

Lisa Wolfe: You're in Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes 1LW1 says, "Cast your bread upon the waters and in seven days you will get it back," you know that verse? It's so obscure, and most people think it's about karma, or stewardship, or something. But there's this scholar of ancient beer, who says, well, that's basically a beer recipe.

Pádraig Ó Tuama: Yeah. 'Course.

LW: You bake bread, you put it in water, you cover it with a cloth, you wait seven days.

PO: It's been fermenting.

LW: Exactly. It would be--

PO: That's fast beer!

LW: Well, it's not--it would be, it would be no Guinness. But it was a staple of the ancient Western Asian diet because it would purify the water.

PO: Yeah.

LW: And so everybody drank it, the whole family it would be, um, probably two, two and a half percent alcohol. And sometimes people would drink it with a big, long reed straw that had a kind of a sieve-like attachment at the bottom to strain out the bread.

PO: Yeah.

LW: Or they would pour it off. And there are parts of Africa where people still drink beer like that with these big straws, like communal. And I was able to make it into several pages in my commentary, because it's a feminist commentary. And of course, since women baked the bread, they brewed the beer, right? So there's, there's beer and Ecclesiastes for ya.

PO: Fantastic.

LW: Did you go get a pint last night?

PO: No. It would have been nice, but I was tired. So I just went to bed.

Leslie Long: That was a long day.

Tracy Floreani: Well, I did record your beer, your beer lecture, which we're happy to have. For posterity.

LW: It was only like two and a half minutes. It's in my book! Which is a commentary, you know, my son said when I explained it to him, "So it's a book about a book?"

PO: Meta.

LW: Yeah, thank you. That is my life.

PO: I'm gonna give you a talk about a talk.

TF: Oh, speaking of books, I meant to bring you one as a gift. But I'll mail it to you! So you don't have to bring it home. It's a friend of mine just had her first book of poetry, her first book was published, and it's about being queer in Oklahoma and deciding to leave. And it's both heartbreaking and hilarious.

LW: Oh really?

TF: It's really interesting. The last one is like a letter to Oklahoma, "My ex-girlfriend." And it's all about what a bad partner you were even though I was in love with you? Well, I think he would, I think you would like it. I'd love to share her work with you. I know people are probably wasting your time all the time.

PO: No, no. That's how I read. It's great. Saves me buying them.

TF: Well, I have an extra copy of hers from when the launch happened. Because I just thought someone's gonna want this as a gift.

PO: That'd be great. Always happy.

TF: Well, shall we start the interview? I mean, we can just have a conversation, but we should talk about the things we want to.

LL: Right. Talk about our things. Go ahead. You said you had a million questions.

LW: I think I'll start with, so when we found out you were coming last spring, I started reading *In the Shelter*. And it felt very comforting and pastoral and kind of devotional, and I would read it at bedtime. And it was it was lovely, and reflective and poetic. And there's even kind of a litany in it. And so I enjoyed it very much. And I'm sad that I hadn't bought a hardcopy. I read it from the library on Libby on my phone. And anyway, so then the next thing I did was I looked to see what our library had on campus and they had *Feed the Beast* and I went in and I picked it up and I paged through it. And then I just had to sit down and read the whole thing all at once. It just was engrossed and so compelling, and completely different. So my question is kind of what happened in between, with you that... or nothing? It's just two different works.

PO: Nothing really. Yeah. I suppose partly, I became safer. I'm not working in religious environments anymore, even liberal ones. So, in terms of employment, I'm not looking for employment in those areas either. So yeah, I mean, in *In the Shelter*, there is reference to the exorcisms and those kinds of things. And that was my first foray into trying to put something of that in print and the bit in *In the Shelter* with the boxes and all of that. I suppose I, I was curious about how to bring literature into conversation with those experiences, and I think those experiences are relatively mild in comparison. I think the experiences I had are relatively mild in comparison to other people, but I still wanted to come back to them. And I want to look at them in conversation with a broader literature. And I suppose I feel the illusory... curiosity was of interest to me, how was it that you bring that into conversation with sonnet, particularly, and then Irish form sonnet, and then Shakespeare, and then text, and then Dante, and like, for me, it was in many ways a literary exploration and *Feed the Beast* for the Seven Deadly Sonnets. And all the way through, I think, to my mind, underneath *In the Shelter* is the quiet narrative of saying, "none of this worked." Do you know, none of this literature worked in the sense of the promises of belonging that it offers, because in the shelter is in many ways that close attention to literature, but a certain recognition that all of the promises that religious literature offer, fail, and feed the beast is just exploring that side of the failure.

LW: So one of the things that I like to introduce my students to that I feel like you're doing and feed the beast is resistant reading of the biblical text in particular. And so I wondered, when or how you kind of came upon that sort of style, or hermeneutic? Or if that's always been part of you?

