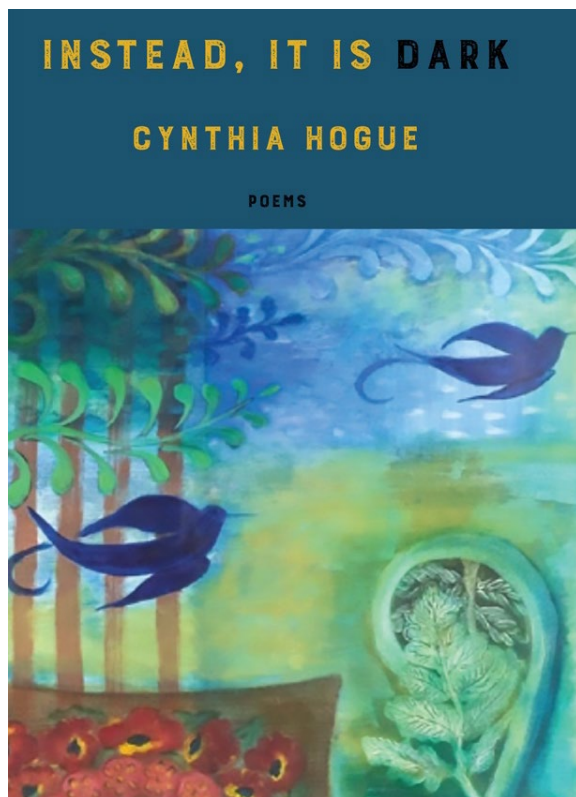


instead, it is dark
A Conversation with Cynthia Hogue
Hugh Martin

In Cynthia Hogue's tenth collection of poetry, *instead, it is dark*, she explores the lingering ghosts of war after her husband suffers a heart attack and recounts dreams of his childhood during World War II. Hogue begins to document her husband's memories and nightmares about growing up in postwar France during food shortages. The project takes on another meaning when Hogue embarks on a journey to collect stories from her husband's extended family still living in France. Through research, interviews, and conversations, Hogue creates a powerfully moving collection that interrogates how war can affect one family and how history overlaps, often messily and painfully, with the present. On the collection, the poet Ilya



Kaminsky writes, "How do other people's memories come to live in our bodies, how do they travel by means of language, from one human body to another, across time and miles, painful miles? I ask this question out of sorrow, yes, but also in wonder, upon reading Cynthia Hogue's beautiful, transformative *instead, it is dark*, a book not of tales or dreams or historical accounts but of memories that survive us, that have already survived us, as they've entered the

lyric." It was an honor to review Hogue's book and also speak with her about documentary poetics, poetic witness, poetry and "responsibility," and much more.

Hugh Martin (HM): You open the book with two epigraphs (from H.D. and Robert Duncan); I'm particularly curious about Duncan's: "Responsibility is to keep the ability to respond." I know Duncan's work has been influential to you throughout your career. This line also reminds me of his well-known fallout with Denise Levertov during the American War in Vietnam. He writes another one of these terse edicts about poetry that can leave one intrigued but also confounded: "The poet's role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it." So in short, beyond choosing Duncan's proclamation for your opening, how do you see the "role" of the poet, and more precisely the poet's "responsibility to respond," in this tumultuous 21st century where so much of the world now lives online? What does this "ability to respond" look like, tangibly, for poets writing today, in 2024? (And of course, I feel that the book, as a whole, answers this by itself!)

Cynthia Hogue (CH): First, let me thank you for these thoughtful, rigorous questions. Such an honor to be in this conversation with you, Hugh.

Ok! Second: I love the first quotation from Robert Duncan, because it encapsulates his sense of being a poet in the world, staying open and engaged with worldly events as well as one's thoughts and emotions. That counsel transcends the historical moment in which it

occurred, and speaks to poets in our own fraught century. Duncan's words aren't prescriptive—as in, how to write a poem—but they do envision an existential mode necessary for a poet to write poetry that matters. The role of the engaged poet—and for Duncan, it is the poet's responsibility—is to maintain that capacity to respond and not shut down or be self-absorbed, or worse, become indifferent or cynical.

