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[Episode 113 – Leo Boix; Amaan Hyder](#) (25/05/2018)

Transcript by Christabel Smith

Producer: David Turner – **DT**

Introduction:

DT: Hello and welcome to episode 113 of Lunar Poetry Podcasts. My name is David Turner. This episode is in two parts and coming up later on is poet and blogger Chrissy Williams chatting to Amaan Hyder about his debut collection *At Hajj*, which is out through Pinned in the Margins. Up first though is a conversation I had with bilingual poet Leo Boix. We met up in London last month, mainly with a view to discuss *Invisible Presence*, a developmental

platform for British-Latino writers, which Leo has established alongside Nathalie Teitler, which is the first of its kind in the UK.

But as with a lot of these conversations and the fact I don't really make any notes before I meet my guests, we didn't really get around to chatting about that much. Instead, we spent most of our time chatting about translating poetry from one language to another, the different processes at play when Leo writes in either English or Spanish, why Leo doesn't translate his own writing and the positive influences various writing collectives have had on his own writing. As always, a full transcript of this conversation is available to download on our website, lunarpoetrypodcasts.com.

Now, this and all future intros will be shorter than on previous episodes. From now on, I will return at the end of the podcast with an outro. Apparently, a four-minute intro at the beginning of an episode that is an hour and 20 minutes in length is just too long for some people. But I love you all, so anything for you, know what I mean? Here's Leo.

Oh yeah, one more thing. If you like this or any of our episodes, please do tell your friends and loved ones. It's the most effective way for us to reach new listeners, especially since we don't advertise or have any budget for that.

Part 1 (00:01:54):

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Leo Boix – **LB**

LB: Hello, I'm Leo Boix, I'm a poet and writer and also a journalist and educator. I was born in Argentina, but came to the UK in 1996. I have two collections in Spanish, published in Argentina in 2015 and 2017, and I'm working towards my first English collection, hopefully coming out next year. So I will read a poem called:

The Somnambulist

counts backwards
as if there was a language just for chairs.
Sluggish. From evening until noon
witch hazel he has not planted
wait for that unknown light.
Oblique moth equilibrium,
iridescence. It is time.
Retreat to the garden
and wait.

And wait,
retreat to the garden,
iridescence. It is time,
oblique moth equilibrium,
wait for that unknown light.
Witch hazel he has not planted.
Sluggish. From evening until noon
as if there was a language just for chairs,
count backwards.

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DT: Thank you very much, Leo. Thank you for joining me on the podcast today. That poem has appeared in the PN Review, right?

LB: In the latest issue, there are going to be five poems of mine and this is one of the poems. It's a poem that started in Spanish. I published a version of this poem in my first collection in Spanish and I reworked it in English and it's a specular poem.

DT: For those that don't know what a specular poem is, or if you want to see the physical form of this poem, you can download or go over to the website lunarpodcasts.com and get the transcript, in which you will be able to see the physical form or go out and buy the PN Review. For God's sake, support literary magazines! Basically, if people imagine an hour glass split down the middle vertically, it's like cinched in at the waist, but it repeats itself in reverse.

LB: Exactly. You can play around with punctuation a little bit, but yeah, that's pretty much how it works. I wrote a few specular poems, I tend to like this form. I wrote another poem called 'The Fall', and yes, I do like it. For me, it works better in English. I do write in both languages, in Spanish and English, but it's a form that for me, works.

DT: Can you give an idea of why it doesn't lend itself to Spanish?

LB: I don't know, it's very difficult to say. I tried many times, but it almost doesn't work for me, I tend to write differently in Spanish and English, I never translate my work from one language to the other. I feel like I'm a different poet, completely, in Spanish and English, the way I write, the imagery, the sensibility in a way. I was born in Argentina, Spanish is my mother tongue. It feels like it's inside me and it comes unfiltered somehow. English is outside me and I can see it physically. I can mould it.

DT: That's interesting, how this form might lend itself to the moulding of the words as well.

LB: Exactly, very much so. It's almost like I can see it and it's like a sculpture. In Spanish, it's difficult. I've tried many times, but I prefer my English version.

DT: I've been trying to think of a quote. I have these half-built, half-constructed quotes from constructivist artists, Russian artists, running through my head, but it's something about some mediums allow you to withdraw something from yourself and some mediums, you are extracting meanings from a form and how ultimately, it can be the same person, it can be the same ideas, but certain ideas will mean an extraction from yourself or something from a form.

LB: Yes, I agree. It's interesting because my first collection in Spanish, I wrote not thinking much about form and when I started writing in English a couple of years ago, it was the opposite, maybe because I went on different courses at the poetry school and I was much more aware of form when I started writing in English. Then, when I wrote my second collection in Spanish, in a way I was aware of form, very much so, although I was always a big fan of Borges, for instance, and his sonnets, so it was always there, but when I sat down and wrote poetry, it wasn't, especially in Spanish, in my mind at that time.

DT: Is there also a safety net involved in a poetic form with a second language, in that the structure is provided for you? I speak Norwegian and try to write a bit in Norwegian, for fun really, but I think I'm at that stage with my Norwegian that it would be too much to consider finding the words and then allowing a form to come out. I think would probably need to choose a form first, then try to fit them in it.

LB: Exactly. It happens to me. It's almost like I decide on a structure and then it's easier for me to build a poem around it. Or sometimes I write a poem and immediately realise oh, actually this is a sonnet, it will work as a sonnet. It was really interesting, two years ago, we did a retreat, part of The Complete Works with Mimi Khalvati and it was a session on sonnets and it was just brilliant, I learnt so much then. I wrote a few sonnets I'm quite happy with, but she was quite instrumental.

