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Episode 85: Maria Schrattenholz; Melissa Lee-Houghton - 17/10/2016

Transcript edited by: Harriet Foyster 18/06/17

Producer: David Turner - **DT**

Conversation:

DT: Hello my name is David Turner, this is the Lunar Poetry Podcast. I'm in a field in Wiltshire today. We're down this way, we're going to Bristol tomorrow to interview some local publishers and poets. We're going have a sort of roundtable discussion just to find out what's going on in the area and if you're down this way you can get some tips, find out what's going on, it should be quite useful for that. Of course if you want to find out more about that episode and all the other stuff we've got coming up you can find us at Lunar

Poetry Podcasts on Facebook, Tumblr and SoundCloud or @Silent_Tongue on Twitter. And as usual all of our content is now available to download for free at iTunes and Stitcher.

Today's episode is in three parts. Coming up later on we've got a couple of recordings that were taken on National Poetry Day. There's an interview with Melissa Lee-Houghton but first up we've got Norwegian poet Maria Schrattenholz who I met when I was on a recent trip in Oslo. We got together at the House of Literature there and just had a chat about Maria's work and influences and a couple of projects she's been involved with recently. Oh and also I was just going to ask everyone to do me a favour.

The Arts Council funding that we got covers trips like this one to Bristol and paying guest hosts and guests for the feature episodes each month, but it doesn't really allow much for marketing or promotion and we rely pretty much 100 percent on word of mouth. So if you do like what we're putting out and you like the episodes or any of the interviews please do share them with friends and all over the social medias. Cheers. Here's Maria.

Part One:

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Maria Schrattenholz – **MS**

MS:

In transit I cling
to my chair in a row
on blue polished linoleum floors
opposite an astronaut standing still
in the watch-shop window at Frankfurt Airport

I will fly for 11 hours thinking I know
what awaits me
humans
to catch between my fingers
like clock seconds and round stones

Finally I'm landed, grounded and then
then I cling to those young boys' hands
making my hands young boys' hands

holding new skin and a continent to chew like a raw steak
pink flavours to float in my mouth like strangers' tongues
against all that asphalt

Time contains
just a certain amount of heartbeats
in an unfamiliar place

And I cling to salty words like "Come with me to Spain or Asia
you'll love it but you can't love me"
and I cling to those rusty naked mountains
and I need that
like I need sugar in my saliva and comparing words to find
the most beautiful language

Humans
to roll tear-like down the airplane window
later

Should I bring that perfume oil
should I bring that sweet rose chocolate
home?

I need an escape, that room to replace the place
I cannot stand
I am free and returning
maps need to be clear from yearning
and I will never grow old here.

DT: Thank you very much, hello Maria. How are you doing?

MS: Hello. I'm doing good thank you.

DT: Just a quick note for the listeners we're in a room in the House of Literature in Oslo and there's a kindergarten barnehage nursery class next door so you may hear some kids screaming. I think they're fine aren't they? They're not being tortured. It's okay.

MS: Maybe they're laughing at us.

DT: They probably are. Yeah. I've got ridiculously big headphones on so they probably find that quite amusing.

MS: Or the serious poetry we are talking about here.

DT: So when I was planning this trip to Norway I contacted a few poets and friends that I have already in Norway and Petter Solberg who's a mutual friend of ours recommended your poetry, and I think his introduction was "you have to talk to Maria. She writes great sci-fi poetry." So maybe you could explain a little bit about the link between your writing and sci-fi.

MS: I published a book last year which is called Atlaspunkt and that is sci-fi poetry where humans, towards the end of the book, humans have evacuated to Mars to live on Mars because earth is no longer habitable. So that is the sci-fi aspect of it but it's also about other things as well.

DT: So my follow up question was going to be is the writing based in fantasy or is the writing quite narrative driven and character driven?

MS: I mean the book is in four parts and it is separated into individual poems who you can also kind of read by themselves or individually. But there is this narrative, if you read it from the beginning to the end you can follow the narrative. Yeah.

DT: The sci-fi connection, does that run through a lot of your work or is it just this one book, or collection?

MS: Yeah. I mean I've always been very interested in sci-fi and I watch a lot of sci-fi movies and read a lot of sci-fi books. So I mean this is my only book that I've published. But I would really like to write more science fiction. I find myself being very, I don't know, concerned about the different aspects of sci-fi and different issues.

DT: Such as?

MS: I mean I would like to maybe write something about artificial intelligence in my next project. But also what I learned in creative writing class is also that you shouldn't force the project into some frames. So I'm keeping it in the back of my head and then I'm just writing and I'll see how it goes basically.

DT: You can always just make some people aliens can't you? Just write the poems first and then just change the first character into an alien, it's easy. Or a robot. Whichever. I don't know much about sci-fi but I'm imagining they are the two main things...

