Annie Finch

Casting Spells

An Interview by Alex Giardino

Poet, memoirist, translator, critic, editor, and playwright Annie Finch has published several volumes of poetry, including *Eve* (reissued in the Classic Contemporaries Poetry Series from Carnegie Mellon University Press), *Calendars* (Tupelo Press), *The Encyclopedia of Scotland* (Salt), and *Among the Goddesses: An Epic Libretto in Seven Dreams* (Red Hen). Her newest collection of poetry, *Spells: New and Selected Poems*, is due out in February 2013 from Wesleyan University Press. Her poems have been published in journals including *Kenyon Review*, *Paris Review*, *Partisan Review*, and *Yale Review* and featured in many anthologies, most recently *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth Century American Poetry*. Her translation from French of the poetry of Louise Labé was published by University of Chicago Press and honored by the Society for the Study of Early Modern Women. Finch's works of poetics include *The Ghost of Meter, The Body of Poetry: Essays on Women, Form, and the Poetic Self*, and the poetry-writing guide *A Poet's Craft: A Comprehensive Guide to Making and Sharing Your Poetry* along with its abridged version, *A Poet's Ear: A Handbook of Meter and Form*. She has also edited or co-edited a number of anthologies, including *A Formal Feeling Comes, An Exaltation of Forms, Lofty Dogmas: Poets on Poetry, Multiformalisms*, and, most recently, *Villanelles* (Everyman's Library). Her poetic collaborations with music, visual art, opera, and theater have been produced by Poets House, Chicago Art Institute, Carnegie Hall, American Opera Projects, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Educated at Yale University, University of Houston, and Stanford University, she is a fellow of Black Earth Institute, founder of The Poets Theater, and currently serves as Director of the Stonecoast MFA program, the low-residency creative writing program at the University of Southern Maine. She is writing a spiritual memoir and blogs as American Witch at anniefinch.com.

This interview with Annie Finch took place on Halloween 2011, her birthday.

Alex Giardino Good morning, Annie, and happy birthday! Our interview today has an unusual premise in that we decided to create a multivocal conversation with other poets, critics, and translators, among them Kazim Ali, Charles Altieri, Tara Betts, Kate Gale, Forrest Gander, Brenda Hillman, Cynthia Hogue, Maxine Kumin, Ethelbert Miller, Patricia Monaghan, Alicia Ostriker, Patricia Smith, and Crystal Williams, as well as your mother, Maggie Finch, who is ninety. It's not only your birthday, but also Halloween and Samhain. In honor of all these occasions, would you share some of your poem "Samhain" with us?

Annie Finch Sure. I'll recite the last two stanzas.

Samhain

I turn my hand and feel a touch
move with me, and when I brush
my young mind across another,
I am with my mother's mother.
Sure as footsteps in my waiting
self, I find her, and she brings
arms that have answers for me,
intimate; a waiting bounty.
"Carry me." She leaves this trail
through a shudder of the veil,
and leaves, like amber where she stays,
a gift for her perpetual gaze.

The poem is a tribute to my grandmother. I wanted to acknowledge that she's an entryway for me into the mysteries of death invoked by the traditions of Samhain. In the theater show where I recently performed the poem, the director asked my daughter, who's twelve, to play my younger self and an older woman to play the grandmother/crone. When my daughter moved from the crone over to me, it seemed like a tangible reminder of the way our maturing as adults is partly about absorbing the spirits of the dead.

AG That poem reminds me of a spell, and "Spells" is the title of your book of new and selected poems, coming out from Wesleyan University Press. Could you tell us something about putting the book together, and why you chose that title?

AF The title *Spells* evokes my sense that poetry is performative language, in the deepest sense—language that we invest with the power to change us and the world. *Spells* also brings in the pagan spirituality that underlies my work: the idea of poems as incantations, heard with our bodies as well as our minds, that link us with the sacredness of nature and each other.

The book gathers a selection of new, and old, previously unpublished poems with what I regard as the most important of my poetry, verse plays and translations written from 1970 to 2010. It also includes many of my "Lost Poems"—poems I wrote in the 1980s, combining meter with experimental language, which remained unpublished until recently. So putting the book together was amazing for me; it felt as if I were integrating the different aspects and styles of my poetry, the different parts of my poetic self, some of which had been deeply hidden for a long time. As I look at the manuscript, I see that I've been writing spells all along, sometimes without knowing it. And that understanding gives me a new impetus for my work moving forward.

AG Recently, you started a blog, called American Witch, which marks your coming out as a pagan poet, who celebrates an earth-centered, female-centered spiritual path. Patricia Monaghan, the director of the Black Earth Institute, was wondering what reactions your blog has received from readers, poets, and critics.

AF It was a bit scary to come out of the "broom closet," but so far I have received positive responses, including that my blog was chosen for a Sunshine Award and was named one the fifty best blogs for Wiccans, by, of all things, a Christian educational group! One gratifying thing is that the blog attracts readers who share my spiritual interests, and they seem to enjoy the poems I post. It has opened up my poetry to a broader audience, outside the American university system and the relatively small world of poets.

