

87. 'Ceasefire' by Michael Longley - A Friend to Jacqueline Saphra

Michael Shaeffer

Hello and welcome to The Poetry Exchange. I'm Michael Shaeffer.

Fiona Bennett

And I'm Fiona Bennett. It's very good to see you, Michael.

Michael Shaeffer

And you too, Fiona.

Fiona Bennett

You've been very busy, haven't you?

Michael Shaeffer

I've been in Manchester doing a performance in celebration of 75 years of the NHS put together by Kwame Kwei Armah of The Young Vic. There were contributions from 19 different NHS Trusts, poems and songs and dance pieces. And it was a really beautiful thing. Yeah.

Fiona Bennett

Lovely. I was in Manchester as well, in the audience for a fabulous poetry reading on Saturday, which was in the International Anthony Burgess Foundation, which is a wonderful building. And I want to do a big shout-out to the organisers of this poetry gig. They're called Poets & Players. And they put together poetry readings with two or three poets and a musician - poets and players, you see - and they're always stunning. I think they must be some of the best poetry readings you can go to in the land.

Michael Shaeffer

Wow, that's great. Are they just in Manchester? Or do they do them all over the country?

Fiona Bennett

I'm pretty sure they're just in Manchester. So it is a localised shout-out. But if you are in that neck of the woods, I mean, it's worth a journey, even I'd say. And on this occasion, there was the fabulous Nick Laird reading from his latest collection *Up Late*, and the cellist Li Lu, who played some extraordinary solo cello music. And then actually, as it happens, Michael, the guest of our forthcoming episode.

Michael Shaeffer

We couldn't have written it better, Fi.

Fiona Bennett

So I did have the very great pleasure of hearing the wonderful Jacqueline Saphra reading on Saturday from her latest collection, *Velvel's Violin*, which we'll say a bit more about at the end.

Michael Shaeffer

We've been featuring some conversations from back in our archive, but you'll be pleased to know that we've been having more conversations recently. And this is a more recent one. In fact it was on October the 20th 2023 that we recorded this one.

Fiona Bennett

So you'll be hearing myself and Michael talking about 'Ceasefire' by Michael Longley - the poem that's been a friend to Jacqueline.

Michael Shaeffer

Jacqui, before we get into discussing the poem and your relationship to it, would you mind giving it a reading out loud for us please?

Jacqueline Saphra

Yeah.

Jacqueline Saphra

Ceasefire

by Michael Longley

I

Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears
Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king
Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and
Wept with him until their sadness filled the building.

II

Taking Hector's corpse into his own hands Achilles
Made sure it was washed and, for the old king's sake,
Laid out in uniform, ready for Priam to carry
Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak.

III

When they had eaten together, it pleased them both
To stare at each other's beauty as lovers might,
Achilles built like a god, Priam good-looking still
And full of conversation, who earlier had sighed:

IV

'I get down on my knees and do what must be done
And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son.'

Fiona Bennett

Thank you so much.

Michael Shaeffer

Thank you.

Jacqueline Saphra

Would it be helpful to fill in the little bit of the sort of background of the of the Greek, of the Iliad and the Homer?

Michael Shaeffer

I was just going to suggest that I think that's useful.

Jacqueline Saphra

I mean, I've always been a great fan of Greek myth. I think all of humanity and inhumanity can be found in the myths. And I think Longley has a very similar attitude and was a classicist, or is a classicist, I should say. And this story is about revenge, I suppose in a way forgiveness, and coming together. Achilles killed Hector. Hector was the son of Priam. And in this poem Priam comes to beg for his son's body, to take his son's body back to bury it, and reminds Achilles of his own father. And there's some kind of understanding between them that comes through that. And it was a revenge killing, really, because Hector killed Achilles' friend Patroclus. So there's all that going on and the body of Hector

was desecrated by Achilles, who pulled the body behind him on a cart. So it was a very violent story. And there was divine intervention in the Iliad but in this story it's all about human intervention. And it's a moment of ceasefire, before things hot up again. Priam does get to take his son's body home to Troy with him, and then of course, we have the story of the violence and the sacking of Troy. So it's not that everything's over. But there is just this moment of shared humanity. And, you know, I think, given the current state of the world - and I'm thinking particularly now about the Israel Palestine conflict - this is a moment to really appreciate this poem. It speaks also of any war, really, it's a very universal poem in that sense. And I think the fact that he has used Greek myth to explore this is really amazing. He wrote it just before the ceasefire in Northern Ireland, and it was published in the Irish Times, I think, 1994. And that ceasefire was the one that led to the Good Friday Agreement. So it's a very important date for him. So it kind of rings, reverberates down the centuries, doesn't it, this poem, in the most astonishing way. It takes both ancient history and the present time and actually the future inside it.

