Season Two, Episode Four: Writing, Recovery, And Artistic Truth with Luke Goebel and Amy Speace

INTRO:
Welcome to Red Hen Radio, a podcast brought to you by Red Hen Press. We're a nonprofit publisher fostering diverse stories every year. On this podcast, you'll get to hear from the people who are inside the literary world, the authors and publishing professionals who are working hard to keep independent literature thriving. Stay with us as we introduce you to today's segment.

Kate Gale:
I'm Kate Gale. I'm the publisher of Red Hen Press, and I'm delighted to be here with Luke Goebel and Amy Speace. It's a great time to be here with you as your books are launching in 2026.

So Amy, I'd love to chat with you a little bit about your book. I think many people think of songwriting and poetry as overlapping. I think some people think of them as somewhat interchangeable skills, but you might have a different opinion. You might feel songwriting is one skill, and poetry is another. Obviously, you are a singer-songwriter and you have now written a book of poetry that's coming out.

So, did you think of that as a very similar skill, or were you hopping from one thing to the next?

Amy Speace:
I think it's like same religion, different sect. So, like, if poetry is Catholic, songwriting is like Southern Baptist or something, you know, something like that. It's skills and the listening, there's a lot of similarities. So when I came to poetry…I mean, I started poetry before I started writing songs, like a long time ago when I was a kid, but I wasn't really very serious about it until a few years ago.

So when I came back to it, I think being a kid poet helped me be an attuned lyricist to my songs. My lyrics and my songs have always been called poetic. And I have a lot of symbolism and metaphor and alliteration and a lot of the technical terms that we use for poetic language. I didn't make them by choice, they just naturally come from me into songs. And so when I switched and I became a poet, I realized I kind of had a lot of those skills already naturally in place as a songwriter.

I also have rhythm in my writing because when I write songs, I feel a groove as the lyric is coming. People always ask me if the music or the lyric comes separately, and mostly as I'm writing a line, I can speak it out loud and find out if it's a ballad or a rocker a powerful pop

punch. So I use that skill in poetry, and then I kind of make choices about things like the structure, the form of the poem based on the breathing of the rhythm, and all that is musical.

The thing that I realized I lacked when I my MFA program was...It's a completely different tool of communication, whereas with songs you only get like three minutes to hear the song once.

So even if you're using poetic devices as a songwriter, I really have to be very clear with the story I'm telling and with the message I'm trying to state so that the listener just gets one time through and with the music helping them, they're like, “Oh, I get this song. I get this story.”

Whereas with poetry, you can allow more space and ambiguity for either the sort of structure, the form of the poem—the blank space on the page, for instance—the reading of it to inform the meaning. And then you get three or four times through a poem. I sometimes don't catch a poem until I read it through and then speak it out loud. So they’re hand in hand, but they're very different technical skills. Does that make sense?

Kate Gale:
It does.

So I know one of your teachers was Doug Manuel, who's a Red Hen poet. And he grew up with music. His father owned a record store. And one of his books that Red Hen has published was kind of an homage to that record store. And I know you've read it. But he's very deeply entrenched in music and now teaches classes on music and hip-hop and poetry and how they're intertwined.

I know you've had some interesting conversations with him about the relationship between poetry and music and how much music influenced him becoming a poet. Do you feel like those conversations really helped you understand yourself as a poet?

Amy Speace:
Totally. Doug was instrumental for me in giving me courage to write from my rhythm. It's funny, he also taught me about rap, because I'm a folk singer, so Sugarhill Gang was my Joni Mitchell. And we just jammed for the whole summer. We were working together on the rhythmic dynamic of poetry when you’re coming from a sort of song fan place.

I was actually gonna write a whole critical paper on this, and he was like, “gotta listen to this,” and I was like, “I cannot talk about rap, I know nothing about it,” but since then, he's really gotten me into some really great hip-hop and stuff like that. But we really love the language play of the music that comes from the African American element. So if you go back to anything that was like train chants or anything that was like a work song, there’s a groove to that song because

you're trying to get a rhythm so that you can do the work, and that went into gospel, then that feeds in through Elvis white folk music, I mean…I could go on. This is like my nerding out on language and music and rhythm for me, because I'm like a very non-professional ethnomusicologist as well.

