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## [Episode 120: Tom Sastry](#) - 30/11/18

Transcript by Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Tom Sastry – **TS**

### **Introduction**

**DT:** Hello, welcome to episode 120 of Lunar Poetry Podcasts. My name is David Turner. As regular listeners will know, this is the last episode of 2018 and the last episode, in fact, until maybe April 2019 as I'm taking a break after four years of fairly intensive podcasting.

Those of you that need to supplement your poetry podcast hit should head over to our companion podcast, *a poem a week*, which you can find wherever you found this podcast.

My wife Lizzy and, very occasionally, me, will continue to bring you a poem every Sunday. As well as that, you can go over to the Lunar website and take a look at our poetry podcast finder, a directory of over 30 poetry and spoken-word podcasts, produced in the UK and Ireland, with more due to be added in the coming months. Do get in touch and let us know if you would like to hear me talking to anyone particular in 2019.

I don't know whether I should be whispering or not. There are two little squirrels in front of me and I don't want to frighten them. The perils of recording podcasts in English parks. The main reason I've chosen now as a good time to take a break from the series is our current Arts Council England funding has come to an end. I just want to say a very quick thank you to them for their support. We've produced so much that just wouldn't be possible without that money, not least a huge improvement in sound quality in the last five episodes. Beyer Dynamic M58 microphones, if you're wondering.

This was never part of any wider plan, but a recent development has meant I'll be using the upcoming break to get together my first book of – mainly - poetry, which will be published in 2019 by Bristol-based publishers of innovative and experimental poetry, Hesterglock Press. I really like Paul and Sarah at Hesterglock, so I'm looking forward to working with them a lot. While we're on the subject of financial support and books, just a quick reminder that our anthology of poems by former podcast guests, *Why Poetry? The Lunar Poetry Podcasts Anthology*, is available for £9.99 from Verve Poetry Press and, allegedly, some bookshops.

Buying that book will directly support covering the cost of transcribing future episodes. Get over to [lunarpodcasts.com](http://lunarpodcasts.com) to find over 80 episode transcripts, including this episode. That's the admin done. Today's guest is Bristol-based poet Tom Sastry. I met up with Tom at his home in October 2018 to chat about the links between his performance style and his writing, his debut pamphlet, *Complicity*, and far too much chat about seagulls. Completely my fault.

As happens quite a lot when recording, there was something we wanted to chat about but weren't sure if we could because we weren't sure when the episode would be going out and we didn't want to give away any secrets, but I think by the time you've downloaded this episode, it should have been officially announced that Tom's debut collection, *A Man's House Catches Fire*, will be published by Nine Arches Press in October 2019, which is great news, because he's fantastic, as you're about to hear.

Anyway, that's it for announcements of poetry books coming out in 2019. How about we get on to the episode? Here's Tom with what I now assume is the titular poem from his upcoming debut.

### **Conversation:**

TS:

A man's house catches fire

I was suddenly uncomfortably hot  
but I have always had these surges

and at first I thought the smell of smoke  
was just me going off my head

which I have learnt to expect.  
So I closed the curtains, undressed,

turned the heating off and lay  
in the last of my stillness

watching the shadow of a flame  
playing on the wall

until the shadow reddened  
and I could see no way out.

It's been a month, now  
with the fire still raging

and me not dead  
and no help coming

so today I stepped outside  
smelling more than ever of myself.

My oldest friend was passing.  
She said *Is it that time?*

*Are the houses of men burning too?*  
I said *You're mistaken.*

*Nothing is burning.*  
and I walked back into my house

which is still on fire.

© Tom Sastry, 2018

**DT:** Thank you very much, Tom. Thank you for joining me on the podcast. We'll get round to you introducing yourself. I'm not going to introduce you because I'm terrible at introductions. I didn't mention this before we started recording, but my mind's a bit distracted. So I was walking down Broadmead on my way here – for those that don't know, that's the main shopping street in Bristol – and I was eating a pasty that I'd bought from Greggs because I'd got out of bed and not had any breakfast and rushed out and suddenly needed something to eat.

I felt something approaching me from behind. A seagull landed on my head and took the pasty out of my hand, in the view of everyone. It struck me that for that moment, I was living in a Tom Sastry poem because not only was that ridiculous, that a seagull might have hit me on the head and stolen my pasty and everybody laughed at me, but it also involved the melancholy and loss that exists through a lot of your poems.

I was very hungry and I'd lost my pasty, but also the shame I felt from the schoolkids laughing at me. It was a terrible time for it to happen because it was school-run time so there were a lot of 12-year-olds laughing at this grown man that had been hit on the head by a seagull and had his pasty stolen.

**TS:** It's real life. I think I should approach Greggs with that story and see. I know Jo Bell and others have had work from Nationwide. I feel I could be the face of Greggs.

**DT:** Yeah, you could be the face of Greggs and it's how you credit your work. I think I would rather not be known as 'the man who had the seagull hit'. I've made it known now on the podcast, but I trust my audience not to laugh at me.

**TS:** I trust my audience to laugh at me. What I've done and I don't know if this touches on how page poets can function in a spoken-word setting, but in Bristol, I think I'm best-known as a spoken-word artist, rather than a poet. Outside Bristol, I'm a page poet. Essentially what I do is read these miserable, very slow, very pagey poems and then I just tell lots of jokes against myself in between. This seems to work tolerably well, so no, I don't know where I'd be without seagulls crapping on my head and without my imaginary, fantasy life as the voice of Greggs.

