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[Episode 115 – Jane Yeh; Roy McFarlane](#) (29/06/2018)

Transcript by Christabel Smith.

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Jane Yeh – **JY**

Introduction:

DT: Hello, welcome to episode 115 of Lunar Poetry Podcasts. My name is David Turner. How are you lot? I recently got some feedback from a very knowledgeable and experienced podcast producer about the series, relating to how it’s hosted, edited and produced. Part of that process involved us agreeing that these intros sound far better when recorded outside,

so here I am in Victoria Park in Bristol, South West England, trying to avoid the screams of the kids attending the primary school, which sits at one corner of the park. The reality of trying to record a voiceover whilst birds chirp and sing in the background is that I am now sat on the ground as I talk to myself in a bush.

Today's episode is in two parts. Coming up later is Roy McFarlane in conversation with me at this year's Verve Poetry Festival. First though is a conversation recorded April 27th of this year in central London with Jane Yeh. We met up in Covent Garden to discuss her second collection of poetry, *The Ninjas*, out through Carcanet Press and her upcoming third collection, which will be out in 2019, also with Carcanet.

There's a little sausage dog just running past, you may have heard it.

I've been looking forward to chatting to Jane on the podcast, as many of my more recent interviews have been with writers who focus on themes rooted in the exploration of their own identity and while this is a vital process for writers to work through, it is sometimes easy to feel like the only way you will get recognition as a poet in the UK is if your writing practice is very much inward facing. Jane's style of writing runs contrary to that assumption, as it explores fictional settings with voyeuristic, often lonely, characters at the centre of her poems.

I hope it's also clear from the conversation that it's often only through interviews such as this that writers dissect their own writing practice, as they're usually too busy writing to consider these questions unless prompted. As a listener, it can be common to think 'I'm not a proper writer like these people because I don't ask these questions of myself'. The reality is that most people don't ask themselves these questions. Most poets I know, which is quite a few now, are simply overwhelmed by the fact that they haven't forgotten how to write a poem, to sit around asking why they're doing what they're doing. I hope that makes sense.

As usual, I will use this opportunity to ask that if you like what you hear in this episode or any of the other 114, then please do tell your friends, family, work colleagues about the podcast. Or maybe go and leave us a lovely review on iTunes. I have no marketing budget and word-of-mouth recommendations are invaluable.

Here's Jane.

Part one (00:03:25):

JY: Hi, I'm Jane Yeh and I'm the author of two collections of poetry, *Maribou* and *The Ninjas*. The first poem I'm going to read is;

A Short History of Mythology

So these poems have stood out a lot compared to the stuff I read for pleasure and professionally. Maybe we could start by chatting about why you choose to write as characters.

JY: I know, I guess it's something I've done almost from the beginning of when I started writing, although when I really started, as a teenager, of course like most people I was writing about my own feelings, like having a crush on someone or wishing I had a boyfriend or whatever. I guess to me, because I know my own life and experiences they're not that interesting for me to rehash or even elaborate on directly, so I guess I've always been interested in writing about other characters or imaginary characters.

I read a lot of fiction, I always have, ever since I was little, so I guess in a way I'm a little bit more like a fiction writer than a poet, just because I like to make up fictional worlds and characters. It's also kind of weird though, because obviously a lot of the poetry I read, like you say, is people writing about themselves and it's really brilliant and super-interesting, but somehow I don't feel like trying to do that about myself or my identity.

DT: I think it's important to point out at the moment, because I was a bit worried about how I would word that question, because it's difficult to start talking about things like this without making one way seem better than the other and that's not what I'm trying to do. It's interesting to see how strikingly someone like Luke Kennard straddles both, what was he saying recently? He has this internal critic, which appears as a fully-formed character in his poems, so that's an interesting tool as well, but yours is very consistent through all of your poems.

JY: Practically, yeah. I do have a handful of poems which are more autobiographical or personal, but not a lot.

DT: It would also be untrue to talk about your poems as complete fiction as well because things from your life must appear in them. There was definitely a difference between the two more recent poems I read online. In *The Ninjas*, there seemed to be – it may just be the fact I'm away in London, away from my wife at the moment – an underlying theme of lonely moments within those poems.

JY: Yeah.

DT: These themes that run through which I'm assuming would lead back to the author, rather than the characters themselves.

JY: Again of course, there is always something of the author in the characters and stories they invent, even though they don't seem to be autobiographical. Especially in *The Ninjas*, but also in *Marabou*, I would definitely say one of the main themes is loneliness or being almost an outcast, or being apart from the mainstream of society or the world.

