

Jo Balmer is a poet, classical translator, scholar and literary critic. Her first degree was in Classics and Ancient History at University College, London, and she later completed a PhD in Translation and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. Her published poetry includes, most recently, her collection *The Paths of Survival* (Shearsman 2017) and *Letting Go* (Agenda Editions 2017), a sequence of 30 mourning sonnets. Jo has spoken to *PVCRS* about some of her earlier work in the past, in 2010 and 2013.

This conversation, between Jo, Fiona Cox and Elena Theodorakopoulos, took place at the colloquium ‘Remaking ancient Greek and Roman myths in the twenty-first century’ which was held at the Open University’s London centre on 7th July 2016. The discussion explored the often transgressive use of ancient myth in contemporary poetry. In particular, it focused on three poems from the sonnet sequence, *Letting Go*, on which Jo was then working (it was subsequently published in 2017 by Agenda Editions). The sequence was written in response to the sudden death of Jo’s mother after a misdiagnosed heart attack, and includes many poems based on passages and myths from a variety of classical texts. In each case, Jo introduced the poem before reading it. Each reading was then followed by a Q & A with Fiona and Elena. The following is an account of the conversation, which also draws on the interlocutors’ notes and email exchanges beforehand.

I. ‘Lost’

JB. I wrote this first poem in the sequence about the night my mother died. It is based on a passage in Virgil, from *Aeneid* 2, which describes the sack of Troy by the Greeks; as Aeneas is fleeing the city with his family, he suddenly realises, to his horror, that his wife Creusa isn’t with him and goes back to search for her through the burning streets. I followed Virgil’s lines pretty closely in my own poem as they seemed to chime with the situation in which I found myself that night.

Lost

Up to that point, I was still in the dark.
I was retracing steps, staring down paths
I saw as ours, not knowing she had been
ripped from us already, had slipped unseen
as she sat down to rest. We’d just spoken -
I heard her laughing, hanging up the phone -
but when next we gathered, friends, family,
one of us would be missing, tricked away.
I bargained with gods I did not worship;
I blamed, I begged ambulance men, medics.
Reaching home, I tried to put on armour,
convincing myself that they had saved her,
that they had been in time, they had, they had...
In response there was only silence, dread.

(after Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.735-57.)

FC. *Letting Go: Mourning Sonnets* is a title which signals the process of working through grief. In *Piecing Together the Fragments* you entitle the chapter where you comment upon the poems responding to your niece's death as 'Finding a Place to Hide'. First of all, could you say more about the way in which classical texts help you to bridge the gap between the intensely private and unbearable, and publication of your work? Has the literary/ intellectual world become kinder to personal histories that are articulated through responding to the classics?

JB. Well, as you'll know, the phrase 'A Place to Hide' wasn't mine but a reference to a slightly ironic quote from Charles Rowan Beye (that Classics as a discipline provides a 'profound place to hide'). As an individual I find these emotions deeply private and not something you would discuss much, even with close friends. But as a poet, you also need to write – and want your work to be read. This is where the use of myth, of ancient texts, does indeed provide, if not a place to hide, then a bridge across the two conflicting conditions. It renders the particular universal, it is inclusive rather than exclusive. You are offering a way for readers to say, 'yes, I know that.' Or, 'I can imagine that.' And, as with *Chasing Catullus*, I wanted – no, I knew *I had* – to express these distressing emotions but couldn't do it directly. My grief was becoming toxic and I needed to write my way out of it so here approaching it through the prism of myth and classical texts was the only way through. That said, there can be opposition from classicists to the fact that you aren't presenting a 'faithful' version. On the other hand, the literary world might feel you are wearing your scholarship too heavily, or 'over intellectualising'. All I know is that I write the only poems I can in the only way I can – myth, classical text, is the vocabulary through which I can speak.

As for your question about the opening up of the literary world, Fiona, I think, yes, it is most certainly doing so. There are so many amazing poets using classical themes and literature in their work at present, whether working with the original texts or through other translations of them. However, as I said, there is still a distrust of 'difficult' or 'intellectual' work. In an interview for *The Paris Review* in 2000, Geoffrey Hill – who sadly died recently – approached this head-on, arguing that life is difficult, the human psyche is complicated, so why should poetry simplify? He also noted that intellectualism does not necessarily preclude the emotional or the sensual as is often assumed.

