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[Episode 116: Ross Sutherland; CI Marshall](#) – (26/07/2018)

Transcription by Christabel Smith

Part one:

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Ross Sutherland – **RS**

DT: Hello, welcome to episode 116 of Lunar Poetry Podcasts. My name is David Turner. How are you lot? I've got a couple of announcements before we get on to the episode. Firstly, I finally added some intro music. You probably noticed. Regular listeners would have heard it on the last episode, but I got hold of it quite late, so I didn't have time to work it into the chat. The music is taken from a track called Moon Museum, recorded exclusively for us by an artist

called Snazzy Rat. If you like what you hear and want to listen to more by old Snazzy, get yourself over to his BandCamp page. See the episode description.

The next piece of news is very exciting. We're publishing an anthology later this year to coincide with the fourth anniversary of the podcast series. I will return at the end of the episode with a list of the poets involved, but they've all appeared on the podcast and they're all excellent. The majority of the poems are previously unpublished, so there's lots of new work there. The book titled *Why Poetry?* will be out September 27th through Verve Poetry Press for £9.99, which is very reasonable.

There's also going to be a deal whereby if you pre-order it, you will get free delivery. The bargains never end. As well as through the website, you will obviously be able to buy the book in, I was going to say all good bookshops, hopefully it will be available in the rubbish ones as well. For more information, get yourself over to Verve's website or click the link in the episode description. It's going to be a really fantastic book and the level of poetry in it is very high.

So, on to today's episode. It is in two parts. Coming up later, I chat briefly to C.I Marshall at Verve Poetry Festival in Birmingham. You see? Pieces in the jigsaw. It's all making sense now. First up though is me in conversation with Ross Sutherland. We met up in Ross' home in Peterborough, an area of England that is hard to pinpoint. It's not quite the Midlands, not quite East Anglia, and they really don't like it if you give up and say it's near Cambridge.

We met in June this year to talk about his award-winning podcast series *Imaginary Advice*. If you haven't listened to *Imaginary Advice* before, you're really missing out. It's an amazing exploration into what can be achieved with music, voice distortion and brilliant story-writing and telling combined. It's an oasis in the desert of long-form interview podcasts, true-crime stuff and let's face it, men shouting over each other. It was fascinating hearing how this medium is now shaping the way Ross writes and the way he is now thinking about performing. His Best Fiction win at this year's British Podcast Awards was very much deserved. If you enjoy this chat or anything else we do, then do tell people about us. It really is the best way for us to reach new listeners. Here's Ross.

Conversation:

RS: My name is Ross Sutherland. This poem is called;

In Which I Confess To Many Murders

On the way back
from my latest murder
I pause on the bridge
to marvel at the possibility that I
Ross G Sutherland
may never be held accountable for my crimes

despite the near-constant references
to my murders
within my poetry.
The names of my victims disclosed in full
along with burial locations and instruments of death.

In my early work I was cautious.
I used to telegraph my latest atrocity with nothing more
than a red object
placed in the still-life of each poem

an Irish Setter by the fire
a chilli discovered on a mahogany floor,
Ryan Giggs eating a Kitkat.

Over time, I learnt to fit each text
with a pressure trigger
ready to pop
should the poem be critiqued
and spill its fetid cargo

EG. My poem about a hot air balloon in Somerset
(published in *Views*, 2012)
can actually be reversed
like a sports-jacket
transforming into a confession
about
throwing a postman off an viaduct.

But
I gave up on metaphor when winter came.
The ground was too hard.
My voice gained a new sincerity.

These days
I plainly describe my homicides
to groups of serious young men and women
at the Aldeburgh poetry festival.
So,
I say,
Here's another one
about
another guy
I killed
in cold blood.

After readings, I move to the door to wait for the police,
occasionally selling a book or two.

Each sale
I presume will be the last.
On the flyleaf I write, Dear reader,
I wanted to stop so many times,
But why the fuck should I do the critic's job for them?
Thank God it is finally over.

And yet it never is.
I hate my audience for not picking up on all these murders

But murdering them directly would be cheating,
I think we can all agree on that.

At night after my reading, I walk the sea-front
between vast black hotels
that shrink and expand with the moon.

I am shit at skimming stones
but I like to do so anyway

Sometimes
I hear a police siren
in the distance

like an audience member with an annoying laugh
slowly fading into the hills.

©Ross Sutherland

DT: Thank you very much, Ross. This doesn't happen to me very often, but I sort of assumed I was going to be biting my lip through whatever you were reading and trying not to laugh. I normally don't corpse, but I nearly went then. That was really good. I'm going to start off by saying congratulations on your recent British podcast award.

RS: Cheers, thanks, dude.

DT: A win in the Best Fiction category, is that right?

RS: That's right, yeah. You could argue that my podcast is not a fiction podcast, because it sort of covers a bunch of stuff. I tell stories on it, definitely there's fiction inside it, but it's also got essay-writing in it and it's also got poetry in it as well, but there is never going to be a category which I fit into well, so that was the closest, I think.

DT: How does it feel to be the best UK liar that has a podcast?

RS: Very good, yeah, absolutely, that is how I should introduce myself. I really love being able to increase the quality of a lie with some sound production. I really like the editing part, actually. That's kind of become my new passion. The amount of stuff you can solve or realise about a bit of writing when you've got to listen to yourself saying it, over and over again.

DT: I should say now that your podcast is called Imaginary Advice. I don't know if you have this, but there are a couple of podcasts that I like and I really hope there is a large crossover between my listeners and their listeners, because I sort of want the same people that like that thing I like to like what I'm doing. I would hate to think the people who were really into Imaginary Advice think that I'm a prick.

RS: They don't think that, they don't think that. I can guarantee they don't think you're a prick, David.

DT: Do you have that relationship with other podcasts as well? You sort of wonder about their listeners and the life behind the podcast.

RS: Yeah, I do, I'm really obsessed right now with this Twin Peaks podcast from Brighton called Diane. I just love it because it's so much more than a podcast about Twin Peaks. It's much more about using some of the elements of Twin Peaks to talk about mythology and psychology and to really explore a whole bunch of different stuff. It's really, really well researched and also seems to have its core of a big, big following behind it of Twin Peaks fans, both here and over the world.

