

“The Hole in the Wind” from the Author’s Point of View

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In June 1995, when I received a letter from the Literature Department at the South Bank Centre in London, inviting me to participate in a ‘ghost poem series’ they were planning jointly with BBC Radio Drama, I was in a phase of transition: between books and between homes. My third book, *The Stinking Rose* had just been published in March of that year and I had done an extensive reading tour in England to launch the book. I had written a few new poems since the manuscript of *The Stinking Rose* was finished, however I had no clear idea about my next book. Also, I knew that my selected poems (*Point No Point*) drawing on my first three books was scheduled to be published before a completely new collection could come out. And so I felt that I had time: time to take a break from writing and to wait for new ideas, time to think about other aspects of my life. Also, the prospect of having a volume of selected poems due soon felt like a major turning point to me.

In April my husband and I bought a house not far from the flat where we lived and by June we were fully absorbed in renovating the house in preparation for the big move. And it was during this rather turbulent phase in my life that I received the offer from the South Bank Centre to write a ghost poem for their programme. It was a pleasant and welcome surprise. Over the years I’ve especially enjoyed working on commissioned poems because the assignments have invariably led me to topics and themes I probably would not have thought of writing about on my own. And so for example, the idea of writing a ‘ghost poem’ would not have occurred to me had it not been for this invitation.

I still remember the terms of the commission: the poem had to be approximately ten to fifteen minutes long and it could deal with any subject as long as it was a 'ghost poem'. We (myself and seven other poets) were invited to read our ghost poems in London on December 13th, 1995 at the Royal Festival Hall where the BBC would be recording us. (Later, the poems were broadcast separately during 1996.)

As soon as I read the letter, I felt intrigued and challenged and yes, inspired although at first I had no clue as to what my subject would be. Just the idea of a 'ghost poem' as opposed to a 'ghost story' greatly appealed to me. In fact, I immediately replied to the South Bank Centre, accepting their commission without knowing how I would write the poem. Well, it was June and I had until the end of November to submit it, so I felt determined and confident that somehow I would find a way to write it. After a few days I decided that I would focus on Juist, a German island in the North Sea. My family and I had just spent Easter there. It was our first visit to this island and from the beginning I had found it spooky and ghostly. I also found it 'exotic.' I'm sure that for many northern Europeans it's simply an ordinary island—but for me it is an exotic place. I did not expect that much (if anything) had been written about Juist in English language poetry and so this was another reason for me to write about Juist.

Juist is a long, thin island just off the German coast. One of the East Friesian islands, deceptively close to the mainland. If one travels by ferry it can only be reached at irregular hours because of the strong tides. Another characteristic aspect about this island is that there are no cars on it except for the doctors' and the fire brigade's vehicles. Nowadays it's really a family island, offering wonderful walks along the beach or through the sandy undergrowth of the inner, middle section of the island. Some areas are wildlife protection zones. On a nice, warm and sunny spring day it is hard to imagine that this island and the waters right off the shore have been a continuous setting for human tragedy and disaster. A great deal has been recorded about the storms, floods and ship wrecks of the past centuries. But even today if one talks to the islanders one realises that the danger and the unpre-

dictability of the currents of the North Sea are very real. Sudden accidents at sea and severe floods continue to occur and the islanders live with this acute sense of insecurity.

Once I had decided that the island of Juist would be the subject or the setting of my poem, I started to worry about the length of the work: it had to be at least ten minutes long. And this was another difficulty, as I initially saw it. In my first book, *Brunizem* I have a poem entitled "Search for My Tongue" and one entitled "Well, Well, Well," each of these poems takes about ten minutes to read aloud. In *Monkey Shadows* (my second collection) I have more ten minute poems: one entitled "Mozartstrasse 18" and another entitled "Maninagar Days." However, despite the fact that I had 'done it' before, that I had experience in writing long poems, I found the prospect of writing another long poem daunting. Perhaps it was because the earlier poems had just happened to turn out that way. I had not *planned* writing 'ten minute poems': rather in many ways I consider them to be lucky poems that seemed to have written themselves without much intervention from me. Before "The Hole in the Wind" was written (and before I had even started doing the research for this poem) I was concerned, on a very abstract level, about how I would maintain the poetic tension in the language as well as the reader's interest (especially considering that it would also have to be approved by BBC Radio Drama).

These thoughts and worries lingered in the back of my mind as we finished renovating our new house. We moved in at the very end of July and in August I started to do what turned out to be extensive research connected with the island of Juist and its history. I was also interested in studying wave and storm patterns. I read memoirs and accounts of legal proceedings. All the books I had access to were in German or in Low German. There was no time to obtain English books. I wanted the poem to be grounded in reality, despite all the imaginary details I knew I would add to it. Another turning point for me, after our move, was 'a room of my own'. For the first time since my daughter's birth in 1989 I had my own study—something basic

and crucial for any writer and something for which I was very grateful. I suppose writers invariably focus on the more down to earth elements connected with their craft: where to buy the cheapest paper, where to find the nicest pens, etc. And so I also associate my study as an important element connected with the writing of "The Hole in the Wind," which was one of the first poems I wrote after our move.

