

An Interview  
with Author  
Karen Meadows

# *Almond, Eyeless*—

## Can Poetry be Translated?

**In *Almond, Eyeless*, Karen Meadows explores the complex interaction between internal and external landscapes and the powerful influence of context on experience.**

By Petra Caroline Rieker



**A** *lmond, Eyeless* (Groundhog Poetry Press, 2018) is the first book of poetry by Karen Meadows. Her work has also appeared in *Subtropics*, *Blackbird*, and *The Hollins Critic*. She has an MA in English and creative writing from Hollins University. Working to market small businesses and startups, she lives outside Philadelphia.

In *Almond, Eyeless*, Karen explores the complex interaction between internal and external landscapes and the powerful influence of context on experience. Through rich sound and unexpected imagery, *Almond, Eyeless* confronts how the self is compromised by society, relationships, or even brief, impersonal interactions, yet maintains the persistent, often desperate, need to be understood by another. Karen brings a distinct, original voice to invented and traditional poetic forms, guiding readers across the contours of boredom, guilt, and misunderstanding to reveal the beauty that

resides within our own vulnerabilities and starvations.

**PETRA RIEKER:**

**Congratulations on your first volume of poems! It has been on the bookshelf since March 2018 and has made it onto the Small Press Distribution's Bestsellers List. With more than 50 poems, it's a wonderful collection. Can you tell us about your poetic writing process and current work?**

**KAREN MEADOWS:**

Thank you! The collection has had a really nice reception and I'm thrilled with how things are going so far.

My writing process can be very different, depending on the poem. A poem's beginning often dictates how I work to get to the final draft. The more narrative poems come on quickly and tend to keep a tidy string. I wouldn't say they come out seamlessly from start to finish, but a more complete framework emerges early and will require less reorganization and rethinking than a more structurally complex, imagistic poem.

More commonly, an image will come to me, or a line or phrase, and I'll know instinctually if that's the beginning, middle hinge, or ending of a poem. From there, it's usually a rush of imagery and shaping that toward a cohesive end. All those images and fragments get jotted down in a journal-type notebook. Once a poem is really taking shape, I switch to legal pads. I do a lot of recopying of entire poems

as I work through them. It helps me stay inside the rhythm and sound structure. Once I feel I have a nearly complete draft, I'll type it on the computer and print it. I'll leave it alone for a few days and then come back to see what needs to be tweaked.

Currently, I have a bunch of ideas that are stemming from one main subject, but I'm a poet who needs time to percolate and let things build inside before I really try to capture ideas with words. So, I have a notebook with a working title for my next collection and am jotting down notes, ruminating on different takes on that concept.

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**PETRA:** Your book plays the English language; you explore the physics of relationships. Where do you get your ideas for your poems? To what degree are they related to your personal life?

**KAREN:** Ideas for poems can come from anywhere. They've come from news articles, travel, works of art, the garden, and scientific phenomena. And, yes, some come from personal experience or the experience of friends. Writing has always been a coping mechanism for me. If something is particularly difficult or confusing to me, the only way I can deal with it is to

explore it through imagery and sound. By capturing it that way, it lessens its grip on me; I can be done with it.

Though I use the first person a lot, many poems are my taking on a persona. Often an image or a line will come to me, seemingly out of nowhere, and I have to spend time figuring out what it means, creating the backstory. A poem can be fleshing out a tiny cross-section of that persona—a super-condensed short story of a single moment or thought, if you will.

I'm very interested in how people interact and the ramifications of those interactions, whether in our most vulnerable moments or simply passing by on the street. I studied psychology with a focus on behaviorism. How people act in specific situations, how they change for others, transgress others, and the mercurial nature of emotions and relationships have always been a fascination for me. We're all so similar yet so different in the constructs we build while perceiving the world. I would say *Almond, Eyeless* is about connections—how they're made, morphed, and lost.

**PETRA:** Poetry, with all its nuance, rhythm, sound, and multiple levels of meaning, is certainly the most difficult language to translate. Is it, in your opinion, possible to translate poetry from one language into another without losing meaning?

**KAREN:** This is a tough question, and one I go back and forth on. When I was younger, I shied away from reading a lot of

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translated work. I always had this suspicion that I was ultimately missing out on something, being cheated somehow by the filter of a translation. I would think: “Do I actually love Baudelaire, or do I love David Paul’s translations of Baudelaire?” Ultimately, it didn’t matter. I couldn’t stay away. The greats in any language are magnets and their translated works are beautiful offerings.

