



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

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

The rights to any and all poems printed in this transcript are retained by the author, **do not** reprint or copy without the permission of the author. – David Turner, Lunar Poetry Podcasts.

©2017 Lunar Poetry Podcasts

[Episode 36: James McKay](#) – (June 2015)

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: James McKay – **JM**

Transcript edited by David Turner – 21/04/2017

Conversation:

DT: Hello, my name is David Turner and this is another episode of Lunar Poetry Shorts. We are at I'Klectik ArtLab in front of this lot Silence Found a Tongue. Hello.

A: [CHEERS AND APPLAUSE]

DT: They wanted to 'whoop' but I told them not to. Today I'm joined by James McKay. Hello James.

JM: Hello David.

DT: We're going to begin with a couple of poems.

JM: in the beginning

in the beginning was the word and the word was probably obscene but no-one was quite awake enough to properly hear it and I guess that makes it all right

slightly after the beginning we had coffee and a smoke and we wondered what to do and it was cold so we burned the property ladder for firewood because we realised that ladders are just prison bars turned sideways but mostly because it was cold and fires are pretty

sometime approaching the middle we heard rumours of a long and slippery slope somewhere and rushed to fetch our sledges

after that we sat a while in frozen mermaid tea-rooms looking over Echo Beach the sea came in to melt the snow but things became no warmer

it was drifting to a close when we reached the end of the rainbow we had a few beers and our smiles and our bellies shone all the brighter for them

later on we visited the tambourine man he sang us songs we weren't sleepy and the only place we had to go was back to whence we came

heading home we took the long way round to hunt bear in the park but there were none just a tribe of unfriendly Eskimo monopolising the swings in the moonlight

near the end we laid us down in psychedelic blankets and made love to the shipping forecast in poor visibility I watched your Atlantic swell and shift in an area of unseasonable high pressure

and at the very end we saw that it all had been excellent and we slept until it all began again

©James McKay, *Quiet Circus*, Vintage Poison Press, 2011

A: [APPLAUSE]

JM: And now another one about getting a job for. You have to have lots of jobs, being a poet and this is about, probably the worst one I ever had. This is about when I was God, just temporarily on a casual basis;

EXPERIENCE NOT ESSENTIAL

the ad read short and sweet
omnipotent creator type wanted for fucked up world
and to be honest i needed the money
you know how it is
what with the price of everything

the hours seemed daunting
but they explained at the agency that
freedom from the constraints of space and time
was a standard clause in the contract
the job's sole flaw in their eyes
was the relative lack of openings
for further advancement
i said i have no ambition
i just want to pay the rent
& they said that was just the kind of answer they were after

though looking back on it
they must have been desperate
the job having been so long unfilled
after the shock resignation
of the previous employee

so i signed and went home dreaming
extra bonus weekends in the middle of the week
atomic bombs that do no harm
and have a graceful fall-out of pink butterflies
go back and stop the Inquisition
before a single heretic gets even slightly singed
i toyed with plans for a garden filled
with every kind of dancing flower
and foliage to sing a peaceful shade of music
in one long Mediterranean evening
for you and i my love to sit together through eternity
though it doesn't take an all-knowing deity to figure out
that still you wouldn't want to sleep with me

i don't remember much about the job
too much having-to-be-everywhere-in-the-universe-at-once
and people dying painfully all the time
and not even being allowed to wax wrathful on the bad ones

it being out of line with the culture of mercy initiative
they've been trying to introduce

if you ask me
the whole organisation is a fucking shambles
that whole freedom from space and time thing
turns out to be a ruse designed to circumvent
official controls on the length of the working week

i left the only way i could
by wiping every bit of consciousness
that wasn't just plain simple
armchair beatnik something poet
lover of rain on urban pavements
and the company of fellow
21st century-type degenerates
one last thing before i walked
i whacked up the brightness
the colour and the volume
on whatever portion of reality
i might happen to inhabit
for the amusement of my friends
and the irritation of my enemies
so far it seems to be working
i feel bad sometimes
about leaving them short-handed
but no one lasts too long
they tell me
not in that line of work

©James McKay, *Quiet Circus*, Vintage Poison Press, 2011

A: [APPLAUSE]

DT: Thank you James. Hello properly.

