

# AWP 2020 EVENT OUTLINE

EVENT TITLE: A Reading & Conversation with Shira Erlichman, Hanif Abdurraqib, and Brenda Shaughnessy, moderated by Cortney Lamar Charleston presented in partnership with AWP by Alice James Books

EVENT DESCRIPTION: Alice James Books presents three exciting and award-winning writers to share their most recent work: Abdurraqib's *They Don't Dance No Mo'* is a bracing examination of black performance and race, history, and culture. In *Odes to Lithium*, Erlichman pens a love letter to lithium, her medication for Bipolar Disorder. In *The Octopus Museum*, Shaughnessy expresses fear over survival in a world rife with very real threats: school shootings, climate change, etc. Introduced and moderated by poet and editor Cortney Lamar Charleston.

EVENT CATEGORY: Poetry Readings

EVENT ORGANIZER: Carey Salerno, Alice James Books

EVENT MODERATOR: Cortney Lamar Charleston

EVENT PARTICIPANTS & SHORT BIOS:

**Cortney Lamar Charleston**

Cortney Lamar Charleston is the author of *Telepathologies*. He has received a Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation as well as fellowships from Cave Canem, The Conversation Literary Festival and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

**Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib**

Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib is a poet, essayist, and cultural critic from Columbus, Ohio. His first collection of poems, *The Crown Ain't Worth Much*, was released by Button Poetry in 2016. His first collection of essays, *They Can't Kill Us Until They Kill Us*, was published by Two Dollar Radio in 2017.

**Shira Erlichman**

Shira Erlichman is an author, visual artist, and musician. Her debut poetry book *Odes to Lithium* and children's book *Be/Hold* came out in 2019. She's

received fellowships from Vermont Studio Center, Millay Residency, and AIR Serenbe. She teaches and creates in Brooklyn.

### **Brenda Shaughnessy**

Brenda Shaughnessy is the author of five poetry books, most recently *The Octopus Museum* (2019.) Her work has appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere. She received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2013 and is Associate Professor at Rutgers University-Newark.

## **PANEL EVENTS**

### **1) INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

Hello and welcome to A Reading & Conversation with Shira Erlichman, Hanif Abdurraqib, and Brenda Shaughnessy, moderated by Cortney Lamar Charleston. This event is presented in partnership with AWP by Alice James Books.

A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the organizer of this panel know and a printed copy of the presentation will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing perfume.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone's use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.
- We realize the lines for the bathrooms may be long, but please refrain from using an accessible stall unless you require such accommodation. Please also be aware family restrooms located on level 2 are reserved for those with disabilities or those wishing to use a single-stall restroom.
- If you have any questions or concerns regarding conference accessibility, please call or text the Accessibility Hotline (503) 455-4127 or email [events@awpwriter.org](mailto:events@awpwriter.org).

Opening moderator remarks and housekeeping announcements

Introduction to all speakers in the order in which they are sitting (see bios above)

## READINGS IN THE FOLLOWING ORDER:

- 1) Brenda Shaughnessy
- 2) Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib
- 3) Shira Erlichman

## MODERATOR QUESTIONS:

### **Organizing Thoughts:**

Brenda Shaughnessy, Hanif Abdurraqib and Shira Erlichman are singular talents within the world of poetry but represent distinct and disparate poetics among them. While there is at times a tendency to put artists of apparent similarity in conversation with one another, much insight can be gained from placing work, and the artists who produce it, in conversation with one another that bear no immediate resemblance. This reading and discussion is one such example of this organizing principle. As these poets read from their work, the minds of the audience will automatically be searching for threads that tie these different voices to one another. The purpose of the moderated conversation is to make this instinctive, reflexive pursuit of the mind easier, to bring parallels and commonalities to the surface for the benefit of everyone: audience and artists both.

### **Prospective Discussion Questions:**

*These questions are intended to be addressed by all poets reading.*

- How does a poem begin for you? What is the impulse that pushes you to the page?
- I'm interested in the process of invention for each of you, not in the sense of creating something new but in regards to information gathering, research and reflection that helps formulate what shape a

poem will take. How do you come to arrive at the allusions, facts and other pieces of information that become a part of the poem?

- What is the importance of humor to your work? Does it arise by intention as a balance to the heavier or darker subjects you find yourself wrestling with?
- One thing I believe threads the work of all three of you is a certain intimacy afforded to the reader to the speaker. What are the ways in which you consciously invite such a feeling of intimacy or closeness? Does this happen subconsciously?
- Given the subject matter of your recent collections, there are many reviews that attempt to contextualize them within the times they are appearing. This is natural. But what is the relationship of your work to the moment we are living in right now in your eyes? What does the poet owe, if anything, to the moment?
- You all have been lauded by your peers, critics and fans alike. In all of the rightful and deserved praise, what is one thing you believe people gloss over about your work? Stated differently, how do you see your work vs. how you see it described?

