

92. Meeting Point by Louis MacNeice – A Friend to Imtiaz Dharker

Fiona Bennett

Hello, and welcome to The Poetry Exchange. I'm Fiona Bennett.

Michael Shaeffer

And I'm Michael Shaeffer.

Fiona Bennett

Hello, Michael, you're in an unusual setting.

Michael Shaeffer

I am, I'm in my apartment in New York. I'm here doing the Grenfell play that I did at the National over the summer last year. And we had our opening night a couple of nights ago, in fact, and it went very well. We've had a lovely review in the New York Times. And Sarah Jessica Parker did a very lovely Instagram post recommending that all her 9.7 million followers should come and see it.

Fiona Bennett

Well, that sounds fantastic. It sounds like you're totally, totally on top of the situation there. I'm thrilled to hear. I would expect nothing less.

Michael Shaeffer

How are you? How are things in England?

Fiona Bennett

It's all very good here, Michael. And strange that you're so far away at this moment in our journey and our adventure with poetry together. Our listeners are not going to be able to see this happening, but I am holding in my hands *Poems as Friends: The Poetry Exchange 10th Anniversary Anthology*. And it's in my house. It arrived in my house a few days ago. A

beautiful box from Quercus. And I'm just gonna lift it up into the screen as I talk to you, Michael, and you can have your reaction live.

Michael Shaeffer

Oh, Fiona. Oh my gosh. That's amazing. It looks really nice.

Fiona Bennett

I wanted to point out to you that I'm - this sounds such a bizarre thing - but I realised when it arrived...of course, it's in a beautiful jacket...

Michael Shaeffer

...it is...

Fiona Bennett

...of course we were aided and abetted in this matter brilliantly by our editor Nina Sandelson. Much thanks to Nina. And it's a beautiful object...I realised when it arrived, Michael, that I, I had a concern about how fat it was.

Michael Shaeffer

Okay.

Fiona Bennett

You know, we'd sort of thought about the page itself so much with the poems and the brilliant typesetting that the wonderful specialist did for us, and all that had been going on, but you know, the actual thickness of the object - I was concerned it might have got too thin or too fat - but I feel it's perfect.

Michael Shaeffer

It looks good from here. It's really great, Fi, it's exciting to see it.

Fiona Bennett

This is the advance sort of proof copy, if you like, and very soon it'll be in the hands of our wonderful 60 contributors. They'll be getting their copies very soon. And all those listeners who have pre-ordered, it will be in your house before you know it!

Michael Shaeffer

And it's available to buy on May 9th, is that right?

Fiona Bennett

That's publication day and I think if you've pre-ordered it might even slip its way to you before then, I don't know how these things work. But it's very exciting to see it and to be seeing the poems and the stories together alongside each other on the page, the voices of the people that we've spoken to, over time, there in black and white as a reading experience. It's incredibly exciting to see that, and to see the poems that we've so enjoyed spending time with - well, some of the poems have not appeared as yet on the podcast, so there is plenty of material in there that's not been aired in any way before - but those ones where we have had them on the podcast, it's very exciting to see them, if you like, return to the page - the conditions in which they met their reader and where the stories began. So it's really beautiful and exciting. And we've got some events coming up in May. So if you're in the UK, and you're anywhere near Tunbridge Wells on May 12th, I'll be there with one or two special people. We'll put details on the website. And also May 25th, Michael and I will be at Norfolk & Norwich Festival.

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah, sharing some bits from the book. Reading some of the stories of connection that people have had with the poems, as well as reading some of those poems as well. I'm really looking forward to doing some of these sort of book-focused events...that'll be a new thing for us, Fi - very exciting!

Fiona Bennett

And because it's such an exciting moment, we needed to have a particularly exciting episode. And indeed we have. It's been a long held wish by both our guest and ourselves to have this conversation. And we were absolutely thrilled when the wonderful global superstar, I like to think of her, that is Imtiaz Dharker, was able to come and speak to us. Imtiaz Dharker - seven collections with Bloodaxe poetry...more books to talk about here because her new collection comes out on May 23rd - *Shadow Reader* - with Bloodaxe again...and it's fantastic that she

managed to make time to speak to us. So you'll be hearing myself and Roy McFarlane talking about 'Meeting Point' by Louis MacNeice – the poem that's been a friend to Imtiaz.

