

# 86. The Daughter by Carmen Giménez – A Friend to Gita Ralleigh

**Fiona Bennett**

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

**Michael Shaeffer**

And I'm Michael Schaffer. Lovely to see Fiona. You and I can both barely contain ourselves at this moment. Now, I feel that in the past, sometimes we've been a little bit guilty of overusing the phrase 'we're so excited to tell you.' But on this occasion, I couldn't be more excited to finally be sharing a really big piece of news for us, Fi...do you want to tell everyone what I'm teasing about?

**Fiona Bennett**

Yes, I do want to tell everyone, Michael, that we can share with you, our listeners, what we've been doing for the last nine months...which is working on creating The Poetry Exchange Anthology. Poems as Friends will be with you - listeners, readers - in your hands and published on May 9th 2024.

**Michael Shaeffer**

Yes.

**Fiona Bennett**

Yeah, we're terribly excited, as you can tell.

**Michael Shaeffer**

It's been the most extraordinary process to get it to this point. And, you know, we've had to keep this news under our hats. We've been beavering away to bring this thing together. And I have to say, Fiona, I'm really proud of it. I think it's gonna be such a beautiful thing. It's going to be 60 poems. The way it will work is you'll have the poem on one page, and on the facing page you'll have the person's story of connection to the poem. So we've gone back through the archives, we've been listening to all of the submissions we've had, as well as the online nominations that we've received. And we've done transcripts, and then we've edited those down. And obviously, it's a kind of condensed version of people's stories of connection. There's some gorgeous poems and gorgeous stories, some of which - regular listeners - you may have heard before. So there's some old favourites there from Andrew Scott and Maxine Peake. And who else have we got Fi?

**Fiona Bennett**

Roy McFarlane.

**Michael Shaeffer**

Oh yeah. Brian Cox, did I say?

**Fiona Bennett**

I don't think you did. Yeah. Brian Cox is in there. Stephen Beresford.

**Michael Shaeffer**

Oh yeah! John Crowley, Alison McManus - I mean, the list goes on and on. But of course there will also be lots that people haven't heard. And there's this beautiful mix of well known poems, modern poems, and there's a real span of different types of connection that people have had, and different types of poems, all sort of exploring this idea of poems as friends. It's an amazing thing. And it's incredible to get to this point - nine months, as you say, Fi - we've finally given birth!

**Fiona Bennett**

I don't know about you, Michael, but I would say as well, we're kind of returning the material to the source point - you know, we talk to people about their experience of reading a poem, and what happens in that moment of reading - and that's what the podcast has been all about. And now of course, we're kind of returning to the page in recounting the stories in this new way. I don't know about you but I feel that even those conversations that I felt I knew well, and the poems I knew well, I got a whole new personal resonance from that choice of poem, that story of connection, and then revisiting the poem for myself. So it's been a really rich time of being in the company of these poems in this way.

**Michael Shaeffer**

Yeah. And it feels like the right time to do it. It feels like the sort of culmination of all of the work that we've done over nearly 10 years now, Fi. And I think we'd always had it in the back of our minds that it would be a fantastic thing to be able to do. And so enormous thanks to everyone at Quercus for the help and guidance they've given us. And I really, really, really hope that people will pick it up and will enjoy it. Yeah, it's special. I mean, it's not until May 9th, Fi, you know - we're saying all of this, and people have got a long time to wait - but the wait will be worth it, I promise you.

### Fiona Bennett

We wanted to let you, our listeners, our loyal followers know as soon as we could. And as we do that, we'll also be sharing the news and information about the book and all the details will be there on our website. So head to [thepoetryexchange.co.uk](http://thepoetryexchange.co.uk) to see the cover and find out more about how you're going to be able to get your hands on a copy.

### Michael Shaeffer

And we'll be giving you some more information about the book in subsequent months as we go on. And then of course, as we get closer to the launch date, there's going to be various events that Fiona and I will be at...we'll keep you updated with all of that in due course.

Fi, I suppose we should move on to what this actual episode's gonna be.

### Fiona Bennett

We should indeed and it feels actually very appropriate that we're sharing a conversation that we had actually a few years back. And you'll hear more about them in the conversation itself, but it feels appropriate that it is a writer who we're talking to.