DT: We'll come on to the Complete Works in a moment. You've already suggested that you will write in Spanish or English. Have you attempted to translate anybody else's work?

LB: I've been doing it for a couple of years and it's something I really enjoy doing, especially cultural translations and versions. I started with a poet called Jorge Eduardo Eielson, a Peruvian poet, he was better known as an artist primarily, but he was a great, great poet. He was born in Peru but lived most of his life in Italy. I just bought the book in Madrid and just loved the poems, I found them exquisite, so I decided to translate some of the poems. I realised there weren't any books in English of his poetry. Then when I wrote the poems, I wrote versions of the poems, like my own responses, almost like a dialogue between him and me.

He died in 2006, so I felt this personal connection with him. Also, by doing translations, I was so looking at the lines, each word and the context, I was so involved with his poetry and his life that it felt right to have a dialogue, so I did this kind of three-column sequence of poems and they were actually published in MPT, Modern Poetry in Translation last year. I'm still translating his work and also, I've translated another Peruvian poet called José Watanabe, a great poet, he died in 2007, I think. I did a few translations, again published in MPT quite recently, actually in the current issue.

So I'm constantly looking at Latin-American poets, known here or not very well-known, and trying to translate their work into English, although that's actually a 'no-no'. I was born in Argentina and my mother tongue is Spanish and I should be doing it the other way around, I should be translating from English to Spanish, but I just found it amazing. It's such a fascinating process because it's so creative. You're just so involved in the work.

DT: Hopefully at some point this year, we're going to have a conversation, on the podcast and Modern Poetry in Translation, about the mechanics of translation because I find the whole thing fascinating. My very good friend, Nils Christian Moe-Repstad is a fantastic Norwegian poet and he hasn't really had much work translated and I don't feel currently that my Norwegian is good enough to attempt it, though I do feel I have enough of a relationship with him personally to know what he means through his poetry.

That's such an important part, isn't it? You can start with a word-to-word translation, but that doesn't necessarily give you a poem. I say necessarily, but it definitely won't give you a poem. How much, of the translated poem, do you feel is the original poet's work and how much is yours? And then, how much of that is necessary for it to work?

LB: In the case of Edilson, it took me months and months. At first, I wanted to be a purist, I wanted to translate almost word by word, then I realised there was something missing, the musicality, the internal rhyme, there were all these things I felt I had to work on. When you translate, you're constantly making choices of words, so that process took me a long time and then by writing the versions, writing the responses, actually in some cases line by line, replying to his poems line by line, I went back to my original translation, retouching things, words.

It really felt like a conversation between us. It's interesting because I was reading recently this book by Ursula K Le Guin and Diana Bellessi, a great Argentinian poet and they became friends. Diana Bellessi didn't speak a word of English and Ursula K Le Guin's Spanish wasn't very good. They became friends and decided to translate each other's poems and they produced this book, 'Las Gemelas, El Sueño', 'The Twins, The Dream', something like that. It's a brilliant book because you can see in the poems the choices they made and I was thinking how, not knowing the language, they probably exchanged many, many letters and looked at the dictionary. It's a fascinating process and actually, the end result is brilliant. It's almost like reading each other's work and talking about each other's work in such a meaningful way.

You could see it in the book. It was a book published in 1997 and I went back and actually, my idea was to do a little bit of that with Diana Bellessi, translate some of her work into English, here in the UK and work with her, hopefully.

DT: If any listeners are interested in the process of translation, I'll signpost that the Poetry Translation Centre offers some really excellent workshops. They offer workshops in which you don't need to know the language of the poet because, as you're saying, it's more about grasping the feeling that's trying to be conveyed.

Before we move on to another subject, it must have been a fascinating process for you in terms of how you then write in English if you've gone so deeply into someone else's work and tried to think about how that would best work in English.

LB: Yes. Remember, I started writing in English just a few years ago, not very long, and I have been here for almost 20 years, but for years, I only wrote in Spanish. I read in English, I read lots of poets in English. It took me lots of years to realise that all my friends are here in the UK and I should actually start writing my poems in English. That transition from Spanish to English was actually quite daunting at first, then it was amazing, because it felt another door had opened for me. As I said, because I write quite differently, I can choose and it's kind of fun.

Translating is part of it, in a way, because it's almost like navigating these two worlds. When I write my poetry in English, sometimes I ask people to translate it into Spanish and the other way round. I never translate my work.

DT: Going back to my friend Nils in Norway, his English is definitely competent enough, but in the same way, he doesn't feel confident he could transcribe it into English. I suppose, again I don't have enough experience of it, but in the process of translation, do you have to destroy before you can create it again? As an artist, do you want to do that to your own work? That may be part of the trouble?

LB: Yes, definitely. Also, I remember I was part of this collective a few years ago called SLAP, Spanish and Latin American Writers and Poets, and we would read poems, mostly in Spanish, sometimes to English audiences. People sometimes wouldn't understand the language and I thought to myself 'What if I translate this into English?' I did and I think it's a different experience, translating your own work. I feel like it's better when I write in English straightaway. It feels like it's truer to who I am in English, rather than translating myself in a poem from Spanish to English.

DT: You touched on the Complete Works earlier. I'd like to talk about that programme for a bit and the effect it had on your writing, but maybe you could just explain to the listeners what that programme is, how it came about and how you got involved with it.

LB: It's basically a national scheme to promote the work of British poets from different backgrounds. I was the first Latino British poet involved in the scheme. I was part of the third series of the Complete Works. It's a really successful scheme in the sense it catapulted many poets that are now really well-known, including Sarah Howe, she won the TS Eliot prize, and Mona Arshi, she won the Forward Prize and many other poets. It's a great scheme. I was so happy I got it.