**DT:** Also for me, as a Cockney who's moved to Bristol, it's a year now since my wife and I have been in Bristol, it feels like I've finally been through an initiation test in that a seagull's whacked me on the head and nicked my pasty. I feel I belong now.

**TS:** I'm from the South East of England, I'm not from London, I'm from that sort of doughnut where London is too close for these places to have any life of their own, but too far away for you to actually be in London. I think it's a fairly unenviable condition, living in the commuter fringe of London, so I'm very pleased to have left. When I first moved to Bristol, there's a poem I'm not going to read because it's dreadful, but it was one of the first poems I wrote and it's about that feeling.

I was in Montpelier, Bristol, for anyone who's from Bristol, the first place I lived, and I was standing at the top of Richmond Road, looking over, you get quite a view from there, you

can see the hospital incineration tower and lots of other beautiful landmarks of Cotham at the other side of Gloucester Road. The seagulls were screaming away. It's actually the first time I'd heard seagulls inland because it was just at the point where pigeons were still in control of most of the country, at that time, the seagulls hadn't yet really challenged their empire.

Now, you feel a bit sorry for pigeons because a little fat pigeon will be pecking away at some grain and all of a sudden, 60 seagulls will threaten to pick his eyes out. Now, pigeons are underdogs, but at the time, pigeons were the evil empire and seagulls were exotic, from the sea. I heard these seagulls clacking overhead and thought 'I'm by the sea'. It was another couple of weeks before I tried to get to the sea from Bristol. If you look on the map, it looks like Bristol is right by the seaside, but if you try and get to the seaside from Bristol, it's harder than you think.

**DT:** My wife and I both moved to Bristol, I had this idea, because I used to live in a small town in the south of Norway called Kristiansand. Having been born in Central London and grown up in the South East of England and only experiencing the sea after a two-and-a-half-hour drive with my nan and my aunt and them smoking in a Ford Fiesta and drinking cups of tea as the rain lashed at the windows of the café, that was my only experience of the sea.

Then living Kristiansand, I really understood why people had this connection with it. I'd always thought it was where the land stopped and it was a barrier, but you got a sense there of people's connection to it, people who'd grown up there, it was an extension of their landscape. I had exactly the same thing, I thought 'If I move to Bristol, I'll be really close to the sea'. I've seen it once in a year, because it's such a pain to get to. I think we had to go to, what's the one on from Weston-super-Mare?

**TS:** Burnham-on-Sea? Or Brea?

**DT:** It's a long way, isn't it, because you look on the map and that's actually just the Bristol Channel you can see and no one wants to touch that.

**TS:** Not unless the council has dumped several trillion tons of sand from somewhere else on the mud and then it could be tolerable. I don't want to mock the seaside towns of Britain because they have a hell of a time, but it's not what you expect. Then again, I blame poetry for this actually, or a particular notion of poetry which comes from the Romantics, a lot of English people have this idea they should enjoy blustery, elemental weather.

This is because they are victims of poetry and they think having lots of cold rain and hail whipped into your face by a strong breeze while you shudder in the comfort of your knockoff, not-quite-Gortex anorak, is actually you getting in touch with nature. It's not. It's nature telling you to fuck off and you shouldn't do it. We have this idea that if we subject ourselves to the unpleasant aspects of being in the outdoors, we're in some way actually getting closer to the land and moving away from the suburban people we've become. I think this is almost the exact opposite of the truth.

**DT:** It's an interesting idea that poetry is something we need to endure, like the British seascape.

**TS:** No, I think poetry is something we should enjoy. Basically, everything that people who aren't deeply immersed in poetry think poetry is, is dreadful. Rhyming doggerel on greetings cards, the idea of being passionate in a hailstorm, all of these things are completely ridiculous and I'm not in any way criticising actual, popular poetry done by actual popular poets, but the whole received idea of poetry, an unenthusiastic teacher lecturing on what a poet really meant to say, all this stuff is not very good and of course, poetry has a dreadful image problem.

Also, rather like Britain, it's true of Britain itself, Britain has a terrible image problem, largely because of its own misdeeds, to be fair, but then again, there's lots of dreadful poetry for which people ought to atone, but the brand persists, people continue to believe in poetry, people continue to believe in Britain, even though, if you grew up in Australia or New Zealand, there's no particular reason to believe that Britain even exists. It probably doesn't touch your consciousness very much.

You just have faith that Britain is there and one time in your life, you might visit it and you might be conned by all those old poets into going for a walk on that cliff top and getting whipped with horrible, icy rain in your horrible, knockoff anorak, but actually, the idea, the mythical idea of the place is more real to you than the real thing and I think that's true of most people with poetry. When you're actually engaged with poetry, you realise it's much more complicated and multi-faceted and interesting and exciting than you were ever led to believe.

I'd like to think some of the poetry that's being written today will replace the Romantics and sweep away that received idea of what poetry is really about. All of a sudden, in 200 years' time, people will be taking clichés from contemporary poetry that we don't even recognise yet and go: 'Oh my God, is that what poetry is? I'm not interested in that, I don't want to know anything about that' and the real poets of 2200 will then have to fight against those clichés, in order to establish they are part of a real, living, vital art form.

**DT:** I'm trying to imagine what will become clichés in the future. We'll think on that. In your own writing, do you feel any obligation to try and dispel some of that myth around poetry? Not so much individual poems, because if you look deeply enough, you will find poems you love in all styles, it's not a problem with individual poets, it's collectively. Do you feel you're writing to combat that in any way?

