Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND
LOTTERY FUNDED

Please note, *Lunar Poetry Podcasts* is produced as 'audio content' and is intended to be heard and not read. These transcriptions are to be used as an aid alongside the audio recordings. If it is possible I recommend you listen to the audio which includes emotion and emphasis, not included in this text. This transcript is produced by a human and may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

If you would like to see any changes to the way this transcript is formatted, then please contact us on Twitter or on Facebook. Alternatively, please take the time to complete this short online survey.

Episode 110: Caroline Bird – 19/02/2018

Transcript edited by Christabel Smith – 19/02/18

Host: David Turner - **DT**

Guest: Caroline Bird – **CB**

Intro:

DT: Hello, welcome to episode 110 of Lunar Poetry Podcasts. My name is David Turner. How are you lot doing? Before I introduce this episode, I've got some great news to share. Lunar Poetry Podcasts has been awarded a Grant for the Arts by Arts Council England. This means that everything we release in 2018 will be funded by the money we received in this

grant. We've got some great guests lined up for this year, but rather than listing names now, I'm going to suggest you go over and follow us @Silent_Tongue on Twitter or Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook and Instagram or over at our website, lunarpoetrypodcasts.com, where you can also download a transcript of this episode.

Getting this money means I will be able to get around the country to interview people, rather than waiting for poets to come to Bristol. The funding will also be used to develop the new A Poem A Week podcast, in which we bring you, you know, a poem a week. As with all Lunar Poetry Podcast episodes, A Poem A Week is available to download or subscribe to via Soundcloud, iTunes for Apple users, Stitcher for Android users and hopefully, anywhere else you get your podcasts from.

There is also an exciting third project in the making. I can't talk about it at the moment. If you follow us on social media or on the blog over at our website, you'll find out as soon as we make it public. Another initial use of the funding and, I'm really sorry to any of you that aren't interested in any technical stuff, but I've used the money to buy some pre-amps for my microphones and invested in some new editing software, which should mean this and all future episodes should sound clearer and louder than those in the archive, which is great for those of you listening on public transport on your way to work, or with toddlers demanding milkshakes and yogurts.

For those of you that are interested, I'm now using Reaper to edit audio files, which I'm pretty happy with. It's much better than Audacity, which I've been using so far. In this episode, I'm talking to poet Caroline Bird about her latest collection, 'In These Days of Prohibition', out through Carcanet Press. I met up with Caroline at her home in South-East London to talk about how the collection developed and how the writing and editing process was different from that of her previous four collections.

I've been waiting a long time for an opportunity to talk to Caroline, after seeing her chair a conversation at the National Poetry Library a couple of years ago. I really love 'In These Days of Prohibition'. I can't recommend it highly enough, so I was excited to sit down and have a chat with Caroline about it. Also, having been lucky enough to travel the country and speak with hundreds of poets, very few people are spoken of as fondly as Caroline by other poets. She's definitely in the same category as Jacob Sam-La Rose and Malika Booker in that respect, so it was great to be able to sit down for a couple of hours and find out for myself why so many poets regard her so highly.

In this conversation, we cover the usual poetry staples of guilt and shame and denial and how all those things get in the way of us loving ourselves. You know, the usual cheery stuff. I'm going to stop talking now. Before I go, if you enjoy this conversation or any of our other 109 episodes, please do tell your friends. Word-of-mouth recommendations are invaluable to us. After a few months of being a little bit sporadic in uploading episodes, the Arts Council funding will guarantee that there will be an interview uploaded once a month for the rest of 2018. Tell your friends that, eh? Here's Caroline.

Conversation:

CB: <u>Eye Contact</u>

I see a small room light up in your face,
like your face is a dark, sleeping mansion
but something is moving, someone's awake
in a back room and they've switched a light on.

But why? What stranger is raising her head
in your face at this time of the evening,
when our judgment lies slumbering in bed?
Yet the silhouette seems so appealing

like we've quarrelled or shared some transgression.
Your night wanderer. But what does she know?
Will she turn if I yell the right question?
Will she wave? Will she come to the window?

Yes. Now she's staring so clear, so apart,
unblinking, from that visage with a view
and you think that I'm scouring your heart
but I'm not, I'm just looking back at you

from this attic I live in at midnight,
to the woman who's waving from that hidden
room you don't visit during the daylight –
it's not locked it's just slightly forbidden –

yet for this moment she's owning the space,
owning mine; before dawn flicks the lights on
to reveal every quarter of your face
and I can't see which room's the secret one.

DT: Thank you very much for joining us, Caroline.

CB: Thank you.

DT: We'll start with a brief introduction about yourself. I'll have to find a new phrase for that, because I keep saying 'about yourself, by yourself' but I think people know what I mean.

CB: I think it's clear. It's the beginning of our chat, so it makes sense in context. I'm Caroline Bird, I am a poet and a playwright. I have five books of poetry published and my most recent came out about six months ago, it's called 'In These Days of Prohibition.'

