

stCOMMONPLACE PODCAST

[EPISODE # 11](#)

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[guitar music]

Introduction

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Intro]: Hello, this is Rachel Zucker, and this is episode eleven of Commonplace: Conversations with Poets (and Other People). I spoke with poet and professor Shane McCrae on October 11th, in New York City. He was in town for a few days to give a reading. Shane teaches at Oberlin College and is the author of four books: [The Animal Too Big to Kill](#), [Forgiveness Forgiveness](#), [Blood](#), and [Mule](#). My friend Arielle Greenberg recommended Shane's work to me a few years ago, and I loved it immediately.

Shane's work is intimate, innovative, upsetting, and radical. Shane writes about family, racialized violence, slavery, the Civil War, fatherhood, using forms that are broken, wild, highly crafted, resonant, and musical. I met Shane for the first time about a year ago. He was coming to New York for another reading, and I invited him to speak in my class, *The Legacy of the Confessional Impulse*, about his work, about his relationship to the so-called "Confessional Poets," in particular Sylvia Plath.

After Shane visited the class, we continued to correspond via email about our own work, our poetic foremothers, and about the intersection of race and the confessional. These conversations informed my writing of my lecture, "What We Talk About When We Talk About the Confessional and What We Should Be Talking About." So it was wonderful, in this recent conversation, to revisit some of these topics with Shane, to hear about his upcoming book [In the Language of My Captor](#), and about the epic poem he's currently writing.

One of the pleasures of Commonplace for me is mapping the terrain of similar and unlike, which is to say making connections with other writers around the things we have in common, and the compelling points of difference. So, for example, Shane and I both write long poems that are autobiographical and arise out of grief, anger, and sadness. We love and are formed by many of the same writers. We are obsessed with many of the same emotions and events and problems. We have shared poetry loves and discovered in this conversation the coincidence of loving a weird novel by Helen DeWitt called *The Last Samurai*.

And then there are our connections across and through dissimilarity. I'm aware when I talk to Shane that I am Jewish White woman raised by Jewish artist-intellectuals in New York City talking to a Black man raised in the South by White Supremacist grandparents in a Christian home, and aware of the profound effects of these differences. I tend to write apparently personal or blatantly memoiristic poems in and about the present or near-present in free verse. Shane talks in this episode about why he often writes into and about the past rather than the present moment--his love of the sonnet, the consequences and harms of Whiteness, the problems with retributive justice.

This episode goes to some difficult places. We talk about the Holocaust and about lynching, Yom Kippur, Whiteness, the Christianity of confession. Several times, Shane says he isn't going to get onto what he refers to as "The Soapbox," but by the end of our conversation he does, and I'm glad he does. We talk about reality TV, humiliation, and Donald Trump. Today, a week before this heartbreaking, deplorable election for the president of the divided states, I feel compelled to say the following: I love the way in which listening to Commonplace has some of the pleasures of eavesdropping, of participating invisibly in the intimate connection between two people talking in a state of semi-privacy. But when I saw the Trump Tapes, and heard Trump's non-apology, something about this podcast became newly clear to me.

I want everything about Commonplace to be the opposite of the recorded conversation between Billy Bush and Trump on the bus, the opposite of what Trump calls "locker room talk," the opposite of Trump's irresponsible dismissal of those comments and the even worse things that he said on the record, in public, straight to our faces. "It's just words," says Trump. It is my hope and intention and plan that Commonplace be just words, not as in "mere" but "just" in the sense of words that arise out of the search for what is fair and right, words that arise out of the complex struggle to act and behave in moral ways. Commonplace is not, and should never, and will never be the kind of locker room space Trump says is pervasive and forgivable. I'm not looking for a White-washed politico conversation in which everyone always and easily agrees, where we pretend to be colorblind, better than we are, beyond reproach, outside responsibility or fallibility.

[5:13]

Let us not, as we reveal ourselves to one another and to ourselves, pander to one another, kiss each others' asses. But Commonplace is not and never will be a Trumpadelic locker room. Instead, let Commonplace be an unlocked space for just words that mourn and decry and transform unjust ideologies and actions, even as we talk about the most sacred and quotidian aspects of living and art-making: book purging, childcare, television, writing. Let us not turn our voting booths, bedrooms, schools, places of worship, town halls, city streets, hearts, or podcasts into a cesspool locker room of hate speech in which words are simultaneously devalued and used to deride, divide, oppress, toxify, and kill, as surely as shouting "fire" in a crowded theater.

The Commonplace website, commonpodcast.com, has links to the books, composers, and bands that Shane mentions in this episode and to Shane's books. An audio excerpt from Shane's newest book-length poem and two hand-picked playlists are available to [Patreon](#) subscribers of Commonplace. Please consider making a one-time donation or becoming a [Patreon subscriber](#) or [writing us a review on iTunes](#). All of these things help keep the Commonplace podcast going strong. Please vote, and please let us know what you think. And thank you so much for listening.

[Soft guitar music]

[7:08]

RACHEL ZUCKER: It's so funny that the first thing you said when you walked in here was about Sylvia Plath because that was one of our first exchanges over email when--it was last fall, right?

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah, yeah -

RACHEL ZUCKER: When I asked you to come into my class?

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah! It was exactly a year ago, actually. Might not have been exactly but in this stretch of days that I'm here now, last year, I was here too.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right! And I said, "Oh, I'm teaching this class on the legacy of confessional poetry and I know you're interested in Sylvia Plath." It's so funny. So I don't know if you have any Jews in your life or if you know much about Judaism. Do you?

SHANE MCCRAE: [laughs] Um, no, I actually don't. I know, the minimal amount. I'm bummed that I don't know more. I studied Hebrew for a little bit and I really, really enjoyed it, biblical Hebrew, but then I had to drop the class. Of all the classes in my long college career that I dropped, the one that I actually still think about and regret is biblical Hebrew.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wow!

SHANE MCCRAE: It was surprisingly—I don't want to say easy, but—it was surprisingly easy to pick up as you went along. The rules made sense, things added up, and I really really enjoyed it. I wish—I'd like to start studying it again. But it's hard to find the time.

RACHEL ZUCKER: What made you want to take that class?

SHANE MCCRAE: I wanted to learn the languages of the Bible! And, uh, the closest I get is Latin, which is not all that close. You know, I have a biblical Greek book, or a New Testament Greek book, and I just haven't gotten around to learning it. In my head, someday I'm going to find the time to do both. I don't honestly know if that's true, but I would like to think it's true.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well I was thinking about you when I was preparing for this and thinking about you coming in because Yom Kippur starts today at sundown. And so the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called the "Days of Awe" -

SHANE MCCRAE: Oh wow -

RACHEL ZUCKER: And this is--now I'm going back to my Yeshiva days--the one way of thinking about it is that on Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, the Book of Life is open and then you have to do your teshuvah, or your repentance or your atonement. But repentance and atonement are not the same... they're not really a good, accurate translation of the Jewish concept of atonement. Then on Yom Kippur, that's like when it's signed and sealed and you're in it or you're not in it.

So I don't know--I was thinking about you because so much of what we've corresponded about and talked about in terms of our poetry and our work and our way of reading and our way of thinking is about issues of sin, shame, repentance, atonement, the role of poetry in all of that. So in a weird way, it feels like a really--this happened by accident because you were in New York, so it was just an accident. But in another way, it doesn't feel like an accident to me.

I'm wondering what you're working on now and if some of those themes--they're not even themes. How can you call sin or atonement or forgiveness or shame a theme? But are those presences as strong for you now as they were in your earlier work?

[10:39]

SHANE MCCRAE: Well, it's funny you should say that [laughs], because I--for about two years, I've been trying to figure out how to write this possibly epic poem, that is basically just copying Dante, and recently—I published an earlier version of it a while back, but now I'm kind of bummed out about it—recently, I figured out the first nineteen pages of it, which, two years to get to nineteen pages—for me, it's a long time, but it's also, like, I feel good about it. The protagonist goes to Hell, and they're in Hell, and I got that done. And it's like a chapbook, so I've got them in Hell, so I guess yeah—I guess that kind of stuff is on my mind a lot, all the time. I don't usually

think about *why* I write what I write, and I have yet to figure out *why* I feel inclined to write this book about Hell, but I can't get very far away from it.

