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The Journal of  
Poetry & Poetics

Volume 9, 2021 Issue 4

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One University Drive, Orange, California 92866  
[www.chapman.edu/poetry](http://www.chapman.edu/poetry)

ISSN: 2169-3013

 [www.facebook.com/groups/TabulaPoetica](https://www.facebook.com/groups/TabulaPoetica)

THE CENTER FOR POETRY AT CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY

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*p o e t i c a*



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## **Design Statement**

The annual, distinctive print issue of *Tab: The Journal of Poetry & Poetics* engages the reader with poetry as a material object and asks that the reader negotiate between image and text. The design does not assume a traditional role of quietly framing content; instead, design actively shapes the reading experience and continues to experiment and explore the intersections between form and content, object and space, and reader and reading.

Beginning last year, the 2020 print issue was the first issue that was driven by inclusive design and low-vision principles. We commit to producing an engaging and increasingly equitable experience for all abilities. We developed a new website for online issues that also makes available accessible issue archives, including audio recordings of poems. Visit our website at [TabJournal.org](http://TabJournal.org).

The 2021 print issue was created during a time of quarantine as the world underwent the isolation and anxieties of the Covid-19 pandemic. During this time, we reflected on concepts of time—as a sense of place, as space, as structure, as visual experience of light and dark. Time has an impact on psychology; we can lose time or lose track of time. Time has a history of visual representation and documentation as well. This year's print issue explores visual expressions of time warping, time traveling, and the chronology and the kaleidoscope of time keeping. The images and texts engage in ideas of process over time, such as healing or growth.

While the design for online issues draws from the year's print issue, the issues that follow in March, May, July, September, and November are designed

and formatted for the on-screen reading experience. Decisions about page size, typography, and composition are driven by the online reading experience, rather than to mimic a print version.

To request one or more copies of the print issue, please use the Contact form on the website.



**Susan Michele Coronel**

Susan Michele Coronel (she/her) is a NYC-based poet and educator. She earned a BA in English from Indiana University-Bloomington and an MEd in Applied Linguistics from Queens College. Her poems appear in publications including *The Night Heron Barks*, *Prometheus Dreaming*, *Hoxie Gorge Review*, *Ekphrastic Review*, and *Passengers Journal*.

## **Pandemic Q & A**

1. What do I taste when the weather revolts?

*Gold dust from volcanoes erupting on open seas.*

2. How many years to stave off the virus?

*As long as it takes to digest the moon.*

3. What are your goals for the immediate future?

*Eat honey and watermelon, then dip the rinds in sand.*

4. Can you trick wrens into a discussion?

*With a thumb or a worm in a bright pear.*

5. Remember the plot against your sister?

*I was the one who designed the map.*

6. Is breath on the playground really a crime?

*If your grandmother watches from the roof.*

7. Do you recall the hands on that woman?

*Not as long as clover covers my skin.*

8. Will you eat cakes in tight underwear?

*Yes, and slurp soup in a summer dress.*

9. Can you retell a riddle wordlessly?

*It makes sense to use your hands and elbows to cover a sneeze.*

10. Do men still go to church to find harmony?

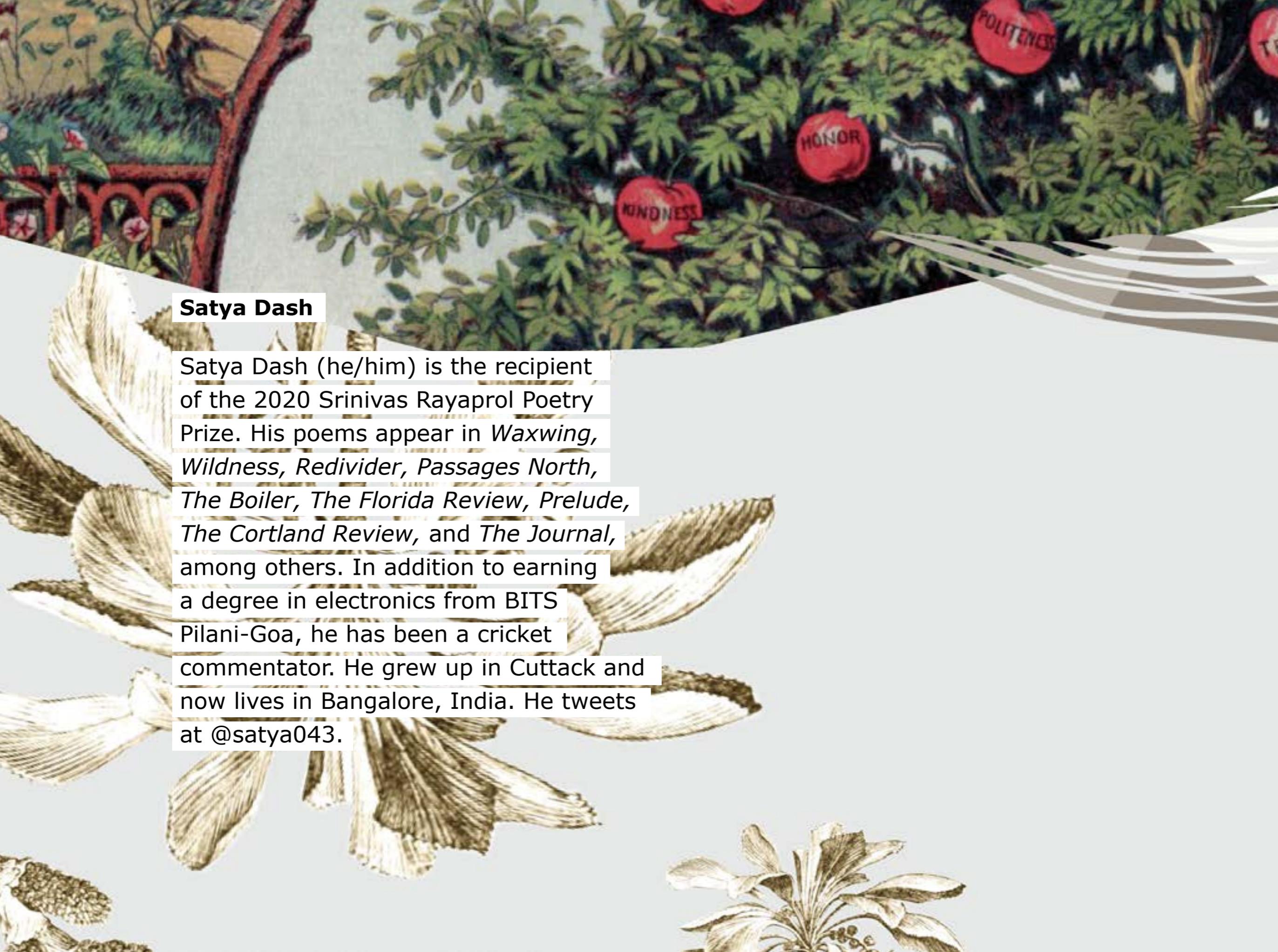
*No, they schedule video chats with potential girlfriends.*

11. How does a nation wait for baseball?

*By opening umbrellas for boy dolls.*

12. Is there a cure for isolation and despair?

*Waterlilies float then dissolve on the pond's surface.*



## Satya Dash

Satya Dash (he/him) is the recipient of the 2020 Srinivas Rayaprol Poetry Prize. His poems appear in *Waxwing*, *Wildness*, *Redivider*, *Passages North*, *The Boiler*, *The Florida Review*, *Prelude*, *The Cortland Review*, and *The Journal*, among others. In addition to earning a degree in electronics from BITS Pilani-Goa, he has been a cricket commentator. He grew up in Cuttack and now lives in Bangalore, India. He tweets at @satya043.