DT: I'm going to slide it across the table because I really love this book and the main reason we're chatting today is because of 'In These Days of Prohibition', out through Carcanet. I had a Twitter conversation recently with Jane Commane from Nine Arches and we were talking about – I think it was Raymond Antrobus who instigated this conversation – trying as much as possible to read poems in chronological order, reading collections from start to finish and trying to get a sense of what the poet wanted.

Then the whole conversation started about people dipping in, especially if you're in a book shop and you don't know who it is, it's natural to dip in, and I agreed completely with Raymond's point, because of the editing process I've been through with this, I've talked to a lot of editors about the compiling of books, but also had to admit I never do it myself. I'm too greedy, too impatient. But this one, I started and just sat at the table and read it, handed it to my wife Lizzy and she did the same thing, and you could see the look on our faces, the tension was building up as we wanted to talk about the poems to each other. I really loved this book, it's fantastic.

CB: That makes me really happy. It makes me really, really happy that you read it in order because I think that's so important with poetry books. You wouldn't start a novel and just open it in the middle and go 'I don't know what's happening,' because you know there's going to be an arc to it. Even though generally there's not a narrative for a poetry book, definitely thinking about it in terms of the journey of one poem to another, and the poems also have a kind of chemical reaction to each other, they start speaking to each other. It's such a long process, putting the order together.

What I do is I lay all the poems out on the floor or sometimes on the walls, like that scene from 'A Beautiful Mind' when it's like, 'ooh, he's gone mad,' and then I kind of pounce on the poems, like, 'that one needs to go there, that one needs to go there.' This book was especially ordered, because, this sounds clichéd, but I was crawling towards some kind of hope, but I had to go really, really dark until I could get there. The last few poems of the book, I actually wrote last and the book couldn't finish until I'd found them. I think it really is important to read books in order, otherwise you're not actually experiencing the full book.

DT: You mention about the final poems being written towards the end of the process. How natural is that? Obviously, not every poem is written in the order it's gone into the book, because that wouldn't be an editorial process.

CB: It would be a chronological process.

DT: Actually, I've got a really fantastic collection by Anne Sexton at home, which is more like diary-entry poems. It's an exercise in just laying out stuff in chronological order and I think it's interesting to see why that doesn't necessarily work. Even though it's a fantastic book, it does highlight, there's a statement by Anne at the beginning that says that this isn't the right way perhaps to lay out a book, but it felt natural because of the emotion at the time.

Who helped you through that process? Is it something you do yourself? One of my favourite poetry pictures is a photograph of Tom Chivers and Melissa Lee-Houghton walking through 'Sunshine'. It's laid it out on the floor and I really loved that aspect. Did anyone walk through those poems with you?

CB: Not with this book, no, actually. It was quite a personal process. Obviously, my editor and my publisher helped me go, 'are you sure about that line? Maybe this needs to be swapped around,' kind of the forensic bits afterwards. But in terms of the order, I think it's also because it's quite personal, so it's in three sections and originally, I gave each section a really crude title. The first section was called something like 'Intoxication' – I knew this wouldn't be the final – no, the first section was called 'Inebriation', the second was 'Intoxication' and the last one was something like 'Redemption' or something really, really crass and crap.

It was just so I could know, in these broad strokes, the worlds that I was treading on in each section. Then afterwards, those horrible titles got replaced with epigraphs. The first was a quote from John Ashbery which says, "Suppose this poem were about you, would you put in the things I've carefully left out?" which I love. The second section was a quote from a Leonard Cohen song that says, "Is your passion perfect? No? Do it once again." The last section was from a James Tate poem which goes, "But we still believe we shall come through it. I signal this news by lifting a little finger." That expressed what I was doing in each section, with a lot more subtlety.

DT: That's really enlightening to hear. It's something you don't see much from collections, shoving your work in, as it were, and talking about it, but you do need those stage directions for yourself almost, don't you, in the writing and editing process? At least even if those titles are now hugely embarrassing to you, they are a really good insight of what your basic narrative, drive, was through the book. I really like that idea about what you were talking about, the last title being themed around redemption in some way. I really loved how the book aimed towards a feeling of wanting redemption but didn't expect it through the creation of this book, because a lot of books do expect that just by compiling something, redemption will come from that.

CB: Yeah, I had to stumble on it because I didn't feel it. So much of the book is about shame, you know, shame around addiction and shame around fucking up a relationship and cheating and you know, letting yourself down and all that stuff. Often, writing poems, there's an element of self-punishment to it sometimes. You're not always writing to make yourself feel better, sometimes you're writing to underline an insult that you have towards yourself, but then the poem will speak back to you as you're writing it and often is kinder to you than you are to yourself.

DT: It's funny how different events and talking to different people, seemingly disparate, come together. I saw Luke Kennard last week in Bath and he was talking about adding character voices, or second characters, in order to question himself as a writer. Something just linked between what you said there and these voices, feeling this feeling of overwhelming guilt throughout the whole book, but it's not a sorrowful attempt at seeking

redemption. It's quite an honest attempt at showing how you can feel guilt, but not necessarily continue to carry it.