JM: Hello properly.

DT: First question why poetry?

JM: I write poetry, I guess, because I want to know what I'm going to write next. I've stood up in a room, a little bit smaller than this, somebody's living room at a house party 15 years ago. I didn't have any... All my friends are musicians. They're all standing up and we had this, kind of, talent show thing and I couldn't play any instruments or sing any songs. About a week beforehand I sat down and wrote a ten minute poetry set, of which that 'God' one was in it, that's fifteen years old and it's just been addictive ever since. It's never

crossed my mind not to write poetry for 15 years and it's never crossed my mind not to stand up and say it to lovely people like this.

DT: In that talent contest, fifteen years ago, did they have a glittery ribbon thing hanging over the kitchen door that you had to walk through?

[LAUGHTER]

JM: Not at that one but we did it again and we did it again and then we got a regular slot in a café, and yes glittery things did happen quite a lot later on. I compared it for two years, it was called Home Cooking. It's still talked about in terms of awe in Newcastle upon Tyne, largely because we used to go on until 3:00 in the morning until everyone was unconscious. Maximo Park met at one of our gigs, actually.

DT: So, what have been the main influences on your writing and development as a writer and performer?

JM: Well, it went back to when I was a student, more than twenty years ago now, because I've got a good old fashioned classical education. I studied Latin and Greek and I spent my student days writing essays on Virgil and Horace and Pindar and all that difficult stuff. I sat up all night reading the Beats, reading Alan Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs and the women Joanne Kyger, particularly, Dianne Di Prima. So, really my writing is in the space between the two of them. So, it's half counting feet doing incredibly intense analysis of hexameter and verse and all that kind of boring stuff. And the other half sitting up in smoky rooms listening to jazz and generally rebelling.

DT: I would argue that's equally as hard. [LAUGHTER] I don't like Maximo Park or Jazz. [INAUDIBLE] We're going to go get on to talk about the Edinburgh [Fringe Festival] show which you're taking up to, Edinburgh of all places. [LAUGHTER] And it's called, The Boy With The Moomin Tattoo. Have I got that right?

JM: Yes, it is called The Boy With The Moomin Tattoo.

DT: And all of your poems today are taken from that show.

JM: Yes they are.

DT: We'll talk about that in a moment but we'll take another poem first.

JM: Longish one now. Those two were pretty much the oldest poems that are still in my repertoire. This is brand new from about two months ago and it's called;

FAGGOT HEXAMETERS

This is a story about the first time someone called me a faggot.
Also, a poem that embroiders the truth a bit. How could it not?
When a memory's just a piece of the world like a floor or a teacup

picking up cracks and mysterious stains. I was eighteen years old and back in Newcastle for Christmas, having failed to get laid my whole first term at college. Still jail-bait, the age of consent being still twenty-one and the tabloids and Tory grandees howling murderous triumph over a dead generation of queer men, and warnings on local news from your local vicar: the gays are after your children. They actually used to broadcast that shit on *Look North*. Having left school, I fell into drinking with sports-playing lads who would never have looked at me mere weeks before, in the kind of Neanderthal bars I'd spent my whole drinking career keeping out of for safety.

Schooldays had stopped feeling safe around twelve or thirteen. I don't like to dwell on the grim masturbatory treadmill of male adolescence. My first memories of sexual desire? Green shoots springing rotten out of the ground, milk teeth with abscesses already in them, my god, the shame hells of sweat-steamy changing-rooms, where the wrong boy was always the pasture your famished eyes were most desperate to graze. This boy, for example, open neck shirt, suggestion of chest hair, fear of my schoolboy days and hero of many a pillaring schoolboy night, no one used your arousal to keep you afraid quite as deftly as this guy, this one at the bar, his attention distracted by some passing pussy, his word not mine. And, while we're on language, the word we all knew for putting some one in his place was 'gay'; for marking him out or starting a fight or making him cry was 'gay'; whereas 'faggot' was alien, a word from the underground movies and J D Salinger, four-colour sleaze and a world of alarm and adventure. And, to be honest, where 'gay' meant at best a high-functioning eunuch kind of existence, 'faggot' meant one day I might just get laid.

