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Episode 21 – Bethany W Pope (April 2015)
Transcribed by Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner – **DT**
Guest: Bethany W Pope – **BP**

Conversation:

DT: Hello, my name is David Turner, this is another episode of Lunar Poetry Shorts. Today, I am joined by Bethany Pope. Hello, Bethany.

BP: Hello.

DT: We're outside Old Paradise Yard, which is where Silence Found A Tongue, our open-mic night, takes place and it's about to start. We're near Waterloo Station, you might hear some trains and traffic, but we are in Central London. You might even hear some birds, hopefully, and some squirrels, maybe.

BP: Squirrels cluck, kind of like chickens.

DT: This is a reference back to another podcast, I've been plagued by chickens in these podcasts, they'd better not start clucking. Maybe we'll have a poem to drown out the 'clucking' squirrels.

BP: Machete

[Unfortunately we are unable to reproduce this reading.]

DT: Thank you, Bethany. How are you?

BP: I'm very well, how are you doing?

DT: I'm all right. Thank you for joining us. This is one of the nicest environments I've done a podcast in, actually in the fresh air.

BP: There's cherry blossom right over your left shoulder.

DT: Brilliant. First question. Why poetry?

BP: Why do you breathe? I have to. I've been writing since I was about 12. When I was living in an orphanage, I started writing. Actually, probably before then. My mother has a poetry – quote, unquote – collection that I wrote when I was about seven. They are all about Jesus on the cross. I was a special child. I think for some people, it's what you have to do. Some people have to run. Some people feel the pleasure of the universe when they run. I feel the pleasure of the universe when I write.

DT: It's a compulsion?

BP: Yeah. Oh yeah.

DT: It's quite a common thing with a lot of writers, that it feels like a compulsion and it's not always a positive experience.

BP: It comes out of you.

DT: I've had this suggestion before, 'oh you must be really happy, doing something you enjoy all the time.' It's not always the case, is it?

BP: Yes! I guess it's a little like childbirth, which I've never experienced. I'd be very surprised, but it's like something you have to push out of you and it hurts sometimes to get it out, but when it's there, you feel 'oh, yay, it's a baby!'

DT: And now it's going to haunt me.

BP: Forever! I'll never be free of it.

DT: How often do you read your poetry in public?

BP: About twice a month, I'd say. I started out doing open mics and now usually, I do guest readings.

DT: You're not from London, are you?

BP: No, I live in Swindon. My husband and I think of it as 'Pigtown'. That sounds bad, but it's because of the pig iron they used to make the railway. So it's 'Pigtown'.

DT: Do you get much opportunity to read in Swindon or do you have to travel?

BP: There's a lively poetry scene in Swindon, but I prefer to travel.

DT: Which nights would you recommend?

BP: On the first Thursday of the month, there's open mic and guest poetry readings with the local community. I can't remember where it's held right now.

DT: People can Google that. You don't need details anymore.

BP: The best open-mic scene I've found is in Wales. I go to 'Cardiff First Thursday' at the Cardiff Arts Centre, which is also on the first Thursday of the month, which is why I'm not very familiar with the Swindon one. It's very enjoyable.

DT: I haven't been to Wales yet. It's my intention to travel as much as possible for Lunar magazine and write reviews of events. Maybe Cardiff should be my next. I normally ask at this point if my guests have had anything published. You have a book in front of you, you may as well talk about that book.

BP: This is my latest. This is my fourth collection, Undisturbed Circles, published by Lapwing and it's a collection of double-acrostic sonnet crowns and cycles. I'm obsessive and crazy and a little bit weird and I like form. I like form so much that I make it harder on myself. You read the acrostic down the left-hand margin and then down the right-hand margin and it forms a circle. I was interested in that shape because sonnet cycles are circular naturally, but in a lot of cultures, the circle is considered a perfect, sacred form and so that appealed to me, especially since a lot of my subject has to do with myth.

DT: We'll come on to talking about that, but maybe we should have another poem.

BP: OK, I think I'll read the one from Undisturbed Circles since we're talking about it. This is called Three-Legged Crow and the Three-Legged Crow is a god in a lot of East Asian cultures.

[Unfortunately we are unable to reproduce this reading.]

DT: Thank you very much. 'Pain-drinking monkey without thumbs', I love that, that was great.

BP: That's actually how naturalists refer to crows, they call them 'apes without thumbs'. They're actually the only species other than us that understands displacement.

DT: Crows freak me right out.

BP: I love them.

DT: They're really nice, but I think too much watching 1940s' black and white films because I suppose they were one of the only animals that was picked out properly on black and white film.

BP: Alfred Hitchcock actually chained them to his actress to terrify her. That wasn't the crows' fault, that was Alfred Hitchcock.

