COMMONPLACE PODCAST

EPISODE # 12

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RACHEL ZUCKER: [Intro]: Hello, dear listeners. Thank you, each and every one of you, for downloading and tuning into episode twelve of Commonplace: Conversations with Poets (and Other People). A special shout out to my Patreon subscribers. The Patreon bonus materials for this episode include new, unpublished work by Steph Burt and a reading with commentary and context of the long, excellent poem, "A Man Meets a Woman on the Street" by Randall Jarrell. Patreon supporters, as well as the one-time donations and iTunes reviews and emails and tweets, keep this podcast going strong. Check out the great resources on commonpodcast.com, and stay tuned for upcoming episodes with Jericho Brown, Bernadette Mayer, Alica Ostriker, and Kristin Prevallet, as well as with a bunch of west coast authors I'm going to talk to on my upcoming trip to Portland, Seattle, and San Francisco.

I spoke with poet, professor, and poetry critic Steph Burt in my apartment in mid-October, when Steph was in New York City for a reading. Steph is the author of poetry collections *Popular Music, Parallel Play, and Belmont* and five books of criticism, including *Close Calls with Nonsense*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award and the newly released, *The Poem is You*, which we talk about in this episode. Steph is a professor of English at Harvard University, parent of two children, and a frequent writer of book reviews and articles about contemporary poetry for the *New York Times*, *Boston Review*, *Artforum*, *Cold Front*, and many other prominent publications. Steph also writes about music, comic books, and trans issues.

Steph and I write different kinds of poems that occupy different roles in the poetry community. Steph is a tenured professor at Harvard and a frequent reviewer and critic. I'm an NYU adjunct who is more-or-less averse to writing formal reviews or criticism. This podcast, which I love making, is the closest I come to criticism, and it's really not a form of criticism at all. Connection, close listening, appreciation and wonder, yes, explication, scholarly context, not so much. If you've met me or read my work, you know I identify as a cis-gender woman and that that is an important aspect of my identity. Steph identifies as someone with two genders. One of the things we talk about is the way in which we occupy our overlapping gender identification of the female or feminine in disparate ways.

Steph has a strong interest in girlhood, the rococo, the brightly colored, adorned, the pretty, in gender expression and dematerialization fantasies. I am preoccupied, perhaps too narrowly, with female embodiment, maternal roles, apparent naturalness, and authenticity. Out of and into these differences, it was supremely enjoyable to talk about imagination, persona poems, everything about our shared passion for poetry, with someone who has deeply and seriously studied the work of all the poets I love, as well as a whole lot of poets I haven't yet read. Another thing we share is a commitment to becoming better listeners and examining various forms of privilege. I was, initially, intimidated to talk to Steph because Steph is an erudite powerhouse. But I had so much fun talking with them and wish we'd had more time.

I learned so much about my own work, about Steph's work, about poetry from this conversation, and I have a list of poets to go read next, although I haven't even begun the great list I got from Shane McCrae. But Steph had to change clothes, put on makeup, and rush off to read at the KGB bar. I hope you enjoyed listening to this conversation as much as I enjoyed having it.

One last thing: I'm recording this introduction on the afternoon of November 7th, the day before the presidential election, knowing that whoever you are, wherever you are, you won't hear this until a few weeks after the election is over, perhaps months or years later. Commonplace has been a space of radical engagement for me, bringing me closer to artists, art, listeners, and myself in new ways, but editing this episode and writing and recording this intro have been a pure escape. Everyone I know is a wreck, able to think about almost nothing else. Everything, everywhere is about the election, but also, nothing else seems to matter. I certainly have a strong hope for who will be president by the time you hear this, but other than that, I won't say more about it. I hope this podcast, like good art, can provoke, console, distract, and engage and can be there and be what you want, when you need it. Thank you. Thanks for listening.

[music]

[5:25]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Thinking about you as a critic is important to me personally because you were the first person to write seriously about my work in a mainstream, larger publication. I'm

thinking of that--it was sort of a review, but it was larger than just one book review--about *Museum of Accidents*--in the *Boston Review.* I was so honored and amazed by the attention; you were very positive about the book. But it also kind of messed me up--

STEPH BURT: Oh dear.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And I wrote about that a little bit in *MOTHERs*, just the experience of--I still to this day don't know exactly what it was for me about reading that piece, but I got hives, which was so interesting. I guess I just wanted to acknowledge the kind of amazement that I have at this moment of sitting with you in my living room and getting a chance to talk to you, you who are both my peer as a poet but also really, I would say, the preeminent poetry critic of my generation, and also having had this particular relationship with you.

STEPH BURT: That's super flattering, and also terrifying, because one aspires as a poetry critic to give an accurate account of what's interesting and what's beautiful and what's compelling about a piece of work and not, I hope, to give the poet hives! It also points out something that I have no idea how to handle but has become something that I sort of have to think about now, as it wasn't, frankly, ten years ago, or maybe eight years ago, which is: the generation to which we belong is a generation with a number of poets who have a number of books out and have already received a number of different kinds of attention, either in this sort of National Trade Press, *New York Times* book review community or in the smaller, but still national, communities that have more specialized and deeper interests: the community of people who are working in pre-modernist forms, the community of post-language poetry avant garde.

To be a critic who writes about that generation is to be someone who is writing in dialogue with the existing reputations and the echo chamber of how work is read by people that--you're part of the same generation that you're part of. Whereas, when I was thirty-one, and I writing about first books, the people were my age. I was their age, but their books were first books or maybe second books. Their books didn't come with a trailing set of reputations, and they weren't sort of personae, where the work could be measured against the previous work. The people I was writing about when I began to practice criticism, where I knew what the body of work was, and the name already meant something before the book came in the mail, and it meant something to my readers and not just to me, were people who were older than me, people who had been socialized and educated into a different set of reading practices in a different culture.

So it's weird to be writing about established or already well-known, or honestly, in your case, to some extent, influential, as well, poets who were also my peers. It adds three more layers of weirdness that I also write poetry that is being read by the people I'm writing about. And, even if I can figure out how to avoid explicit material ethical problems, it still feels weird. But I'm not going to stop writing poetry, and I'm not going to stop explaining what I like in other peoples' poetry.

RACHEL ZUCKER: It's funny because I was going to ask you: so what are the perils and pleasures of writing about living people, but you're saying there's even a more subtle category than living or dead; it's writing about writers who other people have already written about or who are more established. In that case, your job as a critic is not just discovering them or elaborating or describing what you like about them, it's about being in, as you're calling it, an echo chamber or a dialogue, I guess.

[10:30]

STEPH BURT: Yeah, a dialogue or a conversation. I like writing about recent poetry, and I like writing about poetry that's not already famous, and I like being able to say here is work that most of my writers haven't heard of. I like being able to say, "Here is Allen Peterson. Go read Allen Peterson. He's great. He's doing something no one else now is doing." "Here's Rosa Alcalá. She's quite good. She's not famous yet. She will be soon. She should be soon. See what the different kinds of projects and ways of hearing her parts of America and her attitudes are." I like doing that quite a lot. I like doing it for poets who aren't very famous or who are long deceased, as well. I like telling people to go read Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt. If you like Robert Browning or Elizabeth Barrett Browning, you should go read Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt. But Piatt isn't speaking to our moment. She's not going to write any more poetry because she died in 1908 or so. She's not a part of a live carreer that reflects what it's like to be around right now. You can't go to a Piatt reading.

