

Transcript of The Last Custodian Podcast Episode 2: Hannah Hodgson

Host: Stephen Lightbown (SL)

Guest: Hannah Hodgson (HH)

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Introduction:

SL: Hello, and welcome to The Last Custodian podcast. I'm Stephen Lightbown. In this podcast, you'll hear my latest collection of poetry *The Last Custodian* read in full, as well as conversations I've had with other creative people to discuss process, disability in the arts and other topics.

Stephen Lightbown reads from *The Last Custodian*:

Day 37: Torbay

Hospital inspectors would have walked the path I do.

The main entrance, first observations: the floor

stained with prayers, could do with a clean, pile of corpses.

Bayview Coffee Bar shuttered in a Styrofoam of death.

Everyone will need to take their final breath,
safe care provided, pillows, a last rite handed out.

Did it feel like wandering the trenches with a lantern,
applying gauze and a prayer to amputated limbs?

They would have done it though, carried on, call bells,
exploding like missiles; nurses would not have known

what they were running towards, their own fate,
clear as flashing orange warheads in ceiling tiles.

Bed after bed without answers until they stopped,
fell still, with the pulse of their small watches.

Outpatients, pharmacy, A&E, I find what I need
from the pockets of the new earth.

Cause of death,
the same.

Day 40: Plymouth

The sky is peeling.

Visibility measured
by abandoned cars.
This day is three
Golf Estates thick.

There is a strange beauty
in the red that stains
the sky. Cinematic,

almost; yesterday's tarmac
is still in the palm of my hands.
Dust rents my lungs.

My static day marked
by disappearing tyre tracks.
Every wasted breath

trashes my chances
of meeting the Librarian.
I need some sort of purpose.

Hope scratched
by the grit from
the constant cloud.

No choice but to wait,
reeking of cherry juice
and paranoia.

Movement is futile. A sign
in an abandoned Subway:
More freshly made tomorrow.

Day 41: Plymouth

I turn into the street. The familiarity of potholes under wheels gives me hope that this one may have been exempt. I see the postbox where Mum would post my birthday and Christmas cards. I push to it, put my hand in its mouth, place a palm where she would have placed hers, to hold her hand before...

I ask the postbox, *Has she been here, has she tried to write?*

The postbox doesn't reply. I look down at the dust and see only my tyre tracks, no footprints. I could post my faith somewhere else.

I decide to hold on to it.

Day 42: Plymouth

I find them in their double bed, insides by insides. Dad loved the way you could lift up the mattress and reveal a huge storage space underneath. I want to hold them, but I can't bear to touch, see, smell. Eventually the bed will take them.

When people die they look like they're sleeping. That's a lie. They don't look peaceful at all; they look dead, not like my parents.

I'm glad you were together, I whisper at the husks I can't recognise.

Before I leave, I wonder if they ever felt this helpless when they watched me in a hospital bed. Altered from the son they raised, but still their son – a seed into a tree, into a table, then a bonfire.

I place a framed picture of them on the side of the bed, their faces held together by the light.

Day 45: Kingsbridge

Talking to a collection of stones,
I've already forgotten their faces.

Grandad is late out of my
North Face rucksack.
A large **G**, now tattooed
in Sharpie on his cliff face.

U and I never got time to talk
about having a child. One of those
conversations that gets ignored,
a cobweb in a lampshade.

The rest of my family:
Mum, Dad, Nan.
Their own letters weigh heavy;
how did I outlive you all?

Removing the remainder
of the contents – flask,
goggles, cable ties –
placing them all in the cart,
dragging this caravan of life.
It carries medication, a way
only into tomorrow.

I'm low on catheters, laxatives,
a day or so as dust falls
from the next hospital.

