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SM: Sarah McConnell, producer and host

AS: Audio Sample

HH: Henry Heart

LB: Laura Bylenok

IM: Irène Mathieu

Transcript:

00:00:00

- SM [music] On December 14, 2012, 20 children and 6 adults were murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School. President Barack Obama struggled to make sense of the event in a public address shortly after.
- AS These evening, Michelle and I will do what I know every parent in America will do, which is hug our children a little tighter. And we'll tell them that we love them. And we'll remind each other how deeply we love one another. But there are families in Connecticut who cannot do that tonight. And they need all of us right now. [music]
- SM 8 years later, Sandy Hook still haunts the public imagination. Henry Heart, the Poet Laureate of Virginia turns to poetry in response.
- HH Clouds inch over the school of tears. All paths curve toward the black [inaudible]. Shadows frozen on classroom floors.
- SM From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell, and today we test the power of poetry to help us heal through another crisis as coronavirus spreads

worldwide. Later in the show, making sense of the disturbing side of science through poetry.

AS This image of two rats sown together has haunted me for decades really, and you just can't unthink it. But first, Virginia's Poet Laureate is Henry Heart. He's the Mildred and J.B. Hickman professor of english and humanities at William and Mary. He says, we can turn to poetry to make sense of tragedy. Henry, you started writing poetry when you were away from home at college at Dartmouth. What had sparked your interest?

HH Looking back on that period, I experienced a lot of sort of typical anxieties and confusions. The sort of typical confusions and anxieties that teenagers experience. But it was also the Vietnam War period, and my father had been in World War II, The Korean War, he had been in the National Guard. When he retired from the military, he was a lieutenant colonel. He told me numerous times he wanted me to have my war experience, to go to Vietnam. And that kind of accentuated my confusions and anxieties, and I found in poetry that poets were also dealing with anxieties, confusions, caused by that Vietnam War period. I think that's why I was originally drawn to poetry. AT first I was just reading it, but then Robert Siegel encouraged me to write poetry. And I found I could express feelings, ideas, that I hadn't been allowed to express, or that I just hadn;t expressed before. And for me that was very beneficial.

SM Who was writing poetry that tantalized you?

HH The very first contemporary poem that I read and wrote a paper about was by Robert Lowell. And he was involved in the anti-war movement. This was a poem, it was an elegy, for the union dead. And it reflected on a lot of American wars, past and present. So he was probably the first contemporary poet who spoke to me, who got me interested in contemporary poetry.

SM Have you in your own work sometimes undertaken some commentary on the political landscape?

HH Sure. I wrote poems about the Vietnam War, I think when I was trying to come to terms with it, trying to understand it. To understand what was actually going on in Vietnam but to understand the effect the Vietnam War was having on American society. And recently I've been writing a series of poems about what happened at Sandy Hook—that's partly because Sandy Hook is a small town just about 10 miles south of the small town where I grew up. And I spent quite a bit of time at Sandy Hook. And as it turns out, the principal, who died at Sandy Hook, used to be the principal of my elementary school, Mitchell Elementary School in Woodbury Connecticut. That was years after I had left, but my sister-in-law teachers in the Woodbury school system. She knew Dawn Hochsprung. My niece knew her because she was at the elementary school. And she continued to live in

my hometown even when she had the job at Sandy Hook. So, yeah. And I'm—like so many people, very distressed about mass shootings.

SM What did you decide to address in your poem on Sandy Hook?

00:05:41

HH Well, I've written a number of poems about Sandy Hook. I guess the poem that addresses what happened most directly was called Sandy Hook elegy. I was really just trying to express deep sadness about what happened there.

SM Would you read from one of your Sandy Hook poems?

HH Sure. So here I'm focusing on the school where the massacre happened. Clouds inch over the school of tears. All paths curve toward the black [inaudible]. Shadows frozen on classroom floors. A morning dove huddles above icicles on a powerline. Beyond the parking lot, branches crack like gunshots. Soon, night will settle like a crow's wing on the school. Snow erase the playground like a misspelled word. One Fall, we filled burlap bags with apples fallen from our trees, and pressed them into juice. It's December now. Crowned men bow by sheep on the village green, offering gifts to the sacred child. When we kneel before a marble slab, swallowing wafers stained with blood, frost cracks across windows. On a nearby pond, children hold up sheets to skate toward a bonfire on the far shore. Sparks etching ancient designs in the dusk.