ET. I was very struck by the use of the first person, through which you inhabit the role of Aeneas, but also I thought that there was something Dante-an about the opening line 'Up to that point, I was still in the dark' an echo of Dante's dark wood, which is 'like death': the sense of being lost, being in the dark – and perhaps an underlying sense that in meeting Virgil as your own poetic guide, you too might emerge eventually?

JB. Yes, the use of the first person in versions of third-person ancient epic is a device I have employed previously, for instance in the poem 'Fresh Meat', based on *Iliad* 22, from *Chasing Catullus*. It opens up the text to the personal and hence to the universal.

ET. 'I tried to put on armour' is a very moving turn of phrase to my mind: the way in which the metaphorical armour with which we try to shield ourselves from hurt is a translation of Aeneas' picking up his own armour and returning to the burning city. But also how this metaphorical use of armour as a defence against grief makes us think again about the way in which Aeneas, frenzied and misguided, puts on armour at the start of the book and goes looking for Greeks to fight – the fight is already lost, he just hasn't come to the realisation

yet. So that the lines with which 'Lost' ends perfectly express Aeneas's own attempt at convincing himself that he was in time, that he could still save Troy.

JB. The use of the armour image seemed to fit the situation described precisely; I was frantically driving from my house to my parents' after a panicked call from my father, hoping against hope that all would be all right when I arrived there. It's a short drive, no more than 5 minutes, but at dusk in winter through a wooded Sussex lane, it definitely seemed darker than ever so, yes, Dante in is there.

FC. Yes, as I read these poems, it seems to me that what we are seeing here is a translation of the emotions? One example of this is to see the way in which you try to persuade yourself that the ambulance men had saved your mother with the repeated 'they had, they had'. It's an emotional echo rather than a verbal one. The sense of loss and exile of Virgil's *Aeneid* II infuses and informs your response to your mother's death. And does this mean you understand Virgil differently after the deaths of your mother and your niece, or that the way in which you already read the Creusa episode [in *Chasing Catullus*] shaped the way in which you articulated your grief?

JB. The poems are definitely written to be 'translations' of the emotions too, which is a great way of expressing it. And you're right, 'they had, they had' mirrors *si forte...si forte* in Virgil's Latin [l.756]. This is also (I hope) a good example of Geoffrey Hill's point about the intellectual and the emotional, the way one can translate the other. But I believe every scholar's reading is personal, however much we like to view scholarship as objective. And for me, all texts are transformed through working with them this way. The known becomes unknown, strange. And the unknown suddenly very familiar.... It was also very interesting to revisit a text I had previously used in *Chasing Catullus*, there to give Creusa her own voice. In the same way, I really love how both of your own readings of my poem throw us back afresh to Virgil's text!

II. 'Ice'

JB. Moving on, the next poem comes from the middle of the sequence and is perhaps far more transgressional. I was trying to write about the dreadful first few months of grief in the terrible cold and snowy winter of 2010/11 when my mum died. The passage that kept coming to mind was Livy's description of Hannibal's troops trying to cross the Alps in their march towards Rome – strangely, perhaps, because at first glance it seems completely out of context:

Ice

All winter the earth tipped from under us;
we were balancing on sheer precipice,
with no way down or up. Beneath our feet
new snow had drifted on old, not too deep
yet soft, and the more we tried to progress,
the more it shrunk, the more it smoothed to slush
or compacted ice. Even if we crawled
on hands and knees, still we would falter, fall

without roots to cling on to, straws to hold,
each step an unyielding struggle. Below,
between the clouds, we saw our Forest streams,
the Downs lit by lowered sun; there, it seemed,
most lived their lives on solid, fertile ground.
For now we were trapped. Out of reach. Ice-bound.

(after Livy, *Histories*, 21.36-7.)

FC. Are there different challenges involved in translating or creating the ‘transgression’ of a prose passage rather than responding to poetry?

JB. Definitely. Although it is something I really enjoy. I did the same with a passage from Plato’s *Symposium* in the poem ‘Cancel the Invite’ from *Chasing Catullus*, as well as in a few other sonnets in this sequence too. And I’ve always liked James Harpur’s ‘The Flight of the Sparrow’, based on a famous prose passage from Bede, which I read when I was first starting out as a poet and it must have stuck. But here, the Livy passage is not only prose but also history, yet history that has now become mythic and we can all recognise the context. So, hopefully, most readers will find an entry in to the poem, even if they’re not classicists.

