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**Episode 54: Tim Kiely (January 2016)**

Transcript edited by David Turner – 22/2/2017

Host: Lizzy Palmer – **LP**

Guest: Tim Kiely – **TK**

**Conversation:**

**LP:** Hello, my name is Lizzy Palmer and this is another episode of Lunar Poetry Shorts. Today we are in my house and I am joined by the lovely Tim Kiely. Hello.

**TK:** Hello Lizzy.

**LP:** How are you?

**TK:** Very well thank you, very well. Freezing and bitten with cold but otherwise basically holding together.

**LP:** Winter has arrived.

**TK:** It has definitively.

**LP:** So as usual we will start with a poem. Please.

**TK:** This is;

Sestina on an Unknown Italian Artist

He was young when he first found he could paint,
Making a palate of his plate, his bread
The brush, the pulped fruit he found he could move
To mimic that consistency of flesh.
Soon after, he was wanted by the Church
And this was held, itself, a miracle.

His first commissioned piece, the miracle
Of Feeding the Five Thousand, did so move
A visiting bishop, who swore no paint
Could ever render, in such brilliant flesh,
This Christ, munificent, here, breaking bread,
He said he might, one day, give the whole Church

Just such a splendid rendering, and the Church
Would number him among the saints. His paint
Would flush each once-remembered miracle
With pious colour; his Last Supper bread,
Lazarus shuddering from the tomb, the flesh
Of Christ sky-searing and transfigured, move

Tears from the faithful. And yet, he would move
In later years, away from miracle.
You might see, entering his local church,
Judas' dark plumb-line; the Temple bread
Eaten by David; Jacob, scored in paint,
Offering blind Isaac his plate of flesh.

He needs must love us in our sickly flesh,
It seems, this Christ he would let himself paint
Only rarely, and who even the Church
Did not find fit for purpose. Miracle

Gave way to *Ecce Homo*; did we move
Him who had taken our tears as his bread?

"*In this way, it would seem, he earned his bread*",
The guide tells me, as we move round the church
Somewhere near Urbino. Her learned remove
Cannot dull altogether that the flesh
Is sharp as ever. More's the miracle,
Until the end, there was the will to paint.


**LP:** Beautiful. Thank you, Tim.

**TK:** Not a problem.

**LP:** My first question for you is the one we always begin with. That is why poetry?

**TK:** I think, I can't really answer it without going back to the effects that I remember of the very very earliest poems that I heard, read aloud, had on me in a very very tangible way. I've been acquainted with versification before, I guess, as a way of expressing yourself. I got brought up on have a very strong diet of Roald Dahl's Revolting Rhymes and Dirty Beasts when I was much younger, as I suspect a lot of people did.

But there are two experiences that really, kind of, stand out for me. One very shortly after my family moved to the UK, I was about eight years old and I remember hearing read aloud for the first-time Alfred Tennyson's, The Eagle by my then English teacher Mr Braithewaite. I did not, in later years go on to be a huge fan of Tennyson but that poem still sticks with me as this compacted brilliant charged instance of feeling like I had kind of had my view of the world knocked sideways a bit.

And I remember a very similar thing happening a few years later when I would have been about fourteen, fifteen starting my English GCSE, as I suspect a lot of other people encountered it for the first time. Reading, At a Potato Digging by Seamus Heaney who would then go on to be one of my, kind of, heroes I guess as a model for writing poetry. Particularly coming, for the first time, to the phrase, "In a million wicker huts, beaks of famine snipped at guts."

There have been other instances since then but those two, kind of, crystallised for me, most clearly, why I think and continue to think that poetry has an important job to do for us as human being. As grandiloquent as that might sound, I think that it speaks to me of this potential and possibility to view the world in a way that offers new possibilities. A way to look at the world through a different prism of language, to look at it slantwise.

To have that experience whether it be disturbing or celebratory or affirmative or sometimes just electrifying you with the movement of it all. That to me I think answers something quite fundamental about why we need poetic language as a way of seeing and experiencing the

world. And how that then has to kind of find its way out of me whenever I try and have an encounter with something like that.

I suppose that's a very long way of saying that I do it because I think... I think really it sometimes just leaves me with no other choice. I have to meet the language in that way and I have to see what the experience works on me and what hopefully it works on a reader or an audience when I come to it.

**LP:** Great. Obviously, there you've just covered a few of your influences. Did you want to talk to us a little bit more about some of your other influences as a writer?

**TK:** Well, like I said, I've already mentioned Heaney as somebody who I think really probably had the most lasting impact and the one that went down the deepest. After I studied him I would then, kind of, take his collections and the way that he would write about poetry and the craft of poetry as well as the stuff that he actually wrote... He was a great critic as well as a great practitioner of his craft... Occasionally, you know, holding onto them with the regard that I imagine some obscure religious cults hold onto their holy books.

