

## Literary Conversations: SPOKEN WORDS

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You can also purchase our featured authors' books from Politics & Prose: [If They Come for Us](#) by Fatimah Asghar, [Life of the Party](#) by Olivia Gatwood, [Homie](#) by Danez Smith, [Finna](#) by Nate Marshall.

**Bethanne Patrick:** Hi, everyone. Welcome back to PEN/Faulkner's Literary Conversation series. My name is Bethanne Patrick and I'm the PEN/Faulkner Board Chair for Programs. I'm so excited to welcome you here for our Spoken Word presentation. For those of you who are joining us for the first time, PEN/Faulkner is a literary nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC, with a mission of celebrating literature and fostering connections between readers and writers to enrich and inspire individuals and communities.

We fulfill that mission by administering two national literary awards, the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction and the PEN/Malamud Award for excellence in the short story, as well as through our education programs, which bring free books and author visits to DC public and public charter schools, and of course, literary conversations like this one. If you'd like to learn more about the work we do, please visit our website at [penfaulkner.org](http://penfaulkner.org) and follow us on social media as well. Before I introduce and bring on tonight's amazing panelists, I want to mention a few quick technical notes about the webinar.

There will be live captions provided this evening. To turn captions on and off, you can use the CC button at the bottom of your Zoom screen. There will also be a brief Q&A session at the end of the event. You can submit your questions using the Q&A button, also at the bottom of your Zoom screen. You can upvote favorite questions and we'll do our best to get to the ones that you vote for in the time we have. Very important. You'll find our panelist books on sale through politics and pros through links we'll put into the chat. It's time to get this conversation started.

To do that, I am honored to introduce tonight's panelists, who have joined us from around the United States to talk about Spoken Word poetry and how it forms part of the literary landscape today. We have four panelists. Fatimah Asghar is a writer and filmmaker. In 2011, they created Spoken Word poetry group in Bosnia, Herzegovina while on a Fulbright studying theater in post-genocidal countries. They are the writer and co-creator of Brown Girls, an Emmy nominated web series, a Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg fellow.

They were also featured on the 2017 Forbes 30 Under 30 list. They are the author of *If They Come for Us*, *One World* 2018. They are the co-editor of *Halal if You Hear Me*, an

anthology that celebrates Muslim writers, who are also women, queer, gender non-conforming and/or trans. Welcome, Fatimah, thanks for being here. Our next panelist, Olivia Gatwood has received international recognition for her poetry, writing workshops, work as a Title IX Compliant educator in sexual assault prevention and recovery.

Originally, from Albuquerque, New Mexico, she now lives in Los Angeles. Olivia is the author of two books of poems, *Life of the Party* and *New American Best Friend*. Her debut novel, *Whoever You Are, Honey* is scheduled to be released in 2023. Welcome, Olivia. Danez Smith is a Black, queer, poz writer, and performer from Saint Paul, Minnesota. Danez is the author of *Don't Call Us Dead*, Graywolf Press, 2017; winner of the Forward Prize for Best Collection, the Midwest Bookseller's Choice Award; and a Finalist for the National Book Award, and [insert] boy, YesYes Books, 2014; winner of the Kate Tufts Discovery Award and the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry.

Danez is a member of the Dark Noise Collective and former co-host of VS with Franny Choi, a podcast sponsored by the Poetry Foundation and Postloudness. Danez's third collection *Homie* was published by Graywolf Press in January 2020. Last but not least, welcome Danez. Nate Marshall, our moderator tonight is the author and editor of numerous works, including *Finna*, *Wild Hundreds*, *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop*, and the audio drama, *Bruh Rabbit & The Fantastic Telling of Remington Ellis Esq.*

He teaches creative writing and literature at Colorado College. Nate was born and raised on the south side of Chicago. Welcome, and thank you so much to all of our panelists for this evening. So glad to have you here.

**Nate Marshall:** Well, hello. Glad to be here.

**Bethanne:** Hello, Nate.

**Nate:** Thank you, Bethanne.

Bethanne: You're welcome. I will leave it to you now.

**Nate:** All right. Appreciate you. Cool. Hello, Zoom folks out in the Zoom world. The chat is off for you while I'd ask you where you were coming from. I'm in Colorado Springs, Colorado so it was up to you all from somewhere by some mountains. [chuckles] Wonderful. I'm really excited to have this conversation with this really wonderful set of writers and writers who have really had a chance to observe and just be fans in community with for a number of years. I think that maybe just before we get really into the conversation, it makes sense to just read a little bit.

Maybe if we can just open up this space with a poem or two from each person and then we'll come into the conversation. Fatimah, would you be willing to open the space for us?

**Fatimah Asghar:** Yes, thank you for having us. Thank you, Nate, for moderating. Thank you to PEN/Faulkner for having us. Let me-- Oops, that is the wrong document so let me just take a second to get the right one. Okay.

They're in their Lord of the flies bag

Terrence says about the boys nestled in the mouth of the waterfall

The one boy's eyes to the sky

legs wrapped around the rock to keep him alive

Afloat, the river running over him, kissing him

Just so his body in interruption in the water, the rush, and roar of its call

Partitioned by the fall, dividing it from itself

The other boys perched around him like water nymphs

Staring off beyond the dip in the mountains where the sunsets

The boys so landed, they become part of the land

The roots rooting around their ankles

Yes, in their Lord fly bag, but a load of the flies before it gets dark

Before they do what they do to piggy

Before they split and hunt

Wild still, boys who jump from high where the trees are

Into the water cradled so lovingly by rock

Boys who forward the river in their sock

Throwing their shoes to any soft land willing to catch

The water, a mother, both healing and scolding

Both soft and gathering pressure around the fall

Shallow enough to walk, deep enough to dive

The boys know her like their own where to step and where to not

How to say hello when to let her sleep

Their big toes scraping into the moss to hold them steady  
Fingernails finding the hook  
between roots to anchor

To pull their bodies upwards

The cookies, cooking their song

The sun winking its set

Everything green, nothing poisoned

Alhamdulillah to no land so well

You can play with it, to never second guess where your foot lands

How to get your body where it wants to go

To be so from, you from, alhamdulillah to cradle the fall and not fall

To hear the rivers rush and feel safety

Wild, the boys in their Lord of the flies back

Yes, the boys there on top of the waterfall

The boys wild, but not lost

The boys wild and belonged

Then, this next one I'm going to read is a short section from my novel, that's coming out in the fall. The only you need to know is that there's three siblings. Kausar is the youngest. Aisha's in the middle, and Noreen's the oldest.

