



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 14: Tory Town Poets \(March 2015\)](#)

Host: David Turner - **DT**

Guests: Ölmo Lazarus - **OL** & Sioni Richards - **SR**

Transcript edited by Harriet Foyster - 14/5/2017

Conversation:

DT: Hello my name is David Turner and this is the Lunar Poetry Podcast. This month I'm in Basildon and I'm joined by Ölmo Lazarus and Sioni Richards and collectively they're known as Tory Town Poets. We're going to start with Ölmo and Sioni giving us brief introductions about themselves. Actually, first you might hear some scratching in the background, it's Buster the dog. He's massive and he's mental. So, it's not us, we're not

scratching the floor. Maybe Ölmo could start with just a brief introduction to himself and his work?

OL: Okay, my name's Ölmo Lazarus and primarily I'm a poet. I do two kinds of poetry really. I mean I do children's poetry but I also do spoken word stuff and under the Tory Town Poet umbrella it is mostly the spoken word stuff that I focus on. I tend to write an awful lot about Basildon where we're from, and a lot of it is about my experiences growing up in this town and almost all of it is rooted in real life, about people I know and about things I've seen. And I suppose I like to be a bit of a storyteller really, that's kind of what I try to get through my poetry.

DT: And Sioni?

SR: Hey I'm Sioni, I'm an artist from Basildon in Essex. I started doing spoken word poetry about 18 months ago? Something like that. Also, primarily making work about Basildon where I grew up, places I've been and the people that I've seen. A lot of it's kind of just the reality of where we're from and slightly politicised, so kind of like a left-wing outlook on stuff. That's about it really.

DT: Cheers. Right so the discussion today is going to mainly focus on the culture or maybe lack of it in satellite towns in the UK. I hope we're going to talk widely enough for the discussion to be relevant to listeners in Bolton or Gateshead but as we're in Basildon today we'll be focussing on the town's relationship with, locally, Southend and more widely with London. So maybe between the two of you could give us a bit of information first about Basildon, what it's like, the kind of town it is.

OL: Well Basildon is a new town. It was built after the war and like I think you find with a lot of new towns it's almost like devoid of a history of almost. Everything's very kind of prefab and was knocked up very quickly. And what I feel, anyway, growing up here and living here is we lack a cultural element. There isn't that kind of culture here. So, people who are interested in visual art, in poetry, in music, we have to travel to try and get that.

I mean if you're interested in poetry and art Basildon is not a place where you are, generally speaking, going to find it. We have to either go in one direction to kind of Southend-on-Sea, or the other direction to go to London if we want to go to open mic poetry nights, if we want to go see an art exhibition, if we want to see a band playing or anything like that.

DT: Yeah, I think that's enough context. First question: who, what, why Tory Town Poets?

OL: Do you want me to kick off with this?

SR: Go for it.

OL: Right, Tory Town Poets... You can kind of trace the origins of Tory Town Poets back quite a few years actually because although I had been writing for quite a long time I've only been doing spoken word for a year and a half maybe two years max. Before then I was in quite a few bands, quite a few awful bands! And I used to write lyrics with them and stuff,

and I was in a couple of punk bands and a hip hop outfit and we'd done lyrics and that's how my writing started. After my last band split up, I mean I'm going back about five years now, a mate of mine was in a band and he asked me "could you write some lyrics for me?"

Because he was a vocalist and a guitarist but he was absolutely hopeless at writing so he said to me "can you write me some lyrics?" So, I ended up putting together a little booklet of just kind of collected poems and writings and ramblings and stuff, and that whole project never really happened. But I ended up labelling this little booklet the Tory Town Poems. And that just kind of stayed stagnant for a very long period of time, it never ever got used. And then I believe the next step towards Tory Town Poets happening was when it was when you went to see [Big Audio Dynamite](#).

SR: Yeah, I went to see Big Audio Dynamite and they do a lot of sampling in their music. I got quite interested in it. Jacques had done a lot of stuff when he had had house parties where he played around with mixing songs just using Audacity. And so I turned around to Ölmo and I was like "hey, could I wrack your brain? I want to do a little music project and just try and make some beats like purely out of sampling really." And Ölmo has got a brilliant attitude where if you mention a project to him within about two days he'll have completed the project.