SM Did you return to Sandy Hook afterward, during one winter?

HH I did. I drove [laughs] to Sandy Hook. I didn't actually go to the school. I think at that point the school was fenced off and it was being demolished. It was totally demolished and all the rubble was taken somewhere and dumped. But in another poem, The Sandy Hook Fire, I do write about trying to fish our way up the river back to Sandy Hook and where the fire had happened.

SM In addition to your own poetry collections, you've written biographies and critical works about some of the poetry geniuses, Geoffrey Hill, Robert Lowell, James Dickey, Robert Frost, and most recently, Seamus Heaney. Who have you most enjoyed?

HH Well, I think I have most enjoyed working on Seamus Heaney. I'm writing a longer study about Seamus Heaney that focuses on his—it was really an obsession—with gifts. The idea of the gift, being gifted. And your responsibility if you're gifted to share your gifts with others. And from the beginning of his career to the end of his career, he was writing obsessively about gifts.

SM Is there a particular work of Seamus Heaney's that stays with you that has been most influential really on your thinking and writing? Well I think the poem that he places first in his various selected poems, collected poems, it was placed first in his first book, *Death of a Naturalist*, a poem called *Digging*. I'm sure one of the reasons why I feel a sense of solidarity with Seamus Heaney was because he grew up on a farm. Not a Christmas tree farm like me, but a farm nevertheless, in northern Ireland. And, his father and his grandfather spent a lot of time digging peat, which they would use as fuel in their houses, to heat the houses or to cook. Seamus Heaney didn't have electricity in his house when he was growing up. But this poem is a poem that celebrates his father and his grandfather as very good diggers. But Seamus Heaney says in the poem, he is not gonna spend the rest of his life digging peat or potatoes with a spade. He's gonna spend the rest of his life digging and really digging into history with his pen. What I discovered from doing some research is that pen he's referring to was a gift. It was an actual gift that his parents gave him when he went off to a private Catholic school in the very north of northern Ireland. And one of his very last poems was also about, is called *The Gift of a Fountain Pen*. So he thought of the pen as a gift but also the pen as a tool to release his poetic gift.

00:11:16

SM We just have time for me to ask you about being named recently Poet Laureate of Virginia. Has anything changed for you since you were named Poet Laureate?

HH Well, I get asked to go around the state a lot more to give talks, to give poetry readings, so that's one of the changes. And I've also gotten busier with the poetry society of Virginia. I had done work with the poetry society before, but when I became Poet Laureate, I wanted to have a project. And my project was to, well first, be a good ambassador for poetry in Virginia, but also to try to improve the financial foundation of the poetry society. We've had some financial difficulties. In the old days, we would have a 3-day annual poetry festival. And then it went down to two days, and then it went down to one day because we just didn't have the money to pay poets to come to the festival. So my mission was to do some fundraising. And I was relatively successful.

SM Did becoming Poet Laureate this year finally persuade your parents that being a poet has paid off after all?

HH Well, I think, maybe so. When I was in college, because I think of my father's engineering background and military background, he really wanted me to go into the sciences or—originally, he wanted me to go to Westpoint and be a professional soldier, which I don't think was my destiny [laughs]. But as I began to do better in literature, he stopped complaining that I was wasting my time pursuing what he thought was an impractical field. But when I became Poet Laureate, yes, I think he was finally convinced that I had taken the right road.

SM Well, Henry, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

HH Well, thank you very much for inviting me to talk. It's been a pleasure. [music]

SM Henry Heart is the Mildred and J.B. Hickman professor of english and humanities at William and Mary, and Virginia's Poet Laureate. Coming up next: scientific images that haunt. [music]. In college, Laura Bylenok was fascinated with genetic engineering. Now, she manipulates language, not DNA. Bylenok is a professor of english and creative writing at the University of Mary Washington. And her debut, full length collection of poems is called Warp. I love in your pieces in this collection, Warp, how deathly you sort of wonder and bring up the science of a thing. And then, it can turn as it does in the very first poem, which is called wave particle, to a relationship.