Anyway, week before Christmas, back in the home town and that guy finally sees who I am. "Get that fucking faggot away from me!" bursts on my head like a baptism. First time he's taken the slightest notice of me in public, and I'm not about to do anything that tears me away from those fearful, beautiful eyes and it's him looks down first, in a way that I now know a lover sometimes submits. The lads laugh and he leaves and I stay and the century turns: we discovered the ones that were really after your children were the respectable church-going types on the news, terrified, it now becomes clear, that the gays would get to the dear little children first. Things get better: not everywhere, not without effort, but always:

even the Newcastle Arms has gone all leather sofas and *lattes*, but that's a whole other story, and this was a poem about when I learned that it's not so much words as intentions. Still rather you call me 'faggot' than 'gay', to be frank, though I don't lose much sleep. In the world we all want there'll be no need to specify, will there? Thank you for listening.
©James McKay, *Very Friendly Weapon*, (Publisher to be confirmed.)

A: [APPLAUSE]

DT: Cheers James, I think they all liked that. So, The Boy With The Moomin Tattoo, what is all that about?

JM: Well, it's about... Look here's the Moomin tattoo... Do we have Moomin fans in the audience?

DT: James has revealed... which character is that?

JM: That's Snufkin.

DT: Snufkin on his right bicep, for those who live in the Internet.

JM: Do we have anyone in here who's never heard of Moomins before? [AN AUDIENCE MEMBER INDICATES YES] In which case, I need to explain to you... The Moomin books are the greatest works of writing of the 20th century, Tove Jansson... I'm absolutely serious. Philip Pullman is campaigning as we speak to get her a posthumous Nobel Prize for Literature. She was an illustrator, artist, writer, cartoonist [who] grew up in a very bohemian enclave. A small island in a fjord in the north of Finland, in Swedish speaking Finland.

Where she wrote this series of books, they were translated the sixties. You're going to hear about them this year, there's a movie out at the moment, all sorts of stuff. They're the best books ever, they're the first books I ever remember buying. I bought Comet in Moominland for five pence at the school jumble sale when I was seven years old and I still have that copy. I've read them and reread them, grew up with them.

Until my last summer at college... I got Snufkin, who's my hero, tattooed on my arm. All he owns in the world is his green dress and his mouth organ and he travels around. Moomins hibernate but Snufkin doesn't, Snufkin goes travelling in the winter when the Moomins hibernate and has adventures with the Hattifatteners who are small electrical creatures that grow from seed. But you're never allowed to know what he does because Moomin Mama doesn't think it's suitable. So, you never get to find out what Snufkin does, you get hints later on in the books but you never really get to find out.

So, I had this [tattoo] done and I was casting around for a show to do this year in Edinburgh and it occurred to me but it's been twenty years now since Snufkin has been on my arm.

When I had him done I had no idea that I was going to end up standing up in front of rooms of people trying to entertain them. I had no idea I'd be travelling for a living which I now do, I'm a tour guide. I spend my summers travelling around the UK and around Europe with coach groups of people and in general my life has just got more and more Moomin ever since I had it done. [LAUGHTER]

So, what I wanted to do was to pick out some of my... Like, all of my poems from the last fifteen years and pick out ones that have Moomin, kind of, themes. People who know the books will know, Tove Jansson writes a lot about the seasons, a lot about tolerating people that who you don't particularly like. A lot about nostalgia and melancholy, there's a lot of that and a lot about the North. So, a lot of the poems are about growing up in Newcastle and having family that come from Shetland and that kind of thing. So, really it's a retrospective all hinged around quotes from the Moomin books.

