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Episode 117: Andrew McMillan – (31/08/2018)

Transcribed by Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner – **DT**
Guest: Andrew McMillan – **AM**

Introduction:

DT: Hello, welcome to episode 117 of Lunar Poetry Podcasts. My name is David Turner. How are you lot doing? Where to start with this one, eh? Myself and my wife Lizzy have been busying ourselves with Why Poetry?, the Lunar Poetry Podcasts anthology, which will be out September 27th, in time to celebrate the fourth anniversary of the podcast. I suppose I should seize this moment to remind you the anthology is available to pre-order from Verve Poetry

Press for only £9.99 including free delivery, so get yourself over to their website or follow the link in the episode description.

The book charts the history of the podcast in the form of a transcribed conversation between me and friend of the series Abi Palmer, which weaves its way through 28 poems by former guests. Poets in the book include the likes of Helen Mort, Jane Yeh, Mary Jean Chan, Nick Makoha, Luke Kennard, Travis Alabanza and Melissa Lee-Houghton. It's a unique line-up of poets and I honestly don't know where else you will get a book quite like this one. Proceeds from the book are going towards ensuring the series remains transcribed for as long as possible.

As well as the pre-order option, we will be exhibiting at the Free Verse Poetry Book and Magazine Fair at Senate House in London September 22nd at which we will have advance copies available to buy. So if you're coming along to that, do stop by our table and say hello. On to today's episode, in which I chat to one of my favourite poets, Andrew McMillan. I met up with Andrew at his home in Manchester at the beginning of July to talk to him about his second full collection of poetry, Playtime, which is out through Jonathan Cape.

In 117 episodes, this is the first time I've met up with a poet to specifically discuss the transition from debut collection to second book. I found Andrew's reflections on confidence in his writing, audience expectation and reaction and placing growing demands on readers just fascinating. As with his debut Physical, Playtime deals with what it is to be a man in general, what it is to be a queer man specifically and how as boys, they or we learn about other male bodies, only this time around, more so, as it were.

This collection is a more focused attempt to deal with these themes and I feel lucky to have spent time with Andrew, listening to him explain how he attempted to refocus that gaze. If you enjoy this conversation or any of our other 116 episodes, please do spread the word, either on social media or in the fleshy, real every day. It really helps us reach new listeners. As always, a full transcript of this episode is available over at our website, www.lunarpoetrypodcasts.com. Here's Andrew.

Conversation:

AM:

Martyrdom

tonight I started walking back to you father
it was meant to be a stroll but then I started
walking faster father I started chanting all
the names of all the men I ever went to bed
with father my thighs were burning and my feet
were heavy with blood but I kept the pace and chants
of names up father listed them to fenceposts

and the trees and didn't stop and started getting
younger father and walked all night till I was home
just a spark in your groin again and told you not
to bring me back to life told you I repented
every name and had freed them of me father

DT: Thank you very much, Andrew. We briefly discussed before that I don't like to request poems from people and it's mainly because I like the surprise. I would have chosen that one. The surprise is always really nice when a poem I wanted comes up without demanding it. Firstly, I should say congratulations on the publication of your second full collection, Playtime. Because I haven't had this kind of conversation on the podcast before, it seems natural to brazenly ask you to give us an insight into what you see as the changes from your first collection, Physical and into Playtime.

AM: Yeah, so the poem I just read, Martyrdom, was the first poem I actually wrote for the book and I wrote it during a time I'd gone away to finish the first one, so it kind of crosses over in terms of the timeline quite a bit. This is much more about childhood, early adolescence. I guess Physical ended up being about me and people like me in my early 20s and I became much more interested in thinking how it was, how it is that we grow into our sexual selves or our physical selves, as it were.

I think Physical wasn't really that sexual, people just thought it was because of the cover, whereas this one is much more explicit, much more personal. I feel much more vulnerable about it. It strikes me now when I still read from Physical a bit that some of the poems are quite general, so they might talk about the bodies of someone, or the bodies of men, whereas this is a lot more narrative, I think, and it feels a lot more personal, at least in some of the startings of some of the poems.

DT: Very interesting to hear you say that because it's always nice to give the author the chance to set that tone, but the few notes I have made for this conversation revolve around the fact that there isn't a definite cut-off point between Physical and Playtime. There seems to be a merging, especially in the first section of Playtime, and it's really funny to hear your view on how you view the different collections of poetry, because it seems to me now, some of the things I've seen written about Physical actually reflect more what Playtime is. Where the crossover lay, it seemed to me you were trying to be more focused on those points and maybe reiterate.

AM: I think so, yeah. It's interesting because in many ways, Physical was received in a way that was utterly unexpected to me and it was a glorious three years with it. In many ways, I think what happened was there was the book, then the reaction to the book and those are two separate things, in a way. There's like the book and the imagined book, what people imagined it was. I think it's right that a lot of what was imagined about the first one, I almost carried or tried to take forward into this new one. It is a continuation in many ways, it's almost like a prequel, because it's about a younger self, I guess.

DT: How did the reaction to Physical inform the writing? Did it have any conscious effect on the way you were writing?

AM: It gave me a certain confidence to know that it must be all right. It just gave me a certain confidence in the sincerity of it and so, Physical came out at a time when it felt like there was an emergence of a new sincerity in poetry, which I was really attracted to, so Hannah Lowe and Liz Berry and Helen Mort, this very sincere voice and I'd done three pamphlets before Physical came out and I remember when the first one came out, when I was still at Uni, it got this one review that basically said 'this is just kind of teenage angst, why would anybody care about what someone thinks about themselves? It's just too emotional.'