So, I go home and a couple of days later Ölmo's like "oh here you go I've made about ten different beats. Come check them out." And they were really cool, very much like old school hip hop. And then Ölmo dug out this old book of Tory Town Poems and was like "let's have a go at playing around with that." So, then we started writing together and making music and then after a little while, because I'm not a rapper at all, I got a bit frustrated with doing writing but not being able to do anything with it. So, I kind of came up with the idea of going and checking out a spoken word gig.

OL: Yeah. I mean I think that was quite an organic process, wasn't it? Because I felt like, especially your writing Sioni, where you hadn't done as much writing as me previous to Tory Town Poets had you? Your writing was just getting more and more complex and more and more interesting. It was making me up my game really. And it got to the point where Sioni's writing was getting so complex that fitting it to a beat was becoming quite an issue. Do you remember when you first tried to communicate to me how to rap that Memphis Soul Stew song? You could do it like that!

But for me that took me a good month of just "a man puts pen to paper duppy writer takes flight" just that line was like "blurghh" just trying to get it out. So, I think... We even did flirt with the idea on one of our CDs of saying "why don't we do a hip hop track and a spoken word piece?" But it was when you first said "let's go to an open mic poetry night" that it kind of moved to that direction. I was dubious, man.

I mean I had very, very little experience of spoken word poetry, I was aware that it was an art form, I mean I knew about [Scroobius Pip](#), you know and that was the closest that I'd got to experiencing that art form. And I was very dubious about trying it out. We went to [Lipped Ink](#) at the Poetry Cafe, [Mr. T Thompson's](#) night, and I was blown away. I fell in love with it

straight away, and straight away I thought "this is the direction that Tory Town Poets is going to go now, this is the next step in our evolution."

DT: I think next we'll talk about... We'll come round to this idea of place, sort of where we grow up and how that affects us as artists. How do you think, as artists, do you answer the issue of either choosing to travel regularly to larger towns or cities in order to share your work or staying at home and trying to establish some sort of scene?

OL: I have not done any work in trying to establish a scene here. I'm not saying it couldn't be done, it just hasn't been done, has it?

SR: Yes there's kind of a small bubble.

DT: I was actually going to follow it up with a short question, a sort of sub-question, in that... In the knowledge that it would probably fail?

OL: Yeah, I've pre-empted that. Absolutely.

SR: I think there's kind of a small bubble, and there has been since we were growing up at least, there's been this little scene of local bands, lots of battle of the bands kind of stuff, but it's very much rooted in the metal/rock scene which isn't really our bag anymore.

OL: No, it was when we were growing up, but not now.

SR: Basildon comes from this tradition of like east end London migrating out to the coast, it's a stop off point I suppose for people heading for the seaside really. And once it kind of sprung up as an actual town I think that carried on so I suppose culturally it has inherited this east end identity. But I guess it is quite interesting that when we go out we go into London to do stuff and we're talking about Basildon. It's kind of like we're taking some sort of our culture back into London. It's kind of this cycle.

OL: It's interesting.

DT: So Ölmo you've still never performed in Basildon?

OL: I've never done a gig in Basildon, no.

DT: Sioni how about you?

SR: No. You did with bands?

OL: Yeah. But as a poet...

DT: But as a spoken word artist, or whatever the wanky term is, you haven't? Because I suppose what I'm wondering is do you not feel obliged to do something here? Or would it just feel like a wasted effort?

OL: I do think that if I could do something here it would be awesome.

SR: I think it would be awesome if there was an awesome venue filled with awesome people.

OL: Yeah it wouldn't be sustainable, would it? I reckon you could at a push, at a real push, and I haven't got the time, energy, or effort to do this... At a push, I reckon you could create a one-off event. You could get enough people down and do something but you wouldn't, at the moment anyway, be able to have a monthly or even a bi-monthly thing that kind of ticked over, and where you get fresh faces and exciting poets coming through.

