(MUSIC PLAYS)

(MUSIC STOPS)

BEC:
Hello, and welcome to the Big Anxiety Podcast Series. We’re recording on Gadigal land in the studios of 2RPH, which is a community radio station and radio reading service in Sydney. In this series, for the Big Anxiety Festival, we're talking to different creative personages about mental health and their lives, and how these things come together. My name is Bec Dean, and I'm the curator of the Big Anxiety Festival, and I am joined by poet, essayist and editor Omar Sakr. Hello, Omar.

OMAR:
Hello.

BEC:
So, Omar, it’s great to be able to talk with you today about your work and your relationship to mental health. This year, your second book of poetry entitled ‘The Lost Arabs’ has been published and this follows your debut collection ‘These Wild Houses’ from 2017. Now I've got copies of ‘These Wild Houses,’ but I keep missing out at my bookstores on ‘The Lost Arabs,’ so how does it feel to be a sold-out-in-some-bookstores poet? (LAUGHTER)

OMAR:
Feels good, yeah. It's been doing really well. We're into a second print run at the moment. It's exciting that people are trying to get it, it's less exciting that they're not getting it. (LAUGHTER) So you know, there's pros and cons to that.

BEC:
Do you feel like there is a particular moment in poetry in Australia – is this for younger poets coming through? It feels like poets are very present, particularly, visible for me, even though I'm quite close to it in the kind of visual arts world. It seems like it's kind of penetrating beyond this, I guess the silos, that we usually have around art forms in this country in the way that discourse can operate between those spaces.

OMAR:
Yeah, I hope so. I hope that that's true. It's difficult for me to say that with any kind of objectives, obviously, I have a lot of friends who are poets, I'm paying attention to what they're doing. So yeah, they're present for me always. But yeah, I think, you know, certainly social media probably has something to do with this. The prevalence and increasing popularity of spoken word poetry. And yeah, younger poets who are, you know, really killing it. Alison Whittaker, for example, or Ellen Van Neerven. Amazing poets coming up, like Eunice Andrada as well, or Maryam Azam. So, really cool, diverse, young poets who are just really good.

BEC:
It's really exciting to have a second opportunity to get into an art form, because poetry is something that a lot of people leave behind, in the same way that they leave behind art at a particular point in their schooling. And for that to, sort of, punch through, it's a wonderful thing to see happening from my perspective. And we are going to get you to do some readings from ‘The Lost Arabs’, which is a really wonderful thing too, but first, I think maybe we could talk about your beginnings as a writer and how you got into writing poetry.

OMAR:
Well, it was an accident. It was only a few years ago, I started writing poetry with any seriousness in 2013. And I was doing a Master of Creative Writing at University of Sydney. I had an amazing teacher, Judith Beveridge – was just incredibly generous mentor, and still is. But you know, I accident (LAUGHS) I didn't like poetry at the time, I had a pretty dismissive view of it. And I just kind of needed to fill out my enrolment, I had one unit left (LAUGHTER) and, friend of mine was like, you know, why not poetry? And I was like, because I suck at it. I'm not good at it, and therefore I hate it. (LAUGHTER) And he was like, well, that's a good reason to do it. And so I did. And like I said, you know, Judith Beveridge was a formative influence on me. And it was around that same time as well that I discovered spoken word poetry and started seeing in studies in black and brown Indigenous poets, poets, who are coming from my kind of socio economic background, talking about things that mattered in my life, which I had never seen before in poetry. And so that just kicked open the door.

BEC:
And it's wonderful that things happened by mistake, as well and sort of altered the course of your life. Speaking from the point of view, basically an ignoramus around this field, could you give me a sense of what your poetry is about? Or just describe it a little bit for people who don't know much about poetry.

OMAR:
I think, really, I write to find out more about myself and the world. So it's an intensely personal act, and it's an invitation as well, from myself to readers to come with me as I find out more about myself and the world, I hope. Yeah, I don't know if it's necessarily about a singular subject. It is just a way of looking, a way of finding meaning. And, you know, I would say that there are broadly themes that I return to like faith. I grew up within a Muslim family, and like belonging, I am the son of migrants. And, growing up in this incredibly racist country, was to experience a constant sense of attack on the notion of belonging, without ever having an alternative. There was no sense of Lebanon as a place that I could access, and there was no sense of Turkey, even which my father's from Turkey, no sense of that as being a place that I could access either. So there was only ever this place, and it was a contested place.

And then there's my sexuality, being bisexual, experiencing it first as a queerness that didn't have a label and knowing that it was taboo and wrong, both within my faith and within my cultures, all three of them, that being Australian, Turkish and Lebanese. And so it was like, yeah, it's constantly being othered, constantly being put on the margins.

BEC:
So this invitation to people into your world and your experience, I guess, with ‘These Wild Houses’, it's kind of focused on your growing up. And a lot of those places are painful, and they're traumatic, through this sort of lens of mental health, how it is to write those words out of yourself, and to have others kind of experience them. I guess, it's a hard question to ask. But it's something that we can't separate ourselves from. If you're writing about art from your experience and the experience is deeply traumatic, how that sits with you, once it's kind of written.

