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Episode 94: Birmingham (06/03/2017)

Transcript edited by David Turner – 04/03/2017

Intro:

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Stuart Bartholomew – **SB**

DT: Hello, this is Lunar Poetry Podcasts, I'm David Turner. Today, I'm in Birmingham for the Verve Poetry Festival. Today's episode is in three parts all recorded in Birmingham. My trip to Birmingham was funded by the Arts Council money that I got last summer as is the transcript that will accompany this episode. If you want to find out what we're up to then

you can find us at Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook, Tumblr, Soundcloud and iTunes or @Silent_Tongue on Twitter. I'm joined by Stuart Bartholomew who is going to explain what Verve Poetry Festival is and how it came about.

SB: That's a big question, thank you. Well we wanted to do Verve, we're in Birmingham and we felt like there wasn't enough poetry being noticed here. There's a massive spoken word scene in Birmingham, there's also lots of really good page poets. The scene felt very disparate and we just thought, well we want people 'A' to come here and 'B' to see what's here, so Verve was born out of that.

The other thing we're trying to do was... We felt that because we we're a very, kind of, multicultural city and also [there's a] very broad range of poetry going on here we wanted to try and build a festival that reflected that. Verve tries to do that, we've got pretty much half the program is spoken word, half is page poetry. We wanted people to come from every kind of different background and I think we've managed that. You know, we just quite naturally booked a lot of women because I think there are some amazing women poets and we just felt like we wanted to hear them. Why it hasn't happened before? No idea.

DT: I've been following a lot of the performers and readers on Twitter and everyone seems to be really impressed with the line-up. You've done a really good job of highlighting [that] the mechanisms behind organising a festival are obviously very difficult but having a diverse line-up is not that tricky, is it.

SB: It's easy as pie. For me, the festival designed itself I'm called the programmer but, you know, I just didn't feel like I was making choices half the time, some of the people who've come have just been so obvious to be here. You know, you just see some of the festivals where it's all men or there's a lack of different races present and you just wonder how that could happen. Particularly because this is a city centre festival as well, we just felt like, you know... Look out the window, that's what it's got to look like and that's what we achieved, I think.

DT: Yeah. Talking to one of your performers, Amerah Saleh, who will come up in the programme that you're about to listen to. We had, very much, a similar conversation about... It's about time... It's one of the event few events that I've come to that's actually gotten close to reflecting the people outside.

SB: Yeah and you know they're all writing poetry, they're all listening to poetry in their own ways and places and just the joy in some of their eyes when they heard we wanted them to come here and be together and be with each other. One of the things that I've really loved about this festival... I didn't know this would happen necessarily the amount of poets who've come see the poets and the amount of poets who've stayed after their performance to see different poets and just learnt new things and seen new ways forward. You know, that's got to be a good thing.

DT: Definitely. I'll be posting links to Verve Poetry Festival and everything they're up to and might be up to in the future. So, you can follow what they're doing via our social media. I've now dug myself into a hole because I never record introductions before I've done the

editing. I have no idea who is coming up next. I'm going to guess it's Amerah. Thank you, Stuart.

SB: You're welcome. Thanks a lot.

Part one (03:35):

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Amerah Saleh – **AS**

AS: (Untitled)

She is a mythical angelic light sitting,
That sits on her tattered weathered down maglis
wondering whether her sons are coming home for lunch

She's cooked,
And cleaned.
She aligns the overused curtains across the balcony to dry
The long grandfather clock dangles its existence into the room to remind her of time.

Her sons are bloodied red meat rebels fighting the devil for blessings,
Their coal stained chipped fingernails remind them of the elbow grease they put into home.

They wrap her into exorbitant ribbons of gold for solitude and protection.
She, she is the acrylic softness on a paintbrush breastfeeding two babies at once.

Whilst her feet flake off excess of disorientated bodies into her eyeliner outside,

She,
She does not know of sons who come home.

DT: Thank you very much Amerah. It's really nice to meet you. Thank you for joining me on the podcast. Maybe it would be best if we start with a short introduction to you.

AS: My name is Amerah Saleh. I'm a spoken word artist, born and bred Brummie and I work for an organisation called Beatfreeks here based in Birmingham.

DT: Just to give a bit of context, we're here in Birmingham in Waterstones for Verve Poetry Festival. If I've done my job correctly this will be part of a collection of interviews all based at Verve Poetry but we shouldn't speak too soon, it may not turn out that way. I just watched you read and I was really very impressed. Your introduction there was slightly different to the one you did downstairs and it might be good to begin by discussing the differences between, as you were saying, you introducing yourself as a producer and as a solo performer. Maybe recap, a bit, as to how you see the differences.

AS: So, I produce quite a few events in and around Birmingham and I think that's the hat that I have in the city, a lot. So, it's either, "Hi, I'm Amerah. I work at Beatfreeks". That's generally my producer and campaigns hat on and then when it's me as a solo, I'm a spoken word artist. So, it's a mindset, it's a different mental shift, it's the same with hosting. So, it's different when I'm hosting something to performing, to producing.

DT: Yeah, you were saying that you're a lot more downbeat, or sorry I should say it the other way around. It's more positive to say it that way, isn't it? You're far more upbeat when you're hosting. You hosted the Apples and Snakes 'Dice Slam' last night.

AS: I did, yeah.

DT: It's been really well attended so far, hasn't it? [**AS:** It's been brilliant.] A lot of stuff has sold out. The reason I wanted to start talking about hosting is because I definitely understand what you mean... When I'm doing the podcast stuff, although it's my voice the majority of times hosting, we do have other hosts but I deliberately never post pictures of myself. I try to be as invisible as possible as a producer. I've had that struggle as well when I read on stage, that conflict of suddenly you know which role are you playing which persona are you playing.

DT: So, what do you do with Beatfreeks, exactly what kind of organisation is it?