I really took that to heart, like I think you do with criticism and just thought it's not that, I need to be less sincere, then it needs to be less honest and actually, Physical was just the book I felt I wanted to write and the fact that it did what it did when I began to write again, I knew it was OK to be writing into that territory, I guess. It gave me permission to trust it, but I didn't feel any kind of pressure, I feel much easier about this one. I felt a real anxiety about that first book.

DT: My question was slightly loaded towards anxious feelings, it wasn't quite what I meant. Also, within that, does Physical free you up to write more definitely in the poems in Playtime?

AM: I think so. I just think Playtime isn't going to win anyone over, so the people that really didn't like Physical will really hate this one, I think, which is fine. It will be a quieter thing. I think first books have a very certain energy to them because it's often a new voice, whereas this one will be quieter and I'm going into it with no expectations of how it might be received. I just feel easier about it. I just feel like it will have a readership because of what happened to the first one, so people, whether they like it or not, will still buy it, I guess, to a certain extent.

Then whatever happens, happens. I was talking to Jean Sprackland and she said this really interesting thing to me, she's my line manager at work, as well, in my other life, she said to me after the first book, 'it's just a building of a life's work and so some books will be quieter than others and some books will be looked at more than others, but it's just a building of a life's work'. I liked that a lot and it made me calmer about the whole thing.

DT: When Physical came out, I got an excited email from the poet Bobby Parker, we'd been chatting a lot and he said 'you have to read Physical'. It was funny, when I got hold of Physical finally, because of doing the podcasts, my 'to-read' list is growing and growing, and unfortunately, the stuff I want to read for pleasure and not for interviews always takes a back seat. When I finally got around to reading Physical, it wasn't the book that Bobby had promised me and it wasn't worse or better, just a very different book. It seemed Physical could be interpreted a lot more, whereas you seem to be even more demanding of the reader with Playtime.

AM: I've not thought of it like that, but I think that's really interesting. I think Playtime, there's less wriggle room in it, I think it points directly at some things that are quite

uncomfortable and just says ‘look at this’ and there’s no way of not, apart from turning the page and not reading the poem. I think that’s definitely true.

DT: In my notes and in my reading for this interview, I was trying not to focus on Physical too much because I want to focus on Playtime, but there are a couple of lines, particularly in Strong Man, I really loved the image of the line ‘what is masculinity if not taking the weight of a boy and straining it from oneself?’ There are a few lines like that which can’t be taken in any other way in Physical, but they appear very regularly in Playtime, these emphatic statements.

AM: Not consciously when I was writing it, but I guess I feel more secure in my own voice or what I want to say. I’ve always been attracted to lines like that in poetry that don’t have any simile or metaphor and are just a kind of plain statement of fact. One of the things that really interests me in poetry is how they can make something, how you can strip every adornment out of it and have it still be kind of poetic. I love lines like that, that to me seem true, rather than being beautiful images.

DT: Also, the reason I mention that is because I always like to think of people who are perhaps getting to the point of publishing a pamphlet or thinking about what it would be to have a collection come out and it’s important to them to realise that those people they may be trying to emulate or looking up to, perhaps aren’t as sure in their voice as the reader might think. I think it’s important to have that conversation, about how your view on your own ability will change over time.

AM: I think so and it’s interesting, because I think when people first start out, or people are published, I think there’s a view that you walk through a kind of magic door and on the other side is a land of incredibly confident, self-assured people. Actually, the more people you meet, even if they’ve got eight, nine, 10 books, they’re all poets because they’re incredibly neurotic and nervous and unsure of themselves and they use poetry as a way to figure stuff out in the same way we do. You learn more as you go through, how to bluff it slightly in public, but I think everyone is still just as anxious and nervous and unsure about what they’re doing underneath.

DT: This idea I’ve built up reading Playtime about being quite demanding on the reader, you seem to be more definite about the form of the poems as well, there’s a lot more space, almost like you’ve erased the stage directions, but there seems to be instruction to people how to read these poems.

AM: Yes, I mean the breath space and stuff is just something that developed from the pamphlets through to Physical and then through to this. I like that idea of instructions for the reader because I always think of it like scoring a piece of music. You’re very rarely in the same room as someone who’s going to read the book and so you have to at least hint to where you think they should pause or where you would like there to be a moment of reflection. So getting rid of all the punctuation and just using these kind of breath-space things, to make it sound more like natural speech and try and give the reader some sort of clue as to where to pause and where to stop and where to keep reading.

DT: Recently, I spoke to Jane Yeh about the element of collage or the cut-up element of her poems, in which it seems as if you can interchange lines and it's something similar going on in Playtime. Although it doesn't feel as though you can switch the lines around, the removal of punctuation and these breath gaps gives you the impression you could start lines in different ways. It could be a different emphasis. Although it feels as though you're demanding something of the reader, you are allowing a freedom within that, to maybe start at different points and revisit scenes.

AM: I'd not thought of that at all, but that's a really interesting point, it makes it quite democratic, which I quite like.

DT: I tend to make a lot of statements. I'm happy for them to be refuted. I think that's where my idea of a more confident speaking voice came from as well, in allowing you to go back and start a line halfway through or put the emphasis somewhere else, but retaining those spaces, seemed a much more confident act.

