Nottingham Contemporary

Thu 9 Jun
7-8.30pm

Five Bodies

Live transcript

KEYWORDS

poem, words, poetry, book, read, collection, write, bodies, moon, scale, lives, river, conversation, shape, experiences, nottingham, sea, imagined, idea

SPEAKERS
Karen McCarthy Woolf, Sumita Chakraborty, Sarah Jackson

Sarah Jackson 01:28
Hello and welcome. It's my real pleasure to welcome you all to this evening's event on echoes and disturbances with Sumita Chakraborty and Karen McCarthy Woolf. This event is part of Five Bodies, a collaboration between the critical poetics research group at Nottingham Trent University and Nottingham Contemporary, and it provides a series of free monthly talks, readings and workshops exploring creative critical writing, hybrid methodologies and experimental thinking. For those of you who are new to Five Bodies and our work together, critical poetics is a multidisciplinary research group based at Nottingham Trent that seeks to stimulate debate, collaboration and innovation among scholars, artists and practitioners, whose work is concerned primarily with creative and critical practice and theory. And described as the most inspiring gallery in the UK, Nottingham Contemporary is an art centre based in the East Midlands, working with artists, academics and communities to reflect on contemporary art, society and visual cultures. So our Five Bodies programme this year focuses on poetic ecologies of the Anthropocene, exploring ideas from weeds and water, to eco trauma and deep time, and featuring some of the most important international creative critical voices working today. The talks and readings aim to open up new conversations about

Talk

entanglement, coexistence, resilience and sustainability. And it is with these ideas in mind that I'm really delighted to welcome tonight's poets. But before I do, I'd first like to thank my colleagues, Canan Batur at Nottingham Contemporary and Linda Kemp at Nottingham Trent University for their support in developing this series. And particular thanks also to Andy and Niall from Nottingham Contemporary for their technical support this evening. It's worth noting the event includes live captioning, which can be accessed via a link in the YouTube chat. This will open in a separate window on your browser and you can adjust the scale and the layout to suit your requirements. And now to our speakers this evening. It's an honour and an absolute delight to welcome and introduce Sumita. Sumita Chakraborty is the author of the poetry collection Arrow, published in 2020 by Alice James books in the US, and by Carcanet in the UK. The volume has received widespread coverage in publications such as the New York Times, NPR and The Guardian. Her poetry has appeared widely in magazines and journals, including Poetry, the American Poetry Review, PN review, and Stand, and she's received a Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg fellowship from the Poetry Foundation. She has been shortlisted for a Forward prize for best single poem by the Forward Arts Foundation and will be a 2022 Kundiman fellow. Alongside her creative practice, Sumita's scholarly writing has appeared in Cultural Critique, Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment, Modernism/Modernity, and elsewhere. And her monograph, Grave Dangers: Poetics and the Ethics of Death in the Anthropocene is forthcoming from the University of Minnesota Press, which I'm very much looking forward to getting hold of. Sumita spent the last three years at the University of Michigan as the Helen Zell visiting professor in poetry but this autumn she joins the faculty at North Carolina State University as an assistant professor of English and Creative Writing. And Karen McCarthy Woolf is slightly held up but I hope will be joining us very shortly. Karen was born in London to English and Jamaican parents and is the author of two poetry collections, and the editor of six literary anthologies. Shortlisted for the Forward Felix Dennis and Jerwood prizes for best first collection, her debut An Aviary of Small Birds tells the story of losing a son in childbirth, and it was an Observer Book of the Year. Her latest collection Seasonal Disturbances, explores gentrification, the city and the sacred and was a winner of the inaugural Laurel prize for ecological poetry. In 2019, Karen moved to Los

Angeles as a Fulbright postdoctoral scholar and writer in residence at the Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA, where she explores the relationship between poetry, law and the impacts of capitalism on Black, Brown and Indigenous bodies. Karen also writes for radio: recent highlights include a multi authored version of Virginia Woolf's Orlando, which was nominated for a BBC audio Award, and a reversing of Homer's Book of the Dead for BBC Radio 4's Book of the Week. And it's my huge pleasure and honour to welcome Karen and Sumita to Nottingham, albeit virtually this evening. Just a quick word on the running order. So assuming that Karen is able to join us, we may have to tweak the timings. But as soon as she's able to join us, Sumita and Karen are going to read and present first of all for around 15 minutes each. And then we're going to have a conversation on the theme of echoes and disturbances before returning to Sumita and Karen for a further short 10 minute reading. There will be the opportunity for questions at the end. So please do send through any thoughts or questions or comments via the YouTube chat. And I'll keep an eye on that throughout the evening. And now it's my very great honour to hand over to Sumita, who will begin.

Sumita Chakraborty 07:35
Thank you so much, Sarah, for that incredibly kind introduction. And for everything truly, including the invitation. Thank you as well, to everyone who I may not have had the chance to meet or get to know yet at Nottingham Contemporary, and at the critical poetics research group at Nottingham Trent for making this series happen. It has been a genuine gift to be involved with Five Bodies. And I just feel myself so enriched by the conversations I've had the opportunity to have, of course, Niall and Andy, thank you so much to you as well. And I hope to be able to thank Karen in person because it's been a real joy getting to know her work as well. Or not in person, but you know what I mean, getting to know her work as well over the last couple of weeks, and I have been so looking forward to reading and to speaking with her. So the general idea that the two of us had figured out was that, for our first readings, we'll be reading from our most recent books. And then for our second reading, we'll be reading from newer work. So I'm going to stick to that general plan. And I'm going to read two poems first from my collection Arrow. One is long one is very, very short. So if you start wondering why I'm reading forever, for the first one, bear in mind, the second one will not be anywhere near

that long. The book Arrow is largely about the aftermath of violence and the aftermath of trauma. And more than that, it's about becoming someone who can learn to value love and kinship and care in the aftermath of those events. So while it is directly in some ways about that violence, it's more telling a story of the renewal of life and hope after that violence. So accordingly, the speaker of the collection goes through a fairly dramatic shift in attitude, particularly concerning love and care. I'm going to read the very first poem in the book, which finds my speaker in a, who yes, is me, but finds my speaker in a fairly fraught emotional state. And then I'm going to read the last poem in the book. So hopefully, you can get a bit of a sense of how that journey goes. In this long poem, you'll hear quite a few references to first names, those first names are the names of poets, mostly American poets, who have helped special significance for me throughout my life. It's sort of a Bildungsroman coming of age in that particular sense, and you'll also hear references to some current events of the time, including some astronomical facts, some ecological discoveries and other ecological climate catastrophe related events, as well as a recurring motif of a Malaysia Airlines Flight in 2014, that mysteriously disappeared with all of its passengers and its crew. So just to have those things in mind, you'll also hear some phrases that are from Titus Andronicus, which sort of speaks to the emotional state that I was describing for the speaker at that time as it is Shakespeare's most juvenile, most bloody and in some ways, most brutal play. So with all that out of the way, I'll also read the epigraph because it's from one of my favourite poets Alice Oswald. The epigraph from Memorial reads, like oak trees, swerving out of the hills and setting their faces to the wind, day after day, being practically lifted away they are lashed to the earth, and never let go, gripping on darkness. Marigolds. When I picture Robert, he is in the public garden, watching setting suns, like the ill fated King, turn all to gold. Robert, with the swans, Robert under the statue of Washington. Robert amid the tulips. Without a childhood home, I made for myself a house of orchids, of sewer grates with fishes on them, of forsythia and maple trees. Of this I am sure: when Robert cross the bridge between Boston and Cambridge, he saw Poseidon. In late summer he could tell that underneath the sailboats is a god, mighty and to be feared. In midwinter, he alone knew the ice could not long contain that God. In the pipes in his home, he heard the gurgle of illness. I smell illness in the riotous orchid blooms.