DT: But that's another thing, isn't it? I think really, initially what I mean is like just a one-off gig. Because the... I don't know I find it interesting that you don't feel, or even if you do feel obliged that you're able to ignore it. This is not supposed to sound judgemental I don't really have any view either way whether I believe that you should stay or not. It's odd because it's a big effort, isn't it? To keep buying train tickets and travel to either Southend or London, it's a big cost.

SR: I suppose a big part of the spoken word thing is going to the open mic nights and seeing other people.

DT: Is it really what you're aiming for? To mix with other people who are doing the same work? You're not really searching for an audience but maybe a connection with other artists.

SR: Probably, especially when we started it was about 50/50 of wanting to like perform but also wanting to see other people and see what other people were doing. We were so unaware of poetry and spoken word and what it was about and I think, especially in London, there was this scene going on with people doing it every day of the week. So many interesting people, you know that wasn't happening in Basildon. That doesn't happen. So, it was kind of an education I guess.

DT: Just a general question, this doesn't only relate to poetry but the arts in general... If local audiences aren't engaged isn't that the fault of the artist and not the audience? You know if audiences aren't being responsive isn't that our fault?

OL: That's a very interesting question I mean you've shifted the focus there certainly. And perhaps yes.

DT: And sorry can I just add one sort of thing, covering my arse a little bit. I'm not suggesting we bend our work to suit people. I'm just saying do we need to find a different way of putting across the same message? I don't mean dumbing stuff down, I don't mean being less of an artist, I just mean finding a new way of putting that message across.

SR: I guess it largely depends on kind of who you think your art is for I guess. Because obviously, there are some artists who are very interested in engaging as many people as possible and I think it can be seen as very pretentious to say that your art isn't for everybody

but I don't think it necessarily has to be. I think there's this idea where people talk, especially with art, people talk about art engaging the community and art engaging people. But I think we kind of forget that artists are a part of their community and that artists are people and I think it's perfectly fair to just want to engage other artists.

DT: I'm definitely not suggesting that we should be trying to talk to the greatest number of people as possible because invariably that leads to art with very little substance. But what I mean more is if there is no audience that can't just be the audience's fault because surely, it's within all of us to build up a small... Because I mean how many people live in Basildon?

OL: Thousands.

DT: Certainly enough people to garner a small following. There has to be doesn't there? I don't know.

OL: I mean we have got a small Basildon following. I mean there are people from round here who like what we do. A lot of them are our mates, to be fair. Mum this goes out to you.

[Laughter.]

OL: There are a few people who, after reading articles about us, have emailed us asking to buy our books and CDs and things like that.

SR: Some people get annoyed because they think that we're slagging of their town.

OL: Yes, some people have got a little bit annoyed with us in the past.

SR: It's our town as well!

OL: I'll say what I like! Yeah so there are a few people locally who do like what we do. I just feel like for me my primary art form is poetry and what I lack here are the channels in order to get that across to a local audience.

DT: I think the reason I believe that what I just asked is more of a general question is because it comes from a point of view where people might complain that people in their local area aren't receptive and actually I don't get that impression from either of you two. You're quite happy just doing your stuff where you want to do it. I was just trying to get your point of view.

SR: I think with art I'm quite selfish in that I probably do it just for myself really and when people engage with that and enjoy it it's all for the better but it's not something you can necessarily seek.

DT: I mean I agree with you completely. I came from a visual arts background before I started writing, I mean I've only been writing for not even a year yet, but spent ten or twelve years within the visual arts scene. And you do become incredibly selfish and you're allowed to, and it's never questioned. You can show your work in exactly whatever way you

want. You don't have to explain anything. You can put it in a box and never show it to anyone and be perfectly justified, but there seems to be a demand with poetry that you share it, be more open with it, which is an interesting point in itself. I mean is poetry a sort of unique art form in that way?

SR: Yeah, I think especially with spoken word because it's so much written to be performed. And if you're performing something there's this implication where it has to have an audience. If you've got an audience then you have to take them into account whereas with visual art you can hide behind it. You can put in a space and engage directly as the middle man between your work and the audience.

DT: On the subject of audiences, actually, and travelling away from where you're based, does the fact that so many performers and artists travel in order to share their work mean that we ourselves or our work needs justification? Does the interaction with a public give our work greater meaning? Is that what's causing people in satellite towns to travel?