So you'll be listening to myself and Michael, talking about 'The Daughter' by Carmen Giménez: the poem that's been a friend to Gita.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Fiona Bennett

Ah, so Gita, this is amazing, this poem. It'd be lovely if you could give it a read for us.

### Gita Ralleigh

Yes, of course.

### The Daughter

by Carmen Giménez

We said she was a negative image of me because of her lightness.  
She's light and also passage, the glory in my cortex.  
Daughter, where did you get all that goddess?  
Her eyes are Neruda's two dark pools at twilight.  
Sometimes she's a stranger in my home because I hadn't imagined her.  
Who will her daughter be?

She and I are the gradual ebb of my mother's darkness.  
I unfurl the ribbon of her life, and it's a smooth long hallway, doors flung open.  
Her surface is a deflection is why.  
Harm on her, harm on us all.  
Inside her, my grit and timbre, my reckless.

### Fiona Bennett

That's really astonishing.

### Michael Shaeffer

When did you come across this poem, Gita?

### Gita Ralleigh

I really only came across it a couple of years ago. And I think I'd always admired poetry and you know, I love the greats - Neruda, who she mentions, and Ted Hughes, Derek Walcott I was aware of...but about the only female poets I'd really heard of were maybe, you know, Sylvia Plath and perhaps Carol Ann Duffy. And then a few years ago, I did a creative writing degree. And subsequently, although I didn't do poetry as part of my degree, I became a little bit more aware of some of these sort of more contemporary voices, particularly some of the American poets, you know, Claudia Rankine, Natalie Diaz...and I was looking at a form for something I was writing about the lyric essay, and Giménez wrote this memoir, actually, of motherhood called *Bring Down the Little Birds*. I just loved it completely, and then I kind of - you know, the way you do - you get slightly obsessed with one particular writer or poet and track down everything that she has written. And this particular one is, I think, it's about seven or eight years ago she published this, and it's in a book called *Milk and Filth*, which I absolutely love as the title. And there are lots of poems around motherhood and feminism, and some sort of allegorical and mythological stuff there as well. You know, I always feel like poetry - I feel like prose is sort of like a house, or a stage set, maybe - you have to go into it, and then you're sort of living in it - whereas I feel like poetry is something that goes into you, somehow. And, you know, I could really feel in my body the way that this hit me in all those places, so I've just kind of hung on to it since then.

I mean, I'm a poet as well. Actually, at the time, I wasn't even writing poetry very seriously. I had a Tumblr, which sounds very dated. And I was posting little poems around the theme of the goddess and feminine power - for myself, really - it was very private. And then eventually, I kind of worked them up and went to a workshop with another very lovely, kind of well known poet, and she sort of said, 'I really love them, but I can't see anything of you in there. What's the connection with you?' And then of course I turned to this poem and I thought, 'that's why I'm so obsessed with it', because I have a daughter, who's nearly 13, and I have a son as well. And I think the reason I was collecting all these stories and poems about goddesses was for her - that brightness, that fierceness, that kind of fire that

they have, and you kind of don't want them to lose that - ever. And that line where she says – 'Daughter, where did you get all that goddess?' - I just absolutely love that line. So that kind of gave me a way into my own work as well, and made me see that what I was doing was kind of creating this archive for my children. So it was really formative, I think, in my development as well, as a writer and a poet.

**Fiona Bennett**

Amazing. So the degree in creative writing was...

**Gita Ralleigh**

I think I actually got the degree in 2015. But obviously I do everything very part time because - being a doctor - so it actually took me three years to do my MA -

**Fiona Bennett**

You've got two children, you've got an MA in creative writing, and you're a doctor. Anything else you want to take on, Gita, while we're here?

**Gita Ralleigh**

Well, I'm really proud of my book, which -

**Fiona Bennett**

Oh, wow!

**Gita Ralleigh**

- which came out last year. So this was a little thing that started off as a weird Tumblr site that no one's ever seen, and eventually made its way into a book, which was just incredible.

**Fiona Bennett**

Amazing.