Fiona Bennett

Yes, there's so much in that title, isn't there?

Jacqueline Saphra

Yeah.

Fiona Bennett

So I imagine then, Jacqueline, that it's been with you for a while, this poem?

Jacqueline Saphra

Oh yeah, I think I keep returning to it. And I can't even remember the first time that I read it. But each time I have a sense that there's no recovery from whatever awful conflict is happening, and that people are not speaking to each other, you know, different sides are not having that communication, let alone a point for forgiveness or understanding, I come back to this poem. You know, I came back to it when Russia invaded Ukraine, you know, and at other times. Wherever it is, it works for any, any awful, terrible conflict, when we're talking about people trying to understand each other, and feeling some empathy.

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah it's really how the poem opens, isn't it, is with empathy – 'put in mind of his own father and moved to tears - that's such a brilliant opening, it kind of sets us up, doesn't it, I think.

Jacqueline Saphra

Also men crying, you know? When was the last time you saw a male leader crying in the current world, you know?

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah and, you know, a warrior.

Jacqueline Saphra

Yeah.

Michael Shaeffer

Crying.

Jacqueline Saphra

Yeah.

Fiona Bennett

Well I'm curious about the second line then as well - 'Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king / Gently away'

Jacqueline Saphra

Yes.

Fiona Bennett

So is that he's going, 'I - oh, no, I can't.'

Jacqueline Saphra

Do you think it's about some kind of inner struggle he's having with himself, you know, 'am I going to find some connection with this man? Or am I going to tell him to leave?' Maybe?

Fiona Bennett

Yeah, that's what it seems to me. Like, he's sort of almost going 'I can't, I can't allow myself to see that similarity, you know, I've gotta keep you at distance or all that's gonna flood through me.' But then Priam kind of moves it, doesn't he?

Jacqueline Saphra

Yeah. In the Iliad, there's actually a ransom demanded and Priam turns up with like, lots of treasure. I think the interesting thing about the Longley is it's a kind of re-envisioning of this whole story very much connected with, with human agency and with humanity, isn't it? Because there's no, you know, there's no ransom in this poem. It's Priam turns up unannounced and the connection is to do with recognising some commonality of experience.

Michael Shaeffer

Yes - 'and / Wept with him until their sadness filled the building.'

Jacqueline Saphra

And that's interesting because I, when I was practising reading this poem, I've actually underlined the word 'with'. I felt like that was very important. And, you know, what that achieves in that line.

Michael Shaeffer

And then in that second stanza, there's a respect for Hector and for Priam in the...there's a sort of a reverence about how he makes sure that the corpse is washed. Yeah, interesting - 'ready for Priam to carry / Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak.' That's interesting, isn't it? It's quite surprising that 'wrapped like a present.'

Jacqueline Saphra

Yeah, I was having a discussion with my husband about that line, actually, and he said that's the only line in the poem I don't like. He said, why not the word 'gift', other than the word 'present'? And I thought a lot about that. I mean, I always think of 'gift' as being something a little bit more sacred than a present and obviously with more kind of metaphorical resonance, and I'm interested in that choice of a word. And I feel like there's a little bit of irony in there, because we kind of know what follows this. You know, it's a little bit of cynicism creeping in, probably the only place where it happens in the poem.

Fiona Bennett

Yeah that's really interesting, isn't it? Almost as if Michael Longley's felt he can't allow that idea to really float, that this would resolve with this, this action, that it would be okay for him to do that.

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah, and maybe it serves to sort of not let him off the hook, if you like. To remind us that actually there's a terrible thing happened here, you know. Perhaps it stops it from becoming...

Jacqueline Saphra

Cheesy?

Michael Shaeffer

...too easy.

Jacqueline Saphra

And a bit cheesy.

Michael Shaeffer

Too easy or cheesy!