**TS:** I don't think you can really do that. It's interesting. Bristol is a city where the poetry scene, or certainly the live poetry scene, is very much a spoken-word scene. It's most of my social life, to be honest, it's what I do, I go out, read poems and talk to people who like poetry, which is very nice. It means I can live in this bubble where everyone actually likes and appreciates poetry and finds it a helpful thing that's a positive influence in their life.

I think the most important thing is not so much what poetry is, it's how you should approach it. The absolute worst way to approach poetry is reverentially. Like the meaning of

the poem is already established and people in the know know exactly what it's about and you don't know what it's about and your job is to recreate in your own mind this correct idea that people have already got. That's the absolute worst way of approaching poetry.

I think everyone who's listened to this presumably has an interest in poetry and we will all remember people who were very good at sidestepping that idea of a poem as a puzzle that needs to be solved and we will also remember the people who were not so good at it. The nice thing about that is that it's social. I think it's much easier to understand the meaning of something if it actually occurs in a social context. People get together at open mic, they share their poems, some people, perhaps, have been doing it for a little longer than others, but there's a nice equality in the poetry scene.

There's no sense of 'I'm the feature act, therefore you approach me on your knees, with humility and "please, sir, can I buy a copy of your book?" Well, of course I will sell you a copy of my book, thank you very much.' It's not like that and I appreciate that very much. I think that makes sense of things because it becomes an act of communication, something people do and share and talk about and it becomes part of their lives. I think that's a very healthy way of sharing poetry.

I can't imagine sitting in my remote farmhouse, penning my romantic lyrics, then sending them off to magazines then the ox cart comes by in three months' time and I find out what anyone else has made of my poetry. No wonder they were all mad. It's a dreadful way of sharing and understanding poetry.

**DT:** If you're writing in isolation, even sitting with a group of writers at a writing retreat, you're still writing in isolation because you're writing in your own head. Is writing poetry still a communal act for you?

**TS:** Sharing it is. I don't know the answer to this. It's quite a common question, 'who do you write for?' I have absolutely no idea.

**DT:** You seem like a poet who attends a lot of public events, you share a lot of your writing.

**TS:** If you think about page and performance, there's a big Venn diagram and the bit in the middle, which really can survive either on the page or in performance, is what you might call oral poetry. It's not necessarily written to be read in a particular style or to be performed, but it is very much written to be heard. Then, obviously, at one extreme you've got poetry that really is very much bound on the page, probably for the mundane reason that layout is an important part of the poem and it's very hard to recreate layout without an enormous PowerPoint and I don't think we're yet ready for a style of poetry performance that involves the use of PowerPoint to show the audience what the layout would look like. I think we'll never be ready for that, actually.

On the other side, you've got poetry which is so theatrical, it's really impossible to imagine it having anything like its intended effect without performance. Most poetry, whether it's described as page or performance, spoken word or whatever, is actually in the middle. It's

oral poetry and it's there to be read out loud. That doesn't mean all poets are natural performers. Some people are terrified by the idea of getting on stage and performing. Some people are not terrified and perhaps should be.

I may be one of those, but without meaning to, my work very much falls into that bit in the middle. It's written to be read on the page, but it's also written to be heard out loud and I suspect that's because I compose without meaning to, by ear. I don't do it, but I imagine people who are very adventurous with layout have, in addition to that oral sense, a much more developed visual sense of the poem as they're putting it together, which I don't have. It's not something I can do.

As a poet on the page, I am astonishingly conservative. If it's not all justified to the left, it's extremely rare. That's largely because I have absolutely no idea what I would be doing if I did anything else. Two hundred, 300, 400 years ago, everything justified to the left. If I'm in doubt about laying out a poem, I record myself reading it and I use lineation and stanza approach to reproduce, as closely as I can, the way I read it. If I can vary that in a way that adds value, I will, but my default is usually it should look similar to the way I read it.

**DT:** Most of my writing visually just appears as blocks of text, but I do exactly the same thing, That's why live readings are important to me. I'll read them and if I naturally want to put breaks in, I'll put spaces in the poem based on how I naturally want it to be read, which can seem quite dictatorial towards the reader, but it's more of a suggestion. I don't intend it to be so hard and fast, but it's very difficult, that's a problem I have with the idea of something being printed down, it becomes very concrete and it's not as fluid as I would like things to remain.

**TS:** I'll often do something different when I can see a purpose to it, when I really want to scramble that. I feel there are two things you can get wrong. You can either get it wrong visually or you can reproduce the poem on paper in a way it's unreadable out loud. I don't feel very confident as far as the visual aspect is concerned, but at least I know that if I reproduce it the way I would read it, I can't get more than one of those two things wrong.

At least I know it's readable in that pattern because I read it myself. There's a kind of comfort in that. That's the baseline and if I can improve upon that, I will. If I'm really stuck with the layout of a poem, I usually think it's because it wants to be reproduced in that form.

**DT:** I think we might take a second poem.

**TS:** OK. This poem is called;

Thirty-two lines on loss

Everywhere, they are selling:  
the sun in orange juice; the sex  
in perfume; the thirty pence from a box  
of fishfingers, tasting of sea. I lost

my glasses. I left them on the table  
in the café because I was tired  
of looking at billboards and wanted some thoughts  
of my own and because I liked the fog of it

but when I went to leave, they were gone.  
It was Sunday and the opticians  
were closed. I soon realised that the world  
is full of monsters travelling too fast.

