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Episode 123 – Vanessa Onwuemezi

Transcript by Christabel Smith

Guest: Vanessa Onwuemezi – **VO**
Host: David Turner – **DT**
Feature: Mishi Morath – **MM**

Intro:

DT: Hello, welcome to episode 123 of Lunar Poetry Podcasts, I'm David Turner. You alright? I was going to try and get this episode out before Christmas last year but it felt like it would be too much of a rush so I waited until now to do it properly, as it were.

The reason I was busy is that I was putting the finishing touches to my first collection of poetry which is out with Hesterglock Press. The book is a collection of prose poetry, visual art and essay style writing with the whole book being complimented by a series of recordings and experimental sounds and noises, 'bleeps' and 'bloops'. It's out officially the 8 February but Hesterglock have agreed to make it available a little earlier so if you'd like to grab yourself a copy for £10 plus packing and postage then follow the link in the episode description.

[The sound of a cassette tape rewinding] Hello, this is 'meta-David' interrupting the other David. I completely forgot to mention in this bit that if £10 plus packing and postage is beyond your reach financially then there is a PDF version of the book available for only £4. So, that's a one-off-cost of £4 and you can read that PDF version on, I believe, any electronic device. Which is an option, right? I've just spliced this recording in because I just couldn't face rerecording the intro. Back to the intro… [Cassette tape loading and playing.]

The recordings are available for free on my SoundCloud page – link also in the episode description.

I've got three UK book launches coming up if you'd like to come and say hello. The first is Saturday 8th February at Ye Olde Rose and Crown in Walthamstow, next it's Cardiff Saturday 15th February at a fantastic new event called CRASH at the Flute and Tankard pub. Finally, a Bristol launch at HOURS Gallery Space and that's Saturday 14th March. Links to all of these events in the episode description, of course. Of course.

I'm going to be joined by some fantastic poets at these events including today's guest Vanessa Onwuemezi who will be appearing at the London event. I met up with Vanessa in Walthamstow, east London where we both live to discuss how she found herself to be pursuing a life of writing. You know, like all my other guests. I've always really enjoyed chatting to writers at the beginning of their careers as they tend to curtail my inclination toward fairly heavy doses of cynicism about this industry. Which Vanessa does brilliantly with her optimism. Bloody optimism!

As always this episode is fully transcribed, click the link in the description or head over to lunarpoetrypodcasts.com to download the transcript. You'll also find, on the website, a list of 80 poetry podcasts produced in the UK and Ireland to fill your time between my now increasingly infrequent episodes. This list, of course, includes our companion podcast *a poem a week* produced by my wife Lizzy Turner and features some really brilliant poetry readings every weekend. That alone is up to its 81st episode.

I'll be back at the end of the episode with some exciting funding news and with a few words for poet and my friend Mishi Morath who sadly passed away before Christmas. It just doesn't feel right talking about that at the beginning.

Anyway, here's Vanessa.

Conversation:

VO:

Heartland

He wasn't sure where it began and ended. He wasn't sure if it was the beginning of the sickness he was at, or somewhere close to the end, the dark night. He was doubting himself, free of insecurities he'd become loose. Not sure whether he was man or woman, he, she, he she wasn't sure if she was a flock of birds actually, each bird picked loose from the flock until she was all left apart.

She climbed inside her sickness, the upper right heart chamber. Atrium. Wore the chamber like a new skin and she sweated all day and all night because of it. It was important to keep it moist, so that was something.

DT: Thank you very much, Vanessa. Welcome to the podcast. It's weird saying hello when we've already said hello and we've been chatting a little while when NFL was on. This seems like a good place to start. Why don't you tell the listeners how you got into writing?

VO: I should start by saying I studied Biology at university, which is something we spoke about before.

DT: I didn't want to make it too much of a leading question, but it's difficult when you know people and you're coming on to do a professional job.

VO: It's like, what did I tell you? Should I make it known?

DT: It's definitely a good place to start, that you don't necessarily have a background in writing.

VO: Yes, a literary background. I suppose it's good to start there because how I came to writing, involves a kind of U-turn. It's not really a U-turn, but it's the best way to put it. I studied Biology and really enjoyed doing that, but during my degree, I already knew I wouldn't be making a career out of it. Looking back, I think I could have studied other things as well. Languages, I really liked, or History, but Biology seemed the more sensible of the three at the time and I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do with my life, so I did that and I don't regret that.

I did a Masters in a similar kind of subject, but it kind of moved on from Biology. It was Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, basically a bit more of a philosophical take on what they call the hard problem, which is consciousness, the mind, and that kind of thing. It felt quite a natural step for me. I was definitely much more interested in the less tangible questions and I think a lot of writers are really.

