

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC)

JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST: Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I'm Jonathan Rogers, your host.

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

JR: Malcolm Guite is a poet-priest, and chaplain of Girton College of the University of Cambridge. He's also a singer-songwriter, and a biographer of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

(MUSIC FADES)

JR: As Jeremy Begbie has said, "Malcolm Guite has established himself as one of the most important Christian poets of our time." I couldn't agree more.

Malcolm Guite, thank you so much for making time to be on The Habit Podcast. Your poems have given me important ways of reimagining the faith and my place in the world and what kind of world we live in. So thank you for what you've done there.

MALCOLM GUITE: Well thank you. I'm glad you got the word "imagination" in there and talked about re-imagining. Um, one of the things that's been a burden in my work, both in poetry and in my other scholarship, has been to recover this essential idea that the imagination — or at least the baptized imagination — is a truth-bearing faculty. That in order to know things well, we have to engage our imagination.

JR: Uh huh.

MG: And um, I think we've had a very false split in our culture between reason and imagination. I think they're both, as it were, God-given faculties for coming to know what is the case. And I think therefore we sometimes need not only to imagine, but as you said, to re-imagine things.

Um you know, Seamus Heaney has this lovely line in one of his poems where he talks about the “need and chance to salvage everything...”

JR: Oh, wow.

MG: “... to re-envisage / The zenith and glimpsed jewels of any gift / Mistakenly abased.” And then he goes on to say, “Read poems as prayers.” The context of the poem is Heaney remembering a time when he’d been to confession and he’d been given this advice by a priest. And he fuses that memory with a much earlier memory of having been given a kaleidoscope as a little kid, and having accidentally plunged it all in “a butt of muddy water” and sods it up.

JR: Yeah.

MG: But in the poem, the kaleidoscope that has been abased resurfaces “like a marvelous lightship,” he says.

JR: Oh wow.

MG: Then he hears again the voice of this priest saying, the voice spoken from behind a grille, and this is the line, “Spoke again about the need and chance / To salvage everything, to re-envisage / The zenith and glimpsed jewels of any gift / Mistakenly abased... What came to nothing could always be replenished. ‘Read poems as prayers,’ he said.”

JR: Oh! (thumps table) Wow!

MG: (chuckles) That’s amazing. I mean, Heaney is astonishing.

JR: Yeah. Um... (pause) Wow. So, I mean, almost everything is mistakenly abased, right?

MG: One of the gifts mistakenly abased by our culture for about the last two or three hundred years is the gift of the imagination.

JR: Huh.

MG: That we've sidelined it so it's only about the subjective, out there is the objective world of dry, rational facts. And we've abased that gift of intuitively knowing the truth and value of things and expressing that in warm and poetic imagery, rather than simply dissolving everything into a set of tiny particles or mathematical formulae.

JR: Yeah. Is it *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* where somebody says, "In our world a star is gas and dust" or whatever?

MG: Yes, that's a wonderful moment. It's Eustace. I mean, Eustace Clarence Scrubb, where it's kind of... he's basically a reformed character, but at this point he's still got a bit of his old...

JR: Yeah, right.

MG: Um, that we're introduced to a character as sort of mythological, who used to be a star. And he's told he's a star, and he says, "Well in our world, a star is merely a ball of gases and flames exploding into the cold vacuity of space." And the star replies, "Even in your world, that's not what a star is. That's merely what a star is made of." That's such a vital distinction, isn't it?

JR: Oh yeah! It is! Yeah.

MG: It's the distinction Aristotle makes, in fact, between accident and substance, you know. The accident is what a thing happens to be made out of, but the substance is what a thing truly is in form.

JR: Yeah.

MG: And everything has a substantial as well as an accidental cause. And in a sense, our science is simply the science of accident. Not accidents, as in E-N-T-S, but E-N-C-E. There are other dimensions to which only the imagination has access.

JR: And that view that you're expressing here opens up everything poetry.

MG: Yeah. Well po—

JR: To ask what things are made of and two, what they are.

MG: Yeah. Well, so it makes poetry one, as it were in some respects, of the scientific instruments available to us to try and understand what is the case.

JR: Huh. Yeah.