I suppose with any podcast, after listening to it for a little while, you do build up that intimate relationship with these voices that you've never actually met, right? I use podcasts at my most fragile, intimate moments. Yes, walking to work or when I'm stuck on a train or in the bath or going to bed. It's these quite sensitive moments that I then go 'argh, I need to shut out the noise, let's listen to somebody else'. I've convinced myself that they're my mates and I want everyone that listens to my show to listen to theirs and I wish it was the other way around as well.

DT: I have to clarify, I'm from South London and I don't care if anyone thinks I'm a prick anyway. I was born into that acceptance that people probably do and you sort of have to ride it out, so that's fine. I tell you what we'll do, maybe you could give a brief description a bit deeper into what Imaginary Advice is, when it started and why it started.

RS: Yeah, so I started it about four years ago, about the same time as you. I'd been a writer for about 15, 16 years and at least 10 of that has been without a day job, which basically means frantically trying to piece together enough small bits of work to stay afloat. The longer you do that, the harder it is to go back and undo that particular mistake. I had, over the course of those years, created all these very, very small little commissions, which were for a particular project, which had been released, maybe heard by like 30 people, and had never had another purpose for them again.

I was feeling increasingly like the platforms that were available to me as a writer, performer, poet as well, if you want to call it that, were actually quite limited. If you want to stand up and do a poetry reading as part of an ensemble bill then, maybe you're going to get 20, 25 minutes to read something that fits in that environment. Or maybe an essay commissioned or a poem in a magazine, but the boxes are still quite rigid, so I really wanted to find a place where I could take all those commissions and put them into a new place where they could grow a little bit and connect them to my main body of work.

So it started like that. I had a couple of anecdotes and poems and stories that I then recorded for the podcast and I found it just so, I don't know what the word is, it opened up so much for me about what I could do as a writer and the idea that I could have something that was basically like an essay, but then, in the middle of that essay, I could drop a poem into it and the poem functions a little bit like a dream sequence. It enables me to tackle the same questions, but in a different type of language and with a different kind of logic, and finding out ways of putting together different styles of writing became really exciting to me.

DT: Obviously, our podcasts are very different in style, but it seems as though they started, not only did they start at the same time, because I had actually remembered the first few episodes going out and Dan Cockrill saying to me 'have you heard Imaginary Advice?' because he's been listening right from the beginning and he mentioned it to me, for those who don't know, Dan Cockrill is one of the gang that started Bang Said The Gun in London, which was really great.

RS: One of the navigators.

DT: Yeah. So there's that aspect of you just wanting to find a space to archive some work and just have it there and publicly available, but the reason I started these interviews was I used to write reviews of spoken word events and I was given quite generous word counts, like 1500 words in a review, which is a lot to put down, but I found that limiting and I just wanted my own space where I could decide if I wanted to go on for another 10 minutes, I could because nobody was going to stop me.

People might press stop and stop listening, but at least I had that space. Of course, with all of these projects, there's a certain amount of ego attached, but at what point did it stop being a place to put old work and a space for you to actually do something new?

RS: I don't know, I think it has been a gradual, parallel processing thing, but you're absolutely right, just that freedom to keep going and see what comes out. For me, it is also about this idea that in a podcast, through sound design, yes, you can use music and create audio beds, but you can also do really crazy stuff with time. You can have two scenes happening in two completely different time periods, like overlapping with each other, something that just from listening to Radio LAB, oh my gosh, they're able to have three different environments which we are moving between in conversations, happening over the top and you can still distinguish them.

Even through having my voice and slightly EQ-ing my voice differently, was able to help weave together different voices. The more I found that I could almost save bits of writing, which I'd

done, which didn't really make sense, and I was able to use that sound design to pull them apart, then that gave me the tools to think more in those terms and to create stuff more bespoke in that format. I think the difference for me also was I fell in love with it because it felt like all the best parts of stage and all the best parts of what I get from the page, so from the stage, it got to be in my voice and you got to hear me come through the writing and to give it that extra vector, I think that was something I really missed on the page.

Simultaneously, what you got from the page I think in radio is that intimacy, that idea of it feeling like a one-to-one conversation with someone else. I think that Ira Glass quote, in relation to telephones, but he talks about telephones, the most intimate form of communication because you're literally whispering in someone's ear. He's really talking about radio there, but I think that level of intimacy, you don't necessarily get in a gig, unless the gig's going really badly and there's just one person in the audience, which happens. I think marrying together those two just made me fall in love with the format.

DT: Even the biggest stage stars when they perform are never going to perform a gig where 100% of people in the room have come purely for them. People are going to be there with their partners or their friends and just giving someone a chance. That doesn't happen with podcasts. If someone keeps listening to your podcasts, it means they've chosen to keep you often, like you're saying, maybe through earbuds in a public place, they've chosen to slide off with you. We're then whispering in your ear and it's a completely different thing.

My question about that would be where do you see your natural home? If you had an unlimited budget, would you be trying to do this on stage? How much of it is this is an affordable way of developing these ideas?

RS: Maybe that's how it started. Simultaneously, I've made theatre and the theatre I've made was meant to be the same thing, meant to be taking stuff I liked about poetry but expanding it in a different format, but theatre actually has a completely different set of protocols and stuff like that. Everything in theatre is a metaphor for something else. That's not necessarily the same way I would treat creating a radio story. These days, I would say I think audio is the form for me and I'm doing some live shows of the podcast over the summer, so I'll be able to tell you better in a couple of months' time.

I'm going to enjoy that because I've missed live audiences and there are definitely things I like doing with video as an element I miss working in, in this format, for the podcast. I kind of feel like finally, when I was 35, I've found this style of writing that I really like, so I got there in the end. I couldn't have found it that much sooner because I wouldn't have been able to afford the kit or it didn't exist.

DT: I'm being quite careful with this not to geek out into a podcast chat, but there are very serious considerations here, aren't there? We were just having a brief chat about which type of editing software we both use and it's only been very recently, in the last couple of years, that really affordable versions of very, very good editing suites have become available to producers and the artists, because that's something that's interesting about podcasting, I think.

