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Episode 95: Khairani Barokka; Wayne Holloway-Smith – 20/03/2107

Transcript edited by David Turner – 17/03/2017

Part One

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Khairani Barokka – **KB**

Intro:

DT: Hello. This is Lunar Poetry Podcasts, I'm David Turner. Today's episode is in two parts.

Before the episode, I just wanted to mention a couple of awards that are open at the moment. The first is the inaugural British Podcast Awards for which we're up for the 'Listener's Choice' award. So, if you'd like to show us some love and you can go over to www.britishpodcastawards.com/vote where you just need to enter the podcast name, click on the Lunar logo and enter your email address. You can also vote for us from outside the UK.

Secondly, the nomination process is open for this year's Saboteur Awards. If you'd like to nominate us in the 'Best Wildcard' category or any other category you feel is appropriate and go over to www.sabotagereviews.com and click on the Saboteur Awards icon and fill in their simple form. I'll put links to both of these things in the episode description.

And as always if you'd like to follow everything we're up to, you can do so on Twitter at @Silent_Tongue or at Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook, Soundcloud, iTunes or Stitcher and now Instagram. I have done that. Do the right thing and tell your friends about us, okay?

First up, it's me chatting to poet and visual artist Khairani Barokka about co-editing Stairs and Whispers, the first major UK anthology of poetry and essays by D/deaf and disabled poets. That's D/deaf with a capital 'D', forward slash 'little d'. That's out through Nine Arches Press. We also get around to talking about her debut collection Rope, which will also be out through Nine Arches in October 2017.

Oh, and we talk about a crowdfunding campaign for Stairs and Whispers, the anthology, which I'm very happy to say has reached its target. Here's Khairani, or Okka as I call her in the interview.

Conversation:

KB: So, I thought I would begin, so to speak with the poem;

Conception

dogged speck,
clot of blood,
and all of us awkwardly
rivet-welding
selves to the earth
for another quiet week.

i think eggs have self-awareness.
i think they have a say.
i think mum's said
no and no and maybe,
and then she saw this one
little snake, and sighed,

and said,

"well, ok."

DT: Thank you very much. Hello Okka, how are you doing?

KB: I'm doing well, thank you.

DT: Good. In my normal vein of awkward starts to podcasts and interviews, I'll shoehorn in how we met, which was a few weeks ago now, at Verve Poetry Festival in Birmingham. Just a little disclaimer and warning for podcast listeners, there are to come quite a few guests where I'll be saying I met them at Verve Poetry Festival as it was a great festival.

KB: It was brilliantly, brilliantly curated so props to Stewart Bartholomew and Cynthia Miller.

DT: We met, you were doing a reading from your book, which is in front me which I'm pointing which no one can see, called Indigenous Species. I think we should start talking about that because it leads into really interesting aspects of your work to do with visual art and access to literature.

KB: Were you there?

DT: Yeah, I saw the reading. That's why I brought it up.

KB: I'm so sorry, you know when you do a reading and the audience is, sort of, like a mass of, hopefully, friendship and you're hoping that you're connecting with people.

DT: I think the best way to start is if you maybe explain, firstly, what the book is and then how it came about and why the different aspects are important.

KB: Sure. So, Indigenous Species is not a poetry collection, it is one poem and the introduction is basically an essay that introduces that poem. The poem came out in 2013 when I was living in Jakarta, where I'm from. It came out just as a response to all of the environmental destruction that we're seeing but also environmental destruction as social destruction.

Indonesia is extremely biodiverse but also extremely rich in cultural diversity. We have hundreds of languages and also an enormous amount of rainforest that has, unfortunately, been decimated. And as I say in the introduction, you know, the fatal consequences of that are really palpable, last year alone over one-hundred thousand Indonesians died from the air pollution from the fires.

And that doesn't include the thousands in Singapore [and] in Malaysia and it doesn't include kids not being able to go to school first stretches of time and people who lost their

livelihoods as a result of not being able to work. And just, you know, environmental destruction covers lots of different things it covers plastics pollution and it covers mercury poisoning, it covers mining. Indonesia has the biggest gold mine in the world in West Papua and yet the province has had a lot of unrest and oppression from the Indonesian government and the people surrounding that gold mine aren't receiving the benefits. It just goes on and on.

My parents have been environmental activist since I can remember so it was always really emotional for me and I think I wanted to make this a manuscript that I didn't think any publisher would take on. I don't know about you but when it comes to creative projects, when I've decided something's good to do I, sort of, have a commitment to that project like a child almost. With Indigenous Species, I knew I wanted to make it into its own thing. Because it didn't seem to fit into a collection that I was working on, you know, it sort of stuck out at odd angles. It seemed like it was his own beast, so to speak.

So, it was first performed at a residency I did at an emerging writers festival in Melbourne, Australia and I wrote the poem, basically, for this event that was about animals. So, all the poems are about animals and I really love performing it as a spoken word poem. But even when I was writing it... Because I'm a disabled artist and I have been doing accessibility and inclusion work in the arts and I try as much as possible, though I still have many failings as all of us probably at some time or other do...

So, when I wrote it I thought, "Okay, this is this going to be a spoken word poem but I really want it to have images and projections and imagery of the destruction", I wanted to make it graphic and illustrated in a certain way. So, because of lack of time and funding I didn't really get to do that until I did a residency in Malaysia at Rimbun Dahan, which basically...