One of these is time. I spent a lot of time sitting that day.  
I drank a lot of coffee because that is what I do  
when I sit. Perhaps I drank too much. I  
did a lot of thinking and I wanted it

to last longer. But the sun set  
and the sun rose and I called in sick  
and got some new glasses. They filmed me  
in the frames. I looked like a total dick

straight ahead like the world's  
toothiest convict. You always do.  
You accept it. They said it would take an hour  
to make them up, so I went out

into the fog and found a café. I just killed time and  
checked my phone but when I went to go  
I couldn't get up. My body was a sandbag.  
I cried like a doll. I must have really hated the idea

of functioning again. I hate it so much.  
I hated it so much that for a moment  
the surprise of how much I hated it  
stopped everything, even the hate.

©Tom Sastry, *Complicity*, smith | doorstep Books, 2016

**DT:** I really love that poem, I'm really glad you read that. I am always very keen not to request poems from people because I want the guest to represent themselves in the moment and it's important there's a space in the podcast for people to change their mind about their own work and read whatever feels right in the moment, but had I requested one, it would definitely have been that.

Also, in this really awkward way, we can't ever dispel these notions of what it is to do something 'properly' and when you're running a podcast, it's hard not to ape radio shows and talk of things like 'natural segways' and that there should be some sort of klaxon that

shows you up for the fraud you are because this is all random stuff, but it is a natural segway there to talk about your pamphlet, which is called *Complicity*, published by Smith Doorstop as part of their Laureate's Choice series. Could you explain a little bit about how that came about?

**TS:** Yes, it came about owing to, I bought my way in. I attended the masterclass at Ty Newydd, the National Literature Centre of Wales, taught by Carol Ann Duffy and Gillian Clarke and at the end of that session, Carol Ann Duffy asked me if I would like to be put forward for the Laureate's Choice, which I had vaguely heard of but I didn't know what it was. Then several months later, I was contacted by Peter Sansom saying, 'OK, we're doing this, I gather you want to do this, do you have some poems?'

It's interesting, because a lot of poets – and I don't know, I'm not an expert in publishing, but a lot of poets do have an involvement in publishing and I don't – feel that even for first collections and first pamphlets, there's a lot of pressure to theme. You kind of think 'goodness me, first collection, bit of greatest hits is all right, people are finding their voice' but apparently, and I'm in no position to dispute it, there seems to be a feeling that those who have a coherent set of poems around a coherent theme, have an advantage over those who don't.

I didn't have to worry about that. I'd been offered a pamphlet as part of the series and I spoke briefly to Peter and said 'do you want me to come up with a coherent grouping or do you want my best poems?' He said 'I want your best poems' so that's what the pamphlet is. The title *Complicity* is, I thought there must be two or three poems, a title of one of the poems, which could, under certain conditions, be the title of at least one of the others. I literally went through all the titles. There's a poem called 'Complicity' and I could think of at least one of the other poems which could also have been called 'Complicity' had I chosen to do so. That's how it came to be called *Complicity*, that's the story.

**DT:** It's a common thing in poetry to put undue weight on a title which is almost something that's just a result of a desperate search for a word to come up with for a title, which I think a lot of titles are anyway, but if you do want to put your own weight on it, like 'Complicity', who does that refer to? The reader or yourself? As someone like myself who doesn't have any formal educational background in literature, I don't have this insight of a lot of people who've been through their MAs or PhDs, they've sat whole seminars on how to put together a pamphlet submission. Presumably you haven't been either because of the way you approached it?

I've been lucky enough to run little collections of 20 poems, say, that I might submit to go into a pamphlet and I've been surprised by the amount of feedback I've got on what connects these poems. And the questions you're asking of yourself there. What happens if you're a writer that isn't concerned by connections? I'm very happy with disparate ideas. There are themes because it's me being anxious in my own head.

**TS:** You could be a great singles band and the last thing you would want is to be told you need to put out a concept album. I hate concept albums.

**DT:** There's something that doesn't sit right about this idea of having a conceit to what the collection might be at the outset. This is something I've been thinking about as well. The very academic side of what poetry is, it seems to me that somebody else views your work and decides what it means. You don't decide what the themes are in your work. I, as a writer, don't particularly want to be part of that. I don't agree with it. I wouldn't want to set out to look at a body of work.

I suppose that's also denying the reality that someone's go to sell that and they're going to need a tagline or a sales pitch.

**TS:** I do think that's different. The academic thing, it's slightly bizarre in an art form like poetry where, if you take all the money there is in academia for teaching writing and even more so, for writing about writing and for critical writing, and you compare it to the money that's actually available to poets for writing, the resources available for the two are so vastly out of proportion. Sometimes, we get a bit confused.

We complain about some poetry being academic, but actually, the real complaint is that we, as a society, value writing about writing more than writing itself. I think that's a slightly mean thing to say, because of course why should those two things be in competition? Why should critical writing be in competition with creative writing any more than spending on armaments or any other thing that attracted less public funding?

Nevertheless, it creates a slightly odd situation, that there are more people experts in writing about the writing of others than there are people creating work. Massively so. I think we just have to be aware of the fact that can create an over-analytical framework. The publishers in poetry are slightly different. As you say, it's 'I want an angle to sell this' and I think that can be a little bit dubious. One of the things I've noticed as a mixed-race poet is that most of the poets who are published, especially the younger poets – not that I'm that young – but most, especially younger poets that look like me who are published, there is an angle to their work.