LB Mhm. Thank you.

SM The very next piece is called Genome. Genome is rife with cruelty and science, and the cruelty of scientific inquiry.

LB So this poem, I think, was in the making in my mind for years. It took me a very long time to write it. I had a professor who really did sew wraps together. He was an endocrinologist and he would take two living bodies, sew them up down the middle, and then see how their shared endocrine system, how that would affect their bodies and systems. And so this image of the two rats sewn together has haunted me for decades, really, you just can't unthink it. Another part of it is the business of trying to break the code of what it means to be human or what it means to be an organism to an individual, to say that, so right around the turn of the millennium, there was a lot of attention around the human genome project. And there was a lot of mysteries still about how many genes the human body would be revealed to contain. And of course we would have much more, perhaps, genetic information than say, a plant. But it turns out that's not true at all. The human body has 10,000 genes. There are other organisms, grass, for example, which has many more genes. So let me read the poem. Genome, warp verb. Of bees to swarm. I've been dreaming of a swarm of bees I've kept in a chest of drawers. Bees wriggling like chromosomes. Their bodies shaped like compound sentences I read. Come with me, sisters, and we are the self I have been looking for. I don't know what it means. It's been that way for years. Once, before all this, I saw a man crushed a bee like a cigarette butt between his thumb and finger. I wanted to know about the honey bee. To know the honey bee has 10,000 genes. Has breakable codes in her unbroken crypt. To know, to extract the DNA, each adult bee is crushed individually with a pestle, and homogenized in a buffer. To know the bee is centrifuged until unwanted tissues fall away and form a pellet to be discarded. The honeybee, *apis mellifera*, delegate of kingdom animalia, is one among others I know. The silkworm, the sea squirt, the clawed prawn, the zebrafish, the rat. Of which we can read every letter of the body. It sounds like a

metaphor but it is not. Design is decanted from the flesh with a micropipette. Orders and disorders, oddities and legislation of the essence encoded as a fugue in 4 voices. Notes to self to split, to dance, to fertilize, to flee. So easily I get away from myself. It was the man I meant to tell you about. The man I used to know about who killed the bee so carefully. A lab technician whose job it was to sew rats together, thin ones to fat ones, to monitor the effect of hormones on genetic obesity. He told me that sewn together down the side, the rats shared a circulatory system and they each made blood for the other. Everything mixing up when there was no barrier. No skin to hold it back. I wanted to know so many things. That the creature with the most chromosomes is a fern and the one with the fewest is the jumper ant. That a human has fewer genes than a mustard plant. That we console ourselves with the fact we can't understand our own complexity. In the dream, when I watched the bees, I pressed my abdomen to imagine my organs. There was my kidney, my liver, my ovaries, my body I can't see. I wanted to know, were the rats one animal or two? To know what they shared, what they knew, if they knew they were going to die. Each pair survived a few weeks. The honey bees are swarming early this season, out of my chest, to the magnolia tree in the yard. I can see when I'm at the kitchen table. It's simple as a fortune cookie, I break to know what's said inside. And when I do, a bee flies out, humming as I'm also humming when I wake. A chamber of my own, of my own making. And so that poem waves together a few different stores—the story of, of course, the rats, but then an imagined narrative of bees, which are one of my favorite model organisms.

00:20:47

SM Those bees, your sisters, the compound sentences. That's great.

LB Yeah, well and their bodies themselves are compound in the way that they're segmented and that itself echoes the way that chromosomes look so maybe imagistically that's what triggered the poem.

SM Impossible object on page 69 is another terrific slide from science to lover, more akin to wave particle.

LB Mhm.

SM Would you read that?