You don't have to push aside the guilt to move on from it, you can accept it. But there's something interesting that you just said there about having this nagging voice and showing up your own failings, which Luke uses this other voice to do. He finds it necessary to use this other voice, but you seem to be able to use your own voice very well.

CB: Well, I think that's a new tactic with this book, or rather, I shed a tactic that I had in my previous books, where there's a misunderstanding that poems that are surreal are somehow not personal. Actually, sometimes they're so personal that you have to wear three masks in order to say what you want to say. It's almost like being on hot sand and it hurts so much, all you can do is dance. Definitely my last collection before this one, everything was still so raw, I couldn't write poems that were directly speaking to pain. They had to come in from an angle.

So there are poems that are all about the same stuff, but I would write about a woman who thinks she's Nina from The Seagull, who ends up going around supermarkets, saying sorrowful things to people at fish counters. Then the poem becomes so odd and sprawling. It's the same feeling but it's like wearing three masks. Then with this book, I thought, 'I have done that, so maybe the next angle is a little less angled and if I just make my mask a little bit thinner, what will that do?' Probably in the next book, I'll be completely impenetrable, but yeah, for this one I decided to occasionally look myself in the eye and occasionally end on a line that wasn't a swerve.

One of these things is about final lines. Generally, if a poem felt painful to me, the penultimate line would have the emotion in it and the last line would be a look away or a punchline or a laugh or snigger, like the pendulum swinging off. With these poems, a lot of the time I decided to grab the pendulum while it was bang in the centre and end there and see what that did. I'm not saying that either way of writing is better, it was just new for me.

DT: It's interesting to hear that conscious decision. I don't tend to make notes before I interview people because it spoils the flow of conversation, but I did put down a first and last line, mainly because going back to a conversation with my good friend Melissa Lee-Houghton, it's something I don't really agree with. We were having this discussion about the importance of a good opening line. I think this book has a fantastic opening line and a half, which is brilliant, which I won't read because I won't do it justice.

I'm going to spend five seconds looking for this, because there was a last line, just because you mention it, that I really felt did exactly that. It ended with a bang and a pop. From 'The Fear': "Last night in bed, your arms hurt like a jolted seatbelt." I don't know whether I've taken what you said in the wrong way, but it did feel like deliberately, that couldn't go anywhere else. You can't go anywhere from that point. It's so beautiful. It really sums up those feelings of guilt associated to loving someone and inflicting yourself on them, which seems to be a common theme here.

People that have dealt with addiction or any kind of mental health problems, it's something I've dealt with in the past, in dealing with my own bi-polar, the guilt. I can't think of a better way to put it than inflicting my own shit on someone else's life because it is unfortunately a huge consequence of falling in love with someone and them falling in love with you.

CB: Yeah, it is a recurring theme, feeling undeserving and all that stuff, but there's also a recurring theme of denial, because denial is really imaginative. Think about all the things we say when we're trying not to tell the truth. A lot of the first half of the book plays around with that and plays around with the links between denial and imagery, so the first poem in the book, to tell you a little preamble about how it came about. So in my early twenties, I went through a series of unenjoyable adventures. I ended up in a rehab facility in the middle of the Arizonian desert, right?

When you get to these places, you're given a questionnaire and it had all of these very frank questions about how I'd been treating myself, suicide attempts and all this stuff. Obviously when you get to one of these places, you're in the least honest place mentally that you could be and you are so shifty inside your own mind. I went back to my room in the rehab and I translated this questionnaire into a poem, right, so I think a line about psychosis became, "Have you started to look at pigeons like they know something?"

A question about suicide became, "Does the ceiling occasionally ripple?" I translated the whole thing and then the counsellor found out that I'd been doing this to all of the worksheets, I'd been creating all these surreal poems and he called me to one side and said, "What are you doing?" and I was like, "well, this is how I understand the world, I'm a poet." He said, "It seems like you are not partaking in the therapy, you are deflecting by writing." He took my notebooks away from me and my poetry books by other people that I'd brought and forced me to be alone with my thoughts, which was horrendous.

He accused me of using poetry to hide from myself. Then a couple of years ago, this was like a decade later, I remembered that, what felt like an accusation at the time of using poetry to hide from myself and I thought, 'I think there is some truth in that.' Just in the way you have this desire to confess things but not to tell any of the facts, especially when you're writing, for want of a better word, surrealism, or hyperrealism. You're putting this mask onto the pain and presenting it to the world and you're dealing with the unspoken all the time.