MG: So it's interesting that when Coleridge came in his *Biographia Literaria* to look back after twenty years on what he and Wordsworth thought they were up to in that miraculous summer in the 1790s and 98, and that's when they wrote the lyrical ballads and he wrote... *Ancient Mariner*. Anyway. Looking back on it, Coleridge doesn't say — I mean it's very interesting. The way we would talk in secular universities about poetry and literature was very much that literature and the arts were about a private, subjective world of, you know, "artsiness" and you know, that poetry is a sort of imaginary compensation for the kind of grimness of the world.

Whereas what actually — and what the Romantic poetries supremely say — but actually what these two families of Romantic poetry were up to according to Coleridge was not to compensate us by inward fantasy for the dead and meaningless combination of atoms in which we happen to be circulating. We aimed on awakening the mind's attention, removing the film of familiarity, and restoring to us that vision of the freshness and depth

of nature for which we have eyes that see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.

So they weren't trying to make stuff up. They were trying to take away this film which he says our selfishness and sollicitousness has cast over the world, and unveil a deeper but equally real truth about nature which is more than just the surfaces we see.

JR: You're talking about the idea of reconnecting us with reality. Not creating reality in our brains, but connecting us with what's actually real.

MG: Well, they would say their poetry did involve making up stories. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is, you know, not actually a piece of straightforward, what you would've seen with a camcorder, visual reportage.

JR: (laughs)

MG: That's not the point! So in fact, Coleridge in the very same passage in *Biographia* that he says "awakening the mind's attention to the loveliness of nature," he also says that there's a way of telling a story in which you as it were asking of your reader — as he says in the famous phrase, that "willing suspension of disbelief that for the moment constitutes poetic faith." But then he goes on to say, "That I might transfer from our inner nature those truths which will win for these shadows of imagination, that willing suspension of disbelief."

JR: Ah, yes.

MG: In other words, the shadows of imagination are bodying forth certain truths from the inner nature. And of course Shakespeare put the same thing even more clearly much earlier in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where he talks about, you know, "The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling, doth glance from heaven to Earth, from Earth to heaven; and as imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown, the poet's pen turns

them to shape, and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.” It’s a bodying forth.

JR: Yeah. And that’s the same speech isn’t it where he talks about apprehending and not comprehending?

MG: That’s right. He talks about how imagination apprehends more than cool reason ever comprehends. And I think our ways of knowing are on a kind of spectrum between apprehend and comprehend. And we move back and forth. I mean, apprehend, you know — the “prehend” part of that obviously has to do with taking hold of something, like having a prehensile tail you can hold things with. So you can just about reach out to the apprehensible and take hold of it. The comprehensible you can get your mind right away around.

But actually, what you need all the time is a way in which you could woo the apprehensions, as it were, gradually toward comprehension, and also open the comprehensions out into new apprehensions. And that mediating between those ways of knowing, “The imagination apprehends more than cool reason ever comprehends,” says Shakespeare. Imagination is precisely the means whereby we do that.

JR: Oh yeah, love it. Cause one way to make sure we comprehend things is to limit them to things that are small enough that we can reach around.

MG: Right. And the idea of a God who both gives us a world we can begin to comprehend, but constantly beckons us through that comprehension to apprehension, is fundamental to the Christian faith. So the whole point about how the light shines in the darkness — the darkness has never comprehended it. It can’t be contained. And there’s a kind of symbolic dynamic. I mean, I believe things happen literally and truly as well. But between, on the one hand, the womb of the Incarnation, the virgin womb, and the empty tomb, the tomb that has never been used by anybody else before... one of them speaks of the God who has bodied forth and comes to us. The other, the empty tomb — why seek you the living among the

dead? — the way he appears and then he disappears and then he draws them — is the God who is always leading us beyond what we thought we knew.

JR: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MG: He comes to us as we are that we may know him as we are, but then he leads us through that knowledge to something more.

JR: Yeah. That's great. So you... uh, you were... I read in the interview about your childhood with poetry, and I was really interested in this idea that you said for a long time, you were not exposed to poetry in any bookish context. It was just something you heard with your ears in your family.

MG: Yeah, well that's right. I was very fortunate that my mother particularly — my father to some extent, but certainly my mother — knew huge amounts of poetry by heart, and as it were, thought naturally in poetry. So it's not that she sat me down and said, "Now I'm gonna recite you a poem." It would be in the middle of something that we were doing or saying, she would find... she would just start to quote poetry. And a lot of poetry she liked was strongly rhythmical, and you could immediately feel the lift and beat and pattern of it.

