

Transcript of The Last Custodian Podcast Episode 3: Cecil Giscombe

Host: Stephen Lightbown (SL)

Guest: Cecil Giscombe (CG)

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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 75: Chickerell

My dead skin mixes with their
dead skin. I transfer onto the sofa,
an exchange of unpleasantries,
asleep in less time than it takes
to say viva las Chickerell, awake
not long after. The sound of
the fridge opening, I'm here
alone with a single jar of
mayonnaise floating into
the room that died three
months ago, a box of Happy
Families lunges at me, a pair
of Crocs cartwheel in my
direction. Something prods
me from behind. The ghosts
of this bungalow want
my attention. I've stopped
knocking before I enter
houses; maybe that was
the wrong thing to do.

*What's the matter, lad?
You afraid of the dodgems?
You too small for this?
he says through a fag.*

I want to get off.

Day 80: Dorchester

I cross Grey's Bridge near the teddy bear museum,
arrive into a Rothko exploration on canvas.

The countryside behind me, this is nature unsettling.

The sky is thriving. The dust, orange in midday sun;
where it lingers in shadows, a darker red.

The lines have been erased; buildings are a blur.
Consumed by technicolour.

The depth of the street only revealed with every
roll I make further into the painting.

After the bridge, I fall into a palette of emotions.

The dust paints the hairs on my arms orange.
My trainers turn red. Trousers. Wheels. Red.

The orange of my T-shirt meets the red
of my wasteland.

I have been painted into today.
I close my eyes. For once it isn't black.

Day 82: Bournemouth

New York, June 2014. On the High Line we sat and watched the yellow procession on Tenth Avenue make its way to Kong's last stand. **U** held a painting of a wiener dog we'd just bought from a street vendor. He asked where we were from. When we said London, he replied, *Man, that place, I freaking love a Nando's*. I held a cinnamon bun in one hand and paid with the other. I asked **U** if the fact grilled chicken was a reason someone came to our capital city was something we should be proud of. I'd wanted to tell him all the other reasons why he should visit, but nothing came to mind. *Why protect a place you've spent this trip running away from?* **U** had a point. A man wearing a Yankees cap spoke in German as he herded his family into position for a portrait. Click. Beep. Click. Beep. Click. Beep. Click. Beep. Click. The fake shutter noise wrestled for attention with the car horns. We didn't need a camera to capture any of this. (Can **U** still remember? Wherever **U** are. All these details are so vivid, yet I can barely recall **Ur** face.) Below we were drawn towards a man in a blue hard hat and high-vis vest. We watched him stand in the middle of the road and wave passengers from sidewalk to sidewalk. Functioning with deactivated nuclear energy. I tried to see from the way he waved his flag whether he was bored or fulfilled. I told **U** I'd take any job just to live here. Not one pedestrian acknowledged the man or the flag. I wanted to shout down, say anything. There was attitude on every corner, but I had never seen **U** so serene. I had a taste for **Ur** maxi dress, a dizzying devotion. It was the colour of absinthe and somehow was calm in the breeze coming off the Hudson. Old Blue Eyes was right; I did want to be a part of it. I looked for more dollars. The feeling was ferocious. I went back to see if I could buy more hours in that day.

I need to find a breath to go again.

Day 97: Portsmouth

I smoothed the tablecloth,
grateful this wouldn't be a dinner
for one. It was an act. I'd been
minutes from pulping the napkin
with my hands. I wasn't brave
enough to look up; not yet,
at least.

I kept focussed on the descent.
U could have been a stray
boulder, the kind that would
eat me from the saddle, graze
every part I'd exposed.

*Luke? It's me, [REDACTED], are you going
to say hello?* I blanked the face
I didn't yet know. *Hello*, I replied,
eyes still down, waited

for a conversation to become
lost in the dark.

Day 100: Portsmouth

There are things I thought I would miss
but don't. Like the way I thought I'd be
desperate to fuck when I lost my legs,

but all I wanted was to hold my wife
and run my fingers over her like she was
a blade of grass I didn't want to bend.

The only difference between a
creeping speedwell defiantly in a lawn
and a hyacinth in a hand-painted vase
is the care it was placed with.

My urge to tend the weeds is strong.
I want to tell them, wherever **U** are,
U grow in all the right places.

