

Karen Christopher & Mary Paterson

a walk through London

led by Karen, transcribed & edited by Mary

Late summer 2017

TwoFold was a festival of duet performances taking place at Chisenhale Dance Space, London in March & May 2017. The festival was organised by Haranczak/Navarre Performance Projects, and included duet performances carried out by the company and guest artists, alongside other duet works. It also included the two day symposium, “Twofold: the particularities of working in pairs”, at Birkbeck College, University of London.

Haranczak/ Navarre Performance Projects is the company of the performance artist Karen Christopher, named after the maiden names of her two grandmothers.

The following text was commissioned as part of TwoFold and to reflect on TwoFold, which itself reflected on Haranczak/Navarre’s six year duet series, *The Difference Between Home and Poem*.

I have to start by saying, there are these memorials here. They're in beautiful, old style memorial plaques. Each one is written across a number of tiles but they're obviously all you know made for the purpose.

And These are focused on people who sacrificed or died trying to save someone else.

So: Lee Pitt is a 'reprographic operator'. Which has nothing to do with him saving anyone. But you need to know that's what he does because that tells you something about him. 'Aged 30. Saved a drowning boy from the canal at Thamesmead. But sadly was unable to save himself.' And then it says the date.

Then this one. 'Whilst being scolded and burnt ... sacrificed their lives in saving the train.'

And so, it's like that.

And they're quite. I mean, they're quite.

Well no I'm not a foreigner actually because I've been naturalised.

Oh really? How do you know?

How do I know? Because I've got a passport!

Oh – you're an actual citizen!

Yeah, well I wanted to vote, didn't I? So it had to be done.

And that's what being naturalised means, that you get a passport?

You have the right to a passport. You don't automatically get it.

It's a very loaded term.

Isn't that bizarre? I am naturalised! I'm a natural woman!

We are going on a very specific path. So it's really good because they've unveiled it again. It was covered up for a while, while they were restoring it. I'm going to probably forget exactly what it was so I'm going to read on the thing. But It's the union for the guys that made the knives and stuff. Was once upon a time. So let's just see. Be double sure. Yeah, see?

The Worshipful Company of Cutlers.

I never knew that the word cutlery derives from the [reading from a sign] 'Latin cutlarius, from the old French cutellier, a maker or seller of knives and weapons ...' 'Not simply an artisan but a designer, an assembler of parts, he produced the finished article which he then sold in the market place.'

So! It's Cutler's Hall.

What have you given up in order to work with someone else?

My sanity, my pride, my sense of ownership, my! The word I'm looking for, I cannot find.
My sovereign will. No!

I can't ...

So all we're doing is we're looking at ... There are some other things further that way
but it's too much. I knew it would be. I was really planning to finish right
here.

Ok.

There's a plot of land [over there] that belongs to the church, and when you go to it you're in
Cambridge or something. You're not here.

Again, it's like the decision to move to London: there's always a self-serving aspect, as well as the
difficulty of it, or as well as the giving up of rights and privileges, that has to happen

I think

In order to

I mean there's a self sacrifice that has to happen, because of the will of the other person. In as
much as my will has to

But when I think about that, I think: it's not really self sacrifice because I

Want

To do that. Why do I

want to do that?

It was all an accident. It was all really an accident. Well.

I did choose Gerard [Bell].

When I first started this, I figured I needed to start with two people that I chose. So I wrote
them letters: one to Stacy Makishi, and the other to Gerard Bell. It was a proposition to work
together for two weeks. At the end of those two weeks we would decide if we wanted to make a
duet together. Stacy and I decided not to. Gerard and I decided to do it.

Sophie [Grodin] asked to be my intern. Because her teacher at Central [School of Speech and Drama] had emailed me and said ‘she’s my best student’, I decided to meet with her to say, “no”, rather than just to say, “no”. And during the course of the conversation, she was very persistent. And Eventually I found myself suggesting that we could spend the month of her internship as if it’s the probationary period for making a duet.

And do you know why they have -

An elephant?

An elephant and a castle?

Nah. I don’t know anything about that.

I wonder if it was close to Elephant and Castle. It’s the same -

It’s the same elephant, and the same bit of castle.

I suppose it’s just an elephant that goes into war. Is the elephant part of it. And that would make sense because they’re selling the swords -

They’re doing the sword thing. Their big crest up there has a whole bunch of swords on it.

Because In answering her questions I was describing the process I’d gone through with Stacy and Gerard. And I thought: well, I could do that with you; how does that sound to you? And Teresa [Brayshaw] She had known Goat Island. I was at the Flare Festival running a workshop, and her husband is Neil Mackenzie, who runs the Flare Festival, and she came up to me in the lobby. She asked me what I was doing, and I described the duet project to her. I heard myself describing it; and I was describing it better than I ever had before. I was just thinking in my head: wow! it’s making sense now.

This is a walk that I did when I first moved here. So This is just me recreating that walk. Which I’ve done with other people -

A guided walk?

No, CJ took me.

CJ took you. Did he know where you were going?

Yes.

So, when you first moved to London? Not the first time you visited London?

No.

But when you first moved here?

When I first moved here, when I decided I was going to be living here.

And how did you decide you were going to be living here?

Because: CJ.

Self-sacrifice by giving up *her* lifebelt. Voluntarily going down with the sinking ship.

Trying to save a lad

From dangerous entanglement of weed.

