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[Episode 104: Wrexham](#) – (06/08/2017)

Transcription by Christabel Smith

Producer: David Turner – **DT**

### **Introduction:**

**DT:** Hello, welcome to Lunar Poetry Podcasts. I'm David Turner. How are you lot doing? Good, I hope? I think we've gained some new listeners recently, so hello to you if you're tuning in for the first or second time. Hello, of course, to long-time listeners. I wouldn't forget you now. Sometimes, in the arts, it can seem like we're constantly chasing new audiences as if new always equals better. There's a lot to be said for loyalty, if Donald Trump hasn't completely ruined that concept.

You might be able to hear some squeaking. It's some swifts doing some late-night squeaking. I suppose they're chasing flies or something. I'm still having to get used to some new noises now I'm down in Wiltshire. For today's episode, I was recently up in Wrexham, North Wales. This trip was made possible by the Arts Council funding we received last summer. Thank you to them for their support.

Coming up in the episode, we have a short chat with the people who run Voice Box, which is a spoken word night, based at Undegun. But first up, I speak with the Young People's Laureate of Wales, Sophie McKeand. We met to talk about the work she does with Literature Wales, a bit of politics and her new collection Rebel Sun, out through Parthian Books.

For a transcript of this conversation, go over to our website, [www.lunarpodcasts.com](http://www.lunarpodcasts.com). You can also subscribe to the series via SoundCloud, iTunes and Stitcher, or wherever you download your podcasts. If Facebook and Instagram are your thing, we're over there as Lunar Poetry Podcasts and on Twitter @Silent\_Tongue.

If you like what we do, please do tell people about us. Word-of-mouth recommendations are the best form of advertising for us and we really could use your help, chasing those elusive new audience members, as exciting as they are. Here's Sophie. Enjoy.

### **Part one:**

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Sophie McKeand – **SM**

**SM:** My name is Sophie McKeand, I am a poet from Wrexham, North Wales, and I am the current Young People's Laureate for Wales. I'm going to start with a poem called Paper News and I wrote this in response to a series of poetry blackouts that I've been doing on Instagram with the hashtag #thirtydaysofbrexit and #postnewspolitics where I've been protesting some of the nastier elements of our right-wing media and their output and the way I feel that their language is, I'm going to go so far as to say, poisoning our communities. So, this is called;

#### Paper News

I am panic  
I am the tearing  
I am nightmarish scenes greeting police  
I am sickened  
I am reviled  
I am dismay

I am flood warning  
I am winter warning  
I am stay indoors warning  
I am severe weather warning  
I am hurricane force winds warning  
I am droughts to hit the south of England warning  
I am hosepipe bans  
I am swimming bans  
I am hotter than anticipated  
I am deserts forming  
I am 50 degrees c in the Middle East  
and they're all going to have to move somewhere – warning

I am paper  
I am the test paper  
I am litmus paper

Light the paper  
Spark the fuse

I am justifications for war in Iraq  
I am drones dropping bombs on schools in Syria  
I am the only hospital for 50 miles decimated  
I am collateral damage  
I am screaming for my sister  
I am screaming for my brother  
I am burying my family  
I ululate for my family  
I am the freedom fighter  
I am the terrorist  
I am Muslim  
I am Islam  
I am ISIL  
I am fear  
I am your eyes  
I am your ears  
I am the hot salt of blood and ash  
I am coming for you  
I am coming for you  
I am coming for you

I am armies of migrant families invading your communities  
I am the soft bodies of refugee children washed onto your shores  
I am critical scenes at Dover and Calais  
I am young migrant men hijacking lorries  
I am children trafficked  
I am mothers raped  
I am not sorry (it is not our fault)  
I am telling you to send them back  
I am go home or face prosecution  
I am impartial  
I am impervious  
I am swarms  
I am cockroaches  
I build barricades  
I burn camps  
I tear down shelter

I am paper  
I am the test paper  
I am litmus paper

Light the paper  
Spark the fuse

I am young black man arrested  
I am more young black men shot by police  
I am Black Lives Matter  
I matter  
I am All Lives Matter  
I matter  
I am unbiased  
I am white  
I am privileged  
I am male  
I am single-white-female

I am *papier-mâché*  
Stripped and moulded into  
terror

I am gunshots ringing across the playground

I am gunshots fired at police  
I am gunshots in the busy shopping mall  
I am lone wolf male  
I am disturbed white male  
I act alone  
I speak for no one

I am paper  
I am the test paper  
I am litmus paper

Light the paper  
Spark the fuse

I speak for you  
I speak for your fears  
I speak so you don't have to  
I tell it like it is  
I tell your fortune  
I am your problems solved  
I am the voice of your wife  
I justify your fantasy  
I am lap dancers earning ten grand a month  
I am sex workers who. love. it.  
I am prostitution  
I am money  
I am the money you want to spend  
I am the hours you need to work to matter  
I am the crippled NHS  
and we all know whose fault that is  
I am sick people fiddling benefits  
I am the poor who could get a job if they bothered  
I am single mothers shelling out babies for your taxes  
I am warden  
I am judge  
I am critic

