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[Episode 125 - Stephen Lightbown](#) (25/07/2020)

Transcript by Christabel Smith

Episode host: Peter deGraft-Johnson – **PJ**

Conversation host: David Turner - **DT**

Conversation guest: Stephen Lightbown – **SL**

Introduction:

PJ: Hello, ladies, blokes and non-binary folks, welcome to episode 125 of the Lunar Poetry Podcast. As the more, keen-eared listeners will have noticed, I am not David Turner. Not to

worry, though. He'll be back at the end of the episode to say a final goodbye, as he steps down from hosting this incredible podcast, which I'm happy to be taking over.

For now, allow me to reintroduce myself. My name is Peter deGraft-Johnson. I usually speak fast, drop my Ts. Some of you will already know me as The Repeat Beat Poet, but here, with you, I'll just be going by PJ, for the interests of levity and brevity. That's PJ, like pyjamas, not BJ, like certain sexual acts or thatch-headed prime ministers.

In this episode, David speaks to the Bristol-based, Blackburn-born, NHS worker, activist for wheelchair users and fantastic poet, Stephen Lightbown, about his debut poetry collection, which is a reflective, gritty, uplifting set of poems entitled Only Air, which was published by Burning Eye Books in 2019. They also discuss performing, watching and joining in with poetry, purely on digital platforms, as we're still in this extended Corona season.

The pair also talk about how Stephen grew to write extensively, but not exclusively, about his personal experiences as a wheelchair user and challenging the restrictive norms of how we view, or more likely ignore, people with spinal-cord injuries or differing accessibility needs. It's a brilliant interview and you can find more of Stephen's work @SpokeandPencil across social media.

You can also find a full and free transcript of this episode on our website, www.lunarpodpodcast.com, alongside all the previous episodes and their accompanying transcripts too. It's very useful if you like to read along with the poems. On the website, you will also see our poetry podcast finder for UK and Ireland, which is a database of nearly 100 other poetry podcasts that you can use to scratch your poetry itch, including the remarkable A Poem A Week, heralded by Lizzy Turner, which I have also appeared on.

It's a brilliant show, but I am slightly biased. All links will be in the description, of course. Last but not least, a bit of good news. Back in April, I applied for an emergency Covid grant from the Arts Council England, to continue the great work of this podcast and thankfully, that application was successful. So we will be releasing podcasts regularly towards the end of summer and in autumn.

You can keep up with all the latest Lunar Poetry news by following Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook or the newly launched Twitter account @lunarpodpod, alongside subscribing to us on SoundCloud, Podbean, Stitcher, Acast, Apple Podcast, Spotify or wherever you go for your quality podcasts.

I'm on 'Repeat Beat Poet' on all platforms if you would like to contact me, but for now, I'll leave you for the last time in the incredible, capable hands of David Tuner and Stephen Lightbown.

Conversation:

SL:

BEAR OFF A LEASH

I'm out with Bear on Victoria Street.
He pads on all fours beside my wheelchair.
Slaloms his way through soil rain
that falls from freshly watered hanging-baskets
perched like floral eagles on London's lampposts.
Metal cranes observe from above as they deliver
skips to third floors of empty shell buildings
not yet with lifts and walls.
Wet nose to the ground, tension stretches
his sinews. His fur bristles.
Moments from mayhem. The street is a treadmill in reverse,
every third door a Pret. Repetition everywhere.
Step step Pret. Step step Pret. Step step Pret.
Tourists and commuters momentarily forget their handhelds.
We don't belong here.
I am wary of Bear.
I want to get to the station without incident.
No bag dropped and a thousand hands to help.
No raised kerbs and falling out of my chair.
No collisions with the oblivious and distracted.
A wheelie suitcase here. Double pram there.
Sideways glances. Unseen wrath from Bear.
Bubbles of rage fight for release.
Bear explodes. Chaos.
Now upright he claws at a man on a Boris bike.
Interloper on the pavement,
Briefcase and Metro in his basket.
He is too close to our tension.
Bear scratches at the fact we are different.
That in this city of a million faces we stand out below eye level.
The commuter cyclist is collateral damage from our rage.
An accident.
Like we once were.
Lava eyes ignore sense. Bear is too strong for me.
I grasp at the space where moments ago he was.
Bear stop, what are you doing? Let it go. I plead.
Bear replies: Say he deserved it.
Bear is AWOL in the woods. Redwoods loom,
their branches retreat.
You're pathetic, forget the chair, stand up for yourself.
Say I was right.

Bear is a dot. Lost to me.
No good ever comes when he is like this.
I know what Bear thinks.
If people want to stare, give them a show.
Take me out from the trees, put me in a Big Top.
Silence and shame will deliver us to the station.
Bear is right.
Bear is shaking. Furious.
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DT: Thank you very much, Stephen. How are you doing?

SL: It's good to be here.

DT: We're coming towards what feels like the [end of] most intense period of Covid-19 lockdown in the UK, but we are still observing social-distancing rules and we're talking via FaceTime on our Macs. So it seems strange to say nice to be here because we are both not here.

SL: I'm not even two metres away from my laptop.

DT: We're all here, but not here. It's a Saturday morning, we're doing what is to be my 125th and final recording and this is only the second I've ever done not sat in front of someone, but it's all going to be fine because I know Stephen really well. I should probably clarify that we are friends.

SL: We are.

DT: This happens quite a lot in poetry. You meet people, become friends with them, I never expected to consider so many poets friends, but here we are, five years in, and there's a whole bunch of them.

