Nick Makoha

In conversation with John Siddique

John Siddique: Hi there, Nick. Welcome to WritersMosaic.

Nick Makoha: Hi, nice to meet you, John.

JS: It's lovely to be here with you and thank you for doing this interview with us.

NM: Oh, it's a pleasure.

JS: So, I'd really love to start off – because some of our listeners, even though you've been around a long time won't have come across your work and [will] just be drawn in by, you know, your image on the website, or whatever – so, I was wondering if you could share a poem with us to begin with, and then we can enjoy your text in your voice.

NM: Alright. I'm going to share with you a poem called 'Promise to my Unborn Son'.

JS: Brilliant. A lovely piece.

NM: **Promise to my unborn son**

It used to be enough, to be my father's son,
until he was gone. Neither of my two languages
could reach down the phone and ask him to stay.

Even when we lived in the same city. His voice only
ever spoke to me about the news. So when your mother
told me, our second child will be a boy, I panicked.

There were no memories to show me
how to love you and I knew a day would come when
I would stare back at you – without words

like faces on the billboards of the Barking Road.
This road will always lead you home.
It is important to be from somewhere.

I am Ugandan, living in the East End of London.
At your birth, look for me. My voice will be a river
flowing from my mouth, waiting to tell you – everything.[1]

JS: Just gorgeous. Absolutely gorgeous. And of course, your son is born now.

NM: He is. He's been around for ten years.

JS: Wow… amazing. What's his name?

[1] Published in *Out of Bounds: British Black and Asian Poets*, Bloodaxe 2012.

NM: His name is Iden.

JS: Iden?

NM: Yeah.

JS: What a wonderful name. So, the reason I asked you to have a look at that piece is because I've been reading through your work and, you know, there's such a… well, I feel anyway, there's such an underpinning in what has been published around 'journey', around 'land', 'migration', 'belonging', and there's more that I want to talk about that later on. But underneath that… underneath it all, I feel a real sense of… I don't think it's even spoken out loudly, but in this poem particularly, it comes through more tenderly, that there's a lot of reflection about fatherhood, maybe manhood and what that means, and family. And I just wondered if you would reflect on that with us a little bit.

NM: Yeah, I mean… well, I guess fatherhood is… well, family is important to me. Let's just start at that base. And something that I was always grappling with in my childhood was my relationship with my father, because I was in and out of his life because my mum and dad were separated. And because of that, I moved around, not just the country, but the world. And I guess what this poem brings into focus is, I was becoming a father for the second time, and I hadn't fathered…You know, I was a boy–child, and I didn't know what it was to father a boy. I hadn't learnt from my father, so there was this kind of fear and concern, I guess, in many ways. There are

many gifts you want to give your children, but one of the gifts I wanted to give my children was: one, loving my wife; and two, staying together. And both of those things aren't as easy as they sound. So, on both parts… so, it's like what makes a bridge… what makes a bridge, ultimately? Part of the bridge is… are the children, you know. I don't know if I'm making sense.

JS: No, you're making absolute sense. You're making absolute sense. Thank you for being so open, and daring to be vulnerable with us, too, because I think that is actually a really important side to, as you say, 'keeping things together'. If we're steely, if we're too steely, and we don't have that ability to have openness and to look at the fundamentals, then we don't have very far to go, do we? And I think… you know, that definitely does come through, particularly, as I say, in this poem.

NM: Yeah, I mean… it's weird because even now as I'm dressed, I'm wearing what my father used to wear. Like he used to wear a pair of jeans and a yellow shirt. And I don't think I did that intentionally, but then you asked me to read this poem, and this is something I remember. When I used to live with my father in Saudi Arabia, he would wear that. So, you know… I guess in many ways, we become our parents in some kind of way; but also, we need our parents. I think my son right now, he's at that threshold where he's figuring… he needs his own identity, but he also needs his parents and he's grappling with that. You know, as frustrating as that can be, and it's probably even more frustrating for both children and parents around the world because we're in a pandemic, it's a fragile existence but it's a necessary existence. So, as a child figures out the world, they need their parents around.