OL: Yeah, I do see what you mean. I think that the sharing of the art is, for me, one of the most important parts of it. I've never really been a writer for the page I've always written to perform it. And for me the engagement of the audience is one of the most important things and it really helps me creatively as well. It helps me understand what works and what doesn't work. Even when an audience is clapping you can see if they've engaged with a piece or not, you understand that. And it has kind of shaped my work in that respect. It must be important to me otherwise I wouldn't be travelling, I wouldn't be doing it.

DT: I'm just wondering whether the sort of... I mean I'm putting words into your mouth maybe but that idea of justification of your work, is that the transformation that the poem makes from page to performance? Because you could just sit at home, you could both stay in Basildon and just write and write and write if that was all you needed, but there's obviously something driving you on.

SR: I suppose... The first time we went to Lipped Ink, the first open mic that we did, Ölmo performed, I just kind of scouted it out to get a feel for it because I'm not really a performer at all. And then the second time I plucked up the courage to have a go and I guess the reason we carried on doing it was because of the response that we got which, you know like you say, that kind of engagement with the audience and being able to get direct feedback and there's an adrenaline rush.

OL: Yeah definitely.

SR: And that's something... I mean certainly with visual art I've never had that same relationship with my audience.

DT: But you very rarely meet them, do you?

SR: Exactly. I mean I've seen some art works... I went to a sculpture park in Oxford once and there was an artist there from Barcelona and his piece was sitting in the middle of a field. He made a big paella for everyone who was coming along and there was that same

direct engagement with the audience and I found that really interesting. That was probably one of the most interesting bits of art I suppose I've seen because there was the artist and you were having a chat and there was that communication and it was good fun.

And I think there's that same thing with spoken word where you go and you have a night and it's a fun night, you're chatting to people and you can have a beer. Travelling around and meeting new people is a part of that whole process. I think part of the reason why we enjoy spoken word as an art form is because it's not just about the three minutes that you're up on stage performing, it's the whole night.

DT: The social aspect and actually talking to people that also spend a lot of money to travel.

OL: With poetry as well, for me, open mic-ing especially I would say, for me the experience of open mic-ing performance is, at the very most fifty per cent of it, maybe even lower. I think for me the listening and engaging with other peoples' poetry is so so important. And actually, I get as much joy from that as I do from performing. Even to the point now where... Because when I first started going to London it was like "ooh I'm going to London I'd better perform, I'd better get something out there" because I don't get to go to London as often as I'd like. But a couple of times now I've gone to open mic nights and just listened. And I found being on the other side of that is really interesting.

DT: Talking of listening to poetry, we're going to have a poem from Ölmo.

OL: Excellent yeah. Actually, this is new, so we'll see how this goes. First time I've ever read this one out. I actually started writing this when I met you on that train, back from Sheffield.

DT: We might come on to that actually, to how we first met.

OL: Absolutely. So, I scribbled this down on a train, let's hope it works.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:26:29]

DT: Cheers, thanks very much. The next question is do you think the way that you both write might be informed by a longing for acceptance from those you grew up around?

SR: No.

[Laughter.]

DT: I will go on to explain that question.

OL: No I don't particularly think so. I think that my writing is often to... I want to describe those people who I grew up around and I want to explore who they were and what they were like, kind of share that story, but I don't think acceptance is part of that.

SR: I think I still live in a constant inner turmoil of wanting to do stuff and wanting people to see it but at the same time definitely not wanting anyone to see it. Especially those people that I grew up around.

DT: Because others I have spoken to from similar surroundings have spoken of a resentment towards locals in the area that they've grown up and you've sort of touched on that, I probably wouldn't go as far as resentment but there's certainly some sort of feeling maybe bordering on resentment. I mean do you think that's difficult to overcome? Because you were just saying that you had this turmoil. Why do you think there's that turmoil there?

