

The Poet Is In

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIE HOWE

By Margaret Murphy



MARIE HOWE PHOTO BY CLAIRE HOLT

MARIE HOWE WAS A POETRY FELLOW at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown from 1983 to 1984. Since her Fellowship, she has published three collections of poetry: *The Good Thief* (1988), *What the Living Do* (1998), and *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* (2008). She has taught at Sarah Lawrence College, Columbia University, and NYU, and received fellowships from the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation. Howe coedited (with Michael Klein) the essay anthology *In the Company of My Solitude: American Writing from the AIDS Pandemic* (1994), and her work has been published in hundreds of magazines, collections, and journals, including the Poetry section of this issue of *Provincetown Arts*. She is the 2012–2014 recipient of the Walt Whitman Award for State Poet of New York. I conducted this interview with Howe, who also happens to be my neighbor, in Greenwich Village, where she lives with her daughter, Inan.

Margaret Murphy: It's been thirty years now since you were a poetry Fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. What is the importance of the Work Center in your life?

Marie Howe: I arrived at the Work Center in my early thirties. In my twenties, I had wandered in the desert—it was a serious desert—crisis and grief with family and friends and lovers. Before I became a Fellow, I had started to find my way out of the desert, through my MFA studies at Columbia, classes with the great Joseph Brodsky, Derek Walcott, Carolyn Heilbrun, Elaine Pagels, Heather McHugh, C. K. Williams, Jorie Graham, and with Stanley Kunitz.

During my Fellowship I read a great deal, wrote, fell in love, suffered of course, and met my dear friend Stephanie Frank Sassoon, who was a painting

Fellow then. I spent some part of every day sitting in Stephanie's studio looking at paintings and talking about life and art and what we were doing or trying to do. It was a great gift. It has shaped my life. The values of the Work Center are unlike anywhere else. It honors a vocation, the life as an artist. This is a remarkable thing. It resonated with me when I was a Fellow and it still does.

To this day, many of my closest friends and advisors are former Work Center Fellows. Different years, different times, but we have this in common: a sense of writing as an art, as something that's not merely a commodity to be sold at any cost. We also share a tremendous respect, and love, for other artists, which the Work Center nurtures. So many people came through that place, and we watched them and learned from them. I think of the

many times Grace Paley visited. And the writers who were around that year: Alan Dugan, Denis Johnson, Stanley Kunitz.

I've gone back to the Work Center every year since I was a Fellow, and it has been a source of great joy to me. I've taught in the summer program almost every year since its inception. My daughter, who is now almost fourteen, has grown up in her summers there. I wanted her to have that in her bones, the creak of the wooden steps up to the second-floor apartment in the Barn, the buzz of the Stanley Kunitz Common Room, growing up listening to people reading. Out on the grass playing with the other kids, she's heard these voices her whole life.

MM: *What role has Provincetown played in your life?*

MH: My friend Michael Cunningham once said, affectionately, that Provincetown is our hometown, our adult hometown. Michael came from Los Angeles, I came from western New York—but the Work Center in Provincetown is our hometown as artists. A fabulous hometown of freedom and necessity. The two poles we humans can't live without. Such freedom on this narrow strip of land thrust into the ocean—such necessity as articulated by the limits of the land and the unrelenting encroachment of the living ocean.

MM: *Stanley Kunitz was one of the founders of the Work Center in 1968. He celebrated his hundredth birthday there, in the Stanley Kunitz Common Room, in 2005. Who was Stanley in your life?*

MH: Stanley was my teacher and my friend. I met him when I was thirty-one and he was seventy-five. Stanley cut through all the nonsense—aesthetic arguments, careerism, fashions coming, fashions going. He sat in his chair and he was present to the feel of the paper between his fingers, or the seedling he held in his hands. He endured a century. He knew the world when it was illuminated by gas lamps right up to the world of a few minutes ago. He had stacked next to his living-room chair the latest books on the cosmos and the genome. He lived in each minute and in the fullness of time. As a poet he was a success at nineteen, then his poems fell out of fashion. He endured long periods of

what some might call neglect. Later in his life, he began to write in a new way. The last poems of his life are some of the finest poems he ever wrote. At ninety, he wrote "Touch Me," one of the greatest love poems. Stanley lived a life of integrity—politically, socially, artistically. Those last poems seem like emanations of great clarity from great depth. Elemental. That could be why thousands crowded into his readings. I heard from friends that when Stanley read for the last time outdoors in New York City—it was in Bryant Park, I believe—men were working, jackhammers, traffic, all that racket. Friends said that when Stanley started to speak, the streets seemed to quiet down, the construction workers stopped drilling—everyone wanted to listen.

MM: *What is the power of poetry in our culture today? Has it changed since you started to write?*

MH: I believe we were singing to our children before we were drawing on the walls of caves. Poetry might be the earliest, most fundamental art. The lullaby, the ballad, the chant, the prayer. So ancient, the deepest human song. It will always be a part of human life.