So in some sense, I was already set up to be a writer or an artist. I think deep down, that's what I really wanted to do. Nobody in my family was or is an artist or writer, so I think if it's not close to you or you haven't seen it done, it's much more of a wobbly career path as well. There's no set way to go about it necessarily, if you haven't seen it done before.

DT: You're just making it up as you go along.

VO: Yeah, definitely. I think a big part of getting into writing was realising that's what I needed to do, that stepping off a more certain path. I considered Medicine. Before I completely gave up any ideas around that, I considered becoming a doctor, did a bit of work experience in hospital. It was my friend's dad who was the consultant who helped me get this work experience and I was in a clinic with him, seeing patients who had kidney problems.

He left the room for a second and I was with this guy, this older man. He said to me: 'Oh, so you want to be a doctor, that's great.' I said: 'Yeah', being polite and he said: 'You know, because if you want to do something, you should just do it.' Then he said: 'If you really want to do it, it's not hard.' At that point, I was like: 'OK, I'm not doing Medicine.' I think at that point, I moved to France, actually.

DT: It's strange that for some people, what would seem by far the hardest option is, in a lot of ways, the easy option. The path of least resistance is still a difficult path to follow, but had you gone into Medicine, you wouldn't necessarily have had questions about how you get to your goal. Was there any resistance around you about wanting to be a writer?

VO: Most of the resistance comes from yourself and I think family can be difficult for some people. It wasn't for me. My parents have always been quietly supportive. They've never been like 'yeah, do this' and they've never said 'no, I don't think you should do that.' They've always just quietly supported me, which I've always been grateful for, because basically, they've left me to figure things out on my own without interfering very much.

DT: What you said rings true for a lot of writers I've spoken to in the podcast, in this imagined resistance against becoming a writer or pursuing a creative path is often due to not knowing how to get there. It seems an impossible dream.

VO: Yeah, definitely, especially when you're very focused on it as a goal. I think that can be a barrier when you're focused on having the published book, from a position where you've not written a sentence or you've written a couple of things and don't really know where to go with it. You're alone, thinking 'I don't know what to do with my life'. All of that can seem insurmountable, but then you start to realise that you then just have to do the next thing.

I worked at a theatre and the guy who ran the theatre, David Land, we had a conversation and he said 'just do the next thing, don't worry, you don't have to have your life planned out.' Once I started to trust that, it does ring true. You just do the next step. I'm still not published so if I were waiting for that, if that were my goal, and that was the only thing that I could measure my success against, I would constantly be on the back foot and the last 10 years would have been torture for me.

DT: That's probably something we'll come to later. That's something I'm asking myself constantly: how do you gauge your own success, especially if there isn't a profession to exist within? If you're not published, that's many people's view of what being a professional writer is. What are you doing?, basically. That doesn't mean you're not doing anything, but you have to reconcile it in yourself as to what your motivations are.

VO: Definitely and what your view of success is, I suppose. I don't have an explicit internal yardstick for success. I think what helped me was to realise that the goal was to write. The goal isn't to be published. My goal is to write and be a good writer, basically, and focusing on that. That's because I really like writing and it comes quite naturally to me. Not to say I never worry about what I'm going to do with myself or how I'm going to make a living, all those things are a really important part of it.

Going back to when we were talking about your own resistance and what barriers there are, especially with the arts, making a living, is one of them. I started this in my 20s and I don't have any dependants, I'm pretty much a free agent, so to an extent, I can worry less about that aspect of it. It is a very material, as well as a psychological barrier, to even starting.

DT: If we go back to something you said there about your goal being to write and write well, how do you judge what you think is good? What mechanisms do you use if you're not at the stage where you're getting published and getting feedback from editors through the process of putting out a book and reviews and all the bullshit that comes after that? What are your current methods to gauge whether something is good?

VO: I workshop nearly every week with a group of friends I met when I did a creative writing MA, so I think that is my most immediate gauge. I think through practice, you get to know when something is… Obviously you think everything is rubbish on some level, but I think I have a good idea of knowing when something is messy or where something needs work and again, there is an internal gauge. If you're happy with something and it's said what you needed to say, then that is really when you can stop writing, I suppose.

DT: Do you have a constant set of parameters for quality when you're writing or do they fluctuate from piece to piece?

VO: That's a good question.

DT: I suppose I'm thinking more about what your process is as a writer and whether you shift style.

VO: Yeah. Until recently, I did. I still am learning to write, but when I was first starting, my style would really vary depending on what I'd read recently and what I'd read that I really liked. So I read [Thomas] Pynchon and all of a sudden, I was writing these really long, tumbling sentences. I read Denis Johnson and then my style changed, but I seem to have settled into something, at least for the moment, and I suppose the parameters are the same for each.

