

Close Talking Episode #114

“Landscape with a Blur of Conquerors” by Richard Siken

November 27, 2020

<https://soundcloud.com/close-talking/episode-114-landscape-with-a-blur-of-conquerors-richard-siken>

Show Notes

Jack 0:00

Hello and welcome to Close Talking the world's most popular poetry analysis podcast from Cardboard Box Productions Incorporated. I am co-host Jack Rossiter-Munley and with my good friend Connor McNamara Stratton, we read a poem,

Connor 0:13

talk about the poem,

Jack 0:14

and read the poem again.

Connor 0:17

Before we get into today's selection, a quick note that if you like what we do here at Close Talking and have a spare minute of your time, it would mean the world to us if you would give the podcast a rating and review on Apple podcasts.

Jack 0:31

Those ratings and reviews help boost us up the algorithm and find new listeners.

Connor 0:36

And if you have suggestions for future episodes or comments on this one, you can send us an email at closetalkingpoetry@gmail.com.

Jack 0:45

And you can also find us on social media, on Twitter the show is @closetalking. I am @jackrossitermun, and Connor is @connormstratton. On Instagram, the show is @closetalkingpoetry, and on Facebook, it's [facebook.com/closetalking](https://www.facebook.com/closetalking). We also have a website closetalking.com, where you can find all the past episodes of the show. And Cardboard Box Productions has just launched a newsletter 'Unboxed' and if you go to cardboardboxproductionsinc.com you can subscribe for more behind the scenes stuff on Close Talking, and all of the other literary and cultural history podcasts that Cardboard Box Productions makes. On with the show. (Close Talking theme music) Hello, and welcome to an all new episode of Close Talking. I am co-host Jack Rossiter-Munley.

Connor 1:39

And I am co-host Connor McNamara Stratton.

Jack 1:42

And we are here today to talk about as always an absolutely wonderful poem called "Landscape with a Blur of Conquerors" by Richard Siken. So Richard Siken, is a lauded poet, he won the Yale Younger Poets Prize in 2004. And he was the National Book Critics Circle Award finalist. And he won the Lambda Literary Award all in the space of about two years along with some other awards and fellowships, and he has continued to be a vital and vibrant force on the poetry scene. And his most recent, I believe, most recent, is "War of the Foxes," which came out in 2015.

Connor 2:27

I believe he's also maybe a full time social worker, which I read recently, so that can take up some time.

Jack 2:36

That takes up a lot of time. And actual time and like, emotional and mental time. That's that is a taxing profession.

Connor 2:45

Yes. Not for the faint of heart. Yeah, and in part, we've been wanting to do a Siken poem for a while because he's, he's a great poet, but also, the book that won the prize "Crush" was picked by Louise Gluck, who just won the Nobel Prize, and so it was seemed a little fitting to follow up our poem on Gluck after our election episode, with one on Siken, so but this poem, I believe, is from the new collection, "War of the Foxes."

Jack 3:26

It is yeah. And it was one that I think was circulated quite a bit around the time the book came out, like, you know, there's not really like singles, in poetry, the way there is for music. But there's usually a couple of poems from a book that tend to be the ones that are either circulated ahead of time or wind up being the ones that people really pull out as being illustrative of something from the collection or just being the ones that really resonate. And I think this was one of the ones from that book that kind of made that jump.

Connor 3:58

Yeah, no, I think that's right. And also, Siken is a painter as well as poet and that comes to be quite relevant in this poem.

Jack 4:08

Definitely, definitely an important piece. So this is a

"Landscape With a Blur of Conquerors" by Richard Siken

To have a thought, there must be an object –
the field is empty, slosed with gold, a hayfield thick
with sunshine. There must be an object so land
a man there, solid on his feet, on solid ground, in
a field fully flooded, enough light to see him clearly,

the light on his skin and bouncing off his skin.
He's easy to desire since there's not much to him,
vague and smeary in his ochres, in his umbers,
burning in the open field. Forget about his insides,
his plumbing and his furnaces, put a thing in his hand

and be done with it. No one wants to know what's
in his head. It should be enough. To make something
beautiful should be enough. It isn't. It should be.
The smear of his head – I paint it out, I paint it in
again. I asked it what it wants. *I want to be a cornerstone,*

says the head. *Let's kill something.* Land a man in a
landscape and he'll try to conquer it. Make him
handsome and you're a fascist, make him ugly and
you're saying nothing new. The conqueror suits up
and takes the field, his horse already painted in

beneath him. What do you do with a man like that?
While you are deciding, more men ride in. The hand
sings *weapon*. The mind says *tool*. The body swerves
in the service of the mind, which is evidence of
the mind but not actual proof. More conquerors.

They swarm the field and their painted flags unfurl.
Crown yourself with leaves and stake your claim
before something smears up the paint. I turned away
from darkness to see daylight, to see what would
happen. What happened? What does a man want?