Maybe there's an element of, if you're constantly dealing with the unspoken, there is an element of not speaking it to yourself either. So that was part of the reason why, with this book, I wanted to be conscious of that, so some of the poems are evading, but they're conscious of the fact they're doing that. There's one about these four girls who are trying to find Buddha in the middle of the desert and they're searching for this temple and they think it's going to solve all their problems and make them be clean forever. Then they get to the temple and decide they can't smoke in there so they're not going to bother. Then the poem ends on a kind of, 'what can we learn from a little fat man anyway?' It ends on a little swerve.

That's a little bit what I'm talking about in terms of denial at the end of a poem. Sometimes, a poem will get to the door of the temple, if you like, and it'll go 'It's alright, see ya'. So I wanted to write poems about denial, using… Do you know what I mean? I've talked myself round in a spiral, but as the book goes along, I think it starts to shed that tactic and use surrealism to tell the truth, rather than to skip around it. I wanted to prove that counsellor wrong and go, 'Do you know what? I can write like me and reveal myself as well as hide. I can do both.'

I suppose deciding to do that, the by-product was, of course the shame starts to get eroded because when you decide you are good enough to disclose, you start to be able to look at yourself more in the mirror.

DT: That's the point, isn't it? It's OK to both be evasive in your writing and confrontational, as long as it fits what you're writing about. I think with the four women in the desert, that swerve fits perfectly because they're all there evading what's wrong.

CB: Of course. It doesn't make sense for poems to be relentlessly honest all the time in an easy way, because people can't do that. People can't be always simply authentic, whatever that means, and put all their cards on the table in every poem, because it doesn't reflect how life is.

DT: It's actually something I've been speaking a lot about on the podcast and with poets in real life. One of my main gripes with spoken word and poetry slams is this pressure to be honest and confrontational, because you end up with what you're saying there. If there's a pressure that you have to write in a certain style, it won't fit every poem you're writing. It's a danger for every writer to feel, 'this is my style.' I either make a joke out of everything… Because it's like your personality, if you're the kind of person who makes a joke out of everything, you won't deal with everything. If you're the kind of person where everything's just laid out there, it won't do you much good either, being the opposite. It's all about, situationally, which suits.

CB: Yeah, also I think there's a slight misunderstanding of the word 'honest' because no one is relentlessly brave. That's kind of an oxymoron. If you can do it all the time, then it's not bravery, is it? And some subject matters, talk about form fitting content, the pain is clearer in them if they are more evasive or held more lightly, like it's on fire. If you communicate a very difficult truth in a very simple way, what you're saying is I've got to a place where this is easier for me to hold and to look at. Sometimes, that does happen.

In this book, I have a few poems where I feel like I've got enough distance from what I'm talking about to hold it at arm's length and talk about it plainly, but that's not going to happen all the time. Sometimes, you're going to be in the midst of it and things are going to be flying around your head and the poem's going to reflect that, the poem's going to be the opposite of emotional recollected in tranquillity, it's going to be emotion recollected in a room full of constantly slamming doors and horns going off, you know? That's going to reflect that kind of truth or sometimes, a poem's going to be about denial and as a result, it's going to try to trick you every step of the way and not let the audience in.

Poetry is about attempting to be honest. Who knows when you're being honest anyway? Sometimes I write a poem and think, 'OK, I think that's what I think,' and the next day I'm like, 'what a load of shit, what a load of bollocks,' and then that makes you write the next one, because you're kind of constantly going, 'that thing I wrote yesterday, the river has changed since then. I need to step into a different river now and create a new poem.' That perpetual hunger and that perpetual feeling of not really having grabbed the air properly, makes you keep writing.

Whereas I think if we put this expectation on poets to feel like they have to be truth-tellers, they're more likely to write poems that feel false. Human beings aren't truth- tellers. I mean, there are a few people where you're like, 'Oh my God, you are uncannily sorted.' Sometimes I'll meet a poet like that and hear their work and I'll go, 'all right, I believe you, you are rare,' but most people aren't like that.

DT: No and I think the danger comes when assumptions are made about certain poets and collections being completely honest.

CB: The word is very strange.

DT: I find this expectation for poets to be honest to be completely…

CB: What does honesty mean in that context? Does it just mean being plain about stuff, because actually that's not going to capture the full difficulty of being alive all the time, is it? Neither is being relentlessly difficult and obscure, either. I've used the word 'relentlessly' about six times in the last five minutes, forgive me. When I get passionate about things, I start sounding like a wanker. I say 'relentlessly,' 'constantly' and sometimes I say 'inherently' so forget that.

I think it's confusing because sometimes I'll teach teenagers and they feel they've got to go to the most dangerous subject matter, but they've got to find answers in their poems and they feel a huge burden of responsibility, not just to the piece of paper and what they're discovering on it, but to a future audience and to other people who may have experienced similar problems, that they feel they should be speaking to. They have all of these burdens that they bring to poems and it stops you being able to be liked and to play.