In a way I couldn't really articulate what they were. I think you just know when a sentence is… I think rhythm is definitely very important for me. I tend not to be satisfied if the rhythm of the sentence I feel is not working or the way the rhythm of the piece works together.

DT: Is that a rhythm in your spoken voice or more internal? Do you try to imagine how a reader might read it?

VO: Yeah, I read it out loud. I read everything out loud generally, usually when I start, I read the whole thing out loud. Often, I will know the rhythm of the sentence before the words and usually, I try and find the words. I know what the gist of the sentence will be and I might try and find the words to fit that rhythm, I think that's a bit of an obsession. I guess that is a constant parameter.

DT: We drifted very nicely away from my original, very banal question, but you touched upon the creative writing course you took, so if we jump back to how you got into writing. You got as far as you deciding not to study Medicine. So between there and the creative writing course, what happened to get to that point?

VO: What happened? Actually, I was working at the time at a theatre. Somebody started in my team who was doing the creative writing course at Birkbeck, basically. This was about five years ago now, four years ago, and I had been writing a bit. I'd written a short story at that point, I think, and some poetry and she was really raving about it. I went to a party and met one of the tutors on the course and chatted with her a bit and we ended up going for a coffee.

That's, in a backwards way, how I ended up applying. I sent her the story after that. She basically said 'yeah, if you were to apply, you'd probably have a place', so that's how it happened. I didn't really give it too much thought. I didn't consider applying anywhere else either. I was just 'yeah, this sounds all right'.

DT: What was the focus of the course? Was it general creative writing or did it lean towards poetry or prose?

VO: It was workshop based, so you'd workshop every week and it was based around the short story, at least for the first year. I think there were about 30 people in a year, so around 10 people in each workshop and I think two or three people would go every week, so you'd send the story on the Sunday before. On the Wednesday, you'd show up and everyone would rip it to pieces.

DT: How was that the first time?

VO: I remember being really nervous. As everyone does, you suddenly have a weird view on your piece. It makes you look at it differently when you know it's being read. As soon as you email it away and you know it's being read by a couple of people, you start to reconsider what the hell you're doing.

DT: How much did it affect your writing process, knowing everything was going to be read?

VO: I don't know, really. Maybe not enough. I still left it to the last minute. Generally, the way I dealt with it, I would send it when I was just a bit fed up. I'd leave it to the last minute, then write all week and weekend until I was fed up, then send it off. In a way, it was a defence because I was so tired of it, I was happy to see it go, rather than terrified to know what people thought of it.

That was the way I dealt with it and actually, in the workshops, people were always very kind and supportive. It wasn't, for me at least, a bad experience at all. It was a very good one, I think.

DT: It's interesting you talk about the defensive aspect of choosing to deal with deadlines in that way. I haven't done a writing course like that, but I've been part of writing groups. I didn't start sharing any work until I was in my early to mid-30s and it's hard at that point, when you're supposedly a 'proper grown-up', to suddenly start baring yourself in front of people and not get really defensive when people comment on your work.

I did the same thing, I would just bash stuff out, send it and go 'if they don't like it, it's because it was rushed'. I know a lot of writers who swear by not ever joining any writing group, so you don't need peer feedback, that's their view. I'm a strong believer that if you're going to go through the anxiety of doing it, you should do it properly and not half…I'm caught between saying half-heartedly and half-arsedly. Then just send stuff off and have an 'easy out', where you say that wasn't really a considered piece, if they don't like it, it's to be expected.

Did you have to fight against that to get the most out of the course?

VO: You mean fight against my defensive urges? No, I think I did sort myself out eventually. It really just depended on what else was going on in my life. It was at Birkbeck, so it was in the evenings. Everyone worked so everyone was on a similar page. You couldn't always give all your time to it. I think I took reading other people's work much more seriously, I gave much more time and attention and care to that.

Actually, I think after the first few workshops, some of the feedback was really good and helpful. I think when you realise how it can help, you want to send in a story you've actually worked on. You don't want the things they're picking up merely that you haven't spent enough time on it. That's not how you're going to be a better writer. So I think I quickly realised actually, if I want to get the most out of the workshop, I should spend time on it so they can pick holes in it.

DT: Similarly, I think the reason I enjoyed any of the writing groups I've been part of is because it made me read in a way to give feedback, so I was much more considered. It was the first time I'd ever read in that way.

VO: It was the same for me.

