

Light and Darkness in the Magical Gardens: An Interview with Interview with Saba Syed Razvi

By David E. Cowen, Bram Stoker Nominated Author of *Bleeding Saffron* (Weasel Press 2018)

Poet Saba Syed Razvi is a fellow Texan who is currently an Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Houston in Victoria, TX. She earned her Ph.D. in creative writing and literature in 2012 from the University of Southern California. At the 2019 Stokercon in Ann Arbor, Michigan I had the pleasure of listening to her at several panels



and joined in her in a mass poetry reading chaired by Linda Addison. I found her to be incredibly approachable by the other poets at Stokercon. Her enthusiasm for speculative poetry was delightfully refreshing. Dr. Razvi's work is rich in mythology, sexual desire and reflects her the diversity of both her education and her upbringing. Her poems have been nominated for the Best of the Net Award, the

Rhysling Award, and have won a 2015 Independent Best American Poetry Award.

Q: Besides being a Texan you are an Asian American and Muslim American. An article about you noted that you “grew up in Texas attending literary readings, book festivals, museums and *Mushairas*, or poetry readings in the Urdu language, which she describes as the meeting of slam poetry and literary festivals.” Such a richly diverse atmosphere you must live in. How did all of this influence the development of your craft?

A: In short, it gave me opportunity and possibility – a rich playground for the imagination! The longer answer has more to do with how we encounter a sense of place.

Houstonians tend to know and understand the diversity of the city and all it has to offer, but those on the outside seldom know what opportunities await them. Being here, I had a chance to partake in a great deal of that diversity in my own communities and beyond them. I was lucky to be raised in a family and in a community that values artistic expression and creative inquiry. The overlapping spheres through which I learned about the world made for an interesting landscape.

Attending *Mushairas* is definitely a lot like going to slam poetry events – the same boisterous energy and anticipation

fills the crowd and the stage as participants dwell in both areas; sometimes it's like going to a small-venue rock concert or karaoke with a lot of acclaimed artists showcasing their talents – often, the poems are sung or performed alongside music. It definitely showed me how delightful poetry can be, how much space there is for joy as well as sorrow. Of course, there is no shortage of depth or philosophical inquiry or spiritual ecstasy in Urdu poetry or Qawwali, and ghazals have shown me the range possible for emotional expression, the power of vulnerability and the allure of skillful use of constraint and form. That being said, English is my first language, so being able to participate in a world of Urdu poetry also conditioned me to appreciate mystery and the unknown – as there were many words and references I just didn't know as a young person that I had to look up later or ask my parents to explain! I've always been drawn to the otherworldly in stories and songs, and through these experiences, I learned how to inhabit those elements, how sound and sonic structures can be woven into an atmosphere, how they can invoke something of the self to the tip of the tongue.

Literature, for me, has always been both something of an escape from the trappings of the mundane world and a means by which to shape it. I think literature has been one of the main constants in my life...so, in a way, I think it's just how I navigate the world. And, because I was able to experience many kinds of world cultures through literature,

museums, performances, I have grown to love the many possible approaches to creative expression. My own creative world isn't limited to just one cultural framework, and I feel comfortable exploring a global perspective, even as I gravitate toward a specific kind of mood. I feel comfortable using many paths as I explore the world of my thoughts and the cartomancy of my own imagination, as I consider the experiences I've witnessed or discovered, in the shadows and ruins and also in the gardens and starfields. Creative expression is just a way of being human, and being human is made up of so many fabrics of sound, sensation, emotion...these are echoed in the things we encounter in our formative years and in years during which we are receptive to new experiences.

If you can appreciate diversity and difference, your path between two ideas doesn't have to be limited, and the more you encounter, the more fascination you can indulge. In terms of Horror – diversity done right means that so many more ways to frighten your reader await!

Q: I found several poems of yours that deal with the concept of the reflected self. *In Cacophony of Bells: the Origin of Disquiet* which appeared in your chapbook *Limerence & Lux* (2016) the character Fernando was perhaps stalked and/or haunted by his alter ego in the mirror

*Fernando, the self you see reflected
in the liquor in your glass is not
your self. He follows you, though,
commenting on the silences you resume*

**In the poem *Elemental*, found in your collection
heliophobia (Finishing Line Press) you again refer
to this shadow self in the mirror**

*Women in ancient Rome & in Pompeii
Used obsidian for mirrors*

What they saw as self was shadow

**In *Before the Wedding Party*, also in *heliophobia*, you
again use the mirror as a construct**

*Close of ceremony nearing, and in the mirror coy
between
Them, jasmine-garlanded reflections leave no space*

**Again, in *Blue Girl*, also in *heliophobia*, you reference a
similar archetype**

**When she sees that I see,
she loses a wide laugh. The inside of her mouth is
outside of mine, where I stand before the mirror.**

In an explanatory note to the poem *Mirror Lake in Carlsbad Caverns Quivers Like a Scrying Glass Speaking*, which appeared in your collection *In the Crocodile Gardens* (Agape Editions) you noted

Artworks of Arabic Calligraphy also utilized mirror writing in conjunction with palindromic ornamentation and geometric patterning.

The concept of the other self in the mirror is certainly old and fascinating. I recall sitting at the barber shop as a child looking at the seemingly infinite reflections of myself in the mirrors in front and behind me while I sat. Part of me always looked to see if by some chance one of the reflections would move differently from the other. What draws you to this poetical device?

A: One of the things I'm most fascinated by is the way in which we see ourselves and how that is often so different from how others see us. In our society, we have many disorders relating to appearance and also control, and I think these tie into our senses of agency and power. After all, we do not have the power to shape another's perception of ourselves, only the option of influencing it. And so, any engagement with another or with a double is a relinquishment of singularity of self. It is both comforting and terrifying to think of how completely we can be ourselves and still not be seen. At the same time, how

people perceive us has a lot to do with the power we might wield or the opportunities we might find to live ourselves authentically. Because I am so often thinking about how we know a thing, define a thing, see a thing, I can't help but imagine what it looks like from the outside and where that diverges from the interior.

