THE BLUE NIB: DIGITAL PLATFORM

FEATURED POET CONVERSATION/INTERVIEW: MARK TREDINNICK

Please insert brief author bio (third person, c. 100 words, can include website).

Denise: Good morning, Mark, and thank you for making time for this conversation. You're a celebrated poet and writer, and recipient of more awards than I have space to mention here. Yet your background was in law and publishing, so I thought I might begin by asking what drew you to poetry in the first place?

Mark: My background, like everyone who writes, is in letters; I have lived my life in sentences, only some of them my own.

To please one's parents or to fund one's (writing) habit, to pay one's way, or for want of courage, many of us for whom writing is a calling do other things before we get down to the poems and the prose we feel born to—or at the same time as we write and publish. Writing, poetry in particular, does not pay especially well; it's not a sensible career choice. So, before I could summon the courage to do what I had always loved and had always felt might be my life, I did other things. I studied Latin and philosophy and history and law; I took my honours in history; I graduated in law and worked for a year as a solicitor in a large firm. I went to work for a law firm that did much of the defamation work for the Fairfax press. I enjoyed studying law—a profession practised in and concerned very largely with language (and how words can harm and how they can protect us)—but, outside the odd defamation matter, I did not enjoy practising it. Most of all, I hated timesheets and billable hours. I also had trouble acting for clients who treated their franchisees and clients and employees badly, and there seemed to be a lot of that. So, I found a job at Butterworths, the law publisher, and learned there how to edit and publish, and after four years, I got a job as an acquisitions editor at Allen & Unwin. Love that role. I learned so much about making sentences and turning ideas into books. For a few years I almost convinced myself that Perhaps I was a publisher and that a career fashioning other people's books could be my life. But I was Clark Kent at the *Daily Planet*: these were someone else's clothes; there was another guy inside who wanted to bust out and get on with it.

It's hard to say what draws you to something you never didn't recognise as a natural habitat. I loved books from the start and I liked writing. Not so much for the fashioning of stories of the invention of worlds, but for how the process of forming sentences enchanted the world and one's own life within it and seemed to elevate a suburban childhood to something much more worthwhile, something profoundly human. Among the books I read, there were poems, but it you're looking for what may have set me on poetry's path, I think it's this. I loved the sentences—the good ones—more than the stories. I noticed how like love it felt when a sentence got something said, a moment adumbrated, just so. I liked inhabiting such sentences, phrases that cast spells. I wanted, if I could learn, to make them. It was the lyric thing I loved best in letters, and what I was drawn most strongly to write. I grew up with sermons—my grandfather's—and sacred music—my mother's—and those two lyric streams, let's call them Wesley and Bach, may have tuned me to the poetics of literature. But, though I sang and played instruments, it was the music language made, especially when you wrote it down, that I wanted to see if I could make, too. Maybe all my life. Everything else I studied and worked at was what I did to get up my courage to write, and to teach me more of the craft of words, and to and to help me afford a writing life, perhaps in poetry, to come.

Denise: In 'The Gospel of Mark' (published in *The Victorian Writer*, 2012), you touch on the succinctness of the poetic form, and further how a poem is '*about much more than itself*'; or how, as you put it, '*a poem is a leaf that tells a tree*'. Your reverence for this transcendent quality is evident; does it remain the source of your devotion to poetry?

Mark: …I heard Charles Wright, a contemporary poet I admire, describe his poetry practice as devotion. And I recognise something of my own in that. I wish, like him, and some other poets, I attended to my devotions more often than I do. But there may come times in my life when there is less of everything else to do than poetry. I am devoted to poetry—to reading it, to writing it, to teaching it, to making it, to advocating it. I believe in it, I guess, and I wish more people had poetry in their lives the way they have social media and pop music. I'm pretty sure we'd be less lonely, less shrill, less lost—from nature, from beauty, from each other—if poetry, good poetry, occupied people's lives and minds as these other things do.