My fingers wrapped in Noreen's hair as she runs, and I bounce on her back

Across the street, Aisha howls, weaving backpack dangling lightly off of one shoulder

In this world, we are born into nothing but everything is ours

The sidewalk, the yellow markers in the road

The rain falls through the leads and kisses us just so

What no one will ever understand is the world belongs to orphans

That everything becomes our mother

We're mothered by everything because we know how to look for the mothering  
Because we know a mother might leave us  
And we'll need another mother to step in and take its place  
The tree mothering its shade  
The restaurant door, prop slightly open  
Mothering its smell of cookies to us  
The blinking walk sign, holding on long enough to mother us across the street  
And like how the sun was made  
Just so it could mother Noreen  
So it could warm her skin  
The sidewalk made to mother Aisha's knee  
So it could kiss it when her body hits the pavement  
A love strong enough to leave a mark  
The rain mothering us faster home  
The hallway birds mothering their cages  
The hamster mothering its wheel  
All the mothers in the world reach out to the motherless  
And beneath me, Noreen was made to mother me  
Her heartbeat pounding against my back  
Shouting so loud that it fills my entire being  
You're held, you're held, you're held.  
Thank you.

**Nate:** Wow. Thank you. I brought up a lot of questions, but I'll write them down, put them in my pocket. Maybe next to continue to open this space, Danez, would you be willing to bless us real quick?

**Danez Smith:** Yes. Good evening to everyone out there. I'm checking in from Philly. I'll read, I think some new things. This one's called *Ars Poetica* until I find a more exciting title.

There is no poem greater than feeding someone

There is no poem wiser than kindness

There is no poem more important than being good to children

There is no poem outside loves violent potential for cruelty

There is no poem that ends grief, but nurses it towards light

There is no poem that isn't jealous of song or murals or wings

There is no poem free you from money's ruin, no poem in the capital nor the court

Most laws reword a double script

There is no poem in the law

There is no poem in the west

There is no poem in the north

Poems only live south of something

Meaning beneath and darkened and hot

There is no poem in the winter, nor whiteness, nor are there poems in the landlord's name

No poem to admonish the state

No poem to free you, hands do that, guns, flames, love Then, second thing. Let's see. That's the wrong thing. That's work. That's also work. This is the work. Here we go. This one's an evolving poem, so it's going to end what will later be the middle but I'm writing this poem a little bit at a time, it's called *Color Study*.

Newport Green, Michael Braid, honey

Not blood red but the red of the blood

So bandana red, bang red, Brimson

First Sunday white, purple like the flavor

Kinky twist like sun flares on the stoop

My love says I look terracotta  
Thank God, he's never called me chocolate  
Pink tongue around a cherry proof  
Blackest time, blackest tomorrow  
Nipple brown, gums blue, yellow snow  
Smoke in a dark room taupe, white smoke  
Blue smoke, blue flame, and my homegirl vomits  
Four-piece brown all over the dumb thick ones  
Glass heel and the red velvet floor, apology blue  
Green is basil, green as sour diesel  
Brown water, brown people drink  
Brown water, brown, black, white, no green  
Green for blue, a red and dangerous mind blueprint  
White as hunger around a mile  
Red as history, gray as a book  
Stolen plum, whale-white  
Blue eye, brown eye up to God  
God black, God blue with eyes everywhere  
Eyes brown, blue, and yellow  
Blue and yellow, blue and yellow, only  
No black, no black, blue and yellow  
Blue and yellow, blue and yellow, only  
No black, no black  
The green of quitting the smoke

The blue piece of smoke, this blue distance from fire  
Being black and golden at 6:00 PM  
Being black and the embrace of water  
Oh, yellow and fake wreath your joy  
That won't wither and would poison when shoot  
Oh, yellow red, and all beautiful poisonous things  
Teach me red and orange stripes down my back  
Teach me blue crown around my eight eyes  
Brown of the roaches that depress spring  
Ancient brown of stone they care  
They are roaches live forever  
Forever must be beautiful  
Roaches the color of God  
God the color of the tulip past duty  
The color of the coffee's wealth  
The color of bark in my mind  
The color of autumns wonder  
The color of my favorite hands  
And the suddenness of my lover come morning  
Amen, brake light star that helps me, sunless morning  
Amen, yellow and red, my heavy foot's master  
Amen, red eyes all day looking in the mirror and seeing the dead-end  
The color of change  
The color of wanting to change



Is my skin brown?

Is me under the sun I avoid, upon the grass I need green

As what I ran from to live, the green chain around the trachea

The green cage of my mind convinced myself was peace the wet light

On my face, I convinced myself was love, wasn't even want

Was need an easy route?

Was the red indifference of loneliness I needed?

I needed to be filled and so-called men of any color

The white body of most drugs no more

What does the sun look like when my eyes aren't red?

Red by the moon and the clarity of 3:00 AM

I stripped down to ivory and red meat asking each blue God for newness

God's, God, whoever placed the rainbow after the rain

Give me the strength to separate my yesterday's from my tomorrow's

Give me my black mind wash of the caulk and blood, dear God after water

Dear water, I don't want to be cleaned I want to drown and be reborn

The clean slate of the first fish to bear air, I need that trading

My blue world for the blue above that bleeds pink during my favorite hours

Blue possible of morning

Blue hope of yesterday's death

Blue yes of now

Blue let the Robins hungry tomorrow

And maybe this time, my red wings won't burn

Nate: Damn. Okay, I see. Honestly, I'm still tripping on Brimson.

**Danez:** [laughs]

**Nate:** Outstanding. That was hilarious. Thank you, Danez. Wonderful, and last but most certainly not least, Olivia, would you open this?

**Olivia Gatwood:** Hello. Thanks so much for having us. I'm going to read a short poem from my first book and another from my second. Jordan Convinced Me That Pads Are Disgusting.

"They make your panties smell like dirty bike chains," she said

We were sitting on her mother's plastic-coated floral couch,

one of us in a swimsuit, the other sworn to layers. The water was her selling point and I was terrified of tampons

Or rather terrified of the undiscovered crater, the muscle that holds and pulls

And keeps and sheds.

She said, "I'll do it for you."

And yes, we had seen each other naked many times,

We had showered together and compared nipples

Wished to trade the smalls and bigs of our respective bodies

So it wasn't unnatural, really, when I squatted on the toilet seat

And she laid down on the floor

Like a mechanic investigating the underbelly of a car.

With plastic syringe in hand, she wedged the packed cotton into me,

This was what I saw last

Before blacking out and collapsing onto the tile,

Jordan, Blood Scholar, in a turquoise bikini saying, "Now you are ready to swim."

This is a poem I wrote after I saw Sam Sax tweeted many years ago. Something along the lines of love is a cult. I felt that deeply. This is a poem after that tweet, The Lover As A Cult.

And I am humming in an ankle-length cotton dress

Hanging sheets to dry on a thin wire.