MS: That's an excellent idea, thank you so much. You just saved it now, you just saved my project.

DT: Actually that might be quite a nice project. We could go through some classic poetry and just change the characters to robots. That might be a quite nice thing to do.

MS: Yeah yeah. That's great.

DT: But what is it that... So what comes first is it, I mean obviously we're talking about not trying to force your poetry into a certain theme, but if we talk about Atlaspunkt for the moment, which came first was it poems that were just leading you towards an interest in sci-fi or was your interest predominantly in trying to write about that form of literature?

MS: It's a good question but I mean when I started writing I did not know what I was doing at all and I just started writing very fragmented in a way. And as the project grew I had no idea what to really do about it. But then it kind of struck me that yeah, they can be on Mars. And I also had been in South Africa and been out in the mountains in this landscape that is very different to what I am used to seeing. And also like being the cradle of mankind in a way, it is a very interesting place. So I was also writing about the first human standing up and sensing and exploring the world. That's the first part of the book. And this inspiration of being in a different place, maybe longing somewhere else.

So that is the human aspect that I kind of baked into this narrative. And when I figured out that "yeah they can actually just... They're on Mars. That's how it has to be." And then I was very happy about it because it made a lot of sense. And then it was also easier to put those emotions and psychological aspects into it in that context. So it was more like, to answer your question, or at least try to answer your question, it was not this planned thing, it was more that it evolved in that direction that it could be sci-fi and I was happy about it. And when it became sci-fi it became better, I think. It made sense to do it in that way. So it was this merging of... Yeah, and of course I always wanted to write sci-fi, it's a dream, so...

DT: And you mentioned just then that you'd been to South Africa and you sent me the link to a recording which is... So if you could tell us a bit about the project that you were involved in over there and how that other recording came about?

MS: Yeah I mean that is obviously not science fiction.

DT: Yeah I was going to say because there's a difference obviously between the two but they do feed into one another don't they?

MS: They do absolutely and that's the thing because it is science and it's very interesting to see how this human curiosity comes to life in projects like this Square Kilometre Array...

DT: Yes so what is this project? Because I probably won't do a very good job of trying to explain myself.

MS: They have a webpage and you can read a lot about it. It's radio telescopes being built in several countries and amongst them is the Karoo, or the desert areas in South Africa, where they are gonna get a lot of knowledge from the universe basically, and expand the human knowledge of the universe, and that's great. Projects like that captures the urge humans have to understand the universe. And that I find very interesting.

So my friend Rasmus Bitsch who does the Sound Africa podcasts asked me, or I mean we were talking about it and we're both fascinated by these telescopes and everything, and he had made this podcast about it, like a radio documentary about it. And I don't know we just came up with this idea of writing documentary poetry. And then we did it. And I used his podcast, I transcribed it into text and I used pieces of that and I wrote some new poetry around that. I also used some of the stuff from my book, some sentences.

DT: Yeah. I was going to say there are sections of interviews edited into the whole recording. One question I was going to ask was did you listen to those? Had you heard those interviews before or were they edited in by a producer afterwards?

MS: Yeah I've heard it, it's part of the podcast.

DT: It was part of the original yeah?

MS: And also in the poem you can hear some sentences that are also being said in the podcasts.

DT: And how much input did you have on the way it was edited together in terms of it becoming a soundscape?

MS: The beauty of it was that it was this collaboration where I was working on the text and Rasmus was like this catalyst for the whole thing and keeping it together and getting people and he got hold of this girl who reads it, this actress, I think she did an amazing job of reading it. Then also I had to kind of give up control. Just passing it along to somebody else. And then also there were these musicians who made the soundscape. So I had nothing to do... The music was in their hands, that's their field.

DT: Oh, we have some small people banging on the door.

MS: We all worked together on it but everybody was kind of in charge of their own field in a way. The musicians also used sound recordings from this particle accelerator that is in South Africa.

DT: Okay. Yeah.

MS: So that's also a very nice documentary way of making the music. So it's this fine exploration of documentary and other artistic fields in a way.

DT: I'm going to put the link to the podcast in the description to this interview because I really enjoyed it. It was really nice just sitting on the train and listening to the different elements and yeah parts of it are true documentary, true documentation, and I wasn't obviously aware that they'd been sampling sounds from other experiments as well. It makes it even more of a documentation piece. But it's also quite an interesting interpretation of that process as well, artistically and with the writing. I think we might take another reading before we go onto some more questions, please?

MS: Okay.