In “Cacophony of Bells”, I was thinking about the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa. He wrote so prolifically, but he never confined himself to one kind of writing or one kind of self. In fact, he wrote under about 75 different names/identities which he called “heteronyms”. How much life and potential and vitality he must have had! I always found myself intrigued by how richly he developed the lives of this multitude of people or personalities that inhabited the singular body of himself. I think we can be haunted and stalked by all of our unloved potentials, by our regrets and our limitations — and so many of them come to be because we simply don't allow ourselves a full range of experience or expression, often because of perception or social interpretation. In a way, I felt that Pessoa must have been both freed and trapped by all of this fracturing of the self, and yet I think that many of us can relate to that sense of potential.

Nowhere is that tension between self and other as apparent as in conversations about beauty or purity. “Elemental” engages these notions of how we see and align

ourselves. Every mirror distorts something of who we are and what we demonstrate. We see in social media that tension between the artifice of lived and exhibited experience, and even incredibly jubilant and extroverted timelines or media streams can be hiding real depression or suffering sometimes, while overtly emotional ones might be masking a myriad of joys. How we represent ourselves sometimes determines what possibilities we allow for ourselves. The shadow self will find a way to be expressed, if it isn't incorporated into the immediacy of lived experience — and I find that worth considering.

Sometimes life feels like puzzle lived between the words we use for our everyday lives and the words we use for our most sacred experiences. Somewhere between those various words are the patterns that make up the individual psyche, the specific aspects of delight or disgust, the notions of desire as well as boredom. So I suppose that what draws me into this device is maybe...a sense that the worlds we bring into being are in some ways a reflection of who we are in a moment, how we handle who that is in the pattern of moments.

I love the image you've shared of the infinite selves. I am equally entranced by the notion of watching for the one errant self that does a different thing to escape as I am the notion of an infinite number of selves doing different

things while searching for one that might reflect back a sense of sameness or belonging.

I think that maybe one of my deepest fascinations and obsessions is that of the reflected or refracted self. Light and energy are refracted as they make up our world, and we perceive the world through those intersections, too. When a reflection is truly the same and not just mimicry, there is a sense of belonging or harmony, and I guess...that is something I look for in the space between the words we say and the words we understand. Something between simulacra and signifier, between what we know and how we come to know it, is evident in the way we identify what it is we believe we know. These concepts extend into how we stand in societies or partnerships, in allegiances with ourselves, and in building patterns of expression in which to hide as well as to shine.

The beauty of chirality is also one of a chaotic refusal to define order as a sameness. The notion of balance is something we carry in both words and in poetic structure, so I am really drawn to those kinds of patterns that invoke our senses of awareness, harmony, dissonance, expression, and being. In my poems, I think I find a sanctuary in which I can explore them without consequence.

Among the scariest of feelings is that of facing yourself in a mirror late or lost in a dark mood and being unable to reconcile that self with what we identify as the self. We get

lost in the world, and in what we think we should be, what others see as well as what we expect that we must demonstrate to them. And so, mirrors and reflections hold a great deal of interest for me. Through every reflection, the Looking Glass world calls us to an inverted sense of logic, and the scrying glass into a world of phantoms, and even what we think of as accurate will distort what we share of ourselves by turning it upon us -- so many places for our inner demons to hide!

Q: A great number of your poems allude to mythological and sexual themes. There are magical gardens (“*Night---swallow me into your garden/of corpses*” and “*Someone once said / that in Death’s garden all the flowers are blue*”), allusions to Persephone and Leda, with references to both Christian and Muslim archetypes. The astral quality of these poems is almost intoxicating to read. The interplay of these themes seems to be pivotal in much of your writing. Why did you choose these themes for many of your works?

A: Like the affectations of the heart, the psyche finds fascination in unique and subjective experiences. No two people will react the same exact way to any one thing, but the context surrounding any stimulus will give it meaning. The realm of mythology is a plane on which realities are distilled beyond the mundane of every day routine to the

exhilarating rush of the unknown. This plane intersects with the heart's landscapes and valleys, the mind's caverns and caves, and brings us nothing less than a visceral response when all the right elements align. Living is a love affair with death, and dying is a war with desire. We feel things, cultivate them, kill them, pluck them, savor watching the ideas blossom into fruit, only to pull them from some vine and consume them. Life consumes us, time consumes us, effort consumes us. If we are not intoxicated by living out these moments that are truly real, then we are missing a chance to blossom in spirit and in solidarity with all alive things. It some of this that I hope to capture and play out on the page in my poems. Maybe some of this interest comes from my fascination with Sufism and its mystical approach to reality and our experience of it, or maybe my interest is woven from the manifestation of the creative urge in general.

I think myth is just a longing for life made narrative in bliss and mystery. I think sexual desire is the force of life seeking manifestation. So, this approximation of sexuality and rapture in my poems is sometimes about an annihilation of the ego into a feeling of pure sensation – bliss or terror, surrender or possession. I think of sexuality as rooted in an energetic exchange, one that fuses the mystical, the metaphysical, and the base material of biology. I think of the fiery combustion of those elements as a precursor to an alchemical understanding of our

energies in the plane of existence in the world – and so, sexual desire, as opposed to simply romantic infatuation, with its interest in consumption and annihilation, in erasure of boundaries and impossibly infinite ephemerality, seems very much like the perfect dimension through which to explore that Eros-Thanatos drive that guides us to utterance or fulfillment or quest, or even the surrender into sensations provided by the immersion into some moment of inspiration. There is something of the present moment that demands a return to the creative potential that whirls within us, and sex or myth -- or perhaps the union of the heart and the psyche – is the perfect nexus for the exploration of any truth, vulnerable and unforgiving in the face of a world of obstacle, obfuscation, and oblivion.

It's interesting to me that you've coupled mythology and sexuality together in your question. I suppose those frames of consideration are absolutely central to my work—and I do think they have a lot of overlap. So many myths contain not just mentions of sexuality, but markedly sexual interactions, right? And we also have ways of talking about sex—even in secular societies—where we sort of mythologize it, or its potential to connect us to others and illuminate our worldview. And, after all, sex and storytelling both enact a very intimate kind of energy exchange. They're both sort of tantric acts—or they can be, at least—and vampiric, too, I think. There's this reciprocity, this give-and-take, that's crucial to good sex and to

mythologies that stand the test of time. Every cosmogony orgasms the world into being, every dream and nightmare demands that we profess the truths of our spirits before morning. There is power in that navigation of primordial energy. The dance between reason and madness demands that we embrace something more than the easy or the ordinary in order to revivify the matter from which we find ourselves emerging. More often than not, that power and agency we seek as a tool with which to navigate the madness of primordial passion is rooted creativity and genesis in a way that possesses us to seek sexual intimacy, to create mythologies and/or to participate in them. And I think for these reasons, among others, sexuality and mythology are both portals into dimensions that we choose to enter when we want to seek answers that are ecstatic, that are both physical and metaphysical. They're both involved in keeping the balance between the life-death cycle of the human condition; and, in that, they really do provide some ideal pathways to interrogate what frightens or enlivens us.