They gave me a little house, a beautiful little house, right next to this forested area where a python, no kidding, lived in the middle of the night. I remember, once, I forgot my flashlight coming back from a friend's house, my friend Jen's house, and I realised I'm alone in the forest and it's dark and pythons come out at night. [LAUGHTER] And, you know, monkeys would peer and there were wild boars around and it was very conducive to really making art about the rainforest.

So, I thought about making this a performance installation because I consider myself an interdisciplinary artist. I was trained in interdisciplinary mixed media art, which is weirdly how I rediscovered poetry because I always wrote poetry since I was a toddler. Apparently, the first two poetic things I said were, "The sound of the wind is very very thin" and I was like, "That's it!"

DT: Done!

KB: Yeah, done!

DT: Retired!

KB: Yeah, like really little, "Poetry! You can make things rhyme!" So, I got back into you know poetry and performing spoken word through visual art, weirdly. Eventually, I decided I wanted to make Indigenous Species into a book but an accessible book and I wanted to answer the question why don't we see Braille text, Braille text and artwork in the same book. And there have been, you know, tactile books made before but none that were for visually-impaired readers as well as non-visually impaired readers.

The sighted version that I'm holding in my hands, that I read out at Verve, is out now with Tilted Axis Press who very thankfully... Even though I really did think, you know, I'm going to get this done in maybe another twenty years. Like, "The publishing industry isn't ready. It's okay, if I have to do it with my own money I can. So, maybe I'll save up and, you know, make one-off art books or something". But they picked up my whole crazy proposal which I really wasn't expecting.

So, on each page on the left-hand side of the book you have the word "braille" in Braille but it's not raised Braille, it's just the dots on the flat page. I wanted that, specifically, so that it could be a translation of absence because blind and visually-impaired readers, when it's just a flat page, they can't read anything unless they're using a screen-reader. So, I wanted sighted readers, first of all to acknowledge that we are sighted readers... And here I am with my huge... I mean, without my glasses and contacts I'd be blind as a bat, right. And yet there's this weird division that, "Oh, you know, you're not blind or sight-impaired", so just thinking about that.

DT: Just out of interest. Is there anywhere that listeners could go to see examples of these images?

KB: Thank you. Yeah, there have been a few interviews that I've done where Tilted Axis has also provided the images of both the left and the right-hand side pages, and I can provide you with links to those.

DT: Yeah, we'll put links into the episode description.

KB: That would be great! So, the images that I used were of some traditional motifs, mostly from Kalimantan. So, this crab, for example, 'Little Sebastian'... I've just decided to call him that... Is from a traditional form of Dayak tattooing but I, sort of, made it my own little fiery crab. So, there are some traditional motifs but also contemporary motifs and I wanted to be bright and jagged.

KB: I wanted the brightness, actually, to be menacing because people think of darkness and blackness as, sort of, a negative but I wanted to have people feel the frenetic 'neon-ness' as something destructive. So, there's a river that runs through the whole book and it, sort of, symbolises the forces of commercialism.

DT: I really like the fact that your book is visually striking but complex in the same sense. It's not an obvious interpretation of the story as it goes along.

KB: Thank you so much, that's what I was going for, because I wanted the images to tell a story in themselves. For example, the final page of the book, 'dun, dun, dun'... I'm not going to spoil it for you but this is a visual spoiler, right and you only understand what's happening if you look at the visuals. And in the Braille and tactile version, which knock on wood is going to be printed by Tilted Axis this year, if you read the text and then you feel what is happening here and you feel the image, I hope that it will give a further depth to the poem.

DT: So, the tactile version, that's under way is it?

KB: Yes, we're currently trying to sort out the logistics of that because it was always intended that there would be a sighted version and a Braille and tactile version.

DT: I think what appeals to me so much from this book is, the usual idea behind people moving towards accessibility is very binary, isn't it? It's either people can see or they can't see, they can hear or they can't hear. The spectrum is so much wider than that.

KB: Yes, there are so many ways people are disabled.

DT: This idea of having tactile images as well as Braille, as well as a physical [or tactile] book. It seems a much more appropriate way to approach accessibility in publishing.

KB: I feel like, for example, I was on this panel Creative Approaches to Audio Description at the Unlimited Festival last year... In it us practitioners were talking about how it's so boring and, you know, reeking of a blindness that isn't considered when people do audio descriptions that are verbatim and don't perceive audio descriptions in themselves as art-forms. So, there are people, on the same panel, who messed around with that a lot. And, for me, I feel I want the translations of artworks and poems to be completely separate artworks in themselves.

I didn't just want it to be this notion, that is false, of translation as an objective thing, that it's going to be completely the same experience. Because it's not the same experience when you hear a poem and when you read it on the page, you know, for sighted people. And it's not even the same experience when you're reading a poem in Braille and when you're hearing it read out to you by like, you know, 'speech-to-text' or something.

And I know that in the blind and sight-impaired community, there's this whole thing of... Well, you know, people are so reliant on screen-readers but then it becomes all about the technology and what if people don't have access to that technology and what if people don't know how to spell because they're so reliant on [them]? But when I first began the process of creating Indigenous Species I, sort of, ran this idea first by my blind and sight-impaired colleagues who are also in arts and accessibility and I said I had this crazy idea for this Braille and tactile art-book, poem... Book.