## Test Match

constant foghorn of living's burr in the mythology  
of past wakes a man salty chapped lips halitosis  
conclusively proving the night humanizes

you spent decades in the eyes of beloveds so much looking  
it's beyond narcissism now you have no choice but to love  
your face your mother remarks on alternate visits o you've  
put on some belly o your beard now looks like a bird's nest

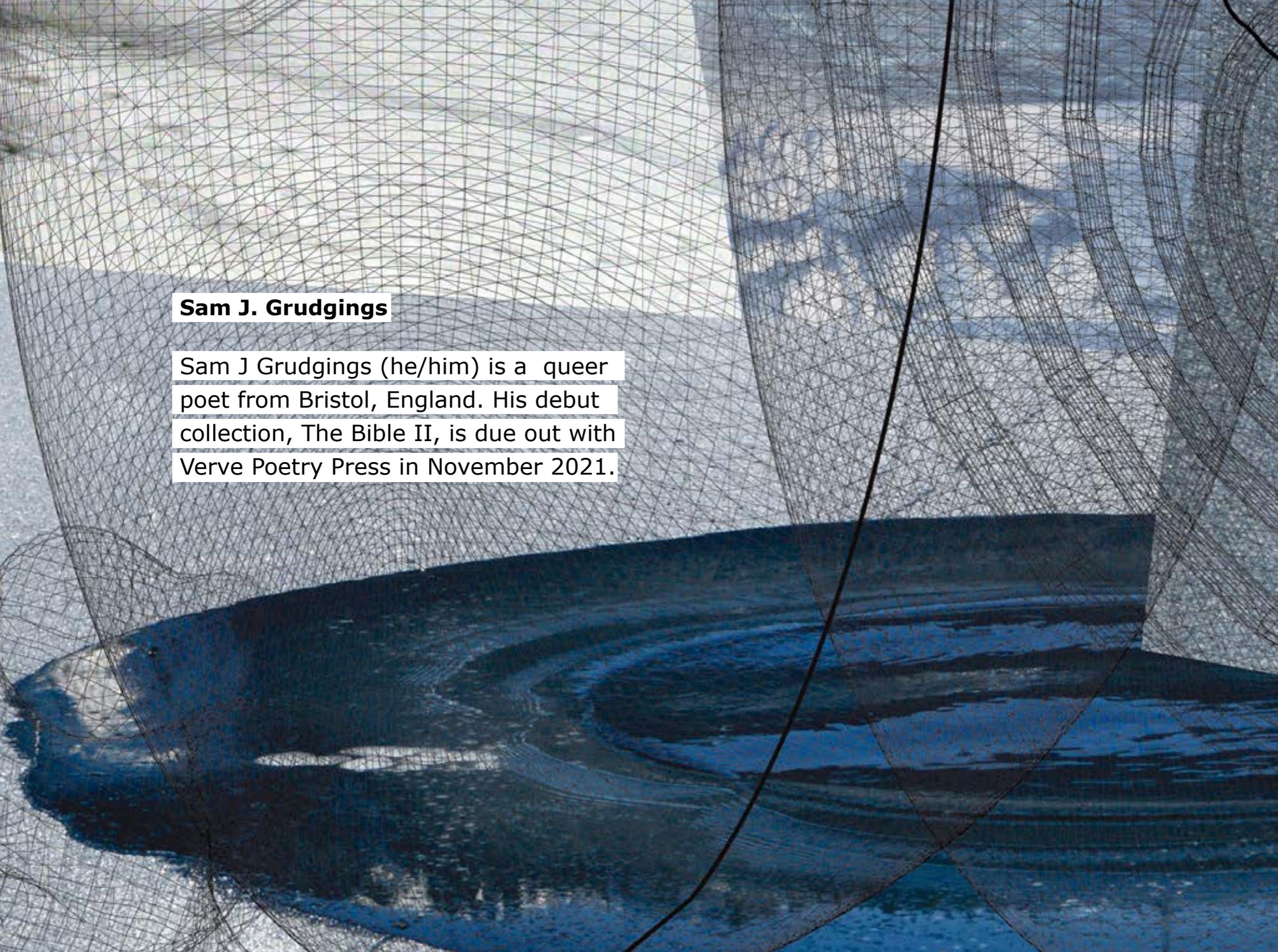
a body often ghosts its tenant touch my perimeter  
thrill it to dance when stripped of speed  
all drama perishes into a conscientious twang

the tea you make equals a throat's capacity for desiccation  
stomach fattening fossil laxative percolating like a liquid thief  
burgling lines of rock downstream flow fibers of dismissed  
brain you rush like a toddler's wonder then wonder why you rushed

I scrub the floor for eyelashes for days I poke my soft  
underbelly of blessings numbers don't change but meanings  
do seasons burn loincloth in oceans of raging glue

summer trampolines temperature    rivers disrobe  
into deserts of grainy bloom    habit threads hair at every house's  
loom    when you try wrapping light    you spin like a saintly top  
become in runny aperture    equilibrium of a drunk's tipsy hop

on one condition    I will spend my whispers on you    listen  
to my breath    I promise to pour you my angst    if you promise  
after brief harboring    you will pass it back



**Sam J. Grudgings**

Sam J Grudgings (he/him) is a queer poet from Bristol, England. His debut collection, *The Bible II*, is due out with Verve Poetry Press in November 2021.

## **my rotten teeth learn to love themselves**

Today is the first day I tried to live  
through photosynthesis.

Tomorrow I will peel off my mythology skin & be  
a tender anonymous reality.

Stranger to myself & the shorelines  
generous with seashells not listened to.

Today is why my early 90s tooth fillings  
still seek out foil. We are not made  
to be constant. This message  
is composed from small kindnesses.

I have shelter. Forgive me that it looks like distance.  
I'm a favourite for second place in being alone.  
The romanticism of yearning never did well  
when all we have is shooting stars, lost  
mannequins & home cooking.

Today I am settled in the past,  
the crook of nostalgia's violent arm makes

for troubling reading.

I have taken to tomorrow as if it was a given  
    & I have taken enough           of my own advice  
to know not to listen to me  
  but I am still here.

I have taken to touching myself as if I really loved myself.  
I learnt that from you.



**Kindra McDonald**

Kindra McDonald (she/her) is the author of the collections *Fossils* and *In the Meat Years*. She earned her MFA from Queens University of Charlotte. She's an Adjunct Professor of Writing and teaches poetry at The Muse Writers Center. She lives in the city of mermaids that is Norfolk, VA.