In addition to that I think probably the people from whom I've picked up the most about my own poetic method and sounded out my own voice best in the last few years... Through Seamus Heaney I came to be acquainted with the Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert who's also been a big influence on me in terms of how I regard the job of poetry and how I try and allow it to work on me when it happens. Don Patterson does a similar thing to me now, in a slightly more naturalistic strain somebody like Alice Oswald or Jean Sprackland, particularly, I think those probably are the ones that stand out the most.

If I branch out from there then I think the list of influences risks becoming incalculable, there are just too many of them. The more of the gods you worship, the more spring up. So, I think that that probably does the job adequately, for now.

**LP:** Perhaps then, at this point, we will have your second poem.

**TK:** Sure. This is a poem that has changed in some respects since I first wrote it, particularly when I took it to New Orleans around this time last year. In the act of performing it, several new bits and pieces became added to it so it's a very living thing, I suppose. In a way that some of the other poems aren't as obviously at first. This is;

Reasons for Learning and Chanting the Suttas

For the sake of the tune.
For your fullness of voice.
For what remains
In some muscle memory

Of the Mass, and of incense.
To keep words to hand,
Your *mettas*,

Or your *nibbanas,*

Which will never fully
Translate themselves,
But keep their strangeness
Intimately.

To sound out
An authority
In the opening
Of a vowel.

To know salutation
In the small of the back,
The pronunciation
Of prostration,

Since the mind
Learns no faster
Than the body
Which bows.

Or simply for this –
It is reason enough
That things are
Forgotten,

Or rather, forget
Their way to us
If we do not
Remember to make

Our mouths,
With all due
Diligence,
Habitable.

As Rabbi Heschel said
Of prayer:
Not to be granted
Anything, but

To be worthy
Of granting;
To be worthy,
In the very throat

Of the song,
Like a bubble
In the filling pool,
Of your bodying,

Sat in the curtained
Dark, signing,
Still point
Of the tuning world.


**LP:** Excellent, thanks very much. So, you clearly take influence a lot, kind of, traditional classic styles and form in your writing and it's often... Or always very elegant and shall we say highbrow. You used the word grandiloquent earlier and I was struggling to think of the right words to apply to that without it sounding like a negative thing because it's not all. Obviously, I myself write in formal style a lot too and I don't think there's enough of us doing that anymore. It seems to be almost frowned upon nowadays. What I wanted to ask is; How far does your style influence your actual subject matter? Also, have you found that that relationship has changed over the course of your writing career?

**TK:** I would say in many instances it's probably closer to the other way around, in my case. That often the subject matter will have an effect on how the style becomes apparent as I'm sitting with it and as I'm thinking about it. So, a very ready example being that, usually, if I'm thinking about... If some material, kind of, arises for a poem about love or relationships then it will often happen that [the] sonnet form suggests itself.

Simply because, partly I suppose, because inescapably as a result of my education and the influences that that's had on me, I know that that is very strongly associated with that particular theme and how as a genre that's worked itself out over time. And often times, you know, that's how it will happen, normally. I'll sit and work on a subject matter and it will happen that a line or a cadence will fall out in a certain way that then, when the rest of the poem takes shape around it it will come to that form usually without too much forcing, hopefully of its own accord, it will come out that way. As for how that's changed in performance, how performing has affected that...

**LP:** Actually that was my next question. I mean, I was wondering how the relationship between your style and subject matter might have changed. But perhaps if we could hear about your experience regarding performance in relation to your writing style.

**TK:** Okay. I think I can take the two of those together because I think they tell basically two different sides of a very similar story. The style over time has I think... I know that I've made a conscious effort at times to pare back on some of the accoutrements a more, apparently high-flown style. Part of that I think is just a process of realising that I can't go through my entire writing career sounding like a pastiche of T.S. Eliot. As much as I loved T.S. Eliot and as much of an influence as his style had on me, especially in my late teens my early 20s.

Oftentimes I would just sound like, you know, badly done early 20th century modernist poetry written by some ghastly adolescent. I think there's been an effort to strip back some of the unnecessaries and just allow more of the poem to speak for itself rather than me feeling the need to constantly add little flourishes to it. There's been, I suppose, more of an effort, more of an impulse towards something like simplicity which hopefully has allowed the poems more room to breathe.

But at the same time, performing has also taught me quite a lot about paying more attention to the whole phenomenon of sound. My whole education, as much as we would constantly be reminded to pay attention to the lyrical effect, was very page bound in many ways of necessity. And it meant that sometimes in spite of my best efforts to try, I had kind of lost an appreciation I think over the years for just the raw facts of things like cadence and rhythm and beat-work.

And that kind of attention to craft does only really, I think, come out fully or does for me anyway when you stop trying to be deliberately ostentatiously kind of highfalutin about it and just pay more attention to the sound of the thing as it hits the audience. That, I've probably learned more about than anything else as a result of performing and as a result of hearing some absolutely excellent poets perform.