So you know, as I say, we used to travel back and forth from Africa where I was born to England on trips each year, and I loved that moment when the boat left the harbor and the land started to recede and we'd see the wake of the boats foaming up. And I'd look at it and be happy, but my mother would look at it and stand beside me and say, "The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew, and the furrow followed free / We were the first that ever burst into that silent sea."

Which you know, she didn't go like, "Now this is Coleridge and one day this will be very important to you, my boy..."

JR: (laughs)

MG: And I loved it! So now I inherited, fortunately, from her that same ear for poetry, and a more advanced capacity to remember it first time off. Or if I said it in a poem a couple of times because I liked it, then I would discover that it was in there anyway and would come out. So I didn't see it written down for a while, and eventually when I did I saw that oh, you can read it. But it didn't have that bookish feel. It certainly never felt like anything to be studied.

Of course, much later I came to realize that naturally that is in fact how poetry. And the great poetry — the epics of the world, the Homers of this world, but also the folk poetry of the earliest times in Europe and England — were not written down. They were part of an oral tradition. They were ways of remembering things. They were naturally a musical language. And um... I still believe that poetry has to be, as it were, sounded into the air and tasted on the tongue really to be understood and appreciated as poetry.

JR: Do you... I ran across an article a while back — I say a while back, but probably 15 years ago — about a great epic poem in India that had been recited by, uh... not a tribe of people, but sort of... the Levites basically of their world. And then this huge, long, much longer than Homer's epics, and they could recite. And then somebody got the idea of let's write this down so it doesn't get lost. And pretty soon after it got written down, the... (pause) people's ability to recite it and remember it went away.

MG: Oh, yeah. Well this is an ancient trope. You may remember — I think it's in the dialogue of Phaedrus and Plato — there's a conversation about where somebody tells a story of the invention of writing, which the Greeks attributed to the Egyptians. And um, somebody goes up to, in the story, somebody shows it to Pharaoh and shows what would be hieroglyphics and says, "Look, we've invented a way of remembering!" And the Pharaoh refuses the gift, because he says, "No, you've invented a way of forgetting."

JR: Yes... yeah!

MG: You've externalized the thing. It no longer comes from its sources. So yeah, the feats of memory in the ancient world are truly astonishing. We've definitely gained some things with literacy, but we've lost some things too. And poetry, because it is an archaic thing, still keeps the memory of that tradition, because poetry cares immensely about the sound of language as well as its meaning.

JR: Yeah.

MG: Or, good poetry does, I think.

JR: (laughs) Yeah. Does everything you write have a pretty strict form, meter, rhyme?

MG: Yeah, I mean that's in a sense, where I have, as it were, begged to differ from the mainstream of contemporary poetry. Ironically, my use of convention and form makes me a radical rebel rather than... (laughs)

JR: (laughs)

MG: Or more conventionalist, you know. Such is life. But no, I very strongly — well, partly because I admire the beauty of the poetry that I love. The great poems of Coleridge or Shelley or Keats, or going earlier to George Herbert and Donne and so on — uses form very beautifully. So I think it's intrinsically beautiful in itself.

And secondly, I actually think the constraints of form, the fact that you have to keep the meter, and you can only have five syllables— five stresses, and ten syllables in a line if it's pentameter, that you can only have a certain rhyme scheme. I think those constraints, far from being, as it were, a handicap, are a positive advantage in a spur to creativity. They make you think again.

You know, there's a famous... there's a letter of Blake's where he's talking about learning the art of being an engraver, and he talks about how the most important line, the first line you draw in an engraving, is what Blake called the bounding line. And I remember hearing the poet Geoffrey Hill once years ago lecturing about Blake, and saying that "bounding" was a really interesting word for Blake to use. He didn't say "boundary" or "binding," either of which were available. But "bounding" is one of those English words which has a double meaning. It can either mean bounding in, or bounding with energy, grace abounding. And he went on to say that it is precisely the "bounding line" in Blake's poetry, which gives it its creative energy.

JR: Yeah.