Nottingham Contemporary

What are midnight trees? I think that once I knew one such tree, if it is the kind owls gather on nightly to fight, barking, eyes dim with bloodlust and the hiss of feathers. I built for myself a house of orchids, with a cave underneath, a cave shaped into an armoury brimming with tarantula hawks, giant Sparrow bees, and Admiral butterflies. In place of stalactites hang treeless, inextricable roots. O, sacred receptacle of my joys. The day I first learned the word Argonaut, I wrote it in a poem. I searched the seas for one. I searched the skies. I searched a painting. In the painting I found the word spears, which I drove slowly into my father's ribs. He I eulogised and he I resurrected, reaching again for the spears. I have seen countless full moons fail. Each of them hollowed, flooding heartfirst the craw-faced light, the bracken underneath. Then the sound of a wounded owl, and a soft sudden darkness in my throat. O, how this villainy. In mourning, the owls are replaced by hawks. From one angle, broad winged hawks seem to have two pairs of hollow eyes. We are looking for you, say the kettles of satellites to the humans lost, to the plane disappeared, to what lives thirty miles below the surface of Enceladus. On this morning in April, Haixun 01, Ocean Shield, and HMS Echo hear a thump that sounds like the colours inside an oyster shell. The frequency of the noise can make a heart stop. Anxious as seaweed, over the sides of the ship creep hordes of trembling locators. The satellites stare with breath hitching in their throats. Between the wine coloured hull of Ocean Shield and Enceladus lies eight times the distance between Earth and the Sun. And thirty miles below the surface of that geyser-ridden, tiger-striped Saturnian moon lies life, report the satellites. The hawks steel their two pairs of eyes up toward alien oceans on other planets. What I am is all that I can carry, wrote Deborah. What can I carry? All that I caught I left behind, all that I missed I carried. The Hawks are not looking toward alien oceans. I am. I am looking, too, to alien men and women. I picture hurtling into them, by turn, to serve my lust. I picture us bent sideways, impaled, contorted and screaming. I picture the different shades of a moan. The word bed fills the four eyes in my mind with the colour gold, gold of the ill fated king in the garden sunset, gold glinting In a decaying tooth, Goldenrod, a haze of pollen, the dragon's treasure, a long necklace of many fine gold chains reaching down to a woman's hips. Young woman walks down to the river down to the river of gold. Young woman walks down to the river down to the river and drowns. In the word bed also joyously wail bed the colour of ashen

near death, bed the fleshly colour of bodies broken for good, bed the colour blue of heart stopped lips. O, here I lift this one hand up to heaven. The ghosts of the poisoned dogs live in the piano. The ghost of my mother, still living, lives in her excised tumour and staghorn kidney stone. The ghost of my ability to love without grief, still living, lives in this poem. All my pockets filled with stones in the river I'll be found. Why, then, I am the devil's dam -dangle me from a cliff twelve thousand feet above sea. O, speak with possibilities. Build me a skin of glass to cover the Grand Canyon, throw me on it. Summon a thousand wilding mares, restrain them with massive chains, foot long links of hardened steel. When the chains buck from fracture, let the mares stampede the glass, bid them trample my body. Watch, from a great distance, as the glass cracks. Watch us beasts entangle. Watch me take a hoof to the mouth, to the skull, to the groin. Hear us squeal and bark and howl, calling out, as wretchess do, to failing life. When at last we one thousands and one blood filled creatures reach the bottom of the canyon, throw yourself in. My voice in your ear will tell you that you were meant to die like this, a beautiful and inelegant dive onto a field of reds, some bright and sunkissed, some dark and pulp dashed, your and our blood across the burnt orange schist. See, O, see what I have done. I fear neither the sight of nor the word for blood. HMAS Albatross has joined the search for the plane. It is May now and there is no sign of it. The detritus lied. The home I made is of orchids, forsythia, barbed wire and burnt metal. In the bedroom I planted what I imagine a midnight tree to be. Its roots during the treeless roots in the armoury beneath. Ravished, my hands cut off, my tongue cut out, I put my home under the Wisteria, craving owls at war under thick purple overhang. No territory there is that is not mine. The albatross, it is mine. Enceladus is mine. Your innermost thigh, beneath the Wisteria, mine. Poseidon is mine, and the river between Boston and Cambridge, and the one that wends through Georgia, floods into the Gulf. I am dreaming of a monument to moments colonised by theatres of the imagination. O monstrous. The O of a mouth without a tongue. The O of two pairs of lips clasped, starving on one another. Horns and cry of hounds. The ballet in my deadly standing eye is the arrow's flight into the neck, the horses' tumble into the canyon. A nation's search for a single tiger with quills in its neck. A spilt cloud of felled bees. The elephant's horror in the flock of red billed birds, feathered locusts who from their first breath form trembling caverns

with their mouths, their aggregate force snapping branches off trees. The orchestra plays low drum beats, a single singer carving the melody. Do not, I pray, promise me an untroubled lake. Take me instead for the stag, the rifle and the hunter. Promise me unending days in which I can picture, then picture again, a fire whirl, the slowness of the sea drinking a ferry or a plane, the gasps of air bubbles around carapaces, the moons of Saturn. I myself am hells, and I prize them as if they were the rarest blooms. Promise me I will always reach again for spears, await the horses on the glass above the gaping, hollow O of the earth. All is lost. Flee this house. So chants James's ouija. Or perhaps in the palace of time our lives are a circular stair and I am turning, writes Lucille's ghost guided hand. Always in my mouth I hold the head of an axe with its bit at the back of my throat. O heavens, can you hear a man groan? Here nothing breeds but we fazed and hungry. O wondrous thing. Worlds such as this were not thought possible to exist, writes the astronomer. It is June. Deep beneath those golden waves of the river I'll be found. My sister has joined the list of those I mourn. Her ghost lives in each powder winged moth. In the ballet, the stage fills with a troupe of dancers in dusty gold skirts, shoes asphyxiation blue, hair the tones of flesh. Centre stage are six dancers who wear only red, moving in unison so they throb as one bloodied yolk. The troupe around them shudders as though in blissful death throes. The single singer quiets. The orchestra breaks down its instruments. For my brethren slain I ask a sacrifice, O barbarous, beastly villains like myself. Die. Die saying please, die longing, die helpless, die with your eyes fixed to the most treacherous side of a mountain, to newborn stars, to planes not found. Die with your throat stuffed, so that each moment hereafter is a dream of a gasp. Die, so that my midnight tree might grow new branches, die, like a sapling struck by lightning in an ash ridden and still smouldering field, die amid the tulips, die snowing the orchids I grow, die in the mass of horses in a pied flock of shrieking birds. From the oceans creatures great and small take to the land. From the land each parachuted seed takes to the sky. From within my armoury comes a scent melodious and unearthly. A strain of moths, black, flies as those sewn each to each at the wing. Their flight path blooms dark into the grey air like a print from a silvered glass plate. Soon we will learn our bodies are formed of dead stars, so that if we made incisions from breastbone to rectum, the caves within would reveal themselves to house celestial ash. As the stag, I fear the mouth of