And your question is perceptive. It is, indeed, poetry's gift for transcendence, its doing such large work in such small gestures—that explains what you call my devotion to it. Poetry, which recruits to expression many aspects of language not much practised in everyday prose and even in literature, can fashion at least four kinds of transcendence: on language, on being, on our relationships with each other, and our relationship with the more-than-merely human world. Each word in a poem is more charged and poised, as Louis MacNeice once said, than in prose or everyday speech; language is pulled short, reduced and intensified, and its affective powers are heightened by all that poets learn to do with words beyond merely making sense with them. Chat becomes chant in a poem, and the effect can be psychotropic—healing, shattering, consoling, transfiguring. Rhythm is at the heart of poetry's capacity to turn speech into enchantment; so is poetry's radical compression; so, too, image and metaphor; so, too, form. Those devices, too, are what allows a poem, in the right hands, to articulate not just the poet's subjectivity and self, but all our selves. Each of us is all of us in a poem; the personal becomes the human. Poetry is uniquely gifted at catching the otherness in all of us, the deep humanity in each of us—the poet, her subject—our human selves, not just our identities as asserted or ascribed. This is how poetry can help us belong again, each of us in our own particular manifestation of being, and each of us in the kinship of all souls. And poetic language has this special gift, too, to re-enchant the places we inhabit, to find inside real estate, the Real Estate, the wildness, the topography and eternity, and allow us to be animals in habitats again, to belong as profoundly as that.

There's obviously a lot more I could say—and have been known to say—on all those points, but that will do for now. One more thought, another transcendence. It occurs to me, as it has to many poets and philosophers and painters, and sportspeople: years may pass, but moments last, sometimes forever. The moment—Francis Webb said "the enormous moment"—is perhaps the home province, the country, the parish, of the poem. Of the lyric poem, anyhow. And poetry understands this, and writes moments as if they inhabited place more than they inhabit time. It writes poems as if they are places, and lets us conserve them, and conserving them, conserve ourselves. A poem catches the myth in the moment.

To summarise all that: Poetry is what happens when you ask more of language. It's what happens to language; it's what happens to us (readers and writers; individuals and societies); it's what happens to the world we live in and how we live in it. To *live* poetically, for example, is to apprehend what eludes most people (the birds, the patterns, the presence of

the future in the present, the mood, the frequencies) and to live beyond tribe and tribalism, beyond polemic and polarity, beyond identity and stereotype.

Denise: You've been described by Judith Beveridge as 'one of our great poets of place', defined spiritually and linguistically as well as geographically, and landscape is obviously a huge source of inspiration for you. How does the current environmental crisis affect your writing?

Mark: We have always been in environmental crisis, I guess—anyway, since humankind began to live outside the Land, rather than in and with the Land, and to treat it as a bunch of assets to exploit. John Clare mourned the passing of the old ways; Hopkins saw the problem—the destruction human hands tend to work on landscape, the hewing and delving, the hacking and racking of the "growing green" in his felled Binsey Poplars in 1879. But we're truly in the thick of a calamity now, though you'd never know it if you watched the news. We are living in the midst of a mass extinction event that will impoverish and imperil the experience of life on earth; and it is true that the surface temperatures of the earth are rising and that the climate of the planet is shifting, all of this because of how we have lived on earth and how we have fuelled that existence; and it is true, as we saw in the southeastern quarter of this continent through the summer of 2019–20, that the climate is growing increasingly less able to sustain human life. The future looks grim. Even if we didn't cause it—though the smart money says we did. On the face of it, the idea that poetry can help us stop or side-step this coming catastrophe, is insane. Poetry, as Auden said, makes nothing happen. But the truth is we could have done with—and still we could do with—a whole lot more of the kind of nothing, the interiority and soul-making and care for the way things were that he had in mind. And that is how poetry can still help. Not as a genre, but as a Way. As an enactment of Slowness. Poetry as a practice, a way of being and seeing and then of saying more aptly and kindly and inclusively—poetry as more than just a text type or even a politics, can help us remember the earth and our selves as its stewards and kin, and can help us care for each other and the earth in the trying years ahead. It can help by making coherence out of chaos, by making, as Frost put it, a momentary stay against the confusion of a rapidly changing earth. Poetry—reading it and sharing it and making it, if it's good, and as a way of sweating the small stuff of remembering the earth and hearing the birds and dwelling in the family of all things with gratitude and courage—can help us live deep, and that may help stem the tide of shallowness. There is a lyric mode and it helps us inhabit moments not just markets; it helps us reverence lives beyond our own; it reminds us to make souls (to use Keats's phrase), not just noise or money. Freeing language and—though language—our selves, from cliché, from plastic concepts, from exploitive tropes, from colonising, exceptionalist, enmifying discourses, from the thunk of theory, from toxic anthropocentrism, poetry can free those who share it and what it teaches, even just for a while, from their captivity, from the sway of all the thought that has put the earth at peril. If we could just remember the earth, the way lyric poetry has tended to do over millennia, in every phrase, we may conserve it, slow its degradation, stay our depredation, remember our organic selves, poetry will help us feel accompanied, and sane and forgiven, in our plight, and that may help a few of us through. One's thing's for sure, everything will surely be lost, if poetry is not practised.