You had to present a series of poems and it's a very thorough process of selection. In my case, it was so diverse. We have Momtaza Mehri, for instance, or Victoria Adukwei Bulley, or Will Harris or Tomi Sode or Ian Humphries. There are so many different poets, brilliant, brilliant poets, so it was a really enriching, really inspiring two years for me. By the end of the process, there's an anthology published by Bloodaxe in London, in Manchester, so it's a great way of showcasing your work. It was brilliant. I really, really enjoyed it. For me, it was crucial because I felt part of a collective, part of a group, whereas before, I was a little bit on my own. I was part of the collective of Latin American and Spanish poets, but it felt a little bit more isolated or ghettoish.

We were doing events or readings, but it was always for people interested in Latin American poetry. This was a completely different thing. It was pretty much for everyone. It was a big challenge for me because it was all in English. It felt like now was the time to do it. My mentor was Michael Schmidt, director of Carcanet and editor of PN Review, so we worked together for two years, editing poems and polishing poems. So it was great, a really inspiring scheme and as a result, I started this new scheme called Invisible Presence, which is a smaller version of the Complete Works and it's for British-Latino poets and writers. I'm running this scheme with Nathalie Teitler. She's also the director for the Complete Works.

DT: Before we get onto talking about Invisible Presence, I just wanted to ask, because while there are so many links between the two things, they are essentially very different schemes, set up for different reasons and I just wanted to challenge a commonly held assumption that poets are happy to isolate themselves, that loneliness is an important part of their practice and I really want to refute that quite strongly.

It seems to be that is only supported when you talk to people who are part of these schemes and how important it was for them to suddenly feel part of a group and to feel, maybe more so with the Complete Works and things like Malika's Poetry Kitchen, when that first started, you had certain people in the Arts Council view of things who would be described as 'marginalised voices' or from marginalised backgrounds, but I really think that feeling of communality does feed into everyone. I think it's a real shame we don't all get the chance to sit around [with other poets]... It's sort of why these podcasts exist because although it's me having a conversation with one person, it then goes out to hundreds, or thousands, of people to share in that conversation and have that link with writers.

LB: Yes. I felt isolated as an immigrant from South America because of language barriers at the beginning, then cultural differences, as a journalist as well, working on my own, this was a great opportunity for me to be part of a group and a wider collective. Some other poets from the scheme had a chance to be part of groups in the UK already, so for me it was great, brilliant. I learnt a lot. We had loads of seminars and workshops. We went to a retreat and had Mimi Khalvati and Pascale Petit working with us for a week, with tutorials and readings. It was brilliant.

DT: Is there one thing you would look back on and think 'That was an amazing moment, that really opened the way I thought about my writing'? As an example, my most recent guest, in episode 112, is the fantastic Mary Jean Chan and whilst she wasn't part of the Complete Works, she talked about how Nathalie Teitler almost gave her permission to write about fencing, which Mary Jean had felt was too banal a subject when she wanted to write about gender and sexuality issues, but then how permission to write about something seemingly mundane to her allowed her more freedom to express herself.

LB: It's interesting you mention Natalie because she was crucial to me. She came to one of our readings with SLAP, the Latin American collective, and she heard us and came to me and said 'I'd love you to start writing in English, I'd love to read something in English' so we started working together and she was amazing. She encouraged me to write about [certain] themes, nature for instance, or myth, or folk lore or gender issues. She was really crucial. Even

during the Complete Works, doing workshops with her gave me a lot of confidence, to be able to write and share what I was doing.

She was quite crucial, I have to say, for me. During the Complete Works for two years, I guess that residency, that retreat, with Mimi and Pascale was very important because we looked at individual poems, with both of them, and they gave me great ideas and encouragement. That week was very special. As well, the readings, because for the first time, we read all together and it felt really that I was part of something special.

DT: I only know Natalie online, which is quite common when you work on poetry projects, but it does feel in 10 years-time or maybe sooner, people will be talking about her in the same way they talk about Jacob Sam-La Rose at Barbican Young Poets and the likes of Malika Booker, whose Malika's Poetry Kitchen has gone on to touch so many poets' careers at the very start. Similarly with Jacob. It does feel you're two steps away from Jacob with any poet in Britain at the moment, especially now, when they all seem to be winning awards. It seems that Natalie, quite selflessly, is having the same effect on a lot of writers.

LB: It was important for me because she lived in Argentina for years. I think she was born in Argentina, so there is this link with Argentina and also, she did a PhD on Argentinian poets and she's bi-lingual, so for me it was brilliant because she allowed me to express myself in such a way, it's such a unique thing. Also, when I was writing at the beginning in English, she encouraged me to use Spanish words or 'Spanglish' words and that was really liberating because I felt like I would never be able to cross and she would say 'you can, you're allowed, you can do it and it's empowering and important for you to do it.' She gave me that permission and I learnt that with her.

DT: She seems to be very good at giving permission. Mary Jean said exactly the same thing. I think we'll take a second poem please, Leo.

LB: I'm going to read a poem called Río Nuevo. It's a poem about a river that suddenly appeared just a few years ago, in the middle of Argentina, because of the overworking of the land in Argentina, because of the appearance of these large groups who are growing soya beans and destroying the land, changing the landscape. It's a major preoccupation now in Argentina. I wrote this poem;

Río Nuevo

Huge mounds of earth, upturned grass,
Eucalyptus logs carried along the surface.

Around soya farms, land gaped open
like a canyon. Terra firma's revenge.

