



## INTERVIEW WITH MEGAN HARLAN

### AUTHOR OF MAPMAKING

Winner of the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry, selected by Sidney Wade

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Interview by Michael Smith

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*Your background as a writer is diverse in terms of subject and form. You currently work as a journalist, a book reviewer, travel writer, fiction writer, and poet. How do these changing frames of reference affect your poetry?*

Working in different literary genres has certainly clarified the purpose of each one for me. I find the craft-work of travel writing, book reviewing, and reported pieces very satisfying, and invaluable for developing the practical skills with language – editing, pacing, Thesaurus-perusing – that also feed poetry (“practical” not being a word generally associated with “poetry,” but there it is). But as I move from the structured world of ledes and deadlines to the wilder spaces of creative writing, it’s exhilarating (and sometimes terrifying). I leave character and story, narrative shapes and development, largely to my fiction. In poetry I believe the narrative is language itself, and for me that means using it to frame ideas or emotions that I find mysterious and yet stubbornly vivid (like, for example, the notion of “farsickness”). Where my fictional voice and subjects tend to be grounded in the noise of everyday life, the voice in my poems has grown, by contrast, a little more heightened. Poetry gives me the freest range to cross personal histories, cultures, eras, and other boundaries, to follow the language itself to wherever it leads.

*I understand that travel is something of a second nature to you and has been present throughout your entire life. This is evident in your poetry. But I was wondering how exactly travel fits into your process as a poet. Do you actively seek out new places and experiences for the purpose of writing about it or is it something more long term that has to go through a period of fermentation before it makes its way into your work?*

I’ve never traveled in order to write a poem about the experience – only because I’m not very good at writing poetry through “assignments.” As you suggest, the process is more hidden and meandering, since my poems do not organize themselves into being very obediently. Often in the very beginning, an image will arise that I can’t shake off—even just a quality of light (like the sun striking the water in “Ocean Elegy,” based on my childhood memories of swimming in the Arabian Gulf, though that setting isn’t named in the

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poem), or an atmosphere, even one glimpsed in photographs, as in “Atget’s Paris.” And over time, this wisp of an experience, memory, or image takes on meaning and shape—it’s like I’m writing the poem to discover why I’m being haunted by this sensory perception. This period of fermentation can—and often does—take years.

*What authors helped guide you throughout the timeline of writing *Mapmaking*? What was the pace of the project altogether?*

Three poets that guided me at the outset—because they inspired me to want to write poetry, period—were Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, and Elizabeth Bishop. Other poets whose work I kept returning to while writing the book were A.R. Ammons, Anne Carson, Lawrence Joseph, Alice Fulton, Jean Valentine, Rae Armantrout, and my mentor in college, the late Deborah Digges. At a certain point I found myself reading bilingual editions of Rilke and Durs Grünbein and Octavio Paz (I’d picked up a couple of Paz’s collections based on his time in India). Seeing two languages in the service of one poem opens up so many unexpected vistas and possibilities, and often tripwires my own inspiration to write.

As for the pace of the project, I’d put the timeline at about five or six years. I think the earliest poem in the book was published in 2003, and I finished writing *Mapmaking* in 2008. I’ll also just note one thing about the title. For the longest time I was not aware that the word “map” kept appearing in my poems -- it’s funny how that can happen. When I finally noticed all those “maps,” the title emerged, and the structure of the book began to fall into place.

*Throughout this collection the title seems to take on a strata of different meanings. When I finished reading it I felt as though I were left with an archipelago of both sentiments and thoughts that fluidly straddle the line of the subjective and objective. How do you feel about the work in terms of where your personal experience and the phenomenological bleed together?*

Thank you for this wonderful question. I think the answer has to do with the idea of location – the point at which we meet, are changed by, and can change the world around us – which has always fascinated me, even just on a literal level (maybe because of my peripatetic childhood, when being in transit was the norm). And location includes elements of metaphysics – how place relates to time and the apparent nowhere-ness of death – that often enter or at least brush against my poems. I like to bring the poem’s speaker right to the brink of these questions, to that point where autobiography (even of a very interpretive sort) can engage with them head-on.

*As you write, do you have a vision of a certain audience for your poetry?*

I don’t imagine a particular audience. When I write, I try to create a voice that speaks the poem’s own idiosyncratic language as fluently as possible. I love to read poetry, and I try to write poems I would want to read.

*What are your future poetry plans? Is the thematic path of *Mapmaking* something you are interested in continuing or is a completely new project on its way?*

I am working on a second book of poems, one different in theme from *Mapmaking*, though which might relate to it in a way I can’t yet see. I envision this new project as a whole structural piece – also different from *Mapmaking*’s collage-style collection – and am excited to see where it goes. 