**Gita Ralleigh**

But there was something very startling about the fact that the language is very simple and very direct. It doesn't shy away from being quite kind of visceral, almost. I'd always sort of admired poetry from a distance before, I think, and this sort of poetry, I felt like it was - somebody was talking to me. It felt like a stranger on the street had turned around and said, 'hey you, listen', and it really felt like I could relate to the kind of sensations and the feelings she was talking about. I know a little bit about her family because of having read the memoir. And you know when she talks about the gradual ebb of my

mother's darkness - not that I had a kind of troubled childhood or anything - but I think, associated with any kind of immigrant childhood, there's a lot of fear. And there's a lot of darkness in terms of your own history that's sort of lost and left behind, you know, with all the kind of extended family and the relatives and the family stories. And then you have this new life opening up. And, as she says, in some ways, compared to perhaps my grandmother's life, it's so easy, it's so smooth, there are so many doors open, but at the same time, you want them to keep the kind of fierceness, the kind of the grit that comes with being of that background, I think. So it was just arresting. And you know, these contemporary poets really were the ones that drew me into writing poetry rather than just enjoying it.

### Fiona Bennett

It was so fascinating what you said about the visceral nature of these writers, which I absolutely agree with. And that's what I both love and admire about their work is the quality of inhabited experience that they are able to express.

### Gita Ralleigh

Yes, I mean, that title - *Milk and Filth* - that just says so much about motherhood, and in such a brutal but honest way, doesn't it, and I just love that kind of getting straight to the point, but also being very complex in that the emotions they're dealing with - they're not trying to paint a kind of happy picture or pretend that it's all easy or straightforward at all.

### Fiona Bennett

So you seem to me to be someone who, if something offers itself, you, you move towards it...I just wonder where that comes from?

### Gita Ralleigh

Well, not to be too brutal about it, but I think it comes from growing older, as a woman, because I think you spend so much of your life really being - especially if the daughter of immigrants, and there's a lot of fear - not just fear of racism or, you know, the fear of how people will react to you - but also the fear of failing and the fear of disappointing your parents who've made all these huge sacrifices for your education, and so on...so you kind of find yourself becoming very constrained. And I think I got to 40 and I just thought, you know what, I'm 40 years old, I've had two children; I don't give a stuff anymore. I just don't care what anyone thinks. And I think it comes from, you know, transcending those kind of narrow roles that we have. So that was very liberating, definitely. Yeah, I recommend it!

### Fiona Bennett

Yeah, yeah. I just love the form of this poem, Gita.

### Gita Ralleigh

There's a real freedom there isn't there because, you know, certainly, even in my work, I tend to be quite constrained and think, 'oh, you know, it's got to be a couplet or a triplet, or even if it diverts from form, it's got to start off with some sort of thought of form.' But here I think she allows kind of that sentence, almost, the beauty of the phrase to just take its time... And I love the fact that when she says – 'I unfurl the ribbon of her life, and it's a smooth...' - that's the longest line, and it does unfurl really smoothly and beautifully. But I think if you have that confidence in your poetic voice, you know, you can do something as beautiful as you've done here, where every thought is an image is a line unto itself, almost, and then she moves on to the next one. I mean, I don't know, what did you think?

### Fiona Bennett

Yeah, very similar to you. What struck me was that every line - that's beautifully said, you know - is an image is a line is a thought, and holds its own. So therefore in a way what does really interest me is the little leaps between the lines. They do stand on their own, but they also stand together.

### Gita Ralleigh

Yeah.

### Fiona Bennett

The movement through the poem is kind of fascinating, isn't it?

### Gita Ralleigh

Yeah and the images. So she moves from the kind of the lightness to the light, and then the passage and then we come back to the hallway later. So she's picking up these images, and then the darkness. But I agree that it's done so skillfully. And even the surface and the idea of deflection and reflection, I think comes back to that as well.

### Fiona Bennett

Say a bit more about that, because I'm not sure I'm there yet with that line.

### Michael Shaeffer

I wanted to ask about that one.

### Gita Ralleigh

Yeah...I think of the kind of untroubled smoothness and beauty of young children. And we have this thing, which I think Italians also have, about the evil eye. And people in India, for example, often put whole - you know - black eyeliner around their baby's eyes. And the reason for that is to deflect the

evil eye. And I don't know what exactly her Hispanic background is, or if she's thinking in that way, but the 'surface is a deflection' makes me think of that, because then the next line is 'harm on her, harm on us all', which again, makes me think of this idea of - my mother always used to say to me - we never say anything good about our children - even now, my mother would never say to me, 'you look nice', never - because the idea is if you do that, you invite the evil eye to look upon your children. So I wonder if it's some kind of reference to some idea similar to that; or that's how coming from the background I come from I read it anyway. And then this kind of spell-like incantation, you know - 'Harm on her, harm on us all' - it almost seems to be of a piece with that idea, to me.