Power. The men spread. The thought extends. I paint
them out, I paint them in again. A blur of forces.
Why take more than we need? Because we can.
Deep footprint, it leaves a hole. You'd break your
heart to make it bigger, so why not crack your skull

when the mind swells. A thought bigger than your

own head. Try it. Seriously. Cover more ground.
I thought of myself as a city and I licked my lips.
I thought of myself as a nation and I wrung my hands,
I put a thing in your hand. Will you defend yourself?

From me, I mean. Let's kill something. The mind
moves forward, the paint layers up: glop glop and
shellac. I shovel the color into our faces, I shovel our
faces into our faces. They look like me. I move them
around. I prefer to blame others, it's easier. King me.

Oh, yeah, it is. It's a poem that goes places in a pretty big way. And I am super super into it.

Connor 7:37

Yeah, oh, man. It's so good. It's so good.

Jack 7:41

I like like, the main thing that I take away every time that I read it is that it rides a fun line, I think between thoughtfulness and accusation. And it points pretty equally, I think those things both outwards and inwards. And I really appreciate that. And as impressionistic as it may seem as you go through, I do think we can do a bit of a narrative breakdown, which is fairly basic, I think, which is that it's a painter painting. And like, they start with a field and start drawing figures in the field. And I have a lot of thoughts about the process of putting men in a field.

Connor 8:34

Right. Who are conquerors of some kind.

Jack 8:37

Right. And it's, it feels like almost no matter how the men are placed in the field, there's almost an agency given to the figures, once they're painted, that they keep turning into conquerors, like you can paint a hand, but then the hand wants a weapon in it, even if, like there's the line, "The hand sings *weapon*. The mind says *tool*." So, in the painter's mind, maybe they're painting like, oh, it's, you know, some innocuous tool, but in the hand of the person in the field it looks like a weapon, kind of no matter what they're going to do. There's a couple of moments like that throughout the poem that I find really engaging. I like the way that the artistic process ends up personified through that where there's all of these artists intentions and concerns and we're in the head of the artist as they're doing it. But there's so much agency given to the piece of art that they're creating that then reflects back on the artist as they are creating it. I really enjoy that.

Connor 9:45

Yeah, totally. I agree completely with all that and it's like one of those things where it's like taken to the you like watch something become the logical extreme of itself, like over time where it's like, alright we got our landscape, I'll start with one guy, whatever, it's a guy, and

then it's like, all right, he's trying to kill something. And then there's more guys. And then it's like, they're a bunch of conquerors. And then by the end, it's like, king me, like, I'm a conqueror, basically. And I feel like that kind of like, move, where it's, it's like, pushed to its extreme, and you get to kind of like, watch the, you know, the snowball roll down the hill and get bigger, basically, and bigger. It's very fun, and it's, I think you can, you can see it in other things, too. But it's especially fun in, in poetry, I think, because there's like, because the poem is like, establishing its own, like, you know, logical structure. And obviously, this is helped also by it's like, he's painting it so you know, we're not sort of strictly talking about conquerors, and so it's like a creator, creating, you know, like a poem of a painter kind of thing. There's already like, extra imaginative license, but like, once you build up the logical extreme, like you can, or the logical foundation, you can, like push it to the extreme. And then like the reader, like you kind of accept it when you get there, but then like, but if you were to like, have jumped there, it would seem a little too far-fetched or like not realistic, or like way out of nowhere. And it's this, I don't know, it's a very cool, I feel like this this poem does that move like, really well.

Jack 11:50

It's interesting, you mentioned that, because that's something that like Ross Gay does really, really well, in his poems is that kind of seamless movement. But in his work, you usually end up somewhere different from where you start, in a bigger way. And I feel what happens here that I don't see as often is that it makes lots and lots of moves, but you're, like, fixed in space and time, to a degree. And it's just doing all of those moves within this exact activity. But you still feel like you've gone so far, I think, because it's about like painting, I feel like I'm there at the easel the whole time, in a way that with many other poems that make those kinds of moves, I feel like I'm traveling around to different like, because, you know, like, metaphors will enter and leave that take you out of the space that you're in, in different ways, even if they if the poem still takes place in the same location, or is about the same activity, the way that those moves often operate, is they are taking you to like, and here's where I introduced my allusions to Greek mythology, and here's where I introduce this tree that was very important to my childhood or whatever. And the moves are doing that where they're about taking you away to bring you back with greater understanding, whereas this is about consistently, just burrowing deeper and deeper down.