It's hard to find much hope when you look at the numbers. But we must find hope—despair is unlikely to help much—and poetry can help with hope, too. It's the thing with feathers, as Emily Dickinson put it. Every good poem contributes something true and beautiful to the world. Every finished poem is another small good thing done. A refusal to

surrender to hatred and confusion. We are languaging animals. To a very large extent, we live in lives and wider realities whose meaning and merit and beauty, whose divinity or hotness or inadequacy, we largely fashion through language. The trashier and more exploitive the language we live in, the worse our lives, the worse we treat each other and the world. The more poetic our language, the more poetic our living and our conception of the world we inhabit. In this way, every good poem runs small repairs on reality, on language and on ways of considering and participating in the world (the human world and the world well beyond it).

One reason we are where we are is that we learned to speak of and think of and act in the world less poetically. So, it's poetry we need, if we're to rediscover a world worth sparing from all that bad language has wreaked upon it.

On Christmas Day, the world lost one of its great souls; the Land lost one of its fiercest, most tender, advocates; and I lost a friend: Barry Lopez. In the last paragraph of the last book he wrote (*Horizon*), a book he lived and wrote for thirty years, Lopez considers the "alarm in the air" of these catastrophic days, and he places, as he always did, his hope in the certainty that there are always others, unknown to us, ignored by prevailing discourses, who are pioneering new (or continuing old) ways of being that will fashion a future out of all that seems lost in the present. Among those who know what might help are poets, I think. And only because they refuse to stop practising the wisdom poetry sometimes engenders. Poetry—because of the way rhythm and form and metonym, speech music and figure and radical compression of speech work on human consciousness—has, I think, the power, more than any other art perhaps, to create the space in which wisdom, as Barry Lopez put it in an earlier book (*Arctic Dreams*)—may just arise. Possibly not too late. Lopez was a writer committed to the idea, and the practice, of writing as a literature of hope. And the last sentence of his last book he imagines something he refuses to call redemption or salvation coming to us as a "cantus" singing back a distant knowing (abandoned or overlooked or silenced, perhaps) into one chord with "the thing deep inside us," and fashioning a new knowing that may swim us clear of all the plastic in the oceans and the shrillness and Co2 in the air. It is a hard thing to name why we so need this reconnection with ourselves, the severing of which has severed us from the world and loosed us to wreck it. But without question, poetry is an old human way we have largely lost in dominant discourses, left and right, and look what good losing it has done!

Never was poetry an easy case to make. But never was the need to make it more urgent.

I write poetry, as I say, because it is given to me to write it. I write it because I can't do much else any better. But I also make it because I believe it, as you see. The alarm in the air sometimes silences me, dampening my faith. It is easy to despair, and sometimes I do. But then I think of Barry's life, his refusal to give in, his commitment to engendering hope and doing something useful, and to celebrating and fashioning beauty and performing some kind of hard and retributive truth-telling, as Seamus Heaney puts it, and I pick up the pen and try again. I don't believe poetry is for politics. We need poetry, in fact, because so much of the rest of existence is a practice of politics. The politics poetry performs is the sort the heart needs to help it stay free; whatever love is for, poetry is for that. But speaking up for places, making a decent account of what a human life on a living earth can feel like, forgiving each other pretty much everything but cruelty and cant, speaking down narrowness of mind, shallowness of thought, toxicity of speech: this is a kind of politics I'm happy to allow my poems to perform. And it seems to me poetry, including mine, might be that cantus Barry Lopez died hoping we would yet hear; making it might help keep language wide enough awake enough to all we are connected (as Jane Hirshfield puts it) to keep us sane and smart in the catastrophe that unravels around us.

Denise: In the midst of this ecological crisis, poetic activity is dismissed by some as frivolous. In your poem 'Litany, An Elegy', commissioned last year by Red Room Poetry for 'Extinction Elegies', you ask '*who will we be, our language atrophied a little / More, when Norfolk parakeets run out of trees…?* https://www.dumbofeather.com/conversations/mark-tredinnick-on-poetrys-power-to-heal/ What do you feel is, or should be, the role of poetry in such a world?

Mark: Looks like I might have anticipated this fine question in my last answer, Denise. Thanks for mentioning that poem, which I've included in my new collection, *Walking Underwater*; and thanks for mentioning that vital Red Room Project, whose idea is to do with poetry what can be done no other way: to cry peril and sing grief and say benediction and rejoice notwithstanding, and recast some of life's exquisite spell (Dickinson's phrase) all at the same time, and to hope to do some good by singing up the complex ecology of what it is like to be alive in an age of mass extinction, and to hope also to wake the complex adaptive system of response in many hearts—rage for change, responsibility, compassion, hopeful desperation—upon which any kind of revolutionary change starts with.