PO: Well, I was always attracted to it. But the more, the more I read, the more I thought, "Oh, you can do that? You can do that?" You know, "you can do that?!" I think learning about Midrash was a great life changer. And I was at a conference in London, looking at Holocaust and human behavior through the lens of history. And so the idea of teaching young people about critical thinking, and I was one of the few non-Israelis there. Anyway, I there was conversations about Midrash that then changed the way I looked at things. And I began reading Midrash then and you know, historical Midrash, "Rashy," you know, but from that then looking at contemporary Midrashic scholars, particularly Avivah Gottlieb Zornburg and her work, and just seeing what you're able to do when it comes to reading text. I love *The Gospel of Solentiname*, as well by Ernesto Cardenal. And there's something about the way that he doesn't correct people, when they'll say something, and they read a text and then immediately they're talking about what happened yesterday. Man, these unconscious associations, it's happening, it's a psychoanalytical approach to seeing what happens when you open a text. And he shouldn't correct people because they're doing nothing wrong. But so often, in the context of a controlling environment, regarding a text, the desire is to say, "Well, you need to get it perfectly right in order to be able to justify making that association." He doesn't try to do that. So it's seeing—and it's not just a biblical material, then it's thinking, what would it be like to do that with Gilgamesh? What would it be like to do that with Irish mythology? What's it like to do that with Greek mythology? And looking at Greek mythology and the original stories where you go, this huge narrative that we have about Persephone, for instance, it's just spun out from a single line in a very early text, and somebody added something, and somebody added something, and somebody added something. And, you know, I'm just seeing the way that these narratives develop is all about somebody that brings their associations and probably their own experiences to it. And I think seeing biblical literature just as another world literature into which human projection is entirely welcome, as part of the project about what it means to live with a story. That made me think, "Oh, look at what you can do."

LW: If something could be in dialogue with you.

PO: Yeah.

TF: Can I ask a follow up question? Because yesterday when we were talking at dinner, I heard you all talking about the erasure poem. And I heard you say, "I had great fun with that." And I was really struck by the idea of having great fun with a text that is doctrinal documentation of exclusion, or isolation from the religious community. So I was just wondering if you could talk more about the idea of having fun with text that is inherently not fun for the people about whom it's written.

PO: Yeah. There's an Irish writer, Nuala O'Faolain, and she was an editorialist in the Irish Times who died young. And she released a book called, *Are You Somebody?*, which was a list of her editorials, a collection of editorials and half of the book then was a long introduction, kind of like an autobiography, or part of an autobiography. Brilliant. And I read it in my early 20s, and one of the one of the editorials says, "me and the Pope have reached a new level of our relationship, I no longer care what he says." And I remember reading that thinking, "I yearn for your life. I yearn to be in a situation where I don't care." And I was still trying to be very devoted at that stage. But I loved the freedom she had to say it. And

also, the fact that she was writing about it meant she wasn't entirely free, either, you know, and I didn't see that as hypocrisy, I saw that as cultural, you know, how could you be a feminist in Ireland in the 80s, and 90s, and not care about what the Pope was saying? Because, you know, it's not about caring for the Pope or not, it's about thinking, this shit is going to affect me, and going to affect other women. So I love the clarity of her language, I think she's a brilliant, brilliant writer. And so I realized, during the pandemic, when that's sent out on the family, and you know, there was somebody had said, "Oh, have you seen their documentation that had come out two days before," and I thought, "It wasn't even on my radar." And I had known that the Synod on the Family was happening and that something was released. But it wasn't like I've marked it down to go, "God, keep an eye out on the Monday morning for what's going to come through." I don't sign up to any of those lists anymore. So when it did when I did read it, then just a few days after that paper was released, and they just immediately thought, "Well, what can I make it do?" Again, it's a dialogical relationship with the text, and dialectical, too. In the sense of, I thought, every text is always saying much more than the things it's saying. And the attempted forensic precision that you find in a Vatican document like that, that thinks it's being so, so clear about all of these things. Part of me wanted to do pages of psychoanalytical anarchy into the text, to think "Well, look at what else is there, hidden." Some of which is creative. God is a pilgrim. And then some that is, you know, people with homosexual orientations declare, "illicit any form of God that cannot be recognized as God." Some of it is playful, some of it is theological. Some of it is creative. Some of it is just protest. I had another page at the end of it, which was all from the footnotes that just spat out flibbertigibbet. Because I kind of wanted to have playfulness of language, but I was limited in terms of pages, because it's a chapbook I was limited in terms of pages. So whenever that gets published in a full-length collection, I think flibbertigibbet will go back in.

LW: My students were really drawn to the part where you had to work so carefully to find the letters to spell out respect.

PO: Repent and respect.

LW: How it just, you had to be drawn in to work so hard to find that word.