I just adore American roots music and where it comes from and the different rhythms of each instrument, and so I explore that in my music, but it's fun to now explore it where the music has to be written into the word and the groove and the rhythm. The drum beat has to be written into the word.

I like to play with that as a composer, that I'm kind of composing the music, but just with the sound of the word. I know Doug does that so well. And when he performs, he's doing that. So I love watching his poetry because he's so musical, and so…he just like grounds himself in the earth when he's speaking his poetry. I'm such a fan of his.

Kate Gale:
Mm-hmm.

Yeah, I am as well. I like to think about that intersection between poetry and music. And for myself, editing poetry, if it's not feeling quite right, I always like to read it out loud when I'm reading my own poetry or someone else's, because it's hearing it that allows us to understand what's going. And I think that when we're editing prose, we tend to read it out loud as well.

Which moves us over to discussing *Kill Dick*, Luke's book. So I wanted to say something as an introduction to this book. I first entered L.A. with an introduction to the film industry. Everyone I knew worked in the film industry. My kid's dad worked in the film industry. And so it felt to me big stories being told in LA were being told through film. And so I wanted to start a publishing company so that I could see stories being told in other ways. But it took me a while.

Once I had gotten it started, though, I was really obsessed with Carolyn See's book, *Golden Days*, and with *Day of the Locust*, because both of them, to me, were sort of the quintessential books that had big narratives that retold the American Dream. And the California dream is the American Dream, but in neon. A person isn't looking to marry just a wife and live in a house; the house has to be by the ocean. They don't want a dog, they want a pet dragon. The wife has to be Pamela Anderson, sort of an exotic version of the American wife. And the whole thing is in neon. And then, because it's a California dream, there's gonna be an apocalypse, and there's gonna be sex and drugs and music and a swimming pool and this whole sense of chaos that you have in *Day of the Locust*.

And so I was looking for that novel because I felt like that really made us a big California press. And as soon as I read *Kill Dick*, I was like, "This is it. This is it." And at that point, my husband and I had been traveling to Greece since before the 2008 crash, and then I'd been to Vietnam. And so I was sort of becoming obsessed with this whole idea of the global and the global north and this big wealth disparity that I feel like you feel in California, especially in L.A. and San Francisco. And I felt like this book had all of that in it.

And I feel like a really big novel that's going to really hit in the way *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* did has to be an idea that meets a moment. And I feel like that's what this novel does. Because it has that big moment of the wealth disparity, the chaos that's happening right now in this country, and that sense of darkness, and that whole sense that…of how we're all kind of paying attention to this in this very odd way. Like if you think of that of Luigi moment, that was an odd way of unraveling in the way that in this book, the pharmaceutical executive is being observed and his life is being unraveled in a way that is also very strange. So I feel like the way this novel tangles and untangles is going to very much hit a nerve.

And so I'm very excited about it. I think that this is a big book. With that, Luke, tell us about coming into this. And I'm also curious when the whole thing happened with Luigi, were you surprised or did it seem like that was inevitable given everything that had happened with Big Pharma in this country and so on?

Luke Goebel:
It's nice to be here with you, Amy and Kate. I think that, I mean…I guess when it happened, it's that thing of like, I created everything. I've been living in this ouroboros of creativity, and now it's starting to inhabit the world around me. Which of course is ridiculous and not true, but at the time, I was torn with that sense of like, "Well, this is good for the book, but is it good for the world?"

There was another strange thing that happened when there was actually like someone who was killing homeless people in LA, remember? A couple of years ago. And that was really shocking and upsetting, especially since that's the subject of the book. But I guess looking back, it makes sense. It's inevitable that we live in a shock economy and that we're all inundated media and feeling like it hurts our souls to be watching and witnessing everything that's happening in the world, constantly choosing not to do anything about it, right? And that's a choice as well.

And so when someone takes action like Luigi, it harkens back to, like, the 90s. You know, when I was coming into my consciousness of like what was happening with Earth First or Animal Liberation Front or other direct action. Obviously, those are different, those entities espoused in...mostly tried not to hurt people.