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10

11

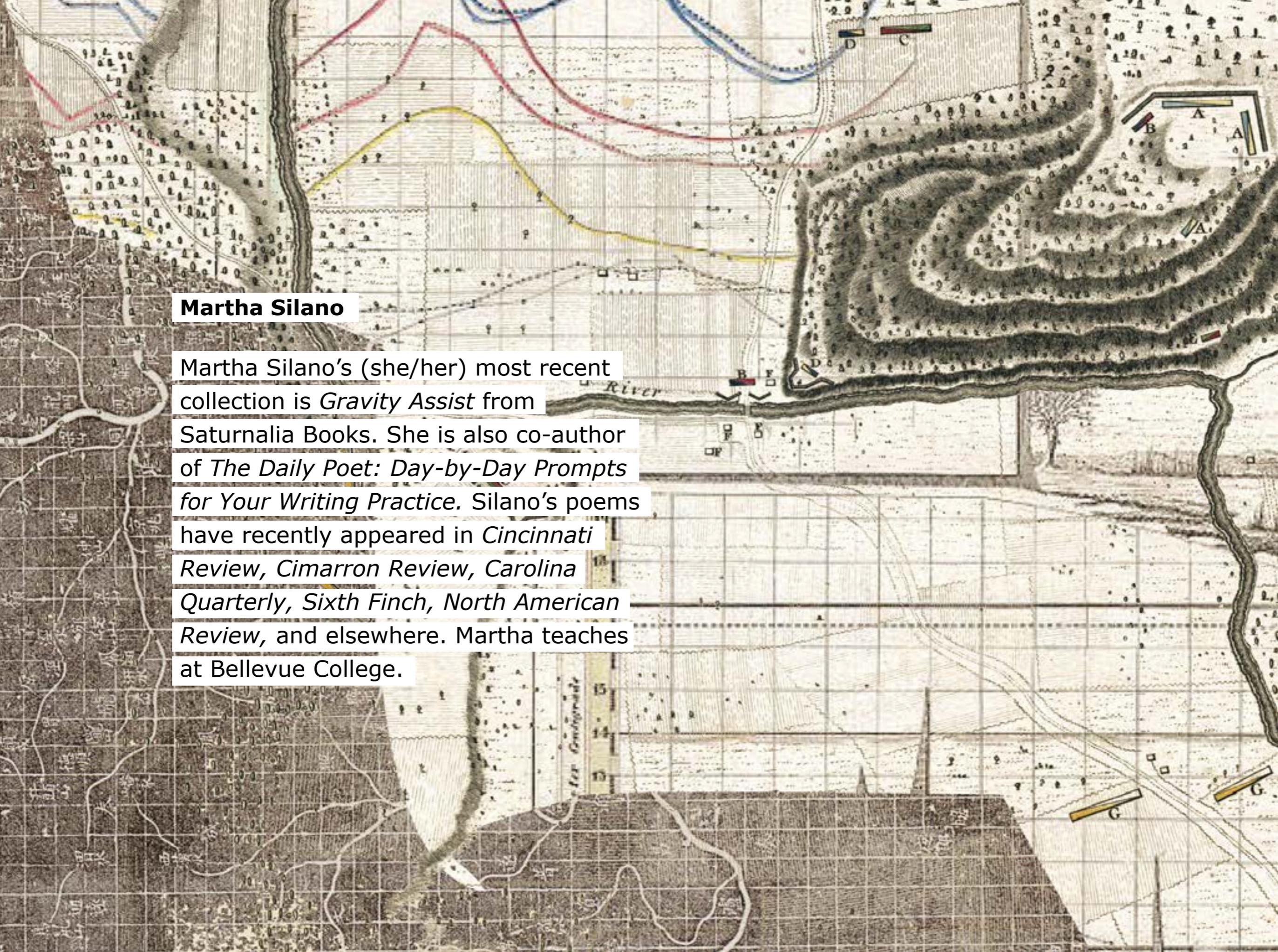
12

## **Imagine**

I was a key  
an attic token  
a hanging ribbon  
castoffs slumped  
with ancient dolls  
I was holy thighs  
a strawberry swelling  
mint leaves floating  
in peach tea  
a May chestnut  
I spun pinballs wild  
a flicker of fairies  
revealed in flame  
I found myself split  
a box in another box  
in a U-Haul  
there's a reason  
we scatter like salt  
every time I want to burn  
away, I remember  
I was taught to save things.

## **Humbled**

I have just learned and wanted  
to share, that if you are feeling  
melancholy, you can now see  
what the Hubble telescope  
held for a second in its lens  
on your birthday, and it is as magnificent  
as you might imagine, a collision  
between two spiral galaxies  
that began 700 million years ago  
caught in all its scatter light, aqua gold shimmer  
a crash of a candle on a pillow of frosting  
wished out, from your breath, you small thing.



**Martha Silano**

Martha Silano's (she/her) most recent collection is *Gravity Assist* from Saturnalia Books. She is also co-author of *The Daily Poet: Day-by-Day Prompts for Your Writing Practice*. Silano's poems have recently appeared in *Cincinnati Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Sixth Finch*, *North American Review*, and elsewhere. Martha teaches at Bellevue College.

## Dream Weaver

I've just closed my eyes again and it's the summer of the drill weight the drag wonk  
the dragon drama of a wayside wave of fault the damage almost climbed aboard  
climbed almost away from the bipolar rainstorm I thought I'd eschew my wrecks and  
leave tomorrow behind but they traveled with me to my collisions where I learned  
to sharpen a maelstrom o dream weaver no one taught me to say the lug wrench  
will loosen and tighten the listing will righten no one taught me *help* I blamed myself  
the parts the drill bits hadn't wrecked how does a dream get you through the night  
I kept doing stupid things mice-infested houseboats two or three braggart brainiacs  
o drench wedding o dogfights did I believe I could reach the morning light stayed up  
with the cases of beetles awake on the green of a country club golf course were we  
poor or playing poor no job or picking squash posing nude trying on hippy shirking  
the mandrake and the management the 9 to 5 giving up all ambush casting away  
belief a plank flying through the starry slabs an astral plenary a plate through the  
staggered slats a lunar briquette though hard to function harder to forget o drag  
weight I didn't believe you could get me through the fatigue of why would a father  
of why would a mother normal his manic nonstop irrational I reasoned we'd done  
wrong but I believe we can reach the neon moss may be coming soon toward a  
lambent amble where I yell to a dribble of sunbeam there still may be time a bright  
side flying untangled from their negligence our father's rosary in texts we closure  
we heal we emerge and meet me on the other side or Spain or a cave of jubilant  
handprints o dream endeavor o dream dream dream I didn't believe

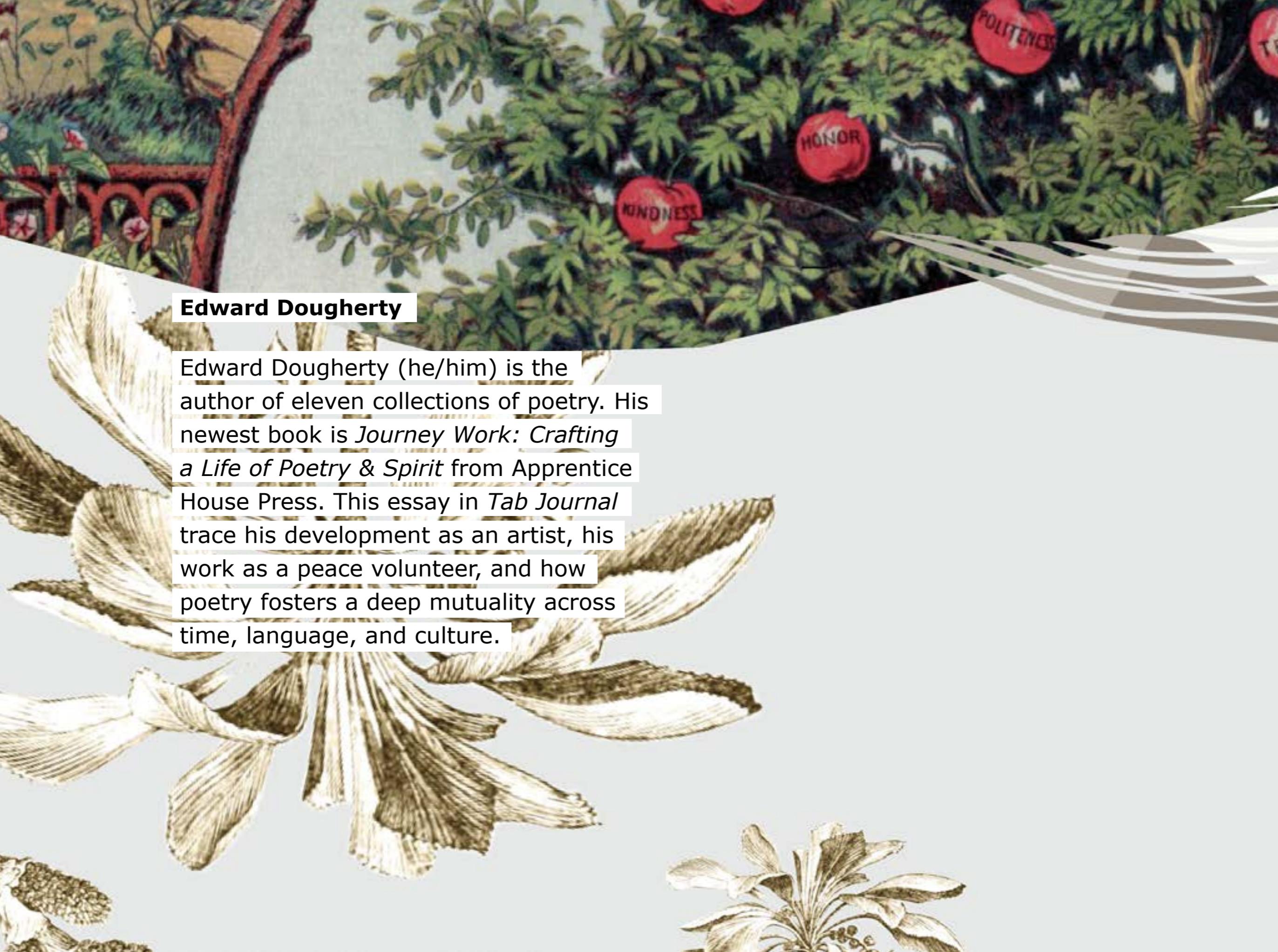


**D.S. Waldman**

D.S. Waldman (he/him) is living on Kumeyaay land in San Diego, California, where he teaches creative writing. His work has appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *Copper Nickel*, *Poetry International*, *Los Angeles Review*, and others. In 2019, he was selected by Ishion Hutchinson as winner of the Foothill Editor's Prize. He is enrolled in the MFA program at San Diego State University.