ET. Yes, the episode is well known, but always in such a masculine context of overcoming adversity and forging new paths. Using it as you do to write about a daughter’s struggle with grief for her mother is a beautiful surprise. It’s a wonderful example of how a new adaptation can make us go back to the old text and see something new in it. And of course the first person introduces the ordinary soldiers’ perspective into this in a way that Livy would never quite dare.

JB. I was very interested in that aspect. Although there are many ancient texts articulating the grief of a mother for a daughter, I could find hardly any that wrote directly of a daughter’s grief for her mother. But using male military history to invoke female experience harks back to Sappho’s use of Homeric imagery and language and I liked the thought of tapping in to that.

FC. How far are your poems filtered through a network of other allusions? ‘Ice’ reminds me irresistibly of Christina’s Rossetti’s ‘In the Bleak Midwinter’ through its depiction of spiritual emptiness and desolation, and the imagery of ‘snow on snow’. In its evocation of feeling paralysed and trapped it also evokes the opening of C.S. Lewis’ *A Grief Observed* where he states that nobody had ever told him that grief felt so much like fear.

JB. Very often. In *Chasing Catullus*, for instance, Eliot’s *Four Quartets* were a constant presence. Here I think the depiction of a terrible winter lies so deep in the consciousness of a northern European that, again, you are tapping in almost subconsciously to so much that has gone before. And, now that you mention them, I see the links to Rossetti now – a song of our childhoods – and also C.S. Lewis’s work on grief.

ET. What is particularly awful about the Livy episode is that Hannibal’s soldiers have just reached the highest point of their journey through the Alps and have been encouraged by him to believe that they are now within reach of Rome itself, and that the journey downwards will be much easier. He tells them that the rest of the journey will be *plana* – smooth, clear, obvious, straightforward – but they almost immediately find that it is anything but, as they

simply cannot get down from the summit. Just like Aeneas, Hannibal's army then have to retrace their steps. Read against this fierce and bleak intertext of an already exhausted army, unable to reach what is below them and having to climb back up the mountain, the image of ice for grief is terribly raw. The Livy story provides so much here: the loss of the solid ground beneath your feet; the circularity that ensues when it turns out that, however hard the ascent was, the descent will be even harder.

FC. Yes, it's notable that you introduce the adjective 'solid' in 'solid, fertile ground.' The transposition of Livy's imagery into the imagery of the sunlit Downs not only re-situates Livy in England, but also highlights the gap between the grieving and everyone else, and the way in which grief shuts you away from the ordinary world.

JB. In the Latin Livy has *apricos colles* – 'sun-warmed slopes' – and *humano cultu digniora loca* – 'places more suitable for human cultivation' – but yes, this was a very important aspect for me; the desperation of being locked out of everyone else's world – the unattainable, firm ground – in a whirl of ice and snow seemed to resonate. It's the sense that, when you're grieving, everyone else seems to be moving on but you're stuck, you can't move with them. Life goes on all around you and you can't connect back with it. And so Livy's image of the calm, far vista below the icy peaks was another reason why I was so drawn to this particular passage.

ET. But, again, does the intertext also provide some room for optimism? The more famous part of this passage is Hannibal's ingenious solution to the problem – the zig-zagging paths through the gradient and so on – which is the most spectacular instance of his heroism in overcoming nature itself in its most hostile manifestation. Your sonnet omits this directly but it may allude to it none the less, and perhaps also to the idea of path-breaking which, since Callimachus and Virgil, is also a male trope for poetic innovation. So perhaps Balmer is here also somehow Hannibal overcoming the Alps, although just not quite yet, as the poem traps us in the time before.

JB. You're quite right. At first, at least consciously, I omitted that part of Livy's passage in writing this sonnet, when I felt no hope myself. Now I have written a second sonnet, later in the sequence, about Hannibal's solution, the stone-breaking and so on, articulating the point when grief, too, begins very, very slightly, to lift.

