Writers Aloud

Episode 425

RLF INTRODUCTION: Hello and welcome. You're listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London.

Hello and welcome to episode 425 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, 'Poetry Break', host Julia Copus is joined by Rebecca Watts to discuss the poem, 'My Grandmother's Love Letters' by the twentieth-century poet Hart Crane.

Julia Copus: This is 'Poetry Break' for the Royal Literary Fund, I'm Julia Copus and with me today to talk about one of her favourite poems is the poet, editor and literary critic, Rebecca Watts. Rebecca's debut collection, *The Met Office Advises Caution,* Carcanet 2016, was a Poetry Book Society recommendation, and was shortlisted for the 2017 Seamus Heaney Centre First Collection poetry prize.

Her second, *Red Gloves,* was also published by Carcanet, in 2020. In 2019, Rebecca edited Carcanet's *Elizabeth Jennings: New Selected Poems,* introducing a new generation of readers to one of the twentieth century's best-loved poets. As a critic, she has contributed essays and reviews to the *TLS* and *PN Review*, and is known for her 2018 polemic, 'The Cult of the Noble Amateur', which sparked widespread debate about contemporary trends in poetry.

Rebecca has collaborated with visual artists and composers and has completed poetry commissions from the BBC, the Polar Museum, and

Addenbrookes Hospital. Her awards include residencies at Hawthornden Castle and Gladstone's Library, and grants from the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative (that's one to get your lips around!), the Society of Authors and Arts Council England. She's currently working on poems, creative essays and songs, so lots to look forward to from her.

Rebecca, it's so nice to see you in the flesh and meet face to face because we have communicated, haven't we, by email and by Zoom and all sorts of things. So this is the first time that we are getting to meet and it is lovely to have you here.

Now you've chosen a poem by an American poet. Could you tell us who that poet is, what the poem is, and maybe what first drew you to it, if you can remember, or what it is that you love about it now?

Rebecca Watts: Of course. So the poem I've chosen is, 'My Grandmother's Love Letters' by Hart Crane. Hart Crane didn't have a long life, he was born in 1899 and died in 1932, so he's a real, kind of, American modernist, I guess; has also been described as *'the* romantic of the twentieth century'.

So he was bound to appeal to me because I have a real soft spot for Romanticism in all its forms. This poem was really my first introduction to his work, and it was several years ago I picked up from a charity shop this lovely little *Selected Poems* in the Faber Poet to Poet series. So it's: *Hart Crane: Poems selected by Maurice Riordan*.

Julia Copus: And we should say at this point that by probably fairly weird coincidence, we've both got exactly the same edition haven't we?

Rebecca Watts: We have.

Julia Copus: We're going to delve into the poem in a little bit, but first we should hear it and before we have a listen to it, is there anything that you would like us to listen out for in particular, even particular words or phrases that you would want to draw our attention to as we listen?

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, it's an interesting one. I love poems like this where there aren't any really tricky words. I imagine all the words in this poem will be words that most people are familiar with. It's quite clear what the situation is, but acoustically, it's really doing a lot. So I would listen out for some repetitions and maybe even a handful of rhymes, not to fixate on them, but just be open to them appearing.

Julia Copus: That they might be there, might not be thudding at the end of a line.

Rebecca Watts: Absolutely.

Julia Copus: Okay, well, should we have a listen to the poem?

Rebecca Watts: Sure.

My Grandmother's Love Letters

There are no stars to-night
But those of memory.
Yet how much room for memory there is
In the loose girdle of soft rain.

There is even room enough
For the letters of my mother's mother,
Elizabeth,
That have been pressed so long
Into a corner of the roof
That they are brown and soft,
And liable to melt as snow.

Over the greatness of such space
Steps must be gentle.
It is all hung by an invisible white hair.
It trembles as birch limbs webbing the air.

And I ask myself:

"Are your fingers long enough to play
Old keys that are but echoes:
Is the silence strong enough
To carry back the music to its source
And back to you again
As though to her?"

