(INTRO MUSIC)

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

Hello and welcome to the Big Anxiety Podcast Series. We're recording on Gadigal land and 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 people about their mental health and their creative lives, and how these things come together. I'm Barbara Sullivan from Radio 2RPH.

(MUSIC)

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

I have in the studio with me today Evelyn Araluen, who was born, raised and writes in Dharug Country which is out in Western Sydney. Evelyn is a descendant of the Bundjalung Nation. And she has been commissioned to write a new work for the Festival. She is the official poet and is an Ambassador for the Big Anxiety Festival for 2019. Evelyn, welcome.

EVELYN ARALUEN:

Thank you for having me.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

Could you talk a little bit about your role as the official poet in this year's Festival? It's quite special. What does it mean in terms of your involvement?

EVELYN ARALUEN:

Well, the first thing that you mentioned is that I'm gonna be working on a commissioned poem for the Festival. So, this is gonna be creating a new work, which reflects on the themes of anxiety and the other themes around mental health that this Festival is working to make visible to a new audience. So, I've been bringing in some of my own practices and some of my own perspectives to try to write about mental health and anxiety from the perspective of a young Indigenous woman living today. So, the production of that work has been a really interesting process so far. We're doing a few different things around the poem. We're gonna be filming it. It's gonna be performed at Art After Hours, New South Wales Art Gallery. And then as Ambassador, I'll also be a representative of the Festival and the different themes that we're talking about. And, hopefully, bringing in a few more people into the conversation through that role.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

Now, you mentioned the process of writing. Is it different, as a poet to, be commissioned for a piece of work for something that is very important such as the Big Anxiety Festival, as against just writing on a theme that is near and dear to your heart at a particular point in time?

EVELYN ARALUEN:

Yeah, that's a really good question. I think that if it were a commission on the basis of something that was equally as important but that didn't necessarily feel personally relevant to me, it would be an almost impossible task. Not just creatively but also ethically. So, I was really open to the conversation around this particular kind of commission because it's something that I've reflected on previously in my work. But it's really hard to give yourself the space and the opportunity to just confront that head-on. So, in many ways, this has been an opportunity for me to actually challenge myself in my work and just really situate my response to not only my experiences but communal experiences around mental health in, you know, in Australia, in the rest of the world, in my specific communities. And create something that, hopefully, gives a more honest light to some of these experiences. And I think poetry has really been an excellent opportunity, for not just me but a lot of other people, to verbalise those feelings and those anxieties and those hopes, in ways that are just really challenging outside of that poetic space. I've worked on other commissions before that were a little bit less thematically focused and had a bit more free reign. But, actually, that is terrible for me.

(LAUGHTER)

EVELYN ARALUEN:

I respond really well to just like, very strict instructions. So, it's been a really great experience to kind of be handed the responsibility for talking about such an important theme but not necessarily pushed into the exact ways that I wanna represent that. So, I found a really good balance in between all of that, I think. And so, I'm really excited about the work that I produced for the Festival.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

So, you talk about other voices. I think, if I'm not wrong, you were responsible for setting up a very interesting initiative in Redfern called Black Rhymes. Tell us about that.

EVELYN ARALUEN:

Yes, so Black Rhymes Aboriginal Poetry Night was something that we established in 2016. It was as a response to some visiting Aboriginal poets, Ellen Van Neerven and Samuel Wagan Watson, who were coming to Sydney. And myself and a few other Aboriginal people in the area, Lorna Munro, Elizabeth Jarrett, we sort of took a moment to look around and wonder what we could actually provide for these people who were visiting and who were really exciting and had amazing work to share.

So just really out of the blue, we decided to start a poetry night that creates a space specifically for Indigenous voices in Redfern. And that's something that has a really long history, going all the way back to, like, Black Theatre in Redfern and all of these amazing initiatives that were begun in response to the gentrification of Redfern as, you know, a site of Aboriginal community and Aboriginal refuge in the face of the ever-changing textures of colonisation.

So, we were prompted into that because we wanted to have a space for these poets that we wanted to listen to, and we wanted to host. But we were really amazed and surprised just how much enthusiasm there was there. So, the first time we ever held an event, we completely booked out the venue. We had over 140 people come and wanna listen to amazing Aboriginal voices. We had people sitting at the back of the bar who wrote their first poem of their life just so that they could step up for the open mic, which is really exciting, so.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

Indeed.