PO: That's the thing is how difficult is it to find respect in the text. I was actually delighted, from an artistic point of view, to say, "The word 'respect' isn't even implied." So look at look at the level of unearthing you have to do, the level of archaeology, into this language. And I do see that as it's an artistic project, but it is also a literary one in the sense that it's visually artistic but it's literary, in the sense of thinking, "Language is always saying much more than we think it's saying." And Terrance Tilley has a book, *Story Theology*, which is a very basic introduction, bit of a primer really, into reading of gospel texts, through the lens of literary criticism: plot, character, locale. Really helpful, just a really great book to read in the first week of doing a course on narrative theology. He has a line in the middle of it where he says, 'The author of his story cannot control stories' power to reveal.' And I find that anarchic and it's insight about what happens, for him to say that theologically, that's very interesting about the Bible. That confirms something that poets are always trying to say, you know, you can never control a poem in its reception, or any artists who don't think that they're writing something doctrinal. Anyway, and so I felt like, well, the Vatican can't control the story that they're telling you.

TF: While we're on the topic of comparing the tone of in the shelter to feed the beast. I saw one of the interviews where you describe, feed the beast as, 'Homo rage in poem shapes.' Which I think is an

excellent description. Thinking to your next book that's coming out, *Kitchen Hymns*, how would you describe it? In terms of overall tone.

PO: I kind of feel like the book isn't written yet, even though it's completed. Often, I think the book is only completed when you have it back. And you can't change it anymore. And you're like, "Shit." So, um, what would I say?

TF: Maybe the space that it came from, where you were in that moment, versus where you were during the others?

PO: Yeah I wonder....

TF: I think you're just resisting giving us a preview. [laughs]

PO: No, I'm not! I'm thinking through... um...

LW: Running through the table of contents?

PO: Yeah, it's in three long sequences. One called "Do you believe in God?", where every poem has the same title: "Do you believe in God?" One sequence where Jesus is crawling out of Hades, and Persephone holds the gate open for him. And they meet and become lovers in the garden by the gate. And then the last section called "Kitchen Hymns," which is a secular setting of the mass.

LW: Oh, lovely.

TF: That's a nice preview. Enticing!

PO: Yeah, I think that's all I know. I mean, so the phrase 'kitchen hymns' is kind of a casual phrase, used to as a gathering point for hymns that were sung in Irish over centuries that couldn't be sung in the chapel because they wanted Latin. Often hymns that are local to a parish or local to a valley, and often song from the point of view of Mary. And so when you read these texts--they're all in Irish—when you read these texts, it's hard to know if she's singing to a baby or to a corpse. Because sometimes she's saying, "Oh, look at your nose so broken, well look at your sweet face." And a well-known musician, who's also a theologian, and I think something like an ethnomusicologist says, Níóirín Ní Riain says, 'What man could write a line like that?' You know, when you're reading these texts you go, "These are these are lullabies. Hypnotic lullabies." And there's a collection of them published from 1928 called *The Poems of God—Dánta Dé*--and there's a, what's the opposite of a *nihil imprimatur*? There's the opposite of that pasted into the front of it, which says 'none of these can be sung in the chapel.' Fascinating. And it was done as a secular literary project. It wasn't published by the church. But nonetheless, I have an original copy from 1928, and this imprimatur was put into it.

LW: That's so contradictory to what we have in the Bible. And it's so ignorant of what the biblical text is a collection of—there's a psalm, I want to say it's 13LW It's really short. And some, a number of scholars say it was probably written by a woman, it's about being like a weaned child--

PO: "I've stilled and quieted my soul, like a weaned child at its mother's breast."

LW: That's what that made me think of. And so, you know, to me, the Bible has that stuff. Ignorance of that in the authoritarian.

PO: Yeah. For me, I suppose partly what *Kitchen Hymns* is, is an exploration of what feels necessary to say, even if it isn't permissible in certain places. I don't see it as a text of rebellion. It doesn't have a big bad wolf finish. It just has, "This is what I have to say. When it comes to the question of religion."

TF: So a lot of the interviews I looked at with you, the conversation always goes back to religion or your peace work. And clearly, those are deeply meshed with your dealings and work with poetry. But are there things about poetry that you don't get asked about or that you do want to talk about?

PO: Very much.

TF: Because so much of that content and subject matter is the focal point?

PO: I mean, like, for me there's no question that poetry is the sustaining force for me. Theology, in some ways, is an exploration of poetry. And peace work is an exploration of language and the impact of it. Poetry is at the heart of everything, I mean if I had to choose between them—in a luxurious world where 'employment' wasn't a word. Poetry is everything for me. And within that I love the narratives of whether that's Greek mythology, Irish mythology, or biblical mythology, you know? But it's for their poetic purpose, and their artistic and creative purpose. I suppose it's, while I'm asked about it less, I try to make sure to bring it in. For me, the question is form, what is form and how does form shape my work in terms of Villanelle or pantoum? Or erasure? "But also, the form."

TF: Yeah, so it's interesting that you're talking about form because some people find form limiting and some find it guiding.