LB Absolutely. Impossible object. This poem opens with an epigraph that comes from a paper, a scientific paper. And it goes, here we show that DNA, origami, can be used to assemble a mobius strip. So that's the guiding image in the poem, is this idea of a mobius strip. And the form of the poem too actually begins in the middle of a sentence and then ends in the middle of a sentence, and the idea is that you can continue from the end of the poem back to the beginning and read it again and again and again like a

mobius strip. And so, impossible object. A mistake as simple as this. When I traced the border of her body and creased the surface, counted curves until I knew their numbers, knew their formulas, until I found the set of origami folds to model her. To sequence her. Until she hummed like a centrifuge and for 10 minutes, she split. An atom in my palm. An empty space, suspended over a slightly different empty space. Before she turned, a single edgeless surface. The lull was almost tangible. Away. And I didn't know there was no border to crumple in on itself. No threshold to cross. I scruitized the yellow sticky note she left, and fold it into a tiny balloon. Her fingerprint in pencil pressed inside. That poem is of course also about the intimacy of two bodies, much like the two rats actually. Thinking about this idea, what are the natural and unnatural forms of closeness and what does it mean to be physically close to somebody.

SM But it's fascinating how powerful it was the minute you say she and then refer to the single edgeless surface, and of course that's not how through the millennia we have depicted women's bodies.

LB That's right, yeah, and the "she" brings a particularity and a humanness to this idea of abstractly to consider what the nature of being is.

SM You also wrote a poem that makes reference to alcoholic mice. What was the inspiration for that?

LB So, the alcoholic mice are a subject that I've been working on since this book came out. I'm writing a long sequence of poems that's focused on different model organisms but particularly the mouse, the house mouse, the animal that hasn't been subjected for many many years to studies involving alcohol, which I'm fascinated by, by those particular studies in that there are—that alcoholism exists in mice. You give, for example, a bottle of alcohol to a mouse and a bottle of water to a mouse, and you allow them free access to both. Some mice taste the alcohol, say no thanks, then they go back to water. Other mice taste that alcohol and they want more, and they become inebriated, they become staggering. They become symptomatic in a lot of ways that people are when they drink alcohol. So to say, let's study it with a mouse is of course, it's one step toward understanding but it's one that I want to sort of pull out of the lab and say, what happens if we restore the identity of these mice, and that sort of dignity to these mice that as creatures they might hold.

SM So now that you are teaching poetry and writing poetry, do you still feel like this was a great choice? Are you luring another chemistry major over from the dark side to poetry?

LB I tried to, you know, some of my very best students are science majors. And I love it when I get science majors in my class because they have this eye for a different kind of detail and a different kind of diction. I was telling my students the other day, I said, "you know, I've been having this word in my head that I need to get into a poem, and the word

is prokaryote. I don't know what it is about it but I just want prokaryote into a poem and it's going to turn itself into one." And of course we talk a lot about the love of language especially in beginning poetry classes to say, "what are the words that you love the sound of that you wanna sort of roll around in your mouth or roll around in your mind or phrases that you're walking around and you just can't get out of your head and you feel it in the rhythm of your body?" And so prokaryote of course is a cool word, it's a scientific word.

SM What is it?

LB It's a cell that doesn't have a nucleus.

SM Aww.

LB And so we're eukaryotic beings, we have cells with nuclei, and the prokaryotes are just a different kind of creature altogether. And the karyote though is actually etymologically the interesting part because it's the kernel, it's the seed. And so to have that nucleus, which itself looks like a seed, being named as a seed, but then the pro as in before the seed being the seed for the poem, that's the kind of love I feel, and I think those science majors who are in that classroom with me, they feel that kind of love too. They say, "Yeah I can write poems with words like that too" but in other contexts would feel jargon or objective or very scientific. But to sort of restore the music to that kind of language.

SM Ugh, well this has been wonderful. Laura, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

LB Thank you so much. It's an absolute pleasure to be here. [music].

SM Laura Bylenok is a professor of english and creative writing at the University of Mary Washington. Her poetry collection is entitled, Warp. [music].

00:27:58

Welcome back to With Good Reason from Virginia Humanities.

