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[Episode 23 Kadeem Beresford-James](#) (April 2015)

Transcribed by Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Kadeem Beresford – **KB-J**

Conversation:

DT: Hello, my name is David Turner and this is another episode of Lunar Poetry Shorts. Today, I am at home in Camberwell, in my kitchen, and I am joined by Kadeem Beresford-James. As always, by way of introduction, we're going to start with a poem.

KB-J: Hello. Creatives

[Unfortunately we are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Thank you very much. That was short and sweet, but it leads really nicely into our first question, which is why poetry? But first, I completely forgot to say hello properly. Hello, Kadeem, welcome. I'm such a professional. I wrote in big letters on the bottom of another piece of paper that I should say hello and left that one upstairs. Anyway, hello. Why poetry?

KB-J: Well, I started writing poetry in secondary school, after one of my grandmas died. Because of the way my family is set up, half-brothers, sisters, whatnot, I had three grandmas growing up. My brother's dad mother, she died when I was still at secondary school and it hit all of us really, really hard, because we spent a lot of time with her over summers and stuff like that.

I couldn't figure out a way to get the emotion out. I was really, really angry at everybody for no particular reason and that's when I wrote my first poem. It was fucking terrible. I don't have it anymore, I don't even remember what it was called, but I remember it making me feel better and then I started carrying around a little black book and then everybody got to know me as 'the dude with the black book in his blazer pocket.'

DT: What part of the process was cathartic, the writing or the sharing?

KB-J: It was the writing, because I didn't share it with anyone. I wrote it and I would recite it to myself and that made me feel better because it was like understanding how I felt, because I didn't get why I was so upset with everybody. Then I wrote it down and then I understood myself.

DT: There's definitely something about locking in certain emotions, painful emotions, with words on paper, isn't there? I started, for reasons we won't go into just now, because it would go on too long and I don't want it to be about me. I started writing for similar reasons in order to try and rein in the emotions in some way. Do you have any insight into why that might work?

KB-J: I think it's because, you know when you think something, it doesn't really feel real until you say it. With something like that, if you can't talk to somebody about it, I think writing it down is like you talking to another you, so actually you have talked to somebody about it, it just happens to be yourself.

DT: That's interesting, it's more of an internal monologue. If it was an internal monologue that happened just inside your own head, it would become tortuous, but there's something about putting it on paper. It's there on paper and you don't necessarily have to go back to it.

KB-J: It has a life by itself, almost like something in a test tube.

DT: Is it similarly cathartic to read in front of people or is it different?

KB-J: I find it different. The writing I find the same, the performance is like I'm bearing parts of myself to people. It's never the whole story, but it's always little pieces of the story, whatever the poem happens to be about. That one is about me finding myself, the one I read before, me finding myself as a poet. I now have a title: Kadeem, poet.

I feel like it only works when I perform it to people because I know that I'm a poet. Other people don't know I'm a poet until I tell them I'm a poet. It's a different kind of catharsis.

DT: It's not even a year since I first read in public and I found it very, very disheartening at the beginning, about people's preconceptions of you when you go up. Ultimately, I think everybody's got a poem similar to that, which is dealing with the idea 'now I'm a poet' and you can't go to an open mic and just read.

It's like there's no such thing as outsider art, there's no such thing as being outside a poet, or it can exist, but it's such extreme circumstances. That whole idea of getting up in front of people and stating 'I'm a poet, this is what I do, this is how I communicate with the world.'

KB-J: I don't think it applies just to poets. I call it creatives because it applies to all the arts.

DT: That's why I mentioned outsider art because it's very difficult to be a painter and not show your work in some way. I suppose everybody's work needs some validation, not to feel better about it, to feel it's OK, but ultimately most people seek validation of their work in front of an audience. How often do you read in public?

KB-J: Not as often as I used to. I used to go to poetry nights every week when I was in uni, that's when I started reading, at Poetry Unplugged. Roehampton University.

DT: So you would read in London? It's not that far.

KB-J: I didn't live on campus, I lived with my mum. So it was quite far because I lived in South Norwood, it's near Croydon, quite far to go, but I enjoyed doing it, so it didn't feel like a chore to go into London just to read at night. I really enjoyed it. I was discovering something about myself. I only started reading then and then continued to read. Now that I'm out of uni and have to work, I don't go as often as I'd like. I've been to a few more in the past months. I want to turn it into a regular thing again.