Addressing the family: *I can't
push Chair through a silence.*

Day 46: Start Point Lighthouse

When I was newly injured *M* would bring me to this mile of jutting headland punctuated with a lighthouse. We would come early; I didn't want the pity of ramblers, offers of help, witticisms or indifference. In truth, it was my own expectations I wanted to avoid; I'd compare myself to them. I wanted strangled ankles from tightly wound walking boots, the jolt of cliff stones under foot. Even the hill sheep with their freedom and parkour couldn't escape my judgement. *M* would hold the rucksack that would become her home as I zigzagged my way up the mile of self-esteem. Narrow the angles but increase the distance; this path was about learning trade-offs. Back here, with *M*. I sense her silently nurturing once more. I never questioned the encouragement, just went forwards. Maybe I needed to find my balance in the void. Halfway up the hill. Framed by a field of ferns, I'm OK with stopping. I follow the gaze of the lighthouse.

Moving with purpose
Towards the shore that hits back
I see a future

Day 52: Torquay

That's all we are:
hunted, prey.
Hands around my mouth,
pulled to the ground.
I am no threat.
Cheek to gravel.
I see my wheels disappear.
Instinct takes over.
Find **G**, the slingshot.
See the impact. Temple implodes.
Am I prey or hunter now?

We are both on the floor,
unable to move.

Unable to move,
we were both on the floor.

Am I prey or hunter now?
Saw the impact. Temple implodes.
Found **G**, the slingshot.
Instinct took over.
I saw my wheels disappear.
Cheek to gravel.
I was no threat.
Pulled to the ground.
Hands around my mouth.
Hunted,

prey.

Day 54: Torquay

I want to lie under the rubble
of a fallen wall, to understand
the weight of unknown faces.

I hold **G** in my hand.
Remember watching him
clean blood from gutted fish
in his garage.

What I have done still smeared
across his surface.

*Is this how it is now? I ask.
One against one. Can I do that?*

Day 55: Torquay

The first thing I notice is the smell –
rancid horses' stable.

It lingers like the 3 am guest at an old party.
I find her in the front room with the armchairs.

She could have been forty. Her perfume
despair. I guess a week, if not longer.

Is that you, John? Her words catch
in a riptide looking for the shore.

I keep my eyes open for signs. Two rucksacks,
one rolled-out mattress, a book, *Don Quixote*.

Her voice in the cushions, swollen,
bandaged, clearly a ruin.

Did you find him, that man in the wheelchair?

John. The man I killed.

I hold back the urge to gag. To cry. To leave.
I move towards her, place my hands on
something I'm still trying to understand.

Day 71: Honiton

i could call a cat a meowopotamus,
who would care?

and yet, as the sun clambers,
i've stayed as Luke.

i took the life of another,

Luke.

when i was four days old,
when i was three eye blinks
post-surgery.

when he asked me my name
 Luke.

he drawled each letter
L u k e

it felt euphoric, maybe erotic,
to hear someone say my name,

to know who i was, to stay who i was.

i'd always quite liked the name Tyler,
 i met one once in California,

he ate white rice
 with raw eggs and walnuts for breakfast.

 i could never have been that guy.

when i was given a wheelchair,
 still Luke

when i met, then lost *U*,
 still Luke

today,
despite every wretched contortion,

still Luke.

(c)Stephen Lightbown *The Last Custodian* (Burning Eye Books, 2021)

Conversation:

SL: My guest for this episode is Hannah Hodgson. Hannah is the author of two pamphlets and is about to release her new collection *163 Days* through Seren in early 2022. I saw Hannah talk at an online event earlier this year where she spoke passionately about access to the arts for the disabled community so I wanted to invite her onto the podcast to talk about this and her own writing process as a disabled poet.

I don't know how you feel about this but as disabled poets, there's an element of having to work twice as hard maybe as non-disabled poets because actually the advocacy and the trying to make poetry — and even just our lives that we live — more accessible is really bloody tiring and there's an element of us having to, kind of, do that to fight for space so that we can share our writing so it's a bit of a double-edged sword, isn't it?

HH: It's so tricky because there is this line and that's really difficult to navigate as a disabled poet. Do you say "xyz has happened to me at this organisation, this shouldn't happen to anyone else,"? Do I post about that, do I email about that, do I run the risk of getting blacklisted by them because they just think I'm too much hassle? It does take up a lot of my brain power when something does go wrong and I think it plays into the whole "It's my fault anyway because I'm disabled," and obviously that isn't true but... It's so difficult because everybody knows everybody and everybody has good intentions, I think, and usually once you flag something up things change. I'd say eight out of ten times things will change if you flag them, but it's those two times that really, really hurt and you worry that you're never going to work again and of course that's ridiculous but I've found that I've had to measure my tone and how I speak about it and I think I get away with it because I smile and I try and be as presentable, as nice and package myself in a way that it's just "Oh, it's fine! But there's this thing..."