Fiona Bennett

A bit cheesy! Easy and cheesy!

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah. And then I was really surprised by 'When they had eaten together, it pleased them both / To stare at each other's beauty as lovers might'. I wasn't expecting that turn. I'm really interested to know how you feel about that.

Jacqueline Saphra

Um, I think it's a bit like seeing someone for the first time and connecting with them. And maybe it is a little bit like you feel when you fall in love with someone that you, you suddenly see them maybe in in a different light, and they're seeing each other in a different light. I mean, there is also this theory about Achilles and Patroclus, who was murdered, you know that they were lovers. And there have been novels written about that. So I wonder whether there is some kind of homoerotic thing going on here, I don't know. It's possible that there is that kind of connection - 'Achilles built like a god, Priam good-looking still'. But it is curious isn't it - it certainly made me pause when I get to it.

Fiona Bennett

You can really see the look that's happening between them. It's such a brilliant choice of description for that, even if I don't know or understand necessarily what's being said narratively, I get the atmosphere of the moment, I get the look. Also, the other thing that happens when lovers have that connection, as you were describing Jacqueline, is that the whole of the rest of the world falls away as well. So maybe that's also part of that choice is that it's to do with no longer having to carry the position. You know - what's everybody else in the room doing? - is what it starts to make me think, you know, as they choose to forgive.

Jacqueline Saphra

I think also, it's worth mentioning that the whole idea of breaking bread together, of course, is very resonant and very symbolic. Allowing that connection, you know, especially in those times - the idea of sharing a meal is obviously, very, very crucial. And then what's interesting is the way the poem loops back again, it almost goes back in time. And with that very quite difficult, I think, sort of syntactical construct at the end of the third stanza - 'Priam good-looking still / And full of conversation' - comma - 'who earlier had sighed' - it's really tricky to get your head round that, isn't it?

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah, I had to re-read that a few times.

Jacqueline Saphra

Yeah. And I can't help feeling - bless Michael Longley - and I'm sorry to have to say this - but I wondered whether he was trying to get that rhyme in between 'might' and 'sighed'. And that might have been part of the reason that we get that strange moment. But on the other hand, it does make us think about the timeframe and the chronology. And so - 'who earlier had sighed: / 'I get down on my knees'' - loops us back to the beginning of the poem, when Priam 'curled up at his feet'. So, you know, he's a very bright man and a brilliant poet, so I'd like to think it was intentional. But it is a tricky moment, and it takes a few reads to get it, I think.

Fiona Bennett

The rhymes are really wonderful though, aren't they? They've just got enough completeness and closingness on them. They don't kind of overchime. I don't know how he's done that, quite, it's very clever.

Fiona Bennett

Right? Yeah. It's interesting because I was going to ask you about the breaking of it into the four parts.

Jacqueline Saphra

They're not everywhere. So in the first stanza, you've got 'tears' and what should rhyme with it, it becomes the word 'and'. And in the second stanza, you've got 'sake' and 'daybreak', which are big rhymes, but then you've got 'Achilles' and 'carry', which has a little bit of a consonant going on that is similar. That last couplet with that big full chiming rhyme 'done' and 'son' - and isn't it interesting how those two words are paired? They're kind of attracted to each other somehow - 'done' and 'son' - aren't they, in the poem and in the story. I mean, he tends towards very long lines doesn't he, Longley, and one of the reasons this poem is very difficult to read is because of the long lines. If you look at the first stanza, for example, it's all one sentence.

Jacqueline Saphra

Yeah.

Fiona Bennett

And I actually wonder if that is partly to help us. What strikes you about that, queen of sonnets?

Jacqueline Saphra

Well, you can tell I've chosen a sonnet because I do love sonnets, and well, thank you for calling me queen of sonnets - I have written quite a lot of them. But it's interesting reading it out loud, because actually, the numbers very much get in the way, if you try and read it with the numbers in it. So I deliberately took those out, especially the last one where the final couplet runs on from the previous line. But if you say 'four [IV]' in the middle of those, it becomes very confusing. So I think maybe he is trying to help us or maybe he's making it a kind of episodic poem, isn't it? So the first bit is the curling up at the feet and the weeping. And the second one is the corpse being laid out. And the third one is eating together. So you have the basically three different scenes unfolding.