The difference between now and when I started to write? Thirty-five years ago, the pool of poets was so small—white males, one or two men of color, and one or two women, usually chosen by the white males. When I was in graduate school, we were taught two women only, Elizabeth Bishop and Mona Van Duyn. The year I started graduate school, 1980, was the year Sharon Olds wrote her first book. The door was about to be kicked open by other women poets as well. As it opened, of course, so many voices poured out into the living world. Not only women, but people of color, gay voices, lesbian voices, Chicano voices, Latino voices, Asian, Native American—everybody who had been pushed to the margins began to sing. It was thrilling, but gradual. It really happened over that decade, from 1980 to 1990. And then, of course, the whole AIDS epidemic cracked open a whole other aesthetic. And then so-called performance poetry, and hip-hop, and rap, began to pour into the culture. All of these things are at play now. It's thrilling because today it's a great ocean instead of a narrow river. But I think it's disorienting too, for many poets, because there are so many voices. One can feel, why is one more voice necessary?

But we will always have poetry. People go to poetry, still, for the major moments in their lives. When somebody dies. When somebody falls in love. When somebody gets married. When somebody has a child. When someone's sick. When someone's in grief. They reach for a poem. In the way we reach for a blanket on a cold night, people will reach for the poem. Sometimes people don't know where to look. This is where we can help—the poets, and anyone who loves poetry. The more we give poetry books to people, the more poetry floats around everyone's house. Eventually, a poem gets picked up and someone looks at it and says, "Listen to this." I think people instinctively know that there is an art that holds language, that touches

reality in a way that even the most wonderful TV show can't, even the most wonderful music can't.

Perhaps we remember the murmuring sound of a lullaby that says, "You're not alone." That's what poetry says: "You're not alone."

MM: *What are you doing as the Walt Whitman New York State Poet?*

MH: As State Poet, I'm trying to bring poetry to the people in ways that are accessible, and interactive. I've been sponsoring an event in Washington Square Park, once a week during the summer, once a month during the winter, on Sunday afternoons under the Arch. It's called "The Poet IS IN." It's modeled on the Occupy movement, using the human microphone—the speaker reads a line of the poem, and then the gathering repeats it back as a chorus. We choose a poet, say Walt Whitman. I pass out lots of Walt Whitman poems. One after another, people get up and say the poem, line by line, and the crowd says it right back: "I celebrate myself." "I celebrate myself." "What I assume you assume." "What I assume you assume." "Every molecule that belongs to me belongs to you." "Every molecule that belongs to me belongs to you." It's amazing to hear the poems moving through the voices and bodies of the people there. My own daughter got up and read, "A child said to me what is the grass." The whole crowd said back to her, "A child said to me what is the grass."

MM: *What a great way to bring poetry into our everyday lives. What else are you doing?*

MH: I team-taught a class called "Poetry Everywhere" as part of NYU's graduate ITP (Interactive Telecommunications Program). ITP teaches art and technology on the cutting edge. I team-taught with a video sculptor. The idea was to have his students do tech projects that bring poetry into unexpected and public spaces. We're hoping to install several of these projects in Grand Central, Penn Station, and other places in the city. Some are video, some are booths, some are outdoor projections onto city buildings. One project will have a poet in a booth at Grand Central for commuters to stop and talk to. This poet (many will work at the table) will write poems for people who ask for one.

MM: *Let's talk about your poetry, the work you've done in the thirty-plus years since you started to write. One of your earliest poems, "After the Flood," written while you were a Fellow at the Work Center, is the first example of your use of Bible stories to write about life. You have continued to do this, and it has become one of the most distinctive aspects of your writing. Why do you use the Bible stories?*

MH: When I was a young girl, those people were real to me, in a very human way. I felt, in my imagination, that there was more to them than what was written—the spaces in the story could be filled in. The Jews know all about this, in their midrash. This rabbinic tradition is to read the stories from the Torah, knowing that the Torah



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is never complete. The midrash asks us to imagine what happened next, to fill in the gaps of the narrative text. What did Isaac do the next day? What did Sarah do when Isaac came back down and told her what had happened? The stories. There's so much silence and space in them. Just as there is in life, people's actions in real life. There's this terrible richness there—where the essentially unsayable is.

You ask me to read the uncut version of an early poem, "After the Flood." I see now that so many of the themes in my life are wrestling this poem. How to survive the alcoholic family, how to live after the flood, the fear of love, the hope for love, the belief in regeneration, and the doubt. Stanley used to say that we have these key images that we turn over and over. It's very moving to me to reread it today. [It was published as a much shorter poem, "Recovery," in *The Good Thief*.]