The artists become producers, almost exclusively, in a way you can't do in other mediums, unless you've got a huge budget or you're a stand-up and you don't need anything other than a microphone in a room and even that, you need to get around the country presumably. You need to publicise it and pay for advertising. But this that we're both deeply engaged in feels much more egalitarian, as long as you've got the initial income to buy some equipment.

RS: Yeah, but you know, if you've got a smartphone, my first couple of episodes were recorded on my smartphone, sat in my wardrobe and I edited it on Garage Band, which came free, I suppose I've still got the laptop, but yeah, it does feel like we're in the middle of this huge boom of that and I love live gigs, but touring becomes increasingly hard. It did also come as a result of, I ran a night at Bethnal Green Working Men's Club for six or so years with a group of poets, which was called Homework, where we set ourselves a new writing exercise every month and it was great for us, it was the reason we kept writing, it gave us new deadlines, it was so important to me.

But as it got harder for everybody for everybody to clear enough space in their diary to be able to do that, even though we knew it was good for us, you know what diaries are like and life in general, we just couldn't continue, but then radio, well, I call it radio, it's not even radio, is it? It's not radio at all. But podcasting basically means I get a gig once a month with about 700 people and I can pay myself a little bit for it.

DT: We might come on to those issues later, but it's odd how things, the coincidences when I have guests on the podcasts, so I don't particularly plan which poet should follow which, because it's all down to people's diaries and when they can do interviews and I try to keep a mix of guests, but often it's other factors that dictate that. But I'm going to have to do that weird podcast thing where I say that my latest episode, which hasn't gone out yet, is with Jane Yeh.

RS: I love The Ninjas. It's such a great book.

DT: And I'm really excited about the book she's got coming out in March 2019. She's working on her third collection and we talked a lot about how she is a fiction writer first and foremost. That aspect of her poetry where she's assuming characters is really fiction-based, so it's odd you're back to back and there was no actual decision there. My guests have gone sort of 'confessional, confessional, confessional, fiction, fiction' and it's a really nice break because I think I mentioned this in the last conversation, but it's easy as an emerging writer to perhaps think well, if it's not confessional, it's not going to get picked up and where's the space to just play around?

RS: Yeah, in relation to that, I did some teaching not that long ago for a group of young writers, emerging writers probably, like 18 to 21, and all of them in their sets pretty much had a poem about the most traumatic thing that had happened in their life to that point. They were intense, intense things. I'm presuming somewhere along the line in the workshops they run, someone has encouraged them to do that. Towards the end of the week, we were going to have kind of like a show and tell, come read a poem, and there was one poet, she was like 'I just can't keep getting on stage and saying this'.

It's just like yeah, right, if you are a performer, it's Groundhog Day and you are forcing yourself back there again and again and again. It's not like 'oh, it was cathartic to write it, now it goes in a drawer, goes in a book and I'm glad I got it out there'. It's like no, you have to relive that moment again and again and again. When does that stop being cathartic and liberating and when does it become this kind of repetition compulsion where you're just stuck with it? I have sympathies for anyone who's been working in confessional for a long time who then goes 'I want to change voice here a little bit or do something else'.

DT: I think it's hard to redirect that mirror, whichever way we're choosing to shine our creative practice.

RS: Yeah, because it will always be about you. The party can't start without you. Whatever it's about, it will still be about you. Absolutely. It's tricky. These things form really early on about what our entire relationship with writing is. It's really deep down in the psyche as to what it is about the art form that makes you happy.

DT: With Imaginary Advice, I suppose...Every time I say it, I keep hearing...

RS: My weird robot voice.

DT: Yeah, I couldn't put it better than that. Your weird robot voice. People go and check out Imaginary Advice and you'll know what I've got stuck in my head, but I suppose what people are tuning in for is there's a real variety across the type of writing and the ways things are recorded and presented, but there are repeat characters if you like and I presume they are facets of your personality and who you are and your identity.

One thing I find really fascinating, maybe because it reflects something deep in me, is the slightly neurotic writer breaking down throughout the presentation of the piece and the repetition of these things and I was just wondering from that - I'm making an assumption here, you can just say I'm wrong if I am - but that seemingly blending the confessional, not the confessional but the inward-looking with the fictional, and whether you feel that could ever work on stage or whether you feel that's purely something you can only develop through trust with a listener perhaps.

RS: That's interesting. I think in terms of combining half-truth with fiction, that is something I feel I do on stage and partly for reason we were just talking about. It's like if I have to get on stage every day for 24 days of like the Edinburgh Fringe, I'm going to twist to the truth to protect myself. I know the truth when I say it, even if I'm saying the other version of it, but I want to give myself a little bit of distance. I want to be the character.

If you're a live performer, I don't know, that level of sheer, complete honesty and fragility, particularly going up in front of a crowd that may not all be there for you, they're not necessarily your mates. When they come in, some may know your stuff and will be giving you the benefit of the doubt, some people are here almost against their will.

DT: Particularly poetry, solely poetry audiences. Not the most supportive of people.

RS: This is the problem, isn't it? We've got such a broad church, we have a lot of factionalism. There's not really a huge amount to unite us because it's this nebulous, grey area in between lots of other art forms, where lots of people are almost passing through or ideas start off as poems then actually crystallise into other stuff, but it's in that weird grey area. When someone says to me 'there's a poetry night on near me, do you think I should go to it?' Like 'No!' You should find out who's on the bill and Google them and listen to their stuff and decide. The fact there's a poetry night on near you, that could be anything from avant-garde noise poetry to stand-up in rhyming couplets to I don't know what, it could be anything. Do more research.

Audiences are an unknown quantity and it's difficult to put yourself out there like that and I think that's naturally why poets that spend a lot of time on stage callous over their actual personalities a little bit, sometimes in a bad way, because I think you become weird exaggerations of yourself, and sometimes things become more exaggerated, but I think in every circumstance, it helps to play a part a bit. I feel that does apply. It's easier in radio, definitely, and I do love the fact that with each new episode of Imaginary Advice, I try to change the format. Now I've been doing it for four years, formats are resurfacing, things I've liked in the past that I want to go back to, but that freedom is difficult to replicate

DT: I think now would be a good time to take a second reading.

