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[Episode 45: Emily Harrison](#) – (November 2015)

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Emily Harrison – **EH**

Live audience – **A**

Transcript edited by David Turner – 18/04/2017

Conversation:

DT: Hello. My name is David Turner and this is another episode of Lunar Poetry Shorts. [**A:** Cheer.] And as usual we are at I'klectik Arts Lab in Waterloo in south London.

EH: Yeah.

DT: You have to go through a tunnel to get here. Today I'm joined by Emily Harrison. Hi Emily.

EH: Hi. Hello everyone else.

A: Hello!

DT: Hard work aren't they?

EH: Yeah, I really wanted like, a whole... Has someone got trumpet? I wanted something going on.

A: [TRUMPET NOISES]

DT: Anyway, we are going to start with a poem.

EH: Hello everyone. I'm very aware of this [the microphone] but also of this [the audience]. What's more important guys? The thing that will stay forever on YouTube, that I will listen back to and cry about, as we all know, we've all got egos. Or what you guys, real flesh people think of me?

I am going to start off with a poem. What have I decided? So, I went to the doctors the other day and got to fill out one of those forms and for the first time I felt comfortable doing this. It asked me for my religion. Now I was brought up in a Christian Methodist family and I went to Sunday School every Sunday until I was sixteen. That was when I was allowed to not go anymore, so I didn't.

And this first time, which was probably a few weeks ago, I felt like I could finally say that I was an... That dirty word that my mum wanted to wash my mouth out with soap [for saying], I could say I was an atheist. [**A:** Woo!] I love that, a 'woop' for the atheists. We never get 'woops' we get told that we're cynical.

So, I was writing this and I wrote it in capitals to make it really obvious and over the top and then just as I was handing it over to the receptionist, I realised I'd spelt the word atheist wrong. I was like, "You win this time God". A little joke there for YouTube, I've been planning that all day. Though, this isn't a time for jokes, this a time for poetry. This is called;

I look on all the world as my parish

I didn't understand
why we were colouring in
John the Baptist again
with the same
sharpened-down colouring pencils
that no longer fit the tray they live in.

They replace last year's picture
with this year's picture.
We've just stayed within the lines this time.

Sunday school took place
in the hall beneath the church.
Off-limits stage and ballet bars without the mirrors.
Self-reflection was never encouraged

and neither was sneaking around the garden.
No one was buried in this one.
I remember it was there
that I first saw a millipede.

They taught us Satan invented the question mark
and when told Jesus died for my sins
I honestly thought he shouldn't have bothered.

Shrove Tuesday 1999,
me and Jonathan make pancakes.
Flipping from one side to the other,
he asked as inoffensively as palm crosses,
'You don't actually believe all this, do you?'

I thought when the moment came
it would bite like lemon
but this juice came from a plastic bottle.
I shrugged and asked him to pass the sugar.

Still, to this day,
that was the sweetest pancake I have ever tasted.
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A: [APPLAUSE & CHEERING]

DT: Thank you very much. I prefer savoury pancakes.

EH: That's because you're not a heathen like me.

DT: First question. Why poetry?

EH: Why poetry. So, I knew this question was coming because you ask everyone that.
And I did think like, "Oh, let's think of a wanky way to answer that."

DT: Sorry, this is a highly original format!

EH: Oh yes. Highly original! Sorry for anyone giving the game away. I've listen to your other stuff. Why poetry? So, I really like the idea, again this sounds like I have written this, but I love the idea that poetry kind of refuses to be lukewarm. It's either like really intense all of the time whether it's really funny, really hard hitting or whether it's something that you really... You know, you're going through a shit time and you think, "Right I'm going to pour my heart out on the page."

And that's something in my life that, kind of, parallels the things that I've been through, the kind of the ups and downs. And I think that is something that, everyone says this, but I do like the idea that you have to choose specific words and you have to be a bit picky. I think that's why it drew me to it I think.

DT: So you're a passionate pedant?

EH: Yeah.

DT: There's a room full of them in front of us here.

