

## Appalachian Fall Newcastle Launch Transcript

Speakers are Katharine Margot Toohey (publisher), Magdalena Ball (event chair and interviewer), Jennifer Maiden (author) and audience members

KMT: Okay. I'm Katharine Margot Toohey. I'm the publisher of Quemar Press, and I thought I'd start this launch and Q&A by reading a small section of my introduction, and introducing Maggie, and thanking everyone who should be thanked. So, I'll start now. In November, 2016, Quemar Press released Jennifer Maiden's 21st poetry collection, *The Metronome*. Since that time, she has written two vibrant novels in juxtaposed prose and verse: *Play With Knives: Three and Four*, and this major new poetry collection focusing on poverty, power and the ways in which they are interconnected and intrinsic to each other. The theme of *Appalachian Fall: Poems About Poverty in Power* was inspired partly by the situation in last year's American Presidential Campaign, in which President Trump's victory was dependent on voters from impoverished and threatened regions, such as Appalachia. The 'fall' in the title, the American autumn season, is a metaphoric setting surrounding these poems. Here, 'fall' can be also a technical fall, a drop in poll numbers, a spiritual decline or a dancer leaping from a pas de deux. In analysing the impoverished aspects of power, Maiden recommends the equal perspective allowed by poetry. While writing this collection, she was able to clarify her position. "The difference between what I do and other things called political poetry or satire is that they consist of commentary or caricature, both of which place the writer in a superior or inferior position. My work is imaginatively empathetic from an equal basis, which is a more fluid and internal position politically, and, therefore, much more insurrectionary. It isn't a traditional Marxist philosophy that discounts the individual in favour of historic events. It's more like A.J.P. Taylor's belief that history depends on the peculiar traits of individuals - hence his interpolation that, of course, in politics, the impossible always happens." And that was quoting Jennifer Maiden, that line about A.J.P. Taylor. In light of Jennifer Maiden's Hierarchical Theory, this equality in poetry could balance some effects of trauma. Here, for example, she also uses poetry's equal position to address a recent traumatic professional destabilisation of her own. Her Hierarchical Theory is that trauma in the

power structure results in the sufferer moving up and down precariously in the power structure, something central to the issues of poverty, power, their similarity and polarity. The poems in this collection act as a platform between the heights and depths of hierarchy, letting the reader, poet and characters look power in the eyes with a level gaze. And I would like to thank MacLean's for hosting this event, Maggie, a vibrant and accomplished critic and writer for chairing this event, and my mother for writing the collection, for allowing me to kickstart my press with her work, and for writing poetry which has led Professor Robert Adamson to call her the "great poet of our humanity". Now I will hand the mike over to Magdalena and Jennifer Maiden.

MB: Thank you.

JM: Thank you.

Audience Member: Thanks.

MB: So we're a relatively small group, so please do feel free to treat this in a very relaxed and intimate manner. I'm sitting up in this chair so I can actually look down for once on people, instead of looking up. It's so exciting to have a poet of Jennifer Maiden's caliber and experience here in Newcastle, to be able to actually launch a book of her poetry here in Newcastle and I'm just thrilled to have her here. Jennifer and I have spoken. I've interviewed her before. We've spoken on the phone before, but this is the first face to face, so that's really exciting for me. You know, great for Newcastle, again, to have a poet like Jennifer. So welcome. What I thought we'd do is we'll just do a bit of a Q&A, I'll ask Jennifer some questions and we'll just have basically a chat, and I think I'll just open the floor and you can ask all your questions, anything you want.

MB: What I wanted to know is Appalachian Fall is a fascinating concept. The U.S. election but not just the U.S. election, but this whole notion of poverty in power and the way in which people and forces can be manipulated towards power, trauma, there's a whole range of things you touch on in the book. So I'm really curious as to whether you began the book with this notion of what you're going to write about and then began writing poems to flesh it out, or whether you were starting to find your poems began forming into a kind of theme?