## **Park Dr. Los Angeles**

Of course there is nothing the matter  
with the stars it is our emptiness  
among them drifting farther off  
into the city music the mind's holy  
little hands building shadows into a burst  
sofa horizon the way we speak  
of ourselves as old looking up  
into the light nothing is the matter  
with fog with rain except  
they never come haunted as we are  
by the best the clean and untouched  
like a tower full of mirrors at night  
touch me don't I love this town  
I love the long drives the borrowed rivers



## Edward Dougherty

Edward Dougherty (he/him) is the author of eleven collections of poetry. His newest book is *Journey Work: Crafting a Life of Poetry & Spirit* from Apprentice House Press. This essay in *Tab Journal* trace his development as an artist, his work as a peace volunteer, and how poetry fosters a deep mutuality across time, language, and culture.

## Creating *Angle of Ascent*: The Stage Model of the Creative Process

No access. All the locks' tumblers seemed to in place, but the key didn't fit. It slipped into the groove, but no internal movement. Or the pins weren't aligned. No opening.

I had drafted more than twenty pages of poetry, first handwritten in my notebook and then selected, revised, and typed up. I chose multiple sections rather than one continuous flow of text. I even had a title: *Angle of Ascent*. So much was coming together, but still, something wasn't right.

I set the series aside.

■ ■ ■

Whether it is an individual poem, a series, or an essay, once a draft is completed, I often sense warm confidence and excitement; I've even let the momentum of those feelings carry me into submitting work to editors, only to have them reject it. The positive sensations of the process being complete—at least this stage of the process—can easily be confused for a positive evaluation of the resulting work. Typically, that energy cools. Then, I can read my own writing with the discerning eye of an editor, someone who has not created it but who is evaluating it.

After some time, I don't know how long, I started re-reading the sections of *Angle*. I thought it was done, or at least complete, but incrementally, less appreciation and more critical appraisal was active. So I could tell there was a

problem with *Angle* but not what to do about it.

In the various stage models of the creative process, this is called “The Impasse.”

■ ■ ■

I first came across the stage model in *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* by Betty Edwards. She summarized the reflections of Hermann von Helmholtz, a German scientist who contributed to physics, physiology, and the philosophy of science in the 1800s. He identified three stages in his process of scientific discoveries, and since then others have been added.

We all love the *a-ha* moment, the breakthrough, those sudden, brilliant insights that, like bolts of lightning, strike as if out of the blue. It feels like a gift. *Illumination* is the briefest stage, but it is outsized in importance because of the sense of surety, relief, and exhilaration—gratitude, even—that can well up in us as we realize the way forward. Not to mention, the mystery of it.

However, what often gets overlooked in the lore of creative breakthroughs that tell the story with great emphasis on the Illumination, the exposition is often less dramatic. Before *a-ha* moments are often two other stages, each involving very different kinds of work. The first, which von Helmholtz called *Saturation*, includes research and engagement in the dynamics of the problem. I’ve also seen this stage called *Immersion*, which stresses just how soaked a person needs to be in the situation, grappling with the component parts while seeking a unifying synthesis. The hallmark of this first stage is work—long periods of effort, in bursts or across the calendar. When I finished typing up *Angle*, I might have completed only my

Saturation stage. Knowing the stage model enables me to be patient with that stymied sense that I've put in all this work, but the book just doesn't work. The stage model invites me to add one thing to the previous sentence: *yet*.

The Saturation stage can be even larger than the individual project or problem we're working on. In *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation*, R. Keith Sawyer calls this initial stage *Preparation* because he zooms our lens out beyond this particular poem or sequence of them, this experiment, or this campaign launch—to the larger context in which the problem and the person trying to solve it are working. He points out that “we don't expect a creative scientist to also be a gifted painter,” which highlights that learning a field and “internalizing the symbols and conventions of the domain” are part of this saturation. Another prominent researcher, Teresa Amabile calls this “domain specific skills” in her study *Creativity in Context*. Musicians need to learn the structure and progression of chords, painters need to learn composition and color theory. Sawyer says that “Psychologists now know that creativity is domain specific,” which means that it's not strictly a personal attribute that an individual brings into every situation. There are abilities and habits, attitudes and behaviors creative people do share, but most creative people have accomplishments in a specific arena, in part because they've internalized the workings of a specific field.

To learn the symbols and conventions of that arena, Sawyer advocates formal schooling, though he cautions that “the role played by schooling in creativity is complex.” Too much or too rigid learning can lead to exceptionally competent members of a field, but they may become “oversocialized.” People with too much

knowledge in too fixed an attitude find generating and evaluating novel ideas more difficult. There needs to be a sweet spot between knowledge and experience on one side and, on the other side, a “beginner’s mind” (to use Zen teacher Suzuki’s phrase) that doesn’t worry about the right or appropriate way. Now, when someone in that sweet spot approaches a problem, they are prepared to immerse themselves in it. And “creativity results,” Sawyer concludes, “when the individual somehow combines these existing elements and generates some new combination.”

By the time I started *Angle*, I had completed an MFA in Creative Writing, written many poems and collections, even having the good fortune to publish eleven of those collections as well as co-author a poetry-writing textbook. A great deal of training and practice had built up in me as a poet long before I even had that first inkling of an idea for a poem or the next that accumulated into and became *Angle of Ascent*. And yet, none of that experience ensures that this poem or this project will succeed, by my own standards, let alone that it will be up to the standards of editors or readers.

■ ■ ■

Not all processes even hit the Impasse wall; some progress to the goal through alternating trial and error, plan and adjustment, and attempt and refinement. For his 1974 book *Darwin on Man: The Psychological Study of Scientific Creativity*, Howard Gruber poured over the notebooks that Darwin kept over the course of his voyage on the Beagle but also in the following decades. These demonstrated that Darwin’s ideas followed what Sawyer calls “a more incremental process, a series

of small mini-insights, each a key step." There wasn't a single moment when the light bulb brightened; instead, his insight "was constructed day-by-day over a long period of extended activity." This distinction is important because we don't want to confuse the feeling of insight with the accomplishment of it; how we get there may not be as important as the feeling of it makes it seem. In fact, we may never feel the breakthrough; the mini-insights simply need to build up over sustained work. I think this was how it was for me, writing *Angle*. I had an unbroken stretch of time to return to the series, add to it, refine it, set it aside for a day or two, but then take it up again, renewed.

■ ■ ■

It was from such effort-less work that I had produced the first draft of *Angle of Ascent*. I read, I had ideas, I wrote them down; when mowing the lawn or driving around doing errands, new rhythms or images occurred. I kept my notebook handy. It was more like the string of mini-insights, so small that they didn't register as all that creative, but I kept at it and after a few weeks I had pages and pages of drafts.

Typically, work of this sort doesn't produce the spontaneous *a-ha* that Illumination does; the hallmark of the Saturation stage is the old-fashioned virtue of discipline. In her nuanced study of creativity in a host of disciplines published in *Notebooks of the Mind: Explorations of Thinking*, Vera John-Steiner underscores just how important this is: "One of the most neglected areas of the study of creativity is that of discipline, the structures that the individual who works outside of institutions imposes upon him or herself."