the rifle. As the rifle, I point my mouth, deadly, toward you. As the hunter, I execute myself so I may feast. Worlds such as this were not thought possible to exist. My Lord, I aim a mile beyond the honeyed moon. So one of the things that takes place in this book has to do with the fact that, as I'm sure you just heard in that poem, many of the speakers attempts to look outward, end up becoming violent, and even have a kind of colonialist vision at times. So there's a certain acceptance of love and humility that comes along with the transition from that first kind of imaginary of feeling the need to take up space, sometimes in the most violent and loud ways possible, and to something quieter by the end of the book. So I'll read to you the last poem in the book, and then I actually have a cento to share with you that is part of what Karen and I had talked about before, and although she's still not here, I still want to read it in her honour. So the final poem in Arrow is titled O. Stars are not the end but the beginning. A bird is to its throat as a promise is to its sharp edge, I wanted to make for you a sun shower. Instead, I have made for you a mortal thing. Writing is knowing how to cut. There is a space in my body that did not exist when I began this book, it is a window, when I next speak, I will do so through that window, please leave the window unlatched. When I next speak, it will be with changed lips, I wonder what their colour will be. Finally, she enlarges the figure to a grand scale and cuts off its head. And then Karen and I, in our planning before this, we decided to write centos from each other's books, and then kind of read them at this point when we would have launched right into a conversation. I know she hasn't made it. I'm really hoping that changes at a certain point, fingers crossed. But I still do want to read in her honour that cento I wrote with lines from her book, Seasonal Disturbances, which is truly gorgeous. All of you should should read that immediately. Stop listening to me and go read it. The tento is titled when it's over, which is a line from Karen's poem, True Love. And then in the form of centos every line in this is from a different poem of Karen's. When it's over. There are no halcyon days, the sea itself is dying. A skeleton leaf tattooed around a scar breaks loose from its parent and falls. I decide to conduct an experiment. I have a life jacket and I'm prepared to swim. I have a washing machine and a cat. The truth, hungry for a beginning I do what I always do and lean in to take a picture. No birds nesting or singing in the trees, a detritus of branches, cars, a string of unilluminated dragonflies dangles. I could see trees blown over, a

paroxysm spreads like a moon in the cracked glass. Yes, these trees, my roots, these roots, attest that the lie and its most remarkable products leave a demolition in its wake. Who knows what the water might shake out of me? Thank you so much.

Sarah Jackson 24:26
Thank you so much for that stunning reading Sumita, it's an incredibly powerful collection and I don't say this at all lightly. It is, you know it veers from the sure footed and the exquisitely tender to the deeply violent at times. And I guess some of that came across in the reading from you know, I wanted to make for you a sun shower, you know, to the kind of the throat stuffed, to the tongue cut out on the word spear puncturing the father's ribs in marigolds. So thank you so much for sharing that. And also, thank you for your cento. I feel like we have the beginning of a conversation already, even without Karen with us at present, and reading Arrow, I was really struck by the kind of the prevailing theme of both human and ecological trauma in the collection. I wondered if you could tell us a little bit about how you see or how you understand the intersections between the human and the ecological in terms of the violence and trauma at work here.

Sumita Chakraborty 25:47
I love that question. Thank you. And thank you also, for your kind words about Arrow, I really do appreciate it. I think that I'm sorry to go back again to Alice Oswald. But I think that she said it best in an interview that I read some time ago, that there is no distinction for her between the human and the nonhuman, not only around violence, around pretty much everything, but also certainly pertaining to violence. I think that in that interview, she commented on how the best nature poets for her are people like Homer, right. And that's because they are not telling a story about an element of our world. They're telling a story about how these poets who approach things that way, are telling a story about how trauma and violence and other acts of destruction, don't happen in a vacuum, don't only happen to one creature and not to another, they happen all the way down, so to speak. I think the challenging thing for me in thinking about that is to also at the same time constantly hold in view, the fact that they just because they're all happening all the way down and happening simultaneously and in an

entangled fashion, doesn't mean that they're all happening in the same way. Right? different individuals, different subject positions, different nations, and so on, and so forth experience these acts of violence, incredibly differently. So when you think about the scale on which any given trauma takes place, you don't only have to mediate between the scale of the individual and the scale of the planetary, which is one of the things I'm obsessed with in Arrow, and also just generally in life, what you have to mediate is between several different kinds of scales that are constantly morphing, and are shaped by factors well beyond any single given person's comprehension. So I think to go back to your earlier comment about how the book seems to veer pretty dramatically, in part that veering is created by an attempt to mediate between scales that are not mediatable. And the only way that speaker is able to kind of settle down at any moment in time is when she gains surer footing on the idea of care, including care for others that she may not even have imagined or encountered. I hope that answers your question. Absolutely, yes, it answers my question and has also raised a tonne of other questions that I'm desperate to talk to you about. And scale is actually one of the things I want to wanted to ask you about. But I'll come back to that. I just wanted to kind of unpick a little bit this, this, you know, the, I guess the deeply racialised nature of the Anthropocene, and the criticisms that it doesn't take into account Black suffering or other kind of marginalised, the experiences of other marginalised people. And I wanted to ask you a little bit about how questions of race, gender and class, for example, are at work in your writing. If you could maybe give us an example of one or two of the poems that you really feel that you're kind of grappling I guess, with this, with this kind of the problematic nature of entanglement in the Anthropocene? I think, well, let me just say briefly, I know we're here to talk about the poems, but in my scholarly project, which you were also so kind to bring up, it's really front and centre, particularly the racialised concerns, because one of the reasons that I'm so focused in that project on the ethics of death, as opposed to the ethics of life, is because I think that, and many scholars have written beautifully about this, I think that focusing on vitalism, or the imperative that we all live in focus on sustaining life has often been used to perpetuate great harm. And that great harm has often been racialised. So when we think ecologically, we are often for understandable reasons, trying to imagine a world where the world still lives. And I think that

is one of the fundamental issues with the idea of the Anthropocene, because that stands in direct contrast to a lot of recent work in critical race theory, and in Black Studies in particular, that are asking us to dwell in the consequences of death. So that's my motivation, largely for my critical project. So it's very much on my mind, and I mention that because in my poetry, I think there may be some readers who might find that questions of race or of gender are pushed to the background, because they're not always things that I explicitly bring up. That being said, for me, I don't read it as pushed to the background. There are, and I could give you a few examples of poems, where I insert little mentions of sexuality, for example, briefly, in marigolds, about being interested in men and women. There's another poem where I briefly describe myself as Brown in a different poem. And of course, the entire book is largely predicated on gendered violence, on domestic violence and on sexual assault. So that'll come out here and there as well. But I think for me, even more meaningful than pointing to those specific small instances where I mentioned something directly, what I might suggest is that this entire book, asks what you do in the aftermath of unfair and uneven pain, like that is the exact story, as well, of the way the speaker comes to be the way that the speaker is. That's the entire occasion for speaking, that is the entire book. So although at some points, it might feel like race and gender, and sexuality aren't being explicitly addressed in the poems, they are always there, because they are the reason that any other articulation exists.

Sarah Jackson 31:35
Yeah, I very much, very much got the sense and the, you know, the prevalence of this gendered violence is, you know, it's brutally shocking throughout the collection. And I guess you said something about pain. And I'm interested in how we can communicate how we can express, you know, these experiences of pain in language and poetry in particular. And I noticed that in your collection, you kind of probe the boundaries between the essay and the lyric and you veer between, for example, the long poem, and the fragment, and we've got the phases of, of the moon, we've got kind of something like a script at times as well. And I wondered if you could kind of maybe say a little bit more about that use of form? I'm thinking or I was thinking about David Farrier's statement that the Anthropocene puts pressures on the conventional

claims of lyric poetry to be governed by a singular and therefore stable, if mobile perspective, but I think this question is also related to human and ecological pain, as well. So I guess to what extent is your own generic and formal hybridity, a desire to move beyond kind of traditional literary conventions and to find a new way to orient and express those experiences of pain in an entangled and unruly world?