You need to be able, when you're writing a first draft, to take your pain or whatever you want to write about and juggle with it and look at it from all different angles and mix it around like a Rubik's cube and split it open. You need to be able to be careless with it and reckless and rash. If you feel like, 'Oh my God, this is the truth and I've got to treat it like a precious object made of glass and skin,' then you're going to lose your sense of humour, for one thing, and you're going to be careful and carefulness is something I think you want to reserve for like your sixth draft, or your seventh draft, not your first draft. But that's not their fault, it's this weird thing we've got going on now.

DT: I used to do a lot of improvised stuff on stage and I really enjoyed making stuff up as I went along, but it was the process of getting deeper into editing this series and looking for people and thinking of conversations, it made me really careful. My writing became really

stunted and it took me a long time to get back to being able to play around with things and start throwing ideas at paper. What I began to do was just write diary entries, try to forget about the act of writing a poem, then pick parts out and shave things down and try to add to them. I really relate to that statement, I think you're completely correct in saying there is a pressure to be honed immediately.

CB: Yes, whereas you need to have a big block of marble at first to be able to make the sculpture out of it. You might read a poem and it's the most delicate, beautiful, sculpted, but it doesn't – I'm not going to speak for every poem, sometimes poems do come out like a blaze of lightning and just appear – but most of the time, they don't start like that at all. I think if you know what you want the poem to be, or what you want it to say before you start it, you're going to limit the discovery process.

You want to be able to just hang out in the privacy of your own imagination, like randomly opening doors and boxes, and also, not to think anyone's going to read it. If I knew that all of these poems were going to be read, even though obviously I do want them to get published, when I was actually writing the poems, each one I would say to myself, 'This is just for me, no one's reading this one,' otherwise I wouldn't want to write it.

There was this feeling when the book first came out, when I was out on stage reading them out and thinking, 'God, this is very personal,' I'd go, 'Well, why did you put them in a book, you twat?' If I'd written them with an audience in mind, it would have changed what I said.

DT: I'd like to talk about that some more, but can we have a poem before we do move on?

CB: Yes. I'll read a little sonnet called:

<u>To Be Explicit</u>

I wanna rip you open
like a sack of doves,
press my skin to the stir
of hindered flight,
feel the flutter swell
into a wheeling room,
an exodus fathoming air
like a scream,
a strobe-lit punch, my
whole sky crammed
with your lost pressure;
pocket just one
souvenir feather and
leave you in peace.

DT: I love that so much. I've been sharing it with so many people. I just, yeah…

CB: Thank you. I don't often read it because it's just… filthy.

DT: Yeah, but when else can you read it other than on an educational podcast? Tell me if I've made a wrong assumption, but do you find it odd that people pick up collections like yours and read poems as statements rather than starts of conversations? Maybe that's where this desire for honesty comes from, because they feel like you're telling them something rather than asking of them.

CB: Yeah, definitely, I have a poem upstairs on the wall called 'A Fragrant Cloud', written by James Tate. I must have read it thousands of times because it's outside the bathroom and every time I read it, it takes me somewhere else. I get something slightly different from it and it's never stopped doing that. For me, that's because it's alive. When poems are working, they're like people. You meet them on different days and they change, according to who you are on that day and what mood they seem to be in and how you're perceiving them and what you've learnt since you last saw them.

They don't have a fixed message to them. That's why poems use imagery as their main form of communication, because they work on a dream level and you can talk about the things in between the stuff we pretend to know and add pictures to the wordlessness. The idea of a statement doesn't quite fit into that. If you can paraphrase a poem, there's no point writing it. Have an article or a great quote or something. A poem, you want people to dream it, then wake up from it, then go, 'ooh, what did that mean?'

Of course there's an enjoyable element to people trying to figure it out, but only if they don't think there's a fixed answer. I think often the reason why people feel conned by poetry is because perhaps us, as poets, we haven't quite made it clear that we find difficult poems difficult too. I don't understand what John Ashbery means, but I enjoy the poems; I understand the mystery of them, I enjoy the mystery of them, I understand that they feel like experiences and they change, but I don't solve them in my head.

I think we don't say that enough. When we read these really obscure poems, it's not like we've figured out a code that we haven't let anyone else in on. So of course people are going to be looking for statements in poems if we're not taught to enjoy mystery. We're not taught that in schools, are we? Poems are often taught like crossword puzzles.

I saw this horrible thing on the internet a few days ago where a mother posted her son's homework and it was to write a sonnet and it was a graph of 14 lines, with boxes for each word and how many syllables should be in each box. I just thought, 'oh God, that actually looks like a crossword puzzle as well,' and that would kill poetry for you, if you feel it's a butterfly that's got to be nailed to the wall or that somehow you've got to start with something incredibly clever and then translate it perfectly into a poem that can then be decoded back into a statement when actually, poems are much closer to dreams. We know that all our anxieties and passions and yearnings are inside it but we can't quite locate which bit communicates what.

DT: What can we do as poets to change that? One of the problems I find in art galleries is if you over-explain things, it's taking away the point. In trying to make things more accessible, often you remove the mystery, which is part of the magic. Do you have any feelings of, what can be done in order to make it- not more accessible, I suppose that is what I mean, but that's not quite the right word. What would make it more approachable to people?