AS: So, we are a youth engagement agency based in Birmingham, all very proud Brummies as you'd know if you met the whole team. We help brands and organisations better understand and engage with young people, that's kind of [us] in essence. Everything we do is through creativity, so we can go through an eighteen-month campaign with the Heritage Lottery Fund to get more young people understanding what heritage is in the city. To supporting festivals like this and getting young people really, as you say, a seat at the table. So, we give or try to give young people that seat at the table with people that make decisions in the city.

DT: It's been an interesting day actually, I don't know whether it was deliberately planned in that way but hearing yourself talk like that Anthony from Outspoken, Joelle Taylor, about this idea of giving platforms over to people. Is your job easy in that way? You know we're talking, not just from support you get... As usual my questions are not fully formed. I think in my head I'm carrying around this idea, there's this lazy assumption that it's hard to engage young people.

AS: That's the assumption people have, yeah and we, kind of, like to go with, "No young person is hard to reach. There are just better ways of reaching them" and that's kind of what we do.

DT: Yeah. How does the city support what you do? Do you get a lot of support?

AS: Yeah, we're kind of... As a brand we're very well known, in the city and outside of the city. We've got a little branch out in Barbados, Lucy who used to work with us here and then went back home, set it up there. So, it's lovely that with young people we're a very trusted brand. Arts organisations, a lot, like to put Beatfreeks on because it's got a good reputation and with organisations and brands in the city I think they see us as youthful, diverse but professional. Or I like to think so anyway.

DT: I'm sure they do! That wry smile on my face was not questioning your answer then it was more that I suddenly had this idea of planning meetings at councils desperately... With a white-board with 'diversity' written on it in big blue letters. Do you have issues with organisations, with them understanding your version of diversity or representation?

AS: Yes, so we're running something on 30th of March [2017], we're doing a big... It's called Brum Youth Trends and we're bringing a load of stakeholders and organisations from the city into a room and we're launching a report called Brum Youth Trends. We've currently got over five hundred young people doing the survey on what they think the trends are in 2017, where they go to access media, where they buy stuff from. What the little habits are of young people are in Birmingham and that will be launched into like a top ten, kind of, report. But we're also running a workshop on that day called, Don't Say Diverse When You Really Mean Brown.

DT: Good, I like the sound of that. I think the reason these questions are on my mind, I recently attended what was a very good workshop and seminar looking into researching how creativity can help the mental wellbeing of young people. And there were two definite camps in the room, those that were sort of researching and had come with the assumption that it would be impossible to get kids off their iPhones and get them to listen. Against the people actually doing the work who were like, "No. You can't get them to sit down once you engage with them" and it was interesting/depressing that that is still happening. It just means that, I suppose the money isn't always released in the right places, to those that know how to use it. How if in any way does this work inform your writing?

AS: Ooh. I think it's like my Instagram bio, "I care about poetry, young people, social change in Yemen" and they're, kind of like... That's me in a nutshell and Beatfreeks is social, young people, art so it hits all of those. I think, I know quite a lot of the young people in Birmingham that are artists [and] they'll come to me for advice or come and have a conversation with me, as you saw earlier. So, for me Beatfreeks allows that bigger platform, that bigger community, that bigger network other than just sending a message on Facebook and going, "Argh, I've got a poem, please read it."

There's that support network and we run that through monthly events that we do in the city. We can convene two hundred young people in a room, half of them literally just listen

and half of them share. And there's this really beautiful mixing and networking that happens that isn't a networking event. So, yeah, it's about not just me trying to do so much, it's about doing what do what I do good and well and then allowing Beatfreeks to flourish in everything else. Allowing the young people to be able to be peers to each other and advocate for each other like that.

DT: Yeah, I think that's what really interests me about the most successful youth work that's going on. I was just trying to think of... Jacob Sam-La Rose! [**AS:** Oh yeah.] At Barbican Young Poets and Rachel Long who is now working as his assistant. You know, just this idea of bringing together young people... Actually, this isn't only exclusive to young people, this is relevant to anyone without a platform but since we're speaking in this direction....

Giving people a chance to talk about ideas and then some place to speak, just seems such a simple idea. [**AS:** Absolutely.] I almost cannot fathom why it's not happening more. Like, I don't know. I don't even have a question I'm just exasperated by it.

AS: You'll be very surprised as well to take that idea to some organisations and brands that will go, "Wow". You can't even ask if they're being serious, like you've got to go, "It's two different worlds". [**DT:** Yeah.] We're very lucky to be in a world where young people are getting, not just seats at the tables but full on hours at the table to have those conversations. About our history, about what it means to be black or Muslim at this time.

AS: We're so lucky to be able to provide those platforms and spaces for young people to do that. When you step out of a sector and you go into another one, which is what we do, we work cross-sector. So, we're constantly balancing those, "Yay, creativity" to, "What are you talking about?" And it's those conversations that you try and like really fit together.

DT: You briefly alluded to a conversation that happened before we began recording and I don't think it's giving too much away, we're not going to mention any names... But you were being asked by someone that you knew about the role of politics in their work or the politics of identity, I suppose and how you don't have to be overtly an activist to talk about politics. We touched on, briefly, in that conversation [about] the personal being political. This is again not a question but maybe you could just explain a bit what you were saying there.

AS: So, for me, I don't think I've ever called myself an activist and been like, "Hey, I'm Amerah and I'm an activist". I've said I'm a human rights supporter but activist comes with a certain pressure and look from people. But I completely and wholeheartedly believe that your personal is political and your political is personal. As I was saying to young boy, or [rather] young man I was just chatting to, him being a black boy on a stage; If there was a black boy in that audience then all of a sudden, he is connecting with another young man in that audience and that is his form of activism.

Never mind the content that could... You know, I've seen him do brilliant pieces about hyper-masculinity or doing pieces around being Black, British-born and what it means for him as a young man. So, it's almost like the content is secondary, it's who you are as a person and everything, all your experiences are that you bring with that you can't run away from it in poetry.

