

PRISM REVIEW CONTEMPORARY INTERVIEW

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MICHELLE DETORIE

interviewed by Genevieve Kaplan

I first met Michelle Detorie's poems when I received a review copy of her 2012 chapbook, *Fur Birds* (Insert Press, 2012). The strange little book captured me with its first lines: "I am 15. Female. Human (I think)." Continuing on, I encountered odd and not-obviously-poetic objects: "old bones," "sour birds," a "dead seal," branches and sticks, and "metal / chains a-linking." I found characters equally animal and human, a setting both wild and tame: "We lived in a burrow...I licked my paw" and "everything seemed fine until / we rolled [the seal] over and saw / the blood" and "each of us was asked to speak." The tensions in *Fur Birds* were wild and surreal and uncomfortable and exciting, so when I saw that Michelle's book *After-Cave* (Ahsakta Press, 2014) was about to be published I decided to be as brave as her poems: I contacted the author to ask if she would do this interview with me for you, *Prism Review*. She agreed! I've since learned a few more things about Michelle: she's tall. She's enthusiastic and knowledgeable and willing to discuss her works-in-progress. She's a savvy and generous promoter of literature. She's an eager reader. Etc. Etc. But don't take it from me—you can learn more about Michelle yourself. Read on to find out how *Fur Birds* became *After-Cave*, how maps become poems, how animals allow insight, how writing is a process that can't be rushed.

Since the occasion of this interview coincides with the publication of your first book, After-Cave (out from Ahsakta Press this fall), it makes sense to begin first by offering congratulations (Congratulations!!!), and second, by asking about the journey these poems have taken as they came together in this volume.

Many of the poems were first published in journals, and you've also published chapbooks that included sections from After-Cave – so can you take us through the process of how you encouraged these poems and poetic series to take on the form of a cohesive, book-length project?

Thanks! The poems in this collection came together over 3-4 years, beginning in 2009. I think I began to realize that I was working on a series/project pretty early on. When I started the poems I was volunteering a lot with the Santa Barbara Wildlife Care network. I assisted in the rescue and care of oiled, starved, and injured seabirds, and so I was having these very intense experiences with creaturely life. For many years I have been interested in the politics and poetics of interspecies relationships, affiliation, and alliances, and my work with the birds helped me wonder about and imagine different realities, and the way I do that is primarily through writing and poems and art making.

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In 2010 I had a back injury, and was convalescing for the better part of the year, and during that time I thought a lot about the body and care and how the world is put together, and I'd returned to some writing I'd done about adolescence, and then the Deepwater Horizon disaster happened and I did a lot of writing in response to that, and perhaps because I was in pain and on pain meds all of those concerns in the writing got all mixed up. And then I had surgery and felt better and returned to the project and saw that it was becoming a book. So I just kept going. Different pieces were published along the way, but I always saw them as part of something bigger.

I'm curious about the relationship between the three sections of After-Cave, "Fur Birds," "Feralscape," and "After-Cave" – do you imagine these sections functioning as separate long poems—books within books—or more as punctuating hinges that move together to sculpt the book as a whole, or something else? Did you always imagine the book in three sections, or were earlier iterations of this volume different?

I definitely think of the book as a whole, but the sections are discrete and within each section there are smaller parts that can work on their own. At one point, the book had a fourth section – *Havens* – that came between *Feralscape* and *After-Cave*, but I ended up taking that out because I wanted to treat it as a separate project. The questions in that project are similar and related to the questions in *After-Cave*, but they inhabit a different world. And three sections just felt right to me, and right for the journey the speaker in the book is undertaking.

I also really like triptychs.

Your work doesn't always behave as some readers might expect poetry to—After-Cave isn't a collection of discrete, titled poems. The lack of titles or individual poems encourages us to read the book more as a whole, or as larger pieces. Some pages (the lines on p.53, for example, beginning "Lace is the sound of the unwound / gun," or p.78 "Time's to put away / until we forget..."), though, do feel more like "poems," complete and discrete on their own.