JS: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And it's interesting you talk about that… that line, you know, we don't even realise that it's there. It's almost like a line of life that runs through. You know, there's your parents before you, their parents before them; now, it's our turn and then, that time is passed onto the kids, isn't it? I was thinking there's this poem by Khalil Gibran that talks about children as being like the 'arrows of time' and that we are the bows that kind of launch them forward. You could almost see these successions of archers and bows moving forward through time.

NM: I suppose, well two things: One is, that's one of my wife's favourite poets, is Khalil Gibran. Time, is, I think… One thing that's been brought into focus is time, you know, and the importance of it. So, how do you use your time? Where does it go? Who do you spend your time with? My daughter and I, we study a lot because I'm doing a PhD, she's doing her GCSEs, and we're all a lively bunch, but my daughter is probably the quietest. But my… I'd say that the conversationalists are my wife and my son, and like when they come into the house it is very noticeable. But that's been probably one of the gifts and I mean even though it's… I like to be quiet in my mind as a poet. One of the gifts, you can always tell when the door goes, I can always tell, 'Ah, there's my wife. Ah, there's my son.' I don't think they even notice the world that's occurring around them. But they're that little gift… I said to my wife yesterday: 'You two should start a sitcom.' Because it's like watching, I don't know, *The Two Ronnies*, or *Morecambe & Wise* sometimes when they interact with one another.

JS: Yeah, there's a kind of a mother-son bond thing, isn't there – that's 'just a little world of its own'?

NM: Yes. Yes. You said it better than me. That's really what I was trying to say.

JS: Absolutely. And also, there seems to be a father-daughter one. It's really quite interesting.

NM: Yeah, I don't know why I have the stars aligned that way, but they do.

JS: They do, and I think it's… a thing, you know. It's wonderful to talk about family, and I'm really thankful to you for going there, that's just really gorgeous, actually. I just want to turn towards your line of being a poet. I just wondered when did younger Nick discover that there was a poet inside him? How did that begin to manifest?

NM: This is a question that I get asked a lot. There's the straight route and then there's the zigzag route. So, the straight route is… I think looking back in hindsight, everything was about becoming a poet. Whether I was going to pursue it, I was always a poet and I think I knew that. And now that I look back, I can see the signs. But when I actively started to pursue it, it was almost coincidental. So, I moved here when I was four years old; and between the ages of four and ten, I was here. My mum says during that time, supposedly, I wrote a poetry collection. I don't know where she's put it, but she says I wrote a poetry collection. I know that at six years old I wrote my first poem. I can actually remember the experience. I know the school, it was St. Joseph's, and I wrote my first poem, 'A butterfly'. And then, I guess the biggest event which triggered the 'journey' of the poet was when I was in boarding school in Kenya, in a school… it used to be

called Imani. It was a school that was initially for children whose parents worked for the Del Monte plantation… a pineapple plantation in Kenya, but then it became an international school, and I went there with my brother. Yeah, one of the things that happened was a maths teacher kind of took me under his wing because I had been moving from school to school, living in country, and I'd always have to adjust to the new world, the new people, you know, fitting in. And I think he kind of saw that, but he gave me my confidence because always my grades would slip as I started a new school, because I had to figure out how they do things. And it was my maths grade that started to pick up first and that's because he'd spend more time with me, he'd give me extra work. In that first term, I think all my other grades were rubbish, my maths grade was fantastic. But that… to me, that gave me a lot of confidence. And then, you know, eventually, all my grades improved. But then, one day he died of a heart attack, and the news was passed on to all of us. And I remember getting ready for school, in my boarding school, and walking up to the classes after breakfast and I was late, and I just burst into tears. And that day was tough… And then I think it was prep, so in the evening, it was prep time and instead of doing prep, I couldn't even think about prep, but I just thought, you know, 'Let me just write him a poem.' And as I was writing the poem, the tears were falling from my eyes, and I think everyone else… I didn't even see everyone else; they were just watching me. And then… I can't remember… I think her name was Elaine, but a girl called Elaine… she took… Eliane, Eliane… That's her name! She was from Liberia. And she took… she grabbed the poem, read it, and then all of a sudden… all I remember from then on, the next day, the poem was in the yearbook. I was being asked to be… everywhere they could use a poet, they asked me to come. So, whether it was reading poems in church, or was reciting poems to other schools, that was the birth of the poet. But even then, I didn't relate, I just thought, 'This

is something extra that I do.' And then, from then on, it just kept… every year something would happen, so when I came back...