DT: Having not studied academically, I'd never had to read with a view to remembering anything. When my wife Lizzy and I lived in Bristol, we started a writing group. I very rarely shared any work with the group, but I kept going to run the group, just to read people's work, because it informed a lot, as to how I would interview people on the podcast. It just trains your mind to take things in a bit faster. This may be something that a lot of people who have studied take for granted because they may have learnt that at an early age, but I never needed to. It was quite a new skill for me to have to pick up.

VO: That's interesting. Also, Biology, I did read a lot, but as you say, you read in a different way when you're critiquing someone's work, especially if it's creative work. There are certain parts of it, like being in the workshop scenario, giving feedback, speaking in front of people and things like that, it's something that if you've done a degree, you will have done before and for a lot of people, that's more than half the battle.

I'm not that worried about speaking in front of a group of people generally. It seems like such a distant memory now, but I do remember feeling a bit out of my depth. I hadn't really read that much. A lot of people were really, really well read. They were all different ages, so some people had just had more life to read books in. My academic experience had been really scientific and it is just a different way of thinking about things.

Now I've realised that I did really have to learn how to participate in a workshop setting and learn how to critique things. Now when I read something and there's a comma out of place or I think 'actually, this might have done better if they'd put that here' or something like that, I forget or take for granted that's something I really had to learn. I guess speaking about barriers into writing, that could be one that could put a lot of people off doing a creative writing course.

DT: Definitely. I think it goes for all skills in life. In the furniture workshop I'm a maker in, I have to keep reminding a lot of the senior makers to not be too hard on some of the younger people. It's easy to forget how you don't know anything and people need to be allowed a space. I've never been part of a workshop where it's been felt people can't make mistakes, but you don't know that until you're in there and I think this is one of the barriers we're talking about. It's the unknown.

It's like you're saying, perhaps had you had a writer to talk to in your late teens, early 20s, when you were first thinking about going down that path, you could have at least sounded someone out. I had exactly the same. This is not about me, but I think it's important to remember, neither of us are particularly old, but I find, especially when you get familiar with a skill, that it's easy to forget what it was like not knowing anything about that skill and not being able to talk about it.

VO: Definitely and it's good to refresh yourself, I suppose, and good to have conversations like this. It's also good to try and keep learning new things or keep doing things which make you realise you're a lay person in many respects, many specialisms. When I started my newest job, I was sitting in a lot of production meetings, people talking about theatre production and there were so many words thrown around, I'd be like 'what? What is that?'

You might know some because it's basically construction language, I guess, but people would just talk and I'd be like 'OK, but how do I spell that?' You would learn it's an abbreviation of something and I think at that time, I did realise that even though I had no idea what was going on, I'm quite comfortable with that now. Again, a lot of these resistances are inner resistance. It's perfectly normal not to know anything about something that's new. Perhaps a previous version of me might have beaten myself up about that or might have just avoided that situation altogether.

DT: Similarly, when I have to tell some of the senior makers in the workshop to not be too hard on the younger makers, you have to conversely remind the younger makers to not feel bad about knowing certain things, because even then, within a field you feel you're almost an expert in, there are always things you don't know.

There are methods of furniture making I know nothing about, because I've either just not been trained to use them or they just pre-date my training and they're not used anymore. You can go to anyone in the workshop and they will know far more about one aspect than you. Maybe that's just a lesson for life.

VO: Yeah, I was going to say that's everything. When I lived in France, you just had to not know. I couldn't speak French, so there was a case of just having to ask a question 'what is that thing?' in French, having to ask or say to people 'I don't understand, can you repeat that?' Kind of losing your pride, I guess.

DT: It's funny with the amount of parallels. Having moved to Norway and learnt Norwegian as an adult pre-dates me focusing properly on writing and I've been far less embarrassed about anything in my life now that I've gone through the process of learning a second language as an adult and seemingly, in my own head, humiliated myself in public so many times, not knowing what a bread roll is called or not being able to pronounce my Rs at all and they're really important in Norwegian. People not knowing what I'm talking about because I've got a lazy London mouth.

VO: I had the same thing. I had a stop-over in Paris yesterday, or whenever I flew back, and I asked for, and supposedly I can speak French, but I went to a coffee place and asked for a coffee with soya milk and she was just like 'huh?' and I was like 'Oh God, no, I've forgotten already.' It's a real baptism of fire, as you will know, and it's a good lesson. It teaches you to laugh at yourself.

DT: That's a very good point. Maybe we can get onto laughing at ourselves as writers afterwards. Not taking myself too seriously is a big thing for me at the moment. It might be a good time for a second reading.

VO:

Accusations, Accusations

The witch was standing on the front steps of her house, leaning forward, as if forehead on a pike. Her husband died, I've been told. Would it explain the wailing always seeming to be coming from there. Always seeming to my ears like it could be the wind, human, or no difference?