Often when I give readings or performances, someone comes up afterward and thanks me because they've never met an "out" pagan poet before. I know a couple of young poets who are pagan—Stacia Fleegal, for example—but it's rare. Ilya Kaminsky and Katie Towler have edited an anthology from Tupelo Press called *A God in the House: Poets Talk About Faith*, where I did an interview about pagan spirituality. Maybe all of this will help create a further space, and we'll begin to see other poets emerge as pagans.

AG Alicia Ostriker wanted to ask about your early religious upbringing. Were your parents religious?

AF My parents were both deeply involved with a range of spiritual books and ideas, and my father started the world religion seminars at Columbia. There was constant talk about spiritual matters in the house, but no religious practice. So I was thrown onto my own spiritual devices, and when I wasn't tagging along with my friends to their churches, I was out in nature. At home, I would try to make sense of all the books around the house—hundreds of books on Hinduism and Taoism and Krishnamurti and Gurdjieff and Kabbalah and Christian mysticism and world mythology and Sufism and Confucianism and Zen. I tried to absorb all these ideas into a practice on my own. After I finally discovered paganism, I influenced my parents, and they both became interested in goddess and female-centered spirituality later in their lives.

AG How has your poetry and spiritual practice evolved together? Was there an immediate link between them when you first discovered paganism?

AF You're right—the poetry and spiritual practice developed together, even before I was conscious that they were different things. As a child I loved to hypnotize myself by repeating words

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and phrases over and over. When I learned about poetry, what I loved about it, and found very familiar, was how it could create a new consciousness inside myself. The spiritual practices of paganism can create that same state of mind. I suspect that's how poetry first developed, out of the altered consciousness of spiritual practice. It's all about repetition, which is the root of poetic form. Reflecting back on my childhood, I now recognize that from the very beginning I understood poetry in a pagan way.

A more conscious pagan practice came to me after I had tried many other paths, and none of them felt real. I was living in San Francisco in my twenties when I first met other pagans, and immediately I felt in tune with the drama and beauty of earth-centered spirituality and how it resonated with my feminist and environmental values. Everything came together for me when I linked being a mother and a poet to paganism, after I moved to the Midwest. I joined a family-centered earth-spirituality group that was forming and wrote poems for the group's rituals (that sequence became the framework for *Calendars*). I loved doing that—it was in itself a spiritual practice. Poetry and pagan practice have been closely tied together for me ever since.

AG You recently said in your blog, "The ancient things are not far away. . . . In fact, they may be the closest to us of all, because they are the things that arise naturally out of being human." Is there a connection between that thought and how you draw on ancient poetic forms? Could you give an example of a new poem you are working on that is in an ancient form?

AF I see poetic forms as markers toward a more organic, rhythmic, tribal kind of existence that has survival value for us now spiritually and psychically—clues to living more authentically in relationship to other people and our environment. So I do treasure the ancient forms that way, as clues. I also treasure them as a vocabulary. If you go back to the Celtic bards, they had such a wide range of poetic vocabulary to draw on. Poets now, when they write in form, tend to think of a highly limited range—a sonnet or iambic pentameter—but forms are much more infinite than that. I try to keep learning different forms so I'll always have tools available for whatever I need, so I can keep challenging myself, keeping the friction or traction that arises from an encounter with the unfamiliar. It's important for me to keep it fresh and not to use a form for a while, after it starts to feel too safe or predictable. That keeps space for surprise and being a bit off balance with the form.

This morning, I was walking on the beach and I felt the feeling of starting a poem. I listened inside, and the first lines came out in an accentual four-beat line, a rhythm I haven't used in years:

> When I go down to the place of pebbles and
> footprints,
> the wet pool, the dry bask, the brittle long wait,
> and lean on the silence as tall piers are leaning
> with barnacled mystery from the low tide,
> it's water I learn from, through smell and
> through silence.

That rhythm reminds me of the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Seafarer," a poem I love—four accents holding fast against the rushing tide of varying numbers of syllables in each line. It just arose and felt very fresh to me when it came. It was like, "oh wow, it's you." I guess that's how I like to think of the forms. I mine them by first listening for the form that is meant to be there, without expectations, and then holding that form up in stillness, each line of the form waiting to embody itself in the silent meditative darkness.

AG You used the expression, "felt the feeling of starting a poem." Can you say more about your writing process? This makes me think of Ethelbert Miller's question about whether you see a connection between a white space on a page and meditation and silence.

AF I appreciate the depth of Ethelbert's question. It's funny, but the white space isn't something I look at now—not since I pretty much stopped writing free verse. Now when I write, it's about hearing. There's a space inside me in which I hear the words, and I don't think of it as white, I think of it as darkness—like the darkness of the night when poems often come to me, or behind closed eyes when I meditate. That's where I hear the words coming, into that fertile dark silence. I wait, and sometimes I move, or dance, or talk aloud, but they're all kinds of waiting. I wait and offer myself into darkness, allowing myself to be filled with the words. And then the words sink into me and alter me.

AG You have worked with a great variety of forms in your poetry, including drawing from other literary traditions. One of your former students, Josh Davis, was wondering what particular forms have requirements that you have yet to satisfy to your liking.