Connor 13:13

Yeah, that's such a good point. And I think part of the reason why is like, logic itself, and like, the idea itself is like a big part of this poem, where like, it's like, kind of, like, the poem starts to have a thought there must be an object. So we have already like, which is a great way to open, but like, we have already, like a thought, like, as a kind of thing that's like in the poem, rather than just like an underlying sort of current that's driving it somewhere, you know, and that that kind of like recurs too, you know, like to have a thought there must be an object and later in that stanza of the first stanza, there must be an object, so land a man there. And it's kind of like, you know, and then, you know, there's like, sort of different repetitions, there's a lot there's a lot going on, but you know, like many stanzas down like "Land a man in a landscape, and he'll try to conquer it." So like, you know, and then there's also like, the mind, that kind of like appears as its own character, right? There's like, there's the speaker that's like "I paint it

out, I paint it in again" like I'm, the speaker is doing something but then there's like, you know, "The hand *sings* weapon. The mind says *tool*" you know, "The body swerves in the service of the mind," which is evidence of the mind but not actual proof. And, you know, and then like, at the end, you know, "A thought bigger than your own head." You know, "why not crack your skull when the mind swells. A thought bigger than your own head." Then in the last stanza, like "The mind moves forward, the paint layers up: glop glop and shellac." And so there's this kind of thing that he is Siken like, establishes in the beginning of this poem, which I think like he adheres to in this kind of rigorous way, which is like, painting is kind of the embodiment of this, like thought experiment, right? Which is like, well, you know, I'm, I'm not just like painting a man who happens to be a conqueror. I'm like, what happens if you create a man? Like, what happens, like, there's this kind of like, because I feel like one thing that I get from the poem, at least that the poem is like wrestling with is like, is there this kind of, you know, innate, or, like, ingrained, sort of conquering attitude of men, like if you, you know, if you plop you know, there's the line, just like, "Land a man in a landscape, and he'll try to conquer it", right? You can make him handsome, and then you, then you're a fascist make him ugly, and you're saying nothing new, which is, like, hilarious and true line. Just so great, like, line because it's, yeah, it's just like, if you make the guy look good, then you're like, check out this conqueror he's pretty sweet and good looking. And then it's like, don't you want to be conquered by him? Then you're a fascist. And if you're, if you make them ugly, then it's like, oh, sure, everyone who conquers stuff is truly ugly in their heart. Very cliché. Anyway, but but it's kind of like, it's, you know, and, like, in the way that you were saying, like, how the, this the, the hand seems a weapon, like, once you have the hand, there's like, there's something violent in, like, in the nature of the hand, right, that he's painting. So, so it's like, but but the way that he like links, the kind of paint and the thought, kind of, like, makes this poem, and the the painting process, like a parallel, kind of, like thought experiment for, like, you know, power and conquering and men. And, you know, and then by the end, it's like, consumed the speaker himself in a kind of way, when he says, "King me." And obviously, there's, like, I think where the poem gets more complex in a way that I don't quite know how yet, is there's like, you know, we often, like talk about this idea of distance. And like how, you know, Siken is not the speaker. And the speaker is not necessarily like what's happening in the poem. And there's all these like, ways that the distance between those kind of agents or subjects or whatever, like, helps inform how we as the reader, another subject, an agent can, like, approach that stuff. And so like, by the end, when he says "King me," it's like, you know, there's an irony or like, a, you know, it's not, I don't think any reader like, gets to it, and is like, oh, he just wants to be, it's not like him singing, "I Just Can't Wait to Be King" or something, you know, he's clearly through throughout the poem, and the way that it establishes, you can see the speaker become taken over by the process so that when the speaker says, "King me," you don't take it at face value, right? Are you you're like, this is like a commentary on something. And I think there's still a question in my head of like, exactly how we're supposed to, you know, read all of that. But I think like at the at the very minimum, that's like one of the kind of the things that it's working and you can like see it sort of happen, especially, you know, in those last two stanzas where it's like, "I thought of myself as a city and I licked my lips. I thought of myself as a nation, and I wrung my hands," the speaker's getting these kinds of, you know, ideas of, of grandeur and of power and empire and things like that. And then it's like, "Will you defend yourself?" And then the stanza, new

stanza, for me, I mean, which is like a kind of great little turn where now the right because no longer the the painted conquerors are not the violent ones anymore only, it's like also the in this process of painting the speaker has become, you know, a conqueror. There's there, you're so right, that there's not the kind of because what, like what Ross Gay does so well is this kind of ambling, like meandering of thought, and then it's sort of accumulating things as he goes that then like at the end, you know, like there's a, there's a sum that's greater than its parts, even if you don't really know how you got there. Whereas this is like a pretty straight, straight shot, especially in the way that it links the thinking process and the painting process. Yeah, which is,