CB: It's about us talking more about what we don't understand. That sense and narrative conclusions is something we put onto the world, rather than something that is naturally there. Actually, at the core of most things is this eternal question of 'what the hell?' Remember when you're five years old and you look at your own hands and suddenly think, 'Oh my God, I'm me, looking out of my own eyes.' You still haven't figured out the mystery of eyeballs, and it gets so freaked out in this magical way of thinking about consciousness and, 'I'll never be anyone else or inside anyone else's head and this is so strange.'

Then as we grow up, in order to function, I think we put the filters on ourselves as blinkers and we don't access the strangeness all the time unless we go off the rails or fall off something. We stop remembering that we all felt like that and that we are all terrified of death and we all can't remember how we got here and we all don't know what's in the sky and all of these simple, child-like questions, 'whys', They were never answered, we just stop asking them.

If we can tap back into that, which everyone feels; poetry is, I think, could be properly enjoyed by everyone, not by changing what it is but by us changing this expectation of sense, that everything has to be decoded. For example, every night everyone dreams and we all know that somehow our brains have this surrealist painting alter ego that translates our days into essentially these kind of strange art films, but then we wake up and we forget about it and get on with our normal day. But we spend half of our lives in this place of mystery. If it was allowed more that you can read a poem and go, 'I've got no idea what that's about but it reminds me of having no idea what my relationships are about or having no idea how I feel about this,' then we could enjoy it more.

So often, I'll read poems by my favourite poets like, for example, James Tate or Selima Hill and I still could not tell you in plain words what they mean at all. There's this poem called 'I Take Back All My Kisses' by James Tate and it starts with the line, "They got me because if the forest has no end I'll go naked." I remember reading this when I was 13 and thinking, 'Yeah. That's how they got me. They got me because if the forest has no end, I'll go naked too.' I don't know what that means in plain words. I just know that I understood it in the centre of me somehow. Don't know, don't know how.

DT: I spend a lot of my time reading what is self-titled as experimental literature and sometimes, my wife will pick up what I'm reading and say, 'I don't get it, it makes me feel stupid,' and I completely get that and I keep trying to remind her that the only difference between her and I is that I don't let it make me feel stupid. That's not like I've got some control over what I'm reading. But it's really interesting you made the point about being a

child and viewing yourself. I still distinctly remember reading encyclopaedias as a kid and not understanding anything, but really enjoying phrases and the language of it.

I think that's what's taught out of us isn't it, often, in school? That we lose the sense of finding beauty in the rhythm of words and it becomes a logic puzzle to be solved. I think in that part, if you can't get the logic or the mathematics or the algorithms behind it, of course it can make you feel stupid because you'll feel like you failed at something. It disempowers you from the ability to say, 'well I just don't like that. I'm not an idiot, it's just not for me, I'll move on and find something else.'

CB: Exactly because as much as I enjoy a mystery, there's a lot of poetry that I don't enjoy the mystery of. It won't hit me on a deeper level, but it doesn't make me think, 'Oh, I'm never going to read a poem again.' Just like when you're a teenager and you listen to music and flick through songs on your iPod – not that I had an iPod, but I don't want to say Walkman.

DT: Mini disc player?

CB: Sure, sure. Who had one of those? You just feel like, oh, that doesn't speak to my ears on some level. You just trust your instincts because you know that you're allowed to have taste and that's a part of being a person. The music you don't like is just as much you as the music you do like. That is very clear when people are young. The same should be able to be said of poetry. You're allowed to hate 98% of it because the 2% of it then you'll love with a total passion. It's not a judgement call, it's just what speaks to you.

You're allowed to go into a library and flick through books or just read the first poem and instinctively read more or instinctively not read more until you find something. There's an image at the end of Donna Tartt's book 'The Goldfinch', where she says that when art speaks to you, it's like a man in an alleyway kind of going, 'pssst! You! Come over here!' and handing you a secret scroll or something. It feels like no one ever has discovered this poet before. The secrecy of that and the frisson of it, most people have had that with music, but it's also wonderful when you have it with a poet.

DT: A less literary way of putting it that immediately sprang to mind is Art Brut's song 'My Little Brother Just Discovered Rock n Roll'. It's really great because I'm 19 years older than my sibling Tiegan, and to see them go through a process of discovering music, that I've been through, and realising that's why my dad laughed at me for certain things. Going back to this idea of making things more approachable, I really do wish a lot of poets would share more their discarded drafts with an explanation as to why they don't work. That's a really invaluable insight because the act of discarding drafts that don't work and discovering what isn't right for you is equally as valuable as discovering what is right.

It's this whole thing of going through and just deciding what the 98% of your own faults are not right to be put down and maybe that could be part of explaining. If you can explain what you didn't want in a poem, it's as good an explanation as to what was left and give people the space to interpret it. It may be a way to explain what the process was to building that thing without revealing the magic behind it or pulling the carpet out.

