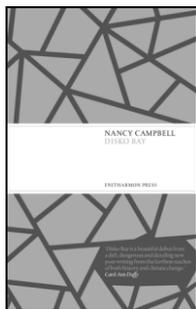


## A CRUEL AND TENDER BEAUTY NANCY CAMPBELL INTERVIEWED BY KAY SYRAD



**Nancy Campbell**

photo © C Bjorn Valdimarsson



**Kay Syrad**



### ASEQQUKU / FRAGMENT

A raven's wing at rest on the deep snow  
remembers sunrise, the slow warm light  
that grows behind the crags. Remembers flight  
– plummet, beat and drift – and the low  
confusion of wind in a distant nest.  
No covert feathers could be blacker,  
and frozen sinews do not fester  
once the stained bone they cling to has lost  
its body, sliced at the scapular.  
Never to breed, never to scavenge  
on scarlet seal hearts by the ice edge

**Nancy Campbell, from *Disko Bay***

Nancy Campbell's *Disko Bay* (Enitharmon, 2015) was shortlisted for the 2016 Forward Prize. The collection is mainly based on Campbell's 2010 artist's residency at Upernavik Museum in Greenland – the most northern museum in the world – and another residency in Jutland, Denmark, and comprises three sections: *Disko Bay*, *Ruin Island*, and *Jutland*, each set of poems responding very specifically to both the culture and nature of each place. The collection is striking in its use of a wide range of poetic forms (Campbell has studied on one of Mimi Khalvati's Versification courses) and traditional modes of storytelling; in *Disko Bay* there are sonnets, ballads and songs, a series of pantoums, a sestina; there are also lessons and riddles and proverbs, and a poem that consists of *Seven Words for Winter*.

What is also striking is Campbell's inclusion of Greenlandic itself: during her residency, the poet lived amongst the islanders and began to learn the language, finding that for her, 'Greenlandic had become the key to representing the Arctic'.<sup>1</sup> For the reader, being able to see and try to hear the long sensuous Greenlandic words is integral to the whole experience of the collection, contributing to its shamanic quality and its effort to embody the deep history of these northernmost places. Campbell articulates in these cumulatively affecting poems the role language can play in our understanding of the current fragility of our environment; and invoking the mythology of the Arctic, she also declares the role of women in knowing and protecting that environment.

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<sup>1</sup> See Nancy Campbell, *How to say I love you in Greenlandic* [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/nancy-campbell/greenland-how-to-say-i-love-you-in-greenland\\_b\\_2163763.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/nancy-campbell/greenland-how-to-say-i-love-you-in-greenland_b_2163763.html)

**KS:** On the front cover of your book, Carol Ann Duffy is quoted as saying that ‘Disko Bay is a beautiful debut from a deft, dangerous and dazzling new poet...’ We can certainly agree on ‘deft’ and ‘dazzling’ but what exactly do you think she means by ‘dangerous’?

**NC:** While I can’t speak for Carol Ann Duffy, she may be referring to the fact that my work has taken me to dangerous places in dangerous times – and I try to bear witness to this. In many parts of Greenland everyday life is still fraught with natural dangers: when you walk across the sea ice, there is always a risk of falling into the freezing water below and the sea even threatens those on shore, as bergs break apart and a wash follows. There are human dangers too: suicide is tragically common in these small, close-knit communities, especially among young people trying to find their place in a changing society – and historically the struggle for survival has brought other forms of violence to the surface. The human capacity for violence to fellow humans, to animals, and to the wider environment fascinates me.

In Iceland, the weather can change on a knife edge, and anyone living in the northern Tröllaskagi region, or travelling the roads that wind around vertiginous cliffs there, will experience life-threatening storms and avalanches. It’s common to wonder whether you will reach your destination. In both countries, but in Greenland in particular, it’s considered unwise to make plans for the future – even the next day – in the face of these dangers. I’m inspired by the literature that comes out of such landscapes, the way it engages with essential truths about the human condition, whether the novels of Jón Kalman Stefánsson about Icelandic fishermen and postmen battling through storms and snowdrifts, or Greenlandic songs that express gratitude to Sila (nature) after bad weather or a period of dearth.