SL: And friends because of the podcast because we first met at Verve Festival. I'd been listening to the podcast and connected on social media and you came up and said hello and it blossomed from there.

DT: One more, final caveat and this is more for the listeners. We're going to be touching on some topics today and because we are friends, I may ask some questions with far more informality than I would if I didn't know Stephen. It's important to say things like that because sometimes, when you drop in on friends' conversations, lines of questioning can seem a bit glib or insensitive. That isn't for you, Stephen, it's purely for the listeners.

SL: Understood.

DT: So you just read a poem there from a book and you should tell us about that book.

SL: It's one of the poems from my debut collection, a book called *Only Air*, which came out last March 2019 through Burning Eye Books. It's a book that charts my experience of 25, 20 really, years of when I started writing poems about my life as a wheelchair user. I had an accident when I was 16. I was sledging in the snow.

I thought it would be a good idea to sledge backwards through some trees, also when it was dark. There were lots of things I probably should have been thinking it would have been a good idea to avoid. I hit a tree and spent six months in a spinal unit. Now I'm a paraplegic, full-time wheelchair user.

About 15 years after the accident, someone bought me a notebook and I started to jot some things down and that led to me going on a poetry course with Malaika Booker which led to me writing a poem, *A Letter To My Legs*, as a way of saying, I'm really sorry for kind of ignoring you for the past 20 years because this strange, detached feeling that I had with parts of my body that I couldn't feel anymore.

Malaika suggested there might be something in that in terms of writing more poems on my disability and my chair and how that feels. I'd wanted to get into poetry as a way of getting away from that, from writing about anything but my chair, as an escape. In this notebook, when I flicked through the early pages, I'm writing about how much I enjoy baked potatoes and hedgehogs and football and all sorts of weird stuff.

Actually, I went home, started writing and couldn't stop. Then four or five years later, I had all these poems and just felt like they wanted to fit into some kind of collection. I didn't know what else to do with them, but I wanted to share them.

DT: What was the timescale of [moving from] writing for yourself to thinking about an audience?

SL: It was quite quick really. I didn't even start showing an interest in poetry until my mid-30s so I was late to this really. I didn't consider myself a poet at the time, I was just writing stuff down and they all rhymed, they were all daft. I didn't read poetry and the ego in me said I didn't need to read poetry, I didn't really like poetry, I just liked writing it, but then I've always been a bit of a show-off.

That's also why the accident happened, because I was showing off. I've always had that in me from a really young age, being extroverted and wanting to be the centre of attention but also wondering why I wanted to be the centre of attention and shying away from that at the same time. It wasn't that long after writing these poems that I started to think...

I'd just been through quite a big break-up and I was going on dates and I was that annoying person who would read poems to people. I look back now and actually die inside because they were terrible. I was performing them at that point. I think I was using these first dates as a way of trying to create an audience and get some feedback. The feedback was that there weren't many second dates.

I was in London and a lot of this stuff was around. John Hegley was doing a regular thing at the poetry café. You could turn up and he would read some poems and you could read a poem back. I went to a Poetry Stanza group in Greenwich, but then amongst writing these poems, I was coming up towards the 20-year anniversary of my accident and I had the idea to write 20 poems for 20 years.

I wanted to produce, put them into a little pamphlet myself and give 20 of those pamphlets out to close family and friends. So 20 poems, 20 years, 20 pamphlets. I had that then in my non-poetry life, one of these dates worked and turned into a marriage. I changed jobs and moved to Bristol. Moving to Bristol completely consolidated my love for poetry. I guess that's where it took off. There's a fantastic poetry scene in Bristol, but it feels quite compact at the same time.

There's lots of things to go to, lots of things to listen to, people were really willing to share and talk and things like that. Quite quickly, I started to absorb a lot of information that led to conversations with people. I was able to read more, which meant I was building a bit of a profile in Bristol and then I was approached by Burning Eye to see if I had a manuscript.

Really, from someone buying me that notepad and writing poems about baked potatoes and not reading anything else, to the book coming out, was about seven years.

DT: It's very natural for people who get into writing poems as adults, there's a period where the poems are almost diary entries and you're writing to yourself and working out your emotions, then there's a transition, sometimes a sharp leap. For some people, it's smooth and long drawn-out, you don't really notice it, but you move from diary entries to deliberate communications with audiences. You're not talking to yourself strictly anymore, you're talking to other people.

SL: That's right. The first poems, personally, I personally felt were quite cathartic. They were like free therapy because I was able to articulate thoughts that I was having and anger and resentment that built up from being in the chair. That enabled me to put this stuff down on paper and question it, question whether or not I actually felt like that and move beyond that initial anger and draw out why I was feeling angry, what it was making me feel that way.

I wasn't doing it for any other reason. For me, it was a purely personal learning process. I've spoken to other poets who say, it's not cathartic because it's an art form or whatever, but for me, the art-form side of it, the performing side wasn't coming into it at that point when I was writing these particular poems, because I found that poetry, the succinctness and ability to use different forms and the way to play around with language was giving me a platform to challenge the way I thought about things, more than if I was just going to write prose or pure diary entries, which I had been doing before.

I'd kind of had bits of therapy in the past and they didn't always work for me because I felt like I didn't want to stick at it. I'd have three or four sessions and be like, right, done, I'm sorted, I'm all right. One thing that did stick was to write a positive diary, so write a good thing, ignore everything else that happens in that day. Even if the only thing that someone does is make you a cup of tea, write that in as a diary entry.