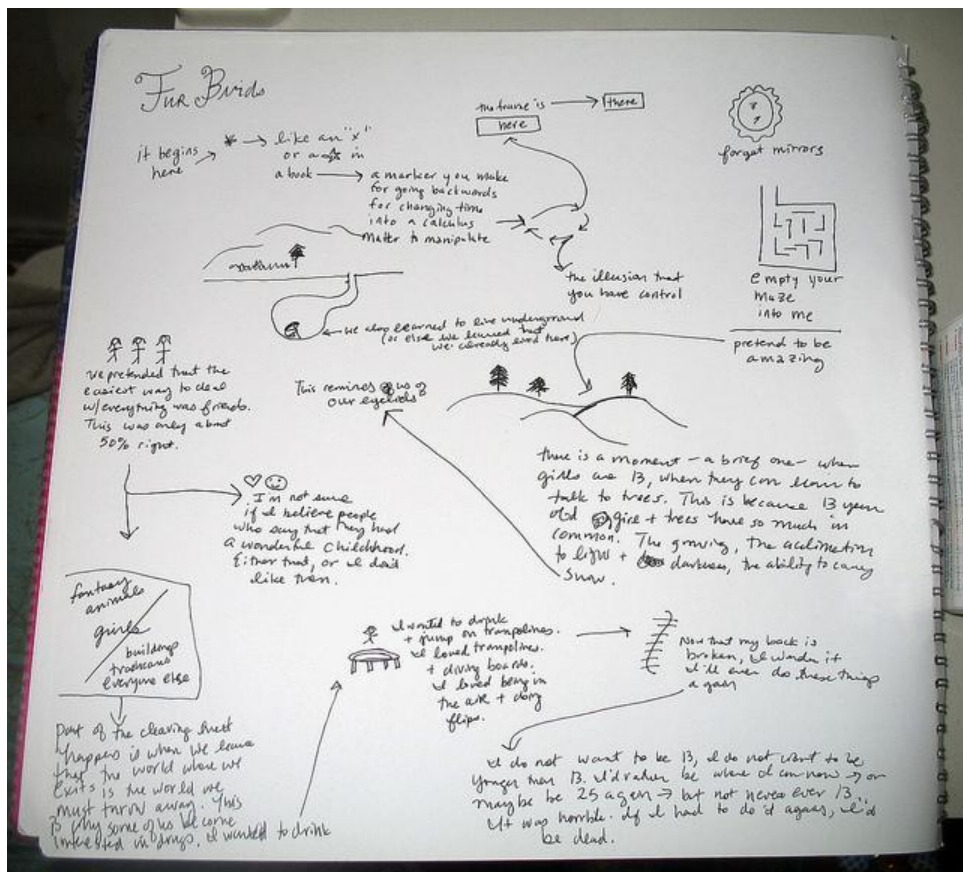
Earlier you mentioned realizing you were working on a series/project during your drafting process – could you describe how for you working on a group of poems differs from working on discrete poems? And, more about your writing process in general – is the project-ness of After-Cave demonstrative of your work overall, or do you find it's more of a departure from earlier (or later) writing?

I do write individual poems, but most of those come out of this larger constellation of notes, drafts, pictures, maps, reading, research, and conversation.

I like projects. It takes me a long time to figure out what I'm making and wondering about, and so projects are a way for me to do that over lots of pieces and a longish period of time. I also write *a lot*. Like, sometimes I have to write pages and pages to get to the language that starts to feel like the language I need or want. I do write individual poems, but most of those come out of this larger constellation of notes, drafts, pictures, maps, reading, research, and conversation. This is the way I've managed to create a writing process that feels both organic and sustainable.

Would you be willing to share a piece of pre-poem ephemera that led to After-Cave with Prism Review readers?