Whenever I sit down to write and I don't have a thing that I'm already working on and I don't necessarily have a line jumping around in my head, I find myself kind of drifting over to the Hell book again, and so yeah—I guess I am still writing about that stuff, it is inevitable.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Who is the protagonist in this epic poem?

SHANE MCCRAE: [Sighs] I don't even know, and that's a big problem for an epic. For a long time, I wanted the protagonist to be really vague, which is a difficult thing to make compelling, but I was hoping that the compellingness of Hell itself would be enough, and now... the protagonist is sort of solidifying and becoming—it makes me really sad, because I resisted this specifically for a long time, but I think the protagonist is gendered. I think the protagonist is a he, and I can't—I just don't think that there is a way for me to get around it with the way that the poem is shaping up, with what's happening in the poem. I don't think it—it started to not make sense to not have the protagonist be gendered, which is fine... I, you know, if I have to choose, I'm probably happier with men going to Hell, so that's—but I don't, you know—the thing that made me resist is I don't want to do another one of these Western epics where there's like the male hero who's doing whatever.

There's Alice Notley's *Descent Of Alette* which is really good, and useful predecessor, but yeah—I think the protagonist is a male, which is considerably more specific than it was before, but other than that, my sense of him is that he was very selfish, was very—well, I don't even know if selfish is the right word, because I'm thinking about selfishness, I've been thinking about narcissism a lot lately, and what does that really mean, because I think that when one has interactions with narcissistic people or whatever, it's very easy to feel personally snubbed or personally harmed, and I'm trying to come to a point where I'm recognizing that narcissism very literally has nothing to do with me or anybody else who's interacting with the person. It's about the person, so they're not particularly trying to harm the other, they're just not interested, and I don't think it's an unkind disinterest, it's simply like a switch that's not—and so I don't know if I could say that the protagonist is narcissistic in that sense, but the protagonist is very inside himself in a way that makes him not consider other people.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hmm. Wow. And so what's it like being in this long-term relationship with this guy, who has turned out to be a guy, and may or may not be narcissistic, and you're kind of invested in him at this point, and—

SHANE MCCRAE: I don't know! I mean I guess—I mean, you know. The weird thing about writing is that even when you're writing something that's horrible, or very, very sad, or you're like detailing grimly an atrocity, it still feels kind of good, like, yay! [laughs] Which is in some ways not great, and so it's—I want to say that it is not fun, but it is fun to write.

[15:00]

It is fun to figure out how to make this thing work. I don't—what, honestly, that makes me think, what I really need to do, is figure out what he's actually, exactly like, so that I can have a relationship with him, and then be bummed out by that, which is what I suspect will be the next step, but up until this point, what I have enjoyed about the whole thing is that it has allowed me to do some things with my imagination that maybe what I was doing before hadn't allowed me to do? It is very, very much—and I was listening to your Matthew Rohrer podcast and he was talking about his book *The Others*, which I'm really pumped about, and he said it was like a straight-up narrative, and I was like oh crap, that's exactly what mine is.

Mine is like a person goes from one place to another. They do things. Events follow. There's not like these lyrical gaps. There's not like spaces where you're trying to, like, imagine how so-and-so did what. It's a narrative, so I've enjoyed stretching out in that way. I've enjoyed and been pained by discovering that I'm not all that good at it, which is why I think it's taken ten years. I've already had a version of this poem that is seventy pages long, and so fifty of them are gone. I'm realizing just that those fifty weren't very good, but this twenty is—I think it's okay. It's been nice. It's been really nice discovering that I can think of things that I guess I didn't think I could think of, I wasn't aware I could, I would have thought were beyond me. So that's been fun. The guy himself I haven't thought about too much.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, let's talk about the pleasure of writing even when one is writing difficult, dark—could be personal trauma, or historical atrocity—

SHANE MCCRAE: It's weird. It's something that I think—I mean, I think every writer knows it, but I also think that they don't want to talk about it. I mean, it's vaguely uncomfortable. Like, you don't want to read your poem about this horrific thing happening and introduce it by saying I had a lot of fun writing this horrific poem, but yeah, it is pleasurable, and I don't—I honestly don't—on some level, I guess I don't think about that too much, because I think that that is necessary.

What I would say is that when I was, like, a teenager, I had this idea—I think it was a received idea—I don't know how true it was—that I only write when I'm sad. And when I meet young writers, they all kind of say the same thing—"I only write when I'm sad." And now I want to say to them, I don't even understand how could you write when you're sad, like you don't—when I'm sad, I don't even want to write. I'm just sitting around being sad.

Where, like that Wordsworthian idea, where—I'm going to paraphrase here—"bummer feelings thought about later," is basically—[laughs] is basically what it really is, like I have to be in a good enough mood to deal with my bummer feelings, and then I can make a poem, and so when I was younger I thought it came out of sadness, and it doesn't. It comes out of—it's an expression of happiness, even if the thing itself—the act is an expression of happiness, the product itself might in fact not be very happy. But I think it is an expression of a happiness necessary to make the poem. I'm sure this isn't universal. It's just, for me, at least, I have found that the model of I

only write when I'm unhappy, it produces nothing, and if it were to produce anything, it would be turgid, and not worth reading.

[18:24]

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean, it's related to another issue, I think, that's very present for me and for a lot of other writers right now, which is the question of how do you write about personal trauma, personal difficulty, historical difficulty, social political inequity, injustice, oppression, atrocity, without, in a way, enacting violence in the artwork? And Roger Reeves has this great craft talk, I guess, about poetry in the age of Ferguson, and he talks—have you seen it?

SHANE MCCRAE: I haven't seen it, but—

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, it's pretty—it's pretty fascinating, and he does a close reading of a Seamus Heaney poem, but he also talks a lot about this instinct that so many of us have to like—I'm not on Facebook, but to—for those who are, or for whatever their social media is, to basically, like, post: "Look at this horrible video! Look at this!" as a way of saying "I'm not on the side of this terrible behavior," but then, in a way, we're all, like, re-exposing these tragedies, and I think—not to equate posting a video of, for example, police brutality, to Facebook with making a poem or making a work of art, but there is something that is similar in the sense of, like, at what point does—like, we want, as poets, for our poems to provoke feeling in the reader, and to provoke—to be experiential, not just be distant and unfeeling. But then if we are doing that, if we are succeeding in that, to what extent are we reenacting trauma, reenacting violence?

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah. You know, I actually—I think about this a lot, because I tend to end up with poems—I realize it more and more—that are very sad, and I, myself, am generally pretty happy, although, like, the art I like—as you see me in my Joy Division shirt—tends to be a bummer. I tend to like bummer, dark, heavy things, but it's weird that I like whistle them. I'm like skipping along listening to, like, bummer black metal. I don't really know why that is. Maybe it's a kind of—well, you know, Mark Kozelek, who I get more and more depressed by as time goes on, said in a very, very early interview with his band The Red House Painters that he listens—he makes really sad music and listens to really sad music because that makes him happy, and he couldn't, like, listen to—his example was Michael Jackson—because he couldn't relate to it and it would bum him out. And so I think that that's sort of where that is for me.

But with regard to, like, the effects that the work is going to have on other people, I think that this is probably why I tend to write about—like, I write a lot about the Civil War. I write a lot about, in some ways, relatively old traumas, and there are a couple reasons. I think that—I think that various—and this is probably going to sound kinda kooky—I think that various world regions are traumatized generationally by various long-past things. Like I think that for a very long time, a good chunk of Europe, like well in into the Seventies, the Eighties, the Nineties, was really messed up by World War One—even though everybody would have pointed to World War Two, I

think World War One was the thing that people couldn't figure out how to get over, and I think they just now starting to be aware of how messed up they are by World War Two.

[22:04]

And, in the same way, I think that America is very screwed up by the Civil War, and it hasn't really figured out how to think about it. It hasn't figured out how to confront it. It *really* doesn't want to confront it, and so what that ends up meaning is that even though it's—you know, a hundred and fifty years ago, it is still an open wound. It's still festering in public. It gets passed on from generation to generation to generation to generation, and so when I'm writing these poems about things that happened in the Civil War—although the new book has some Civil War stuff, it has some early twentieth century stuff—when I'm writing about that stuff, I feel like... these are the wounds that I want people to look at, these are the things that I want them to think about, because if they can start thinking about these things—I think it's useful in that if they can start thinking about these things, maybe they can take steps toward healing these things, but I also think that except for in a sort of, like, public memory sense, most people aren't going to feel personally traumatized by reading about this terrible thing that happened in the Civil War.