What is true is both mantic and manic, and it seeks to surrender itself as much as to seek our own silence. Poetry navigates this dynamic when it invokes the paradigmatic play between life and libido, the divine and the deathless, and sometimes between the refractions of the spirit against its own song. And dwelling in the realm of the imagination is itself a form of astral projection, if we really give in to it,

maybe! In this way, the poems become portals, pathways, places for the real to thrive in a pocket of verse.

Q: As a follow up to the previous question, cliché is certainly the hobgoblin (another cliché of course) of speculative poetry. Your writing is fiercely devoid of cliché. I see it as if you are proudly showing both the reader and other writers, this is how you make something special with your words. What advice can you give the fledging poet on how to use archetypes without resorting to cliché?

A: Firstly, thank you for the kind words! Secondly, the word hobgoblin is just really delightful, anytime it appears! So, I thank you for inviting that sense of playfulness into the inquiry of the somber space of poetic craft.

Any writer who works with the materiality of the literary or artistic traditions worries about treading overly familiar ground, even as they seek to revivify its memory. Maybe that's part of it — being aware of the conversation allows you to participate in it. So, I guess I credit my passion for and education in literature for the rich hues with which I hope to encounter topics in my poetry. That said...archetypes are based in deep motivation and memory, in empathy and longing. Finding a way to reach into the deepest parts of the psyche, facing our demons and

dancing with them, can bring out ideas that resonate like archetypes.

Take, for instance, the ideas of Carl Jung and Marie Louise von Franz on folklore and emotion; they remind us of how expansive and also minute the generative moment of light and dark in the heart can be. In the end, we all feel desire and it compels us — so, the matter that remains is a path or a door or an aperture through which we encounter it. And yet, without the longing or desire itself, there is no walking through the door into experience, into the experience of the poem.

Sometimes we turn to the familiar for reasons rooted in a need to say something about what we experience that transcends us, but also feels inextricably like the core of us. That's the realm of archetype — the face of the mirror in the dark, the door opening on its own in the night, the voice echoing in the mind and from an unseen source — both familiar and strange at once, and in that juxtaposition of intimacy and novelty is what resonates with the other, what invokes the other into the self.

In a practical sense, I think that the image is often the aperture, the point of entry, the way something reaches you. By trying to focus on what reaches and also surprises the other, I think it is possible to live in a world of the familiar without making it seem tired. We reach for the

familiar expressions because we want to connect, but shortcuts take us out of the delight we feel in poems. So, we have to take care to think about why we wanted the familiar as a means to connect, and then...we can make it different, make it strange...

As advice, I'd say...if we think of the sense of the mirror that we just talked about....take the familiar image you seek, and refract it through your own peculiar layers of self. Think of the adage you hope to employ, and ask it what it can offer with a bit of flourish; sometimes, in revision, that seed itself has bloomed into something more specific, more particular, and more aligned with the poet's voice, even as it is haunted by its lexical origins.

Q: You did an extensive interview for Andrea Blythe in 2018 discussing the use of light and darkness and the notion of desire and embodiment in *heliophobia*. Please share your thoughts of the use of these themes in your work.

A: I'll try to talk about those ideas without invoking too much of the interview, so as to afford some novelty here, but I recommend it – as well as Andrea Blythe's work and also your own! From interview questions themselves, I think we can find an inspiring range of considerations that shape how our poems are illuminated by our readers and for ourselves as writers!

So much of our contemporary world is guided by the spectacle. Things are real when we can see them, more easily understood when demonstrated visually. Our devices and entertainment fixate on the look of a thing, on an aesthetics of sight and spectacle to connect to understanding. Sight tends to rely upon light, but...what is obvious and evident seldom holds much appeal for the curious among us. A good horror story or movie tends to create suspense and fear by masking or hiding the sight of the monsters because, once we see them, we are less afraid. A good science fiction story needs the appearance of the technology and the natural world to entice us with obscurity. And, a good work of fantasy knows that the things that are hidden from sight are what send us on quests. For that reason, knowledge and ignorance are inextricably linked to what we can see or what we can't. Of course, an overly simplistic rendition of light as good and dark as bad helps no one. Look at the sun too long, and no good will come of it. Avoiding the dark, often means avoiding rest and rejuvenation for those weary of struggle. As far back as our oldest stories can be found the notion that light and dark are contrasts that stand for any number of things that compel and confound us. Shifting between patterns of light and dark can yield patterns of insight or narrative, a story from still objects. Shifting between sound and silence can yield song and echo that build a melody from a mantra. Knowledge is more alluring when we don't yet have it, and so there is a mystery that comes from the

temptation of a thing we cannot grasp. My interest in using notions of light and dark often have to do with how I see the world essentially, so it isn't much of a surprise that they find their way into my poetic structures, too.

The interplay of light and dark is a reminder of our own tenuous existence. These flashes of dream and reality that make up the fabric of poetry (at least, poetry the way I write it) are pockets of life, and we can only see them by moving between them, limber and lean, lingering or longing, light or lightning in the night. Too much light, and there is no contrast for the making of any shapes of sound or sense. Too much dark, and it is all absorbed and indistinguishable. To make any sense of our impressions, to find any analytical insight in our experiences, we have to navigate both the sensory and the abstract, both the known and the unknown. For me, the interplay between light and dark is about negotiating those textures and finding meaning in the matrix of impressions that we experience.