So I really like being able to write about our moment. And I like being able to write about poets, who I'm the first person to be able to get 3,500 words to talk about them. I like writing about George Herbert, also, but I'm not the smartest person who has ever written about George Herbert.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You're definitely the smartest person in this room who has ever written about George Herbert. But, so that's so interesting--

STEPH BURT: But there's a part two!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, go ahead, sorry.

STEPH BURT: The part two is that there are two kinds of writing about living poets, where it makes it harder instead of easier, and less fun instead of more fun, although I still do it. One is the possibility of log-rolling. If I'm writing about a poet who is institutionally powerful or who is also a critic or reviewer, and I like the book enough to write about it, I have to try to pretend that this person will never review me.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Huh.

STEPH BURT: That's only an issue with poets who are also critics. But there are some poets who are also critics who are quite good, who, under the right circumstance I'm happy to say, "This is quite good. You should check it out." I've written about Dan Chiasson, for example, who is a very good critic, and a very institutionally powerful one at this point, as well as a good poet. I did have to stop and ask myself: Is it okay for me to do this? Does it create the impression of log-rolling? I don't think he's ever written about me; maybe some day he will, but I need to ignore that--

RACHEL ZUCKER: I'm sorry. For the naive, the critical-naive, log-rolling in this context--

STEPH BURT: Oh, log-rolling means, "I'll give you something if you give me something in return. You scratch my back; I'll scratch yours. We're all part of a sort of institutional horse trading, insiderish group that gives cookies to each other."

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, I won't get bogged down in that term. But it's fascinating to me, like, who is the log, and who is the roller? Or are you both rolling the log together? Is that the point?

STEPH BURT: No, maybe I should have said horse trading. But the point is, you don't want to create the impression of an old boys network or a self-dealing club. There are critics who handle this by just never writing about anyone they know. There are probably critics who handle that by never writing about anyone who is also a critic. But one is excluding quite a lot of territory if one does that. And I have had situations where I decline to write about a book I like or I decline to write about a poet I like because the situation--I'm just too close to them--the situation would create the appearance of a conflict of interest, and it would just be unethical.

The rule I normally use for that is if I knew and liked the poet before I knew and admired the poetry, then in some circumstances, I will recuse myself. But if it's somebody that the only way that I knew the poet is because I liked the poetry, I'm much more willing to just say, "Fine. I'm going to explain why this is good because I trust my judgement more." The other situation where it is a little bit awkward is just where you know someone personally. People of my own generation who I socialize with--the better you get to know someone as a person, maybe the less you can trust your judgements of their poetry, but you still have to try. You still have to try.

[15:07]

I enjoy the fact that our moment has so many different kinds of informal ways that readers and poets and critics can examine and introduce one another's' work that do not pretend to objectivity. I would be conflicted--I'll give you an example--Monica Youn's new book *Blackacre* is a terrific book. I imagine she may be on this podcast sooner or later. Good! That's a terrific book. I have been reading Monica Youn's poetry since the mid-nineties and have been admiring it since the mid-nineties, but I really know her too well to accept a commission to review her work in a newspaper or in a number of magazines. I have conflict standards. It would be clearly unethical. But we can interview each other!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. I liked that interview she did of you recently!

STEPH BURT: Yes! There's going to be a part two out in *Boston Review* any day. I don't know when it drops. But the interview, the podcast, the informal essay, the personal memoir, the back-and-forth exchange: there are all of these ways that poets can react to each others' work now that do not pretend to objectivity, and that's great.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Fascinating! Okay. And by commission, do you distinguish between paid and unpaid work or no? Just that there are certain things that interviews and podcasts and conversations and those kinds of things fall into one category and then--

STEPH BURT: I think a review and a critical essay is different from a personal essay, a print interview, broadcast work. Different publications have different standards of who you're allowed to review. *The New York Times* Book Review--they have to have very strict standards, because they have to apply the same standards to poetry reviewing and comic book reviewing and Al Gore reviewing a book about climate change. Whereas literary quarterlies can have and do have, I think, much looser standards. When I write for *The Yale Review*, I don't worry as much about making clear to the managing editor exactly how many times I've had dinner with someone, which is usually zero. Most of the poets who I write about, I've never met and probably will never meet.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So let me ask you another question about the act of writing about our moment and the place that that occupies in the larger sense of you as a critic. I mean, I'm sort of curious to know--this is sort of a dumb question, but--I feel like there's lots of things that critics do. They say: who is the most important person writing at this time; who will be the most important person.

STEPH BURT: Yikes.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right? That's one thing that some critics do. They also say--they make up names to describe groups of artists, like schools of, you know, the elliptical poets is the new thing. Or, they try to describe poetry to a non-expert poetry audience. Clearly, that's something that's really important to you. Or, they try to contextualize the role of poetry or the use of poetry in a larger, non-poetry setting, maybe for poets or non-poets. What else am I forgetting?--to look backwards and to say, "Well, this is what happened, and this is how we got here. You can't understand our present moment without understanding where we came from." Or, making predictions, not necessarily of who is going to be the most important poet but, like, where is poetry going.

STEPH BURT: Yeah. Yeah. Stock-picking. If you like lists of things that critics can do, there is a good one near the beginning of Auden's book *The Dyer's Hand*, which is one of my favorite books to give people who want to be critics, partly because it is so unillusioned and

anti-professional about what it is literary critics do. I can't spit out Auden's seven things that critics can do. One of them is to recommend reading to people and say, "You might like this." Another is to give historical information about the background of a work we already like. There are a couple of others. It's sort of a minimal list. Those are all things that critics can do. I aspire to do most of them, not all at the same time. I think there's just too many--too many sound like I wish there were fewer. I don't.

[20:03]

There are a lot of different kinds of poets and poetry and poems being generated even if you confine yourself to the English language in the United States. And they just don't try to all do the same thing. They have different audiences and they have different goals. I think it's a fool's errand to try to say what's great or who is the most important. You can't say for a fairly crowded space while you're in it what's the most important poem, what's the greatest. I think that's ridiculous. You can say what's the most influential right now. You can say what do many, many people seem to be reading and responding to, which, right now, is Clauda Rankine's *Citizen*. I think it's not even close. That doesn't mean *Citizen* is the greatest or best poem of the past five years. It means it's the most influential in the short term and the most talked about. It's also quite good; I like it a lot! Is it the one that I feel closest to, or that I feel I have the most to say about? No. Other people are better analysts of it than I am. I have had the pleasure of writing about it, and I may again.