And they said, "Oh, that's really cool and interesting", and I thought, "Phew!" Because I don't want this to be seen as a charity object. I don't want any of my work to be seen as

charitable quote, unquote because as somebody who identifies as disabled I just really hate people treating us as [needing charity].

DT: There has been enough of that, hasn't there?

KB: Yeah, as though we're consumers. And also, translating things into accessible formats and only thinking of us as consumers rather than us as artists. And that's a big problem in terms of infrastructure and arts institutions around the world where for example people will say, "Yes, our venue is completely accessible", but the stage isn't accessible because it didn't even dawn on them that the artist would be [disabled].

DT: I think it's quite often... Of course, it's necessary and completely appropriate that you would try to make everything accessible to an audience but if you're not allowing artists from those groups to make work and present work it's never going to be completely or appropriately directed to the same audience, is it?

KB: The disablement of people is more of a problem than the impairments that people may have. So, for example, I did not have proper pain medication until I arrived in London. So, for like years, I couldn't create the amount of work that I wanted to or the quality of work that I wanted to simply because I wasn't getting proper health care. And there are other forms of disablement that really intersect with a lot of other forms of identity. So, I guess that might bring us to the anthology that I'm co-editing?

DT: Yes, that's the direction I was heading in anyway because it links also into this [idea of] giving autonomy to artists, disabled artists as well, in order to talk to audiences. So, yes, we should move on to talk about that.

KB: Right. Nine Arches Press, which is also publishing my debut full-length collection Rope in October, in early May we're going to publish Stairs and Whispers, D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back. [INAUDIBLE] And that is definitely a collaborative effort, co-edited by the wonderful Daniel Sluman, the wonderful Sandra Alland and myself. It has essays and lots of poetry from really top notch poets from around the UK.

The condition for consideration was that you had to be based in the UK and that you had to be Disabled yourself or D/deaf. It's just been a brilliant process, I really feel like it is a dream job. Sandra has, also, said elsewhere it really is because, first of all, we get to explore so many facets of other people's lives that bear no resemblance to any of our lives at all. Because there is such a wide variety in terms of what disabled lives are. So, we're exploring that band we're exploring different poetics, how someone who considers themselves learning disabled might write poetry in a different way. And that language needs to be taken into account as well.

[Along with] how people who are hard of hearing play with the language that they may hear or not hear in a poem. And just in terms of intersectionality it's been brilliant as well, for example, Daniel is a man, Sandra Genderqueer. So, we pick up on different things, so there might be a poem where somebody says, "Hey, actually, that's a little bit sexist" and somebody says, "I didn't get that part" or somebody says, "Is this racist?"

Because we only really want to include poets who share our ethics and our ethos of being truly inclusive. And so, we really wanted to present the best of what we thought the spirit of a Disabled poets' community should be and the quality is really, I think, breath taking. I mean, sorry to toot our own horn but I feel really privileged.

DT: There's currently a Crowdfunder campaign to fund the publication of Stairs and Whispers.

KB: Yes.

DT: That will have been announced, I think, four days before this podcast has gone out, so we don't know the result of that. It's very close already beyond 85 percent I believe. So, I think it looks like it's going to happen. Hopefully, when you're listening to this, that has happened. Yeah, let's think positively, I'm sure it will have happened. We're just in this difficult position of talking about the future in the 'past'.

KB: Yeah! But things look good so hopefully... It's been partially funded by Arts Council England and by and Nine Arches but you just need that little push. Because one thing that I also really love about this project is that, you know, we are committed to paying contributors, poets and editors. There will be poetry and also essays and also videos that Sandra has been working on that are accessible, with BSL. So, it's a whole multimedia operation.

DT: So, was there any criteria in terms of what you were asking for or did you just ask for general submissions first to get an idea of what people wanted to send in?

KB: Yeah, actually we're working on ordering of the sections right now, obviously, and how that works in the book. Because, as you know, sometimes if poems are just read at random you don't realise the order that they should be in. So, that's a lot of shuffling of pages. Yes, we did just ask for general submissions from the D/deaf and Disabled poets' community and we're, sort of, seeing themes that are emerging, common threads if you will.

Also, we wanted a great variety of poems that didn't club too heavily in terms of representing one Disabled life or another. Also, the poems as a whole... If we see, for example, "Oh, okay, this poet has written a poem about this experience of treatment", maybe then we'll take another poem from another poet that has also touched on those issues. Or we'll look to another thing that they've written to, sort of, encapsulate more diversity.

DT: So, in a really nice twist of fate, the program we put out talking about issues around accessibility which was hosted by the wonderful Harry Giles. Harry was joined by two guests who are both in the anthology, Andra Simons and Abi Palmer. One aspect that they did talk about was this idea that a lot of arts submission processes don't allow for the fact [that] you may go through periods of not feeling very well so you can't meet deadlines. You may not

have physical access to [computers] you know. So, I was just wondering whether any special consideration was taken in that respect?

KB: I see, we had quite a long submission process, I mean, this whole project has been two years. We had quite a large window and I think there was a certain point after that window closed where we were getting people, you know, inquiring as to whether they could submit. But we really did... You have to have a cut-off point somewhere and I think almost two years is pretty long cut-off point.

DT: Yes, of course.

KB: So, eventually, you know, Jane and all three of us had to say, "No that's it. This what we're working with and it's a task in and of itself to work with what we were given in terms of submissions". But I think we did a great job of, hopefully a great job, of including as many women as possible, Gender-Queer people as possible [and] Trans representation. In terms of people who are non-white, you know, Black, Asian, minority-ethnic because I think oftentimes the notion of disability and who is disabled and who is a disabled artist is just, kind of, whitewashed and you don't see a lot of...