RS: Yeah, absolutely. This is a new thing I've only just been working on this week because I've had a big break from just writing poetry. I feel poems have come out accidentally in doing other work, but I wanted to sit down and fall in love again with writing for the page, writing poems more in discreet units. So what I've been doing is at Christmas, I got a book of family wordsearches and I've been taking one wordsearch and reading along the lines and trying to decipher it, almost as if it was a poem that had been encrypted.

So sometimes it's about adding letters in between or decoding in various ways. It tends to come out as gibberish, then in the next draft, I push it out even more and add more lines to make more sense of it.

DT: Has it gone so far that you've developed any rules for yourself or are you just letting it flow?

RS: Yeah, the rules are coming out in that I've become much more comfortable with first drafts being utter gibberish, then taking quite a long time with the second draft and allowing myself more rules about moving lines around and adding new lines if necessary. To begin with, the poems were just me trying to enjoy language and I set myself that as the end goal, like 'don't worry, Ross, just enjoy the process'. Now, some of the more recent ones have been revised enough times that actually, they've turned into stories and feel more like me in conversation with myself, rather than just deciphering. So let me read you this one. It's called;

Wrong Secret

He woke ROFLing in the patient canteen,
big toe turning black.

A nurse escorted him back to his lodgings
like the hurried final page of someone's homework.

He sat on the bidet a while,
and listened to the Ellen omnibus.

It felt like his days were being stowed away
in shipping containers
patrolled by hairy-legged stevedores.

He took off his clothes
and stared at the weather:

the broken pines,
the meditation pond vivisected by the storm.

The scene was far too 'on the nose'
to appear in the memoir.

His medicine was formulated to make him cringe
in fifteen minute intervals.

Humiliation had somehow become part of the condition.

To think this rehab centre was once a Montessori school
full of aggressively complicated alpine-wear.

Then later, the headquarters of Monster.com.

Rumour had it, vice-president Edwards
had grown tired of feudal obsequiousness
and led a DDOS attack on his own servers.

The traces remained if you knew where to look.

The energy of self-sabotage ran through everything,
like fibres of manganese.

Off-duty nurses sold drugs behind the swimming pool.
Even his therapist encouraged him to relapse,
the same way art manifestos
always include an ironic get-out clause.

Nothing is truly valuable until it is destroyed.
A life is defined in ten mistakes.
Even being taken by the Rapture
is technically still just “failing up”.

He wandered into the quad,

comforted by the fact he was both inside and outside,
like the hurried final page of someone’s homework.

Soon he was dreaming a dog-fight
behind a day-glo bodega,
the sound of gas derricks beyond the highway,

his wife wrapped in white
like a statue by Bernini

He woke ROFLing in the patient canteen,
big toe turning black.

©Ross Sutherland

DT: Thank you very much. You’ve sort of touched on this already and it almost feels like a really naïve question, but just a bit of history, the first question I ever asked was in October 2014 to Pat Cash and it was Why Poetry? That was the fundamental starting point for too many interviews, before I had the confidence to think of more nuanced ways of saying that. I want to change that round a bit. I’d like to know where poetry starts in your writing, if you know.

What do you see in the podcast and in your own writing as being poetry, because it’s quite a broad term with your poetry, isn’t it? I’m not being negative, I think it’s a really pleasant thing, a really wide view of what poetry is.

RS: I think what’s quite nice these days is maybe I don’t have to worry so much about that. I tend to say ‘I write poetry’ rather than ‘I am a poet’. I feel it’s a lot nicer to define myself by the verb as opposed to the noun. It makes it a lot easier to a certain degree. As someone who, not so much these days, but definitely in the past, spent a lot of time doing poetry workshops in schools, sometimes with quite young kids, but really any age in a school, any pupil asked to write poetry, that’s going to come with a lot of anxiety about ‘who am I to do that?’ Part of my role there is basically to try and throw all of poetry under the bus and say ‘you call yourself a poet by writing and that’s it.’

The confidence which comes from sitting down and beginning a thought you don’t know the end of, for me, that I feel is what starts to be the centre of what a poem is. It’s that kind of, if I was going to be all hippy about it, it’s more like a dream space where you don’t know where you’re going and you’re working intuitively into something, which is why I say almost all ideas

begin for me as poems and then some move off into different formats and the ones that stay as poems remain crystallised in that original state of exploration.

DT: That's interesting, the nub or essence of an idea. I think one of my biggest points if anyone ever asks for feedback on their work, especially what would be considered more spoken-word stuff, is that the idea was good, it was just never an idea for a poem and the fact they stopped at a poem was what shackled that idea. It could have gone in many different directions, but trying to be a poet and control that idea was perhaps what let it down.

RS: Yeah, I mean I feel it always helps with a poem to know what the door is, the way into a subject, but I don't know which poet says, maybe it was like Billy Collins, I don't know, maybe he was quoting someone else, about how a poem tries to escape its own subject matter, which is why when someone knows the end of a poem before they've begun it, then it's like 'I don't think this should have...'

DT: Like the build-up was just to get to that end point.

RS: Yeah, it's like 'this should have been something else. That point should have been the start or you should have worked in a medium where I feel like you could have explored that further'. But yeah, it's a thorny thing, isn't it? I suppose you probably spend a long time specifically trying not to think about it too much at the risk of then killing any urge to do it in the first place.

DT: Throughout the 116-odd episodes, I've tried to stop myself giving caveats of what we're saying, but I think it's important in moments like this to say 'if you don't agree with these ideas about your own writing, that's fine, because out of the 200+ guests I've had on, every one's got their own version of what the answers to these are and I think that's perhaps what stops people answering fully, because they don't want to sound like they're dictating to other writers how they should be writing. What I'm asking is how you feel about your own writing and it's not that I want answers for myself or the listeners, it's just interesting to see how everyone works in such different ways.