DT: Yeah, and the episode I was telling that guy about, with Travis Alabanza... Who for anyone that listens to the podcast regularly will know Travis and their work and how amazing they are so I don't have to go into that too much... They were also talking about how, when Travis is booked to read in front of predominantly Queer audiences of colour there's a completely different side and reading to their work. But if you put Travis and all that they represent in front of a quote/unquote, normal poetry crowd that is predominantly white, Travis' appearance at the microphone on its own is political enough.

I think it was interesting to hear you giving that advice and I suppose this must come up a lot in Birmingham, with the mix of people [in the city]. It was quite strange, it's not often I leave south-east London come to a place and the mix of people hasn't really changed very much.

AS: Birmingham's better!

DT: We don't have to debate that. I'll give you that, we're in Birmingham, I'll let you have that.

AS: There you go, you're here. You've got to say, "I'm in Birmingham, I'll shut up".

DT: But yes, I suppose, as I said earlier I wasn't going to use the word issues but I will now. The issues and topics that young people are talking about here, I'm assuming must be quite similar to those that are coming up in London and probably Manchester but I would assume that those three cities are isolated as you travel further through the country.

AS: Yeah, I mean like, me standing up in a crowd in Leamington Spa is a political thing, being a Muslim in a scarf [and] female to be doing poems about another part of the world, that is political. But the crossover, when you bring it down to human and the words, everyone can resonate with it, everyone can relate and no matter what [even] their appearance, you can't go, "There's nothing relatable here". There's something in it that makes you go, "Okay". Something connects us and that's what I like about poetry. I really like that.

DT: You summed up something I've been struggling to say for a long time I think that's the real beauty of it, is that you can say extremely powerful things in very subtle ways if you are aware of who you are. Especially performance poetry and spoken word but even as a page poet standing and speaking at a microphone, if you're aware of your situation and your position you don't have to be so obvious in the way that you... Well, you don't have to list those things for people because people can see it and hear it.

AS: Poetry is reform, not revolution.

DT: Okay.

AS: Poetry is subtle subtle little changes, "I'm going to change these thirty people [at a time]" or something like that. So, the way I dress which is...

DT: Very well!

AS: Thank you! A little bit different to what somebody would assume a Muslim woman would wear and that's political, one hundred percent. So, me standing on a stage is already a stance that I'm making, without me speaking. So, when you add everything to it, you almost... The content doesn't become secondary but it becomes an add on to this bigger package.

So, me standing on stage without speaking is... Somebody has looked and gone, "Oh, okay" and I go, "Hi, I'm Amerah Saleh a Muslim spoken word artist". That someone might turn and say, "I didn't know Muslims dressed like that" that's definitely reform. I haven't gone out and protested on the streets of Birmingham, like you've probably seen all day. outside of Waterstones. That's every Saturday by the way.

DT: It's rowdy out there, isn't it? I like it, it's good.

AS: It's different as well, there's different... Like, someone's calling for Mohammed, someone's calling for Jesus.

DT: Yeah. Without being too urban-centric, if anyone knows what it's like to stand outside Brixton tube station, it's got that vibe to it. I've just got one eye on the clock, so I don't want to run over too much because that means too much editing and cutting stuff out. Is there anything coming up for yourself personally or Beatfreeks that you'd want to mention?

AS: Well, the first Thursday of March we run quite a popular night in Birmingham called Poetry Jam. That is an open-mic and it's free for everybody to come, it's currently at Java Lounge Coffee. It's in a coffee shop because we like the, kind of, industrial aspect of coffee shops and what it means to young people. It's also in a neutral space so it's not branded and it's independent but it also is inclusive to people that don't want to be around alcohol.

DT: Actually that's a very good point, I think a few event organisers in London need to catch on to the idea that bars and pubs are not necessarily the first place to throw events on now.

AS: And that's not even religion, it's just some parents won't allow their [DT: Absolutely] kids to go out and go to places where they think... Whereas, you know at 16, 17 my mum was like, "Oh, okay you're in a coffee shop". If I said to my mum that I was in a pub she'd be like, "1: You shouldn't be drinking. 2: What the hell are you doing in a pub at nine o'clock?"

DT: I have plenty of friends that just don't want to be around people drinking and it's nothing to do with religion. Yeah absolutely. So, that's...

AS: It's at Java Lounge, we try and fit twenty-five open-mic slots in two hours. It's first come, first served by seven o'clock although, the open-mics have usually gone [by then] so about six-thirty people arrive. So, that is 7:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m…

DT: And anything for yourself coming up? Any gigs booked?

AS: If anybody listens from Belgium, I'm in Belgium.

DT: They might do, I'd have to go through my Soundcloud account. I can see which towns people are listening in so I'll check it out. And if you are listening from Belgium thank you very much and check out... What's this gig happening in Belgium?

AS: Yeah that's... I'm doing a few big projects around.... I don't do a lot of work directly in my community and that was purposeful over the last few years because it could have swayed who I was as an artist and also as a person. So, I actively, kind of, moved away from my community and by 'my community' I mean Muslim women and females specifically but also Muslim men, I like to challenge barriers. To challenge perceptions.

So, I'm doing a big piece of work over the next year with the Birmingham Rep Theatre in that community, talking to a lot of parents and women about what it means for their children to follow their dreams and why something like an arts career isn't as valued as much as being a lawyer or a doctor.

DT: I need to, along with American spoken word artists, I need to stop talking to youth workers because they make me sound really pessimistic and cynical because you have so many great things going on. We're going to run out of time, I will put links to all of your social media stuff in the episode description. Also, I'll be re-tweeting... We'll follow each other and I'll re-tweet stuff which is probably easier than reading it out now and we'll finish with one more reading please.

AS: This hasn't got a title so if anybody can suggest one then send it my way.