Jack 21:17

But it still manages to travel so far, I feel like a lot of straight shot poems have a much more like linear development to something. And this does have that conceptually. But it feels very different as you read it, you don't necessarily feel the same kind of momentum that some of those poems managed to communicate. And I don't feel like this is a poem that's interested in momentum it's interested in taking you on this sort of mind journey, which is really cool and engaging in its own way. But it it manages to replicate the ambling feel, which I really like is a description for the kind of stuff that Ross Gay does, but it doesn't amble widely, it just ambles through this sort of thought process. And I love the way that you pulled out what's going on in that like end section because the language even mirrors the way that the speaker is talking about themselves, with how the conquerors in the painting are introduced, sort of as dangerous agents where it says, "*I want to be a cornerstone* says the head. *Let's kill something.* Land a man in a landscape and he'll try to conquer it." Here we have, "Will you defend yourself? From me, I mean. Let's kill something." And now that let's kill something goes from being the head of the conqueror in the painting speaking to the speaker, to the speaker speaking to the reader, and part of what I love is and what works so well is this questioning around, as you were saying, we've discussed a couple of other instances on the podcast even about, you know, destructive impulses, and are they inherent in different art that's gotten into that, like Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, and, you know, other other pieces of art that sort of create these characters as avatars for the destructive impulses of humanity or whatever. But coupling this artists creating a piece in which he is consistently confronted by humans showing up in the landscape, feeling destructive and conquering with the fact that any artist creating, especially someone like a painter, where the art is more likely to be solitary than something like, you know, filmmaking that's more collaborative or something. But you have this sort of myth of auteurism and total creative control that is going into the creative process so in the realm of making that painting, the creator, even if they're influenced by a wide variety of people, the piece that they are creating, they have total dominion over and it is a very, you know, authoritarian version of authorship that happens in the painting process. And I feel like that's a lot of the personal reckoning that's going on, which is, you know, the, the speaker wants to be absolved at the beginning to make something beautiful, should be enough. It isn't, it should be. You can feel the conflict within the artist as they go to make something that will be consumed by others saying, I just want to make a nice looking picture, but I can't do that because you know what, that's not how art works, because a bunch of people are going to look at it. And I don't want to create something that's like, violent and awful, and I don't want to earn you know, pointlessly whatever, like the tension between the artist creating and the, like reception

that it might receive, I feel throughout this poem, and it is that injection against the author's complete control, that is, the tension at the beginning, that is, in some ways, trying to be rejected but then the painter gives themselves over to it and in the end, feels this almost kinship with the conquerors within the poem. And obviously, I'm a sucker for that stuff, because that's basically how the analysis of popular culture works. That's like, why it happens is the application of cultural theory and then taking very seriously the proposition that culture is like, collaboratively created, and that consumption of culture is an important way of looking at it. And I feel like this poem is an illustration of the three main levels at which that level, that kind of cultural criticism operates. And it's also I think, for me, at least, and I like to think more broadly, is a really useful way of thinking about culture, which is you have the art the artist, or creator and their intent, you have, which here would be the speaker, you have the piece of art or the text, which would be the painting they're making, and then you have, however that piece is received or consumed, which is where, broadly, we all end up making meaning out of cultural products. And I like the way that that process is illustrated in this poem, because it shows an artist deeply engaged with all levels of that. And I think that where you see a lot of breakdowns in art, and artists is where they are unwilling to see the levels beyond their intent as valuable and valid. And I think it comes up most often in conversations around like, cancel culture and comedy, but it comes up in other ways, big and small, where you will see the person on the most basic level of rejection just being like, it's a joke, come on, I'm kidding. Like, lighten up, which is, I think, another version of it's not enough to make something beautiful. It should be but it isn't, but it should be. But I think by the end of this poem, you agree that it isn't enough to just paint a beautiful picture with a fascist in it. Beautiful conqueror in this picture would not end up actually being beautiful. It would be a picture of a fascist in the world of the poem. And I like that artistic reckoning with it because, yeah, and there's many iterations of this, I think, and particularly as the group of people doing cultural consumption becomes more diverse, and more groups are empowered within a capitalist structure of popular culture as consumers, you can see the ways in which artists have to be more thoughtful about how they create art. And I think that on balance, that is a very good thing. And too often it is simply viewed as artists being constrained, as opposed to a new step in an ongoing cultural conversation, of which those who create art are one piece, and they are not the be all and end all. And they do not have final dominion and authority. And they are not conquerors. And that's the, like direction and orientation that I feel like this poem takes, which is, by the end of it, the artist pointing the criticism that they had been putting onto the piece of art back on themselves, not I feel like in an overly harsh way, but in an honest way that acknowledges they too, can be a conqueror, and all of the ways in which they are. And that's where I feel like the very end of the poem, the last sentence is just "King me." And it sits on its own as a sentence, because the poem imbues it with all the conversation that came before, and you feel like the real painting is going to begin after this poem ends.