Land—or country—is wise. This is an understanding lost to prevailing discourse, and rich in the understandings of traditional cultures. There is something known, established, proven and sustained in the pattern of long-evolved relationships we might call a place. Some wisdom is lost when some of those relationships are broken; some wisdom is lost when even a single species, like a language, goes extinct. Something known can no longer be known. These ideas play through my poem, an elegy for all that is lost of our humanity and wisdom when animal species die out and languages are silenced and diversity of thought and speech and way of life is diminished. Poetry's role in a world that is losing wildness, is to stay wild; in a world losing its diversity, to be diverse; in a world forgetting our organic selves, to remember them. Poetry's role is, as it always has been, to resist. It is to refuse to go quietly. It is to give to all that passes a local habitation and a name, as Shakespeare puts it. It is to insist on the lyric nature of reality, denied by the discourses of politics and ideology and exploitive commerce, and to call as many people as who care to hear back to what it means to live lyrically, not just theoretically or digitally.

Denise: We live in politically charged times where the funding of the arts (in Australia, at least) is under direct threat – an area you tackle in your bluntly titled article 'The Inhumanities; Or, the war on the humanities & why our humanity is at stake' https://www.marktredinnick.com/riffs-and-plaints/the-inhumanities-or-the-war-on-the-humanities-amp-why-our-humanity-is-at-stake How do you view the relationship between politics and poetry?

Mark: I guess I anticipated that question, too. I also got to speaking about it passionately in an essay I've included as an afterword in my new book, *Walking Underwater*.

I wrote "The Inhumanities" because I saw a government playing politics for ideological reasons with the arts, of which poetry is the central practice. Poetry's work has been to remind us what it means and what it takes and what it costs and how messy and glorious it is to live a human life on earth; it's work is to remind us also how to be human and why it matters to do that as well, as freely, as humanely, as beautifully, as we can. To speak for what is irreducible in each and all of us, for the integrity of each human life and the world that is each human moment, poetry needs above all to speak in a language that is mandated

by no one and alive with the autonomy of each instance of being that each of us, and each animal and moment, is. Poetry keeps us free by keeping language free from all sorts of cant and agendas. I was writing to keep it free from the cant of the right; but poetry is, I'm not alone in saying, under attack from colonist and purists, ideologues on the left.

Poetry fails to do the work that only poetry can do when it tries, or is forced, to do political work, when its phrasing and subject matter are mandated, when it is given agendas—except for the agenda of keeping human and other lives free from hegemonies of all kinds—to prosecute. Its work is freedom; its work is justice; its work is the renovation of language and the recharging of the human spirit; its work is dignity; its work is dissent; its work is the refusal of ugliness and hypocrisy; its work is never to go quietly. Its politics is the defence of human dignity and the carrying on of a conversation that might elevate an understanding of what a good life is. It stands for all of us, though; not just some of us. Its policies are the kind of glorious mess of contradictions any given life is. All humanity, in particular the disparaged and overlooked, is whom it's partisan for. A poem that works must imagine how it speaks for any one of us at all. That is a radical political act in an increasingly shrill and partisan world, both left and right.

Here are eleven things I think (passionately) about politics and poetry—as I say them in the essay on poetry I add to *Walking Underwater*.

1. Through history, poetry has often been exhorted to profess political causes—both coercive and subversive. Regimes enlist poetry; the rebels enlist it, too. Poetry is often asked to assert or conserve various norms, some old, some new, some noble, some less so. Now, poetry—this art, this finest human accomplishment—has a part to play is social change. But it does its work, it makes deep change happen and hold, at the molecular, not the social, level. On the whole, good politics—let alone bad—is going to make pretty bad poetry, because politics is not poetry's business. Poetry's business is what politics (like theory) oversimplifies or overlooks or overwhelms or flat out denies; poetry's business is life (its affirmation, its conservation); its work is humanitarian; its work is divination, conscientious objection to cant and platitude; its work is disruption, revelation. And the fashioning of enduring coherence, where there is, otherwise, chaos and shrillness.
2. If it *Others*, if it enmifies, if it cancels, if it peddles stereotypes and newspeak, a poem won't be doing poetry's work—that softer, more enduring, more powerful labour. Poetry is what water does to rock. Poetry's politics is its refusal of political stratagem and idiom. The power of poetry—the danger it poses to piety and political control—is its insistence on, and its practice of human beingness—the mess of any given everyday life in all of its maddening and beautiful particularity and carnality and divinity and contradiction.
3. Poetry performs its politics, then, by refusing politics. By refuting in its language and its approach to what is real, the deadening and deathly discourses and dictates of ideology. Poetry dissents. Its dissent is the heart's, the body's, the mind's. Poetry is the dissenter's discourse. It practises and models a way of seeing and being and saying that each human being needs to find if they are to come all the way true—and to stand clear of the clutter of what one is told one is or is not or should be or should not be.
4. Refusing orthodoxies, practising plurality, poetry closes distances down. There is a way of dying to one's self, Rumi writes, and coming back plural; and I think poetry is that way.
5. SURE, POETRY is partisan: it wants justice; it wants freedom; it wants truth. It will speak for that which is disparaged or denied or neglected in dominant discourses (commerce, theory, science, politics, scholarship); it will tend to find inadequate the renderings made of the meaning of a human life in the idioms of daily discourse, online and in the market and in the papers and on the floors of parliaments; it will speak for the lives of those who cannot speak because they are trees and rocks and fish and microbes and birds. And it will speak for those whose lives are not seen or valued. It wants equality; it despises pomp and purism.
6. But poetry does not do its best work in the idioms of power and theory; it does not do its best work from the stage or from the soap box. It famously makes nothing happen, as Auden put it. Which is to say, it fashions the kind of silence—the absence of cant and cliché and dogma and cause—that deep and thoughtful, regenerative living requires; it makes a space inside all the noise for wisdom to arise.