Here is a picture of something called “fur birds thought space.” It is from 2010, and it is interesting to look at because it feel really far away from what *After-Cave* became, but I can also see how I am making my way to that world.



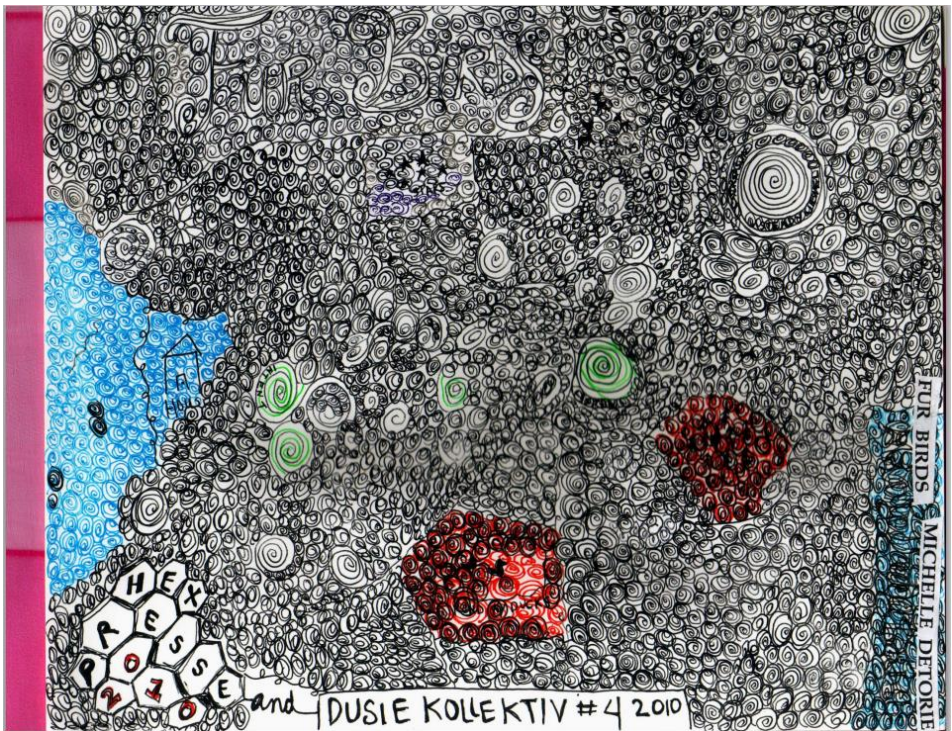
and here is an “in progress” picture of a 3-D “poem house” I made for “Fur Birds”



Here is a link to “Fur Birds” -- published as a chapbook for the Dusie Kollektiv in 2010:

www.dusie.org/Dusie%20pdfs/Michelle%20Detorie%20Fur%20Birds.pdf

and here is a picture of the back page of the map (the book unfolds like a map)



At earlier parts of my life, the idea that a poet is someone who makes poems – like individual poems that have individual titles and fit on one page – was very much the dominant mode I worked from. It was the model that seemed most present in workshops and in most of the books I was reading. And I made very different types of poems when I was working in that model. But it started to feel really forced to me, and so I just let myself do something else. For now, moving away from that and honoring the sort of unfettered, gushing messiness of the way language moves through my body and fingers feels more comfortable and generative and energizing. But it is also more work because I write through things over and over and it takes longer.

I like this idea of the poem and the body as one—language moving through you—and I’m very struck by the notion of messiness. Reading After-Cave, I’ve been noticing your continual attention to white space, how the language moves across the page, throughout the book a poem might begin at the top of the page, nearer the bottom, justified left....

The omen of a dark place becomes strategic, liquid.

A small distance between a book and a room.

A book is a room, I am a house.

A house whose with fur the pages clot with the ruins of half-finished places.