But I try to spend a lot of my energies within being a critic doing things that I'm the right person to do, doing things that either someone needs to do because no one else is doing it--read Allen Peterson, everybody!--or doing things that I'm maybe the right person to do: writing about, for example, poets who seem to move me more than they move other people, or poets who have a relationship to the literary past that especially excites me, poets who are using science in interesting ways, poets who are really using--the feminine is not quite the right adjective, but it's close--femme poets, elaborate poets, rococco poets--I've written about this. Some of the poets I'm very excited about right now are reclaiming or making new and making newly interesting kinds of syntax and kinds of material that would have been dismissed as frivolous earlier. That is a gendered dismissal. That reclaiming of the inherently ephemeral, the frivolous, the bright pink, the elaborately colored, the rococo, the nearly baroque--that is a kind of reclaiming and a kind of appreciation that I especially enjoy doing, partly because those are some of my favorite poets writing right now, some of them.

Robyn Schiff and Angie Estes would be my first example, but there are others, partly because some of those goals are close to some of the goals of the poetry that I am writing right now, and partly because I do have some identity politics stake in this because I'm a [inaudible 23:49].

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, can we talk about that one second?

STEPH BURT: Sure!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay. I want to come back to criticism, but they're related, these two questions.

STEPH BURT: Everything is related to everything! Really truly, relations stop nowhere, right?

RACHEL ZUCKER: [laughs] Exactly. So, you know, I am not--I don't think I'm going to be the most intelligent, in terms of asking this question--

STEPH BURT: You may be the most self-deprecating! You are the host of the podcast. Ask!

RACHEL ZUCKER: [laughs] I know, I know. Okay. So: in our email exchange getting ready for this, we talked about your different names, and I still don't know actually what your preferred pronouns are.

STEPH BURT: Oh, they, if it feels comfortable.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay. So. I have been thinking a lot about different names and different relationships to gender, and I was thinking about, for myself, the feeling I have that being born a woman and writing about female experiences is absolutely fundamental to my identity and to my writing.

STEPH BURT: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. But I was also thinking about the ways in which I think that I have almost no awareness or very little awareness of gender expression and that my--in certain ways, some of the things you're talking about are really absent from my pallette, you know? Like bright pink.

STEPH BURT: Yeah, you don't do that!

RACHEL ZUCKER: No. And I was wondering--I'd love for you to talk about it in whatever way you want, but I was also wondering--if you think there's a relationship between formalism and some of those--a kind of creative engagement with gender expression, gender fluidity, with the femme, with this--because I feel very old. No, that's not quite the right word. I feel straight, in the sense of limited and a more narrow path, and if I could describe that path--and interested in the way in which some kind of authenticity or the fantasy of authenticity is so driving my work and my understanding of my own experience in the world as a body, as a person, as a gender. It feels to me more and more like an interesting but also really, really limited way of thinking about my view in the world, or my place in the world, or my experience in the world. I think it is related, for me, of my aversion or distrust or lack of confidence with formal, ornamental play.

STEPH BURT: Wow. So much is in there! So I want to talk about your poetry and female embodiment and femininity, which are related but different, and about generations and what roles people and writers and authors can play. And then I want to talk about a word that you use, which is formalism, which can mean ten different things, some of which are the opposites of other things. Interrupt me if I go on too long or I get too technical or not technical enough. But we do need to talk about form and formalism.

First I want to talk about your poetry because when you talk about yourself as a writer, you tend to sell yourself short, but you could also describe yourself accurately at the same time. I think when I read your work, and it's not something that you alone do, that there is a lot of interest in female embodiment, in how you interpret your way of being in the world and using language, and being connected--and having other people expect you to be connected--to other people, in a way that can be generational, that can be about maternal roles, that can be read as closely connected to biology, not just the fact that some of your best poems are connected to pregnancy and giving birth and having infants, but also, like, some of the others have, like, fluids in them.

We just talked about one in which a child barfs at you. That is part of the relation--when I read your work--to female embodiment that you think about. It's connected to your thinking about female roles, mother-daughter stuff--which is part of what *The Pedestrians* is about. These are ways of thinking about sex and gender and gender roles that don't have a lot to do with gender expression, with how you look, or with what kind of words or syntax you use, or with what kinds of cultural references are in those poems. Although their informality--the fact that you're writing in a tradition that is syntactically and orally indebted to Mayer and to Ginsberg--speaks to your interest in embodiment, in how it feels, viscerally, to be in your body rather than some other body, and to be viscerally connected and to have other people expect you to be viscerally connected to other people because you have had sex with them--that is in some of your best poems--because you have given birth to them, because breastfeeding, because medical stuff.

[30:18]

So the unvarnishedness, the roughness, the authenticity of the kind of free verse that you write in, which is one or really a couple kind of free verse among others, actually is connected to the fairly unornamented kind of embodiment that is in your work when I read your work. And you can do it quite well! And I'm very happy to be reading it. I don't see my own embodiment in it. I see yours. Now that kind of free verse is a form. All poetry that is interesting--at least, to me--has a form. Free verse is a form. Your free verse is one kind of form. William Carlos Williams' free verse is another kind of form, right? Alice Oswald's free verse is a different kind of form. We'll get back to that, but that is a choice about exuberance combined with plainness, and it's a choice that reflects a sense of authenticity of your body being actually your body--that at least the implied Rachel Zucker that is in your poetry has.

And I'm talking, again, I'm looking at you right now, not about the human being who could be photographed, but about the sense of Rachel Zucker, the implied author, that comes out of reading your poetry.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay.

STEPH BURT: I think it might be true of the actual Rachel Zucker who, like, makes coffee and wakes up in the morning and decides what records to listen to, also, but that's not a Rachel Zucker that you can directly access through the poetry I'm talking about also, the sense of the person who comes from the poems, in which people who read you and never meet you can have.

So that's not my sense of my embodiment at all, right? I don't hate all the things about my body--there are lots of things I like about my body! I have a six year old and a ten year old; they're awesome. My ten year old was talking about how he likes his body and asked me whether I like my body recently, and I said there are lots of things I like about it. It can do most of the things that I want my body to do. It can play the piano. I'm okay with what size it is, more or less. I don't really mind my coloration or my build, but I kind of feel like I'm supposed to be a girl, and kind of look like a guy unless I'm trying really hard not to. So that's not right. I don't feel at home in my body, even though I feel at home with a lot of the things my body can do, like talk in front of a microphone or give poetry readings or play the piano.

I had the good fortune of reading at SUNY Albany, last week, and it was a terrific audience, I think mostly students, and the students, they were Michael Leong's students, if you know his critical and poetic work, and the more I've gotten to know his work, the more amazed I am at how well he had prepared his students to meet and listen to me because it was a super receptive audience. Michael and [inaudible 33:40] who also teaches there, had really worked on that. So these students had read my personal essays and my lit crit, and some of my books, and I had a student say, you know, "I read your poetry and I read your essays and I read your essays about feeling like a girl inside and feeling like you hadn't grown up and needing a training bra and being very shy, and then I came to your poetry reading, and you seemed quite confident as a public speaker. How can that be?"