Yet I would lead my grandmother by the hand
Through much of what she would not understand;
And so I stumble. And the rain continues on the roof
With such a sound of gently pitying laughter.

Julia Copus: That's great, isn't it? So would you mind just in terms of content, very briefly, to give us a sort of sketch or a run through, maybe roughly stanza by stanza?

Rebecca Watts: Sure. So I suppose being very executive summary about it, stanza one I take to be saying, 'What a perfect night for some nostalgia'. Stanza two, 'Maybe now is the time to revisit and examine those memories I've left in the corner of the attic for so long'.

Julia Copus: 'There is even room enough'. Yeah.

Rebecca Watts: Stanza three, actually, there's something a bit scary about going there. You know, we have this 'hung by an invisible white hair', trembling, cobwebby, sense. It's all getting a bit cold and fear-inducing. And then we have this direct question: 'And I ask myself', and I suppose what he's asking himself is, 'Can I even do it? You know, if I get over my fear, that's one thing, but am I mature enough, am I strong enough, am I sensitive and capable enough to channel or hold or process, generally deal with the past?'

And then in stanza five: 'I want to bring the past into the present, reconcile myself to it and it to me, but it doesn't seem to want to belong there. And so I've reached an impasse'.

Julia Copus: Well, I think that's brilliant, so should we delve a bit deeper?

Rebecca Watts: Sure.

Julia Copus: It's interesting because in the edition of poems that we've mentioned we both got, edited by Maurice Riordan, he says something in his introduction on the first page that I found really useful as a way into Hart Crane in general, and maybe specifically this poem too. He talks about how Hart Crane saw in the modern age a break with the values of the past, and that he viewed with dismay the dominance in America of a materialist culture that betrayed its historic destiny.

But his response was to commit himself to the transforming power of the imagination. I suppose this poem could be seen to have quite a lot to do with the transforming power of the imagination, do you think?

Rebecca Watts: Yeah. And also very much it's asking a question, I suppose, of how the present can process the past or carry the past forward into the future. And what is the role of the imagination in handling memory, as well as obviously in this poem, we have the physical handling of memories in the form of letters. You know, it's not an accident that the letters, which are the physical substance of the memory, are 'brown and soft and liable to melt as snow', you know, they're hardly there at all, and soon they could disappear. So one of the reasons I love this poem in a way that I didn't actually love many of the other poems in the Hart Crane selection, this one really spoke to me because of the intimacy of the atmosphere and the clarity with which the scene is cast.

Julia Copus: It's in this self-contained space, isn't it, up in the attic?

Rebecca Watts: We're in the attic, yeah. And you know, an attic is just an evocative space anyway, isn't it, for many reasons? But, you know, 'steps must be gentle', is a metaphor, but actually I have the sense of this young man – he was fairly young when he wrote this poem, I think twenty-one or so – *creeping* across the beams to the corner of the roof and reaching out to something.

And all the textures of the paper and the word, and then the sound of the rain and all of that conjures very much a sense of a charged present. But actually one of the things it's charged with is the past and the weight of the past and what should be done about it.

Julia Copus: Yeah, absolutely. I wanted to ask you about some of the imagery, especially at the start. Do you think it's supposed to be representative, so we've got the 'stars', we've got the 'rain', is that meant to be straightforwardly representative of a specific thing or...

Rebecca Watts: I think 'stars' and 'rain' are things in poems that are carriers of lots of meanings, they can be bent to different wills. When we begin any poem, I think we are trying to grapple with, quite literally, *Oh, what is this about?* You know, *Where am I? Who's here? What's happening?* So I certainly encounter the 'stars' and the 'rain' in the first stanza, as exactly that. You know, we're in a roof space, maybe there's a skylight, an attic window, and the speaker is looking out and seeing 'no stars'.

You know, it's a darkness; it's a blank, which later comes to sort of resonate in a slightly bigger way. And the rain itself, you know, it's soft rain but by the end of the poem, it's a slightly different kind of rain.

Julia Copus: It's sinister, isn't it, by the end? At the start it seems to be sort of gently cradling almost. There's that lovely phrase, 'the loose girdle of soft rain'.