RS: This is it, isn't it? It's like I love a very, very open definition of poetry. I feel like it's just that exploratory space. You could also say that for me, it becomes a poem when it's outside the flow of capital. That is probably also like a bit of a definition of it. I don't know whether therefore if a poem was commissioned, whether that means it stops being a poem, but certainly, the less money involved in it, the easier it is for me to tell you if it's a poem.

DT: Moving on and taking that idea of exploration, I'm thinking definitely about specifically your podcast episodes where repetition is explored. How important is it for you to find and locate a breaking point in a narrative? It almost seems like you're trying to break the piece in where you're getting to. I'm thinking specifically about, is it Seven Trips to Spar?

RS: Me Versus The Spar. I think there are seven versions, yeah.

DT: It's not only a particular highlight of mine of your podcast, but it's one of the best things I've listened to in ages. I really do love that and what draws me to it is that idea that

you could just keep doing that until it completely breaks down and it almost does at some point as well.

RS: I'm a huge fan of the OuLiPo, that's the origins of a lot of that stuff and it really inspired my work, so for anyone listening that's not familiar with the word, it means 'Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle', it was a group of French writers who began in the 1960s and they set themselves up as a kind of anti-surrealist movement. They didn't like the surrealists. Well, the surrealists were saying 'we're accessing our unconscious minds, we're breaking through the bourgeois mindset by painting our dreams and we're totally free.'

The OuLiPo were interested in the same thing, but they were like 'no, you're not free by just removing the rules. You're just becoming slaves to rules in your subconscious that you don't understand'. So the OuLiPo flooded their work with rule-based systems and created all these arbitrary rules around it as ways of disrupting their natural thought patterns and therefore avoiding cliché, because they would make it fiendishly hard to write, by putting all these obstacles in the way. Then just in the way the mind has to think around the obstacles, you'll end up in more interesting parts of your brain.

That's kind of the OuLiPo thing and I fell in love with various techniques they've gone and done. I really love the univocalisms, which are poems that only have one vowel, I find them really fun and interesting ways of thinking about writing. I loved Raymond Queneau's exercise in style, which is exactly the same as my Spar thing, it's a very short anecdote which then gets told over and over again in different styles. I think I like loops and retelling the same story over and over again from this way of advancing a story in a kind of lateral way, as opposed to a linear way.

So actually, a very, very small text, but then by revisiting it, either in a different genre or with a slightly different angle over and over again, you get to explore different aspects of that same thing. It is about breaking it eventually. It's about exhausting...

DT: It's what Georges Perec said, isn't it? His book was Exhausting A Place In Paris, where he sat in a square, he was an OuLiPo, part of that movement and tried to describe every single thing he saw, to the point where everything lost all meaning, because if you're actually seeing everything, you're not seeing anything. The reason I bring that up is if any listeners are interested, you can go back through the archive to somewhere in the 60s, between 60 and 70 in episodes, there's an episode about collaboration.

I'm sure you know them both, but Sarah Lester and Nathan Penlington on the 40th anniversary of that Georges Perec book, they repeated the exercise over a weekend in Hackney Town Square, [An Attempt At] Exhausting A Place In London, which is out through Burning Eye and it's a really interesting look at how you can just exhaust an idea and eventually, it may loop back on itself. It's all about loops, isn't it? You can exhaust an idea and suddenly by continuing with it, you can reenergise it in a lot of ways.

RS: I love working in that kind of way. What actually inspired me to do a lot of that stuff as well does actually come down from this aspect of live performance that an audience doesn't see, which is repetition. That idea, like when I've toured with a bunch of people and

we're doing the same show every single night, and you gain this kind of real, granular interest in other people's performances, and when someone else does their bit on stage that night, slightly different, that becomes really interesting and I think that idea of how through repetition, things can shift and change, that I absolutely love.

One of the things I like about using repetition is allowing one audience member to experience what that's like. I did this theatre piece years ago and it was called *Comedian Dies In The Middle Of A Joke* and it was a seven-minute show. It was set in a working men's club, a stand-up comedian comes out on stage to do a routine, I've already told them in advance this is a reconstruction of a murder, that after seven minutes, someone in the audience stood up and shot the comedian, but before you get to the gunshot, the show stops. There's a sound like a record being wound back and the entire show resets and then everybody moves one seat along and it starts again.

This time, you've got a different person playing the comedian and we're all in a different space in the room. The thing is, the comedian is actually just an audience member as well and they're reading the routine off an autocue. There are various points in the script for people to heckle. The only thing that's unscripted are the heckles. You can't heckle at any point, you have to heckle when you're sitting in the right seats and it's the right time. What you find is over the seven performances in one sitting, with one audience, the heckles get smarter and smarter and funnier and funnier as people try and break the show.

They know what the comedian has to say in response to their heckle, so they can make them sound even more stupid by setting it up. What I really loved about that idea was that level of prescience, is that a word? The fact that the audience feel like gods for that little time. They know everything that's going to happen and the confidence that comes when you know the structure so well that even they can feel comfortable playing with it.

DT: I wonder how much of that attraction for you comes from, you have a background in fine art, right? Is that what you studied?

RS: No!

DT: Did you used to write in Liverpool?

RS: I briefly taught electronic literature, so a kind of English and Cultural Studies course, that's when I was doing my PhD, but I studied at UEA, I did Creative Writing.

DT: I might just leave this bit in. Like I said, I don't mind if people think I'm a prick. That's interesting actually, because I had made an assumption and it's interesting how I was wrong, so I was going to say that I've found with a lot of writers that have a background in having studied Fine Art is the overlap of what happened in the early 70s with Performance Art when the process was the thing and the final act wasn't actually part of the artist's practice, it was just the bit that sold tickets, the public-facing part of it.

It seems to me with the repetition and this idea of you showing your drafts, is that through the podcasts and through your performance work as well, that you're trying to give the

audience the process as well. A book isn't perhaps enough at the end. The final piece isn't enough. You're inviting the audience into the process of making a piece.

