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[Episode 51: Abi Palmer](#) (January 2016)

Transcript: Alba Frederick

Host: Lizzy Palmer – **LP**

Guest: Abi Palmer – **AP**

Conversation:

LP: Hello, my name is Lizzy Palmer, and this is another episode for Lunar poetry shorts. Today I am in Camberwell in my new house which I just moved into yesterday. And I am joined by the poet Abi Palmer.

AP: Hello Lizzy.

LP: Hello Abi, how are you?

AP: I'm very well, thank you. It feels like we're cousins or sisters.

LP: Yeah, long lost cousins. I think we are.

AP: Yeah, definitely.

LP: Cool. So, as we always do, I think we'll start with a poem, please?

AP: Well, have I got a treat for you?! I have a poem called 'The Palmer'. So I don't know if you know this Lizzy Palmer, but the origins of our shared family name is in pilgrimages. So, Palmers who went out, and a lot of the pilgrims who went out on pilgrimages and came back with palm leaves to prove that they'd been on pilgrimages, actually didn't finish the pilgrimage and would buy them on the way, so this is a poem about that. It's called 'The Palmer'.

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LP: Wonderful, thank you Abi.

AP: You're very welcome.

LP: So, the first question, which we ask everybody, is "Why poetry?"

AP: That's a really interesting question. Do people have succinct answers to that question?

LP: No. I think pretty much everyone's answer has been different to that question. It seems quite like a silly, vague question, but it does provide really interesting answers.

AP: I guess for me, poetry is a lot about organisation of thoughts. I have a lot of words to say quite a lot of the time. If you're ever with me in a pub you might notice that. Poetry is so much about the organisation of ideas. You have this very small frame within which to place things. So I respond to poetry in a way that I don't respond to other writing. It makes me think in a different way and it's just how things come out. I've tried writing in other forms. Apparently I sleep-talk in rhyme which is a really bizarre thing that my boyfriend told me recently.

LP: I snore in iambic pentameter. It's just natural.

[Laughter]

AP: Us bards!...So I guess it's a lot about organisation of thoughts and it's also about restrictions. You've got so much space out there within which to put things. I'm a words sort of person, and I like having limits in writing. I really like Oulipian poets who set themselves

really rigid rules and I like that kind of organisation of ideas. I think things happen which surprise you, that if I had the freedom of a novel, I would have too many ideas and just pile one on top of the other. And the other thing, I have a lot of pain in my hands. I've got a medical condition that causes a lot of pain and so actually writing very small amounts is helpful. I couldn't write a novel. I've always written poetry since I was really young. I wrote my first poem when I was about 4. But it's kind of lucky because as I've got older it's become more and more necessary.

LP: Often the way, when I'm thinking about how and why I write poetry, I wonder if it's a control thing, or an OCD thing, particularly if I write something that's strictly structured and rhythmic. So do you think maybe that's got something to do with it, or is it more of a cathartic thing for you? As you say you have a lot of pain and you're concentrating on ordering and metering something.

AP: It's kind of both actually. I would say, in some ways, I think I write for two reasons. One, because I've got something that I just need to talk about, so for instance I've written a lot about disability and pain and sometimes it's just easier to process it that way. But actually when I write like that it tends to be that I remove restrictions so I remove punctuation altogether and I remove any rules except just to keep going, which is the opposite to all the advice you're given to deal with pain. But when I'm writing about other things, it tends to be [about] having the rules or having a restriction.

I'm quite a perfectionist writer, I'll just rewrite and rewrite and rewrite, and cut and stick and cut and stick and then go into it with a pen and go over and over with the same line kind of obsessively, so I guess I have that obsession to make it right and make it perfect. Then sometimes something comes out of that that you weren't expecting so I feel like there are two ways of thinking, or two ways of using words.

One is that you've got an idea that you need to say, and the idea is fully formed and the words are just using it and sometimes I'm using the words because I like how they sound and then through that suddenly you have some kind of major revelation or it makes you think about things differently; so then sometimes I'm led by the words and sometimes the words are leading me.

