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NB: Welcome to this edition of the Being a Writer podcast—a podcast that explores writers’ creativity and resilience. This series is part of The Literary Consultancy’s new programme of support for writers that focuses on cultivating and safeguarding literary creativity. With a range of special guests, we explore what it means to be a writer today.

The following was recorded at Free Word, on the 23rd of October 2019, for Being a Writer: an Interactive Forum—a TLC event in association with the Royal Society of Literature. In this podcast, poet Yomi Ṣode speaks to the theme A Room of One’s Own, on how he finds and makes time and space to write. It is not available here, on Being a Writer.

YS [00:00:56]: Good evening. Thank you very much, Aki, for this invitation. I was lost, I didn’t know how to approach all of this… so it’s been really good to hear everyone so far tonight, and if there’s one thing I must share so far, earlier today I was working. I still have my badge with me. I’m not sure how many people work and write and try to mix the two and it’s a headache, so even listening to Dean talking about the collectives, [and] just seeing the array of the collectives, I was never a part of that process. And I wasn’t even part of that process because I worked full-time. And then, I saw Malika’s Poetry Kitchen, and I’m part of Malika’s Poetry Kitchen, but the only reason that I’m part of Malika’s Poetry Kitchen is [that] work finishes at five. Malika’s Poetry Kitchen kicks off from, like, seven, so I can actually do that, right? I can make that. And I feel, as I go into [my] presentation, I’ve been within the field, now, in the scene for 12 years. And for the best part of that 12 years, I’ve missed out on so much. But that’s part of the process, in terms of employment.

I’m [don’t] necessarily want to look at that with regards to employment, so to speak, but there’s something to look at within the presentation. Mine’s a little bit weird, bear with me. It’s kind of part monologue, part me talking, and just, yeah… because I really wanted to make it personal, really centred, and in some way, I hope you all relate to it.

So, can I tell you a story?

Audio

[00:03:25]: Yeah yeah.

YS [00:03:26]: Cool. London went through one of its hottest summers in recent history last year. The interesting thing, was whether it was a blood moon, or a rare bone sighting in X amount of years. I felt like I was part of something very special, like a record-breaking moment. And, one of those days, something very, very special happened.

Audio

[00:03:51]: Fam, look.

YS [00:03:54]: I looked up at your mother. I said, ‘Well, all right, then,’ knowing, again, life was about to change. Yep, that’s when we found out about your baby sister.

Audio

[00:04:10]: I really love my baby sister.

YS [00:04:15]: I have been here before. The many moment I said it’ll be fine, not knowing whether I believed my own lie, and it wasn’t a lie, it was an affirmation. I wasn’t sure, as yet, on a placement hold. A plaster, just so she wouldn’t worry. ‘It’ll be fine,’ I said. ‘It’ll be fine, it’ll work itself out,’ I’d say, and somewhere, like a magician, I would find time.

You know, I read once that time is the indefinite continued progress of existence and events; a continued process, meaning, at the point I heard, fam, look, even in sitting down, I could feel the minute hand like a long-time nemesis closing in.

This wasn’t new. I have been employed for 17 years. Four of those years I’ve been working part-time. And 12 of those years, I’ve been writing before or after work, doing promo, or social media runs at lunchtime or in between meetings. Playing catch-up, working twice as hard and knowing how much time I was losing. The minute hand, my nemesis, that interestingly enough shaped who I am today.

And in saying that, I felt within that time, I’ve always felt, because I worked full-time, and then I went part-time, in all these moments I was missing, I was constantly just trying to catch up on something. Constantly trying to learn as much as I could within the time I was losing. And I say this to anyone that is employed, or anyone that has got family, or anything in terms of commitments that they have to go through…, it’s always a constant battle in terms of the sacrifices that one has to make, and there was something there in regards to the conflict, because there was talk about the finances as well, and for the most part, contractually, I get paid every month from work. And I was thinking, but I could do this as a freelancer as well, but then, in being a freelancer, it also means I have to think about what happens, in complications, when it comes to family, household, as well as other things. So, I can’t necessarily make a decision based on my own dreams and vision, which also felt like I was limiting myself slightly. I will always have this guilt. I’m being told all the time, just take the leap, take the leap. It’s not so easy to take the leap. If I take the leap, are you going to support me if things are running dry? What would happen, if I made that decision, how best would you support me? would you just sweet talk me? You’ll get there. It’s tough for four months, but it’s not always as easy. For that, I always felt this bit of guilt, as if I’m not fully committing myself as a writer, in the decisions I needed to make, and this was definitely one of the best parts that made me, initially, meet into that conflict.

The day your sister was born, I decided to stop time.

Audio

[00:07:42]: Ooh, like a superhero, Dad?

YS [00:07:45]: Well, something like that.

Audio

[00:07:47]: Yeah yeah, my dad is a superhero. A superhero, superhero!

YS [00:07:52]: And nothing mattered. I stared at your sister for so long, she rubbed and clawed at my skin. She warmed to me as if our hands hovered a radiator on the coldest day. I was no longer a stranger. You okay?

Audio

[00:08:08]: Yes.

YS [00:08:10]: Okay. I was no longer a stranger. I wanted to stop time, and spend however long with her, and also with you.

Audio

[00:08:21]: I love you, Daddy.

