
Crafting Connection: Christina Davis Reaches Out



Christina Davis is "carving out a place in the noise." Hers is a syntax stripped bare, absent of the "ums," the "likes," the half-starts and premature stops of everyday speech. In that syntax one finds evidence of the contemporaneous density and paucity of text. A few words in succession reveal the locked chambers of childhood, loves longed for and lost, the vigor of grief.

*We are each what never leaves us, what we never see
the back of
is the self. But what loves us*

*is at the back, as Eurydice was
escorting him out
without his knowing.*

Her concerns are the interchangeability of opposites and the human community; the need not only to speak, but for speech to reach an intended.

*I want to tell you all the little wrongs between us,
the ones they don't arrest.*

*If you were here, you'd bend into me,
low as a fountain's stump of water, and whisper*

"Once everyone's dreamed, we will sleep."

In "Forth a Raven," her first collection of poetry, this is embodied by the raven itself. It is the bird, and the flight of the bird. It is the recollection of mourning, and the act of having loved. So we learn to read these poems not only as independent vessels, but also as a poetic sequence.

Thus, in the deep of winter, we find ourselves on foot in a New England landscape where the seasonal cycles are in gentle juxtaposition with the cycles of human experience: life being lived, imbued as it is with loss, and loathing, and loneliness. Overhead, the birds fly south. — Carlin M. Wragg, Editor

Note: This transcript has been slightly modified to enhance readability.

CARLIN M. WRAGG: Shall we start with "The Raven's Book?"



Christina Davis: [Reads "The Raven's Book"]

CMW: One of the first things I want to ask you about is the idea of the bird. The bird seems at once subject, symbol and image. What were your intentions for this and other poems in which birds appear?

CD: You just made me think of a great writing exercise in which the students are asked to choose a mundane object, say the cup you just placed on the table, and utilize it in two different ways. In the first draft the object serves as the symbolic centerpiece of the story, somewhat like **THE GOLDEN BOWL**, while in another draft the object serves as a random ornamental detail in the background, a non-symbolic prop. The same is true of the way in which I use birds throughout the collection. In "Forth a Raven" they are

foregrounded as the primary metaphor, while in "Wave Hill" the geese are headed "together and gunward" and are just passing through.

In writing the collection as a whole the bird began for me as the primary symbol and gradually became anything that moves onward and outward—a sheer non-noun-ness, the pure directionality of "forth." It could have been anything. But in its first instance it was a bird, the first bird in the Bible, the raven that was, to a certain extent, kicked off of the Ark. Before I happened upon it as a symbol, I was always searching for the punch line, always looking for a place to arrive at in my poems. The raven's fate gave me a symbol, but it also gave me structural and procedural permission not to know where any given poem would arrive.

CMW: Can you tell me the myth of the raven in the Bible?

CD: I had been working on a poem on telephony and the far-flungness of the human voice when I decided to research the symbol of the dove in Genesis — my grandmother would have been so happy — my devout Southern Baptist grandmother finally getting me to crack open a Bible! But, while looking up the dove I came upon this line about Noah: "And he sent forth a raven and a dove, and the raven came not again unto him." I'll never forget the mournful, inverted structure of that line, "came not again unto him." The non-return of the raven and its subsequent status as the bird that represents mortality and carrion — he shows up **FAMOUSLY ON POE'S SILL** — was very compelling for me. I became interested in how the raven could convey many things that are sent forth and/or

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shunned by society, and those were, to my mind, sadness, uncertainty, death.

CMW: There's a note at the end of the book that explains some of your influences—can you talk a little bit about them?

CD: "The raven's book" was once a way of saying The Book of the Dead; so we all get to look forward to being published in that book. That's part of the implicit universal of the poem.

But as you noted, it's based on a letter that can be found in **NADEZHDA MANDELSTAM'S HOPE ABANDONED** — flat-out one of the most beautiful love letters ever written. It was written in 1938 after the poet **OSIP MANDELSTAM** had been taken away to a work camp in Siberia; he never received the letter. The letter is another raven that never lands. Or rather, the strangeness of the poem and of the letter is that we are its recipients, not him. That is the tragedy and the redemption of it — and of language itself. It is received at last; it is heard, but not always by its intended recipient.

I think for me hope, the synonymy of hope and language, that she — let's say the "I" is Nadezhda Mandelstam, it's probably not, but if it is her — that she, by merely speaking, is creating hope. That when a person puts something into language that they believe in an Other, they believe in reception.