Part of the way their work is presented to audiences, in blurbs, in performance gigs or blurbs to publications, is very much about race and race politics. That's fantastic in the sense we can talk about these things in the poetry world and in other places they're taboo, but it's also slightly oppressive in the sense that if you come from that background, that's all you're really there to write about and speak about. I think that's an example of the marketing thing, perhaps being indulged more than it should, if we were really aware of what we're doing by doing that.

I think theming is the same. If you've got that academic background and you can be your own academic and find your own themes and you know how to do that, then perhaps you could take what could be quite a disparate group of poems that don't really have a theme and make them appear coherent. You can play that game and perhaps if you can't, that might be slightly harder to do because there's this thing that you're only just understanding yourself what each of these individual poems is there to do and to see them in a bigger context is actually quite difficult and it can feel like an imposition on your work.

We can all do it. Anyone can play the game of taking two or three poems that have something in common with each other and say 'this is the theme of my collection', placing those poems one at the beginning, one at the end, one where the staples are and trying to fool people into thinking of the thing as a coherent whole. It's not a difficult game to play, but for some people, that could feel like 'oh yeah, this is actually quite nice, I'm making connections in my own work'. For other people that would feel like 'I'm imposing something on my work, it doesn't feel like mine anymore.'

I do wish there was more scope for people to produce collections and especially pamphlets, which are just 'this is my best work. I'm not going to tell you anything about the connection between them. You can work it out if you want, you can get your own idea of who this poetic persona is, whether it's me or not, who knows whether we are writing personi or not, but I'm not going to tell you'. I suspect it is more about selling books and talking about books than it is about the actual integrity of that collection, this desire for coherence.

**DT:** I was just thinking as well, perhaps there is a freedom as a writer to write a very heavily-themed collection of work for the purpose of moving away from it afterwards and feeling like you've closed a door. Of course, this all comes back to the individual choice. It shouldn't be something that we have to enter into as a matter of course as writers.

**TS:** I have to say, I'm in a very privileged position in that I do what I do and I fall into it quite naturally and my work seems to resonate equally. I'm certainly not near the top of either tree, but my work seems to resonate equally with both audiences and that's not because I have made a conscious study of how to do that, it's just the cards have fallen in quite a nice way for me, which means I can perform in different settings and I seem to fit there.

To some extent, I think people in my position are the lucky ones and those whose work is very much for the page or very much on the theatrical side of things and may not translate to the page quite so well, I think they have a harder time of it. Those of us who are in the middle actually have an easier time of it. There are different craft skills you'll learn in different places and I think this is the thing. It's one thing to say that there shouldn't be an implicit hierarchy and I think it's another thing to say they are the same thing.

They are sort of the same thing for many people, myself included, but definitely, if I read at a small literary society and there are probably 20 people there, older, most of them would have been writing for decades, there is a more precise use of language. It's not to say there are not spoken-word artists who use language in an absolutely forensic way, there certainly are, but in the main you will generally find a more forensic and precise use of language in those places.

If you go to an event that's largely a spoken-word event, you will find not just a higher standard of performance, but you will also find a greater attention to the sonic qualities of language and the thing I would love to teach page poets, even ones who read very well, is links. Actually, what you say between poems. You're not introducing a poem, you're not necessarily explaining a poem, you're actually creating a performance, creating a persona that people can spend time with.

You're in people's company. So the idea that either you read a poem without any introduction or your introduction consists of an explanation of what the poem you're about to read is about and you haven't really thought about those remarks until you get to the poem, the one thing you will find at a spoken-word event is that people are so much better at what happens between the poems. There's just a gulf the size of the Atlantic there. That's not to say you can't have both of those skill sets, but I think there is no question that certainly for most new artists, there is an enormous amount to be learnt from going to a setting where there is a slightly different culture and a slightly different set of expectations and producing work that works on those terms, in those settings, even if you then come back to what you know.

I really buy the idea that there's no hierarchy and there shouldn't be a status hierarchy, but I always get a little bit worried when people say 'it's all poetry' as if the two cultures have nothing to learn from each other. I think they've got a great deal to learn from each other. You also find different voices. If you go to page-poetry events, you will hear the voices of older women writing their life experiences, in a way you won't at a spoken-word event. Spoken-word events are more inclusive in lots of other ways.

You don't want to go so far to say these are the same thing, that you think if you know one, you've got nothing to learn from the other, but you do want to get rid of that idea that one is better than this other.

**DT:** I've met a number of people choosing spoken word for PhDs, I'm thinking of Katie Ailes who's in Scotland at the moment with the Loud Poets organisation up there and Lucy English, who's teaching at Bath Spa and is a Bristol-based poet. What worries me is it seems – and I don't think either Katie or Lucy are doing this – that these critical papers are talking of spoken word in a way that was traditionally a language used for poetry, because I think what will happen is spoken word will appear to fail because it's not the same thing.

I think we lack a critical language about spoken word and I think it's too easy to dismiss spoken word because it can't be tied down and analysed in the same way as a poem on a piece of paper can be, or something that was deliberately written to be filmed. It may have existed in the moment, but it was always going to be archived and most spoken word is very fleeting, isn't it? It isn't supposed to last in its original form, it's supposed to last ephemerally in your mind.

**TS:** You talk about film. I'm not a big fan of performance videos. Every time I've seen a poet and I've seen their clips, I've had the same experience, which is 'Oh, clips are all right' and you see them, and I think even more with poetry than with music, it's really, really hard to capture on camera a performance film. I'm not talking about an abstract poetry film, where there's a filmmaker's art involved, but it's really hard to capture a film of a performance that actually conveys the directness.