I've caught sight of her on other days, swaying barely upright queuing at the post office, bank, supermarket, bar, pub, zebra crossing, bones old feather crisp and she's light, as if held up by air particles particles.

DT: Thank you very much. We'll return to one thing we were talking about, when we were discussing ways we read and talked about the books you were reading when you were studying Biology. I've spoken to people with a scientific background, I don't want to put too much of a divide between any subjects, because they don't exist, but it suddenly struck me it was possibly a very different way of reading, in that I know from speaking to friends who have studied sciences, that fundamental to all of it is to question what you're reading, in order to question the process.

You wouldn't necessarily question the text, it's more the process to get to that point, whereas with creative writing, you're very much picking apart the text you see within a book. Whether you believe the text or not, the truth is relevant or the fact it isn't true is…

VO: The fact that it is fiction?

DT: Yes, that's exactly the word. I suddenly couldn't think what the opposite of non-fiction was. You're quite right, it's fiction.

VO: We could talk that into the ground.

DT: I was wondering if you've ever thought about the influence of that questioning of process has had on your writing?

VO: So the biological, scientific background?

DT: That part of your academic study.

VO: I think actually, in some ways I always struggled with that, the scientific reading. Mostly what I read when I was studying was papers that would be divided up for you, method, a list of equipment and all that kind of stuff and there was a very particular writing style, which I could never seem to get. I'd write essays and my friend would write essays and they'd say 'your writing style is really good' and to this day, I do not know what they were talking about.

I think in a way, I leant towards the more literary stuff. Now you see scientists who write popular books who need to be more literary, but the really hard-core biological stuff, I suppose you're reading, you're questioning, but I think actually, you can probably argue that mode of thought has invaded everything else. Scientism or intellectualism has invaded literature and ways of looking at art which aren't really so appropriate for it.

DT: Do you have any examples?

VO: I suppose one thing I found when I was workshopping, or actually when I talk about someone's read something I've written, often the first thing people say will be 'I know nothing about poetry' or 'I know nothing about literature' and that basically means perhaps they haven't understood what you're saying, they haven't got the meaning. 'I don't get it' type of thing.

I feel that's not the point. If you were to 'get it', if you're reading something and it's speaking to you and you understand every sentence, then the work hasn't really done its job. I should be able to read a scientific paper and understand what the scientist thinks they have discovered. That should be plain. You read an essay and should understand their arguments, but I don't think I should understand immediately what a writer or a poet is talking about, simply by reading the text, if that makes sense.

DT: Absolutely. It's something I've struggled with since returning to writing six years ago, this need people have for wanting to understand. It seems to be accepted you can listen to a song and not understand every line. It could be emotive and draw something out of you. Even if you don't remember 75% of the lyrics, it can still be affecting.

There seems to be a huge expectation that you should understand, or the reader should understand everything the writer is trying to say. I don't understand why that should be anyone's aim as a writer. I know some people will aim for that.

VO: The question is usually 'what is it about?' Or when a piece of writing is reviewed or critiqued, maybe, often the reviewer will pick out some themes and say 'this relates to capitalism' or 'this relates to a social novel' or whatever it is. As soon as you've done that, it's the meaning people take away. People get really frustrated with you not giving it up, not saying 'this is about her dead father' or something like that.

If I knew exactly what it was about, I wouldn't have written it or I would have written one sentence. If I could have told you in one sentence what something's about, then there's not really any point, is there? So I think actually, writing in a sense has taught me how to read, or how to be a better reader. I still sometimes have a tendency, I think 'oh, this reminds me of this', you do have a tendency to generalise or reduce something down into the thin thread

you can put into words, or the thin thread you can glean from it, but actually I think the best way to read something, even something scientific, is to read at least the first time, not trying to understand everything, just read it really plainly and that tends to be the best way to absorb work, especially poetry.

DT: This is something that's been talked about a lot on the podcast. It's not something we necessarily need to go into now, but a lot of people have cited the way poetry is taught at schools as the reason for the obsession about understanding things, because the way it's taught is to unlock this riddle. Things may have changed, it's a long time since I was at school, but it may be now that some parts of the curriculum are allowing students to read stuff and enjoy it, but it seems as though there is still an emphasis, even if you're allowed your own individual take on it, there still has to be a take.

VO: That's why I hated English Literature at school. I could not hack it. I remember that. Even now, I don't think I have an incredibly analytical mind and I think when I am forced to analyse things like that, I can't seem to find the energy for it, whereas some people really can. Also, obviously to be a good critic you need that, but the best critiques don't look for the thing that they already know. You're looking to see what the writer is saying or what the writer is evoking, rather than trying to draw out themes that confirm your own viewpoint or understanding of what literature should be saying.

