

# explorations



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## INTERVIEW

### CLOSE QUARTERS

*Jacek Gutorow in conversation with Justin Quinn*

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Photo by Karel Cudlin

Jacek Gutorow: *Your first book of poems was published almost 30 years ago. Do you count the years?*

Justin Quinn: No, I don't. In fact, your question made me aware of it for the first time. Only rarely do I look back over poems from old books – mostly I'm thinking of the next

poem that I'd like to write, or the fact that I've nothing to write. At the moment, I have nothing to write.

JG: *The debut volume The 'O'o'a'a' Bird (1995) contained and anticipated most of the themes and issues that would surface in your next books. I remember that what struck me when I read it for the first time was its stress on political and historical issues. As it is, the book opens with three poetic statements on (respectively) terrorism, Irish history and the French Revolution. Later in the book there are other themes and concerns but I'm wondering about this triple opening. Was it deliberate?*

JQ: I didn't set out to write about politics in any of those areas. Perhaps the strongest impulse was space – particular urban spaces. For instance, around Dublin Bay, where I grew up, and then Prague where I've lived from 1992. I was fascinated by the layers of history, the traces of previous generations and their customs, which shaped those places. They made the environment in which I spent my days and lived my life, and so writing about those particular spaces led me to politics and history. I find it difficult to think about these latter in the abstract – they only begin to make sense for me in particular places and the rhythm of a life. I don't think I could understand social democracy, for instance, before I lived in mass public housing at the edge of Prague in the early 1990s. I understand the large European political changes of the twentieth century as they touched upon people whose children and grandchildren I know, upon streets and buildings that I've spent my days around. I began to understand Irish colonial history through Dublin's psychogeography – Kilmainham Jail made a huge impact, for instance, where the signatories of the 1916 Rising were incarcerated before their execution. I knew the particular paving stones in Dublin where particular events took place. I was intrigued by the way the state tried to affect that psychogeography – imagine a community, as Anderson might put it – through statuary and architecture. That's always the feeblest mark, always inviting irony. So it was always places and spaces first.

JG: *I would say it is even more palpable in Privacy, your second book. In many poems one can almost feel a friction between private places (or even intimate niches) and public spaces. "The world's being folded back/ Into a suitcase", as you put it in Privacy's opening "Landscape by Bus." Do you think such a basic existential tension is somehow resolved in the act of writing poems?*

JQ: No, I don't. The only thing that resolves that kind of basic existential tension is death. The world keeps unfolding itself out of the suitcases we put it in, fortunately. Poems perhaps allow us to catch our breath in the midst of all this packing and unpacking. We make a little song of our confusion and fluster, and that feels good. Some people resolve this by going for a run or talking to their friends. I like talking to my friends also, but perhaps it has something to do with the culture that I grew up in, and that I remain vaguely a part of, that those conversations can't reach what poems can. I can imagine other people, in other cultures, having that need met by conversation with those close to them. It could also just be my problem – that after more than a half a century on the earth, I still haven't learned to talk with people properly. That wouldn't surprise me.

JG: *May I ask you about John Ash? In The 'O'o'a'a' Bird there is a poem that you describe as written "after" him. Ash is rarely mentioned and acknowledged by critics, which is a bit baffling to me as he is without doubt a fascinating and original poetic voice. As far as I know, none of his poems have been translated into Polish. I don't remember anybody mentioning him, let alone writing about his poetry. I'm always wondering, by the way, how it is that some poets make it to the reading lists and others don't.*

JQ: There seem to be two questions here. First about Ash and second about fame, such as it is for poets. I'll try to answer both. I was reading Ash in the early 1990s. If I remember correctly, David Wheatley and myself were both interested in him. I was writing the long sequence at the end of the book, and the poems were arriving quickly. In my rush, I might have mishandled the Ash poem. We shared a publisher in Michael Schmidt at Carcanet. When Michael sent my version to him, no answer came back, or at least none that Michael shared with me.