A group of girls with swollen nipples braid each others hair  
While you watch, nod and direct their fingers over and through, over and through  
Even the memory of their muscles must be unlearned and retaught  
By your singular touch, how to hold a spoon or crack an egg.  
We are sitting on the cusp of spring.  
We are always sitting on the cusp of spring.  
I remember what it was like to be them, the girls  
Pungent and ripe and apologizing for every audible movement  
But also looking out at the infinite tongue  
of a middle-America highway and feeling joy.  
I don't know what happened.  
Maybe, the only reason we fall in love  
is to see what we look like to someone else.  
I remember when I first came here, you told me the laundry was my duty.  
You said you liked how precise I was with cloth, praised the way I hung and folded.  
I developed an affinity for bedding.  
And after the night of drying, we would unclip the sheets from the line  
Lay them out on the field, make love, and fall asleep in the breeze, all before even going  
inside.  
We never had any clean sheets.  
It was our favorite joke.  
Soon, you stopped caring and I lost purpose.  
I waxed and waned into a cup of bitter tea.  
I have started to meditate on all of the other things I can do with a sheet.  
How I can twist it to be rope or drape it over my sitting body.

When you told me that you admired the way I scrubbed a toilet

I heard "Everything you touch becomes new."

When you told me to kill the chickens, though I have never so much

As swatted an insect, I will practice wringing my own ankles.

I am afraid that outside of here, is just another here.

I am afraid I will spend the rest of my life

Hoping to build myself in the vision of someone else.

What am I, if not yours?

What do I do with my hands when they're just hands?

**Nate:** Damn. That's some-- Let me try not to cusp. That's the last line though. Good deal. I will say this. Maybe this is just a good question to-- Okay, I can feel free to cusp. Look, you don't want to tell me that, so touching that, but a question there, it is my mix. [chuckles] I'm thinking about this for all of you all, right? Obviously, I'm familiar with you all's work, for at least about 10 years deep for every single one of you all. I'm curious what-- I'm certain that you restarted doing poetry gigs and features before you released the first book and maybe you were working on it at that point.

I think about both of those things as a curation, putting together a collection. Could you talk about the similarities, the differences? What skills are really applicable? What things you had to train yourself into? Just in making, I don't want to say transition, because I think that's trite, but in thinking through the differences of those kinds of presentations.

**Danez:** I think what merely comes to mind is just how much being a poet, whether doing features or whether like in a Slam, on a team, or just individually requires you to think so much about what the audience is receiving in their emotional journey that you're sending them on. I feel like that is remainder throughout the curation of a book, especially like a poetry collection that's not--- If all my things are about a thing, but not always about the same thing and so there's always this emotional art that I'm trying to chain its way through and that feels very similar to thinking about what is last column that you read at a reading.

When do you do a funny poem in a Slam, trying to play on. It really is an emotional manipulation just trying to play on people's emotions. I think that feels like a very transferrable skill because you're already seeing the work that you're curious and that you're about and then thinking about how do I invite somebody else into this? How do I set somebody best to be affected by this work? I think that's a privilege because it made that idea that somebody was on the other side of the book much less scary because I was already used to people on the other side of the mic.

**Olivia:** I think there's a way that when you're so used to being-- When you're on a stage, I think obviously that's a very scary thing for a lot of people, but it becomes more scary the idea that you're not in control of the way someone receives something. In performance, a large part of your tool is your voice and your enunciation and just your presence. I mean, the poem is living in your body. If there's this way that it becomes personal, that is more personal, I think even in a relationship with a viewer, but when it's in a book, I remember just being really afraid of the idea that someone was experiencing it without me there.

What used to be the body as a tool and a voice as a tool became thinking about a visual presentation on a page. If my voice isn't there, how can I translate something? Of course, you only have so much control as you do even when you're on stage, but I think for some of us that were maybe came to writing through Spoken Word or through Slam, I never learned about line breaks. I was writing just full paragraphs in a journal. It was a whole other education in performance in its own way, thinking about the way the poem is written on a page and how that affects, how a reader might perceive it.

**Fatimah:** I think also there's a thing about reading poems out loud and you could feel what was working and what wasn't working by doing that. It was kind of an extension of an editing process in a way because you would bring a poem to an open mic or to a show, to a feature, to a high school classroom, and you will hear instantly where the dead space was. You could hear people's attention wavering from your poem if it was not good enough.

You could just catch the natural rhythm of your line, and so much like I think in the-- Is it the Art of the Line that there's this really beautiful Graywolf series, I think in the Art of the Poetic Line. The line is like an extension of breath. It's like the idea, like this is what your training the reader a little bit for the breath, which is I think a really beautiful mediation on breathwork, on poetry, on presence, and on some of what we do when we think about the line.

For me, I think there was also this thing where I, at the time when I wrote my first poetry collection, I was a teaching artist, and I worked in high schools in Chicago. I needed poems that kids would listen to without knowing anything about me because no high school motherfucker gives a fuck about your bio. You come in and they're like, "I don't care." They're basically like, "Are you going to entertain me or not, and are you going to hold my attention or not?" For me, there was this thing and they're mean. They're like, "You have a mustache," and I'm like, "I know. Leave me alone." [laughs]

They're so mean and I think that there's this way in which you just got to like roll with the punches. My mustache wasn't lined up, but [laughs] it's okay. You just have to roll with the punches a little bit, and I think that you have to win them over. I think that's the thing is you have to learn how to win them over. For me, I think of myself as I want to get bogged down in an image. I go towards-- I have this tendency to become unintelligible.

I think for me, working in high schools were, and coming up through Spoken Word in a Slam was a real desire, and a real need to become legible, and to become intelligible to so many of my students who I love, and to my family, who I love. To be, I want you to

understand me. How is this an extension of understanding? I think then in terms of crafting the poetry collection as a collection, there was also the idea of how do we create that understanding on a narrative, on a narrative spectrum in a poetic form.

How am I doing something that's building an arc, even if it's not narrative, but building an arc, an emotional arc? An arc where one poem forms the other, where you're learning as you're growing and I'm winning you over or bringing you in little by a little bit. Then, I'm able to earn my right to do weird shit as the book progresses.

To me, I think those were where I saw a lot of those overlaps and then able to bring in poems that I don't normally read out loud and bring them into the poetry book in a way that was like, "Cool, this is going to be in here," and earn that right a little bit by what they were sandwiched by, and I was giving the reader.

**Nate:** Thank you for that. I'm thinking now about some of the things that you were just saying, Fati, about the poetic line in this notion of the line as analogous with breath, and then Olivia, you spoke to this as well. When you were talking about the line break is being something that when you come up in this oral tradition, like that's not a thing that you necessarily have a relationship to. At least as the "line". Certainly, you have a relationship to the breath or to like a statement or to an image or what have you.

I guess to that point, then when you move to the page, when you move to producing books, whether they'd be books of poems or novels because at least two of you all have novels that are forthcoming, which we're very excited about. Does that thing of the breath still take place? Also, I guess, what does the page open up for you? What can you do on the page that is either impossible or more difficult for you to do in performance?