EH: You can taste it, that's what I think, when you've got a room full of people who also write poetry.

DT: A room full of passionate pedants. So, what have been the main influences over your development as a writer and performer? Also, are they different?

EH: Yeah, I think they are. I think, obviously, you write before you perform because otherwise you'd stand up there with nothing to say so, I did start out by writing. My mum used to read a lot of Edgar Allan Poe to me when I was really, too young. I was probably about six or seven and she'd read his short stories and they're really dark. So, I started writing quite young under the age of ten, the kind of teen angst stuff that should have come later.

Which means I got out my system quickly which meant that, you know, I could start writing slightly less self-involved stuff... 'Jokes', everything I write is self-involved, why did I say that? Slightly less self-involved, if that's possible. So, I started writing from a really young age and I'd have all these little notebooks and things and my mum found me one recently from when I was like 10 and they are just dark and quite terrifying.

So, I said to her, "Does this not point to something, mum? Should you have maybe talked to me about these?" But she loved the idea that I was kind of being creative and she used to write me poetry and things and it was, kind of, a little thing we did together. So, I owe a lot to my lovely mum.

Performing was a completely different thing, the first time I performed I burst into tears. I read something about my dad and just cried and I was about fifteen. It was the day before my sixteenth birthday, I remember it, and I was in this weird barn in Swindon place called

Lowershore Farm and this woman took me out onto these hay bales and sat me down and like did some hypnotherapy with me. It's all a bit odd.

So, that really stuck in my mind I thought, "I'm never doing this again, I'm clearly horrendous!" But I always wanted to be the muse. I had this idea... My mum's got lots of pre-Raphaelite paintings and I've got red hair and I always felt like I could be the muse but no one was writing about me and I was like, "Well, stuff that, I write about myself.

So, I started writing about myself and then found a platform, finally got a bit of confidence in life. As you do, at some point as a young woman you, stop hating yourself. Hopefully guys. Though, let's not reflect on that now maybe. Performing was really fun.

Salena Godden is a big influence of mine, to see a strong-willed woman kind of stand up there and not give a fucking shit. She doesn't care, she just reads what she wants to read. She's sexy and she's sassy and she's not apologetic for it and I think that as soon as I saw her read, one of the first times, I thought, "I want to be her". So hopefully I'm not ripping her off.

DT: I want to be Salena.

EH: I want to be Salena! I hope I'm not ripping her off too much but that's a big shout out guys. If you haven't seen her perform then please go and find her, she's life changing.

DT: She's got some great stuff on Youtube, actually.

EH: Absolutely.

DT: We'll have a second poem I think and then we'll go onto some other stuff.

EH: Great. So, talking about influences and things, I write a lot about mental health. I've been in and out of hospital my whole life, I got diagnosed with bipolar when I was eighteen. I feel like I've got to be quite honest, I've had occupational health on my back recently and I, kind of, have to keep saying things like, "This is my label. This is when this label happened". I talk about it a lot and I write about it a lot.

I did a gig recently for the lovely Mr. Tim Wells and I got offstage, I'd read a really serious poem about about being in hospital which was difficult to write let alone read. I got off [stage] and I went to have a bevy because this is scary and you need a drink after. And a man stood next to me and he looked me up and down and said, "That's a very tight dress you're wearing". And I said, "Fuck you!" and I said, "How dare you?"

Someone else was on stage and at the time I didn't care and I'm really sorry to whoever that was, I need to find them and apologise, oh my God. And basically he got off lightly because I went and wrote a whole bloody poem about it. I always think that... Like, the dickheads in your life get away with it, whereas you turn around and you're like, "Right, I'm going to sit down and slave over something".

So, this is for anyone who thinks that they can fix another person who's got mental health problems, for the wrong reasons. I do think people can be there for support and that's really lovely but the kind of people who love the idea of having a crazy girlfriend, can go fuck themselves. So, sorry for the swearing, I know I'm a potty mouth. Though I should take advice from Salena, "I don't give a shit!"