**Fiona Bennett**

Ah, yeah, no, that's great.

**Michael Shaeffer**

Yeah, that's really good. I wasn't sure if it was to do with her lightness.

**Gita Ralleigh**

Yes, possibly, cos she says – 'We said she was a negative image of me because of her lightness' – is the first line as well, so it may be to do with the fact that she has a daughter whose skin colour is not the same as her own, and not the same as her mother's, which is also the case with my family as well, you know, bringing up children who have dual heritage.

**Fiona Bennett**

There's so much going on, isn't there?

**Michael Shaeffer**

I love 'Sometimes she's a stranger in my home because I hadn't imagined her'. I think that's really terrific. I have quite a lot of godchildren and I really identify with that, you know, there's this moment when you really recognise them as being completely their own person.

**Gita Ralleigh**

Yes, particularly as they grow older, and they become so much themselves. And even when they're babies you sort of think, 'you are just you, aren't you, you are just the way you are', and then that only becomes more so as they grow older. So I think that's true that you do have these imaginings, you know, when you're pregnant, and you think about what it's gonna be like, or you imagine having a daughter – particularly maybe, I don't know – as a mother. But they're never the way that you imagine them; they are just happily their own person. And you know this idea of 'where did you get all that goddess?' - you know, all this energy and all this life that children have, and that young girls have and



that sometimes, you know, just dissipates with life and the ravages of life and how much you don't want that to happen to them.

### Michael Shaeffer

Can I ask you about that second line: 'She's light and also passage, the glory in my cortex?'

### Gita Ralleigh

Yeah. Now I'm not sure about that. I mean I like cortex, being a doctor. Because I'm assuming she's referring to your cerebral cortex, you know, to your brain. Yeah. Does she mean the birth passage? The glory? I'm not sure, but I don't mind that. I like it when a poet's a little bit mysterious.

### Fiona Bennett

Yeah I know, it's good isn't it? We don't want to know, we don't want it all pinned down. It's actually a very good balance of ambiguity and precision. It's very well crafted, isn't it?

### Gita Ralleigh

Yeah. I don't think she's using words in a way to be deliberately oblique or obscure. I think somehow we get the feeling of what the meaning is, even if we can't pin it down exactly...you know, that the words sort of leave a feeling behind. There's a kind of dream logic to it almost. And I think this kind of ability to talk about motherhood, to talk about the body, to bring in the visceral, the kind of, you know, childbirth, you know - Liz Berry's got a fantastic poem called *The Republic of Motherhood* - but you know, I think that reclaiming of this part of our experience...you know, so many poets now, for example, look to Sylvia Plath as being the first person that we ever came across who wrote about these things, and I think having poets like Liz Berry, it's going to be such a wonderful thing for poets in the future, you know, who can read these poems while they're at school and think, actually, it's all right to talk about our experiences as women and as mothers and as girls.

### Fiona Bennett

And I think what's so great, as well as the depths of what it means to do that - it is about motherhood - you don't have to be a mother to connect to this poem.

### Gita Ralleigh

No, it's about a shared history, really. Certainly all women, even if we're not mothers, we're all daughters. So it's a beautiful way that she kind of tugs on that rope, and you can see that rope going forward and the rope going backwards as well, which is, lovely.

**Fiona Bennett**

And I think *that*, sort of, for me, is like she's rewriting kind of ideas of lineage.

**Gita Ralleigh**

Yes, absolutely. And I think she has a very strong feminist ethos in all her work. And of course, you know, being a feminist in the context of being a woman from a minority culture, from an immigrant culture, adds another whole set of overlays and connotations and issues that she kind of, I think, is exploring in her work, which is really, really fascinating.

**Fiona Bennett**

So I'm also really interested Gita about, you know, your other work as a doctor, because you're talking about writers whose work is visceral, you're talking about body...