In October 1995 we made a second trip to Juist. And in early November I felt that I had to start writing the poem. My mind was full of a great deal of information and I still did not know how I would compose or structure the poem. I had a vague idea that I would use different voices and that I would break up the narrative—techniques I had used before. However, the poem itself was a mystery to me. I could not predict what it would contain or what it would sound like. I remember that I felt acutely desperate. I felt that I was in a 'now or never' situation, I had to plunge into the writing of the poem in order to see how it would develop. As usual, I could not plot it out beforehand but hoped that the poem would 'write itself' which in fact is what happened. Once I had written down the opening two lines of the poem: "The hole in the wind where the scream lives— / The scream that is the voice" the rest flowed rapidly. The poem was ready within three days. I was in a trance, at another level of being, during the writing of it.

For me, the structure or the form of the poem and the rhythm, cadence, metre, tone, diction, syntax within the poem all come together with the subject matter. The poem comes out as a piece, as an organic unit, if it's going to work. Frequently, what happens to me is that I might have one line in my head and if I write it down it leads to more lines. Then, in a few hours or a few days I might have a poem. A poem has to have its own life and its own rhythm—just as a baby is born with its own blood in its veins. When I'm writing a poem it has to come naturally. The poem has to create its own form while it is in the process of being written. I cannot impose a form upon it. Of course, in the end I have to polish it up until it sounds right. I always have to read my work aloud while I'm in the process of writing and

revising. When I feel that I have a certain rhythm in my mind that's connected with the images and ideas, then I feel that I'm able to write. When I have a phase where I feel that I can't write, it usually means that I have no music in my mind, or no thoughts that are working in a way connected with music. Also, I feel that the poem has to have a certain energy to begin with—and when I'm writing this energy has to appear and take over, so to speak. I attribute my style and my voice to sheer luck. In a way, I am blind to my own technique. Ultimately, I rely so much upon instinct and intuition.

To some extent, everything that a writer knows enters and influences anything that he or she writes. One's knowledge is always there along with one's vocabulary. Often, (especially for me), one is not conscious of this 'knowledge' or of one's system of beliefs while absorbed in the process of writing. For example, my concept of Hinduism (by that I mean my own interpretation of Hinduism) as well as my private philosophy has appeared in "The Hole in the Wind" but I was not aware of that until Cecile Sandten questioned me about it. As far as other influences are concerned, I did not know of Goethe's poem "Der Erlkönig" nor Theodor Storm's *Der Schimmelreiter* or any other work of his when I was working on "The Hole in the Wind." On the other hand, Wallace Stevens' poem "The Idea of Order at Key West" was very present in my mind when I reached the concluding part of the poem. The simple reason for that is that it is one of my favourite poems in the English language. Of course, I have inverted its meaning in my conclusion to "The Hole in the Wind." Furthermore, my reference to Stevens is quite oblique: a slight hint. German readers, however, are usually not familiar with Stevens' poem and so I provided Cecile Sandten with this information which she was able to use in her essay.

I find it interesting that several reviewers have observed a connection between "The Hole in the Wind" and my poem "Augatora" (both of which appear in my collection *Augatora*). My curiosity about the relationship between the words *window* and *wind* eventually led me to *augatora*, a word which comes from the gothic *augadauro*, a completely

different etymological root from the Nordic roots of *window*. In my poem "Augatora" I have juxtaposed these different words, different etymological roots and in a sense, different interpretations for the physical object 'window.' On a deeper level however, the poems "The Hole in the Wind" and "Augatora" are completely independent of each other.

The poem, "The Hole in the Wind" as it is now (in *Augatora*), takes about twenty minutes to read aloud. However, for the reading at the Royal Festival Hall on December 13, 1995, the poem was fifteen minutes long. Afterwards (and before its publication in *PN Review*) I made a few revisions and restored a few stanzas from my first draft that had been left out so that the poem would not exceed fifteen minutes. The manuscript of "The Hole in the Wind" and my accompanying letter to the editor had another bizarre fate: The IRA bomb that exploded in Manchester on Saturday, June 15, 1996, destroyed among other things, the offices of *PN Review* and Carcanet Press. A large part of the ceiling collapsed on top of the editor's desk where my poem was lying. Fortunately, no one was working in those offices on that day. But for a long time afterwards I felt spooked thinking about how my manuscript had literally been bombed. As if the tragic aspects of the poem had taken another macabre twist.

On a more positive note however, the poem has been well received by audiences and readers. And critics from different parts of the world have been generous and enthusiastic in their appraisal of it. As a writer, this has given me a tremendous sense of relief and it has also surprised me because to some extent it is always difficult to evaluate one's own work. I find that I have a tendency to take my poems for granted.

Finally, I would like to say that I have truly enjoyed reading Cecile Sandten's detailed, perceptive and original analysis of "The Hole in the Wind."

Bremen
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