Maybe some, but hopefully it wouldn't be the same as if I were talking about things that were happening right now, and I feel like, in some sense, it's because these *are* things that are happening right now. I have an extremely difficult time writing about, like, the exact moment, because I can't get my—when I'm talking about the Civil War, I feel relatively calm about it. I feel that I can get into a sort of happy space where I can do it, whereas with, you know, all the shootings over the past few years, and so much of the other stuff that's been going on, I just can't get to a frame of mind where I can make it happen. I just—it's too upsetting, and so I do think that to some extent it is true that these acts sort of inevitably reinscribe, and so I think that the real question is not "Do we reinscribe or not by doing these things?" I think that we do. I think the question is "Is it useful to reinscribe?" Do we reinscribe and does anything good come out of that?

And I think that it definitely can, but I think it depends on how it's done. I think it depends on how these things are framed, and it's possible that I simply can't think of a—because I'm so sad about everything that's been going on for a while, I can't think of a frame that would make poems about contemporary events work in a useful way. I think I would just be sort of—I would personally just be reenacting this, my own sadness about it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm-hmm. Do you feel like other writers are doing it in a way that's helpful to you, or do you also feel a little bit like, wanting to distance yourself from writers who are trying to write about the current moment?

[25:05]

SHANE MCCRAE: I do think—very occasionally I will come across an individual poem about the current moment that will strike me really hard. I guess, honestly, I haven't really thought about my engagement with this work. I haven't—I'm realizing as you say this that I tend to not seek it out. I tend to not want to do it, to—I think I'm just not really ready for it, which in some ways is an attitude that I can't really afford. I feel like when I'm writing these poems about things that happened a hundred years ago, that is my engagement with what is happening right now, but when I look at the contemporary works engaging with it, I find it—I find them very, very sad. I think what I—the work that I would like to engage with would be White writers talking about it, which some of them are trying to do, but I think it's kind of awkward, whereas I don't—this is going to sound like a weird thing to say—I don't necessarily want to read Black writers talking about this, so much, insofar as I feel like I feel it, I feel like it resonates, but in some ways, it's painful to...watch us sort of have to keep doing this work on the present moment in our art over and over and over again when—yeah, yeah. Sorry, I can't even really articulate about this.

RACHEL ZUCKER: No, that was—I mean, you're raising so many really fascinating questions to me, and as you were talking I had like ten different directions of wanting to ask you. So, one question that came to mind was your protagonist in your epic turns out to probably be male—does the protagonist also have a racial identity? Are there other—

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah. I don't know. I honestly don't know, and I'm not sure—I haven't been able to deal with that yet, I've thought about it. That's a question I honestly can't answer. There's a lot of different ways, different directions the poem could go depending on if I decide that the speaker has a racial identity. I suspect the speaker will, but I haven't decided yet what I want the poem to do, or what I want it to do with that yet, because one of the reasons I think that I was writing this poem was as a reaction to—you know, like my [fifth book](#) comes out in February, and from the second book to the fifth book, they've all been very, very intensely about race, and about racialized violence, and about sort of all the stuff that we're dealing with right now, though I've come at it mostly through looking at things that happened during the Civil War, or maybe things that happened during my childhood as opposed to talking about things that are happening exactly right now, partly because I have this notion that what is happening right now is simply the echo of stuff that happened like a hundred and so odd years ago.

So, the epic was partially written in response to having done that over and over again, and I thought that it would be nice—it sure would be nice to not write about racial violence. Why don't I write about Hell? [laughs]

I guess was what I was thinking. I just wanted to do something a little bit different for a while. I think that probably it's going to—racialized violence is going to find its way into Hell. I think I've already done the work that I want to do, I guess I will say, with regard to, like, making the protagonist a male in Hell, I find satisfying. I don't know that I would find it extra satisfying to make the protagonist a White male in Hell. I don't think that that—I don't—part of the reason is—I think the reason that I can be okay with the protagonist being a male in Hell is because, although I have personally had a very difficult time with men for a lot of my life, and like

masculinity, I am not usually the victim of it, so—whereas, in fact, whether I want to or not, I benefit from patriarchy and all this other crap.

[29:58]

With regard to Whiteness—this is probably going to sound counterintuitive—I think that the reason why I might be resisting making him White is because I have been the victim of aspects of Whiteness, consequences of Whiteness, and I am very, like, profoundly, like all the way down, uncomfortable with the idea of retributive justice. I don't think that it works. I don't, I don't... I mean, a lot of what I see happening, with reactions to various things that people are doing, is simply, like, trying to flip it on the—like those naked Trump statues that they had, a while back—yeah, one of my problems with it was that there was some fat-shaming, but a bigger problem was that you can't escape his sort of reductive terribleness by repeating it, you know?

And that's why I don't—I think if I were to make the protagonist a White male in Hell, I would be sort of repeating this kind of violence, and that's not a way out, because you repeat it, and then the person who did the initial violent act feels wounded, and then they repeat it, and then it just goes back and forth and back and forth, and yeah. So I don't—it probably won't be a White man.

RACHEL ZUCKER: We talked a little bit about the pleasure of writing, even if it's about sad or difficult things. Can it also be a kind of refuge from the present moment, from the difficult things that are happening now, to engage—even if it's okay in Hell—to engage with Dante, to engage with the past, to engage, even, I guess, with the difficult parts of your own childhood, but knowing that you have temporal distance from it, or—and I'm thinking about this both in terms of your work as I've read it, but also in terms of its relationship to Plath. I feel like with Plath, she continued to hurt herself in the writing.

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah. I think so, yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I don't really see that in your work, and I don't know if that's a hopeful—like, if that's a prayer, or if that's really an observation, and I wonder if that's something that comes naturally to you, or if that's something you've had to work on. Like are there things that you're like, you know what? I'm not going to go this material, or I'm not going to go in this form, because it's going to hurt me? Like, for example, what you're saying about maybe not writing about the present moment, in certain ways, and trying to—even if the work is about, really, the most difficult things—that it, that writing it, and being in that space with that work, is a kind of refuge and consolation and sustaining place in some—a healthy place, somehow.

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah. You know, I think so, because there have been times when I've—not usually in poems, sometimes in little prose things—when I've reacted to things that have happened, that are happening right now. And I find when I write, even these prose reactions, I feel much more opened up, much more vulnerable, much less happy writing than when I'm

writing poems. I guess I would say that it's a kind of a refuge. It's a thing that—I mean, I have mixed feelings about it. I would very much *like* to be able to write what's happening right now. In some ways, it bums me out that I can't make myself do it, but as I said, also, I think I resist, in part of me, the idea of Black people having to do this. I think poems that are mourning are useful.

I can understand and I did actually—I guess I should say that there is one poem in the next book that is about—that's ultimately about Tamir Rice, even though the speaker is—he's an early Twentieth Century—he's an invented early Twentieth Century Black actor, but the poem, the way it was framed, and the stuff I ended up talking about, was very consciously about Tamir Rice, so that was one way I figured out how, by going to the methods I usually work in to get to something that's sort of happening right now, was able to feel—well, no, I still felt sad. That poem was actually really angry. But yeah—I think so. It's often enough a refuge from—which means that I have to, again, back to Wordsworth, I have to get comfortable enough to where I can do that work, and so a lot of things that I really want to write about, even personal things, that I still feel very sad about, I just can't really do it.

[35:16]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm-hmm. It's so interesting to talk to you about the pressure that you feel or that you feel like is being put on Black writers to write about our racialized moment of violence, and I'm wondering how you feel about—this has been coming up a lot in the different podcasts—about this question of imaginative identification as a source of empathy and freedom and playfulness, and I hear that very much in what you're describing, of wanting to write about a protagonist who *isn't* you, who was vague in a lot of ways—maybe becoming less vague, but like the freedom of that, and the importance of that. I wonder if you feel that that permission is not equally available to White writers, for example. And the idea that we should be upset about, you know, a permission less granted to White writers is ridiculous, but *even* if, as White writers, we value the imagination and we value persona poems, we value the entire genre of fiction, that there's something really different at this moment in history for White writer to speak in the voice of a person of color, or the other gender, or to be careful about appropriating someone else's story, or to—even if we still, on some level, believe in empathy as a fundamentally important thing for us individually and for our art, there's still something really problematic about that, to say the least.