As for fame more generally, it's often difficult to say why many excellent poets are overlooked. My best guess is that their work simply doesn't fit into the larger cultural and social narratives of our time. Take Vladimir Nabokov and Seamus Heaney, both of whose fame was created in large part by the US cultural climate during the Cold War. Nabokov's US fame was coeval with the onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s, and it suited many mainstream periodicals like the New Yorker to lionize a White Russian, at the same time that they dismissed the claims of leftist US writers (see Louise Bogan's reviews of the time). Heaney, along with Derek Walcott, demonstrated to US criticism that you could have decolonizing literature that was anticommunist (which Heaney was through his engagement with Eastern European poets). That swings the klieg lights on them both. Both are marvellous writers, and so when they are illuminated thus, they are able to hold our attention. Neither is reducible to the cultural discourse that pushed them center stage. Equally I love many poets who never enjoyed even a stray ray of that limelight. Fame isn't fair, but neither is its work ever done. Prompted by your comment I'll be going back to John Ash who I haven't read in 30 years. Perhaps we can start a revival.

JG: *More often than not you write poems based on rhyming and metrical patterns. As you probably realize, there are common misunderstandings as to why poets should conform to any formal rules. Many people (my students, for example) are repelled by what they describe as, say, mannered or artificial diction of a poem. They often ask: why not write freely and spontaneously? Why use rhymes and versification at all? How do you answer such questions?*

JQ: I agree that mannered or artificial diction is awful, and the generations rightly filter what has come before. Wordsworth did it, Frank Ocean did it. But that's different from formal rules. The best analogy is perhaps from music. If a rapper changes the rhythm from bar to bar because they want to be free and spontaneous, that's fine, but they shouldn't be surprised if no-one wants to listen to them. Same goes for rhyme in rap. Rhyme makes lyrics so intensely explosive and effective. Again, if the writing of poems, prose, or rap is for you primarily a form of self-expression, then there is always a balance between the needs of the self and the needs of the medium (sometimes the medium needs

outrageous, untrammelled self-indulgence; sometimes it doesn't). The problem with self-expression is that most selves don't have much to express, including my own self. For me the poet is more like a conduit, than a source of emotions, ideas. In my case, rhyme and metre, etc., make the conduit work better, but for other poets (many of whom I admire) other constraints work better – such as the constraints of different types of free verse. The mechanical thought involved in working out numbers of syllables and rhymes, frees the imagination to think up all kinds of weird stuff it wouldn't otherwise, just as counting in meditation allows you to let go of your petty, needy self, and glimpse for a moment or two amazing vast horizons.

*JG: What is the moment when you introduce, or at least think about, rhythm and rhymes? Do you feel like controlling this and consequently tailoring the intended message to the imposed forms?*

JQ: I find myself at a loss with these questions. One is so wrapped up in the moment that one isn't really sure after the fact. There is a degree of control and tailoring involved – nip and tuck – but as I indicated earlier that control is often a way of circumventing the more obvious control involved when one wants to make a point. In debates at university, say, it takes me quite an effort to maintain the coherence of the point. (Some of my colleagues and students might remark that the effort isn't always successful.) One must keep one's ducks lined up! But in a poem one launches into the serendipity of things, prepared always to roll with the randomness of what language gives you.

*JG: What you have just said is interesting because when I talk to my students about contemporary poetry, they sometimes complain about poets' self-centredness. One should not generalize, of course, but I think we can agree that modern poetry is often annoyingly limited to mere self-expression. For example, the idea of the modernist impersonal poem which is not so impersonal after all. After thirty years of studying Eliot's work, I find The Waste Land a confessional lyric. Veiled and indirect, but still very personal. The first-person perspective is irrepressible: you want to escape your shadow, yet you end up writing about yourself. I can see from your previous answer that you are very much preoccupied with this hopeless aporia.*

JQ: Absolutely. Sometimes though it depends what kind of self you have. Take Allen Ginsberg – his self was huge, generous, and, like Whitman's contained multitudes. I think he should be canonized, in spiritual as well as literary terms. So by talking about himself he was also talking about the world. I've known other poets who on a personal level are mean, petty and vain, yet their poems often provide them with an opportunity to escape those aspects of themselves, and huge currents flow through their texts. That's wonderful! (Though also perplexing when you meet these people.) Eliot's a chapter all to himself. I don't particularly like the poems, and have never got much from reading them. I think it's unfortunate that he has garnered so much critical attention. For me, that period belongs to W. B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, and Edward Thomas.