(Untitled)

I am built on money stolen from my brothers in Somalia,
Built on what once was Jewish land,
Built on business
Never people.
Tell me my country is victim
I will tell you no,
My country is not victim
It's not enemy
It's not rebel
It is innocent lives who don't know how to understand what happened

When Saudi says they are Saudi,
I say no
You derived from Yemen.
Stolen from Yemen.
Took everything we own and sold it to big dogs

Now you build monsters and tell them you help us

Tell me how
Tell me why my own uncles are getting rejected at your boarder
Whilst his wife's house is being bombed
Bombs found that were used once
In Iraq
Told they were too dangerous to use again
Britain stopped making
Saudi stopped buying
Or so they told us

Tell me why my 6 year old cousin ran with these telling the police he's never seen them before
That they're new
Tell me Britain hasn't been secretly selling them to Saudi
Tell me why they're being thrown on civilians?

Tell me why the hell my cousin recognises bombs so well?

When your whole life shifts, at 3.56am in the morning, you are sat on the corner of your bed with countdown playing in the background - you realise you have been trying to build a political status for yourself, for a country you never believed in, for activism that doesn't mean anything to you here. Don't tell me that I am not doing enough, or I should be doing more. Or even that the foundations of me are being built,

My foundations were made in the concrete and soil of Aden,
reborn again at nine when families of 50+ would gather in a one bed house
For the sake of unity
My foundations were made when trying to talk to doctors became a barrier
Language
Wahid, ithneen, arba3een duwa akalat erm shalat, erm basalt game al ga3ada
Baffled in panic and picking out what they understand
My foundations were made in Yemen when I realised all homes are broken.

DT: Thank you very much Amerah. Thank you for joining us.

AS: It's been a pleasure.

DT: It has! Thank you.

Part Two (25:20):

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Emma Wright – **EW**

DT: Well, fancy that, I didn't mess up the intro. That was indeed Amerah Saleh. Lucky me. Next up we've got Emma Wright from The Emma Press and she's talking about their latest poetry anthology, This Is Not Your Final Form, which is a collection of poems about Birmingham. One thing I did forget to mention at the beginning was that, as always, if you like what we do please tell your friends we've got no advertising budget, it would help a lot. Here's Emma Wright.

*

DT: Hello Emma. How are you doing?

EW: Hello, I'm well thank you. I have had a very wonderful Verve Poetry festival so far.

DT: It's been really nice, hasn't it? You've been far busier than I have but maybe we can talk about that in a moment. Maybe we could start off with you giving a brief intro to [The] Emma Press and the work that you do.

EW: Yeah. The Emma Press started in 2012, I'd just finished my job at Orion Publishing Group, I was working on their e-books. I was their e-book production controller, converting five hundred e-books a year and I fancied something difference and also, I'd had time to have a lot of thoughts about publishing while creating five hundred e-books a year. I wanted to dabble in editorial and cover design and marketing and text design as well.

So, I had lots of ideas about the processes which I wanted to get involved in and also, I guess I thought more widely about the publishing industry and how it was really... The top positions were dominated by men and then everything else was run by women. I liked the idea of starting a press that was very obviously run by a woman, adding to the other really great feminist publishing houses like, Virago and Persephone.

And I thought one way of doing that was just to put my name there and, kind of, as a pledge that it would be a personal publishing house. I think another thing I noticed while working at Orion was that people didn't really seem to care about the publishing houses. I would say that I worked at Orion to people at parties and they wouldn't really have heard of it, they'd know the authors but they'd have no, kind of, connections to the publishing houses.

And I thought well this is clearly a problem, that no one cares about the fate of anything other than Penguin and maybe Random House or something. So, I thought, I wanted to create a press that has personality and that will be aspects of my personality.

DT: So, yesterday which would have been Saturday the 18th of February, you had a small showcase at Verve Poetry Festival here at Waterstones in Birmingham, to launch a new anthology called, This Is Not Your Final Form, edited by Richard O'Brien and yourself. Could you tell us how that came about and... I was going to say the link to Birmingham but as you explain what the book is, that's going to be obvious.

EW: Well, so I moved to Birmingham in 2015, I came from Reading and the Waterstones there just hadn't been very interested in The Emma Press as a new publisher. There aren't that many other bookshops in Reading either, so I haven't really had that much of a connection to the retail scene there but when I moved to Birmingham I thought, "Okay, this is my new chance. I'm going to get into the bookshops here. I want to see Emma Press books in the city where I live".

So, I tweeted Stuart, the regional manager of Waterstones and I think it was quite a passive-aggressive tweet. I think they were doing a general shout out for ideas of things to do in their new refurbished premises and I just said I would like to see more poetry events from a local poetry publisher. Then Stuart called me in to have a meeting and one of the main things we talked about was how Birmingham should have its own poetry anthology.

Because that would be something that Waterstones could sell and that's one way it could support the local poetry scene. So, that was something that was ticking over and then Verve happened, the idea of Verve was born through various discussions between Stuart and Cynthia and Roz Goddard.

I guess we were talking about different ways that I could be involved and I really wanted to programme the children's events because I got very passionate about poetry for children and then also, I wanted to create this really excellent book of poems celebrating the city that would be a, kind of, a way of me learning about this new city that I live in. Also, it would be a way of meeting lots of local authors and reaching out to them because it felt really important that I did something to tell people I was here and that I wanted to be a local publisher and someone that they could send writing in to.

So, then the festival picked up pace and there was the idea of the festival competition and so the entries... Well, all the poems that we read for TINYFF, they were entries into the competition. So, Hannah Silva picked out the winners and then myself and Richard O'Brien, we read through all the entries and picked out poems which we thought constructed a really varied portrait of the city. That's what the title reference is, TINYFF, Birmingham isn't really what people think it is. People from the outside, we wanted to tackle...

DT: It's definitely got that feeling of the kind of city that doesn't, or it's never going to seem quite finished. There's a lot going on, isn't there? A lot of development.