AM: I'm glad it seems more confident, I do feel more confident, but that is really interesting. I like that idea, that it moves towards the democratic poetry in a way. As an aside as well, I would say that Jane was one of the first-ever poets I read properly and her first collection has this incredible line in it that says something like 'extinct in geological time', which is this kind of perfect ending to a poem. It's one of the first contemporary poetry books I ever read and I think she's fantastic.

DT: I don't normally go in for this idea that every poem has to end on a killer line, but this poet I was talking to disproved that, because every poem did end on a really great line and it worked. I think picking out those words and lines and statements I mentioned earlier in Physical and more often in Playtime, it's interesting that you seem to have bumped those sort of lines with that weight further up into the poem.

AM: Particularly because there's quite a lot of white space in the books, even visually on the page, the poems often end quite quietly and I quite like that. I like that each poem fails slightly and doesn't quite get towards where it wants to be so there has to be another poem that kind of tries again. The first poet I really read properly was Philip Larkin, who I know is very unfashionable these days, but has this great ability to go 'der-der-der-der-der and here's the meaning of life'. His final lines just leap off somewhere.

Mark Docherty has that same quality and I always wanted that, I wanted to try and somehow emulate that, to have that kind of confidence or swagger, not to undercut a poem with humour or bathos, but just to be confident to step off the end of the pier and go 'this is the meaning of life' or 'this is why I've shown you it'. I think moving them up sometimes into the body of the poem switches it up slightly.

DT: Caroline Bird, that's who I was talking to.

AM: She's full of wisdom.

DT: She should have my job, actually. In These Days Of Prohibition, it was a conscious effort to not give the reader any room to move. It was a conscious decision for the whole collection and I suppose that's what interests me, not necessarily the difference, but what the writer's motivation is for that. Obviously, this doesn't happen in every single poem, but in the poems in which you do bump up what would be a final line in some other poems, is that for your benefit or is that for the reader?

AM: I guess it comes from a conscious decision to stay in the poem for longer than I should, which I think is really important. When I was judging the National last year, 15,000 poems, however many it was, a lot of which were very, very good, but really plausible because they end on what should be the end line and they're watertight and they've been edited to death and they're fantastically brilliant, but they just don't live with you afterwards for many different reasons.

One of the reasons is because the poet hasn't sat in the poem for long enough, they've got out too quickly or they've got out as quickly as they could, because the subject made them uncomfortable. I think more and more, I'm just trying to stay in it and just keep writing, even notes or phrases longhand, after the poem feels like it should have finished, to see, to try and surprise myself and then I think the reader might be more interested in it.

So not knowing where the poem's going to end up when it starts, so maybe that middle line that feels quite strong or it's quite direct, might be where I know the poem's going initially, but then it's about you want to sit in it for a bit longer and say what you really want to say. That's what makes it interesting, not really knowing what the poems are going to be about until they come out or until it goes off in a weird direction.

DT: Very interesting point and it does tie in neatly with how I was reading Caroline's latest collection, in that I rail against this received wisdom that you have to edit, cut down, cut down, make something neat. Funny you mention judging a competition because a lot of it feeds into that idea that a person may only see one poem of yours and it has to be neat and tidy.

What appeals to me normally is work that just continues and doesn't subscribe to that. What surprised me about liking Caroline's was she did it in order for the poems to end awkwardly, not neatly, and I really liked that taking that received wisdom of something very short and sharp and neat, but making it uncomfortable to read and to end on.

AM: That's so interesting. Bobby, who you mentioned earlier, would be another really good example, where the poems feel like they have a kind of extension, beyond where another poet would stop. I don't really think there's any point, and nor can I do it at all, to sit down and write a poem by going 'I'm going to write a 20-line poem about this and it will end with this line'. I think that leads to very plausible, but quite dull poetry that doesn't surprise me so it won't surprise the reader, it doesn't move me, so it won't move a reader.

Whereas you see in Days Of Prohibition, which is such a great book, that ability that I'm always surprised by the end of the poem and Mark Docherty's poems have the same quality, where you get to the end and think 'how on earth have we ended up there? Because we started there and we've ended up somewhere utterly incongruous to that, but it makes sense.'

I don't think that can be engineered beforehand, I think that can only come from sitting and writing and writing and maybe cutting a lot of that out. The other half then has to be edited to make it tight again, because otherwise it's too baggy and kind of messy, but the editing shouldn't come in too early, before the poem knows what it wants to be about. There's no rush with it, I think.

DT: There's a danger with that almost stereotypical view of editing that you know what a poem should be before you start. What possibly could come out if you've got an idea of what the finished object should be?

AM: That's what I've always wondered. Some people can and it must be an easier way to write, to sit down and go 'right, I know what I'm writing now, it's going to be this' and then kind of dash it out. Any time I've ever, ever tried to do that, it's just not worked or it's led to something that I would never show to anyone, it's never made it to the light of day, it's just become an exercise or something to kind of be harvested from later.

DT: I'm going to take a second reading before talking more specifically about Playtime. Did you feel the mechanics of your writing changing between the two collections at all? We've already established there's quite an overlap between the two.

AM: There was a moment when I really, really struggled. I'd written that Martyrdom poem that I read out before, which opens the book, then, I don't know why, but I got it in my head that the next thing I did had to be radically different. So I went down weird roads. I decided I was going to write a sequence of historical sonnets about women. They were terrible, as one might imagine. Then I thought 'I'm going to do x or y', just floundering and floundering. Luckily, I've got a really good relationship with my editor, so I can send him stuff, Robin Robertson at Cape, as I'm going along and say 'Look, I'm lost, what's happening?'