AF There are so many! First, there's a form I've invented myself that I'm still trying to get behind, to inhabit fully—the nine-line form I call the "nonnet," which was given to me by a figure from a dream. I've been gradually building my acquaintance with it ever since, for almost a decade.

Then there's the canzone. The only canzone I've seen that I thought really worked was Agha Shahid Ali's canzone about his mother's death. I know that someday I'll write a canzone, but it's going to take a lot out of me, or put a lot into me, to do it. I knew Shahid and loved him so much, and that poem of his is so recent—I've only been reading it for a few years—so it's not like coming to terms with a form that I've known for years and had a chance to absorb.

There are Celtic forms I haven't tried yet; I take those on slowly because they are so daunting. And there are some forms I'm still feeling my way through culturally because I feel unsure of the ethical or political implications of seeming to appropriate them. Blues is one of these forms, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, haiku is another, even though it was one of the earliest forms I used as a child. It could be that I haven't yet found a situation in which I can feel free and clear to use those forms. The time might come when it will make sense, and if so, I look forward to that. I'm writing my second ghazal now in honor of the Occupy Movement, and I do feel comfortable with that form, partly because I feel that Shahid gave me his blessing to write the first one for his anthology *Ravishing Disunities*.

AG On your blog you scanned in the image of the crumpled piece of paper on which you had been working through a poem. It looked as if you had a mathematical equation or a recipe alongside the word "water."

AF Yes, that recipe is the form of the poem! It's an ancient Celtic form called the Rionnard Trinard. Lewis Turco asked me if I would write a poem in this form that had never been done in English before, for his *Book of Forms*. Of course, I immediately said yes because I was so excited about the chance to pioneer this new and unfamiliar form. But I had no idea what I was getting myself into [laughs].

The structure uses internal rhymes, full rhymes, half-rhymes, and alliteration; it has to begin and end with the same syllable; the ends of some lines rhyme with the middles of other lines, and so on. So that is the "mathematical" formula you saw. Around that time, I was hiking with my daughter on the Appalachian Trail for four days, and I brought the formula along with me. As we were hiking, I mulled these elaborate forms and schemes over for hours and hours, and I very gradually came up with the poem. By the end I felt I had learned something profound about the Celtic bards, what it was like to be a poet in an oral culture, to have these forms as physical talismans in your brain, almost like a worry bead in your hand, to roll over and over and over in your mind to get it right. After being on the trail, I stayed in a cabin with no electricity, and in the long darkness of night, remembering the poem in my mind, I felt as if it was keeping me company. I imagined the bards sleeping in their caves over the centuries, and how the forms kept them company too. So here is the poem, "Rune." It's only four lines long—one line for each of the four days of walking!

Rune

> Ring of words, each woken
> By craft, felt past fearing,
> Set to sing clear among
> Us here, held in hearing.

[Repeats the stanza four times.]

AG I'm so glad you repeated it four times. That had a very different effect than reading it once on the screen. It accentuated a cadence, like walking.

AF I surprised myself there too—but I like the way repeating it turned it into a ring. I wanted each syllable to have the weight it had that night in the darkness, after having been walked out through those thousands of footsteps. That's what repetition can do. It can get us beyond our fear, the fear of the conscious mind, and bring us into a place where we are willing to open ourselves to the words of a poem. Just the way if you were repeating something in three-dimensional space you might need to repeat it a certain number of times—stretching bread dough, or sweeping a floor, you'd need to keep repeating that motion—or wiping a table—until you've finished the task and done the space. That's the process of composing in repetition as well. It's that physical feeling of reaching forward in time until you've achieved whatever you need to achieve. It's mysterious because you don't see it the way you see the table or the floor or the bread dough, but I feel it in time in just as tangible and real a way.

AG Charles Altieri observed that you are "our great contemporary poet of the body and touch." Your chants work to link the body to the poetry. He wondered, does the notion of chant still satisfy you?

AF More than ever actually. It's become deeper and even more exciting as I've gotten greater facility with a more varied vocabulary of rhythms and chants, as I've come out as a witch and become more in touch with the potential of my spiritual practice in terms of subject matter and inspiration, and as I've become more at home being off the page and performing my poetry. I'm working with a director now for the first time to perform my poems on stage. To chant directly to an audience without the page in between opens up more power in terms of the chant for me. So, in a way, I feel like I'm just beginning my work with chants.

AG How does that feel in connection to a sense of individual ego?

AF I guess for me poetry always overrides individual ego, but I think it's true that chant overrides it even more because it's like being part of a communal body almost. Not even a communal mind, but a communal body. It's not about the individual.

AG Along these lines, as Charles was wondering, what happens over time as our bodies decay and the senses dull? I should add that he offered an apology for the obvious Christian orientation in the question.

AF That is a sensitive apology because it is a Christian notion that you need to transcend the body's temporality. Paganism doesn't feel threatened by the decay of the body, since it recognizes death and life as part of a cycle that is at once sacred and physical. Unlike the idea of a transcendent God, the point of the Goddess is that she is immanent, part of the natural world, and so she dies and lives and changes; she doesn't have to stand outside of nature to be sacred. And neither do we. The older I grow, the more I treasure the fact that I have, as my yoga teacher calls it, embodiment. And if anything, I now feel more sensitive than before to the power and energy of the chant.