PO: But I mean, isn't everything form? Like even free form is form. Like, even when you see people doing free form stuff, very quickly, that becomes the standard, where other people are like, "Oh, I'm doing another free form thing, just like that free form in that book that did really well." And so everything is a vehicle for trying to say something. Every form, whether it's formal or not. And so sometimes I think the question about formal form and informal form, or formal form or free form, they have an illusion that it's possible to write without form. (chuckles) I don't think that's true. I think everything's in form. The question is, is it suiting the intuition of the art that you're trying to put across? And for me, that's the question about what's the relationship between the form and the text of your work? And are they in conversation with each other? And, you know, depending as to where you are, formal form is in or out of vogue. You know, for a while in white American poetry it'd have been hard to find something like a Villanelle, or a sonnet. Black American poetry really made a huge literary turn towards that, I think, in the last 10 years, I might be wrong about that, I suppose it's the last 10 years when I noticed. Danez Smith, for instance, in their book, *Don't Call Us Dead*, opening with a corona of sonnets. And I think that has shaped the face of American poetry, of people of all ethnicities and races in terms of their public acceptance and the engagement with formal and broken engagements with things like sonnet and Villanelle. And then Jericho Brown's introduction of the Duplex. And American formalism is really leading the way in intriguing ways in poetics. And that's influencing other parts of the English-speaking world when it comes to that.

TF: Thinking about from things I've read that you've said about growing up speaking both Irish and English, growing up with biblical texts, it's clear that language has always been a big part of your world, poetics of some form or another have always been part of your world. When did you get serious and committed to poetry as the form? Has it been a gradual thing?

PO: No, it was deliberate. I come from a musical family, six of us play instruments. My dad is a very fine pipe player and tin whistle player. He wouldn't say he's very fine, but he is very fine. I play the guitar, bouzouki, and mandolin and banjo, you know, I can play the guitar and a variety of stringed instruments—is what a friend said to me once, insultingly.. And he's not wrong! So for a long time, I wrote songs. And I mean, I wrote poetry all along too, but I also wrote songs. And when it became clear to me that art and its performance was always going to be part of something, and that maybe it was part of something for me in a way that I was definitely serious about—no matter how I was earning money—that I was definitely serious about this form of art. I thought, Well, being a singer-songwriter, it's so much time, and I wanted to give the time to writing rather than to gig after gig in a bar. And this isn't in any way, a self put-down: I knew that I was a better poet than I was a singer-songwriter. So I just thought, well, I also want to go where I feel like I can have the flourishing of things.

TF: If I'd known I would have prepared and brought my guitar and made you sing a song.

PO: Well, I am actually thinking of—I want to buy a harmonium—and I am thinking of using a harmonium in some recitals for *Kitchen Hymns*. Because I can play the guitar on the piano was well, in the sense of being able to hold the chords.

LL: What a great idea, though, to perform those hymns. So people can hear them.

PO: I didn't tone them. Rather than that, they wouldn't have a melody. But the idea would be to hold something like a drone on that, but then, that people can hum along to as well. So I'm interested in what happens in a room, when you can create an experience in the reciting of a poem. I think it's a communal experience.

LW: Something happens in your body when you sing that gives it a different aspect.

LL: So as you're talking, I was thinking about, I was talking to one of our students after you talked yesterday in chapel and one of the things--so we live in what's called the Bible Belt. And a lot of our students have been raised with a very strict understanding of Scripture. Scriptural interpretation. So it feels very unsafe to step away from anything that has been. And I thought yesterday, especially with the poetry workshop you did with them that gave them a way to kind of take a step. But I was wondering, how did that begin for you, because obviously, you've struggled with what your faith of birth looked like to where you are today. And as students are thinking about that for themselves, especially here, too, I mean, religion and faith are very strong influences.

PO: And so, the question, how did I do it?

LL: I think people are always looking for... How do I find what I believe while also letting go or holding on?

PO: I mean, some of it for me, it was kind of an accidental falling into Ignatian spirituality. There, Ignatius in his, in his guidance on prayer says to people read a text, maybe read it twice, then close the text, and call it to mind and then put yourself into it and describe what you can see. And these are very imaginative readings, to free associate with the text. They're also an exercise in point of view and an exercise in close reading. And an exercise in plotting the gaps of the text, which isn't to say that any texts with gaps is limited. Every text has gaps. There's no such thing as a gapless text. Hilary Mantel has a great series of Reith Lectures. And a third of them is about a particular Polish writer who tried to write

a text that was completely comprehensive, and was essentially driven mad by her project. And Hilary Mantel has huge respect for the project of this writer, but also speaks about the failure of not being able to cope with that. It's a brilliant, brilliant Reith lecture (that happen every year to commemorate the BBC). So I think for me, Ignatius was the surprising door in. I'd heard a few people speak about the Bible, a great one, Frances Hogan, who is a gospel scholar, and I just loved the way that she said, "Well, this is the Jesus of Mark we're talking about here." And I was 19, I think, when I heard that, and I'd never heard *anyone* say that. And you're like, "Can you say that?" And I just loved her close reading, and that she knew, "Well, no, Jesus of Mark and Jesus of John are *very* different characters, my God, I don't think they would have liked each other at all. 'Shut up!' Mark's Jesus would say to John's Jesus."