MG: He said, you know, a modern poet writing a poem about a tiger would think that because the tiger is free to roam around the forest, that they should have long, loping lines and short lines and things written big and small and... whereas, you know — and no frame or symmetry in their verse. Whereas Blake goes, you know, Blake uses this strong meter in representing a "Tyger Tyger burning bright, / in the forests of the night; / What immortal hand or eye / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?" And then since the energy of the tiger is all the more concentrated and fearful, because of the fearful symmetry and frame of the poem.

And Hill went on to say in this lecture that the constraints of the poem, its rules and limitations of form... rather than being a prison or a dead hand — in the right hands, of a poet knows what he's doing with them — are actually much more like the walls of a furnace.

JR: Hmmm...

MG: You know, you put the fire in the furnace or in the brazier, it burns much more brightly than if it were loose. It has an intense heat. And then of course he went on to show how that's the other image in the tiger

poem, you know.

JR: Oh yeah.

MG: So... yeah. I... well, I think it's fair. I've written poetry in blank verse. I've written in slightly freer verse just occasionally where I've varied the line length. But I've never written a poem which didn't have meter or consideration of form. I've not written those kinds of modern poems which I think of as really chopped prose, where its claims to be a poem rests in simply the fact that its lines don't reach the edge of the page.

JR: Yeah. Well, when I teach creative writing, I always require — when we do the poetry part of the class — I always say you've gotta write at least in meter, and I would prefer that it rhymes. Just for the very reasons that you're saying. Those constraints give you somewhere to start, give you something to do, and make you discover some things you didn't know you could do.

MG: Absolutely. Yeah. And at least when you're finished, you've got something that... whatever else you may need to find or learn how to do, it at least has the virtue of pattern and rhythm and the pleasure of repeated sound.

JR: Mmhm. And I know you write a lot of sonnets, and I think the sonnet is such a great form for talking about Christian truth. Right?

MG: Oh yeah,

JR: It's set up in one direction, and then you have a turn.

MG: Yeah, the volta. And also, it kind of — also there's a curious thing where I think one is drawn sometimes to one's opposite or corrective, and I think one of the reasons why I like the sonnet, which is by definition a brief form — you can see the end of it. It makes this little square on the page. You know when you're gonna stop before you start, and you

necessarily write a sonnet towards its final line. Um, I think that's a particularly important form for me, because by nature I'm the opposite. I'm very loquacious, I can go on, you know, try to stop me.

JR: (laughs)

MG: My mother used to say to me "You have the gift of the gabvery gallopy." But she also used to say, "Your tongue will get you hung."

JR: (laughs)

MG: And I can remember when I first started writing the sonnets that became *Sounding the Seasons*, my book of 70 sonnets going through the Christian year. Which I did in a context of articulating verse for a church, for the church I was serving, and um, a reflection on the Gospel and the seasons, and so I began to occasionally try these from the pulpit. And um... I remember one of the congregations saying to me, almost in a whisper, "Malcom, why didn't you tell us earlier you could do this in just 14 lines?" (laughs)

JR: (laughs) Oh that's great. Um... poetry had a role in your coming back to the Christian faith, didn't it?

MG: Yes, it did. I mean, it was a... it kind of had roles at various stages, but it had a very important one at one of these turning points. I mean, I was brought up in a Christian household, which I'm very grateful now, but I guess like a lot of kids of my generation, probably all of us for different reasons, I kind of rebelled against that and turned my back on it in my mid teens. I was about 14 or 15 when I decided I was an atheist.

And I did it, as I saw it, in a very thoroughgoing way. If I wasn't gonna— I didn't just, I thought right. I know this is the case or it isn't the case, and it, you know, I believe falsely, as it turns out, but I never did... sciecne that disproved it all... and I went in exactly the opposite direction.

So I became a very reductive — I wanted to be a marine biologist anyway — but we didn't have Richard Dawkins famously in those days, but the equivalent guy was B.F. Skinner, who was a behavior scientist, who very much thought you could account for everything — and everything, including all of human behavior — could be accounted for in entirely classic, as it were, Newtonian terms of action and reaction. One thing forces another to happen, and you just have to manipulate what the forces are and you can control things.

And um... so I tried to believe for quite a long time that we were literally just a random concatenation of mutually rebounding particles, which by some bizarre chance had thrown up this accidental epiphenomenon, this side effect of thinking you were a person. I remember being very proud of the word “epiphenomenon.”