I am tissue paper for your tears  
I am tissue paper for your fantasies  
I speak for you  
I speak your mind

I am your friend  
I am transparent  
I am impartial  
I am information  
I am sensational headlines  
I am no editorial bias  
I am right-wing-think-tank-expert-opinion  
I am the future  
I am your present  
I write your past  
I am right (there is no left)

I am paper trails  
I am words  
I am the universe in pages  
I am your world  
I am your friend  
I am paper-thin  
I am paper news  
I am newspaper

Light the paper  
Spark the fuse.

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**DT:** Thank you very much.

**SM:** Thank you.

**DT:** Welcome to the podcast, Sophie. Thanks for joining us.

**SM:** Cheers.

**DT:** Isn't it really bloody wearing how necessary it is to keep writing poems about that?

**SM:** Yeah. Part of that, the length of it and the repetition of the 'I am', is because I want the poem to feel that relentless deluge that the news can feel like at times. I wanted it to reflect that because that's how I feel.

**DT:** It does feel like it just keeps going and going.

**SM:** Yeah.

**DT:** Reality, I mean, not the poem.

**SM:** Yeah, yeah!

**DT:** The poem does, but it's supposed to.

**SM:** Part of it, yeah.

**DT:** Was that part of the Thirty Days of Brexit or does it precede that?

**SM:** It was after. So Thirty Days of Brexit came after. After the Brexit vote, I was quite devastated. I didn't agree with the vote, but I do believe in democracy and I believe we have to take on board what people voted for, but I felt really upset that what people voted for is not what they got. I mean, we've all seen the bus with 'We'll give £350million to the NHS a week', which clearly is never going to materialise.

So I felt that newspapers were implicit in that because even though everybody knew these things were a lie, they were still printing it. I absolutely believe in freedom of speech, the right of an individual for freedom of speech, but when I take this poem to schools or I work with young people, one of the questions I ask is do we think that organisations, such as newspapers, have the same right as an individual to freedom of speech or do they have a moral obligation to print some semblance of the truth? That's the question that comes out of Brexit really.

So the blackouts that I create, the newspaper blackouts, are taking the newspapers and when I run the workshops, it's encouraging not just young people, I run them with age 10 up to however old, adults, elderly people, but it's about people taking control of the language that we are fed by the newspapers, re-shaping it to our own ends, sometimes quite ridiculous and absurd poems, sometimes quite subversive, but it's about, hopefully, people feeling in the workshops they can take control of the language.

I think when you view some of the language, especially some of the tabloids and the 'Daily Fail', when you take it out of context, it's really shocking they're allowed to say this hate speech.

**DT:** It's ridiculous, some of the stuff that's allowed.

**SM:** If that came out of the mouth of a Muslim cleric, he would be chucked out of the country, but it comes out of the mouth of Katie Hopkins and it's free speech. I can't quite grasp that.

**DT:** I'm quite into free speech, but we might just have to ban her name from the podcast.

**SM:** Yes, sorry about that.

**DT:** I'll have to start beeping it.

**SM:** You can beep that out, yeah.

**DT:** I don't do any educational work, so I hadn't really considered it. Suddenly I just thought how useful it would be to start analysing that kind of language in the tabloid press. It's quite a good way of just picking stuff apart, isn't it? If you start by saying we're going to take out the words as the bones, then start to look at what this is saying.

**SM:** Absolutely. As a Young People's Laureate, very much I see my role as encouraging young people in Wales to find their voice and I work very much with marginalised young people and groups. So maybe young single mothers, maybe care leavers, the gypsy-roma traveller community, and often people who exist on the fringes are, it's really sad, but they tend to be afraid of language because it seems that literature in the past has been considered as a pursuit that's very middle-class. You know, it's very literary.

This is one of the reasons I love working with Literature Wales because their focus is very much on widening participation, widening access, so I very much love working with them, because we have very similar views on how to do this. So when I'm working with challenging groups, who are afraid of language, if I take newspapers, I'm taking the language, so people don't feel so afraid of maybe their spelling, or people who are dyslexic, because we've got it there and then we're going to black it out, then we're going to cut it up, we're going to be subversive.

But there's no wrong answer, it's just their creative response to that text that I've brought. And there's some really interesting stuff that comes out.

**DT:** I'm going to have to watch my language because it makes me angry thinking about it, but you mentioned Katie Hopkins. That's worse than anything that might come out of my mouth. It makes me really furious that anyone is made to feel like language is inaccessible. It's just ridiculous. I can't even find the words to describe how angry it makes me feel.

How do you, or it may be Literature Wales, do the leg work? How do you reach marginalised communities, because I think this is the big thing for organisations to look at, because it's all very well wanting to do it and going in with the right spirit, but it can often be very hard to actually reach people, can't it?