DT: Well, we've had guests on in the past who've spoken of the fact that as an artist you can be Black but you can't necessarily be anything else. You know, in people's minds you're, sort of, marketed as being a Black artist so you have to almost forfeit the fact that you're disabled or the fact that you're Queer or the fact that you're Trans.

KB: Absolutely, it's all about intersectionality and I think that's the beauty of poetry is all of that comes out. It's so strange that nobody ever talks about white identity and never asks, you know, a straight white man to qualify, "You know, I'm a white guy but I'm also straight and I'm also..." You know, why is there that distinction? You know, this notion of identity politics, well what about white identity politics and straight identity politics and male? So, I think the great thing is that we're all on the same page in terms of politics.

And also, we have been educating each other, I mean, I'm not trans, I'm not Genderqueer, Sandra has been educating me about that. I'm not a cancer survivor, Daniel is, you know. We're constantly educating each other in the most beautiful way, really. So, it's been a joy, it's been a real joy.

DT: The poem you read at the beginning of the interview is from your upcoming collection, Rope and that's through Nine Arches. Maybe you could tell us a bit about that and certainly plug the date by all means because I know for a fact this will be out at least before the collection comes out.

KB: So, Rope comes out the first week of October [2017], I'm extremely excited about it. I really can't believe that so many of the things that I've wanted to do all my life are finally happening, sort of, all at once. A few poems in Rope I began ten years ago and it actually took me ten years to finish properly and I think I just did a lot of living in my twenties. So, from ages twenty-one to thirty-one, all of those poems are in there and they, sort of, encapsulate this sense of feeling un-moored.

KB: I think everybody in their twenties, you know, you do feel un-moored and you're trying to grasp at something like, what is it that you can feel happy doing? What is happiness? You know, how do you attain stability in any shape or form? And that brings me to this concept of Rope which I just realised I use that concept in a few poems, I bring that metaphor about. And there is a poem called Rope which is the final poem in the collection about what it is we're trying to hold on to and what it is that we think is important.

And it's also about relationships and feelings and mental health and trying to find solid ground, basically, it's all about [my] journey through my twenties in various places. I mean, when I look through the poems in Rope, I wrote them in Asia, Europe the Americas. I've just been fortunate to, for example, get scholarships in the States so I was there and then residencies elsewhere and so it's sort of like this map, for me, of the past ten years of my life.

Some of it is auto-biographical but also some of it is about my friends' experiences. You know, for example, the poem Cutting that I'm going to read at the end of this podcast is about other people's experiences. Some of them work is fictional, some of it is prose poetry that's also fictional. Some of it is nonfictional and what I love about poetry more than... I mean, I work in non-fiction and fiction as well but poetry feels like my home. What I love, so much, about it is, as I say, in the introduction to Rope, poetry is fiction/non-fiction/poetry/other, you know.

DT: I really love the fictional/non-fiction aspect about poetry, I think that's what attracts me to it.

KB: Yeah, and you can't put your finger down and say, "This is based on their experience". I mean, not all the first-person poems in Rope are my own experience, I may be writing it with an 'I', you know, from a first-person point of view. But I love the fact that nobody can actually really tell what happened to me and what didn't. What's fiction and what isn't? Some of these stories are my friends' stories, some of them I just came up with in my head.

But I think what is true in all of them is the emotion and I feel like poems are, sort of, repositories of emotion that are artefacts of emotion, you know, that we can go back to and pick up. Things evolve in interesting ways and much like, you know, this concept of disability cultures and [INAUDIBLE] culture, it's like the line between abled and disabled is artificial. What do you consider disabled, what do you consider abled?

Although, you know, in the book we say that disabled is the opposite of enabled with an 'E' not unable with a 'U' as with the social model of disability, mostly that we are seeing nowadays in the language of arts and accessibility people. But yeah, it all sort of ties together because these cultural contradictions, quote/unquote, are really not contradictions at all I feel like. You know, I'm a Muslim feminist my dad's a... I learned the word 'feminist' from my father.

I remember when I was small, he... It was really funny... He was, actually, in my exact same position he was a PHD student on scholarship in the States. I learned the word feminist because he had applied to be a feminist organisation and they rejected him because he was a guy. And I was like, "But what is feminist?" and he said, "I was trying to get into this group and they wouldn't take me". You know, and he prays five times a day and my family they're very spiritual Muslims and they're the most, you know, feminist people in my life, a lot of the time.

So, I think that a lot of stereotypes that people apply to, you know... People assume that being a straight white male is, sort of, what being human is and it's not. There are so many varieties to the human experience and I think that's, kind of, what I'm trying to get at with all the work that I do. With Rope, with Indigenous Species, Stairs and Whispers all coming out. Even with...

I co-edited with Ng Yi-Sheng, this anthology of urban short fiction from south-east Asia called, Heat. Heat was part of a trilogy Heat/Flesh/Trash that also came out last year, showing the variety of what it means to be in south-east Asia and writing about south-east Asia. It's nothing like... You know, you see so many travelogues of, you know, White guys coming to south-east Asia and we certainly got a lot of those submissions as well, "My Thai prostitute experience", no we really did!