RS: That is true. It turns out no, I don't come from a background of Performance Art, but that is absolutely on the nose and if I was being cynical, I'd say maybe that's because deep down, I secretly believe that writing poetry is more fun than reading it. On a different day, I might not answer that one, but I love the idea of, I don't want to meet the audience at the end, I don't want to sand off all the edges and make the thing perfect and then hand them something which is this completely-made thing.

I think because the journey of exploration I go on when I write, I want them there with me as I'm exploring it. I want them to see the moment that I finally work out what it's about and that is about opening up the process. That is partly why I like using at least sometimes in my writing career, why I really enjoy using form is because form writes that large, particularly in something like univocalism when you can only write using one vowel. People can see you struggling to tell a story and having to find these workaround solutions to getting through scenes and they're there with you in your room, writing it, when they see you doing that, but not being presented with this perfect work of art.

I guess because for me, teaching poetry to young people, that's so much of the uphill struggle, basically trying to expose the wires. One of the exercises I run with students is to get them to take an existing poem and then just write the opposite poem, take every line and reverse it. Some of those would be obvious and some would be really, really hard, like 'what's the opposite of February?' I always feel like through the act of writing, it's like playing a musical instrument, it's like what are you going to do to begin with? You've got to learn the standards. It's only through playing and being inside of the music that you can work out how to do it. I always feel writing through learning is the best way to do that and so, as much as I can make my audience also writers, the better.

DT: As you said earlier, on a different day, you may answer these questions slightly differently, so I'm not locking you down in this one way of thinking, but had it not been for Pinned In The Margins and your having such a large attraction to the process of things, do you think you would have found it that easy to be published? Because there don't seem to be many publishers in the UK that are taking those kinds of chances on writers and allowing them to develop those ideas, in that like you're saying, if you're interested in what leads up to the book more, you need quite an understanding publisher.

RS: Yeah, you do. I was really lucky that I met Tom at the right time in my life. My first collection was one of the first ones, I don't think it was the first one that Pinned In The Margins put out, but it was at the very, very start of that imprint and so I think we met at the right sort of time. I think Tom also being someone who's not only interested in being a publisher, but also interested in producing live literature and theatre and who kind of understands this dual process of both finding how page and stage fit together.

I'm really lucky and all the books we've made have been experiments, with us trying to locate that voice and trying to find ways of allowing poems to... There's something very exploratory about how I try and write and experiments, you never usually hit the ball in the middle of the

bat, do you? There are going to be mixed results and being able to work with Tom to basically help cast off the bad ones, I feel really grateful. I presume maybe now, I feel slightly out of touch in terms of poetry presses and what small, hip, young presses are doing stuff.

DT: I'm wondering, actually. You've definitely got people like Offord Road Books, Test Centre in particular, who are very interested in producing vinyl LPs alongside collections of books.

RS: Their stuff looks beautiful.

DT: Beautifully presented. I'm just wondering whether, because you've been involved in writing and publishing poetry for a lot longer than I've been in doing this podcast and sort of examining it, I do wonder if perhaps then when you first started working with Tom, whether the scene was more open to experimentation and whether it's become more unified now. It definitely does feel more like there's a particular style and I would be happy for people to come on the podcast and prove me wrong, but I do feel like things are becoming restricted for writers.

I've always loved what Tom's doing at Penned and what the guys are doing at Test Centre because it's nice to know there is something going on and they're proving you can sell books as well. Not only are they printing them, I hope they're not running at a huge loss, I'm hoping they're turning over. I'm rambling.

RS: Not at all. It's so hard, isn't it? I don't really feel, at the end of the day, advice I always give to any sort of young writer who is feeling like the gatekeepers aren't returning their calls, who feels like the scene is getting smaller and smaller, it's always like 'yeah, was ever thus'. Eventually, I think it just comes down to creating your own platform, whether that's setting up your own imprint or running your own night or setting up your own podcast. As we said, the church of poetry is so broad, so big, and yet, it's very hard to join existing clubs.

DT: Just because I would like to give people a bit of faith and a bit of confidence, if you are writing experimentally, do also check out Hestorglock Press in Bristol and Dostoyevsky Wannabe in Manchester, especially if you're looking at crossovers between essays, prose-writing and poetry.

RS: The Dostoyevsky Wannabe stuff is great.

DT: And it's all affordable, they're trying to make accessible books by selling at 2% over cost or something. It's crazy. You can get most of their books for £4 or £5 on Amazon.

RS: Did you say they were based in Manchester?

DT: Yeah. They're really good. They published something of mine, but that's not why I mention them. They're a good publisher despite publishing me. We're running out of time. I just wonder, because I'm asking these questions of myself as well, with the podcast and the audio stuff, if we move away from it being a podcast and this experimentation of audio and

musical bed and voice distortion, have you tried to think of some ways that can return to the page in any way or do you think that's the limit of it, that has to be where it exists?

RS: I think interesting stuff always happens at the boundaries between art forms and so I think it's exciting to try. I don't know what will come out of that, but I'm always interested in taking stuff that worked in one form and seeing exactly what happens when you migrate it across. I don't know. I think so. It starts to almost blend as art writing and that's funny because that's a world I knew absolutely nothing about and yet, I should look at because I should be looking at how art writing could be translated into sound.

I think there are definitely loads and loads of artists grouped around that area on the other side, the page side, who are doing stuff with writing over the top of other writing or are kind of using text in a much more experimental way, using text with image and stuff like that. I know the sort of Poem Brut night which runs at Rich Mix would probably be analogous to that kind of stuff in terms of exploring.

DT: My wife Lizzy and I were part of a Poem Brut night in Bristol and Paul Hawkins and his partner Sarah run Hestorglock Press. Paul has published Steven J. Fowler, who set up Poem Brut, so he put on an event in Bristol and it was a really interesting point at which mainly performers, stage performers, were encouraged to put stuff up on the walls and try and represent their vocal or audio work in image form, because it exists in this fabulous archive online, Poem Brut, the crossover between handwriting and the spoken word and glitches and slang and broken-down text and found text and collages.

It's an amazing project. I hadn't thought about that before, but now you bring it up, that perhaps is what led me to think I would like to see some Imaginary Advice try to return to the page, because it seems like ideas that on the face of it seem like they won't work, there has to be something there, doesn't there?