EW: Yeah. In the year and a half, I've been here I feel like so much has changed already and it must be exhausting if you've been here for any longer than that.

DT: What was the uptake like when you asked for submissions? Did you get a good response?

EW: Yeah, we got maybe about 250 people sent poems in.

DT: How did... Something that does interest me quite a lot is; How did your selection process work? Did you give any criteria to Hannah first before you chose which poems went in?

EW: We didn't give any criteria to Hannah. Hannah is a Birmingham native so I guess she had her ideas about what she wanted to represent Birmingham in the first Verve Poetry Festival, a really significant event for the city. I guess there's that pressure to pick out poems which are worthy of being the first ones, the inaugural winners.

She picked out a really really fascinating selection, there are really great poems and I don't think they're very obviously about Birmingham. They're kind of tangential and it was interesting seeing that from her choices that show how she wants to portray the city which obviously, she has strong feelings about. And then for the rest of the poems me and Richard went through and we tried to... I guess we were looking for poems that surprised us and poems which chimed with our feelings about the city but also poems that just showed us a new way of seeing parts of the city because we've barely begun to explore this, kind of, huge area.

So, we felt like we wanted to have a certain amount of information in the book, kind of, explaining stories or bits of slang. But also, I guess, more of a similar route to Hannah, who wanted to show the different roles that the city can take in people's lives. So, there's going on a date in Birmingham, that's the winning poem by Susannah Dickey or just having passed through Birmingham and just remembering its road system or something.

We wanted to engage with all or as many aspects as possible, so we were looking for a real range but also just that, kind of, essential spark that we're always looking for when editing books.

DT: That sounds really interesting. I'm looking forward to reading it actually, I picked up a copy yesterday. And if people want to get a copy themselves. Do you have an online store where people can order it from?

EW: Yes, you can order it from my website which http://www.theemmapress.com/or from all good bookshops.

DT: Yeah, all the best ones. They better shape up, eh? Thank you very much for your time. Thank you for joining us.

EW: Thank you.

Part three (32:52):

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Luke Kennard – **LK**

DT: Finally I'm joined by Luke Kennard who is a lecturer at Birmingham University and the author of Cain which is available from Penned in the Margins. We're mainly talking about that poetry collection which has just recently been long listed for the International Dylan Thomas prize. Before Luke I just wanted to say a big thank you to Verve Poetry Festival, Waterstones and Birmingham in general. Although, I didn't get to see much of the city. Poetry is all consuming. Here's Luke.

*

LK: Nut Factory

The unshelled peanuts pour down the flue
Like a throng of ecstatic bald men, dancing.

I put my hands into the flue and raise them.
I let the peanuts fall over my head.

I place a nut between my teeth.
It tastes of pencil lead.

I place the bad nut in an iron trough.
When the trough is full it is taken to the furnace.

The good nuts are portioned, weighed
And sealed into foil bags – but I am not involved in this.

We can eat as many nuts as we like.
We are all so sick of nuts we cry sometimes.

Friday mornings we leave the factory, dancing.
Like unshelled peanuts pouring down a flue.

DT: Thank you very much Luke. How are you doing?

LK: I'm good thank you. I'm a little hung over but that usually makes me more apt to talk about myself.

DT: Yeah yeah. I think a heavy night of drinking is the perfect preparation for talking about poetry. I really liked the last line of that, the peanuts pouring down a flume. Which collection were you reading from?

LK: That's from The Harbour Beyond the Movie which came out in 2007.

DT: And who is that through?

LK: Salt who were still doing single author collections of poetry at that point, which they stopped in about 2012, 2013. I forget when. They're doing, kind of, literary fiction now and they've got some great stuff on their list. I remember it as a slightly bleak time where I nearly gave up writing completely.

I had written two novels which had completely failed. There isn't even anything good to, sort of, fillet from them for a short story really. They were just long, long failures. [I] didn't have any idea for what to try to do for the next novel and my poetry book with Salt hadn't... I know it's, kind of, vulgar to think in terms of sales and readers but I think my fourth collection sold about 140 copies or something like that.

The ones before that had, sort of, been at least in the low thousands and then it was like, "Oh my God. Absolutely nobody cares". So, what does it matter if I'm kind of developing or changing what I'm doing when it's actually just...

DT: Unfortunately, it's a complete natural thing to do to liken the success of a book with sales numbers because there isn't really another gauge, is there? And it is an act of communication, isn't it?

LK: Yes and if nobody is there and nobody is receiving it... Sorry, I didn't mean to go all self-piteous straight away, that wasn't my intention! I just thought, well you know I don't have a publisher anymore I don't really... I thought, I don't know, I'll just start writing more articles and essays on poetry and I can just publish those instead for my research output for the lectureship that I have and maybe just leave writing because it's not really working out.

So, I sulked in that way for about three or four months before starting the next novel and then Tom Chivers who's the editor of Penned in the Margins, kind of, more or less talked me into writing another collection of poetry.

DT: Yes. So, you were close to completely knocking writing on the head?

LK: Yeah, that's how I felt at the time. I'd go on long walks to sulk, in the evenings.

DT: Was this out of the ordinary for you? Was this quite a shock to yourself?

LK: A little, yeah because it's the only thing that I'm good at. So, it in a way it was a bit of a temper tantrum as much as anything else.

DT: I have it about every three months. I just want to jack everything in.

LK: Yeah, every quarter.

DT: Yeah, I have to get that feeling out of my system.

LK: Yeah yeah. It probably keeps you going a bit as well, kind of a necessary death drive as well.

DT: But do you think it's a necessary part of self-criticism as well? To get that down on yourself.

LK: Yeah, it keeps you hungry, it keeps you wanting to actually do something that is interesting. I think the thing that made me want to, sort of, see Cain through. Apart from the fact that it was a, sort of, research project as well so I could just do a lot of reading and make a lot of notes... If I wasn't really feeling like writing I could just spend several hours doing that and still feel like I'd done something productive.