And it's just nothing like what life is actually like if you're from south-east Asia where you have so many different experiences. I just feel very privileged to get to edit these books and to make these books that show different facets of human experience that I think are still under represented in literature.

DT: I think that's a really beautiful place to stop because time is running on but we'll take one final poem before we wrap up, completely.

KB: [00:26:36] Thank you so much for having me, it's been fun. So, conception was previously published in Magdelene and Cutting was published in an anthology from ISKRA to benefit the organisation, Everyday Victim Blaming.

<u>cutting</u>

cropped short feels like exhalation:
punk sigh of right.

something about long hair
reminds me of tears all down the front,

a friend after the first time,
before she cut it off to be strong
and then it happened again times two.

reminds me of tangled feminine juices,
guilt crystallizing down telephone lines,

after other friends cut their hair, and
the forty-third man walks.

long hair
reminds me
of all my “hers”.
secrets of the majority,
walking open into
bitumen cities.

sometimes long hair
makes anger rise in tresses.
mess. sinless.
bless.

DT: Thank you very much Okka, I really enjoyed it.

KB: Thank you so much for today.

Part Two (27:39):

Host: Lizzy Palmer – LP

Guest: Wayne Holloway-Smith – WH

Intro:

DT: Coming up next, Lizzy Palmer talks to Wayne Holloway-Smith about the imminent release of his debut collection Alarum, out through Bloodaxe Books. The pair also talk about a short course that Wayne led at The Poetry School in south London called, "The Poem as Party Guest", which Lizzy also attended. Here's Lizzy and Wayne.

Conversation:

WH: No Worries

Oh yes, the help you need is strapping, for sure.
It might at any time now pull up outside your door
in its mucky white van, man-arms flush
to the steering wheel; its muscular weight
the only buoyant thing in your hallway,
your kitchen, and stood upright in itself –
full face, a dimple-checked, unshaved grin.

Almost a caricature in its self-assuredness,
and, you imagine, shirtless beneath its coveralls.
A well-oiled metal box of fixing tools. For fixing.
A roll-up behind one ear, it promises itself to you,
that everything can definitely be sorted, mate,
the pieces of it all will be cleaned and fitted
back together. Good as new. No worries.
And you want to believe it'll show up this time, at least
you are sure of that, so sure you can hear it whistle.

LP: Thank you.

WH: Pleasure.

LP: Hello Wayne. How are you?

WH: I'm alright, yeah. How are you?

LP: Very well thanks, it's nice to be here.

WH: Yeah, I'm sorry that you got here before I did.

LP: It's taken us a while to get together, hasn't it?

WH: That's true.

LP: But we've made it.

WH: Finally made it. Even today could have gone wrong but didn't in the end.

LP: Not yet.

WH: That's true.

LP: I have pressed 'record' on the recorder, so that is the main thing.

WH: Was that happening then? I enjoy that.

LP: No, it wasn't happening. I'm just always afraid that that is the one thing I'm going to do and everything else goes right.

WH: Okay. So, we would have conducted a fairly interesting interview and then you would've forgotten to record it? [**LP:** Yeah] And then we'd have to reproduce the whole thing, artificially. [**LP:** Perfectly] Yeah, I wouldn't have been able to do that.

LP: I'd like to start by talking a little bit about how we met. Which was at The Poetry School in Kennington. As you know [but] for the benefit of our listeners.

WH: Yes, I was there.

LP: You were there. I took one of Wayne's courses, which was called, Poem as Party Guest which was a really interesting idea for a class which maybe we can get on to in a little bit. I was wondering if you could talk to us a little bit about how you got into teaching a class at The Poetry School and then a bit more in general about how you teach classes, how you structure them, maybe, how you get work out of your students?

WH: Well, The Poetry School thing came about, I think, probably because a while before that class, like maybe a year before, I was invited to take part in another Poetry School initiative which was called something like The Tutor Academy. Which took on like maybe four younger poets and gave them an opportunity, each, to teach twice on like almost like a module long course. We each got a different topic or we chose a different topic and then we would, kind of, alternate between us for eight weeks. So, I taught twice on that and then a while later...

I kind of enjoyed it and part of my livelihood is that I lecture, so I kind of explored the subject matter of how to communicate poetry to... You know, the thing about poetry, I think, is it's really difficult. Like, my whole idea of poetry is that language is like quite reductive, there's one word called sadness [yet] there's a thousand different experiences of sadness. How do you pin all of those different experiences onto this one word, 'sadness'?

So, I think poetry, kind of, has the potential to stretch and go beyond language to get at meanings behind and outside of the restrictive nature of English language as we use it in the everyday. So, I've been constantly trying to articulate that to students but in the restrictive everyday language, so it is... And one idea I came up with was just this idea of a poem as a party guest.

So, I wrote to Julia Bird at The Poetry School and told her about it and she thought it sounded good, so we arranged for me to teach there. Which was fun. I really enjoyed it, did you enjoy it?

LP: I really enjoyed it, yeah.

WH: The struggle with that particular class, I think, Lizzy is that everyone was already quite good. [**LP:** Yeah] My expectations of this messianic presence, being me, sweeping in and making everyone a brilliant poet was like completely subverted or undermined by the fact that everyone was already really good!

LP: Everyone was really good, yeah.