DT: Just an aside, do you think writing about myths or mythical imagery, do you think it goes hand-in-hand with writing in classical form?

BP: I think so. The original idea of form was to convey stories, convey culture touchstones in a memorable way, so I think the form fits that nicely, because the whole evolution of form came from people having to memorise their poems and not being able to have the luxury of paper or a Kindle. One day, we might all wind up back at that.

DT: That's a point. You do stand out, especially on the spoken-word circuit, there aren't that many people that focus heavily on writing in form. Do you feel… I was going to say lonely, I don't mean lonely, you're amongst friends, obviously. Are you aware how unusual it is to be writing in that style at the moment?

BP: I wasn't until recently. This is not my first excursion into form. My previous book, Crown of Thorns, has an emperor's crown, which is the 45-sonnet sonnet crown and they are all acrostics, not double acrostics. I think I'm so interested in form because there's an almost transcendent freedom in limiting yourself so extremely. It's almost a, I don't know, I don't want to say religious, but it's like yoga.

The discipline of it leads to some sort of an odd, paradoxical freedom that I think you miss out on if you focus solely on free verse. I'm not saying anything against free verse at all. I enjoy it.

DT: No, it's tricky sometimes to have this conversation without it sounding like you hate one or the other because it's just ridiculous.

BP: You need all of it. It's the same with people who read only one genre of literature. How can you live with only one flavour in your mouth? You need everything.

DT: How do you go about critiquing your work? Do you have people you can share with? Not only do you write in form, you write in quite extreme form, it's quite intense. Do you find it easy to share that work in the development stages?

BP: I don't workshop. I used to. I kind of have a thing, not against all workshops, as I think a little bit of workshopping is good for everybody, especially when you're learning how to do it, but I think too much of it and everybody's poems start to sound the same. It's inevitable. I don't workshop. There are one or two people I share my poems with while I'm writing them. My husband is trained as an editor and he is merciless, absolutely merciless. It's really wonderful, so he's the primary one and there are a couple of others.

DT: How would you like to see your writing progress? Do you have anything in mind?

BP: I don't. I want to see it get better. That's primarily the goal for everybody, I think, who writes. You're always dissatisfied. You're satisfied for about 30 seconds after you've done something new, then you're on to the next thing and you try to make it better, you try to top yourself. I don't know, lately I've been playing around with acrostics sestina, acrostic sestina cycles. I just recently won a prize for one of my acrostic sestinas, the Bristol Poetry Prize.

DT: Maybe we should have another poem.

BP: Yeah, OK. This poem came out today on the Open Mouse.
No Exit

[Unfortunately we are unable to reproduce this reading.]

DT: Thank you very much. Just a quick one, what is Open Mouse?

BP: It's a website, a poetry website, openmouse.com. It's a poetry journal online. I've had something published on the Open Mouse today, a couple of poems.

DT: What have been your main influences over your development as a writer and performer?

BP: I think my main influence, actually the first poems – that's really neat, like a steel-drum set…

DT: There's some music behind us which is distracting for both of us. The danger of being outside…

BP: I think my primary influence early, my father used to read me the Odyssey when I was very little, too young, two or three years old, so that's where the love of classical literature

comes in. Dylan Thomas was also very early, I'd say 11 or 12. Then of course, I fell in love with TS Eliot, as everybody does at university, and Yeats.

And Seamus Heaney, oh my gosh. Seamus Heaney could write form. He wrote sestinas that you didn't know were sestinas. You had to really look for it, it was so natural. David Morley, George Szirtes.

DT: Are there any things you would recommend to our listeners to check out?

BP: Right now, actually, I'm really interested in an author called Pascale Petit. She has a wonderful book out, she's astonishing.

DT: I really love her new book.

BP: It's so good, especially the one about eating the…
DT: What's it called?

BP: I can't remember the name of it. The birds you eat. It just went out of my brain. I remembered it until you said you couldn't remember it.

DT: I was looking at people across the garden to answer the question, but check it out.

BP: Yes, check it out. Also, Bobby Parker, he's up and coming, he's very, very good. And Helen Ivory's last book, Waiting for Bluebeard, is fantastic, just astonishingly raw and good and also, like a fairy tale gone horribly, horribly wrong.

DT: Just before we wrap up, do you have any blogs?

BP: Yes I do. My website is www.bethanywpope.com and I also edit with Mab Jones, Black Sheep Journal. If you Google Black Sheep Journal poetry, you'll hit it.

DT: We'll have the links underneath the video to the title of your book and all the collections.

BP: There's one more book recommendation, a novel, it's Carly Holmes' The Scrapbook and it's absolutely fantastic, it's about witches.

DT: Thank you, Bethany. That was Lunar Poetry Shorts.

End of transcript.