I don’t think meaning is lost per se, but there’s no perfect one-to-one in translation—that’s where a lot of nuance and inherent depth in poetic choices can be lost. For example, my friend, poet and translator Daniel Coudriet, and I were discussing differences in translations of the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca. Daniel is fluent in Spanish and can read the original and appreciate that *sueno* means both sleep and dream simultaneously and *cielo* can mean both heaven and sky. There’s no English equivalent that works the

same way. The translator has to pick. I, as a non-Spanish speaker, miss out on some of that complexity. The fact that there are many translations of Lorca, as well as Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, Bohemian-Austrian poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke, and many other writers indicates that each new translator believed that those who came before didn’t get it quite right.

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For me, there are two types of meaning in poetry—technical and emotional. Great poems are a perfect synthesis of sound, rhythm, form, and overt meaning, but it doesn’t end there. A poem lives and is great to us because of what’s in the gaps, between the words and lines. I’m referring to what the poem evokes that is or had been ineffable to the reader. There are mystical aspects to the great poems that persist and reach through, despite the limitations of the language into which they are being translated.

**PETRA:** How close do you think the translation of syntax is tied with the translation of sound and rhythm? How close should the translator stick to the verse form?

**KAREN:** Not being a translator or linguist myself,

it’s difficult for me to answer the first part of your question with authority. From what I understand, syntax is tied with sound and rhythm a great deal. While preserving one, the other slips and vice versa. Articles, adjectives, and prepositions are ordered very differently across languages (or don’t even exist in some), so the translator is faced with this very sticky issue when trying to preserve sound but operate within syntactic rules of a language.

Things can get even more complicated if the poet purposefully manipulates the syntax of the native language for a play on words, slang, or an affected structure. The translator has the difficult choice of deciding which aspects of the work are integral to the experience of the poem and the poet’s intentions and how that can be conveyed in the contemporary target language. This is daunting, to say the least.

Regarding your second question, writing great poems in verse form is an incredible achievement. And if someone is considered a formalist poet, that aspect of the work is very important to them. How could anyone ever dream of translating Robert Frost or Richard Wilbur without preserving form? I mentioned Baudelaire earlier, and there are incredible translations of his *Flowers of Evil* poems that preserve the formal structure and rhyme schemes of his poems without straying too far from the original text. There are some additions that were made by the translators to achieve that structure, but



they keep with the tone and are often more beautiful than the literal French.

The American poet and translator Gary Miranda said something important about translations: “If it’s a good poem in one language, it should be a good poem in the other.” If a translator is too beholden to a literal translation of the poem and its structure, they might end up with a pretty bad poem. And that’s not maintaining the integrity of a writer whose work has lasted centuries or is a prominent poet in another country.

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Until recently, I had hung on to some purist notions of translation. I felt that poetic devices, such as repetition or the use of “O,” should be preserved without question because a poet uses them to create a specific effect. Those are very conscious choices. But translators like Miranda have abandoned some of those devices in their translations because they just feel unnecessary and can be a barrier for a contemporary audience.

I wholeheartedly disagreed until I read the original *Legend of Sleepy Hollow* by Washington Irving

to my son. (Not a poem, I know.) The language was so thick and antiquated that it was virtually unreadable. Being a word nerd, I enjoyed it, but my son packed it in after a few pages. And that’s not a long story! It was a shame because he was so excited to read about the headless horseman.

After that experience, I became a little more open-minded to the idea of “updating” more antiquated modes of speech or form to welcome in contemporary readers. It can be done without sacrificing the spirit of the work.

**PETRA:** What are the skills a poetry translator should have?

**KAREN:** First and foremost—a passion and respect for the work. The more you live within a poet’s *oeuvre* and immerse yourself in their voice, you’ll come to understand which aspects of the poetry are key to that poet’s work. That way, if you must make a decision about which path to go down, you can feel more confident that you’re staying true to the integrity of the vision and style, and not just exactly what’s on the page. Most translators of poetry are poets themselves, so the work is naturally in good hands.

Second, I would say it’s important to have a solid foundation in the technical aspects of poetry. That’s really where you begin to see the artistry and depth behind the great poems and what led to some particular choices. This would help the translator be more assured that any manipulations

Meadows, Karen. *Almond, Eyeless* (Groundhog Poetry Press, 2018)  
<http://bit.ly/Almond-Eyeless>

A reading by Karen Meadows of her poem “Anita” from *Almond, Eyeless*  
<http://bit.ly/Anita-Almond-Eyeless>


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during translation maintain the integrity of the poem.

**PETRA:** Is there a language you would especially enjoy hearing your poetry recited in or would like to have your work translated into?

**KAREN:** Oh, any language would be incredible! I studied French, so that would be the language in which I could best understand, from a technical perspective, why specific decisions were made. I would also be able to recite them correctly on my own. However, it would be fascinating to hear the poems in a completely unfamiliar language, such as Arabic or Japanese. They would take on a completely new life and dimension, which is all I could ever hope for as a poet.

**PETRA:** Thanks for the interview.

**KAREN:** Thank you for asking such interesting questions! 



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