WH: So, in terms of structure I don't necessarily have a formula, like, I normally turn up and have a loose idea and then see how people are engaging with each other. So, the first week is for me just to, sort of, try and find out who everyone is. Then I, kind of, build a

structure or a loose structure around that but I think the lesson for me. The success of it is always contingent upon the participants of this students, so that's what I'm more interested. In terms of... What was it you asked? How do I get them to do work or something?

LP: Yeah. How do you get the work out of people?

WH: How do I get the work out of people? The thing is, it's more difficult sometimes in a university context. Whereas, somewhere like the Poetry School Road or I just taught at the Faber Academy, the same sort of thing, people have paid money to learn something and they just really fucking want to learn it. So, it's not difficult to make them or to, kind of, coerce them into doing work [as] that's what they're there to do.

LP: Yeah.

WH: Sometimes it's like... Like, for our class, one of the things I did in the first lesson was just ask them to, kind of, suspend their disbelief. Or to put aside, just for the five weeks, their own ideas about what a poem was allowed to be and just for these five weeks explore this new thing that I was presenting. I'm really interested in stuff outside of traditional modes of poetry in some way so, sometimes people turn up with particular expectations and then it's just about asking them to forget about those for a bit. They can go back to them but, just for this course, see if there's anything else helpful that they can find.

LP: I mean, we don't have to focus on The Poetry School, it was over almost a year ago now, that class that I attended. Maybe you could just sum up the concept of what that was, just because I think it's an interesting...

WH: I guess, again, I don't think this is like a catch-all way of looking at poetry, it's certainly not some kind of manifesto or something. It was just one route into a type of poetics I was considering at the time. I was just wondering about the poetry that I don't like, basically, and how much of a kinship that poetry has to the way that I personally behave at parties. Which is just to get drunk and tell people about how terrible Neo-Liberalism is, which is sometimes not really what someone at a party has attended for.

LP: No.

WH: I think the thing is like... I guess you can read it on the website or something but it was, pretty much just, what are some of the things that, socially, aren't conducive to building a good relationship. So, if someone talks out you and you don't feel part of the conversation. Like you're interchangeable, that they want someone to speak at, you could be anyone. Erm, going on too long, preaching. Effectively, just not being interested in any type of actual social exchange, any genuine social exchange.

So, I was thinking that poetry could operate and has operated along the same lines. I've read poems that have bored me, you know, it's almost like if they were a party guest I'd be looking around the room trying to find a way out of the conversation, which is obviously not even a conversation it's a monologue. But those, kind of, people follow you around, don't

they, continually talking. I've read poetry like that so I was just thinking, how can we find ways of ensuring that we don't reproduce that kind of social exchange within a poem?

LP: Yeah. It's such a good idea and I did, I really took that away from it, actually. Even though, it was almost a year ago as I'm writing now I am thinking about the things we discussed in the class and I think it's such an important thing to try and make your poetry, not that bad party guest. I thought it was a really important idea.

WH: [INAUDIBLE] I mean, like I said, it's not the only thing I think. I just thought it was interesting for a bunch of people to explore during that particular period of time. [**LP:** Yeah.] And it's something that, obviously, I'm aware of when I'm writing, hopefully. I don't want to bore people. Luke Kennard said this thing once, he wrote this thing in Poetry London which was something like, "One of the problems of contemporary poetry is that the poet assumes by default that the reader is interested in their lives."

LP: Yeah.

WH: And that's true and I do, do that, so I need to stop doing that. I need, kind of, mechanisms within my own thought patterns to make sure that I have that at the forefront of my mind when I'm writing here.

LP: You mentioned your university lecturing. Could you talk to us a bit about that as well? Where you do it, what you teach?

WH: Yes, I started doing a bit of lecturing because I did a PHD at Brunel [University] and I guess you're almost obliged to do a bit of lecturing at that point. But also, you get paid for it. So, I did that and I carried on doing that. But the thing about Brunel is, I was only being paid per hour, so although I enjoyed it, when everyone goes on a Christmas break and everyone says, "Have a great Christmas". I was thinking "Well you can have a great Christmas, you're on 1 £40,000 a year contract irrespective of whether you teach or not. But I don't have any money for the next five weeks now".

WH: And over the summer it's even worse, you know. I finished my PHD, so I passed my viva, handed in the suggested changes, whatever, signed a deal with Bloodaxe [Books]. That all happened in the space of a week, in the summer, and then on the Monday I started selling tea at Borough Market for like six quid an hour. And in terms of like this, sort of, linearity of narrative we've been taught to believe. I didn't feel that was, kind of, consistent with that.

When a job came up for University of Hertfordshire '0.5' post, so two and a half days a week, I applied for it and was lucky enough to get that job and I really enjoy it, I like working with the people that I work with. I also, currently, teach on an MA for the Open University, a poetry course which was designed by Siobhán Campbell and Jane Yeh. So, that's been a really weird and interesting experience, teaching remotely. I don't think I've ever taught a group of students whilst also eating a bowl of cereal before. So, that's quite in some ways beneficial. I like eating cereal and I don't mind teaching either.

LP: It makes everything better.

WH: Yeah.

LP: Apart from the cereal thing, what would be the main differences between teaching remotely and [teaching in a classroom]?

WH: One of the things I find, Lizzy, is a lot of what I say, perhaps, I say through body language and mannerisms. So, I could say something and people would know the good nature of it because of the way that I say it, the tone of voice and the expression on my face and probably my heavily camp posture. I say that for the listener, I am currently sitting in a pose much like a teapot.