Sumita Chakraborty 33:00
That's a really lovely way to phrase it, I don't think I'd ever previously quite thought about it as a way to express those sorts of pain or even as a way to express a different kind of lyric subjectivity or non lyric subjectivity. But I think it's certainly directly related. For me, form is very, very important. And it's very important, because everything has one. I think that sometimes particularly students, or readers new to poetry, will think about, for example, free verse or formless, so called, poems versus traditionally formal poems. And what I like to stress is that there's no such thing as something that's formless. And I mean that in terms of literary work, as well as just in terms of bodies on earth, everything you're looking at right now has a shape, it has a way of being in space. And that's the same thing that poems do, regardless of whether it's an inherited form an invented form or a form that doesn't seem particularly patterned at all. It takes up space. And it the shape that it makes when it takes up space is what lets it have mass and a material presence. So I think for me, while I didn't consciously prefer perform those experiments in form, and my work is getting even wackier, by the way, my newer work is visual poetry, a lot of it. I'm still writing traditionally lineated poems, but a lot of it is very much not that, and some of it is even starting to starting to poke into the mixed media, which is very exciting and very scary for me, because I've never done it before. And I'm having to learn things as if I was like, a baby for the first time, like, how does this device work? So I continue to play and push the ideas of formal hybridity. And again, while I don't think I consciously do that in order to challenge the idea that there any, anything is deficient about the received forms in which all of us do, and I certainly do, also, write. I think that it's true that pain and various kinds of specific experiences, even non painful experiences, shape bodies, they shape who we are, they leave marks. I think that yesterday actually at the workshop for Five Bodies, one of the students was commenting beautifully on how

the body is an archive. And it's an archive that stands sort of at odds with institutionalised senses of archives. So the official records that exist of our bodies are not accurate to everything in the wholeness that our bodies are. I thought that was a truly remarkable insight and it it resonated with me for how I think of poems as well. They are bodies and they are embodied archives, and the shape they take is dictated by that which they contain, so that they don't have to conform to any shape that doesn't suit them. Does that make sense?

Sarah Jackson 35:53
Absolutely. And it makes me think also about how the planet Earth is also an archive. Yes, and retains traces of the ways in which we have been treating it, that those absolutely don't just disappear. And thinking about the planetary, again, going back to this question of form, you mentioned scale earlier. And I guess in moving from the human to the more than human, you also move from the mineral, for example, to the planetary, and questions of scale, both kind of temporal and spatial scale are central, of course, to thinking of the Anthropocene. And I was wondering if you had any thoughts on whether and how poetry might bring together both the deep past and the deep future as well as the microscopic and the macroscopic and how that intersects with those experiments in form that you've been exploring, both in Arrow and in your new work as well.

Sumita Chakraborty 36:52
That's a really interesting way to phrase that too Sarah, we have to get together and just talk for a million years at some point, I love every way in which you think about these things. And I like to be modest, I think about the power and potential of poetry and really any literary art and scholarly or critical philosophical inquiry as well, because I'm always very wary of an understandable, but to me kind of frightening, tendency to overstate the potential power of the written word, I'd like to just give myself a reality check on that quite frequently. So I don't know what poetry can do in terms of bringing together those scales. But what I can say is that, for me, poetic rhetoric, as well as any other form of writing is a way of thinking and imagining that differs from what we tend to see and receive in the everyday. So for me, holding, for example, all of these scales together is not something that we have the opportunity to

frequently do as just day to day people going about our lives, I think that would be quite maddening and not productive. And I'd never make it to a single meeting ever. So poetry encourages and even forces me to think and inhabit ways of being that differ from what my day to day life in late capitalism encourages and forces me to be. And I think that insofar as I can state the power of poetry in terms of any of these real pressing, real world scenarios in which we dramatically need so many material interventions, that my words and then few others are capable of actually creating, I will say that the thought experiment, and the discipline and repeated discipline that it takes to put yourself into the mindset where you have to grapple with all of these different scales has been to me very, very instructive and really productive in in a broader sense as well.

Sarah Jackson 38:50
Thank you, you mentioned then, I guess, the capacity of the poem to hold these scales together or, you know, obviously recognising the limits of that as well. And I was really struck by this, you know, phrase, you know, the poem's capacity to hold and also perhaps its capacity to touch and I know this is something we, we discussed during the workshop or before the workshop yesterday, I was reminded when I was rereading Arrow just before the event this evening of in your acknowledgement, you include Roland Barthes's statement from A Lover's Discourse, that language is a skin, I rub my language against the other, it is as if I had words instead of fingers or fingers at the tips of my words, and the tactility of this collection is astonishing. It's a deeply textured volume. You know, at times, the touch is brutal. At times, it's sticky and at the time, other times it's just so tender and light footed. And I wondered if you could say a little bit more about this appeal to tactility and its role in kind of the affective registers of your work.

Sumita Chakraborty 40:05
Of course, yeah, I mean, I'm going to overshare and share personal stuff now, you know the thing about Love Languages that's always floating around. I hate the phrase ick. But there is something to be said about the idea. Mine is words, it just it really always has been. And it actually repeatedly causes disagreements. My husband's is like literal touch. Like, it's like, there there feel better. And like, don't tell me to don't pat me, say more words. And I think that's just it's kind of the way in which I

know, to receive care. And I know to offer care is through language. And just before I get too touchy feely, not only care, right, I've experienced great physical violence in my life, for a long time. But I think, and I want to be careful to say this, because I'm not I don't intend to imply that words do more harm than physical actions. I actually don't think that's the case. And I think that ranking suffering that way is very strange and an ill begotten project. But I will say that words can be as brutal as anything else. And when I was talking about the state of mind that my speaker is in during marigolds, you know, that's the version of me, it's a stylised and aestheticised version of me, that really was quite brutal with words and with language. There was a long time, before I accepted any kind of tenderness or care into my life. And before I really started teaching myself how to be someone who could be tender and caring. And at that time, you know, I was kind of a rough person to be around, I could be very, very harsh. I could be kind of mean, and all of that was with language for me. So I guess what I mean to say is, I think I've been alive in both pleasant and unpleasant ways, to the haptic possibilities of language for a very long time, to the point where it feels it truly doesn't even feel like I'm trying to create it when I write. That's one of the things that just comes incredibly naturally to me. And sometimes I even have to pare it back, if it's too dense in moments where I don't want it to be dense. Because for me, it's the materiality of language. It's just a constant, constant thing, both personally and intellectually.

Sarah Jackson 42:26
Yeah, wonderful. Thank you. And I guess it's the capacity of words to both kind of inflict violence or not your words, but that that kind of expression of violence, but also the capacity of your language to care that's so powerful in the collection, I was also struck, you mentioned just then the kind of the materiality of language. But what I noticed about the collection was the ways that you kind of veer between the materiality and immateriality. And there's, you know, there's a lot of ghosts, there's a lot of haunting, there's a lot of sexuality of course, in the collection, I could continue this conversation for a very long time. I wonder if it would be a good time to invite you to read for a little longer, and then perhaps we can pick up the conversation after that, if that feels okay.