Fiona Bennett

So many things I immediately wanted to ask but I must restrain myself and just thank you for bringing us this poem and to invite you to perhaps kick off by reading it for us.

Imtiaz Dharker

Meeting Point

by Louis MacNeice

Time was away and somewhere else,
There were two glasses and two chairs
And two people with the one pulse
(Somebody stopped the moving stairs):
Time was away and somewhere else.

And they were neither up nor down;
The stream's music did not stop
Flowing through heather, limpid brown,
Although they sat in a coffee shop
And they were neither up nor down.

The bell was silent in the air
Holding its inverted poise—
Between the clang and clang a flower,
A brazen calyx of no noise:
The bell was silent in the air.

The camels crossed the miles of sand
That stretched around the cups and plates;
The desert was their own, they planned
To portion out the stars and dates:
The camels crossed the miles of sand.

Time was away and somewhere else.
The waiter did not come, the clock
Forgot them and the radio waltz
Came out like water from a rock:
Time was away and somewhere else.

Her fingers flicked away the ash
That bloomed again in tropic trees:
Not caring if the markets crash
When they had forests such as these,
Her fingers flicked away the ash.

God or whatever means the Good
Be praised that time can stop like this,
That what the heart has understood
Can verify in the body's peace
God or whatever means the Good.

Time was away and she was here
And life no longer what it was,
The bell was silent in the air
And all the room one glow because
Time was away and she was here.

Fiona Bennett

Thank you so much. The meeting point of your voice and this poem just feels totally meant to be. So has it been a friend to you for a long time, this poem, Imtiaz?

Imtiaz Dharker

Yes it has. In fact, the first time I heard it, or lines from it, I was sitting at a table with a boy I just met and he casually said: 'Time was away and somewhere else. The waiter did not come, the clock forgot them.' And it just stopped me dead because I wasn't especially interested in this boy, but for a few seconds I fell in love with him because he said those lines. And so of course I went and looked for the poem and found MacNeice and 'Meeting Point' and all his other work. The boy went out of my life, but the poem stayed.

Fiona Bennett

That is a fantastic story. Do you think he felt he was in the poem? Having the experience of the poem?

Imtiaz Dharker

Yes, I think at that moment. Maybe it was that something was held up, but he said the lines and he chose his moment and it worked.

Fiona Bennett

So that was a long time ago, this encounter with this boy?

Imtiaz Dharker

Longer than I care to remember. I was probably 16. And he'd have been just a little bit older.

Roy McFarlane

And were you into poetry at that time?

Imtiaz Dharker

I was already writing poems quietly, hiding them away, but I was writing.

Roy McFarlane

I'm intrigued. How did this appeal to you? I can imagine the lover being caught away with - 'whoah, this guy quoted these lines at me' - but the 16 year old poet, how did this appeal to you?

Imtiaz Dharker

Well, I could see right away that there was a rhythm to it. I mean, just that 'time was away and somewhere else' - just that was enough to catch you to begin with. But then the sharp line - 'the waiter did not come' - that mixing of a big idea and the waiter, I think that's really what hooked me and I've always loved that. But over the years, my relationship with this poem has changed in all kinds of ways. And I've come back to it and found different things and learned different things. When I went to it, I felt it was like a film on the page. If you just start with that image of the two people sitting at a cafe table, I mean, it's something we all do, it's something that's part of normal life - 'there were two glasses and two chairs' - but time was

away and somewhere else. And it's as if they're being suspended in time and space, with this kind of concentrated image of lovers in that moment of complete absorption with each other - 'two people with the one pulse.' And normally I'd be thinking of their backstory, and there clearly is a story, but the poem makes a space for them outside of time, somewhere between reality and fantasy.

Roy McFarlane

I don't know what came to me - why *Brief Encounter* - remember that film - that came to mind with this? And then I thought, knowing that you're a filmmaker as well...and then you're now explaining this kind of filmic imagery, the profound imagery in this.