DT: It's an important thing to talk about, how difficult it can be to keep dragging yourself to open-mic nights because the main thing is, you're not always talking about things that are very pleasant in your life. It's not that nice an experience, getting up and talking about certain things, and to do it in the dark when you're working, you get up in the dark and come home in the dark, go to sit in a basement and listen to a lot of stuff you probably don't want to listen to, get up and do your thing, then go home again, get in really late. It's quite a commitment, isn't it? Do you find it gets in the way of writing as well?

KB-J: Not in particular because when I first started reading, I would write stuff on the way to open-mic nights and perform the stuff I wrote on the way, then that was it. I would always want to read something new. I would never want to repeat myself. I have this thing about

repeating myself in general. It never got in the way, but it started to get harder, because I started feeling like I had to write stuff that might get a decent response, because having a decent response is really gratifying when you're walking off stage and after the event, people come up and say 'I really enjoyed your poem'.

It's like 'thank you! I worked hard on that. Thank you for liking a part of me that I wrote and shared with everybody'. There were some nights that didn't happen and I went home and thought 'oh, it suddenly isn't worth it anymore.'

DT: It goes back to that idea of wanting validation. It's egotistical, I don't mean that in a negative sense, it's a natural thing, we all want validation of the creative things we do. You wouldn't be the first person that said having that idea of validation in your head stifles you a little bit, creatively, and you need to at some point step away from going to the same nights, meeting the same people.

If you had unlimited funds and were able to travel to any night you wanted, that would probably make it easier. It's often moving in the same circles of people and poets that causes the problems, not the nights themselves. It's just a repetition, isn't it? When I first started performing, I had this idea that I wouldn't do the same thing twice, but then you're going to the same nights all the time and you sort of are doing the same thing all the time.

You're being you in the same space and it essentially doesn't matter what words come out of your mouth. That's the problem with performance, rather than poetry, the performance side. Maybe we could have another poem.

KB-J: This one is called Contradictions.

[Unfortunately we are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Thank you very much. How do you critique your own work? Do you have people you share it with?

KB-J: No. I critique it constantly as I write. On semi-long poems like that one, I try to go for certain patterns, like reusing the same phrase or rhyme or metre. It has to sound good to me and if it doesn't, I have to go back and change it until I'm happy with, like, the first stanza and then I can continue writing. After every stanza, I read through the whole poem as if I was performing it and if it doesn't sound fluid enough, I have to go back and change it. I'm a perfectionist about that stuff.

DT: Would you say you were more focused on how the poem sounds out loud as a performance piece?

KB-J: As a performance piece, yeah. In terms of performance, I am more concerned with how it sounds. Obviously, the topic of the poem is important to me and I do consider what I write, what metaphors I use, very carefully. I always think about them very carefully, even though some of my poems don't sound like I have. I do consider it all very, very carefully.

I've got a lot of poems where I've tried to use a certain metaphor and it's just not worked, so I've had to stop writing it because it just turned out sounding like a piece of crap.

DT: You would discard a poem based on one metaphor and prefer to move on to another piece?

KB-J: Yes. It's like I've started building something and a part of it near the top, or even around the middle, as I've built up, has fucked up, like a bit of it and the bit of it being fucked up has messed up the whole thing. So I would rather knock it all down and start again than try to change that bit. I do try to change that bit first, but I think two hours trying to change the same line, and I've had experience, it's just not worth it. I'd rather just start again.

DT: It's a tricky thing to talk about, at what point you give up on a poem. It's obviously completely personal. There often aren't very tangible reasons as to why you would cast something aside because it would often just be a personal feeling or just the sound of something. Have you ever been on stage, halfway through a poem, and thought 'this is fucking shit' and perhaps not stopped?

KB-J: Yeah. On my computer, because I type all my poems and keep them in this big, purple folder, I have two folders in my poetry folder, one I call Before Enlightenment and the other's called Settled Storm. Before Enlightenment has all the shit, Settled Storm is all the ones I actually like. I think they are about balanced, which says a lot. I do write often and I've written a lot, but not all of it gets performed and I have performed some of them and I fucking wish I hadn't.

DT: It's happened to me a couple of times where I've read something that wasn't meant to be funny and people laugh at it and I'm like 'that's it, that's going.' Fuck that. I don't know, I don't trust myself to deliver it in a clear enough way to communicate the true feeling. If people, an audience, are laughing or not laughing or reacting in a way you don't want them to, it's your fault, not theirs. It's the way you've delivered something or written something.

