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[Episode 31: Donald Chegwin](#) – (May 2015)

Transcription by Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Donald Chegwin – **DC**

Conversation:

DT: Hello, my name is David Turner and this is another episode of Lunar Poetry Shorts. Tonight, I am at our spoken word night, Silence Found A Tongue **[APPLAUSE AND CHEERING]** in Waterloo in South London. I am joined by Donald Chegwin.

DC: Hello.

DT: We're going to start, as always, with a poem.

DC: Ok, this one is called;

KINGDOM

Bow down to the King Prawn!
The King Prawn is the royalty of the sea!
Bow down! Bow down!

The plankton are the subjects of the King Prawn
and they bow down, they bow down!
The King Prawn invites carefully selected plankton to his palace for a feast
Then the King Prawn eats the carefully selected plankton's hands and feet.
Their deaths are honourable!
Bow down, bow down!
The King Prawn has 12 kilos of lady prawns delivered to his door each night
and they bow down, they bow down!

The King Prawn wears pearl-encrusted shell-suits.
The King Prawn has daily caviar baths.
The King Prawn has 89 meals a day
while the King Prawn's subjects starve.
But bow down, bow down!
Don't forget to bow down!

The King Prawn's enemies have caught the King Prawn in a net.
They've taken off his shell-suit.
They've made him undress.
Down with the King Prawn!
Fuck the King Prawn!
We drown the King Prawn in lemon juice.
Time to tighten the noose.
We throw one half of the King Prawn in the BBQ.
We throw one half of the King Prawn in the stew.
We laugh.

Now there's a new King Prawn.

Bow down to the new King Prawn!
Bow down! Bow down!

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[APPLAUSE]

DT: Hello, Donald, thanks for that. First question is always: why poetry?

DC: I think for me, there's something I like about the economical, precise nature of writing poetry. The way you can create a narrative or mood or a little world, in just a few stanzas or a few pages. I kind of write a lot of short stories and flash fiction as well, but there are a few more tools to play with poetry, with the rhythm and structure, particularly performance poetry. You can play around with the silences and tension and things like that.

DT: And the shouting.

DC: And the shouting as well.

DT: Are your poems short stories?

DC: Sometimes, there's probably a blur between what you'd say was flash fiction or a short story and what would be a poem. With performance poetry, there's so much you can do with it, so many different influences from hiphop or comedy, or folk music. I love the fact there are no rules, in contrast to what you're taught at school.

DT: How much time do you spend worrying about whether your poems fit as poems?

DC: I don't think I do. I've got several poems that are basically just recipes.

DT: Could we cook something from them?

DC: You could. I'm not saying I'd recommend it, but you could do. I find there's something very visceral, very cathartic about performance poetry, that you can channel emotions. There's something very satisfying about that.

DT: For you?

DC: For me. I'm not sure about anyone else.

DT: Sorry. That wasn't an accusation.

[LAUGHTER]

DC: Also it's not as lonely as writing a novel or something like that. You can go out and actually perform it in front of people, see how it goes down, get a reaction.

DT: We'll come onto the spoken word bit afterwards. What have been the main influences on your development as a writer or performer?

DC: There are a couple of influences for me. In my job, I write about horror films a lot, and exploitation films, and that's been a big influence on me, partly because a lot of the exploitation films in the Seventies and Eighties had a weird approach to narrative, particularly the good ones by Dario Argento and people like that, but also the terrible stuff, like Troll 2, Slugs and Night of the Bloody Apes, films like this.

DT: Bloody Apes!

DC: Yeah, the title was worth it alone. It's like a different approach to structure and narrative. You can laugh at them, they're funny, but there's also something very sinister about that. Also, the other thing I would say is childhood, childhood nostalgia for me, the children's shows I used to watch as a kid and again, there's a sense of wonderment and being slightly terrified by things like Nightmare and Button Moon and Trap Door and all these kinds of shows. **[A: Button Moon?]** There's something terrifying about that. I'm terrified now.