Magic, adventure, discovery, creation...all need light to transform, reflect, or ignite something beyond the mundane. But the light isn't even noticeable without darkness to bear it into blossoming. What lies between the dark and the light is a rainbow of what we can see and all that we are unwilling to look at. If the domain of poetry demands a noesis beyond the evidence of spectacle, which

I think it does, then an invocation of darkness is an easy way to complicate the consideration of what is before us. My work tends to engage these dualities often -- light and dark, color and its absence, sound and silence, danger and safety...so, these themes of contrast speak for the fabric of the world, make a place for it in a poetic landscape that allows the poem to exist beyond just recounting or representation of experience, allow an experience of poesis to unfold for the reader. The space of ink yields for the space of the page, and vice versa; which one illuminates the world and which relieves its scrutiny, the text or the caesura?

Of course, sometimes the monsters are scarier when they're hiding in plain sight, when the fear is illuminated by a black light lurking beneath the surface of what is apparent. Hide from the monster or flash its face at us and we might just wonder how we invited it into our domain. After all, isn't that what keeps us awake at night at times? Even if we never close our eyes to darkness, the vulnerability will still remain, the shadow in the closet or under the bed with chilly fingers is just as terrifying to the touch as the sight of it is in flashes of light. I don't think we can have one without the other; our eyes adjust as much to the dark as to the light. The dark compresses and the light expands, but the shift from either one to the other bears a fleeting frenzy. It is so with poems, as with life.

Q: I try to ask this of every poet I have interviewed. Poets I have met often fall into two camps. Some claim only to write when inspired. When the moment or the “Muse” takes them. Others, tell me they are methodical, writing every single day for some set time, perhaps even working on a goal of writing so many poems per day or week. I’ve seen some interviews of you where you described a fairly strict writing regime which included trying to record dreams as soon as you have awoken. How do you approach your writing, both in determining what to write about and the form of expression you will choose for your piece?

A: I think that when I’m writing, I feel alive. Anais Nin once said, “we write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospection.” Sometimes, I think that writing allows me to revisit moments that have left a distinct impression upon me, sometimes it’s a chance to rewrite a story or live out an unlived potential. I feel most like myself when I’m writing, even when it’s just journaling. There is something special about putting pen to paper and giving voice a shape, something that feels magical and that invites words that rise up from the ordinary.

Really, every writer has moments in which the words are elusive or inaccessible; despite my interest in jotting down dreams when I wake, my thoughts just before I sleep, or

various ideas or images that strike me throughout the day, I also find myself stuck sometimes. This pandemic has definitely made the world weird, and not in ways that are always easy to make sense of; these kinds of things sometimes quiet the voice, stifle the voice. It can be frustrating, but it's just how it goes. I prefer to make writing just...part of my identity and daily life, rather than to think about how many poems or stories or words I can write in a day. Of course, I try to do the NaNoWriMo word count every year and even the NaPoWriMo poem-a-day challenge when I can, but usually tend to freeze myself up when I think of the finished project instead of just appreciating the journey of getting there. So, I don't think about it terms of word counts, but of time.

So, I guess, in short...I try to write all the time as a way of making space for the Muse, but there are certainly times when the Muse doesn't want to visit and the words feel more like stretching than ballet! I like to take a long time to finish my projects because I like being able to inhabit the world of those words for a long time, letting them take real shape before I let those shapes go out into the world. I guess I am more driven by the process than the product, and I know that some product will eventually emerge if I let myself enjoy the process. Art happens in its own time, but I think we have to be willing to make space for it to happen. If we want to make writing a central part of our lives, then we have to write, which means that we have to cultivate a

relationship with the creative energies that make writing possible. Some people like to binge those moments of life, but others parcel them out. I just like to immerse myself in writing, however I can – notes or ideas, passages or lyrics, scenes or titles – or sometimes just scrawls on the page that build momentum over time. I write much more than I publish, and I write about whatever seizes my attention or my fascination. Sometimes, thinking about an audience can unlock a sense of what to write about, as well as how, but at other times...it's personal and individual. I feel, usually, like everything I am doing is kind of writing...living is an act of writing one's will upon the wall of the world, and reliving it in ink can be a technicolor kind of exciting if we let it.

Q: Another question that I like to ask the academic poets I've interviewed. The focus of this blog is not for poets to describe why they write as much as how to help aspiring poets learn this craft. Poetry is an art and a craft which requires, as the old cliché goes, inspiration and perspiration. To be good a poet must learn the craft of poetry. Being inspired by the "Muse" is good, the poet must still learn how to take that inspiration and create something people will want to read. You are both a teacher and a poet. I have had the pleasure of interviewing poet teachers like Michael Arnzen, Michael R. Collings and Frank Coffman and have asked them about that dual role. Have you used your

poetry to teach? Do you consider yourself a teacher when you compose verse? What advice do you give your students about how to learn the craft of poetry?

A: When I was in graduate school, I had occasion to complete a project that asked me to research the author interviews in *The Paris Review*. I enjoyed the project immensely, and its enjoyment came chiefly from being able to hear about writing and life through writing in the words of so many authors whose works I'd read and appreciated. So, the idea that this blog is meant to reach out to writers seeking engagement with craft that might connect to their own senses of the writing process appeals to me a great deal. I think people should read as many interviews as possible because there is great adventure in that dialogue on the page.

Generally, I really enjoy teaching poetry because it feels like falling in love with its possibilities all over again, each time I get into a lively, passionate discussion about craft or creativity with students. When we teach, we kind of...get to relive the excitement and novelty of the field that propelled us when we were starting out. It's exciting. Of course, it's always different with each class or cohort or individual because the dynamic changes, but I'll think of what I might say broadly to most students.

The advice I'd give my students:

1) Marry the muse! Not literally, of course, if your muse is an actual person, but...dedicate yourself to the art you wish to create. Read everything, reflect, revisit. Talk about it. Think about the theory as well as the art. Live the art. Every writer's relationship with his or her work is a unique one, but they all have something in common: satisfaction in the writing comes from commitment to the process. That is, to find satisfaction in creating poetry, you must be committed to the process of writing it, which involves chasing the lust of inspiration as much as it involves the everyday living of the work itself. The more effort one puts in to a relationship with one's poetry, the greater the likelihood of finding joy in the passion and the hard work of it.