I was flicking through this stuff, I'd stuck at it for about a year and I was, actually, there are some positive things in there, but doing that made me think more about how I actually fit into the world. I started to think how society and societal things about not being able to get on a train without asking for assistance. I was like, actually, this is all right, me understanding this, but this is bullshit, this stuff shouldn't be happening.

I then found I wanted to use it as a way of changing perceptions, try to challenge the norms people had. I made a conscious decision. I thought, I can go and read poems at open mic night and write about whatever, trees or love or rainbows or whatever it might be and that would be fine, I would be a poet in a wheelchair that wrote about those things. Or I could make a conscious decision to be a poet in a wheelchair that talks about those things that probably not that many other people are talking about on that open mic if nowhere else.

I realised I was going to those events, I wasn't seeing people like me, I wasn't hearing poems that I could connect to on a real, personal level. I could connect to people talking about, I dunno, love of football or something, but I didn't really see anybody talking about... There were poems about mental health, poems about the body, relationship with body and occasionally, poems about disability, but nothing specific to me about spinal-cord injury and being a wheelchair user.

I made that conscious decision that was what I wanted to write about. I didn't mind if I was pigeon-holed.

DT: So we're 13, 14 months on from the publication of *Only Air* and as you say a very conscious decision on your part to talk about your experiences as a wheelchair user. It's hard to separate the person I know and the memories I have of them from the writing and sometimes I transfer their personalities onto the writing and read a lot into it because I know the people. That whole idea of a journey through writing and so much of it starting from anger reflects a lot in my own writing process and that of others.

As you were saying, there's a lot of writing about mental-health issues and certain forms of disability, class and other subjects where you might feel your body or you as a person are not always welcome in the world around you, and there's a natural transition. The healthy thing seems to be you realise that your own body is not the issue, it's the fact the world around you won't allow it to fit in. Now you've had time to reflect on the book, do you find it's been successful in that?

SL: I think so. One of the things I try to do, as well, quite quickly the anger poems moved to one side. I then made another decision that I wanted to normalise my life in public. I wanted to talk about the things everyone else was doing that people maybe didn't think I could do, like relationships or having a job or going on holiday, doing those things people maybe don't assume are fairly normal things to do.

Quite a lot of people have come up to me and said afterwards, I'd never even thought about that before, I'd never thought what it would be like for someone who can't feel half of their body to lie in bed next to someone who can feel all of their body, that person who can feel all

of their body stroking your legs and you've got no idea that's happening, ;but that's a real, intimate moment you've shared and I feel privileged to be let in on that and know a little bit more.'

Also I think my wife and I both reflect on the fact that people are inquisitive. I've had a lot of time to get over it and get used to people asking me really random questions. For my wife, who's still fairly new to this, we've been together for four or five years, I can't remember. Keep that in because it won't make a difference, she'll find something to shout at me about in this anyway, it might as well be the fact I can't remember how long we've been together.

She is still getting used to people saying really random questions about our relationship and why she's with me. She's like, well, he's got a Northern accent, that's what I liked about him. But he's in a chair. She forgets and that's really good for us, so it annoys her when it's the first thing people think about. For me, I thought I may as well answer some of these questions because I know people in the audience are thinking them.

If I'm sat over there, reading a poem about something else, I know people are thinking, how did he have an accident? Was it a car crash? Part of me thinks I might as well own that information. The book has helped in terms of me just being a bit more OK about what I'm prepared to share and not share, but also I think it has enabled other people in similar situations to come up and say thanks, I've read that book and that really resonated with my life.

DT: You mentioned you were happy when you first started reading [poetry] to be pigeon-holed as disabled writer because you were firm in that you wanted to own that and you wanted to be representative of voices you weren't hearing at events. Was it the audience interaction afterwards that helped you realise you weren't only appearing as that?

I hate to make it seem like a solitary pursuit because it's not. You spoke about going to writing groups and moving to Bristol and there being a community, it isn't an isolating thing, but it can feel isolating because you're with your own thoughts all the time. It isn't until you meet readers or read at events and you hear from audience members that you realise how open your own writing is. It's not just about that singular subject, is it?

SL: That's right and you'd think you'd be writing about one topic and read a poem and someone comes up and talks to you about that poem and says 'oh my God, that really resonated with me, that poem about your dad'. I was like, that was a poem about my dad? Oh, right, fair enough. I didn't realise that was a poem about my dad, that was a poem about me being a child and this, that and the other.

You can write a poem. What you can't do is dictate what people take from that poem. I think that's one of the joys about this. I've not had many reviews of my poetry, but the ones I do, I'm really intrigued when people say I really like the way you put that line after that line. I'm like yeah, that was a happy accident. I don't know how much thought goes into this. There's an element of craft, but also, I think I'll take that praise where it comes.

It's quite nice to be considered to be a poet. There's always that imposter syndrome that sits in this sort of stuff, that feeling that maybe I'm only being asked to read because of the chair and I'm reading something that might me, ironically, stand out in a group of other poets all talking about similar issues. I learnt to go with that.

There's always something to fight against. Equally, there's always a way of thinking, do you know what? I'll just take this door that's been opened or this opportunity and I'll just go with it and make it work for me.