DT: I definitely got that feeling of 'outcast', a lot of the characters seem to be voyeurs in themselves. You seem to be observing characters which themselves are observing the world around them. A poem that stood out particularly in *The Ninjas* was Sargent's *The Daughters*

of Edward D. Boit, where you imagine what the young girls in the paintings might be thinking. It's in four parts and then four scenes, in which you elaborate a bit on the characters. Sargent's paintings come up a little bit more and there are further references to images. How often do you take images as a starting point?

JY: That's also something I've done for a long time and actually at the moment, I'm doing it more deliberately. I've always been interested in art history. What I was taught was pretty canonical Western art history, such as painting and Old Master paintings, which I really like and feel really drawn to. When I started writing these poems, again in those first two collections, they're mostly these Old Master-type white-male artists, so in my new collection, the poems I've been writing, I've been trying to focus more on contemporary art and also not entirely paintings.

Some of it is installations or videos or films. I'm very drawn to or inspired by visual images. Obviously, you can be inspired by anything that's a visual image, like an ad or a poster, but something that is already in a sense a work of art, has this extra power in a way that's attractive.

DT: That process of taking visual art as a starting point, does that happen physically in a gallery space or would you reflect on it afterwards or go through catalogues?

JY: Mostly, it is actually working from reproductions, so jpegs on a computer pretty much. The Sergeant painting, The Daughters of Edward D Boit, I had seen a long time ago in person, in Boston, where it hangs, but only once really, many years before I wrote the poem. So a lot of time it's working from reproductions or even in a way, like my memory of what something looked like.

Again, with this same poem, I had a little postcard reproduction of it from the museum gift shop, but when I wrote the poem, I actually deliberately didn't look at it or keep looking at it whilst I was writing the poem because I didn't want to be influenced by it too closely. So actually, in the finished poem, if you look at it, some of the description doesn't actually fit the painting because I kind of misremembered. There's no doorway that one of the girls is standing in, it's actually just space.

DT: It's interesting, if I'm stuck for subjects to write about or struggling for inspiration, I spend a lot of time in galleries, looking at paintings. It's one of my favourite things, to write from paintings, and Leon Kossoff will always strike something in theme it's really textural, almost sculptural. I think that's why I need to be in front of the paintings, because I like to see the depth and volume. He painted alongside Frank Albach and they paint in a similar way. They paint portraits and landscapes, mainly of building sites in post-Second World War London, post-Blitz London.

I had a discussion with a friend, who also writes from paintings and they do a similar thing to you, have postcards or jpegs. Their process was needing to remove the scale and the gallery from the image. It was this uniformity of having stuff on screen that allowed them to draw stories out of the images. I wonder how much that plays?

JY: It's not that so much, it's more the convenience of having a jpeg or a postcard you can look at when you want to see what it looks like properly. Most of the time, I don't know what it is really, because when I look at art in real life, especially paintings I love, what you're saying, what actually interests me in the brushstrokes and texture and everything like that, but when I'm writing a poem about it, that doesn't really come into it.

DT: It's interesting to hear that you're perhaps writing from a memory.

JY: It's definitely already mediated by my memory. Obviously, I'm not trying to make some exact reproduction of it in words, because what would be the point of that? I've only started trying to think about it, or theorise about it, recently, so I don't really know what my conclusions are. It's one of these things, in the same way I write these dramatic-monologue poems or poems about characters, I've just been doing it for a while or just started doing it for who knows what reason, it's like you start theorising about it afterwards, if you have to.

DT: It's only when someone invites you on a podcast and forces you to think about things. This is an important point about these conversations, that quite often, the subjects that come up when you're talking about things, aren't part of your process necessarily, are they? You just do things you're drawn to and hopefully get enjoyment out of as well. I don't know why I like looking at Leon Kossoff's paintings while I sit and write about them and I don't think I would want to think about it too much because it would take some of the enjoyment out of it.

I was born near Tate Britain so it's quite nice to be in that location, knowing my dad bunked off school when he was a kid and snuck in there to get away from the truant officer.

JY: When it was just an abandoned industrial building?

DT: No, so Tate Britain, the older. So these characters that come up within your writing, I'm wondering whether you're writing as yourself as another character or are you viewing them? Are you putting yourself into those personas?

JY: I guess there's a sense when people talk about writing dramatic monologues, like poems, I use this terminology too when I'm critiquing students or something like that, you talk about trying to inhabit the voice of this other character that you've created, or speaking in this character's voice, and in a way that's true, or the most obvious way of putting it, but when I'm writing, that's not exactly what I'm doing or trying to do. I write really slowly, line by line or sentence by sentence, and I almost feel some kind of voice is being created by one line and then what the next line is, or what comes up in this one line or statement, what this kind of voice is saying.