**Olivia:** I think that I had this, there was something at first that felt really restrictive about the page, but as I started working on the page more and moved further, not further from Spoken Word, but further from Slam, which are obviously very different things. I found such freedom in not having to write strategically or write within these strange, arbitrary ideas. Like, is this a three-minute-long poem?

There was this way that I just felt a freedom to write, to let stories be as brief as they needed to be, to let stories be as a thing that people can sit with versus something that is being used in a competition or as some currency. I think Slam specifically is like taught me so much and I'm so indebted to, but it was just so freeing to-- I realized how many stories. Also, there's a really loud Harley-Davidson outside of my house. I don't know if you can hear it, that person clearly has a huge cock.

Anyway, I realized how many stories I had, not been telling because they weren't something I could put into a three-minute-long Slam poem. Yes, I lost my train of thought because of the Harley, but that's it for now.

**Danez:** I love those thoughts, Olivia. When you were talking before, I was thinking about a professor of mine in college, who was the first one to point the difference between page and

stage for me. He's like, "Your poems are only going to be good when you're around to read them," and that fucked me up because I was like, "Maybe they're not." I think what we have that transfers well to the page, Nate, is a sense of, and Fati, I think spoke to this, but a sense of just emotionality, and really what I'm thinking about is duende of like, "We know--"

With practice on the stage, you write a line and there are certain lines that are not that tight, but if you say it well enough, people will like it, but then you know instinctually after a while be in Spoken Word and Slam when you write something you're like, "That's going to make the people go fucking crazy." That sense of moving a crowd and which comes learning that immediate response that comes with performance. That, I think transfers well to the page.

There is a sense that I feel bad for people who just write on their own or just without an audience, and then just start sending their out into the world. How do you ever know if you move somebody? I think that was a big trust that like, "Okay, I know how to make somebody feel a thing." I think what pays off more on the page is that there's a different, certain emotions have certain currencies in performance. I think there's a type of quietness that sometimes is better articulated on the page or in performance that is lengthy.

I think it's also thinking about how long, but I don't know how poems get longer, maybe they approach drama, you can do other things that you can't trust within the confines of what is typically Spoken Word and Slam. There's other types of sentences that you can do on the page, too. I think that was a frustration with Slam or with Spoken Word, in general, is that sometimes there's really creative writers who just the way they play with language isn't rewarded on the first listen. There's something about the static pace of the page that somebody can continue to look at.

I think Olivia was talking to this, that is different just like that one time through listening thing, and so you're able, still with arms with that ability to move somebody, now you're able to play in language in a different way, and able to trust that your reader is listening to things going on in the room that they're focused, that they have an attention there as well. Yes, that's what I'm thinking about in terms of the page stage thing.

**Fatimah:** Yes. I really love both those thoughts, Olivia and Danez. I really agree, and I think that thing of when you're rewarded on the multiple read, I love that thought you were saying Danez about, and there's poems I return to, and I reread, and I get something new every single time I reread them. There's the poetic forms that people use, the way that people do things, and I think that they're secrets, and they're preserved secrets that you get to go back to and you get to enjoy.

There's things about, I think that I can be a visual writer in the way that I approach the page and I do form play on in poetry. To me, there is something about the page that can hold something that is different and can be enacted in performance, but that is its own

rendering of that. I think about, for example, this is true for screenwriting, which is, I think a form that pretty much everyone in this group right now, the four of us all do, but when you write, and this was the biggest mind thought when I first started for me, screenwriting was I was like, "Oh, the thing you write, it's the blueprint." It's not the thing, you write the thing, you put all your effort in, you do all of the stuff, but it's not actually the thing and it changes so much.

Then, the directing happens and then there's pre-production and that's one thing, one movie, one vision of the movie production, which is another vision of the movie, and then editing which is the final vision. There's this element that I was like, "That, to me, feels very similar to performance." It's like you write the thing, how we write it like Olivia was saying like, "Oh, I wrote it in my journal, like a paragraph chunk," and then how you perform it every single time gives a new life, a new memory to it, a new texture, and ability for it.

I think it's like the blueprint a little bit. How do you have the blueprint, also be in its own integrity? How do you have it be both a blueprint and in its own integrity? I think about the-- if you guys ever get the chance to see the screenplay for *A Quiet Place*, it's so fascinating because it's really its own-- it's like a blueprint but that whole movie's ain't nobody say shit that whole movie. [laughs] The way that the movie is and the pacing is and how it is, it's a visual document as much as it is a movie.

I think that that's the blueprint that'll allow that thing happen. It's a really amazing study on what something on the page can look like in a different form. Sorry, I've been talking so much, but I think about Ilya Kaminsky, who's an incredible poet and on the page, it's so stunning, and then hearing Ilya read is like its own spiritual experience. It is so deeply profound. The first time I ever heard Ilya read, me and Danez were sitting there to each other and we both just like wet for like-- I was not prepared for that.

Ilya's poems are incredible and they cannot capture what Ilya reads like. It's not the same thing and so to allow both of those things, to have their separate integrity, I think is so important because I think all of that, they are their own mediums. They are their own integrities and they inform each other, but they are distinct in that way.

**Nate:** Yes. Thank you for that. I've been writing notes and I have a lot to think about, but I do want to maybe just ask a couple of direct questions to each of you. Olivia, I read both your books, both the books of poems, *Life of the Party* and *New American Best Friend*, and they certainly feel to me like two complete collections, but they certainly bear some relationship to each other. They do have a shared DNA. I'm just curious, did that process feel--? Did it feel discreet?

Like, "Oh, I am working on this book and now I'm working on this book," or was it a little more blurry than that? Also, now you have this forthcoming novel, so what has that process been like in relationship to those two?

**Olivia:** Thank you for reading my books. I think at the time, I don't know if it's this one anymore, but at the time, there was a lot of distinction. When I wrote *New American Best*



Friend, there was a lot of distinction between the chapbook and the full length that was like a thing. I guess New American Best Friend is a chapbook and so I remember feeling like there was this having a personal anticipation for the day I would have written a full-length collection. In some ways, New American Best Friend feels like a younger sister or something to Life of the Party.

I think there's ways that New American Best Friend has a certain innocence to it. I think I had just like lived less when I'd written that book. By the time Life of the Party happened, I hadn't just experienced more, but I was also just at a more advanced stage in processing my own life. Life of the Party, I think even now, I'm very proud of that book and both of those books, but it's funny because I go through phases where I identify with one more. I identify with New American Best Friend a lot more in my life right now than I do with Life of the Party.

Maybe that's because I'm on Zoloft. I'm not sure, but it changes, but I think with fiction, and I'm really curious to hear how you've navigated writing in novel, Fatimah, because I feel like I just both have utilized the skills that I've gained from poetry, but I also feel like I had to learn how to write again. I had to learn all the rules to this entirely new craft. It's the hardest thing I've ever done. Partially, just because there's so many words. There's just so many words. There's just simply so many words.