He said this really helpful thing to me, he said 'look, it will be different, because you're already a different person than you were three years ago, you're going to write new stuff, but you have your sensibility, so don't panic'. That was so freeing. I came home and I think immediately wrote a couple of poems I would have been scared to write before, because I felt like they were too similar. So I went through this phase of really trying to radically change and realised 'actually, I still want to say the same things, it will just shift naturally because I'm going to shift naturally.'

I think with this one, there was a definite attempt at trying to focus in on specific moments, which there hadn't been in the first one, so the first one was more general memories, whereas this second book was definitely 'this happened this day and I'll write about that or this particular incident', which involved this time around, much more sitting in very, very uncomfortable places for quite a long time, which I don't advise as a writing technique, ethically.

This one was much more focused in on… Some things would occur to me, like 'God, I remember that, I remember when that happened' and then I would just sit with that memory for quite a while and see what came out. Again, the first one was much more taking the

experience of me in Manchester in my early 20s and trying to somehow generally capture that, whereas this one feels much more tightly focused, I guess.

It's only three years, but I feel like I wrote this one much slower, or the individual poems came individually, rather than in clumps, like they sometimes did with Physical. Also, the panic really was that Cape do not that many poetry books a year and so you have to sign the contract so they can officially put you into the schedule and so, when I signed the contract for Physical, it was a book, like me giving over a product and me signing a contract and that kind of made sense logically.

Whereas this one was really signing a contract on maybe five or six poems, which utterly freaked me out. There was no rush with it, it could have come out next year, the year after, there was no rushing me into it, but that having nothing, starting again. Most of Physical was written in three or four years, it wasn't a lot of juvenilia and stuff crammed into it, but it's the kind of life's accumulation of stuff you've got to play with.

Suddenly, with the second one, there's nothing. I had that one poem I'd written when I was finishing the first one and I'd never had to do that before. I guess it was just learning how to do it again or seeing if I even could do it again or thinking 'if it is only this first book, maybe that's enough'. But it did come back.

DT: It's amazing how no achievement will prepare you for the next step. It doesn't really matter what you've done before, if you've suddenly then got to produce something again. I find it with the podcasts. If I get a lot of feedback about a particular episode, it does nothing but scare the life out of me about the next one, that I'll suddenly forget how to talk to people or it won't flow or I won't edit it correctly.

AM: That's the thing, I think every poem, people have said this much more eloquently, but every time you write a poem, you immediately forget how to do it. You have to learn again. Maybe we were going to talk about this later on, maybe not, but the whole prize culture thing is such a weird thing anyway, or it did for me and it was fantastic, but it comes in such peaks and troughs. Like The Guardian thing, that's exciting for a few weeks, but then you have to come home and empty the dishwasher. It's not life-changing in the way that winning an Oscar would be in another art form or winning the Turner prize, it doesn't really shift anything.

Being shortlisted then not winning is a weird thing in itself because there's a lot of hype leading up to it and then you're really happy for the person who wins… I remember after one of them me and my boyfriend just went to the cinema to see a Helen Mirren film. We'd had the award ceremony, we clapped who won, then we were like 'oh, let's just go to the cinema'. It's a very weird, intense bubble for four or five minutes and then you have to leave it, thankfully, because it's an odd space to occupy. You have to put all that aside when you write. It would send you mad if you tried to write towards prizes or even held in your head what anyone was going to think of it.

DT: I suppose all prize-giving bodies, because of the way they work, focus on a very unnatural distillation of any point of your writing career because they'll have arbitrary dates

you have to get work published within for them to be part of the shortlist, so it's not you that gets to dictate what gets read and how it gets read.

AM: That's the thing, I think. This is interesting, say me and Sarah Howe's book came out the same year, but we were on different years of our shortlist, which was weird because it was kind of mid-year to mid-year, the Sunday Times one, I think it was. Genuinely, the best thing prizes can do, or the best thing they did for me, is just allow me to meet people I now feel really close to, like Max Porter, because Grief Is A Thing With Feathers came out in the same year, or Jessie Greengrass whose short-story book was out that year.

Sarah and Matthew Siegel from America, and people like that, you come to feel very close to certain people because it's such an intense time you're kind of throw together in. And no one remembers. I've been introduced as having won stuff I was never shortlisted for, been shortlisted for stuff I won, like nobody really remembers, which I actually find quite comforting. In the grand scheme of things, it just doesn't matter.

DT: I've spoken to a few people about prizes, but I always try to allow people to bring that up themselves. I've always made a point that I don't invite people on that have won anything because that's out of my control, it has nothing to do with the reasons I would want to speak to anyone and it's such an arbitrary thing as well, who decides.

AM: Having been on both sides of it, having judged stuff, you realise not how arbitrary it is, because everything I've judged, I think the winners utterly deserved, but how much it's about that conversation in that room or how much it's about the negotiation and the conversation around justifying why we like something and not something else, why it should be this and not that. Having been on both sides of that, so much of it is just luck or who the judges are or what mood they wake up in that morning or what they decide they should like or support.

DT: I think it's important to point out the act is arbitrary, even though the choice is very, very considered. Saying the process is arbitrary is not questioning the ethics of the judges in any way. It's just only a very small number of any poems or collections could get nominated for anything.