But it was also like, what if nobody is interested in another collection of stand-alone poems by me because that was, sort of, how it felt. Like, is there something that people might be interested in? I was thinking more in terms of a sequence [of poems]. I was teaching a module on the MA at Birmingham [University] which was stories that are a bit more like prose poems... At the moment, we're looking at some Maggie Nelson and bringing in Claudia Rankine's Citizen on to it next year which is titled as a lyric essay.

Books of poetry that are, kind of, one thing that have a properly unified theme or even plot to them. That, kind of, excites me slightly more and I suppose I felt as though it had more of a hook in a way. Rather than just, here's another book by me with fifty or so poems in it and the title is a fragment of one of the lines. I think I just felt so bored of doing that as well, I had nothing more. Like I'd written myself into a corner a bit.

DT: Maybe we should talk about Cain a little bit now then, because I suppose my opening question or opinion I suppose, more than a question is... Talking about being so down on yourself about lack of sale and that feeding into wanting to communicate with people. What leads you then to writing what is essentially a very complicated collection to get into?

LK: I think partly, just the sense that there is an audience who actually really like things that are quite difficult and quite tricky. I suppose I knew also when I was writing it that I was really... Especially the anagrams which are, kind of, the centrepiece of the book, that I was really obsessed with them and I was really enjoying them. And still, I think of them really fondly in spite of the fact that almost every review of it says, "The anagrams... I don't know". But on the other hand, there are writers who I know who are maybe more on the Avant-Garde side of the spectrum who really like that.

DT: I've definitely got a list in my head of people I'm sure would really love it. Maybe you should explain about the anagrams.

LK: Yeah. So, it's a brief passage from Genesis, the bit after Cain has killed Abel and is confronted by God and tries to make an excuse, so include the phrase, "Am I my brother's keeper" and then God, kind of, curses the earth itself. So, it's Genesis chapter 4, verses 9 to 12 and it's about 350 letters that make up that little square of text. I, sort of, went through just fairly brief chapters, where Cain actually appears, trying to choose a section.

I, kind of, knew it had to be around that sort of amount, about 350 letters. The long form anagram, if it's too long then it's not really that impressive. Like, you know, most novels are an anagram of a Tale of Two Cities, for instance. If it goes beyond a page then it's like, "Whatever, you had every letter at your disposal at fairly normal frequencies. So, what? That's nothing". And at the same time, you're not just doing a crossword. It's not an anagram of somebody's name it has to be something more than that, so it has to be a real compromise between concision and length. You need enough room to play with but it also needs to almost fail to be even remotely coherent.

DT: So I'd heard a lot about this book, we have a mutual friend Melissa Lee-Houghton a very close friend to both of us but I wasn't aware of what... I knew what was happening with the anagrams but I hadn't seen the book. I saw it quite recently and there's a lot more going on around the anagrams, graphically it's a very interesting book as well and there's a text that sort of runs alongside [the anagrams].

LK: Yes. And the whole design of it was entirely, kind of, Tom's thing. He had about six different prototypes of ways that we could present the marginal notes. I guess, because they are anagrams of quite a limited set of letters and obviously, the letters have to appear with the exact same frequency, so you end up using some really obscure words.

So, I knew as I was going through it that a lot of those words were going to need... I felt that people wouldn't actually bother to look them up. Like, the word 'holothurian' which a just was, sort of, thrown up while I was trying to put letters together. Then I had to look it up and holothurian is the genus of the Sea Cucumber. So, to move in a holothurian way is to, sort of, bob disconsolately along the bottom of the ocean, something like that. I'm feeling fairly holothurian at the moment.

It also has a lot of ‘aitches’ in does holothurian and there are many aitches because it's the King James Version of the Bible though [DT: I did notice that there were a lot of aitches] there are forty-one aitches, I think. It's got 'Es' which is useful and so many aitches which kind of became... Well I found that I had to make a, sort of, joke out of that, one that almost threatened to undermine the whole project.

So, there's a lot of sighing, a lot of laughing, a lot of oh-ing. There's a bit where one of the characters just names pencils, up to 9H and back again. That, kind of, was something that could potentially be quite funny but also could just make the whole thing just seem completely daft I guess as well. But I feel like my work always teeters on that knife edge anyway so that's natural.

DT: Reading the anagrams it was making me think of you know how with certain groups of friends you have different levels of playing Scrabble. You know, there is the absolute

correct 'rule book' way of playing Scrabble and then there are different, sort of, 'in the spirit' versions, aren't there? I get the impression that, whoever the character was that was writing those anagrams would be quite annoying to play Scrabble against.

LK: Extremely annoying!

DT: Because it's completely right.

LK: Yes, it's technically correct and that is it! So, there was a plot that gradually... I had about six [anagrams] for a while, I committed to writing thirty-one of them because I talked about it in a couple of interviews saying that it was going to be a sequence of thirty-one anagrams. Then I sat down to, kind of, get on with the project and in my head, I'd kidded myself that I'd already written quite a few and actually it was six that I'd written so I had to write twenty-five more.

The six kind of vaguely fitted, I had these three characters who I was kind of juggling around and that it was basically a, sort of, sitcom. Because the whole genre of the sitcom or the comedy drama, it is formulaic. You have this sort of A, B and C plot, you have the characters that reset every episode. Almost like a cartoon like thing where even if they died in the last episode, they're alive again the next one.

That felt like quite a nice parallel to me, the rearrangement... It's normally a comedy of manners in the sitcom, generally, all of the humour in a sitcom derives from characters trying to save face in one way or another or get away with a certain lie or pretending to be something other than what they are. But it's always just a rearrangement of the same elements in every episode. So, I wanted that to be a little parallel with the anagrams.

DT: Yeah.

LK: And it's, sort of about our obsession with TV as well and partly about, I suppose on a personal level, the fact that I am able to engage far more emotionally with a long running TV show than I seem to be able to engage emotionally with extremely tragic current events, you know.