RS: Too right. Only when something becomes impossibly hard does interesting stuff come out of it. Exactly. I'd like to give that a whirl because I think it might fail. Just for one year of my life, I would like to commission myself to do a project that I actually knew how to do.

DT: Unfortunately, I think we're running out of time. Before we take a third and final reading, we'll just wrap everything up. Listeners, if you want to see or find any of Ross' writing, the best place to go is to the Pinned In the Margins website. All the links I'm about to mention will be in the episode collection so you can go down and click. Do go and check out Imaginary Advice, there's a website link to that in the episode description. Any podcast app that's worth its weight has got a link to both Lunar Poetry Podcasts and Imaginary Advice. If they don't have it, don't use them, find a new app. Just before we go, Ross, is there anything you'd like to mention coming up?

RS: I'm doing a couple of live versions of the podcast. That's me taking a similar kind of approach to writing which I do in the podcast and trying to move it to a live space, which means using video and some other stuff as well. I'm doing one at Edinburgh International Book Festival on 14 August and then 13th September at Anthony Burgess Foundation in Manchester and then 14th September at London Podcast Festival.

DT: I have to say, one thing that's constantly coming up is this Anthony Burgess centre. They seem to be having the best, not just because you mentioned it there, but honestly, I keep hearing it come up and there seems to be a lot happening in Manchester. That Anthony Burgess Foundation seems to be booking the best people.

RS: It's an awesome space. I've only done something there once before, but it was great. Already, even back then, which was years ago, it felt like a really important meeting place for writers in Manchester.

DT: Thank you for joining me, Ross. This has been 18 months in the planning. Well, not much planning, but 18 months since first invitation, but it takes a long time to meet up sometimes. Really enjoyed it.

RS: I really appreciate it, man. This is called Dedication. Sorry, David.

Dedication

Every time I look at you, David Turner, I am reminded of the first time we met. There is something contemporary about my affection for you, David Turner. Everything I know about you seems new. And unexpected! There are so many things I wanted to say to you that now feel no longer appropriate.

We look at you, David Turner, we all do. And something inside us DIES WITH JOY. You beat us mercilessly with your happiness, David Turner. Whenever you are photographed in Paris, you are the looker, David Turner, the Eiffel Tower behind you, retreating into the aperture.

In fact, David Turner, you are so full of Love that YOU should be re-named Paris! And Paris should be demoted to Venice. Venice would in turn become Monte Carlo, and so on and so on, all the way down, Luton vanishing from our maps, forever.

We treasure your perspective, David Turner. Even when you say things that do not make sense! Such points of view are hoarded like early forgeries of Matisse: worth more than the original to the right collector.

When you do it, it is called Art. When we do it, it is called destruction of public property. And when you email a funny jpeg to your friends I can see them going rabid with their love for you.

Last night, whilst writing this poem, I scrunched up the first draft into a ball and made a perfect origami replica of your head. So realistic, that I could not sleep knowing it was out there in the darkness, staring at my kitchen door through its crumpled eyes.

David Turner, if you did not exist, it would be necessary to invent you. On David Turner Day we would descend on your hometown like jackals, wearing David Turner masks from randomly chosen moments of your life. Men with hard faces would stand outside your school selling tee- shirts detailing apocryphal statements attributed to you, David Turner! Saving a child's life would be called "going for a David Turner", and eBay would crumble under the weight of objects that you have touched!

How could you be so perfect and yet refuse to stop time and let us love you forever? You with your perfect life, like one long low- budget Richard Linklater film...

You, David Turner, as cute as a duckpond, so that we must warn children against drowning in your beauty

And it is unclear yet whether you are responsible for the end of the world, David Turner, my dearest friend. This century has given us bigger mysteries, but you are its most interesting.

I will spend the rest of the night trying to work out what it was I should have said to you. And for that, David Turner, I can never forgive you.

©Ross Sutherland

DT: Dear listener, try and imagine that being read to you three foot away.

RS: That was more intimate than even I expected.

Part two (1:06:54):

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: C.I Marshall – **CM**

Intro:

DT: That was Ross Sutherland. If you get the chance to see him live, then take it. He's a great performer and I'm sure his live podcast shows are going to be unforgettable. As mentioned, you can check all live dates on his website.

Next up is the last of four short conversations recorded at this year's Verve Poetry Festival and in this instalment, I chat to the winner of the Verve Poetry Competition, CI Marshall. It was great fun getting to know Consuelo over the couple of days we were in Birmingham

together and listening to her talking about marathon running, San Francisco and the Playboy Club in the city was illuminating. Here's Consuelo. Me again, then Consuelo.

Conversation:

DT: Hello, Verve, how are you doing? Come on, cheer, cheer, cheer! We're nearly there, we're nearly free from poetry, but you've got one more bit of nonsense from me. This is the fourth and final...I'm wondering if I should mention this because they might not go out in order when I release them... I said fourth and final, so that's dictated when that has to be released now... the fourth and final short conversation with poets at the wonderful Verve Poetry Festival in Birmingham.

Today, I am joined by the fantastic CI Marshall, originally from Northern California, who has travelled here from Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Consuelo was the winner of the Verve Poetry Competition 2018 and we're going to begin with a reading of that poem.

CM: Thank you, David. Myself As A Playboy Bunny.

Apologies, we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time.

DT: Thank you very much, Consuelo. I used to always say to people 'I don't care about first and last lines, don't keep telling me poems need to begin and end well if there's enough meat in the middle of them', but people keep contradicting me by writing really excellent last lines. I really love that 'fast, fast as an autumn wind whipping the bay'. Would you mind explaining a bit to the audience and to the listeners how this poem came about?

CM: I'd been wanting to write this poem, I'm trying to think, maybe for 45 years and I didn't start writing until 20 years ago, so I've had this running around in my head, because I actually did interview to be a Playboy Bunny at the San Francisco Playboy Club, which is really hysterical. So the poem is supposed to be funny and people don't laugh, but maybe that's because they don't remember Playboy Club.