SL: It's weird, in a sense, that we're trying to be respectful and kind and not want to hurt anyone's feelings about the fact that we've maybe had to get lifted up some steps and not been able to sit on the stage and yet no-one's apologising to us about the fact that that's happening, they're just... people feel like "Oh, we've really gone out of our way to make you feel welcome, we've sat you on this balcony away from the rest of the audience," and you're like "Thank you very much! Thank you for this opportunity! I'm not going to badmouth you to anybody else," and it's really hard because I think we just want the same opportunities as anybody else.

HH: Yeah.

SL: And I think, I heard you speak so beautifully at the Kendal Poetry Festival event *Where To Next?* and I think one of the things that struck me about that was how this sort of double-edged sword of the pandemic: on the one hand, obviously horrendous. I don't think we necessarily need to caveat that in the sense of that and for people with disabilities as being a really difficult time, but on the other hand, I speak to many people with disabilities who found it quite a liberating period and quite a liberating period for creativity and also seeing what's possible and I heard you speak a lot about that and I'm interested in terms of actually, how you do feel about some of the things you've been able to access and some of the time you've had to write over the past year?

HH: For me, creatively, it's been an incredible year. I have written way, way, *way* more than I would have done if I'd have had to... If I kept going round the country doing every job that was offered, that was very much taking my energy away from creativity and being able to do it remotely has just meant that I can write so much more, like I've written — all separate poems — a full collection and two pamphlets this past year. It is strange, because I'm seeing a lot of places moving towards in-person again. I'm signed up to email lists and it's "We're back! We're in the garden and if it rains we're going to move inside." and it just... It's going back to being exclusionary and even though the Arts Council has put out a really amazing statement on "There needs to be a combination", I personally feel that the Arts Council should say "Okay, if you're an organisation that gets over a huge amount, you should have to livestream a proportion of your work." That's just how I feel and that's what I'd hope but I don't really know how you go about going "Hey, Arts Council! This is what you should do," because they're quite massive.

You know, I have been creatively nourished in a way that I definitely wouldn't have been without the pandemic and myself and many others have these hard drives, now full of online events — even events we haven't watched yet — because we know it's going to disappear. Like, if not fully then partially. It's not going to be an everyday thing; there's not going to be everyday things on in poetry so it upsets me, the rush back to in-person because it's the same people that were saying "Oh, we're being so accessible and so inclusive!" that are doing that.

SL: Yeah. I think that's a good way of putting it. I think it is upsetting. I've found the same, in terms of this rush to go back to in-person and I think we do what we do and being in front of a live audience is difficult to replicate and I think for me that's part of the issue is that it's not about trying to replicate, it's about trying to provide something different and I think an online event does provide something different that actually you can lean into and why would you not want to have an event where maybe you might get, if you do it in, I don't know, a town and you get maybe 15-20 people at your event, you do it online and you can get people from Australia and from Singapore and from America. I was at something in Coventry recently, they had people

from all over the world! I mean, they were coming in from different timezones and the open mic was so much richer for it. That's not an accessibility thing, that's just making your event better by having different voices there, more diverse voices. I don't know if there's anything that you feel particularly that people could and should be doing in terms of trying to make their events more accessible, whether that be online or in-person.

HH: Try! That is just the bar. Just try and make it accessible. There is this big fear, I've noticed, around getting things wrong and being called out for that but I think if you explain that, you know, this is a new thing we're doing, it's for accessibility reasons, feedback is welcome but please be kind. I've not seen an organisation be slated for that. I think it's very... It's vulnerable. It's a vulnerable thing to say, to say, 'We do not know fully how to work this thing. We want to do it really, really well. We're trialling it and it's going to be something that goes forward.' Part of that — and I said this at *Where to Next?* — is going, "Yeah, we did ignore disabled people for a very, very long time. We weren't as inclusive as we could be and we're sorry but here's what we're doing to change that," and that's really important, the kind of recognition of that lost time and those people that haven't been able to access your event. I hope that people try. It's just as simple as that.