The story **ED HIRSCH** told was about the Hungarian poet **MIKLÓS RADNÓTI** who was shot by a Nazi firing squad in World War II and buried in a mass grave. When his diligent and devoted wife finally exhumed the body they found poems stowed in his trench coat, written while starving in a concentration camp. And yet to say that the poems were poems of despair is, according to Ed, not quite accurate.

Ed's feeling was that wherever there's a You there is hope, even though the poems were absolutely despairing poems, so when we read poems that we consider bleak and severe and depressed, in fact the very fact that they have been written suggests that person had hope, which I find a very redemptive thing. So I think that "The Raven's

Book" is questioning the diagnosis of despair. And is also implicitly saying that "The Raven's Book" or The Book of the Dead, has life within each section, something that puts forth life. I love that "to-and-fro-ness," that tug of war within it, which is the very essence of hope. I mean, hope always lives with doubt as its bedfellow.

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CMW: As you're talking I'm reminded of another pair of images that appear in your book: the mountain and the valley.

CD: They rely upon each other. As in **OPPEN'S** beautiful poem. He describes how absence and presence touch and are contingent. I think in Forth A Raven I was really interested in presence and absence, departure and arrival, and in my newer work, a slight variation on that polarity: nearness and farness. As the child of a man whose life's work was telephony — in particular, cellular communication — I am fascinated by how potentially far the human voice can travel, but I'm also aware of its limitations. **HEIDEGGER** talks about how something like television or the telephone, though it has killed farness hasn't necessarily produced nearness.

CMW: With that in mind, let's move on to "How to Play House." I'm going to ask you to read a series of three poems in succession that aren't linked explicitly, they're in different parts of the book, but seem to have some sort of loose relationship, if you will.



CD: [Reads "How To Play House," "Understudies," "The Calling"]

CMW: The reason I think these poems have a relationship with each other is because I feel they are, in a way, parables. Not in the sense of being religious poems, but in the sense that they have a lesson to offer, and that they also offer a way forward. "The Calling" is, I think, just funny... In it,

you play with the idea that we are named, that we continue to live our lives in possession of that name, that the name becomes us, and yet is also different from us. You say something about players on the stage of life... These are just some of the things I'm thinking about as you read and I wonder if you were conscious of these things as you were writing.

CD: What immediately came to mind, and again this is going to be a tangent, but then again the whole idea of Forth A Raven is to pursue the tangent. I think I've always been fascinated by freedom and the fear of freedom — and among poets, the quest for some containment or some instruction, the quest for some criterion, for some way to know whether what we're speaking is correct or appropriate or arriving somewhere. It's what's fascinated me about certain authors like Henry James. I think many of his most vital characters are Americans who are terrified of their own freedom and therefore seek out the corsets of life.

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I think in poetry we're similarly seeking and rejecting that. You start with the blank page and you inform yourself by limiting possibility. Constantly limiting each stage limits the next. Each line you put down limits the possibilities of the next line, but it is the only way forward. **ANNE SEXTON'S** famous line about "poetic structures being the cage that lets the creature out" comes to mind.

To write a poem is to write law, a little law whose governance is that page alone. So it makes sense that sometimes those laws come to the surface in the form of a directive. "How to Play House" I find, in some ways, a very tragic poem. On the one

hand it's very elliptical and wry, but on the other hand, in one's solitude and freedom you need to enforce yourself against the bleakness of sheer space and the terror of open time.

CMW: In "Understudies" you offer the idea that love comes to us through the eyes, and that death is a sound...

CD: I'm always fascinated by how we live among words, live assigned by words. Whether they inform us, whether we can break the shackles of certain words that are placed upon us.

I've always been particularly fascinated by that moment in **HAMLET**, which is what "Understudies" is based on, when "into the porches of the ear" the poison is dripped, into the father's ear. I think I'm fascinated also because we live in such a visual culture and it made sense to me that somehow death would come through the ear, this organ in which we haven't schooled ourselves. It's still wild, the frontier of hearing. At the same time, they say — I learned this when my father was dying — that the last sense to leave you is your hearing. I did not know this "I feel saddened by how much the voice has been made monotone in modern society ... I'm profoundly saddened by the way the voice has been stripped of its dialects and its intonations in order, we feel, to communicate more purely or more broadly." at the time of writing the poem. But as a reader of my own past poems, I'm heartened that the poem knew it before I did.