7. The revolutions poetry sparks take place, though, in the heart. The bombs that poems throw are, on the whole, soft. They never stop going off. And in their going off they do not maim so much as heal. They change lives, but they do not change governments.
8. Poetry reminds us we live lives no one else can claim or name or defame, and it gives us back to that life, our own, that irreducible life that only we can lead—all theory and politics notwithstanding—and to the wildness and sufficiency and grace we come in with.
9. Poetry has tended through history to practise language as well as language can be practised. It has freed language from the way everyday as well as arcane discourses reduce it—and reduce us.
10. Orwell and others have warned us what happens when literature gets co-opted by, gets colonised by, ideologies, no matter how worthy the causes they serve.
11. Poetry is the voice of all that cannot be cowed, all that refuses to be stereotyped, catalogued, theorised, labelled, controlled, commodified, enmified, reduced, shamed or cancelled (by any kind of orthodoxy)—that kind of thing (the shaming and silencing) is what poetry most resists. The insistence on the truth of our human lives deeper than all categorisation: this is a large part what we need poetry for. That is its politics.

Denise: At its best, poetry transcends the personal and speaks to us all; it is timeless and universal. Yet we are all constrained by our own individual circumstances, culture and era. How do you go about transforming your personal experience to a place of universal significance?

Mark: …We aren't constrained by our circumstances. Nor defined by them. They are what we have and where we start. Not where we stop. They are the way, the only way maybe, to explore the territory poetry writes, for poetry, I think, lyric poetry anyway, has always mostly been: 'A record of the plangency of Being

Once, and only once, alive in time.'

Denise: In your essay 'I am Nobody. Who are you?', published last year in *Eureka St*, https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article/literature-s-power-is-in-self-not-identity, you make a compelling case for poet's need to find a place deeper than identity from which to write. How do you define this 'self' through which we may transcend our inherited identity?

Mark: Definitions are useful, but they tend to diminish what one means. It's because definition of the most important aspects of life—love, grief, desire, remorse, belonging, being, freedom, beauty, truth, virtue, death, self, poetry—is so difficult and ultimately inadequate that we need poetry, which gets closer to what those things mean through speech-music and metaphor than we will ever get through rational articulation along. Art, in other words, says deepest things better than argument. Writing compellingly about what can be known and felt, but only defined with some cost to the integrity of what one is trying to define—that's what poetry is for; that's why poetic language is necessary. Not to be too obscure, but if one could define Self one wouldn't need poetry (to speak for it). In that essay I worked hard, though, to speak clearly about this Self, which has been written about, of course, for centuries, in all cultures, in poetry and philosophy and spirituality.

What I mean by Self is that which is irreducible in each of us. It's not, or not merely, what others want to call us or name us; it can be no one else's category. It is who one is when no one's looking; when there' is no pretence to be kept up, no uniform to be

worn, no role to be played. I don't think it is what one asserts one is; it is more than one's culture allows or obliges one to be. It is that instance of being, or human-animal being, of that you alone are. It is who one hopes to be loved for being. It is who one wishes the world could see one as—if the world could learn to see through and beyond gender, age, skin colour, class, category, creed, culture, calling, visage, politics, taste, dress-code, postcode. It is the aspect of a speaker or a subject's being, of a reader's being, that poetry tries to do justice to.