Water rushed down a deep gully
carved beyond the wire fences

of Argentinean flatlands. Abject sludge
pumped through Cuenca del Morro basin,

chiselled a network of waterways, ravines.
A new river appeared—the Río Nuevo.

Rich marquetry of woods, *bosques*, grasslands,
natural sponges, now gone

for tassels of maize, soya beans, all in rows.
Large agro-groups killed the native

forest to plant this new golden crop—*La soja*.
Deep rooted trees replaced by tiny rhizomes

that grow fast, barely touching the ground,
only there a few weeks per year.

New owners didn't rotate their crops.
A Martian landscape rapidly arose.

As soil shifted, gave up under its own weight
breathless, falling behind. Locals sensed

buried flows. Nothing was permeable.
Shallow tunnels sprung up, erosion hastened,

turned streams into deep wide trenches.
Campesinos clawed at unstable cliff walls,

a clod of soil dissolved in their hands.
"It's basically dust". *Es como polvo*.

In the middle of a field, a giant canyon drops
abruptly away, currents rush at the bottom.

The land has been cleft in two. An electricity pole
on each side of the bank, its cables still attached

to rods leaning sideways, rusty old nails
to hung bouquets of artificial flowers.

Pampero storm gathers force, wind follows,
It laughs out loud, carrying bleached sterile seeds.

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DT: Thank you very much. One more question about language. How often do Spanish words and phrases appear in your English poems?

LB: It's interesting. Sometimes, not at all, sometimes I write poems without any Spanish words, and sometimes, especially when I'm talking about something that relates directly to Argentina or South America, I tend to use more words in Spanish. Sometimes, you guess the meaning of the word by the context, sometimes there's no way of knowing, you have to go to a dictionary. Sometimes I like it because of the way it sounds in Spanish, it goes well, the music of the sound, how it looks on the page. There are many reasons. I recently wrote quite a long sequence called 'Pombéro', it's a story about a mythical figure in South America, mostly in Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, and I used a lot of Spanish words, mostly places or plants or trees or birds that are specifically from that area.

It feels a very Latin-American poem because he comes from that region and also, I included words not only from Spanish but from Guaraní, because it's a mostly Guaraní myth. Guaraní is an indigenous language from that part of the world. As for Pombéro, it's a Spanish name, but there are Guaraní names for this particular creature. It's an interesting story because he protects nature, plants, rivers and goes after people who destroy nature or the fish or who kill animals, so he can be a protector of nature, but he can be also quite nasty towards people, especially towards woman, especially unbaptized woman or women with single children, so it's really ambiguous.

People still believe in his powers and they leave rum or tobacco outside their doors. There's not much written about him. There's a lot of oral tradition. I was fascinated by the story and I wrote this long sequence. Going back to what you were saying, I used a lot of Spanish words. It felt right to do it.

DT: It's interesting what you're saying about using Spanish words in English poems or when the main body is in English. If you're referring to something that is from a region where the first language is Spanish, it makes sense to use it. Where do you feel the obligation lies as to who then explains what these words mean? As a poet, do you feel that's it, the work's gone out, it's up to you [the reader], if you want to know what this word means, it's up to you to search? Or do you feel in some cases, it's necessary to put footnotes or explanations?

LB: Sometimes, the poem tells me it's fine to use a few words you may not know and sometimes, it's the other way around, and I do feel I need to clarify for the sake of the poem. I remember writing this poem in three large stanzas called 'England'. It was quite a surreal poem, so when I used a few Spanish words, I wanted to clarify them a little bit, otherwise there would be too much confusion. In other cases, it really works quite well when you might not know the meaning of the word and you might guess because of the context. It's something I'm really conscious about when I write in English.

Also, in Spanish, I use a few English words. I remember doing a reading in Buenos Aires and I used a few words in English and it felt completely different, because English there has a completely different political charge because of the Falklands [conflict], for instance. One person came to me afterwards and said 'You could use that word in Spanish, why are you

using that word in English?’ I explained to him I’d been living in the UK for 20 years, English was part of my daily life. We talked, we discussed it and it was a really interesting discussion, but it felt it was quite a strong reaction.

I probably use more Spanish words in my English poems than the other way around, mostly because at the moment, I’m definitely writing more in English. It’s something I’m aware of, I’m fascinated by these debates, even when I read other poets. I’ve been reading a lot of Latino poets who are working in the US at the moment, who are either from South America or second or third-generation Latino and using loads of Spanish words, for instance people like Javier Zamora or Natalie Diaz or Francisco Alarcón. He used to write in Spanish, then he did another column in English, so two columns. He became very well-known in the US as a Chicano poet writing in Spanish and English, publishing in the US.

You have people like Lorna Dee Cervantes, she uses loads of Spanish words, sometimes whole lines in Spanish, not translating the lines. It felt really political, they were making a case that some of these poets came out of the Chicano movement in the 1960s and 70s and there was a reason why using those Spanish words was so important for them. In a way, I draw lots of inspiration from them. I feel my experience here is completely different from the Chicano poets in the US, but I feel part of that larger family, that collective in the UK.

DT: My own writing contains a fair amount of Norwegian, considering it was a language I learnt much later, I didn’t move to Norway until I was 28. I don’t have Norwegian parents, I didn’t live in Scandinavia as a youngster, I just moved there as an adult and learnt the language, but I’m quite interested in the gap between the literal translation and the meaning in the first language. When I first started learning Norwegian, I was fascinated by words like ‘tannkjøtt’ which means ‘gum’, but literally means ‘tooth meat’ when you break the two words down. As I’m writing in poetry and writing anyway, I found those gaps...

Once you translate, you get rid of the meaning because you translate directly as ‘gum’ and lose the root of the word. I was giggling to myself internally when you mentioned these writers seeing it as a political statement because when I do it, it’s just seen as being too bloody clever and a typical poet, being deliberately deceptive and trying to remove as much meaning as possible.