JS: Like life just was insisting that you do this, really.

NM: Yeah, so, it was always 'close at hand', is what I would say. So, I assumed everyone wrote poetry. I didn't… it even took me a while to suddenly realise, 'What? Other people don't write poetry?' I assumed because I was doing it, it must be something that everyone does. And it took me a while to realise not everyone writes poetry, you know.

JS: So, looking back now, if it's always there, where do you think that lies within us? Because I recognise exactly what you're saying and maybe somebody listening to this right now.… has that exact same thing; and yet it's not the kind of thing I guess is often talked about. Where is that?

NM: I mean I have many theories. They're all the same thing, really, but it's a 'word to world' fit. So, we create the world that we live in. I'm looking at a table, but until I call it a table it's not a table. It's just something.

JS: Yeah.

NM: You know… So, words have power, right? And, you know… I believe in God but, you know, if you believe in the Bible, like the first… it's the utterance that God makes that brings things into being, you know, and so the word in and of itself, is necessary. A child doesn't speak a language –

its first utterance is a cry, yeah? It is taught language and through language, it then is taught the world. So, language is important, but there's another layer to language which is poetry. And what poetry does is… it does this amazing thing… is that it can encompass all of human existence, both now, and what is in the future and what is in the past. And not only can it encompass that, all the history of it, the geography of it, the emotion of it. And, ultimately, what it does is it holds all our story, you know. The story of human existence can be conveyed through words.

JS: Yeah, it makes the job of the poet actually very, very important; but also, sort of looking at it, from what you're saying, is it takes a lot of the ego out of it as well, doesn't it?

NM: Yes…

JS: You know… it's just a thing of such importance that story is recorded… not just stories, but the spaces between the stories, or the absences that we can't barely talk about but, somehow, we manage to put a line down on a piece of paper. I have a saying myself which is, 'The paper can take it'. Other people may not be able to take it, but the piece of paper can take it. That's what I actually mean by that. And yet, somewhere in the words themselves, but also just within that arranging of space, within that movement of flesh and nerve and soul and bone, something that's kind of unspeakable is somehow given some form, so that it can be met by another person.

NM: Absolutely… Absolutely.

JS: Yeah.

NM: You know… the poem knows more than we know.

JS: Do you find that to be the case that you write something sometimes, and you'll be standing on a stage, or something, and it speaks back to you with its wisdom?

NM: I wouldn't say sometimes, I'd say all the time. I'd say when I write and, more so now… so now I write something and, ultimately, I'm like a craftsman. If I was a carpenter, I would be making a table or shelf. You're trying to make the best shelf, but once you've made it, you know, and I was saying this to my friend the other day, it doesn't belong to you anymore – it is its own thing; it's its own creation; and now, when you use the table, it now teaches you – it teaches you how to be. So, in the same way you make a poem and then you read the poem… when you read it back, it is now talking to you, as opposed to you talking to it.

JS: Can I just ask you about that actually, because you bring up that craftsman-like element? I was going to come to that a bit later on. Something that I notice about your writing is there's a precision in your words and your stanzas. I actually wrote the word 'honed' down when I was reading your book, *Kingdom of Gravity*. You know, little phrases and words like 'iris of black glass', 'axe heads', 'short ropes', 'standing outside of myself'. I always wonder about the origins of things. And I know that… I think your father was a surgeon and you studied biochemistry… Do you

think part of that accuracy comes from that scientific part of yourself, or that want of somehow taking 'soul' as we're talking about it, that's manifesting through poetry, but you also have this scientific side, so you want to get it down and you want to get it clean? That's the feeling I was getting.