But it's not like oh here's the voice of this lonely robot, or whatever, and now I'm going to speak in it. Do you know what I mean? It's almost more that in the process, it turns into the voice of a character or into some kind of character, but it's not like I have a preconception of it that I'm aiming at. I imagine people in acting classes must have some exercise where it's 'oh, here's the character you are, now speak in their voice'. It's not like that, it's more the opposite in a weird way.

DT: That's interesting because with a lot of people who are doing spoken word stuff or anyone that's done any improvised stuff, it goes back to that thought of acting, anyone who's done that would read your work and perhaps assume you had a conceit to begin with and an ending point and you found a way to let your character through that. It seems more that you start from quite a small starting point, then allow the whole thing to develop.

JY: I would say that's definitely true. I don't just start out with a whole conceit in mind or any kind of end point at all. Like you say, I guess it's very improvised, so moment to moment, obviously many moments, because I am such a slow writer, but it's quite haphazard as well, it leaves a lot to chance. If I think of some strange line that day that might be interesting, the poem is going to turn into that, or some character's going to come out of that.

DT: Is it the writing process that's slow or does it also take the ideas a while to germinate?

JY: What I'm trying to say, again it's sort of weird because I haven't really thought about it myself until now, I guess it's that ideas are only coming through each sentence I'm writing. So I guess you could say both of them are slow because they're coming together at the same time.

DT: What's the mechanical process of your writing? Do you have a few pieces on the go at once or stick to something until it's worked through?

JY: Usually, I'm only working on one thing at a time. Occasionally, there will be something and I'll put it aside and then be doing something else, or if I have a deadline, occasionally I'll be doing one thing in the morning and one in the afternoon, but in a way, I do just work out one really slowly and worry away at it, which I don't actually think is the best process. It's literally the opposite of what I recommend to students because I don't think it's that effective, but it's the way I've fallen into working unfortunately, so that's what I keep doing.

I'm thinking when I finish this current book, and am embarking on a new book, I want to change my process and see if that does anything.

DT: Did you have a pre-decided theme or idea about what the collection should be about or did it just suggest itself as pieces became finished?

JY: Each of these three books, I didn't have any preconceived theme or project. It's just like the poems I've been writing for the last several years. Obviously, they have their own commonalities and themes that emerge when you see them en masse, but it's not any kind of project or concept.

DT: I don't know why I keep asking that question. It seems to, at best, bore people and at worst, annoy them. It always seems that question only comes up when you're trying to sell a book afterwards, suggesting a unifying theme to a potential buyer or reader.

JY: I think it's an interesting question. I feel increasingly here, and before that in the US, most of the poets I know are often writing what they see as a collection that has a project or

unifying theme. That basic idea, they aren't just writing a bunch of whatever poems come to their mind. They have more of an arc or some kind of aim, I guess you would say. It's kind of cool. A lot of these collections with that feel are really strong and interesting. For me, again, it's just somehow I can't come up with an idea like that I feel strongly enough about.

DT: Speaking recently to Mary-Jean Chan, reflecting on her daily pamphlet, and is very concerned with her debut collection coming out through Faber, we were chatting about how for a lot of poets, the first collection is the most personal and an exploration of themselves and they can get that out of the way and get on to maybe considering 'well, I'd like to explore this theme or that theme'. It also might be a consequence of funding opportunities that become available to you once you've published the first collection. Someone might come to you and commission an idea or a project.

JY: Yeah or often, if you're applying for grants or other funding, you have to say you have some idea for a project. Again that probably is part of it with the American poets especially, how many of these contemporary American books have this kind of project.

DT: How much do commissions and projects play in your practice?

JY: In terms of financially, or supporting yourself, the money, at least for the things I've been asked to do, there's either no money or minute amounts of money, so it's not for that. What I like about it, I actually love it when people are 'Oh, I'm doing an anthology on this theme, would you be interested in contributing something or writing something for it?' or other kinds of commissions. I really like having some kind of external suggestion.

Again, the way I don't write about myself or my feelings or experiences really, so I am always looking for something else to write about, or even just a starting point or jumping-off point. Again, that's definitely one of the reasons I'm drawn to writing about art or art pieces, because it's something totally external to me, but I can grip onto as a starting point.

DT: It's useful, having those prompts external to yourself. It's something I need to get back to more. I get too bogged down in thinking about myself too much, I don't find it very healthy, plus I don't think people particularly want to read about it much. There are two sides to my writing. I have a way that's very confessional, but also really enjoy writing fiction, which is bordering on short stories.