Fortunately, I did enjoy the support of my college in granting me the time and financial backing. I had proposed a number of projects for my sabbatical year, including researching the creative process by interviewing artists in many fields as well as reading up on the research being done, and I mapped out the year for the various parts of that project. I also proposed my own creative work, especially new poetry. That “proposed project” of writing new poetry was actually my usual ongoing project: therefore, other than the artificial deadline of the sabbatical year, whatever poems or books I wrote had no time frame, no predetermined subject matter, and no form or length requirements. As usual, all that was up to me. I promised none of that; whatever I came up with would suffice. And yet, also as usual, I had to impose on myself those structures—or discover them from within the material—and that takes a strange discipline.

For me, one of the most subtle forms of discipline is to be available and then to follow inklings, hunches, and curiosities. Availability might not even seem like discipline. And yet, it takes practice. Sometimes the experience is like hiking up a dry streambed, noting the contours of the land as indicating a potential water source. Water is not running, but it did once, and it just might in the future. Sometimes, this availability is like playing multiple games of chess at the same time, each distinct but deeply related at a meta-level. I’m not just idly waiting, though. It’s an active process, this being available. I revise typed-up drafts or assemble them into collections, which takes one kind of thinking-intuition, or I muse and walk and maybe jot new pieces in my notebook, which is a very different kind of intuitive thought. Sometimes, it’s like speaking one language on the first floor of your house,

a different language in the basement, and a third on the second floor—they don't overlap or converge. Sometimes all the immersion work never sparks an *a-ha*; it's just work. Digging post holes and then filling them in.

What led me to writing the first drafts of *Angle* began as a long circuitous journey from a proposed book review of a Japanese novel about Fukushima. To prepare myself for the novel, I read Gretel Ehrlich's book about her trip to that area shortly after the triple disaster of massive earthquake, devastating tsunami, and long-term radiation hazards from the meltdown at the nuclear power plant there. At the same time, but separate from the Fukushima explorations, I thought I needed to prepare to teach "The Bible as Literature" again after many years of a colleague teaching it, and so I was listening to a Great Course on The New Testament; that led me to finally pick up a slim paperback version of *Gilgamesh* that has been on my to-read pile for decades.

Meanwhile, I was also plowing through books on the creative process, articles on research by social and biological scientists, and readings that I'd gathered for my own growth over the years. One day, I caught Shankar Vedantam's *Hidden Brain* podcast. In one episode, "Why Our Brains Weren't Made To Deal With Climate Change," which starts at the Mendenhall Glacier in Alaska, which my spouse and I visited just a few years ago. That personal connection perked my ears, but the content sparked my imagination. He highlighted the brain science behind the lack of urgency regarding climate change among the general public; I recognized my own sense of aversion, turning away, not wanting to know—certainly in any depth.

My first mini *a-ha* was so small that my internal Richter scale didn't register

the slightest rumble. I simply sensed how related these fields of interest were. It was more like a constellation: not a real shape, just points that seemed connected somehow. Such a sensation of coherence was exhilarating, but I didn't know what the relationship of ideas was. Instead, it led to reading quickly and loosely about the science of climate change, and from this, I begin jotting notes and drafts of poems. In this way, I could relate to poet May Swenson's observation (quoted in John-Steiner's *Notebooks*): "The poem teaches us something while we make it." Writing these parts of *Angle* sparked new understandings of the material, and these understandings led to changes or new developments in the writing. It was cyclical but also expansive, both centripetal and centrifugal. The cycle leapt outward to connect to material I remembered. For example, years and years ago, I had copied a few sentences from the poet, essayist, and novelist Linda Hogan that felt relevant. Her book *Dwellings* has shaped my imagination in ways that now feel inherent. Hogan writes, "We are looking for a tongue that speaks with reverence for life...We want a language of that different yield a yield that returns us to our own sacredness."

The actual writing of drafts may have taught me—with a little *a-ha*, not a full stage of Illumination—that I was searching for a language to deal with this topic. Maybe our whole culture is. We have scientific symbols but they don't have the feeling of reverence and sacredness. And they don't have the power to move us. I certainly felt numb the more data I consumed. What energized me were the vivid scenes. Images. Hogan's passage resonated because it named for me the project's central problem. This creative process felt more like a matter of following, not

intending.

One *a-ha* did tip the scale. Reading parts of the *Gilgamesh* story where grief drives the story, I became aware of what causes me to turn away from our environmental crisis. I'm in mourning. Sorrow spurs wordless numbness. From that insight, I began integrating quotes from *Gilgamesh* into the poems. After some weeks, I drafted all this up by typing the notes, tweaking phrasing and order.

But the actual writing didn't measure up to the vision. And the weird thing is: I didn't actually have a vision for the piece. How can actual work not fit the vision if there isn't a predetermined goal? The creative process is not like assembling a jigsaw puzzle; we don't have a completed picture we're trying to make. At best, we have a generalized idea of the final result, and if we're lucky, doing the immersive work actually makes that image more detailed and clear. When it does, then we can generate material toward it, cycling through to refine the vision then to refine the material toward that vision, again and again.

Sometimes, writers have a general form to work backward from, which could easily be used to assess progress. If you're writing a play, for example, that form includes general patterns that can assist this unknown. If you're writing a romantic comedy, there are even more specific elements of the form to support you. However, like Darwin's process (not that I'm comparing myself or my sequence of poems to him and his work), I was assembling from the details and material, building something I didn't know how it should look. If you compare this approach to how we assemble a jigsaw puzzle, then we don't know what the picture is, where the edges are, if pieces are missing (since we're making them as we go), or if the pieces we do

have belong in this puzzle or some other one.

All this is to say, I was stuck. Locked out, somehow. I was dissatisfied, but not sure why. I couldn't tell what was missing or where it would go. I didn't know if there was too much in there or if certain parts of the series needed revision (and if so, what).

I was cast into the second stage: Incubation. Now my methods needed to switch from deliberate effort to even more intuitive work, the work of daydreaming, of musing. In their book *Wired to Create: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Creative Mind*, Scott Barry Kaufman and Carolyn Gregoire say that "the creative incubation that occurs during daydreaming is critical to creative thought and achievement and also to insightful problem solving." This sounds passive, but it is a dynamic process; it's just that much of the activity is hidden from conscious thought and intentions. In 1880, the first American psychologist to gain public notice, William James described the non-linear, associative processes inherent to incubation as a "seething caldron of ideas." Sawyer quotes him as saying:

Instead of thoughts of concrete things patiently following one another...we have the most abrupt cross-cuts and transitions from one idea to another...the most unheard-of combinations of elements, the subtlest associations of analogy; in a word, we seem suddenly introduced into a seething cauldron of ideas, where everything is fizzling and bobbing about in a state of bewildering activity.

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another..the most unheard-of combinations of elements, the subtlest associations of analogy; in a word, we seem suddenly introduced into a seething cauldron of ideas, where everything is fizzling and bobbing about in a state of bewildering activity.

For some, this stage is as frenetic as James describes it; others say it is as calm as waiting for a bus. Others simply take a break, turn attention to other tasks in their work, or take up the daily routines necessary for daily life. I think the “work” of incubation gets eclipsed because Illumination often takes place during these breaks—taking a bath (Archimedes), shaving (Freeman Dyson), going for a drive (Gertrude Stein), stepping onto a bus (Henri Poincare), or taking a walk (Mary Oliver). Understanding the stage model and some of these patterns and methods enables me to enter this stage of Incubation with more ease: I trust that some part of myself, a part that is paradoxically beyond words, is still writing.