AM: You're not comparing like for like is the other thing. It's not like you've asked five people to draw a picture of a house and you're going to judge the person whose looks most like a house. You're judging wildly different things against each other, so in the end, say with the National, you can only think 'has this poem done what it wanted to do as well as it could have done?' That's the only way to judge stuff really, because you can't really put two utterly different poems up against each other and go 'which is better?' What does that even mean?

Also, that means different things to every single person. It's a shame, because I think on both sides, prize culture and poetry, people get either very het up about it or put a lot of weight on it or a lot of disappointment onto it and all you want is for people to be reading your stuff. Reading good stuff as well. That was an answer to a question you didn't ask, wasn't it? I'm sorry.

DT: It's good when things go that way, it means I don't have to think as much, which is great. After that slight but very interesting tangent about prize-giving and judging, we'll take a second reading then get back to, I was going to say my notes, but my notes don't make any sense. We'll get back to something else.

AM: Get back to something. I'll read this poem that I wasn't going to read, but I keep forgetting it's in the book, so it's the poem I'm most nervous about in the book because it's about something very, very few people know about me, even some of my very close friends and so every time I pick this book up, I remember that I put it in and you can't take it back now because it's been printed. So Transplant that's on page 19.

Transplant

the sound of hair being ripped out
reminded me of velcro shoes
being hastily removed I hadn't
realised it possible
that I might grow into kinder
ownership of my own looks
that I could one day have been fine
with baldness but it seemed to me
at seventeen that I was being
unmanned and that my unlived youth
was already receding
so I paid a doctor thousands
to take a strip of hair from the back
of my head pull out each follicle
and put them into the front
to give me the line I thought would
make me happy and stitch the skin
on the back of the skull together
leaving me with this grimace
this equator this scar
that catches the cold weather holds
it deep inside reminder
of my vanity tideline
of Canute tattoo of the time
I couldn't live with what I was becoming

It's the first time I've ever read that out loud.

DT: Really? It does feel that stands alone somewhat in Playtime, but it connects a lot of ideas and actually, perhaps even more than Martyrdom, it feels like it connects Playtime to Physical in what is it to be a man, what is masculinity, what is it to go from being a boy or

adolescent to being a man? What I like about Playtime is how it seems to be much more about how it is to interact with other men and not men in a general sense, because you are interacting with individual men and those interactions can do nothing but raise ideas of your own vanity, whether you are vain or not vain and how much you read into those ideas of attraction. You seem the most bare in a lot of ways.

AM: That genuinely is the poem I feel most, not worried about, that's the wrong word, but most vulnerable. I genuinely have to remind myself it's in the book because I kind of block it out.

DT: There are many poems within Playtime that could be considered more intimate or baring, but…

AM: Yes, for whatever reason, that's just the one I feel… But then it's going to be in the book, it's going to be online at Granta as well, it's going to be out in the world, people are going to see it, but yeah, first time I've ever read it out loud, except to myself.

DT: It's odd, there are always these small elements about our personalities and experiences that are far more embarrassing to us. That poem probably won't mean much to many other people in that they won't feel that anxiety.

AM: It's true. So there's a poem in the first book called Urination, which starts off with this fear of bumping into someone in the urinal and it just started off with me having that social anxiety and writing that down, then reading it out to a lot of people and realising actually, a lot of men are scared about that, even if they don't talk about it. It came to me to think of stand-up comedy where it's the principle of 'I will say something and it will be funny because you will recognise it but have never articulated it', so kind of anecdotal, observational comedy.

Often times, poetry works like that as well, to a certain extent. I will point at something and go 'this is what happened to me and I'm ashamed of it' and even if people can't relate to the direct experience, they can see themselves in that kind of discomfort, I guess.

DT: There's a study into men's behaviour at urinals and how odd it is if you walk into a public bathroom and there are three urinals and one man is standing in the middle, because it's socially unacceptable to do that because there is so much pressure on how you behave in that moment, when you're exposing yourself and expelling waste from yourself.

AM: More and more, I was interested in that idea of how is it that boys find out about each other's bodies? Girls, it seems to me, from a naïve, non-intelligent point of view, it seems to me they are much easier with each other's bodies. Girls will hold hands, help each other get changed or choose outfits. Boys don't do that, so the only way they touch each other's bodies is through contact sport or fighting.

I was sat next to these two blokes on the train the other day, I think I tweeted it. It was this extraordinary thing where he sent his four-year-old son to learn mixed martial arts, like boxing

and fighting, and he said 'he's walking around now with his fists near his chin.' I thought 'what is happening to kind of men in the world that they feel that is what they have to do?'

The girls go to ballet, but the boys learn at four years old to fight each other. It struck me as this extraordinary thing, that he was really proud of. I'm more and more interested in the way boys will learn about each other's bodies, because they do, but often times, it's in secret or clandestine.

DT: To lead on, reading Playtime and the poems Watching MMA and Clearance and Phone Box, the way men interact and learn about each other's bodies, the images that kept coming up into my mind were the paintings of Francis Bacon and the images he used as a basis. For people who don't know him, he used a lot of the early photographic and film studies of movement, which included almost-naked men wrestling and how he believes that most reflected his attraction and his learning how to be physical with other men, because it had to be done through this pseudo-aggressive or plain aggressive manly act, attacking each other before you were allowed to be intimate.

AM: The photographs he had done in his study or in the studio when the blokes were wrestling are really important to me, a really important touchstone. That whole idea has been really important, through Physical and this book as well.