But it does make sense that people feel this devastation of just being inundated with negative systems. And I think that that's what an LA book really does. Like Nathaniel West's *Day of the Locust*, which was a huge influence, one of my absolute favorite books. I think that an L.A. book—and California, too, with Steinbeck—looks at systems, how systems work, and that the riots of the Locusts are inevitable. The violence in LA, these things are in the…

And that's why I think an L.A. book so well speaks through this larger culture of America and of the world, is just that there's just this impending sense of catastrophe and calamity that's waiting for us. And characters don't come world, and the world gets built around the characters. The world's already fully formed. Right? The characters are here and have lost innocence before they ever even take their first breath.

And so I think with *Kill Dick*, it's like we look at these systems like Purdue Pharmaceuticals and the Oxy epidemic, and we look at systems like what's going on with the current administration. We look at anything. And it's like…these are just systems of power that repeat themselves over and over. When Purdue Pharmaceuticals gets called by the Kentucky courthouse to deliver evidence that they misled the public about their drugs, they drop a million documents on the courthouse. These systems are really successful.

And I think that thing about an L.A. novel is that it really reveals the inevitability of calamity. We used to look at L.A., at least when I was growing up in this little town in Ohio, everyone was like…my parents who met in the Christian cult, and the people that I was raised with—my friends' parents and stuff—were like, "Don't turn on the TV and don't watch that VHS tape. Satan is in Hollywood."

The idea used to be, like, music is evil. Film is evil. But L.A. isn't evil. L.A. is just accurate. It just captures what society really is and has been reflecting that mirror. And we just didn't want to accept it—the truth of it, you know—but that's what makes an L.A. novel great, like *The Big Sleep*: the corruption and the systems are all in place. And it all usually just comes down to, like, a few rich people maybe in the same family who don't want to talk about what happened at home, so they tear up the whole world.

Kate Gale:
Yeah, I feel like your book moves through those ideas in a way, though, that also ends up being very entertaining. I've talked with different people, especially young people, about the book. Sometimes, people will say to me, you know, "I got stoned and read through the whole book in a couple of hours, and I thought it was just the most entertaining book."

I realized that the book has these different levels. You could just read through it as a dark thriller and be completely entertained. And so one of the questions that you end up asking yourself as

you're reading this, is I kept thinking…Luke is making an extremely profound point about the darkness of pouring drugs into the poorest community and what that does to us. And at the same time, he's asking himself the whole time he's writing this, "Are you not entertained?"

And that's the big question of our time when you're writing a novel. Because if you're going to get it out to a lot of people, if you're going to make a point to a lot of people, you have to keep asking that question. And in *Kill Dick*, there is an eventual standing up and saying no.

So yeah, I feel like you're doing a couple of things at once here. You've written this very entertaining book, and you're making these big points, and you're asking big questions at the same time.

Luke Goebel:
It all comes down to the fact that this book was born because my brother died of an oxy overdose. So it's that Sophoclean dilemma of: What do you do? What do you do to bury your dead? What do you do to honor your dead? What do you do when somebody did something that at least partly killed your blood?

Then, you know, it's fun to have fun. Like, I'm not gonna ask anyone to read something that isn't doing three things at a time in each sentence, you know? And I think that's where it gets back to music. My first interest was lyrics. I grew up in this little town with like 2,500 German Catholics, and my dad was Jewish, but it was basically monoculture, and the only thing that I really had to listen to is the music that he brought.

Some of it was like *Can the Circle Be Unbroken*, like the folk albums, and some of it was like, you know, Neil Young, who I ended up meeting, or the Grateful Dead, or this or that, a lot of Bob Dylan. Later I found, like, Harry Smith had preserved all that music, and that he intersected with The Beats and sort of the counterculture movement that I later became interested in. But that was all entwined in all of that. And so like, you know, the idea that protest would be clever, or have a sense of humor, be intelligent, wasn't new. That was my origin, was if you're gonna hit, you gotta hit with something that fires at a lot of different levels and is funny and is tragic and is lyrically brilliant and maybe like stacks up a bunch of double spondees or does a bunch of things poetically that are interesting and that, you know, are happening at a level that most people won't even understand their construction, but they get it. Like you're talking about, it's musical, it's like prayer, it's something that hits us at a soul level.

So you know, like, at one level it's like, you're left with the dilemma of "Well, do I take violent action?" You know, it's like Hamlet was a model for the character that I'm satirizing, who's most like me in this book—Phil Crow, this failed, ne'er-do-well, wannabe professor, which is what I

was when I first started writing this book—and I just was like, how do you take action? Do you take violent action?