KB-J: That depends. All writing, especially poetry, is down to the interpretation of whoever's hearing it or reading it. If you've got an entire crowd pissing themselves at something that's actually meant to be sombre, then maybe you've messed up a bit. But if you've got one or two people sniggering here or there, that's them hearing something no one else has heard and that you clearly didn't hear.

DT: I think I'd be happy with them laughing. One or two people are just on another planet. Would you like to see your writing develop in any particular way?

KB-J: I don't know. I'm a novelist as well, so I want that to develop. In terms of poetry, I've never been really sure. Even when I was in school, when I first started writing, I remember writing something at the start of a Biology class and someone leant over my shoulder and I guarded my notebook, like 'what the fuck are you looking at, mate?'

He said 'You writing poetry again?' I said 'Yeah, what of it?' He said 'You know you're never going to make money off that?' Even then, I was 15, I was like 'So? This is what I want to do,

leave me alone.’ Now, I suppose something I have considered is putting them together in a booklet, a collection and publishing that and having that to sell at poetry events.

DT: I was talking to someone about this recently. There isn’t enough collected writing by the same authors, where they publish short stories and poetry all in one booklet. I don’t understand why there is a division so much. One writer’s writing, no matter what style it is, will usually sit together pretty well. You have to think a bit more about the editing, I suppose, and placement of individual pieces.

I have never understood why people say ‘I’m a poet and I write short stories’. I understand why, in conversation, it comes out like that, but to other writers, just say you’re just a writer. I mean that in a really positive way. You should really be able to turn your hand to most things and if you do, why can’t they go in one pamphlet?

KB-J: True. I agree.

DT: I think it would make your poetry – I don’t mean you specifically – I mean us, it would make our writing more accessible as well, if they were bookended by short stories. I think people that were not necessarily interested in poetry would be more inclined to buy a collection of short stories which also had poetry in and they would then have the time to read. I don’t think that’s a way of dumbing down either. I think it’s quite a nice way to market to readers.

KB-J: It’s a way of getting your name out there as not just ‘that dude who reads poems’, but also as ‘a guy who writes stories’. I’m asking a lot of people at the moment how they have self-published stuff. None of them are poets, they’re all novelists. I’ve not got any replies yet, because I’ve asked them very recently, but the fact I’ve not asked any poets is kind of telling.

It’s like I’m asking people who’ve published books, but nobody who’s published a book of poetry. It’s because they haven’t really self-published, as far as I am aware, at least.

DT: I suppose it does happen. Possibly the reason the two don’t go hand in hand, I think it’s easier to self-publish your poetry because if you’ve written a poem and you’re happy with it, you don’t necessarily need any outside editing, whereas with a longer piece of prose, you would be wise to get someone in to edit and actually have a look at the thing before it goes out to print. That might be a reason. Does your prose writing inform your poetry writing?

KB-J: No. They are very, very different. I try to be as simple as I can. I don’t like to use really long, complex words, even though I know lots of long, complex words.

DT: So you say.

KB-J: Transcendent. Manifesto. I try to keep the words I use simple because I don’t think poetry should be about using lots of flowery words. I think we’ve evolved beyond that. That’s the English teacher version of how poetry should be and I think that in 2015, we should be a step beyond that. There’s a place for it, sure, if you want that kind of sound, but I think we’ve

gone beyond that. I think you should be able to get your point across using the simplest words you can.

My prose, I also try to use the simplest words I can, but I did a writing course and one of the things they tell you to do is if you have one word that you can use in place of five words, use the one word. That often means I am using long, complex words. My poetry tends to be about me and my experiences of the world. The prose tends to be sometimes based on my experiences of the world, but usually the plots are completely fictitious.

DT: Also, in terms of what kind of language and style of words you use, I suppose with prose, you've normally got more of a captive audience, who are a bit more invested in reading. They may have started two pages earlier and because they've come across one long word, it doesn't mean they're going to give up on what they've already started out to read.

Poetry, I think in most people's minds, is still quite throwaway and if you get two stanzas in and there's a word you don't understand, you can just put it down. It will turn people off very quickly. I don't actually think that's necessarily to do with using a long word, it's perhaps using words inappropriately and trying to be too clever just for the sake of it.

KB-J: I remember I was at one night, I won't say which, but the headliner, the poem he read was nothing but complex words. I felt like he had picked up a dictionary and just found every word with more than five syllables and written them down in order. I know that wasn't what he did because at times, I could follow what he was saying, but for most of it, I just tuned out because it was 10 minutes long. One poem and he just kept going and going. I was mystified.