2) Take Risks. Make all the mistakes! Fall over and over again with your words and your lexical, linguistic, syntactic, thematic choices. The scars are full of patterns from which your poetic process will emerge. You'll connect with your voice, and your readers will connect with it, too – if you don't give in to the ordinary, predictable patterns. Readers will forgive a story if it follows a formulaic plot, but they won't forgive a poem if the only pattern they see is the structure of the verse or the words that have already been said. Poetry isn't the place for sitting on the sidelines or making the safe choices; it's about rebelling against the syntax of the world and all its

impositions upon you. The more risks you're willing to take, the more you're willing to fall down, the more you will learn how to stand back up with a flourish – and, in a poem, that pays off!

3) Be Yourself. Mimicry might be a wonderful way to learn how to improve one's poetic moves, but it isn't the way to stand out. It can be compelling to try and make what others before you have made well, but poetry is the playground for the unexpected and the unusual. If poetry is meant to BE an experience rather than just representing one, then speculative poetry must take care to be deliberate and real and vulnerable – and unique, in how it crafts that experience for the reader. Only you can create the world you want us to inhabit, so use your voice to compel us there!

When I teach courses in literature or creative writing, I tend to be spontaneous with my choices of assignment or activity, to use the energy of the space and the audience and the group. I'll compose alongside my students and talk to them about my own sense of process, show them drafts and revisions. I don't assign my own work to my students, though. I think of myself as a medium more than a teacher when I compose, so the best thing I can do for my students is teach them how to focus their individual energies and voices so that they project through a field full of words and thoughts. It feels like invocation or mediumship, like

a dance more than an obstacle course because it means giving in the daunting nature of the task and being vulnerable, even when you don't want to be. I do talk openly and often about how process demands resilience, how success and failure are both fleeting, and about how the acts of crafting poetry and cultivating audience are interrelated. Knowing who you're writing for, and who you're hoping to reach, makes writing feel resonant with purpose.

Finally, I think that every poet must teach himself or herself how to write all over again when beginning a new project. I don't think you ever write the same way twice. Each project has its own rules and circumstances, its own gimmicks and limitations. Every time you sit down to create something new, you have to teach yourself to be patient and candid, how to make a world in which you want to exist. Blow a bubble and then another; no two are alike. So, every poet becomes both a student of the world as it is revealed to himself or herself, and a teacher of the world as it exists in this moment and the next. I think that the biggest mistake any poet can make is to assume he has nothing left to learn. Begin with beginner's mind, and the page comes alive with possibility. Think you know everything, and you'll be making a big slimy mess of your words that no one will want to place on any bookshelf of memory.

Q: I know from poems like *Becoming Prodigal* which appeared in the *Homestead Review* in the summer of 2005 you are certainly adept at non-speculative poetry when you choose to be. But in the academic field how have your peers responded to your focus on the more speculative aspects of your works?

A: I guess I feel lucky to be able to say that I haven't found any resistance to my work or any obstacles in its reception in my academic spheres. My scholarly research work aligns with my creative interests, so it's a natural and easy engagement. My dissertation focused on science fiction and speculative fiction works, primarily the figure of the robot or automaton in literature. And, my interest in expressions of gender, embodiment, and sexuality in literature have drawn upon aspects of theory and literary experimentation. Lately, the work of feminist scholars like Julia Kristeva on abject horror and Helene Cixous on madness, monstrosity, and *écriture féminine* seem to connect myth, alterity, curiosity, and a break from conventional patriarchy in a way that ties right into the speculative dimensions of my creative interests. So, I find that the scholars whose works I've been influenced by recently in my more theoretical inquiries into literature do influence and inspire my creative expression, too. This connection enables my work to fit easily into the academic landscape, as I can focus on both artistic and aesthetic experimentation as well as indulgence in the delight of the

genres. I like to think about theory and philosophy as I engage whatever ideas are seeking creative expression.

Of course, literary theory is also speculative in nature, and its connection to poetry is not a huge leap — especially when navigating the literary canon, human noesis and epistemology, through theoretical and aesthetic innovation, experimentation, and investigation — all of which lean in to the speculative. Philosophy, itself a courtesan of poetry at times, takes speculative engagement and makes it sing. So, I suppose my efforts are reasonably well received, or at least not opposed, in part because speculative literature is part of my own field of interest and expertise. I'm not only interested in the creepy for its own sake, or the fetishistic aspect of technological innovation simply for its novelty, or even the escapist illusion of fantasy for its delight, but because those are places where the literary and market genres richly collide — and because I'm interested in the darker aspects of the psyche, how it finds utterance through discourse and how it shapes our understanding of cultural phenomena. I think that in academia, we are seeing a lot of interest into the realms of speculative literature, in part because of what it shows us about creative expression, but also because its popularity shows us something about our society and its notions of self, other, and circumstance. I like to think that what I create is literary art, whether that fits into a speculative poetry category or not, but that the category is probably my favored approach in poetry. When

I write, I try to produce things that satisfy the generative impulse. The work has to satisfy what I believe is good art before it connects to any kind of thematic, aesthetic, or ideological genre (though I suppose there's no real separation of those, just delineations between them). I just happen to like the dark, the creepy, the macabre, and it finds expression in speculative literature without seeming egregious or out of place. Perhaps my work has been generally accepted because my reach toward the creative is first rooted in artistic impulse and only later shaped by genre expectation. That is, I usually seek to write something based on some impulse, but will later explore the shape that the project will take. Not everything I write falls under the realm of the speculative, but I generally prefer things that are a little weird or outside of the ordinary in general. And, well.... aren't all the ancient classics speculative in nature, anyway? I suppose it makes us all seem like we are in good (or godly) company!