Day 102: Portsmouth

I was eight when I saw my first dead body. Our neighbour in Plymouth. Heroin. Surrounded by the dead all I'm thinking about is corpses I've seen before. We lived in a big townhouse down near the marina. The super yachts looked like model boats from my bedroom. Next door had been converted into flats. This guy lived on the top floor. Nice bloke. Always in a pair of cycling shorts. I used to help him clean his mountain bike. He'd tip it upside down. I'd furiously spin the pedals whilst he dripped oil on to the chain. I went at those pedals like I was hand cranking a Model T Ford. I got into biking because of him. It was guilt. I wanted to keep his bike on the road. People asked us how we didn't notice he was missing. New tenants kept arriving. For a week or so I remember a smell moving into our house. The way **N** did when **G** was in hospital with a disease I couldn't pronounce. The memory of it made me sad. We couldn't place it. Out of the window I remember seeing a shadow of white boiler suits walking up and down the stairs on the outside of the building. Next thing the boiler suits are carrying a stretcher with a body bag. The smell went with him.

Day 112: Chichester

A bird arrives, nonplussed.

The sky has been silent for weeks.

I am hungry for this bird,
a collared dove,

not for the meat under its wings,
but the company.

Does this bird know the end
of the world is here?

I do not speak, remain plastic
café table still.

Time is too precious
to waste on sudden movements.

Its only interest in me is the food
I cannot offer. Its funeral eyes

mirror my own.

I wonder if those eyes watched
as its mother spoke,

You can be an eagle.

Its head bobs like it's listening
to dirty beats, wing propped on a bar.

I offer my filthy hand,

crave the dance contact brings

Let me stroke this bird,
each feather a friend lost.

I'm here, I'll barter Carnation milk
for conversation.

I watch it fly; my red circles
chase it through the dust.

Day 120: Brighton

Following the trail is like driving a Grand Prix track in a cardboard box, address written on the top. Delivery drivers on their tea break, but the kettle has been stolen, so they go to the café next door, which is shut, then out comes the whisky; no driving today. And I'm sat in the box waiting for a delivery slot whilst the other cars hiss by. Lap after lap. I have been denied death. Again. Every once-able soul is somewhere else and I cannot get in. It would've been nice to have a free run at the aftermath, but for every door with level access there is a whole town of ring pull tuna up a flight of stairs. I'm no supercrip to be wanked over. I'm just trying to break the tape.

Day 122: Brighton

*Remember when I was chair
height and would bring
home a feather if I saw one
on the street?*

*Tape it to a teddy
until I had a bird bear.
Give it wings, watch
it fly away from my
hugs.*

*As an adult I'd watch a seagull
strut. I'd look at its plumage,
think, that bird*

*has dined on a drain-drunk rat,
then rummaged landfill
for a dessert of thrown-out
Micro Chips and used
nappies.*

***M**, why didn't you say anything?
Why did you let me pick up
those feathers?*

Am I making sense?

*I've started
collecting feathers
again. I need help
finding a bear.*

Day 123: Brighton

I killed another man today.
Over a book. *The Da Vinci Code*.
Go figure. The Lanes are stained
with his blood. I take him
on my tyres.

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

Conversation:

SL: My guest for this episode is Cecil Giscombe. I first encountered Cecil when he was lecturing at Zoeglossia, the disabled poetry community that I'd been a Fellow of for the last three years. He's a multi-award-winning writer, successful lecturer and cycling fanatic. Amongst other topics, I wanted to talk to Cecil about some of the themes that come up in his work: travel, place and disability.

CG: I'm Cecil Giscombe. The name under which I publish is — I use my initials C.S. Giscombe. I'm a writer, poet. I've published a number of poetry books which are available and out there. You can find me on the internet fairly quickly.

SL: So tell me Cecil, does a disabled person have to write about their disability to be authentic?

CG: My response to that, see, I've been talking about it in school, is to be very dubious about authenticity as a... um, as a thing. I'm really not all that much of a Marxist but I've noticed that rather often when someone talks to me in person or online about some authentic experience or insight that person has something to sell me. Where do our concepts of authenticity come from? I think of the media; the media driven by commercial interests supplies a lot of them. I'm dubious, as I said, about authenticity. I just Googled authenticity and what popped up after definitions was 'Authenticity guarantee eBay: shop with total confidence!' So there we are!

I remember that James Baldwin said — and I'm quoting him "I wanna be an honest man and a good writer." Honesty, as James Baldwin knew and wrote about elsewhere can be very, very messy. An example of this is what Langston Hughes wrote 100 years ago. He wrote "An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose." So all of that addresses, I think, the messiness of writing, the messiness of honesty and it sidesteps authenticity in favour of being honest which is maybe something that one needs to construct again and again and again over one's lifetime as one's situation and knowledge changes. You don't have to search for things to write about, they're gonna find you and if you're honest you can go into them.

SL: We first met at Zoeglossia and I wonder if maybe you can talk a little bit about how you came to be involved in Zoeglossia?