NM: I do like precision in writing. I mean, I appreciate your compliment. Yeah, I mean, probably the scientific nature, but I'll take a step back and I'd say that poetry is a science, you know. Poetry is many things: it can be a science; it can be a religion; it can be a philosophy; it can be a parable; it can be all these things; and it demands all these things. So, I say to my friend, like when I'm writing a book, or even a poem: to write a book is like climbing a mountain. And the reason why you hear the precision in those poems, is because to write that book I had to climb the mountain. So, the beginning of the book is the bottom of the mountain, where it is easy to walk; I can even run around the bottom of the mountain; I can dance at the bottom of the mountain. But as you move up the mountain, you need to use more of yourself, you need to focus your breathing, you need to use more of your muscles, you need to gather your steps. So, that precision is because I am at the top of the mountain, you know, if that makes sense.

JS: No, it makes absolute sense. And it's just really sort of gratifying to hear that as well, actually. I was almost waving my arms there going: 'Yes, it's as much a science as…' You know, science and art do not need to be separated out, in any way. I was wondering if you could speak to us about… because we're talking about this early phase, where, you know, the poet was just kind of revealed basically and then he had to get on with it, which is wonderful? And so, it's fascinating that it's almost like it's almost no

choice in the matter. And I was wondering about kind of what books, or writers you felt supported you in that journey? I know you had a very interesting encounter with a very odd little art film called *Swimming to Cambodia* by Spalding Gray. But – and it would be great if we could talk about that a little bit – but I also wondered what other books you leaned into at that time?

NM: I didn't relate to myself as a poet as if it was something special – I assumed everyone was doing it. So, it wasn't like, 'Ah, I'm a poet, I can only read poems'. I just assumed everyone was writing poetry, because that's what people do. But once I distinguished myself as a poet, then I started reading more poetry. I think the first poet that opened my heart was probably Li-Young Lee…

JS: Yeah, marvellous.

NM: He probably opened my mind and my heart, because he spoke of being from somewhere else and not fitting in. He spoke of love and articulated it from a male perspective without pomp or without sentimentality. He spoke of philosophy, and these were things that compelled me. Kwame Dawes, but more because I saw a career as a poet which I hadn't seen. I wasn't trying to be some kind of kingpin poet – it was just more… I see the way, you know, when you see the waters open… I see a way. And I think Kwame was that poet that started, 'Gosh, I could do this as a living.' You know… so, what Lorna Goodison does for poetry is important to me. Even just my contemporaries, so people like Saffir Elaho or Morgan Parker, you know. But, at the time, when I was younger, I was,

if I'm honest, I was naïve to poetry, in the sense of I didn't know where to begin. My taste was wide.

JS: I was just wondering, you know, just for anybody who's writing, who's listening, I was wondering what your writing day looks like, when you're having a writing day? Because I know you've also really…evolved the expression of your work, so that there's obviously this kind of poetic writing, and I know you're in academia too, but with the poetics you've taken that into stagecraft as well and brought that onto the stage, and that's just amazing. So, I wondered what your writing day actually looks like when you're working, when you're in a strong work period around either writing poetry, or somehow taking that denser material of poetry and opening it up for the stage?

NM: Alright, I'm going to answer this in two, maybe three parts. So, part one. In my ideal working life, I'd love it that I write every single day. That would be ideal. So, I wake up, go for a run, you know, do some writing, hang out with my wife, kids, go and do whatever they do, you know, I'd love that. It doesn't happen that way, and I've had to kind of release myself from that attachment, of that. What I've realised, is that my process is different: I'm always writing. Now, what that means is, it doesn't mean I'm always actively at a page writing, but my mind is always in the state of the poem. That's what I've come to realise. But I didn't realise that at first, because I didn't understand. It's kind of like only seeing through a glass darkly, you know. So, what I didn't realise is that I'm watching a film and the film is informing me about what I'm thinking; I'm listening to a song; I'm having a conversation – the poet is there, you know. So, there's Nick… Nick 'dad', or Nick 'man', or Nick 'husband', and then there's the poet, who's observing all these things. And inside of all these things, he's making