Sumita Chakraborty 43:13

Of course, that sounds great. Thank you. Hi, again. So this will be a shorter reading, and it's of newer work. And I was just talking about my visual poetry with Sarah in that conversation, that's not what I'm going to be reading because that would be impossible to do without showing it to you. And I'll read some more traditionally lineated new stuff. Most of this is unpublished. So you're among the first to hear it. And when you write a book that's about really deeply personal subjects, and you are someone who is rather an oversharer, both of which are me, sometimes you get questions from people that really do push your boundaries in ways that you hadn't quite imagined. I don't frequently write out of anger. Sometimes I write of anger, but not out of anger. This first poem I'm going to read is an exception to that fact. It's titled, When they ask, is it true? I answer and I'll read that title again, when I read the poem as the title goes into the first line. The only other thing you need to know about this poem is a couple of years back, I think it was, NASA announced that they had brand new news about the moon, and poetry Twitter, myself very much, very, very much included, lost their collective mind to try to think of what it was about the moon that had just been discovered. And truly I am also telling on myself, I'm not just making fun of anyone else. I'm someone with a little moon plushie in my bookcase. So yes, I too, completely lost my mind. That's all you need to know. When they ask, is it true? I answer what more is there to learn about the moon? Listen, you and I both know there's more I could share. I could tell you about the first time I put pennies in my mouth. I could tell you every time I grew or sheared my hair, no, I know. What you want to know is whether I wept, whether I begged. In a few days the astronomers will tell us what they've learned about the moon. You and I were in this together, our nude breasts pressed against our draughtiest windows in the winter. Say the moon has more silt than we imagined. Say it has a mountain, say baby lions roam its crests in little felines space boots. The things we're closest to aren't easy to name, but that's no excuse. Deimos and Phobos brothers IO around marble in the cheek of a name Euclid too dim the photograph, too small, still we named her. Ours though? We named it moon like Holly Golightly naming her cat, cat. Have you put a name on my child's mouth? If you were asked to give our moon a name right now right this minute, what would it be? Whoever told us we have the right to learn anything about the bodies for which we never even imagined names. I'll next, read a little excerpt from a sonnet cycle that's in

progress. And I truly mean in progress as in the first full draft has not been completed. So I'm just really dangling out on a limb here for you all. It's called Nandana canonet, which is a Sanskrit name for a mythological, celestial and paradisiacal garden, kind of the Sanskrit Garden of Eden. What makes a garden? Playing in it must be a song on the subject of impertinence and of a body's insistence on bliss. Despite the many traces left on that same body by the many incursions that have been made upon it. That bliss is what the word loam should mean. My garden is the shape my husband makes on a bed. That means that my garden lives on our bed. That means that somewhere in our bed must be dirt, and worms and the roots of some seedling, a dead body or two. Me, I know where the bodies are buried. When your asleep, shuffles off of you and I tell you the dead are always sleeping with us you hold my hand and ask, are you alright? You hold my hand and ask Are you all right? It took me so long to believe my nightmares deserved that question. Lately, it's occurred to me that my new anxiety about whether a topic is worthy of a poem might in fact, just be my old anxiety about whether I am worth consideration in the smaller moments. Anything noteworthy, as in worthy of writing down, as in when I first fell in love with watching football as a child and realised I'll never be able to make my body as worthy of description as those athletes have. Maybe I'm nothing to write home about, but who writes home about anything that matters to them anyway. When I imagined the home I would make I had in mind a fortress, and I imagined myself the master of arms. I imagined myself the master of arms. But as I'll never tire of reminding my students poesis comes from the Greek for "to make" and one of the words that can be made from it is autopoiesis which means self making. In other words, things change. When the athletes hurtle down the grid iron dodging all kinds of trouble, I scream - I can't help it. Despite the danger I know lies behind every flick of the wrist or juke of the knee or crack of a helmet. I know I love them only because of what they have made themselves into. My father told me often that it wouldn't matter if he killed me in the night because come morning no one would care. Little lamb I say to myself now standing over the sink washing the dishes we soiled, what have you made it the chances you worked so hard to shape? What have you made of the chances you worked so hard to shape? I have made butter chicken. I have made puff pastry from scratch. I made James Beard's farmer chicken, I made shallots pasta. Yes, the infamous one. I've made

towering cheesecakes, I've made all of Marcella Hazan's sauces. I've made saag paneer, I've made brownies, blondies, lavender chocolate chunk cookies, roasted beets with goat cheese. This stanza is for you, my dear friend who pointed out that there is no food in my first book. It's true, I admit it. When I wrote that book, I'd been hungry and not for food for a long time. I didn't know how to whet an appetite because I didn't know appetites could need whetting. I had spent most of my life avoiding fullness, resenting the soft parts of me while running my tongue along my sharpest tooth. Parts of me, while running my tongue along my sharpest tooth, still crackle and shake. I confess I don't speak of air all that freely. Once I was describing the courses I teach and the ones I want to teach at a job interview, and one interviewer asked me with a raised eyebrow, What about courses that aren't about trauma? I made something up about wanting to teach an Asian American Lit course about food. There was some truth to what I said. I have asked myself often whether I think often enough about joy, whether I have a vocabulary for it the way I have one or 12, for grief and for pain, but here's what I wish I had said instead, parts of me still crackle and shake. Joy has its Lutz, its stances, its flower gardens, its surround eaves, it's milk bands, I'm coming to you live from the bowels of hell, it's rancid here. Take a seat. Welcome to class. And I'll stop there because after that, in the drafting of the sonnet cycle is just pure chaos at this time, tune back in in probably two to five years to figure out where that ends up. And I'll end with one last poem. This is from a series of mine called the B-sides of the golden records. They're inspired by NASA's voyage 1977 Voyager spacecraft, on which a committee of scientists, artists and intellectuals included two things, two records, they called the golden records, which were intended as sort of a message in a bottle to any extra terrestrials that the spacecraft might encounter. I suppose that committee thought that the extraterrestrials would have access to some way to play a vinyl because that's the bet that they were making there. The idea was to portray a sort of greatest hits of humanity or an introduction to Homo sapiens, it had quite a bit on it, like pictures of people eating and chewing, pictures of different flowers and birds and other kinds of things, music, and things like that from a range of cultures. It also of course, left out a great deal, some intentionally and for boring reasons like copyright, and the Beatles, Here Comes the Sun couldn't be on it because of copyright. And also, because of the sheer fact that the

committee was all quite privileged, white folks, and mostly white men, and therefore left out quite a bit. They also didn't want to portray humans as bad so that, as I'm sure you can imagine, also involved quite a few exclusions in the golden records. So my series is called the B-sides of the golden records, and it is about the things that were left out, of course, not comprehensive, but just about a range of things, whether bad or harmful, or even simply mundane, that wouldn't have made it onto something that say Jimmy Carter called a hope or a dream for the future and for future human Extra Terrestrial alliances. So with all that said, I will read the first poem in this series, and that'll be my last poem. Thank you so much again for hearing me read and I look forward to the conversation that is again to follow. The B-sides of the golden records track one, the canary flies toward the mine. Once there was a patch of moss on a fallen tree trunk, we ran our hands through it, we sat on it - when we did so we crushed the spores, we crushed insects. Once whenever we saw an insect we'd swat it or smash it in a wad of toilet paper. How to trap and kill an insect can sometimes be an entire plot point in our romantic comedies, we sometimes make lovely romantic comedies. Once we made crackers and cookies and all kinds of shapes elephants, lions, circles, stars, we have trouble believing anything is real, unless we can swallow it. More than once we have poisoned the water. We are so very afraid that you will think we are trying to hurt you. We are so very sorry we could not send you Here Comes the Sun. It was written in a garden where there were purple and yellow flowers and a windmill and moss. What we need is for you to listen to our arias, our ragas and our syncopations and to think that we are worthy of saving, or at least deserving of a gentle vigil. We would also like if you could look at our demonstration of licking, eating and drinking and tell us how we work. Once we touched our unwashed hands to one another's lips, once we took pictures of the insides of our bodies, once we tapped messages to each other in languages we invented for when only silence and percussion would do and we heard our tools scrape against one another and a wild dog bleated somewhere far away. We walked. Our hearts beat. We laughed. Thank you.