DT: In the time we've known each other, it's like you've been on an X Factor-like personal journey to find this balance in your writing, where you can simultaneously embody personal feelings around access and representation and being labelled by other people as one thing and how restrictive that can be. Ironic and really fucking annoying, you can be talking about matters around restriction and lack of representation and by doing so, you're labelled as one thing and then restricted in another way. You seem to have come quite a long way in finding your own balance with those things.

SL: Yeah, definitely. Before I wrote poetry, before I used it as a thing that consumed and filled my time, I liked doing endurance sporting events. I would do marathons and triathlons and long-distance swims. I would really throw myself into the training. I'd get really wound up and the competitive side of me would come out. That was basically to prove to people I could still do this stuff.

In my career as well, I progressed quite quickly in my day job, chased promotions and moved around the country trying to get these jobs. I was thrashing myself, all to prove I could do these things. I wasn't going to be held back by my chair. Coinciding with writing the poetry was I had a few injuries and an illness, I then wasn't able to train as much as before, so the poetry filled that time.

The more I wrote, the more my wife said I was becoming much more chilled out, like I was finding much more peace with not having to constantly prove people wrong. Finding that balance of being happy to be on stage and say this is who I am, this is what I'm talking about and I'm not bothered whether you are impressed by this or not, I just want to talk to you about it, that balance really helped.

I wasn't really bothered if I was pigeon-holed or not. I don't know if I would consider myself a political poet in a sense. I'm not canvassing for change all the time, I'm not wanting people to go and lobby their MPs, but weirdly, I've been asked to write more think pieces on some of this stuff, outside of poetry, or talk about this stuff.

I think if you can be true to yourself and true to your experiences.... Also, I think I would be setting myself up for a fall if I felt like reading my poems to 10 people was going to change the world. It's not. But if it makes one person in that room think slightly differently, or maybe doesn't sprint across a car park to ask someone they see getting out of a car in a wheelchair if they need help, then that's great.

That's all you can hope for really and I think it helped me manage my expectations about the book. Not everyone's going to win a Forward prize. Not everyone's going to sell thousands of copies and be asked to do Nationwide adverts or opening festivals and all that sort of stuff. That doesn't mean your poetry doesn't count. It doesn't mean there's not a place for it and it doesn't mean that even if you don't have a book and all you're doing is scribbling on Post-It notes, that's absolutely fine.

DT: I'm going to disagree with something you just said, maybe because I don't think you're giving yourself enough credit. I'm in agreement that reality is if you're reading to relatively small audiences, it's not going to have wide-ranging impact because logistically, it can't. But your energy and the way you look at poetry has had an effect on the organisers of events. I would argue that will have far-reaching impact.

The way you talk and enter discussions on social media will have a significant impact on other writers with a wide range of access needs. I think it's important for listeners to know that most people that know you would disagree that it's not having an effect.

You mentioned you weren't seeing or hearing people with spinal-cord injuries. Obviously, a very narrow view would be to say most poetry events are held in basements or back rooms of pubs and it's hard to get into them, but that lets people off from doing something about it.

SL: I agree. I'm happy to be challenged in the way you just did because again, whenever you embark on something new with a disability, there are new ways to then be frustrated at the injustices you face because I was focused on not being able to get on public transport or a beach to go surfing.

Now I'm in poetry. Right, now I'm going to get annoyed about the fact I can't get in venues or if you can get in, there's no disabled toilet, or if you can get in there and have a pee, actually you can't get on the stage and you've got to sit in front of the stage and no one can see you. You're right in the sense lots of events are held upstairs in pubs, downstairs in basements in quite small venues.

I'm also pragmatic enough to appreciate there's not much money in poetry and a lot of people putting events on are doing it out of goodwill. They're doing it at a loss and venues are expensive. You're not selling tickets at £20 a time and 200 people are turning up. You're getting £3, £4, £5 a ticket, maybe 20 people are in the room and you've got to pay travel expenses for your headliner and a fee and maybe the venue is secondary.

I've heard people talk before about 'why would I? I would not want to ever be contacted by somebody with a disability about putting an event on, so why would I put an event on that's accessible?' I get it's the right thing to do, but it's going to cost me more money and no one's going to turn up. Well, no one's turning up because they're not seeing people. It takes time to do this stuff.

Equally, the time it takes to get people in your audience, your event might have stopped because maybe you got bored or things have moved on or you moved away. There is a cycle to these things that's really difficult, but actually, I think it's hard a lot of the time because

people are consumed with you putting that event on. They're not necessarily having the brain space to think about actually, some of these things are quite straightforward.

It's not that hard to think about. I was contacted to read at a new event that was starting. They said, it's in this venue, the venue's fine, it's accessible, there's a loo and all that sort of stuff, but the venue have said they're going to bring a stage in. It's a temporary stage, are you happy to sit in front of it?

I was like, the venue doesn't have a stage, you're going to bring one in for the night, why bring it in at all? It doesn't need it, you're only going to have 15 people, they're all going to see us, you don't need to be onstage. They were like, oh yeah, good point. I'm happy to have those conversations with people to talk about stuff.

I've been talking a lot about conscious decisions, but when I did the launch for Only Air, I wanted it to be as accessible as possible. I sometimes go to talks when they want to talk about accessibility and poetry and I get there and realise what they're talking about is whether or not you can understand sonnet 67 that Shakespeare wrote because it's written in a language that's maybe quite difficult to understand, it's not talking about things we 'get'.