LW: or "You're such a snob!" (laughter)

PO: And I think the Jesuses of Mark, Luke, and John, would all agree that Matthew's Jesus just never shuts up. Just walk away, he'll be talking for the next five chapters, God Almighty. He's a synopsis. He's a series of footnotes.

LW: He's a show-off.

PO: So I think, for me, the opening door was a literary one into looking at how, seeing texts like that as works of art, and as much as I appreciate the art of poetry and the art of fiction, it's to say well you can also appreciate the art behind these. It's a mystery as to how they're compiled, you know, of course there's some historical data, but then there's also a sense of so much about what we don't know. And within the context of that, I feel full freedom therefore, to bring, what my limited brain says about art appreciation, to the art appreciation of texts, and then the art appreciation of a life in response to those texts. And to feel freedom within that. To say, "You can say whatever you want." If Jeremiah, in Chapter 3, has God say, "Look around you Israel, is there any place where you have not fucked?" *Strong* language, the verb implying "thrust"--it's a brutal verb. If Jeremiah has God say that, well then, we can all say what we want. So therefore, what do you want to say? What have you thought about saying? About religion, about its experience, about its influence, and about its relationship to the text. And so much, it seems to me, of the problems of the texts, it's not the text itself, it's the policing and controlling mechanism of the text interpretation, by those who are violent in trying to prescribe what the text can be interpreted to say. And that is both boring and dangerous.

LL: That is the fight that often happens in the place our students live. Is that fight between hearing it differently and going back to their places of worship and hearing that there is no place to look at that differently.

PO: That's a failure of the intellectual project, unfortunately. I do find that much charismatic Christianity, whether that's of a Catholic or Ecumenical or Evangelical flavor, it's frightened of the brain, and sees the intellectual project as somehow antithetical to the process of engaging seriously with the resources of faith, and there is no fight. I have a body, part of which is a brain. Use it.

LW: Well, I mean, it's about power, in the end.

TF: I have a follow-up. Well, it has me thinking about people coming to text for epiphany or revelation or whatever word they want to apply to what they get out of texts that they look to for spirituality. And it has me thinking about the word "revelation" or "epiphany" that comes through writing, which is a whole different act. And I think it's interesting because in some of your interviews I've seen people refer

to you as a healer, and I think of you as a seeker, and to me, poetry seems it's a way to not always say something we want to say, but a way to ask a question and explore it. So I don't know if you feel like, as a writer, that that's giving you more of a way to think about revelation and epiphany and understanding, versus just as a reader.

PO: I mean, a lot comes to mind. An immediate association is that the Irish word for poet, *file*, is related to a verb, "to see," and that revelation is the translation given to the final book in the Christian Corpus for "apocalypse," so apocalypse has nothing to do with the end of the world, it's to do with kind of pulling up the curtain and seeing what is. Seeing the here and now, and so I'm interested in writing, in looking at the furniture, but what's being referred to: the time, the place, what else is going on, the weather. All of these strange pieces of anecdotal data that sometimes make their way into ancient texts. The mythological and biblical, and biblical mythology too. Which are just artistic flourishes sometimes, but they're very interesting. And what that is to life. A friend of mine went through a terrible grief, and I was on the phone with him, in the first few days of what has continued to be devastating years, and I said to him, "What can you see?" And he said, "Cherry blossoms have come back. They shouldn't." So, there's something that happens to us in grounding ourselves, that is a literary project, to describe what's happening, and the idea that that's only pathetic fallacy is very limited. Seeing something is about looking around and locating yourself in what's happening, and what else is happening. It's a matter of saying, "My world is falling apart, and the world is continuing to flourish," or, "My world is happy and the world is going into winter," or whatever. And that, I think, is one of the ways that writing can humble us to say, "Your little planet is only one planet about what's happening." And so I mean, for me, I try to see, try to ask, and I try to look around.

LW: Well I noticed that you co-authored a book on Ruth, not long ago, and I wrote a commentary on Ruth, that was my first book, part of it was on Ruth, and I haven't gotten my hands on that book yet, so after you've had a chance to take a couple bites, I'd be curious—well I'll also say too, while you were talking about these Ignatian readings, when I was on my sabbatical writing my [unknown] commentary, I did my sabbatical at Episcopal cathedral, because I couldn't go out of town, my kids were little, and I just needed a place. And they had a library that nobody ever used, and they had an Ignatian prayer group that started during that time, and I thought, "Well that's like a sabbatical-y thing that I should probably do. So I went through the exercises, and as you were talking about that process, it struck me in listening to your podcasts that that's kind of how you read a poem. An Ignatian reading of poetry. Are you intentional about that, or maybe you've thought about it along the way?"