SR: I suppose a big part of it is the fact that a lot of those people knew me when I was a kid and when I was a teenager and when I went through all those awkward stages in your life and all those times when you're, kind of, trying to search for who you are and what your identity is and where you fit in. It just makes me cringe. And I guess to a certain extent we're still doing that. All those people you went to school with, you kind of run into in the pub and they go "oh I saw a thing you're doing in the local paper." I guess it's still a part of stage fright in a way. You're putting yourself out there.

DT: Do you feel like, in a way, is it a feeling of being judged by those people?

SR: Oh for sure yeah.

DT: Because I think that's sort of what I meant by the idea of having some sort of longing for acceptance because quite often those that we would resent from childhood are friends and family. Maybe a wider family structure, maybe not parents, but maybe aunts and uncles and people that you don't share views with. But isn't that... You know we're sort of told to love these people unconditionally. So, what effect does this... Because it's quite a big conflict, isn't it? That you're making something that's very important to you which naturally you should probably share with those people but you don't feel like you...

SR: Yeah, I mean in terms of... I mean the people that I grew up with who were my very close friends I'm still very good friends with and you know those people are supportive and we've got a good relationship with them and so you don't mind putting yourself out there. I suppose it's more the acquaintances and the people who knew you but a very kind of limited perspective of you. And there's something strange about them seeing... Like your best friends have already seen you at your absolute worst and you've seen them at their worst and so no one has got like a moral high ground.

Whereas those people who know you, who you went to school with but you never were close to, as soon as they see something like that, like some sort of expression, then you're putting yourself out there and suddenly they know you a lot better than you know them and I think there's a weird kind of... It makes you feel quite vulnerable I suppose and quite exposed.

DT: Is it an inspiration to work, this resentment? I'm just trying to work out whether it's a help or hindrance having that.

SR: I think... I don't suppose I resent anyone, but I think I find that I do a lot of what I do in spite of this fear of how people will perceive you after you do it. You're always aware of it every time you do something, every time something gets filmed or something gets recorded like this, you're always aware of the fact that someone might see it. Especially with the Internet, like when we first started putting videos on to YouTube, because it shows you exactly how many people have seen it you become very aware of the fact that you have no idea who those people are. And occasionally people will say to you "oh, I saw this thing that you did on YouTube" or they'll say "oh I saw you in the paper" and you're like "I can't believe that person saw it."

DT: Before Christmas a fella at work said "I Googled you" and there was something on YouTube which I didn't realize had gone out. It was this thing about keys in the kitchen drawer. And he'd only watched the first few minutes, it didn't make any sense, it was completely out of context and he was like "is that what you do?" And I was like "well yeah but could you please go back and watch the whole thing or like not watch it at all, or try to forget it maybe."

SR: Yeah and I suppose that's the frightening thing, is that you put yourself out there and just have no idea who is seeing it. And all these odd people from your past end up coming out of the woodwork and saying "oh I've seen that." And like I said they know you so much better than you know them and that's a very odd feeling.

DT: Before we move on we'll perhaps have another poem from Sioni, if that's alright?

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:34:15]

DT: Thanks man. That was good. Actually, this is just an aside because we sort of mentioned earlier about the difference between... You know what poetry becomes when it's off the page. I've been reading that, as preparation I got both of the poems, printed them out and had been reading through trying to place them in the podcast. So, I've been reading that for a couple of weeks and that was just a completely different thing, that wasn't what I've been reading. It's amazing how things just translate. Because I've known Ölmo for a while and Sioni and I have only met today I wasn't aware of your energy, you know how you read and what the energy was in the words but it just really came alive.

It's just an interesting point. And in the preparation in the last couple of weeks I've been thinking about this idea of how to place the conversation around satellite towns and how your creative development as a youngster and teenager, young adult, might be different to those in the city. And I just kept coming back to the point that I think it has to be pointed out that growing up in the city or a satellite town brings the same pressures to conform. A simple example would be as men we should follow in our father's footsteps and that's

perhaps where this resentment comes from because we're not allowed to flourish creatively or whatever.

I was just thinking because there are a greater number of galleries in the city, it doesn't mean that the city kid doesn't feel these pressures less keenly. They're still the same. So, what I was wondering was could it be that a large part of the cultural isolation... Cultural isolation... Wait a minute I'm going to get this right! Cultural isolation of a satellite town is down to perhaps just social conditioning and it doesn't actually exist, it's just you've been brought up to believe that you can't.