AG Do you see a difference between learning metrics and doing what Patricia Smith has described as "really taking that skill into your body"?

AF Patricia was my student in the Stonecoast MFA program, so I know she understands that difference! Richard Wilbur once said that a good rhyme rhymes a phrase, not just a word. I think the same could be true of meter; ideally you want to have phrases or lines or stanzas fall into meter together, a far more organic process than assembling words. I have seen my students develop, sometimes only in a few weeks, from the word level to the phrase level. There's a satisfying surprise when meter is involved with your body, almost like a reflex action that happens, so you simply regroup into the metrical patterns as opposed to when it's on the level of your brain. Then you are treading the edge between the honesty of knowledge and the honesty of surprise. I think that's where true creativity lies.

AG Brenda Hillman wondered if you could speak to how metrical form offers both freedom and constraint.

AF Emerson talked about "the wise restraints that make us free," and for me the constraint of a form is increasingly a doorway into more freedom. It occupies my brain in a way that invites my unconscious to play a greater role; it keeps my ear satiated in a way that helps free me from my ego, and it builds a liberating rhythmic link into other humans and nature.

AG Could you speak about the dactyl, a form you have worked on for many years? Brenda Hillman also hoped you could share your thoughts on that particular metrical foot.

AF When I was getting my PhD at Stanford and writing *The Ghost of Meter*, I scanned the poetry of Whitman, Dickinson, Ginsberg, Lorde, and other poets and discovered that on some probably unconscious level, based on their patterns of imagery and meaning, iambic pentameter represented power and patriarchy to these poets, while the dactylic meter was linked to intuition and the body and a revolutionary approach to the world.

After I finished absorbing this idea, I wanted to write in dactyls because I realized that they were clearly being used by the poets in this tradition as a meter of liberation—a rolling, sensual, radical alternative to the established, powerful, conventional beat of iambic pentameter. So I taught myself dactyls, largely by writing *Among the Goddesses*. It was difficult, because there were very few dactylic poems available as models. But that was the beginning of my journey into chant and incantation and meter. I realized I had turned myself into a completely different kind of poet and person, by training myself to channel this particular energy frequency that hadn't been a conscious option for me before. It's like meter-yoga. Other meters followed, but dactyls are still one of my favorite meters. They're captivating and hypnotic, strong, and so laid back.

AG "Encounter," in dactyls, is a poem you consider an *ars poetica*. Vitor Alevato do Amaral, your Brazilian translator, observed that this poem is as much about flying as about landing, that it is about experimenting with form and creating meaning that readers can understand. Could you read that poem for us?

AF **Encounter**

Then, in the bus where strange eyes are
believed to burn
down into separate depths, ours mingled, lured
out of the crowd like wings—and as fast, as
blurred.
We brushed past the others and rose. We had
flight to learn,
single as wings, till we saw we could merge
with a turn,
arching our gazing together. We formed one bird,
focussed, attentive. Flying in silence, we heard
the air past our feathers, the wind through our
feet, and the churn
of wheels in the dark. Now we have settled. We
move
calmly, two balanced creatures. Opened child,
woman or man, companion with whom I've flown
through this remembering, lost, incarnate love,
turning away, we will land, growing more wild
with solitude, more alone, than we could have
known.

AG What do you think about Vitor's observations about the form and the meaning?

AF That's a lovely interpretation of Vitor's. It makes sense to me, especially because this poem is a sonnet, probably the most familiar form, in dactyls, an extremely unfamiliar meter. I don't know of any other dactylic sonnet. It's interesting in terms of the history of this poem because it took about a decade before I realized the poem should be in dactyls, and it was that metrical decision that made the meaning and tone finally become clear to me. Experimenting with form allows me to create the difficulty that my creative self needs, but hopefully without getting in the way of readers' understanding, because I really do want to be understood. I guess, in this poem, if the flying is the difficulty and the landing and looking into the eyes of the other person is the understanding, then it's a perfect analogy for that: the difficulty of the form allows the feeling of solitude, and having that separateness in solitude is what allows us to connect.

There's a satisfying surprise when meter is involved with your body, almost like a reflex action . . .

AG Cynthia Hogue wondered if you would talk about the relationship between your later formalist work and your earlier more experimental work, such as *The Encyclopedia of Scotland*.

AF Some people have assumed that my work developed from formalism to experimentalism because *The Encyclopedia of Scotland* was published late, twenty years after I wrote it, and also because most of us, using twentieth-century history as a model, are taught to think of exploratory writing as always the later, more advanced state of the art. In my case, however, it was the exact opposite. Rather than my formal work acting as a foundation for later experimental work, it was my experimental work that became the foundation for later formal work. That's why Ron Silliman remarked on his blog that he thought *The Encyclopedia of Scotland* would force readers to rethink my formal work.

Like many educated people in the 1970s, after college I felt that serious contemporary poetry needed to be fragmented. My first handful of formal poems had been written as explorations (actually, one of those early poems was just included in Rita Dove's *Penguin Anthology of Twentieth Century American Poetry*). *The Encyclopedia of Scotland* was my "real" poetry, my manifesto of formal and syntactic experimentation.