There's a huge amount in the way you write that really appeals to me and I would prefer to spend more time exploring that. I think there might be quite a few people listening that feel a pressure to write about themselves because that is the predominant fashion. I think it's good to talk about ways of looking for prompts externally to yourself. Even if it's not with a view to being published, it might be healthy for writers to take a break from thinking about themselves, the internal 'I'.

Are you conscious of when the switch was made to know what led you to start writing more fictionally? Any advice for people that might want to try writing more like that?

JY: One thing I've noticed a lot from teaching is when you give people exercises that force them not to be writing about themselves in a confessional way, they often produce really good stuff, that's really different from the way they were writing before. Always, they will say 'I really enjoyed that, it was interesting'. That doesn't mean they're going to spend the rest of their life writing dramatic monologues, but trying something different is really worth it when you're working on your craft.

DT: Do you have an example of an exercise you might give?

JY: Yes, there are ones, like every teacher ever has used them, I'm sure, writing from visuals. Every student picks their own image, again it can be a photograph or an image of a painting, or it could be an ad or a poster if they want, totally anything, then go away and write a poem that's inspired by it in some way. It's as simple as that really. Again, I think it is probably natural for most people, especially when they're starting out, to just write in the 'I', first-person voice. So even just being directed specifically to not use that as your starting point can be fun or exciting for people.

DT: That's really interesting. Before we move on to anything else, we might take a second poem.

JY: So the poem I'm going to read is called A Short History of Style. The sub-title is Joey Arias, at Jackie 60, New York 1997. So Joey Arias is a performer and performance artist and in the 1990s especially, in New York when I was living there, he was famous for doing a one-man show where he was singing the songs of Billie Holiday and he could vocally imitate her to a remarkable extent, but he himself wasn't physically impersonating Billie Holiday, although he was in drag, but his own drag, not trying to look like Billie Holiday. This is kind of a memorial to those performances.

We are unable to provide a transcript of this poem at this time. Apologies.

(00:27:12)

DT: Thank you very much. It was interesting earlier to hear you talk about working from sentence to sentence. Another note I made about a few of the poems in *The Ninjas* and then audibly within that poem, there seemed to be a gathering together of those sentences, not that they're completely disparate because there's a lot of work going into the order of them, but there's something ringing in my mind because I was at an event recently, put on by Toast Poetry, which had Remi Graves, Mary-Jean Chan and Joe Dunthorne reading.

There was a short Q&A afterwards and Joe Dunthorne was talking about going through old notebooks and stuff that doesn't work and put aside sentences or images he likes. He's got a folder on his desktop, which will be saved ideas. I wonder whether that's any part of your process, whether you will hold onto things, or how you feel about discarding ideas.

JY: That's really cool. One of my friends, this American poet Amy Woolard, for a long time she worked like that. I don't know if she still does, but like what you said Joe Dunthorne would say, keeping this whole notebook or file of really good lines that you'd had to cut for one reason or another from a poem. I sort of used to keep a list of some good lines that I was hoping to use again, but actually, it never really worked out. I like the idea of that and the idea of collage and these fragments of poems, but again, for whatever reason, it hasn't actually worked out for me.

I think when I'm writing, especially more recently, so the poems I'm reading today are all going to be in my next collection so they're more recent, I'm definitely interested in this idea of thinking of the poem as a collage of these lines or sentences or images and trying to be less linear and less logical in terms of the construction of the poem.

DT: That's fascinating to hear because I was wondering whether I'd just projected that onto some of the poems I've been reading in the last couple of days, this idea that things could have been shuffled around. You definitely get a sense of that, but it's very interesting to hear you talk of working in a very linear fashion and going from line to line, then having this feeling that things could have been reassembled and reorganised.

JY: Actually, I guess recently in all of these new poems, the editing I do or the revising I do, is more about changing the order of the sentences or lines than other kinds of editing that one can do. So sometimes I do literally switch the order of some sentences to see what happens.

DT: Going back to the visual arts, you were saying it's not just paintings. How much do abstract and collage images play into the way you think about writing? From *The Ninjas*, it may have just been the painters I was familiar with, but it seemed much more figurative in that respect.

JY: Yeah, in a way it might be partly the kind of art I'm writing about now, the contemporary art, tends to be less figurative, or maybe I'm subconsciously seeking out less figurative work. I'm not really sure, to be honest. I feel I need less figuration to be able to create a story or characters out of than I used to in those earlier poems. For instance, one of my new poems is inspired by this installation in a small, basically a one-room gallery, so there are different pieces arranged around the room and none of them are figurative per se, except a cast of a foot.

There was a wheelchair that was cast in bronze, or painted gold, or something like that. Different objects. But the poem itself is about a man, or a boy, so I guess maybe it was interesting to me to create something that was about a person, even though the visuals I was working from don't directly represent people.