LB: Yeah, but for instance in the case of Lorna Dee Cervantes, she was born in the US from a Mexican family and she was forbidden to speak Spanish because, I remember she lived in San Francisco and there was a lot of racism against the Latinos in San Francisco in the Hispanic community there, so the family forced her to not speak Spanish, so when she started writing her poems, she used a lot of these words and that’s why it felt so powerful, because it felt like she was rebelling against that. Also, as I said before, writing whole lines felt really powerful.

Also, I guess because I’m bilingual, I get that. I wonder if you’re not bilingual, if you’re just an English reader and you read those poems, you feel you’re left out when there is so much Spanish there or so much of the language you don’t understand. Sometimes I just guess, but I like that sort of challenge, even when I read something I don’t wholly comprehend, I love that.

DT: It's definitely loaded as well, isn't it? Because English comes with so much weight and expectation, everyone globally will know roughly what you mean, so it comes with that connotation as well. I haven't yet had a guest on that is firstly an English speaker but is then bilingual and chooses to write in their second language and drops in English words, because that would probably be viewed as arrogance rather than anything else, just the assumption you would know what these English words mean. Whereas for yourself, English being your second language, it's seen, hopefully rightly so, as an exploration of your bilingual nature. It's interesting how it works in those two directions.

I get what you mean, is that political message seen by a solely English-speaking person? Or is it just 'I might scan over that line' and you're relying on them then to go and look it up?

LB: Exactly. Recently, I was doing a course at the Poetry School, Latino Poetry and Poetics, and in one of the workshops, there were three English-speaking poets, one from Australia, from the US, from the UK and we were doing a workshop with Spanish words and I asked them to use some of these words in their English poems, even if they didn't know their meaning. This poet said to me 'Am I allowed to? I'm not Latin-American, I don't have any connections to South America, I've just been to Argentina recently.' I said 'Yes, try and see what happens.'

She actually wrote a really good poem and she used a few words in Spanish in the context of this travelling, going to Argentina. It felt like she was quite wary about using a word.

DT: That is a serious consideration for – I don't mean to stereotype – younger writers with so much political awareness around appropriation and what you take from your travels around the world and how much you're allowed to pick up. I suppose it's all to do with the awareness of whether it's appropriate or not for you to do it and that will tell you whether you can use that phrase or use a reference to a certain culture.

LB: You were saying you sometimes use Norwegian.

DT: Yes, because the Norwegian language represents a very defined part of my life, for a start. If I'm writing about a time or an event that happened during that time, usually some Norwegian will come out.

LB: You will include some of those words.

DT: Yeah. It wasn't the first time I spent any time in a psychiatric unit, but it was the first time I was diagnosed as being bipolar and I then spent – it was a very odd period of my life – I spent a few occasions in psychiatric units in Norway. That mental-health awakening, or coming to terms with being bipolar, happened in Norwegian, which was a very strange experience because my Norwegian wasn't quite good enough to comprehend.

LB: You weren't bilingual [at that time]?

DT: I was talking Norwegian, but I would say I was conversational level. I would say I am fluent now, but I was more conversational then. Plus, when you're talking to psychiatrists, it's a completely different language in itself. Quite often if I'm writing about mental health, a lot of Norwegian phrases will come up because it was such a formative experience in terms of coming to terms with living with this condition. A lot of times when I think about shame or guilt... I consider it odd but I'm sure if I spoke to a psychiatrist, it would be very obvious to them why I do it, but the Norwegian language will often come up in my mind if I'm trying to express those kinds of feelings.

LB: I feel the same when I'm writing something related to South America or Argentina, even my own family or family experience, I would definitely use a Spanish word, like a title of a song, because it kind of places a poem in my mind to that specific place, that region, or even a time of my life. Remember I left Buenos Aires when I was 19, 20, so I spent half my life in Argentina, half in the UK.

DT: Funny you mention song lyrics. I think in English, when I'm thinking about a poem, if I ever add Norwegian words to it, I'm far more inclined to include Norwegian song lyrics and I would never do it in English because I think I might have a bit of a hang-up that it may be slightly clichéd to include pop songs and pop-culture references, but it's happened a few times in Norwegian. I think also, when I was learning Norwegian, it was amazing for me the first time I could understand a Norwegian song on the radio, because it meant I'd come quite a long way with the language.

LB: This whole thing with language is really interesting. I remember speaking with my dad and he told me 'I don't understand why you're now in the UK', in the sense I was really bad with languages, my English was terrible at school, I promised never to learn another language. I was terrible with languages. I ended up living in the UK and learning English. I remember the first few years, I really struggled. I didn't speak a word of English when I came. I was terrible. So that process was actually quite complicated and after years of being here, I befriended English. It's almost like it's part of my life. It's fascinating what happens with language. Poetry is a great place to explore those things.

DT: Going back to the conversation about translation, I think we forget too easily how emotive language is and what the emotional attachment is. I suppose that's why these phrases in other languages dredge themselves up, because they are so emotionally charged. I suppose that's the whole point of trying to write a poem, to communicate that in the first place. All these short bits of writing we're leaving in the world are just attempts to leave bits of ourselves and these memories.

LB: Yes. In the anthology, the Ten anthology, part of the Complete Works, I wrote a long piece, it's called 'Ode to Deal' and it's a poem divided in different sections. It's interesting, I was using indentation to mark the places where I was going back to Argentina, it's a constant, I'm writing in Deal in the UK, then back to Argentina. I use Spanish words in those places and those parts of the poem. Visually, you can go through this English-Spanish. I thought a lot about this transition, this constant going forwards and backwards towards English and Spanish.