DT: What do you feel would be the ideal feedback from a reader, with your writing? This would probably change from piece to piece, but as a general thing. There will be a follow-up question as to what you're aiming for in terms of a connection with readers.

VO: Any good feedback is nice. You want someone to either be disturbed by something or I think a feeling is definitely better than someone saying 'oh, I totally get what you're saying, this is about Freudian psychology' or whatever. Definitely, you want somebody to feel something. I think the times where I've read things and it's impacted me the most, I remember when I first read The Aleph by [Jorge Luis] Borges, I was just blown away.

There's no other way I could put it. It's definitely a bodily thing. I couldn't at that point have summarised the piece for you, I couldn't have told you what it's about or even remembered a lot of it immediately after, but I definitely felt something very strongly. It felt like a truth that has been transmitted to you through your skin rather than with your intellect.

DT: I tend to find the more I like something, the less I have to say about it. I can't verbalise why. I just adore Lydia Davis and I can't ever tell anyone what it is particularly. I've thought about it quite a few years now because of having attended these critiquing sessions. I've tried to do it a little bit as a thought exercise, to try and put into words why I like something. I have written a few reviews in the past, mainly live events, and I tend to find if I can write 800-1000 words about something, I probably haven't enjoyed it.

I'm trying to wrench out of myself what certain books mean to me. It's strange that I have been attracted to writing poetry, because stereotypically that's mainly people who are trying to express these thoughts and feelings through words, but then it's probably in a deliberately difficult way. It would never make a review.

VO: Yeah and also, I think maybe it's more accepted that you don't know immediately what poetry's about. Short stories and novels and narrative are always about something. It has to be about something, unless you're getting very experimental. Usually the best stuff I read, or the stuff that's really impacted me, like you, for someone to ask me what it's about, 'well, it's about this man.' Thinking about [Vladimir] Nabokov's Pnin, I think he wrote it initially as a short story in The New Yorker and I listened to it on the podcast. If you asked me what it's about, I'd say 'well, basically about a guy who loses his suitcase and then gets it back and goes to give a lecture.' Obviously, that's not what it's about.

DT: Such a good point. There is what happens and there is meaning and they are often disconnected. For some writers, the whole meaning is that stuff just happens. That's a deliberate style. That's a very good point you make, stuff is either narrative, seemingly, or experimental. If it deviates from that, it's considered, I'm talking very much from an English language and British publishing standpoint, you're either in or out, but it does seem you're happy to stand outside of that standard.

VO: Again, it depends. When you're reading writers you admire or finding new writers that are doing things you've never done or never read before, it makes you a bit braver. A lot of the short stories I write are narrative, more or less. They go somewhere or they start with a person. They are stories, I suppose, but then I haven't really thought too much about whether they are experimental. I've been called experimental, but I don't really think too much about what that means. I guess I just want to get the story done, which is enough, just getting it done, then you leave the labels to someone else.

DT: In my very narrow experience, the people that call writers experimental have a very narrow view of what experimental means. It's quite amazing, the amount of poets I see at live events introduced as being experimental… it pretty much solely comes down to them using odd line breaks, there's very little experimental about the writing. If someone that considered themselves to be an experimental writer, for them to go to the lengths of calling someone else an experimental writer, you'd have to be pretty out there. To impress someone in that 'club'.

Similarly, the vast majority of writers don't really care where they are so long as they can keep writing. It's like you were saying at the beginning, your motivation is just to write and to write as well as you can, that has to meet certain criteria you lay out. There is a narrow band of people that have a very defined idea of what it is to be a writer and they can be quite defensive about the club they are in.

VO: Definitely. A lot of this, I'm just discovering. The label experimental was at least a year or two ago, fairly new to me, I just knew what I liked and didn't like. I like a lot of stuff that could be deemed very traditional and other things that could be deemed really out there. Again, what we were just saying, meaning is really the key. Whatever it is, it seems you want that feeling where it's got in through your skin.

You don't want the feeling somebody's telling you how to feel about the sentence they've just written or you don't want to feel like your emotions have been manipulated by a writer

trying to control how you read them. You want the transcendent thing. You want transcendence from it. That is the goal.

DT: I don't know whether it's a quote I've read or something somebody's said on the podcast, because my memory doesn't work that way, but basically 'there's a difference between leading people and pushing them'. I'd like to write more short stories, that's probably going to be my focus more for the next couple of years. A lot of people would think I write more experimentally and whilst I do mainly reject formal narrative, I would agree with you that if it fits with the meaning I'm hoping to drive through – drive, I just said I wasn't going to drive, I was leading, not pushing – but share with the reader.