EVELYN ARALUEN:

Yeah, you don't think that that's gonna be a catalyst until you realise just like, how much our community is crying out for that kind of opportunity. So, Lorna and I have continued a lot of that work over the last couple of years. We've hosted, I think, probably, now about five of those events. And so, we're now gonna be partnering with the Festival to give again another opportunity for those Aboriginal voices to be heard. But also, to occupy a really different kind of space, the New South Wales Art Gallery, and the performance night there is gonna have a really different tone.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

What you're trying to do is embody the mission of the Festival, which is to create empathy. And also, a way of encouraging people who haven't spoken up about their own mental health, to feel they can come forward.

EVELYN ARALUEN:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think it's really important that we recognise that there are different kinds of spaces where people are going to be comfortable with different kinds of voices. And it's so important that as we're doing this work, we are centring First Nations' voices as much as we possibly can. Because, you know, these are the communities that are suffering most from mental health issues in the country at the moment. And so it's gonna be, I think, a really fantastic opportunity to frame a lot of the work that the Festival's been doing and to just bring that into the kind of focus of like what responsibility the whole community has to addressing this crisis of mental health that Aboriginal people are facing. So I think it's gonna be really, really important. And also creatively, I know these writers. I know these poets have just got so much to share. And so it's gonna be an amazing opportunity to hear that collectively, you know, and correspondingly with the work of the Festival.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

It's very interesting that poetry is proving to be a catalyst for these voices being heard in the Indigenous circles. The spoken word is how your culture was really...

EVELYN ARALUEN:

Our oral history is like, not only just speaking to each other, speaking to, you know, our children and our old people, but also speaking to the land. And so, I think that poetry is just something which is really natural for Aboriginal people.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

Yes.

EVELYN ARALUEN:

And it's just been a really amazing emergence in the last couple of years with really incredible writers like Ellen Van Neerven and Alison Whittaker and Natalie Harkin and so many other new writers who are sharing these voices in these particular styles and formations, that I think are now starting to get a little bit of attention. But it's a real change and a real shift in the dialogue for how Aboriginal writing and how our oral cultures are being seen to be transforming and growing and getting bigger and brighter every year.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

So, you are quite an accomplished, young Indigenous writer yourself. You name these other names, but I know... (LAUGHS) ..You have accomplished a huge amount in your short life. I think that everyone would love to hear you read some of your work. Would you like to read one or two pieces?

EVELYN ARALUEN:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. The first piece that I wanna share is actually something that I think is a part of the particular perspective that I've been bringing to the Festival. Hopefully that I'll bring to the Festival. So, in 2018, I won the Judith Wright Poetry Prize with a poem called "Guarded by Birds." Which is thinking through suicide and mental health, and how as Aboriginal people we understand the impact of the many strange and foreign influences of colonial culture. And so trying to understand something that is not spiritually known for Aboriginal people until colonisation, in these cultural terms, is a real challenge for me.

So, I wrote this work that can only ever speak for me and what I've sort of been witness to. And it's not necessarily the brightest or the happiest of responses to what is, really, for Aboriginal people today, like an ongoing crisis. But it does attempt to bring something personal and tender to the impacts that that has on our communities. So, this is a poem called "Guarded by Birds."

When you go

as the spaces between

wine and Zoloft

say you must

at thirty-seven

or some other too soon

before old has a chance to grow in you

before youth has time to loose you from his claws

I will meet you at the edges of a body shaped like loss

and trace the outline of your absence with smoke

then take from the air

the name of a man

who smelt like river

and spoke like distance

Second surviving son to two generations

of fathers to buried boys

loved and beloved in your loudest lonely

by the daughter to what I swear

I heard you call deliverance

Too good, too good

this eloquent offering

of birdcage to gulls

There are knowings I cannot tell you

and things you do not know how to say

between tradition and trauma

there are nights when we meet voiceless

in the shadow of once was gum

the memory of leaf and branch

the place where you want to die

I know little of this ceremony

have only collected for the coolamon

carved from river red

to carry water, to carry child, to carry smoke

to carry you to those who watch

and hope there will be place for you

When you go

I will be the one to tell the birds

they will wait as I gather the eucalypt

and tell me

take them still living

break the branch if you must

Actually, before I wrote that poem, but thinking about it really as a response to that kind of experience. There's another that I wanna read, which, I really like to read these two together because I think that it demonstrates that there are some kinds of finalities or some kinds of experiences that feel really final. But you can never really kind of predict what's gonna happen the next day, the next year, the next lifetime. And so this poem, "Wangal Morning," really just thinks about living through and enduring through something that you didn't necessarily think would ever be a reality.