But soon after that, the experimental, metrical poems I now call the "lost poems"—the ones that will be collected for the first time in the new book—came pouring out over a period of about four years. Since then I have come to understand that formalism and postmodernism are not opposed; we can inhabit form more powerfully when the ego is untethered, decentered. Doing critical work in feminist theory and the aesthetics of the "poetess" tradition helped me to find my way through the relationship between formalism and postmodernism. That's when I came up with the term "Postmodern Poetess."

In the Bay Area in the 1980s, I was strongly influenced by Language poetry, and I think that helped empower me as a formalist. The ability of repetition to defamiliarize language and create altered states of consciousness works for me in the context of exploratory poetry; the only living poet I've met who enjoys Swinburne the way I do is Charles Bernstein. So I don't see the formalist and experimental approaches to poetry, or the narrative and performance approaches, for that matter, to be at odds with each other; each of them is contributing an important aspect of the center, of the whole.

Some of the techniques I developed when I was writing *The Encyclopedia of Scotland* would find their way into *Calendars*. For example, people have pointed out that there's a lot of heteroglossia in *Calendars*, poems that have parenthetical voices conversing. It's a quieter kind of experimentalism than *The Encyclopedia of Scotland* or the "lost poems," but I agree that it's there.

AG In your new book *Spells*, you will publish about thirty of your "Lost Poems." Could you share one of those with us, and clarify what you mean by calling them lost poems?

AF Between 1985 and 1989, I wrote about one hundred poems that were metrical, but not ref-

erential, and they played with language and syntax. Journal editors during that sharply divided time in poetic history—whether the journals were experimental, mainstream, or formalist—had no place for such work. So I kept them hidden, for almost twenty-five years. When I first showed the purple folder containing the lost poems to Kazim Ali, I felt as if I had taken some radioactive skeleton out of the closet. Kazim confirmed my sense that their time had come, and now editors are asking to publish them.

AG Would you read one for us?

AF Sure.

An Imaginary Companion

My blood was wise, my arms were weak, I was
a vessel from the inside. I could speak
alone, as if to water, that spoke back
beside me with no language, never stopped
to hear me, but continued, dark on black,
and if I'd been that way, I would not have
    stopped.
Two merciless companions, we were clocked
on our own time, as "water" and "free clock."
If it bit me, it bit me with the cold
and I ignored it—I bit back. So cold.
We have no hard companions. We are old
and warm as wild flowers, touch no ice,
have just a toe for one gold-rippled shallow,
and never make our conversations count
against the time that clocks me since I lost.

AG Forrest Gander observed that your work has shown "an unusual and exemplary suppleness and amplitude." He wondered if that has been made possible, in part, by your exposure to and interest in international writing and translation. Could you speak to that?

AF The longer you're a guest in other poets' worlds, across language and culture, the more you understand that they are writing for all of humanity, and that we all have the right to do that. That kind of realization can make a quantum change in a poetic voice. It shakes you down into the core of things, where current poetic divisions are less intimidating.

As long as I can remember, I've had this openness to different poetic traditions and threads. I wouldn't be who I am today without the poets who have become part of me through translation—Louise Labé, Akhmatova, Sappho. Translation, of course, is not only about space; it's also about time. In college, I was lucky enough to study ancient Greek and Latin, and an early translation I did then from Anglo-Saxon will be included in *Spells*.

Perhaps the amplitude can be traced back to when I was seven and my family spent my father's Sabbatical year camping in a Volkswagen bus throughout Europe and the Middle East. The experience of sleeping in a car for fifteen months, surrounded by Spanish, Greek, Turkish, Arabic and so many other languages, just as I was learning to read, radically changed my internal language-map. Now it feels as if I need that sense of intersecting with other kinds of languages to feel completely inhabited. Maybe that helps explain why I sometimes feel like the only person moving from a Language poetry reading to a Cave Canem reading to a new formalist reading at the AWP conference.

AG You have written an opera libretto based on the life of the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva, and the Iranian poet Farideh Hassanzadeh has asked you a question in an interview that I thought was so beautiful, I hoped that you might answer it again for us. She asked you, "If you could have traveled the time tunnel and to be in the village of Yalaboga; arriving to a morning when Marina Tsvetaeva had decided to commit suicide, what would you have done to make her change her mind?"

AF The image of the poet that I grew up with, and maybe that many of us have, is that a true poet is someone who writes in isolation, perhaps in a garret. But more and more now, for me being a poet is about being connected with my tribe and being willing to become a voice for my tribe. I would want to remind Tsvetaeva that humans aren't meant to live in isolation. I would start by hugging her; I wonder how long it had been since she'd had a hug? I would certainly share with her, if the time felt right, the possibility of the female-centered spirituality that has meant so much to me. But what might help most of all would be to remind her how much her words are treasured. That's what I meant by using the word "triumph" at the end of the libretto.

AG In 2010, you participated in a symposium called "The State of American Poetry," which was published in the *Huffington Post*. In that article, you said that "American poetry is at a dead end." Maxine Kumin asked if you could you elaborate on that, especially for people who don't agree with your claim.