There’s another aspect to Greenlandic literature which could be perceived as dangerous – the sexual and scatological nature of many Arctic stories, some of which I allude to in *Disko Bay*. This has caused some controversy, in particular the use of explicit epithets in songs by female shamans (see the comments on their first publication in *Qarrtsiluni* <https://qarrtsiluni.com/2011/01/05/qavak-songs/#comments>). For me, the language I use is the only valid way of representing the shocking, disruptive force of the original Greenlandic. If there’s danger to be found in my work, it is inspired by a desire to communicate my experience, rather than to cause harm to others.

**KS:** I find the poems have both a cruel and a tender beauty: they are highly controlled, austere, unflinching, unemotional in the Zen sense of sustaining a neutrality towards your object (culture in extreme nature) in the moment of observation – and yet they express great sadness, or a feeling that the situation is beyond sadness – that we have entered a period of lament, a wake. Is that a fair representation? Is this quiet- or non-self approach fundamental to your eco-poetics?

**NC:** I’m intrigued that you find Zen in the poems. The word ‘unflinching’ calls to mind the way in t’ai chi (which I’ve practiced for some years now) one moves fluidly with and around a partner. This approach to objects is expressed in Lao Tzu’s *Daodejing*, translated here by Martyn Crucefix:

– there is nothing in the world more soft  
more yielding than water  
yet in conflict with hard resistant things  
there’s nothing better

I’ve never written about my t’ai chi practice, but it’s entirely possible it has made its way into the work.

I agree that the narrator of *Disko Bay* is often a neutral observer (I only recently noticed how much watching, how much looking through windows there is in the sequence). This approach wasn’t intentional, or conscious, but it’s true I would rather allow the reader to feel an emotion, than tell them what I feel. I’ve been reading Eavan Boland’s essay *A Journey with Two Maps* (the first in her book of the same name) and maybe some of her comments on “the elaborations of authorship” are relevant

here. She writes of the choice the poet makes between *I* and *we*: between “the silvery I of the poetic singular” as used in *The Prelude* (where it is “the silhouette of the hero”) and the “hallowed we”, full of the “intensity of a more communal imagination” (that of the Middle Ages, of *Everyman* and *Pearl*, and later of the balladeer). Poems with this communal voice have always appealed strongly to me. Boland traces it through to 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry, quoting James Merrill’s remarks on Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*: “he seems to invite his readers into a community of shared suffering, or shared sensitivity”. Boland writes of this communal language: “in its strength and poise I recognized the old dignity of poetry – its relation to the tribe.” But she ultimately comes down in favour of travelling with “two maps”. I hope as well as this neutrality readers will find a lyric *I* in *Disko Bay*, reporting physical, personal encounters – the feel of a hand holding my throat as I try to pronounce a challenging Greenlandic diphthong, or losing my companions on a mountain journey.

Yes, some of what I saw was beyond sadness. As a teenager I believed we could save the world; then I spent my twenties grieving for the irrevocable damage done to the planet. Now, I’m trying to find the next step. What should I write in a period which scientists are now describing as ‘the Sixth Mass Extinction’? How can I justify making such work while our geological era (designated the ‘Anthropocene’ in recognition of the fact that during it, humans have dominated the environment) judders to an ominous conclusion? My observations of climate change in the Arctic and encounters with people living at the forefront of such change have deepened my thinking about these questions, as have my discussions with other visual artists and writers whose work responds to the polar regions. In particular, conversations with Emma Stibbon RA, whose graphic art depicts icebergs and glacier melt, have reconciled me to feeling that however transient our efforts of expression, they *are* necessary. As Maureen Duffy writes in her poem ‘Nowadays’ the contemporary ecopoet follows Ted Hughes, who observed a ‘furtive hedgehog’: ‘knowing / you couldn’t protect it but leaving your will / in words; all that we scribblers can do.’ I should add that I don’t necessarily consider myself an ecopoet, as my writing shifts between many different subjects. If, as David Borthwick writes in his introduction to *Entanglements: New Ecopoetry* “the central concern of ecopoetry is recognition of human entanglement in the world” then perhaps I have to accept the label to some degree.

