

## **SPEAKING IN TONGUES: WRITING THE SEQUENCE *BIBLE STUDIES***

My third collection *Torso* was several years in the making, but I don't consciously plan a collection. It's only when I have enough poems to fill seventy-something pages that I begin to examine more consciously how any themes and poems answer or speak to each other. That collection moved into four sections: the first a cluster of memory poems, changing into my life in the present; the second section versions of Lorca's *Dark Love* sonnets, which were a collaboration with my partner Keith Rainger who speaks Spanish, where I attempted almost to blend my voice with Lorca's and celebrate his sensuous images, his proud absence of narrative; the third section nine sonnets for a dear friend who died; the fourth section a sequence of twenty one poems called *Bible Studies*, some of which spoke in the voices of people from the Bible who loved their own gender.

My poetry has always mixed the autobiographical 'I' with speaking as a motley crew of other characters: Adam after the birth of his third son, a man with a dancing bear in India, a Serbian prisoner-of-war in my first collection; a married Conservative councillor arrested for indecency in a public toilet, a gay concentration-camp prisoner in my second collection; a sequence spoken by John Clare and the gypsies, homeless boy, lace-maker, rich man and neighbour he met on his escape from an asylum in Essex. These voices of other characters have helped me to take a different approach with my poetry if I've been 'stuck'. They've helped me to think my way into another's situation, as well as using that voice to reflect from a sideways angle on whatever issues may be crucial in my life at the time of writing.

Moving into my first gay relationship after the end of my marriage nudged me towards writing *Bible Studies*, to deliberately return to original, apparently 'sacred', texts that depicted same-sex-love-relationships. In several poems I chose to speak in voices from the Bible. This helped me to explore other perspectives, whilst (at the same time) speaking from aspects of myself: 'speaking in tongues', whilst acknowledging (painfully sometimes) that my tongue is queer now. I must side with those in the Bible who love their same sex: I now speak as 'one of them'.

For example, in relation to the poem *Gethsemane Nude* I imagined myself into the voice of the young man in the linen cloth from St Mark's Gospel who followed Christ to Gethsemane. Writing in another's voice can be a liberation, as I find I become absorbed into whatever rhythms and images blossom from the character. That poem also allowed me to luxuriate a little in the King James' Bible rhythms, which I suppose were some of the first 'poetic' sounds I enjoyed as a boy at Sunday School.

*Bible Studies* alternates sonnets with free-verse poems. As a counterpoint, the sonnets usually explore personal memories, starting with my mother and schooldays, moving onto friendships and love poetry. The sequence's tussle between free verse and sonnets explores my continuing experimentation with sonnets, alongside my growing interest in free-verse and what that artistic choice might represent. This is specifically in relation to form versus free-form: speaking either as a good boy sticking to rules, or as an older man who cares less about pleasing everybody.

Writing as another character can be an effective way of approaching an apparently 'dangerous' subject metaphorically. Writing *Bible Studies* (a process that took two and a half years) helped me to develop a series of queer voices to 'answer' the voices and influences of conventional religion. Writing *Bible Studies* (and returning to Biblical texts with a contrasting potentially unorthodox interpretation) helped me to discover a changing sense of selfhood in the face of challenges thrown by changing my life.

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