JM: That's interesting. It's a bit of both, I'm actually trying to remember. I think it was. I think it was initially that one had to, the next step on from Trump's election was to write about Trump and I think the most attractive poetic viewpoint on that is actually to look at the electorate. Trump's electorate is actually much more attractive than Trump is. And particularly that area, the vast Appalachian electorate area, and areas of poverty in America, and the world, too. So, and the intense lyricism of that, which, again, feeds into how you can see the attraction of Trump, you can see the lyricism of Trump in a sense to all those people: the power and the negative and positive aspects

MB: Yeah. One of the interesting dynamics I felt in this book was the social and political rhetoric versus the poetic, which was that political rhetoric is very, very simplified: it's almost language trimmed down to the sound-bite, right to it's most basic level, whereas poetry is the opposite: language, you know, at its most multiple, most complex. Is that something that was playing on your mind when you were working on this: how can I get into something that's real?

JM: Yes, you needed to work on those aspects where that's possible: where the anti-rhetoric, if you want to call it that, is most possible, which is by sussing it out and looking at the spirituality of the situation, that explains the disparate emotions involved, and the authenticity in those areas, and also to find out those in Trump as well, what potential there is for lyricism.

MB: Yes. I read an article, I think it was only a couple of days ago, about how the people in Appalachia were feeling manipulated

JM: Yeah

MB: And disenfranchised

JM: Yeah

MB: Not just in terms of their voting decisions, but in terms of now, how people are pointing the finger, going, you know...

JM: Yes

MB: ...this is because these unthinking robots were actually manipulated into making these choices, and I guess in some way in your work you give them a voice

JM: Yes

MB: you provide a voice, where there was only rhetoric perhaps before

JM: Yes, well, again, it wouldn't be, I'm not sure. It might be far too condescending to say they were being manipulated, I think.

MB: Yes, well I think that was the point of the article: people just say: well, we're easy targets...

JM: Well, yeah

MB: But we're all individuals

JM: Yeah. Yeah. I think they wanted certain things that Trump is doing, and Trump is doing certain things. They wanted his right-wing rhetoric, because they like that, but they also wanted his particular, rather complex politics of non-intervention, you know, they're sick of wars. The extraordinary thing about Trump for me is that he stood up to the Bush Family and said Iraq was an enormous mistake: that it should never have happened, and this is axiomatic - that he was able to say that in large Republican groups - and get enormous support, because they know that that's true: that it's a terrible thing that they've done in society, and Appalachia knows that, of course, because they lost their children: their children, you know, taken, ridiculed and shot, corrupted by those wars, you know, and they had to go for money, and Trump was saying: look, I'm not something you're frightened of, I'm not extreme, I'm not an intellectual

MB: not an intellectual

JM: I'm not going to take anything away from you, but I'm not going to do this to your children any more

MB: Can you read *Wind Rock*? That might be a good example

[Jennifer Maiden reads the text of the poem *Wind Rock*]

Audience members: Great...beautiful

MB: I feel like this poem and many poems in the book, they seem to sit on this kind of interface between the political and the personal: there's this voice that's almost intimate and yet there's also this massive force and there's a really interesting kind of tension between those two forms

JM: I think what first struck me about Trump was: I think that this man did not want to be elected, did not expect to be elected, obviously believed the polls, or wanted to believe the polls, and he had an election strategy - which he did not think was going to work - he had a strategy because you have to have a strategy - and it worked, you know, and they had the numbers, they had the Rust Belt numbers, and it worked. In my last collection, the book before this, the end of that, Trump is actually on the phone to the hero, George Jeffreys - who has some magic line of communication with all American presidents - and telling him: I don't know what to do, I don't know why I've won, I don't know why they wanted me to win, I didn't expect to win, and I don't know what to do - and I think that's not so far from the truth, actually: I think you have that helplessness. I think you have a man very influenced by the elements, you know, really at the mercy of strong forces constantly about Trump, and he's constantly trying to meet these, he does what he knows he has to do to please his electorate, he makes these right-wing statements and then he waits to be knocked down. He waits for them to be contradicted. He waits so that he won't have to do that, but he can say: I tried to do that

MB: One of the things you do in the book that's really fascinating for me, particularly as a hybrid human being, is the way you slide smoothly between American politics and Australian politics, so many of the poems - a lot of the poems- are about the American political election, but Turnbull gets a mention and there are lots of Australian political poems that are informed by the overall theme of the book but stand alone

JM: There is of course a deep interlinking between Australian and American politics, always has been. The Americans, you know, seem obsessed with Australian politics, and keep meddling.