If that comes across best with quite a standardised narrative, I would be happy to use that. The one thing I hate about a lot of artistic movements that really disheartens me is when they have a manifesto because it seems to be one long list of things they are rejecting. Similarly, with a lot of artistic movements, it's a deliberate act to reject everything that's come before, to invent something new, as though there could be a new way of feeling for a human being.

VO: Exactly. It's all really the same thing. I think if you write or make any kind of art, you do think about this. The drive towards experimentation, whatever that may mean today or what it has meant, the avant-garde, modernism, is really the drive towards meaning. I don't deliberately write the way I do. It wasn't a conscious choice. It was more of an evolution of style because you want to get there. You want to touch reality and by reality, I mean the reality you feel exists that you can't see.

There's no sense it can give you access to it, but you glimpse it and then you're trying to convey it and your style evolves as the most effective way of doing that, so if I add gaps to the work or write in a very… I think the reason I started, I've always written quite surreal work and the reason for that was it felt more real, it gave me more access to what felt real, to write things which were a bit unusual and I think that should be your only driver.

I think a manifesto is nice, I guess it keeps people together. It keeps people out, it keeps some people in. That's really the only aim and I think whatever umbrella that comes under is fine. Definitely, realism or very traditional writing, I don't think is as effective anymore. Having said that, I think of writers I really like, Denis Johnson, say, who you would probably say writes realism, writes in such a way that makes it fresh and that's really what you want, freshness. There's a quote attributed to Francis Bacon – the painter, he said the purpose of art is 'to deepen the mystery'.

I think that's a good way of putting it. You want to create a vacuum where somebody is drawn in to it. When you're talking about leading and driving, that's the way I see it, which is why I don't like the question 'what's it about?' because as soon as you've given someone a meaning, that's what they take away. You really want them to be dumbfounded. In that respect, you create a space for them to really go into the mystery of it.

DT: That's a really nice idea to finish on, giving a reader space to exist in your work and allowing them to do whatever they want, as long as they feel they have the confidence to do it. How we make poetry and a lot of other forms of prose more accessible and more

welcoming is a completely different conversation. At least writers are already making the effort to do that with their writing. Unfortunately, I've run out of time, but we will take a third and final reading.

VO: This is a story, At The Heart Of Things, I'm reading an excerpt from it. This story won the White Review Short Story Prize this year, 2019.

At The Heart Of Things

there is no meaning. Hanging the picture on the wall I give a
little too much force to my thumb skin breaks under pressure an orb of
blood red red
to dark red to dry red to skin to iron to rust to heat to
sweat to yesterdays as we move, we move. Tuesday. Going into the city
with the rest of
them sliding down the greased pole of means become ends. Let me tell
you. I
slipped and travelled against the sharp grain of escalator. One flight of
metal
before I hit flat floor and crack, to the back of my head. I cried like a child
oh
I oh I said me am in pain.
I was at work by the afternoon. At home by early evening feeling the burning
scratches on the backs of my legs and the bruised curve of my head. My
mind
curved bruised.
In bed, the sheets scraped and tugged me sore any way I tried to lie. I
face
down, looking for a cool place, stretched out an arm and all that was solid
dematerialised. I a nothing slipped into water. Water as pressure. I felt
the
water as pressure. I'd always thought of pressure as a pushing down
oh it
was every drop of water for miles working into me. There was nothing to
my
fingers, no weight, no force on the pads of my feet, no cold draft wafting
past
the hairs of my skin, no sound, no sight. I couldn't set my watch to nothing.
I waited. I couldn't scream, unaware of mouth or lungs to do so not
breathing, not dead, not alive. No fear. Not yet. Eyes wide open into dark,
and no sense. Unsayable.

DT: Thank you very much, Vanessa. If anyone listening wants to read the full short story, which is fantastic, I will link in the episode description to the White Review website and you

can read it there. It's been so great to hear you read today, because I can really get a sense of the rhythm in each of the pieces, as you mentioned earlier. Thank you so much for coming on, I really loved chatting.

VO: Thanks for having me, it's been really nice.

Outro:

DT: Hello. You stuck around. Grab yourself some vegan Percy Pigs as a treat. As I said in the conversation , I'll link to Vanessa's prize-winning short story at The White Review and also to her Twitter page and anything else that I think might be of interest.

The exciting funding news I mentioned at the beginning is that Arts Council England have agreed to fund a project which will see the remainder of the series transcribed and for me to complete the archiving of the series at the British Library. This means that when I finally do hang up my podcasting headphones and millions of microphones, the entire series and the accompanying transcripts will remain available on the British Library website and hopefully never disappear like so many other audio projects. Just think how many poets' voices are lost in the mini-disc graveyards of the 1990s. The project will run from February to July so it's all pretty imminent.