LP: What have been your main influences as a writer?

AP: I've had some really good help, I suppose. I started writing when I was a lot younger and when I moved to London I met some really influential poets. I ended up living quite close to Wayne Holloway-Smith and reading his book 'Beloved, in case you've been wondering', and that was a real shift for me, in terms of how I wrote. The aesthetics of the language he uses... he would create a mood through the poem that would totally shift how you were feeling. I think he'd probably be quite bewildered by that description but creating a mood that is totally new, rather than just writing about something that's happening to you. That was a huge influence. Since then Bobby Parker's been a big influence in totally the opposite way, in that he talks very much about what's going on in one very distinct voice, and that's been a huge influence.

In terms of woman writers, I heard Karen Hayley read a few years ago and she's a voice actor as well, so she creates these voices in her poems and then through that it creates a different mood. Performing a voice is a really interesting thing and Salena Godden manages to do a mixture of both where she writes in a voice on the page and as she's performing it, you're there with them, just through the voice that's used.

In terms of character poems, this is a really good example of a poem that I started writing with a character in mind, and then it ended up telling me more about myself than I realised. The character in it is a clown. I grew up in a clowning community. My mum was a clown artist so we would go to a lot of clown conventions and there would always be clowns around us. My brother ended up doing clowning. I started writing this poem with this clown character in mind and then it ended up being quite an emotional poem about how I feel about my family. This is called 'Clown Noir - A love poem in 3 acts'.

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LP: Thank you. You perform a lot and presumably a lot of your poetry has been written for performing. So I was gonna ask you about what projects and things you have going on at the moment. I was reading a little bit about some of your recent work and you do a lot of pieces which are interactive with the audience so I think maybe it would be interesting to talk more specifically about some of those. And I should say, for listeners, if you would like to be involved in a bit of audience participation with the next poem, you should now go to your kitchen and get some salt and keep it aside and you'll find out why shortly! Perhaps Abi, you could tell us a bit about your interactive pieces that you do.

AP: Yeah. Something that really interests me about writing is the idea of metaphors, and the conflict that happens when you have a metaphor that makes you think about something from a different angle, connecting two things that hadn't been connected before. I'm really interested in connections and juxtapositions. I wondered how far that could go and whether it could go beyond just words [and] into other language. I started trying to write poems that you were totally immersed in.

For instance, the salt one we'll do later was an attempt at immersing you within an idea that became the poem, and then from there I started becoming more interested in the opposite of that. So 'What happens when you take one experience and words and contrast it with a totally different physical experience, how does that change how you listen to the words?' and that developed into a project called ['Alchemy'](#) which is about testing these experiences. It's taking the classic idea of alchemy - earth, air, water and fire being the basis upon which everything is created.

Aristotle was suggesting that the entire universe is just made from these 4 elements and then in the 17th century, science as we know it now - empirical science - started to develop [and] people started to question that logic, in that it's entirely text-based. Aristotle said it and it was quoted back for generations. And Robert Boyle came along and said, well actually, we shouldn't just be relying on the words of one writer, we should be testing these experiences physically, so he started testing reactions between different elements and through that he formed the basis of the periodic table. So that's a really exciting conflict between a verbal or

a literary experience and actual physical experience and I was wondering if we could reproduce that.

So 'Alchemy' is a chance to do that. I've created it, I did it as a live performance first for an event called 'Roulade' which was themed around alchemy and I was testing people's experiences. I had 4 poems. One based upon earth, one air, one water and one fire, and then 4 physical experiences. You could have dirt rubbed into your hands for earth, or you could smell the smell of a lit match that's just been blown out, for fire. Or you could suck on a Wrigley's Airwave - that was one of them. That was quite an intense experience. There are all these different experiences and you pick two at random.