So, every single piece of feedback that you give any student online, you can't leave any room for doubt about your positivity towards their work. There's such a risk of offending or upsetting someone, you can't make any jokes, you have to be fairly straight forward and also very thorough. The other thing is that there's quite a few students and there's not that much time, so each piece of feedback, kind of, needs to pre-empt the questions that they will ask about that piece of feedback. So, it ends up being three times as long as that feedback would have been had I met the person face to face. So, that's quite strange, again it's got some really good things about it. Also, it can be slightly hard work but I'm enjoying it, it's a fun experience.

LP: [00:41:27] Good. Maybe at this point we could have another reading.

WH: So, I thought maybe I'd read this one... I've never read this poem before, out loud, but it if you want to read it was published by Poetry, so it's on the Poetry Foundation website. It's called Some Waynes. It's effectively just a list of Wayne's.

> <u>Some Waynes</u>
>
> Magic Wayne with flowers; Wanye West; Box-of-Tricks Wayne;
> Wayne sad on Facebook, proving he loves his daughter; the
> sporty Wayne – loves himself skinny; Bald Wayne, head like a
> rocking chair; Amy Waynhehouse; Wayne the ironic; Fat Wayne
> - tits pushed beneath a Fred Perry Wayne; Wayne from near
> Slough; Ugly Wayne – the unlikely mess of his wife Wayne –
> canned laughter, Wayne who renamed another Wayne fleabag;
> Track-suited Wayne – your hubcaps, his pockets; Home and
> A-Wayne; Randy Wayne; Wayne, fountains of him, every drop
> snug to someone's mum; Wayne, boyfriend of Stacey; Wayne-
> ker; Wayne the rap star, gold teeth, grime; Wayne the superhero;
> Wayne the Cowboy; Dancing Wayne – in tights; It's-Wayning-
> Men; a cavalcade of Waynes fucking each other up in a Geoff
> Hattersley poem – in a pub, in Barnsley; Purple Wayne;
> Wayne's World Wayne; Wayne 'Sleng Teng' Smith; A-Wayne
> in a manger; all of them have stopped what they're doing, all

of them divided in two rows and facing each other, all of them,
arms raised, they are linking fingers, all of them: an architrave
through which I celebrate, marching like I am the bridegroom,
grinning like I am the bride

WH: Turns out I'm not going to read that again, I think.

LP: I find it so hard to stay quiet on the recording and not react, like I would if we were at a performance.

WH: Oh yeah? What would you have done?

LP: Cackled!

WH: Oh cackled, that's alright then. Okay. Well, at least it was a positive reaction that you were repressing.

LP: You're reading from your new book.

WH: That's right, Alarum.

LP: Let's have a chat about your book.

WH: Yeah. "Gotta shift some units!" so let's talk about it.

LP: I'll just say the official release date is the 23rd of March, 2017.

WH: Yeah.

LP: Which may be in the past or the future depending on when this podcast has been put out.

WH: We were talking about linearity a minute ago.

LP: It doesn't exist.

WH: It doesn't exist, no. Yes, so 23rd of March but it is available for pre-order on Amazon, if that's a thing you do. Although, I don't really know... Why do people pre-order? You can't get it any earlier, right? Like, you can pre-order it or you could get it on the 23rd and it would come to your door at the same time?

LP: Maybe in case it sells out?

WH: Right, yeah. I'm sure that this book will have already sold out by the time that you go onto Amazon.

LP: So, it's published by Bloodaxe [Books].

WH: By Bloodaxe, yeah, who I love. Because like I said another thing recently, they seem to be quite pluralistic in their approach to who they represent and the subject matter and the voices and the demographics that they represent within the poetry arena. And I am really pleased that they're allowing me to, sort of, be an additional voice. Another voice in a long list of really good voices. Some of my favourite people have been published by Bloodaxe, so yeah it is the only place that I sent my manuscript.

LP: How long a process was it putting your manuscript together?

WH: My thing with Donut Press came out in 2011 and there's not a poem from that pamphlet. Like, a lot of people when they bring a pamphlet out and then they bring their first collection out, you'll find maybe five to ten of the poems cross over but none of the poems cross over into this. So, pretty much they're all new. That was 2011, so six years so maybe it was five years?

LP: Is there an overarching theme or subject?

WH: The title kind of indicates some kind of alarm, though it's an archaic expression of that term and there are varying types of, kind of, alarm. I think in the book, like anxiety being a major feature... I don't know, I guess I can't really dictate how anyone's going to read it or the themes that they pick up. But I would say the two things that I was interested in...

Well, it wasn't like I sat down and tried to explore these themes but the things that came out of my head seemed to be about anxiety and class and the way they coexist or the way that, in fact, received notions of working-class masculinity... The way that received notions about mental health and then my own kind of experience of mental health can, kind of, disrupt those dominant narratives of working class masculinity. Which is something that I think probably does happen in the book, at least for my money.

I haven't actually paid any money but if I did pay any money and read this book I would... My kind of thoughts about it would be, "Well the dominant themes of anxiety and mental health in this book really do disrupt the received notions and narratives about working class masculinity. That's a really successful book I might buy one for my friend or something".

LP: I can't wait to read it, it sounds really great.

WH: You're come to the launch, aren't you?

LP: I am.

WH: 17th March. This may or may not be in the past or the future or maybe it's today.

LP: We're not going to say.