DT: This 'cut-up' or collage aspect of your process of working, how much do you want to communicate that to the reader? Does that play any role?

JY: Actually, only super-recently, I've been trying to think a little bit more about the form of the poem on the page or what it looks like on that page. On the one hand I kind of like the

fact that most of the poems I've been writing, even though they kind of are like this strange collage, they're almost rigid-looking on the page. They're set out in stanzas and the first letter of each line is capitalised, which is considered old-fashioned nowadays. I kind of like the sense of order that gives you, but actually, I'm also just starting to be interested in these much more open forms, especially as contemporary poets, who are doing really interesting work, use them so much. The idea is coming into my mind more, so I'm only just starting to experiment with them, where the phrases and words are spread out a little more on the page, not like concrete poetry, where it's making a little shape.

DT: Giving air and space inside.

JY: Yeah.

DT: Forcing people to pause.

JY: Yeah, yeah.

DT: It's fine if your process is to get to a traditional-looking poem, but if you want to communicate that to the reader, it's very hard in a traditional book to express that, because everything's very defined, it's printed there and there's no movement in it necessarily. Have you considered taking your poetry off the printed page in order to express more this feeling of collage?

JY: What do you mean?

DT: More taking it closer to what some of these installations are that you're taking your inspiration from, allowing some live movement within a text.

JY: I guess I haven't, to be honest.

DT: It just popped into my head because I've been thinking about one particular artist [Ed Atkins].

JY: It's an interesting idea. I guess if I thought more about performance or maybe were a better performer, I might be trying to do something more radical. To me, the outcome I want is something that is satisfying to me or to other people when you read it on the page. Again, I guess it's old-fashioned, but to me, the way it's performed is always going to be secondary really.

DT: I also meant not just in the performance sense, but in the way people are allowed to read the work, whether there is some way of controlling more how people interact with the words, even without your presence.

JY: Actually, I remember just recently I was in a seminar about Oulipo, that movement that started in the 60s or 70s maybe. I hope I have his name right, I want to say it was an academic named Dennis Duncan who had studied a lot about Oulipo and then was giving us a basic summary. He brought in a book and I can't remember, it might have been by Raymond

Aquino, but it might have been one of the other figures, it was actually really amazing, where the book was I think meant to be 100 sonnets, it was all French, but each page of the book was slit, so each line was basically like a flap.

It was like you could be assembling your own sonnet out of 14 lines, but from all different poems in the book, by moving the flaps. It was super-cool and I thought how cool that would be to do as a project. Maybe for someone else, not for me. The idea of that, the way it's kind of modular, and also has this degree of chance.

The thing it reminded me instantly of was the poet Crispin Best he has this thing online, I assume on his own website, where he literally wrote 1000 lines, they're quite short, one-sentence lines of poetry and there's a randomiser. You can put them in a certain order to write, maybe a 12-line poem each time. It was really excellent actually.

DT: There's a very interesting digital poetry project at the moment called ToRNN, based in Bath. It's a student [Meghan McKeague] there on their MA course and she's designed this poetry bot which has taken, I want to say the work of Keats, it may not be Keats, but it's a very well-known poet and it's like data entry. You enter the works of this poet and it regenerates poetry. The computer doesn't know what makes good poetry, there are just certain rules.

Whenever anybody talks about collage now, in terms of poetry, these things come to my mind. It may not be the author themselves that comes up, it may be more of a collaborative process to go through in working with someone else in order to show that cut-up nature of the work, otherwise it's just hugely laborious.

JY: The thing that was really interesting to me about this randomiser that Crispin made, well obviously he's a good poet, so all the lines were just interesting and strange separately, but it really was amazing. They were in quatrains, so four-line stanzas, it was pre-set to do that I guess, so you would see these four sentences in this order, then you'd be 'ah, interesting'. Each one would be about a totally disparate thing, like some thought about pizza or a dog, but then as soon as you put them together in this particular order, it generates this whole other idea or image. I do really like the thought of that.

DT: Yes, my question was definitely more aimed at what you want the relationship to be with the reader, rather than questioning why you haven't done any of these. It's interesting to see what writers' different aims are, how they want that relationship to work. With these changes you're considering with your upcoming third collection, how has that process been with your publishers? Have they been fine with any changes that have been made? I don't think I've spoken to any poets about the process that goes on between each collection and how easy it is to change direction or suggest new ideas

JY: I guess I'm lucky. They're pretty laissez-faire. They've never seen a manuscript and said 'we don't like this' or 'this isn't commercial enough or I don't know what enough'. They pretty much are happy with what I've been doing, I feel really lucky. I sort of assume they must understand implicitly that of course anyone that is writing is going to develop or change their practice from book to book. That's just natural or par for the course. They haven't

actually seen the final manuscript of this book yet, so we'll see, but I've been assuming and they act as if it will all be fine.

