was "Let Evening Come." I read it typed out and, well, there are no words that can say what that did for me, how that helped me.

The other twin to my book, a very different twin than Don, is Tony Hoagland's *Donkey Gospel*. We were writing our books together, and he was pretty much the midwife for *What the Living Do*. I was resistant, and he kept saying, "Marie, just go to your desk, get a

bunch of those papers and send them to me.” No exaggeration to say that he probably said that to me two dozen times before I actually got some of the papers and sent them to him. It was weeks and weeks and then he was like, “Okay, send me more.” And he really, really helped me finish that book. Nobody does anything alone. We’re all in conversation with each other, all touching each other, and Tony and Jane were really huge.

MS: That is amazing. As you’re looking ahead and working, what do you think is on the forefront for you?

MH: Well, I’m trying to finish a book of prose that has been really something to write. It’s essays and stories, and it is a wrangle. I don’t know how people do it. I’ve been doing mostly that for the last three years. But back to the poems, I feel very close to what you first brought up. Virginia Woolf said it, “The angel of the house has been killed.” Women have still not told the truth about their physical life. There’s so much more to say, and to celebrate, investigate, and sing about. I feel really interested writing a book that’s even more about being a woman, or having a daughter, but having said that I don’t know that that will happen.

But that’s what I’ve been thinking about. And about these girls in Pakistan, and the women in Congo. I have this good friend, Eve Ensler, and she just built this place in the Congo for these women and girls who have been gang raped almost to death. And there is this one doctor that sews them up time and again. You know, these women designed and built this city of hope themselves. And they dance, they go there and they heal, they get operated on, they are sewn together. And it’s complicated, Marissa, because our cell phones are the reason why this is happening in the Congo. They need the materials for the batteries and they are terrorizing the people to get them off the land, and they are raping women to do that. And girls, girls my daughter’s age. And the trafficking? We could go on and on. How do you not go crazy?

MS: Certainly. So how do you? How do you not go crazy in this world?

MH: I think that it's more how do you stay awake to what's happening without being overwhelmed by it. I think that love, daily love, living with them and serving them and being with them is a way. And I think that taking action is another. Eve is one of the sanest people I know because she actually takes action all the time. Brenda Hillman takes action all the time. She's in Code Pink and she said, "It feels great. You no longer are constantly walking around thinking 'I should be doing something' because I am. And it really helps." So, I feel that that's a start. But as an artist we try to find a way, and every once in a while, as we've mentioned Adrienne breaks through, Lucile breaks through, Maxine Hong Kingston breaks through, Whitman breaks through. I think Tony is doing for men and for white people, though some people find it hard, what some of those people were doing for us all. I think to stay in the moment helps.

MS: Yes, being conscious of ourselves may be the first step. Shifting in another direction, a bizarre sort of question that I have for you is: What is one question that you've always been expected to be asked but haven't?

MH: I think influences. I don't think that people ever ask enough about influences. I ask my graduate students: who is your favorite poet right now, whose book is next to you all the time. Now go and find out who that person loves. And then read that poet and then find out who that poet loved and read them. Find the generations and go back as far as you possible can. Think of Jane Kenyon, she loved Keats. And through Jane, I ended up reading those Odes much more carefully and closely again. I always loved them but then I really fell in love with them. Or I love Hopkins, Herbert. I love John Donne. I love whoever wrote the Book of Job. Those people had a

huge influence, and these were people who were actually writing about the state of their soul.

MS: You spoke earlier about Jane not being ashamed of her faith. What it is about your upbringing, or your place in life, that might have influenced your relationship with spirituality?

MH: I think that I'm much more comfortable now. But for a while it felt a little goofy. In the 80's Sharon Olds was writing about sex, and people were writing about race, and it was all really great but I felt a little like there is this part of yourself that's central and that you're shy to talk about even to your closest friends. We don't have the right words for these things; we have to find new words. But Jane's faith, and she did have faith, was so much a part of her everyday life that it was just in the poems effortlessly. It helped to see that. And Brenda, too. She's another very spiritual poet. And Jean Valentine, too. I love her poems. Jane Cooper. These people mean so much to me, and every other woman who's ever written.

MS: As my last question: we struggle with and talk a lot about Narrative Poetics in academia, and what to we do with the you/the speaker issue. I've read many interviews of yours where at times you're referred to directly or other times called 'the speaker'. I'd love for you to tell me your position on this.

MH: I think we should always say 'the speaker'. What does Emily Dickenson say? "It does not mean me, but a supposed person." There's a way when one's speaking, even speaking to each other like this, Tony used to say: "My representative meets your representative". So there's a way where, finally, we're scalded down, but we don't even know who we are. To be able to say anything in the poem is important. Often a voice will come and it is not my own. I mean it's not the way I'm talking to you now. But it is a voice and I just follow it.

Shouldn't we allow speakers to say anything they need to say, and then we can either dismiss the poem or accept it? But think of all the great poems written in voices who aren't at times likable, but they show us aspects of our humanity.

We need to follow this convention of saying "the speaker" because as awkward as it can seem some days, we need it. Look at Whitman. It's not Walter Whitman talking in *Song of Myself*, it's a supposed person. Look at Dickinson. She has dozens of identities in her work. I don't think that it's any of our business. I love poems that are brave. I don't let people use "you," because it's breaking a barrier.

MS: And it's an assumption, which can be dangerous.

MH: Right. People can read all kinds of things into poems that haven't even happened.

MS: Thank you so much for joining us today.