AF I'll start out by saying that those were not my own words. It was a provocative question posed by Anis Shivani, who organized that symposium. But I found his wording useful, and I ran with it. In the interview I used the image of a Spirograph painting made with centrifugal force, spun out by the power of Modernism a hundred years ago and just now beginning to reach the end of that spurt of energy. It spun out into experimental poetry, performance poetry, formalist poetry, anecdotal poetry, and various culturally based poetic movements, none of them having much to do with each other. A lot of energy is lost in the distances between those different schools. At the Stonecoast MFA program, which I direct, we make a conscious effort to weave these poetic approaches together into one conversation, on the model of my anthology *An Exaltation of Forms*, but that's still a rare thing, to have narrative free-verse, formalist, experimental, and performance poets in the same room. So what I meant was that a widespread turn in a new direction—a turn towards one another—is needed if poets are going to do our job for the planet at this crucial time.

AG In that same symposium, you also said, "The disembowelment of [poetry] was, of course, facilitated by the twentieth-century technologies of the typewriter and computer screen, which kept poetry away from its own center by severing it from its writers' and readers' mouths, ears, and bodies." Yet you have been tweeting, you have a Facebook page, and you have your blog. Could you clarify what you meant and tell us about your experiences with technology and writing?

AF Twentieth-century literary technology was page-based and textual. The typewriter and word processor screen severed poems from their physical presence in the ear, the mouth, the body, in favor of a silent, isolated communion. The habit of letting the sound of poetry resonate in the musical part of your brain as you read was largely lost; we learned to read on the page, for meaning, with the logical part of our brains instead.

But twenty-first century technology is different: it's networks, multimedia, interactive, crowd-sourced. Poetry performances can be distributed as easily as texts. Video and audio bring poetry back to the voice, the community; it's no coincidence that there is a renewed hunger now for a poem's rhythm, its heartbeat. Leonard Shlain's book *The Alphabet and the Goddess* connects contemporary technology's appeal to the right brain with a return to a more ancient, intuitive kind of spiritual experience, and with nonhierarchical weblike structure and the instinct for synchronicity and transparency—which are aspects of social media as well. The time and technology are now ripe for experiencing poems in our ears. One reason I wrote *A Poet's Craft/A Poet's Ear* is to help complete the link between the diversity of 21st-century poetics and the formal roots of the craft.

AG Crystal Williams wondered what your thoughts are on the wave of formalism emanating from contemporary writers of color. She wondered what you understand that formalism to be doing, if anything, differently than the new formalism you've written about.

AF I think that "emanating wave" is literally awesome. The poets of color I see coming through Stonecoast, often bringing a slam or performance background to formalism, are doing incredible work in form. Some of the most exciting contributions in *Villanelles*, a collection I just finished editing with Marie-Elizabeth Mali, came out of the Cave Canem workshops. Now I'm advising Tara Betts on a new anthology of Black formalist poetry.

Diversity has been central to my understanding of New Formalism—a key part of what makes it "new"—ever since I published the anthology *A Formal Feeling Comes* in 1993. At that time, it seemed to me that just as women and people of color were getting power and education and access to venues of publication so that we could begin to make our mark as poets, meter and form, some of the potentially most powerful tools of poetry, had been yanked away from us. I always felt that by reclaiming these tools we could have access to a great reserve of poetic impact, and that seems to be happening now. The formal poetry coming from younger poets of color now feels to me as if it is taking deep breaths of fresh air and speaking powerful, long-pent-up truths; it is exactly what I had hoped and expected and wanted from New Formalism.

AG Given the dominance of free verse, do you think, as the poet Georgia Popoff was wondering, that there is a "lost generation" of formalists?

AF There are many fine poets who were lost for a while because they worked in form. Hart Crane took longer for the mainstream to connect with than the free-verse modernists; then there's William Stanley Braithwaite; Paul Lawrence Dunbar; Sara Teasdale; Eleanor Wylie; Owen Dodson; William Meredith; and many others. Going further back, Longfellow, for example, is a poet deserving of a lot more appreciation.

AG *A Poet's Craft* is a comprehensive book on poetry, and *A Poet's Ear* is a meter handbook excerpted from it. I understand that these books on craft emerged from your teaching.

AF Yes. I worked on *A Poet's Craft* for thirteen years. It's quite a tome, and it feels as if it contains just about everything I've learned from a lifetime of being a poet, including decades of teaching. My students at Stonecoast had a big effect on it, especially on the sections about meter and form that are excerpted under the title *A Poet's Ear*. A lot of the insights and ideas and exercises about meter in these books involve uncharted metrical territory that has never been codified or published before, so we were developing the ideas and figuring out how these meters work together. It was

profoundly exciting teaching. I would sit there in class, and when people would say smart things or ask good questions, I would scribble them down and incorporate much of what we were doing in class into the books. The acknowledgments section is huge; I am indebted to all my students for what they gave to those books and how they improved them.

AG What has changed in the climate of contemporary American poetry for formal poetry since you first started publishing in the 1980s?

AF My "lost poems" are a good example of how the gap between postmodern experimental writing and formal writing no longer applies the way it did then.