MB: despite Trump not being particularly close to Malcolm Turnbull

JM: Yes, well, again Trump not being particularly interventionist, Trump would be one of the least interested in Australia, one of the least interested. I suppose the real thing is the connection with China: Pine Gap and so on, because you have that huge conflict between Democrats and Republicans. The Democrats wanted to confront China and the Republicans - the Kissinger Republicans - were pro-Chinese. And of course in Australian terms, the pro-Chinese section is Kevin Rudd, so Kevin Rudd and the Republican Party have a nexus but I suppose by the same token in the Labor Party Gillard and the Democrats, Gillard being quite a warlike politician, like Hillary Clinton, so even within the Australian Labor Party you've got a split between the American Republicans and the American Democrats, and the American politicians themselves of course exploit that, use that, because they're concerned about China.

MB: So there are all these interesting binaries - hard and soft - that seem to almost contradict themselves. you've got the

JM: Well this is where the poetry comes in

MB: Yes. And so I guess you're able to deal with that in poetry in a much more holistic way than if you were writing political commentary

JM: Yes, yes. Politics contains its own conflict , and so does poetry, so it's a natural thing

MB: And yet you don't see it too often. Well, you don't see too many poets I think writing poems that very directly address political situations in the way in which this one has, for example, thematically

JM: You do, but there's a vast timidity, I think, and they're frightened they'll be seen to have the wrong attitude, whichever way that goes -whether it's right-wing - if their audience is right-wing, Quadrant and so on - or whether the audience is left-wing - Overland and those - it's very inhibiting, so I think Australian political poetry has a real trouble with inhibition - it's very predictable. You won't get something contradicting what they think would be their correct position, which again is where I'd like to think my positioning is very good, because I try for an equal position so I don't look down on the

potential subject. I don't look up to them reverentially, either, so basically I'm constantly trying to get a position which I suppose is equal

MB: Yes, and I suppose you get to use in poetry, which you wouldn't in political commentary, you get to use a persona

JM: Yes

MB: Which is a very powerful tool

JM: Yes

MB: So you can bring in characters who are no longer alive

JM: Yes

MB: Do you feel that you are almost creating them as new characters, for example when you bring in Eleanor Roosevelt

JM: No. Interesting question. No, I feel I'm fighting a lot of natural inhibitions in myself in seeing a historical figure as somehow one-dimensional, and I feel I'm fighting for this third dimension, I feel I'm fighting in myself to overcome any inhibitions I might have about historical accuracy and go to the real historical accuracy, which is where the doubts and the emotions and the passions are, and I think again that equal position, they're obviously empathising poems, but no, I don't think they're new characters. I think they're *the* person, and I think I'm doing my level best to cover something in that person that I can see and I can deal with.

MB: Almost like a channeling

JM: Possibly a channeling. It is like a type of channeling, yes

MB: So I'm going to ask you to read another poem, and this one I think kind of picks up on some of the things you've been talking about - also again something you do quite interestingly in this book, which is to slide between I guess the poetic voice but also almost breaking a third wall with the reader in which you kind of address real life

situations, and this is *Posing a Political Threat*. This one, too, is a little meta-poetic in that you deal with the nature of poetry and what poetry can do

JM: This one actually contains, it is actually a quote - not from Katharine - but from one of my previous publishers. He'd decided to discontinue publishing my work, much to my concern, arousing my curiosity to find out why and I asked whether the reasons were political and I got this very indignant response: no, it's not political, because you don't pose a political threat, and a political threat to *what* I don't know, if I had posed one, but anyway that was the response, and I thought: that's rather good: because *do* I pose a political threat, and

MB: It's a fascinating question, I must say. Auden's Does poetry make nothing happen

JM: Yes.

[Jennifer Maiden reads the text of the poem *Posing a Political Threat*]

JM: That was actually the Democrat leader Janet Powell who told me that. She told me that on the phone.