**SM:** I hate the 'hard-to-reach' label, but it exists for a reason, that communities are hard to reach. So I work in participatory art, so it's about creating work together. I've been doing that for a decade now, so I suppose there's just a point where people have heard of the work I've done, so sometimes Literature Wales will contact me and say 'We'd like you to work with this group, we've made inroads with this group and we'd like you to come'.

Other times, a group will get in touch with me. I recently worked with Welsh Women's Aid, I worked on a series of workshops with the women. This is where I love it because if you'd had said to those women on day one, 'so a poet's going to come in and over six or eight weeks, you're going to come in once a week and you're going to write poems and then at the end of it, you're going to create a poetry pamphlet that you're then going to read the

poems [from], at a launch, to local dignitaries at an event'. They would have literally, well, then I was going to swear, but they would have told me to F off, you know.

So vulnerable women, who were at the refuge for various reasons, but they did it. It's a journey and a process, whereby day one, obviously I don't sit there and say 'write me a sonnet', we talk and have a laugh. I think what it is for a lot of people is they don't feel what they have to say has value and that's maybe because of the way literature has been structured in the past and maybe the way the curriculum is structured. It's very hierarchical, there's a lot of power structures going on, there's a lot of this sort of looking at 'what these people have to say is very important and the rest of us, all we can do, is hope we can bask in their light for a small amount of time while we go about our daily lives.'

I don't believe that at all. I believe we're all a genius, it's just a case of finding it. It won't be through words for everyone, it will be through paint or music, but we all have that capability. My approach is, when I'm working with a group, somebody in the group might say something, I work with the gypsy, Romany, travellers and somebody will come out with a line and I'll say: 'That's so poetic, I'm going to write that down'. She'll say: 'No, that's not poetry' so I say 'I'm the poet, I'll decide what's poetic, I think that's poetic so we're going to write that down'.

Then it's just about building their confidence and it's amazing, if people feel heard, and if they feel safe and not judged, they'll say the most beautiful things, write the most beautiful things. It's just creating that energy, that environment, with them, where they feel they can do that.

**DT:** I think it's Keith Jarrett, talking about working in inner-city schools in London, because that's where he's from, watching kids cussing each other in six or seven different languages, just explaining to them about the poetic beauty of that, perhaps explaining to them also not to be so nasty to each other...

**SM:** It's creative!

**DT:** ...just highlighting to them that they do have a capability when it comes to language and communication, they have their own things to say. Also, I met, I can't remember her name, but she runs, up by Newcastle and Sunderland, the Washington branch of MIND and she works with young people, the young people considered to be the hardest to reach and the contradictions she sees in meeting them...

Perhaps the difficult thing is to get them in a room, but engaging with them when they're in a room is not the difficult thing. It sounds like yourself and Literature Wales go into it quite open-mindedly, but I think a lot of organisations go in believing people are hard to reach and that seems to be the obstacle, that you've pre-determined they're hard to reach.

**SM:** It's also your attitude. If you go in as a 'I'm clearly a very important poet, so I'm here to impart my knowledge', they're just going to tell you to fuck off.

**DT:** Rightly so.

**SM:** I would, to be fair, you know. Politically I stand very left, I'm very much an anarchist, so we're all equal as far as I'm concerned, so I might know more about one thing but they'll know more about their lives than me, so it's about sharing knowledge and me helping them to shape that into something, as opposed to me going in being very important, basically a pain in the arse.

**DT:** On that note, we'll take a second reading.

**SM:** This piece is called Rebel Sun. It's a longer piece, in three parts, so I'm just going to read part one. More and more, I believe that anarchy is not the state of destroying everything, it's a state of autonomy, people working individually and autonomously, but working together for the benefit of all. The book, the collection, is very much looking at different elements of this and how it's reflected in the natural world.

I use the motif of a murmuration of starlings, which is the name for it when you see them sort of swell across the sky. Murmuration, what a beautiful word. That for me is pure anarchy because nobody is choreographed. That murmuration, each starling has arrived of their own accord, and they create this beautiful art across the sky and then they go again, they dissipate and that is pure anarchy to me. So starlings appear a lot in this collection, but this piece Rebel Sun is also looking at the language of protest and how many different words like that I could shoehorn into a piece maybe. So this is part one;

### Rebel Sun

(i)

Your alarm rings beetles. Opening curtain-heavy eyes you waterfall out of bed. Regrouping in the bathroom you notice manes of dune horses patterning through the window onto new tiles that march like soldiers. Slicing knife-edged blinds across golden plumes, you frown and stand on scales that burp toads – you still haven't lost ten pounds. You try to shower flabby thoughts away but the seal blubber in your mind holds fast and John Lewis doesn't sell the correct excavation knife.