I hate sudden awakenings
I want to wake up slowly
so I can register the thickness of the duvet
the temperature
of the light that falls
or doesn't fall on my face
the size of the room, how close
the walls are
the resonance of my breath
if there is someone next to me

before I open my eyes

in a headache hotel room in Berlin
with sweaty synthetic white blouse
and smoke-smelling hair
on the couch in my childhood home
still broken from 5-year old feet jumping
illegally joyful
in a plane seat over Africa, someone
bumping my sleeping bent knee
in an empty dark room above the Arctic Circle
not knowing if it's day or night
in a narrow London bed made for one

but containing two

snaky rain running over window glass

someone playing piano in the next room

no fire alarms

so I can gradually

undisturbed

pour myself

into this existence.

DT: Thank you very much. So obviously the two readings you've done today have both been in English but your book Atlaspunkt was originally written in Norwegian. How did the translation come about, have you been translating it yourself?

MS: Yes. Yeah. I translated it to English by myself and got some input from English speaking people as well. I mean it's probably not perfect but it's readable in English.

DT: And how is the process? Is it a direct translation or are you trying to... Do you try in some way to rewrite it in English as you go along?

MS: Ah it's both. I mean I didn't find it very challenging to translate because it's not very abstract in a sense of, I don't know, like stretching the limits of the Norwegian language in any way. It's easy to directly translate a lot of it. But of course sometimes I had to rethink the meaning of the sentence and stuff like that. And also the rhythm of the words and how they worked together. You have to rethink.

DT: Yeah. And how important is the sound of the poetry being read out loud to you in your writing?

MS: It is kind of important, but it's not like I am sitting and reading it aloud all the time while I'm writing it. I do have it as part of the process, to deal with it in a rhythmic way also.

DT: That was the reason I wanted to ask that, because you mentioned about trying to keep the rhythm when translating. Is the rhythm always the same as a written piece or does it change when you read it out loud, and does that affect the way a piece is translated?

MS: I mean it has to change I guess depending on the language. So it's not like it's fixed or set in any way, it's more like trying to just... Trying to make it work basically. This poem that

I read now is written in English from the beginning which is interesting because it's a very different language from Norwegian obviously. I find it easier to play with and I find it easier to put rhythm into it in a way. I mean maybe you don't hear it when I read it now because I'm not used to reading it but... It's interesting.

DT: I've spoken to a lot of Scandinavian writers about the fact that most people that have been to university in Scandinavia, usually your level of English will be quite high, especially written English but there still seems to be quite a divide between writers that will write in their mother tongue and translate to English, and those that will feel comfortable in writing directly in English because it's not always that transferable is it? But then I suppose it's the style that you write in. Are there any limitations in English, do you feel, when trying to convey something over from Norwegian?

MS: No, no limits.

DT: No I just wondered, because I speak Norwegian and I've tried a few times to write, either to translate my poetry into Norwegian just as an exercise or I've tried to write in Norwegian and I find it really difficult. I can't... And my own writing is not very elaborate, it's quite simple and quite basic but I still find it quite difficult to go over to Norwegian with it. So I was just wondering, I wasn't trying to lead you anywhere with that.

MS: No but it's also because, as you can hear from these poems, it's also a bit about transportation around in the world and being in different places and so it's also like trying to put words on my journeys in a way, using English as the spoken language. For the last one or two years I've been travelling and using a lot of English, that's been my main mode of communication in a way, so it also feels natural to use that language to describe these travel experiences like this, being in different places and meeting different people.

Like in this first poem where I say "comparing words to find the most beautiful language"... It is interesting when you are travelling and meeting people of a lot of different nationalities. A lot of conversation is about language actually, like "how you say that?" and "how do you swear in that language?" Blah blah, you know? You always have a lot of people, with not necessarily English as their first language, and then everybody is communicating in English and then there is a lot of talk about language. It's interesting.

DT: Yeah I used to work a lot with exhibition work in galleries around Scandinavia but the common language was usually English because it was just easier that everyone picked something uniform. But then it was interesting watching the Scandinavians and to a certain extent Germans as well. There were certain phrases which would come up from each language because everyone just agreed that they were the best way of describing something or the most attractive way of describing it.

And usually when talking about the artwork, which was quite interesting, people would lock on... If you're trying to describe something, I think maybe that's what I was trying to get to with the translation, descriptions of things seem to be most often the most difficult things to translate. You know we can all find ways of communicating instructions and descriptions of... I'm not contradicting myself there am I? No. But in terms of trying to elaborate and

creatively describe something, maybe that's where the problem comes with jumping over to another language?

MS: Maybe.

DT: I mean I'm sure my failings with Norwegian are just my failings.

MS: I haven't tried to translate these English poems into Norwegian so I don't know how that would work. But I mean it's not like they necessarily have to be in English I think. We'll see what happens to them.

DT: And what's your background in terms of study? Is it all Norwegian or Norway-based?