Poets who give just as much attention to those elements as a more formal approach to style would give you to things like enjambment and the structure of the poem on the page. They will pay so much attention to the structure of the poem in the air as it is heard. I've heard some poets do absolutely extraordinary things since I started performing that has really forced me to raise my game in that way.

**LP:** It can feel a little bit hard to justify, if you write in those kinds of styles, as you and I are given to do. As there's such an abundance, at the moment, of spoken word styles and slam and that sort thing. though, when you think about it it can still be relevant when you think in terms the sound and the rhythm and how it can work.

**TK:** Absolutely. Absolutely and if I might suggest, I think... For me anyway, working within a very formal set of restrictions sometimes can actually force me to pay more attention to those things. It's one of the reasons why, I think, it's just quite important as a poet that you have to have some kind of sense of craft and a sense of what's gone before you and how other people have used this form before. Because otherwise you are, kind of, arbitrarily closing yourself off, I think, to a whole set of real surprises that can come out of just how inventive a poet is forced to be when they put quite a narrow set of restrictions on themselves to say I will only write a poem with this meter with this number of lines per stanza, it's going to work like this.

And that means that they can't cut any corners, they have to really strain every muscle that they have to produce creative and ingenious effects and the results can be absolutely staggering. And as a result of knowing how to do that well I certainly have been able to write better free verse as a result of doing that [**LP**: Yes, definitely] because it forces you to pay more attention to just the raw, stuff.

**LP:** Yeah and you can pull it back once you've restricted yourself in that way. I don't know about you but I get a massive sense of achievement if I have managed to create something within those boundaries [**TK:** Yeah] and then trying to maybe pull back and simplify it. It does become easier once you've done that.

**TK:** Absolutely. Absolutely and oftentimes, bizarrely, the smaller the poem the greater the sense of achievement because... I've become fascinated in the last few years with very very small scale poetic forms like haiku and senryu. And, you know, classical styles of Chinese classical poetry that's kept to four lines apiece and in the zen tradition where there has to be a set-up of... You have a proposition in the A and B line you have an opposition in the C line and then you have to synthesise them in the D lines in some way.

Being able to pull off a really staggering poetic effect in that concentration of space is an achievement that still, kind of, blows me sideways when I come across a really good example of it.

**LP:** And it's fun.

**TK:** I have to admit it, yeah. As a way of trying to see the world, it's very interesting. This is one of the reasons why... The thing that eventually prompted me to go on Twitter was, almost jokingly, a friend of mine... When I mentioned, a few years ago, that I didn't think I could use Twitter because I didn't know what I could say in 140 characters that wouldn't be just adding to the noise. Apart from Haiku.

And she said, "Okay, well then why don't you write haiku on Twitter?" And I did and that was about three, four years ago now, I think, possibly longer and [I] have produced quite a lot of short poems since then. But it means that you're always, at least in a very rough and ready way, you've always got some way of seeing the world floating around on your peripheries of vision that are searching for or open to poetic effects as they arise. It makes for a much more interesting procession through the day to day world than one might otherwise have, I think, anyway.

**LP:** Great. So, I'd like to have your third and final poem please. If I may?

**TK:** This is a poem in keeping with the theme that we were talking about not long ago. This is a sonnet called;

Some Excuses for Keeping Quiet

If you knew I got this excited when
You talked of Paris, or Hemingway, or
Told me that the earth's smell just after rain
Had its own word, and it was 'petrichor',
So much so that I lost all words of my own,
Just worked through worn jokes which still made you smile,
If you knew I saw your chocolate cheekbone
And thought of words like 'lips' and 'edible',

Of course you'd be concerned. Who wouldn't be?
There's only so much I can say to you.
Two hours later, coffee finished, we
Will hug fashionably, and when we do
I will lose some of my thoughts in your hair.
I'll probably talk about this later.


**LP:** Thank you. I've been trying to move away from writing in form recently but you make me want to take up sonnets again.

**TK:** I choose to regard this as a good thing.

**LP:** Yeah, it's a compliment. Great, lastly, where can people find out more about your work? Do you have websites, blogs, books?

**TK:** I do. First of all, all of the poems that I've read in the last half hour or so are from my three self-published pamphlets that are all available over Amazon Kindle or directly from me. They are, in the order that they were released, Footprints, Long Walks Between Little Lights and The Everywhere Room. There's about twenty poems in each one and they're available for about two quid a toss.

Alternatively, you can also follow me on Twitter where you'll see some of my shorter work, haiku and the new form that my meditation group basically invented at this point called the nyku and some other short stuff that's @TimKiely1. I've also, very recently, blown the dust off my old Wordpress account and you can find both my more recent poetry and hopefully more updates on my poetry in future as well as writing about poetry or semi literary things of one sort or another on there. That's https://timkielypoetry.wordpress.com/.

**LP:** Thank you. Obviously, as usual the links that Tim mentioned will be written beneath the episode. So, that's it, thank you very much Tim.

**TK:** No problem. Thank you very much.

**LP:** Yes, thanks everyone for listening. Bye.

**End of transcript.**