**KS:** Can you tell us about other contemporary poets or thinkers you particularly value or admire?

**NC:** My work on the Arctic was informed by reading Barry Lopez’s seminal book *Arctic Dreams*. A few years ago I ran a book group called Arctic Book Club with the aim of introducing readers to the growing subject of Arctic literature. We read everything from the bestselling *Burial Rites* by Hannah Kent to the first Chukchi novel, *A Dream in Polar Fog* by Yuri Rytkeu, which remains one of my favourite books on the polar regions. I try to read widely on the subject and seek out international perspectives.

In poetry, I have enjoyed Harriet Tarlo’s work, both her own writing and her anthology *The Ground Aslant: an anthology of radical landscape poetry*. As well as the obvious recommendations – Alice Oswald, Katrina Porteous and Kathleen Jamie – I would cite the work of Carrie Etter, whose recent book *Scar* (Shearsman) is a brave poem charting the effects of climate change on her home state of Illinois, and Isabel Galleymore, whose close observation of the natural world is witty and refreshing. Galleymore is based in south-west England, and there’s a lot of other interesting writers working in Cornwall right now, emerging poets producing exciting, formally innovative work: ones to watch include Anna Catherka and Sarah Cave.

Water conservation issues have preoccupied me this year, so I’ve been reading the work of Lorine Niedecker: “The Brontës had their moors, I have my marshes” she wrote. I’m especially interested in writers who focus on one place, not only Niedecker, but also John Clare and H D Thoreau. Thoreau, along with Gary Snyder and John Berger, appeals to me for his tendency not to regard his “work” as limited to activities such as reading or writing but also engaging in a practical way with the community or landscape, for example working the land. I read a lot more non-fiction than poetry; on my bedside table right now are a number of books about human/animal interaction: Eleanor Morgan’s *Gossamer Threads*, which explores the connections between humans and spiders; Esther Woolfson’s

*Corvus*, on her life with crows and other birds; and a few second-hand books about the Loch Ness monster – these are homework, as I’m involved in an artists’ books project about Nessie for World Book Night.

**KS:** Many of our readers have also studied with Mimi Khalvati, who has perhaps done more than anyone in the last 20 years to encourage the serious study and writing of formal poetry. I was interested to read in your article for the Poetry School how you came to choose the pantoum form for your poem about Upernavik history, *The Survivors* (in *Disko Bay*), ‘because its lines repeat, so that the reader re-encounters the same phrases in new contexts – just as events can be seen to repeat themselves across history...Colonisation plays a big part in the pantoum’s story [...] It seemed a fitting form to consider the colonisation of Greenland and its consequences.’<sup>2</sup>

As you say in the article, it was not easy to control the form and you had to sacrifice ‘some elements that had initially seemed central’, but that the discipline of form gave you ‘a means to express the austere Arctic landscape and what [you] perceived as a human tendency towards constraint and cruelty [...whilst] paying homage to the importance of song in Greenlandic literature.’ Considering the value to you of these formal poetic forms, how would you respond to someone who considers such forms out of kilter with the ‘informality’ of modern discourse or even undemocratic?

**NC:** It was a huge privilege to study with Mimi Khalvati. The calibre of other poets on the course – including Kathryn Maris, Fiona Moore and Nancy Hynes – was also an inspiration. Mimi’s classes gave me the confidence to try many new approaches – deciding when to use form, and when to abandon it. I was fresh from Mimi’s course when I first went to Greenland and I was still buzzing with the excitement of the things I’d learnt. I don’t always use strict forms such as the pantoum and the sonnet, but it was a deliberate choice to do so at that time and in that setting. I can relate to something Mimi herself once said (in an interview with Lidia Vianu): “I think each poem has its own palette, music, form, and my job is to be flexible and versatile enough to provide the body it needs through which the mind or soul might speak.”