Your car is a tortoise and you grovel to work together. Outside your office the daily protest march has begun. Thousands of bricks defend workers from the insurgent army of brilliant light demonstrating across courtyards. You shield poached eyes from the insurrection and scurry indoors to where strip lights and air-con salve jittery skin. Someone has opened a window near your desk so that you are forced, again, to confront the agitators outside. A swarm of birds occupy plastic trees chanting *comrade! comrade!* to the Rebel Sun.

You decide to take a stand and, lassoing your desk that floats down-office in the flood, type a strongly-worded e-complaint.

You try to sign off with your name but cannot remember. The letters are ants marching determinedly in circles. You brush this diversion aside and type *yours sincerely desk 391*. They will know who you are. You eat lunch at breaktime then buy lunch from the sandwich van

parked in tar sands at the back of the building. You are a caterpillar deliberately gnawing through another day. You consider taking up smoking again to curb your appetite.

Some workers are cavorting with birds in the sunlight. They won't last. You've seen it before. Socialising with agitators burns skin to ash. Soon concentration will slosh around the office like over-watered concrete and you will have to dismiss those who are not already blown away by the afternoon hurricane.

You finish work late. There is no traffic. The tortoise is now a hare. Black skies are punctured by bright laser eyes as you surge home exhausted. You are a plague of locusts devouring the contents of the fridge. Blood red wine flows as you settle alone with friends whose scripted conversations intertwine like ivy with social media feeds across the lounge floor. A river of wine finally engulfs the tiny boat in which you are trying to ascend.

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**DT:** I have these really odd, TV-based memories from my childhood and this is going to age everyone in the room and probably alienate young listeners because they won't get the reference here, but when early Microsoft programmes were out, the screensavers that used to slowly bounce around the screen in rainbow colours and were the height of technological advancement at that time, I saw a programme with an illustrator and how he was trying to base one of these screensavers on a murmuration of starlings and they were looking into the physics and mathematics of this, because before the common-held idea was that it was some sort of hive mind and they moved in unison.

They couldn't match the movement, they couldn't reproduce what they were doing, until they realised that each starling was acting independently of each other and that the beauty was in the independence rather than the collective thought.

**SM:** Yes! Yes!

**DT:** It's really nice, isn't it, that?

**SM:** Yes. Anarchy.

**DT:** And of course, the fantastic Benjamin Zephaniah was...

**SM:** He was talking about this with Frankie Boyle, who I'm also a huge fan of.

**DT:** He's fantastic, yeah. So who is your book published by?

**SM:** Parthian books, they're based in South Wales.

**DT:** When did that come out?

**SM:** Launched on the 1<sup>st</sup> June.

**DT:** So it's very new.

**SM:** Yeah, I was at Hay Festival as well, which I was so excited about, because I was there as part of the Wales India Mela, which is a festival. Earlier this year, I went to India with, so it was a British Council Wales initiative with Parthian books and also Wales Arts Review and Literature Wales, so the return leg was to see some fantastic Bengali poets come back with us, come here to Wales.

We were at Hay, my book was in the bookshop at Hay, I should be really cool about that, but it was all over Instagram, I was taking the photographs of me going: 'This is the book at Hay'. I'm going to be honest, that was a definite career highlight.

**DT:** I've been watching the excitement on Instagram around Ledbury, which was this weekend. I haven't been to either of those festivals. I'd do the same, if my book was suddenly somewhere, it's the whole point, isn't it?

**SM:** Yeah, there is that validation. For the last 10, more, 13 years, I've been working mainly just doing spoken word, then I wanted to create, well, I did create hand-stitched pamphlets, mainly because I was like 'I don't want to be part of the establishment, I'm going to do my own thing'. I did an album, I toured a few shows, then there comes a point where now I have a book out and a title, could I be any more establishment? When did that happen? But yeah, there's only so long you want to spend in the hinterland before maybe you want a wider... I don't know. I'm getting older. I'm not sure. Maybe my ego just needs more validation.

**DT:** It takes a while. I've had similar issues, well not that I've had offers of publication, but a similar thing of I don't really want to be part of that, well, that's how I used to think. I think there's a natural process that does... If you then start to see it as being part of something with people you genuinely admire, and you want this physical object, then that's fine, you just have to reconcile with yourself that you are then part of that system. You don't get tarred with the same brush just by having a hardback book.

**SM:** Exactly, I suppose there's a point as an artist, we're constantly evolving and progressing and then it's like, where do you progress to? To have a book out after having been working in the industry so many years feels like a lovely milestone. It's a book I'm really proud of.

**DT:** I had Rachel Long on recently and two of the members of the Octavia Collective, based at the South Bank in London, and they were talking about what it means. Octavia is a collective of women writers of colour. They were talking a lot about what it means to aspire to be part of a canon that doesn't reflect you, do you form your own? A very generalised feeling is you can only complain about an established canon so long, for so long before you think, well should I try and add something to it? If it's not what I want now, it's only going to become what I want by adding to it.