DT: I don't know whether Carcanet is a team or whether it's individuals, but have you throughout the three books worked with a single person or does that change over time?

JY: Again, it must be different at every publisher, but at Carcanet, because they're quite small, at least since I've been with them, it seems like there are basically two people that edit things. There's either Michael Schmidt, who's also the director and then there's always a second editor who works there, so it's always been the second person that was my own editor, but that person has changed over time. In my first book, it was Judith Wilson, in my second book it was Helen Tookey and now the current editor is Luke Allan.

DT: Obviously this is different from writer to writer and publishing house to publishing house, but what do you mean when you say you work with an editor? What role do they have in the final manuscript? Are we talking about changes to poems? Scratching out lines? Or are we talking about fitting them onto pages and the order of the book?

JY: Again, even with the particular people that I've mentioned, I know other writers that have worked with them and had different experiences, but this is just my experience personally. With none of the editors I've had has there been that much back and forth, they've kind of let me do as I please and haven't really requested many changes or edits to things, so very light touch, I would say.

DT: What is your personal editing process? Do you have people you share work with or do you rely on small readings at poetry events? How do you develop the sound and flow of your work?

JY: I don't really have people to share work with anymore, since I left the last post-graduate programme I was in. Obviously when you're doing a degree or course of any kind, you have this in-built set of people you can show your work to, then once you leave that, you're often on your own and often you have to develop your own network. I have a lot of friends who are poets, but we don't actually share our work with each other, for whatever reason. I'm kind of just reliant on myself. It would be nice to have people I share work with.

It's hard at the same time because everyone is so busy. Even people whose work I really like, or who I like personally, if they were asking me to read their work all the time, it would be hard finding the time and the headspace and all that kind of stuff. So when I was writing *The Ninjas*, which already now is a long time ago, I don't know how I fell into this, but actually for quite a while, I would write a new poem or finish a poem and send it to an old friend of mine, who's named Ed Park, he's a novelist who lives in New York, where I used to live.

It wasn't to get his feedback or edits or anything at all, it was more like 'here's my poem' and he would basically just send back an email like 'great' or 'this one is really good'. It was just general encouragement, but then after a while, I stopped doing that as well.

DT: My wife and I moved to Bristol last autumn and in January, I started a writing group, so as part of the group, we all share poems and offer feedback. That's useful in itself, but I tend to use the sessions as a way of reading people's work and giving feedback because it means I'm thinking about poems, so when I come to interviews, I'm always thinking about writers, so I don't actually share a lot of work at the sessions. Similarly to you, I also have a couple of friends who I will just send the work to and they will send a 'red heart emoji' back or something.

I don't get any feedback, but what it means is I don't feel like I'm just doing the writing for myself in a vacuum, I'm actually sharing it with people, regardless of the feedback, so I guess that's important as well, purely because the process of writing any book is quite drawn out. It would be easy to lose all contact with any reader in that development stage. I suppose it's important to have that immediate connection.

We're running out of time, but just to give a proper plug to the upcoming collection, does it have a title yet?

JY: Right now, it's a working title, but I think it will end up being the actual title because for a few years, while I've been working on the manuscript, I still haven't been able to come up with a title I really, really like. So by default it's just taking the title of one of the poems, so the title might be Discipline. Again, I'm hoping to come up with something else, just because I hate that pressure of having the title poem in a collection. That's what it looks like, it is, for now.

DT: That will be available when?

JY: March 2019.

DT: Through Carcanet Press. I'll put a link to Carcanet on the website and your website in the episode description, rather than reading them. No one ever understands websites when I read them on audio, for some reason. So there will be clickable links in the description so people can just find stuff and it's a lot easier. To finish off, we'll take a third and final poem.

JY: This poem is just called A Short History of Destruction. Actually, sorry, I didn't think this would have much of an intro, but when you hear a poem out loud, it's easy to miss odd words that people say. In the first stanza, I use the word *étagères* a French name for a piece of furniture with open shelves that is traditionally used to display ornaments. In the middle of the poem, I use the word 'ewer' which means a water jug.

A Short History of Destruction

In the palace of the cats, we minused and gnawed.
We burrowed and simulated, skirting the wormholes.
In the shiny halls, cubist paintings looked down on us

Like startled Martians; lavish flower arrangements loomed
From the persistent étagères. Our peril

Was molten and diabolical, with a side of *told you so*.
Our children vanished and reappeared under different names.
All day, cats covered in gold sat in their perpendicular chairs,
Planning invasions. In the padded drawing-rooms
They ate statement salads and filed their nails.