MS: Yeah I studied contemporary art at the Art Academy in Tromsø in Northern Norway, interesting place. And then I did two years of creative writing at the same university and that's where I know Petter Solberg from. And then I just did one year of creative writing in Bergen at the Skrivekunstacadamiet. Yes, so a lot of very useful knowledge.

DT: And how did Atlaspunkt come about? Was that an extension of stuff you'd been working on at that point or is this newer work?

MS: No I started writing in 2011 and then I worked on what was going to be that book during the two years of the creative writing class in Tromsø. So I worked on it during those years with feedback.

DT: And who is it published by?

MS: Oktober.

DT: So you approached Oktober? Is that how that worked?

MS: Yeah I did. And I sent them... It was very different from, of course... I mean it was unfinished and everything and they said "this is not finished but work more on it" and I did. And I got into this dialogue with my editor and worked with her for quite a while and then in the end it got finished. Yeah.

DT: Yeah. No it's just... I don't know it's nice to actually... I think this maybe a very London thing, I think the impression is that, especially poets, you have to sit around and wait for someone to approach you. And it's nice to know that it is still in your control slightly, that you can still go and knock on people's doors and send manuscripts. But that may be a difference between the U.K. and Scandinavia in general I don't know. I'm just looking at the clock, I always wish I could just talk for hours with everyone but I can't put that stuff out on internet. I think we should finish with a reading please.

MS: Okay.

The first touch of crackling cotton hotel sheets:

a reminder of those lemony lusts, those nights
glossy as thickly membraned photographs
but told of to no one

Now I share the bed with my mother
like we're both in the same womb

Then bright morning comes and before she awakes
I leave with only myself
dressed in my knee-length men's shirt
with suitcase wrinkles and naked legs
through sliding doors
into June

I'm just another caffeine soul
in the pastel Stockholm streets
in the smooth subway tunnels
wanting to smile but
the liquorice between my teeth stops me
and sunshine headaches

Your skin is still freshly smelling, lining my skull
on the inside
you're also in this world somewhere
anywhere
I don't know

White airplane trails from horizon to horizon
evaporating my gaze
the flatness of the world keeps me walking
suddenly I recognise an ice cream-shop
because I've been here before

but still nothing has my name on it

I'm watching taxidermied animals
husky rabbit-grey, grouses
museum dusty
in children's patterns I clap my hands for them
then I stand still like them
glassy eyed
reborn anonymous.

DT: Thank you very much.

MS: I mean I don't know if it's relevant but when we were talking about sci-fi and language and translation and all of that I find it also relevant to mention this movie that's coming, it's called Arrival. And it's based on a short story called The Story of Your Life by Ted Chiang, and you can find it online. And that is a beautiful short story about how language affects the way you think and how you perceive the world differently through different languages because the aliens are arriving and they obviously are communicating in a completely different language.

This linguist tries to understand them and she is able to communicate with them and she learns the language and it affects her whole perception of the world and it's very interesting. So yeah. It's like when you're in another country and you talk to people who are bilingual or have different languages, like in South Africa people have several languages often and it's often like 'so do you dream in Afrikaans or do you dream in English?' Or I mean people often ask that and I mean if I use English as a second language a lot I start to dream in English and I start to think in English and I start to write in English. And it's different, and it's interesting.

DT: I think that's a good place to stop. Thank you very much Maria.

MS: Thank you.

Part two:

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Melissa Lee-Houghton – **MLH**

DT: So that was Maria Schrattenholz. You can get hold of her collection Atlaspunk through Oktober Forlaget which is a pretty well established Norwegian publisher. There'll be a link to their website in the description to this audio. Coming up next is the absolutely amazing Melissa Lee-Houghton who was down in London recently and I was lucky enough to meet up with her for a chat. It's quite a long one but I'd challenge anyone to meet Melissa and not want to talk to her for hours and hours. Here's Melissa.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:40:26]

DT: Thank you very much. And that's from your new collection, Sunshine through Penned in the Margins.

MLH: It is. Do you want to see it?

DT: Yes please, I'm going to have a quick look. It's actually nice, people don't often read poems that are quite that long on the podcast but I really enjoy it. You read it really well. So we were talking earlier before we started recording, you were telling me that you're also a playwright. Would you identify yourself as that first or are you just a writer in general?

MLH: Just a writer in general. I just write a lot of stuff.

DT: But do you find the form of writing poetry to be restrictive in terms of the amount of space you have?

MLH: Not at all, no. I think it's just... Because I think if you always read very different things, you're interested in lots of different art forms and, even film and visual art and all sorts different things, poetry... You can do anything with. I think it's the thing that I'm most into in terms of what I write because it is very dramatic. That, I could turn that into a play, I could make that into sort of a dialogue or I could do something with it. And I like writing that you can change into something else all the time, I don't see it as being very fixed at all. And to be honest I would never take that and do anything with it now because it's there and it's done. But I like the idea that you can. It's never over is it? You can always do something else with it.