Sarah Jackson 54:26
Thank you so much, Sumita for sharing this new work. It's such an honour to hear it and so much to look forward to as well. We can talk

a little more later. But first at the start of this evening, I introduced the brilliant Karenn McCarthy Woolf, author of An Aviary of Small Birds and Seasonal Sisturbances among other works. Unfortunately, Karen wasn't able to join us at the start of the event for technical reasons, but I'm delighted to say that she is now back online and in the room, Karen, it's brilliant to have you with us. And we would love to hear some of your work.

Karen McCarthy Woolf 55:15
Hi, everybody. So good to be here. There was a huge regional power cut where I was. So thus, I'm here now. I'm going to read some sections from my second collection, Seasonal Disturbances. And I'm going to commence, in fact, what I'm going to do is I'm going to read an extended poem that runs throughout the book, it is called Conversation with water. It's in the form of a zuihitsu, which is a Japanese form, which literally means running brush. And its format really coalesces several narrative threads into one, and they sort of build and run, so if you think of sort of several streams and tributaries that might make up a river, and then run out to sea. That's really the nature. That's the formal nature of that piece. Tiny bit of background on zuihitsu, it's a Japanese form. It was popularised most recently by the Japanese American poet Kimiko Hahn. But we first saw the zuihitso form in Sei Shonaagon's Pillow Book. So it has quite a long heritage. So I'm going to read Conversation with Water and the other thing to say. So it's as a version of that. The other thing to say about conversation with water is that it was written while I was in residence at the National Maritime Museum, and also actually on a barge in the middle of the River Thames. So this is Conversation with Water, a zuihitsu. Lying on the floor of the wheelhouse sensitises the body to movement and sound, the thrum of the generator on its last legs, a swish of fuel in the tank. Most birds travel in pairs or at least here one notices most birds when they travel in pairs, skimming close to the surface over water that flutters. It feels good up on the freshly painted deck. All this time, from my vantage point, I've looked left to the Commons and the Lord's not towards St. Thomas's, with its walled garden where I sat cradling this, the pain so white and intermingled. It's true. There's a lot of weather here, and I also saw a bird with a neck bent like a crowbar perched on top of an industrial winch, scanning the eels. The pull of the tide is the pair of eyelids drooping shut. I open the

pillow book, randomly on page 23 to number 22, list of dispiriting things: a dog howling in the middle of the day, the sight in spring of a trap for catching winter fish, robes in the plum pink combination when it's now the third or fourth month, an ox keeper whose ox has died, a birthing hut where the baby has died. Oh River. Here I am riding on your back in a little dinghy they call a rib. It's like clinging to a grizzly by the scruff of the neck. Who knows what the water might shake out of me. I confess must be nautical in origin. I decide to conduct an experiment. I will find water. I open Haruki Murakami's What I Talk About When I Talk About Running randomly on page 92. He writes, seeing a lot of water every day is probably an important thing for human beings. For human beings might be a bit of a generalisation, but I do know it's important for one person, me. If I go for a long time without seeing water, I feel like something's slowly draining out of me.

1:00:28
Even a frayed rope can tether a boat. The closest is lying with my head in my mother's lap, the thickness of the paint, bottle green and grey. In reality, I give thanks for the barrier. Your reinforced banks. There's something in spreading yourself thin. Yesterday at the makeup counter, the girl who was colour matching my foundation said that men are attracted to moisture, it is scientifically proven. The answer was lip gloss. But now I realise this is why I think of you dear river as female, as feminine, all water is I'm beginning to believe that. There are many thicknesses of rope, or wood smoke drifts from the chimney like breath. A knife in its sheaf on the window ledge. A review of Masaru Emoto's book about the shapes of water crystals make when you say the words love and gratitude says Emoto frequently appeals to coincidence as significant then jumps to puzzling conclusions unsupported by his chain of events. On the sixth day of the fifth month, when the moon is God knows where a pair of Canada geese and four Goslings nudge at stones to get at worms in the mud at low tide, the chicks orbiting the mother. The river swallows time as a whale swallows plankton, although plankton we now know is no longer a certainty. And is it wrong? And is it wrong? Is it wrong to say and is it wrong to say something wrong to say something about to say something about and is it wrong to say something about wanting? Is it wrong to say something about wanting to is it wrong to say something about wanting to kill myself? According

to Mr. Emoto water does not like listening to heavy metal. Also, did he change his name to Emoto to echo emotion. They tell me the bridge jumpers fight, find out they want to live in the end. A boat has its own life. A boat has its own life cycle and itinerary. Driftwood must be collected, dried, chopped, at least two weeks in advance or the fire will go out. The experiment is pleasing it also makes me think Murakami is like that. When I was reading the Wind up Bird Chronicle I got from the tube carriage sat down and settled into my book. The man opposite was reading and it was the same book. We looked up at each other and recognised the swimming pool blue jacket. I think he was slightly ahead of me. Now at the back of my mind, there's an inkling that since I decided on the zuihitsu everyone in the poem is suddenly Japanese and that Japan is also an island, a cluster of islands, oh river, I submit to your rhythmic dictatorship and propensity for ruthless expansionist acts. You are the centre of our forgetfulness. Is it death or just the sensation of being unfolded I desire? Words stream past me, disturbed surfaces, reflecting clouds, rain slashes the window like claws.

Karen McCarthy Woolf 1:04:47
That's Seasonal Disturbances and that's Conversation with Water and the long poem running through that. And actually in the book I break it, rather than run it all the way through. It seems interesting to read because it acts very differently in the book to how it actually appears or sounds rather than appears really. Right. Okay, so I'm gonna read another poem that has a watery, watery feel. It's called Souls of the Sea. It responds to a visual art piece by the artist, Ellen Gallagher. Ellen Gallagher, was actually herself responding to a Detroit electronica outfit called Drexciya. Sort of like Detroit techno. And specifically, Drexciya wrote a lot of sort of like an afro futurist, mythical Black Atlantic space, where all the babies that were lost in the Middle Passage, it's really a kind of a musical homage and transformative resurrection of the souls via music. It's electronic or it's techno, so there are no lyrics. So it's not really the lyrics but it's a poem that responds to both the artwork and the music it's called Souls of the Sea. Hushed unshushed in waves we speak, drum located, heart beats, our sighs salt crystallised in gull cries, black pumice sharp, the our milk teeth, our dark seas untendrilling, Vulcan ire's squid sucker locks hurtling rough current swirls of underness. goat skin / cymbal crash, parachutes us up. Our mother