**SM:** Yes, I absolutely agree. You've summed it up for me.

**DT:** That's why I came to Wales, just to put everyone's mind at rest.

**SM:** Thank you. That's it. I do feel for example, there's been a bit of a hoo-ha recently in the literary scene in Wales, because there's been an independent review carried out about Literature Wales and how they go about engaging people in Wales and the review was very scathing of Literature Wales and was quite a hatchet job. Everyone collectively gasped and said 'would you put that in a report?' It seemed very subjective, it was not what they were asked to do, then since then there have been replies and today, there has been an official Arts Council reply, saying the report is not particularly professionally put together.

This report was interesting because Gary Raymond, the editor at Wales Art Review, has written a brilliant response to it actually, which I would highly recommend to anyone, if you're interested in the ins and outs of the Welsh literary scene, and he basically said this report is a big old flobby, spitting dinosaur that's rearing its ugly head, because that's how it used to be.

The report very much says it's about the author and the book and the author takes their book into a school and they read the book and people buy the book and of course, that is one element of literature and it's a very important element of literature, but a lot of the young people I work with, on the projects I work with, when I'm working in youth clubs or with Literature Wales or Barnardo's, those children are not going to buy a book. It just came across as very elitist. But what's great is it's been recognised as a certain faction.

The thing is, there is absolutely a place for academic literature and it is an important, essential part of Welsh literature, we absolutely need it, but it's upsetting and frustrating when certain elements of that say it's the only way people should engage with literature, because it's elitist and immediately discounts thousands of young people, or just people, from being able to engage with literature. That's not the point. The point of Literature Wales is widening participation, reaching a hand out.

The centenary of Dylan Thomas, I went into all sorts of places, taking Dylan Thomas poems, they fund a huge array of extra-curricular activities, which some people might not even think are over-literary, but the point is, that might be the first point of contact for certain young people to engage with that author or that book and then they might buy the book.

**DT:** I've just been interviewing Rishi Dastidar and he came out with a really good point, that somebody is going to read something for the first time at some point and it may be something you're editing or putting together or presenting and you have to be prepared that they won't have any contextual knowledge about what you're doing, or perhaps any interest, and you have to step outside that.

There's a huge problem in this country where education is founded on the rewarding of a very, very small group of people and those people didn't grow up on the estate I grew up on. I'm guessing, I don't know Wrexham that well, I've only been here a couple of hours, I'm guessing they don't live in this region either, too many of them anyway. I think it's criminal actually, the way that so many young people are denied access to that kind of learning.

**SM:** Exactly. Exactly. That's why it's so important that national organisations are encouraged to go out and find ways to engage. That's the point. It's finding new ways. The point is then, that when you're looking for ways to engage with new people, not everything's going to be successful, because they are hard-to-reach groups. The point is, you've got to try. It's that keeping trying, putting a hand out of them.

**DT:** I also think it's a really positive point. Reports like the one you just mentioned are largely ridiculed and reviews in places like The Spectator and Private Eye, when they talk about younger poets, especially younger female poets, in this country, they do get widely ridiculed for this outdated view. I think it's passing. It's just annoying when you're trying to fight against it as part of your job.

**SM:** They still do it and you think 'have you not learnt?' We don't work like that anymore, there's a whole new raft of artists coming up who are not backstabbers, we want to make a living in the arts, but not by being careerist, not at the expense of another artist. We want to put our hands out and help other people. I love that that's becoming more the way that artists work.

**DT:** I think that's a really beautiful place to stop. You've summed it up really nicely. We'll finish with one more poem and if you could remind people the publisher and where they could perhaps get the book.

**SM:** OK, so the book Rebel Sun is out with Parthian books, so you can buy the book from them and it's a hardback poetry book, beautifully designed by my partner Andy Garside. We wanted it to have a nod to the old Russian propaganda posters. This is me unashamedly being an anarchist-socialist-left-wingy person. I'm going to leave it there. So you can order the book online, it's £10, but it's free postage and packaging. This final poem is called From The Ashes and it's a nod to Baudelaire's Albatross, which is one of my favourite poems of all time ever;

#### From the Ashes

The Albatross straps a leather sack of infinite ideas  
across her feathered breast and, rising  
to greet the sun, locks wings out.

In the cold blue sky  
white clouds wrap her in myth.  
When she settles her feathers are  
plucked by people who have lost all sense of their own worth.

One final sharp tug and the bird is bald  
*grounded like the rest of us.*

The oven lit for supper.

She is ugly and ungainly, her flesh  
tough and chewy, we wail  
while threading feathers and curiosities  
from the sack onto fat necklaces.

That night our eyes billow with clouds,  
white bellies distend like volcanoes  
belching white-hot fire  
and curses.

The next morning, mourning over  
the newly barren ground,  
we scatter on the wind to salve burned skin  
with patterns of stars seared into our eyes.