JR: (laughs)

MG: And I was a precocious 14 and 15 year old, you know. And the only— this situation was fundamentally absurd, and you know, apart from experiencing bouts of existential angst where all you could do was sort of contemplate the void. But anyway. I was endeavoring therefore to find the scientific, reductive explanation of everything that happened... which is one way of trying to sort of distance oneself from the emotions of one's own stormy youth.

JR: (laughs)

MG: Anyway, I was taken by an aunt of mine to Keats' house. I didn't really know anything about Keats, but there was the “Ode to a Nightingale” on the wall. And I read this poem, really because I had nothing better to do. It was only because I was in the room where you could look out through the casements and there was the tree that the nightingale had sung in, you know, that magical April he alluded to in years previously. And I started reading this poem, and as you may remember, it has a very unpromising start in terms of (pause)... low register. It begins, “My heart aches, and a

drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk, /
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains / One minute past, and Lethe-
wards had sunk...”

So I was reading this as a sort of moody 15, 16...

JR: (laughs)

MG: And I was getting, oh yeah, you know, ache. Dull. Drains. Sunk. Lethe... I'm with you, mate.

JR: (laughs)

MG: Anyway, so I was sitting there moodily reading it, you know fair enough. And then of course, as you remember, the poem suddenly and inexplicably, out of a moment of sheer grace, lifts as the bird sings. So he goes, you know... just after that, after the word sunk, Lethe-wards, it suddenly goes, “'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness, — / That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees / In some melodious plot / Of beechen green, and shadows numberless, / Singest of summer with a full-throated ease.” And I was going, what was *that*?! I mean, that just — I was astonished. I didn't know English could sound like that.

So I was reading the poem, and of course the poem ushers you through. And it's this kind of hyper-sensory poem because he goes out in the dark.

JR: Yeah.

MG: “I cannot see what flowers are at my feet, / Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs, / But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet...” So I was really with him. And then this extraordinary thing happens just towards the end of the poem. First of all, he has this — Ruth comes in. He sees this woman standing, hearing a nightingale, you know, “when, sick for home, / She stood in tears amid the alien corn.” And then!

Suddenly out of nowhere, he produces this image of magic casements. They're like windows at the back of the poem, opening onto something. "Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands..."

JR: Wow.

MG: So I read this, and it was a genuinely numinous experience. I didn't have that word then, but that's what it was. And it wasn't like, oh, I read Keats, now I'm a Christian or something like that. But what happened was it cracked open the kind of concrete, materialist, reductive explanations of the world that I had. Because I walked out of that and I said, there is no way that poem is the result of an unwinding enzyme.

JR: Mmhm.

MG: There's a distinction between a chemical reaction that I can produce, you know with titratine in a lab, and "Ode to a Nightingale." But the "Ode to a Nightingale" as Keats writes it, and the "Ode to a Nightingale" as this callow teenager read it in Hampstead in the 70s. Something happened there, which is more than the sum of any of its parts, and it's got something to do with the sound, with the bird flaying, and with the window opening. Those things are more than themselves, you know. The sense of the bird retreating further and further beyond you, seeing you in the next grove, and yet your having heard it and being drawn towards it.

So in a sense, that set me off on something. It opened me to the possibilities that there was mystery behind the appearance of things, that somewhere there were magic casements that would open onto perilous seas. And then in the end, that led me to the Gospel and to faith. But not directly. There were many indirect parts. but I think that was a moment of spiritual opening.

Subsequently, of course, when I came to Cambridge, by that time an agnostic rather than an atheist — so that I were at least open to a

possibility, not discounting or foreclosing on things — I began to find, very much like Lewis, that the poets I really loved were all Christian poets, and they were making their case for Christianity in ways that cold prose couldn't. And I would very much echo what Lewis says in *Surprised by Joy* about his experience of reading English in Oxford, where I was reading English in Cambridge. Which was he says, in effect... in *Surprised by Joy*, "I suppose, in a way, my imagination was baptized before I was." The rest of me took a little longer to catch up. That was very much my experience.

JR: Yeah. Now you didn't start writing poetry though until after you'd become a priest. Is that correct?

MG: Well, I didn't start writing poetry— of course I wrote poetry as a teenager. Once I discovered Keats, you know, I was a Keats wannabe. I mean, and I wrote lots of pastichey, you know, sort of romantic Keatsian, sub-Keatsien lush poetry full of quoths and doths and privies, you know.