DT: You'll have to remind me because I don't keep up with these things very much but you were recently in London for the Forward Prize.

MLH: I was.

DT: And what was that nomination for?

MLH: It was the Best Single Poem category for a poem, a really, really silly long poem. It goes on forever. It's a difficult one because it makes me feel very, very bad when I read it. I was in agonizing pain emotionally when I wrote it. So then I suppose you have to go through 'well, I'm been praised for something that was very painful.' And if you don't think about it

like that consciously, it's not too bad. But when... It's been very odd. For that particular poem I found it very, very difficult to deal with, I suppose, any kind of praise for it because I, instinctively, I don't like that it exists.

I don't like that I was in that much pain that I had to write something like that. And also because it possibly doesn't always come across to people that read it I don't think, that it comes from a place of sort of suffering, because it's about sex. So again I think people might say 'wow it's a really exciting poem about somebody's intimate thoughts about feelings about their body and about other people and what they want and things' but it's actually nothing to do with that for me.

It's absolutely got nothing to do with relationships, it's got nothing to do with having sex with somebody, it's purely about longing for something that's never gonna come. That's what it's about for me. And that's a very, very hard thing to write about and it's a very, very hard thing to then stand up in front of people and read. And I never intended to ever read it to an audience actually. So I read it twice in London recently and I felt really bad. I felt really bad afterwards because I have to go into that place to perform something. You know the same way an actor would you know?

DT: I've had this conversation a few times because I am quite open in my own writing and then that point where you come to read your work in front of an audience and the... We were speaking briefly as we had a cup of coffee before we started recording weren't we? About the reactions of audiences when they come up, and very genuinely and well-intentioned they come up and they tell you how much they enjoyed your performance. And how real your emotions seemed to them.

MLH: Yeah.

DT: I don't read much in public anymore because I don't enjoy it but I was constantly telling people 'I'm not an actor. What you saw then was how I felt in the moment.' And there's that idea isn't there? We were talking about sort of truth in your poetry. There's this idea that... Are we obliged to be completely honest in our writing but then in some way be actors when we're on stage?

MLH: I think so, yeah.

DT: Are we expected to switch over?

MLH: Well we're not expected to but people that don't will always struggle. I used to be me. I used to go and do a reading and I was absolutely me, and often that me was a very fragile, vulnerable person, which just doesn't does work, because it doesn't... It's just so profoundly uncomfortable for the audience and for you to do that. And so I've realised that the only way to do it is to perform something so I have to be somebody else. Now it's got to the stage where I've never worn the same outfit twice. I do a lot of readings so you can imagine this is getting silly. I do that, it wasn't a conscious thing for a while, but I do it because I don't want to be me.

I need to be as far away from me as possible if I'm going to read something like that. And although I do get in it and I remember that place and I am articulating and expressing those feelings I still have to be... I feel like I'm an actress and it's not me. Because also have you ever read the book Perfume? I can't remember who wrote it. It's a novel about a man, I love this novel so much, and it's a really disturbing novel about a man who has this profound sense of smell and he kills loads of women. And at the end he creates this beautiful perfume and he pours it over himself and a big crowd of people just basically rip him to pieces.

This is very dramatic and melodramatic as well, but I feel like that's what can happen to somebody if they're... You know you're not an actor, you're not an actress. You're not reading somebody else's work, you're reading something that is very profound for you in a way that it's never going to be for the audience, and they can tear you apart if they want to. Some of the comments I get after readings will disturb me for weeks afterwards. They really, really disturb me, worry me and I feel that they're trying to take something from or they're trying to own something about me. I've given them something. And I feel very exposed. I feel like I might as well be stood in a room absolutely naked, I genuinely just don't feel... It doesn't make me feel good.

DT: What kind of comments affect you the most? For me it's the more polite and empty comments have the worse effect on me. Because I just think 'what were you watching.

MLH: Yeah they're pretty shit.

DT: And they really... I find just really empty comments about "oh I really loved that..." When people are obviously trying to be polite and just be enthusiastic but I don't know because I can't connect it to what's just happened and it's...

MLH: I find it hard, yeah. It's all very discombobulating isn't it? I think that's the best word I can think of. I know what you mean because you think 'I didn't actually enjoy that. What did you enjoy?' And you sort of have to go 'okay, that's you and that's your experience and that's really great.' But if you do with a lot of people, if a lot of people say that to you, I start to get very drunk and then get in a bad place. Very quickly this happens. But I think some of the things that actually people say to me are profoundly weird. They're not just empty comments they're like, I was telling you before somebody at a reading I did recently said that they were going to go home and masturbate, right?