**Gita Ralleigh**

Yeah. And in fact, I do tend to focus, as a specialist, in breast cancer, which of course - although not exclusively a female disease - is predominantly a female disease. So a lot of my patients are women. So yeah, I think all of those threads are probably there. And poetry and medicine, I suppose on the surface, there's not very much that connects them. But I do teach medical students and undergraduate scientists at the institution that I work at, and although their work is much broader - so it's looking at sort of philosophy, ethics, you know, legal issues - when I do a poetry workshop with them, they absolutely love it. Because poetry really teaches them being a doctor is not like being a scientist, you know, there's an art to it, definitely. Poetry is such a wonderful medium for kind of giving you that kind of human experience.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Fiona Bennett**

**The Daughter**

by Carmen Giménez

We said she was a negative image of me because of her lightness.  
She's light and also passage, the glory in my cortex.  
Daughter, where did you get all that goddess?  
Her eyes are Neruda's two dark pools at twilight.  
Sometimes she's a stranger in my home because I hadn't imagined her.  
Who will her daughter be?  
She and I are the gradual ebb of my mother's darkness.

I unfurl the ribbon of her life, and it's a smooth long hallway, doors flung open.  
Her surface is a deflection is why.  
Harm on her, harm on us all.  
Inside her, my grit and timbre, my reckless.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Michael Shaeffer

That was Fiona with the gift reading at the end there. Our thanks, of course to Carmen Giménez and the University of Arizona Press for allowing us to use that incredible poem, and to Gita for allowing us to share the conversation.

### Fiona Bennett

Yes, indeed. Our thanks to Gita Ralleigh - doctor, writer, poet. Even since that conversation, Michael, I think Gita has produced at least one more, if not two more books. And they are wonderful. So I really encourage listeners to go and seek out her poems as well. Two collections: the most recent, *Siren*, published by Broken Sleep, and also *A Terrible Thing*, published by Bad Betty Press. And then her most recent book is a children's book, and it's called *The Destiny of Minou Moonshine*. I haven't had the fortune to read that either for myself or with some young people, but I can tell from what I've glimpsed of it that it's a very beautiful, wonderful book. So I do encourage people to seek that out. And we'll put full details of all of that in the description page.

### Michael Shaeffer

That poem and a condensed version of Gita's connection to it is one that we'll be featuring in the anthology, of course, Fi.

### Fiona Bennett

Indeed it is, along with these other ones that people don't yet know. So just to also say that in the description page, there'll be a link there to the [website](#) where you can find out all about our anthology, and as we said, see the cover - so, link in the description page to take you straight there.

So Michael, I think in our bonus poem tradition, we must have a bonus poem that is featured in the anthology. And I remember when we were doing the very difficult job of working out which 60 would go in this volume, I remember coming across this wonderful online nomination that we had from our contributor, with a beautiful poem that really sort of chimed out to both of us and we went, 'oh, we must have that as a page in the book.' So I wondered if you would give us 'Harbour Dawn' by Lucy Maud Montgomery, for the closing of this episode.

**Michael Shaeffer**

I'd love to, Fi.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Harbor Dawn**

by Lucy Maud Montgomery

There's a hush and stillness calm and deep,  
For the waves have wooed all the winds to sleep  
In the shadow of headlands bold and steep;  
But some gracious spirit has taken the cup  
Of the crystal sky and filled it up  
With rosy wine, and in it afar  
Has dissolved the pearl of the morning star.

The girdling hills with the night-mist cold  
In purple raiment are hooded and stoled  
And smit on the brows with fire and gold;  
And in the distance the wide, white sea  
Is a thing of glamor and wizardry,  
With its wild heart lulled to a passing rest,  
And the sunrise cradled upon its breast.

With the first red sunlight on mast and spar  
A ship is sailing beyond the bar,  
Bound to a land that is fair and far;  
And those who wait and those who go  
Are brave and hopeful, for well they know  
Fortune and favor the ship shall win  
That crosses the bar when the dawn comes in.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Fiona Bennett**

Thank you, Michael, for that beautiful reading. And thank you to you our listeners for listening. We'll be back next month with more poems as friends.

**Credits:**

Carmen Gimenez Smith, 'The Daughter' from *Milk & Filth*. Copyright © 2013 by Carmen Gimenez Smith. Reproduced by permission of the author and University of Arizona Press.

Episode & transcript © The Poetry Exchange, 2023