DT: It was definitely reading Watching MMA where suddenly I made that connection. The poem opens with describing the two fighters as 'just being any two drunks outside the pub having a scrap' then the line 'like lovers reuniting'. It made me think that was what was eating away at the back of my mind, I couldn't work out what I was trying to make the connection with.

AM: It seems to me that MMA is just the gayest thing ever, innit? I love this paradox that it's this incredibly hyper-masculine thing, that any time I've ever watched it, more so than boxing, which seems to me to be two blokes stood punching each other, mixed martial arts, because it's often times about grappling in a hold, tends to be nearly-naked men just rolling about on top of each other, often times for quite a long time. It just strikes me as incredibly homoerotic in a way I find fascinating because it's on that intersection between violence and sex, which is what I'm really interested in.

There's a great quote, and I've forgotten who said it, that 'sex often looks and sounds like murder' and I'm really interested in that intersection, so actually, I guess one of the new things in the new book is pursuing that much more, through a couple of the poems, the more violent aspect of it.

DT: I suppose there's that element and that question as well, as a man, what do you need to experience before you can submit to another man? The central aspect of MMA is physically forcing someone to submit and all that's missing is what happens after.

AM: It's what happens after. I find that really interesting. I was just reading Terrance Hayes' new book, which is astonishing that Penguin have just done American sonnets. There's this great line. Again, we were talking about final lines and sorry, this doesn't make good podcast

listening at all, but I'm just going to find it. 'I can't speak for you, but men like me, who have never made love to a man, will always be somewhere in the folds of our longing, ashamed of it'. I just thought God, that's interesting, because that's coming from a different point of view, a kind of heterosexual point of view, but it just struck me as such a beautiful line and it's such a good book, American Sonnet For My Past And Future Assassin.

DT: I've been lucky enough to see him read some of those, they're really fantastic. I saw him at an event, part of the Golden Shovel Anthology with Peter Khan and Patricia Smith, it was really amazing to watch him. Again, it's almost hypocritical of me, after railing against that kind of short, sharp, pointed writing, he does such a great example of what that can provide.

Going on from that idea of what it is to submit, the pride men and boys are taught to take in their battle scars and bruises, led me on to thinking about your poem Phone Box, in which it describes the contact between yourself and another person and because they're soaking wet from the rain, the traces they left on you. It's a really interesting exploration. It took me back to Physical and 'what is masculinity if not straining the boy away from you?' As young men, we spend years pushing the boy away and what it is then to allow a man towards you in that context.

AM: A secret is that's the only poem in the book that's entirely made up, I just invented that one.

DT: It's far more image-laden.

AM: It didn't happen to me, so I had to make it a poem. I'm interested in what happens when bodies collide with each other. It seems when bodies are put in front of each other or forced to interact with each other, especially strangers' bodies, I'm fascinated by what that does to people. It's the root cause of everything that we're living through at the minute, so the rise of Trump, the rise of the Alt-Right and an exposing of people like Harvey Weinstein who've been behaving appallingly for years.

It's at the root of toxic masculinity, which is learned. People aren't born with it. It's learned behaviour from society and I'm really interested where that comes from. Then if you learn where it comes from, how do we then begin to solve it?

DT: That idea of toxic masculinity, one theme that arises through a few poems is the idea of going for a blood test and this idea, I think it struck a chord with me because I used to take Lithium, so I had to have blood tests every three months. Lithium is a poison and you're basically waiting to find out if the poison has had too much of an effect on your body, then you have to stop taking it. You were talking about finding the root. Sometimes, it seems as though men are waiting for the bad, whatever is toxic within them, to be extracted rather than to be looking for it themselves.

AM: I think so because we're told, well, it's different for gay men and that's a whole different conversation, but I think certain men are told they shouldn't look for it, that they can't be vulnerable. It seems to me that we've abandoned our young men to pornography,

that there's very little, I know this is changing, but certainly when I was in school, there was no adequate sex education, not even for straight people, let alone for LGBT people and that if we are abandoning the responsibility of sex education to pornography, how can we be surprised when young men turn around and expect certain things of women or expect women to behave a certain way or expect their own bodies to look a certain way?

They're being taught a false ideal, which is incredibly violent, incredibly misogynistic. I'm not anti-porn in any way, but if we're not backing it up with any proper sex education, we're going to turn out a generation of young men who will have utterly, utterly unrealistic expectations and ideas about what sex or intimacy or love should be. As a society, we're utterly failing to properly educate and prepare young people for what their bodies are going to do anyway. They're just not going to do it safely.

DT: It's very worrying that even though the education system seems to be picking up the slack and saying we need more sex education, it seems to be reflecting a culture that wasn't so influenced by pornography. It seems quite an old-fashioned view of what that means.

AM: It worries me, again I've written about pornography, I'm not anti-porn at all, but it would worry me that 12 or 13-year-old have access to smartphones, access to the internet. I could find out about being gay in a very benign way and talked to young, innocent people online and then stared going out when I was 16 and kind of figured it out for myself. If you just type something into Google, in two clicks, you could find something incredibly violent or looks very horrific because you don't understand what it is that you're looking at and then become scared. I think that's really dangerous.

