Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 73: Just a Bunch of Beatniks

(Brief intro music)

Rachel: Hello, and welcome to Not Your Mother's Library, a readers' advisory podcast from the Oak Creek Public Library. I'm Rachel.

Mary: And I'm Mary.

Rachel: April is National Poetry Month—no, please don't leave so fast! (chuckles) We know poetry can be a weird one, but it is a legitimate genre that should be celebrated, not shunned. If you think this kind of thing is hokey or otherwise inaccessible, then it's likely that you just haven't come across a poet you simply click with. Because when you do, it's like magic. That's a simile! This is why we come to you today with recommendations that will make you want to join the next neighborhood poetry slam. First, though, if you already do have an appreciation for all things poetic, then we have the perfect program to propose! That's alliteration.

Mary: Thanks, Rachel! Yes, this is the third year I am running the Oak Creek Public Library's Poetry Contest—can you believe it?

Rachel: No!

Mary: Submissions will be accepted throughout the entire month of April. There are three age categories: Middle school, high school, and adult. Please check our events calendar for how your original poem should be formatted. Submission slips will be at each reference desk, so be sure to fill one out for your poem to be considered. All poems are judged blind, so please do not include your name on the poem itself. If you do, I'm the one who has to use the Wite-Out.

Rachel: (chuckles)

Mary: Each category will have prizes for first, second, and third place as well as a chance to be published on our website and the Oak Creek *Current*! If that's not enough poetry for you, we will also have our second annual Poetry Open Mic Night on May 29th! You can read your original poems, a poem you loved by another poet—just be sure to include who wrote it—or

simply sit back and enjoy others reading their poetry. Winners of the OCPL Poetry Contest will be announced at this event, as well. For more information on these and all upcoming events, please visit our online events calendar at oakcreeklibrary.org/events. Now, let's get into it! Like Rachel said, sometimes, for the average person, poetry can seem a little too serious for casual reading. Hopefully we can change your mind by the end of this episode! My first recommendations are very dear to me. The first is "Beautiful Chaos: On Motherhood, Finding Yourself and Overwhelming Love" by Jessica Urlichs. As you can probably tell from the title, the author has put together a collection of her poems that embody the highs and lows of being a parent. Trigger warning: There are themes of loss. But there are also beautiful moments of love, themes of identity, growth, vulnerability, and challenges. There are poems in here for every moment of parenthood: Pregnancy, the newborn stage, toddlerhood, school age, and everything in between. If you are hoping to be a parent, or if you are one, this is a wonderful collection of poems for you to experience. On the other side of parenthood, being an adult child of an estranged parent can be difficult to find words for. If this resonates with you, I highly suggest "Paper Flowers: Poetry on the Mother Wound" by Jessica Jocelyn. The poems explore what conditional love from a parent can feel like, how it can bleed into other relationships as you get older, and the grief that comes with knowing that your parent will never be who you needed them to be. There were so many times while reading this that I had to just put it down and let myself feel what I just read. And I think that's what makes a fantastic poem.

Rachel: Mmhm. Before I recommend my first poet of the night, I would like to encourage our listeners to tune in to episode 13 of Not Your Mother's Library. It was recorded five years ago when OCPL was shut down because of the pandemic. Myself and Leah, who was co-host at the time, tried our hands at reading some of our favorite pieces to celebrate National Poetry Month. I will freely admit that my editing skills were not quite as passable then as they are now, but if nothing else you can peep the show notes to see our recommendations. Personally, I am a big fan of classical poetry, so I very badly recited Baudelaire, Dickenson, and Rimbaud. Anyway, this time around I wanted to highlight other types entirely, like jazz poetry. None did it better than Langston Hughes, a master of mimicking the improvisational feel of jazz music upon the written page. Take, for example, his poem entitled *Dream Boogie: Variation*.

Tinkling treble,

Rolling bass,

High noon teeth

In a midnight face,

Great long fingers

On great big hands,

Screaming pedals

Where his twelve-shoe lands,

Looks like his eyes

Are teasing pain,

A few minutes late

For the Freedom Train.