One is another whose fur we pet in the dark tunnel of a house.

thump, thump in the dark narcotics

Little	House
Bloom	When
The	Sun
Comes	Up

Little rips out of the dark night. Mirror feathers
 Bloom around the lips. An ear for snow-blind
 The ses like worms writhing. Here she
 Comes wearing the lipstick of smudged sticks
 smelling of Possession

A window gives way
 to gravel undergarments
 the woods—the pines—
 yielded

back to the House
 by the time When
 the Sun
 is Up

Pages 38-39

But it never feels messy; it feels purposefully placed. Especially in “Feralscape,” where the placement of the words continually shifts, essentially enacting the “scape” of the title. There’s a technique that, for lack of a better work, I’m referring to in my head as seaming—for example the literal line on p. 38 between Little and House, Bloom and When. But there’s also the sort of ghost-seam, the blank space

running down the poem blocks on p.39, and less noticeably on p.43 when the extra spaces between “in which” and “a page and a bird” line up to form the seam of the first two stanzas; “a zipper” “organ” “teeth” “like” “frocks” and “a continuance” all begin at the same point on the page and form a sort of backbone to the poem. I look at “Feralscape” and see organization.... Somehow “Feralscape” manages to be incredibly clean and messy simultaneously. Maybe that’s what’s drawing me to it.

Feralscape was actually written/drawn as a map, where – as one unfolded the booklet/map – lines expanded and were built upon. I have some pictures here, but I feel like a video would be better at showing how the text moves and expands in the original, hand-drawn version. See: <http://ovariessequins.blogspot.com/2011/06/feralscape.html> & you know, the placement is very purposeful – very intentional.

Your map is fascinating! Is there anything you feel is lost (or gained) in the transfer of “feralscape” from hand-drawn map/draft to the printed volume of After-Cave? Do you have a preferred version? Publishing a draft-book like what you’ve done with Feralscape is a gutsy and complex move—how do you think the early publication affected what “Feralscape” has since become?

I feel like they are two separate works, even though they are very closely related. I recently was listening to Jack Spicer’s Vancouver lectures on Penn Sound, and in one he reads two poems from *Book of Magazine Verse* which are essentially identical, and when he talks about them he makes it clear that he considers them two separate poems “dictated” to him at different times. That seems familiar to me; I often write through things multiple times and words and phrases get repeated, but physically the language feels

altered or re-oriented/discovered each time. The hand-drawn map/draft is messier, more difficult to read, and certainly more difficult to share/reproduce. It was a first pass through that “feral scape.” The version in the book is cleaner and easier to read, and I feel like its situation in the middle of the book is very important because it is what carries the reader out of the world of “Fur Birds” and into the world of “After-Cave,” so it also does a different kind of work, but it is still very “feral.”

This also circles back to the chapbook question I hinted at earlier on in the interview—about how having sections previously published in chapbooks influenced your work on After-Cave as an entire volume. I’m sure you didn’t take the published chapbook of Feralscape and stick it together with a couple other chapbooks and decide that made a book. Poetry very often seems to beg the question of work, since it can seem like, looking at a single page, there aren’t that many words there, so maybe it’s really easy to generate. Can you elaborate on the type of work you undertook as the project of After-Cave grew and changed and regenerated?

It was a lot of work, a lot of time. It took years. The number of words per page or book is an interesting way of thinking about it, since often I must produce at least 3 to 10 times the words to find the words that make the poem. A lot falls away, or gets culled out, or must be written before the other words come. & the imaginative work that goes into finding that world, mapping it, and then leaving it – that happens every time I sit down to write. Finding it is difficult, and leaving it is sometimes very painful (one must go to work, or go to sleep, or have some supper). The imaginative labor that goes into finding/mapping a world, learning a speaker and how to hear her – that is *work*.

Publishing excerpts of longer projects as individual poems or chapbooks is way to share that process along the way, and at certain points it feels right to share in that I can recognize parts as discrete aesthetic pieces that can stand on their own and do a certain type of work, but that work is always at least a little bit different from what those pieces do in a book, especially a book like *After-Cave*, which really moves through the pages sequentially. Of course there are other ways to read it, but that is mostly the way I read it.