I wrote the essay in China for a seminar on Identity and the Artist. I wrote passionately and carefully about the question of self, identity and art because there is, I believe, something inalienable and sacred in each of us which it is one of the purposes of art, of literature in particular, to celebrate and defend; and because it is that aspect of being that is most easily denied when literature is, as Orwell writes, "prevented" by ideological orthodoxies—when its subject-matter and diction are controlled and mandated for ideological reasons. When poetry is appropriated for politics, no matter how virtuous.

In my mind too, of course, is what is sometimes termed "a social justice turn" in the arts and their interpretation in the west—the assumption, in particular, that identity (identity that refuses the norms of gender and that doesn't belong to the what are described as the dominant (white, male, heterosexual) culture)—is the only proper subject for a poem or a play or a novel, and that the merit of a work is judged by the identity asserted by its author and by the work's engagement with the prescribed social justice subject-matter. My concern is how perfectly inadequately poetry will always do the inchoate work it's being asked to do—the wrong it is commanded to right. There are sharper instruments than poems for making regime change. My concern is the harm that so co-opting poetry to this (perfectly just but singular) political cause, or to any other, does to poetry and to the work that poetry alone can do—the work of freeing us from prejudice and stereotype, and the work of elevating our understanding of the nature of an autonomous human life. Poetry is the discourse of the heart, and of the Self, and without such a poetry—if it is disallowed for instance, or cancelled, because it is deemed bourgeois or patriarchal or decadent or uncool—our sense of Self shrivels and societies grow shrill and tribal. My concern is also for the diversity of poetry, the multiplicity it speaks, the pluralism it stands for and defends, and for the freedom from politics that poetry in its nature enacts.

Of course, there is more than an outside chance that what I fear I fear because I am, on the surface of it anyway, a privileged white, straight male of a certain age, and the poetry I believe in and try to write has been the poetry of the categories to which I would appear to belong. But then I don't really hold with categories. And the poetry I believe in has also been the poetry of all times and all classes, I reckon.

A poem hopes to render each of us—this woman, this man, this bird, this child—as any one of us at all. In poetry there are no Others. **There are only selves**. Two legs (or one or none) are just as good as four; in poetry, none of us is more equal than the other. Each of us, rather, is a manifestation of being, as the phenomenologists put it; any poem capable of escaping its privacy will need to catch *that*—the being—not just the creed or cause or party affiliation—of the thing, the moment, the place, the woman, the child, the man, the bird, the world. In a good poem it is her own Being a reader seems to read revealed; it is not so much the poet's secrets that are disclosed (they are transfigured to myth by metaphor), but the human secrets of the reader.

Whoever is configured in a poem—the *I* of the poet or whoever—is offered as a metaphor of human beingness, some aspect, some moment, of the human condition. They do not stand merely for themselves or their tribe. And if they do, the poem falls short of poetry's purpose.

Here is some of what I wrote about this in "I am Nobody":

"MOST OF WHO ONE IS, I want to say, cannot be explained, or contained, or in any sense captured by a cause, or a gender, an ideology, or a theory or a tribal affiliation. There is something irreducible in each of us—and in that uniqueness, we are all the same. Each a unique instance of the human. Deeper than identity is what James Baldwin—and most of the spiritual traditions of the world, and now psychology—call the self.

"And I think it is the life of the self that literature plumbs and charts; and I think a writer can only write that territory, induce the conversation only literature can have about it, can only hope to do that kind of justice to and redeem human life, if she writes from that realm in herself—as free as she can set herself from all other belonging—except to love, except to nature and to language.

"She writes best when she writes as nobody in particular at all, a no one with a pen in her hand."

"THE WRITER will likely be the partisan of the powerless, of the broken, of the beautiful and the mysterious and the damned—her kin. The writer will likely write the flawed majesty, the bewilderment, of people caught, without a script, without perhaps their clothes, on the stage of their everyday lives and griefs.

"But she had better not—unless she has no choice—join a church or a bank or a sect or peddle a program. For literature is the discourse of the soul, it is the idiom of being, and that kind of language, like love itself, will not prosper in captivity. No matter how kind."

No one's asking me for my advice, of course. But if they were, I'd suggest this: write as a poet, write as human, a self, as nobody in particular; and write about whatever you want, but try to catch, if you can, yourself or any of us out being human in the poem's moment. Being aspects of moments, species of place. Catch us in our contradictions and yearning and hope and despair. Leave the mantras for the yoga mat; save the banners for the march. Show us something that reminds us we're rea—all of us equally—and that we are not alone, and nor are you. Make no special pleading for yourself. Don't portray yourself as a victim. Or if that's what you feel you are, remember that it's a big club. Be careful how stridently and narrowly you identify yourself. Identity *with* becomes very quickly identity *against*. Try, like poets of all identities, ethnicities and genders, empowered and outcast, across the ages—to see yourself as an instance of humanity, of all grief and joy, as an angelic organism, a thinking, languaging mammal.