For updates about this series and our, *a poem a week* series head over to lunarpoetrypodcasts.com, 'Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook and @Silent_Tongue on Twitter.

And to finish, my friend Mishi Morath. When I first started attending poetry open mic events back in 2014 I naively assumed I wouldn't hear any voices like mine or those that I grew up around. Not only did Mishi sound familiar, he was one of those people. He was fair bit older than me but was from the same part of London as my family. While his first love was non-league football club Dulwich Hamlet he always talked passionately about poetry and the positive effect that writing and public speaking in the form of poetry readings had on his life. Even if, in his words, poetry did attract too many wankers – though Mishi truly felt there were too many wankers everywhere.

The National Poetry Library on the South Bank in London and the open mic night Poetry Unplugged were almost as important to him as the Dulwich Hamlet terraces at Champion Hill and for anyone that knows how important that club is to him knows that is the highest possible praise. Making this podcast has brought with it a constant stream of nagging doubts, most notably 'what the fuck am I doing?', though preserving the voice of a friend seems motivation enough.

I always knew that eventually a guest of the series would no longer be with us and the episode may be one of the few records left of their voice I just hadn't anticipated it might be someone who I'd miss so much. I sat down with Mishi back in June 2015, for episode 41, in the clubhouse at Champion Hill and we'll finish with a couple of poems that followed on from us

discussing just what poetry had given Mishi. They're also a pretty good insight into how Mishi viewed his own mortality.

I'll apologise in advance for the sound quality, I didn't know what the fuck I was doing back then. Until episode 124, sometime in the spring, here's Mishi 'Dulwich Hamlet 'Morath.

MM: […]to give that speech or whatever if I hadn't got the experience of reading at poetry nights. So it's not just about poetry, it's about improving your life, making you more confident.

DT: And finding a way to communicate.

MM: Sort of. People say I do that anyway, but what I portray publicly is maybe not what I feel inside. That's another thing about poetry, not only do I enjoy doing it, it's also very therapeutic and if it clears my head a bit, for whatever reason, I'm not going to give specific incidents, in a way it doesn't matter, cos there are so many different ones, but if I'm feeling down and I write poetry, I feel better.

DT: On that note, is it one more to finish?

MM: I've got two small ones. Is that all right or am I taking too much time? I'm going to finish with two lovely morbid ones. This one I wrote after there was a phone-in on LBC about support for some bishops on assisted dying. This is called;

<u>When The Time Is Right</u>

As time creaks on
I start to fear
What will happen
When the end is near.
There's nothing wrong with me yet
No need to panic
I'm not going crazy
From my normal to manic.
But when I die I want it to be quick
Scared of suffering
Terminally sick.
If ever that happens
I don't want to linger
Time to go
With the flick of a finger.
Is it too much to ask
To turn off a switch
A painless death
Without a hitch.
I don't want to suffer
Right to the end

Give me the option
Of a man's best friend.
One last farewell
A time to say goodbye
Small prick of a needle
A bit of a cry.
At the moment you can only do this
If you're comfortable or rich
Flying off to Switzerland
When pain's too much of a bitch.
Poor people like me
Have only the nearest bridge
If we want to die with dignity
To sleep in a mortuary fridge.
You preach "god's" will
Saying your prayer
Watching me dosed up with morphine
As if you care.
Pumping my body
With a multitude of drugs
Prolonging my suffering
From white coated thugs.
You warn me of Harold Shipmans
Stalking the ward
Well just let me take my chances
And die of my own accord.

MM: This last one is quite topical, it's about when Charles Kennedy died a few weeks ago. It's called Another One Bites The Dust and it's about people's reactions to death and how people were so nice to him.

<u>Another One Bites The Dust</u>

I hope when I drop dead
You're honest about who I am
I'll be the one who's brown bread
So won't be able to give a damn.
If you're one who never liked me
Don't pretend that you did
Just say it like it really was
When they nail down my coffin lid.
I don't want a ton of plaudits
Like for that Charles Kennedy chap

If you must say it how it was
None of that pretend you liked me crap.
Because if you're someone who I don't like
I'm not going to pretend to cry In truth
I will be smiling
When it's your turn to die.
It's not that I didn't like him
But bottom line was he's one of them
And even though he's seems a decent bloke
At heart he was still a Lib-Dem.
Yes, he died far too young
And had a drink problem like me
But it's not as if I'm celebrating
More indifferent than full of glee.
He was a politician from the telly
I didn't share his views
In fact the only thing I'm sorry about
Was that it was him & not Simon Hughes.

End of transcript.