The lyricality is evident, but so much of Hughes's work reflects his time. He rose to popularity during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and continued on into the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s. This was the height of jazz and blues in America, when it was played live at any nightclub worth its salt. You know what is considered important imagery in blues? Trains! In *Dream Boogie*, Hughes draws parallels between a man playing a piano and the sounds of a steam engine. If you didn't get all that during the first readthrough, rest assured that I didn't, either! Poetry often requires the reader to do at least a little analysis to get the full picture. To me, that's a big part of the enjoyment. The process is comparable to cracking a code…but I digress. Langston Hughes's effect on African American literature is inarguably astounding. For works from the same era from a woman's perspective, try Gwendolyn Brooks. I remember reading *We Real Cool* as an undergrad English major, and it stuck with me. You can actually hear a recording of Brooks reciting it, which will definitely help with understanding the bizarre line breaks. Just plug the name into YouTube!

Mary: Unlike Rachel's excellent recitations, my poetry reading will not be featured here today. You'll just have to check out these books experience it yourself. That being said, my next recommendations are what I typically think of when I think of poetry: Big emotions about big themes of life, like feeling like you don't fit in, love, loss, the inevitability that life will indeed end, and so on. The first of these is "Night Sky with Exit Wounds" by Ocean Vuong. I love Vuong because of his juxtaposition of real life and idealism. His poems include commentary on what it means to be a refugee and to be a queer person today. "Night Sky with Exit Wounds" is his debut full-length book, but has many other published works including "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous" which was longlisted for several awards. He has spoken about the relationship between form and content in past interviews, saying, "Besides being a vehicle for the poem's movement, I see form as…an extension of the poem's content, a space where tensions can be investigated even further. The way the poem moves through space." Precisely because of this, for me, Vuong's poetry should be read on the page instead of listened to, if possible. If I can insert a throwback here, Ella [sic] Hopkins, the author of YA books like "Crank," was my first experience with this. The poem creates an image on the page that adds to the content and meaning. If you're looking for other poems with themes concerning death and the big questions in life, you'll want to check out "Bright Dead Things" by Ada Limón. Limón was the 24th Poet Laureate of the United States and has written lots of publications in English and Spanish. "Bright Dead Things" is in some ways a memoir in that it draws from events in her life like moving from New York City to rural Kentucky, falling in love, and the loss of her parent. She has been called "accessible" not only for the readability but for her relatable writing. You'll feel these poems.

Rachel: I'm going olde school with medieval poetry. At this time in history, we started seeing a lot of Latin poems reproducing the sounds of Christian hymns. Bards sang ballads in great halls, taverns, or just out in the town square. Folklore was a strong influence, too. Ballads are one thing, epics are another. Being the profound-yet-charmingly-whimsical lady I am, I have a certain somebody in mind: Dante Alighieri! That's right, the famous Italian guy and patron saint of romantic goths everywhere who happened to pen the masterpiece that is the *Divine Comedy*. It's heavy stuff…lots of hellish imagery. Maybe that's why he broke it down into three parts—*Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*—then even further into cantos. Those are 'sections', in

layman's terms. Anyway, Dante's *Inferno* is the most popular of the three, and I'm lifting the summary from good ol' reliable, Wikipedia: "The *Inferno* describes the journey of a fictionalized version of Dante himself through Hell, guided by the ancient Roman poet Virgil. In the poem, Hell is depicted as nine concentric circles of torment located within the Earth. As an allegory, the *Divine Comedy* represents the journey of the soul toward God, with the *Inferno* describing the recognition and rejection of sin." Dark, yes, but beautifully written: Take, for instance, the beginning of Canto IV:

In my head

A heavy thunder, so that I upstarted,

Like to a person who by force is wakened;

And round about I moved my rested eyes,

Uprisen erect, and steadfastly I gazed,

To recognise the place wherein I was.

True is it, that upon the verge I found me

Of the abysmal valley,

That gathers thunder of infinite ululations.

Obscure, profound it was, and nebulous,

So that by fixing on its depths my sight

Nothing whatever I discerned within.