Rebecca Watts: 'The loose girdle of soft rain'.

Julia Copus: And then it's changed, it's almost *mocking* by the end.

Rebecca Watts: Exactly. So it's worth looking at, and we'll come to this I'm sure, the words that are repeated through the poem. Some of them mean something quite different the second time, which is really what you want repetition to do in a poem, you know, to be not the same thing, it's the same word sonically, but that it means something more, something different.

Julia Copus: Yeah, or sometimes the same, but deeper. You've gone deeper into it and it's got an additional meaning.

Rebecca Watts: So, yeah, I don't think in the first stanza that the 'stars' and the 'rain' are emblems, I think they are...you know, I think partly why I'm obsessed with this poem is: it's at once very intimate, we're in a corner of the roof and we're dealing with someone's secret past, their love letters, you know, but also there's this real sense of cosmic space, 'Over the greatness of such space / Steps must be gentle'.

I get darkness and void from that. I get a sense of different worlds that are trying to be bridged, but might not be bridgeable. So I think the scale is once very small and huge in this poem, which is one of the reasons I love it. And the stars, of course, are setting that up right from the beginning.

Julia Copus: Yeah. Now you've already mentioned about the sounds in the poem. There's no formal rhyme scheme, we're not talking about full-on rhymes at the end of the lines here, are we?

Rebecca Watts: No; I mean, interestingly, there are two rhyming couplets in this poem. So in the third stanza we hear, 'It is all hung by an invisible white hair./ It trembles as birch limbs webbing the air'.

Julia Copus: Yeah, so we do have that full rhyme there.

Rebecca Watts: So we have the full one, and then in the final stanza. 'Yet I would lead my grandmother by the hand / Through much of what she would not understand'.

Julia Copus: 'Yet I would lead my grandmother by the hand', it's got that feeling of pentameter hasn't it, those five stresses, so it almost becomes a traditional classical-sounding couplet?

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, and I was interested in the way that, I suppose for me, end-rhyme offers a sense of certainty. Any kind of formal metre, end-rhyme, it has a surety about it that unmetred lines, unrhymed lines, don't have. And I was really interested that the things he's most definite about, that fall into these metrical patterns that rhyme at the end, are the bits telling us most about the fragility or the failure of the connection between the present and the past.

Julia Copus: The failure of understanding in the second…

Rebecca Watts: Exactly. That's the stuff that he feels most sure about and that in itself is quite an eloquent message I suppose.

Julia Copus: Yeah, absolutely, I think that's a brilliant insight. I noticed as well the predominance of 's's going through, it's like the hiss or the whisper of rain or maybe a whisper becoming a hiss by the end of the poem.

Rebecca Watts: Yeah. And it's the rain, and it's also, I get the sense, you know, when you open old texts and you have the sense that someone's hand was once there on that paper.

And then we get hands as well later on. It's almost…it's the whisper of these past lives and these past intimacies. That should by rights be gone, they've been pressed so long into a corner of the roof that they're 'brown and soft, / And liable to melt like snow'. They've kind of outstayed their welcome.

And yet here they are. And then we get these images later on of music and echoes and what sound is coming through the silence, and the 'source', you know, 'To carry back the music to its source'. All of this is whispering and sound and some kind of vestigial messaging that by rights shouldn't be there, but very much is there and it's the speaker's job to have to deal with that in some way.

Julia Copus: Negotiate it, yeah. I don't know if this is going too far, but just picking up on the idea of the 's' sounds. The fact that in line seven there, the third line of the second stanza, we have the word 'Elizabeth', where there's 's' softened into a 'z' sound, Elizabeth, and it's given a whole line to itself.

Rebecca Watts: I was really wondering about that. That's the only line that just has...consists of a single word. I feel there, maybe there's something quite personal going on, you know, the announcement of 'Elizabeth'. I started thinking is this something to do with, you know...Elizabeth I think was Mary's mother, was she, in the biblical story?

Julia Copus: Oh, I see. Don't ask me, I'm the daughter of a vicar!