I don't think so, personally. I was raised in a Christian cult. So you gotta forgive everybody. But then at the same time, you don't. I mean, you gotta say something. It's not just about docility. Like, Jesus was also a radical, you know?

Kate Gale:
Amy, going back to you, I'm curious what you think about in terms of themes. And I always think about how the writers that people look up to when I teach writing—and I think you've done some teaching as well—often writers like, they'll say, you know, "I read Emily Dickinson. I like this idea of just being able to be by myself and be a writer." And I think that people like Poe and Hemingway are attractive to guys that think that they might want to live a life that feels like a big life, where they could be drinking and partying and still manage to be a writer somehow. Sometimes women are attracted to that idea of spending a lot of time alone like Emily did. And I always feel like Walt Whitman is a better model because I feel like he was active in the world.

So I'm curious of two things: one, what you think is a good model as a writer, and the second, what kind of takeaway you were hoping for in terms of the book in general.

Amy Speace:
That's such a hard question to answer because I think I've just spent my whole creative life just trying to create spaces for myself where I can create. I started out in New York City, definitely chased adventure. I did not have an adventurous childhood. I had a very strict Catholic childhood in a small town. There was not much but white Christianity around me. There was no conflict (or so I thought) in my family. Everything was perfect.

And then when I got out of college and got into New York City, the world started to shatter around me into truth. And I kind of went through a real crisis of faith that led directly to me picking the guitar up and starting to write.

I was angry at God, angry at religion, angry at structure. It was the '90s. I don't know what I was chasing. It wasn't fame. It was just high adventure. I was definitely, like, out there until three o'clock in the morning doing tequila shots with the theater crowd, with the rock and roll crowd, living who I always envisioned I would hope to become.

So I kind of put myself into the town. I grew wanting to live in New York City and be a bohemian. I was obsessed by the '20s in New York City, by St. Vincent Millay and all of those writers. I read everything in front of me. I went to acting school at the National Shakespeare Conservatory. So I thought of myself very highly as a professional actress in the classical

tradition. But I was also a drunk folk singer, so it was really fun. It was like high-brow, low-brow. I was living downtown, making no money, and doing Shakespeare off-Broadway.

So was just chasing the thread of the experience, honestly. And because of that, I was really attracted to other artists that were experiential artists that I could find their life story in it. So like Patti Smith was a huge person for me. I got a chance to play music with Lenny K. and to hang out with a lot of that crowd in downtown New York City. I got exposed early Judy Collins, who discovered me, who took me on a ride and a tour of all of her crowd. Tom Paxton was a mentor, and I've met Maria Muldaur and all those people.

And I found out how crazy it was—like seriously, debauchery and crazy fun—and now that I'm older and I have a child and I live in Nashville, which is a quieter lifestyle, it's a house-and-yard lifestyle, whereas New York City is like…you're not inside that much. You're out as much as you can be. Nashville, you're in a lot.

My ideal artistic space is a lot of silence. I'm way more…I don't want to say introverted, but protective of my creativity now that I'm getting older than I was back then. I was just throwing it out there back then. So I'm always really interested in reading about writers who walk a lot in the woods or create their own writing space, things like that.

I mean, I've got my little writing space. I've got my piano. I've got all my guitars. All my instruments are all in this room. But there's shelves and shelves scattered of poetry. And if you can see my desk, it's a train wreck. I'm a messy creative. And every day is, *is it a song or is it a poem or is it something else that I'm working on*? And then I read biographies of my favorite writers, like Dylan. I've gone down the Dylan train and I've met him once and it was really disappointing. Don't meet your heroes. You know, Joni Mitchell is not a really forthcoming human being about her process.

You were talking about The Beats, and I've had the really great fortune of working with David Amram, who was one of the guys hanging out with Kerouac and those guys in that day. He wrote the script and the music for *The Manchurian Candidate*. My god, it's just…he's a 95-year-old still-working musician who is from the Beat Era. He's a genius, and he stays up till four o'clock in the morning smoking pot and jamming with a bunch of folk singers in a hotel room. He's just trying to put himself in a space where spontaneity and improv is happening.