My entire sex education was putting on a video in school. The only thing I remember of it is it said: 'When a man becomes sexually aroused, he might become flustered and want to take his jumper off.' That's all it said. I found that to be mostly true throughout my life, but that doesn't in any way adequately prepare you for the real world and that's failing particularly, I think, young queer kids because the more I think about this, the thing about even if sex education fails heterosexual kids, they'll mostly be able to look around and see examples in older siblings or in their family or just in wider society.

If it fails young queer kids to that extent, and they can't look around and see other examples, they just become lost. I didn't even know what that word meant, I didn't know what that word gay meant until I was like 14 or 15 and then I look back and go, actually, a lot of these poem are, well, I knew when I was seven or I knew when I was eight, but just didn't have a language for it, and that worries me a lot as well. I think that's what's beginning to shift.

DT: I think that's what's so important with the kinds of writing that are getting published now. Following on from what you were saying there, even as a heterosexual adolescent, even if you're not getting sex education, you can look to the media for ideas about what romance is or intimacy is, but as a young queer kid, you're not going to see that in many places. There's a bit of an age difference between myself and my wife and she doesn't remember the series This Life. That was the first time I'd seen any intimacy between two men.

There were these elements of shame and it seemed quite an aggressive act at times, but then it seemed to go through those emotions. I can't remember seeing anything like that again for years and it's so unusual to actually see these and this is why I think it's so important that there are more chances in literature, not just in poetry, that these stories can be told, because then at least in private or through libraries, people can go out and find these more realistic stories. This is what I like so much about Playtime, it confronts this idea of violence that leads to intimacy, or violence that results through shame, but it also tries to give a more realistic view. It isn't always that stereotype.

AM: I got excited walking to Waterstones. I was working in Newcastle and went into their Waterstones and bought Richard Scott's book and had this moment where I thought 'God, even four or five years ago, or 10 years ago when I was first starting to shop for poetry, there weren't those kind of books on the shelves. It felt like such an exciting moment, to buy that as a book. I had a real moment of thinking 'God, we've come a long way very quickly'. There's still a lot of work to do in terms of representation, I think, but the fact a book like that, because it's by Faber, it will be on the table and kind of facing outwards and things like that and it will be unashamedly about what it's about, it felt like such an important moment.

It really struck me when I was just kind of buying it, how five years ago, it didn't look like that on the shelves. You wouldn't have find those kinds of books by these young, queer poets, but it feels like we're in a moment that feels really interesting at the minute, with Danez [Smith] and Ocean [Vuong] as well, but from our own, home-grown talent as well.

DT: I've not always been a fan of the way the big publishers operate, but when they do pick up a title like that and Richard Scott's Soho is absolutely brilliant, it does so much because automatically, if it's a Faber book, it's stood up on its own, not just slid into the bookcase.

AM: That's important, I think, and it's just a great book.

DT: We'll finish with one point. I try not to centre myself in any of these conversations and over what is early four years now, when I was first reading Playtime and then was reflecting on what it meant in context of being a second collection following on from Physical, I was finding it quite hard to make notes. I was surprised because I really loved both collections and I felt like it was really easy to engage with them. But I was wondering whether there was something in me, going back to this conditioning as a boy and adolescent, that was stopping me from engaging. There was almost a block in my mind that wasn't allowing me to write notes or questions, because if I was writing questions about these, they felt too close to my own experiences. I don't know whether you've had much feedback from people about how they've read the poems.

AM: That's interesting.

DT: It wasn't easy to read and contemplate these ideas of how closely intertwined libido and violence and grief are. That was a really hard thing to try and disengage with in order to think about the listener and the conversation.

AM: That's interesting. I mean, it's not been, you're one of the first people who's had it, that's not seen it before. The people that had copies are the people that kind of helped me do the various editions of the manuscript. It's interesting, there are poems I find myself not reading out to audiences. One of them is the Transplant poem, but I think that's for different reasons. There's the kind of sequence of – it's not going to sell the book at all – the sequence of masturbation poems in there, only because it's about finding out about one's own body and kind of how we go through that.

Someone I won't name said very funnily 'the sequence should be called Wanks For The Memories.' I wish I'd called the book that, but I didn't. I find myself not reading those to an audience, because I almost think maybe I'm still slightly uncomfortable with some of those or some of those ideas. Sharing them with an audience publicly feels quite odd. In terms of feedback, again I think it's that idea, I mean often times, I've been running a few workshops recently, I did one with Caroline in fact, a week, where we talked a lot about truth and daring in poetry and one of the things that's kind of struck me is women will get called 'confessional' and men will get called 'brave'.

That's the kind of gendered reaction to how we deal with this kind of poetry. I was influenced a lot by people like Sharon Olds, so in that quote unquote 'confessional/apparently personal', whatever it's kind of called, vein. The only real point of that kind of poetry is to, you know, if I was writing about nature, I would show you a tree because I think that tree says something about the beauty of creation, or whatever I'm interested in. The only reason to kind of show stuff about yourself is because you think it can say something about something bigger, otherwise it's just a diary entry, or just a kind of blog post, it's not a poem.

I guess with everything I've been writing or trying to think about, it might feel like it is just metaphorically masturbatory, just kind of about me, but really the idea is to go 'this is this, because I think it says something about intimacy'. I guess, almost like that Urination poem we were talking about, you have to try and put yourself on the line and say 'I think it's this' and other people will generally look at it and say 'actually, no, it is, that's what it feels like'. There's a poem I put on Twitter a few week ago, one from the book that's about when I had an eating disorder when I was younger, and a couple of people got in touch with me privately and said 'no, actually, this is what it feels like' or 'that felt true' or 'that felt interesting', which was nice, because they could see themselves within that thing I was trying to show them.