**DT:** A camera will never capture what the audience captures, will it?

**TS:** I've had that experience so many times, of not being particularly excited to see someone, because I've seen the films and thought 'that's all right' and then actually seeing them in the flesh and having a totally different experience. I'm not actually convinced that particular style of filming poetry by pointing a camera at a performer when they're performing, or the kind of performance-poetry film that's very fashionable at the moment is the old 80s pop video one, where the poet's taken out of the theatre and they're walking along, there's some kind of setting, usually an urban setting, but they're basically talking into the camera while supposedly doing something else, but actually not, it's just a performance on location and I think that's a really weird, bizarre thing to do to poetry.

Sometimes, you get these bits of pseudo-dramatisation, so you have the poet talking to camera, then there will be these fleeting glimpses of someone who's supposed to represent a character in the poem. I just find that really weird, it's like those 80s pop videos where Lionel Richie would...there would be a little drama. Do you remember the video to 'Hello'? Surely we can do better when it comes to capturing the energy of performance than that?

**DT:** You're veering dangerously towards the pop video that breaks down halfway through and goes to a scene in a restaurant or to conversation. It's that idea that a music video could be something different. All you're really doing is ruining the thing people loved, which was the track all along. I don't want to get into the politics of the Nationwide advertising campaign, but if you set aside the question of whether you want to be involved with advertising any company...

**TS:** Anyone who is trying to make a living out of writing, who gets a gig working for an organisation that isn't actually, so far as we can tell, doing great evil in the world, I think I would not criticise them for taking the money for one second.

**DT:** I have heard an interesting argument, that the way the videos are filmed, the way the adverts are filmed, it seems to be suggesting this is just this poem happening in a 'real-life' situation. Of course it's not because there's a camera crew there. I'm going to talk about Matt Abbott specifically because I know him and I don't want to talk about the other poets because I don't know them that well, but Matt's one of the first four and he's sitting on the doorstep of a house and seemingly, the advert is trying to approach everyday life. But of course there's nothing real about it.

**TS:** It's like a musical, isn't it? Someone's talking, your character's doing something that's supposedly realistic, or a stylised version of real life and all of sudden, someone launches into a song. It starts off very low and you're not even sure it's going to be a song and all of a sudden, they're going 'waah!' It's the poetry equivalent of that. Actually, what we're doing is a strange, truncated snippet of musical theatre with a poem.

I think every single one of those poets, if you'd given them a similar brief but it wasn't a commercial brief and they weren't there to do whatever it is that's going to be most effective at selling mortgages or bank accounts or whatever it is Nationwide is hoping you're coming through the doors to ask for, every single one of those people would have done that differently if you'd given them a budget and said 'make a film of your poem'. Of course they would.

I don't know what the ethical problem is with that particular style of presentation. It's just possibly not what the poets would have done.

**DT:** Ethically, I don't feel there's really a question. You're either happy with doing that work or not because advertising is not real. I've worked on car commercials as a prop builder, I was not particularly happy with it, but you're either in that business or you're not. I chose to get out of the business because, like you were just saying, one company is not necessarily better than another and you could perhaps float around and have one job every four years where you're working for some amazing charity, but you're still working for a film company and they are still taking their money from someone else.

It's all very muddy water. That's why I chose to mention Matt. I think Matt will trust me enough to know I'm not criticising his decision to do the work, it's just interesting there have been very few people talking about what that situation has done to the poems, to the poet's message.

**TS:** I've always assumed that if someone approaches you and says 'I want your poem for this piece', like Greggs come to me and say 'I want your poem because that poem really says Greggs to us', then I think you sacrifice the poem. If they say 'we want your skills, we want you to write something which fits this film', then obviously you're not giving up a work of art to them. You're offering your skills. We know what the issues are with that. You might make a judgement as to who they were and what they were and do it on a case by case basis.

If you actually give them something, I think it's not yours anymore because, quite plainly, the meaning of anything... If I give a poem to Greggs and that poem is seen by millions of people in an ad break, as opposed to the 100s of people I'm performing to in theatres, quite clearly the meaning of that poem is 'Buy Greggs' products'. It no longer means whatever else I thought it meant, and it might mean 'Buy Greggs' products because they give you all these nice, complicated feelings that are in this poem', but it still means 'Buy Greggs' products' and clearly you're happy to endorse that message because you did so at the beginning of this podcast and the seagulls are clearly listening.

**DT:** I need to clarify, it was an endorsement of Greggs, not an endorsement of seagulls. Nor was it an attack on seagulls. I'm not denying the seagull's right to see food and try and take it. I attended a book launch recently by a Bristol-based writer called Tim Dee and he's just written a book about observing seagulls in urban environments, which again goes back to questioning whether Bristol is connected to the sea or whether it is in an urban landscape.

Most of the book is questioning whether we reduce seagulls purely to scavengers because they are sitting now outside their natural landscape, we don't see the other side of their life. We don't see other aspects of their communal nature with each other, we just see them fighting over food or our discarded food and how we frame them in our own landscape. It's fascinating. I feel bad I judged that beady-eyed, mean-faced seagull. But I've just decided that shape of face is mean, but he just has a beak.

**TS:** In the garden outside this house, you get seagulls flying overhead. They are very beautiful if you just look up at them. There's nice light, we're Northern latitude, it's very soft light and you look up and they're flying overhead, they're very graceful. But they're like us. They're an aggressive species that use the power of the crowd to intimidate others. We can identify with this because we are very similar. We're entitled to our own experience of seagulls, however much we may lack an understanding of what's really going on from the seagulls' point of view.