DT: Well more and more of us disappearing into Netflix, aren't we? [LK: Yeah.] Rather than engaging with what's... I don't mean that in a deprecating way, It's, a completely natural thing to do.

LK: It is! And it's not just escapism. It's literature, it's part of how we represent the world that we're in but I wanted to reflect a little on this sort of... And often these shows, things like Breaking Bad which I really really love, often you want to watch something where the characters are in a far more stressful situation than you are in your own life. Whatever's going on there you want something that takes you out of that by actually stressing you out for forty-five minutes to an hour.

So, the thirty-one anagrams, kind of, formed this thirty-one episode cancelled TV show that just goes wrong some way through. The narrative has the three characters Cain, Father K,

who is my equivalent of Henry is John Berryman's Dream Songs and Ada who is the one female character. They both compete for her affections in the slightly chauvinist tradition of the sitcom.

It's set in a, sort of, Balkanised territory, a disputed city between two states and they end up kind of on the run and they end up in exile. Well they end up starving to death in a temporary prison. That, essentially, is the rather depressing plot of the whole thing, ultimately it comes down to that and there are various complications and things along the way.

I got so into this, I was really really in love with this and I felt as though the story really hung together and of course actually it doesn't really. It's, kind of, more in my head that than it is in the thirty-one anagrams. So, partly the notes were an opportunity to give definitions for the really obscure words the 'logorrhoea' the 'drogue' the 'holothurian'. And also, because you can't really do footnotes anymore because it's been done so well already, you know. You can't really do footnotes post David Foster Wallace without it just seeming like you're paying homage to David Foster Wallace, essentially. So, I felt as though, even though that would be a neat way of just defining the obscure words it would just look derivative.

It was a Fine Art academic Crystal Bennes, who I've been in email contact with for some years, she read some of the anagrams while I was writing them and she suggested looking at some old sacred texts and looking at the 'scholaia'. Which are, sort of, like a doughnut of notes, very small notes around the edge of a small central square of text. So, it completely reflects that, like how they're presented in the book completely reflects that. Like, certain editions of the Midrash use that kind of thing, so it's just continuous prose around it.

DT: Are there any plans to develop that text around it or do you see that as just solely belonging to Cain?

LK: I think just solely belonging to Cain really, I enjoyed it a lot and it was an opportunity to, kind of, fill in the plot holes that the anagrams made necessary. Also, they're a like backstage notes almost like blog reviews, episode by episode blog reviews, of this putative TV show. I am aware of how incredibly self-indulgent as a project it is really and it was a lot of fun to write, I really enjoyed it. I was kind of aware while I was doing it that this will be quite enjoyable for some people and other people will find it intensely off-putting.

You know, this fake thirty-one episode TV show that I was creating a fake backstory for. But I think if you're somebody who quite likes post-modern American fiction or who likes getting the sort of games that Nabakov plays, like Pale Fire and things like that. I've always seen Pale Fire as a major influence on this book.

DT: Did many people feel like Cain was being quite self-indulgent? I'm making assumptions there.

LK: Erm, it's had some really really generous and lovely reviews actually, quite surprisingly. But often it is the anagram sequence that is singled out.

DT: Yeah, that's what I was thinking.

LK: It is quite a difficult sequence.

DT: Because the three sections are very very different. And the last section is much more welcoming. Well, I suppose it, sort of, rewards you for sticking with it.

LK: Yeah, for sticking with the anagrams, yeah absolutely. I've done a couple of things where I've read from it live and one of my friends and grad students, Sean Colletti, has a very good low Californian voice and he reads the notes as if he is... And he actually does, it's a weird sort of thing... One of his jobs is that he reviews TV shows episode by episode on podcasts and in print as well. So, he feels like a natural person to ask to read those. It makes quite long but it's quite a nice way to do it.

DT: I think what was running through my mind as I was reading it because I'm very... We interview people that describe themselves as purely spoken word and purely page poetry. I personally don't like to get into that too much because [when you're] reading stuff live you do what you want, basically. The fashion for spoken word is sort of... Inherent in it is some form of honesty, whatever audience [want to] believe [as honesty] and clear communication.

I just worry that there may begin to be a pressure on poets in general to move away from the kind of writing you display in Cain. I think my question is a pretty simple one. Is there a problem with seeming clever in your writing, deliberately?

LK: Oh sure. No.

DT: Do you feel any pressure in that way?

LK: Yeah, no. And again, sort of, like just reading reviews and responses and sometimes just blog reviews and things like that where people will go on for like ten thousand words and some people just seem just scarily obsessed with you or obsessed with really hating you sometimes. I feel like I've learned an awful lot from that and the five collections over the years... Trying to find that kernel of either anger or love or something human that, kind of, counterbalances the sense of play in a way, the serious play.

So, I knew there probably would be people who would just think that this was just academic navel gazing. But I felt like having Cain as a project gave me a focus to get away from that, to actually write about the many different visual and literary interpretations of Cain. There are certain things that I forgot that I meant to, sort of, make more of. So, the school poems in that book which are just autobiographical reflections on embarrassing memories at school.

They came from Hermann Hesse's novel Demian, which is not a terribly good novel, it's one of his worst probably. It's the last one that he wrote and it feels like that but the relatively good first half of that novel is about an extremely over-sensitive schoolboy and the trouble that he gets into it because of that. It's about Cain essentially the whole novel Demian is obsessed with the Cain mythology and the meaning of Cain. So, it was one of many novels

and creative responses to Cain that I read while I was researching the book but then I forgot to... That was something that I probably should have put in a footnote or something like that or just had a little, sort of, you know 'work cited' thing at the back.

I think it, kind of, worked and they were little reflections and refractions between the poems and things. So, the long monologue poem where I went on about how annoying I was at school and how, just because I couldn't play football I would just go around talking at the boys who were playing football. Just making up very self-indulgent long stories that had these sort of [INAUDIBLE] and I would even do commercial breaks. Intensely annoying!