She was difficult to stomach –

the starling risen from the ashes.

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**DT:** Thank you very much, Sophie, thank you for joining us.

### **Part two (31:52):**

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guests: Tim Humphrey-Jones – **TH-J**; Natasha Borton – **NB**; Tukaisloveletter - **TLL**

**DT:** That was the Young People’s Laureate for Wales, Sophie McKeand. This is our penultimate episode before we reach the end of this funded period. If you’d like us to tell you who you’d like us to talk to in the future, or any topics for discussion in the next series, you can go over to [www.lunarpodcasts.com](http://www.lunarpodcasts.com) and complete an audience feedback form.

Up next at Undegun, I’m talking to Natasha Borton and Tim Humphreys-Jones about their monthly spoken word night, Voicebox. After that brief chat, we’ve got a selection of some of the open-mic performers and part of the feature act for that evening, which was Tukaisloveletter. There will be a list of the performers’ names and the times they appear in the episode description, but they are as follows: Pat Edwards, Graham Weaver, Lucid, Evrah

Rose and Natasha Borton. Excitingly, there's some beatboxing in there. Here's Tim and Natasha. Enjoy.

**TH-J:** Undegun has been running for just over four years. It was set up by This Project, which is founded by Dave Grey and Mike Jones, and they've been doing a fantastic job here. In terms of the art space itself, it was initially set up as a pop-up art space, but it has now been here four years, so it's doing really, really well. Exhibitions are constantly changing, they've done things with local organisations, mental-health groups, they've had exchanges, so I think they had Finnish artists over and sent some Welsh artists over to Finland, that was really cool.

They regularly have gigs on here as well, they play a big part at WrexFest, which is at the end of the month and Focus Wales, which is at the end of May. Yeah. Fantastic space, fantastic people here.

**DT:** So we're here tonight for Voicebox, which is a monthly poetry and spoken word night. How did that start?

**TH-J:** So basically, I'd been to a couple of poetry nights outside Wrexham. So I'd been across to the Absurd in Mold, I'd been across to Poetica in Bangor, not sure either of those are still running, and then I'd been to Dead Good Poets Society up in Liverpool and a couple of other places, Chester Poets. I'd enjoyed all the stuff that was going on in the near-vicinity, but there wasn't anything central for Wrexham people to come to.

I clocked that this pop-up art space had appeared and I just thought 'that would be perfect', walking in expecting I might need my business pitch, approached Dave and said: 'I really want to do a poetry night. Can I do a poetry night here?' They sort of went: 'Yeah, sit down, we'll have a cup of tea'. So I sat down with them a few times, had a think on the name, came up with a few, which got discarded fairly quickly, as always is the case, and yeah, we landed on Voicebox, felt that was appropriate.

I've never wanted it to be exclusively a poetry night, so we had spoken word, poetry, storytelling, beatbox, rap music, acoustic singers, pretty much everything except for a ventriloquist. If you're a ventriloquist, please come and tick that last box off for us, that would be great.

**DT:** Natasha, can you tell us about the format of the night and how it's structured? I believe you've got a feature act tonight.

**NB:** We try to open about 7pm, but that never happens, does it? We have an infamous open mic, which we've managed to tailor to really give the people of Wrexham a really good platform, from newcomers every month to internationally recommended artists that have actually come through Voicebox. So we have that at the beginning, then we have a bit of a break, when we have a picnic, which is delightfully supplied by Tim and Jade, and then when we come back, we always have a headline artist.

Tonight, we have our headliner, Tukaiisloveletter, he's an amazing artist, I met him on the Words First BBC Extra and Contact programme we did last year, or a couple of years ago. We all got together, a group of 12 poets, and he was just phenomenal, a lovely person. We always have quite good artists, internationally-recognised poets and spoken-word artists. We have people bringing their Edinburgh Fringe shows. We have a bit of everything, which is brilliant to bring to Wrexham.

**DT:** Really professionally...because we've been pretending he wasn't sitting on the armchair beside me. Hello to the feature act. Are you looking forward to tonight? It's going to be good, huh?

**TLL:** I am indeed looking forward to it.

**DT:** Where are you based?

**TLL:** I'm based in Manchester and Birmingham right now, but we're trying to work on London and hopefully, I can build a good relationship with Wrexham and be up here more often.

**DT:** First time?

**TLL:** First time. It's wonderful to be able to perform here.

**DT:** If I do my job properly, there will be poetry coming from the night. It's yet to happen so you can't be too sure. We're going to hear more from you as you're featuring, but where can people check you out?

**TLL:** Yeah, [www.tukaiisloveletter.com](http://www.tukaiisloveletter.com) everything's pretty much on there.

**DT:** I'm going to put the link to that in the description. I believe Voicebox as a night also exists further as a collective?