Denise: Your poetry is at one level highly analytical, yet your feel for language is intuitive and speaks to us emotionally. I am curious, do you ever experience a tension between analysis and intuition? Is the need to dissect ever at odds with the desire to feel and communicate feeling?

Mark: …Poems only work if they have bodies and if their language feels as alive as streets and skies and animals and children. A good poem thinks and argues a bit; but it won't be a poem if it does not catch the "plentiful imagery of the world," as Billy Collins

puts it, and if it does not catch the inner life of a state of feeling and being. The thinking and the feeling are sometimes at odds, I guess, but what reconciles them is the insistence of the kind of poetry I aspire to on rhythm and other aspects of speech music; what helps you think with your heart and feel with your head, as it were, is also the work of making an architecture of voice—form, in other words. And what helps are these two adages: 1. Put a bird in it, and 2. 'no ideas but in things' (William Carlos Williams). A poem, wrote Horace, should instruct and delight. *And*: not one or the other. And by instruct, I don't know what he meant, but I don't take it to mean tell anyone else how to live; I take it to mean: have something to say that has not been said before. Say it fresh. Write it the way you haven't heard it said before.

Denise: You have a close connection with China and have visited it several times in the last three years. What inspiration do you find there, and what is the response within the Chinese artistic community to your work?

Mark: I first went to China with my poetry because I was so beautifully translated by Isabelle Li, who also had some of my poems in translation published by leading journals in Beijing. My poems and my essays and my work in ecocriticism were also known in China, where, to the surprise of some, ecocriticism is a lively discourse. One thing led to another, and after appearances at poetry festivals and events in Hong Kong, Hangzhou, Xichang, Miluo, on the international writers' program at the Lu Xun Academy in Beijing. That was 2019. Much has deteriorated in the relations between the west and China, between Australia, in particular, and China, since then, and I'm not sure how long it will be before I am back there and what will become of several books planned with Chinese publishers. But I hope things return soon to the amity that characterised my encounters with China. Poetry is almost the first language of China. Lyric poetry, they claim, began there with Quyuan 2500 years ago, a claim Indigenous cultures might quibble with; in any case, they've been writing and revering and sometimes co-opting and always sharing poetry there for a very long time. I met no minor official, party representative, or student who could not recite poetry at me and who did not want to engage in a conversation about its importance. Poets are rock stars in China. I've in China read poems to a football stadium of three thousand people.

I think there are aspects of my work that's recognised in China: my concern with place, my birds, my architectures. And for my part, I am inspired by the love of poetry I meet in China and by the incredible landscapes and the beauty of the language, and I am awed (overawed) by the energy that belongs to an ancient culture that's travelled three centuries in seventy years (from feudal destitution through civil war and revolution and collectivist industrialisation and totalitarian control to enormous (if patchy) prosperity and superpower status, and by the persistence inside that narrative of the small human and natural moments that remain almost untouched by any of that grand history. China like all of us is a contradiction and a paradox. Some poems—a number of them feature in *Walking Underwater*—have come to me so far, and quite a bit of prose. Mostly I just feel fortunate. One sits one day to make see if one can get some poems written about small things that matter a lot, but probably to no one but yourself, and ten years later you find yourself on a stage reading them in the high mountains of Sichuan Province.

Denise: You gave a paper on the six gifts of poetry in China, due to be published shortly. Could you, I wonder, give us an idea as to what to expect – a teaser, even?

Mark: In Xichang in late November 2018 on my third visit to China, I watched a number of fellow "foreign" poets stumble through introductory remarks we had not realised till then we would be expected to deliver to a large audience, on the nature of poetry and why it mattered in a globalising world, and I decided I should get something written down. We had six minutes, so I settled on *The Six Gifts of Poetry*. It's a very Chinese kind of title, I guess. I found it a useful way to bring together thoughts I've written about for many years. I've used it in my teaching many times since. And I'm making a short podcast on it next week. I still haven't written it up. In fact, I'm thinking it's going to shape a book on poetry and poetics that I'll write in the next two years. If you come do my six-week online poetry masterclass, *What the Light Tells*, you'll hear them all elaborated there, one gift each week. Poetry is for Freedom (freeing language from cliché and stereotype, it frees us, too, giving us back to our fuller humanity). Poetry is for Forgiveness (poetry forgives us for being human). Poetry is for Hearthing (poetry contains the fire it starts; it fashions coherence from chaos; it closes distance down). Poetry is for (Re)Connection (trading in metaphor and refusing cant, poetry writes us back into the webs of connection daily life severs). Poetry is for Survival (cultures everywhere, according to Gregory Orr, evolved the lyric poem to carry us through trauma, consoling and speaking hard truths at once). Poetry is for Justice (poetry honours the complex and paradoxical truths of lived experience; it writes the inner life of the actual world; it remembers the earth and it dissents from platitudes).