I think it's becoming really clear to me that certain stories, whether they're fictional or not, I think beg for a specific form and sometimes they can live in multiple forms, but I do feel like the New American Best Friend and Life of the Party were both the memories that I needed to tell us poems, and the novel feels like an investigation and a meditation that I needed to tell in a longer form. Then screenplay is as Fatimah said is it's this whole other thing that's ultimately really collaborative, which writing a novel or writing poetry is not.

Luckily, with poetry, if you come up in Spoken Word, you do have experience with collaboration on Slam teams. It's just wild how vastly different they all feel. I think with the two collections of poetry, it's an interesting relationship to now be safe behind the door of fiction. I feel so exposed looking back at my collections of poems and feel like, "Oh my God, I can't believe that is all out there." I think New American Best Friend and Life of the Party didn't feel too big of a jump. They did feel like a pretty easy transition.

It was the jump between genres that felt like, "Holy fuck, this is a whole new ball game and I'm a terrible writer," which is not true, but feels true when you've been doing poems for so long.

**Nate:** I feel like to your point, when you start to write fiction after having such a home in poetry, and I think this tradition of Spoken Word, which often demands an eye narrator that is very close to one's self, if not just indistinguishable from oneself, when you make that transition to fiction, you're like, "Yo, I was really just out here snitching on me. Why am I out here telling on me when I could talk about my character?" Fati, I'm curious if you

have thoughts about this transition between genres that Olivia posed, but then also, you're stepping into a new genre, so what's exciting for you there?

**Fatimah:** Yes, I was thinking about what you're saying about like I'm stitching on myself in poetry. I feel like I'm stitching on myself by being an artist. It doesn't matter if it's fiction or not. It's just like, there's such deep things that these things touch on, and there's a real vulnerability in the process of excavation. There's a vulnerability in being able to say like this is-- even if this is a character, it's a character that came from my mind and it's been with me. Now, I'm showing you this person, making their mistakes, and tracking their life everywhere.

I think that's something I've been thinking about is genre as relationship. When I think about that, I think about the fact that I've been in relationship with poetry for 10 to 12 years, and so that is a different tenor. There's a different tenor in that relationship, there's moments where I'm just like, "I need some space from you," or like, "We're not fucking right now and you need to be in therapy," because that's like, there's some shit. My relationship to the genre of screenwriting is five years. My relationship, so poly. It's wild how poly my life is on real level. [laughs]

My relationship to directing is about three years old, and my relationship to fiction is about three to four. These are all long-term relationships. They're very long-term investments. I'm with them every day, I'm in this engagement every day, I'm in it, and yet, there's still newnesses and there's differences and there's things like that. Thinking about the both and when I first started writing for screen, I kept being like, "Well, it's just writing. They are both writing and there is the truth in that, and then there's also the vast difference of what it means to not be."

Yet, even when I write a poem, every time I come to the page, I'm startled with the feeling of, "I don't know how to write a poem." I'm just startled in the honest of not knowing and that thing of like, "This could be a failure. This could not work." I think I feel that way with pretty much all of the genres and with fiction in particular. I think that sometimes for me a poem, I can feel if a thing is a poem or wants to be a poem. If it feels like it's a slowing down of a moment, if it's like a thing that is a singular moment or feeling that I can really slow down and be in and luxuriate in. When something is--

Because I also still think my poems are very investigative. I think the book, my book, if they come for us presenting a very deep investigation of generational trauma and history and the way that that manifests, I could feel it physically manifesting in my body without fully the language, and then started to touch on what is this pain. Then that pain started to come out in different-- Thank you, Nate. Started to come out in different poems and in that very deep historical interrogation.

I think the same thing though about screenwriting and I think the same thing about fiction. This book of fiction that I'm going to release in the world feels very vulnerable to me. It's a very, very vulnerable book, and it's vulnerable for several levels. It's vulnerable because

it's a newer genre to me, and so I feel new with it. I feel there's that kind of, "Oh my God, I'm putting out something that I don't have a very long backing in and I don't have a very big community in." This is the thing that I've been writing and it's personal, so even though it's fiction, and so it feels-- It's a lot about an interrogation of orphanhood, and it's really interrogative in that way.

I think with fiction and screenwriting, there's elements of narrative that you don't have to contain in poetry. In poetry, you can have one-off, so you can have a project but you could also not. I think with fiction, there's those things of like, if you make an edit in the beginning of the book, it ripples through the whole book. If you make an edit in screenwriting in page 5, it ripples. That's even harder when you're writing a TV show and you're going across multiple genres. I cannot tell you the amount of times I was in a writer's room and we would change something about the pilot and inevitably, the entire thing would change.

It would seem like an innocuous change in the beginning, and then you were like, "Oh, it ripples, it ripples, it ripples, it ripples." That kind of tracking is not necessarily something that you have to do when you're creating a poetry collection, even though there's a different kind of tracking. I think for me, that there's some of that. The genres lend themselves to requiring different parts of your mind, especially when you're harnessing a narrative project that's over multiple pages, when you're harnessing a narrative project that's over 300 pages of fiction, when you're harnessing a narrative project that's over 60 pages of screenwriting over X amount of episodes, you're really getting into something that's a little bit different and you're spending more time with character and character arc.

Whereas, in the poetries can be so much about the interior, even though it's also about the world. There's characters in your poems and there's personas, but it's not necessarily the same thing as that long-form tracking.

**Nate:** Yes, it makes me think about almost the way that different kinds of travel functions. If you have a train, you can take out a cart, put it somewhere else. More or less like, if it has fuel, it'll run. It'll go down the track, but you can't take off the wing of a plane and starts to-- It feels like the long-form thing is more the plank, where the whole thing is dependent on the whole thing in this way.

Danez, I was thinking about this most recent book, *Homie*, which is such a book, [laughs] especially considering this thing that Fati was saying of genres or as relationship. This really is a book of relationship. It is a book that is the chock full of that. I'm curious, what relationships shape how you come to the page, to write, to edit? Or said another way, who are the homies that populate your world when you step towards the page, whether they're real, or imagined, or historical folks, ancestors? Who are those people, and what are those conversations like internally?

**Danez:** Word. I think there's a couple of folks that come immediately to mind. One is my workshop groups from Cave Canem because I think I've learned-- That was just one of the most foundational-- Not foundational because I've been writing for a little bit, but just the

most-- Every time I went to Cave Canem, I felt like my work increased and pivoted, or focused, and I had a greater control over what or better good articulation of what I was trying to do, which let me also try more things.