Imtiaz Dharker

Absolutely. I mean, you realise that so much of great poetry is about love and death. And both film and poetry happen in time. It's like sometimes stopping time. And this is like a freeze frame. And again, when we think about so many poems, they look back in time, look back or forward. There are so many references to time in this poem - the pulse, the clock, bells, stars and dates, the sands as well - and MacNeice manages to freeze the frame as if it's one of those moments on film, where the main characters are still and really intensely focused. But time and space spin around them. They're made almost immortal and mythical. No one even says the word *love*, but, you know, in this - it reminds me as you said, of *Brief Encounter* - because the hands don't have to touch. This is high romance in a public space. And I was also thinking of *Casablanca* and films like that.

Fiona Bennett

I've got to ask about 'the moving stairs.' What do you see? Or what happens to you in that first verse? 'Somebody stopped the moving stairs'.

Imtiaz Dharker

Well you know, to answer that question, I'm going to talk about punctuation.

Fiona Bennett

Great.

Imtiaz Dharker

Because of course, the moving stairs, the escalator, it stops. It's a loop stopping. But that line is in brackets. And after it there's a colon. And usually I can't be bothered, you know, with colons and semicolons. But here it's perfect to show the way that the escalator has stopped. It's a punctuation, a halt, and that's a perfect use of a colon as far as I can see. And again, after 'they were neither up nor down', there's a semicolon. And again that's absolutely right to suggest the way they're suspended in time. So this poem taught me to respect punctuation in poetry. The fact that it is - can be - a tool, used properly.

Fiona Bennett

But it goes from that moving stair in the first stanza, and then he takes that as the loop into the second one of they're 'neither up nor down'...and then that allows him to go to the stream – upriver downriver - I love that sort of almost image association, isn't it? Everything is flowing, I suppose, literally.

Imtiaz Dharker

Absolutely. In fact the other thing that's happening is the whole poem sounds like a kind of a spell, but it also at times sounds almost like a nursery rhyme - 'neither up nor down' - especially lines like that, or the other repeated lines - 'time was away and somewhere else.' And it really is very regular. But that iambic tetrameter of ticking along like a clock, with the very specific rhymes of AB AB, but it has an internal music, just in the way the words chime inside the lines as well.

Fiona Bennett

Yes, beautiful.

Imtiaz Dharker

I sort of imagine - do you know when you were talking about one thing flowing into the other, and of course that's in the refrains as well - and if I imagine drawing the eight stanzas of this poem, I'd draw eight overlapping circles. And they'd be kind of magic circles holding these two people together. But then amazingly the circles begin to take on a life and a movement of their own, and they begin to lift off the page and they're pulled into the action into this moving picture.

Roy McFarlane

The most powerful verse for me: 'The bell was silent in the air / Holding its inverted poise —'
Wow. 'Between the clang and clang a flower, / A brazen calyx of no noise' - I had to look up
the word calyx.

Imtiaz Dharker

Because the bell doesn't toll, it's movement is suspended. Actually I think for MacNeice the
bells were a kind of haunted thing. His father was a clergyman, and he says his church was a
sort of annex to the home, but rather a haunted annex, which is one reason I think why church
bells have for me a sinister association.

Fiona Bennett

Yes, that word brazen is quite interesting, isn't it? 'A brazen calyx of no noise'. We tend to
think of brazenness being loud, or I do. To be brazen with no noise is - that's arresting in
itself, isn't it, as an idea?

Imtiaz Dharker

Yes, completely, and it also reminds me of 'Sunlight on the garden', his other poem with its
kind of threat of war – 'The sky was good for flying / Defying the church bells / And every evil
iron / Siren and what it tells' – that feeling of the bells being a slightly ominous thing.

Fiona Bennett

And this was written close to the beginning of...

Imtiaz Dharker

'39.

Fiona Bennett

'39, okay. And that takes this whole question of time being suspended into a kind of meta
poignancy, doesn't it. You want time to stop and for love to last forever, whoever you are,
whenever you're falling in love...but if that's happening in 1939, there's a whole different level
to that need, isn't there?

Roy McFarlane

I remember your thoughts about Louis MacNeice - he was married, and then he was divorced, and he was really lost for a period of time: do you feel there's a connection with that? Love and love lost?