MB: So one of the things that that poem picks up on which I just want to mention, because I mean a lot of the poems are quite intense, a lot of them are political, is that very subtly and woven throughout the entire book is that - and that poem really has it - is the sense of humour, the sense of a chuckle, kind of wry humour that runs almost like a thread through the book. Do you see that almost as well as almost a political power?

JM: It's an equaliser, isn't it? It's not satirical poetry. It's the same feeling as when you think what might the characters themselves feel in that situation, it's the same character the reader would have empathising with that character. I don't like satire. I don't write satire. I regard it as a very conservative form, and I think the humour, if its working, if its good humour, if its blending two disparate elements that haven't been blended, in which case its what Koestler said was the act of creation, then it's innovative, it's not conservative and I think you suddenly realise something's new, something's funny, you know: oh, yes, I hadn't thought that before: I hadn't seen that connection, and something about humour does that, something about humour does that and also it's a link with the

reader because as a new experience for me when I'm doing it, it's a new experience for the reader, hopefully, when they're reading it, and of course for the characters it's a new experience: they're realising - my characters are constantly realising things - so, yeah

MB: Yeah. I mean, I even find it quite funny, the little play on words, like where you've got Angela Lansbury, you know, the whole Murder She Wrote Thing, and the character actually comes in. It's quite funny to think about the different layers of reality.

JM: That is part of the characterisation, too, because I feel those empathies - not punning, again that's not quite what I do -

MB: Not distancing

JM: Yes, it's involving, and it happens to characters, and when, if, I'm doing something humorous, if I'm doing a wordplay, that wordplay's part of the characterisation, it's not me commenting out on the characters from outside.

Audience member: It's totally the characters.

JM: Yeah. It'll differ from character to character. The nature of the humour in it differs for each character. Hillary Clinton's got a totally different sense of humour to Eleanor Roosevelt.

Audience member: So it's not your sense of humour

JM: Well, it is mine in a sense - I suppose it has to be - but when I'm experiencing a poem, it's not.

Audience member: Yes

KMT: I've found with your work, that the sense of humour is actually, it's like the Keynesian idea of money: money's a link between the past and the present, and between the present and the future, and the humour in your work has the same sense of function: it literally links past experience to present, to some future experience

JM: Yeah. Yes. It's temporal. It's a temporal bridge.

MB: That's an interesting way of looking at it. And since you've raised temporal bridge, you know I think a lot of the work tries to form a kind of temporal bridge as well, when you bring in those characters, like Eleanor Roosevelt or someone's grandfather, these characters, Jimmy Carter, June Carter

Audience member: Cash

MB: I didn't realise actually that there was a link between those

JM: Yeah, yeah. That's, it's the Carter Family

MB: The Carter family, yes

JM: And Mother Maybelle is the mother of June Carter, but it's actually, the lady who materialises at the Inauguration is the sister of Maybelle, (to KMT) Can you remember what her name is?

KMT: Sara.

JM: That's right. Sara.

MB: Sara. Even bringing in these kind of ghosts into the work creates a kind of temporal bridge between what might have happened in the past, what's happening right now, you know, what happened just last year, but also what's happening right now in Australia, everything seems kind of connected, and maybe that's what poetry can do

JM: Yes. Yes.

MB: at its best it can actually flatten time and transcend it in a way

JM: Well, a certain intense prose, a certain intense lyrical prose can do that, too. I'm actually writing online for Katharine for - I write novels of course for her online press site - she's got to a point now where actually her Medieval French translations get as many hits as my novels, so it must be going pretty well - but, yeah, what was I talking about?