Which is just.

it just stays in my head. This dangerous entanglement of weed And he
was 19 and he
was a railway clerk. And this was July 16th
1876.

And a lot of them There's just one person and the saved person. They're a series of duets.
Mostly. Not all of them. But mostly. One person and another. Doing this thing.

There's nothing to confuse the moment. It's just giving you

A Moment.

in time.

And usually in place.

Then she said, "I wanna do one with you.

"Can I do one with you?"

Well first of all, Goat Island ended. CJ and I both lived in Chicago, but CJ had been suffering a little from not being in Britain ... I'm just trying to notice where we are. *The public gallery of ... The court... Of the Royal Court. Central Criminal court.*

Are you being silent because you know it's good to be silent down here, or is it out of ... No. It's a bit of respect that comes to me. This is where they come out. Sometimes the press are out here. *Wow.* Trying to catch people. Sometimes when I go through there and I come out here, there's all press and nothing happening, or a throng, or like now: not that much.

I can't imagine. Moving across the world like that. How it feels. To leave that life behind. 25 years. In one city.

I couldn't imagine it either.
Because the only thing I'd ever wanted in my life was to stay in one place and reap the benefits.

How

can I proceed in the world and try to be open to different ways and a different way of being?

I realised that being in the studio with just one other person was the most terrifying thing I could do. What I need is a shock!

where there's no witness. There's no tie breaking person. There's nobody who isn't right here. Trying to do this thing. Just you and me. And if I don't do something, you're left without someone. To respond to.

So there was that. And that's what I said. I needed a shock, so that I wouldn't clearly not just so the weight of what to do is equally borne ...

And this one has complicated language. 'Drowned at Teignmouth whilst trying to rescue a boy and baby and seen to be in difficulty.'

That. I don't know.

It just seems like there's a complication there.

How come you were prepared to leave?

I guess because I had made CJ do it. Yeah ... I would have just stayed. I would have just stayed.

Jacob Marley's chains! I mean, it's like I have all these performances, from Goat Island, from when I was ten, you know, on, now.

Rattling behind me do you know. They

They are a lens to see through?
They have tracked thought patterns in my head?
They have solidified certain relations that I understand?

I sometimes say a line, by accident, and think: I know that person. Don't you know.

And they're quite. I mean, they're quite.

My mother used to do these puppet shows. There was a Winnie the Pooh puppet show, and the owl couldn't say the word 'seed' without saying the word 'cake' afterward. So he kept. There was this courtroom scene where he was the judge. He was saying 'this procedure' and he kept saying, 'this proceed-cake'. And now I can't hear the word 'procedure' without saying in my head the word 'cake.'

It *is* a mental thing. It might be a spiritual thing, if those things are real. Do you know? It might be karma, as my mother would like to say. And there's a lot of things it could be, but whatever it is, it's a matrix, that holds me there.

What holds me?

And in a strange way I don't feel that I am always right. Or that I always know what the best choice is, or what the best option is. And so polluting my will with the will of someone else means that I have to really fight. I have to convince the other person. And so if I'm not going to be able to convince them, maybe it's not really a good idea, or not a good idea now, with this other person.

And I didn't say it, because we were crossing the street. And also because you were talking about the piece or the work in front of us, or whatever it is that you actually said. And I think I thought,

that whatever it was we were actually saying deserved to resonate a little bit there rather than me just going to this big thing. But it floated back for some reason

the crossing of the street and everything.

I know that in order to speak to Gerard Bell I have to behave in a certain way, to get the result I want. And so of course I'm manipulating him. He's manipulating me. Responding in a particular way. I am to him. So everything I come up with is in the context of him. And that's where ownership dissolves; because I can't say anything that I think of is my idea in the absence of Gerard

or the others

Because I think this commitment idea is easier to understand, with just one other person. I mean, for me, in this current period of time that just passed. I think I wasn't sure I could

Float

More than one other person. In my commitment requirement

It's always a dice roll because there's no way to know, from my point of view. Some people know. The press obviously know. They come here. But I have no concept. I have no way of checking. Also, sometimes guys come out with their wigs on, and that's always good for a visitor from the US. If someone says, "take me on a walk, I'm just visiting," I say, "OK!" And I take them here, and it throws them into a swirly tailspin.

That's where the ownership dissolves. I can say – yeah, that was my idea. Of course I can say that. But I would feel wrong not to say the context and the origin and this idea comes as a response to the process of working with *him*. I would never have had the idea otherwise. This would never happen.

I want to be working with people and I want an incredible amount of commitment.

Do you remember what it said? The West ... The West West Front entrance is that way.
West Front entrance is the one we've got to be at.

So we

What was I saying?

You were saying, when you worked with Teresa ...

Oh! For instance, I wanted to include something about these moths I'd just read about in a Rebecca Solnit book, *The Faraway Nearby*. There is one story that goes along the bottom edge of all the pages, in a single line. It's about moths that drink the tears of birds. They will actually do it to people, too: eye fluid. They take minerals from it: salt, whatever.

So we're just walking along the river and I say, you know, what I was reading last night, these moths that drink the tears of sleeping birds.

They drink the tears of sleeping birds!

We're walking. And she's just silent. I'm waiting for it to sink in. It's kind of sinking in.

And then she says. "But Karen. *Why* are the birds crying?"

(My mother doesn't even remember that. I told her about it, just recently, when she was here, and she was like 'what are you talking about?')

And I was, like

It's about tears.

It's not about anything else.

It's about tears.