I'm thinking OK, that's accessibility in one form, that's not the accessibility I'm thinking about. Before we even get to that, we need to think whether or not I can get into this venue to hear this poetry. That is a conversation that doesn't happen enough in poetry circles. There's a lot of focus on whether or not spoken word has a place alongside page poetry and are we still able to celebrate poetry that was written 100 years ago and who's on what shelf and who's won what award?

The actual reality is the fact there is a whole part of our population that is not allowed into poetry events and no one seems to really mind that much. I think that's pretty disgraceful. There is a lot more we can do about that. We can get onto that when we talk about lockdown and how that has helped in some ways. But yeah, I made a conscious decision that I wanted to make my nights as accessible as I could make them.

I say that because I realised very quickly that I only knew about access and disability in terms of my own personal experiences and actually, I was very naïve when it came to other things. I was devastated when I realised other people were coming to my events who had disabilities different to me and my event wasn't accessible to them. I was like, I have made you feel like I feel when I go to events and I'm not having that.

DT: This is my point about not doing yourself down when talking about your own impact. One of the most positive outcomes of that event was your ability to talk openly and honestly about the areas you felt you'd failed in. It's only through us as a community talking about our own mistakes that anyone else can learn from them. How else will you know unless people have told you?

What's important is to avoid a situation where it becomes incumbent on the person with access needs to have to tell you how to solve these things. Just so listeners know, I hosted

that launch and recorded it and whilst we both feel if we're going to say an event or project is accessible, we are both very proactive in saying what does that mean?

Suddenly on the night, we realised neither of us had any expertise in how to use an induction loop, which is a system which enables a microphone link to hearing aids for anyone who's using them in the audience. We found out halfway through the event that it wasn't working because neither of us had really thought you might have to check that.

Unfortunately, in a lot of circumstances, you need a hearing aid to test it. It's only through being willing, or not too overly embarrassed by admitting that publicly, that other people might think oh shit, I've never thought about that either.

SL: That's right. I was gutted about that, but I didn't want it to spoil the night, particularly for the people in the audience that didn't work for. Being able to have a conversation with them and come to a solution, which is where I gave them a copy of the book and the poems that were going to be read out, so they could follow, it was by no means an ideal situation, but the feedback I got afterwards was they appreciated that and we have continued the dialogue since then about what worked and what could be improved at different events.

I have no problems with making that mistake. I have a problem with making that mistake again going forwards. I can't beat myself up for not knowing something, but I can try and make sure that doesn't happen again and try and use that, as you say, as a way of helping other people figure stuff out.

I think this is where I feel I've grown as a performer, or someone who's interested in poetry because being fairly new to poetry, you go to a workshop and someone will say right, you need to read every day. You go to something and someone will say have you read this poem by X? And you'll be like no, I haven't, I'm a terrible poet and you go away and buy that book.

I'm forever buying books without ever reading them because I'm spending more of my time reading other books. Before I started this, I thought sonnet was a song by The Verve, I didn't realise it was anything else. So I could spend all my time reading and learning about form and poets or trying to learn about putting on events and talking to other people about events and trying to make them accessible.

Again, it's about that balance. I want to grow personally with this art form I'm choosing to get into, but also, I want to spend a lot of my time that is consumed by poetry, in terms of sharing it and allowing other people to share their poems. I'm not bothered if I never read another poem again if it means 50 other poets with disabilities can read their poems and talk about their experiences, because I think that's important.

A lot of people think they're not sharing their poems, they're not able to get open mics, so maybe they think their standard of poetry is not up to that of the people who are able to read poems 20 times a week. It's a slower, longer process to hone your craft and get to a standard where you maybe feel you're growing. It takes longer because the events are fewer and far between.

DT: This is a good point to take a second reading, then we'll visit the invisible digital world of poetry events.

SL: Given it's lockdown, I was thinking of things I've missed during lockdown and one is cinema, so I thought I'd read this poem. It's called;

WALKING AGAIN THROUGH AVATAR

Act 1

In 3D glasses I walk as Sully's blue skinned
Na'vi, mobile again. I've got this. Folded
into my velvet cinema seat, somehow
unbalanced, running on feet not owned
for fifteen years. I breathe, I believe.

Act 2

Behind the glasses tears escape
the red blue hue as I escape
into celluloid. Trapped by my body,
prisoner in the IMAX,
grateful for the black box darkness.

Credits

I'm not ready
to wrench atrophied legs from seat
to wheelchair. Ground-breaking. I ran.
The names of those who helped
me challenge surgeons' words
roll before my eyes.

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DT: We obviously now exist in a world where physical access to any space is heavily restricted for everyone. I think we're over the worst of able-bodied people on Twitter complaining they can't get anywhere, as though it's suddenly a new phenomenon that some people might not be able to get to certain spaces. This goes across many industries and sectors. Obviously the arts sector already had some experience of digital events and streaming.

A lot of artists have led the way in making sure events can be continued online on platforms that are being used fresh for these sorts of things, like Zoom, Instagram Live. You're a poet who's embracing Instagram Live and you've got these Instagram sessions weekly.

SL: Lockdown has been a really interesting time. I caveat all this conversation, like I have with everything, these are my personal experiences, I'm not an expert on anyone with a

disability that may have their own experiences of lockdown. I fully appreciate I'm lucky in the sense I have a partner I get on with, I live in a nice flat, we've not been short of things to eat.

It's not been particularly traumatic for us, but it's been really interesting. At the start of this year [2020], I had five weeks off work. My body had given up on me, I was not able to get off the sofa, I was physically tired and every part of me ached. I had five weeks off where I didn't really leave the house. I'd gone back to work after that period for a couple of weeks then lockdown happened.