Maybe my answer comes more from the jazz tradition. I want to be in a space of improv. So I'm playing with people, and we have a bed that I can trust, then I can just kind of fly around and then always come back to the scale, which is home, so…

Maybe home is just this little writing space here. And then I'm throwing things out into the world. And so the second part of your question is, what do I hope to accomplish?

It's with everything that I do—whether it's a song or a poem or a story—I want to get, as a writer…I think I'm trying to get a little closer to the essence of the conundrum. I'm just trying to ask the question. And then I guess I put it out there to see if anybody is out there asking it with me.

Kate Gale:
The big question.

Amy Speace:
Yeah, the big question. I'm trying to ask the big question. What's my job as a writer do?

It's funny, as a folk singer, I've been in this place lately of how do I, as a person who writes music in the folk tradition…I certainly have politics in the stories that I choose. What's my response and what's my responsibility to respond?

I have a single coming out in May that's called "The Reckoning" about Renee Good and how to sell my son this world when this is happening. And it's really a portrait of an artist. It's me. I actually say, "I'm coming to a blank page, and I don't know what to say." And so I think that's kind of how I approach my world, is just to tell my truth and hope it's somebody else's truth and ask the big questions. It sounds real simple, but I don't really think that way.

Kate Gale:
I like what you were saying, though, about the different parts of your life, because I think that there are parts of your life when you're living in one way and then you move on to a different part.

When I was first going to New York all the time too, for Red Hen, one of Red Hen's staff moved there and started running a bar, and that's kind of bad for me because that means free drinks. And so I remember showing up there, and she was like, "Free drinks, Kate!" And she was like, "What's your favorite drink right now?" And I said, "Mojitos." There were many mojitos and it's just not a drink you should have maybe many of anyway. I don't think I've had a mojito since that night. It was a long night. But...

I look back on that, and I just think my life now is not that life anymore. I am just focusing on health and life and writing and sustaining Red Hen and sustaining culture and all that kind of

thing, as you are in many ways, too, because carrying people takes a lot of work, and fewer mojitos.

Amy Speace:
I just want to just say as well, the fun of being in a playground like New York City artistically and alcohol and drugs and all of that—you know, so many drugs and alcohol and men and the subway—it was just crazy. I love looking back on it now as a sober woman in my 50s, because it's like, well, that's where the meat of the story came from. Glad I survived it. I might not have.

But I wasn't telling the truth in my work back then. I can look back now and tell that story because I can stand above it soberly and tell the truth of it. I think my craft came later. And the craft helps me know how to tell the truth, and when to tell the truth, and when to hide it.

Kate Gale:
Yeah, and that's one of the things I always think about when I think about writers who are aspiring to that Hemingway-ish life is, how honest is that life?

So Luke, I know in your book, your characters, at least some of them, are behaving badly. Tell us a little bit about your thoughts on your characters' behaviors, and is there someone—or just some idea—that you think if you were talking to writers out there, this is the kind of thing that you think makes for a healthy writing life?

Luke Goebel:
Well, it's funny because when you say they're behaving badly, those characters behaving badly, I immediately think of the poor and the addicted and the people who are abusing substances, but the ones who are really acting badly are the ones in their estates in Bel Air, etc. So it's funny that we're just programmed that way, to immediately look down instead of up when we think about bad behavior, or even up and down in terms of socioeconomics. You know, even these words are loaded, but...

I can only say what I did, which is I'm also a sober writer. I can't imagine, you know, it any other way. I think that what you said is so true, that, like, I wasn't able to capture what I was really experiencing when I was that close to the fire. I do think it was very important that I went and did all the terrible things that I did. And it's sort of that, like, outlaw country. Like, I like Sturgill Simpson a lot, right?

Amy Speace:
Love him.

Luke Goebel:

And when you say Nashville, I think of Todd Snider.

Amy Speace:
He was my friend! I love that guy!

Luke Goebel:
He was my brother's favorite musician and I listen to him all the time. Every holiday, like, that's…like we all get together and we think about my brother, we play Todd Snyder songs, you know, "Train Song" or "Corpus Christi Bay" or anything, and all the *Cash Cabin*s. Everything is amazing, and I think about like…what does it mean to be in outlaw country or what does it mean to be outlaw as, you know, like white folk, and then how does that connect to other forms of like just positioning yourself outside of the dominant patriarchy, you know, like hegemony as usual? Like, how do you align yourself?