That is a question that really goes to the core of one of the things that many of my poems are trying to explain or embody or address, which is that I don't feel at home in a kind of unadorned physical embodied world. Could be a lot worse. I like my life. But I don't feel at home in my body. At least in part because it's kind of the wrong gender because I'm trans. And that's one of the reasons--not the only reason--that I am drawn, often, not always, to an aesthetic of elaboration, to an aesthetic that doesn't apologize for prettiness, to an aesthetic that says bright violet and magenta can be extremely powerful, compelling colors.

[35:29]

Some of the poetry that I write is defending that, either in its use of pre-modern forms or in what it's about. I've been reading through--I've always sort of used it to look things up, but I'm finally reading--from page 1, volume 1 to page 3200, volume 2--the Roy Foster Yeats biography. Yeats is a poet I think we don't pay enough attention to, and people who do pay enough attention to him don't like him enough, or maybe I'm just saying they don't like him as much as I do. Obviously, I don't believe all the things that he believed, but I find him jut tremendously attractive for a lot of reasons, one of them being just the amount of technical skill involved, one of them being the way that he is always trying to pay attention both to the power of the inner life and to the way that we don't live only in our inner life, the way that we live with other people, with politics, with the weather.

One of the many things that I find attractive about Yeats is that early and late--and he changes so much, of course--but early and late, he is always interested in truths and anti-truths, solves and anti-solves, in the way that if you're in the arts, if you're thinking about how to embody emotion, how to make aesthetic objects, no sooner have you completed the articulation of a truth then a counter-truth--and that's Yeats' word--will emerge. No sooner have you solved the problem, then the opposite problem will emerge. No sooner have you managed to make an objective correlative or a satisfactory expression for part of yourself, part of your experience, then some other part will emerge. There's a sort of obvious, reductive way that that would be attractive to someone who has two genders, and an obvious, almost as reductive way that that would be attractive to somebody who has been trying to live multiple roles for a while.

But even beyond that, the Yeatsian insistence that all truths, when fully realized, turn out to be half-truths, is important to me as a reader as well as a writer. One of those truths--for me, I don't know that Yeats would have put it this way--is that the unadorned and direct and the apparently natural and the elaborate and the artificial and the pretty--like the black and the pink, or the beige and the neon violet--exist in a kind of dialogic relation. The poetry that I want to make and the poetry that I want to read--they speak to each other. But I do tend to emphasize, maybe, the sort of bright neon violet stuff because it's been historically disparaged and because I identify with it. I guess that brings us to form! To formalism!

RACHEL ZUCKER: [laugh] Wait, can I--can we--can I--can we do a little side trip and come back to form?

STEPH BURT: Yeah!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay. My head is spinning because I'm so interested in all the things that you're saying, and this moment is just so interesting for me, right now. Nobody can see us, but one of us wearing very beautiful nailpolish--

STEPH BURT: Oh, thank you!

RACHEL ZUCKER: --and lovely earrings, and a beautiful scarf--

STEPH BURT: Aw!

RACHEL ZUCKER: --and a beautiful color blue shirt--

STEPH BURT: Scarf comes from Belmont, where I live, secondhand store called Revolve, if you're ever in Belmont, Mass?--

RACHEL ZUCKER: You really look totally smashing, and you told me that you're going to change into something that I suppose is even more beautiful when you go to your reading. I don't wear any jewelry, really, and do not feel particularly smashing, although I did take a shower--

[40:01]

STEPH BURT: You look fine!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Thank you. So I'm interested in that. You're using the word adorned and unadorned. I'm interested also in the ways in which you are--your work accesses a certain kind of ornament and adornment and girlhood that I don't think I ever had or ever had access to. I did, in a certain way, absolutely have access to it, and I didn't need to convince anyone or people don't misgender me. I don't need to do that work and I--in a certain way--feel at home, for sure, in my body. In certain ways that you're describing. But in other ways, I feel like I have almost no--I'm so interested in poets--male, female, trans--who write about girlhood. That's like the lost era for me. I guess I had one; didn't seem to be an important part of my development somehow. I seem to have skipped over that.

But I also want to say something: there's another element that I think is at play right now for me that I feel compelled to point out, although it may be an essentializing gender stereotype, which is that you have a certain kind of authority that I associate with being male.

STEPH BURT: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You described me as self-effacing, or as--

STEPH BURT: You do not have a self-effacing manor. When you talk about your own poetry, you make it sound as if you liked your poetry less than I like it. That is what I meant.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, okay. Well, I do think that there are things that I do that undermine my own authority or that my self-presentation is gendered in the sense of--for my own feeling--a real lack of confidence or authority. It's not confidence. It's a certain relationship to authority that I feel is very gendered, for me. So I really wanted to point that out. I feel so happy because there's a tiny thing you said that I disagree with [laughs], and again, I think this is a gendered

moment for me, too, like, the happiness with which I feel I can disagree with you about something and not feel like a total moron. That is about Mayer and Ginsberg because even though I like Allen Ginsberg a lot, I actually think they're doing something really different--

STEPH BURT: Oh, yeah!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, I know you didn't mean that they were the same, but I think in there--in that difference--for me, is something really important that is about--I'm trying to write about this and I haven't really started, so it's all a big mush in my head. But it has to do with--I think that, to the extent that I feel that my lived experience and my writing and my aesthetics or poetics subvert or undermine binaries, I think it comes from a poetics of motherhood that I think is not only available to women or to mothers at this point but that came into being with Mayer, with Notley, with--at that moment in history--women who were writing into a space as a very self-consciously underrepresented group and were writing with all the things that you talk about--indeterminacy, and interruptedness.

Because you had said the words and the syntax that you use has a kind of authenticity and a relationship to--I don't know. I'm working on an idea which is very important to me that is not fully articulated that's going to bring us back to form--that there is a formal third space--as they sort of talk about "the third space" in *The Grand Permission*--that it's something that undermines, even though it seems at first to be an essentializing of gender, it actually makes it much more fluid and less binary and very much available to people who are not mothers, who are not women. I think we don't even see that anymore as a poetics of motherhood because it's come so much into the groundwater, or something. So it's related to form. But can you now go back to form?

[45:20]

STEPH BURT: Yeah, I have six different things I want to get through written down.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I know, I'm sorry!

STEPH BURT: No, it's good. I hear you describing sources of your own style as Mayerian as opposed to Ginsbergian. I hope I've been reading you that way also. I think there are other bits of what you're trying to do that I do trace to Ginsberg, the parts that also you have in common with actual memoirists, particular buildings, where the actual building is named, or particular classroom moments that are in your poems, which have something to do with the sort of [inaudible 46:01] or Ginsberg desire to record real places, and they sound different to me than what's going on in Mayer, even if they had to pick who had influenced you more.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, that's fair.

STEPH BURT: So everything--formalism--everything has a form. Describing why you like a poem in a way that is interesting to others, and how that poem differs from a prose account of the same feelings or the same events--means describing the form. Formalism, in one of its meanings, means trying very hard to describe that form, which I'm in favor of. It can also mean caring only form a form, which is a kind of hypocrisy or dead end. It can also mean a devotion to or an interest in poetic forms that pre-date 1911, which I have, and not everybody has, and that's okay.