DT: For any listeners wondering, that anthology is called 'Ten Poets of the New Generation', out through Bloodaxe, and that was edited by Karen McCarthy Woolf and as you say, that was a result of, was it the third year of The Complete Works or in total?

LB: Each series, they've got an anthology. It's published after [the course has finished].

DT: I'll put a link to that anthology in the episode description. There are some great writers in that book. We got really deep into the language stuff there, we could talk all day, I'm sure, but let's finish off by talking about Invisible Presence, what that is and how it came about.

LB: Basically, Invisible Presence came out of the Complete Works experience, me and Nathalie Teitler talked about the idea of opening up the game for British-Latino poets. By being the only British-Latino in The Complete Works and knowing there were so many really good unknown writers and poets in the UK, we felt it would be a great idea to start a mini-Complete Works for these poets. So we embarked on this project and luckily, we got funding from Arts Council. Now, we are working with 10 amazing writers and poets, not only poets, they are writers, fictional writers, there's an actor, it's very varied, the group.

Really interesting, the group. We've got first-generation Latino, second-generation Latinos, writers who were born here with Latin-American parents, most of them are bilingual. Some write mostly in English and very little Spanish, some write in Spanish with some English. It's really fascinating. We're going to work with them for almost a year. It's going to be workshops, guests coming and giving talks, workshops by Kayo Chingonyi, Keith Jarrett, myself, Nathalie and some other poets.

Then we've got a few events coming up. The main event will be one on the 23 June at the Roundhouse. It will be a big showcase for the poets to read in this space, then there will be more events coming up, probably the second part of the year in schools, community centres, embassies. There are quite a lot of activities, so we're really excited about that.

DT: One of the members has previously been a guest, so those who've already listened to episode 86 will recognise Carlos Mauricio Rojas from that podcast, who is also a part of Invisible Presence. For those who want to check out one more writer, you can find episode 86. I used to do three-part episodes, they were quite complicated, but in the episode description are start times for each individual guest, so if you just want to check out Carlos' work, you can do that. There will be a link in the episode description as well.

One question about that project. You mentioned you felt part of something larger when you started The Complete Works as opposed to SLAP, one of the earlier collectives you were a member of, how has the difference between those collectives informed how you've shaped Invisible Presence?

LB: The first collective, as I said before, felt quite ghetto-ised. Although we were all from different parts of South America, it was mostly in Spanish and after The Complete Works, I realised it's actually very important to reach a wider audience. I wanted to work a lot with craft and work with your poems and text and explore different avenues for your work. With the first collective, it was mostly readings we would organise and we didn't do many

DT: That was Leo Boix. Do check out Invisible Presence and the writers that have been part of the three iterations of The Complete Works poetry programme. There are some wonderful poets over there to discover. Next up is Chrissy Williams in conversation with Amaan Hyder. Chrissy is a poet and editor and her debut collection, *Bear*, came out with Bloodaxe Books in 2017. Earlier this year, Chrissy invited a few poets to take part in a series of interviews for her blog, in which she asks all of the participants the same 12 questions, asking them to reflect on their debut collections roughly a year after publication. There is a link to Chrissy's blog in the episode description.

It's a fascinating series of interviews, featuring former podcast guest Khairani Barokka and Rishi Dastidar, alongside others. I really love the format of the interviews and the range of answers given to the repeated questions really highlights the differences and similarities regarding the experience of first-time publication. While I chat to a lot of writers about their first collection, there is an unspoken trust between Chrissy and her interviewee, which I can't really replicate. This is because she's in the same position. I was keen to capture that in audio form as there is quite a small window of opportunity for this series, as Chrissy moves further from her own debut collection into the future.

Our aim was to replicate the format of the original interviews, so it's fairly quick-fire, with Chrissy being very disciplined and not interjecting. I think it works well, although all three of us probably wished there was more time to chat. Here's Chrissy and Amaan.

Host: Chrissy Williams – **CW**

Guest: Amaan Hyder – **AH**

AH: Coats

My parents in a playground,
playing Follow The Leader.

I take my father aside. He says, 'My father says...'
I take my mother aside. She says, 'My father says...'

We walk through school, me between them,
their small hands reaching up to mine.

They are given messages to carry between classrooms.
The *rr* you get in squirrel is an English sound they don't have.

At lunchtime I see Mr Speedy take off his jumper.
His shirt rides up:

I come out to them.
They are looking to see who has eaten the mash.

Yesterday, when they were clearing their plates,
my father was scolded for accidentally dropping his cutlery into the food bin.

'The light wasn't open,' they say.
Their drawings are pinned to a noticeboard.

They point out which houses are theirs.
I don't recognise them.

These are the pictures the grow up in.

©Amaan Hyder, *At Hajj*, Penned in the Margins 2017

CW: Thank you.

AH: Thank you for having me.

CW: I'm going to go straight into the questions. The first one is: How long did it take you to put the manuscript together for this first collection for *At Hajj*?

AH: I would say it took around three years to put the poems together. I think some of the poems were written longer than three years ago.

CW: What's the oldest, do you think?

AH: Some were written during my Masters degree, so that was 2005-2006, so quite a while ago now, maybe a decade old.

CW: That seems quite common. How much did it change after Tom [Chivers] at Penned in the Margins accepted it?

AH: There was quite a lot of shuffling of poems in and out, mostly by me. I'd say I didn't find the shape of the collection until I had delivered it, so I guess there was quite a lot of changing and shifting and poems slipping in and out. That's how it came together.