My collection is *163 Days* so it's... I spent 163 days in a hospital and there's gonna be a poem and some medical notes for every single day so I am really excited about it as a concept.

SL: Had you read those medical notes before? Have you read... Are you sort of reading these for the first time?

HH: I was reading them for the first time. It was, em...

SL: Wow.

HH: It was difficult because I mean, I have had to fictionalise them from, like, just a copyright a perspective and also from a very boring perspective, like, nobody wants to know my urine output on that date.

SL: Should put it in!

<both laugh>

HH: Nobody cares!

SL: Did you have to fight to get those notes then? Were they difficult to get hold of?

HH: They weren't that bad. I got them quite a few years ago but they were £50 and the law's changed now so they are free to people.

SL: Without giving too much away, do the poems talk to the medical notes or are they, are the medical notes incorporated into the poems in any way?

HH: They certainly overlap and yeah, it's kind of, how Hannah felt about that and how the medical side of that felt about that and I've also put in from consultant letters that I've had recently. I've been using some of my more recent diagnoses because I think otherwise you know, towards the end I think people would be like, "Oh, you've got this thing!" and I'm like <laughs> That is six years out of date... like, *this* is my actual diagnosis so I have had to manipulate the truth and that has been super interesting in that, em... What is truth?

SL: Yeah... and it's a big thing to be wrestled with in poetry, isn't it? Because I used to get told about this. I had a mentor and I would write this poem about a conversation that I had and she said, "We need to change that word," and I was like, "No, no, but... This person said this!" and she was like "The truth is what you want to get across in a poem. It's not a factual account."

HH: Yeah.

SL: But it's, but that's... yeah. 'What is the truth?' I think is really important.

HH: Mmm-hmm.

SL: This podcast is built around my collection *The Last Custodian* which is set in an apocalypse. In the book they kind of restart the world through books that they find and they leave little trails of leaving books so one question would be: If you were to restart the world with books, can you think of two books or one book that you might use as a way of restarting the world? Or two: If in an apocalypse and you had all the help and support that you needed to be able to do this, where would you go first? Where would you go and just kind of explore first? Feel free to answer one or you can answer both if you like. You can even put your new collection in if you want.

HH: I'm not doing that! That would be the most awful thing ever! Like, "Restart the world with my book!"

<both laughing>

Er, no. Probably Audre Lorde, a collection of her essays. That would be incredible.

SL: Very good.

HH: Before I came on I was thinking, “Hmm, right, if I woke up and everyone was dead and I could somehow magically get myself down into my chair... There’s about eight miles on my powerchair so I could probably get to a pharmacy, like, ravage the pharmacy and then be like ‘I don’t know what to do!’” but if my chair had 300 miles on it instead of eight... what would I do? I know where I’d go. I would go to the butterfly house in Williamson’s Park which is in Morecambe.

SL: Oh, lovely.

HH: The most beautiful place ever and I’ve not been in years and the butterflies are very nice. Hopefully the butterflies aren’t dead?

SL: For your apocalypse Hannah, we’ll allow butterflies to stay alive because it would... I’d hate for you to use those 300 miles on your chair that we’ve just given you to get to a butterfly house and they’re all dead!

<both laughing>

HH: And they’re all dead! That would be so bad.

SL: Be real sad, wouldn’t it? No, butterflies are alive. Enjoy the butterflies!

<both continue laughing>

HH: Okay, cool, cool!

SL: Thanks for listening to this episode of The Last Custodian podcast. *The Last Custodian* was written by me, Stephen Lightbown. This series was produced by Rowan Bishop with many thanks to all our guests and Arts Council England for funding the series. If you enjoyed the episode please consider subscribing to the series wherever you get your podcasts to be kept up to date with the latest episodes and feel free to leave us a review on Apple Podcasts.