At what point in your writing do you think about poem/series/project titles? Are they part of the initial composition, or do they come later in the process, or something else?

Hmmm. I think they come at different points. & sometimes I give things “working” titles that I don’t expect to use as actual titles for publication. For example, right now I have several projects that have working titles like “bitchy ghost,” “moss pit mud lady swamp poems,” and “dragon poems.” I guess I actually start to give them working titles pretty early in the process, if only to help me keep track of the different threads. Sometimes those threads knot and tangle together, and sometimes they remain separate.

Those working titles are very evocative—it seems impossible for anyone not to be enticed by “moss pit mud lady swamp poems”! [Ed. note: read past the interview for recent poems in the series.]

Could you say more about the human/animal connection of the speaker who inhabits so many of the poems in After-Cave? I notice the speaker is often animal (or animal-like)—“I licked my paw” (4), “I am animal” (23)—but the relationship is always complicated—“I am.... Human (I think).” I tend to read the “I” in After-Cave as simultaneously animal, girl, and poet, where the level of each

characteristic (I have a sort of pie chart in my head. I'll have to draw it for you) rises and falls as the book progresses. Do you have a specific narrator, or type of narrator, in mind? Do you envision the speaker of each section as someone/something different?

I love that you read the “I” as “simultaneously animal, girl, and poet.” That makes me so happy!

I think of the speaker in the poems as being the same throughout the book, but there are moments of polyvocality and other voices that thread through her consciousness and the environment, which is really a way for me to describe and wonder about the subjective and the social. To me it feels as though there is always a sort of pivoting or swiveling kind of consciousness – especially in instances when we are being socialized or instructed or offered (or smothered?) with particular ways of knowing and thinking, and we imagine how others see us – and the things they say about us or to us thread through us. So that sense of simultaneity that you describe makes a lot of sense to me. It is also true that the speaker in the book is learning as she goes, and that shapes her narrative/report/take on things.

I like your description of polyvocality; it seems to me the book continually enacts a kind of give-and-take not only of the speaker(s), but also in the content and subject matter of the poems. After-Cave often feels like a journey: girls and birds disappear (p.40) and appear again, changed into pages and birds (p.43), for example. I drafted out the pie charts I mentioned earlier, but they felt so static, unable to really convey continual movement of your book as it progresses. It feels alive. So I tried this, instead:

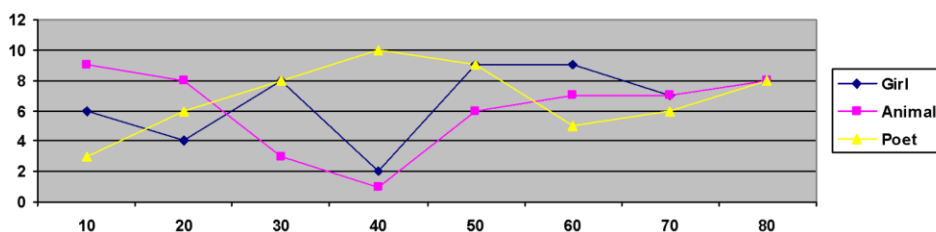


Figure 1 “We are either all together or else we are all alone” (p.17)

This isn't the way I usually read poetry—I don't think I've ever graphed a book before! But the world created in After-Cave is so odd and all-encompassing that I've found it difficult to describe in words (and images, too, it turns out).

In trying to imagine the reader of this interview, who may not have yet read After-Cave, I worry that we've been discussing your work on too large a scale, focusing on the concept and procedure, rather than the poem. I worry that may not be representing your work as particularly poetic, as functioning as a poetry. Which it does, of course! Listen: “gushing / mud, bridle-bearing ghosts / blown in from the neighboring thickets. Tumbleweeds or / teeth? Imagine if you had / to choose” (26). Throughout After-Cave, readers are confronted with an overall attention to sound, use of numerous poetic devices, significant and illuminating choices concerning lineation and spacing, etc. It is the poetry (by which I mean the way you choose to use language) of your book that first drew me in. So, a question: as a reader of poetry, what is it that most often compels you to continue reading?