DT: I wouldn't take that from them. They're fucking idiots . You have the mic.

[LAUGHTER]

Don't let them boss you around. Trap Door scared the shit out of me. Not Button Moon, though. Can we have another poem, please, Donald?

DC: OK. This poem is called;

EGG CITY BLUES

Four million eggs were poached in the city today.
Four million eggs poached and six million eggs prepped in other ways:
two million eggs scrambled,
two million eggs boiled
two million eggs deviled, steamed, coated in oil.
Eggs in the city! Eggs in the city!

Today we eat eggs with friends.
We eat eggs on the subway.
We eat eggs in our PJs.
We eat eggs while sending text messages,
egg yolk dribbling messily onto our phones.
Imperfect eggs are crushed beneath our Jimmy Choos!
Lack of eggs is not an issue, not in our city, not today.

A couple of kids throw eggs at the door of Old Man Joe.
A couple of lovers dip toes in eggs like soldiers
then lick each other's toes.
Egg tasted. Eggs wasted.

Eggs devoured.
Do cracked eggshells expose egg power?
Yes, it's true.
But don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg
because lack of eggs is not an issue, not in our city, not today.

"What's beneath the egg?" people forget to ask us.
"What's beneath the egg? What's beneath the egg?"

Some days bodies are poached in the city,
bodies mangled and twisted,
scrambled and boiled like eggs, like eggs.
Some days there are eggshells without eggs.
"Don't tread on the eggshells if you want to keep your legs!"
they tell the children.
Behold the Egg City inferno:
Abandon all yolk, ye who enter here!

Some days eggs disappear like props in a conjuror's trick
and on other days The Age of the Egg seems mythic.
But not today.
Today we enjoy eggs in the city,
eggs poached, scrambled and coated in oil.
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[APPLAUSE]

DT: Donald, your poems might be said to be a little surreal. Is this over-simplistic?

DC: Some people describe me as being surreal. If someone asks me what my poems are like, I might say surreal as a shortcut, but for me anyway, there's something real about them as well. Surreal suggests they exist somewhere else. I try and channel real emotion and real things that are going on.

DT: You made a point earlier about horror films and how they use humour to deal with quite scary things. I'd say your humour may be surreal, but the points you're trying to cover are quite real, aren't they? Being crushed by egg men or stepping on these egg people. There are real fears and emotions underneath the humour. I'm not mental, am I? Am I?

[LAUGHTER]

DC: No. I guess a lot of my favourite authors are the kind of people that are sometimes tagged as being surreal authors, like Mikhail Bulgakov that did *The Master And Margarita* and Flann O'Brien, who did *The Third Policeman*. They kind of walk this borderline as well, between scary and funny. You're never quite sure what is supposed to be which.

DT: If we move to the spoken word side of it, your poems are very different when you read them on a page and when you perform them out loud. There's a new edge to it when you're screaming about eggs. It adds something. I wanted to ask about the need for truth in poetry.

DC: I think there's always a need for truth, whether it's a confessional poem or a poem about eggs. I think you can still channel some kind of truth, some kind of real emotion. People can tell if it's faked or not.

DT: Are you deliberately walking a path where you're trying to keep in touch with some sort of reality? Is it conscious?

DC: Definitely not.

DT: It's just the way it comes out?

DC: Yeah. Pretty much.

DT: At the same time, you're not offering the same kind of truth I'm mentioning, in that 'you can see the whites of your eyes, so you must be telling us about your life'.

DC: I don't know. I don't know what psychologists would say, but I think there is something about it, channelling stuff about me, something about my life.

DT: Maybe slightly disturbing?

[LAUGHTER]

DC: Yeah, maybe it is. They're all about my life in some ways.

DT: I'm being a little facetious. You do get a sense of who you are and that isn't necessarily making you out to be a psychopath.