An interesting thing I told the audience and those of you who heard me when I read, I just love this, I'm very interested in architecture and the 1966 Playboy Club in London was the final design of the Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius, which I find to be very, very amusing. He was a very serious man. His work was all concerned with light and space, it's beautiful if you've never seen it, so I thought that was interesting. So what happened was, I had never been able to write this poem, so when I saw the Verve contest on Twitter, I thought 'cities, I know about cities' and San Francisco is one of my favourite cities.

If you haven't been there, it's very, very beautiful. It's got beautiful bridges and the bay is beautiful, it's got the best coffee in the world and it's got steep hills and great car dealers and of course, now it's too expensive to live there, but anyway, that's what happened. I sat down

and obviously, they didn't hire me, for obvious reasons, so I had to put an ending to it and I was a very serious marathon runner. I remember I just had this vivid image, just before the AIDS crisis hit in '78, I had this vivid memory of Mayor Mesconi placing, it was on a gold ribbon, the medal around my head and then a month later, he and another supervisor Harvey Milk, were shot in their offices. So I guess it was a great thing for me to do so well in the marathon, but it was also tragic and very American that they were shot.

DT: You said this had been germinating in your head for a very long time. Is that usual for your writing practice?

CM: I think someone who's lived the type of life I've had, which has been extremely varied and extremely different from most people's lives, when you get to a certain age, these things keep coming up in your head. And I teach, so I love to tell the students about things that happened when I was younger, the same age they were, and how different it was then. So yes, I have a lot of food for fodder, I guess we would say in the States. I have a lot of experiences, a lot of really unusual people. Some of those people are quite well-known people.

I just heard a young woman out on the street, you have great music here. She was singing Free Falling. I'm a huge Tom Petty fan. I don't know what the money means here, I don't even know what it was, I just threw it in her guitar case and told her 'Yeah, Tom Petty forever'. I'll get off on a tangent, but I was on the Strip in the 60s and the Rolling Stones were walking down the sidewalk. I saw Jim Morrison and Whisky A Go Go and there were 25 people there. I've written a poem about him and that's another poem I haven't completed, I mean, I've stuck away some place.

DT: I once saw The Ordinary Boys walking across Clapham Common.

CM: That sounds good to me.

DT: Very self-indulgent of me. I was wondering if there's a connection between the long-distance running and the germination of ideas, because I'm a middle-distance runner myself and I have a very similar relationship to writing as well, I think, in that I don't write for a while and things have to sit with me.

CM: When I ran marathons, I didn't use my mind. The watches weren't that good, so I would take a Sharpie and write my splits, which would be my times that were supposed to be 10 miles, 20 miles, that whole thing, but I didn't use my mind. I ran Boston. I ran too many, that's probably one of the problems in terms of brain cells, but what I learned later in life was I couldn't run anymore because you deteriorate the vertebrae in your spine from the impact. No one told us that, I found that out.

So I started doing yoga, I got my certificate. I'm very interested in that. The biggest thing yoga taught me was introducing my body to my mind and having them being the best of friends. Because I've been able to do that through the practice of yoga and actually, I'm stronger now probably than I was when I was running 125 miles a week. And the breath. I wasn't really cognisant of my breath when I ran, which sounds absurd, but I wasn't. So it's that blending of

the mind and the body. Running, I either wasn't conscious of it or didn't use it, but now, I use it a lot in my writing. A lot. It makes me sit down. There are a lot of things I use, that balancing of my mind and being able to tell my mind what to do and it will actually do it.

DT: That point you made about writing the split times on your wrist, I often talk about long-distance running to people in terms of it's not a slog, you're not running 10k, 20k, 40k, you're breaking it down in your mind into splits, into kilometres or miles, much in the same way you might break a collection or a manuscript into smaller pieces and break down the points of your life into smaller, manageable parts.

CM: I think one thing I would say when he was saying that, it triggered again, these cells kick in and I think I can actually grow new ones now, anyway, the fact that you can pull these things out and they come back to you and you can actually write them and you can control them much better than you could have before. That's a major thing. The other thing I was going to say too is the discipline. There's no way you can run a marathon unless you're really disciplined and of course that takes some mind control too.

That discipline and that time, like 'I have to get this poem in the calendar in Poets and Writers' and I'm always looking at that, I have it on my own calendar and all these ways to make me do it. It's that sense of time, that big digital clock they invented in the 80s, I always see that, because it's on the finish line when you've run a marathon, so I always see that digital clock and that helps me be able to finish a manuscript, to be able to finish a poem, to meet the deadlines.

DT: Talking of finishing, we're running quickly out of time. We're going to take a second and final poem. I'm really annoyed, because I want to keep talking, but we're going to have to finish. Thank you, Consuelo.

CM: Thank you. This, well, you'll know who it is, it's in the title, so I'll just read it.

Apologies, we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time.

DT: Thank you, CI Marshall, thank you to Verve 2018. I love this festival, it's brilliant.

Outro:

DT: That was CI Marshall. You stuck around to the very end. Grab a biscuit, etc, etc. This anthology I was telling you about, I'm not going to list all the names of the poets in the book because there are too many, but just as a little taster, we've got work from Helen Mort, Travis Alabanza, Melissa Lee-Houghton, Nick Makoha, Luke Kennard, Khairani Barokka, Zeina Hashem Beck, Susie Dickey and Mary-Jean Chan, to name but nine of the 28 poets. If you want to know more about the book or what else is coming up in the series, get over to lunarpoetrypodcasts.com, where you can also find a full transcript of this episode.

You can always find us @Silent_Tongue on Twitter or Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook and Instagram. This episode and the accompanying transcript were made possible with the generous support of Arts Council England, specifically the South West office. As I said earlier, if you like what we do, do tell your friends. It helps a lot. If you want to go even further, why not leave us a review over on iTunes.

Thanks again to Snazzy Rat for the music. I'll be back at the end of August with episode 117. These episode numbers are so far beyond anything I ever thought I'd achieve, they seem a little bit ridiculous now. In episode 117, I'm going to be chatting to Andrew McMillan about his brilliant second collection, Playtime. Thanks for listening. I still can't believe anyone does. Much love. Bye.

End of transcript.