Rebecca Watts: That could be wrong, but it's interesting, the first time the owner of the letters is mentioned, they're not the 'Grandmother' of the title, but they're 'my mother's mother'.

Julia Copus: Yes. Very significant.

Rebecca Watts: New line, 'Elizabeth', new line. And then we talk about the letters, why does it matter so much to distinguish the matrilineal line to announce 'Elizabeth', like she's some great presence. It feels to me that there's something biographical going on there.

Julia Copus: So we should say there are two ways aren't there, of approaching any poem. The one idea is that it should be able to stand

on its own feet and be read by anybody and mean what it means to the reader. So perhaps that's the most important attribute of a poem for me. But, the biographical context does alter how we read the poem. So you, I think, know more about that context than I do?

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, I by no means have done a deep dive into the life and times of Hart Crane, but I did pick up on the fact that he came from quite a turbulent household. His parents eventually divorced, I think when he was in his late teens, but earlier in his life he was brought up partly by his grandmother. Now I can't be sure, I haven't verified whether that's the maternal grandmother of this poem, my hunch is that it is because she seems to have been quite a substantial figure in his life.

And there was a period after he left school without graduating and ran off to New York to try and become his own person. Where his parents were in the process of a divorce, and his mother *and* his grandmother turned up to stay with him indefinitely in his one-bedroom apartment!

Julia Copus: O-*kay!*

Rebecca Watts: Consequently inspiring him to try and sign up to the Armed Forces as a way of escaping from them. So, you know, there's clearly personal experience there that is underpinning this poem in *some* way. And we don't need to know that, but it certainly did change my understanding of how this poem ends when I realised that the grandmother he's probably talking about was still alive when this poem was written, because I'd been assuming that he was musing on how to bridge the space or make a connection between people who are now no longer living. But actually, if this is a person who is still living, who he could talk to, you know, who he *could* 'lead by the hand' through certain experiences and that's something he wants to do, but he feels she won't understand, that has obviously quite a different resonance.

Julia Copus: So yeah, line twenty-three, 'Yet I would lead', as in, I *want to* lead my grandmother by the hand.

Rebecca Watts: See, this is again, how words repeated, even if a kind of grammatically functional word, such as 'would', you know, the first 'would' you would probably interpret as *I would like to, I wish I could, I want to*, whereas 'Through much of what she would not understand', there's a stubbornness in that, she refuses to understand what I'm trying to explain to her. So there's a whole lot of emotional dynamics hidden away, I think, in this poem.

Julia Copus: Very interesting...because without those dynamics, you would assume the grandmother to be no longer around?

Rebecca Watts: Definitely, I think. And here we are in the modern day and she...I would have to introduce her to the present, sort of beyond her in the way that the past is beyond the speaker.

Julia Copus: Because it does seem to be a poem about some sort of retrieval or a regaining of something that's been lost, do you think?

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, I was really interested in this word 'pressed' in the second stanza, these letters 'That have been pressed so long / Into a corner of the roof'. I mean, he could have said, *left* in a corner of the roof; *mouldering* in a corner of the roof. 'Pressed' implies a hand that's doing the pressing.

Someone put them there. Why did they want them hidden away? There's almost like a trace of their hand still on them, such that this is not the speaker's property; 'The letters of my mother's mother / Elizabeth', she's very present, even though she feels very far away. So the question of who is reclaiming what, why are the letters in this attic?

Whose house are we in? Are we in the speaker's house? Is this a family home that he's come back to visit? Is the grandmother living there? Does she know the letters are there? And also who are the love letters to and from? There's so much that's unsaid and there is a sense, I think, of trespass.

You know, not just the present kind of trespassing on the territory of the past, which maybe should be left as it is, left to dissolve and melt away. But also this sense of the ownership of experience, and whose experience counts most now. And whether those different experiences and different worldviews can ever be brought into a functional dialogue.

Julia Copus: Yeah, exactly. You mentioned at the start the R-word, Romanticism. There is that sense, I think, that the letters hold some kind of promise. that they are a portal to some sort of richer experience, something better, you know, that Romantic, capital R, Romantic poetry idea.