Of course, maybe it's just because I choose to attend conferences that take a bolder and riskier approach to literary investigation, but most of the literary conferences I have attended in years past have been good about embracing speculative works – provided that they also align with other literary trends and modes of cultural discourse. I do see a difference between work that is purely commercial, purely driven by the appeal of the market, and work that insists on being both enjoyable, entertaining, or

indulgent and also insightful, experimental, and artistic. Works that are lauded as literary, but rooted in realism haven't fallen out of favor, but they aren't where the excitement is, if you ask me. Poems written with a formulaic plot in mind won't always work terribly well unless some linguistic tether exists to excite us, but works that are overly focused on the zeitgeist without a look at literary tradition still might hold an appeal in the moment. Let's not forget that poetry likes its structures, and can take on themes that are at odds with what is expected. Prosody can energize the familiar, and the strange can be made a space for psychic journeying through it. I guess that what I'm trying to say is that whether or not my work engages contemporary trends in speculative literature, it always does try to engage prosody and aesthetics, which tie it to the academy – and, because I like the non-realistic modes, I gravitate towards them in both research and writing. And, as Ani Di Franco said in a song once, “I just happen to like apples, and I'm not afraid of snakes.” All language is haunted by the worlds that brought it into being, and every creative impulse is imbued with the terrifying reality of its basic biological existence as well as the magic of its monstrous wish to be alive or undead. The halls of academia are lined with the minds of the dead, and their words live again when we exhume them for our own ends; so, while there are snobs in academia who turn their noses up at anything that isn't excessively rooted in realism, there are also those who will tell you that the best parties of the

imagination sometimes leave reality behind – especially when we decolonize the canon, let the madwoman out of the attic, rebel against the patriarchy, and let loose the demons of convention. Speculative literature has really created opportunities for just those kinds of innovative forays into creative expression that tie the academic to the artistic. And, I'd like to believe that my efforts in this endeavor have been appreciated, too. Academia has become more diverse and more welcoming to differences in thought and approach, which makes room for these experiments and innovations.

Q: One of your bios I read notes that you are researching *Sufi* poetry in translation and writing. Tell us about those studies and whether you have used any of that research as a basis for your more speculative poems?

A: I'm fascinated with Sufism for so many reasons, not least of which is that it seems to me my own way of connecting with life. I find that no matter what I do, in my use of creative energy and effort, I seek some kind of union with the divine, some kind of mystical transposition of my senses upon and within the realities of the world in which I live. Living in this manner is about an immersive engagement with the open heart, one open with intoxication, indulgence, love, empathy...what annihilation of the spaces between the self and the

experience of reality, which can seem other than real. But in this estrangement of the self from that which enlivens the senses, I think we find a way to invoke that creative energy. My efforts to study the use of vernacular and intimacy in these poems has yielded a great wealth of excitement about the technologies of expression through which we connect. This worldview is invoked in most of my poems, which utilize dream and nightmare in ways gnarled upon themselves, and which ask us to consider the exhilaration of fear in every surrender into delight. In my chapbook *Beside the Muezzin's Call and Beyond the Harem's Veil*, I've included a series of poems about alchemy and technology, poems that incorporate the technology of the word, epistemology, the ways in which we invoke sense or humanity – and, I've interrogated the uses for these technologies by inquiring into how they function in the making of devices of imaginative pleasure or social utility or even of racist exclusion. I think that my exploration into Sufi poetry has really invited an engagement with what is conventional, transgressive, honored, exiled. A great number of my poems have probably grown out of my fascination with the otherworldly and other-word-liness. The figure of the dervish is one that also makes an appearance in several poems, as does the fruit of the astrolabe. The ascetic that seeks to immerse himself (or herself) in love is radical in his (or her) embrace of liminality and exile. By exploring the boundaries of what is acceptable or strange, I think we

can find true inquiry into how to relate to one another in a manner beyond tradition or convention. In Sufi poetry, one finds a fusion between the sacred and the profane, between the human and the inhumane, between the ineffable and the rudimentary; love is entwined with fear, human biology with the cosmos, and madness with philosophy. I find this terrain to be deeply humbling and definitely exhilarating. By any name, this multifaceted engagement with the self and the other is the perfect space for a poesis of aletheia or lethe, of ecstatic rapture, or of occult mystery

Q: From its early roots the HWA has welcomed dark and speculative poetry into its fold. Many of the other speculative literature groups seem to shy away from poetry; perhaps because some of them focus so much on financial status for membership. Have your experiences with the HWA proved to be beneficial to you?

A: You know, I think it's a shame that so many other literary groups focus on the financial aspects of success and leave out poetry simply because it is a smaller market. What I have found is that poetry readers are passionate, dedicated, loyal. These connections make literature of all kinds more relevant in our world. I don't think the worth of a work of art is based on its financial success, but I can see how professional groups might be interested in building bridges to this kind of work and working community.

Because I am personally looking to such organizations for reasons other than employment, I just tend to look differently at what they have to offer.

What the HWA offers me is Community, Joy, Friendship, Fellowship. I love getting to know the people I have met through HWA and StokerCon! I feel like it's amazing to enjoy the company of other people who are at home in the dark. You tell them that your browser tab is filled with descriptions of mummification processes, and no one is going to edge swiftly away from you with mumbled excuses! :) Of course, knowing that there is a group like this also means being connected to a shared excitement. It's not about networking for business per se for me so much as about real engagement. I'm not so much about the hustle, but I love being able to write for a group of people that I can connect with, read with a group of people whose excitement inspires my own, and share in the joy that they show when their works find purchase on the pages of some press or other. It inspires me with opportunities and publications, makes me want to share ideas and thoughts with others.

My favorite thing about the HWA is that because I've met some really wonderful, like-minded people in the organization, I feel connected to the literary community in a way that is supportive rather than competitive, and that inspires as much as it invites celebration. Being part of an

organization like this makes the ups and downs of writing more enjoyable. There is always news of some new thing around the corner, whether it's a new book or blog or article or publication opportunity. And, it's really exciting to be part of a group that works on writing as part of every day life rather than just for research or business. It's a different kind of engagement with writing than what one finds in studying literature in a solitary mode or grading papers. Others in the group are "in it" just like you, and can offer a space to relate to.

I also have to say that StokerCon I attended before the Pandemic was one of the most enjoyable conferences I've attended; I came away from it feeling excited and inspired to work on projects that had been coming along slowly – and with bags full of books or lists of names to keep an eye on.

I love the fact that this organization honors and celebrates poetry, too. Literary societies have a place in my heart, but writing communities occupy a different place there. Alongside the SFPA, it's been such a source of connection and conviviality. So, I recommend the HWA highly to any writer of works that can be considered horror at any stage of their careers; I've discovered lots of smaller networks within this organization, too, and it seems like I think there's something for everyone in the group. Conferences and readings, newsletters and publications, grants and

scholarship opportunities – and the joy of being able to share some words with the likeminded. Lots of cool things in the organization. I'm glad to be involved!

Q: What is next for you? Are you working on any new volumes or even scholarly works relating to speculative poetry we should be looking for?