■ ■ ■

I set *Angle of Ascent* aside and turned to other reading. Because I had unscheduled time, I decided to explore early poems by Galway Kinnell. When I tried to retrace my steps for this essay, I thought I was reading *What a Kingdom It Was* in his 1982 *Selected*, but can't find the quote, so even my notes are awry. I find some of Kinnell's work essential, a touchstone, but whatever book it was left me counting the pages until the next section. I could feel attention slide away. Then, this line, a lightning rod: “How can we speak with tongues made of stone?” My thrill

was exquisite. Electric. Even though Kinnell was representing this experience as an impediment, to me it was revelation: How can we? The question took on possibility. Everything converged: the idea of a different kind of language, the identification with earth elements, and the fact that it was a question made it a search, not an answer or destination. I was convinced. This was my *a-ha*.

Images and the ideas they suggested/contained in the line and in my own associations were the exact thing *Angle of Ascent* needed. I felt certain, not tentative. The perceptions were stable. And fluid. Energized, I suppressed the impulse to leap out of my chair to run from kitchen to living room and back, but I also suppressed the impulse to bask pensively in the perfect possibility. Instead, I grabbed up the drafts, made notes regarding the line, and got back to work, starting from the beginning.

■ ■ ■

A friend and I were talking about an open mic that was scheduled for that night. We were both planning to attend. I asked him if he was going to read anything new. "Sure," he said, his voice rising as if he was asking a question. "I have the idea," he clarified. "All I have to do is write it."

What he was saying was: all I have to do is actually do the work of actually making his idea in the actual world, transforming an idea into a creation. Having an a-ha is not the same as creating something. Countless people, like my friend, say they want to write a book or have an idea for a story, but what separates writers from these people is simple: writers are people who write. Sometimes they write

in order to induce the a-ha and sometimes they have to write it to work out the inchoate *a-ha*.

And so, the final stages of the creative process also involve a great deal of work. Sawyer puts different aspects of these tasks into one: Verification, Evaluation, and Elaboration. Sawyer says the elaborative part is “where the creator takes the raw insight and molds it into a complete product.” In this stage, the person crunches the numbers, revises the draft (my writer-friend hadn’t gotten to this yet), and completes the painting, making sure the work is as good as it can be. All the actors are off book, having memorized their lines, but now have the hard work of rehearsing to create the impression of spontaneous interactions. While it doesn’t have the crackling pizzazz of the *a-ha*, all this effort can be as creative as the Immersion stage because new problems emerge, usually finer and finer, bringing to bear all one’s skill, experience, and intuition to solve or improve on. The productivity at this stage also could include double-checking that the theory or insight really holds water in its details, and so it means working out all the layers in it to verify that it’s as right in reality as the insight felt in one’s head. All these functions rely on all aspects of intelligence—rational and sequential reasoning, hunches and guesses—and all the skill one has developed over however long one has been engaged in the field of interest. Sawyer says, “The evaluation stage is fully conscious, and the creator draws on his or her immense knowledge about the domain.” It requires making distinctions, not being satisfied, and seeking to improve. I like to think that my sense that *Angle* just wasn’t working is due to the work at this stage. I was evaluating the work, now that the initial stages had created something to evaluate.

Of course, this function was operating as I drafted individual sections, as I ordered them, and as I typed them up. But now there was a holistic questioning operating as well. And to revise it, I'd need to dig in and do more.

This work, too, requires discipline: showing up and chipping away at it. This discipline is necessary because sometimes the results are so incremental that it's easy to feel the effort is pointless. And sometimes, progress is clearer, but it is accompanied by doubt and fear. In *Notebooks of the Mind*, John-Steiner relates a point from her interview with the novelist Iris Murdoch that reveals the relation between the work and doubt. Murdoch puts it quite forcefully; "I live, I *live*, with an absolutely continuous sense of failure. I am defeated, always. Every book is the wreck of a perfect idea. The years pass and one has only one life. If one has a thing at all one must do it and keep on and on and on trying to do it better." Murdoch reflects both the required dedication to the work but also how this operates despite the paradoxical sense of delight in the craft itself even while plagued by powerful emotional doubt.

■ ■ ■

So, I added the line from Galway Kinnell to *Angle of Ascent*. And it prompted revisions to earlier sections so it doesn't come out of the blue. It felt like a give and take, or as Vera John-Steiner describes it, "The process is like a dialogue between the artist and his or her product." Having discovered the importance of Kinnell's line, I listened to the other parts of the sequence for whispers about "tongues made of stone." I revised for coherence, for musical harmony and relations.

Once again, I thought it was finished.

Then, weeks later, I attended a presentation. The woman described how she was glued to the screen for hours and hours, in horror, watching the Deepwater Horizon ablaze and the oil bubbling up from under the Gulf of Mexico. Her hopes raised as each new plan to cap the well was explained and then her hopes fell into deeper despair as each one failed. Still the oil gushed into the sea. The news started showing animated maps of the oil drifting, and little red lights showed where it made landfall, coating the delicate wetlands, washing up on the beach, covering shellfish and birds. Her heart was breaking day by day. One night, she went by her son's room, long after she'd put him to bed, and found him playing with his Legos. She was impatient, telling him he should have been asleep long ago. But, mommy," the boy said, "I'm fixing the hole in the ocean."

Again, something's missing in *Angle*. I had an idea of what, but I wasn't sure how to write it. And the process cycled back again to Impasse. Now, years later, the process continues. The idea is not fulfilled, the whole is not complete, and the details are not exact. Not yet, anyway. Not yet.

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**Sadia Hassan**

Sadia Hassan (she/her) is the author of *Enumeration*, part of the New-Generation African Poets series from Akashic Books. Winner of the 2020 Hurston/Wright College Writers Award, Hassan currently writes and teaches in Oxford, MS, where she is pursuing her MFA at the University of Mississippi. More of her work can be found in *The American Academy of Poetry*, *Boston Review*, *Longreads*, and elsewhere.

**Tryphena Yeboah**

Tryphena Yeboah (she/her) is the author of the chapbook *A Mouthful of Home*, selected by the New-Generation African Poets series. Her stories have appeared in *Narrative Magazine* and *Commonwealth Writers*, among others. She graduated with an MFA in Creative Writing from Chapman University this year.

## **In Conversation: Sadia Hassan and Tryphena Yeboah**

Sadia Hassan and Tryphena Yeboah are two writers whose poetry chapbooks have been published as part of the New-Generation African Poets series from Akashic Books. The following conversation between Yeboah, who is part of the *Tab Journal* staff, and Hassan developed over several months. Here, they talk about fear and hope, self-criticism and possibility, and what it's like to write as women of color in this historical moment.

**Tryphena Yeboah:** If anyone had told me our chapbook set, the first full-length publication for both of us, would be released during a pandemic where we are either social distancing or in a lockdown, I would have discarded it all together and thought it a far-fetched idea. And yet, that was the case with us and many others last year: heavy social media marketing, a virtual book launch, and a series of remote interviews. Here we are again, without so much as a real hug from each other, having this conversation. Do you wonder how different the experience could have been? What is it like for your chapbook to come out in a world just before the US election and in the midst of a pandemic?

**Sadia Hassan:** I think about it all the time, or used to. It was still early in the pandemic then, early enough to dream it'd be over soon and plan to gather with my friends and do as many readings as we wanted. The virtual really felt so expansive, so full of love and connection and celebration for this wonderful project. My friends

did a wonderful zoom reading for me which held so many of the people I loved that I definitely cried. Oddly enough, I appreciated that the virtual nature of things meant I could go slow, prioritize connection over networking, be alone with my work for longer. Our chapbooks were launched a few months ahead of the election but that didn't bother me. What bothered me was the endemic violence of America continuing unabated despite a pandemic. That felt inexcusable.

**Yeboah:** Will you share more on the ways the insurrection has affected you, and especially how you're finding ways to cope, heal, or simply attempt a gesture towards being present?

**Hassan:** I think it hit me at the end of January (and honestly, is still hitting me as February begins to take shape) that there was a near successful insurrection in the most powerful nation's capitol—the nation my parents came to seeking refuge so many years ago. At the time, I played it off with lots of memes about it being white folks' business what foolishness those folks were getting up to, but I was scared deep down that what happened that day would never leave us, that the moment vivified an unraveling my parents could feel in their bones having been here before, not here America, but here on the razor edge of civil unrest, right as they were entering the age of retirement. Whiteness, and its attending brutalities, is exhausting. It has stolen our rest in every iteration of its damned existence and I am tired. I hope you've been able to manage the chaos in a healthier way.