Imtiaz Dharker

I would imagine he's thinking about that. Because, well jumping forward to the end - 'and she was here' - it's not just a romantic continuing thing, I feel as if there is a suggestion that she no longer is here. Talk about that again at the end, maybe!

Fiona Bennett

So then from the bells to the camels...

Imtiaz Dharker

Well, this is the most cinematic part of the poem, and that's what I really was thinking of...it's like a huge double exposure - 'The camels crossed the miles of sand / That stretched around the cups and plates' - you know it's the ordinary world of the cafe and the cutlery and the cups and plates, but it becomes suddenly vast and exotic. I wonder, you know, if this was a film would at that point it go into glorious technicolour? In the end I see this as a black and white film.

Fiona Bennett

Because the real world stays there all the time, doesn't it? The cafe is there all the time - and I'm going to come on to this in a minute, because of course there are various cafes that I've come to know through your poems, Imtiaz - and they are great places, cafes. I know that Roy enjoys a cafe too! But they are great places, because it's where we meet as strangers, it's where we...it is where we can step off from the world, but we're still so in it.

Imtiaz Dharker

Well, I've often felt that if you just put two people at a cafe table, the backdrops could just keep changing behind them. What moves around them is the world. And I feel that when I've travelled, I'm sitting at the same cafe table but the world is sort of moving behind me like a diorama. This is the thing: yes, I see these things in the poem now, but when I first read it, what I read was a love poem - a really straightforward love poem.

Roy McFarlane

What a powerful line in: 'God or whatever means the Good.'

Imtiaz Dharker

Well he did have a church background. His father was a clergyman, and I think that was a very, very strong influence, but it wasn't necessarily all happy. Obviously, he cared about the idea of God, and he says here: 'God or whatever means the Good / Be praised that time can stop like this'. But then he does a kind of metaphysical shift from human love, erotic love, to this other thing that he's trying to deal with: 'That what the heart has understood / Can verify in the body's peace / God or whatever means the Good.' And you suddenly see that all those, all the kind of spinning that we've seen, in the rest of the poem, the images, were leading to this - the body's peace, or winter stillness. And it is a kind of verification, because it is a kind of answer to doubts that even if you don't want to speak of God - God with a capital G - you can believe in the good. These are things the body knows before the mind does - the body's peace - and this idea that maybe there's something beyond, that there's something in us, which is bigger and better.

Fiona Bennett

And you're not quite expecting this poem to go there.

Imtiaz Dharker

No, not at all.

Fiona Bennett

You've sort of been in the cafe, with the waiter not coming!

Imtiaz Dharker

And from the cafe to physical things...worlds, deserts, sands, time, all the rest...but suddenly it's the body's peace. And suddenly, it's God or whatever means the Good. And he, I mean, we're able to hold these inside our own bodies, the idea of physical love, and love for something else, something bigger.

Fiona Bennett

Just knowing, Imtiaz, about all these incredible poems that you've written about stopping time and holding time and holding memory, and holding presence for those that have gone: has this poem come back to you in later life, when you've experienced loss and had those thoughts?

Imtiaz Dharker

Yes, absolutely, because I almost see this - when it moves on from being just a love poem - as a kind of elegy to a moment, a kind of elegy to a time. And when I was writing poems, I couldn't write them at first, my poems for my husband, Simon. At first, I couldn't write them at all, because, you know, I was screaming inside and so that's all that was coming out. But when I stopped thinking of them as poems of grief, when I began thinking of them as poems of love, that was when they became poems. That's when they were able to find a form on a page. They were not grief poems at all.

Roy McFarlane

You know when you talked about the circle...and I guess with the bookending of each verse - you know, it begins with the line and ends with the same line in every stanza... 'Time was away and somewhere else' - and that's repeated in the first stanza - and then we end with the last stanza: 'Time was away' - and there's a specific statement - 'and she was here.'