JG: *That's an interesting choice. As a matter of fact, I'd like to ask you about Yeats and the Irish poetry after Yeats. I suppose this particular context means a lot to you? But isn't it also a kind of burden? Especially with such strong voices like those of Yeats and Heaney...*

JQ: Well, Yeats is be-all and end-all. Perhaps the English language came into being so he could write his poems. I tend not to see him in Irish terms, but more as a poet of the English language. It has never been a burden to be irradiated by the beauty of his poetry. Heaney is wonderful also, but there's no comparison with Yeats. For the past few decades, Muldoon is the one I've been thinking about most, and it's hard to say if he's an Irish poet or not. Anyway, "Irish" is not an adjective that explains much. I don't think in terms of Irish poetry, unless we're talking about the Irish language. Anglophone Irish poets mix in the larger sea of anglophone poetry. Corraling them nationally has always been a diminution. A lot of them make claims for a particular Irishness in their work, but that has always seemed to me to be a lot of tosh that arose from a fear of being mistaken as English.

JG: *Your third book Fuselage (2002) opens with "Laurel," a powerful lyrical sequence and one of those poems that stay in memory for long. I find it impressively eloquent and moving. It is imaginative and modernist, with some echoes of Stevens and Hart Crane. Also, it successfully (but also disturbingly) fuses pastoral and autobiographical elements. I suppose it was an important poem for you...*

JQ: It was, yes, a kind of breakthrough – though from what to what, I don't know. I was deeply immersed in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* at the time, especially the translation John Dryden did with a bunch of other poets. It's difficult to know what more I can say about it, however. The writing of poems is rarely in itself an emotional experience for me – the emotion comes before, or after it's done – but this poem was an exception: line by line, I could feel emotional furniture moving around inside me, and I finished it around lunch time on a sunny spring day. I went around the corner to the pub for lunch, drank three beers, and fell into bed afterwards exhausted. I give this background not because I think it somehow guarantees the quality of the poem – one can have profound emotional and spiritual experiences while writing the cruddiest poems – but because I don't really have anything more substantial to say.

JG: *I'd like to ask you about "Prague Elegies," one of your longest poetic texts (it consists of twenty intertwined sonnets). Can you say something about your inspirations and the process of composition?*

JQ: I wrote most of them during a long winter, which perhaps explains the snow imagery at the beginning. I'd been reading a lot of Central European history. In Ireland, we didn't get much of that at school, so that was a revelation. I was also reading a lot of Edward Gibbon. I'm not much of a historian – what I was mainly getting from this was a sense of vast rhythms passing across the land, with the passage of generations, and the passage of armies across this place. The Czech Republic is a small country that doesn't have an

important global role, but I began to see how it was right in the middle of everything – from the Holy Roman Empire, to the Thirty Years War, right up to the fall of Communism. By reading the history of Prague, you could get the history of Europe. The poems are also a homage to the city that I love from start to finish. Perhaps I love the historical center least because it is so worn down by tourism. Going back to the history allowed me to see this in a new way. At the time I was also entranced by Joseph Brodsky's Roman Elegies, which I mainly read in Czech, as he doesn't come across that well in English. The poems arrived quite quickly, sometimes three a day.