And for me, I mean…it's like we had this project about the Animal Liberation Front that didn't end up getting made with Joaquin Phoenix and Rooney Mara, not because I want to name drop them, but because I really wanted to do that project. I really wanted to see that succeed. Because I think that when you mistreat animals, and you have a system that exists off of the mistreatment of animals, whether that's vivisection or whether that's, you know, food, I think you're basically habituating children and everyone to say like, "It's okay. Let things suffer. Let things be miserable."

Which isn't like…I'm not claiming a food stake. I'm not vegan, but what I am saying is like, I think it's important to look at Paul Beatty and look at *Devil in a Blue Dress* and look at other forms of resistance in the L.A. novel. And then also just look at like, do you identify?

And earlier I mentioned some folk singers, I should have mentioned, like, you know, growing up in the '90s, Ani De Franco and like…I was raised on Joni Mitchell. You mentioned Judy Collins—that was my first concert, in Dayton, Ohio.

But how do you align yourself outside of the system? And for me, that was like I called Ken Kesey when I was 13 on 411, back when you could just pick up the phone and say "411," hit the keys, and then say "Ken Kesey, Pleasant Hill, Oregon," because I read *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and I talked to him a while.

And then I ended up being friends with Mountain Girl (Carolyn Garcia) and that whole kind of Dead scene, and taking a shitload of psychedelics and I also broke my femur. At thirteen, I got tackled by my male nanny, and my femur was in half, and then I was on morphine and then I was on pills and then I was on alcohol and, like, I was just an alcoholic addict from the jump.

It was important for me to get arrested and go to the mental institution and, you know, be crazy and live in vehicles and meet people for a place to stay, *wink-wink*, you know what I mean? Like just get by. And all that helped me to then write a book that accounts for everyone because the last thing I want to read is some fucking book by a white author who only knows white wealthy people.

Kate Gale:
It seems that something all three of us have in common is growing up with white Christianity. I also grew up in a cult. And it does seem like that can have a sort of scarring effect. So Amy, do you feel like that was part of what led you to being a writer and artist, like you were running away from that, moving in a different direction?

I mean, in my case, obviously, I left the cult and had to kind of create myself. I didn't really have a "self." But part of that was that I really wanted to find books. Deprived of books, I'd had to sneak some books, and I wanted to find books. I felt like there was a whole world inside of books that I was being deprived of. And so as soon as I got into that world, I wanted to be part of making that world, too.

I accidentally found out I had all these family members who had PhDs and so on. I guess having wandered out of the cult and gotten myself a PhD and starting the press was another happy accident. I do think that there is something about rabid Christianity that pushes one in the direction of wanting to do something radical. So, in your case, music was your first stop, then this book. So do you feel Christianity pushed you there?

Amy Speace:
Yes, but in a different way than you said. So my relationship with the Catholic God, a very scary Catholic God—I come from a long line of Irish priests and nuns. It was actually a real deal in my family that "the calling" that you got was, like, not just a joke. Somebody was gonna get the call. And my father, who grew up a very non-denominational, small church Christian—like no music, no drinking, no dancing kind of Christian—he just never said a thing. Like he didn't participate. He just stayed home and watched football while we all had to go to the Catholic cult. And I hated it.

So it was an angry God that I rejected. But I was always looking for that God. I was trying to participate. So I was asking if I could be an altar girl. There were no altar girls. And they would say, "No." I would ask "Why?" "Because." And of course, it's like the patriarchal system. I was like this burgeoning 14-year-old feminist ass. I said, "Oh, is it because of feudal land rights?" That's why?" I was like, *OK, you're grounded for a month*.

And so my mother, who, God bless her, she saw something. My grandmother also, I think both of them have that sort of latent…not artistic sensibility, but there's something about them that was so compassionate and attuned to me. And it was very different from my siblings. And I'm the oldest of four, I didn't belong anywhere that we were. My mom said to me, "You can stop going to church as long as you do something for an hour while we're at church that connects you to something."