The book's not out in the world yet. It will be by the time this goes out, so I might be in hiding, it might have gone horribly wrong, but we'll have to wait and see. Yeah, I find it interesting there are poems I still feel too uncomfortable to read out to audiences, because I don't know, I think it's one thing to have it in a book, I think it's one thing to have a bloke stood in front of you, reading something at you. I think that changes it.

Readings are always about the audience, never the person who's reading, so my job isn't just to inflict the poems on them. So I think there are some that will probably only ever have a life in the book and maybe the masturbation suite is one of those kind of things.

DT: It's really interesting, it's connected a lot of things in my mind, and I think because I don't have a physical book, I haven't been published in that way, the only way I currently

share work is to do a reading and I think I was reading things in Playtime and connecting with them very strongly, but feeling like I could never write that because I could never read it out. Really fascinating to hear about how some of these poems may only ever exist on the page, for people to read them privately or in groups or whatever. It's interesting to hear you talk of not wanting to 'inflict' certain things on audiences.

AM: I think so, you just have to be aware of your own position. There's a whole other conversation about poets doing readings and I always think my job is to, not entertain as in make people laugh, but it's about the audience, not about you, which I think is really important. Also, just being aware of the position. If you're stood on stage, as a man, reading something, why would you want to do that, to an audience that, just because of the demographics of poetry, is going to be predominantly women and probably predominantly middle-aged women?

Why would they want to stand there while a 29-year-old bloke stands on stage and reads a sequence of masturbation poems? They can look at them in their own time if they want to or not, but I think part of it is about giving them the choice. More and more, I'm interested in, if I were straight and I wrote these poems, would that change the reception? When I'm 70, if I'm still, God willing, asked to do an occasional reading, do I read them and that changes them? Is that weird?

If I read Urination and things like that, I'm fascinated by who has permission to be publicly intimate as well and back to that idea of men being brave and women just been confessional as a way of kind of marginalising their voices. I think the whole idea about who gets permission to say what and how we receive it is really interesting and when I am a lot older and I re-read some of these poems out, that will change them, by their nature that will change them because they feel very embodied in me and how I present them. There's not an answer in that, I guess.

I'm more and more interested in that idea of the power of the poem embodied in the person at the age they are or the kind of person they are and what that does to them then publicly through someone's life, whether I'll look back on these in 30 years and be like 'God, really?' Or whether these will seem tame and it'll just be a constant progression of radical self-disclosure somehow, I don't know.

DT: You just have to make you sure you go on tour with Richard Scott.

AM: That would be great!

DT: If you go on after him, it will all be fine.

AM: It will be fine, won't it? I'll always just seem vanilla.

DT: I think we're running out of time now, so we're going to finish on a final poem, but just to say at the time of recording, Playtime is not out, but as you're listening, it will be available to buy. It's published by Jonathan Cape. I want to thank you very much, Andrew, it's been fascinating talking, I really enjoyed it.

AM: Thank you for having me and for coming up to the Northern powerhouse.

DT: Oh yeah, we're in Manchester.

AM: Yeah, you can hear the Mancunian wind. Just because it came up in conversation, I'll read the poem about my eating disorder. So the official statistics would be that 1.6% of men will have eating disorders. I would say the percentage would be much higher if we took in other forms of body dysmorphia, including steroid abuse at the gym and things like that, but the official statistics would be 1.6%.

What 1.6% Of Young Men Know

to get the body of their favourite sports star
they must starve themselves that the muscles
are there already if they could only
get at them that the thing to do is eat less
and replace meals with water so that they bloat
and then feel their insides flushing out

that the stomach will expand and shrink back
like a gas holder in a former
industrial town that once the body
has burned off all its fat it will start on muscle
that more exercise just gives more energy
for the body to eat itself alive

that they can forget what it's like to stand
without feeling dizzy that their eyesight
can fail that their salad can be carried
in smaller and smaller tupperware boxes
that the doctor will be forced
to ban the gym will deliver his prognosis

that they will end up in the carpark of the doctors
with their mum saying *imagine a child of mine malnourished*

Outro:

DT: Hello. You stuck around to the end. That means it's biscuit time. That was the wonderful Andrew McMillan. If you can afford to do so, I really do recommend buying Andrew's books or if you are able, requesting them at your local library. They are stunning.

For those of you that don't know, we have an accompanying podcast edited by my wife Lizzy, called A Poem A Week, in which she publishes, you guessed it, a poem a week.

As with this podcast, you can download and subscribe via all the major podcast apps. One more reminder that our upcoming anthology Why Poetry? is available to pre-order through Verve Poetry Press, featuring poems by the likes of Donald Chegwin, Nadia Drews, Keith Jarrett, Joe Dunthorne, Rishi Dastidar, Zeina Hashem Beck and Susannah Dickey. I didn't realise I was this close to a building site when I started recording this.

As usual, I would like to thank Arts Council England, specifically the south-west of England office, for their continued support of the podcast and Snazzy Rat for the series intro and outro music. You can find more from him on Bandcamp. I'll be back at the end of September with episode 118, which will possibly, just possibly, be an interview with me about the history of Lunar Poetry Podcasts, as it will be our birthday episode. Four years old! But that's only if I can get over the embarrassment of editing myself. Either way, I'll speak to you in September. Much love.

End of transcript.