**DT:** As humans, we want to be Corvids, to see ourselves as crows and very intelligent, but as people, and definitely poets, we're much closer to seagulls in that we're picking and stealing stuff. I think that's why I felt bad in myself that I felt angry this seagull had stolen my pasty, yet I would take that idea and reappropriate it.

**TS:** I think seagulls are more like people who chase likes on social media than they are like poets.

**DT:** As a podcast producer, I am also that kind of person.

**TS:** I think the poet is the first seagull, the seagull who thinks 'ah, there's a bin here, I'm going to look through that bin'. They don't even know what they're going to find. They rummage around in that bin and come out with something and the other seagulls are going 'you idiot. Bin? What are you doing there?' Then all of a sudden, they're like 'that's quite good, I quite admire that' and then the first seagull gets pushed to one side because no one wants to admit the seagull got there first.

You've got this big crowd, coming up with a really crude version of the first seagull's message, which is 'dive into the bin and get stuff'. The first seagull was more motivated by the beauty of discovery, by the uncertainty, the 'is this bin a source of food or not a source of food?' What does it mean to be a seagull, hovering on the brink of what might be food? It's more interested in playing with that Subway wrapper and discovering what it feels like and feeling that ketchup on its feathers than it is in actually just grabbing something.

The people that come in afterwards, they just want to use that idea and turn it into something very simple, 'we're all going to dive in, have a massive fight, come out with the food, spread the stuff all over the city centre, if any of the pigeons come near it, we'll kill 'em'. I think the social-media popularity-seekers are most of the seagulls and the poets are the pioneer seagulls who get there first, but maybe don't always get the benefit from it.

**DT:** I definitely think my experience of that seagull today has been coloured by the fact that all through the summer, there were similar stories from tabloids about seagulls stealing food from people at the seaside. Had I had any idea that seagull was somehow avant-garde and the first seagull...

**TS:** He wasn't the first seagull to go after a Greggs pasty.

**DT:** Exactly, but had it been, I would have held it in much higher esteem.

**TS:** It was the Jonathan Livingston Seagull of Bristol in, what are we in now? The Nought-eesies? Then again, the thing we're sort of on the edge of here is that the language that is used to describe seagulls exclusively describes the experience of being plagued by seagulls and does not in any way describe the experience of being a seagull.

We all recognise there's an analogy, or maybe not even an analogy, maybe it's exactly the same thing, the way that you will worry about a seagull and the way of course that vulnerable, voiceless groups of humans will be written about. I suspect the seagulls are relatively untroubled by the way the Metro describes them as a pest and a menace. Unless there is actually an organised seagull cull inspired by that language, it doesn't really touch the seagulls' lives very much, because they're not really that interested in what humans think of them as far as I can tell.

Maybe I'm wrong. I suspect I'm not. It's kind of strange we can recognise that othering and recognise it's something that's deeply threatening in other contexts, but it's seagulls and unless you are a passionate ornithologist... I always worry I'm talking about the ear, nose and throat cavity, but I'm not, I'm talking about birds, so that's good. Unless you're really passionate about seagulls, it's not a big thing, but it does say something.

If they were cats, for example, you wouldn't be able to write about the inconvenience they cause, purely without showing some empathy for the cat itself. We may have wandered a long way off track.

**DT:** I think it's great because we would have just talked about the correct use of language in terms of imagery and ideas anyway and it's much more interesting to talk about it in a more concrete way. I think that was more focused than most poets.

**TS:** I'm a very unconcrete writer. I wouldn't be so grand as to say I've got a subject but, and I think this comes from the spoken-word scene, where there's a lot of pressure to have a story, to have a kind of writing that's to write a subject that's very closely connected to yourself... I think sometimes it goes too far and people feel under pressure to write their own trauma, which I think is really unhealthy.

I don't mean that writing your trauma is unhealthy and sharing it where you wish to is unhealthy, but I think people feeling under pressure to do so is very unhealthy. Of course, there are many, many people who are on the point of talking about or disclosing things that have affected them very deeply, but of course, there are many other people for whom those things remain impossible to speak about for all kinds of reasons.

One of the things I write a lot about are, there are a lot of people in my poems to whom you could have an inference that something awful has happened, maybe an external event, maybe something internal to them, but the poem isn't going to tell you what it is. That's something I've noticed in my writing and something I've encouraged in my writing quite consciously. I think it's important to write some of those experiences of dealing with really bad things without necessarily feeling you owe the audience the reveal as to what has actually happened.

There's an awful lot of that in my writing. If I had come to the stage of understanding my own writing when I put this pamphlet out that I have now, it would have probably been the organising principle of the pamphlet, but of course, early in your career, you don't always have that understanding of what it is that's linking together a lot of these things or you don't have the language for it.

Poets are as rubbish as everyone else at finding plain, simple language about what's going on for them, especially as writing is so much of an exploration. If you knew where you were going, you wouldn't need to write the poem. There's no need. If there was simple, universally understood language that expressed perfectly the thing you were going to say, then why on earth write a poem about it? It doesn't need a poem, it needs you to say it in that simple, commonly-understood language. Poetry is all about finding language for things for which language isn't readily available.

**DT:** I think all poems ever do is highlight the lack we have in a language we feel covers everything.

**TS:** You know that poem, and it's been written by so many poets in so many different ways, it's the poem about 'there's a word in this language that you don't speak, oh reader, which I'm going to write in italics to show it has an untranslatable meaning and this word says something we need 1000 words to say. Wouldn't it be great if we had that word?'