I felt I'd done my warm-up, I was ready to go for lockdown, I knew what to expect. I have tried not to get frustrated at people saying this is really hard, I'm struggling with isolation and the difficulty of not being allowed out because equally, I've seen lots of people with disabilities say this is not a new thing, welcome to our world, this is what we have been experiencing all our lives. We have long periods stuck inside.

Again, I think well, I've had 25 years to get used to not getting out and not being able to get to stuff. It is scary and worrying and frustrating, I can see why anxiety and mental-health problems would come along quite quickly if it's not something you're used to. I didn't go straight from a 16-year-old who was playing football all day, riding my back every day, to being a wheelchair user and just crack on and think there was nothing wrong with it.

I was pretty angry and beaten up for a few years while I came to terms with that, so I think it takes time to get our head around anything that challenges the equilibrium, which is what's happening at the moment. Any kind of normal that anyone had has been challenged to a degree, pretty much. There are people, early adopters in some sense, who embraced that and thought whatever I do, whether it's fitness classes, poetry, film reviews, whatever it might be, let's stick that online, let's get that contact out there, because it's giving people something to do.

Also, it's given me an outlet to be able to do these things. Either that might be monetary because you've had an income dry up or it might be creatively or it might be to alleviate boredom, like I've watched pretty much everything on Netflix and I can't sit and watch TV anymore, I have to do something that's connected with people.

What I've been really interested to observe, coming back to the conversation we've had about accessibility, and this isn't just poetry, as someone who likes going to the cinema, there are at least five or six cinemas in Bristol of which only half are physically wheelchair-accessible. I moved to Bristol thinking it was this amazing musical hub where I was going to be discovering new bands every night, then realised maybe three-quarters of the venues are not accessible to wheelchairs, and seeing lots of these things that have previously said to you we're in a really old building, we're really sorry we haven't got the funding, we can't put a lift in, we're up a flight of stairs, so it's not accessible, all of a sudden, they're online streaming gigs by Zoom.

So you think so you were accessible, you found a way to be accessible. You're not doing this to be accessible, you're doing this because you don't want to lose that income or lose out on putting content out there and you want to still exist so you can exist when all this is over. I've

gone through many different emotions over the last few weeks of actively not joining those sorts of sessions because I'm like why should I join you now, just because you're online?

Then I was like, no, no, I'm going to join these sessions and I'm going to let them know I'm going to tweet about them and scare them. I'm going to email them and say I've been able to join your session, you weren't accessible then, you are now, make sure this carries on afterwards. Then there's another balance in the sense that it's hard because I get what it means for artists and performers because people are struggling for income and lots of this stuff, people are doing for free.

I really hope it doesn't end up being at the expense of things in the real world once this is over. We still need to be out there, we still need to be in venues, we still need to feel that hum of an audience. You still need to feel that adrenaline of sitting in front of someone and reading poems or performing or playing the guitar, whatever it is you do.

Equally, I think there's a world where both can co-exist. We've proved now that you could put an event on and live stream that for people who can't connect and come to your event. You could put an event on where you've got seven people reading at an open mic and three people Zooming in and you put them on a screen because they might not be able to make it, they might have an illness, they might have a physical disability that means they can't get into your venue.

Equally the same for performers. I've shied away from going to read in places around the country because travel is more expensive and it takes maybe two days out to do something, I can't just drive there and drive back that evening. Accessible rooms in hotels are more expensive, or hotels with accessible rooms are more expensive than bunking down in a YHA, something like that.

Now it means I could headline an event in Newcastle and not have to leave home and I think we could be richer for it. Just in lieu of having anything else to do, I've started using Instagram Live to share some poems. What's been really interesting, we spoke at the start about being able to sit in front of an audience, a physical audience, in my chair, and be a disabled poet.

I now exist in a three square of someone's device and I'm white, now middle-class, straight bloke in my 40s on a screen and every 10 seconds, I feel I have to say yeah, I write or read my poems about a wheelchair user. I realise all this stuff I've been trying to get away from, this idea that I feel like part of me is missing. The bit you can't see in the screen is the bit of me in my chair and I'm like shit, I didn't realise that, this is annoying, but good at the same time.

DT: Your point's interesting about some larger organisations conflating accessibility with their desperate wish not to become irrelevant. Just to make sure you're permanently on people's lips is not the same as becoming accessible.

When you told me the other day about how you now feel the pressure to keep reminding people logging into Instagram Live that you are in fact a wheelchair user, suddenly made me think about whenever I go to open mics and have the opportunity to read one poem. You

think, I'm going to read that one about psychosis or suicide or being in a psychiatric unit and then you think shit, do I have to set this up and say I've had all this lived experience?

I was also thinking about how much effort you have put, like a lot of performers, into how you use your body and then suddenly, for so many of us, we're unable to do that in the confines of a video screen. Especially when streaming from a phone.

There's the horrible advert that keeps playing on the TV about the new Facebook webcam you put on your TV because you can get more people in. It's actually quite a fair point. As a performer, you're used to people having this wide range of vision and suddenly, you're restricted to this little box. It doesn't mean we can't perform within this space, it's just suddenly we're having to think about it.

All this effort you've put into how you present yourself on stage, you specifically, that's out the window because people can't see you.