Wangal morning

sounds almost mute

like earth

like blood

then heat

move in shadows

slow given back light

measure the measureless

once more around time

fracture sound

half sigh

fill sky

gather old light from other place

when we, new

muted

you, gentle

slipping through horizons

for bird song

for your poems

for what you have buried here

give these offerings

say to dawn,

make light soft

make light gentle

make it not a night

split open

let not this night

split me open

I’m still asleep

but you know I will wake

if you need

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

That's very moving. And you've won a couple of other awards too, I believe.

EVELYN ARALUEN:

Yeah, I really kind of entered into writing and poetry through the Nakata Brophy Prize that Overland Literary Journal runs. It's specifically a young Indigenous writer's prize. And for me I think that while we're really in a time of great celebration of Indigenous voices, it was that opportunity that actually presented itself as a chance for, maybe, me to say something or to create something in the hope that it might be read and enjoyed by somebody else. And so, yeah, through the Nakata Brophy I published my first poem, "Learning Bundjalung on Tharawal." And then came back and won for a short story a year later, which was really amazing. So, that's been a big part of my entry into writing and into the kind of work that I'm also trying to do around the writing community now. Just sort of making sure that those opportunities continue to bring new voices in as much as possible.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

So, what inspires you? What, as a young indigenous writer, what really drives you?

EVELYN ARALUEN:

In my actual, sort of, like, formal beginnings with poetry, it was learning my great grandfather's language. And going to language classes at Era College and going with my sister and learning Bundjalung, and having a connection to something that was really difficult, growing up off country, to feel connected to and to feel responsive to. And also learning about grammar and vocabulary in just the different ways that language manifests, you know, through country, really transformed the kind of writing that I was able to imagine, even down to the very level of a sentence.

And then in terms of the, sort of the more imaginative and the political and the cultural influences... I mean, I've always loved reading. I'm really grateful that that's something that my parents really encouraged in all of their kids. You know, they didn't have that growing up. So, it was something that they really made an amazing effort to give to us. So, I've been really lucky and had a really rich upbringing with literature and poetry, and all of these kinds of different influences. I probably wouldn't write, or wouldn't necessarily feel the need to write, if I felt that the exact way that my being is structured by the specific cultural and political circumstances of the settler-colonial state. If that was something that I had better representation of in arts and media and culture today, I would probably not necessarily feel that need to force my voice into the void, you know. (LAUGHS)

And it's now something that is becoming so much more vibrant, which is really, really amazing. And there's a lot more access to those voices that are there, or that have been there for such a long time. Yeah, I guess a big part of it is just thinking about what I would've wanted to have heard or to be told a few years ago when I was feeling really lost with my studies, with my identity, with where I was in the universe.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

You are a very accomplished teacher as well. As a writer, you've taken the responsibility that you've just talked about, that sends a responsibility and leveraged that. Now you're lecturing at the University of Sydney.

EVELYN ARALUEN:

Yeah.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

The wonderful thing is, that it's actually a department that is carved away from anthropology. (LAUGHS)

EVELYN ARALUEN:

Yeah.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

It may well feel to you that it's slow, but you are suddenly creating your own footprint there to make it happen. And you're doing a PhD as well. What's your thesis?

EVELYN ARALUEN:

So, my thesis is called “Inscription”, which is the biggest concept that I advance in my work, which is about understanding a fuller and a more culturally grounded history of Aboriginal text duality, of writing, of voice. So, I try to work with... Specifically, like, I work with really, really contemporary Indigenous writers like Alexis Wright, Melissa Lucashenko, Ellen Van Neerven, Natalie Harkin. But I'm trying to place that work in a sort of continuum of our voices from time immemorial. So, I look a lot at the conditions that are structuring how other people could engage with Aboriginal writing and why they have been really slow off the ground. Or why they are often more about containment than they are about expanding the possibilities of our work. And I'm really, hopefully, just writing a sort of a theoretical handbook of how we can better understand the value, the importance and the sophistication of Aboriginal literatures. Not just, you know, today but in our full histories and into the amazing futures that I know that we have coming for our writers and our readers. But it's, you know, sort of stage of very close to submission. So, it's all looking a little bit terrifying at this stage.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

Well, you're a very busy person. Teaching, researching, writing, undertaking all sorts of community initiatives and...

EVELYN ARALUEN:

Sometimes I walk my dogs too. That's... I fit that in.

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

(LAUGHS) It's an absolute pleasure to talk with you today. Thanks.

EVELYN ARALUEN:

Thank you so much.

(MUSIC)

BARBARA SULLIVAN:

I've been speaking with Evelyn Araluen, the 2019 Festival poet. I hope you all enjoyed the reading of two of her poems. She'll perform her commissioned work, "Interior Anxious," and will host Black Rhymes at the Art Gallery of New South Wales at 7:30pm on 16 October. 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.

(OUTRO MUSIC)