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This transcript was made possible with the aid of funding from Arts Council England.

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### [Episode 33 - Molly Rivkin](#) (June 2015)

Transcript by Christabel Smith

Host: Lizzy Palmer – **LP**

Guest: Molly Rivkin – **MR**

#### **Conversation:**

**LP:** Hello, this is another episode of Lunar Poetry Shorts. I am Lizzy Palmer and today, I am joined by the lovely Molly Rivkin.

**MR:** Hello.

**LP:** As usual, by way of introduction, we will start with a poem, please.

**MR:** So I have this poem for you. When I wrote it, I didn't know it was a poem. I'll explain afterwards. It's just subjective truths, some truths I know in my life are super-real.

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**LP:** Beautiful, thanks very much. I love the thought of eating someone's laughter for breakfast. So how are you?

**MR:** I'm well, thank you.

**LP:** My first question is, why poetry?

**MR:** It's funny, I'm not a natural somebody who came to poetry early in life and it was never my dream to be a writer. Poetry wasn't really a choice, it was just I had my first, massive, emotional heartbreak basically and I had all this emotion living in my body and it came out in writing. It was a bit of a compulsion and I didn't even know it was poetry. Some of it wasn't poetry, it was prose. I wrote so much, I guess just to process. Poetry to process. That's pretty clichéd in the end.

**LP:** True for a lot of us. How long is it that you have been writing poetry?

**MR:** I think I actually started writing two years ago, maybe three. I probably started calling it poetry about two years ago.

**LP:** Have you thought about what the main influence has been over your development as a writer and performer?

**MR:** Yeah, absolutely. I was in this emotional tailspin for a long time. At that time, I also discovered YouTube American slam poetry. I had this internal dilemma going on and I didn't know how to deal with it. I was seeing people on the internet who were voicing how I was feeling out loud, in the most beautiful way.

It made feel I wasn't alone in these feelings and it gave me a community I didn't even know, which is kind of what reading and writing does for people. A lot of people bring solidarity. So American slam poets influenced my writing hugely. I actually was borderline obsessed with it.

**LP:** I can see that in your performance, you carry it off really well.

**MR:** Also, your perspective influences your writing. A lot of aspects in my perspective came from American feminism and American feminist thinkers and writers. I want to give a shout to Ani DiFranco because she has been huge for me for 10 years. She is an American folk artist, feminist icon-legend, amazing woman. Any time when I can't find my voice or how to walk through the world, when I listen to Ani, I feel like I'm back on my feet again.

**LP:** On that note, we'll have a second poem please.

**MR:** OK, cool. I want to talk about this one a little because it's collaborative poetry. I worked for a youth programme last summer with Iraqi kids, which will be repeated in the poem. Most of these words are my words, but some, a few lines in the poem, the kids wrote. For Ali and Jafar, a little shout so... It's not all me, definitely not. These kids influenced this poem big time. They are this poem. So anyway, Summer Youth Programme.

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**LP:** Thank you. Could you tell us about your writing process?

**MR:** My writing process is mass chaos. It's no structure, no rules. Maybe since I don't come from a literary or poetry background, it's just brain vomit. It usually starts with an emotion, even tension in my body, I sit down and I give that emotion words. Whatever it is, I don't limit it in any way, just write it all out and then I pick out the parts that make sense because a lot of it doesn't make sense.

A lot of my writing comes from dreams, which sounds odd. I've been sharing a poem recently, I have an acquaintance that I see now and then and I had a really vivid dream about him having an eating disorder. I don't know if it's true, but I felt like there was something in my reality that wanted a voice and so I wrote a poem for it. I don't even know if it's true. My process is off the wall.

**LP:** That's a good enough answer. How long have you been performing and what impact has it had on your writing?

**MR:** I performed for the first time a year and a half ago. It was only a couple of times. I was living in Ukraine. I did the US Peace Corps, which is a volunteer programme where the US sends off college graduates around the world to mostly Third World countries to do service. I went into it very idealistic and came out of it a bit wiser, understand a bit more how things work in the world, I hope.

Anyway, while I was in the Ukraine, my aunt, who lives here in London, invited me to come visit. I had been watching all these YouTube videos and I had one goal in mind, like I'm going to find some spoken-word poetry, I need to do this. I didn't realise how much goes into performance and I didn't realise people practise and memorise their poems and it's actually a lot of work and massively difficult.

I went just to an open mic with my paper, didn't know about anything really, went up, had the worst stage fright ever, just standing there. I actually blacked out half the performance in my mind, don't even know what happened, but during that, I was shaking like a leaf, the paper going nuts.

**LP:** I think we've all had that experience. A bit of a shock when you realise that it's not just people sitting around, reading off bits of paper, as OK as that is. It can be really frightening.