RACHEL ZUCKER: By which you mean writing in received forms--like sonnets or sestinas--or in versions of them.

STEPH BURT: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And you're picking 1911 as the year because what happened?

STEPH BURT: Because *Tender Buttons* and Prufrock and [inaudible 47:19] and various monuments of you-can't-scan-it-but-it-sounds-great Modernism. *Tender Buttons* might be 1910, I'm sorry. But around then, 1910.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Got it.

STEPH BURT: I actually don't like the phrase 'received forms,' because at this point, the anti-prose sense beautiful, generative prose blocks of *Tender Buttons* are themselves a received form, just as the sonnet is a received form. People learn to write their own kind of poetry by imitating *Tender Buttons* for five years. Or by writing poems that kind of sound like different parts of *Spring and All*, which is 1922 for five years. Those are forms that are received, that we inherit, just as the Meredithian sonnet, or the Keatsian ode are forms, and also genres that we inherit. If this were a more academic podcast, I'd want to talk--I was just reading a piece by the academic critic Susan Wolfson about the difference between form and genre and the way they interact--was it Susan Wolfson? I think it was. I don't want to go into academic terminology unnecessarily, but we twenty-first century poets have a lot of options. Every option is a form if you use it well.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay. Can I restate one tiny part of this because I think it might help us?

STEPH BURT: Yeah!

RACHEL ZUCKER: What if I asked the question from way back in this way, which is to say: I'm wondering if you feel, for your own work, that your use of patterns, and more visible patterns, is related to your--

STEPH BURT: Yes.

RACHEL ZUCKER: --your affinity for adornment. And not just that, but I've read--I think it was in the interview with Monica Youn--you were talking about your real interest in not only writing persona poems but in feeling like all poems on some level are persona poems, that we are wearing things and acting in certain ways, and writing poems in certain ways that are always dress up, in certain ways.

[50:03]

STEPH BURT: Yeah. Yeah. I do feel like that. I feel like every poem is or at least is like an imagined, projected, constructed body. Some poems say, "Look, I'm constructed. Somebody worked to make this," and I think almost all of my poems, at this point, feel like that. Other poems seem to have risen organically. They feel natural. They are, in fact, constructed, but that's not hypocrisy, that's just a way of constructing things that feel natural. And that's great! Whitman does that. You do that. That's great. That's not something that is as congenial to me, although I hope I feel natural enough that my poems don't seem brittle or ridiculous.

But I do think that the form of a poem is like the body of a person. And the poem seems to speak to you in the way that a person speaks to you. And poets and critics who agree on almost nothing agree on that. When Charles Olson and Helen Vendler agree on something about poetry, it's probably true?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Uh huh.

STEPH BURT: And as you might imagine, I prefer Helen Vendler's formulation. She has written on more than one occasion about the poem as being like a body. Poems are not--one can take that too far, right?--poems don't live and die with human life spans. One of the great things about, especially lyric poetry--short, obviously personal or obviously emotional poetry--can last far longer than a human life. But poems also don't need to have arms and legs and lungs and hearts. Poems can seem to be crystalline, poems can seem to be talking flowers. More and more, the next full-length book of poetry is going to be--a lot of this into writing poems with non-human or inanimate speakers. That is a lot of fun for me because I can give voice to and give a body to ways of being in the world and attitudes and reactions that do not have to ground themselves in a life story.

I didn't make this up. Bishop does it. Bishop's *Rainy Season: Subtropics* is, for me, the locus classicus of this. But it goes back much farther than that. It goes back to late antiquity within scriptional poems; it's in Donne and other seventeenth century poetry. When I was an actual child--this goes back to your--you don't get a lot of poetic energy from the props of girlhood and the idea of girlhood. And that's fine. When everybody thought I was a boy, and I wasn't sure what I was, but I was definitely not a grown up, and I definitely liked reading and wanted to hang out with girls and have girls like me, and that wasn't happening yet.

I wanted to be a girl, but I felt actually more like what I was was a robot, a robot or a sort-of non-human character. Increasingly, as I write about my childhood and youth, with fewer filters, this is sort of turning up in the poetry. It may not be over yet, I don't know. We'll see what the final form of the next book is. But the list of entities that I felt I had something in common with or wanted to be as a child is a list of superpowered girls and robots or non-human speak, Mr. Spock.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wow.

STEPH BURT: The Vision, if you know who the Vision is. I felt that I had a great deal in common with the Marvel Comic superhero the Vision, who is a sort of bright-red, somewhat mysterious and awkward robot whose primary power is the ability to dematerialize, which, as you may be aware, Shadowcat from the X-Men, Kitty Pryde from the X-Men, the most consequential, as it has now turned out, of my various non-realist identifications has been Kitty's primary power, that she can pass through things. Her body can become insubstantial. I see myself in that. And this, this has to do with not wanting to be a boy, being alienated from the body I had. It also has to do with being alienated from adult life. You asked about authority and about the gender of authority earlier--should I talk about that?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Sure!

STEPH BURT: Because I have a lot of it! That partly comes from getting a lot of As and being expected, early on, to have the life path that in fact I have had. The way has been made smooth for me, and I'm doing what I was expected to do professionally in all kinds of ways. It has to do with economic privilege. It has to do with geographic privilege, actually, being raised not only with professional classes, "Yes, of course we can pay for your piano lessons" money, but with being raised in Washington DC, which feels central, in a lot of ways, in the way that Boston and New York in L.A. can feel central. I used to live in the Twin Cities, which are great places to raise children and great places to live, and the Twin Cities don't quite feel central.

[55:46]

And it also has to do with being raised with male privilege. The kind of male privilege that I was raised in, for good and bad reasons, this has to do with being raised under patriarchy by super kind, attentive parents. Life under patriarchy interacted with the super, kind, attentive parents and the economic privilege and the doing well on tests to mean that I was always someone adults would listen to. And I honestly hope that I'm raising our kids with the expectation that adults will listen to them but also the expectation that they won't interrupt people. That they will listen to others. I had to learn to be a listener. I think I'm still learning. That is an expression of the male privilege that I was raised with, as well as of the other things.

It means that as a teacher and, I think, maybe as a writer of prose, I have problems and challenges that are the reverse of the problems and challenges that many of my graduate

students and some of my colleagues have. I get to be very informal in classrooms, and I've always taught that way. I live in fear that at some point I'm going to seem like mutton dressed as lamb, and it's going to stop working, and I'm just going to seem stupid. But I don't think that point has come. I get to be very informal in my classroom manner. I will stand on things. When I'm--I generally teach in, right now, like solid-color, form-fitting t-shirts and brightly colored scarves. Before I was out, I used to teach in just band t-shirts and jeans; I'll sometimes still do that.