YS [00:08:25]: June 2019. I am sat before an esteemed panel of respected individuals. If the minute hand meant anything, this was the moment it needed pick and tick and talk and shout loud enough into motion. ‘Hi, Yomi. If you could not worry about anything, anything at all—not bills, not family, work, friends, deadlines, what would you do?’ And there it was: time meeting space. Opening space opening its door to say let me in. Time being like, uh, stranger danger. But, still edging to poke its head through, and I was stuck. Like, stuck. It was like meeting Lewis Hamilton and Usain Bolt mid-race, with a red light. If you could not worry about anything. That alone was a scary thought enough. I answered, ‘I think I’d be sat on top of a mountain somewhere, a tall one, the height of the Shard. I’d binge-watch Netflix so bad I’d be attending anonymous streaming meetings like hi, my name is Yomi, and you as the audience would say hi Yomi, so let’s try this again. I’d binge-watch Netflix so bad I’d go to anonymous streaming meetings and say hi, my name is Yomi.

Audience

[00:09:50]: Hi Yomi

YS [00:09:52]: That’s not loud enough. I’d say hi, my name is Yomi.

Audience

[00:09:54]: Hi Yomi.

YS [00:09:55]: Thank you very much for indulging me. And I will say hi. I’d watch the entire season of *Sex Education* in one day, and, ashamedly, I would be feeling like that was so awesome, watching all of the programmes and episodes. I’d eat as much as I want. I’d do no work. I’d talk to friends. I’d do no work. I’d watch the world go by. I’ve got to do work because I have family to cater for. I’ve got to do work because I feel guilty not doing any work. I’ve got to do work because I can’t ignore what’s happening in the world. I’ve got to do work because I have no choice. I’ve got to do work because this friend is winning prizes, and this friend has signed a book deal, and imposter syndrome is settling in. It’s slouched [on] the sofa, watching my life in disgust.

Interesting, how time and space works. Allow yourself enough of it. Soak yourself in its freeness. Allow yourself enough of it, and feel the stems of anxiety grow out of your body, waving like tentacles, knowing [that], at some point, you can’t keep this on forever.

I went for the Jerwood interview in June, and I was sat talking to the panel and they approached me with that question. I didn’t know how to answer. I worked so much through the years, that, at the point where they asked me, if you don’t worry about anything at all, if you don’t have to work, if you don’t have to worry about money, if you don’t have to worry about supporting your family, what would you do, the first response that I gave, was I have to check to see if the kids are all right. I have to check to see if Natalie’s safe. I have to just make sure. Then, they said, ‘We asked you, if you had all the time and not worry about anything at all, what would you do?’ And I realised that I just did not answer the question, and I considered everybody else but myself. And, at that point, I completely broke down. I just didn’t know what to do. I had no idea what my next step was. It’s almost like you have all this freeness, what would you do with all the freeness? And I had no idea what [I] would do, and that, for me, was the scariest thought to have, in terms of if you do have all that free time, and you don’t know what to make of it, that means that you’re literally giving all of your time to everything else but yourself.

That, for me, was a huge signal. Any time that I’m working, whether it’s in the process of writing *Coat* or writing poems or working a commissioned work, it’s been at some kind of sacrifice, some kind of argument, some kind of time I’ve had to selfishly steal and make for myself, just to get the work done, all the while still working within the confines of employment.

Audio

[00:12:54]: Were you scared, Dad?

YS [00:12:56]: A little. You see, if I used up all my time to work, then we would miss out on so many things, like going to the park, cinema, library.

Audio

[00:13:07]: Playing Switch?

YS [00:13:09]: Library.

Audio

[00:13:10]: Switch.

YS [00:13:12]: Reading you bedtime stories. And if I had all the time in the world, then I wouldn’t be working, which might make things a bit difficult for Daddy.

Audio

[00:13:22]: We would still play Switch, Dad.

YS [00:13:24]: I’m sure, I’m sure.

I had a reading in South Africa, I arrived back last week Monday, and this time around the booking really struck me, because my boy, he’d been searching my name on YouTube, and Nat, his mum, said what are you doing, and he said I’m just looking for Daddy on YouTube. Yesterday I took him to one of my shows. He’s getting older and the time and the space, it’s the weird thing in pursuing my career and also now in being a parent, it’s doing this all the time, because time, here, tonight, is away from him, and it’s away from Millie and it’s away from family a home. And it seems as if it’s this interesting thing of trying to make that space, and how to balance those worlds. And it’s one of the most difficult thing[s], trying to make sense of both things.

I cried, in answering the question, to the esteemed panel of respected individuals, because I was stuck. All these poems, drafts of plays, commissioned, socialising with networks, presenting to amazing people, and I was lost for words when asked what I would do if I had all the time I needed. Folks, I have zero answers for you. I can tell you to be your own superhero. In me deciding not to stop the minute hand dead in its tracks, my no thank yous became as bold as a promoter’s no fee but good exposure emails. Another night became less guilt free when home just felt warmer, and inexpensive. My no I’m good meant more when realising the last moment I thought about me, as in me, wasn’t the moment I actually thought I was thinking about me.

In closing, ask yourself, when last have you stopped time? When last have you really made space? I had to almost look at that as in a personal story in regards to me. Because this is my current situation now. I can’t necessarily link it to any other thing, because… at the beginning part of my career, working full-time and then working part-time, I missed out on so many things. And now that they’re actually here, in terms of the book is out, my play is doing what it needs to do, I’m working on a second play, I’m working on a poetry collection, and it seems as if all of those things are just gradually growing up and it’s getting higher and it’s getting higher.

It seems, also, that everything else is equally just as high. And I’m in a position where all of that is knocking heads, for beautiful reasons, good problems to have. But, in the same way, it’s almost as if I have to meander between all of them, and I look forward to discussing all of this with you later, because [we] might be in the same world at this point in time.

I hpe you enjoyed the story, Noah Noah.

Audio

[00:16:48]: That was a great story, Daddy. I love you. See you in the morning.