Fiona Bennett

Isn't it wonderful, though, the way a poem is working on you, and you don't even know how it's happening. As you say episodic, and aware of Michael with a theatre background and thinking of Brecht's approach to theatre - which was that sort of focus on laying out the action as opposed to the empathetic swell of emotion, and being sort of carried through something - I wonder if there's also something of that here. He's not getting carried away with anything sentimental, even though he's talking about them looking at each other like lovers. There's still this distance. There's a cool regard in this poem, I think.

Jacqueline Saphra

Yes. Which goes back to our earlier comments about easy and cheesy, doesn't it? Because it could easily tip into something quite sentimental, this poem, but it doesn't. And I do - I agree - I think those numbers do help to give us pause, don't they? And they make a longer pause between stanzas than you would get if it was just a stanza break.

Michael Shaeffer

Can I ask you, Jacqui, to talk about that last couplet: 'I get down on my knees and do what must be done'. Why is kissing Achilles' hand the thing that he needs to do?

Jacqueline Saphra

Well, it's because he wants his son's body back. And he's prepared to - what's the word - humiliate himself or something or, you know, to beg - to beg to the extent, I mean, imagine going and begging the person who's killed your son, to return his body and having to kiss his hand, when probably what you want to do is stab him through the heart, you know. And I don't know if I dare say this, but I'm thinking about these hostages in Gaza and thinking, if there was a different approach, um, you know, whether that would yield a different result. And I think that's one of the reasons why this poem is so present in my life at the moment is I'm thinking that the cycle of revenge, which the Greeks really understood, this cycle of revenge is never going to end, is it, it feels like it's forever. And so for me, this poem is opening up the possibility of some kind of forgiveness or connection, and recognition of common humanity. I think what's going on there is that Priam does humiliate himself in this way, he does do what probably does not come naturally, because of the outcome that he wants. And then Achilles responds in a very human, very connected, very empathic way, thinking of his own father.

Michael Shaeffer

It's so interesting, the structure of this - that loop around as you called it - it's like it's turning a vicious circle of revenge into a kind of a virtuous circle of, of empathy and humanity somehow, which I just think is extraordinary.

Jacqueline Saphra

Yes, and actually thinking about that, and thinking about the temporal aspects of the poem - it's all in the past tense - but then just that piece of dialogue at the end - "I get down on my knees and do what must be done" - it's the present tense, even though it's referring to the past, and obviously it's reported speech, but nevertheless it kind of brings us firmly into the present. And now I'm thinking about Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement and effort of will and love to bring that about. And all the hiccups on the way that eventually led to it. A most astonishing piece of law-making, of change. Showing it's possible, you know, whatever happened after and continues to happen, you know, that's that cycle was really broken at that point.

Fiona Bennett

And it's just so wonderful today, you know, to be introduced to this friend, when it's so hard to see hope or to keep thoughts of, of the positive possibilities of humanity.

Jacqueline Saphra

Oh, thank you. Can I just read you a tiny bit of something that Longley said about the poem?

Fiona Bennett

Please.

Jacqueline Saphra

He said: "When I was writing it, it was at the time when there were rumours of an IRA ceasefire. And I wrote it partly because I do have some sense of the magic of poetry in the world, hoping that it would make some tiny, tiny, minuscule, unimportant contribution to the drift towards ceasefire."

Michael Shaeffer

That's fantastic. But I love that idea about a tiny contribution to the drift. You know, and in these big geopolitical things, that's perhaps the, the most we can hope for, is to add tiny contributions to the drift.

Jacqueline Saphra

Yes. There's a quote from the Mishnah, which is the first book of Jewish law, which I carry in my heart. And the Mishnah - so it has lots of quotes from ancient rabbis, most of which are completely nuts, but there are a few that are really brilliant - and, and this one from Rabbi Tarfon: 'Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Walk justly now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to finish the work, nor are you free to abandon it.' And I think that speaks very much to Longley saying some tiny, tiny, minuscule unimportant contribution, is that we all if we all make some tiny, tiny, minuscule, unimportant contribution that could amount to something meaningful and substantial.

Michael Shaeffer

Does this poem give you hope?