**Yeboah:** It is disturbing what an incident like that has triggered in your family and many others, Sadia. It's a horrifying feeling knowing that the threat to democracy does not end there, that there's real damage to lives and humanity in general, losses that cost us on global and intimate levels. I don't have the right words to say for something as devastating as this, but I am not without hope for accountability and change in the future.

Frankly, I found myself in a perpetual state of shock, and that came with a numbness that seemed to, if you will, separate me from all that was happening. I'd listen to the news for a few minutes, read a quick update on Twitter, clock into my shift at work, and try to explain to my mother more than once that I'm in California, that I'm nowhere near Washington, DC. I don't remember how I felt doing all of that. Still, I bet it was a lot like my living in America—I am at once hyper aware of my identity as a foreigner and my sole mission to survive, and at the same time, I am confused, tired, afraid, and desperate.

**Hassan:** Try, that line "I am not without hope" stays with me. Especially as I think about your first mission: to survive, to do your work, to get back to family. My father often reminds me to act like I belong to somebody. What I hear in his voice and in your own mantra is a refusal to be subsumed by man-made calamity and choosing instead to lean into an alter-reality of your own creation. What's bringing you joy? How are you tending to yourself and to that joy? Where do you go to find it? That sweetness is what will save us.

**Yeboah:** I turn to my work for joy and for that sweetness, but also to feel other things. It opens me up, reveals me—if even only to myself, teaches me, has me questioning, gives me an answer or none at all, does the graceful work of shaking up and stirring and awakening, given my tendencies to grow numb and mute and absent. These days, it is awfully quiet and when I lie down, sometimes I pray, or cry, or just breathe. It often feels as if I’m reconciling myself with myself in a world that continues to fragment and break apart. In moments like this, I am easily thankful, less overwhelmed, and finally, with some courage, present.

**Hassan:** Can you say a little more about courage? Why courage and not, like, faith?

**Yeboah:** Oh, there’s tremendous faith, but I am guilty of having convictions and doing nothing about them. One must act and not simply believe. Courage because I find myself vacillating between loving what I do—what I *get* to do—and then afraid that I’m doing parts of it wrong, that a good story I write today will be the last good story I ever write. And for that reason, I’m better off resigned than attempt something that’s likely to fail. Long before I knew what it really was, imposter syndrome had me disconnected from and disbelieving my skill and my awareness of what I could accomplish with it. I don’t want to sit at my desk feeling like a fraud, and yet, I am not always successful at dislodging that fear. On the days that I am, courage has a great deal to do with it because I write anyway. I wonder if you could talk about your writing. In a world that is often tortured and bruised in multiple ways, how do you hold an intentional space for beauty, for hope in your words?

**Hassan:** There is a line in your poem “I Tell My Mother I Want A Body That Expands” that goes, “If there is a language for a woman learning to breathe, I’m speaking it—.” I love knowing we speak some of the same language and it makes me happy to hear your work has been opening you up to joy and revealing to you where you can be more courageous. Recently, I’ve been writing about *losing*. I don’t think it’s the same as writing about loss or failure. The word losing in Somali, as I learned recently from my favorite Twitter linguist Aziz Farah, is actually *guuldarro*, which roughly translates to “winning poorly.” Winning poorly, or losing well, feels like a life practice of keeping an eye toward the possible, a portal through which we find an opening into other lives. For example, *emptiness* and *silence* have such negative connotations in the English language, but they offer us new beginnings. I try to remember: in the beginning, there was nothing. In the beginning, there was space and emptiness and the promise of new life.

**Yeboah:** I love what you say about winning poorly! Knowing my fear of failure and my hesitation to break down self-constructed boundaries (mainly to avoid discomfort and rejection), this feels both like a friendly nudge and a new perspective on taking a first step—all the possibilities that abound! Is there one thing you’re hoping to learn (or unlearn) about the craft?

**Hassan:** I am trying to unlearn so much right now, but especially the idea that criticism is more useful to my artmaking than curiosity. I think it’s simply untrue. Criticism stops me up. Where curiosity opens more and more windows of possibility,

criticism closes them all and demands a “right” answer. So I’m making messier, mongrel poems these days in service to my curiosity. Finding new ways to clarify, embolden or better understand a poem without leaning on criticism has been a relief. By inviting strangeness, allowing color and sound and smell to drive certain poems as much as an image might others, I’ve found that I’m less attached to what I thought I wanted from the poem when I began.

**Yeboah:** I must admit I hadn’t given much thought to criticism *while* the work is being done, which is why I am interested in your take on it and very much in agreement with letting curiosity lead. Because my creative process is deeply informed by a desire to write towards and through the quest of my own imagination (often unclear), I think it would be hard to cultivate the habit of looking over my shoulder for fear of critique. I barely know what I’m doing at this stage and as such, to me, it often involves all the strangeness and messiness one can think of. You are not alone!

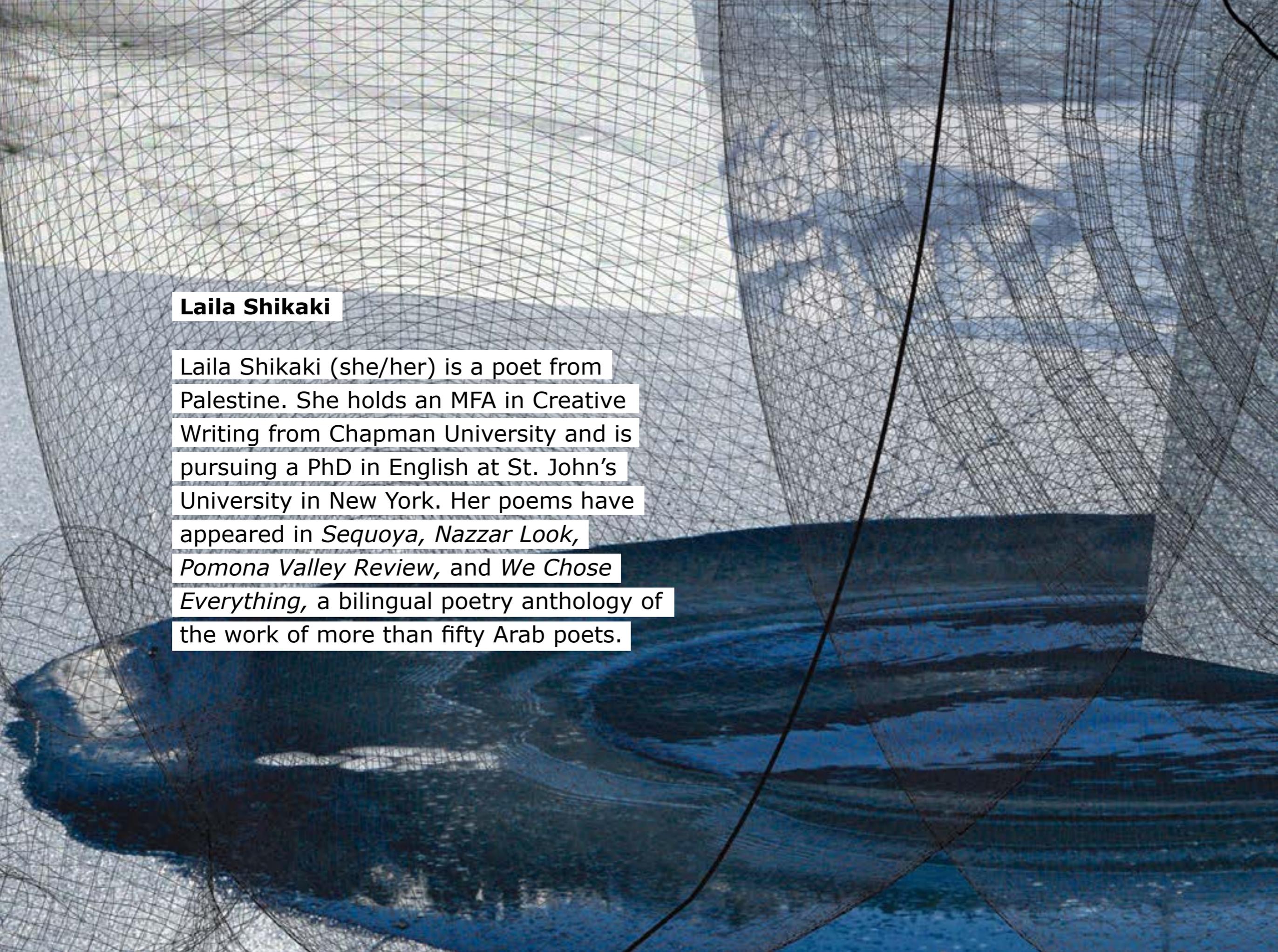
Of course, once the work is done and out in the world, the stakes are different, and I worry how it will be received and not received. But what is more to the point is, there is no telling what will turn up should we give in to the workings of our minds and isn’t that in itself fascinating? To show up and with rigor and great expectation, create something meaningful that may go on to live a life on its own?