SHANE MCCRAE: Well, I think that what, either stated or unstated—because I tend to see people reacting to these sorts of issues without necessarily—because I think that they feel like they need to, and I agree. I don't think that they need to have to describe exactly why it's distressing, but I think that the reason why this is troubling right now is that we don't—that sort of imaginative empathy feels ultimately feels like an expression of power, so that you can—like, Francine Prose has this novel *Blue Angel* and the narrative—the protagonist is a male, and she does a really good job with that. I think it's fantastic. I didn't really feel uncomfortable with it, but I think that if it were the other way around, my feelings would be very different, and that is more to

do—I mean, ultimately, weirdly, and I think maybe this is the reason that certain critics have problems with these sorts of things—this is not—it’s ultimately not really a question about art. It’s a question about politics.

Fundamentally, if we’re just talking about absolutes, just as Francine Prose can write a man really well, certainly a man can write a woman really well. There’s no fundamental reason why that shouldn’t be so, but at the present moment, it just doesn’t feel right, and yeah, I think it has to do with all the various kinds of surprisingly public violence that have sprung up over the last few years. I think that their happening is the consequence of a variety of different cultural shifts. I do think a lot of it—not to get on this—I have a very particular soapbox. I’m not gonna do it. But I think a lot of it has to do with reality TV, in a way that I think a lot of people don’t want to confront, because it’s also kind of enjoyable.

I think that because we are—the general public is becoming more aware of things that, for a long time, mostly only people who read, like, theory were aware of—microaggressions, etc.—it becomes less and less comfortable to watch this sort of imaginative—I think imaginative empathy is the right term, but it always kind of feels like colonizing in a weird way. And we’re just not comfortable with it. I don’t think that being uncomfortable with it is an expression of, again, a fundamental truth about art, and I think that sooner or later, we might become comfortable with it again.

[40:00]

In this particular moment, there are certain kinds of—people are trying to figure out how to have an equal playing field for everybody, and when we are at least acknowledging that it is not equal, we are more conscious about it, that leads to a lot of really good things like VIDA and a lot of other things. With that consciousness in our mind, it is just difficult to watch certain writers appropriate identities. [sighs]. I would like—honestly, I would like for that to change. Honestly, because I think that we are probably losing art, but I think at the moment, there are other things that have to be dealt with first, before people can be comfortable with other people embodying voices that are very different—or trying to embody voices that are very different from their own.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Fascinating. [pause]. I want to think about that for a second, from—I want to flip it to our forefathers and foremothers of poetry, our influences, though I have a little bit of a problem with the word influences because it’s so male-gendered to my ear, but yeah—you mentioned when you first walked in that Sharon Olds’s book *The Father* was really important to you, *Descent Of Allette*, and we’ve talked about Plath—these are the writers who—Plath I have a difficult relationship with. I think I was really scared of her, and also her music is not—is—this is a stupid thing to say, but sort of too loud for me—

SHANE MCCRAE: No, that makes sense -

RACHEL ZUCKER: But I wonder how those influences, or those models, or that work is different for you or for me, if it is at all. I feel like part of how that work is very powerful for me is in a kind of identification, and some of that has to do with gender and some of that has to do with race, although I don't think I would have recognized race as an important part of that identification in those cases until very recently.

And some of it has to do with being a mother in particular, and the poetics of motherhood, and some of it has to do with being an outsider in certain ways, and writing about the body, and subverting the patriarchy in really interesting ways, and all of those identifications, I think, are available to anyone, no matter who they are, but I was wondering how—whether you had feelings about caring a lot about these female, White writers. And they're not the only ones I've heard you talk about.

SHANE MCCRAE: Right, right. Yeah. I think about it a lot lately, partly because I've been thinking about what is my particular poetry education, and what does it mean that it took the shape that it took. I used to think that it was—it was mostly self-determined, but I used to think that that meant that I had a sort of—that I had cast a very wide net, and I'm coming to realize lately that I didn't *really* cast a wide net. I read a lot of books, but they were all in a fairly particular line, and so when I was first starting to write poetry—I lived in Oregon. First, when I very, very first started, I lived in Aloha, Oregon, which is a suburb of Portland, and then I moved to Salem, and that's when I really sort of—when writing really took hold of me. No, I guess it took hold of me a little bit—

RACHEL ZUCKER: How old were you then?

SHANE MCCRAE: I was fifteen.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wow. Mm-hmm.

SHANE MCCRAE: The exact date I started writing was October 25, 1990.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Really? Wait. How do you know that date?

SHANE MCCRAE: Because I—the very first time I wrote, I wrote the date on the poems. I wrote eight poems that day, and I just have always remembered that that was the day—October 25, 1990. And so I had just turned fifteen. So when I had just started writing, when I was first reading, as you mentioned, it was Plath for me first, and then, when I moved to Salem, and was writing more, I went to the poetry section of my high school library, and the people I gravitated to—there were two books that I remember. One was by Celestine Frost. It was called *An Inhuman Rival*. And her selected just came out a few years ago.

[45:00]

And the other was Linda Pastan's *AM/PM*, so again, it was two White women. At the time, I think because of the time that I was sort of coming up, the race—and because I was so young, and because I didn't have anybody guiding me, I didn't think a whole lot about the racial aspect of it. I was raised by my grandparents, who were both White, and at that time I was just living with my grandmother, and I just didn't think about the fact that these women were White. What was much more important to me was the fact that they were women and not men. I was not really interested in male writers at all back then, although I do remember, for some reason, reading a Robert Frost biography, at the time.

RACHEL ZUCKER: At fifteen?

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah. I think I had to do a report about him, or something. [laughs] I didn't do the report but I read the book. So I didn't really think about the racialized aspects of it. Lately, I've thought about it more, and thought about, I wonder what I lost by not being influenced when I was younger. And those are the influences—like, you will continue to be influenced—and yeah, it is a kind of a terrible word—one will continue to be affected in a productive way by writers all throughout one's writing life, but the ones that really stick are the ones that happen early on, I think, and I wonder what I have lost, because those weren't Black writers. But the reason for that was to do I think with with, you know, in the nineties, the Black writers one would hear of on one's own and one would discover in one's high school library would have been, like, Langston Hughes—basically, Langston Hughes.

And maybe Gwendolyn Brooks, although that's much less likely. Langston Hughes was kind of everywhere, and Langston Hughes didn't really appeal to me. And so I didn't really read a lot of Langston Hughes. Part of the reason that Langston Hughes didn't appeal to me—I wrote a bunch about this, in a couple books—that my grandfather was really, really racist. My grandmother was too, but not so bad. And my grandfather, one year, in a kind of attempt to understand me, I think, bought me *The Collected Poems Of Langston Hughes*, and so, ironically, kind of ruined Langston Hughes for me. That book came from him just sort of meant I really wasn't going to read it, because I was a teenager.

You know, I don't know what it has meant. It has meant that certain things are missing. It has meant that, even know, I gravitate toward—I still gravitate toward women writers, although lately, I'm gravitating more toward younger, female poets of color, but I still greatly prefer woman writers to man writers. *Greatly*. And that's something that hasn't really gone away, but it's only been lately that I've been able to, like, really engage with the effects of those particular influences, and, like, work counter to them, and consciously be reading—and when I say lately, I mean in the last—I don't know how many years—maybe before my first book came out. It was a little while before that I've been reading more writers of color more consciously, whereas back in the olden days, I just didn't really think about it too much.