SL: That's right, but I'm trying to maintain some of that. I still put on my poetry performing clothes. I bought clothes last year when I was doing the launch. I thought what is the persona of the person? so I bought some more loud shirts than I would normally wear and I'm still putting those on, I'm doing my hair, which is quite fun.

I'm learning to style hair that's 15 times longer than it's ever been in my life, but I'm still dressing that box behind me. I've put things there that people might subconsciously see. It's a bit of Derren Brown going on in all of this, where I'm placing stuff in there that I want people to see.

I've got a little tiny Lego version of me that sits in a wheelchair. I now put that behind me and I've had a poster made of me in my chair and that sits behind me when I'm doing these readings as well. There's a way of being able to play some music on my laptop that kind of feeds into the Instagram Live, so I'm playing with the form a bit. In a way, I've done in putting the launch together, I'm learning at pace and absorbing and dipping into other things people do.

That's the other thing. Apart from my mum, who's dialled into everything so far and is commenting, I'm like thanks, Mum, this is the equivalent of sticking me on the fridge, like you get to put a strong-arm emoji on Instagram Live and I love you for it, thanks very much, you've got people dipping in and out and it throws you a little bit, in the same way you might be midway through a poem and someone stands up and walks out to go to the bar.

It's trying to recreate these things and go with that and not be thrown by it. Also, talking to people as they're commenting, or acknowledging people that may be there. I think it was the first one I did, I just treated it like it was a poetry night. I pretended to be the host, the open mic support act and the headliner. All I did was put a pair of glasses on, a hat, whatever it was.

It was like we could play around a little bit more and be creative in this space we've got given. Also, I'm still learning by fast track the accessibility of these forums. One of the things I've been frustrated by is still around what is accessible for me might not be for someone else.

Personally, I think I'm going to struggle when lockdown ends because I have never felt more connected to the world.

I am dialling into fitness classes and poetry events and readings and workshops across the world. Not once have I had to ask anybody if this Zoom is wheelchair accessible or can I read at this event? I've just turned up and done it, dialled in. Snuck in at the back, whatever it might be. I've realised actually, when you've been allowed out, I go back out and my frustrations at the world have been ramped up again because I can't get in a shop or this bit here is inaccessible.

I feel really connected. At the same time, I'm aware that if I had a hearing impairment, maybe it wouldn't be so accessible because people aren't looking at the camera. If they're reading off a page, they're looking slightly offscreen and it's more difficult to lip read. You can't caption it in real time, the software doesn't allow it. Zoom, you can't spotlight two people talking at the same time, so it would be really difficult to have somebody reading and somebody doing BSL.

That is a really, really simple flaw that wouldn't be that difficult to set up. One of the people I've been talking to, someone that signed at one of my events last year, I've been talking about whether or not we could do a split screen on Instagram Live and she will sign in real time as I'm doing that. That's something I'm hoping to do and really looking forward to doing.

I'm not bored of reading my own poems, but I'd like to use it as an opportunity to talk to other poets about their experiences and talk to publishers about what it's like to be a publisher in lockdown. If you were an event person previously, what was that like? The 12 people that dial into these things, it's the same thing.

Holly McNish has hundreds of people dialling in and watching her stuff, but actually hundreds of people go to her events when she reads. When I go to read at open mic, it's just 12 people in the room and I'm really happy to cater to those 12 people. It's difficult to get out of that mindset to compare yourself to people. They've got 25,000 on their Instagram, I've got 1000. I love these 12 people that are coming in all the time and joining in.

You've just got to be open-minded and go with it and hope some of it carries on afterwards. The other thing that's really interesting is I worry about when we're allowed back out again and venues start up again, poems we'll see in the real world again, I worry poets with disabilities will get left behind. We've been writing a lot about isolation and being on our own and what that means and not necessarily having the platform to be able to do that.

Next year, probably, we will be so bored of hearing poems about people writing about isolation and what that means, but I know there are lots of people with disabilities who've said they're struggling to find the time to write because they can't pay for a carer to come into the house. Their physical needs are more demanding because they're not getting the care they need from being able to go to a GP or hospital or get people to come in and look after them, physiotherapy-type stuff.

That sense of having that space, maybe not everyone's writing. That's OK if you're surviving and looking after yourself. So there's going to be another element of catch-up. By the time we come to put some of this stuff down on paper about our experiences of lockdown, everyone might be bored of hearing about these experiences. There's always something to be thinking about and being mindful of that is really important.

DT: I've been thinking a lot about yes, being able to access events digitally is infinitely better than not being able to access events at all, but it's not the same as being able to access events physically. I'm hoping this isn't seen as an easy way out for organisations to claim full accessibility. It's brilliant because it will allow performers to perform.

If we can accept that performers have the ability to stream and join events and have the technology, it means you could be headlining in Sydney from Bristol. That would be an amazing thing. It's good for the environment, it cuts costs of events down. If people are happy to accept seeing someone on a video screen, then why not do it? None of this considers audience members and getting people together physically.

One of the things that has come up consistently through conversations on this podcast about access is what you miss out on as a writer or artist if you're not able to hang out with other artists at the end of events and how much you miss out in terms of publishing and performance opportunities. Abi Palmer, who's been on the podcast a few times, has spoken a lot about how disconnected she feels when she's unable to physically be with the poetry community.

That still exists when you're able to read digitally at events because you log off and you're gone from the conversation. If we enter a world where digital events become much more common, I do hope some thought is put into how that social space is recreated.

