Interview with

Anne Marie Macari
Anne Marie Macari is the author of five books of poetry. Most recently published was her book Red Deer, which was released in 2015. She spoke to a Manuscripts staff member, Wesley Sexton, about how to generate new material and what to do when ideas seem blocked. Macari founded and teaches in the Drew MFA Program for Poetry & Poetry Translation.

Wesley Sexton: When writing about a literal situation (something that actually happened) how important is it to stay true to that situation?

Anne Marie Macari: For some people it’s not important at all. I think it’s a little more important to me. I don’t really change things. I might leave them out – if it’s not working I’d rather leave it out than change it. I’m always imagining and creating something in poetry, so I just try to bring a little bit of the literal into the imaginative.

WS: How important is it to make the reader clear of the situation?

AMM: It depends on the poem. Sometimes the poem needs a certain clarity and other times there is something else going on where you feel that the situation or event is the catalyst and you don’t need to know the details. Being curious humans, we always want to know the details. We love narrative. It’s a balance and each poet has his or her own way of balancing lyric and narrative, but sometimes if the poem is great I don’t care. If there’s something else carrying the poem, I don’t have to have clarity. Other times, if there is nothing else carrying the poem, and I don’t know what’s going on the first thing to say is “Well, I don’t understand the poem.” However, if it were a better poem I might not
care so much.

**WS**: *How do you define the lyric poem?*

**AMM**: The lyric is interior. It is the existential part of the poem—the who am I, where am I; it is the consciousness in the poem. It’s also the beauty of the poem—the way language can carry the poem. It’s all those things. But if you put it in contrast to narrative (which is the telling of a story) the lyric is the part that is looking at the story, and feeling it and experiencing it and self-questioning.

**WS**: *Would you say that the narrative is the base and the lyric comes from that?*

**AMM**: I don’t want to make an equation of it because it’s more mysterious than that and usually they’re codependent. Most contemporary poets use both together. You can just have a little snippet of narrative that can carry a lot of lyric; or a lot of lyric just needs a little snippet of narrative, but I don’t want to make some kind of equation between the two because everyone has his or her own way of working with it.

**WS**: *You write from different perspectives occasionally. What purpose does that serve for you?*

**AMM**: It’s not that I want distance but I don’t always want to be so literally writing about myself. I’m kind of bored with myself sometimes, so I like to find a way out. Even when I was writing my book *Gloryland*, which is a lot about motherhood and has birth poems, I used other vehicles. I wrote about Mary and I used other vehicles to write about it because I really didn’t want to say “And then this happened to me.” It’s a way of getting out of the self for me. Distance isn’t quite the right word although it is a kind of distancing, but it’s also gaining a larger perspective.
WS: How often do you revisit your poems and what happens when you do that?

AMM: When I go back and look at the work I’ve published, I am such a different person than I was when I wrote those poems. Sometimes I am surprised in a positive way and sometimes I think I would do things differently now. But part of the survival of an artist is that we want to keep working and moving forward. We’re always looking ahead, but when I do stop and look back, it’s surprising. Who was this person who made this poem? Remember what I was going through then? And look how far I’ve come since then. When I wrote my first book I had just gone through a terrible divorce and those poems are much more autobiographical. I felt like that was always going to be my story, and then I moved out of it and I was in a different part of life.

WS: What is more difficult for you—beginnings or endings?

AMM: They each have challenges. One thing I can say about the beginning is that sometimes if I get a first line that clicks in my head, I know I’ll get the poem. That doesn’t always happen though. Sometimes I’m struggling and struggling; but once in a while I get that first line it’s almost like I’ve found a hallway that leads me to the rest of the poem. That’s a good feeling.

Endings are harder because you have to ask where have I gone in the poem, have I pushed myself far enough, have I questioned myself enough? It can be easy to find a great line that’s a great ending, but is it really enough? Have I really done the work I need to do in the poem? And I find that with my students too. Sometimes they’ll find a great line and it works as an ending but in between the first and last line they haven’t done enough work in the poem. Then there are different kinds of endings. Is it good enough to tie the poem up or do I want to leave it open to leave the reader
(and myself) in a more uncertain place? All those questions come into play.

**WS**: *How do you know when a poem is ready to end?*

**AMM**: It used to be harder. I have a better sense of it now, but you learn how to get more done. I don’t want to say that you learn to be economical because that sounds so mercenary, but you learn how to get more done within the shorter space of the poem. I’m sure at some point I’ll go back and write longer poems, but my poems are no more than a page each—short lyrics with very little narrative—but something has to happen. Some kind of shift has to happen. If that shift hasn’t happened I don’t care how good the language is. I have to feel some transformation in the poem.