III. 'Let Go'

JB: This final poem comes from the end of the sequence, the time when that early, intense crushing pain begins to ease. And at this later stage of grief, I was now dreaming about my mother again a lot. And for this I returned to *Aeneid 2*. As Aeneas searches desperately for Creusa, not knowing she has already been killed by the Greeks, her ghost appears to tell him to go on and to found Rome without her. In particular, I was drawn to Creusa's message because it seemed very much like something my mother would say to me.

Let Go

Those nights I called her name in vain again
and again, filled ruined cities with tears.

I dreamt I reached familiar streets, fear
fixing tongue to roof of mouth, hair on end,
until she came to me through parted crowds
smarter than ever in weathershield mac,
blood red lipstick and jaunty, matching hat
like warrior plume. 'I can't stay long now,'
she said, 'yet am always here. Remember
to hold your hopes close, guard your ambition.
Love. Travel. Most of all, let go anger
or this exile of grief will be too long.'
I tried and tried and tried to embrace her
but, like a thought on waking, she was gone.

(after Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.768-94.)

ET. You speak as Aeneas, and your mother – herself a warrior ('blood', 'plume') – addresses you as she might a young man: 'guard'; 'ambition'; 'travel'; 'anger'. These are not 'feminine' words.

JB. Yes, again, I did want to transgress and transcend gender. The poem is based on an actual dream I had in a B&B in Norwich after leading a seminar at the University of East Anglia – the sort of dream you suddenly have when you're away from home but also feeling very intellectually energised. In it, my mother, who was always terribly smart and fastidiously dressed – and always wore matching lipstick, usually crimson or red – did indeed have on a plumed trilby, one of her favourite hats. But, of course, as soon as I started reading the Latin I saw the connections straightaway. And here Creusa finds her own voice at last although, again, as in 'Lost', my narrative is filtered through Aeneas's first person, transgendering it. This was mainly because I wanted Creusa's ghost to become my mother's, which cast me, in turn, as Aeneas.

ET. But you are dreaming – the repetitions and plurals imply this, I think – and the final line 'like a thought on waking' picks up on Virgil's *uolucris somno* ('swift or fleeting dream'). But it also highlights the fact that we have reached the end of *Aeneid* Book 2 now and that desperately long night is over (*consumpta nocte*, l. 795). A few lines on we see the sun rise even as Aeneas picks up his son and father and the survivors are on their way. Again, perhaps I am wrong to see that the intertext furnishes a note of optimism or at least comfort?

JB. These were definitely intentional. The image of the waking dream is so beautiful and evocative that it draws you in to in it. I wanted to show how grief begins to shift. And in the dream, my mother did tell me not to be so angry – it is strange how the subconscious acts because up until that time I hadn't realised that I was.

FC. There is also a transposition of a huge shared grief – the grief of refugees for a lost country – into an individual personal grief. An intensity betrayed by that plural, 'Those nights', and also the 'ruined cities'. Both universalise Virgil, who can speak for all times and all cities but also highlights the sharpness of acute personal grief. It's a wonderful evocation of the way in which each individual reader of Virgil is visited by individual, personal ghosts, who appear to us as they were in life. So 'tried and tried and tried' translates the repeated *ter*, or 'three times' of Aeneas' attempts to embrace Creusa. There is also an irony in the way in

which Creusa's rather dark prophecies of the long journey, are transposed into a positive command to seize opportunities – to travel and to love.

JB. I liked the device of turning Creusa's bleak message into a hopeful, warm one which reminded me so much of the sort of thing my mother would do – the sort of thing she would want to say to me if she could (if not necessarily encouraging me to found a city empire ...)

FC. Does the title look back to Cecil Day-Lewis' (himself, of course, a translator of Virgil) poem 'Walking Away' and its last line, 'And love is proved in the letting go'? I was also wondering whether you had Milton's Sonnet 23 in mind in your last line, which seems to glance at his last line: 'I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night?'

JB. Again, I think these were subconscious echoes of Day-Lewis and Milton. Although, re-reading sonnet 23, at Fiona's suggestion, I see how this in itself is a version of the *Aeneid* passage. But what has been so wonderful throughout all of our conversation is the way in which your two insights open out the lines I've written into entirely new readings and meanings which I perhaps hadn't even realised were there. Thank you both so much.

Further Reading:

Balmer, Josephine, *Letting Go: thirty mourning sonnets and two poems*, Agenda Editions, 2017

-----*Chasing Catullus: Poems, Translations and Transgressions*, Bloodaxe Books, 2004