Duncan and Levertov shared that ethical stance. Both felt it incumbent upon them as poets not to grow numb or overwhelmed by the world's too-muchness, and that is a challenge that engaged poets face today as well. What Duncan means in that second quotation has to do with his urging Levertov not to settle for simply expressing her moral outrage against the war, which forecloses discussion and insists on foregone conclusion. Instead, in encouraging her to "imagine evil," Duncan urges her to transform the material (Levertov had included very graphic imagery of atrocities against Vietnamese civilians in her antiwar poems) through what he termed "word-work," making through imaginative work the original raw material into art.

HM: In some of your other collections—I'm thinking of *Or Consequence* and *When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina*—you've explored American slavery and, more recently, the experiences of New Orleans' residents facing both a natural disaster and overt racism. In *instead, it is dark*, you confront World War II and American mass shootings, among many other topics. I noticed, too, that the word "witness" is mentioned multiple times throughout the book; there is the poem, "Witness Triptych"; in the "The Daughter," the speaker says in the opening line, "I

witnessed nothing”; in “The Mother,” the speaker mentions “what she bears / witness to.” Did you conceive this collection, which we know from the “Notes” section overlaps with your husband’s sudden heart attack, as poetry of witness, particularly in terms of private and public tragedies? Do you find inspiration, perhaps, from the other collections where you’ve written about large public events when you approach new material?

CH: While I wrote these books and also taught Poetics of Witness courses in various iterations, I developed a socio-poetic approach to the material of a poem. The method of conducting firsthand interviews, as I did for *When the Water Came*, or archival research, which was crucial to writing the slave sequence in *Or Consequence*, “Ars Cora,” are ways to “bear witness” to a crisis or tragedy that I didn’t personally experience, or was chronologically distant. These methods are drawn from documentary poetics.

I didn’t consciously set out to be “witness” to the story of Cora Arsene, who was the last slave in Louisiana to have access to the courts to sue for her freedom before the Fugitive Slave Act closed the courts to slaves. I was so compelled by her story that it wouldn’t let me go over the next ten years. She was lost to history, all that courage and resourcefulness she marshalled to be free, disappeared! Because I am a white poet, I was uncomfortable occupying the position of recounting a slave narrative, so I left the center blank, silent, and wrote around it. A similar question arose when I began *When the Water Came*: how to write of the lived experiences of those evacuees of color who didn’t have the resources, in fact, to evacuate before the storm?

Having lived in New Orleans for some time, I was shocked by the news coverage—especially by the racialized stereotypes—of people in extremis, stranded on roofs with no food or water for days, demanding help that took some five days to arrive. I wanted to offer a way for people whom society silences to speak for themselves. That was what I consciously set out to do.

With *instead, it is dark*, I was seeking a way to honor my husband's life, not "witness" that which I could not have seen. WWII was really not my material, but my French husband, born into Occupied France, come to the U.S. at 60 to re-invent himself, had just almost died. The shock of near-loss catalyzed my beginning to write poems based on memories and dreams he'd shared with me over the years of our marriage. I wanted to find a way to record things about him that amazed me, that I admired about him, all that he'd come through making him him. I approached the enormity of the war through the individuals I had access to—in the main, his family and their memories. The book was written before the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, but it was published in 2023, so one could say that it incidentally invites us to contemplate the suffering of civilians during the current wars, via reading some exemplary voices from another country and century.

HM: In section 1 of the book, "war's chorus," many of the poems capture both the voices and perspectives of children. While these poems subtly examine how children experience war, one recurring element seems to be how, just like adults, children continually prod language, specifically in the figurative sense, as they try to speak of war and describe it. In "The Daughter,"

the speaker—three or four years old—recounts trying to listen to her father to comprehend the larger events outside her grasp: "...and when I snuck to the door // to listen the sound words / made was lightning flashed / right into my skull." Another child, in "the girl on the bridge," resorts to a familiar, more benign image to describe a bombing: "...planes I couldn't see bombs I could as they hit / the whole town different parts lighting up / like a carousel going round and round and round." Could you discuss how you crafted these perspectives and personae? Had you deliberately planned to include these perspectives when you started writing the book?