**NB:** Yeah. So a couple of years ago, I did a project called the International Talking Doors project with Roundhouse and what I noticed there was every single poet that was in there had a collective and we didn't have one. We had our night, which was fantastic, and we ended up having a group of us that were really coming together as artists and really showing themselves nationally and internationally. So we decided to start the Voicebox Spoken Word Collective. At the moment, we've been touring nationally, we've even toured internationally, we have an international beatbox champion, 'Kin 'Ell.

**TH-J:** Battle rap.

**NB:** Battle rap. Beatbox, beatbox.

**DT:** I'm 36, it's all the same to me.

**NB:** So our battle rap champion. We even have a national beat-box champion in Lucid. Myself, Natasha Borton, I've done stuff with the International Collective at the Roundhouse and stuff with BBC1 Extra and contacts up in Manchester and quite a few other places. Tim himself has set up an up-and-coming hip-hop collective and award-winning hip-hop group Spit Bucket.

**TH-J:** As I was touching on earlier, I didn't want it to be exclusively poetry. We had a few people that came through that were sort of rap acts. I've got a friend called Dave whose rap name is his real name, Dave Acton, approached me with the idea of setting up a rap group and he was saying we've got enough people to bring together a collective for the hip-hop side as well.

Again, we talked over names, discarded a lot because they weren't very good and tried to link it into Voice Box so the rap group or the rap collective is The Larynx. That features myself, I go by 'Double-Barrelled' when I'm doing the hip-hop stuff, nothing street, I've just got a posh surname, and then we've got Misfit, JB, Dave Action, Bill Bowman, Lucid we touched on earlier, Runic. There's about 13 of us so I apologise if I missed anyone. Our Brian, Coming of Age, he's based up in Manchester at the moment I believe, we've just taken on another member, Evrah Rose.

So we're always growing, always doing something and from that we formed Spit Bucket, which is myself, Some Person, who's a DJ, Lucid, Dave Action, Bill Bowman and we go by Spit Bucket. We've recently done our first gig at Focus Wales, which was phenomenal. All of us were kind of, well, very nervous, but it went really, really well. We've got our next show on the 29<sup>th</sup> of this month at WrexFest at Undegun and all the other guys from the Larynx will be performing at that as well.

**DT:** We'll endeavour to put all the links in the episode description. There's a lot going on, isn't there? You should come to Wrexham. This event is a monthly event, apart from your short winter break?

**TH-J:** Second Monday of every month at Undegun. We just have a winter break, which is December, January, February. It's every other month of the year. Second Monday.

**DT:** I've given myself a hell of a job with the editing. Thank you very much for joining me. Some poetry.

**[00:39:36]**

Open-mic readers:

Pat Edwards – **PE**

Graham Weaver – **GW**

Lucid – **L**

Evrah Rose – **ER**

Natasha Borton – **NB**

**TH-J:** A Voice Box favourite, Pat Edwards everybody.

**PE:** Face lift

My face in lining up to check  
its worn cheeks and over-hanging eyelids  
In the mirror. Like any old building,

the elements have washed it  
into disrepair, though not yet instability.  
No need for signs warning of  
*falling debris.*

I slap on a bit of make-up sure,  
but it's purely cosmetic,  
just to plaster over cracks,  
add some colour.

If I had more money than sense,  
they could lift me, suck me, fill me,  
provide full and costly renovation.

But when you are poor, all you get is  
unsuitable cladding  
and no real means of escape.

©Pat Edwards

**TH-J:** Graham Weaver everybody!

**GW:** Hello, it's my first time here, I'm here to continue the 'bald men in grey shirts'  
segment of the evening. Some love poems;

Runaways

and the sea is only ninety minutes from here  
and although the window is glazed again with frost  
the car can be made warm as sweet misting bed breath  
and hooded you look good - fugitive, fringe-hidden -  
and we'll have music in cases cracked and love scuffed,  
the streets so empty they'll be ghosted stark and black  
and we'll be starlit still, the road humming behind  
and sending us jet like through sandpaper cold air  
How late it is, you will say, but then sleep straight through  
and wake to find yourself rising in powdered light  
and glad you took this foolish arm way back when  
and laying your hands on the things rebuilt from the dawn

and the sea.  
©Mattias Weaver

**GW:** I'll just finish with a quick one, it's a Tanka called;

Wrexham Baths

every father's arm  
every other father's back  
reads *cymru am byth*  
in ink, in blurring gothic  
each parchment limb testament  
©Mattias Weaver

**TH-J:** Graham Weaver, everybody! Basically, running with a little Spit Bucket theme. We had Dave Acton earlier, we had me. Lucid has just arrived so it's beatbox time!

**L:** [BEATBOXING]

[00:46:00]

**TH-J:** Man, that's fucking ridiculous. I recently went down with him to Cardiff to the National Beatboxing Championships. That was really cool but it's also great to be able to sit there and think 'how are they all doing that?' and 'where's that noise coming from?'