Connor 29:15

Yeah, no I love that. I love that a lot. Yeah, and the "King me" too, in the like, in the imperative being kind of, especially with that, I love that you brought up the repetition of "let's kill something" suddenly being between the speaker and the reader, the "King me" to at the same time, it's like you, reader, "King me," and then you're kind of like, in the, in the way that the

poem sort of develops the speaker's own culpability in the conquering, by the end the reader is kind of roped in to this process. Which, which, which is really interesting. Yeah, and I and I love what you're saying about the kind of cultural analysis and it does make me think of a very sort of rudimentary understanding of, of all this stuff, but it makes me think a little bit of just like Orientalism, and like the history of that, which is kind of how I, how I begin to think about this stuff, where as sort of Europe in the quote, unquote, West, you know, was trying to conquer the rest of the world, basically, there were sort of various forms of representations of that world of the quote unquote Orient of which they were trying to conquer. And the representations some of which was, you know, literature, some of which was painting, some of which was just like, you know, politicians writing about their travels or whatever, formed an idea of what the quote unquote Orient was, and that sort of worked along with the sort of material interests in the conquering, which I, which I sort of take to be one of the basic theses of Orientalism, which was sort of put forward by Edward Said. And it's a lot more complicated than that, but but I think, another sort of poetry related example, Natasha Trethewey's, "Thrall" talks a lot about it are a lot of ekphrastic poems that are describing these paintings of, you know, many of them are like Spanish painters, sort of after, you know, Spain has, you know, conquered much of the Americas, and then has to do with this really, sort of, on the face of it pretty bizarre, like, delineating of race, like, if you have a Spaniard, and an indigenous person, and they have a baby, the painting, like, like, defines what race that baby will be. And then it's like, different if it's, you know, from what someone from Africa are like. But those paintings, like over time, also do this kind of, like, representational work of conquering, which is like, we're establishing the terms on which Spain is enabled to, you know, one motivation, quote, unquote, for taking over the world from the west is like a civil it, we got to civilize the savages or whatever, you know, that, that they're that. And so the, the representational work sort of created this idea of people in the Americas and in, you know, Asia and in Africa, as as less than human in this in this particular way, often racialized. And so I think that like, and even, there's sort of more modern iterations where, you know, I don't know, like, to what extent it was, like, effective, but, you know, like the Iowa Writers Workshop, the sort of seminal MFA program was, like, funded in part by the CIA. And, and also like, modernist, or like, abstract expressionist painters, like Jackson Pollock and others, also had some, like, American governmental support. And part of the ideas I believe, of both of those was like, we are, we are bringing, we are, you know, showing the superiority of America's project, sort of, through our art, which is, like, somewhat different is different than the kind of we're representing the, you know, quote, unquote, the Orient for the purposes of justifying to ourselves that we're gonna conquer it or whatever. But all of those, like, kind of, there's, there's always a relationship, I think, too, with with art and the, the larger, and culture and the larger like, material world, that it's a part of, and the kind of the pressures of power and things like that. And I feel like this poem kind of engages with that, sort of, as you were saying, where there's like, you know, this this desire in the beginning to like, just make something beautiful, like can't art be a purely aesthetic experience or whatever, which I think has like, often been, you know, some goal of art let's, let's remove everything. Like, it doesn't have to, you know, and and also that was also kind of a project of, to go into like poetry criticism a little bit, but like new critics, the the extreme version of the new criticism was consider the poem in isolation, and it should stand on its own and like, ignore everything else about it, and you can get value from it. And some of the, some of the

techniques, I think that came out of new criticism, I mean, namely, just like close reading, which is like, what we love to do, I think are incredibly valuable techniques. And importantly, also, like, shifted criticism away from like, just a purely biographical reading of like, well, you know, Poe had a tough time during this time, and this happened to him. And so then he wrote this poem, and that's what this poem is about, are these kind of like, which still happens now, too. But anyway, I think that the prop one of the problems of new criticism was that it was a like, totally ahistorical, and just like, had no context whatsoever. There's, you know, there's a need to balance, you know, it's, it's like, "The Wasteland" by T.S. Eliot, like, doesn't come out of nowhere. And it's like, responding to historical things. And it's like,

Jack 36:29

Well, I think it's really important that yeah, like unthinking cultural production merely reproduces culture, and shows it back to itself without any critique, or without any context or without any growth. And so if you don't have as an artist or as someone who is producing not necessarily even for mass consumption, but just for public consumption, if you are just reproducing harmful stereotypes and tropes and ideas, you are continuing to perpetuate a harmful culture. And I think that's one of the questions that's really deeply engaged with here, because that's what was going on in the paintings that you're describing or the creation of an orientalist other, it even happened within the United States in the creation of the idea of the Wild West. That was made up by guys from the east who traveled west came back and wrote books about it. Teddy Roosevelt and Owen Wister are like the two main figures. But that was a literary project that dominated the national imagination. And you see it in, you know, I went to journalism school, you see it all the time, in news coverage, where the analysis of how the 2016 election was covered, found all sorts of highly gendered, mostly negative terms overly applied to Hillary Clinton and her candidacy by mostly white, mostly male reporters, you see that also in if you just go back and read what are supposed to be, you know, quote, unquote, neutral or objective reporting from the '50s on subjects of race, or on the Lavender scare in the US government, where the headline says, hundreds of perverts in the US government, and it's about people who are gay, and it's on the front page of the New York Times, or it's in the New York Times. And those are journalists who are not necessarily setting out to be malicious, they are putting out the received wisdom of their culture, without the requisite level of criticism and critique, the mistake that I think sometimes gets made, when looking back at those things is putting a little bit too much emphasis on oh, it was of the time, or whatever. Which can be true of a prevailing culture, but you can also find the alternate histories that are there being written by the groups of people who are oppressed, it existed. You know, we use the example of reconstruction when talking about Black life in the United States. That was a national project for equality that resulted in Black elected officials. The same is true of the way that people talked about policing in the 1960s. But were deemed completely radical and were pushed out of conversation. It's many of the same points that are being made now were being made then, the police exist to protect your property, not my life is something that James Baldwin said on television in the late '60s, the degree to which conscious engagement and critique are being folded into the artistic process is something that you can see to greater and lesser degrees and the lack of can be really, really harmful. As I think you said, rightly pointed out with the history for Orientalism, and with many of the ways that you know, the colonizing powers, reproduced