So I took my Walkman and I would put Mozart in or whatever I was currently listening to. And I would walk through the mountains looking for God. I just rejected all religious tenets and decided that God wouldn't be anywhere these men were telling me they were, but that I was allowed to go find God. And so God was a river and God was a bird. And when my grandmother passed, God was my grandmother talking to me. God were visions that I had. You know, I was a very depressed kid. God was the depression that I had, which I loved, because I was able to be by myself and cry a lot. I would cry and write poetry and write and write. And God was writing. It was this communion with a universal spirit of grief, to me—that was where I landed. So I just rejected what they told me God was, and I discovered my own.

It was funny because I was always chasing structure around it. The thing that I found on my own by writing or by kayaking or by hiking, I could never find in a religious ceremony. I did every meditation course you could possibly do. I did yoga, this yoga, that yoga. I did all of that shit for years.

Never found God. I got sober, and the community that I got sober in basically said, "Find your own version of God and define it the way you want to define it." And I went, "It's the first time anybody gave me permission." I realized that I had been defining God by words and music my whole life. It sounds really like *wooey*, but I honestly feel like when I go to write something, it's a form of meditation and prayer. Of course, you've got to, like, go back and craft it intelligently. But there is that moment of just like…the big dump. And to me, that's my conversation with this other.

It's like when I was reading about enlightenment in my training in college, and I took a lot of Buddhist classes, they would talk about enlightenment, and I would think: But isn't enlightenment that moment when you write the song and you finish it and you sing it? And you get shivers up your spine and you start crying at your own work and you think, *If I die tomorrow, I've done that. And nobody needs to hear it*. That, to me, is enlightenment.

Kate Gale:
Yeah, no, I think that when you are in a creative moment, that for those of us who are creators, that feels like a God moment, you know—let there be light.

So, Luke, you also left a religious upbringing. It sounds like you have something of that with you. So what do you feel you've brought to your creative life and what have you kicked to the curb?

Luke Goebel:
I think I just sort of like subverted the religion. I think I, like, kept it…while just behaving so horribly badly all the time that it sort of equals out. But like I went to confession in Rome for the first time since First Confession, and I just like said everything that I'd done, and I was just sobbing and gagging, you know.

And this priest from like Maryland is like, "Well, you ever think maybe you're an artist?"

And I was like, "Yeah, I'm a writer."

He goes, "Well, what'd you expect?"

So, I don't know! I, too, got sober and they offered me that, like you can make up your own…I don't know. I mean, there's something that I really resonate with the radicalism of that branch of faith that I was raised in. Like, I think if you're actually dig what it says, you gotta be so against the system. You gotta be so for the underdog. You gotta be so loving, forgiving, gotta be like a radical.

And it's like, nobody even does it right, because you've got to give away all your money. You've got to spend your time helping other people. And mean, I think that is sort of what I do with the way that I approach writing. It better be a gift, because I'm not taking care of other people while I'm doing this. While I'm writing this book, which, this one took 10 years, I'm not spending as much time with my family. I'm not spending as much time out on the streets, which I do, helping the people who are addicted or whatever, doing outreach or making sandwiches. I am sacrificing time that I could be spending helping the world, trying to help the world through this other thing.

So it better be radical, it better be beautiful, it better be fun and funny and be, like, affirming life. I'm honoring what I call God by trying to take what has been given to all of us as our time here, and like, make it shine brighter, you know, in dark times. And not by proselytizing, but by some fun, and making the physical world museum quality sentences, you know, where it's like, you could hang that on the wall—like feel that, that's acrylic, or like "What is that made out of?"—and then also being like "Hey, when you're done reading this, you might want to rethink your whole fucking existence."

Kate Gale:

Amy, can you just tell us, as we're wrapping up here, how long did it take you to write your book?

Amy Speace:
The poetry book I wrote in three years. So it was 2.5 years in my MFA program. There's only one poem in that collection that's probably 20 years old. Because it's about…it's called Alexine, and it's about my niece, who's now 26 years old. And it was written 20 years ago because it was written when she was six. And it was one of my first poems.

But it was my thesis. And then, as we were talking about publishing it, I added some poems and took out some poems. So really, it was like a really intense period of three years of just churning out poetry constantly.

Kate Gale:
Well, it's been amazing having this conversation with both of you. I can't wait for you guys to get to meet in person. Amy is touring all the time, so hopefully you guys will be in the same city.

Working with both of you has been absolutely a joy and an adventure, every bit of it. And everyone on the team has loved working with you guys. And there's just going to be more and more. So thank you so much. Let's keep this party going.

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