A: : I'm currently finishing up a book of poems featuring a haunted castle in Ireland, a game hunter, a captive faerie creature, and the ghosts left behind by grief. To expand on that: it deals with ecological trauma, spiritual violation, domestic violence, the haunting of genetic memory and intergenerational transgression. There's a tension between a particular haunting and the gothic setting, its origins in a wild and magical natural landscape, and acts against the fabric of living and dreaming that demand a psychological retribution. It takes place in Ireland, and draws upon my own travels in the area during my stay abroad, as well as lore from the region. And, it's one of the darkest things I've ever written, so it's taken some fortitude and courage to face the monsters in the narrative! I hope that people will find a spooky communion with the tale when it's available — or some allure in the faeries, the alchemical nature of desire, the predatory hunt, the sanctity of the monstrous and the wild in this tale. At this point, it's in the revision stages, so I feel good somewhat consumed by the project and its nuances!

I am also working on some academic work about feminist narrative, trauma, and monstrosity, especially as it relates to feminist notions of community and cultural dialogues about alterity; this project investigates novels and film a bit more than it engages in poetry, but I am finishing up some research on the structural engagement of poetry and science in contemporary poetry collections, these days, too. I might have news about conferences or readings in days ahead, but...I think the first order of business is just getting through this pandemic. Staying home is conducive to writing, of course, but these conditions make us hold tighter to all the things about which we feel vulnerable, and that includes manuscripts in progress, I think! :)

Please share with us a few of your favorite pieces:

What the Shadow Said Before the Simurgh

Circle of air, circle of salt, you do not know my name.
Circle of sand, filling with the darkness
and the wet strings of rot, you
bind me, you
contain me, you
remind me that
this song is my wood and my grove,
my compass, my snow
split with the maw of your tongue's lust,
red like this is a whisper in the darkness
you hold fevered at bay, that these

the bonds we make in shadow and blood
bring power and the song of searing
so surrendering apart because
every man
would bow his head before the kiss of Sekhmet,
its toothy sound, an openness, a gristle
like the mudfilled milky vessel
of man in pain, kneeling. Circle of clay,
it calls you just there, beyond, it
opens a door, moonwhite and angry,
moonspilt and seeking for glassy eyes,
fishwide,
feathers and lenses, lore for the market, lyre
for the magician long forgotten in
your shadow, in the blood clotting in your bones,
for the one you woke
with your pen.
I am unwritten in the breeze.
Do not call me forth.
Write your love in saffron, in oil, in the hues
of sacrifice and grief, circle your sounds
in the glyph of shadow
in blazing light; hear me, and do not answer my call.

from: Beside the Muezzin's Call & Beyond the Harem's Veil
(Finishing Line Press)

Lorca at the Edge of the Sea

These waves falling endlessly
on the unsteady sand, see them,
folding over on their haunches
prostrate – they are
naiads, rising from the heavy
beds of clay to surrender you
to the rough, sifting dunes.

This sound
is their lament, a choir of breaking.
Listen, listen for the lull of it, they
changing, cannot bear
the unchanging of your body there.
See, see how they have brought
the unsunken husk of you, so full
of their own breath, back
to the surface. And yet
you are lying still on the wet sand,
slipping away around you and leaving
a bed. See how they move
your body against themselves, wavering
like the sound of regret, your body
like a ripple left on the sand.
Your legs like the cleaving,
splitting, fusing of a mermaid's fin and in
this coupling,
they are desperate
to birth you in this foam. But you are not
like Aphrodite, not like anyone, but
perhaps Echo - because in this unstitching

you are coming apart and coming
back and you are everywhere around this
scene but where your body
lies, brought like a gift from the sea.
Your body, lost but for them
not bullet-ridden, but studded
with pearls, sprouting moons, shimmering
the holes in your skin.

from: heliophobia (Finishing Line Press)

Hocico

1.

Flair of vinyl blooming from his waist,
cinching there & seeping close along
torso, limb – stiff emergence from tar

A ring of spiked hair around the head,
black, too unyielding a halo, not

unlike a gutter crown.

2.

Give me a Mohawk in colors too gaudy
for mornings. I will own the night.

The Pleiades, a fanfare.
My spotlight, the moon.

Shriek of bats to protest against
the grave of night.

3.

Vocal range registering not a wail, not
a wish, only the monotony of rage.
In the scatter of bodies – disjuncting
angular glides of rhythm –
a burst of supernova.

The beauty of a mosh pit is in the breaking

open – a pocket of floor space,
of memoried men, to contain
the ecstasies of doubt, to cushion
the voice too shrill to exclaim, kept
festered in the bones.

from: heliophobia (Finishing Line Press)

Hatter madder maddest,

join me
at tea. Your chair is empty, warming
in the sun. Your bougainvilleas have shriveled
on the vine and your fruit is dead.

And it is
daisies and posies since

your flies stuck in this honey, spreading
on the table spread.

Eggs not fit to burst
are filling my belly, skin-seams ripping
for them. Hatch me a jungle, my babies, out
of this fleshfield – I am rotting. Time yet
is left –

for swamp to fill the glass
place of pavement,
for foliage and mud –
breathless.

Iridescence isn't
wingless, legless; it began with gills.

from: heliophobia (Finishing Line Press)

Chrysopoeia & Isagoge:

Part 3 -- Palimpsest of Technical Drawings from the Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices: Peacock- Flame, Monk-Child, Song of Fountain and Light.