WH: No. But there is a launch or there was a launch on the 17th of March.

LP: It is going to be or was really great!

WH: I don't think I will ever or will ever have had quite as much fun as I will or have had at this launch.

LP: And also there may not be any point in talking about the book because it may have sold out.

WH: I imagine it would have probably sold out.

LP: I think it might or did.

WH: They're only publishing one copy. Yeah, I'm looking forward to it, I'm looking forward to seeing you lot there. I'm looking forward to... I don't know, it's difficult, I don't really like parties when it' my birthday [it] feels a bit like it's going to be focussed on me. So, I'm going to look for ways to not make it focussed on me or to only have it focussed on me for a very little while and then to just have fun.

LP: You could invite a load of other Waynes and have them there talking to everybody.

WH: 'Amy Waynehouse' is already coming.

LP: I hope so, she's my favourite and 'Wayne-ker.

WH: 'Wayne-ker' is obviously me. There's Wayne Dobson who is like an 80s, television magician. [He] had a heavily receding hairline that he was trying to disguise but I wonder now if he's still living and whether he's still got any vestiges of hair left.

LP: You should try and find out.

WH: I might Google him in a bit.

LP: Yeah. We'll probably wrap up soon but I'd like to talk in general a bit about your writing practice.

WH: Yeah.

LP: If you consider yourself to have a writing practice, it's something I like to ask.

WH: Yeah, I don't know. Everyone, I think says this, don't they?... Like they don't have a time where they sit down and think, "Right, now I'm going to write a poem". I definitely don't do that but I tend to like not write for ages because I have loads of other stuff that I have to do. And so it's almost, like... You know those Scalextric things or whatever when you were little?

Sometimes one car will go slightly off the track and then all the other cars would ram into the back of it? That's, kind of, like the thoughts that pile up into my head I think. So, something knocks me off track and then that first thought is kind of suspended there and then that, kind of, obstructs all the other thoughts until there's like a forty-car pileup. But then, all of a sudden, when that first car gets back on track or is allowed to, or whatever was blocking it is removed, then all forty stream out quite quickly.

So, there's a poem in here that I couldn't write for a long time, I had to revise for my PHD Viva and stuff because I didn't want to look stupid for some people that I, kind of, admired. And I also wanted to pass my PHD, it wasn't only vanity. But then as soon as that was out of the way the whole poem, which is sixteen pages, came out in about maybe two days. That was a really good feeling, thinking, "God, I actually can still write".

LP: It surprises me every time I actually write something, after four months of nothing!

WH: That's true, that's true. I am incredibly surprised every time I seem to have written a poem.

LP: Yeah. I think that's what makes it a really wonderful thing.

WH: Do you find that after you've written it, like one second after, you're really discontented? I find the moment just before, if I'm going to put a full stop in it. Just the moment before I put that final full stop, is the only been where I experience pleasure and then immediately afterwards that drains away.

LP: Self-loathing.

WH: Yeah, self-loathing is a good description of it.

LP: I think it was Hemingway who said, he never feels as good as when he's writing. He feels really shit leading right up to it, really empty and fucked out afterwards. And yeah, that perfect moment where you've just completed a poem, that's the only good feeling.

WH: He might be right, though, I don't know any way want to conflate myself with Hemingway in anyway.

LP: Well, I don't think I could have asked for a better analogy than the Scalextric one.

WH: No, that's true. We already had Scalextric, who needs Hemingway when you've got Scalextric anyway?

LP: Yeah, fuck him!

WH: Yeah. Fuck Hemingway!

LP: The time has gone annoyingly quickly, I've enjoyed chatting to you. Perhaps we could just wrap up with a poem?

WH: Real, quick with a short poem? I could read the sixteen page one, if you'd like Lizzy?

LP: It might be a bit long, maybe not today. [LAUGHTER]

WH: Okay, maybe I'll just do that at my launch? In fact, cancel the launch, I'm just going to read all of the poems in my book.

LP: Cover to cover?

WH: Really slowly.

LP: Is that not what happens at a book launch?

WH: Everyone that I've ever been to, that's exactly what's happened.

LP: I'll just say, as well, we will put the relevant links in the podcast description for the book.

WH: Oh yeah, that would be helpful. Okay.

<u>Lucky</u>

Won't stop fully
watching you grow big on your bike in Vauxhall Park
your dimpled elbows a little too far forward
your bare knees doing god's work propelling you onward
it's raining a bit and I'm thinking
of the crocodiles I dreamt snapping me up
asleep early this morning
there were so many I couldn't count
chasing me in my little wooden boat
rowed out not that far but too far
and watching you grow now
from this distance
all of my sadnesses are lucky
so many I couldn't count
are marching on
this articulate moment
you on your sprayed-gold bike
is a celebration
is a very small girl with my face
is me feeling very alive
is I can still see from all this way
those sadnesses
filing toward my ridiculous boat with its oars
and someone perhaps you is singing

and the crocodiles
a thousand teeth on the cold water tonight

WH: Thanks for interviewing me.

LP: Thanks for being interviewed. I'm glad we've done it.

WH: Yeah, sorry it took so long.

LP: It's quite alright and like we were saying, we don't know when this is or when it's going to be.

WH: I like that, kind of, being suspended between linear conceptualisations of time. We're in the middle of it somewhere, we don't really know when. It's beautiful, thanks.

LP: Thanks very much and thanks everyone for listening. Good bye.

End of transcript.