SR: Yeah and I suppose it becomes kind of self-perpetuating. Southend's got a culture because it's got a culture. Basildon doesn't have a culture because as soon as someone springs up and decides to do something they go somewhere else to do it. So, there's not much chance for anything. And I guess towns that have culture is a bit of a... It's like stalactites and stalagmites, you know, it builds itself up and people attach to it and people are exposed to it and they want to take part in it. Whereas in Basildon, for us we started doing something and then we looked for where we could do it but it was somewhere else. So then automatically we've become a part of another town's...

OL: Yeah, the London and the Southend scenes, yeah.

DT: I think the reason that point kept going around in my head is because it links all these things that we've been talking about. That there's a lack of culture in Basildon because there's a lack of culture. Like you said it's self-perpetuating. Why then do people not set up their own scenes? But it all comes back to this point that if you're told constantly that it can't work then it won't work, will it? And people won't even attempt, it's not even that things are failing, they're not even starting.

But it's just, it's actually not... Again, it's not really anything to do with your practice as poets or artists, it's just more of a general thought really. And it, sort of, leads into the next idea that you could suggest that living in an area without a particularly responsive audience is usually the result of general dearth of culture and this brings me to the question of inspiration. Do some people need cultural deprivation in order to find inspiration?

OL: I think it helps. I mean I think that the lack of culture is inspiration for my writing in that sometimes what I find myself doing is trying to find beauty and find art where at first glance you can't see any of it. Like that piece that I read out just now was a true story about some asshole I used to know. And I bumped into him in a nightclub and I thought there is no beauty in that whatsoever. So, then you try to use that as the inspiration for trying to create something beautiful and I think a lot of my writing is about that. Trying to use the lack of culture or the lack of anything worth talking about and turning it into something worth talking about, using it as the stimulus for creativity.

DT: Yeah. But then you know there is also a counter-argument to that that if there is a complete lack of culture or happenings, does that lead to artists sticking to one type of art? And in our case poets writing one style of poetry? Because that's a response to one place and because that place doesn't change perhaps your work won't change.

OL: That's a danger, that is a real danger, and it's something that I am now having to consciously try and break because I did look... You know I haven't been doing this for a very long time, year and a half, but I looked at the little body of work that I've put together and I would say about seventy percent of it is very much about the same thing. It's about either an experience of this town, little stories and stuff, or just generic 'what it is like to be here.' So now I'm trying to push myself creatively to move away from that. I think I'll always come back to it, it's such a big part of me.

DT: Because there's a contradiction that exists there isn't there? That you both talk of the inspiration you find in Basildon which doesn't seem like it would inspire anyone, but it has obviously inspired you both. But you've both spoken of developing as artists by travelling to places where there are a huge amount of influences. It's not a complete conflict but there is a contradiction there isn't there? That you find inspiration here in Basildon but need to travel to somewhere, or feel like you need to travel in order to share and to develop as writers.

OL: Yeah. Yeah. I do know what you mean. But I think that the Basildon thing will be a constant inspiration for me, it'll always be there in the background, you know? And it definitely was the early inspiration, the thing that got me to start writing and fill up a book and fill up a CD quite happily with that material. But going into London and seeing, well mainly seeing other artists, that's really inspired me to develop my writing. There's a poet who me and Sioni have seen quite regularly called [INAUDIBLE], a very, very talented spoken word artist and he's really inspired me recently to start writing about completely different stuff.

He can go and create pieces quite easily about fantasy and science fiction worlds and all that kind of stuff and he can... Although I do believe it's often that the inspiration is based in real life and real experiences so I do relate to it, he can write these fantastical pieces. All my stuff has been very deeply rooted in the real world before, so now I've written a couple of pieces where I've been pushing myself to try to...Not emulate his style, I'm not copying you! But kind of branch out and try writing about different themes and different ideas. I mean at the moment I'm not anywhere with that kind of writing that I'm happy to share it. That's baby steps at the moment, but that's the kind of thing I've been trying to do.