I think I was drawn to the ones I was drawn to because—wow, I was going to to say something and then I realized it wouldn't make any sense, because Linda Pastan is the opposite of every

other person we've mentioned, I think. Although Linda Pastan is deeply—the poetry is deeply sad. It's just sad in this very, very quiet way that I think it's easy to miss, whereas when I was younger, I liked the kind of violent sadness of Plath, and Celestine Frost, too, had a kind of violent sadness about it. I found it really appealing. I think it's because I felt a violent sadness, and now that I don't feel that anymore—like I love Plath, but I love Plath nowadays for the poems that feel like—she had this—people, like, gravitate toward her angry violence, and that makes a lot of sense, but she was extraordinary in that, but I think she was also just as extraordinary in making these poems in just kind of like pure, joyful beauty and light. There aren't as many of them, but when those show up, I've never seen another poet who has so much light. They're strange moments, and those are the things that I like about Plath now. Although, also, I guess I like “Bercke Plage” a lot and that's not—that's not much. It's specifically anti-light, so—

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hmm. What's your favorite Plath poem lately?

SHANE MCCRAE: Well, I said I like all the light ones and then I realized “Bercke Plage” is my favorite one. [laughs] So I don't know what I'm talking about.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Uh-huh.

[50:00]

SHANE MCCRAE: I like that one because it's—you know, Plath wrote two long poems, more or less. The ones that I think of as being the long poems were “Three Women” and “Bercke Plage,” and I don't think that “Three Women” really succeeds, partly because I think that there's—she had some trouble—like, Plath's thing is she's got one voice. She can use that voice and modulate it in different ways, but when you look at “Three Women,” you see, oh—it's one voice, just over and over again, and it's kind of hard to engage with what's supposed to be happening in that poem, whereas “Bercke Plage” is perfectly suited for that one voice. And I like—I think I like to see poets stretching themselves out, and I think that that is where Plath is really, really doing that, was in “Bercke Plage.” I think that... Plath never really—it's interesting. I've got a *Closer* tshirt on, and when I think about *Closer*, I think Joy Division really—although my favorite song—Joy Division song—is “Ceremony” and they never did it right.

I think they had reached—*Closer* is a perfect embodiment of this idea of Joy Division. “Ceremony” to me is, for all the violence of the lyrics, is actually a very beautifully, happy song. Like, the way that the music is working is like it's got this joyful rush, and *Closer* is extremely heavy and dark, and I don't think that they could have done another record like this, and so, in a sense, Joy Division perfectly achieved whatever they were going to do. I don't think that Plath perfectly achieved what she was going to do. I think she glanced at it, but I think that, especially near the end, that she was too depressed. I think that when she was writing the poems—when she was writing *Ariel*—in a lot of ways, she was angry, you know? And she had every right to be angry, but I think that a few years down the road, we would have gotten even better poems.

I guess I would also say that my other favorite Plath poems are the bee poems, which, for some reason, whenever I read “the bees are flying, they taste the spring,” I just think, oh! That’s the way she wanted *Ariel* to end—you know, when they did the restored edition, they finally got it that way, but she wanted that book to begin with love and she wanted it to end with spring, and, I mean, the vision that she was aiming toward that she couldn’t quite get to was much more, I think, positive vision. So that’s the Plath. I think the Plath that is my favorite Plath is a kind of imaginary Plath.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hmm. I want to ask you about long poems and book-length poems and—but, first, can I go back to—I also just want to ask you, like, who are the younger, female poets of color that you’ve been reading, or, more generally, also, what are the books of poetry that are helping you write or helping you be in the world? And maybe it’s not just poems. Like, music, and TV, and—what are the things that are sustaining to you right now, artistically?

SHANE MCCRAE: Well, just to restrict it to younger poets, I would say that the poets that are really kind of working for me—Donika Kelly, who—her book was on the long list for the National Book Award, *Beastuary*, Anais Duplan, *Take This Stallion*, is fantastic. Sarah Deniz Akant’s book *Babette* is *amazing*, and her engagement with the medieval lyric is something that I don’t think any other contemporary poet is doing anything even remotely similar. The work is fantastic. Carolina Ebeid’s *You Asked Me To Talk About The Interior* is a book that I really love too. Three of these books, if you look at them, one will realize that those are books that I blurb, but I have been fortunate enough to blurb books that I legitimately, like, very, very deeply loved, and that I think are—I think that those books are just really, really, really fantastic books.

The music that I’m listening to is still kind of—the problem with having—I mean, I don’t stream because I find that a lot of the music that I want is not available on streaming services, so I still use an mp3 player, and I have an mp3 player with an enormous amount of memory, and the problem with that is that I’m constantly pulling in new music, and it—it does not often happen that I can really, like, kind of rest with that new music, so there’s—things are always coming in. I keep thinking that sooner or later, I need to reengage with this band called Have A Nice Life. They had this record called—the first album was called *Death Consciousness*. This was years ago. And it was the only record that I ever heard by anybody that gave me the same feeling as The Cure’s *Disintegration*, which, up until that point, I thought that *Disintegration* was very much its own thing.

[55:00]

And *Death Consciousness* doesn’t sound like *Disintegration*. It just has the same feeling, of this very, very, like well-controlled, like very curated, and yet overwhelming sadness, which doesn’t make sense. Like, how would you curate a sadness that’s overwhelming? And yet, *Disintegration*, I think, does that—and *Death Consciousness* does a very similar thing. I find it really enjoyable. Composers—there’s this composer named Gloria Coates, who I don’t think

gets the recognition that she deserves, is my favorite. Certainly my favorite living American composer, although she lives in Germany, but she's from Wisconsin, and she's fantastic. Robert Simpson, who died some years ago—his work I engage with a lot too.

Well, I guess I should say Gloria Coates is my favorite, but my other favorite—I have two—and Michael Hersch is my other favorite American composer, and possibly my favorite living composer actually of them all. His work is—he's a—Michael Hersch is a very—we've had some email exchanges. He's a very interesting dude, because if you look at Michael Hersch, he looks exactly like a professor. He's seems like he's always wearing like a button-up shirt, glasses, he's clean-shaven, his hair's cut short, and he just looks like some—a professor from like the Fifties, you know? He looks like the most clean-cut person, and his work is filled with the most violent, like, anger, and sadness, of almost any music I've ever heard. It's—there's this contrast that's really sort of incredible between the person, as he presents himself, and the work that he makes that I find fascinating.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hmm. Fabulous. I'm like writing everything down. You've given me a great reading and listening list. That's fantastic. So, yeah. So, first of all, haven't you basically published almost a book a year since 2011?

SHANE MCCRAE: [laughs]. Yes.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. And many of them—maybe all of them, on some level, could be considered a book-length poem or a series of poems, or a book—a project, you know, which I have a real affinity for that.

SHANE MCCRAE: Me too.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. I'm not great at the single poem, either as a writer or as a reader, in certain ways, but the book-length, or the book as a whole, is something that's really satisfying to me. Can you talk about that? And your fifth book is coming out. Can you tell us what it's called?

SHANE MCCRAE: It's called [*In The Language Of My Captor*](#), and Wesleyan is publishing it next year.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Fabulous.

SHANE MCCRAE: So, how I ended up with project books—it's sort of—in some ways, I guess it was kind of accidental. In some ways, it is an expression, I think, of the American anxiety about the long poem, which I think is born with *The Waste Land* and never really gotten over. And I think that *it* is an expression of anxiety about the declining popularity of poetry. It seems like it's a rabbit hole that goes on and on forever, and it is, but I think that a lot of poets, like, initially when *The Waste Land* came out, everybody felt like they had to react to it, and one of the

reasons they felt that was because TS Eliot was famous, so everybody's like, look at this thing! Everybody is freaking out about this poem.

And I think that some of the reasons people felt like they had to react to it were deeply-felt artistic reasons. Some of the reasons were jealousy. These things are all tangled up. I don't think you can separate them. But I think that Patterson and *The Bridge* and so many other books and poems—and just the example of Eliot's success—infused Americans with this idea that you *have* to make a major statement. You know, Zukofsky's "The Poem Beginning 'The'" when he talks about Poe, and he says, "Poe don't ya know," but never wrote an epic. Reading that, it's like, yeah—that's basically the Twentieth Century American anxiety. You don't do an epic, you don't do a big thing, then you're not really doing it. I don't actually think that that's true, and hopefully we're going to start getting over it, although, like, just a few years ago there was that moment where everybody was doing a long poem, and so I think that we're kind of reinscribing it upon ourselves.