Rebecca Watts: Elevating the past. Yeah. Yeah.

Julia Copus: So going back to the introduction that Maurice Riordan wrote, he talks there about the visionary power of poetry to transform an intolerable world and that this is something that Hart Crane believed in.

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, and that's interesting in this poem because I think that's really the very thing that's being brought into doubt or questioned in this poem. In – I suppose I'd call it the fourth stanza, although we've got a floating line just before it – where he introduces this direct confrontation, 'And I ask myself', which is such a scary moment because you've been in the soft world of these letters in the past, and thinking about how fragile it all is.

Julia Copus: It's a real intrusion, yeah.

Rebecca Watts: It is. And it's a kind of, *Okay, this is the moment where we face up to reality*. And the whole of the stanza following that is implying that the answer to his question, you know, 'Are your fingers long enough […] / Is the silence strong enough', the answer is, kind of, 'No'.

Because then the final stanza, the counter-argument comes with, 'Yet I would', *I would like to*. And that's why ultimately in the penultimate line,

we have this conflict, 'And so I stumble' because there's this doubt about the speaker's ability to engage with this past and make something out of it, and then his determination to do so and to move forward. And these things can't be resolved.

Julia Copus: Yeah, it's interesting too, the double meaning of the 'Yet' at the start of the final stanza, so 'Yet' as in, *even so*, or *knowing all of this*, but also 'Yet' as in *still,* a sort of temporal, a time idea. That second sense, it's like he's persisting through time as he moves forward through time himself.

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, and that's what...I mean, the fourth and the fifth stanzas I find really tricky to get my head around. The sense is very vivid, the scene is very vivid, and the sense is very clear in the first three stanzas; we know where we are. And then as soon as he poses a question to himself, there's something quite obscure about the imagery and it's like the sentences are water and I'm kind of trying to grapple with who's the subject and what is 'the music' that's being carried back 'to its source'?

And what are the 'Old keys' that are themselves 'but echoes', because it's not quite about the idea of the speaker reliving an experience from the past. It's something more slippery, and I don't quite know what it is, and I don't quite know what the silence is, as opposed to the music.

Julia Copus: Right, so this is all interesting, isn't it, in regard to Hart Crane's idea of what a poem should be doing and how he used metaphor? I read a story about Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* magazine in Chicago, rejecting one of his poems on the grounds that the metaphor was kind of jumping all over the place and she wasn't quite sure what was going on.

And he wrote a rebuttal, and actually to her credit, Harriet Monroe did print the poem in the end with her objections and with his rebuttal, and I think with her answer to those. But yes, he had an idea of what he called the 'logic of metaphor'.

Rebecca Watts: That it worked differently from scientific logic?

Julia Copus: Completely. Yeah.

Rebecca Watts: It's his own thing; it's doing its own thing.

Julia Copus: And that it was more akin he thought to the logic of dreaming, for instance.

Rebecca Watts: Yeah. I feel that in this poem. I think Hart Crane's sense of metaphor is not to do with what words mean, it's to do with the feeling that is triggered when you hear certain words, which of course might be slightly different for different people, but it's more about the emotional ballpark that you are in than about how you could precisely paraphrase or translate the particular phrases that he's written. So, 'Are your fingers long enough to play / Old keys that are but echoes'?

Well, suddenly what's happening is we're being kind of swept into a room where someone is playing an old piano, and the atmosphere of that as a general association, kind of gives us all we need. It's like, there's a sense of something not quite belonging, that the person experiencing this is somehow slightly distanced from this music that's being generated.

Julia Copus: I can imagine that being quite frustrating to lots of readers, actually, as it was obviously to Harriet Monroe. It's something you kind of have to buy into and go with, isn't it?

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, and I think that's probably why I didn't...I mean, the response I had to *this* poem, which I read in the *Selected*, was really strong, and I keep coming back to it and every time I read it I just feel mesmerised and I feel sad, but like that beautiful sadness. That is what, melancholy...

Julia Copus: Which surely motivates all poets.