Jacqueline Saphra

I think hope...I find hope a very complicated word. I'm never quite sure what to make of it, because I think hope...it can be an excuse for inaction. And I guess I'm sort of temperamentally an activist, I was always brought up with the idea that - tikkun olam - which is the Hebrew for 'healing the world' - you know, that in, on some level, it is my responsibility, in an incredibly grandiose way, to try and do something to make the world a better place. I think hope can make us a little bit passive. I see it as more of a kind of galvanising poem actually, that it is possible to ask for forgiveness and to be forgiven. But both, both those acts are very active, aren't they? They're not, they're not about hoping, they're about actually doing something. So I think the comfort in this poem for me is that human beings have the capacity for change. But with the full acknowledgement that it's incredibly difficult to do that.

Fiona Bennett

Ceasefire

by Michael Longley

I

Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears
Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king
Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and
Wept with him until their sadness filled the building.

II

Taking Hector's corpse into his own hands Achilles
Made sure it was washed and, for the old king's sake,
Laid out in uniform, ready for Priam to carry
Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak.

III

When they had eaten together, it pleased them both
To stare at each other's beauty as lovers might,
Achilles built like a god, Priam good-looking still
And full of conversation, who earlier had sighed:

IV

'I get down on my knees and do what must be done
And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son.'

Michael Shaeffer

That was Fiona with the gift reading at the end there. Our thanks, of course, to Jacqueline for giving us the time to have that wonderful conversation and for allowing us to share it with you. And also to Jonathan Cape for allowing us to use that incredible Michael Longley poem.

Fiona Bennett

So we'll put details of that on the description page. And we'll also put details of Jacqueline's brilliant, latest collection, her fifth collection, *Velvet's Violin*, published by Nine Arches Press. It's a very, very

beautiful, tender, powerful, honest and brilliant set of poems that speaks to times past and to now, and to aspirations for better ways of being in humanity in the future. So I think it's a great a great book to seek out.

Michael Shaeffer

Lovely, thank you, Fi. And speaking of our shared humanity, I'd like to take this opportunity to remind everybody that our anthology of poems - all about poems as friends, and about how poems live in the world for people and their relationships with them - we're very, very nearly there now, Fi, aren't we? There's, there's a few little dotting of I's and crossing of T's happening backstage, as it were. But the book is available for pre-order and it will be out in the world on May...oh Fi, I've forgotten the date! What is it? It's not May the fourth is it?

Fiona Bennett

No, May 9th.

Michael Shaeffer

May 9th! I thought it was Star Wars Day. It's not, it's May the ninth. So yeah, you can go to wherever your favoured book retailer is and you can pre-order. And it's, it's going to be a really beautiful thing.

Fiona Bennett

And we've got details of that on The Poetry Exchange website - we've got an anthology page dedicated to that.

Michael Shaeffer

I will also quickly say, just as a teaser, Fiona, that we are going to be doing another evening of online poetry readings with an incredible line-up of readers. *In the Company of Poems*, we call it. We've done two before; the feedback we've had has been amazing. So it looks like it's going to be February. We'll give you more details in coming months.

Fiona Bennett

Looking forward to that. So we've been getting into our habit of the bonus poem, Michael,

Michael Shaeffer

I love the bonus poem, Fi.

Fiona Bennett

So do I. I think we've thanked before but this is thanks to Charlie that this happens. So thank you again, Charlie.

Michael Shaeffer

Thanks to one of our dear listeners, it's just terrific.

Fiona Bennett

We have had one poem nominated, which is not just a poem that's been a friend to somebody, but the poem itself is on the theme of friendship. And I thought, given what you were just saying about the work that we do in the anthology and this idea of companionship, that that might be a lovely way for you to lead us through to the end of the episode.

Michael Shaeffer

Thanks Fi, yes, this is by Carrie Williams Clifford. And it's called Friendship.

Michael Shaeffer

Friendship

by Carrie Williams Clifford

Not by the dusty stretch of days
Slow-gathering to lengthening years
 We measure friendship's chain,
But by the understanding touch,
The smile, the soul-kiss, yea, the tears
 That ease the load of pain.

Fiona Bennett

Wonderful. Thank you so much, Michael. And thank you to all of you. We'll be back next month with more poems as friends. Thank you for listening.

Credits:

Michael Longley, 'Ceasefire' from *The Ghost Orchid*, Jonathan Cape, 1995. Copyright © Michael Longley.

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