blood crushed harsh on splintery rocks, red like lipstick, no ashes unscattered. Our suns are streaming stems of Nile swords, Gladioli machete chopped, antennae, unfurl, sea snakes our curling lashes and electric eel reed slash jelly embryo irises, flash eyeshadow blue Horizons of disco, glitter, murmuring starlings in relief. Under tanker foghorn murk we rattle anchor chains, rattle mummy hair, driftwood white, hush a by hush where she belly gone? far, far away. Hear us in the brush brush sweep across red roof Cafe concrete floors, hear us swoosh submerge under wave swell crash taste our tongue bubble tsunami fizz our bruisy swirls our mothers' necks cut by cutlass tip in underness we resist hydra theory temperatures icier than death when seas creak and dry our world is this. And I'm going to finish with the cento that I work that I wrote in response to Sumita's work. It was a wonderful experience to enter into the book in that way. And actually, I think when you write extractive forms, such as the cento, they offer a very interesting way of reading, of engaging in quite an intimate way with the work. And so, I'll read the cento. And I'd really like to, thank Sumita for the opportunity to work with her poetry in this way. And particularly because it's some of the themes some of the subjects are very, very personal for me, me at the moment. I actually lost my sister last year and it's one of the first moments that I've been able to write about it. Yeah, so thanks. Here are some of my favourite lines of poetry made with some of my other favourite lines of when my sister died from the head of my vision came offspring. Like my mother is the spiders stomach. maman, she says, I am hungry. I can't give you what you want from me. All I do is take, food, food. I'm hungry. She runs her shrunken finger around the orbs of light in the forest that I still don't know. Their domains are terrors, land terrors. Next to the black upright piano was a window, which led up to the day I first learned the word Argonaut. My sister did not live long enough to see the moon. Asking if I wished for one now because I knew it takes work for a woman to welcome a fist. Dark pain. You only gave me yourself. And as to my other question, it was me. Sister when you died, your bones cast an enchantment. I think of new words for solace, one of which is knifed. At the end of a performance of a violin concerto after a beloved dies, one must lock the door. My body invents words and swells with prophecies. My veins make Azalia roots that team with messages. My mother and my sister, my home state. Robert amid the tulips without a childhood is a sprig of radiant blood.

Sister, I was very young, for hazards are abolished, my sister has joined the list of those I mourn. Thank you

Sarah Jackson 1:12:48
Thank you so much, Karen for such a rich and compelling reading. I was struck by the ways in which your voice resonates so clearly with the event theme echoes and disturbances which yourself and Sumita came up with. And it was fantastic to hear the echoes and the eddies and all the ripples of conversation with water aloud. Obviously, when I read it, I read it interspersed throughout the collection. And it's quite a different experience hearing it and hearing it in full. And I also wanted to mention the cento it was such a privilege to have have heard this. So thank you very much for sharing that with us. And I hope we have the opportunity to perhaps hear Sumita's again, for you in a few moments. We've had to rearrange the timing for this evening slightly. And I was hoping that we could have a bit of a conversation between the three of us perhaps but before we do that, I just wanted to ask you one particular question, earlier Sumita and I talked about the tactility of her work and the kind of the textures of her language. And one of the things I was really struck by in your work is the soundscapes, obviously the soundscapes of conversation with water which opens lying on the floor of the wheelhouse sensitises the body to movement and sound, the thrum of the generator on its last legs to swish the fuel in the tank. But I felt that there was a real appeal to the auditory throughout your work and I wondered if you could maybe talk us through that a little bit.

Karen McCarthy Woolf 1:14:24
Yeah. Oh, you know that's a gorgeous question and something interesting to talk about for me, in the my first election An Aviary of Small Birds is centred around a number of bereavements, most specifically, the death of a baby son, in childbirth, and one of the things I realised in writing that collection, and it's something that carried through was that sound actually gives access to a very different emotional landscape template, I found that by concentrating on sound, I was able to, I don't know if that's actually got something to do with the act of utterance itself. And poetry as utterance, and something that is spoken, and what the resonance and the vibration of that energy is, as something that becomes materially alive in a way that, you know, the written word isn't,

and obviously, I think one thing that both Sumita and I both both share is this activity on the page that is also very, very connected sonically, you know, to what is happening. And so, I think that sound plays into many things. But I, you know, in terms of assonance, in terms of rhyme, in terms of tonality, in terms of tempo, in terms of what is spoken, and what is unspoken in terms of silence, and how silence connects so profoundly to trauma. And how silence also connects to whitespace. So all of those things, I think, are considerations that run consistently through my work in many ways. I hope that answers that a little.

Sarah Jackson 1:17:10
Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, in that short answer, you've actually touched on so many things that we've been talking about tonight, and in particular, you know, ideas of human and ecological trauma. And I think the question of silence is such an important one, I thought it might be nice to bring Sumita into the conversation. Sumita do you have any thoughts on how silence operates in your own work? Silence and sound of course.

Sumita Chakraborty 1:17:39
Thank you so much for that question. And Karen, truly, I'm so glad I got to hear you and got to hear Conversations with Water in that way. I too, was struck by the difference in reading it in the book, and then hearing it all at once. And thank you, too, for sharing about your sister. I'm so sorry. Today's actually, the eight year anniversary of my sister's death. So speaking of echoes and disturbances that feels just so I'm honestly so moved to be able to be in this moment with you and with you all, anonymous internet people, in talking about these things, yeah, silence. I think, I've been thinking about it a lot, especially recently, with a couple of high profile court cases I won't, and one in particular, surrounding domestic violence and what people are or not not allowed to say about their own experiences. And I've also been thinking about it a lot, because that kind of the injunction against speaking was a consistent element of the domestic violence that I experienced. And it actually did court violence and court a good deal of risk to begin talking at all. And accordingly, I think when I first started writing poetry, and I mentioned this actually directly in one of the poems early in the books, I really ran toward poetry's capacity for abstraction, to do what I thought

was saying, say things and speak about things, but not actually speak about them at all. And then after that, I veered really dramatically toward the literal because I realised that, you know, my own boundaries of self expression had been shaped so profoundly that I couldn't, I wasn't comfortable saying what I had experienced without pretending it was happening to a bat or a bird or something. So after that, there was a period where I was just incredibly direct. And what I try to do now is mediate between those two impulses, because I think and it goes back also Sarah to scale as we were talking about before, there's a need or a desire to reclaim space, to reclaim experiences and to be able to let your speech acts, whether on the page or out loud, be things that actually speak in ways that are true to you and true to your experience and how you understand and see the world. But there's also great value to non coerced silence, there's no value to coercive silence. But knowing for example, how to sit and stay in your lane, how to be quiet and simply listen when other people are telling you about things that you don't know anything about, right? Those are also the kinds of things that accompanied for me my journey, personal journey and journey in the book, toward being able to accept love and kinship and care. So I think in many ways, as much as it is a mediation between different scales, that book in particular is, Arrow in particular is a mediation between different forms of silence and learning when it is good to yell and when it isn't, and how to make those determinations yourself instead of having them be an extension of violence or just suffering with what has been foisted upon you, if that makes sense.

Sarah Jackson 1:20:50
Very much so. And I'm just very conscious that that Karen won't have heard your cento Sumita. Right, I'm desperate to facilitate this, this sharing once again. So while you're still on camera, if you'd be happy to share that, because I think I there's something about the ways in which not only your collections speak to each other, but also perhaps what isn't said in the lines that you've drawn out and shared with each other that would be really nice to hear.

Sumita Chakraborty 1:21:24
Yeah, of course, gladly. This poem is the cento as I mentioned before, with lines from Karen's gorgeous Seasonal Disturbances, it's titled

When it's Over. That title also comes from Karen's poem, True Love from the book. When it's over. There are no halcyon days the sea itself is dying. A skeleton leaf tattooed around a scar breaks loose from its parent and falls, I decide to conduct an experiment. I have a life jacket and am prepared to swim. I have a washing machine and a cat, the truth, hungry for a beginning I do what I always do and lean in to take a picture. No birds nesting or singing in the trees. A detritus of branches, cars, a string of unilluminated dragonflies dangles, I could see trees blown over a paroxysm spread like a moon in the cracked glass. Yes, these trees my roots, these roots attest that the lie and its most remarkable products leave a demolition in its wake. Who knows what the water might shake out of me?