CH: What I planned in that section was to interview members of my extended French family, the ones who were a bit older than my husband and remembered the war. They told me astonishing things, but I never knew whether an interview would turn into a poem. Both poems you mention are based on memories my husband's cousins told me. The girl who was traumatized by words she wasn't supposed to hear was growing up in the south of France (thus, in Vichy France), and her father was in the military. What did you hear?, I'd asked her. She couldn't remember, but then what she said struck me: Not a day has gone by since then I haven't felt that terror. We know from history how complicit the French military in the Vichy government was, and what they eventually did to French citizens who were Jewish, and also to refugees. The other cousin saw the Americans bombs landing on Tours in the Loire Valley as the Nazis retreated.

In some sense, because the interviews were conducted in French and I am not fluent, I would come away with an impression of the narrative, and then see if a persona began to speak

to me, if the language of the poem began to arrive in English. A very different process than *When the Water Came*. Formal aspects were intuitive—whether I used more or less punctuation, capital letters, aspects like that, which were determined by the speakers of the poems. I didn't plan the book per se. I researched the history of France during WWII, visited historical sites where civilians had died, and very informally, spoke to family members over some years. Poetry can make such long ago suffering and travail present through voice, but this book is in dialogue with present day concerns. I think daily of what the wars today are doing especially to the children in Ukraine and Gaza.

HM: One fascinating poem in the collection, "There Never Was a War That Wasn't Inward," (an allusion to Marianne Moore) seems to depict the oft-ignored experiences women face—a different kind of war—on the home front when, as this speaker says, "Father left for the Front." Eventually, as "conquerors," the speaker recounts, "forced open our homes," the poem captures the ambiguity of being occupied, both literally and psychically: "we tried 'sweetly to go / about our ordinary business' / of being occupied / as with sewing or weeding." I could be off, but it appears that Moore's idea is revelatory here in this moment: it shows that "inwardness" these women faced in multiple ways—keeping their hands and minds "occupied" as they live out, with bated breath and muted terror, the literal military occupation. How did Moore's argument about this "inward" nature of war (from "In Distrust of Merits") inform or prompt the poem in this way, or other ways? I know you've written an entire book on Moore; could you also discuss how her

work, specifically this poem written during World War II, might have helped in your process of writing this collection?

CH: "In Distrust of Merits" is one of Moore's less subtle (as in, more moralizing) poems. Thinking about war, however, I returned to this poem in which Moore contemplates the experience of our combat forces, and casts them as fighting and dying on the front in order to "teach us how to live." Her brother was a Navy chaplain, so Moore and her mother were part of his extended military family. That quotation moved me, and in its image of sacrifice, very Christian, but it's also unexpected in its pedagogical and ethical import. I explored that ethical inquiry (how to live) throughout the writing of this book, thinking about and representing some of the hard choices noncombatants make, if they get the chance, to survive in such extreme circumstances as war and occupation. Her poem is remarkable to me in that she acknowledges that soldiers do not have a choice but to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. According to Moore, civilians who benefit from the military's sacrifices, which she renders sacred, have a responsibility to be better people! I mean, that's basically the Christian message about Christ, which the military perhaps translates in terms of patriotism, but Moore makes it very individual.

The line that gave me my title comes in the Moore poem at a point where she is characterizing the cause of war (hatred of the Other) as being in the power of every individual to redress. Moore's point is that conquering Hate and the tendency to put one's own self-interest before all else is an inward battle. The ambiguity you astutely identify in the characters in my

poem, mostly non-Jewish French citizens, is that they comply with the Occupation in order to survive, although sometimes they didn't anyway. The poem's speaker wants to "clarify / our quandary" after the war, that "we took care/ of ourselves, worried about later, / later." There were some especially heroic examples of people saving Jewish children, but these women kept their heads down. The vast majority were ordinary people who surrendered to the realities of an Occupation. The speaker protests her community's moral innocence after the war. The ambiguity is that there are implied parallels across the decades to our own time (pockets of shared antisemitism, for example). Our "war" today against what causes a form of war, hatred of the Other, is also "inward."

HM: Moving away from World War II, in the latter parts of the book you have poems dealing directly and indirectly with American mass shootings. My favorite of these, "memory holds a trace that at times rises into words," reckons with a conversation you had with your sister about her time covering Columbine as a news reporter. The poem seems to be written entirely in her voice, from her testimony, if I may, about that experience and the more recent shooting at San Bernardino. I know you've written documentary poetry before (I mentioned *When the Water Came...*) but how do you decide as a poet to, as you do here, simply capture a voice, unfiltered, rather than do more crafting or positioning of it within your voice, another voice, or the many different scaffoldings poetry provides?