First of all, thank you for making this graph! It's such a gift to see how you've mapped your way through the book. Really, I'm so grateful. I think it is kind of a visual poem itself.

I read for so many things – there are so many pleasures (and pains – good ones, bad ones) in reading poetry.

I do really respond to *voices*. I like the intimacy of poetry – the way it makes spaces for things that really cannot be said any other way, and makes room for more than one voice or register. And in this sense, I think maybe I respond to voices/texts that sort of pull you close with a sense of urgency. This is one of the things I love about Bhanu Kapil’s work. I also love this in the work of Claudia Rankine and Anne Boyer.

I do love sound. I like to sink into Dickinson and Hopkins. I have a very vivid memory of first hearing Gwendolyn Brooks’s “We Real Cool” (I think I was in 7th grade) and feeling such a shiver of delight by “We// Jazz June” – and realizing that I loved both the way it sounded *and* the way it looked on the page.

And I enjoy reading fiction, so I do sometimes read for story in poetry – for what happens or what changes – at both the level of action and consciousness.. I think this is a pleasure at work in *The Descent of Alette* (by Alice Notley) and *Young Tambling* (by Kate Greenstreet).

And I love immersive experiences – that sense of being sunk in the world of a book. I’ve recently experienced this in books by Claire Hero, Elizabeth Treadwell, Lucas de Lima, CA Conrad, and Cody-Rose Clevidence.

And I love poets who use the page creatively or adventurously – like Jessica Smith and Anne Carson, as well as those who have a writing/poetry practice that leaves the page, like Julie Patton and Helen White.

Wow—so many great recommendations! I hope Prism Review readers might seek out some of the wonderful poets you mention here.

What is the relationship between your writing and reading practices? For example, do writing and reading generally occur simultaneously? Or feel like separate realms? Are there specific poets or books you often return to while working on your own writing?

There is definitely a lot of overlap in my reading and writing, but I feel like they occur in different places in my body. Reading feels like it happens mostly in my head, but I feel writing in my arms and fingers and mouth and gut. I do find the process of listening to poetry to be more somatic, especially if I'm someplace where I feel comfortable closing my eyes. I've gone through phases when I've taken a lot of notes while I read, but lately I prefer reading in big gulps without taking any notes. That said, I also read a ton of poetry online, and that often happens in brief intervals. I am always grateful when people share poems and links to poems via social media. It feels very essential to getting through the day.

How much do you want/need readers to know about you ("the author") to best read your book? I'll read happily—and preferably, I admit—without author's personal contexts, but, earlier on in the interview when you mentioned things like "Wildlife Care network" and "back injury," my ears perked up—I think, oh, of course that's what language like "I towed a line // and dragged it through a river / towards an ocean" or "On a scale of 1 to 10, rate your level of pain" (49) refers to! But there's no Wildlife Care Network or back injury in After-Cave....

I don't want the reader to have to know anything about me to be able to read or appreciate the book. Honestly, the *best* way for anyone to read it would be to just forget there is an author/poet behind the text at all. There is a speaker in the book, but the speaker is not me. I want the reader to listen to her. That said, the *process* of getting to her – that involves me, of course. And of course my own experiences inform that process, but I feel that the poems are imagined or

intuited from a place that is *not* me. I feel like the best way to describe this is being like a channel.

I think writing comes from all sorts of places, and for me there is this very particular ecology of how lived experiences and the ideas I'm thinking about pass through my imagination. Meditation, trance, and dream inform my poetry. I need to imagine and make poems for my own comfort and understanding, but it also a way towards invention and discovery, and at a certain point, the voice I was imagining/following just had a life of her own, and the writing was a way to create the conditions to hear her.