You might have an earth poem mixed with an air aroma or an air experience and I was interested to see, would your physical reaction change the way you heard the words and I'm gathering people's responses to that. Some of them are quite surprising. I recently created the Alchemy project into a [box set](#) that people could take home and try at home and people keep getting back to me and telling me "When I heard this poem using one physical stimulus it felt like a breakup poem but then with another one it was a love poem" and that's amazing to me, to go, that's totally transformed how you heard and felt those words. Pushing outwards beyond language was a really interesting experience.

LP: It's really fascinating. It'd be interesting to see how far you could go with that and in how many different ways as well. That's a really brilliant idea.

AP: Thank you! I'm hoping to push it further at different times, but just getting Alchemy out at the moment is my current project.

LP: In terms of future projects, are you quite interested in doing similar things like that? Do you think it will be more interactive performancey stuff, or do you still have other things on the go... for yourself or other types of writing?

AP: There's definitely two. I feel like this entire interview has been two strands of talking. One where I'm talking about writing and one where I'm talking about performing. They definitely are kind of pushing in different directions at the same time so I feel like, recently I'm trying to improve just the act of writing. You could become gimmicky if you only ever do fun, interactive or weird, interactive stuff. I feel like I'm pushing in two directions. One which is very performance-based, and not just performance but experience-based, playing with language and other experiences, and I'm really curious to see where that will go next.

Before I did Alchemy, I did a project based around mineralogy which had a similar theme. This is something that you probably can't tell via a podcast but 'Alchemy' and 'Mineralogy' are both projects which involve matchboxes. I collect novelty matchboxes and the whole thing started by 'What could you put in a matchbox that somebody opened?' and then the poem came from that, so I've got 500 matchboxes left that I've got to fill so I've gotta do something more with those.

After Alchemy there probably will be a development. I've been referring to it as micro-immersive poetry and I'm curious to see different ways in which you could get absorbed in or

pulled out from the moment through what's in the box. It sounds like a magician. On the other hand, I'm also trying to develop the actual practice of writing. I don't want to go too far just down experimentation without also focussing on actually making the words good, too. So that's something I'm trying to develop as well. And that's hard sometimes.

LP: Yeah.

[Laughter]

LP: On that note, maybe we can have our third and final poem...?

AP: Yeah, ok. So we're gonna try an experiment, if any of you at home want to try this and feedback on how it changes your listening experience, I would be really grateful. This is a poem from my mineralogy collection... my collection of poems about minerals. The mineral here is salt. So what you would do if you were to join in, and feel free not to, but it would be great if you did. What you would do is put a tiny, tiny little bit of salt on the end of your tongue. You can close your mouth, but don't swallow until I say the word 'swallow'. I will emphasise the word 'swallow'. Are you all ready and sitting comfortably? Then we'll begin.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time]

LP: Brilliant. Thank you. It would be interesting to hear some feedback if anyone took part in that.

AP: I'm also curious. Normally there's someone with salt on their tongues as I do that. So I speed up if it looks like they're going [yuk sound]. The best is salt flakes if you've got any of those. That sounds really pretentious.

[Laughter]

LP: Great. My final question. Where can people find out more about your work? Do you have websites, blogs, Twitter, etc.

AP: I do, indeed. I've got a website that automatically redirects to a blog. It's www.abipalmer.com. And you can also get me on Twitter. I'm [@abipalmer_bot](https://twitter.com/abipalmer_bot) because I'm a robot. You can find me on Facebook. I think it's facebook.com/abipalmerisyourfriend. I think that might be what it is. Yeah, so that's how you can find me.

LP: Great. Thanks Abi Palmer.

AP: You are very welcome, Lizzy Palmer!

LP: If anybody would like to leave their feedback, you can do so in the comments underneath the YouTube video which you are looking at and listening to. Alternatively, on the Lunar podcast Twitter feed which is [@Silent Tongue](https://twitter.com/SilentTongue) and we'll see what happens. Thanks for listening everyone. Buh-bye.

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