Rebecca Watts: Yeah. I feel it every single time, even though I know the poem off by heart. And it just takes me to that place instantly. And I think this one does it because the setup is concrete, so it's all clear, whereas I find in some of his other poems, where we are at this level of metaphor from the start, it's already run away without me.

Julia Copus: You're adrift.

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, exactly.

Julia Copus: So he's led you by the hand.

Rebecca Watts: Exactly.

Julia Copus: For the first three stanzas.

Rebecca Watts: Yeah. And he's taken me into this place of textures and sound. I'd almost smell the attic and the moulding paper, you know, it's a familiar place. Even though in itself it's a metaphor in the world of the poem.

Julia Copus: So, by that stage, by the end of the poem, you're happy to be slightly cast adrift?

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, I feel I can be held in that space, as soon as I get to the end of this poem I just want to go back to the start and read it again.

Julia Copus: Yeah...

Rebecca Watts: And that's what you want.

Julia Copus: So it's interesting that you say that because it does end with the metaphor of 'rain' as it started, and as we've hinted, the rain has taken on a different character by the end. Do you want to say something more about that?

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, so we start with, 'Yet how much room for memory there is / In the loose girdle of soft rain', you know, the 'rain' is providing an opening, a welcoming space into which these possibly difficult or painful things can be brought and examined and accepted. But at the end, we have the speaker, you know, setting up this conflict that they're possibly unable to resolve. 'And so I stumble'. 'I stumble. / And the rain continues on the roof / With such a sound of gently pitying laughter'.

So, in those final two lines, 'rain' is a repetition, 'roof' is a repetition, 'such' is a repetition, 'gently' is almost a repetition because we've had 'gentle' in the middle of the poem, 'Steps must be gentle'. But, you know, 'the rain' now is not a comforting rain, but a kind of mocking rain and the gentleness is not…

Julia Copus: A kind gentleness?

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, I mean, 'Steps must be gentle' is a very generous and empathic recognition, I suppose, whereas a 'sound of gently pitying laughter'. Pitying...

Julia Copus: It's sort of like patting someone on the head, isn't it?

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, it is, and there's a lot held in that word, which isn't nice.

Julia Copus: But also is there a sense of that contrast with the 'I', so 'I stumble', rain never stumbles, it's just regularly falling down and continuing on its way in a way that the speaker is unable to do.

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, I think so, I mean, he's brought to an impasse by the end of the poem. You know, there's the sense not just, *I don't know what to do next, but I accept that this cannot be resolved*, so that's kind of the end of that. But yeah, the rain not only keeps going but mocks and pities him.

Julia Copus: I just want to jump back quickly to line fourteen to ask you what you make of that 'invisible white hair.'

Rebecca Watts: Oh, it's wonderful. Well for a start, of course it's not invisible because we can see it as soon as he says 'white hair' and I think of an old lady with white hair. I also think because it's 'hung', and then in the next line we have the trembling and the word 'webbing'. So immediately I'm thinking of, you know, spider, spider webs?

Julia Copus: Yeah. Cobwebs. Yeah.

Rebecca Watts: Yeah. And it's creepy, and it's spidery. Oh, I love it!

Julia Copus: And it just sounds fantastic, doesn't it? 'It is all hung by an invisible white hair. / It trembles as birch limbs webbing the air'.

Rebecca Watts: Yeah. And again, these little gestures that take us outside again, the 'birch limbs webbing the air', on the other side of the roof. And again, they bring us up skywards, you know, into that kind of cosmic space outside. In those lines actually, I'm also interested in this repeated 'it' that begins both of those lines.

What is 'it', what does 'it' refer to, is 'it' the past? You know, 'over the greatness of such space steps must be gentle'. 'It 'is all hung', 'It trembles'.

Julia Copus: I mean, just a very literal reading. The first 'it' you take, I think, as the space of the attic.

And I suppose I read the attic itself as a sort of metaphor for memory, a space of memory. But then the second 'it', that doesn't quite work for, does it?