Item: Beshrew areas of carpet or supernumerary globes.
Item: The case of M., who was flattened by a ewer.
Each day, the smell of cat wafted malevolently through the cracks
In the platinum ceiling. We covered and filleted
In our synthetic beds. The glamour of the cats

Was undeniable, like their long and curling hair.
They rinsed their paws in lemon-scented finger bowls
Between fish courses. A potpourri of tiny bells
Rang out silkily whenever one of them passed by.
We did covet and die many times

In the palace of the cats. Beneath the jagged
Candelabras, with our backward fur and shifty eyes,
We were killed like children. The antlers on the wall
Were implacable as Valkyries. Some of the cats
Played drastic minuets on diminutive grand pianos.

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DT: Thank you very much, Jane, for joining me and good luck with the development of your third collection.

JY: Thank you so much for having me on the podcast, it was really fun.

Link (00:48:07):

DT: That was the wonderful Jane Yeh. Next up is Roy McFarlane. We got together to chat in front of an audience at the second Verve Poetry Festival, which was held in Birmingham in February of this year. This is the third of four live interviews I recorded at what I think is the broadest and most inclusive poetry event in the UK. Roy has a real ability to reflect the voices and noises of Birmingham, his city of birth, and I enjoyed chatting to him about characters in his poems being a composite of many different people.

I think about this question a lot with my own writing. One of the foremost questions I put to myself is: Do I have the right to somebody else's story? I haven't come anywhere near to answering that. While I ponder, here's Roy from Verve Poetry Festival.

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Roy McFarlane – **RM**

Part two (00:49:20)

DT: Hello Verve, how are you doing? Louder, louder, keep going. This is day four, is it not, of Verve? It just seems to be wonderfully endless. Today, I am joined by a local legend, Roy McFarlane. Hello Roy, how are you doing?

RM: Hello.

DT: I'm going to read Roy's bio. I think most of you know who he is, but there's going to be listeners I have to be held accountable to. Roy Macfarlane was born in Birmingham. Now living in the Black Country, he's held the role of Birmingham Poet Laureate and Starbucks Poet in Residence. His first collection, *Beginning With Your Last Breath*, was published by the wonderful Nine Arches in September 2016.

He is the first commissioned writer for this wonderful anthology I'm holding in my hand, *It All Radiates Outwards*, which was the product of the Verve Poetry competition, which asked for poems about cities. We're going to begin our chat with an extract from his poem.

RM: Thank you very much.

We are unable to provide a transcript of this poem at this time. Apologies.

DT: Thank you, Roy, I really love that poem. When I attended the reading for this anthology, I worried that too many people's views and musings on cities were going to be too personal and too inward-looking, but you really captured the noise of the city in your poem, by just focusing on a couple of people. I thought it was an amazing thing to do. How important is the soundscape around you in your poetry?

RM: Specifically in this particular poem, I think the poem came to life in the very essence of Birmingham city. I'm always amazed when I walk through the city, when I see Christians and Muslims having their little stands, talking about the hereafter or religion. All that language. I think that was the thing I wanted to bring out in that poem, the powerful thing about language in this city. I read an article about it. There's something like 120 or 123 languages abounding in this city and I just wanted to capture that, that din of identities bouncing off each other, it's still a beautiful thing.

I don't believe there's a city that's monolithic, one language, one identity. That's the essence of cities, people come, whether it's from the rural, from other countries or whatever, that's what cities are about. So much diversity comes into a city to make a city beautiful and grow and evolve. That's what a city is all about.

DT: I think Birmingham is one of the few places in the country I've visited that's reminded me of what Brixton used to be. Outside Waterstones, that's what Brixton tube station used to be like. That noise. I interviewed the poet Tim Wells up at Stoke Newington in North London and on the recording, I apologised to listeners that there might be a bit of noise in the background. He corrected me and said 'it's sounds'. It's an important point. It might be something that people that grow up in cities take for granted. A lot of people would consider that noise and not a soundtrack. Is that an important thing to try and communicate in your writing?

RM: Yeah. I'm thinking a lot of poems I've read, whether from the Romantics to the present day will capture rural, all that, birds, I mean I couldn't name half the birds that they talk about and all that rural setting.

DT: A pigeon poem?

RM: But they've captured something with all that extra noise that's going around, that gives their poem an atmosphere. I was thinking, what about us? Equally the sound effects, what's going on around me in a city. The number-one thing told to a poet when they're going on a journey and writing poetry is: write what you know. No matter how much I'll read all these incredible poets of the past, half of the things I don't know. I'll understand the craft, the content maybe, but I don't know that.