But for me, it happened because when I—I wrote *Mule* over the—*Mule* I started in 2005, and I wrote it mostly up until 2009, when it was taken. I did some revisions and a couple changes after that, but the bulk of it was up until 2009, so those four years, and it was just—it was just everything that I had at the time. Katie Ford, actually, advised me to do that—everything you have, into your first book, and so I did. And then I was reading Kate Greenstreet's first book *Interviews*, which was still an active thing at the time, in the years leading up to *Mule*, and I started to look at the sequel to Kate's version of the project, and those were—they gave me a lot of solace, but they also got me thinking about, like, what if nobody cares about it?

[1:00:19]

Which is a lot of what you hear about in the first book interviews, like you've got to get—accept the idea that there's going to essentially be no reaction to it, and nobody's going to be interested, and I was like, oh gosh, what if that happens? Will I get bummed out? I didn't know. I was unsure. I thought I might. And so, before *Mule* came out, I was kind of like—I saw two possible scenarios. The far more likely scenario was that nobody would care. There was a slight chance some weird thing could happen and people could care. *Either way*, that could get in the way of writing. I thought, well, before this comes out, I really need to start on the next thing, you know? I didn't want to have years and years and years pass. I didn't want to get caught in the first book in one way or another.

And so I started writing—I wrote the first Margaret Garner poem, which is the first Margaret Garner poem in *Blood*, and I thought, oh! I immediately thought, I could do a whole book of this. I should probably do some research. Because the first one just arose out of knowing the story in the vaguest sense, but I thought I could do a whole book, and I did a chapbook of it, but as it turned out, there were only so many Margaret Garner poems I could write, and so for a second I felt kind of lost, but then I discovered the incredibly large compendium of slave narratives out there, which I was shamefully unaware of up until that point, and so I started writing poems

based on those. And so the project of *Blood* sort of grew organically out of my engagement with these various stories around slavery and the Civil War, and my own, like, upbringing.

And then *Forgiveness Forgiveness* became—it became a single project, I guess again because I had a thing—I tend to have things that I want to write about, and those things tend to be things that I can't do in a single poem, basically, because I'm interested—but then the other thing, I mean, honestly, where this really comes out of, which, it's going to sound funny maybe, is my love of Shoegaze, is my love of My Bloody Valentine. Because what it really comes out of—you know, My Bloody Valentine, particularly in *Loveless*, they'll have these incredibly slow fades where they'll lock into a melodic figure that's relatively short and they'll just repeat it over and over and over again, and it's not exactly drone, because it's busy. There's a lot going on in the music, it's just that it's the same figure that keeps happening, and so a *lot* of why I do project books is because I, in some ways, want to rewrite the same piece of music.

That idea also—or the same poem, I mean—that idea also comes out of Helen DeWitt's novel *The Last Samurai*, where—

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, I love that book!

SHANE MCCRAE: *The Last Samurai* is so good. It is so good. Now I feel like we're part of the same club, because the people who don't know about it, they really should know. I grabbed it randomly right when it came out and I was like, oh my gosh, yeah. I read it so many times. It's so good. So, it comes out of this—the idea that wanting to listen to the same piece of music over and over and over again and have it be maybe slightly repeated—I find that idea fascinating, and I kind of want to do that in poems. The new book has a poem that is repeated, and the first half of it is basically identical, and then after that point, it changes. I felt—for one thing I just realized that that poem—the first version of it, the poem—it was done, but there was more I could do with what had happened, up until about the middle, and that's the purest expression of this idea that I had gotten to, of taking the one thing and doing it over and over again.

But I think that that's where the project books come out of, because it's taking one thing and—even though I'm exploring it, it's really kind of doing the same thing over and over again, and trying to find—like, turning it around and finding different ways of looking at it, and so it's all basically because, I think, when I first recognized—not necessarily that I have a great mind, but I *have* a mind—when I became conscious of myself as engaging with art in a way that I was voluntarily picking out as opposed to just randomly grabbing things, which is in some ways not really voluntary, was My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless*, and that shaped the way I think about what I want art to do, and so I think that that is ultimately what leads to project books, which is *why* writing this big long narrative that I'm trying to write is such a really large break, because, I mean I'm in one place, but I'm not repeating the same thing yet. It feels very strange for me.

But yeah. I think project books are basically because I want to listen to the same song over and over again.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Awesome. What are you going to read tonight?

[1:05:00]

SHANE MCCRAE: You mean what am I going to read at the reading with Monica?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Is that tonight? It's tomorrow night.

SHANE MCCRAE: It's tomorrow night. I've been torn, because I actually think I want to read the long poem, but I think I won't. I think I'm going to read from the next book, and a few—I have a new poem that I worked on before I came here. I'm very surprised by its existence. And so I'll probably—stuff from the new book, stuff that's even newer than that, and a couple older poems, but from the new book, it's going to be—the main part of the book is a memoir that I initially published as a chapbook at the end of last year

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh right, you sent that to me. Yeah.

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah, that thing. That's been, like, very much revised, and interspersed with—the memoir's about me being raised by racists. There's a bunch of prose, but then there's poems, and the poems are about—in the last year of the Civil War, Jefferson Davis adopted a Black child named Jim Limber—yeah! And it—this is one of the things about the Civil War. It's a history that Americans just really don't know about, because we don't *want* to know about it, and there's—so much crazy stuff happened. That's *one* of the crazy things that happened. And so for the last year of the war, there was this Black child that was essentially another child in the Davis household. And the poems in this section, in that part of the book, are spoken either by Jim Limber, or occasionally spoken by Jefferson Davis, which was really difficult—not because I think it's especially hard to write Jefferson Davis, but because I just didn't know—I didn't want him—every Jefferson Davis poem is him narrating a dream.

I didn't want him to be, like, awakened in it, and so I thought that it wouldn't make sense to write the poem if Jefferson Davis didn't speak, but I didn't want him to be as present as Jim. Jim is in the world, and all of Jim's poems are very—for the first time, actually, even though I've written a lot of sonnets—they are all very much—like, there's a Spenserian sonnet in there, there's an Italian sonnet in there, there's Shakespearian sonnets in there. And so all of Jim's poems are sonnets, whereas all of Jefferson Davis's—they're narrated in dreams, and they are all in syllabics, which I have never done, and they're the most boring syllabics. They are like ten syllables per line, because I was thinking of how do I think of Jefferson Davis? One is, I don't think that he would get a sonnet exactly right, but he would know what a sonnet was, because he would have a Nineteenth Century education, and I think that his—like, his poems would like, in a visual sense, in the barest bones way, satisfy what somebody who doesn't really know what iambic pentameter is, would do—so ten syllables per line not worrying about the stresses is what Jefferson Davis would do, whereas I thought of Jim's poem as a much more—because of, I

think that from what I know of the historical record and what one knows about how kids are, he couldn't help but embrace and want to embrace the family that he's with, even if it's with the President of the Confederacy.

And so I think that Jim's writing poems in sonnets is an expression of him embracing this culture that he's not necessarily allowed to be a part of, but he is nonetheless next to. And so I'm going to read a lot of those.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wow! Okay. Will you read something?

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah, I'm happy to read something!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Great. What—do you have some new stuff with you that you're interested in reading?

SHANE MCCRAE: I do, probably! Let me see!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah?

[1:08:42]

SHANE MCCRAE: So, the way the next book works is it's got the big memoir, Jim Limber section, but then it's also got a section of poems spoken by this person called Banjo Yes who is an invented, early Twentieth Century Black actor, and it's got a section of poems spoken by a person in a human zoo in America in the early part of the Twentieth Century. That protagonist is less specified for reasons, but I think I wanted to read one of those poems, which is actually, I guess ultimately the title poem of the book, which I didn't actually—bizarrely, I didn't actually realize that until the other day. I mean, I knew that I had named the book after it, but I didn't consciously think about how this was the title poem. It's called "In The Language."

[reads "In The Language"]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Ugh. That's gorgeous.

SHANE MCCRAE: Thank you.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I'm so curious. Is it short lines, long lines, all over the page?

SHANE MCCRAE: Short lines. I—when I was—so, I kind of get—I get too into writing sonnets, and stuff, and so when I was writing those, I was thinking about this thing that Richard Wilbur said when he was talking about why he didn't write—I think it was why he didn't write sonnets.