CB: I do agree with you. I also would not want to do it myself because all of those previous drafts, that's when I'm in the privacy of my own imagination.

DT: Sorry, I think not previous drafts to poems, but completely discarded poems. You're still showing the working up to something and it would perhaps remove some of the sheen from it, but we've all got poems when it's like, 'that's just not gonna go anywhere.' It's still a difficult act to share.

CB: I agree that it's really important to talk about failure. One of my favourite poets is called Wislawa Szymborska. She won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1999. She stood up to collect her Nobel Prize and said, "I don't know anything about poetry. Inspiration comes from a continuous 'I don't know.'" That's a direct quote from a very long speech about how every time she starts a poem, she has no idea what she's doing. That not knowing and really starting from nothing is one of the hardest things to do because actually, we're so scared of failure that even if we think we're just writing whatever comes into our head, often we'll be guiding it.

It's a bit like staring at a clear pond. You know that somehow, just by staring at it, you have to make objects lift to the surface and you've done it before somehow, but you can't remember how you did it, but you're not sure if you can do it again and most of the time, we'll try and cheat. We'll get out our handbag and go, 'Well, I'll just throw a few objects in first, just to make sure there are some in there,' then you're writing a version of a poem you've written before or you're pre-empting the discovery and it's not going to be magical, but there's always that element of creating something from nothing and sometimes, the poem is going to be an absolute mess.

Sometimes, one little object's going to rise to the surface of it and you'll get a dribble of two good lines and then it will all sink back under. There's no guarantee and so the failure has to be part of writing. There has to be a whole book you didn't write or a whole book you didn't show anyone for the book you end up publishing because otherwise, it wouldn't be a process of discovery and you wouldn't be taking any risks. You'd be trying to write a successful poem and that's always going to be awful, isn't it?

DT: It scared the life out of me the first time I spoke to someone who'd been published a few times. I wonder who it was, maybe Melissa Lee-Houghton, but this idea of me saying, in terms of volume, 'When do you feel you have enough to show to the publisher?' I think this person said, 'if you think in terms of 100, 120 poems.' I was like, what? The point of whoever this poet was, was that you've got 50 or 60 to go in a book, and another 50 or 60 that just didn't quite work out, but you can't just be thinking you're going to knock out 60, or however many poems that go into a collection, that's not how the process works. For every one that might work, you've got maybe one and a half that don't, if not more and that doesn't even include the various drafts.

CB: Sometimes, I'll have a poem and I just can't finish it for whatever reason, or I'll keep writing the final lines and they will just feel false in some way, like they're not making the poem come to life and I won't know why, so I just have to put it in a drawer. Maybe it's

because I haven't lived whatever it is or thought whatever it is that I need to be able to come back to that poem and know who it is.

If we go back to that metaphor about you need a big block of marble to make a statue out of. If that first draft is a big block of material and then you're sculpting it into a face, that's what the poem is, and you're going, 'who are you? What do you look like?' Then you'll get to the seventh draft and you'll see a face staring back at you, but somehow you don't recognise them yet. You might have to go away for six months and then you come back and you just slightly make an alteration to the nose, and then you're like, 'ah! There you are! You've been there the whole time!' When you finish a poem, talking about discovery, it's a feeling of recognition, something you didn't know you knew, often, or someone where you're like, 'oh, I've met you before!'

DT: Someone said recently a poem should teach the author something they didn't realise they knew and I think it's a beautiful point. I've often found things I've written that I'm most content with, I feel they couldn't be in any other form. This is probably an important thing to talk about as well, how often… you don't always know yourself, not only how poems you like by other people work but you sometimes don't completely understand why something you've written has come together. Everything is a line in your life. I spoke to Helen Mort about this, ideas germinating in her head and she was very open about how slow her writing process could be sometimes and how a nagging feeling will eventually work its way forward and become something, and sometimes it will become a poem.

I was reading something recently about how to be a good conversationalist and apparently, you should have callbacks, and that's why stand-ups put it in their shows. And I'd like to finish on something which ties in to the beginning of the conversation, because we were talking about writing process. Was there any pressure build-up reaching your fifth collection? Not towards the publisher, because they've obviously got faith in you, but expectations of audience and expectations you might put on yourself as an artist?

CB: I think there's two sides to it. There is an element of relaxation, having written five books, because it makes you think it's probably not a fluke. I can probably do this and I've probably written enough that people think I'm a poet even if they don't like anything I've written, I'm allowed to teach poetry courses and teach teenagers and pass that on, so there's a safety in terms of the job, as safe as being a poet can ever be. It's an unwise profession from the bank's opinion certainly. But then there's the secret side where you go, 'I don't know if I can write another poem. I don't know if I'm going to get better, I don't know if I'm going to get worse.'