AS What do you call the precise form of surgery in which a heart is removed from a person while she is still walking, still speaking, and placed on a white plate? What do you call what sugar does to a body, how it melts, sticks, dams the pipes, slows blood as it tries to push, slows the tuckering heart, ties it up like a goat. What should we call this type of drowning?

SM Award-winning poet, Irène Mathieu, has a collection of poetry called Grande Marronage. In it, she makes connections between generations of Creole women of color in New

Orleans, including her grandmother. Mathieu is also a pediatrician at the University of Virginia health system. She joins me to talk about poetry, medicine, and family. Irène, your Creole grandmother of Louisiana is one of three women of different generations you feature in your new poetry collection. Tell me something about her.

IM Sure. My grandmother is 96 years old. She is a very sweet, very lovely woman who has many stories. And she has gone through a lot in her life. She's a very strong woman. So, she grew up in New Orleans in the 1930s and 40s. And moved to the Washington DC area with my grandfather in her early 20s, and lived just outside DC for the most of her adult life until just a couple of years ago when she moved. But she is an educator. She spent many years as a teacher in the public school system in Maryland. And I think it's because she is a teacher that she has so many stories and that I learned so much from her without even really realizing that she was teaching me something.

SM Were there stories later in life that you learned about her upbringing that surprised you?

IM I was surprised to learn—this isn't so much about her upbringing but about how when she had first moved to the DC area, as an educator, she really wanted to go further and to get her Masters degree which would allow her to teach full-time at Dunbar High School, which was then a very prestigious high school. And she asked my grandfather if she could go back to school to get her Masters degree, and he said no. And I'm not really sure why he said no, but you could tell even though she told this story in a sort of kind way and did not seem upset about it but you could tell that it was something she was still thinking about. And I really wished I knew more about why he said no and how that sort of shaped the rest of her life and the way that she saw herself and her potential as an educator. So there were things like that that came out in the writing of this book that did sort of surprise me. There were other little sort of funny stories from her childhood. For example, she told me how, when she was a child, she and her brother and her parents would often go to visit an aunt who lived in Biloxi, Mississippi, and she would never swim in the water, because she didn't want to get her hair wet and have to re-do it, and she would always insist that her mom would bring food from home that she would eat because she didn't like eating food outside of her home. She was a very picky eater. [laughs]. So I thought that was a funny anecdote partly because I'm also a little bit picky with food [laughs].

00:31:40

SM What did she tell you about her growing up years in New Orleans?

IM She has really fond memories of growing up in New Orleans. She recently told me that every year for her birthday, her father would get her a cake from her favorite bakery, and it would always be this huge, elaborate, very extravagant cake that the four of them could not possibly finish. But she always looked forward to that because it was such a

grand gesture and she really loved her father. She was a very kind and also very worldly man who often went back to his home country of Spain, so his grandfather immigrated from Spain in 1857, and he went back several times to visit Barcelona. He would always impress upon my father that history is complicated including my own family history, and that there are a lot of nuances, meaning that we have ancestors who came from Africa, we have ancestors who came from Spain, from France, we have ancestors who were already here before the first Europeans arrived. I think that, in the current political moment, and probably for much of US history, there's been an impulse for people to choose a side. You're either black or you're white, and if you're black that means most of your family is from Africa. And if you're white, that means most of your family is from Europe. And the reality is that American society is much more interwoven and much more nuanced than that. And I think that there are political reasons for wanting to divide people that have been in place as long as this country has existed. But my father's grandfather would always impress upon him to resist that compulsion in our society to choose a side and to be one or the other. And to learn about and embrace the nuance and the complexity of this family.

SM Can you read something about your grandmother in your new book?