I think the amalgamation of all those voices just sounds like Airea D. Matthews. Brilliant poet. Let me close this. There's a couple of [unintelligible 00:56:44] Airea D. Matthews is the voice of Cave Canem in my head. Also, the Dark Noise Collective, which Fati and Nate are in. I think just having grown for the last 10 years with y'all, I think there is a like, "Would this make Nate chuckle? Would this make Franny laugh?" Those kind of questions pop up in-- Or Franny cry. I would admit, yes. I was about to say no, not chuckle. Franny cries when I read things. [laughs] I felt away. If I read a poem that I thought somebody should cry, and Franny didn't, I will sit there and work on that. Cool. [laughs]

Other folks and voices, I think they're very real folks. I think about my mom who reads my work. I think about my uncle who reads my work and will call me and ask about every confusing line, "What did you mean by this?" Or asking about the story behind the line. I think about my friend Josh, who doesn't read poetry, but I think about, would this move him? I think about my friend Blair who hates poetry. It means a lot if Blair's like, "I hate poems, but I like that one." Those are, I think it's very real. I think at this stage, there's also the babies that I think about, just younger writers and readers, and how they will be affected. Or, what sort of information and things that they glean from it.

I have to shut those voices out at some point too. I think it helps sometimes to keep the work and the questions super personal in mind. Then I think there are several stages in the process of editing something where I need to open up to the room. It's coming back to the stage. I think features still feel useful or reading still feel useful, because I work on the thing for my own, and then it will be like, "Oh, it's time to read this in front of somebody still, and see what that is like so I can get information to bring it back to my own, and crawl into a hole, and be a moment, and work on poems." Why did I say that long thing? I don't know, but that's what it feels like.

I don't know if there's a conversation that I'm having, unless explicitly for that project with ancestors and stuff like that, or influences. I think right now, I'm working on turning a poem into a stage production. There's a certain album by Earth, Wind & Fire, that's really speaking to me. I think there are-- I don't really know if I'm speaking across time backwards. I think I take these influences for what they are, I sample things, I do all this, but I feel like the echo that I'm more trying to listen to is between myself in the now or myself in the future, and while the past, I think holds information and influence. I don't know if I'm trying to talk to Baldwin because he did, but I might-- [laughs]

Not to say that very much alive and I think ancestor shit is real, but I think where the urgency of the past lives in how it is, for me, how it is applicable to the now in the future. I feel like I'm listening to the past, but I'm trying to talk forward in terms of these conversations that I've used in my head.

**Nate:** Yes. No, I love that. You said this thing, Danez, about finding features useful because of information and you used this word information which is a thing I've been thinking about. One of the things that strikes me about, I guess, spoken word or just like the oral act of presenting poetry in this way, is that the information you get from an audience, at least some of it, is so immediate and that being a real feature of it.

I'm curious for all of you all, because you all have written and will continue to write across multiple genres. You also, two of you, have hosted podcasts and presented in all these different ways. What's the difference? What do you find is the difference in those audiences or the relationship that you maybe have with them as a creator? Yes, is there a difference? Is it just the same people just like, "They rock with me so they rock with me"? Does that feel different? Do those relationships feel different?

**Fatimah:** I feel like they feel different. I think film feels different than poetry to me. I think that there are folks who come to both of those things, poetry and film, but there's a way in which that film has a way of spreading faster. There's an accessibility that it has, the moving in image, the ability to do it or watch it, engage with it and not have to slow down your day. Like you can put something on in the background. It just has a way that it moves a little faster. Even though I think that there are, especially with social media, there's a way that small snippets of poetry do too, but there does feel like there's slightly different audiences or slightly different engagements with the genres, I think.

I think that's a good thing. Something I've been thinking about is, you know how there's sometimes this rhetoric of retaining an audience or retaining the readership? I just don't think that's true. I think that you put art out into the world, and it vibrates with and resonates with who it resonates with. Being, even as a creator, less interested in retaining an audience and being more interested in, what is the project that I deeply wanna tell right now and who will it resonate with? Just trusting that more than-- Because I think that there's real damage that can be done when you're trying to write for an imagined someone without an actual active engagement with them and without allowing them to have their own agency to decide they're interested in it or not. [laughs]

I think that it's that thing of, you're just putting out things that you feel are important, and whoever also feels those things are important, match that. Just having that feel, to me, neutral is more important than this commodification of viewership, or authorship, or audience. That's something that I've just been sitting with, and just being like every single project is at its own unique frequency, and just allowing the truth of that, rather than trying to make that anything other than what it is.

**Olivia:** I really agree with that. I feel like also poetry and film are vastly different audiences for the same reasons you just said, accessibility and just the way people consume, I think that there's a different-- I think there's a different reaction also to film in part because it is so collaborative, and so the person who's positioned to speak for the film is very different than maybe the person who wrote it or all of the people that had a hand in creating it.

This is the longest I've gone in a long time, maybe throughout my career as a writer where I haven't put something out. I, at first really struggled with this fear of irrelevancy and this fear of like, "Oh, if I'm not putting things out, who will remember me?" Now, luckily, it's actually quite nice to form a really strong relationship with my work. Like you said, Fati, know that when I put it out there, it will resonate with who it resonates with. It's nice to see what small crowd travels along with your work. It's nice to see familiar faces, names, but it's also really empowering to just follow your work first and follow the story, and then see it find its way into the hands of new people.

Also, I think a lot about readers, especially aging up. I don't know about you all, but I've seen some readers grow up. People I met at shows years ago when they were middle school students, are now doing things on Instagram I don't want to see. It's like, "Whoa." Then, becoming incredible writers or just becoming their own people and feeling more like peers in this way. It's just wild how your work grows with people and how committing to being a writer is, my friend Jeremy always says, it's committing to growing in public. In that way, it's a really fascinating relationship to have with a readership, like, "Wow, I'm watching you grow, but you're also watching me speak really sternly about things that then are subject to change."

**Danez:** I don't know. I'm just a poet, so I don't got no-- [unintelligible 01:08:06] [crosstalk]

**Nate:** That's not true.

**Danez:** I identify as a poet and-- [crosstalk]

**Fatimah:** Bitch, we all identify as a poet. [chuckles]

**Nate:** Yes, [unintelligible 01:08:14] come on.

**Danez:** Y'all niggers be doing the other shits, and I have a screenplay, is it going be on screen? No time fucking soon. [laughs] As a poet, as the most solo genre nigger here, I don't know, I'm thinking about this relationship between the audience, because I think what I was talking about before, the information you get from live performance, I think that also has a caveat or an asterisk that like, I'm probably, I am very conservative, definitely pivoting to libertarian who sometimes votes Republican by the time I'm 50. Nationally, in my local elections, I'll still vote liberal. I got feelings about taxes. [laughs]

**Nate:** Bro, It's almost tax day, everyone has feelings about taxes. [chuckles]

**Danez:** Look, and sometimes I'm like, hey, I love the fact that I can like possibly marry my boo one day, but he could definitely be my life partner for as long as we can pocket a little bit amount of this money. [laughs] Business decisions. No, I'm just playing, I would never vote Republican. What was I talking about? Audiences.