I don't have any problem projecting authority in a classroom. It took me a little while to realize that my colleagues in graduate school and my colleagues at Macalester College and at Harvard and my students, who are learning to be teachers, often have to have more rules in their classroom, be physically more, like--I'm trying to find the right word--obviously, I don't touch my students because you don't do that, but have posture that is more, sort of, physical presence, that is more self-governed. Some people like being called Dr. this or Professor that. Which seems weird to me. I like being called Steph. That's because, as teachers, and often as women, and sometimes as people who are not used to being seen as authorities--this even interacts with perceived and actual race and ethnicity--it even interacts with actual size. If you are new to teaching and you have a very high voice and you're 5'1", your challenges as a public speaker are different from if you're new to teaching and you have a great, booming, baritone voice, and you played center on a basketball team.

It took me a little while to realize why my friends and why people I looked up to and why people I was training would need to be so formal and would need to have rules and would need to sort of establish their authority. My problem has been as a teacher, and maybe to some extent, as a reader, making sure that I'm listening and making sure that other people have space to speak, and making sure that I'm not just steamrolling them.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm. That's very beautiful, really. Did you feel like there was a turning point for you in kind of recognizing that this was the challenge for you, or was it a gradual--

STEPH BURT: Um, this was a gradual realization. Because there are so many reasons for me to become aware of this: having some sense of ethics and being around other effective teachers who weren't just like me, and having some sense of what feminism is and why it exists, and realizing that sometimes I wanted to be seen as a girl or as a woman--are all independent reasons for me to become aware of this, so I'd have to be pretty thick not to.

[1:00:22]

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean, it's very helpful for me to hear you say this because it helps me articulate, I think, one of the things I really love most about your critical writing, which is the mix of authority and informality--

STEPH BURT: Thank you!

RACHEL ZUCKER: --and humanness. To go back to criticism for one second, although we don't have to--as we said, they're all interrelated--I just read the introduction to your newest book, *The Poem is You*, which I loved.

STEPH BURT: Thank you!

RACHEL ZUCKER: I don't have the whole thing yet, so I'm speaking really only about the introduction, and one section that I've read. But you say--first of all, you talk about how poetry spaces or poetry-filled spaces have a hard time--what did you say? You said, "Each have their own sense of what to read, of what's important, and few have the space or time to introduce work far from its core tastes and concerns." And then the book really strive to do that, sort of introduce different kinds of poetry to each other. And then, I love that you talk about the problem of talking about poetry as similar to, like, telling someone what to go see in America or where to live or how to live.

STEPH BURT: Thank you.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And you say--this is a quote from your introduction, which I feel like is going to stick with me and help me so much--you say, "The answer"--like to the question of what to see, where to live, what to do on your travels--"depends on who you are, where you're coming from, what you like now, and what you want to learn." And I feel like only someone with the informality and the privilege, in a way, and the confidence could so clearly articulate basically my entire teaching strategy--

STEPH BURT: Aw, well thank you.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. So I mean, when I give students books, or I recommend books, or exercises, or whatever, even if I do that for myself, I'm always asking those questions: who you are, where you're coming from, what you like now, and what you want to learn to do. That's pretty brilliant!

STEPH BURT: Thank you.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Maybe it's obvious to you, but to me it seemed brilliant. I wanted to ask you: do you think all artwork or all art has those same set of questions, or is poetry unique in that way?

STEPH BURT: Um, I think all artwork that comes in relatively small units ought to be approached that way. When you're talking about a work of art that is a massive time investment for anyone that wants to try to appreciate it, when you're talking about Ferrante or Knausgård or Proust or *War and Peace* or even The Wire, which I haven't watched yet--at some point--I think different questions emerge, questions about: is this capacious enough that you want to

recommend it to anyone? Does it look like the great big populus world? Is it fair to the big, populous world? Art that attempts to be comprehensive, a different set of questions arise.

One of the reasons why I like *Middlemarch* a million times more than I like anything I've read by Henry James--and I've read most of the major Henry James novels--is that these are giant works that have the aspiration of the big, long, realist novel, which is to be comprehensive, to be fair to a lot of parts of the world. *Middlemarch* actually does it, within the limits of Eliot's time. Some of the marraige plots have to end happily, you can't have explicit sex scenes, you can't have out queer people, but within those limits, I read *Middlemarch*, and I say, you know, "The world kind of is like that." I have read *The Ambassadors*; I don't recommend reading *The Ambassadors*, unless you want to read a novel of that kind of prose style because the world is kind of not like that.

[1:05:10]

I have friends I trust very much, who would make exactly the reverse judgement, but I bring this up--and I think this maybe holds for feature films, I'm not sure. This is also true--within the limits of the genre, again--for multi-year comic book series. There is a sense in which the world is like X-Men, in which it's not like Batman, many other senses in which it's not like--but at least, if you're looking at the run that established the series--anything that is large, that is a big investment, one can ask questions about whether lots of different kind of people would be into it, whether it's comprehensive. One could ask that question about a body of work. The world sort of is, for me, the way that it is in the collected works of William Carlos Williams, with certain obvious limits. It is not the way it is in someone, kinda, like Roethke, or Olson, probably, talented poets who don't speak to me.

But when you're looking at individual volumes of poetry, or individual poems, or poets where you want to recommend some poems by them as opposed to immersion in their collected works, it doesn't make sense to ask, "Is this comprehensive, is this fair to the whole world?" Of course it's not. It's lyric. What makes sense is to ask, "If this moved me, why does this move me? If I find it beautiful, why is it beautiful? If it seems true, what about it is true? If it seems true and obvious, why do I care? If it seems true and nonsensical but moves me, why is it not really nonsense? Who else would it speak to and why?" Those are questions that I ask about when I'm recommending and not recommending poets, when I'm reviewing individual volumes, when I'm thinking about what poets' styles have accomplished what.

They are also good questions about short works of music, about pop songs, about string quartets, about piano sonatas, about hip hop tracks, and about paintings. I suppose, about individual issues of comic books, anything that is relatively short.

RACHEL ZUCKER: That is utterly fascinating!

STEPH BURT: Thank you.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh my god. I feel like we could have the whole podcast all over again about why--like, I love *Middlemarch*, and I'm not a big Henry James fan, but for me, since who I am and what my life is like, I read one and then I'm like, "I don't really like that. I'm gonna go back to George Eliot."

STEPH BURT: Yeah. The problem is you can actually run out of George Eliot to read.

RACHEL ZUCKER: True. True. Although, they're long, which I like.

STEPH BURT: They are long.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I think I also have much more trouble with individual poems and even with volumes than with a body of work, and I think I'm very addicted, almost, to the idea of something that's comprehensive, that's giving a sense of, like, this is the way the world is or not. I think that that's something I need to--I loved your questions about when it's lyric or short there are different questions that you might want to ask. I think I need to do a better job asking those kinds of questions and paying attention to shorter pieces.

STEPH BURT: As a reader or as a writer?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Both, I think. Both. Yeah, both.