And overall, there's a much more open attitude towards form. I've been able to see the change in attitude up close because I've been teaching meter all that time, and over the decades, I've seen students move from being hostile to bemused to curious and finally now enthusiastic about it. Now, we actually require a course in the basics of meter for all entering poets at Stonecoast. Without meter, I don't think I could have been happy as a poet, so I'm glad to see interest in this area growing, and I'm hoping that *A Poet's Craft* will be helpful in introducing more poets to writing in form along with everything else it covers.

In terms of publishing, formalist poems can now be published anywhere, which was certainly not the case in the '80s and '90s. The magazine climate has changed more than the anthology climate or the critical climate. But even there now, more women and poets of color are taking on the power of editing and writing criticism, and that should result in more widespread understanding of formalism, because the cutting edge of excitement about formalism seems to be with us.

I blogged about this role of criticism and editing during the controversy over Rita Dove's *Penguin Anthology of Twentieth Century American Poetry*. So many people were upset about Helen Vendler's treatment of that anthology, and I posted my letter to a young poet from *The Body of Poetry*, called "How to Start a Poetic Tradition," to help remind poets how such oppressive critical structures come about in the first place.

AG Now you publish with leading presses, but you have also self-published. Yolanda Nieves was wondering what your thoughts are on self-publishing, as well as on underground poets and arts funding that is unequally distributed among white artists.

AF I'm a big fan of self-publishing, which I think is a great strategy for any poet who's not feeling part of the mainstream. I got profound satisfaction from designing and self-publishing the original edition of my first book *The Encyclopedia of Scotland* in 1982. For anyone interested in making a place for themselves, I recommend June Jordan's book *Poetry for the People*, an eloquent, practical, and inspiring book on self-publishing and many related topics.

Being forced underground for aesthetic reasons can give you freedom to go your own way. I stayed underground for a long time—deep underground, with my "lost poems" and *Among the Goddesses* staying unpublished for decades. It's like I spent years in an aesthetic incubator. But being underground for race or class reasons is different. It's wrong, and Jordan's book has great strategies to develop alternative structures and make sure that being underground doesn't happen against your will.

AG Throughout your life, starting with having a mother who is a poet, you have been close to many women poets and scholars. Maxine Kumin won-

dered if you could speak to your relationship to one of the most formative women scholars in your life, Diane Middlebrook. Could you tell us about your experiences working with her when you were a graduate student at Stanford?

AF Diane Middlebrook, who was Anne Sexton's biographer, was uniquely energetic and generous and an inspiring feminist. I chose Stanford in large part because I could feel her genuine interest in my work. I often feel that she is still with me, although she died a few years ago. Diane believed in me and stood by me through my original dissertation idea, to reclaim and explore the work of the "poetesses," which was too radical at the time for most of the Stanford faculty, and also when I switched to writing *The Ghost of Meter*. She would reach out to me in a way that women mentors rarely do, inviting me to lunch at the faculty club, and I think she played that role for many women. She gave us a huge gift.

I've had other women mentors, including the great medievalist and translator Marie Borroff, the only woman full professor at Yale when I was there; my wonderful Masters thesis advisor Ntozake Shange, who modeled a deeply artistic life for me; and my mother, poet Margaret Rockwell Finch. It seems that relatively few women poets of my generation were mentored by older women; Maxine told me a few years ago that she has been mentoring women older than herself, which I understand completely. I know it is rare to have had my experiences, and I'm very grateful.

AG Speaking of your long-held interest in a poetess poetics, I'd like to ask you about a transition you recently made in thinking about yourself as a *poetess*. In the 1999 essay, "Confessions of a Postmodern Poetess," you declared, "I am a poetess. It's a relief at last to admit it." Very recently, on your blog, American Witch, you modified that, saying, "After a further decade spent absorbing and meditating on the implications of the name, I will say it again somewhat differently, here on American Witch: 'I am a poetess. It's an honor at last to admit it.'" Can you address that shift from "relief" to "honor"?

AF In graduate school, I studied with the late Americanist Jay Fliegelman and did archival research on forgotten American poetesses, discovering much of their lost writing on microfiche. I found I was sympathetic to their earth-centered worldview and the way they used folk and oral meters. At that time, it was a relief to me to find a tradition of women poets that included long-lived, healthy, happy mothers, members of female-honoring communities. Now it's more than a relief. I've spent years learning to understand their aesthetic, to own my spiritual and literary contexts—and to feel how my literary and spiritual traditions inform each other. In the course of this process of poetic self-acceptance, I have dignified their traditions for myself to the point that a relief has become an honor. And I love thinking of myself as a poet of a female lineage.

AG Who lives in that lineage of poetesses?

AF The most famous poetess, of course, is Emily Dickinson; she located herself in this tradition. She shares with the others an attitude of being part of nature, of not being alienated from it in the way of the poetry of the romantic ego. I have also written about Phillis Wheatley as a poetess, and Lydia Sigourney. Frances Osgood, Helen Hunt Jackson, and Alice Cary are some of my other nineteenth-century favorites. More recent poetesses include Millay, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Teasdale. Teasdale's posthumously published poems are wonderful.

AG What about your relationship with the work of a good friend of Maxine's, Carolyn Kizer? Maxine asked you to tell us more about that project.