No. No, it wouldn't. If we had a word for everything, all we would be doing is shouting nouns at each other and everything that as writers, we value, as that struggle to connect with each other through words and everything we value in conversation which is that we see each other straining to say things and we get a glimpse of it and think 'yes! I've got something from you there', that would all go.

We'd just be going 'perfect word, perfect word, perfect word'. It would be crap, rubbish. We do not want to import all of these perfect words. What's exciting is the sudden revelation that that is something you have to make complicated, that is simple for someone else and this thing flows both ways. That insight is fascinating and that's what all these poems are about, but the actual 'wouldn't it be nice if we had a word for everything?' No, please save us from having a word for everything.

**DT:** I think we may have highlighted the cliché we were searching for earlier, certainly one of them. It particularly annoys me.

**TS:** Untranslatable words in italics to show how untranslatable they are? Yes.

**DT:** This is probably more to do with Sunday newspaper supplements, but the word 'hiraeth' in Welsh, which is that being homesick but more of a longing, a melancholy, and also the Scandinavian word 'hygge'. For someone who speaks Norwegian, it's particularly annoying because, One, absolutely, why do we need a word that explains this sort of cosy, by the fireside feeling, which exists predominantly in countries where a cabin in the mountainside would make you feel like that?

It's also a complete mistranslation and misunderstanding of what Norwegians mean by that word. This idea that we would package it through scatter cushions and sofas and candles and re-appropriate it in that way comes back to that idea that as a poet, somehow you can unlock the meaning in this one word that doesn't exist in the language you're writing in predominantly, that only you can bring it to the reader and package it in a way that takes it out of all context.

**TS:** Of course you're failing if you're using that word, if you're putting that word in italics and placing it in the poem, unless the whole poem is about your relationship with that word in that context... The whole purpose of a poem is to explain whatever it is you are trying to communicate in the language you're writing in. So if that word remains, starkly untranslatable, in italics, that to me is an admission of the poet's failure. I'm going to make myself really unpopular because all my poetry friends have written poems like this.

**DT:** I'm going to have a horrible time this week. I'm going to be going through my poems and discovering all the Norwegian words I've put in in italics, but that's my own issue. Time is doing that thing where it continuously moves forward, so we're going to finish with a third and final poem. We'll just reiterate that your pamphlet, *Complicity*, is available through Smith|Doorstop as part of the Laureate's Choice series.

I'll put a link in the episode description to where people can buy that. Can people find you on social media? Do you do that as a poet?

**TS:** No, actually. I will at some point join Twitter, but I'm scared of Twitter. I don't really believe in brevity, which is a strange thing for a writer to say. Generally, in my experience, people who think you talk more sense the fewer words you use are arseholes. It's like people who 'tell it straight'. I think we should all use more words. I think we should all speak and hear more words.

**DT:** What I will do for Twitter users is share details about spoken-word gigs or readings. I'll read them out in the outro. You can just listen to the end of the episode. I'll just thank you now Tom for joining me. Actually, I'm joining you, in your living room.

**TS:** We can maintain the fiction that I'm here in Lunar Poetry Towers, gazing out at the skyline of Bristol from a height so enormous that the fact we're in W1 is no obstacle. Some very intrepid, high-flying seagulls are soaring several thousand feet beneath us.

**DT:** Crumbs of pasty round their beaks.

**TS:** Absolutely. That's what's really happening. Everything in this conversation makes perfect sense if you know where we are and what we're doing, it just doesn't make sense otherwise. I'm going to finish with a poem whose first line is also its title, which means I'm not going to introduce it;

## I was talking with my marvellous man-friend

about our girlfriends with their friends and how it looks  
so good the way they laugh together, like a dance you could  
learn but not well; and how it's hard sometimes to believe  
you could be worthy of time they could spend laughing like that

when I noticed he wasn't talking back. He had a kind of  
*yes-I've-thought-that-not-exactly-that-but-close-enough*  
look, so I stopped looking for the mercy of regular trips  
to the bar and the toilet and looked at him instead. He said that no-  
one

tells you how friendship is a mystery, like love, because that would be  
to admit that the universe never promised us friends  
but sometimes it's a thing you need to say out loud.  
So I said yes, it was a mystery, how he was reflecting light

like a seventies space-funk tin-foil pearly king. What light was there  
to reflect? It couldn't come from us, because we're extraverts  
and our best enemies say we can only drain light from them.  
Is it possible that our best enemies are wrong?

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## Outro:

**DT:** Hello, you stuck around. I'm still being eyeballed by squirrels. I hope you enjoyed the final, pre-break episode. As I said at the start, I'll probably be back with this podcast in April, though I have some live recordings of some events on my hard drive at home, which I may release as bonus episodes in the new year if it doesn't feel like too much work. I am supposed to be heaving a break. That's a reminder for myself. I'm not very good at taking breaks.

For updates, find us at Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Instagram and Facebook, @Silent\_Tongue on Twitter and over at our website, [www.lunarpodcasts.com](http://www.lunarpodcasts.com). At all of those places, you'll also find updates about my upcoming book, whatever shape that takes with Hesterglock Press. Find our companion podcast, produced by my wife Lizzy, @apoemaweek on Facebook and Twitter.

Thank you again to Arts Council England for their continued financial support since the summer of 2016, with some breaks. I won't go into that now. I definitely have forgotten to mention something, but sometimes in life, you just need to let things go, right? Speak to you lot next spring, when the leaves will hopefully be back on the trees and not under my feet. I'm going to do an Adam Buxton impression now.

**End of transcript.**