STEPH BURT: I feel like it's optional for you as a writer. I would be happy to see the next book have all the poems be five pages long. One of the things about reading *The Pedestrians* is that it has these sonnet-sized pieces, and when I read that part of *The Pedestrians,* I was very conscious of you trying to do something that didn't come naturally to you, which was brevity. And it's great when poets try to do things that don't come natural to them, but--

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, I did want to do something that was really uncomfortable and unnatural to me, but I think I sort of cheated, also, because I really think of the whole thing as one thing, so then I got away with it.

STEPH BURT: It does feel like a series. Yeats did that too, of *A Woman Young and Old* and *Words for Music Perhaps*. Yeats, actually--again, I'm on a Yeats kick right now--found it actually easier to get more internal variety among these beautiful, self-contained lyric unites, if he could think of them in sequence. So it's okay to write in sequences!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah…

STEPH BURT: Now, one of the challenges for me, right now, is the tension between a sequence--a group of fifteen poems--which I've been doing that, chapbook-sized things, twenty poems, ten poems at a time that are related--and I find that is really congenial to me right

now--and a single book. I feel like a single book is supposed to represent me in some comprehensive fashion, whereas a sequence or a kind of poem I write ten of can be a part of me or a facet of me or a sort of version of me, and I actually don't feel like there's one me. I want to keep my promises, and I have one body that has to pick the kids up from after school at one time or be in a classroom at one time. I want to be a morally consistent person. And I have beliefs that are consistent. But I really do feel like I have different social roles, I have different appearances, I have different genders, I feel like I have different ages, although, really I don't, at different times and in different places.

[1:10:57]

And it really feels like trying to drive several square pegs into one round hole, trying to put together this book that's going to be out next year.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Is that what you've got right in front of you?

STEPH BURT: It is. It is called *Advice From The Lights.*

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oooh, I love that title.

STEPH BURT: I'm glad you like it! I went back and forth on it, but I think that is what it's going to be called. We're still figuring out whether it's going to be the longer or the shorter version, and I'm only able to be happy with it if I think about it as a collection of EPs, the way Belle and Sebastian did an album that was actually three EPs that had been released individually, and they all sound like Belle and Sebastian, but they're different. There are new novels made of, like, stories, and sort of collected editions of comics that are three different storylines, so they can be the right length, and I'm really trying to think of this book as having a couple storylines and having a couple mes in them that are different.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Are the different storylines or the different yous formally different? I know that everything has a form, but are they—-is it like, oh, now I'm in this world, and now I'm in this world, or are they more interwoven, like a mosaic or tapestry?

STEPH BURT: Do you mean do they have different forms, or do you mean are they printed as distinct units so you get all of one kind of poem before you get any of the next kind?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Both.

STEPH BURT: So the answer is both. *Advice From The Lights* has, right now, four parts. The second part, which is taken from a chapbook that's about a year and a half old—it's about half the chapbook, the other half—-you gotta buy the chapbook—-is poems of memory, poems of autobiographical recollection of the life I would have had had I grown up as a girl. They were a lot of fun to write. They were formally various. Some rhyme, some scan. I think most of them

have some internal rhyme or some external rhyme, but there's also a prose poem about competitive gymnastics, which is really fun to read aloud. There's a very free adaptation of Baudelaire—my adaptation's called "Mean Girls." So that's one part. And that comes second.

What comes first is poems based on actual childhood memory and teen memory, and poems spoken by gender-variant arthropods and inanimate objects. There are talking kites at the beach, there's a hermit crab, there are cicadas—so that's part one. And those are all—all of the inanimate objects are talking more or less about childhood and youth.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Can you read something?

STEPH BURT: Sure! Sure. Why don't I read you one of each?

[Reads "Herring Gull"]

[1:16:25]

So, rhyme. It's a beach scene. I have maybe too many poems about the beach. Reading it, I'm aware of how that's not explicitly a poem of childhood maybe some of the ways the other talking animals are—or a teen poem, though that could be a teen—but it's a poem that is in dialogue with the poem about kites that's earlier in the book. It's also in dialogue with my favorite Delmore Schwartz poem "The Ballet Of The Fifth Year," in which Schwartz thinks about how you never see a sleeping seagull in the city, you only see them awake. Thanks to Craig Teicher for turning me on to Delmore Schwartz, again. And it's also in dialogue with Baudelaire's albatross, who was a figure for the poet, who was awkward on land but graceful in flight.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Can I ask you a quick question?

STEPH BURT: Yeah!

RACHEL ZUCKER: And then I want you to read the other one too.

STEPH BURT: Only one other one? Okay, okay.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, no! I want you to keep reading and reading and reading—

STEPH BURT: Okay! Okay!

RACHEL ZUCKER: —and I have a million questions too, but—you say in the introduction to *The Poem Is You* that one of the things that poetry's really good at is it lets us imagine someone else's interior life almost as if it were, or could have been, ours, and certainly that's something I love very, very much about poetry. It also seems like a hot topic right now, in the sense that how to navigate imaginative identification, and the empathy that can be enlarged by that, and cultural

appropriation, or appropriation of—you know, birds, or kites, inanimate objects, or animals are not going to be offended by these poems—

STEPH BURT: Yup. Yup.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I don't imagine that women would be offended, or girls would be offended, or people who are cisgender women or girls would be offended by you imagining, or having memories of your life as a girl, but I do think if we were talking about, being white people, imagining our lives as people of color, we might be in a different situation.

STEPH BURT: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So I was wondering how you feel about that aspect of this.

STEPH BURT: I think about that a lot. If you write poems and all the speakers are humans, and all the speakers are white, and you're white, then you've got a really white book, and that's unfortunate. If you write poems where some of the speakers are humans who are non-white, and identifiably non-white, and you're white, cultural appropriation. If you write poems where all the speakers are human, and you think that the speakers have no demographic identifying characteristics at all, they're probably going to sound kind of like you, which if you come from majority-empowered demographics, is not disqualifying, but is not awesome. But there's no such thing as unfair cultural appropriation when you are writing in the voice of a cicada, or a flashlight. And that's one of the reasons that I love writing poems in the voices of cicadas and flashlights and kites and hermit crabs. Now, the cicadas and flashlights and hermit crabs probably sound pretty white.

[1:20:04]

The works of art, that I enjoy that move me, that I love and that I love teaching are by no means all white. By no means. But the works of art that have gone most deeply to make up my own identity and sense of a useable poetics are not exclusively but primarily, maybe overwelmingly, by people whom we would now call white. George Herbert or Philip Sidney did not wake up and say, "I am a white person as opposed to African Americans," for obvious reasons, so we should be aware when we're talking about demographics, that they're historically contingent. One really good way, as a poet, to try and get out of your little bubble in which you were raised is to try to be influenced by writers who are distant from you in time, and I've sort of tried for that.

But I am aware that there is a kind of whiteness in what my influences are and in how I sound that--there are limits to how far I can get away from that. I can try to get away from that as a critic, obviously, and that's both fun and an ethical imperative, and I hope that working really hard as a critic to do justice to the embodied and historically contingent experience of language that's marked as non-white and people who are non-white, but my life experience is in the language of my poems--

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm-hmm. And do you think that the whiteness of your useable poetics--I love that phrase that you just used, the usable poetics--is primarily because your teachers and source-givers were not doing a great job giving you a wide enough range or because the sources and materials and poems that seemed to you at a formative point in your life to be most like you in some way or to speak to you in some way happened to be white?