PO: I've thought about it along the way completely! And I also think that all Ignatius was doing was learning from others who read texts closely. All good historical engagement is people who read texts carefully, and then can read the world in conversation with that text. Ignatius was brilliant at it, and it created a very simple system for teaching others, but it's not a specific project to Ignatian spirituality, or to any one religion. I think what we've found over and over again throughout world literary history is the capacity and how revolutionary it is for somebody to take a text, a constitution, a mythology, a scripture, a piece of art, to read it, and to read it in a new way. And how enlivening a new point of view is. And how dignifying, too, the idea of point-of-view can be. People who've been told that their point of view is unnecessary. I found my way into that both through Midrash and Ignatius, I suppose the two are doing very different things, but in a certain sense each asks a very very close attention to the text, to read very carefully, and alongside that, to read yourself very carefully. Anton Boisen, who was an early founder of chaplaincy, really, in mental health chaplaincy, talks about the living human document.

LW: He was in Chicago, no?

PO: He was in North America, I know, I'm not sure where.

LW: I was thinking he was in Chicago Theological Seminary. I'm not sure.

PO: But yeah. The living human document. And he went through times when he was hospitalized because of mental health breakdowns, and he kept those quiet but he also wrote from the point of view of experience. In terms of what chaplaincy meant, and dignified chaplaincy, and I think it isn't just about chaplaincy and mental health support, but also about thinking about what does it mean for anyone to attend to their life with literary critique? And that the study of your life and the study of language that emerges from there can be taken as seriously as you would the dialogue of a character in a text.

LW: Like how she was putting herself, so wholeheartedly, in such a powerful setting--her in the library for however many hours.

PO: Well, so Brexit had happened, and Britain has a very very fine parliamentary system, but they don't have a written constitution. They call their constitution, "famously unwritten." The adjective there is a distraction—they just have an unwritten constitution. So when they had a referendum—and typically referenda are a mechanism for constitutional republics, or democracies, because a referendum is usually saying, "will we make this change to our constitution, this specific change, and here are the consequences." They didn't have that, so therefore they don't have rules around it. So it was chaos, absolute chaos. All anybody got was a pamphlet through the door, everybody got the same pamphlet through the door, who had a vote about Brexit. And Ireland wasn't mentioned once in it, everybody in the North of Ireland was like, "What the hell is going to happen?" So the Dublin government, at the time, they were not a government that I would have voted for, and I'd lost my vote in the Republic now because I'd lived in the North so long that I didn't have an address in the Republic, so I don't have a vote for parliamentary elections. But the Dublin government, I think, were brilliant. Immediately they jumped in and began running seminars on what might happen regarding Brexit, all around the border, for businesses, for clubs, for schools. So many families crossed the border five times a day, because one kid's in school here, one kid's in sport there, somebody else is here, you're in a club here, you shop there cause it's cheaper, you shop there cause it's cheaper, or whatever. You go to the post office there if you're sending things this direction, you go to the post office here—there's millions of border crossings a day, and so it was crazy what was happening in Ireland in the incertitude. And so the Dublin government began running all of these seminars, and there were ads on national radio, saying, "If you run across border business, there's a ten-minute process for applying for 5,000 euro grant, it's quick, it's easy," just so that you can begin the process of paying yourself for the time you're going to need to think about, "How do I Brexit-proof the future?" And this was the Dublin government, you know, the London government were doing fuck all. But the Dublin government were just saying that this is a crisis, and also, so much of our peace process was about eradicating, making our border all but invisible, and this was paying so much attention to the reintroduction of a border. It still is. Years later, it's still chaotic. Anyway, one of the things the Dublin government wasn't doing was meeting with religious groups. Now I understand why, they probably felt awkward, but religious groups, religion, is the biggest "club" in the country, if you want to look at people who attend something on a monthly basis, it is the largest population. So I was in Corrymeela [peace community] at the time, and I wrote to... we were partially funded by the Dublin government, the fund for Reconciliation, so I wrote to those people and said, "Look, we have an idea for a way in which you could gather people together who are religiously

interested, in a way that doesn't demand that people share religion." And that's by looking at a story of a widowed, displaced, female, border-crosser. It wouldn't be about telling people how they should or shouldn't have voted, because who cares, you can't undo that. But it is a way of having a story that can contain public narrative that might mean that the relationship building upon which so many peace processes are dependent can be used. So rather than thinking, "We don't know how to talk about Brexit." We can talk about it through this. So that went to the Dublin government and they doubled what we were asking for, said, "Find a little bit of money from any northern funder. It can be 100 pounds, it doesn't matter, it's just that we want to see that we have cross-border [indiscernible]. So we did, we found a tiny amount of money from a northern thing, and the Dublin government were saying, "Make their logo as big, if not bigger, as ours," The Fund for Reconciliation, just to say that we want the visuals of this also to be really clear. And I got a text a day later from the official from the Fund for Reconciliation, who said, "I went home last night and I read the book of Ruth. This is extraordinary."

LW: Really?!

PO: Yeah, and it is.

LW: Is that in a book, that vignette?

PO: I think so.