**MR:** I had no idea. Afterwards, I had really nice feedback. People said oh you stumbled over words, but it didn't really matter, we connected with your work and it made me realise, I can do this. I don't know what I'm doing, but I can. Since then, I came to London and have been performing, or trying to, at least once a week, doing open mic. I'm really inconsistent in my performances. Sometimes it goes well, sometimes it's crap, it depends on my mood. If I walk in confident, things usually go well.

It's surprising to me that something I write could turn into something else when I said it to an audience and then people took it and processed it in their experience. It was actually really surprising to me just that something that comes out of my head could actually be something. Does that make sense?

**LP:** Yes! Could we have a third and final poem?

**MR:** I'd like to say before I do this poem I never really know how it is going to go over and sometimes, it goes over well and sometimes it doesn't. It's a feminist poem and I know it's bad to alienate large groups, a large, undefined demographic, men in this case. I guess I just want to say it's something I needed to write. I didn't write it to offend people and I didn't write it to make people feel uncomfortable and so I hope, I don't know... It was my release.

**LP:** Give it a go.

**MR:** I guess I'm putting a little trigger warning on it. So here we go.

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**LP:** Thank you very much. Final two questions. How would you like to see your writing progress?

**MR:** I was glad when that question came up, when you sent it over. I'd like to go more deeply into what is true. I feel I'm right on the edge of being really, really honest in my writing, but it needs to be more nuanced. There are definitely parts I'm missing.

I want to go through the layers of the indoctrination that comes in through school and media and nationalistic, wherever you live, and get deeper into real-life experience and what is actually true. I want really honest, nuanced, deeply real poetry. I'm working towards it, but I know I'm not quite there yet.

**LP:** It's surprisingly difficult to tell the truth when you're doing something creative.

**MR:** Massively.

**LP:** You need to embellish it a bit, wondering if the core truth is coming out. I think about that a lot myself.

**MR:** Every now and then, I'll go for a writing workshop and I've gotten some really good advice from people. For a while, even with this last one, the feminist poem I just did, I wondered what's OK to say? What's OK to speak out loud?

I've had some support through these groups, which is you can say anything you want. Free speech, yes, but don't be a bigot. I don't want to go too far in any direction, but at the same time, I want to be able to speak my truth.

**LP:** How do you be honest? Where does it fit in without offending anybody?

**MR:** That's the ultimate question. I feel as females, we probably take that into consideration massively.

**LP:** Have you got any recommendations for our listeners, things you might have heard, seen or read recently? It doesn't have to be specifically to do with poetry.

**MR:** Silence Found A Tongue.

**LP:** Of course. That's a given.

**MR:** Go see their open-mic night, it's massive. I'm thinking terms of poetry because what I've been doing mostly is poetry. Boxed In is really cool at the end of the month in Shoreditch. Jawdance is also in Shoreditch, it's an open mic and also really cool talent, not just one kind of poetry. I guess most open-mic nights are like this, a lot of different voices and styles, which is cool.

Hammer and Tongue, I do a lot of whatever they're putting on, their open mics I like to go and see, sometimes I read, sometimes I just want to be in a poetry space. I recommend that to people who want to be in poetry spaces. I just got my hands on Joelle Taylor's book *The Woman Who Was Not There*. Joelle Taylor is an incredible poet. I recommend seeing her or reading her book or she has YouTube videos, whatever you want to do.

Inga Muscio is one of my heroes, she wrote a book called *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence*. It's basically a love letter to anyone who has a vagina, metaphorically or physically. Everyone should read it, men too. If you can catch Salena Godden, she puts on a great show and she's genuinely just a really nice person.

I'm going to say this because I have written the first draft of a memoir about my experience in the Ukraine as a Peace Corps volunteer, the process I went through. Though it is not published, if you want to read it, send me your email address and I'll send you a copy of the manuscript at whatever stage of editing it is in. If you're pedantic, just skip it. If you're interested, I'm happy to share.

As far as music, I can't tell you to listen to Ani DiFranco enough because she's amazing. I guess I like American folk music. So Brandi Carlisle. DUS is a really cool rapper in Minnesota, she's not hugely famous, but she has a lot of really cool things to say.

Basically, listen to women's music and read women's books and listen to women's poetry, because whether we know it or not, a lot of the voices that are coming into our heads are male voices, just because that's who gets published more. Even in school curriculums, if you check who wrote most of the books, it's going to be men.

Sometimes, you have to work for it. Try to understand and hear the female voice, that's my advice for listening, watching, anything.

**LP:** That was Molly Rivkin, thank you, and thank you, everybody, for listening.

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