I couldn't possibly have then gone "oh that's really great, that's the best thing I've ever heard" because it just disturbed me. I was looking into a human being's eyes that was saying this to me as though it was a normal thing to say to somebody that you don't know, who has just read a poem that's really profoundly upset them having to read it. Right. It put me in a funk like you wouldn't believe, this. But also sometimes I have men, like I had this guy once say "you write a lot about sex, it's a real turn off for me" and this one comment, because you have to work your way into what possesses somebody to say something so profoundly the bizarre. Some people might have just laughed and gone "okay."

But I thought 'well what were you expecting?! Were you expecting to be turned on by what I was doing?' There was an expectation that led up to a disappointment there that just

made no sense and these sorts of things... Recently as well a lot of people will say "ah I remember seeing you read years ago, you weren't like you are now, you hated it didn't you?" And I'm constantly getting reminded about how much I hated it and I kind of just say "I don't really want to think about that." Like I did genuinely hate it, I didn't want to have to do it. And perhaps I've become alright at it. But that will throw me into the darkest depths of despair.

DT: Not many things catch me but I just can't imagine how I'd feel if someone told me they were going to masturbate after one of my poems. I mean my work is not... You wouldn't want to masturbate to my work. But I mean as amusing as it is between us now, I find that quite disturbing, well very disturbing. Because I suppose that as a man I'm quite protected from stuff like that. Very few people would have the gall to come up to me and say something like that to me afterwards.

MLH: Can I ask you something? Do you think that the person that said this, I don't know if I've already told you, do you think it was a man or a woman?

DT: The way you're looking at me you've made me change my mind to say a woman, but I was going to say man initially because that's sort of.

MLH: Because you'd imagine that...Yeah. Because if a man said that he would have been kneed in the balls right? Because it was a woman it was actually more disturbing to me.

DT: I mean I can't tell but I would imagine that the same person perhaps wouldn't say the same thing to a male performer. I think that's where the difference is, I think it's wrong whoever has said it.

MLH: Yeah. But it's so unsettling. Yeah I do get really odd comments like that that just make me... You then ask yourself too many questions. You want to leave that alone and I do try and leave it behind but I do remember things like that and I don't understand. I can't imagine myself... You know when you think about things that people say and you can't imagine yourself ever either thinking it or saying it? That's what I do a lot in life I think 'would I say that? And what would make me think that that would be a thing that I would say.

DT: A couple of times of in my life people have said some things so shocking to me that my only response is going in to my head and trying to imagine a time where I would have ever have had the courage to do that.

MLH: And if you can't even imagine that then that's what really unsettles you isn't it? That's the thing about shock. I don't think my work is in any way shocking. Real life is very shocking. Real life is incredibly shocking.

DT: As we were talking before, maybe some people do read your intention to shock into your work. Do you think that woman that came up to you afterwards assumed that's the reaction you would... Had she assumed you'd be pleased to hear that kind of reaction because she thought you wanted to engage people in that way?

MLH: Yes. Because I was obliged to perform that poem which is, like I have said, is about sex. So I do it in quite a provocative way because instead of being in it, the doing it that way actually distances me from it in a big way which I need to do to protect myself in order to read it. It's really very complicated. But because I hadn't read it in its entirety before I hadn't any idea what the reaction would be. I also found it quite... Because I've written it and I've read it before and things like that it's just very boring to me you know? So you can't really anticipate what somebody else will think about it.

But I guess when I thought about it I thought 'well okay, I was wearing fishnet tights and was probably being very sort of seductive when I was reading it.' But then you have to think 'surely people understand that that was performance.' I'm not just this... I'm not a provocative person, I'm actually quite quiet and disciplined. I sit at a desk all day and write things, you know? But sometimes you can just look a person's face, you don't have to know them, you might have a sense of what they're like. So you do that though don't you, you guess? Like even on social media you might think 'they've got a really kind face.'

And it's amazing how much you would respond just to how somebody looks these days because we're just assaulted by images of people all the time. And we're constantly formulating our narratives about other people aren't we? So I know that that happens, if you see an actor in a film you can imagine something about them or their real life. You try to because you want to so much. You want them to be a real person. In fact you want them to be the person they are in the film most of the time. But you have to create a narrative for people to make sense of the world.

DT: I think poetry readings as well have this special little atmosphere as well because they can, especially smaller and more intimate readings, there's this whole thing where they can see the whites of your eyes, and if your poem has touched them directly I think people get caught into this short lived euphoria where they honestly believe you were there to talk to them which is an amazingly powerful thing.

MLH: Yeah. If I'm addressing everybody as "you" as well, this is what's difficult. I wanted to do that, I always wanted to do that. It's not really about "I", that. This is actually about... Involve yourself in this, which is part of my deep psychological problem is that I want people to be involved with me and they're not. I feel incredible, intense loneliness that just is absolute disabling on a minute to minute basis. So it's part of the... I'm inviting a conversation that never comes back to me. And I guess that partly, in a reading, people might pick up on that and they might think 'she's talking to me. I need to say something back to her.'