KMT: The temporal

MB: Time

JM: Yeah, one of the things you do find out is that without exploitatively using things you find out that current events just feed effortlessly into what you're doing when you do that. It's all part of it. At a certain point something happens and it's as if you knew it was going to happen and currently I wrote the last prose chapter about Turnbull wanting to turn Australia into a large arms exporter (laughs in response to audience member:) yeah, and it fits in completely with the plot which I already had, and so, yeah, and so I put that in and said: yes, of course, that's partly illustrated by Turnbull wanting to do this, and

KMT: And the time-frame, the temporal bridge, the bridge

JM: Yeah. And while we're talking about it, I think half an hour after we said it we had it out in the novel

MB: That's amazing. I want to ask you a question about that. That'll be my last question, and I might get you to read one more poem and open up the floor to everyone, just do some mingling, cheese and wine, but I want to ask you because Quemar Press is new and you know you're one of the giants of Australian poetry

JM [accidentally leans back on stool and knocks over some books] The giant of Australian poetry is destroying the bookstore

MB: That's right. You're one of the giants of Australian poetry. You've got a long history of publishing with big well-known poetry houses like Giramondo, and now you're working with Quemar and obviously you've got a very close intimate relationship and I guess you're enjoying the ability you're been talking about not to be dictated to, or having to wait for a year to be published by a traditional house - I know how long it takes - and even to be edited: There's almost a power imbalance when you're being published by a big house, in which you're kind of subservient to their marketing conditions and so with that gone, do you find that being able to work almost instantly, particularly with online publishing, does that change almost the way in which you perceive your writing and your planning position?

JM: I've always done this, but what this is allowing me to do is do what I've always done and do a lot more of it and relax and do this. I can relax so that's there's no tussles about

when, and Katharine's the best editor ever, she knows what I want and she can say exactly if somethings not working, she can tell me in two seconds. And she's very quick, as I said.

MB: The perfect editing relationship

JM: Yes, and I didn't, I didn't, this has happened because of a fortunate accident. It did not happen by choice. I didn't leave Giramondo because I wanted to. I definitely did not want to leave Giramondo and I tried to stop it. But I don't know whatever, whatever policy, whatever decision they made, I really don't know but I couldn't stay there at Giramondo.

Audience member: That's your last publisher

JM: That's my last publisher, yeah. And so, well, I had six books with them and won them several prizes

MB: Including just this year

JM: Yep

MB: What was it, Victorian Premier's?

JM: I didn't win it. I was short-listed.

MB: That's pretty big, though

Audience member: That's big

JM: But: and so Katharine stepped into the breach. I certainly didn't have any big fight with Giramondo. I didn't say I'm leaving and my daughter's going to publish me from now on. Maybe that's what should have happened, but it didn't. But now I am with Katharine it was obviously meant to happen. Yes, it was meant to happen. You know, I'm out in the wilderness and at first I was terrified. I thought: what am I going to do, where am I going to find another publisher for what *I* do now and well, you know, like about six inches away, sort of, you know.

MB: Does anyone know what I'm going to do?

KMT: My favourite line, one of my favourite lines in poetry is Wallace Stevens about the little jar in Tennessee and that because this jar is there everything changes around it just because of the existence of that jar and that is what I would desperately like Quemar to be

JM: Like to be. Like Quemar to be, the little jar in Tennessee that changes the environment around it

KMT: Yeah

JM: You're getting there. A year later, you're doing pretty well.

MB: And I think that's one of the joys of being a poet, too. Even when you're in the midst of pain, your probably thinking: how can I use this?

JM: Yes. Yes. Yeah. I think one of my previous publishers is in mortal terror because I won't promise him I won't use him as a character in my poems.

MB: That's right. Well I think Ivor had a few appearances in that

JM: Yeah. No, I didn't say who it was.

MB: Oh, I think there was one in which it was a different character with the same last name

JM: Oh, yes. That was his brother. It was one about his brother. That's fair game. His brother's the Assistant Director of the Brookings Institute or something,

MB: Okay, right

JM: That's this use for that. I reckon publishing's fair game.

MB: Watch out, Katharine. One more poem and then I think we can open the floor. So I was thinking maybe about *The Mystery*

JM: Oh, good idea

MB: because of all sorts of interesting things[?] and so many layers in that. I just love the relationships.

JM: Joanne Burns the poet asked me to write this one because Malcolm Turnbull was the cousin of Angela Lansbury.

Audience member: Oh

JM: Mm. Which is *true*. And she thought this was just something I would have to write about. And I did. So: *The Mystery*. People ask for requests all the time and I do them, so if anyone's got any requests this time: any historical figure who you feel has been unjustly neglected?