Never in a thousand years could I hope to write something even approaching the same realm of talent. Gotdang! [sic] The perfect readalike is John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. This was written a few hundred years later in 1667, but it is still drenched in religion…though, Dante was a Catholic and Milton could be loosely classified as Protestant. "The poem concerns the biblical story of the fall of man: [namely] the temptation of Adam and Eve by the fallen angel Satan and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The first version…consists of ten books with over ten

thousand lines of verse. A second edition followed [seven years later], arranged into twelve books with minor revisions throughout. It is considered to be Milton's masterpiece, and it helped solidify his reputation as one of the greatest English poets of all time." The styles are different—I'd say Milton makes use of less…mmm…florid language—but they both sure as hell take you on a journey.

Mary: My last recommendations for today will end on a happy note, which you may need as an intermission for Rachel's upcoming recommendations.

Rachel: (chuckles darkly)

Mary: I'm going to switch it up and recommend a fantastic free website: poetryfoundation.org. Here you can find biographies of poets, interpretation of their works, and much more! What I did for today is search the "topics and themes" categories for poems about hope. The first one that stood out to me is called *Portrait of a Dog as an Older Guy* from "Cossacks and Bandits" by Katia Kapovich. You can probably tell why I picked it. A dog is making his way in the big city of Moscow after his elderly owner has died. While the premise is sad, the narrator checks in with the dog after a year and he is well fed and happy. You find out that after a while of struggling, the dog had a dream of his former owner who told him to go shopping at the market they used to go to. So, the dog took the subway by himself and all the vendors at the market remembered him and fed him "to his heart's content." It's okay to cry. I did. The second poem I'll recommend from the Poetry Foundation is *There are Birds Here* from "The Big Book of Exit Strategies" by Jamaal May. It's a love letter to the city of Detroit, Michigan. The poet acknowledges that when people think of her city, they assume there is no joy, no confetti, and that it's a war zone. There are racial assumptions and poverty overtones, but there is also life. May does very well as far as correcting the reader that joy does exist, beauty exists…love and freedom exist in Detroit if you just look. She shows the reader that despite this, people will continue to focus on the negative:

…but they won't stop saying

how lovely the ruins,

how ruined the lovely

children must be in that birdless city.

Rachel: I am keeping up my reputation as a goth with elegies. “An elegy is a mournful, melancholy or plaintive poem, especially a lament for the dead or a funeral song. [It] may also reflect something that seems to the author to be strange or mysterious.” Alfred Lord Tennyson and his poem *In Memoriam A. H. H.* is an excellent example of this type. Written to commemorate fellow student and friend Arthur Hallam, who died young at the age of 22, I hope this poem guts you as it did me. Here’s a snippet:

But who shall so forecast the years

And find in loss a gain to match?

Or reach a hand thro' time to catch

The far-off interest of tears?

Let Love clasp Grief lest both be drown'd,

Let darkness keep her raven gloss:

Ah, sweeter to be drunk with loss,

To dance with death, to beat the ground,

Than that the victor Hours should scorn

The long result of love, and boast,

‘Behold the man that loved and lost,

But all he was is overworn.’

I am rendered all but speechless. The pain pulls you down by the lapels to smother your face in grave dirt. Give more! Make me cry! It isn’t hard to do… Another poet known for elegies is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Something I did not know until conducting some research was that his works were often “set to music” by composers including Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert,

Mahler, and Richard Wagner. As you've probably found throughout your listening of this podcast, poems are most effective when read rather than described. Here is my attempt at Goethe's *Anacreon's Grave*:

Here with roses in bloom, with woodbine twining the laurel,

Dove calling softly to dove, cricket crisp with delight—

Tell me, what grave is this, which every god of the garden

Furbelows, lush with life? Rest for Anacreon here.

Always in luck, he loved the spring, the summer, the autumn.

Winter he'll never know—snug in a cozier home.

I will let this one speak for itself. Do keep in mind that a lot of today's poems have various translations to English. This version was recorded online by the Poetry Foundation, but it is by no means the only one out there. Anyhow, that's it from me. My throat is sore.

Mary: We're wrapping up the episode, then. Rachel and I will be back next month with more recommendations. Like usual, please check the show notes for a list of everything we discussed. Subscribe to Not Your Mother's Library, or write us a friendly review to spread the word. Until next time, happy reading.

Rachel and Mary: Bye!

(Brief outro music)