CG: That began with a phone call or a letter, I can't remember which one... email from Sheila Black. One of the founders of the organisation who had known from a mutual friend that I was a writer, was a poet with a mechanical arm and she invited me to contribute something to the *Beauty is a Verb* anthology. Now, I've had a long association in my life with railroads. I've travelled extensively by train in the States and Britain and Canada and er... and Europe as well and I am writing still about the railroad industry and railroad experiences and metaphors.

In the early 2000s when I was an English professor at Pennsylvania I went to work as a volunteer with an historical railroad group. We operated trains over 100 miles of track in three counties in Central Pennsylvania. I went to Rules Class and was trained as a brakeman and a couple of years later I became a student engineer. So I've operated trains and certainly those represent some of the best days of my life. So this experience of operating trains was what I wrote about for Sheila's anthology. I'm gonna read, if I may, two rather brief sections from that. I wrote:

'Later, I applied to be an engineer and I had my eyes and hearing checked and allowed the national inquiry into my 40 year driving record. My student engineer license came in the mail, signed by the Superintendent of our operating partner, the Freight Railroad. Months before, I'd made it through his Rules Class, an all-morning event and passed the written exam. One day, as we were taking a half-full train up to Pleasant Gap, Pennsylvania my engineer, Steve, the man with whom I'd been paired when I commenced my training said, "You run it for a while," and I did.

The horn was a problem. It was a piece of rope that hung straight down next to the windshield. Signalling the intention to move forward; two short toots or to back up; three short toots, was fine, but the familiar signal for grade crossings was more complicated to execute. As every schoolchild in the United States knows, it's two long toots, a short, and another long toot and 'needs to be prolonged and repeated until the engine or train is on the crossing'. The problem was that the engineer should take the equipment through such with his or her hand on the brake. Fair enough, but a childhood accident cost me my left arm some decades ago and it's been a series of prosthetic devices ever since. They've worked well, but the horn was a problem. There was the likelihood of slippage if I used my steel hook to grab the brass brake lever and if I kept my right hand on the brake, the dangling, dancing rope was hard to pluck from my hook from out of the air so I went to Home Depot one morning before reporting for my shift and bought an s-clip and a length of new rope and with the help of a friend, extended the horn cord. That is, we added a loop, a long down-hanging U or bow across the top quadrant of the windshield, an easier target for my hook. Gross movement skills as opposed to fine movement skills. Less difficult to pull on and make a joyous noise with. Easier for me to pipe wildly down the valleys. Two dollars worth of parts. Steve said, "Now we're ADA compliant."

Is this disability? My mechanical man-self ensconced in another machine moving across the surface of Earth? My cyborg, my amputee, my centaur, my rolling man.

As such, I helped the railroad. We sold our service including my labour at the throttle, or my labour on the ground as a brakeman at trackside. A ragtag gang of white kids stared once at Milesburg, Pennsylvania as I waited for a coaltrain to clear the next block before throwing the switch so we could take a full load of paying customers to a restaurant 30 miles away in Tyrone, Pennsylvania and one of them said, finally and definitively, and loud enough for me to hear, and not irreverently: "*Candyman*".

Is this disability? Undying famous black monster of Filmland Tony Todd with a hook for one hand? A monster is something else.'

Okay, now that entry in *Beauty is a Verb* was my intro to Sheila and Jennifer Bartlett and eventually, Stephen, you. I'm wanting in my role in Zoeglossia to be of service as a writing teacher which I've done for many decades. I bring a perspective to writers with disabilities that some of those writers might find useful.

SL: When we first met, we met in-person in San Antonio which is where the first retreat was and they were just three of my greatest writing days I think I've experienced. It was just a wonderful, wonderful experience. I was able to just look in a room and be like, 'Ahh, okay, people get it.' I felt like I'd been writing in isolation. It was really terrific and I'm glad we've been able to continue that to some degree but I really feel like I've missed out from not being able to participate in Zoeglossia again in the flesh.

CG: The days in San Antonio, the important days for me — important moments for me — oddly enough were less at the college Our Lady By The Lake or whatever it was called that furnished space for us and more in going out with people, with other writers, other Zoeglossia writers. There's a thing that I remember understanding when I was very young. When I was, I think twenty, twenty-one and I was walking through a city in Vermont for the first time — Burlington, Vermont — and I realised that I was letting people... I was letting the locals see me and I was looking at them.

SL: What do you mean by that? You were letting the locals see you, as in, you were just out and about or is there something deeper than that?

CG: It's — everything is deeper than that. It's both that and it's everything it's included. You come into a new town and if you're travelling as I often do in unconventional ways, be it arriving on the train, arriving by bicycle, or even arriving in a car and walking, you're letting the locals see you, other people, other people on the street and you're looking, you're looking at them and what's interesting is people you nod to, people you don't nod to. You know, all of that very complex interaction, you know, almost a vernacular of interaction. What are you brushing up against, what's brushing up against you? So going out with people from Zoeglossia, people with obvious or apparent disabilities one way or the other as a group, we let the locals see us. We let

the San Antonio — San Antonians? — see us and we saw them. Nod to some, don't nod to others but there we were, you know, at table.