I do believe that the poem needs to do its own “speaking”, and for me form can help clarify that voice. The sacrifices a form can demand – extraneous subject matter, and so on – almost always lead me to a stronger poem. I don’t perceive it as a difficult, or undemocratic approach. The pantoum, like the ballad, has its origins in an oral tradition, in song, and (like other cyclical forms such as the villanelle) it works best with an uncomplicated, uncluttered narrative. Using such forms certainly doesn’t mean ignoring the rhythms of everyday speech.

The variety of forms available is one of the most exciting resources in a poet’s kit. The poets I admire most are versatile, employing different forms according to the requirement of the work. Adrienne Rich used and subverted the sonnet in her marvellous sequence, ‘Twenty-One Love Poems’, which I re-read often, but she wrote free verse that packs just as much power. Anne Carson distils her knowledge of classical poetry into work so radical that sometimes, as with her verse novel *The Beauty of the Husband: a fictional essay in 29 Tangos*, critics have argued whether it is poetry or prose. Vahni Capildeo includes many prose poems alongside free verse in her collection *Measures of Expatriation*. Taking my cue from such writers, I remain open to every possibility and enjoy working with different forms according to the demands of the subject, from ballads to free verse to hangas (in a recent sequence on bento boxes).

**KS:** You are a visual artist (printmaker) as well as a poet; one gets the sense that this is the case in the physicality of the poems in *Disko Bay*, in the textured representations of the human body and in

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy Campbell, *How I Did It “The Survivors”*, an article for the Poetry School, blog post 29 July 2016

See also article by Nancy Campbell, *Why I gave up a life in London to become a writer on a speck of land in Greenland* in *The Independent*, 14 February 2016, and her essay *Death of a foster son* in Susan Richardson & James Roberts’ on line magazine *Zoomorphic* <http://zoomorphic.net/2015/05/death-of-a-foster-son/>

your concern for the physical properties of language itself. In your artist's book, *How to Say 'I Love You' in Greenlandic: An Arctic Alphabet* (Bird Editions, 2011; recently reissued by MIEL Books, 2016) for example, it feels as if there is no division: the prints and text are one. Could you say something about the relationship between your writing and your visual art?

**NC:** I'm glad the physicality of language comes across in *Disko Bay*. Several poems in the book were originally presented in a different, more physical form. For example, 'Limfjord Lines' was an art installation in Doverodde Købmandsgaard, Denmark, literal lines of text hanging from ceiling beams to floorboards like the reeds drowned and then revealed by the rising and falling waters of the fjord. (It looks very different, run conventionally across the page...) 'The Night Hunter' and 'The Lesson' were first published as sculptural artist's books by Z'roah Press in New York (in the latter the sonnet's lines deliberately bound into the spine so that they can't be read – see <http://www.mcbaprize.org/2013/roni-gross/>)

The relationship between visual and verbal in my work has its roots in two educations. After immersing myself in poetry during an English Literature degree, I was keen to learn more about the material form of the book, so I studied an apprenticeship in letterpress printing with a master printer in the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia – at that time it was the only place I could find to pursue this now fashionable craft. I remember learning to assemble metal type slowly in the composing stick, letter by letter. I valued the thinking time that came with long days working on monotonous tasks in the cosy timber studio, isolated from the world – or so it seemed – by dense forests of spruce and hemlock. It was in making my 'apprentice-piece', a book on the region's wildlife, that I first typeset and printed my own writing. A very empowering act. The discipline and attention to detail that comes with the craft process – incremental changes to the pressure of the printing press and the levels of ink, for example – has also influenced my writing practice.

*How to Say 'I Love You' in Greenlandic* was designed as a book that could be enjoyed both by the Upernavik community and English-speaking audiences. It's conceived as a concrete poem – the images can be read on one level as simple silhouettes of icescapes, on another as sonographs, providing an alternative typography for a language (Greenlandic) which doesn't sit easily in the alphabet it has adopted since the first written records were made by European missionaries. The elusive and changing nature of language, the random nature of signifiers and signs, the endurance of oral tradition all fascinate me, especially in contrast to the specious permanence of type, ink and paper.