DT: I want to move away from sort of accepted adult poetry audiences to younger audiences because you both work in education. Actually, maybe we'll start if you both explain what you do for a living or where you work.

OL: Yeah. Unfortunately, I'm not a millionaire from poetry yet. I'm hoping that's going to happen sometime soon. So, yeah the day job is teaching. I'm a primary school teacher at a local school in Basildon and that's excellent because a large source of my inspiration comes from that, you know, the children are awesome. And you meet people, local people constantly doing that kind of work so that's great. I do get inspiration from that. But on top of teaching I also run poetry workshops. So, I go to schools across the Basildon area.

DT: Actually we'll come onto that in a minute. Sioni if you just want to briefly tell us?

SR: Yeah. So, I work with special needs students in a college.

DT: What sort of age?

SR: Post-sixteen. Some are adults but most are sixteen to eighteen.

DT: Okay. And do you... Right so I met Ölmo in Sheffield and we were both attending a Poetry in Schools seminar which was run by Sammy...

OL: [Jacob Sam-La Rose](#).

DT: That's it. I'm terrible with names. And we got talking about primary school teaching and just about how poetry can be used, in that sense, to teach under elevens but I know Sioni... Do you use any poetry in your teaching, does it come into it?

SR: No.

DT: No so maybe just this small part of the conversation involves Ölmo a bit more. In what way do you use poetry?

OL: Poetry, I use it often as.... Well it can be used as a reward actually. If I've got a new poem, and it's very different to the stuff I've read here today my children's poetry, if I've got a new poem I can use it as "if you're well behaved during the afternoon session you get to hear a new poem at the end of the day." My children do really engage with that and enjoy that. But I found increasingly, especially with doing my workshops as well as in my classroom, using it as a stimulus for writing, I've written a couple of poems recently which are unfinished and they're unfinished on purpose. They end on kind of like a cliff-hanger.

There's one in particular about a spaceman who comes down and he explains how he came to earth and then he says "now I've seen all of your world and I've got something to say." And then I put it onto the children and I say "right if a spaceman had come to Earth, scanned it all, seen everything that's going on, what do you think he'd say about our planet?" And we use it as a stimulus to then create some poetry about that. And it's powerful. I mean children will just blow your mind they haven't got the same reservations as adults. We get so scared about going on stage we go "oh is our poetry going to be rubbish, are people going to engage with it?!"

Children do not care. Most children do not care anyway, and they'll get up after only having an hour to write a piece and they'll give it their best go and they'll absolutely blow you away with what they produce. And it gives kids a voice as well. I mean there are a lot of children out there who, for whatever reason, do not have a voice. And I don't think that's just around here I think you get that in any society. Children who, for whatever reason, struggle to have a voice in their life. And it's really empowering when they're given an opportunity to just share some of their thoughts, share some of their writing with their peers. It's really really exciting, I love it.

DT: And bringing Sioni back into the conversation what do you feel can be done to improve poetry education? And you can answer that with respect to your own schooling, and maybe Ölmo from your actual experience with kids. First of all actually do feel like it's important? Because actually not all poets feel it's necessary to improve... Because if they've come towards it later in life and it hasn't really hindered them...

SR: Yeah, I guess, I mean when I was at school... It's a weird one because really I started writing about 18 months ago and I'd done my art degree and so I was kind of already used to expressing myself or having a creative outlet. But when I was at school I think I definitely remember when we came to doing poetry in English lessons it was something I enjoyed. I kind of had an enjoyment for it but I never really pursued it. I think it's a difficult one because I mean I definitely enjoyed it but then I wonder why didn't I do anything with it until later on in life?

I guess partly I had some English teachers that I didn't really get on with it but then I had some that were really good as well so it's a strange one really. I think some... There's so much poetry that exists that is so engaging and is quite inspirational and it makes you want to write yourself. And definitely a lot of that was probably included in my education. There was obviously stuff that doesn't engage you at all, like Lord Byron, how many ways do I love you? Blurgh.

DT: Don't look at me when you say that!