LW: That's fascinating. A government official?

PO: Yeah. So the proposed project of it is to say, "Look at what this myth can do." I think they wanted us . . . I'm going to get the numbers wrong . . . they wanted us to meet with 2,000 people and we met with 5,000 people.

LW: In groups of what, 5?

PO: I think a maximum-sized group was about 130.

LW: Whoa, that's pretty big.

PO: Loads of the groups were 10 or 12. Then Jordan, my colleague, wrote 8 resources about it, just single-page resources so that groups could do it on Zoom or, you know, by themselves. So there were all kinds of ways—and Glenn who's a brilliant scripture scholar with great Hebrew, he also went out and did all of that delivery work. I did lots of the single sessions, he did lots of the sessions that happened over multiple times. And what was great was that it was about communities of people coming to a text, giving a text a close reading, and then being in conversation with that and seeing the text manifest stuff about today. For instance, looking at historical tension between Israelite and territory, and then to say, "well what tensions are here?" You know, between Britain and Ireland, or England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland? Who here has family members who have crossed some of those borders, one way or another? What are the things that you would hold against England, or Scotland, or Wales, or Ireland, or ...? We did it in the cathedral, one of the cathedrals in Dublin, and somebody said, "I can't say what I've held against the British inside a church." Well, the bishop was there, and was like, "You can say what you want." And so it was, you know, allegations of murderous actions, you know, those kinds of things were being put forward, and so using that text as a way to speak about today and then, what was nice was that you always have a text to come back to. You know, "And then they ride back into here, and Naomi changes her name to Mara." It just was a, it's a psychological container.

LW: That's marvelous, I'll have to look at the book.

TF: You've got that book, don't you?

LL: I do have that book, yes.

LW: Oh you do have the Ruth book?

TF: And I ordered an extra copy, one of the students got it.

PO: Yeah, yeah I signed it to somebody.

LW: That's wonderful.

TF: I'll make sure the library gets a copy, too, it's harder to find.

PO: I think that younger guy got it, your fellow who was there last night.

TF: Landon?

PO: Yeah, yeah.

LL: I think he did, I think Landon did take that one, which will be interesting for him.

TF: So, you have me thinking, too, about, we hosted Alberto Rios a few years ago, and we talked a lot about the border, because he grew up right along the border of Mexico and the United States, and he's bilingual. And I thought, "Why don't we think about it this way more often?" He said that borders aren't just places that separate us, but they're actually a really powerful place where we come together. And they join us. They don't just divide us. They actually, literally, physically join us, and people are crossing them constantly.

PO: And animals cross them constantly.

TF: Yeah, and thinking about how the work you're doing is really trying to join through a border rather than respecting the border, geopolitically.

PO: Totally. And trying to say that borders are worthy of our attention, and that a fortified, heavily policed border isn't the only model for what has to happen at a border. And borders happen naturally, you know? Rivers, the edge of my skin, you know, they are natural—I'm not an anti-border person. But I do think that there can be a much better imagination about how a border can be placed for human behavior, than just a very particular one that is about fortification and prevention.

TF: It's nationalistic, is the way we think about it, for the most part.

PO: Mm, I don't mind nationalism. Small countries deserve the possibility--small, colonized countries deserve the opportunity of exploring safe, flourishing, hospitable nationalism. Often I find it's huge, imperial countries that are the ones saying, "Oh nationalism is this terrible thing." No, *your* project of nationalism is a terrible thing.

TF: Yeah, our project of nationalism is a horrible thing right now.

PO: Scottish nationalism, Irish nationalism, all these other nationalisms are the ones that I think, "I don't know if it's going to be good or not, but we deserve a chance to try."

TF: They're questions of sovereignty, not protective nationalism.

LW: Not worth being ideological about it.

TF: Not jingoistic.

LW: One of the things we talked about last night was the question to you [from my pastor] who asked, "Where do you live religiously?" And we were really intrigued with your comment that you're not interested in the question of what you believe, I think, is more or less, um, "Do I believe in God is an uninteresting question."

PO: It is.

LW: Which, when I teach Intro to World Religions, which is sort of new for me because I'm a Bible scholar, but you do what you do at a small university, but one of the things I've learned from my rabbi friends in town is the extent to which Judaism is not focused on belief, but on behavior. They always make that point, and I try to explain that to my students, and I'm seeing that more in other non-Christian traditions, as well, so I'm curious about... what is it about, for you? If not belief? Which is of course, the typical focus of Christianity throughout much of the history of Christianity.

PO: Yeah. So what is what about, the question of God, or...?

LW: Or religion? Yes, God or—maybe and/or, I suppose.

PO: Hm. Let me think about that.

[laughter]

LW: You could answer in a poem if you want. Well, I noticed, and I think it's intentional: Poet, comma, theologian.

PO: Oh, yeah, totally. Theologian, really, is just because I've done the qualifications. You know, I might as well, I've spent too many years.

LW: Dr. Ó Tuama!