connections. Now the poet, he's egoless, but me, the father, the whatever it is… has ego. He gets upset, he gets annoyed, but the poet is just thinking: 'This is useful'. Not in a kind of parasitic way, but in the sense of, 'Ah, this is where the love is', or 'This is what matters', or, you know, this is what is of concern.' And so, then when I sit down, what I've realised, I've had to learn how to do is, if I'm reading a book, I've got to think, 'Ah, this is the line that holds the emotion I'm thinking, or when I think of my son… like my son said something so beautiful the other day… he has a maths tutor, and the tutor lost her grandfather, and my son came home and when I told him what had happened, he was like, 'Dad, I understand how she feels because we've recently lost our matriarch.' And just to see his compassion, he says, 'I understand how she feels. I hope she's okay.' I mean, I love my son, he's an amazing guy but what I saw there was his compassion. But he doesn't even know he's being compassionate. You know, he's got to go back and be the little rascal that he usually is, but what I know of my son… he showed his true character, which is that compassion. So, when you ask me when I'm writing, I can't… I'm not just going to write that down. That's just tripe. But what that shows me is hope in the world. So, when somebody says… when I'm writing a poem and I'm thinking 'compassion', I have a real-life reference point. Does that make sense?

JS: No, absolutely… absolutely. I know that you've been asked about this so much, right? So, I know that you left Uganda when you were four years old and your mum, you know, you had to bribe people and there was this journey and, of course, that's reflected in your work a lot. The question was – what did you, or your mum, carry with you as you left Uganda? An item in your pocket, or a book in a bag, that you felt like was important to take with you? And have you still got it now?

NM: There's an easy answer to that. I don't think I know the answer, is the easy answer. But what I do remember of the journey… a few years ago, I spoke to my mum about the journey because she doesn't… it's not something she brings out in conversation: 'Hey, look… remember when I brought you to England?' Because it was quite traumatic for her. But when I spoke to her about it, you know, more candidly as an adult – so now as a man and a father and a husband – I remember her saying, 'At the border, everything was touch-and-go.' My mum had to make up a story and, you know, what I realise going back to what we were saying earlier, my mum is an *excellent* story person – like she doesn't write anything down. You know, I wouldn't call my mum a great reader. I mean she was… she studied psychology and stuff like that so, those are the kind of books she likes reading, and politics. I think what my mum did, was what we carried with us were stories; because my mum would talk to me all the time, you know, and tell me about people who were there. And those stories, I think in many ways, that's the poet you see in me. So, one of the things she said to me when she saw my one-man show*, My Father and other Superheroes*, and when she saw me, you know, at the Forward Prize,[2] you know, two things she said to me: 'How do you remember all these stories?' And I think partly because some of them she used to talk to me about; some of them, I heard from other people who were related to us; but the one thing that my mum gave me was the ability to capture stories. She says when I was at this one-man show and she had seen it for the first time, she was like, 'Huh… when I was pregnant with you…', because there was a time, she was being interviewed just like I'm being interviewed right now, and she was on television because she was into politics. And I think she was pregnant with me, and I kicked. And at that point of kicking, she says, 'I know this one's

[2] *Kingdom of Gravity* was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection in 2017.

going to be a writer.' And she told me that story then, so imagine… So, all my life my mum wanted me to be a doctor, a biochemist, but it was only at that point when she saw this, she goes, 'I always knew you'd be a writer', and then she told me this story. I'm like, 'How do you hold that in up until now?' Like my mum is just this conundrum. So, I think the gift that my mum carried with me was story. So, it wasn't like something tangible, it was something intangible, but probably more valuable.

JS: I can't think of a more perfect point to end on, Nick. Thank you so much. Bless you. That was just absolutely gorgeous. Thank you so much.

NM: It was a pleasure. Thank you, John.

A recording of this interview can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**