[Jennifer Maiden reads the text of the poem *The Mystery*]

MB:I think it's almost endemic, that poem in the way it kind of sums up so many of the different things that happen through the book. Does anyone want to ask any questions before we mingle?

Audience member: I just want to ask: how long would it take you to write that?

JM: Oh look, I'm terribly quick.

Audience member: You're quick?

JM: Yeah

Audience member: Yeah

JM: I mean Katharine has a saying. I mean, now I'm actually working for Katharine's Press, she has a saying

KMT: The more grueling, the more gruel

JM: : The more grueling, the more gruel. Yes. She's hard, she's hard. But, no. I'm always terribly quick. I hardly ever rewrite, so it would take me, ah, probably about five hours at the most, you know

Audience member: That poem?

JM: That poem five hours at most. And I'd only rewrite if there's a mistake, if there's an actual physical mistake that I've made, I've made an error or an unintentional meaning. I think you can do that all the time.

MB: Katharine, do you edit?

KMT: Yes, I do.

MB: For mistakes, or do you actually go in to slice up her work?

KMT: Everything

JM: Everything. Everything. She didn't use to, obviously, but now she does, and it's invaluable. If you get an unintentional double-meaning, as opposed to all the intentional ones, you know, she can say that, and also she just, like grammar and corrections.

Audience member: Do you live together?

JM: Yes

[long discussion of American Electoral System initiated by audience member]

MB: Again, these are some of the interesting things I think that Jennifer plays with in the book: this idea of how you manipulate power or how you use whatever system is in place

Audience member: Exactly, to rule people like that out

MB: Or to play those. There are people in government who are cluey about how they use the political structures to get outcomes, that's what they do

Audience member: Do you think the average American was really appalled by Trump getting in?

MB: I don't know if you can talk about the average American

JM: I think not

MB: Everyone on my Facebook feed was, but I don't know if you can talk about that as an average American

JM: I think not. I think they were quite elated in certain quarters that it wasn't so predictable as it was supposed to be.

MB: My boss was American at the time. We were on a flight to Melbourne and I was meeting her there

Audience member: So what did she?

MB; She voted Trump, and I was shocked because I just expected that nobody did. I didn't expect him to win and we had a blackout on the plane and we got to Melbourne and he was in

Audience member [gasps]

MB: And I was like: you know, we were all like: how could this have happened. She was like:

I voted for him

Audience: [gasps]

MB: I was surprised, when I had a calm conversation with her about the fact that she was an intelligent woman who had reasons. I didn't agree with her reasons, but she had reasons and they were considered reasons and they, at no point did she mention, she talked about things like being a non-interventionist, at no point did she talk about racism or any of the issues I thought were important, I mean they were not of any relevance

Audience member: That's what I found

MB: That wasn't what she was looking at

JM: America was hugely traumatised by the Iraq War, just as much as by Vietnam. the fact that he opposed Iraq, the fact that he stood up against the Bushes and said: I oppose Iraq and it was a terrible mistake

Audience member: You think that was a factor?

JM: Oh, absolutely

Audience member: But what about his dreadful behavior mimicking that disabled journalist? I mean that, if I was an American, would be the end for me. I wouldn't have voted at all

JM: This is manners. This is manners, and they don't vote for good manners. They don't

MB: Well, some people do. Obviously for some people that was it. It's a very diverse, very large population and it's very stratified. So they don't necessarily talk to each other

Audience member: So they thought it was an okay thing to do that?

JM: No, but they wouldn't have thought it was important

Audience member[gasps]: See. I mean: again, that was a British - I don't know who it was - but he again tweeted: This is the end for me

JM: I don't remotely think that anyone in Appalachia voted for Trump because they think he's a nice person. I really, you know, I think they voted for, peculiarly, I think they did what all the academics say that they should do and I think voted for policy.

Audience Member: They what?

JM: I think they voted for policy. I don't think they voted for personality. I don't think they like his personality at all, if they think he's got one. He hasn't much. You know, I think they voted for policy.

audience member: Do we do that here?

MB: Not to the same extent

Audience member: We don't, do we?

MB: We do, but not to the same extent. Okay [session concludes]