Denise: Success can be, for many, a double-edged sword. How has public recognition – with all that it entails – affected you creatively, and does it ever threaten your sense of 'self'?

Mark: Poets don't get the kind of recognition that's likely to sustain a false sense of your own importance for very long. It's remarkable how few people anywhere have the least idea who I am or what I've written. From time to time, in particular in China, I feel what it's like to be regarded with respect or admiration for some work one has made, and that feels good. It reminds me to keep going, to find better ways, to see more truly, to keep at it. Now and then I hear how a line or a phrase that I had the wit once not to cut from a poem had made a difference, a big difference, and that makes me feel like I may not have lived an entirely wasted life. Most of the time, though, there is just the too much work and the too little money and the not enough time to get anything good finished, and the too little courage to face the blank screen—the stuff that affects us all. Occasionally then it helps to know I appear to have written a few poems in the past that did not fail, and so it's possible I may write one more. Other times, any honour I have received just makes me know for sure all my good work is behind me. On balance, I'd say the recognition helps more than it hinders. But still beginning each poem I feel like a rank beginner, a cricketer in her first test match, and maybe that's the way it should be. One day I'll start to get the hang of this, I say to myself. One can only hope.

Denise: All artists work differently. Can you tell us a little about your own approach to writing, whether you have a set routine and the times you find most productive?

Mark: I write when I can. I write best when I feel the press of necessity about something: either because I have a commission or because I experienced something or thought a thought or discovered a form that demands a poem in response. I notice I don't write and I don't write, though I plan to, and then I write four poems at once. I don't recommend this approach. I don't much enjoy it; it's just how it is and always has been. Sometimes I have written strong poems when I thought I was too tired and lacked inspiration; other

times, I have written badly when all the conditions were right. Mostly I can get something better written than I feel able. I think that's because I am wilful and addicted to finishing what I start, and because if your parents grew up in the depression and your grandfather was a Methodist minister, and your life has taught you (or perhaps it's an addiction) that you never get anything you don't work hard for, then you work hard for it. Plus, I think I came in with a gift for some of this and a decent ear and tenacity to learn and a hope to get very good at something. I think because I am a little scared of how hard I work, I put off the hard work a little too long sometimes. Or maybe I just need deadlines to help me impose a little order on my driven but disorderly mind.

Denise: What books are you currently reading, poetry or otherwise?

Mark: Because he went and died too soon, I am rereading Barry Lopez: four of his books at once, as is my way. I am reading Steve Armstrong's second book of poems, *What's Left*. I'm rereading Louis Gluck's *Collected* and I am reading Jane Hirshfield's *Ledger* because I read it too fast the first time a year ago, and hers are poems that ring like singing bowls and ask you to listen again. Most of what I am reading right now is manuscripts by mentees, and the *New Yorker* online. And I'm reading *Joy: 100 Poems*, an anthology edited by Christian Wiman.

Denise: Lastly, what advice would you offer to aspiring writers, given the times we live in?

Mark: I gave a little advice before. These times are troubled, like all times, but in their particular way. Singing and dancing and praying in company are out apparently, so those are off the table for now. My advice to young writers is what it always has been. 1. Read a lot: poetry from all times and cultures and from now. 2. Don't be ambitious for you; be ambitious for poetry and for your work. 3. Don't join. Clubs and tribes are bad for writers. But do care. A great deal. About the earth. About music. About justice and dignity. About poetry. 4. Go outside. Discover the *real* estate: the Land, the weather, the geology, the world of meaning of which the human is only a part. 5. Love. 6. Study form and technique. Literature, poetry in particular, is old and long and wise. Take your time, and keep practising. Go to school; learn all the rules you get to break later. On the other hand, don't wait till you've got it all down. You never will. Write and fail as you study. Fail again better tomorrow, as Beckett put it. 7. Get a sense of humour if you don't have one. These are serious times. Deadly serious. Poetry is play with language. Serious fun. If Horace is right, we need to delight, as well as to school. Practise joy. We need as much of it as we can get.

Denise: Thank you so much for your time, Mark (*to be completed*).