[1:11:11]

I think he wrote one or two, but he said that he found the idea--and this is weird, coming from Richard Wilbur--he found the idea of writing into received form abhorrent. I thought, "Well, that's strange, because you're such, in some ways, a conservative poet." But he wanted the form--again, weird for Richard Wilbur--to organically arise out of the occasion of the poem. And I have written a lot of sonnets, and, you know, in some ways there's sort of some organic thing, where I'm writing the poem, and as it's coming, I think, "This is going to be a sonnet." And so I start having it be a sonnet, and then if it isn't a sonnet, it isn't. But with these, I was thinking of that Wilbur idea, and I was like, well, I'm going to let however many stresses are in the first stanza determine how many stresses are in each stanza after.

So what I ended up having were a lot of stanzas--like, the first stanza would be--what ends up happening is the first stanza is the thought that comes to my head. So it's only like fourteen stresses or so, and so each stanza would have fourteen stresses, throughout the poem. It would have like, I think, one rhyme, or something. So it was--all of the poems spoken by the person in the human zoo are in this sort of organic form that grows out of the first stanza. I like that. I don't know if it's something I would repeat, but it felt nice for those. It made sense.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hmm. So you've invented a new form of the sonnet. I love that!

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah, something like that. Something like that. Yeah. And that one's like two pages long, I think, in the book.

RACHEL ZUCKER: It's gorgeous!

SHANE MCCRAE: Thank you.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I'm really eager to also--I mean, I can replay your reading of it. It's a poem, I feel like, that went in very deep and very easily but then I feel like I need to read it ten more times to really be in it.

SHANE MCCRAE: Well, that's what I'm trying for, I guess. I want folks to like them.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You want to read one more? Either from *Forgiveness Forgiveness* or *Mule*?

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah! Can I look through *Forgiveness Forgiveness*? This poem is an interesting book--or, this poem is an interesting book--this book is interesting, not that I think necessarily that what I would do is interesting, but insofar as it is, I think, a fairly difficult book to extract from.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean that's part of what I love so much about long poems, and about your work. Yeah, it makes it--most of the work that I love so much is really hard to excerpt or extract or paraphrase. It's resisting that, in ways that I so adore, but then, yes, we always have this problem.

SHANE MCCRAE: We always have this problem.

RACHEL ZUCKER: People invite me to read, and they're like, "Okay, so you have five minutes." I don't want to seem like a diva, but on the other hand, I hate reading for five minutes. What's the point?

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah, it's the worst. I don't even know. I wonder how you solve that problem. For me, I, when *Forgiveness Forgiveness* was the book that I had out, I would find what I thought was one narrative strand that I could sum up with x poems, and then just read those. Is that somewhat what you've done?

RACHEL ZUCKER: [sighs] I mean, if I have ten minutes, I'll read one long poem. And I do have some that I feel like are stand alone long poems. But I have a really hard time, and I don't think this is a particularly good thing about me. But I would like to read for forty minutes to four hours. That would be the sweet spot for me.

SHANE MCCRAE: [laughs] That makes sense. That makes sense.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I understand nobody wants to sit there for that long, but--

SHANE MCCRAE: I would do it. I read for forty minutes once. Maybe twice. It was crazy. [laughs] I'm glad I got the opportunity. It was hard to do. But it also makes sense. I think I will read this poem called "Forgiveness in America," partially because I guess it has to do with what's happening right now, though it's about something that happened about seventy years ago. It also has something to do with what I think about retributive justice. [whispers] That's a word I'm not good at.

[1:15:36]

[reads "Forgiveness in America"]

[1:17:13]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Thank you for reading that.

SHANE MCCRAE: Thank you. It was a really hard poem to write. Like, literally took—it was forever. I couldn't figure out how to end it. But also I think I was trying to—you know, this actually speaks to what we were talking about earlier—not being able to confront, or write these things, when they're the most painful. I think the reason that it was hard for me to write "Forgiveness in America" was that it—and maybe it makes me want to cry right now weirdly—maybe it's absurd to be, like, locked into this idea, but the idea—it wasn't that White people were lynching Black people. It's not that that's not upsetting, but that's also something that I've been thinking about. You know, as a Black person, you think about that forever. It's been on my mind my entire life, so it's upsetting, but it's also like the atmosphere of upset. It's where my upset generally comes from, but the thing that made it hard to write the poem was that I had not really known that White people collected souvenirs from lynchings, that they collected body parts.

I was not aware of that, and, you know, [sighs], this is one of the problems America has with itself, is, like, we are rightly horrified by the idea that, like, during the Shoah, the Nazis made lampshades out of human skin, etc. I mean, that's horrible, and we should be horrified by it, but we don't think—like, this happened the same time period, and we don't think about people collecting, as souvenirs, or mailing postcards about Black people who were lynched. We don't think about that as something that we in America did. We don't want to accept that we participate in this very basic human barbarity, because we have to be on the side of justice—and just that idea about the souvenirs, that it was a thing that people would go out to collect, that it was a family—it *wasn't* just, like, somebody's terrible father. It was the entire family. It would be like a picnic. It was the kids. They would bring them out and gather this stuff up.

I just—I think that the reason that that poem was so hard to write was because I couldn't get over it. I just thought, this is... horrible. And yeah—so it took a long time to not necessarily get over it, but to get to a place where I could even put it in a poem and figure out how to end that poem.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm-hmm. [pause] There's no response to that.

[1:20:00]

I'm thinking about—there's no good, adequate response to it. I'm thinking, again—it's so much on my mind, about Yom Kippur, and I was thinking about how, in so many of our emails to each other, we say, "Oh! I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry!" And it's always for, like, being too long in the response—waiting. I'll email you and then you'll email me a few months later and say, "Oh, I meant to.."—you know. And I was thinking about how human beings apologize to each other for the *stupidest* things, and *don't* apologize or atone or *really acknowledge* all of the most important things. And I was thinking also about—you know, we've talked about the history of confession, and we had a really interesting conversation about whether people of color can be confessional poets, and I also feel, to some extent, that as a Jew, I can't really—even though I do consider myself a confessional poet, or in that realm in some ways, you know, my spiritual practice—because it's not really a religious belief—there's no one who can say to me "If you tell me what you did wrong, I'll tell you it's okay."

SHANE MCCRAE: Right, right.

It's never okay! It's not okay. And that doesn't stop Jews from doing bad shit, but I've been thinking about that a lot, like tonight and tomorrow, there's some things I can ask God for forgiveness, but the rest I have to ask other human beings for, and also stop doing it, you know?

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah, I mean I think that's—you bring up something that I think—I mean, that is very much something that we sort of have to do, but it's also an interesting things to think about, how we deal with the confessional in American poetry, and that it is very much—I think it is very much a White space. I think it's very much a Christian space. I think the name is not accidental, I think it's very particular, and that if you're not in this White, Christian space, how do

you really occupy it, you know? I mean, where did Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell come from? They're all, like, WASPs in one way or another, at least geographically. It's a Christain thing, that kind of poetry, even if you try to adapt it to other ends. And it's also a very, like—I think that, you know, the reason that it gets its—you know this—the reason that it gets its name is because it's scandalous to talk about your private life in the 1960s, to talk about, you know, your psychotherapy, to talk about your divorce, or whatever.

But the things that really need to be confessed for, and that one needs to be absolved for, if one can—we can't even sort of begin to talk about. There's not a public space for it, like, this idea that it is truly scandalous to have fallen out of love with someone that you thought you were going to be in love with forever, and then to have split up with that person, as opposed to it being truly scandalous to go collect the teeth of somebody who was murdered, is a truly—I mean, it's bizarre. It's like the world is totally upside down. And I think that the idea that that is the space that we reserve for the confessional, I think, means that we simply don't—we're not comfortable confronting that which really needs to be confessed *to*. So it's a really—it's a troubled and interesting genre, and I think that it—or, a way of writing—and I think that it gets dismissed too—without thinking about it very hard, and people tend to not really take seriously, what, at least at base, what it's trying to do.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm-hmm. I feel like I want to start the whole podcast over again—[laughs] with that question, and I just need to think about it more, because I think that I'm really—on the one hand, I'm really vexed about that part of poetry, and on the other hand, I feel like who the hell cares? It's both things. And I go back and forth between feeling like—oh God, I wasn't going to talk about it, but when Donald Trump says, like, "It's just words"—that's—the words are a guiding force in both our lives such in a deep way.