DT: No no. As you were.

EH: Thank you. Are you slightly terrified of me now? I feel like I was being slightly aggressive. I apologise. This is called;

When Your Girlfriend Tells You She's Bi (but you soon found out she meant polar)

To the man who never heard a word of poetry
could only comment on the dress
and to the rest...

I am not your Manic Pixie Dream Girl
I am not Zooey Deschanel eating an ice-cream sundae with her fingers
offering you the cherry
and giggling about how she's always secretly had a fantasy involving
Chewbacca.

I am not going to ring you from the edge of anything.
I am not going to adorably teeter along a rooftop like a temperamental
toddler
with my arms out, yelling "I'm flying!"

I'm not going to let you attempt to braid my hair
I do not fake that thousand yard stare in photographs
to make me appear more interesting
and no. Do not try to fix me.

I'm not going to burst into your boring office job
demand you jump on my plane to wherever
with blatant irresponsible disregard for actual responsibility
because "life is too short".
It's actually really, really long.

Too long to quote Hemmingway under heavy breath.
Too long to be the muse for your half-arsed attempt at a graphic novel.
The red-headed female superhero
fighting MISOGYNY, THE PATRIARCHY
with her cleavage mysteriously enhanced.

I am not the unsuspecting babysitter with Bambi blow-job eyes

I am not whatever you want me to be
No "yes sirs, no sirs, three bags full sirs".

I am not the justification for your pig-headed ignorance about mental health
I am not "if only she'd been better"
I am not The One Who Got Away
I am not "I dated a girl with bipolar once, it's okay."

I am not measured in how many songs remind you of me,
A&E trips
or your lack of sleep.
I am worth the trouble to keep.

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A: [APPLAUSE]

DT: Since you brought it up.

EH: Since I brought up the big 'bipo'. "You mentioned it. Not me."

DT: I wasn't even going to talk about it. I thought about asking... I suppose people's perceptions of the, 'artist with mental health problem', especially bipolar... [They] might have this idea of someone running around with bags of energy just smashing poems out, left right and centre, drawing and making sculptures. And somehow falling back on the memories of these dark holes that they've been in and utilising these emotions, to come up with these great works of art. How does that reflect your practice? Is it true?

EH: I think that there is something quite similar and I think that a lot of people can relate to, with the creative process where you, kind of. You hate yourself for ages and you can't write a single thing and then all of a sudden you get this huge burst of creative energy and you write loads of stuff down. You think this the best thing in the world you think you might be God and Jesus is speaking through you. "Like this is the best thing and it's literally going to change the face of poetry!"

DT: [INAUDIBLE]

EH: Everyone is always saying that. Everyone thinks, "I'm the next T.S Eliot. Life is great!" And then you put it away for a bit and you get the crash and then you look back and you think, "I'm a fucking idiot! Why did I think that was any good? What am I doing with my life? I hate myself, I hate my work. I'm never writing again!" And then the cycle starts again, you don't write for ages then all of a sudden you get that...

And it's exactly the same, you know, with having bipolar. That's how you feel about everyday life, you're like, "I hate myself I don't know how to do anything... Oh now I'm great! I'm Jesus. I'm God. I'm fantastic... Oh no, wait. Everything is shit again." And I think that that cycle is genuinely something that people who write and people who, not even just

write, but people who do creative things and have that outlet really do understand. And a lot of the time, if I explain it in that way to people they go, "Yes, absolutely".

I've never claimed to feel anything that other people don't feel. You know, those days where you just get up on the wrong side of the bed and you just think, "Oh, everything is shit today. I missed the train and it just started raining and it's the one day I've forgotten my umbrella", it happens to everyone. It's just, you know, certain things trigger and certain things go on but I think writing poetry...

Is just a way of... Of course, it's therapy. Of course, it is and even performing is a form of therapy, like, I'm more honest to you than I am with my fucking therapist and it's via poetry. I think if they were to read my poems, they'd know far more about me than what I probably tell them in an hour, in a tiny room where you know it's all very clinical and kind of set up.