IM Sure. This poem is called Furnace. It's about a story my grandmother told me about watching her mother make calas, which are known today as beignets, which my great grandmother would make in the backyard. Furnace, a piece of iron hell, blinking hot, belly full of coal, mother casts the sheets in, snapping. To boil down on my brother's urine are tears, sweat, blood stains. And the furnace would suck those sheets between its teeth, spit them back out, so white they hurt your brain to look at the sun on them. Or the furnace would digest rice balls, mother fried into callous, steaming with hard sauce. Mother, the furnace workhorse. Mother with reddened palms, of chapped and burning fingertips. Because of the furnace, I grew up confusing the smells of whiskey and sugar with fresh laundry. I say the furnace was hell because it was full of such trickery. So hot could burn your fingertips two ways to Sunday and back. As if scorching away the mess of us was the only way to get clean our sticky fingers, our must hair. To smell good and sharp as hell, washed up with whiskey. I bet mother hated that furnace. She always looked mad when she opened it. But she wanted us to be bright, sweet, even if it meant unfastening a little inferno and throwing in her skin, boiling, liquor. I wrote that poem because I was trying to imagine the manual labor of being a housewife in that time period in the 1920s and 30s. And the thanklessness of that very intense physical labor. Doing laundry in an outdoor furnace and then also making these calas, these beignets, which from my grandmother's perspective, are a sweet memory of this childhood treat. But I could imagine that, for the mother who had to do this thankless work, that it could be a lot of labor, and I was trying to think about what kind of emotions that she may have had that were left out of that story about just thinking of the beignets that came out of the furnace and the fresh laundry that, you know, as a child, my grandmother probably took for granted as most children do the very hard labor of our mothers.

SM Another woman that you feature in the middle section of the book is Alice Dunbar Nelson. She lived before your grandmother. She's a fascinating woman.

00:36:02

IM Yes, she really is. And I chose to write about her because she was also from New Orleans. Although, as you mentioned, she was from the generation prior to my grandmother's. And she also moved to the mid-Atlantic in her early adulthood, and lived there for the rest of her life. She lived most of her adult life in Delaware. And I thought she was really fascinating, because she was a woman who was very forward-thinking in some ways, and in other ways was very much a woman of her time. So, as a Creole woman from New Orleans with a mixed ancestry of European, indigenous, and African ancestors. She was very much a social activist. She was a Harlem Renaissance writer. She contributed to and ran multiple journals writing about civil rights issues of the day and women's rights issues. She also was a poet and a short story writer. And she was the wife of Paul Lawrence Dunbar. That was her first marriage, who was her much more well known Harlem Renaissance ex-husband. And I was really fascinated because I grew up hearing so much about Paul Lawrence Dunbar and his poetry, but significantly less about Alice. And not only was Alice a very interesting public figure, but she also had a fascinating private life. She's one of the few women of that generation who left extensive diaries. And in those diaries, we see the contradictions of her life, how she was a woman who had relationships with both men and women at a time when bisexuality was rarely if ever discussed. She was somebody who really demanded a lot from her partners. She wanted, in her marriages with men, she wanted an intellectual equal, that was a partnership based on friendship. Most of the men that she married were not able to live up to that ideal, which at the time was a very progressive ideal. On the other hand, when we look back at some of her writings, we see how Alice Dunbar Nelson had also internalized ideas of classism and of colorism that unfortunately are still present in modern society. But very much were the underlying poison of the social justice movement in that time period as well. And I think that stymied her efforts and others' efforts to really seek full liberation for her people and all people in the United States. So I just found these paradoxes really interesting. And an interesting complement to my grandmother's story in which I saw some of the same paradoxes.

SM What can you read to us from your book about Alice Dunbar Nelson that you particularly enjoyed?

IM Sure. This poem is called Mirror Facing North. It has an epigraph which says, "most loving poet soul," and that's Alice Dunbar Nelson describing Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Mirror facing north. Stand in the same place long enough, and you'll start to see things that aren't there. The way ancient astronomers call dead balls of light, gods. No one is arching his bow at your head. No twins are smiling down at you. The field looks full of