AF Kizer is a delicious poet, a pioneering feminist poet, funny, skillful, controlled, with an inimitable voice. I saw that she was not getting the attention she deserved, so I got the book going and found some coeditors to help me. Kizer is a poet of the intellect, but also of the heart. I place her in the poetess tradition, in the classical line as opposed to the romantic, and I've written an essay about her in those terms, in *The Body of Poetry*. Kizer taps us back into a whole lineage of women poets, and she—like Maxine herself—is an essential link in that lineage.

AG You work closely with younger women poets. One of them is Tara Betts, who wondered if you could talk a little bit about your role as a mentor to emerging poets.

AF I've tried to pass on the power of mentoring to younger poets, through teaching, directing Stonecoast, and through my experiences editing anthologies not only with Tara, but also with Kathrine Varnes, Marie-Elizabeth Mali, and Alexandra Oliver. Coediting anthologies empowers poets because editing is one of the best ways I know to attain an early sense of agency in the literary world; it puts you immediately on the other side of the submission process. When you invite someone to join that conversation, you know it can help empower their career from then on. I've also found it especially helpful to guide women who want to have families because there still aren't a lot of models for that. I've had young women ask, "how did you *do* it?" meaning, how did I raise children and also build a career. It's sad that they have to ask, but it makes it clear that being a role model is still helpful.

AG Your comments about being a mother and mentoring younger women make me think of Kazim Ali's question for you about how the stages of women's lives are celebrated in the pagan tradition as various faces of the Goddess. How has that been reflected in your poetry?

AF In a narrative poem like *Among the Goddesses*, the connection is obvious. But those archetypes shape my poetry in other ways too, as I first discovered when I was assembling *Eve* and found such a wide range of poems coalescing around the idea of Aphrodite, Kali, Coatlique, Inanna, or Changing Woman. Each face of the goddess reaches deep and wide. Writing the poems about birth, nursing, and mothering in *Eve* and the "Two Bodies" section of *Calendars*, I rode the pattern of the Mother-Goddess like an underlying, shaping force that was moving the poems forward through the impetus of my own experience.

AG Kate Gale, who edited *Among the Goddesses* for Red Hen Press, has observed that while you most certainly live in the contemporary world, your poetry exists in another realm, that of meditation, dawn, goddesses. How do you negotiate those two "worlds," if you will?

AF I grew up with the imperative to build my life around poetry and the spiritual realm that poetry opens for me. Building such a life has been a complex journey including many kinds of therapy and other healing, which is in part the subject of the memoir I'm writing. The Wiccan idea of correspondences has been a profound help because it organizes the physical world in tune with the energies of the spiritual world. Poets get a lot of practice in that kind of metaphorical and metaphysical thinking. As to how I manage to do it, I try to follow the Wiccan rule, "Harm none and do what you will." I spend as much time as I can in the magical realm and do my best to keep other things uncluttered.

AG You are currently working on a spiritual memoir, and also on a poetry project called *Weathering*, which you have described as adopting an ecopoetic method that intends to "speak on behalf of a historical moment." Cynthia Hogue asked if you could clarify what you mean by that, and if you have done fieldwork in conjunction with this project. Is it connected in some way with the memoir?

AF The historical moment now is one of crisis for our planet, our species, for all of us as individuals. In many ways we are in the middle of wonderful changes, but how quickly can we empower ourselves to change our energy sources to sustainable ones? How soon can we change our attitude toward the planet and each other to one of respect and balance, rather than exploitation and abuse? In that sense, *Weathering* is connected with the spiritual memoir, one of whose themes is the human relationship to nature. *Weathering* is about climate change, and I'm writing it because of a woman who stood up at a reading and asked me to write about the subject, and I promised her that I would. Some of the fieldwork I have been doing is what I would be doing anyway as a writer and pagan who needs to spend time outside! But I am also reading and making observations. My husband's an environmental activist, which helps with research.

AG Your mother said that she and your father met through a pacifist organization, the War Resisters League, of which your father later became director. Looking at your poetry, your mother observed that "your poetry so far is rarely explicitly political." She wondered if her and your father's social activism influenced your poetry.

AF My great-aunt Jessie Wallace Hughan, one of my lifelong role models, founded the War Resisters League. That political legacy from her, my parents, and the many pacifists I met through the WRL as a child taught me that not only can people change the world; it's our job, our obligation, to change it. But growing up surrounded by activism also taught me to understand the depth of the roots of change. Writers, perhaps poets most of all, have the power to seed the thought-patterns that will show up later in the political realm. In the '80s when I was writing the lost poems, which altered the role of poetic subject and object, I used to say that I wanted to change brain chemistry. That was a political thing that I wanted to do, to change the planet, for greater justice and balance.

I want to change the root, not the branches, and from where I sit, the root is the feminism and earth-centered spirituality in every word of my poetry. The political implications of actually manifesting these attitudes in the world would be gigantic.

AG Would you close for us with a few lines of a poem that speaks to that, maybe something from the *Weathering* project?

AF Here's a stanza from a poem in the *Weathering* project, which will be included in the new anthology of "bops" edited by Tara Betts and Afaa Michael Weaver:

> As I went walking by the side of the sea,
> I found the waves understanding.
> They roiled with pollution and anger and love,
> And the currents of freedom kept rolling.

Alex Giardino is a writer and translator.