Last month we had a lot of new people to Voice Box which was great, some of them have come back which is also fucking great! So, for those of you that caught her last month, you had a massive treat. For those of you that are going to experience her for the first time, oh! Evrah Rose, everybody!

**ER:** I'm going to depress you all for a little bit now because I do seriousness better than I do happiness. I live in a depressed world. When I look around the room there are probably 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 of you that has probably been depressed in your lives. Depression strikes people whether they're happy, whether they're sad, it strikes for no apparent reason at all. This poem I wrote when I was in the middle of a depression when I was walking home from work one day, this is;

Slithering

I live an augmented reality  
With my imperfect intervals, like they were inserted in to my  
internals I'm an absentee,  
I find no satisfaction in this mundane existence just like this world  
before and after me,  
I lay my ashes and pieces upon this mantelpiece, I'm needing  
something to anchor me, that doesn't aim to dismantle me

My face is mapped in a way that compartmentalises everything, like  
an amputee I'm limbless,  
I feel the pain stretch through my core and to my fingers, and it  
lingers, like a foul smell, I don't spend these hours well, seconds are  
wasted, time has no time for time, step in to this world of mine, give  
me a sentence and I'll share half a line as long as twine denouncing  
this frame of mine that's become crooked and old in age,  
I stand on stage as a joker faking love by masking rage, my  
masquerade is a half a shade darker than my soul  
I take the longest route alone, for my home is not a home, it's more of  
a dome of imprisonment, where my thoughts collect and assemble  
and obscure my envisionment  
I need something to envisage someone to listen to reduce the  
diminishment of my omnipotence  
I'm living this, day by day I'm carried away in to the distance away  
from my former self that I'm hidden within, living a sin without giving  
a whim I feel the net closing within an inch I'm giving in,  
I'm giving in  
So Don't crawl inside of my withered skin where winters been and  
snakes are slithering, whispering and differing in their indifference for  
the world they have me living in,  
I'll just continue play the fool without admitting it...

©Evrach Rose

**TH-J:** That was, Evrach Rose everybody!.. Here is, Natasha Borton, everybody!

**NB:** I wanted to give a trigger warning about this half-finished piece. It's about a domestic violence, kind of, relationship that I went through when I was a lot younger. The title is Dminor7th and that was our secret code that meant, 'I love you' when his other girlfriend was around. I should have known from then really, shouldn't I?

### Dminor7th

I was at the High school age  
of finding myself in the faces of strangers  
and dubious places

I wore my tie thick  
and unthreaded the stitches  
reconstructed it in my own image

I'd heard that love songs were sung  
by women with guitars  
I knew then that beauty came only from steel strings and battle scars

Danger came  
in the call of hisses  
tracing my palm

I knew him in a smoky haze  
looked up to him from a floorboard mattress  
and held him to my pulse  
like a river  
finally come to lie still.

He was the first to make my eyes water

He picked me wild flowers  
dipped in poison  
I had nothing but the breathe of them

When he said he saw rainclouds from his bedroom window  
I wondered if they were the same ones I saw  
If this twilight sky could stretch the distance between us  
to touching  
Held out my tongue  
as the air corroded me dry.

He tastes like sugar water  
too close to salt

They warned me about him  
in shallow conversation  
hatred condensed in quick degradation.

Danger came perfume of iron  
blood clot  
at the back of my

But when he beat my breasts in anger  
disguised as sexual desire  
it was their words he drowned  
drumming taught skin

We built a home in the forest  
from the roots of willow trees  
and abandoned wallpaper

He crawled into the fireplace  
replaced by matchsticks and ash  
and set himself alight

So when he said this love of ours  
would be fought before it was won  
I prepared for war

caught his tears in my lungs  
until I choked for more.

and there was always more  
more tears to soothe  
more anger to evade  
more questions  
and answers

Less Love

I remember when we started our own evanescence cover band  
from a yamaha keyboard  
and sheet music

when he bent down on one knee  
and proclaimed his love to me  
to an empty bus station and a pineapple

when we filled ourselves on cups of tea until midnight

or when he broke my nose into heartbeats  
I mistook its scrawl for love letter

I followed him through playground and playing field  
across aqueduct and clearing

The stones to cross the river nearly too far apart

but I found him  
knuckles white  
with hesitation  
and my shirt lay open as my tie tightens

I imagine his voice turning to starlight

my love dying in starlight

Danger came and felt like home

and nothing  
but a jagged bread knife to cut him from freedoms soft silence

From my mothers sewing box  
I stash thread  
the wrong shade of gold

Bittersweet are my memories of first love  
I traced the foundation of innocence to the crack  
and found a vision of him  
meek, milder than I once remembered  
no more drenching in anger and unforgiving  
but pity  
and my heart heaving  
for a man I knew once, loved even  
the way that only teenagers can

He was the first to make me cry in Dminor

\*appendix  
- to his ex-girlfriend

He told me you'd died in the bath

It was really strange to walk into you in the pub.

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**End of transcript.**