There's no certainty in terms of what's going to rise to the surface of that pond. All I know is I want to keep changing. I feel secure enough in the fact I can't escape myself, to know I can experiment with different approaches and it can still sound like me. I've got no interest in trying to recreate what I've done before.

I've got, in terms of prizes and things like that, you do end up wanting those things after the book is finished and it's quite scary to want it because no one goes into poetry for the

money, the fast cars and the fame, that doesn't make any sense, so it's bizarre when you feel that need for recognition in yourself. It feels ugly.

I hope that won't become a major part of my head. I'm far from perfect so I'm sure it will drag me down at various points, but genuinely the best bit of writing still for me is mid-poem when I'm hooked in, I know it's going somewhere, it's a bit like windsurfing, when you're in the harness and the footstraps and you're just hanging on.

Obviously, you're still having to use all your skill and muscle memory, but also, you're planing, you're going somewhere and there's the excitement of that discovery and not knowing what image your next image is going to generate. Or the exciting bit when your mind is super-alert to language and you find yourself seeing words on signs and in books and writing them down, and going, 'I can use that and that,' and being in the middle of the broth.

I just want to keep on finding new ways to feel like that. I think teaching is really important to help with that. When I was 13 and first went on a poetry course at the Arden Foundation and found fellow poets who also wrote in secret and we realised we could be a secret society together, I felt so honoured to be able to be a part of that world and be able to read poems and have them speak to me. Even though I couldn't watch an 18 film, I could read 'Howl' by Allen Ginsberg and have access to all this rage and bitterness and loss and regret, and I felt so grateful, I felt like this could save my life.

Throughout my whole life, even when everything else has fallen away or made no sense, poetry has been the one constant that has always made sense to me because there's no expectation for it to make any sense. So I want to hang on to that sense of fucking hell, I'm so lucky, and the only way to do that is to keep on teaching and sharing that. It's bizarre, isn't it, when you're passionate about something and express it and on some level, it's not quite communicating the full extent of your feelings?

DT: I think I've interviewed more than 120 poets and I've never spoken to someone so obviously enthusiastic about poetry. It's made me feel emotional actually, it's really beautiful.

CB: It's weird because being enthusiastic feels really unsafe because it's so uncool.

DT: I don't think you're ever more vulnerable.

CB: Exactly. When I do slip into that place of thinking about achievements and whether or not I will be recognised, I go into the opposite side of myself. You go into that kind of, 'I'm sitting back in a chair, let me tell you about poetry now.' For me, that's not where the love for poetry came from at all. It came from the leaning in and not knowing anything. So if I start feeling too relaxed, too established, too any of those things, I'm going to stop being able to do it. I'm going to lose the only bit of myself I've always thought was worth something.

It's bizarre. I wonder how many other professions have the potential downfall enclosed in the success, this idea that once you start thinking you can do it, you will stop being able to do it. That's the closest I can get to an answer.

DT: Sorry, I'm just nodding like a doe-eyed Disney princess. I'm in love with what you're saying, I think it's amazing. I think it's the perfect place to stop. It's hard to move on from talking about things like that. Thank you so much. It's been really wonderful talking to you. I was worried I'd built you up a bit too much in my head, having read this collection so closely to interviewing you. We're going to finish with a poem please.

CB: I think I'll read:

Megan Married Herself

She arrived at the country mansion in a silver limousine.
She'd sent out invitations and everything:
her name written twice with '&' in the middle,
the calligraphy of coupling.
She strode down the aisle to 'At Last' by Etta James,
faced the celebrant like a keen soldier reporting for duty,
her voice shaky yet sure. I do. I do.
'You may now kiss the mirror.' Applause. Confetti.
Every single one of the hundred and forty guests
deemed the service 'unimprovable'.
Especially the vows. So 'from the heart'.
Her wedding gown was ivory; pointedly off-white,
'After all, we've shared a bed for thirty-two years,'
she quipped in her first speech,
'I'm hardly virginal if you know what I mean.'
(No one knew *exactly* what she meant.)
Not a soul questioned their devotion.
You only had to look at them. Hand cupped in hand.
Smiling out of the same eyes. You could sense
their secret language, bone-deep, blended blood.
Toasts were frequent, tearful. One guest
eyed his wife hovering harmlessly at the bar
and imagined what his life might've been
if he'd responded, years ago, to that offer in his head:
I'm the only one who will ever truly understand you.
Marry me, Derek. I love you. Marry Me.
At the time, he hadn't taken his proposal seriously.
He recharged his champagne flute, watched
the newlywed cut her five-tiered cake, both hands
on the knife. 'Is it too late for us to try?' Derek whispered
to no one, as the bride glided herself onto the dance floor,
taking turns first to lead then follow.

DT: If anyone heard wailing in the background, it was Caroline's cat. We have completely unreasonably asked him to be quiet for an hour and 20 minutes. Thank you so much, Caroline. It's one of these occasions when I can't understand why everyone isn't making podcasts and chatting to people they really like. Thank you.

END OF TRANSCRIPT