TF: Yes! We haven't been calling you "Doctor" enough while you've been here.

LL: I thought about that in worship, I was like, "Should I say Doctor?"

PO: No, I don't care, no.

TF: I kept forgetting, you know, it's like the first year after marriage, it's the whole first year anniversary, you're in your honeymoon phase of "Dr."

PO: Yeah. Um... what is it about?

LW: Or if you're not interested in questions about belief, what does interest you?

PO: Hm. To speak from a narratological point of view, there's a normative moral narrative that many people have, for how it is that they live in the world. Some of that might be their country's constitution, or a true, or mistaken, or fanciful version about the origin of their country, or it might be a religious text or it might be a certain family mythology, or, you know. But it is a normative moral narrative in the

sense of culture, identity, what's permissible, you know, all of these things. Also archetypes of characters, to think, "Oh, you're just like that character from that story. You're just like a pioneer. These normative moral narratives are narratives in the sense that they are filled with location and plot and time and space and archetypes. And I think that is one of the things that religion provides, is a normative moral narrative. And problematic as all of those narratives are, and selective, and controlling in their imagination of themselves, often, too. As well as uncontrollable in terms of what can be done with them. So that's one of the things that I think of religion as. And the question for me is, "What's possible to play with, around the edges of it?"

TF: The other night at dinner too, I don't know if this is quite related, but we were talking about belief and you said something along the lines of, you're not interested in loving God as much as you're interested in—something along the lines of how we make God.

PO: Well, yes, of course. I mean, what is God? God's just a sound that we make with our mouths. There was a hymn that was sung yesterday in the chapel that talked about God delighting in the justice, and I was thinking, "I think I'd replace that verb." I think God is made in the justice that we try to enact. Whatever God is, whatever it is that we, as Aquinas says, "that which we call God," you know, "that which we call God" is discovered and made and remade in the possibility of seeing something surprising. I listened to what's happening in Gaza, and the Israeli families that are tortured through bereavement and wondering, "Where are our loved ones?" And think, wouldn't it be extraordinary if voices of compromise, creativity, unexpected alliances emerged from within those politics? Can you imagine, in much of the world's population, a selective sigh of relief and excitement would be, to think, "Oh my god, listen to that." Other places would think, "Damn, our agenda isn't going to be taken forward." That is the making of God, in a certain sense. Always small, always naïve, because something is always being born. I don't believe in God as character, but I do believe in God as plot.

LW: Wow. That's so good.

PO: And the emergence of God as plot in this is always small, and risky. And open to being killed.

LW: It sounds to me like you're also identifying God as seeing, observing, noticing.

PO: Yeah. And as art, also. Any creative endeavor in a geopolitical scale is artistic. Like when you look at the Good Friday Agreement between Britain and Ireland, and the preamble says, "Politics has failed the question of Ireland, and so therefore, the question of the sovereignty of Ireland does not belong to the government in London anymore. And that the Dublin government were giving up the question of sovereignty over the North. And it said, "Sovereignty belongs to the people of Ireland, and therefore, in the spirit of concord we commend this agreement to the people of Ireland." In the spirit of concord. Concordia: shared heart. An extraordinary piece of art. And it's that level of elevated language that moves me deeply. To think, "Look at what is possible when people do creative work with each other." And that, I think—I mean I wouldn't ever want to look at a text like that, and say, "Look! That's--!" and try to make a theological argument—that this is a way of thinking of God as plot. I just think, no, just be moved by the art that's happening there, and respond accordingly.

LW: So it seems like this, um, I was thinking of borders between secular and sacred that... you don't acknowledge them—we were talking about Andrew Root a little bit last night, and his--what's his title?

LL: *Secular Youth Ministry* is one of them.

LW: He's got a series.

LL: He's got a three-part series, yeah.

LW: He observes the secularization of American society as a way of commenting—I think, I never read them—on how that's effected congregations.

PO: Yeah, I mean, "secular" and "spiritual" are often—you aren't doing it—but "secular" and "spiritual" are often put as opposites to each other. And "spirit" from "spirare," meaning "breath." Therefore, spirituality is what is it that helps you breathe? And that is a physical question as well as a political one. So the opposite of spirituality is not secularism, it is suffocation. And "secular," I mean, I know you can't define things by their etymology, but it can be helpful to look at the etymology; like "secular" comes from "seculare," "siècle" meaning "century," secular just means to be present in your own time. To take a religious character, Jesus of Nazareth, he was very secular, he was present to his time, alert to the question of taxation and occupation. And with strange and sometimes infuriating responses to that, which caused him popularity among some, and execution from others. So I think of myself as an absolutely committed secular person, and I do not see that to be separate from the question of the quality of breathing.

TF: That's "from breath comes language," in part, too. I mean just don't think people acknowledge how powerful language is, so dwelling in it is also powerful.

PO: Makes and breaks words, yeah.

TF: Well, we should wrap up so that you all can get to the airport. It's been such a lovely conversation.