[1:25:02]

So on the one hand, I feel like *if I can figure out*, or if I can *fully deeply engage* in the history of words and really *look hard* at the way that I and other people right now are using words, why they're using words--the effect of those words, the purpose of them, the consequences, the pleasures, the terrors, the harm--that *is* a life really worth...well spent, and has deep, true meaning, and maybe lasting meaning. And then there are times where I just feel like, you know, when we think about the events and the actions and human behavior--you know, collecting teeth and--even just witnessing--the words just seem irrelevant. And somewhere in between that, I guess--I don't know.

SHANE MCCRAE: Well no, I mean, I understand that feeling, and that really resonates with me, especially because in this particular moment--and since you brought up Trump, I guess I can talk about him too. What I find fascinating about the Trump thing--I mean, there's a lot of things that are fascinating, but one of the things is that we've suddenly slipped out of, like, words *really having consequences*. Like, the thing that just came out a few days ago, with Billy Bush and all that, meant, I had this feeling. The feeling I had was ultimately this kind of old-world way of

thinking. When I say “old-world” I mean like 2015 [laughs]. The feeling I had was like, “Oh, he’s finally said it. And that’s going to be it.”

And it might still be it, but every day that we get away from that, my hope dies. This idea that Trump, who was now recently saying, “Well, if they release more tapes of me saying horrible things, I’ll just keep talking about Bill Clinton more and the stuff that he did.” And I thought, “How is”--I don’t even--honestly, I don’t know how to think of that as some sort of response. I can understand him doing that, what I don’t understand is that people accept this as a response, as if it makes any sense at all. I think that this has to do with this notion that for some reason, words are just--and the concepts that make them work--are just not holding, right now. So that is what makes Trump possible. He *knows* that he can say whatever he wants because it just doesn’t stick. It doesn’t mean anything to anybody.

I almost got on the reality show--TV-- [laughs] on it. I think it’s related! In some ways, Trump is the sort of final expression, the ultimate expression. I don’t think that you can--you can certainly be worse than Trump, even though in the present moment he seems horrific--you can definitely be worse. But I don’t know that Trump is repeatable anytime soon. Or, if he is repeatable--and this is going to sound absurd--I think it’s basically the end of democracy. Like if you can keep doing Trump over and over again, there’s no real way to counteract it, which I guess is kind of scary, that Trump could be the end of the world, I guess if you think about it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, I mean, my only hope--and it’s more like a prayer, I think, than a hope--is that it’s the cry of a dying animal, that it’s--

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah. It could be. I like that idea.

RACHEL ZUCKER: But my fear is it’s not at all; it’s actually just the enactment of what more people than I can possibly face up to are thinking and feeling.

SHANE MCCRAE: Well, I honestly think that that is true, and I guess I’m finally gonna get on the soapbox because that’s the only way that I can explain what I’m talking about. I think that--like, I have students who I think of as very, very--I mean, at Oberlin, everybody is very, very liberal. I have this very bad habit of liberals, where I equate being liberal with being moral, and that’s not true at all. But I also recognize that a lot of liberals are uncomfortable with the idea of morality, even though they don’t necessarily want to say they are uncomfortable. But they are uncomfortable because it’s like another code that keeps us in our place. Man.

[1:30:14]

To some extent, that’s true, but for me, what enables Trump and what makes him sort of scary is that my students think *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* is an acceptable form of entertainment and that the *Housewives* shows are perfectly fine. I honestly can’t watch them, and the reason I can’t watch them--they bother me so deeply--is that they’re entertainment premised upon either the action of or the possibility of humiliation, like real-world humiliation, which I find profoundly

immoral. I don't think people would want to think of it this way, but it's really an expression of the same thing that got people to watch gladiatorial combat in ancient Rome.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah!

SHANE MCCRAE: It's the exact same thing. That we have come back to that, that it's not--like, if you're watching a soap opera and somebody's doing something horrible to someone else, on some level, we know, it's not real.

But reality shows we know it is real, and that's part of the reason that we're attracted to it. But if we find this acceptable, if we're willing to just take it in in the same way that we take in soap operas, I honestly believe this degrades--it makes us more willing to do other things to other people, more willing to accept horrific things. It makes us willing to tolerate a person like Trump. And it's not just, "Oh, well, he was a reality TV star," it's that we have been changed by reality TV so that somebody like him seems acceptable, that it is okay to say horrible things, that the thing that really matters is, in a way that is very different from how communists and capitalists used to frame this, the thing that really matters is *appearance*.

And it's really different from the capitalist way of appearance being a thing that's important. And that also, there are no real consequences for these continual humiliations being vested upon, visited upon, *The Housewives*. There are real consequences! Like, some of the husbands have killed themselves. A variety of other things have happened. Those are *real things*. We don't want to think about those real things.

My problem is that when I think about this, when I talk about this, I feel like I'm such a grandpa. I'm like a person in the sixties when Rock & Roll was a thing and I want to burn The Beatles records. I'm like, "Oh, it's the end of the world." But I honestly think it kind of is, the end of a certain way of thinking about other people, whereas I think that The Beatles stuff and the Rock & Roll stuff is kind of made up, I think that we see the effects of reality TV playing themselves out in daily lives, in a way that we didn't--I don't know--it's my thing.

RACHEL ZUCKER: If you're a grandpa, and I don't think you are, I'm grandma with you. I mean, I've been writing about that and thinking about that, in terms of the confessional, in terms of poetry, in terms of all kinds of things--not only are there no consequences, but there's this real *obsession* with it and this real feeling like everyone should want to be publicly humiliated as almost a form of self-therapy, and this is the way to get famous. I think it is, we *are* really in the new space, that we...

SHANE MCCRAE: I mean, honestly, to enjoy watching other people hurt people is truly no different than--I mean, this is going to bum some people out that I know--it's no different than watching somebody get lynched. Not really. I mean, there's a *level*--lynching is obviously more extreme--but it's the same impulse, to enjoy watching harm being inflicted on another person, which is most of what reality TV is. There are some shows that aren't like that, but most of it is like, "I want to see somebody cry." You know...I watch--I can't even remember right now what

it's called--but last year, I watched the one with the restaurateur on it--I can't remember the name of it. I watched them being terrible to themselves. When you get locked into it, it's really, really hard to step out of it. I'm trying to avoid it now, but it's that exact same spectacle of harm. It's the exact same impulse, which is not fun to think that's what we are, as a people, but frankly, most of us are. And then, Trump.

[1:35:20]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. Oh, Shane. I feel like we could have a whole, a year-long set of conversations about poetry and spectacle and poetry and humiliation and art and responsibility and creativity and imagination and confession and--I hope we can, you know, continue these conversations.

SHANE MCCRAE: I'd love that! The longest podcast ever.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I know, right? Meanwhile, I have office hours, and you--what are you doing today? Something fun?

SHANE MCCRAE: Uh--I'm going to go to The Strand, which I guess is really just Strand. But I'm going to go look at books. I have a very limited amount of money for this trip, and I have brought a bunch of packages of ramen with me. [laughs] So that's--I don't spend my money on food, and I can--because, you know, I can order anything I want from Amazon, but it is so much not even sort of as satisfying--like, going on Amazon and finding exactly the book I want is less pleasurable to me than going to a bookstore and finding a book that is *mostly* a book I want. I enjoy that so much more. So I'm excited to go to the Strand and pay more than I would pay online to find books that I just can't generally find in bookstores in Ohio. So that's my day.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well I hope you find some very, very cheap treasures.

SHANE MCCRAE: Yeah! I'm excited. I'm excited.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Alright. Thank you for so much.

SHANE MCCRAE: Thank you.

[Soft guitar music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Outro]: This has been episode eleven of Commonplace. Thanks so much for listening. Music by Moses Zucker Goren, design work by Eitan Darwish. The Commonplace team is Nicholas Fuenzalida, Christine Larusso, Zach Tackett, and Daniel Shiffman. Upcoming episodes will include Bernadette Mayer, Jericho Brown, Steph Burt, and many others. See you after the election.