DC: Psychopath is quite a good description.

DT: Maybe we should have a third and final poem.

DC: OK. This one is called;

Waking of Insects

The windowsill is a graveyard for dead insects.
Ants. Flies. Spiders. Wasps. A lone beetle.
All entombed in thick grey dust-blankets.
Until you return home, honey, I refuse to Hoover up dead insects
because only a dead insect truly understands how I feel inside.

Until you return home, honey, I shall dine on nothing but tinned curries.
I'll always make two portions – one for one for you, one for me –
and I'll keep on eating on your portion until the day you return home.

Honey, I imagine one of the first things you'll point out when you walk
through the door
is that the kitchen floor is flooded.
I think a valve in the tap has probably snapped.
You might notice one of my old socks is lying stranded in the water.
How I empathise with that sock: lost, lonely, separated from its partner.
Socks come in pairs, honey!
Socks come in pairs!

Breakfast: one tinned curry for me, one tinned curry for you.

The bookshelf has collapsed
and old charity shop books lie mangled together on the carpet
like ingredients in a strange and unsuccessful recipe.
The toilet won't flush.
The front door won't shut properly.
Burglars might burgle me, murderers might murder me.
Let them come!

Ants roam in the honey jars.
Let them roam!
Let them roam I say
until the day you return home
and then I'll set the Hoover on 'em and suck 'em up and laugh as they perish
or I'll scoop 'em up and take 'em out outside without harming a single one of
'em
(you choose, honey, you choose).

Lunch: One tinned curry for me, one tinned curry for you.

You're still my princess and there's your throne.
No one will be allowed to sit in your throne until you return home, honey.
Not even my parents.
Not even my grandmother.
I'd rather make my grandmother sit on the floor
than let her sit on your throne, honey,
even though she's 84 and has bad knees.

Dinner: one tinned curry for me, one tinned curry for you.

Until you return home, honey,
I'll walk on all fours
and I'll scream like a fox in mating season

until the neighbours pound on my door
and shout that they're going to call the police
but they're fucking lying
they won't call the police
they're cowards.

Until you return home, honey,
I'll keep drinking every night
and I'll keep on waking up in graveyards
and on doorsteps
and in strange unclean beds
with no memory of how I got there
and paranoia snacking on my senses.

Until you return home honey,
I won't change my clothes.
I won't mend my ways.
I won't separate night from day.
I'll speak in tongues.
I'll refuse to clean.
I'll listen to nothing but white noise.
I'll watch nothing but static.
I'll talk to the cockroaches and the rats
about the old Steve Martin movies we used to watch together.

I've been eating tinned curries for five years.
I'm expecting you back any day now, honey.

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[APPLAUSE]

DT: Cheers Donald. Final question. Is there anything you'd recommend to people listening to go out and see, watch? Doesn't have to be poetry. Could be better.

DC: Night Of The Bloody Apes, of course. Troll 2 and Slugs. Lizard In A Woman's Skin is a good one. Let's Scare Jessica To Death. Also, one of my favourite poets, I kind of see her pop up once a year, is, do you know The Worm Lady? She's amazing. All the poems about worms and transcending to the universe, being reborn as a worm. She hasn't got a website.

[LAUGHTER]

DC: She's not here, is she?

DT: She's not here, no.

DC: You can't find out anything about her.

DT: She may be in the cabbage patch outside.

DC: Also, there's a novel called, it's 10 years ago, 10 years' old, so it's not cutting edge, but *You're An Animal, Viskovitz!* by Alessandro Boffa, in which someone is reborn as an animal in each chapter, seeking out his true love in each chapter and all his friends are reborn as animals too. They're my two animal-themed recommendations.

DT: Thank you, Donald. Give him a clap.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you to Donald. Thank you to Silence Found A Tongue. Thank you to I'klektic Art Lab and Eduard, wherever he's gone.

End of transcript.