*JG: You have translated Czech poets, mainly Petr Borkovec, Bohuslav Reynek and Jan Zábřana (separate volumes published in 2008, 2017 and 2022). Can you say something about your work as a translator? What drew you into being one? A sense of duty? Curiosity? Fascination?*

JQ: When I arrived in Prague in 1990s and was learning Czech, a poem appeared every Saturday in one of the newspapers. I would translate them as an exercise. I particularly liked one poet's work and sent the translation to him. This was Petr Borkovec. We then struck up a friendship that worked on several levels. We were about the same age, we were both translating (Petr from Russian – especially the White Russian diaspora), and we were both writing poems. I was mainly writing poems about being in a towerblock in the Prague suburbs and couldn't seem to get out. Petr's work, and the process of translating it, gradually drew me out into the surrounding terrain. He was a kind of guide. He was also one of my first friends in the Czech language. So it's hard to disentangle the different strands of our relationship. I feel deep personal affection for him, gratitude for how his poetry drew out my poems, and also how he gently schooled me in how to translate poetry. The Czech translation tradition is long and sophisticated in contrast to the crude and simplistic practices in English. Then the translations of Reynek followed, and last year of Jan Zábřana.

I don't really know why I do it. The translations themselves don't seem to make much impact in English, which makes me even more grateful to Karolinum publishers for their commitment to the project. On a fundamental level, I couldn't think of something that was more worth doing.

*JG: I'm wondering about the problems you encountered while translating Czech poetry into English. Certainly it was difficult linguistically. But there must have been other challenges – cultural contrasts, differences in speech intonation, the music of sense...*

JQ: Each poet brought different difficulties. I had problems understanding some of Petr's imaginative maneuvers at the start. I wondered: why would you swerve a poem in that direction? That's just weird. But then I gradually learned what he was up to – and that was a revelation. Then Reynek was incredibly dense, syntactically. He was also Catholic – as someone who is deeply hostile toward the Roman Catholic church, I sometimes found it a challenge to translate poems as faithfully as possible. I almost had to cover my eyes while translating. And Zábřana's idiom contained early twentieth-century slang that most Czechs have forgotten. And Czech dictionaries are not that great – there's no

equivalent of the OED, so I had to regularly quiz eightysomething people. His widow was also hugely helpful.

JG: *While interpreting the work of the Irish poet James Clarence Mangan you wrote: "To know more than one language is to be more than one person: moving between languages one changes one's breathing, facial gestures, posture and sometimes even one's disposition" (The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry). Is it also your own experience?*

JQ: This was certainly true in the first 15 years I was learning Czech. It was as though I was two people. Because I had limited linguistic range, I often made up for this with clownish gestures and comic overstatement, which led to some embarrassing misunderstandings. Living in a country where you're not a citizen, and speaking the language poorly has certainly been a transformative experience. But as my proficiency developed in Czech, I found the distance between my anglophone and Czech selves narrowing. I still find it difficult to speak Czech in formal situations – the university senate or academic council – as Czechs are uptight about the formal variant of the language, which has a different morphology and vocabulary from how you would speak, say, with a friend. So, instead of working out what I want to say in these formal situations, most of my blood, sweat and tears is spent working out how to say it. My Czech colleagues are sweet about this, and tolerate awful blather from me in these situations, and I'm very grateful for their kindness.

JG: *Don't you have a feeling that this is the state and the condition that most poets sooner or later find themselves in? And that writing in general, especially writing poetry, is like creating your alter ego, someone not exactly you, or maybe more than you, or maybe the real you?*

JQ: I don't think much along these lines, I admit. Sometimes it's weird in retrospect to read a poem that is completely unconnected, in all levels, from what was going on in my life at the time. This wasn't because I was trying to avoid reality in poetry, more like both those modes were present at the same time. It's a bit like how at a funeral people can laugh and enjoy themselves even as they are feeling massive grief.

JG: *You have mentioned some poets you like and admire but actually I'm quite interested in your favorite prose writers. Any readerly encounters that left marks in your memory?*

JQ: The novelist I keep rereading is Henry James. When I was around 17, I read *The Portrait of a Lady* and it has remained for me the embodiment of all that a novel should be. I read it every few years, and am on the second run through the late novels - next up is *The Golden Bowl*. I don't think it's had any effect on me as a poet. I read four or five novels a month, and start and abandon about twice that amount. Some months I can't find anything I like, other times there's a good run. I'm reading Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend* at the moment, and enjoying that. My academic work has drifted more toward fiction over

the last few years, and I'm especially interested in those novels that seem to be written for readers for whom English is a second or other language. That is, the exact opposite of the Jamesian mode. Writers like Yiyun Li, Xiaolu Guo, and Jhumpa Lahiri.