OMAR:
Yeah, look, I think, I say that my work is an invitation to others – it’s also an invocation. And I'm included in (LAUGHS) in a way, it sounds strange, but I'm also inviting my past selves to come forward, and to look again, at the experiences that I could say broke me, but you know, shaped me, I think, is a better phrase, because I don't necessarily think it's helpful to think of yourself as broken or wounded. Yeah, I think that's been a really generative process for me. This is how I can transform moments that were unexamined, because they were unexamined, were still kind of hurting me. That's one of the beauties of art and creativity – it's being able to take something and transform it. You can make it a jewel if you want, or you can make it a tool that helps you navigate the next day, rather than keep you stuck in the past day.

BEC:
It is fundamentally transformative, I think, with any kind of art making is that you take, you know, an experience, or an idea out of yourself and bring it into another form. And I think poetry has this sort of such a possibility about it, because it's read in this kind of intimate content sharing. Because I've heard you perform your work, and it's really wonderful to watch, people kind of be moved in this exchange, and to have those words infiltrate other bodies, I think is a very powerful thing to be able to do. And you do it so incredibly well. The last time I heard Omar reading poetry was to some school kids. And I literally got goosebumps from that reading. What do you think happens in these moments between people in the performance of these words? Is it as magical for you as it is for us? (LAUGHS)

OMAR:
I think there's definitely something in it for both parties. So I'm really interested in the phrase that I so often hear people say, which is ‘move’. And I love that, really, because no one ever says where they were moved to, right? There's a traveling that takes place there. I would hope, really, what it means is you moved closer to me, right? And I think of reading and writing as this kind of migration and this traversing of distances. So yeah, absolutely, I think there's something really important and, a better word is intimate, in the exchange of art, and in particular poems.

BEC:
And for a lot of people, these kinds of experience never would have existed – the reading of poetry to different social groups, for instance, although we do have something that falls along those lines, when we have, I guess, experiences in churches or mosques or other places of worship, where there are incantations or hymns or verses, and we share these kinds of things that don't take place often in the secular world. We're often spoken to, or somebody might give a speech, but the reading of a poem is something entirely other, I think. And you've spoken a bit already about your relationship to religion. And I think one of the things that kind of strikes me in your work is how beautifully you move between, kind of, spaces that feel ordinary in every day, and then into this kind of otherworldly, or sort of divine realm. And I wondered if that is about living in these different relationships to different cultural and, I guess, religious factors in your life?

OMAR:
Yeah, look, I think it's really difficult to quantify the degree to which my faith has influenced my work, and certainly my world. All I can say is that it plays a very large role. Because perhaps at first I was afraid, and I think that is the kind of bludgeon that's used when you're less educated. It's fear. It's fear of what will happen if you're not good. And even more broadly than that, if you don't follow the rules. And because I knew that I had this queerness within me, then I was always aware that I was going to be punished. I could be punished by my family, and that I could also be punished by God.

And so I think a very big part of my work has been getting to a point where I had to unlearn some of the things that I was told about God. I had to find my own way to divinity. I had to find my own relationship to God. And the path there was not fear, right, it had to be a path that was inherently compassionate, you know as naff as it sounds, that is centred on love. Because I could never really totally understand the idea that there was this infinite being of love and mercy and compassion and forgiveness, but who hated me, specifically. (LAUGHTER) And I was like, I don’t get it. I also really struggled with the concept of Hell, for a similar reason. And so I don't know how to answer this question, except that I keep moving within that realm of demons and angels, and what is human, and how do we hold on to that?

BEC:
And this is, I guess, a question more directly related to why we're here and Big Anxiety Festival. But I wanted to ask you if you wanted to share anything about mental health, and how you get the support to live, and to continue your practice, and I guess, the way that you’re fairly open about mental health publicly. And of course, this is one of the reasons that we've got you here, as an ambassador. Was there anything you'd like to share about your experience?

OMAR: Sure, you know, anxiety sucks. It really sucks. And I have an anxiety disorder, and it is just a constant agonizing over every decision. As an artist as well, you can imagine that it's (LAUGHS) particularly painful. You know, every word choice, every title, every revision, but even more broadly than that, socially, what I'm wearing. I try to find ways to get around it. I don't know, I feel, I just feel like it's wrong to suggest that I'm like winning. Do you know what I mean? (LAUGHTER) That it's a fight I'm the victor of, because I'm here and I'm speaking about it. It's just a condition that every day I'm learning again to live with, because the next day is different. It's not the same struggle. And I haven't really found a comprehensive answer to it. I think I don't have the resources to know, economically. And even more broadly than that, because my network, my family is, how do I put this politely, fundamentally more messed up than I am. (LAUGHTER) So when you're in that situation, when you're like first generation migrant, who is significantly more educated than the majority of your family who are struggling with the same demons, right, that you are, and in different ways, it feels like every time I take a step forward in my own journey, then their problems take me seven steps back. And so you're constantly stuck or renegotiating how to survive.