And I guess the weird thing about it is there's probably a very, very particular response that I'm actually wanting in return. Sometimes I want my dad to speak to me, he's dad so he's never going to is he? So I might write to him, like I said the addressee is never... It's always going to shift you know? Nobody ever knows who it is. But it might be that I'm writing to one particular person that can never speak back to me and never would. But then the person that's listening to it is a complete other person that I have never met before and

they might feel the impulse to do that for me. But how to know what to say? It's a traumatic thing. The whole thing about it is traumatic.

DT: And do you think the sense of longing and boredom that comes through in your work and that sort of need for consumption, and going back to... If there are any elements of longing or boredom sometimes that sort of offers a gap to people to talk to you doesn't it?

MLH: Yeah.

DT: And I think out of politeness people try to fill that space.

MLH: They want to, yeah.

DT: Because that's naturally what you would do in a one-to-one conversation. But it still doesn't... It still doesn't answer why someone was telling you they were going to masturbate.

MLH: Yeah it doesn't. There is no way that we can figure this out. We're never going to.

DT: I just really made myself laugh that honestly I think I'd convinced myself that we were trying to work that out then.

[Laughter.]

MLH: It's never going to be worked out! We'll leave that one, we'll leave that behind. It's a lost cause that.

DT: I think maybe we should take another reading.

MLH: Okay.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[01:00:30]

DT: Thank you very much. I really like the way there's so much going on all the time in your writing, it's really nice. Did you have any problems when you were first trying to get it published? Was anyone inclined to try to get you to narrow down to one narrative or were you always able to just...?

MLH: Well I never got much success sending work to magazines and I always thought it would never happen. I wasn't that bothered though, I didn't really have much ambition. But the first book that I published at Penned in the Margins I wrote when I was in a psychiatric ward. So I was writing a lot about other people, they were a lot shorter, the poems. I wrote these self portraits about people that I met, people that I really liked or I didn't like, or some people in my life, in my real life and things like that. But they were nowhere near as sort of busy as these, but they were just as complex.

But it was weird because when Tom accepted the book I just couldn't believe it. I just had... It just seemed like just luck. And I remember until it came out I didn't really believe it was ever going to come out and I just had no idea why anybody liked it. But I think that gives you sort of... Once you've established "right okay I've got a book out" then you can write more. I've always been terrified of writing the same thing. I never, ever, ever want to feel like, even if other people think I have, I don't want to feel like I've written the same thing.

And part of me making it interesting for myself is to condense really overwhelming experiences into something, and they're still very contained even if there's a lot going on in them, but I can't be just that thing there. And that place there. And that happened. Because to me the whole world is overwhelming twenty four hours a day. So that's what that is really.

DT: In terms of the narratives that do exist in your poems are they all your own? Because I should probably... Yeah I should definitely try and explain my point a bit more. I started writing in a psychiatric ward and that's how I came into being involved with poetry. I was encouraged to write while I was on the secure unit. I definitely found at that point, and I had an inclination after spending time in there and coming out, that I found I was trying to bunch a lot of stuff together, a lot.

MLH: Yeah.

DT: And I think it came from living in an environment where there were so many stories happening all at once. And like the common room... So it was a sort of Y-shaped ward. That's a very familiar layout all over the country. But then we had the common room, and that... I think a lot of my poems seemed to take the form of the conversations in there. And they still do in a way but I've sort of... This is going to be a side point, I feel slightly guilty about representing other people's... Well it's not actually a side point, it does relate, I feel a slight guilt about being too honest about other people's stories without having their permission and stuff so that's sort of where I'm getting to I suppose. If they're not all your own narratives or your own stories, how do you feel?

MLH: Well they always are. That's the thing. I'm comfortable with it because they always are. There are some poems that I've written that have an ethical element that you have to square with yourself to be able to put them out there in the world and it's not easy. Nobody would ever know apart from maybe the people that I've written about and they are always people that I think 'they wouldn't mind' or they might find some sort of humour in it, they might be quite flattered by it, or you know, like it's okay?

And often I will send it to that person and sort of make sure it's okay but I always change the names as well if I use a name. It's never the actual name, except when it is somebody that's happy for me to use it. But there are some that I have to say to myself, you know things that people have done that have been really horrible, but then I think to myself 'well they shouldn't have done it.' Like if they'd have thought that to themselves 'I shouldn't have harmed this person' then maybe they wouldn't end up having a poem out in the world about this harm that they've created in the world.