Rebecca Watts: It's like it's the whole structure, the whole structure of everything that's brought the speaker to this place in this moment: the

family, everything that's in the past that's holding him up there. And that kind of links to, in this tricksy bit towards the end of the poem where we've gone off, and with the silence and the music, and is the silence strong enough 'To carry back the music to its source / And back to you again / as though to her?'

I'm always interested – I'm quite literal minded – in the geometry of a poem, like *who* or *what* is here, and where are they in relation to other things. So again, this repetition of the word 'back', it means something different each time. So 'To carry back the music to its source', we're going back in time. 'And back to you again': 'back' is taking us forward, it's returning to him in the present, but then 'to you again / As though to her'?

Julia Copus: Yeah, the syntax is really tricky there, isn't it?

Rebecca Watts: It is.

Julia Copus: And there's also, I suppose, the question of who 'her' is. You know, the 'grandmother' isn't called the grandmother first time round, but is not only 'my mother's mother', then even more specifically 'Elizabeth', so she's named, but the mother gets a mention because…

Rebecca Watts: Two mentions.

Julia Copus: 'My mother's mother'; so could the 'her' be referring to the mother?

Rebecca Watts: Umm...

Julia Copus: I mean, I read it as the grandmother, but?

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, I think...I don't know what I get from that line really. I suppose I was generally thinking of the grandmother, but really whoever she is, it's her as residing in him, almost. It's like he is now, he is now the

kind of the culmination of this maternal lineage, you know, there's the grandmother and then the mother, and now there's him and he's the one standing here with these letters in his hand, so it's the 'As though' of that line that actually I'm trying to get my head round, *I'm back to you again as though to her*, which might as well be to her. So it's, you know, it's just tricky and it's all of these things and probably not quite any of them.

Julia Copus: You see that's so interesting because you said that you are generally quite literal-minded, and that you weren't particularly, as I wasn't, I'm not particularly drawn to Hart Crane from what I've read of his other poems, but I really like this poem too.

And it's so interesting that you are saying, 'Oh, it could be this', and, you know, he jumps about in his...in a dreamlike way when it comes to metaphor and so on, that someone who's a self-confessed literal-minded person would be drawn to this poem is interesting to me.

Rebecca Watts: Yeah, I think it's because I can never drop that desire to make sense of everything. And what's beautiful about this poem is that it won't let me, because ultimately, guess what, not everything does make sense.

And not everything does add up neatly. And I think that is the very dilemma that the speaker here is grappling with. They're trying to go, *Oh, a chance to put the past to rest before it disappears to nothing, before it melts like snow, let's handle these things.* And actually it's like opening Pandora's box.

You know, you touch these things and in a way you might resist it, but perhaps are flooded with feelings that you hadn't anticipated. And suddenly you're implicated in situations from the past that belong to people that aren't you. And yet, here you are connected to them by invisible threads that you can never quite sever.

And there's something to do with all that that this poem is doing. And it's through its acoustic patterning and its beautiful imagery that I can't quite paraphrase, it's holding me in that space. And I just think that's an amazing thing that a poem can do because it's made its own little world then, and we're in it, as long as we want to be.

Julia Copus: It's forcing us as readers to surrender, which as you say, is quite a good thing to be forced to do now and then. Well, I think that's a really good place to end. Thank you so much for talking to us about one of your favourite poems, 'My Grandmother's Love Letters' by Hart Crane. Thank you for your wit and insight and for being just a fantastic guest today.

Rebecca Watts: Thank you very much for having me.

Julia Copus: Rebecca Watts, and Rebecca's latest poetry collection is *Red Gloves,* published by Carcanet.

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RLF outro: That was the latest in the 'Poetry Break' series for *Writers Aloud* and featured Rebecca Watts in conversation with Julia Copus. You can find out more about Rebecca on her website, rebeccawatts.weebly.com. And that concludes episode 425 of *Writers Aloud*, which was recorded and produced by Julia Copus.

Coming up in episode 426, Sara Wheeler speaks with Caroline Sanderson about the sources of her inspirations as a travel writer and biographer, and why the writer's job is to find hope and celebrate the individual human spirit's survival.

We hope you'll join us.

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