*JG: I think one could say that your novel Mount Merrion is a story about Ireland (or the Irish). It reads like something you had to write. Did you feel that writing a novel might help you say things that could not have been expressed in poems?*

JQ: Absolutely. I found myself more and more entranced by big family saga novels like *Buddenbrooks* and *The Forsyte Saga*, and began to wonder how they would play out in an Irish setting, which would also allow me to think more about my homeland. For the first twenty-five years or so living in Prague, I didn't think that much about Ireland. But it started to invade my thoughts increasingly, and once when driving through County Cavan, on the way back from the Northwest of the country, I caught a glimpse of the county hospital. In the next fortnight I wrote about 20,000 words which kicked off with the protagonist convalescing in such a place. I sent it to an editor at Penguin who I knew and he was up for it, so over the next few months, I shirked all the chores I could and wrote the rest of it. I definitely had to write it, and it was lots of fun. Insofar as it demanded a lot of research, much of which was conversation with older people who had lived during the 1950s in Ireland, I categorize it in my mind with the academic books I've written, as both require diving into an area and finding out as much as I can. Poems, of course, have a different dynamic – usually the less research I do, the better they turn out.

*JG: When reading your last books of poems (Close Quarters, 2011, Early House, 2015, Shallow Seas, 2020), I have a sense of a subtle change of tone and focus. If your early collections are mainly about discoveries and spaces, then the later ones are more and more about time and nostalgia, with some elegiac undercurrents...*

JQ: That seems accurate. It's not a conscious decision I made, but it rather resulted in merely following my nose. I found though, in the last decade or so, that my nose leads me back to the same stuff, so I haven't written that much poetry – perhaps one or two a year at most. There doesn't seem much point in recycling the old stuff. So at the moment, I'm mainly loitering around, doing odds and ends (like an academic monograph on the literature of lingua franca English), and keeping an eye on the skies. I'm ready should the occasion arise.

INTERVIEWEE'S BIO: Justin Quinn was born in Dublin in 1968 and educated at Trinity College. He lives in Prague where he teaches at the University of Western Bohemia in the Czech Republic. He has published eight collections of poetry: *The 'O'o'a'a' Bird* (Carcenet, 1995), *Privacy* (Carcenet, 1999), *Fuselage* (Gallery Press, 2002), *Waves and Trees* (Gallery Press, 2006), *The Months* (2009), *Close Quarters* (Gallery Press, 2011), *Early House* (Gallery Press, 2015) and *Shallow Seas* (Gallery Press, 2020). He has written four books of criticism including *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry* (2008). He also translates Czech poetry. His translations include Petr Borkovec, *From the Interior: Selected Poems 1995-2005* (2008), Bohuslav Reynek, *The Well at Morning*, (2017) and Jan Zábřana, *The Lesser Histories* (2022). His poetry has appeared in the Yale Review, TLS, Poetry Review, Irish Times, New Yorker, Poetry Ireland Review, Souvislosti, The Literateur, Body and the Irish Review among others. Tomáš Fürstzenzeller translated his poetry into Czech (*Vlny a stromy*, 2009). His novel, *Mount Merrion*, was published in September 2013. He was a founding editor of the poetry journal *Metre* and has published two critical studies, *Gathered Beneath the Storm: Wallace Stevens, Nature and Community*, and *American Errancy: Empire, Sublimity and Modern Poetry*. He is married to Tereza Limanová and they have two sons, Finbar and Manus.

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INTERVIEWER'S BIO: Jacek Gutorow is Professor of American Literature at the University of Opole. His academic interests concern American and British modernism; he also writes extensively on contemporary Polish literature. He is the author of seven critical books, most recently *Pęknięty kryształ. Szkice o modernistach (The Flawed Crystal. Essays on the Modernist Poets, 2019)*, and seven books of poems. He has translated American and British poets (Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery, David Jones, Charles Tomlinson, Simon Armitage, Justin Quinn and others). His recent critical works deal with the ambivalences and dilemmas of the modernist sensibility.

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