

How Will You Live? A Tribute to Mary MacRae, *Brittle Star*, Issue 24, Autumn 2009

Introduction

by Jacqueline Gabbitas

Some of you won't know who Mary MacRae was. But hopefully, by the end of reading these tributes you will go and read her book, *As Birds Do* because you'll recognize that here is a poetry you should have in your lives. When Mary died in July, she left a hole in the poetry world that truly won't easily be filled, not just because of her unfailing commitment to challenge her own writing, and by extension the ambitions of contemporary poetry, nor because of the eloquent, tough yet generous criticism of other writers' work, but because those that met her, that read her poetry, were changed. The following tributes touch on how Mary and her work affected many of us.

In my editorial, I describe how she came to the aid of *Brittle Star* with a last minute close-reading of a Marilyn Hacker sequence. But just as easily I could tell you of our conversations about Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, which resulted in me searching for a second-hand copy that, in my fantasy, may well have been the one she lost when she was a young woman, and my sending it to her. And could tell you of her smile when she thanked me for it. I could mention how, when I worked at the Poetry School, each year I would bank a donation from Mary of up to £100 for the school bursary fund as recognition of the value of the education in poetry the School gave her. All of these things would give you some insight into Mary as a person.

I took her book with me to Hawthornden as one of a few companions on my month-long Fellowship there, and wrote a poem to her (at this point she was already very ill) about a woodpecker she identified for me one day. I sent it with a wee note (it was rough, but I'm glad I sent it), and, as thanks, she sent me a gift of perfume and bath crème and a wonderful soft-toy bumblebee that vibrates when you pull a string. She always thought I was a busy bee, but while I was busy with other things poetry-based, she was busy with the making of poems. I'm very thankful for this. I learnt a lot from Mary's feedback on my poems, having been in a number of groups with her, and am grateful for this, but I learn still more from reading her poems. But most of all, though, I enjoy them, these friends to be taken along with you when you know you'll need them. It is difficult to accept there won't be more.