**Fatimah:** [laughs]

**Danez:** I think you only, I don't know about y'all, but I feel like whether it's like happy, sad, cry, whatever, there is a particular forethought that I'm putting into what work I'm bring in front of an audience. Maybe I want them to be silent, maybe I want them to be uncomfortable, and it's still a type of work that I'm asking them to elicit a response if I'm bringing it in front of them. I guess what I'm saying is, I can't trust that audience for much. [laughs] I can't actually bring them things that are maybe more confusing or more about-- I don't know what the fuck I'm trying to say. I think what I'm trying to say is maybe the way I bow to performance, actually hinders how I can trust that audience to that relationship because I'm actually bowing to them a little bit in the curation of those poems.

The only thing I can trust is that the poems that I've designed to elicit something if they don't respond and they're not doing what they do, but I think I can't trust that relationship across every project. Especially as y'all are talking about as you grow, I feel a pressure. I'm glad even though I write, I think young people as a part of the audience that's in my brain. I'm not a YA author. I'm not trying to be out here writing for kids because I think that does require you, one, it requires a particular type of intelligence. I think there are people that do it really well and can care and tender to that relationship with doing literature and art for children.

Also, I need the freedom to write these very 33-year-old poems. That's also a type of poem that I'm probably not going to bring to the high school because it will relate to the teachers more than them. Because of my own curiosities, my own things, I become maybe an unreliable spokesperson for these audiences that maybe have attached themselves to me. I believe you get to ask your audience to ride with you. I don't need everybody that likes me now to like every project. I have that relationship. I love Beyonce, I'm like in her top 5% of fans. Do I like every Beyonce album? No, but when she releases a song that I don't like, am I like, "Never again"? No.

You have to leave your artist freedom to do what they need. I think that's a thing for an audience too. Just because you're somebody's reader-- That can be really intimate relationship. I feel a deep relationship with folks that I read, but I also have to remind myself that I can't feel betrayed if they do something that I don't like because that's the energy that we're saying they had to get out at the time.

You also find new audiences. I think that's the thing with readership too, like maybe there is somebody that wasn't going to be your fan from the start, but your fourth, fifth book, whatever new project you do, that hooks them in. At the end of the day, I think it is just about the relationship between you and yourself as an artist. If you move yourself, other people might be moved. If you excite yourself, other people might be excited. If you think it's crap, other people will probably going to think it's crap. I think audiences, they can be everything. It depends on the work too. Sometimes we really do write shit for people and sometimes fuck them. It's a wishy-washy relationship.

I think, sure, if you want that information, then I think that also becomes about mission. What am I trying to get people to do and react with? Maybe the work has a deeper choice,

but some shit is just out there for folks to feel. I don't know. This is information for the next project. If you try to write some healing and nobody comes to you and say that they were healed, back to the drawing board, right? [laughs] That's information. If you wrote a beautiful poem about your grandma and everybody's like, "That was a tight poem about a shoe," you need to go write about your grandma again. That was a very weird analogy, but it happens.

**Nate:** Sorry to all the grandmothers. [laughs]

**Fatimah:** Public apology to grandmothers everywhere.

**Danez:** I'm thinking about grandmas. I think about that one time a White poet put my grandma in a poem that they wrote. It had my grandma walking across dead bodies to march and sing with Dr. Martin Luther King, and that was a real poem that got published on a real website. Let me tell you, the information I gave them back was not what they thought what they were going to get. That was-- [laughs] [crosstalk]

**Olivia:** You get too familiar.

**Danez:** Yes, too familiar, but also, I don't know, maybe that's another thing is like audiences, they'll fuck you up too and tell you when you did a bad thing. I don't know, what are we talking about? I don't even remember what the original question was. I'm just going to stop talking.

**Nate:** [laughs] Excellent. Wonderful. I think we're at about the time where it makes sense for us to transition to some audience questions, and we have two. If you have some other questions, then please send them in and we'll try to get to as many as we can. I'll start with this one that was one of the first ones to come in. Kyla writes, "I really believed in myself. I wrote until my arms gave out, but as time passed, I stopped. I'm having a hard time getting back into poetry. That once sweet, safe vulnerability feels off. What advice do you all have?"

**Fatimah:** Honestly, I think my advice is not going to be the fun advice, but it's [unintelligible 01:16:20]. [laughs] I think that if poetry is showing you that it's not-- Don't force the thing. If it's telling you right now that something feels off, it's not the mode, it's not the genre, I think that's valuable information. There are other genres that you can write in, there are other things that you can do. If you continue to try to force something when there's a little bit of a burnout, that's going to make the burnout worse.

My advice would be to replenish the well and to just-- I think about that from the artist's way a lot is like, sometimes you're in really deep burnout and we've gone through a ridiculous lifetime, let alone the last few years, and so if you're like, "I'm having a hard time being vulnerable, I'm having a hard time accessing vulnerability, I'm having a hard time accessing poetry," that's okay. You can be like, do you still love reading it? Do you still love being around it? Then that's information. If you're like, "I can't even read this. I don't like being around it at all." I would say, find the other genre. Find the thing that allows you to do the thing.



There's so many writers I know who-- I think about someone like [unintelligible 01:17:33] who was a music journalist and then did poetry and essays, and then went back to music journalism. Had sworn off music journalism a little bit and then went back. I think that there's these genres, these things, they reveal themselves to you in ways that are really beautiful if you allow for that to be a listening, versus you try to impose a will on top of it.

I would just say to try to think about if poetry is not offering you vulnerability, what is? Follow the what is. If you need to live a little, if you're like, "I need to cook, I need to be with a lover, I need to whatever. I need to live a little bit in order to access that vulnerability," then go do that. There's so much poetry that is not just about writing, and you can go and explore that in so many different ways

**Danez:** I want to just ping The Artist's Way which Fati just mentioned, which is a phenomenal workbook that you can do. I find it to be really recharging if you're trying to heal your artistic practice. That might just be something to check out and see if it's for you. I think maybe the word vulnerability is always really charged for me, and so I'm wondering-- I think the advice of going to where you can do the vulnerable was great.

I think also if you do want to write poems, I guess my question is, do they need to be vulnerable? At this point in time, I guess if your writing was very personal or confessional in a way, there might be a reason why. Maybe you don't feel safe enough to do that, but do you feel safe enough to play in the genre? Can you write about in persona or using personification? Or, does it have to be you, or does it have to make sense? Can you delight in the language for a little bit?

I think that was a term for me at one point in time just in terms of poetry practice, where I think I had gone to poetry for such cathartic or inspired reasons so often, that I also needed to form a relationship with poetry, the language that didn't require some type of emotional or experiential toll for me to enter, that I was just going in it for the delight of language and to experiment with sound, to just experiment with words and language.