And I wrote that after writing the anagrams but then hadn't necessarily noticed that that was a direct link. That that was a comment on the project as a whole, to a certain extent but one that is...

DT: It's funny you should say that because after reading that poem about annoying people at school then going on to the anagrams... It's a bit like someone poking you. You know, you think... Well I certainly did. I'm going to stick with this, you know you won't be beaten. I often have that with books, "I'm not going to be beaten by this". I quite like art in general that deliberately tries to confuse you. I'm not suggesting this does, but I'm quite up for the challenge. [**LK:** Yeah.] But it did feel like someone was poking you in the chest and saying, "Come on. Stick with it". You've just had a novel published maybe you could briefly describe that.

LK: Yeah. It's called The Transition, it tends to get summarised as a dystopia which, I suppose, I wasn't expecting. It's set five to ten years into the future and it's a satire of the housing crisis but also generational tensions and a, kind of, self-improvement scheme which is central to the novel. It centres on a young, well actually not that young couple, in their 30s who are living in a wall-papered conservatory.

LK: A, sort of, bedsit and this is slightly in the future where nobody can actually afford a whole flat anymore. Everybody's in the equivalent of bedsits and is paying £500 a week, at least, for them and is just trapped in this cycle of debt and not really being able to start their lives, you know.

DT: Have you been talking to my friends? I live in a part of south London which is quickly developing into that.

LK: Yeah! We talk about it in London but I really feel as though it's coming in other cities as well. [**DT:** Yes, definitely.] I mean, in Bristol which is just so far away from London but it just happens to be quite an attractive arty city and therefore a desirable place to live. But there are really shitty areas where a two-bedroom falling apart terrace will still set you back the best part of £500,000. I mean it's... This is somewhere that used to be...

You know, people used to be able to buy those with their student grants. There are people just a few years older than me who went to university for free and were just given £10,000 at the beginning of the year and some of them bought houses with that because the houses

cost nothing then. And so, there is this kind of... I don't know, I'm starting to sound very querulous now but that kind of fed the novel in a sense.

That sense that, this is actually... This is a massive sort of displacement of wealth and a massively imbalanced system that we're being asked to accept and it's not. It's not acceptable and if it's not possible to support a family on something like a teacher's salary, which it really used to be. I think if you look at the statistics of who used to occupy these houses that are now rented by twenty lawyers in one building. It would have been a family where either the mother or father worked and it would be a job like a teacher, you know.

But these jobs that we [first] go to university then train and do other courses to train for and become qualified for, only to be bringing in about £1500 a month and it goes nowhere. And it's like, "What the hell?" and you just feel like you've been sold this massive lie.

DT: Is there any particular reason it ended up as a novel? Do you feel like it was the only way of tackling it? Because it's a huge subject.

LK: I mean, I've always written fiction, I've always written short stories, it's just been with very limited success. So, I've had stories that have been published in quite small journals and I've always been desperate to write a novel. My dad is a freelance translator and he would always give me his old typewriter or word-processor when he upgraded to the next one. So, every year I'd have a different typewriter or small thing to work.

LKSo, from the age of about eight really, I was always trying to write prose, I was always trying to write long-form prose. And it took a lot of, just trying to get used to working on that scale, a lot of getting it wrong before I came up with anything that was hung together in the way that a novel is supposed to. Also, accepting that it has to be something quite systematic, that it has to have a plot that you've thought through. That you've mapped out a little bit.

DT: Who is the novel published by?

LK: 4th Estate. Yeah, it just came out in January. It's been fun, it feels quite different because...

DT: I'm not very good at making notes, did we mention the title or not?

LK: I think I did but I'll say it again, for the purpose of advertising. It's called The Transition and it's out now in all good bookshops. Again, going back to the vulgar matter of success and sales and things like that. It's felt really strange because, like already, before it was published it had already been read by more people, just within the industry, [INAUDIBLE].

It had already been read by more people than had ever read my poetry before it was even published. So, that felt like a real, I don't know... It's stupid and it's really immature to think that way but it just felt more... It has felt more real it. You know, I really cringe at myself saying that because I do love poetry and I will carry on writing poetry.

DT: Gotta sell books though Luke.

LK: Yeah, you've gotta hustle!

DT: Otherwise you'll be in that dystopian future. You don't want to be stuck in one of those bedsits.

LK: Yeah, oh god. What am I saying?

DT: I've got one eye on the clock and I think we're running out of time so we might finish with a reading.

LK: Shall I read one more poem? So, as I was saying, there is quite a lot of TV and obsession with TV in the book and lead into the long anagram sequence is, kind of, a couple of poems about television. One that is just an attempt at a sonnet about television and one that is about binge watching and then one about zombies. That one tends to work as a standalone thing outside of the sequence. I often feel that when I'm reading something that's quite narrative I feel like I'm trying to convince somebody to watch a boxset that I'm three seasons into it and they're probably not going to watch but I'm trying to talk them round to it. But this one works in isolation. It's called;

Zombies

When I come round everyone is *big* into zombies:
they are playing zombie games and watching big-budget
remakes of zombie films. They dress up as zombies
and spend half the day in SFX getting made up to look
more like zombies. They go on zombie team-building exercises.
They have zombie-themed weddings and read
zombie comic books and watch many episodes of high quality
zombie dramas. It's like I've died and gone to stupid.

'What's the deal with zombies?' I ask a man
dressed as a zombie in one of many *Ask a Zombie*
booths which have popped up on the high street.
'We're having a zombie moment,' he says.
'Clearly zombies have tapped into some key
part of the collective unconscious I don't have
because I do not give a flying fuck about zombies,'
I tell him. 'Easy there, buddy,' he says.
'You looked at yourself recently?'

DT: I'm glad you read that one I really like it. Thank you very much Luke.

LK: It's a pleasure.

DT: Thank you.

End of transcript.