STEPH BURT: You know historians. So you know what a monocausal explanation is. And you know why monocausal explanations for human events are almost always wrong. My teachers tried--some harder than others, but--tried to make available sources and works of art that were not entirely white. People who are raised as white, as European-Americans, whatever, who are in literary studies are more often and more forcefully told now than we used to be, "If everybody on your syllabus is white, that's screwed up, fix it now." But I don't feel like I was deprived of black authors. I was, actually--deprived is the wrong word--my sense of race in American writing as a teenager was about black people and white people until probably, like, midway through college or something, which in retrospect is unfortunate and screwed up. It also speaks to who lives in Washington, and it speaks to patterns of immigration and who publishes what and what high school teachers do.

But I don't feel like I was never around non-white writers. I feel like my experience, unfortunately, and what has spoken to me has been whiter than the experience of a lot of white poets I like. And there are poets who are white poets who are doing a terrific job of writing about the complexities of racial identification and racialized experience just in the United States. Bruce Smith comes to mind. I would like to be able to do some of the things that Bruce Smith's recent poetry has done; doesn't work. I have been trying to--I can't do what he does, partly because his writing about race is through, sort of, American football and masculinity and Bruce Springsteen-y stuff, which I love to read but can't write.

I've been reading and listening to other people of our generation, people like Tess Taylor, who are trying to figure out how to talk about whiteness and race, and I've been trying to write poems that address that. There are a couple near the end of the new collection *Advice from the Lights*. There's one that's got concord grapes and Emerson's "Concord Hymn" and "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and physical labor and new world colonization in it, and it feels a little abstract and a little professorial to me, but at least it's me trying to think in a way that's aesthetically interesting about race and whiteness and white guilt.

[1:25:12]

I'd like to write about that more. I have a folder full of more or less failed poems about race. But these poems where I'm trying to do this are poems that are more third person-y and more essayistic. They're not poems of childhood memory. They're not poems that feel as personal.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Ugh. Steph, there's like a million things, but I so don't want you to be late.

STEPH BURT: I don't want to be late either!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Read your other poem.

STEPH BURT: Okay. I want to jump back a few topics to say that this book, *Advice from the Lights*, that's going to be out next year, it's got actual childhood memory; it's got talking flashlights and characters and animals. It's got sort of third person-y poems on public affairs, on geography and tourism and travel and infrastructure and liberalism. We didn't get to talk about liberalism.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I know!

STEPH BURT: So many poets of our generation who try to be very political are about neo-revolutionary politics or sort of abstract analysis of late capitalism, and they're wonderful thinkers, and it's a very promising poetics, but I myself am trying to write a poetics of the art of the possible, of regulating minimum wage and reducing carbon emissions and collision building, and what Astra Taylor calls organizing as opposed to activism, not that I spend a lot of time organizing, but it's important to respect that and encourage that, a poetics of incremental change and compromise. Not neoliberalism, which is terrible, but actual liberalism, in the mode of Paul Wellstone, which is great and we need more of it.

So that's kind of the back of it. And parenthood poems, continuation of the parenthood stuff in *Belmont*. And in the middle, there's a long translation from Callimachus, my favorite ancient Greek poet. We didn't get to talk about ancient Greek either. Next time! But I won't read you translations from ancient Greek, and I won't read you a long poem about liberalism. I will read a poem that appeared in *The New Republic*. Thank you to Cathy Park Hong for publishing it!--a couple months ago, I guess, which is one of the poems of actual childhood and teen memories. The adults around me tried really hard, but I was not a terribly happy childhood. I was not a childhood. I had much more fun in my angsty adolescence. That had a lot of ups and downs and a lot of frustrations but a lot of joy and more friendships in it as well. I try to do justice to that, but of course it's easier to write about painful or embarrassing bits.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Sure.

STEPH BURT: So I'll read you one of the sort of refried and represented, framed teenage memory poems.

[Reads "My 1987"]

[1:30:24]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Fabulous. When might this book appear?

STEPH BURT: *Advice from the Lights*?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah.

STEPH BURT: Fall 2017.

RACHEL ZUCKER: That's wonderful.

STEPH BURT: I hope it doesn't disappoint.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, so far, I love it, and I'm so happy to hear the poems because I'm not going to get to go to your reading tonight. Are you going to read either of these two?

STEPH BURT: I have no idea. I have no idea. [laughs] I might actually read that one. In all of my poems when I'm done with them and I walk away from them then come back and say, "Oh, that is in dialogue with three or four other poems that I semi- had in mind." I am somewhat intimidated and delighted to be reading with Terrance Hayes tonight. I love being able to write about his work as a critic. I am--terrified is the wrong word--but I am humbled? Dwarfed? By the fact that I am going to be reading my own poetry and then he will read his poetry. A couple of the poems in *Advice from the Lights* are distantly in a kind of spiderweb-y related to some of his poems. I think that poems has little tiny bits of one of his poems called "The Blue Terrance" in it. His ability, along with a couple other peoples' ability, Bishop's ability, your ability in certain ways, Paul Muldoon's ability to write autobiographically without having to write narratively are things I've been trying to learn from. Brenda Shaughnessy's as well, I should say.

I didn't mention Brenda Shaughnessy, and I didn't mention the comic book *Jem and the Holograms* earlier, but I should mention, going back to how do you represent yourself and going back to the artificiality of girlhood and the artiface of girlhood and also the way that it's imposed on cis-gender girls without their asking first, and it was never imposed on me, which is one of the reasons I find it empowering, and lots of people don't. But the two sides of girliness--the artificial side and the often disempowering, you're-stuck-with-it side, have rarely been done as much justice simultaneously as they are in Brenda's brand new book, which is called *So Much Synth*, and if you want to see a visual depiction outside poetry of the empowering aspect of a girly aesthetic and you read any comic book at all, *Jem and the Holograms* is a comic book that you need.

As I think--which I have to do when I go home tomorrow and start marking up papers--as I think about the cover and the visuals for this next book of poetry, which I absolutely trust Graywolf on--I'm happy to be working with their designers--but I'm going to send them some images of Sophie Campbell's art for *Jem and the Holograms*.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Awesome! Awesome. This has been a total pleasure; I feel like we need to have part two because I have like five pages of notes of things I wish we had talked about.

STEPH BURT: Come to Boston!

RACHEL ZUCKER: I will. While you change, I'm going to ask my son Moses who just walked in if he's ever read *Jem and the Holograms* because he--have you ever read *Jem*?

[music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Outro]: This has been episode twelve of Commonplace: Conversations with Poets (and Other People). Music written and performed by Moses Zucker Goren. Artwork by Eitan Darwish. Commonplace producers are Nicholas Fuenzalida, Christine Larusso, and Zach Tackett. Many and more thanks to Daniel Shiffman. Take care, and thanks for listening.