**WS**: *At what stage in your writing process do you begin to think about an audience?*

**AMM**: I don’t think a lot about that because I think I’d go a little crazy. One of the things about writing poetry is that if you have an audience it’s not a very big one; and in some ways that’s good because you have the freedom to do what you want to do. When something seems finished, I then think of my little group of writers that I show things to and ask myself, “Is this ready to come to the group?” That’s very important to me. I have a very tight group of four or five women who have been working together for a while now and I can’t imagine not showing them my work. They are my crutch and they are great critics. They are my audience. It’s a very small audience but they are my favorite people to have read my poems.

**WS**: *Have you ever revealed a poem too early and felt that feedback inhibited the poem’s growth?*
AMM: If you show a poem that is too raw, people are going to try to find something, and it may not be what you need to know. Work on something—do a lot of drafts before you show it because it can be derailing. I don’t have that issue any more but I remember being in workshops where the critiques didn’t feel right and maybe that was because I showed the poem too soon. Also you have to learn to listen to all the voices and know when it’s right for you and when it isn’t. That’s part of the workshop experience. You want to listen to everything, but you also have to learn what you need out of the critiques. A lot of times even as a teacher I’m stabbing in the dark trying to figure something out and I may or may not be helpful. I like to say that to the students: just because I said it doesn’t mean it’s right.

WS: When you write your very first draft, do you write in lines or does that come later?

AMM: I do write in lines, but that doesn’t mean I don’t change them. My default setting in my brain is to start something in couplets. It doesn’t always stay that way but for me couplets are a type of skeleton or scaffolding that I can work off of. It gives me enough space in between for something to happen. I don’t always keep them but if you read my work there are a lot of couplets. Very early on in my writing life, I wrote some prose poems and I think that was because it gave me freedom not to worry about the lines. If you get stuck on line, just stop and write it out in prose. Just let yourself go because the most important thing is to write freely, and then you can shape it. Especially for younger writers: write in a journal, write in prose—just write and don’t worry about the lines yet. Just get it out there on the page. We have so many ways of stopping ourselves and critiquing ourselves and that can really be detrimental. You have to do it at some point, but just let stuff come out first.
WS: You spoke earlier about how your voice often changes. How do you navigate these transitions between styles or between voices?

AMM: I’m full of uncertainty, especially after I finish a manuscript. There’s always this period of I don’t know what to do or I don’t know where I’m going or I don’t remember how to write a poem. I know that sounds crazy but I really do go through that. I think a lot of people do. But then if I’m doing something which is different from what I’ve done in the past (which is usually the case) I have so much uncertainty about it and I have a hard time sharing those poems. That’s where I am right now with my new poems because they are so radically different. I like the poems but when I read them I’m very nervous about them.

WS: Well, the titles of your new poems are taken from traditional Shaker hymns, correct?

AMM: That’s right.

WS: Where did you get that idea?

AMM: I finished Red Deer—the cave poems—and those poems are very visual. I didn’t connect it but I remember thinking I wanted something to do with music. I wasn’t able to write for a while, but something in me was hungry for music in my poems. I was reading the New York Times one day and I saw a picture of Francis McDormand in a little Shaker outfit, and there was this play off-off-off Broadway—well, it wasn’t even a play but this group of people who were going to be performing Shaker spirituals—and I just knew I needed to hear that. So I got tickets and we went down to this little performance garage. It was a wonderful performance by the Wooster Group of four women, very plain, who weren’t singing beautifully. They were literally just singing these
hymns off an old record of Shaker spirituals and everything was completely simple. Every once in a while they would shift their seating and I different one would sing. Then halfway through some young men came out and they kept singing, but while they were singing they danced with the men in a circle to these simple dances. It was ecstatic. The first part was very meditative and the second part was ecstatic, and there was something about the simplicity in the hymns that was very important to me. I grew up going to church. I went home and started writing. I wrote the first half dozen in twenty-four hours, which is what happens to me when I find something. All I did was take the titles of the spirituals—not the content or anything—and go with it. These poems have more rhyme and meter in them than I am used to using, but I’m very uncertain about them. People seem to like them, but I am very self-conscious writing in rhyme and meter because obviously I grew up without it. We’ll see where it goes; I have about twenty of them now.