CW: I'm going off script already, it's terrible. So the long poem, the *At Hajj* pieces that run through the book, was that something that was in the manuscript at the beginning? Or did that come in later?

AH: I imagined it just as a more, say traditional, collection of poems, but I quite liked the way it flowed through with these more discrete poems interspersed with the larger, prose poem long section. Initially, it was going to be discrete poems, but it changed.

CW: That's really interesting. It's a really striking feature of the book that it keeps coming back to that. OK, wait, back on script, back on script. It was your first collection, it came out last year, how do you feel about it now?

AH: I'd say the book has receded a little, just because of the time that's passed and because I've been writing new things, so the new poems have been at the front recently and the collection has been behind them slightly. Picking up on what you were saying, what I do remember whenever I think about the collection and see it on a book shelf or just think about it, I always think of the shape of it. I always think of the long prose poem section, as we were just discussing, with these singular poems in between. That has really stayed with me.

In a way, what I was trying to do, or what has come out, has been to write about these discrete experiences and then also write something long that's quite processual. I like the contradiction between those two. I find with writing, I'm always trying and wanting to do contradictory things. I want to do this, then I also want to do this. So whenever I think about the book now, that's always what comes back to me.

CW: It feels really like that reading it, the not wanting to commit to one particular viewpoint. How have readers responded to the book?

AH: The readers I know best are obviously my friends and my family and they have been incredibly supportive with the book. I've only done a few readings of the work from this book and the readers I've met have been very positive and that has been really buoying for me and really nice. The book has been reviewed, I'm really lucky to say, in poetry journals. There was a review in The Sunday Times too. The book was well received and they were all really thoughtful and engaged reviews, so I was just over the moon about that. It's always a surprise, to be honest, to hear that people have read the books.

CW: It's interesting, that mix of you don't even know if you will get reviews and when you get reviews, you don't always want to look. It's a double-edged nightmare. The next question is: How has the broader poetry community responded to the book? Do you keep track of these things or does Tom at Penned in the Margins?

AH: They send me reviews, which is really nice. I'd say also, in terms of the broader poetry community, I guess my publisher is the main conduit to that, so that's really nice. I've been aware too that some of the poems have been tweeted. Two of them were tweeted by Kaveh Akbar, the American poet, and that was a complete surprise to me, a really lovely surprise. It's been lovely because you never know how the book is going to be received or even if there are going to be reviews.

CW: I've tried to word the next question as vaguely as possible, so you can answer it in whatever way you want. What do you think about prizes in this whole context?

AH: I follow prizes. I often find it's a good way of finding books to read, books I haven't heard of that might be on a prize list. I would say I don't write, or rather, this book wasn't written with a prize in mind and I think it would be quite misleading if I were giving advice to someone, I would say 'don't think of a prize at the end of it, think of the poems' because I

think that's important. I do enter single poems into competitions which have prizes, but none of these poems were written with a prize in mind.

CW: I think the answers to that question were probably the ones that varied most dramatically in terms of the blog and it probably says more about me writing the question, in terms of nervousness about validation. All of this stuff is me trying to figure out what my relationship with validation should be. Anyway, right, on to nicer things. Have you been writing poems since the book came out?

AH: I have been writing poems since the book came out. I found I wanted to continue to write and there were things I wanted to explore. I've been interested in the dynamic between queer sexuality and also being the child of immigrants and the intersection between those two things, the commonalities between those two things, the inability to say certain things, the habit of keeping quiet. So those things have continued to interest me. I've been writing poems more on that theme.

Sorry, this sounds really contrived, it's just been the way the poems have come out, it's hard sometimes when you're talking about writing poems, you have things in mind you might want to write about, then I hope I follow poems down the path and I don't know where the end might be. I guess I'm exploring, that's what I want to say.

CW: It doesn't sound contrived at all, it sounds really focused and interesting. What do you think are the different pressures on you now, as someone who has, in quote marks, 'published a first collection'?

AH: All of my writing happens in isolation. The poems were just with me, I was working on them, then when the book comes out, it becomes public. People you don't know read the book and then you have to step out with the book, to an extent, and read and discuss. Maybe that's not a pressure, it's just a difference from being in a room and writing the poems, to accompanying the poems out into the world. Another pressure is perhaps that another book that doesn't exist yet might follow.

CW: It sounds like you've got a really clear area of stuff you're writing about now to build towards whatever the next publication or body of work you put together is. I know some of the other people answering this, several of them use the phrase 'difficult second-album syndrome'. It sounds like you've already got an area you're coming through and that's really encouraging and inspiring.

AH: Thanks. I would also say I have a lot of uncertainty about that future work as well. It sounds great I sound really confident about it, but there's a lot of uncertainty infused all the way through it.

CW: Hooray! That actually makes me feel even better.

AH: I don't know what it's going to be at the end. They say the story you finish is never the story you start, so this is my starting point, I don't know what it's going to be at the end. Probably something completely different.

CW: But you have a starting point and that's awesome. This question is the one where I don't beat about the bush at all and really ask the thing that's driving me mad at the moment. How much do you need the validation of your work by others?

AH: I have thought about this a lot. I think the point I always try and get to – I hope this doesn't make it sound so easy – is that I'm happy with the poem myself and that sitting alone with the poem, I'm happy. I think it's an important step, but of course, there's a lot more to it than that. There's being published in journals and having a book published, or the process towards book publication, which is fraught for all different kinds of reasons. I would say I would always come back to that point where I'm happy with the poems because all those other things outside of it, you have no control over, for example, whether a poem gets accepted to a journal or whether a collection is published, you don't have control over those things really. With yourself and your writing, that's a relationship you can work towards being happy with.