SL: One of the things that really comes through in your writing and various pieces of yours that I've read is about the railroads and I just was interested in terms of what it is specifically that you love so much about the railroads because that comes through so vividly in the way that you write and a subquestion that I might have of that might be: I was wondering reading this, is railroads a way for you to write poetry, or is the poetry a way for you to really indulge in your love of railroads?

CG: The only answer is yeah, yes, yes, all of the... all of the above! I have many memories, most of which I'm sure are totally false, of train travel across the United States when I was very... when I was like 18 months old. And there's the history as well. I mean, we lived in Ohio which is a weird, interesting state. It's part North and part South and my grandparents — my parents' parents lived elsewhere. My mother's people lived in St. Louis, Missouri and my father's people lived in Birmingham, in Alabama and I recall — I do recall, this is not a false memory at all — a very clear memory of going to visit my grandparents in Birmingham which is, you know, is the South and, um, those visits on the train, getting off the train in Birmingham were my most profound encounter with the Jim Crow laws; the segregation laws so you know 'White there; Coloured there', okay we go that way! And that itself is a huge memory for me. But as a teenager and then of course as an adult I simply continued taking the train and I'll still take the train if I have the time to do it which, because I'm a Bougie college professor, I do. I often will. One has unexpected encounters on the railroad. I could go on for a long time about that. Being cooped up with people for a couple of days is a really interesting experience.

SL: Well, you say that, I mean, one of my favourite trips I've ever taken was on the trains in America. I took a train from New York to Miami which, you might think actually in your experience it sounds like that actually might be a short journey but it was a 24 hour journey for me and it was an experience. I absolutely loved it. There was something about sleeping on the train and listening to the rhythm of the train. It was as good a night's sleep as I've had and the smell coming through of the diesel and the, kind of, when you're going through the tunnels and the noise and... I have this really vivid memory of looking out on either window and there just being water on either side and you couldn't see the tracks and it was staggering. And falling asleep in Washington and waking up in Georgia and just thinking, 'This is...' It just blew my mind! It was staggering and when we got to Miami I felt like I'd trekked across the world and we said, 'Oh, where have you come from?' and we said 'We've got a train from New York!' and I don't know if we wanted a round of applause but we ended up with just a slight shrug and a bit of indifference and it sort of... I really like that. I mean, where I came home and bought a guide to various train trips you can take across America. If I was to get the chance again I would. I've been completely inspired by the way that you've written and speak about the railroads.

CG: Oh, thank you! Thank you.

SL: And maybe that seems a good place to bring it to a close but I wanted to bring it to a close with one final question. We've spoken about *The Last Custodian* and it's a book of travel in an apocalypse. If you found yourself as a surviving member of the apocalypse and you could travel anywhere you wanted to, guessing if railroads aren't working in this scenario but you've got your bike, so we'll let you have your bike. Where are you going to go? Where would you travel?

CG: Well, I mean, I thought about that a lot. Cos I, about that question that you ask Looking at *The Last Custodian* and the names on the rocks it's very solitary and imaginative, you know, you remember the companions and so forth and I can't — I tried to get my head around the question and couldn't quite do it. For me, like what I said before, travel involves arriving someplace and looking at the locals and letting them see you at the same time. I probably wouldn't go anywhere. But I must say that we seem to be in kind of an apocalypse right now, the Covid thing and what's prepared me for this apocalypse is my old habit of watching a TV show called *The Walking Dead*. <laughs>

SL: Cecil, there could be another podcast on *The Walking Dead*! I have just started the final series of that as well so... We share a lot. We share a lot of interests!

<both laughing>

CG: There's some stuff we have in common, sir!

SL: It sounds like then, in that case, what I really have taken from this conversation is that, the way that you speak, even if you travel by yourself it sounds like you never travel alone. It sounds like there's always people there and I think that's something I've never really thought of before. I'm going to take that away. I'm going to look at journeys that I make with a new awareness, I think, of the people around me because I think the conversation and the question that I've done about actually this character travelling across the UK in an apocalypse, you know, for what purpose? But maybe that book is his way of telling other people through the diary entries what has happened.

CG: Mmm.

SL: And that for me, it's always been of interest to still commit that somehow hoping that maybe someone will read that and share that journey because otherwise, maybe what is the point? What is the point if you're not able to share those journeys and those shared observations.

Thank you very much Cecil. It's been a really enjoyable conversation, yeah. Thank you for your time.

CG: Thank you, thank you for the opportunity and the experience.

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.