SR: It's really kind of boring and not really my sort of thing. But I think as a rule it's there and if you enjoy writing then you enjoy writing I suppose. I think a lot of people find that on their own. But I suppose it's just important, especially for young people, to find some sort of outlet I guess. Because it can help you really find your own self. Especially when you're going through adolescence you're always trying to find someone else who's representing you. You use music to express yourself, you know you find a band and you're like "yeah that's exactly how I feel." Whereas if you find an outlet and you can... A lot of young people obviously don't even show it to other people but it just lets them consolidate in their own head who they are and what their thoughts are which is very important.

OL: And for me as well yeah?

DT: Yeah yeah.

OL: So the most important thing I think we can do with poetry in schools and with education is, and I think this is actually just generally in writing and is something I've experienced and then developed in my teaching, is the children seeing the teacher as a writer. I think that's very important. I don't think I had a bad literacy education at all. I mean I had some really inspirational English teachers, I did. But when the children see the teacher or the facilitator or whoever's leading the lesson as somebody who also writes that's really good because you get up and you have a big piece of paper on the wall.

You start writing your poem, you cross out lines you say "that sounds rubbish," you write a new line above it, you say it out loud, you try it out. They see that whole creative process.

And I think it takes the pressure off of them, as opposed to saying "I'm the boss, I have all the answers, this is what a good poem looks like, let's read a famous one, this is what good poem looks like, now make your one.

DT: I think it's a really good point actually you just made. I think there are a lot of young people... Maybe not the kids you teach because the kids you teach are very young and they're not yet affected by this feeling, but a lot of kids won't draw and show their drawings, they won't make sculptures, they won't write poems and read them out because all they're all exposed to are finished pieces of work. They're judging themselves against people who have been writing for years and years and years.

And you're absolutely right, show your working, show your shit poems and how things don't work out. That's creativity. You know like we were talking about earlier before we started recording, you don't get anywhere creatively unless you've fucked up hundreds, thousands of times and realizing what is shit and you have to promise yourself that you won't make those mistakes again. And I think kids can't just be exposed to amazing... Of course, they can later on, but they need also that middle ground of seeing the process happen.

OL: Absolutely I mean it's got to the point now where I write children's poetry and with my class I will read them unfinished pieces, ask what they think. I mean kids are a great audience because adults, generally speaking, we try to be quite polite to one another. We'll say "yeah it's okay, I can see what you're doing there." Whereas a kid will turn round and say "I didn't get it. I don't get it. I don't like it."

And that really harsh criticism from nine year olds has actually really helped my writing of children's poetry. I wrote a piece recently about cavemen and I thought it was bloody brilliant, I thought "my class are gonna love this." And yeah their faces... That said it all. Absolutely that kind of bemused expression on their faces. I think as well when they see me turning round and saying "oh that's not very good that one," see me screwing it up and putting it in the bin, and saying "oh I'm gonna write another one next week," I think that's helped.

DT: I think we're going to wrap it up, I think we've covered everything but just one last chance to mention any blogs or Twitter accounts so people can...

OL: Find us?

DT: Find you and see if they want to come along and see if they like what they've heard.

OL: They want to follow us. It's all very threatening, isn't it? Follow you. Yeah so if you want to check out some more of mine and Sioni's work you can go to [facebook.com/torytownpoets](https://www.facebook.com/torytownpoets). There you'll be able to get updated on any of the features we have coming up or any open mics we're attending or any information about CDs and books we might have out. On Twitter you can follow us @torytownpoets and that's all one word. And we've got quite a lot of spoken word videos up now.

SR: Yeah there are a few things on YouTube, some stuff that we did with a friend of ours.

OL: Yeah Matt Rowley from [MattBoxFilm](#). Yeah we've recently done a collaboration with MattBoxFilm called the Stonehaven Sessions so we have some videos up from that as well and you can find that at youtube.com/torytownpoets. You probably didn't have to write that down, it's all pretty straightforward.

DT: What we'll do is all of these links will be in the description on the YouTube video when this goes out so people can just click on there. But basically, if you were to Google Tory Town Poets there are hundreds of ways of finding out through social media what these two are up to. Thank you Ölmo Lazarus and Sioni Richards.

OL: Thank you.

SR: Thank you.

DT: It's been good I've enjoyed it.

End of transcript.