The sacred letter is the song of any scribe, sound and sense bound in the simplest strokes, graceful turn and punishing constraint but the sense and the sensing bound at once. The sacred stone is a shape, a displacing clay, a geometry of material that shadows the light. The shifting of the numbers of the stone and tree, the rhizome's offering to algae and ant, and the slivers of those shapes make up the faces of edifices of

the sacred, where may be seated the songs of the pious, bearing the lettered lingering of the mewling, guttural wish of the pit of navel and the curve of the nape of the neck, curving skyward. The shape, repeating is a structure. The structure of bone is a cathedral, a temple, a mosque, a library, a rosary on which to count the many sins of the sacred and the unsacred and the scared are simpler to reach by song. And if the song is kept in keyed tin, in fountains opening at the mooring of the peacock's ominous throaty warble, a portent to slip open a pocket or a portal to the rivers of the garden, like the rivers extinguishing a small flame born by a tin monk bearing in his lap a child, lifting a cup to the shore of tin bridged on the other side. The letter letters the world, the world letters the sound, the sound letters the name, and the name is the song of being and light. And what of the words curling like henna on the body, inklovely tattoos on the body's walls, and the body is the building of a sacred space now lettered with words that unring the spoilt song of a screen-built homeland or the ruins of a hand-bricked wall, walling the gardener from gardens of orange and olive grove, from the rivers in sunny land. Where does the land dip open and fold? Where is the tongue's taste for petal and leaf? Where will the mountain's path lead? And to write those many names with light, hues of neon and electricity, ephemeral as breath, is to say that the word is a world of words, worldlied and world-weary and wearing the sacred songs, the stroke of the scribe there beyond the world of the unread, velvet and ripe for the asking and the eating and the taking of this breath—a voice commands

you to look at the letters of your dreams and read...

from: Beside the Muezzin's Call & Beyond the Harem's Veil
(Finishing Line Press)

Aubade for a Seraph (or a Demon)

Wake with a dream, the dream he left you, knowledge of noetic names—

he, hierophant ancestral, seer of the ways, of spirit song—glyph in your throat, a blackened hand, a leper's nose and murder in the strangling hours when the sky hangs low, trees bowing low, branches limbering in awe—

You can ask, then,
for the angels, the thousands of birdwinged bodies without blood,
to still their thrum, to bring you
into a sheet behind a cloud's numb—

here, there are rooms, hidden
in wrinkles, in simple folds

here, the slippery skins will
never stop begging for more than is

here, the cold doesn't slip in
to the uncovered air just between your shoulderblades, or
the anxious curve of your hip,

where his hand warred once
broad, familiar, palmed, but now
somewhere else, faceless in time—

And even the shadows here have tongues, waiting to lick the length of you, the creases of your ears, the lattice of the corners of your eyes—afraid to close but too afraid to

look

to one place—

it was a hand there around your throat—
and it is a long time before sunrise.

from: In the Crocodile Gardens (Agape Editions)

The following two poems are a sort of Easter Egg at the very end of the book, playing with the notion of the colophon -- from: In the Crocodile Gardens (Agape Editions):

A Note on the Type

From the brilliant hoard of coin and heavy / citadel's keep,
the uninitiated mystic falters / through the forest memoried
along the seething / banks of river, emerging / bare bodied
and bare handed into the flaying / sun of this desert. The
oasis appears, ever / alighted, a fortress under the shimmer
of fire-shade. / In its courtyard are stems and spines
reptilian, scaled, sharp-edged. / The unaligned / gnostic,
draped bare in borne promise / steps onto the banks and
emerges golden / as a crocodile accustomed to basking /
like a basilisk or a butterfly's antenna. / Her teeth grow
sharp and, hungry, / she pulls from the tree's fronds a string
of glittering flesh, flayed from the resinous / taste; as it falls
/ in loops and coils, the mystic begins to learn / the reading
of the shadows and light blooming from inside, / lucid

letters of black and bright thorn, budding fruit haunting the reflection / of these vines. As she clammers / along the banks, the oasis fades, and her / wet, taloned feet leave prints light and pallid, crisp in their / movements onto the blank horizon of the beyond, a page / waiting to be filled / with the lucid black letters of gilded / blade in ribbons, fallen / from a maw turning back to a mannish mouth, // the light foot / printing the metered step, / measuring from man's stride to a woman's lilting song. The seeker / speaks in many tongues: / a song hangs in the air, haunts / pulp of plant and seed, and leaves / bearing the palimpsest of her angling, inkly gait, her / chiromancy of a heritage clutched from clay and fire, // waterspent unearthly light.

A Note on the Setting of the Type:

From within the crocodile's keep,

I have emptied myself hollow—

I am left.

 With the echo
of you,
 your words left.

 Split me open
with a drop of sound
 like a spike,
slither in an open cave,

 a desert of nothing but snow.

Leave me—
 brittle,
bare and bonestrung—
 a lute.

Leave me to long—

Is my heart a stone
 or, a geode—
filled with stones,

 candy-hued crystalline teeth,
prismed, longing
 to reflect the light
left,
 instead
 of holding its echo?

Scrying for the Unworthy with Feather and Bone and Sanctuary

I: / falling into a swirling line of / falling into a / falling into
innocence, there / is nothing more to say to you /nothing, at all. I
don't / know you, I don't know / you, I don't know you in the
way of this / I don't know this / life anymore. // Who we
were is nothing more than skeletal and buried far beyond rot /or,
melting. / You are your sickling garden, foliage and fallen. You
are / The way you look at me, I see sockets of the dreamlands,
only / where the remnants once became / true. // I can't /
anymore / do this anymore, do / this without the strength of
Atlas / the earthen world on my world on my worried shoulders /
and not without the heart of Circe / witchy and willing / to take

you / under / the blanching weeds. Not / every woman has the
heart of / Penelope, after all. // I am going home, because / I am
sung anymore / don't know where I'm from anymore / and the
days / and the days are melting / beyond rot / into nothing but
heat and flame and red, red suns that / flicker into catatonia. //
The crocodiles are coming, with their greensick skins like vines.
// This is wrong / this is /wrong, there is nothing / left to cling
to in the chasm / the spirits pulling with / reptilian shadows/ at
my ankles. There are hollows / left between us where the world
once left / the hearts beside our unwashed feet. // The
nightmare's just beginning in the heart of beasts and teeth
/ that hate / that chew. // Don't let it let / the stars consume me.
Don't let the waters fill me with the empty / reach of something
smaller than a pebble / or a pearl / sticking in your teeth / your
devouring mouth, like hope / the edge of a hippopotamus
roaring / from the heart of ancient fire.

from: In the Crocodile Gardens (Agape Editions)

Saba Syed Razvi, PhD is the author of the Elgin Award-nominated collection *In the Crocodile Gardens* (Agape Editions) and the collection *heliophobia* (Finishing Line Press), which appeared on the Preliminary Ballot for the Bram Stoker Award® for Superior Achievement in Poetry, as well as the chapbooks *Limerence & Lux* (Chax Press), *Of the Divining and the Dead* (Finishing Line Press), and *Beside the Muezzin's Call & Beyond the Harem's Veil* (Finishing Line Press). She is currently an Associate

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