Going back a bit, what I also wanted to say about having a full collection published is it's public in a way that having a poem published in a journal isn't. When you have a poem published in a journal, it's part of a larger landscape of other poems, that's comforting in a way. A collection is just you, so it's scary.

CW: I empathise a lot with trying to get to a place where you feel at peace with the stuff you have no control over. That's the trick. That's the goal really.

AH: Also, writing new things or just writing something else really helps with that question, so I'm not spending too much time thinking about whether my poem was good, I'm moving onto the next one. I guess that's fraught too, because how long should I be spending on each poem, I'm not spending enough time on each one. I find writing new things always helps.

CW: Which poems or poets are currently inspiring you?

AH: We were talking about this just before. Mary Jean Chan's 'a hurry of english'. Within that pamphlet is the poem 'Chopsticks', which was published a while ago now. I felt very close to that poem, that poem was very familiar to me. I recently read, or heard on the Poetry Magazine podcast, Danez Smith reading 'How Many Of Us Have Them?' I really enjoyed listening to that. Slightly away from poetry or into poetic language, I was reading Clarice Lispector recently, 'The Hour of the Star', and 'Agua Viva', which are full of this very poetic, prose-poetry kind of language, which I found intriguing.

Poetry absolutely comes out of reading for me. Reading is absolutely at the centre of where writing comes from. I feel I'm a reader first, that is the central thing. I actually don't think I would write without reading.

CW: I feel I want to pull that out as the quote for this interview. What advice would you give to someone who was about to publish their first collection?

AH: That's a tricky question. I think I'm probably quite full of anxiety about being published and anxiety about writing, so I would say 'just enjoy it, you're writing because you're enjoying the poems, just enjoy the writing and find what you love'. I'd say 'go with your gut', I think that's always good advice. Trust your instincts.

CW: The advice to enjoy it is simple but often gets forgotten. As someone who gets a lot of anxiety around these issues, enjoy the moment. OK, this is the last question and it's probably quite a big question, but we'll see. What is ultimately the point, for you, of writing and publishing poems?

AH: That is a big question. Initially, when I thought about that question, I thought 'I don't have enough experience to answer it'. I would say I would think about the writing process and what is the writing process, so you try and write a poem and then at some point, you think 'this is OK, this poem has been successful' or you come to an end point. When you go and write the next poem, none of that previous experience is necessarily helpful in helping you write the next poem. You have to go back to zero.

I often find this is my experience and I feel like that might be the meaning, that you're always having to find your way and find your way again. That is perhaps the meaning of it. I guess the fact you will never really know how it happens. You might have a process that helps you or a way of doing it, but you'll always have to go back to zero in a way and I think that's where the meaning is. The knowledge is always fleeting.

In terms of publishing poems, that's a hard question. I'm not sure I have an answer for that one. I guess it comes back to validation, having a collection together, and also you're adding a book of poetry to a larger landscape of poetry. Also, when I'm reading, I think I'm looking for stories maybe I've heard that I haven't found in literature and part of the writing project for me is putting down stories I haven't quite encountered elsewhere. For example, from the poem I read at the beginning of this, which was about my parents' experience and my own experience in relation to theirs, in some respects I don't feel I've quite encountered that in other places, so there's a desire to put that down in writing. Those are my thoughts around that question.

CW: I'm not going to interject any of my own stuff in here. Thank you for taking the time and answering all these questions.

AH: Thank you for having me. It was a real delight to think about those questions and my answers. It takes you right back to writing the book.

CW: To end, can we ask you to read please?

AH: Sure.

Mohammed's Mobile

I think Mohammed peace be upon him would have had one of those phones that aren't big or black like you sometimes get in old TV programmes. He wouldn't have had any pictures on the wallpaper because that would have been like eating pork but he might have had a tasbi on the top bit because you can get tasbis which slot into the hole where the headphones go.

The one I mean is the one Faraan my cousin has. I believe the colour of Mohammed's phone would have been white because that was the colour he liked to wear. I feel that he would have written his name on the back of his phone because he was a good man. He would have kept his phone clean and washed his hands before he used it. I am certain that he would have kept his phone switched off so that he would not disturb other people. His phone would have been on vibrate.

Mohammed was a good man.
He looked with big black eyes.
He lived in different places
and both his parents died.

His wife was called Khadijah.
She believed him first
and then Ali was second
The Devil was the worst.

My brother's called Mohammed.
He's always in our room.
He's stopped watching TV
and he hates middle school.

My dad does not believe him
and neither does my aunt.
My mother would tell them
but she's in Pakistan.

To make my brother happy
we go out on our bikes.
We stay away from others,
eat Bountys in the night.

CW: Thank you.

Outro:

DT: Thanks for sticking around right until the end. Grab yourself a biscuit from the tin. If you want to find out more about the series, follow our blog or download 'Episode transcripts' and go over to lunarpoetrypodcasts.com. You can also find and follow us on Facebook and Instagram at Lunar Poetry Podcasts or on Twitter at @Silent_Tongue. Don't forget we also have an accompanying podcast, A Poem A Week, in which my wife Lizzy publishes, you guessed it, a poem a week, usually read by the author themselves, but sometimes by us or a guest poet. You can find A Poem A Week on SoundCloud, iTunes and all other pod-catchers.

If you, like me, are listening right to the end of podcasts, and following pleas from the desperate hosts, why not go over to iTunes and leave us a lovely review? Finally, a big thank you to Arts Council England, whose financial support has made possible this episode and all of our episode transcripts. Thanks for listening. We'll be back in June with episode 114.

You might be able to hear in the distance an ice-cream van playing the A-Team theme tune. It's gone. Right you lot, bye now, bye, bye, bye.

End of transcript.