Poetry is at once intensely visual and yet resides so essentially in the acoustic. I feel saddened by how much the voice has been made monotone in modern society. You know, even when I watch the evening news, I'm profoundly saddened by the way the voice has been stripped of its dialects and its intonations in order, we feel, to communicate more purely or more broadly. The whole idea of broadcast-ness... I actually think this book has a lot to do with how far the voice can go and what it has to do to get that far, what sacrifices have to be made for our voices to reach the most people.

CD: In some way poetry knows it won't reach the most people, therefore it doesn't have to make all those sacrifices. In any case, "Understudies" is very much about hearing and privileging that sense.

CMW: Would you talk a little bit about minimalism?

CD: We've become such a portable culture — everything must be portable or else is not considered good — and so in some ways I feel bad that my poetics plays into portability, but I think it comes at it with a different

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purpose. My kind of minimalism is about carving out a place in the noise, a clearing in the decibels.

I also arrived at minimalism as a kind of compromise. A lot of the negative feedback I received for about ten years from different critics and friends and teachers was that my work was too emotional. Actually, the word I heard most frequently was "sentimental," which I've always found a very problematic term. It seemed to emerge again in the usage around the time that women poets began to become major players in the early Twentieth Century poetic landscape. But I'll stop there. The point here is that you're always making compromises to be heard in some ways, but the compromise I was willing to make was to discipline myself lengthwise, to be economical and kind of ruthless so that although I would be emotional, this unleashing of emotion would play against the very taut discipline, almost scientific discipline, of the minimalist line. I also felt that the intensity and density of the ideas and images could be relieved by the brevity of the poems themselves, their vertical brevity.

CMW: Were you interested in provoking certain thoughts in your readers, or do you feel a sense of openness with regard to what the reader finds in the poem? Do you think much about the reader when you release your poems into the world?

CD: I'm obsessively thinking about the reader. I was thinking about that as I was coming up here. I was thinking that all of the edits I made in the last year of writing *Forth A Raven* were for the reader's sake. However, when I say "for the reader's sake," the edits I was making had to do with having changed my mind, not about what I wanted to articulate, but about who the reader was.

CMW: Let's talk about mortality and solitude again because I think these subjects play a significant role in your book, and I know they've also played a significant role in your life after this book. The poem I'd like you to read next was particularly moving to me because while my mother was taking care of my grandmother, who was dying of lung cancer, I was trying — and failing — to write toward the idea of that last breath that you so beautifully render. I'd like to start there.

CD: I should just say that I did a family project where I researched the last words of all of my ancestors. Then I realized that the only ancestor among them who I'd been present at the death of had said absolutely nothing. So "Last Words" was what to make of that nothingness for somebody like me who's so involved with language.



Christina Davis: [Reads "Last Words"]

CMW: I want to ask you about the relationship between the "no" and the "yes." I was so curious about the line, "if No had never been said to her."

What does that refer to? Are you telling us she had a life full of everything she wanted?

CD: In some ways it's a reference to CELAN'S directive, "Speak, but keep yes and no unsplit." Life is in many ways the splitting of the atom of "Yes" and "No." In my grandmother's life, I feel that "No" got the better of "Yes." My grandmother was an artist herself but was very much governed by her affiliation with the Church of Christ in Western Kentucky, and she never really, or at least not audibly, questioned beyond that. I felt a great sadness for her and for what the language did to her, the very same language that liberated me.

CMW: You've mentioned this opening up and, at the same time, this limiting thing that language does, which makes me think about the physical world manifested in the poem; the "in and in." I came away from "Last Words" with a vivid picture of someone gasping for air, and yet you showed me that the act of that gasp was beautiful. I think there's something interesting in that duality. I'm thinking about the way in which language can anesthetize — is that the right word? — even as it makes possible a deeper experience of something that's quite hard to grapple with.

CD: I think there's a corollary between this poem and the title poem, "Forth a Raven," because there I remember I was trying to narrow down all the questions I'd ever asked to two categories. I have this best friend, Nancy, who gets a kick out of putting everything into two categories. There are the runners and walkers in life and she can literally divide anybody who has ever lived between the runners and the walkers. I would always enjoy introducing a third. I'd say, "What about the bikers?"

But I decided I would try to follow that categorical imperative and reduce every question to two questions. I actually feel it was successful for me personally. Those two questions were, "Do you love me?" and "Will I die?" I could trace every one of my questions back to those two chromosomes.

But I think with this it was sort of like "if every word were stripped from me what would be the

bone? What would be the fossil that remained?" And I think just watching my grandmother, and the peace that overcame her, and the taking away of all the directives and all of the commandments and of all the instructions that "Yes" was what remained: the eternal "Yes."