DT: I really love Tove Jansson.

JM: Yes absolutely. Have you ever seen her illustrations for The Hobbit?

DT: No.

JM: Okay, Tove Jansson... This is only going to mean anything to Tove Jansson fans but it will mean a lot to you. She did illustrations for a 1950s Norwegian edition of The Hobbit and I saw one copy of it once in that really expensive children's bookshop in Cecil Court, just by Leicester Square. It had the cover off and it was really stained and it was really badly damaged and he still wanted three hundred fifty quid for it which tells me it's quite rare.

DT: Yeah, she's very collectible.

JM: Very collectible. But her Hobbit is fantastic, by far the best Bilbo Baggins I've ever seen. His helmet is far too big for him and the armour is far too big and he looks a little bit, kind of, shy and awkward and he's sort of standing there looking... It's just fantastic.

DT: What form does the show take?

JM: What form do we have here now? It's a poetry show, so it's me standing up in front of an audience.

DT: Are there monologues linking the poems?

JM: Yeah. I mean, I'm going to have my Moomin books with me, we've got notable bits... I'm actually going to read out bits of Tove Jansson, which I hope isn't going to get in the way of copyright too much. The Free Fringe which I'm on in Edinburgh, actually is copyright free because we're not charging admission, we're just putting the bucket around. So, actually, you can do the Rocky Horror Show if you want on the Free Fringe and no one's going to come after you, if you should want to do that.

I think that's alright, touring it later is going to be the problem. I just hope, if I wave the books around and every time I pick one up say, "Available from Penguin Books for the price of £7.95", that'll stop them coming after me.

DT: I've no idea.

JM: Nobody seems to have any idea how much is fair use.

DT: Just don't stop, keep moving and then they can't get you. Where is the show going to be on?

JM: It's going to be on in The Lizard Lounge [at the] Electric Circus which is down by Waverley Station at 3:15 in the afternoon.

DT: How have you gone about developing the show? Have you just done individual poems at open-mic [events] or have you 'scratched' it?

JM: All of these poems are ones that I've been doing... I mean, they're fifteen years worth of Greatest Hits. So, they're all poems that I know and I've done before but I'm working with Matt Panesh, [the] Monkey Poet who seems to be directing half the spoken word shows on the Free Fringe this year and putting everybody in the right slot. So, I've had a couple of quite intensive sessions with him. Apparently, I'm to do some of them more like Laurence Olivier and some of them more like Viv Stanshall, those are my director's notes. So, come and see it and find out how I get on with that.

[LAUGHTER]

DT: Have you been up to Edinburgh before?

JM: Yes I have. This is going to be my seventh Free Fringe. But in the past, I used to work with Richard Tyrone-Jones as part of Utter Spoken Word. It was Richard that practically killed himself getting spoken word the foothold that it's got in the Fringe. So, I went up in 2009 when we were at Fingers Piano Bar on the far side of the tram and no one could get to us and no one was there. And then in 2010, just helping out with Utter and 2010 was the year that everyone was in the Banshee Labyrinth.

Apologies to non-Edinburgh people but the Banshee Labyrinth is 'poet central' pretty much. It's an amazing venue and Richard had managed to programme all spoken word in all five rooms and we had Mark [Grist] and Mixy, Dead Poets would go in at 12 and do their show. They'd then sit in the bar and all the poets as they finished their shows would be trapped by the Dead Poets on their way out and by the time Utter came on a half seven everyone was legless. By the time it got to midnight it was messy but beautiful.

DT: I think this is a shit question. Do you have any advice for people that are going up to Edinburgh for the first time? I mean, how to develop the show, not particularly what they do when they get there but in terms of tightening things up, maybe.

JM: Well, if you're going up for the first time, I don't think there's any advice that can help you.

DT: I knew you were going to say that, that's why I didn't want to ask.