So, I think that for people who suffer with mental health problems or anything, you know, the majority of them will write and it's the 'chicken and egg' question, you know, which one came first. But there is solace there, I really do believe that.

DT: Do you think that artists... Actually, we'll talk about writers specifically for now. Do you think that for writers with mental health problems, there's a danger that they might become addicted to that cycle of crashing [followed by mania]? Do you think that people can become reliant on those moments for inspiration?

EH: Absolutely, and you know there's a whole debate about whether people with mental health problems are more creative. I know friends and I know people who will stop taking their medication because they feel like it's stopped them from being creative. They believe that their creativity is part of their disorder, or something that they go through, that they suffer through in order to get this amazing piece of work.

Personally, I think that can be dangerous but I can totally relate to that. There are times where I've been, you know, drugged up on meds and I think, "I've not written a thing for months. It must be because these pills I'm putting in me aren't making me creative anymore". And I think it's about finding, like you said, a balance. It can be quite addictive.

DT: There's a danger, isn't there that writers become convinced that their creativity is coming from their mental health condition. When, in actual fact, it's only ever going to prove to stifle it. It's only going to ruin your life eventually.

EH: Absolutely, and you know the worst times are when you can't even turn from one side of the bed to the other. Let alone pick up a pen or organise your thoughts. But I do think that people can write in any state of mind and I think that there are things that people will find comfort in when they pick up a pen and are, kind of, getting it out and being able to see it. Whether it's funny...

I was explaining this earlier like, I am more than happy to joke about my own mental health problems but I would never mock anyone else's. People have every right to talk about how they feel in their own way and, you know, my defence mechanism has always been humour

so it's going to come out a little bit like that. But I do find that, you know, picking up a pen and having a write can be extremely therapeutic and I think that more people should do it really.

DT: So we've done mental health! Solved that.

EH: We can draw a line under that!

A: [LAUGHTER]

DT: We said earlier, didn't we, that 'USP' has been 'mental health' so it's nice to not talk about it, sometimes. [INAUDIBLE]. Let's have a poem next.

EH: Sure. Lovely lovely. So, I had a little chat outside with some people about trigger warnings when it comes to poetry events. I still don't know where I stand on the whole trigger warning thing. I don't even know if we came to a conclusion, did we? I kind of said that I would maybe mention that this was a poem that might need a trigger warning. I don't know whether I'm comfortable saying anything more... I think I'll leave it at that and I'm going to love you and leave you with a poem. Thank you for listening guys, and for my chat that's always lovely too. Like I say, cheaper than therapy... 'Jokes', I get it on the NHS.

A: [LAUGHTER]

EH: But no, genuinely, if I didn't have an audience, I'd just be talking to myself more often than I already am. So, thank you. This is called;

The girl with the jade earrings

Your Edvard Munch rip-offs,
seven feet tall,
loomed like bad decisions.
Fairground mirrors
laughed at both of us.

You were living on a blow-up mattress.

Stacks of Prozac
in the corner of the room
where the books should have been,
stolen to be sold as
plastic surgery for the soul.

I regretted boasting to your friends
that I might be on the telly.

I flinched like a brush stroke
until you'd had enough of waiting.

Your eyes pinned me down and said,
'Let's give *The Scream* a reason
to pull a face like that.'

The bed deflated,
became a see-saw
where we'd never find common ground.
You pulled everything down to my ankles,
dragged me along the carpet.

An elbow to the face
I still want to believe was an accident.

I focused all of my energy
on finding a pair of jade earrings
I'd taken off for safekeeping,
a gift from Kaya.
I wasn't leaving her here again.

And when you chased me out into the street
complaining you didn't have my number,
it was raining.
Of course it was raining.
It needed to.
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EH: Thank you.

A: [APPLAUSE]

DT: Thank you, Emily Harrison. There will be links underneath this thing when it's on the internet so you can see more of her work and check out her stuff. Thank you, I'klectik. Cheers, bye.

End of transcript.