CD: [Reads "Forth A Raven"]

CMW: I love the way you read this because I've read it myself and have thought about these last lines, the way they're broken up — that's one of the things we have with poetry, this space on the page and the breaks in the lines; they give us instructions about how the words want to be read — so I was curious to hear

how you read
"not whether,"
the last line.

*"If every word were
stripped from me what
would be the bone? What
would be the fossil that
remained?"*

CD: I think I read it a different way every time! But I should say something about those last lines, which I didn't get to note in the official notes. They are a re-rendering of a sentence in **GULLIVER'S TRAVELS**. Jonathan Swift was so anti-religion; it's wonderful to incorporate his voice into this.

But the thought itself came from having just watched that extraordinary documentary **WINGED MIGRATION**. It follows birds across the earth, and just when I saw the birds begin to cross over a continent I wondered if they had any notion of how far that was, and how long it lasted, or to whom it belonged, or if it was just a mass of time and space for them. And I wondered if it mattered as much to them as it does to us. It would all be an island — I mean a continent is inherently island-like — so that kind of displaces the human conundrum of "do you love me?" Not to dismiss it, but it creates a different spatiality for those questions to exist in.

In fact of course these aren't even ravens! You know, it occurs to me that you're not going to see

ravens crossing over continents. They're probably living above a stoop somewhere. So in some ways the title is already uncanny and absurd.

CMW: How did "Forth A Raven" come to be the title poem of the book?

CD: Because it ultimately guided all the poems that were written. I'd almost compare it to a figurehead on a boat, just that cutting through of forwardness and forthrightness. Heidegger talks about the gamble of existence, the rolling of the dice of which we're a part when we're born. We don't choose to be born; volition enters after. I'm very interested in that, the first flung-ness of not choosing.

I think poetry is much like that: you fling yourself into this blank space and you put down some random line and then you begin to erect laws around it, civilizations of words. These similar impulses play out in very small spaces, as well as across continents. And then you create the name and that name becomes you. One day I would like to write a book about names because I am fascinated by the difference between proper names and other words.

CMW: I'm curious about the sound of names. How do names, which have so much meaning, come to be these words that are attached to no other object? They're not things, they're not verbs...

CD: Yes, you could have loved a man named John and you could have met another man named John whom you despised and within that same word is held harmoniously those two opposed people.

CMW: I keep wanting to ask, what does that mean? Because there's a way in which these poems are so open at the end and yet so closed and complete.

CD: You know, the conductor of my choir — we're a semi-amateur choir in Greenwich Village — said that the amateur is governed as much by skill as by love. I was quite taken with that thought. But, as you say, these poems are all driven by the tension between closure and openness. That's what's going on.

You asked me once about religion and whether I'm a religious poet and I was thinking I do use the word "god" a lot, but I'm beginning to realize that the word "god" is just the largest direction, one of the greatest aims a voice can take, even as an agnostic.

CD: It's like a dancer spotting a wall; it's that wall. Whether or not you believe in it, it's this most magnified of words and in saying it you feel heightened and heard. You feel headed. The words spot the wall and go toward it aimed.

I think oftentimes we do that with the Beloved, as in the poem "Wave Hill." We aim so much towards them but we cannot necessarily arrive at them, can't be received by them, which is not necessarily their fault that we've sent so much towards them that they cannot contain. Or that we project upon them things that they aren't. So I think a lot of that is also what this poem is about. This is counterpointed by another kind of aim in the poem: bullets headed toward the geese.

CMW: That makes me think of some other poems, which you haven't read during this conversation, that involve the deer and hunting and animals. How do these things figure into your experience?

CD: I think it comes back again to the idea of directions and that we have unnaturally cut off the directions of animals by roads, by towers that are erected in cities that have crippled their native directionality. So I feel that we have become this huge obstacle to them. There's something in **RILKE'S DUINO ELEGIES** in which he says that we, in looking at the world always perceive obstacles and punctuation, whereas an animal's gaze is utterly open. They see space; their perception goes relentlessly forth, whereas we see the destination of death.

Christina Davis is the author of "Forth A Raven" (Alice James Books, 2006). Her poems have appeared in "American Poetry Review," "Boston Review," "jubilat," "The May Anthologies" (selected by Ted Hughes), "New Republic," "Pleiades," "Paris Review" and other publications.

She is the recipient of residencies from Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony and of several Pushcart Prize nominations.

A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Oxford, she is currently the curator of poetry at the Woodberry Poetry Room, Harvard University.

To read additional information about Ms. Davis, go to www.openlooppublishing.org