their power through art through government funded art, that is an artistic tradition that people now have to engage with, because if you're a painter, that's part of the history of painting, and if you're a poet Rudyard Kipling is back there, waving at you from history saying I did this too. And so you need to be conscious of the sort of forms that you write yourself into as well. And I think that that's something else that's going on here where like, if you're a poet, and you're writing about a man, what does that mean, when the weight of the history of poetry also exists? I've been thinking about this recently, because I play music, and I play guitar. And most of the people whose guitar music I really like, are either Black or white guys who loved Black music. So when I pick up a guitar, I'm engaging with that musical history every time I play. And I don't necessarily have an answer as to what are the implications of that. But it is something that I've been reflecting on a lot lately, because I play the same licks that Magic Sam played. What does that mean, I play the licks I got from Jimmy Page, who, you know, didn't credit a bunch of Black artists, when he and Led Zeppelin released music. What does that mean? I don't necessarily know, but it's something that I have to think about when I'm making my own music.

Connor 41:25

It also makes me think I've recommended this in the inaugural newsletter, but I'm still reading the *Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States for Young People*. And one of the points that the author Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz makes is that the sort of myth of the pristine wilderness that like settlers came upon and the, you know, when they came in North America, and they're like, oh, it's just trees forever. And like, it's just this, and you know, with that implication was, of course, a) indigenous people are basically similar to animals, because they are part of the wilderness. And b), it's totally chill for us to conquer all this land, because it's just there for the taking, or whatever, when in actuality, you know, that the, like, the landscape of the Americas, was highly managed and cultivated by indigenous peoples for thousands of years. And there was like, there was a road that went from, you know, Mexico all the way up through into Canada, on the west coast. There were just tons of little like farms everywhere, and like sort of cultivated areas, like, I think they were called sort of like deer havens that were like, would draw deer to come graze there, which made it very easy to hunt them, or something, which if you didn't know what you're looking for, maybe you just think, oh, that's just well, how convenient that nature just lined lined up those deer for us or something. And in fact, obviously, like something that the settlers did, was they took a lot of that stuff. And you know, they they would, if it had truly been something of the author points out a pristine wilderness, the settlers would simply not have been able to survive, because they did not have the skills to live in a pristine wilderness, because

Jack 43:35

They would have died.

Connor 43:37

They would have died, which many of them did. And they relied on both taking, bartering resources from indigenous peoples. And I think it like but nevertheless, I mean that that myth and that image, and that representation of what the Americas were, when white people came here, has endured to this day, you know, it was only in the past year or so that I learned that

the Amazon rainforest has been basically managed for thousands of years to increase biodiversity and like to reproduce certain kinds of beneficial crops for thousands of years by people who have lived there, which I think is very fascinating to me. And something that I that I didn't know and just kind of like, I don't know that it's always like living put in, like living in harmony with the land or something. But it's, there's a, you know, there's, I don't know, it's like, it's not just either you're an animal or you're a conqueror who just like, extracts all the shit and plunders it and burns it, and puts it in your car. It's like we've had sustainable, but like, intentional management of nature for such a long time. And I think that, anyway, it's just it's the it's not the only thing, but that one of the dangers of representation is that it has allowed the genocide of indigenous peoples and the erasure also of those peoples who are still, like here and surviving against all odds, and may become in the Department of the Interior, if we have our way. So anyway, I but yeah, I just the last kind of little thought that you brought up with how the poem doesn't kind of just go straight, it, it seems ambling, and it doesn't just go straight to, to the end, I think, is a really great point, because it's quite a long poem, actually. And, but but it, I think, the effect of its length, and it's, it's, it's breaking down the steps is it really gets in the process of representing, and like, how there's like, such definitive moments in the beginning, where it's just like, ah, like, this beautiful guy in this landscape with light on his skin and bouncing off his skin, and he's easy to desire. And like, that should be enough, right? And then it's like, it's not okay, he wants to kill something. And then over time, you know, you can see like, you know, but but I think like, there, there's a lot of little steps in the representational process for a painter or any kind of artist or creator. And yeah, I just, I think, like, the struggle is broken down in such a beautiful and interesting way, in this form.