JR: (laughs)

MG: And I was at least trying to make that sound. I had another go at writing poetry as an undergraduate. Slightly better poetry, but it was of course a bit academic. But what happened actually was that um... (pause) yeah, and I suppose — and then when I was ordained, in a sense the extraordinary experience of being a parish priest, and officiating the liturgy, and initiating people into this gorgeously made pattern of sound and movement and gesture and metaphor and meaning, which was transformative for them and for me. That in a sense was the thing I'd always wanted to do in poetry anyway... (laughs) But I was doing it in the given poems of the faith, which are the liturgies and the hymns. But eventually I came to realize that that other thing I'd loved so much had to come out too, but that it could come out in its right place now.

JR: Hmm.

MG: I think when I was ardently hoping — when I was a full on, you

know... (pause) Keats wannabe, and sort of playing Romantic poetry air guitar...

JR: (laughs)

MG: ... in my twenties, I would've — poetry would have become a false religion to me in a way. And I needed to — I mean you know, famously T.E. Hulme, I think, said, "Romanticism is spilt religion." Um, but uh, that doesn't mean that when you find the unspilled cup on the altar you don't still... nature's the joy and the beauty of Romantic poetry. But now you kind of have a context for it.

It's also to do with what Lewis says about first things and second things, that if you put first things first, you get the second things as well. You know, find Christ and take the cosmos through a needle, but there's no point in getting the whole world and losing your soul.

JR: I love it. I had every intention, in this conversation, of talking about your sonnet... I would call it a sonnet cycle, but you know, "After Prayer" that you wrote inspired by George Herbert's poem "Prayer."

MG: Yeah. "Prayer," yeah, that's right.

JR: We're almost out of time, but I just want to say, for the record, your sonnets on the poem have really opened up that poem for me. I um...

MG: It's literally just a list of images. I mean, he doesn't even use the verb "to be." So he says, "Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age, / God's breath in man returning to his birth, / The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage," and so on. He goes on. And every one of those is richly and beautifully what prayer is, but he doesn't tell you why. He leaves you to do all the thinking and imagining, and he just gives you this core thing.

And I was astonished at the sheer generosity of that poem, because you can — as a poet, you can write a long time for an image, and when you

get a really good one...

JR: Yeah...

MG: Whereas, here Herbert comes along, and he gives by my reckoning, 26 absolute gems, all in one poem, 14 lines, for free. And then he adds the words, “something understood.” Which is almost not even a conclusion, but a kind of offer or a challenge. What are the some things you will understand.

JR: Yeah...

MG: I’ve done quiet days and retreats based on that poem, and one of the things I used to say to people was, you know, any one of these images could be a starting point for a new poem. And then one day I was on a retreat myself and I thought, well, maybe I should take that seriously! And so I began the sequence of 27 sonnets which is “After Prayer.” Yeah, I don’t know how much time we have, but maybe I could read one to us.

JR: Oh, I’d love it if you’d read one or two. I don’t know if you have your own ideas...

MG: D’you have any particular ones you’d like to hear?

JR: You know what, I would love to hear... “The Christian Plummet.” I wanna hear... I’ve got... a lot I want to hear. But let’s do “The Christian Plummet” if you don’t mind.

MG: Okay, yeah yeah. We’ll do that one. This one’s quite a dull one but so... we don’t stay down here, but it’s really important that we have to go down here to understand.

So “The Christian Plummet” is the image of a lead line that they used on a ship, that they’d lower down to find out how much water there was under the keel. And that was the original context, prayer is like a plummet. But I

just loved the way he put the word “Christian” and “plummet” together.

JR: Yeah.

MG: And I thought about that in the modern sense. I happen to be one of those people who occasionally really plummets down in their feelings. And I think there are quite a few Christians like that, and I think experiencing that doesn't make you not a Christian. On the contrary, it may be a very important part of your role within the wider faith, so that's partly where this is coming from. So um... “The Christian Plummet.”

Down into the icy depths you plunge,
The cold dark undertow of your depression,
Even your memories of light made strange,
As you fall further from all comprehension.
You feel as though they've thrown you overboard,
Your fellow Christians on the sunlit deck,
A stone cold Jonah on whom scorn is poured,
A sacrifice to save them from the wreck.