That was very different than having to be like, "Okay, now I have to say something about myself," or "I went through this thing and I want to capture it." Or "I'm inspired and so I must something." Maybe this is a chance to pivot and not just ask yourself, what is your relationship to the word, to the sentence? Does that bring you a particular joy or presence or good busyness that you feel like is worth your time? If it does, it have to always just be you and your vulnerability,

**Olivia:** I have nothing new to add. I agree with both.

**Nate:** Yes, we don't all have to answer all of these questions. I guess I'll move to another one so we can try to at least get these last two in. Ty writes, "My experience with writing and progressing as a poet has been a series of ascensions and plateaus. I'm curious what y'all have done in moments when your craft wasn't actively improving or growth felt more difficult? How were you intentional about challenging yourself or thinking differently?"

**Fatimah:** I think that's so natural. It's just such a natural thing to feel like you're trying, and it's not really going anywhere or you're not growing in the way that you want to, or you feel like there's a low going on. I think that is just so normal. I think the more that you can normalize that, the better. Sometimes you need that stagnation to have the breakthrough and you need that space of like, "Ugh, it's not really working." It's really painful and it's really uncomfortable, but there's nothing that you can do other than go through the pain and the uncomfortability of it. [laughs]

It's the same thing, I think, with any dark night of the soul, of that's for you spiritually or anything, you just got to go through it and you have to listen. You have to learn how to listen to what it's telling you, and to know that that's not linear, to know that that's not going to just reveal itself to you. I would say, you could read, you can do things at The Artist's Way, you can meditate. If you're like there's other things that you can try to do to allow for more opening for you, but sometimes you just got to go through it, and you got to be able to hold the uncomfortability. You cry, you call your friends, you're like, "Am I a failure?" You do all of that. You're told, "No, it's fine. It's normal." Then you just keep writing until you do feel like you grow.

**Olivia:** Part of listening like you said is, I think that that's a real opportunity to consume. I think reading is one of the most productive things you can do when you're not happy with your own writing. Also, watching films, going on excursions to learn about elements of history that you're fascinated. I think that it's an opportunity to welcome the work of other people. It doesn't even have to be from a place of looking for inspiration, I think it's just a good way to relieve yourself of yourself for some time. Whenever I just feel really like I'm not having a good writing day, I don't push myself through it, but I do push myself to then go and especially read and watch the work of people who I feel are making work that I admire.

**Danez:** Word. That was all great. Hi, Ty. Ty was just texting me about the blankness of the walls in this Airbnb. Good to see you, Ty. Also, I'm going to talk to Ty a Little personally because I know him. This goes out to anybody out there. I think your answer is literally in the first sentence. It is a series of ascensions and plateaus. That's great. Ascensions and plateaus, no fucking downfalls? Wow. What the? No declines. That sounds great.

I think you have to trust during those moments of plateau, when maybe this anxiousness about not actively growing or improving comes out. I think you have to trust that they are seasons in that it is cyclical. I think that is just a hard trust that you must learn as an artist that it's not always going to be about steady, exponential growth and development, whether in the career or in the artistic practice. I think we beat up on ourselves there, especially, and I think it's real, but especially when you start making money from your art, there's this grind culture, like you always have to be producing because producing literally means food. The bad poems are not food or the bad art is not-- It doesn't feel like it's going to turn into your future.

I think you have to trust that you will get back to it. I think writing is just difficult sometimes. I think bad art-making is fodder for good art making. I think it is important to still find ways to have a practice when you're not doing it. I think folks are saying all the things, you keep writing, you keep reading, you expose yourself to different types of art. You take it in, you keep experimenting you. That's the thing about experiments, they fail and fail and fail, and then you find the one thing that helps it fail a little less or makes it start succeeding.

I think just having that trust that it will keep happening, that you are a good artist, and you are, Ty, that you will find it, that you have the skills and experience to continue to discover it. I think we got to be grateful that like in plateaus are sometimes that you need to chill right or that you need that energy, that your creative energy needs to go towards mental health, needs to go towards food, towards love life and intimacy and friends. That your creative energy needs to go towards money, that it needs to go towards whatever it may be, and so there are times that we're just not going to be actively improving.

I don't know, I have to trust that if I don't write a book for 10 years, I still can, and that the time in between was worth it. I have to trust that my growth does not wither when I'm not actively attending to it, or my artistic spirit. I know that feels hard and it's been hard for me too, but I think the thinking differently, the thing I'd have to think differently about is the fact that it's a long game.

Being a motherfucker that often thought that I was going to die young, I also have to beat up my own mind and trust that unless I die, I will live, and that continues to be true every day. Maybe I just have a long hope that I'm going to get to see 70 or 80, and so I don't need everything to happen. It's okay if 27 was about rest, and if 34 was about attending to family, and if 40 was about changing up whatever what may be. Because there will also be those years that I wrote that great thing, that I really worked hard on that, that I achieved this thing, that the award finally came, that whatever.

I have to trust the long journey of time in my life as an artist that allows every season not to be about discovery and winning, because that's always happening, that discovery, that cataloging right. Experience is useful, but I think we have to learn to trust that it might always not be the easiest thing to chart, and that sometimes we're living too in the moment to be able to see that we're still climbing. Or for us, it feels plateauing, but if you can zoom out in the future and see where you've been, it's going to grow. It's beautiful. It's an arch.

**Fatimah:** I love that answer.

**Nate:** Wonderful. This has been really great. I thank you all so much. Thank you, Fatimah. Thank you, Danez. Thank you, Olivia. This has really been a wonderful conversation. We're nearing the end of our time. I did try to answer some of the questions or just like offer a few thoughts for folks in the Q&A box, but I do want to bring up Aerial Merillat, aorry, I want to make sure I pronounce your name right, PEN/Faulkner's marketing coordinator

for final words. Thank you so much to all of our participants, and to you all the audience, and certainly to PEN/Faulkner for putting this together.

**Aeriel:** Yes, thank you. Thank you so much, Nate, for moderating that conversation so wonderfully, and thank you to our amazing poets for tonight's incredible performances and discussion. What a fun and insightful conversation. Thank you so much for bringing that energy, all of you. A huge thanks to everyone in the audience who came out tonight and engaged with us. If you enjoyed tonight's program, we hope you'll consider making a donation to PEN/Faulkner using the link we'll drop in the chat right now. Any amount you give will help us continue to provide high-quality literary programs like tonight's Literary Conversation, as well as our Education and Awards programs year-round.

You can learn more about PEN/Faulkner's work by visiting our website, [penfaulkner.org](http://penfaulkner.org), and by following us on social media. While this Literary Conversation is the last of our season, what a great way to go out. We still have our Pen/Faulkner virtual award ceremony coming up on May 2nd at 8:00 PM. We'll be honoring our PEN/Faulkner award winner, finalist, and literary champion, Oprah Winfrey. We'd love for you to join us at the ceremony. You can learn more about the event and purchase tickets on our website, and just thank you all again for being part of our literary family. We hope to see you soon. Have a good night. Bye, everyone.

[01:31:14] [END OF AUDIO]