**Hassan:** Showing up with rigor and great expectation feels so studious! I can’t say I do it all the time, but when I can, it feels a little like wonder and it’s that wonder

that has allowed me to stay open and love my writing for what it gives me, which is time and space to reflect. I love my writing, too, because it leads me through new portals where I can practice reverence for the mundane and listen for what might still be emerging. I mess up and hold space for beauty in my work by allowing for the full spectrum of human experience to make itself known. Beauty, absolutely, but also the devastation that cleared the path.

**Yeboah:** It is what you've done so excellently with your chapbook, *Enumeration*. (I'm thrilled to have my work in such good company!) I am amazed by how you capture the relationship between body and motion—this idea of the body becoming and taking shape, yet breaking apart and running away is evident. In the poem "Enumeration," you write: "a woman's body / can be cleaved / fresh as torn earth / and no one / not even her mother / can put it back right." The confidence of your language and how you slip between these realities are remarkable. Thank you for sharing these poems with us!

**Hassan:** Thank you for sharing with us your joy! As the speaker in your poem "I Sing Therefore We Sing" offers us: "my joy is something you can wear, too / Throw it over your head like a blessing, bestowed." I have happily thrown over my head the many blessings of friends, mentors, siblings, and strangers this year, and they have nourished me. Thank you for a poetics of plentitude and care. And to Kwame Dawes, Chris Abani and our friends at the African Poetry Book Fund, praise for the labor of love that has come to yield such a bountiful harvest in the field of African Poetry and Poetics. And praise to us, our endurance.



**Laila Shikaki**

Laila Shikaki (she/her) is a poet from Palestine. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Chapman University and is pursuing a PhD in English at St. John's University in New York. Her poems have appeared in *Sequoia*, *Nazzar Look*, *Pomona Valley Review*, and *We Chose Everything*, a bilingual poetry anthology of the work of more than fifty Arab poets.

## Book review

*Tethered to Stars* by Fady Joudah  
Milkweed Editions, 2021

In *Tethered to Stars*, the Palestinian-American Fady Joudah writes poetry that can be placed in the space between the mysticism of the sky with its constellations, zodiac signs, and stars and the humble earth with its problems of police brutality, identity struggles, and human interactions. Joudah mixes poems about zodiac stars, which address someone or something that is not always necessarily known, and personal poems, where he discusses his Muslim and Palestinian identity, his job as a physician, his travels, and family. Even the title of Joudah's collection is a nod to a pre-Islamic poem written by the famous Arab poet and orator Imru' Al-Qais, which Joudah quotes in the first few pages of his collection. The connections that Joudah creates through his poetry are, thus, not only between humans, but also between us and the outside world. Joudah's poems allow the earthly to connect to the sky and show how the sky affects the earth, as astrology suggests that the position of stars when you were born and the planets' movements affect your characteristics and the ways people perceive you. These connections seem to be appropriate for the world we are living in and especially the previous year we lived through.

Joudah's *Tethered to Stars*, which is his fourth book, uses names of all the 12 zodiac signs as poem titles. The most touching poem of this collection is "Sandra Bland, Texas," an elegy to the African American woman who was found hung in her

jail cell in 2015 and whom many believe was unjustly treated. In the poem, Joudah writes about Bland's horoscope, creating yet another connection between humans and the universe above us and also connection with death:

It's clear you're my pretext, Sandra, you were  
an Aquarius (my dad is as well), but do zodiacs exist  
for birth into the afterlife? If so, then on the date  
your breath no longer tethered your body, you became  
a Cancer, proliferative, this nation's sign

Under that sign, ten years before your murder,  
I asked myself in Darfur, what is the threshold  
for suffering to create us equal.

In these lines, Joudah thinks beyond life and death and wonders about a person's sign when they pass away, a somewhat unexpected thought. What Joudah does as well here is make a connection between Bland and his own father (both having the same zodiac sign) as well as with the poetic speaker, presumably Joudah himself, as he describes his work as a physician. Moreover, in a previous stanza, Joudah uses the collective "we" to show how the United States, but perhaps the world itself has forgotten Bland, writing:

We have nothing  
named after you.

Will you excuse me  
for naming a poem  
an imaginary place that,  
as with any home,  
one doesn't inhabit  
all alone, even if  
in a coffin one is  
all that there is?  
And one, not even,  
and one, far more.

There are many powerful and hard-to-read poems in *Tethered to Stars*. The book's fourth poem, however, is where the poet becomes more personal. In "The Holy Embraces the Holy," Joudah tells a story of helping an old man in Perue, someone he perceived to be French. Joudah continues the story:

He asked me first: after I insisted  
he take an extra gulp from my canteen,  
for heart and lungs to turn serene.  
I took his question to mean  
that he wanted to credit my kindness to a place  
when he gets to tell his story.  
I gave the credit to Palestine.

The flow and the rhymes in the passage above demonstrate the narrative, conversational tone of most of the poems in this collection.

Wanting to give “credit” to Palestine is touching here, as Joudah is very much part of the Palestinian diaspora, having lived in Libya and Saudi Arabia before moving to the United States. He has also translated the intricate poems of the prominent Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, allowing them to become even more widely known. In this particular poem, the man reacts to Joudah’s self-identification: “Maybe ‘Palestine’ was the last thing he expected to hear / Or his face had nothing to do with the word / Maybe he anticipated ‘American’ first and foremost / because I did say ‘water.’” This tone that runs throughout the book makes Joudah’s poems conversational even while some of them can be perceived as philosophical, using the poetic characteristic of allusion and also both medical and astrological terms.

In one of the last poems, “Aries,” Joudah shows his tremendous ability to play with language and translation. Joudah’s Darwish poems are exceptionally well translated, and so is the translation word play, imagination, and imagery in “Aries.” If you understand Arabic, then this poem is exquisite, and if you do not understand the language, then this poem remains to be exquisite because of the way it is written and meant to be perceived, as you can read in its opening stanza:

Duhkha: a vanishing of suffering, an Odyssey  
that rams me into Sisyphus, Ithaca’s other name.  
Duhkha: I don’t pronounce it properly  
or insert the proper symbol for it in word doc,

a dot at the mouth of the cove the first h makes.  
Duhkha sounds like the word for laugh in Arabic,  
the noun not the command. In dialect of dialect,  
duhkha imagines duqqa:

“Aries” is a poem that embodies what this collection is about. It starts with metaphysical astrological allusions, then moves to different cultures and places in the world, and then exhibits Joudah’s language abilities and the mix between his English and Arabic.

The poem builds toward the last two words of “Aries,” where Joudah shows personal connections:

when you see duhkha laid out on the page  
you can hear the Arabic for dizziness. And falafel,

couscous and sumac combined,  
and humus is mine.

Fady Joudah’s poetry—and *Tethered to Stars* in particular—continues to be what our world needs right now: metaphysical, mystic, and full of allusions, yet also grounded, humble, and human!