Jack 47:09

That's such a good point. And I really like it, because I think it's easy to discount harmful representation as being unthinking. And it is from the point of whether it is considering how representation can be positive or negative, but it is still the result of many conscious choices. And I think that is something that this definitely illustrates because in showing how conscious this artist is being about the kind of representation they put out, and the number of choices they have to make to do, you know, a conscious job, by implication, it illustrates how all of those choices are being made in the opposite way by another person and how the abdication of thinking through those choices is also in itself, a significant choice. And you can see something like, I don't know, *The Expendables*. Like, there were a lot of choices made to get that cast together, you had to identify all of the '80s and '90s action stars and work with them to get them to appear in the movie. It's not an accident that there's no women in it. It's not like a film that you're expecting to try and have great representation of women. But like, don't just decide because they chose this project of putting all the action stars in one movie, that that isn't still a big choice.

Connor 48:28

Fuckin' a.

Jack 48:33

I'm pretty sure that's a direct quote from the movie. I don't know for sure, but it seems like something they'd say.

Connor 48:41

Yep, yeah. Should we read it again?

Jack 48:46

Let's read it again.

“A Landscape with a Blur of Conquerors” by Richard Siken.

To have a thought, there must be an object –
the field is empty, sloshed with gold, a hayfield thick
with sunshine. There must be an object so land
a man there, solid on his feet, on solid ground, in
a field fully flooded, enough light to see him clearly,

the light on his skin and bouncing off his skin.
He's easy to desire since there's not much to him,
vague and smeary in his ochres, in his umbers,
burning in the open field. Forget about his insides,
his plumbing and his furnaces, put a thing in his hand

and be done with it. No one wants to know what's
in his head. It should be enough. To make something
beautiful should be enough. It isn't. It should be.
The smear of his head – I paint it out, I paint it in
again. I asked it what it wants. *I want to be a cornerstone,*

says the head. *Let's kill something.* Land a man in a
landscape and he'll try to conquer it. Make him
handsome and you're a fascist, make him ugly and
you're saying nothing new. The conqueror suits up
and takes the field, his horse already painted in

beneath him. What do you do with a man like that?
While you are deciding, more men ride in. The hand
sings *weapon*. The mind says *tool*. The body swerves
in the service of the mind, which is evidence of
the mind but not actual proof. More conquerors.

They swarm the field and their painted flags unfurl.
Crown yourself with leaves and stake your claim
before something smears up the paint. I turned away

from darkness to see daylight, to see what would happen. What happened? What does a man want?

Power. The men spread. The thought extends. I paint them out, I paint them in again. A blur of forces. Why take more than we need? Because we can. Deep footprint, it leaves a hole. You'd break your heart to make it bigger, so why not crack your skull

when the mind swells. A thought bigger than your own head. Try it. Seriously. Cover more ground. I thought of myself as a city and I licked my lips. I thought of myself as a nation and I wrung my hands, I put a thing in your hand. Will you defend yourself?

From me, I mean. Let's kill something. The mind moves forward, the paint layers up: glop glop and shellac. I shovel the color into our faces, I shovel our faces into our faces. They look like me. I move them around. I prefer to blame others, it's easier. King me.

Connor 52:06

So Jack, here we are having discussed yet another challenging and marvelous work of poetry. While I know as always, you have spent the last two weeks studiously preparing for this moment. I suspect in the wee hours of the morning, you might have indulged in partaking in other media forms. And I'm just curious, you know, you know what, what you listen to what you're watching, what you're reading, what you're doing, what's going on up there.

Jack 52:44

You are correct, the wee hours of the morning are my favorite time to catch up on all of my different viewing and listening and reading. Mostly viewing in the really early morning, it's nice to wake up early and kind of get some of the some of the binge watching out of the way. I feel like for recommendations I've had some some, some big downers and some pretty long books. So I just have some watching and some listening thoughts. You know, I'm reading but like, alright, so there is a YouTube channel called Corridor Crew, which is about the various visual effects artists and filmmakers who work for the Corridor Digital YouTube channel. So it's like a companion channel, and for a long time they did behind the scenes stuff, they've had a couple of series that they've been running now for a while that are visual effects artists react, and stuntman and stunt women react. And they in those series as they break down as professional visual effects artists, why visual effects in different films are good or bad. And they talk a little bit about the visual effects techniques that are being used, which is really cool. It's very informative. There's also a miniseries that one of the people this guy Wren does. And basically, he'll take an idea, like how much water is there on earth, and then uses visual effects to show like how much space it would take up, how much of it is freshwater versus saltwater, how much

is in lakes, rivers and streams, how much is in ice, how much is an oceans, and he's done this for a couple of different things.