DT: I think my main sort of quandary with the whole thing was that I had enough faith in myself that whatever I wrote, if I ever involve anyone else in my writing I would try and do it fairly and, you know, I'm just talking about people that have been quite nice, if you put aside arseholes, just people that you've come across and especially people I've met within psychiatric services, other patients... My main worry is that what happens when that poem goes out into the world and other people read it and treat someone else's story as entertainment? And I'm okay if people do that with my story. And that's sort of why I was wondering because it seems, I understand with your work, if it's you writing about yourself then you can square that quite easily with yourself can't you? It's your story/

MLH: Yeah definitely.

DT: But I was just wondering about just a more general conversation about what right we have to tell other people's stories. And even if it's someone that's been a fucking arsehole to you. It's an important question.

MLH: I think if you don't use of names, there's no litigation is there? I'm joking a little bit. There is something that has really, really been occurring to me lately. There's somebody that I write about and I've always written about her, she's in all my books. She died. And so that's been an ongoing, you know, 'what can I say?' The thing is I know, I know that she would have wanted her story to be told. So that's what I'm trying to do. When she died she sort of visited me. It's genuinely... And I was terrified and I said "what, what..." And I didn't know what to say and I remember just stuttering "what do you want me to do?" And she said "always love me." And in my mind I suppose that's what the writing is constantly addressing in her, it's loving her I guess.

But I do use her name. But there was a period of thinking 'is this actually an okay thing to do?' I've written something about her that was more factual, an essay, and somebody said to me "actually if her family read this, you'd get sued." You do have to be very, very, very careful with a lot of things. But I very rarely use a name. The only names that I do use I think generally are people that are dead. They have no say in it but they're never in a context that, I mean me knowing them well, they'd go "that's terrible and I don't want you to..." You know they would be okay with it. Also there's an element of I suppose... I'd love somebody to publish a poem about me I think it's really cool. How fabulous.

DT: But this is what I mean about the difference between giving a fair representation of a person and whether they find it flattering. For instance I have a poem which has been published in a magazine and it's about a very specific incident that happened on the ward but it's written in a way that, because every day is the same, that's the whole point, you're there and they get your medication and that's the whole point.

MLH: Yeah yeah, I remember.

DT: It's sort of set that it could have been any... That's the whole point. I think I've written it in a very fair way about the people who are contained in that, I haven't used their real names. But what I would really worry about is that someone, after it's been published,

would read it and find some sort of entertainment in the fact that these people are sick. And how... You know that element of like the viewer in a zoo, like viewing through the glass literally at these people. That's what I don't feel comfortable with. I know myself, I know my motives, and I'm happy with the ethical question of whether I mean right by writing about them but it's just that, I suppose going back to what we were talking about earlier, about being able to let go of your work and trust people.

MLH: Yeah I couldn't do any of this if I actually thought about what people thought. I do consider... It's a very voyeuristic thing. So you have to appreciate what a voyeurism is to be a confessional poet. You've got to appreciate that it's an exchange. I think my poetry is very masochistic and I think that the audience are often very voyeuristic. But I find it fascinating so it's okay. But I know that I can't sit around thinking 'what would they think about this person?' Or worry about that because again it would just inhibit me from doing the work that I do.

And I suppose I'm very bloody-minded, that's the thing about me. I've got one life. This is the only thing I'm good at. What am I going to do? I'm going to push it as far as it goes because otherwise there's no point in it for me. I don't want to do anything halfheartedly ever, apart from maybe go off in a hot air balloon tomorrow which I'm pretty sure I will do.

DT: I think I might join you yeah. And so yeah talking about masochism, we could maybe have another reading?

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[01:14:34]

DT: I think we might have run out of time, but it was really nice chatting to you Melissa, thank you very much.

MLH: It was wonderful!

DT: Yeah they'll be links to your online presence in the description of this so we don't need to go into that too much now. But Sunshine is out through Penned in the Margins now.

MLH: It is, now. It's in the world.

DT: Get over to Penned in the Margins. I've just realised that I love everyone they're publishing. It dawned on me yesterday. Alright, thank you Melissa.

MLH: Thank you very much.

DT: So that was Melissa Lee-Houghton. Her collection Sunshine is currently out through Penned in the Margins. You can probably find it in most bookshops but you could obviously also buy it direct through them on their website. Next up, on National Poetry Day last week I

was over at Mile End at the Art Pavilion there to see a couple of performances by James Wilkes, Emma Bennett and Ella Finer.

Coming up are two of the performances from that night, the first one is a work for three voices performed by Emma, Ella and James and it's entitled 'And I remember a feeling of tightness on the skin.' The work is based on transcripts of interviews about three people's experiences of a poetry reading and the transcripts have been organized into a score that explores the ways in which speech elaborates moments of experience bringing them into being through the work of the voice and through a kind of digestion or chewing over which is shared, public and provisional.

[At this time there is no transcript available of this perfomance.]

End of transcript.