But someone has their hands on your long line,
You sound for them the depths they sail above,
One who takes Jonah as his only sign
Sinks lower still to hold you in his love,
And though you cannot see, or speak, or breathe,
The everlasting arms are underneath.

JR: Mm. I love it, Malcolm. The reason I wanted you to read that poem was for that line, “You sound for them the depths they sail above.” Um, and that feels like, to me, a big part of the poet’s job.

MG: Yeah, thank you for singling that line out. I think that is exactly, that sense of sounding the depth... and we are such a speedy, surface-skimming culture at the moment. That’s why we need this opportunity to slow language down and... and uh, the mind’s attention, and let it sink into a depth.

JR: Yeah. Well, that’s something your work has done for me, Malcolm, so thank you for that. I love the way your cycle ends. Your sonnet on the line, the image, “something understood.”

MG: Yeah.

JR: And you say, I share as pilgrims — or, “still on the brink, I share as pilgrims should / some of the somethings I have understood.” And uh... so I really appreciate your, uh, the ways in which you have shared the somethings you have understood. And when I read — especially this — the one thing I think about this cycle, this 26 sonnet cycle on Herbert’s poem, is that any of us could, as you say, any of us could... it would be a great exercise to write more of these poems.

MG: Yeah, oh you could. If I were to do this again now, I could write 26, 27 different sonnets, because there’s so much in each of those images.

JR: Yeah. And in terms of the somethings you have understood... we all understand something a little different.

MG: Yeah.

JR: And we, together, as we each give an account of what we’ve seen, we get a fuller picture together of what’s true.

MG: Yeah. I think one thing I love about the word “understand” is the sense that when you understand something, you aren’t “standing under” something. I love — there’s a great line — the modern Irish poet Micheal O’Siadhail has got a poem about being out in evening in the garden, having eaten a meal, and the moon and stars are coming out, and dancing spontaneously — you know, putting a record on and dancing with his wife in the garden. And then they stop and look up, and then the last line of the poem — a great line — is “We stand under stars we could never understand.” (laughs)

JR: Oh, that’s so good! I love it! Alright, I gotta ask one more question, I know you’ve got to go, and I do two. You’ve probably been answering this question for the last 40 minutes, but who are the writers who make you want to write?

MG: Well, in the first instance, it was definitely Keats. Keats is the person who made me want to be a poet. I still had something Keatsian. I wanted that really rich, beautiful sound which I felt was missing from contemporary English poetry. But um... in the end, Coleridge made me want to write in another way, in that Coleridge really gave me grounds for understanding that the imagination is a gift from God, and it can be done in consonance with the logos. That we can have a “repetition in the finite mind,” as Coleridge put it. Of the eternal and infinite act of creation in the I Am. So Coleridge is another person.

I think... there are a lot of contemporary writers, not necessarily in poetry, where you think oh, you know, that’s good, I’m glad that somebody put it in that way. Obviously, in the 20th century for me, the Inklings — Lewis and Tolkien, Charles Williams and Owen Barfield — are important. Um, you know there are some pretty impressive contemporary poets and writers, among the contemporary Christian poets, people who spur me on and make me think gosh, that’s good I’d like to do something better — is Luci Shaw. I think she’s extraordinary. And Scott Cairns, um, you know... really fine.

And although — I haven't written a novel, but there are some people still writing in that great mythopoetic tradition. You know, Susanna Clarke — *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, that's an amazing book. So there are contemporary writers too.

In theological writers, there are some writers that just put their finger on the relationship between the imaginative art and really good, substantial theology. One of the people, both in print and in person, who has immensely inspired me is Jeremy Begbie. He writes mainly about music and theology, but he and I were both involved in a thing called Theology Through the Arts. And he just had a book recently called Redeeming Transcendence, which really brings together the sort of apparent... you know, some people would set an opposition between Christian doctrine and artistic freedom. And Begbie never does that. he really shows you how the great christian doctrines are the foundations and stimulus of Christian freedom.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

JR: Well Malcolm, thank you so much for being here. This has been a... such a treat for me, and I hope we can talk again soon.

MG: Okay great! It's been good to be with you.

(THEME MUSIC)

DREW MILLER: The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We're so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville.

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beautiful songs.

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(THEME MUSIC OUT)