Imtiaz Dharker

Yes, I think that's a really important change at the end: 'Time was away and she was here' [Imtiaz's emphasis]. And I don't think even MacNeice read it with that kind of emphasis, he just read: 'Time was away and she was here.' But for me it has to be 'time was away and she was here' as a last line. And then of course, even in the beginning of that stanza: 'Time was away and she was here / And life no longer what it was'. So something has changed here, something is going to change.

Fiona Bennett

We have this question that we ask: could you describe what kind of friend it is?

Imtiaz Dharker

It's a friend who's there at all kinds of stages of life. If I was having wine at a table and celebrating, I would want this poem to be there. If I was afraid of what was coming up, if I was troubled by what's going on in the world, I'd want this friend to be there. If I needed a moment of stillness and wisdom, I'd want this friend to be there. I very much see this friend at a table, maybe with a glass of wine.

Roy McFarlane

Meeting Point

by Louis MacNeice

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Forgot them and the radio waltz
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And life no longer what it was,
The bell was silent in the air
And all the room one glow because
Time was away and she was here.

Fiona Bennett

And that was Roy with the gift reading of 'Meeting Point' by Louis MacNeice. Our huge thanks to David Higham Associates for permission to share the Louis MacNeice poem. And of course great thanks to Imtiaz Dharker - Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry 2014; Cholmondeley Award, Society of Authors; Royal Society of Literature Fellow, and recently appointed Chancellor of Newcastle University. Thank you so much to Imtiaz for spending time with us.

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah, thanks indeed. Just wonderful to hear you, Roy and Imtiaz having that conversation. I really enjoyed it. And I really enjoyed meeting that poem as well - meeting 'Meeting Point'.

What a fantastic poem, I had all sorts of very imagistic - you kind of make reference in the conversation quite a lot to the sort of filmic aspects of it - that was really vivid for me, actually. And I think the conversation really helped me find a way in to a poet that I've not always been immediately drawn to, as you know, so thank you. And of course there is a very particular connection with Imtiaz for you, Fiona. Not only are you a huge fan of her work and a great admirer, but of course she presented you with your MA.

Fiona Bennett

She did indeed, Michael. I've got to admit, it was quite a moment. I don't think I even knew that was going to happen till I walked into the hall. I knew that she had been made Chancellor of the university only just before...I remember going and thinking, I wonder if she'll be anywhere near, and I thought, oh, no, she won't do that; there'll be so many of these ceremonies with all these students, you know? So it was extremely special to receive our MA from the great poet that is Imtiaz Dharker. And of course, she gave a knockout speech.

Michael Shaeffer

I bet she did. She seems like such a lovely person, she came across so well in that conversation. And I believe that we're lucky enough to have an extra recording from Imtiaz of one of her own poems. Do you want to tell us a bit about that?

Fiona Bennett

It was a lovely, serendipitous moment right at the end of the conversation with her, where, having spoken about this, if you like *Brief Encounter* setting of Louis MacNeice's poem and cafes, we were able to hear one from Imtiaz which resonates beautifully with that location.

Imtiaz Dharker

Hiraeth, Old Bombay

by Imtiaz Dharker

I would have taken you to the Naz Café
if it had not shut down.

I would have taken you to the Naz Café
for the best view and the worst food in town.

We would have drunk flat beer and cream soda
and sweated on plastic chairs at the Naz Café.
We would have looked down over the dusty trees
at cars creeping along Marine Drive, round the bay
to Eros Cinema and the Talk of the Town.

We would have held hands in the Naz Café
over sticky rings on the table-top,
knee locked on knee at the Naz Café,
while we admired the distant Stock Exchange,
Taj Mahal Hotel, Sassoon Dock, Gateway.

We would have nursed a drink at the Naz Café
and you would have stolen a kiss from me.
We would have lingered in the Naz Cafe
till the day slid off the map into the Arabian sea.

I would have taken you to Bombay
if its name had not slid into the sea.
I would have taken you to the place called Bombay
if it were still there and if you were still here,
I would have taken you to the Naz café.

Michael Shaeffer

That's about all we've got time for this month. We'll be back with you next month with more poems and friends. Until then, thank you for listening

Credits:

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Imtiaz Dharker, 'Hiraeth, Old Bombay' from *Over the Moon* (Bloodaxe Books, 2014). © Imtiaz Dharker.

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