smoke, but no one has set a fire. And the sky could be a bowl of mercury, crescenting higher with every degree the temperature rises. A hot bubble. Step into the field and put your hands over your eyes. What you see in the blue spotted darkness is what you believe and what will tether your heels to this place. Love. Looking like nothing you recognize. Love dressed in a snarl, in a bottle of gin. Love, not interested in friendship. One thing the astronomers found that I will not contest—the drinking gourd. I followed it to the city’s mess to remake the nation with man, while he was trying to stuff me into the smallest cup. Take me in, though I was bursting into thick air. What the stars didn’t mention—to nourish a person to the point of survival takes an entire person. I had to keep walking, long enough to see my feet reappear. Free feet that are there enough. And this vision too is a kind of gift. I wrote that poem when I was thinking a lot about her relationship with Paul Lawrence Dunbar, which, according to the historical record, was a very violent relationship, unfortunately. There was a lot of intimate partner violence. And I was trying to imagine what Alice may have been thinking and feeling while she was in a relationship with this man she admired so much on an intellectual level, but who was so violent towards her at times, and how difficult that relationship must have been.

00:40:50

SM When you were getting to know more of your grandmother’s stories, you have said that, “I paid attention to what she didn’t say as much as what she told me.” What did you notice about what she elided or left out?

IM I noticed that whenever I would ask her about something possibly negative or controversial, she would give me very vague answers or answer in euphemisms or proverbs. And I was really interested in why she would respond like that. I think part of it is because of respectability politics, so the idea that, for women of a certain generation and for people of color particularly, this idea of trying to always present a good face and never talk about things that are negative in order to be fully accepted by society. And I think that she had that so engrained being a woman who came of age in the 1940s and 50s, that it was really difficult for her to talk about anything negative. And I was fascinated by that because I think that our identities are formed as much by the stories we know as they are by the stories that we don’t know. And so I started to ask myself, “What stories are being left out of this narrative, either deliberately or because they’ve been forgotten, or were considered unimportant and therefore haven’t been passed down?” And I think what I’m trying to do in this book is ask the greater question of, you know, what does that look like at a national level? I’m exploring this within my family, but what stories have we left out of our national understanding of history and our country’s discourse about the past? And what stories have been deliberately omitted?

SM I noticed that at the start of the book you open with, “one door open leads to another. There will be more and more things coming out to liberate the soul and the body.” And that is a quotation of your grandmother.

IM Yes, it is. It's funny because I wrote that down as soon as she said it because it was just so beautiful and profound and really captured the essence of what I was trying to explore in this book. And she was just talking, you know, I had asked her some question and she was going off on a tangent and then, a little while later, after that, I said, "grandma, you know you said this, don't you?" And I read the quote to her, and she said, "I said that?" [laughs]. It was very sweet. And I think she was starting to realize that that's really what she was doing too is she was telling me these stories and what I was doing with them is sort of a kind of alchemy of taking them and figuring out, "how do we go from point A to point B to a more liberated place as women and as people of color?"

SM How do you reconcile the labor that goes into writing these poems with the hard day job you have as a doctor?

IM Well, I think that medicine and poetry involve similar types of emotional labor. So, they both involve creating a sort of intimacy between, in the case of medicine, a patient and a physician, or in poetry, a writer and a reader. And in that intimacy there is a potential space, a potential space for healing. And so I think that they actually utilize similar skill sets but end up with very different end products in terms of the mechanics of just finding the time. I write somewhat sporadically. I, for many years, kept a journal that I would write in daily, that was really just a log of what was going on in my life. But I realize in retrospect that journaling for me was a way to use language to get at something that I couldn't quite verbalize until I actually sat down and made myself write about it. And that's often what I'm doing in poetry. I'm just starting with a word or an image or a phrase or feeling and I'm writing towards a clarity that I can't predict and often is surprising when I get to the end of the poem. And so, these days, I don't write on a daily basis, but I try to as much as I possibly can. And it certainly is variable. As a physician, my job right now as a primary care doctor is more of a 9 to 5 than it was as a resident when my hours were very all over the place and involved a lot of very long and overnight hours. So it is a little bit easier to have some protected time in the evenings which is when I like to write, to just sit down and explore that either in my journal or through a poem.

00:45:06

SM Are you now finding more of your work inspired by some of the people that you encounter in the course of your practice?

IM I try not to write about my patients specifically, but I do think that the language of the body and the understandings of illness and the pathology of the disease is shaping the way that I write about the body and the way that I write about relationships and other topics that come up in my poetry.