SL: Completely agree. Before we did this podcast and I was doing a bit of prep, I put something on social media and said what are people's experiences of this and how have people found it because personally, I found it good in some respects? There were things I hadn't realised. If you are neurodivergent, physically in an audience, you can take cues from other audience members and that's not as possible, watching on a screen. It can be really tiring and fatiguing and attention span can be difficult because you're dipping in and out of the screen, from what I was told.

I was like, of course. What we can do at the moment is our best but we can still continue to get better. We have to learn. If we just plateau out and keep banging out Zoom events and Instagram Lives, there also has to be a way people get paid. Just because you're sat in your front room in front of your bookcase doesn't mean you're not sharing your own poems and putting effort into putting that together, you've not spent a good couple of hours not being able to eat and getting nervous and sweaty.

That energy, that adrenaline, that comedown afterwards still exists. In some respects, it's more weird because as a performer, you're not taking cues from anyone. You're looking at yourself and you're thinking that's really weird. How often do you sit and read a set to yourself

and not get any cues back from the audience? I grew as a performer by getting feedback from people.

That feedback, it's easier to think you're doing a terrific job because you put a video up and you've got 27 likes and three comments that say that was great, thanks very much. You think yeah, this is brilliant. It's artificial in that sense. Nothing will ever replace being physically in front of an audience and existing and talking to other poets.

I think we can be a bit cleverer, we don't have to keep churning out poetry readings. More conversations and thought pieces. I did a workshop this week with Roger Robinson and I thought it was brilliant, it was two hours of him talking about how he puts a book together. There's a writing exercise in there. I could have done without the writing exercise, I just enjoyed listening to him going through his process about how he's written his books. More of that.

Poets have mentioned how in Zoom, you can use the classroom format, go into break-out rooms and have smaller chats. I'm part of a writing group you set up in Bristol, which is still going strong. We did a writing workshop this week, there were 15 people and it's really difficult. By the time you're number 15 on that list, you're saying I'm not going to give feedback because it's the same as everyone else is giving.

Just eking our way through this, step by step, day by day, and trying to understand, but there's a really good opportunity to understand. I'll be really gutted if I never get to be in front of a live audience again and spend some time with people afterwards, talking about I really enjoyed your set, thanks very much, how did you pull that together? Learning in that real-life environment.

DT: I think that might be the perfect place to stop. We're going to take a third and final reading. It's suddenly hit me this is the last time I'm going to say goodbye to someone. I'm glad it's you. We will fade out straight after the poem, so I will take this opportunity to say thank you very much for coming on and being my final guest. I may pop up again, in some way, in the future, if PJ will have me, but this is firmly the final time I will be producing anything. So thank you, Stephen.

SL: It would be remiss of me not to say thank you on behalf of every poet you've spoken to as part of this podcast series. You've done a tremendous job of giving people a platform to talk about poetry and their experiences. Through your podcast, I definitely felt I was part of a community that I didn't know existed. It's been a real honour to come on and be the last person to waffle on about poems also. Thanks very much for that.

DT: If it's made you feel part of something, I don't think I could have done anything more. Anyway, we'll take the poem.

SL: I'll give a little intro to this, if that's all right. There are two lockdown connections to this poem. First of all, it was written during lockdown in a workshop through Spread the Word and Rachel Long, which I really enjoyed. Also, it's part of a series of poems I'm thinking about for a second collection, which I was writing before lockdown, but strangely enough was about

what would happen not to me, but I've invented a character of someone who's a wheelchair user and wakes up one day and realises he's the only person left alive in the world and what it would mean to be isolated outside of the house, isolated in the world as it would be in this new version of life. Each poem is the title of the day, set over a year. This is;

Day 162, the Piano.

the piano removes my silk pyjamas,
the keys squeeze my fingers like fresh
grapefruit at breakfast and I watch the pith
and seeds of my fingers poured into a glass,
when the sheet music swims into my eyes,
pulls me under with the weight of a treble clef,
all I want to know is how did I end up alone
in this orchestra playing a concerto that wasn't
written for me

I spend all morning breaking into house after
house after house just to find a piano in amongst
the corpses. And I do, I approach it with caution,
wipe the dust from the lid, pour the juice back
into the grapefruit and crack my fingers.
there is no-one to teach me but somehow
I have to hear a sound, even if it is played
to an audience of photographs
that will never applaud.

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Outro:

DT: Well, that's it. Six years. Pretty crazy. A final thank you to Stephen Lightbown for his time. I suppose this conversation revolved around how we get as many people into the poetry room as possible, whether in real life or as part of these increasingly common online events. I hope the past 125 episodes of this podcast have been an entry point to these spaces and discussions to some of you.

All I ever wanted to do with this project was hold the door open for others. A huge thank you now to all of the guest hosts who have helped me offer such a wide range of episodes and, of course, to the more than 200 poets who have appeared in one way or another since 2014. None of this project would have made any sense without you lot, though. When the first episode went out, Pat Cash, I was simply happy with more than 20 people listening in.

It blows my mind to think 10s of thousands of people worldwide have stopped by at some point and spent time with me and my guests. I'm going to miss doing this a lot, I think, but it also feels right to go. Plus, if there is every going to be proper progress made improving the diversity in representation of the arts in this country then those currently holding editorial and publishing roles, I just need to get out of the fucking way.

It's not enough to simply give platforms to under-represented artists. They need to be allowed control and to make decisions too. So this is me getting out of the way. Lots of love to you lot.

End of transcript.