BEC:
Yeah, I guess, at this very moment, there's quite a lot of political discourse about mental health. Because, of course, there's this idea that our leaders want to suggest that they're interested in supporting people with mental health, but then sort of deny the whole range of factors that contribute to mental health conditions - putting, you know, poverty, disability, access, racism, you know, is like a massive one. And we do these incredible kind of mental gymnastics to separate those things. So thank you so much for sharing that because I feel similarly that there isn't a solution other than to keep moving forwards. Yeah. (LAUGHS)

OMAR:
Yeah, that’s basically what it is. Like what am I going to use today to get through tomorrow? And then you have to find something else. You know, recently I expended my CAN subsidized mental health sessions. And then it was like, okay, that's done. I can’t afford to do it without it being subsidized, so now I have to find something else. And I always have poetry, right? Thankfully. It's not enough to make me well. I think actually, falling in love, being in love with my current partner has done more for me than poetry ever could – just love itself. And loving my friends and being in these kind of supportive relationships, has done more for me than poetry can. But it still, many years ago, did have a huge role, right, in saving me. And reading likewise, from a very early age, was my way of escaping the damages as they were occurring.

BEC:
Yeah. Thank you, Omar. We are going to ask you to read some poems from ‘The Lost Arabs.’ It's been lovely talking with you. Thank you so much for being an ambassador for the Big Anxiety.

OMAR:
Oh no, no. I think it's really important.

BEC:
We’re just absolutely delighted you're involved in the program. Love your work. Wish you all the best for the future. Thank you.

OMAR:
So I'm just gonna pick some poems, hey.

Fridays in the park, or how to make a boy holy.

& i can't help but notice his hips first, bumbag slung low, as the train doors open at Roxburgh Park. & i take in the trackies, his shadowed jaw, the slabs of concrete parking over him. & as Arab boys are timeless or else stuck in time, I breathe easier in their pause, their familiar, inescapable heat. & later, i spot him in the supermarket & know he knows i'm watching the way a shepherd tends his flock or the way the ocean shivers when the moon slides onto it's back. & there is no significant body of water in the suburbs, nothing to drown in yet we drown anyway. & I take him in the long grass of the park, i taste him in the weeds, knees wet with mud, the night buzzing with the deaths of mosquitoes. the wild silence after, mouths heavy with musk, is complete & even the birds are mute with love in their nests. there is no song except our huffed breaths, the shuffle of grass bending beneath us, tickling skin, the whole world an animal gone quiet. i asked my aunty about the supernatural hush i felt & she said the animals stand still in holy awe, they know the Day of Judgment will fall on a Friday. & this is why neither of us made a sound, why his fingers bruised my lips to crush the gasping as one of us disappeared into the other, why the park bristled with jungle knowing, the kind with teeth, why it felt like the end of the world & the beginning, o the beginning of another.

This poem is called Ameen.

I am supposed to begin with prayer. A snippet of tongue. Bismillah. If I'm feeling Arab I extend further into r-rhahmani r-rhamin. Sometimes that means when I am most scared. In the name of God the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful I make my tea, ease my soreness, prep for sleep. How religious I sound when in truth it is one of the few phrases I know as well as English. In the grip of a nightmare it is to Arabic I return for solace. The scraps I have left. It is enough to awaken to sweat. I fear repetition, that I might wear the sacred out of language. Rub the holy off my mouth. What then will I face the devil within the dark? Our shared loneliness? Ask me to love him, I dare you. I might. I know I must not go with only this lark, these irreverent song, spells empty of heft – this speech contains only myself, & nothing of all the other names God answers to.

One more?

BEC:
Yeah.

OMAR:
OK. Sailors Knot.

There are only so many ways a son can save his mother and I know none. Hair trailing upward, body twisting I watched her drown in air, again. I still blamed her for not making dinner. Didn't care for the floundering. Couldn't tie a sailor's knot nor find a length of rope. Now between us borders, a gulf of time. When I call – but I don't ever call – she says ‘my son, a lifetime of never submitting, not to any man or god, yet the angels I can feel them dancing on my skin. Who's laughing now?’ It’s true, we all knew she had a heart of gold. A pity, my cousin said, it lies in a drug fucked woman. Sometimes I wake at night choking on the rope I should have made to save her. Maybe with every beating she gave me warning to flee a sinking ship. When she calls – but she never calls, except for cash – she says, ‘my son the angels are burning up like tiny candles, and the power's out, so oh, I shouldn't enjoy it, but I can see now!’ I'm laying prostrate by the unmade table in the kitchen, empty plates & knives floating to the ceiling. Let us both linger in the image of the record-keepers blazing, every sin purified. Across the tripwire lines of country, we sit in the dark waiting for the call to come or for a length of rope to unfurl.

(MUSIC PLAYS)

BARBARA: And that was Arab-Australian poet and festival ambassador Omar Sakr in conversation with Bec Dean, curator of The Big Anxiety. We'd love you to come back and listen to other podcasts featuring artists and festival ambassadors in conversation with Bec Dean, curator of The Big Anxiety and me, Barbara Sullivan from Radio 2RPH.

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