DT: It's an issue I have with spoken word that's heavily influenced by hip hop or rap, in that most of it is based on the language you hear on the streets and that's the whole point of it, it's supposed to be very clear and direct, until they get to that paragraph or stanza where they rhyme everything with 'initiate'.

Every sentence ends with the same rhyme. What are you doing? This was so beautifully pure until this point that you picked up the rhyming dictionary or Thesaurus or the two combined and you're like fuck, what are you doing? This was going so well. It's hard sometimes, because you can't get into this discussion without seeming like you hate that style of poetry, because that's not the case. It's just why over-complicate things?

The way I try to write poetry is definitely in a similar style to you. I write in a way that you would hear people speaking on buses. If I do write anything longer, I tend to get much more cleverer. You've got the space and time to do it, that's the thing, and you can really show off all the long words.

KB-J: I know things!

DT: Transcendent was pretty good. And manifesto, very topical, we've got an election coming up. Maybe we could have a third and final poem.

KB-J: Of course. This one's called Incomplete Masterpiece. The thing I love about this one is I wrote it as I was walking away from the corner shop near my mum's house. It's a true story.

[Unfortunately we are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Cheers, man. Thank you. I nearly yelped in pain then.

KB-J: That was your elbow?

DT: Yup. I'm becoming plagued by external noises on these. If it's not chickens or squirrels, it's fucking elbows. Thank you, that was nice. I was listening. What have been your main influences over your development as a writer or performer?

KB-J: Other poets on the circuit. I have never read a lot of poetry. I have maybe three poetry books, one by Philip Larkin, one by Emily Bronte, one by Edgar Allan Poe and that's about it. I've read those and after I read them, I was like 'that's really cool' but I don't feel like reading more poetry. It's not something I pick up to read because I suppose I know a little bit of disdain for history. They're gone. It's not that they don't matter, but I would rather hear the words from people who are still around.

My influences are mostly from other poets because there have been times where I have been in a real slump in terms of my mood and my outlook on life and then I've been at home and it's like 5pm and I'm like 'I know, I'm just going to go out to this open-mic night that I saw advertised on Facebook'. So I go there and hear some people reading and I'm like 'wow, I remember when I was in uni and I'd just started doing this and this was the feeling I had' and then I feel really, really uplifted.

It's always because of someone else's poem that I've read. Sometimes, they're someone who's just gotten on the circuit, sometimes someone I've heard before on the circuit. It doesn't matter who they are, sometimes I'll just hear something from someone and that will be enough to set my mind working. I might look rude during some open mics, but I've just taken out my notebook and started writing something in the middle of someone's set because something they've said has set my mind off and I can't help it, cos if I can't write it, then I'm likely to forget it because my memory is like that.

DT: I really enjoy writing notes as someone's reading because you have been so inspired or they may have mentioned something. You're not writing directly related to what they're saying, but it's set a train of thought and there's something really energising, to sit down and try and listen to them and try and get your thoughts down. It's quite a buzz, isn't it? What would you recommend to our listeners to go out and see or read or watch? This doesn't have to be poetry related.

KB-J: Good. In terms of reading, I would advise A Series of Unfortunate Events by Lemony Snicket because there are lots of literature jokes. It's a children's series and in one of the later books, there's the end of a poem by Philip Larkin and the first line of that poem is 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad.' The fact that book is for children, they can Google that one line and find swearing in it.

So that and anything else by Daniel Handler, mostly because he's my favourite author and the things his characters go through make me want to write more. I want to talk about my experiences because some of his characters are around my age, so oh my God, I've had similar experiences and I want to write about it, not prose, I want to write a poem. In terms of seeing, any Broadway show. Wicked, Avenue Q, anything by Cirque du Soleil, if you get a chance.

Go and see them because they're all really, really good. They are all things I've seen and gone home and wanted to do something. They made me want to do something creative because I know that someone has created this thing I've just seen that's really big and lots and lots of people, writer and non-writer, have been to see and really enjoyed.

DT: That's about it for the questions. Just take this opportunity to mention any blogs you might be involved in.

KB-J: I'm part of the Kerosene Chronicle blog. It's on Wordpress so kerosenechronicle.wordpress.com. We're moving to another website whose name I can't remember yet. When we actually do the move, I think we're going to put a post up on Wordpress to say so.

DT: I'll put the link to the video on YouTube so send me a message and I'll change the description. Cheers, Kadeem, really enjoyed that, really enjoyed chatting. You can see Kadeem at nights in London. If you want to. Cheers.

End of transcript.