SM I heard the illusion to tuberculosis earlier.

IM Yes, yes, absolutely. At the beginning of my medical training, I think I was very wary of using too much medical language or too many patient stories, because I think that there's—for me I thought there was a possibility of becoming a little too sentimental, or of employing this fantastic medical jargon for the sensationalism of the language instead of feeding deeper into the meaning. And I think I'm at a point where I feel a little bit more comfortable incorporating some of that into my work. So with some of my newer poems, there's certainly a little bit in Grande Marronage, but in some of my poems that haven't been published yet, I do delve into that a little bit more deeply.

SM Before we go, the final part of your book is told in a voice that I presume is yours.

IM That's correct, yes.

SM Read for me one of those poems.

IM Sure. This poem is called DCA to SDQ, and I should clarify that DCA is the airport code for Reagan National Airport, and SDQ is the airport code for the Santo Domingo airport in the Dominican Republic. It's a poem that's in 3 sections, and in thinking about my great grandfather and how he was such a great traveler and a worldly man, but also the class privileges that went into being able to travel at that time period, I related that back to myself as somebody who has had the privilege to travel a lot, but also what that experience has been like for me as a person of color traveling to various countries and how that, the perception of my identity changes depending on where I am. DCA to SDQ, 1. I'm with a group of other Americans trying to get into a nightclub. The bouncer lets the boys in, nods and winks. Stops me. Tu se du la por favor. I pretend I don't speak Spanish. Level and cut my eyes into razors. I'm not Dominican. He looks me over, considers, steps aside, but the sugar on my tongue has already dissolved. Rotten aftertaste thinly coating my teeth. I'm strung in the cobweb night dense as 200 year old cotton pales as sugarcane stacked in wagons, dense as the salt iron throb of blood. Of course I want to leave then. But the boys are already throwing back rum shots and I don't have the heart. 2. The incredible thing about this country is that we don't see race here. It's all a melting pot. Oya de san cocho. Everybody does bachata the same, you know? My friend's face is a cup of cream. Our parents sow skin, fix hearts. Our hands are soft as clean gauze. Our necks are smooth, our breaths confident. When we smile, our teeth look like boarding passes. We are smiling in a restaurant in the old colonial city. Perfect slices of stewed goat on our white plates. I look down and I think I see the goat's heart. I want to say, "there is a faint bleating coming from my plate" but I don't have the mouth. 3. What do you call a goat trying to get into a nightclub? A billy club swinging. What do you call Billy and his friends throwing words like darts at you? A faint bleating. What do you call a game of darts in the colonial city? A mourning. What do you call a game of darts in Washington DC? A body club mourning. What do you call a ghost that dances on your plate? What do you call a bleating mourning of darts? A word

throwing clubs in the city. A morning dance at the club. What do you call the precise form of surgery in which a heart is removed from a person while she is still walking? Still speaking, and placed on a white plate. What do you call what sugar does to a body? How it melts. Sticks. Dams the pipes. Slows blood as it tries to push. Slows the tuckering heart. Ties it up like a goat. What should we call this type of drowning? One of the big themes in Grand Marronage is class, and thinking about how class and capitalism have really shaped the way that we relate to each other as human beings both within the United States and also outside of the United States when we travel to other countries. Well, we don't travel depending on who we are and how much money we have. And I wanted to think about how that history of racialized capitalism really sort of haunts all of us and defines how we are able to move and what it feels like when we go different places whether it's within our own country or city or within another country. And how that privilege is also shaped by US imperialism. Was thinking about that in the last stanza, and what are all our role is in the complicity of that imperialism. [music].

SM Irène Mathieu is a pediatrician at the University of Virginia health system. Her new collection of poetry is called Grande Marronage. Major support for With Good Reason is provided by the law firm of McGuireWoods and by the University of Virginia Health System, pioneering treatments to save lives, UVAhealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Matt Darroch, Allison Byrne, Lauren Francis, and Jamal Millner. For the podcast, go to withgoodreasonradio.org. I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening and may your family and people you love stay safe. [music]