CH: With *When the Water Came*, I worked very strictly with only the words of the interviewees. A number of poets pointed out that I was inserting myself into the poem nevertheless by editing and shaping the words on the page. Something similar occurred when I created “memory holds a trace...” although I wasn’t interviewing my sister, or trying to write a poem using only her words. We were merely catching up on the phone when I suddenly realized I was listening to her speak a poem. After the San Bernadino shooting, she told me she was relieved to be on vacation, because she wouldn’t have to cover the shooting. And that fact must have triggered painful memories of covering Columbine, which she hadn’t actually realized she’d been repressing. My sister had worked over a decade for ABC news as a West Coast producer. She was pretty hard-nosed—but not, as I discovered, hardened. She just never spoke of any of the emotional challenges of her job until this moment.

As soon as I got off the phone, I wrote down what she said. I used only her words, but once again, I come into the poem in the editing. I tried to capture the intensity of her voice on the page, her hesitations, her denial of obvious upset. The spacing to mark her held breath was where the craft came in—the shaping, the breaks, the use of white space and typographic marks—to convey the sudden eruption of profound emotions. It was my intuition to leave it raw, to capture in poetic voice the body’s evident rejection of the consequences of gun violence. I documented the traces of that trauma. Recently, I had the occasion to discuss this poem with my sister, because of trying to answer your question, Hugh. We compared notes about our professions. She reports the news of the day, and poets, as Pound said, “The news that stays

news." My sister filmed and edited the burial of the young victims, but never expressed her emotional response in so many words at the time, until our conversation more than a decade later. A poem captures and preserves those details, that response, and then it transcends its moment. That is perhaps the "Why" of documentary lyric poetry.

HM: This question also relates to "memory holds a trace that at times rises into words"; in the poem's eighth stanza, you appear to torque the punctuation and give readers a visual and aural blip—a line beginning with a comma, then an article, then a quick enjambment (" , the /"). To me, this is the only moment that we feel the "poet" entering the poem to, productively I think, sort of "interrupt" the documentary form and suggest both an emotional pause, a stutter, a choked-up breath just when the speaker recounts observing the lids of coffins closing over murdered schoolchildren. Can you discuss your decisions here to craft this? How do you anticipate a reader or listener experiencing it both aurally and visually?

CH: I don't know about you, Hugh, but I rarely find that a poem arrives as a whole or complete piece. "memory" did, however, likely because it was in my sister's voice. I received my sister's oral words as a shock—I was half-listening and then I was wholly alert and her words were being seared into my brain. When it came to writing them down, memory fed them back to me, replete with the emotional pauses and the choking up and the veer or breaking off to gather herself back into coherence. A line such as " , the /" came as an actual pause in which my sister

tried to compose herself. I kept that breaking off, in the same way as I ran the words on a line together without normative punctuation, to convey the struggle to break through the silence that trauma causes. Emotions long-held spilled out, surging, and then were forcibly suppressed, expelled. I opened with more formal quatrains and then shifted to single lines isolated by double or triple spacing, and then back to the quatrains (“, the /” is the quatrain’s fourth line). Aurally, the repetition of certain vowel and consonant sounds is both conveying how we speak in echoes, repeating ourselves unconsciously, and my poet’s ear catching the sounds up in recording them. The short o’s: Columbine-cover-blood-bodies-cover-covering, which pepper the poem with staccato sounds, contrast with the higher long vowels, such as cleaning-shooting-light. Such echoes are punctuated by the plosive b’s and hard c sounds (Columbine-cover-casket-cable). The visual aspects of the poem were where you perhaps see more of me shaping the material, but the aural aspects were already in the music of the voice. The craft comes into the poem in trying to convey this actual powerful moment, which I received aurally, so a reader might experience something of what it was for me to hear the speech in the first place. And perhaps, feel something of my sister’s response. I have long been fascinated by what voice and speech reveal about the person speaking. I’d never thought about my sister as compassionate, but there it is in the words.