Clip (Wren Wreichman) 54:21

Have you ever wondered how much water there is on Earth? I mean, numbers quickly get very large when you start adding zeroes to the end. Have you seen those videos that show the scale of our universe? They're pretty neat because they demonstrate just how much larger other stars in our galaxy are than our own Sun.

Jack 54:36

And they're really cool videos. And it's such a cool concept because it basically takes ideas and turns them into something you can look at as opposed to being something that's kind of hard to comprehend. The percent of water that is in all lakes, rivers and streams is wild. I highly recommend you check it out. He also did one that was really cool, which was essentially about like exponential growth and why we have a hard time understanding it. And did it in the context of why people were so bad at understanding why COVID would spread the way it did. So basically, just like using the tools of visual effects to do really cool, interesting personality driven educational stuff, there's like, I think 11 or 12 of them now. Really good, really good viewing.

Connor 55:25

That's like, I want does he do one for the difference between a million and a billion, and a trillion. Okay.

Jack 55:33

Definitely one about million and billion, I'm pretty sure. Cuz showing that visually is like, crazy.

Connor 55:42

Because a billion is a lot.

Jack 55:45

A billion is so much.

Connor 55:47

Yeah.

Jack 55:48

So that's what I've been watching. And then I've been listening to "Mass Education," which is St. Vincent, aka Annie Lennox's like piano based acoustic-y version of her 2017 album, "Masseduction," and it's really good. I like her a lot.

Connor 56:05

I think I would like that a lot. Because I love her piano stuff like the original one of the New York. That's mostly piano, I think,

Clip (Annie Lennox) 56:13

New York, so far in a few blocks to be so low.

Connor 56:25

That was one of my favorites.

Jack 56:28

It's really good if you can also there's also online a lot of like acoustic guitar performances by her on KEXP and other stuff where she solo performs a number of the "Masseduction" songs and those are also really, really good.

Clip (Annie Lennox) 56:41

wasn't true love, back to you love

Jack 56:46

She is so she's so talented. That's what I got going on. What about you? What are you, what are you digging into these days?

Connor 56:55

Oh man, well, since we're on the music topic, I'm just gonna have one song recommendation because it's a little embarrassing, and also, very me. And also it's a great song. Okay, Phoebe Bridgers and Maggie Rogers said that if Trump lost, they would cover the Goo Goo Dolls song, "Iris." (Goo Goo Dolls clip) Trump lost, in case you didn't know. And they fully covered it. And it's fully awesome and really hard to find because they only put it on Bandcamp for one day, while they raised money for Fair Fight, which was great, they raised a lot of money. And that was a song that I listened to a lot in high school as I went through my angsty walks around the neighborhood. (Goo Goo Dolls clip) This one's just much better because their voices are amazing and it's acoustic. And you know, you can find it on YouTube, and maybe it'll be somewhere but anyway, it's a it's pretty good.

Jack 58:30

I'm definitely gonna try and track that down. Yeah, it was not the soundtrack to my angsty high school walks. But I'm excited to hear it.

Connor 58:41

Then there's just some reading I've been doing a lot of little readings. But there was a recent interview that I came across, actually just today, which I found really interesting. "In These Times" interviewed Dean Spade, who's a fairly prominent legal scholar, pretty radical, especially on trans issues. And he just came out with this book about mutual aid and kind of like mutual aid, as a way to build solidarity. And, you know, especially since the COVID crisis, but also since George Floyd's murder and the uprisings, you know, as that as the interview notes, like mutual aid has become such a sort of come to the fore in a way that it hasn't, I think, in a lot of ways, and so, but anyway, it's an interesting way of thinking about how that those sort of acts of

mutual aid, you know, obviously on the most basic level are just helping people survive, but also our way of sort of building community and building kind of power if it's sort of done intentionally, and so I've found the interview, I'm gonna get the book but I found the interview really like a really good primer on on how to think about that, so I recommend that.

Jack 1:00:19

That sounds great. Cool. Well, plenty to think about until we discuss again.

Connor 1:00:26

Yes, when I hope Phoebe Bridgers and Maggie Rogers will cover another angsty song The Counting Crows "Long December."

Clip (Counting Crows) 1:00:33

a long December, and there's reason to believe maybe this year will be better than the last.

Connor 1:00:46

Another anthem of my youth.

Jack 1:00:48

Oh man. You had much more interesting, angsty walks than I did.

(Close Talking theme music)

Hello, everybody thank you so much for listening this is co-host Jack Rossiter-Munley, just reminding you that there are a ton of ways that you can get in touch with us and we love to hear from you. It's always great to know if you have a different reading of this poem, or any of the other poems we've covered. Or if there are any poems you wish we would cover in the future. You can send us an email at closetalkingpoetry@gmail.com or the show and Connor and myself are all on Twitter - that's another great way to connect. I am @jackrossitermun, Connor is @connormtratton, and the show is @closetalking. You can also find us on Instagram @closetalkingpoetry or on Facebook at facebook.com/closetalking. See you next time.

(Close Talking theme music)