Karen McCarthy Woolf 1:22:36
Oh my god, am I am I yeah, I am on mic because I'm a Yeah. Oh my god. It's such a cool thing, isn't it? Just to hear your things reshaped? I'm so glad we did that. Yeah,

Sumita Chakraborty 1:22:55
It was your idea. It was Karen's idea everyone and it was brilliant. And, you know, it's, I was a pleasure to work with your book in that way. And to read it in that way. And yours. I'm honestly floored and moved, you've given me such a gift. When I myself first started writing again after my sister died for a while, speaking of silence was kind of wordless. I started that by doing translations of Roca. And then those turned in to Windows in the book, which is kind of a long poem composed of fragments in a ratio as I drew out of my own translations. So the experience of found poetry, being a way back to articulation and to language is something that's so deeply personally meaningful to me and something that I have experienced. So thank you for giving me that gift.

Karen McCarthy Woolf 1:23:43
Oh, it's my pleasure. And yeah, equally. Yeah, I do. I do find actually, I've been trying to, oh, you know, just think about different ways in which I would write about it. And there's so much as I know, you know, to process in the loss of the sibling. And, you know, I mean, I had already been through quite a lot of quite intense bereavements. You know, and I've written about them. And I, it was weird, because when I wrote

Aviary, it was very much like in the instant after and I wrote it to survive, like really base survival, not based work, but you know, the actual place from where I needed to begin in working. And I think that in this you know, very much this kind of like being able to use other words, other texts, other poetry, other writing, and some vocabulary and also just to kind of like sort of, project yourself out of the narrative, because the narrative can kind of, like, spin around in your head, it's kind of like a groove in a record, kind of like, you know, kind of continuing in it. There's a truth in it, but there's also a captivity in that, I think, you know, and so being able to break out of it, and also just being able to break out of my own narrative, but also to break in to yours, if I could use that term, you know, in a, in such a, yeah, I mean, I actually love translation as well. And I love translation, because I do find it a very intimate, detailed form of reading that is almost, you know, and it's kind of, I love the fact that you seek to lose your own voice, a little in translation, you know, that that's part of its endeavour. And yet, you know, that it will be there. And I think what appears in those gaps is always, you know, I mean, there are some found poems, in Seasonal Disturbances from this book the Popular Science Encyclopedia, written in 1929, full of really hideous kind of eugenics really, yeah. And it's kind of like eco fascism, but it's also not, you know, as, like, a lot of the ideas still really stand in it. But then there's others around kind of, like, population, the great population myth, which I'm always like yeah, I'm really ready to go down the great population myth. When we've all learned to share nicely. There are a lot of people there are, but you know, 1929 Anyway, but you know, there's some found poems there. And actually, and I think you used one of the lines in the cento from one of those poems. It's the no birds, No birds singing in the trees isn't it?

Sumita Chakraborty 1:27:23
Yeah, there are a couple from, a couple of the different science of life poems. Yeah, there are a few.

Karen McCarthy Woolf 1:27:29
Yeah. And you know, that was fascinating. Because I actually managed that one, I managed to get like a, I mean, it's a popular science book, but one of its authors was HG Wells.

Sumita Chakraborty 1:27:38
Oh, Christ.

Karen McCarthy Woolf 1:27:39
Yeah. And the other was Julian Huxley, Aldous Huxley's brother and the sort of zoologist.

Sumita Chakraborty 1:27:47
I'm even less surprised by the, by the eugenics now. I mean, I was already not surprised. And now,

Karen McCarthy Woolf 1:27:53
you know what I mean. But the fascinating thing is, as I, as I read those poems, I kind of like, something happens, and you unleash another voice. And it was weird, because writing in the Trump era, and it was seen as a post Brexit, immediately post Brexit, and then, somehow in these poems, this kind of voice of this kind of hideous controller of this kind of sort of evil eugenicist. I was thinking of a swear word, but zoom seems to be quite a PG space. Anyway. But you know, that kind of person just kind of emerged, and then suddenly, I have this voice, you know, of this real idiot. But this very powerful idiot. Yeah, yeah. Because I was not seeking that, particularly. But that's, that's what came through. And I do love the fact that there is a kind of divinatory aspect sometimes, you know, to what we do in poetry, and different voices can come to us through many different channels. And I think that's a form of great excitement and joy actually, to me.

Sumita Chakraborty 1:29:09
I do too. Yeah, I agree. It's also for me a great way to kind of check myself. I mean, I was talking a lot before about the, like, somewhat sometimes dangerous and violent mindsets that come up in Arrow, especially early in the collection. And that's important to me, because I think we have a really ingrained narrative of what a victim and even more what a survivor is supposed to look like. And even as a bereaved person, we'd like that is a benighted, suffering graceful, always excellent person. And only under those circumstances can we can a broader societal level, extend sympathy toward someone who is suffering, only if they're just that good, right? But hurt people hurt people isn't a cliche for no reason,

right? It's just true. And I think that sometimes it's important always, it's important to me to make sure that I'm not letting myself always be the hero of these poems. Sometimes I'm the villain of these poems. People aren't just one thing. So yeah, that way and it came for me, sort of like with your, with the science of life for you, for me in marigolds, one thing that unlocked that kind of violent voice that I wanted to tell on myself about was Titus Andronicus, there are no good people in that play. So incorporating those things into the voice of the speaking I, was a really useful way, I think, at least for me to tap into and explore the parts of myself that I'm not happy with, that I'm not proud of, that I'm ashamed of even. How long do we have I could keep going for a long time.

Sarah Jackson 1:30:56
Yeah, I'm reluctant to kind of butt in here, I feel that this is the start of a another big conversation, a conversation that deserves much more time than we're able to give it. I was struck by something you just said Sumita about people not just being one thing, it resonates, I guess, with the idea of language not being one thing either. And, as you've both been been talking about your use of found language, for example, I'm getting a real glimpse of kind of the echoes and the disturbances between different registers, modes, voices and languages, you know, from the scientific, which is very prevalent in both your work to the found, to the literary and to the critical, I'm conscious that you're both kind of critical scholars, as well as creative practitioners. And I feel like I could keep talking or keep listening for such a long time, but we have gone 10 minutes over lenght now, so I'm very, very reluctantly going to sort of wind things up if that's okay. Of course. Just wanted to thank you both so much for such a powerful and really compassionate reading discussion and for sharing your words and your experiences, and also I have to say your, you know, your pain and your care, as well as all the echoes and disturbances between them. It's been a real honour to talk with you this evening. Karen, I'm so sorry you weren't able to be here for the for the full event. But I hope this is the start of a much longer conversation with you both. For now, I'd like to thank also Nottingham Contemporary of course, and Nottingham Trent University for sponsoring this series. And thanks to my colleagues, Canan and Linda for their support in curating Five Bodies and to Andy and Niall for hosting the event this evening. Our final Five Bodies public event, of this series at least, will be on 30th of June and will

feature Elizabeth A. Povinelli, and Rindon Johnson, who will be reflecting on futures, maps, memories and meanderings. But finally, thank you once again to Sumita and to Karen and to everyone who has joined us online. We really look forward to seeing you next time.

Sumita Chakraborty 1:33:18
Thank you so much. Thank you

Colophon

Curators: Olivia Aherne, Sarah Jackson and Dr. Linda Kemp
Assisted by: Canan Batur and Niall Farrelly
Technicians: Andy Batson and Catherine Masters