HM: In the final section of the book, “a love story,” there seems to be a sense of the speaker trying to move on, move forward, from both the partner’s near-death and the ghosts of the war. In the penultimate poem, “The Understanding,” there are oysters, champagne, “a ‘43” vintage

wartime wine, yet the characters seem pulled to the inescapable past. The poem closes with these uncomfortably ambiguous lines: “we had tasted something which / nothing in years since could cleanse” (91). As a poet considering a book’s emotional and thematic trajectory, did you reach for these tonal shifts intentionally or by something more intuitive? Do you think your next project might resume any of these themes or focal points?

CH: This book was written out of love, catalyzed into expression by the shock of near-loss, but its quest is to understand. “The Understanding” dates from when I was new to France and didn’t know the culture. The poem features the formal courtesy of the French bourgeoisie of an earlier era, as the elderly hosts in the poem embodied. There was History in that home, that which lingers long after the war has receded in memory. We were guests of an industrialist who’d done business with the Nazi Occupation in Paris, however, and they had survived very well indeed. I had no way of knowing that, but read all the signs of wealth and culture, and was curious even then about how a businessman had navigated the war. I had the audacity to ask him that question in my atrocious French. It was likely very rude, but the industrialist was cultured and courteous.

I usually just write to see what the poem wants to say. What I remember about writing it, interestingly enough, was that I was inspired by Norman’s [Dubie] brilliant work with imagery. I’d just been reading a new collection. I don’t have his astonishing descriptive gift, but I was paying careful attention to his imagery as I read, and it inspired me, writing this poem. I even

discovered how an image can house a mischievous humor. The poem describes an occasion that is almost ritualistic in cultured French society—the aperitif, the taking one’s seat at the table, the tasting of the wine (and the requisite response), since the host had quite a collection and had brought out an excellent vintage. The fact that the wine, despite being carefully kept, was ruined required a delicate balance of courtesy and honesty. Where the poem was going after all that description was not obvious to me . . . until it was. That resolution, that “we had tasted” something the years couldn’t “cleanse,” came to me in a flash of insight as I wrote the poem’s last stanza. I hadn’t consciously been taking the poem there, and the insight almost seemed to me too neat, as if I’d led the poem there inexorably, but in fact, it was latent in the material. The story was not a French version of *Schindler’s List*, but a much less comforting, much more ambivalent exemplar.

Can we “cleanse” what we’ve done in life, choices we’ve made and actions we’ve taken to survive and even thrive? I asked those questions in this book, what ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances did. Essentially, these epistemological as well as ethical questions. My poems often explore how we “know” something, and the insights in a poem often offer what Alice Fulton calls “an inconvenient knowledge.” Poems can be appreciations, laments, celebrations, insight. Poems of inconvenient knowledge nudge us into self-reflection, which in turn, might change our perspective, or urge us to be more humane. A new collection I’m putting together now continues that inquiry to some extent, but also considers the urgency of environmental concerns. The last poem, “The Loire Valley (Solstice 2015),” suggests that future

inquiry. Other poems I've been working on are more in the realm of ars poetica, considering what poetry as an ancient art form brings to our lives. I like to think that it matters. Poets must believe that.

Hugh Martin, an Iraq War veteran, is the author of *In Country* (BOA Editions, Ltd., 2018) and *The Stick Soldiers* (BOA Editions, Ltd., 2013). His essays and poetry have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *GQ*, *The American Scholar*, and many other publications. He teaches at the United States Air Force Academy.

Cynthia Hogue's tenth poetry collection is *instead, it is dark* (Red Hen Press, 2023). Her ekphrastic Covid chapbook is entitled *Contain* (Tram Editions 2022), and her third collaborative translation from the French of Nicole Brossard is *Distantly* (Omnidawn 2022). She served as the second Director of the



Cynthia Hogue

Stadler Center for Poetry at Bucknell University from 1995-2003. There, she trained in Conflict Resolution with the Mennonites, earning her certificate in conflict mediation. Among her honors are a Fulbright Fellowship to Iceland, two NEA Fellowships, and the Harold Morton Landon Translation Award from the Academy of American Poets. She served as Guest Editor for Poem-a-Day for September (2022), sponsored by the Academy of American Poets. Hogue was the inaugural Maxine and Jonathan Marshall Chair in Modern and Contemporary Poetry at Arizona State University. She lives in Tucson. Her website is:

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