JM: [LAUGHTER] Until you've done it, until you've done the three weeks and until you've had the... It's not even the rowdy audiences that are the problem, it's the random three people sitting at opposite corners sleeping through the gig or skinning up through the gig or just not being... I mean, until you've done it... I mean, that's why it's so valuable, there are few other places where you can just go day after day after day after day and do it.

I think, probably the thing is, don't try to make it too long. They are [usually] hour-long slots, especially on the Free Fringe but you don't want more than forty minutes, forty-five minutes of material because you will get heckled. You can always chat to people beforehand and you will want time to... And you don't want to be getting to the end, to your big finish and with guys coming in afterwards, standing in the door, looking daggers at you, "You should have finished two minutes ago!" Keep it short, I think, keep it forty-five minutes and allow yourself fifteen minutes for getting in, getting out and chatting. Yeah, that'll take a lot of pressure off.

DT: Speaking of keeping it short, shall we get onto some more poems?

JM: I believe, very strongly that all poetry sets should have cover versions in them. I know a lot of musicians, in fact, how I started was being friends with musicians, working musicians. And they think it's absolutely astounding that anyone, especially when they're beginning performing, would sit down and try and do a set of originals. I mean, you wouldn't do that, you don't do that if you're a huge band playing stadia. Why on earth would you do this in small rooms? So, I developed a line in cover versions.

A couple of years ago I did a show entirely of cover versions called The New Popular Recital where I became a Victorian parlour reciter, with my Victorian parlour reciter's hat.

DT: James has just put a hat on now.

JM: Yes, I've just put a hat on, I need to to get into character. [LAUGHTER] And so this is my cover version that I'll be doing in this show. It is an object lesson to everyone in how to cope with a bad review. Poets in the audience, you've had bad reviews. Everyone's had bad reviews and the temptation is to become all bitter and twisted and hate humanity and that's fine. But if you can possibly manage it, do this, this is how Rudyard Kipling coped with a bad review. He had a stinker of a review from a man called Mr Trail, a real stinker of one I can tell you about afterwards if you want and this is his response. It's called In The Neolithic Age.

[We do not have permission to transcribe this poem.]

[00:23:36]

A: [APPLAUSE]

JM: So, with that plea for diversity and tolerance and everything being right, let me hasten to tell you what I think is right. This is a poem called;

WE ARE ALL GRANDBABIES

*young and hungry I supposed being a poet
to consist mainly in garrets & coffeeshops
drafting urgent manifestos*

*having on the whole since eaten rather well and
managed these fifteen years without
writing a single one, here it is...*

it is to be immeasurably DEEP NAKED and KIND

first of all KIND to the ladies and gentlemen
it is their evening after all

then DEEP long in the roots tooth-strong
and NAKED in an emperor's new charity shop suit of old empty
overempty streetside underempty next the skin.
and DEEP which from another point of view is HIGH

KIND for what is childish now
may yet turn out to have been most grown-up after all
and KIND to all the people just trying to make a living
they are NAKED too

actors wear costumes
poets supply our own NAKEDness
book the right floor show
every house is a bawdy house

DEEP down to the empty gut and laughs
NAKED and unafraid DEEP and rising
KIND and quite prepared to look like an idiot

it sees a spade and NAKED it says spade
a poet and says poet and it knows less respectable
four-letter words than that but KIND is
often to speak gentlier

DEEP we are few KIND we are many
and all of us NAKED grandbaby poets
and we speak beautifully each to another

KIND to sisters and brothers of all tribes
even those who don't know yet that
Howl and Other Poems is the best book ever
closely followed by *Moomin Valley in November*

DEEP because this is no desk job
and KIND to yourself at the end
that whatever your burden sit lightly your work-songs
be taken for skylarking and victory

©James McKay, *Very Friendly Weapon*, (Publisher to be confirmed.)

A: [APPLAUSE]

DT: Thank you James, that's it. What's your blog?

JM: It is, www.mckaypoetry.com.

DT: It will be in the description of this, thing along with information about the show.
That's not relevant to people in the room. It's for the Internet people. One more round of
applause, please.

A: [CHEERING & APPLAUSE]

End of transcript.