This is what I know and I will do everything I can to translate that into that form, that poem, so yes, it's so important to capture the atmosphere, the environment around me in my poem. I want to catch diverse voices. I'm very much a voice person and I have characters.

DT: When you say write about what you know, it's a very common piece of advice, but I was going to follow it up with: how do you write about *who* you know?

RM: I write about people around me. The characters that come up in my collections are usually a combination of individuals I know. So I either pick the best of them or the worst of them and then make a character and that character starts to walk through my collection. In, *Beginning With Your Last Breath*, there's a guy called Bevan and you'll see him crop up in three or four of my poems. Bevan is literally a collection of four or five of my friends. It's what we lived through the 80s, being black in the Midlands kind of thing and the struggles, but the joys. We loved our basketball. I wanted to talk about that and I showed it in my collection, but we also had police officers following us around. I needed to show that.

The music we grew up on, Motown, soul, R&B, Marvin Gaye. I needed to show that. You'll find Marvin Gaye going through all my collections.

DT: He should be going through every collection.

Any characters that exist in poems you love or you write yourself, do they have to be composites of different people in order to aim for a form of universality?

RM: That's an interesting question. Yeah. It's an interesting question.

DT: Quick-fire!

RM: I've always gone for several people to make that individual. There's Patterson I can think of, that's about a guy we used to go to, actually that's a composition, I just realised that's not Patterson, it's a composition of two or three guys. So there's something about me doing composition that comes through these characters. I'm not sure if it's about getting the best out of them or getting a diverse feel. I guess that's part of us being poets or storytellers, you pick as many truths as you can, but you make up other parts as well, to make that character exciting.

DT: If you're really concerned about the people you're writing about, you perhaps don't want to write about them as individuals because you don't want to give too much away about them personally and maybe it's easier to compose a character out of different elements because you're protective about them?

RM: That's interesting. I keep saying interesting, I do apologise. It made me think, I've been blessed with one or two relationships with some beautiful women during my journey and one of those ladies when I started my poetry, said she was worried about getting into the book. 'You always write about people around you and is it safe to be a lover of yours, because we'll end up in your book?' The last poem I'll read is about somebody who's real. What was the question again?

DT: Is there an element of protecting the person you're writing about by adding other elements?

RM: Sometimes, I may protect people. Sometimes I just write. Again, it's important to write the emotional truth. It's something somebody taught me. If you fuff about with it and don't really write the truth, then people know you're making it up. So if a character has to be the wife, the partner, somebody I hated or was angry with, it's going to go in there as well as the composite individuals. It's quite interesting who I protect and who I don't. That's the best way of answering.

DT: What are the differences and similarities between writing a love poem to a city in a love poem to a person?

RM: There are equal metaphors, innit? You'll see that in my next collection about certain journeys of love. I'll use landscapes, cities. In the last collection, there was something about Birmingham city and the way I fell in love with a woman, but equally looked at all the different things that were happening in the city, from the busker who's playing his saxophone to walking around the art gallery, the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, all of that was

included in this love poem that was talking about love with this woman, but also about the love of the city. I think they're equally the same. Were you not expecting that?

DT: I try to go to everything with an open mind, Roy. I don't expect anything in this life anymore. I'm jaded, jaded by poetry. I think I'll spoil the mood if I go on with another question. Let's wrap up with a love poem.

RM: The following love poem is something I perform on the circuits all the while. Somebody told me they read this yesterday morning, so I thought let me read it again, from my perspective. It's often known as 'The Tights Poem' as well. As I Did The Night Before.

We are unable to provide a transcript of this poem at this time. Apologies.

DT: Thank you very much.

Outro (01:04:18):

DT: Hello. You stuck around to the very end. You're part of a very select group of people. Treat yourself to a biscuit. This episode and the accompanying transcript have been made possible through the funding I've received from Arts Council England.

You can download that transcript over at our website, lunarpodcasts.com, where you can also follow the blog I update sporadically. If you want to follow us for updates on social media, you can find us @Silent_Tongue on Twitter and Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Instagram. There is a Facebook group, but I'm probably going to pack that in soon as it's pretty much a waste of time, what with the evil algorithms and all that.

That's it for today. Come back and join us for episode 116 – 116, it's crazy – in which I'll be talking to the incomparable Ross Sutherland about his poetry and his fantastic podcast series, Imaginary Advice. It will also be the fourth and final interview from Verve, with C.I. Marshall.

But for today, that's it. Tchüss.

End of transcript.