MM: *This aesthetic, using the Bible stories to talk about life, makes me wonder whether you've ever been concerned that there are readers out there who don't know the stories—the atheists, the agnostics, the unbelievers—so they're missing what you're saying?*

MH: Well, first of all, I'm not saying anything. I'm not here to say anything. The poem, if I'm lucky, happens, and then I get to try to hear it as well. I've got nothing to say. I want to make that really clear. There are poets who do have things to say. I'm not one of them. I really want to have an experience writing the poem, where the poem tells me something. The poem itself holds more than the poet can know. It's like a great painting, or a great piece of music. We, I think, are incapable of making art. But art knows how to make art. We participate, if we do what it tells us to do. I always say this to my students. The poem knows more than you do. If it doesn't know more than you do, start over. If you're just saying what you already know, that's not a poem.

MM: *Your poetry, more than most poetry I've read, has a spiritual dimension to it. Whether it's your voice coming through, or someone else's voice coming through, I think this is one of the most important contributions your poetry has made to our culture.*

MH: Early on, I didn't understand it when Stanley said that every poet carries key images around in her heart, key questions. After years of talking with him, I finally knew what he meant. Of course. Each of us carries around central questions, central bewilderments, central concerns. Maybe they're carried as a memory of a certain tree in our childhood, or an incident, or a dream we had once. For me, what concerns me is who are we, where do we come from, where are we going, what is reality? We know that the world we see is not the only world. We know our sight is limited. We know our senses are limited. There are probably creatures right in this room who have senses beyond ours. What they perceive is different from what we can perceive. We know that everything we see is only a matter of perspective.

As we've discussed, I grew up immersed in the stories of the Torah and the New Testament.

To me they're the deep myths in my life. I loved Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and his ladder, Mary, and Mary Magdalene, all these characters, not as saints, but as humans. I always identified with them, very deeply, as human beings, as confounded as I was, confounded by what in the world is going on.

MM: *What are you working on now?*

MH: Some poems have come in the voice of Mary Magdalene. I think of her not as the character we see in the paintings but as a woman who lives in time like us. One who lives a little bit outside the system. A woman who is the subject of her own life, not an object, who is spiritually hungry and possibly bewildered. She exists throughout time—in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance and in China and here and in the twenty-first century. So it's Mary Magdalene I'm listening for right now. I've written several poems in her voice but I don't know yet what I'll keep and what I'll throw away. I throw away about 90 percent of what I write, when it's just me talking rather than the poem itself. It's a relief to throw them away. [See the poem "Magdalene—Men, Their Bodies" in the Poetry section on page 102.]

MM: *Do you think of anything in particular as your best work?*

MH: Let me put it this way. I think about the people who opened gates for me. I think about *What the Living Do* and how many people talk in it and how many people talk in the poems of Robert Frost. I think about a wonderful poet named Ron Schreiber, who wrote a book called *John*, about his partner. If it weren't for Robert Frost and Ron Schreiber, I wouldn't have given myself the freedom to do this, to put people who are talking in my poems. That's what I think of as my best work—what I wrote in those moments of freedom. Other poets create the space where poems happen. If I could list influences, I would never be done with naming the names.

MM: *What makes your poetry so special is that people get it. People can read your poetry and relate to it. And it is transforming.*

MH: If that's true, I am grateful for their company. Robert Frost says, "No discovery for the writer, no discovery for the reader." So we learn what the poem might be saying to each of us together, and alone. But not alone.



MARGARET MURPHY was Executive Director of the Fine Arts Work Center for six years, starting in 2007. Prior to the Work Center, which she considers her job of a lifetime, she practiced law in NYC, as head of environmental practice in an international law firm and later as founder of a Greenwich Village-based nonprofit legal services group serving older New Yorkers in need.

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The poet Alexander Blok lived through the turbulent years of the Russian revolution. He came from a well-educated intelligentsia family, but unlike many people of his class, decided to stay in Russian and remained loyal to his country. This 1905 poem reflects the uncertainty of the times: the first revolution, the short but shameful war with Japan and the ongoing discontent with the current government. The 1914 poem Listen is one of his early works where he is in search of answers to some of the most complicated questions about our purpose in the world. He contemplates the role of a poet, concluding that the main reason for life is being useful. That said, the work of an artist should not just be a reflection of his life, but should also touch the lives of others. Poets and their poetry have the ability to take readers places and into worlds they've never imagined. Poets can often be tortured souls or great thinkers who allow readers a new view on the world which they never would have imagined. These greatest poets provide the kind of emotional connection to the written word that few can. Vote up the all time best poets on the list below or add the poets you think are the greatest if they aren't already on the list. list ordered by. all voters. The Poet is a divination card. A set of nine can be exchanged for Blood of CorruptionBlood of CorruptionAmber AmuletRequires Level 20+(20-30) to StrengthGrants Level 10 Gluttony of Elements SkillAdds 19 to 43 Chaos Damage to Attacks-(10-5)% to all Elemental Resistances+(17-29)% to Chaos ResistanceCorruptedIn my dream, a voice spoke to me. It said:'My reach knows no bounds.All that is pure is destined to rot.All that lives is destined to serve.'- Doryani, Queen's Thaumaturgist.