Over time my work has become more experimental, and less of a dialogue between text and image, or text and book structure (which is what interests many book artists, rather than illustration). Of course physicality also implies its opposite – what is not there. I've been exploring linguistic erasures and emptiness. Last year I toured *The Polar Tombola*, a live literature event which asks participants 'If you had to lose a word from your own language, what would it be?' The intention is to embody language in order to give people both responsibility for the words they use and a means of thinking about language loss. The piece is partly inspired by the Oulipian concept of the lipogram... which I take a step further in *proviso*, a work which records the permanent erasure of a word from my own English vocabulary.

**KS:** I see that you have a third residency in Iceland coming up in 2017. What will your focus be during this residency? Have your artistic priorities or concerns changed in the light of the world events of 2016?

**NC:** I found it very difficult to write during the summer and autumn of 2016. Of course I wrote: reviews and articles, my journal, letters and tweets, even a few poetry commissions. But I was full of doubt and despair, and aware that I was unable to respond fast enough to the tide of world events.

I've slowly been able to regather a sense of purpose and determination. I've been helped by reading of women artists, writers and publishers fighting prejudice and oppression in the 1960s and 1970s, like the poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis. I came across a fantastic interview Rachel did with poet C A Conrad

([http://phillysound.blogspot.co.uk/2008\\_03\\_01\\_archive.html#517149889320728031%23517149889320728031](http://phillysound.blogspot.co.uk/2008_03_01_archive.html#517149889320728031%23517149889320728031)), which touches on the creation of the radical journal *HOW(ever)*. Also the TV documentary on the founding of Virago Press in London, aired last year, made inspiring viewing. The work of women in that period has had a massive impact on the freedoms of subsequent generations – including mine – and I’m only just beginning to understand the odds that were stacked against them. That’s an empowering lesson for the struggles we face today. Of course, I feel concern for the future. “Pick one’s battles, is my feeling, and get your work done,” as DuPlessis says. I’ve joined English PEN, feeling this gives me a way to engage positively in issues surrounding freedom of speech and human rights.

Just one of the worrying aspects of recent events is that government policy on the environment has become sidelined. Laurence Buell wrote that the “environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity’s relation to it”. I take that as a sign that writing, and publishing, has an important role to play – as Borthwick writes, in the book quoted above, it can be “a subtle form of activism”. The writer’s role as a provider of information and education seems more important than ever before. Five years ago in an essay I argued for silence as a poetic stance in a world that seemed overwhelmed with information. Now to be silent seems unforgiveable.

So I will keep writing – I’m working on two books: a non-fiction book on ice, which I’ll be researching during my residency in Iceland at the Gunnar Gunnarsson Institute. Luckily it is not far from the Vatnajökull glacier, Iceland’s largest icecap. Later in the winter I will be writer in residence at the Jan Michalski Foundation in Switzerland, working on translations of *Chants d’Ammasalik*, songs from Greenland recorded by a French ethnologist in the 1930s that have yet to appear in English. It feels necessary to bring these voices to a wider audience at such a critical time.

**KS:** Thank you.

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Kay Syrad’s publications include a volume of poetry, *Double Edge* (Pighog, 2012), poetry, prose and prints with Chris Drury in *Exchange* (2015, Little Toller), and two novels *The Milliner and the Phrenologist* (2009/2012) and *Send* (both Cinnamon Press); a new poetry collection is forthcoming with Cinnamon in 2018. Kay has collaborated with artists, dancers and musicians and has exhibited work in the Art Language Location festival (Cambridge) and Kaleidoscope Gallery, Sevenoaks. Her art-text work, *work of the lightship men: 1000 tasks* was bought by the National Maritime Museum for their permanent collection. She reviews for several poetry journals and is Poetry Editor of *Envoi*.