Follow-up questions will be asked as part of this fluid discourse.

Responses of each participant to moderator questions will be spontaneous but pertain to the readings they performed during the event and their newest collections of poems. Presenters might answer questions about craft, poetics, and/or subject matter as presented in their readings.

Q&A session: At the end of the event, there will be time for a 5-10 minute Q&A session. Please pass the wireless microphone to the person posing the question or please repeat all questions into one of the wired microphones.

## CLOSING

Wrap up and thank you for attending. We hope you enjoy the remainder of your conference!

## **The Two Things I Remember from Freshman Physics Class**

1. Ms. Kissel's deep love for her cockroaches.
2. Relativity.

I'll start with Ms. Kissel: barely 5'2" with a red-headed pixie cut. It is her second year teaching public high school and it shows. The whole year Roc, a tall, freckled, hell-on-legs, calls her by her first name and only raises his hand to make fart noises. Quaking Ms. Kissel, bargaining with Roc to "Please, stop?" while he pops his gum, snorts. Then there is Crazy Willy, perpetually clad in black with floppy, unwashed hair. He was just Willy before The Incident, which should be a solid foreshadowing for you.

One day Willy raises his hand and when called upon staples his middle finger. The class goes silent. Ms. Kissel shrieks, which is what any human being would do. But we are high schoolers, forever fronting. To us her reactivity is ludicrous, a delicious edge, our tiny teacher's face stretched beyond recognition in terror. Poor Ms. Kissel, begging Crazy Willy to go to the Nurse while he just smiles, bug-eyed, no one's child.

But the one time we all give her our undivided attention is after Thanksgiving. "How was your break?" she asks, and before we can answer she interrupts, begins describing a three-hour car ride to her parents' place for the holiday and how she took her pet cockroaches with her in the back seat because "no one could take care of them." Now we are riveted, and she is tall with story, her arms windmilling describing all six roaches freezing to death on the ride over because her heat was broken. How she wept all the way home, speeding, hands choking the wheel.

We are teenagers, judgemental, freakishly un-ourselves, but we are listening. We think we know how this goes. Some of us throw out a few real condolences, until Ms. Kissel twists to face Willy, her eyes glowing, her smile bucking. "When I got to my parents' house I put the little fish tank in front of the fireplace. I waited. Ten minutes passed. And then, one by one, their little legs began to twitch." Someone in the back throws a fist into the air. Another stops chewing her pencil to gasp. "They lived."

It's true. But what I remember most about the story is that she cried. As if her heart longed to kiss the vermin awake. No disgust. My despicable stranger, you too have a hard shell, your own flawless antennae. Every morning and every night I swallow your bitterness, the imposed disgrace, the so-called proof of a shortcoming or defect or lack. Say what you will about roaches, what she loved would not die.

## Unwished for

I'm standing in my town's ice cream shop when I notice them: the white couple smiling at me. Blonde woman standing beside a mailbox, waiting patiently for news, husband reassuringly placing a hand on her shoulder. The flyer they're on is pink: international color of positivity in the face of infertility. They are having a hard time, my couple. That's why they're here in my ice cream shop. But they have faith, they're trying, haven't quit wanting what they want, in spite of it all.

*Could you be the one?*

I lick the crest of my cone slowly, examine their bullet-pointed criteria.

*21 to 42 years.*

It's not conscious, but somewhere inside a voice says: "Check."

*No criminal record.*

"Check."

*No history of mental illness.*

I say, out loud to the paper, not caring if the teenager behind me churning into an icy chunk with a steady fist hears, I say: "I know this is different, Susan, Jim, but I would never wish Frida to not have been hit by that trolley. I would never look her in the face and say, 'I choose to unmake you and your paintings and your horror-ing heart. I rob the woods of your little deer.'"

"It's different," Susan says, "you're not Frida."

"Plus," adds Jim, "*that* was physical. A freak accident. Try another argument."

What they don't want of me lives. It sees through my eyes that they would prefer it dead. It knows better than to whimper, or show defeat. What they don't want of me breathes.

"Eugenicists," it says.

The woman gasps, hand to chest.

It continues: "You want to spare yourselves. That's not love."

"We don't want her to suffer," they chime in unison. Oh — *her*? It was decided: A girl. Claire. Or, Vanessa. Or, Claire. She'd have red curls, love olives, sing in her sleep.

"She doesn't want to suffer either," I peel the words open slowly, "but she'd rather be *alive*, than *not suffer*."

I am not talking to a piece of paper in *Herrell's Ice Cream Shop*. I am not invoking Frida. I am not naming an unloved ghost Claire. I'm licking my wrist of a smudge of strawberry cream, listening to the terrible Top 40 hit blaring overhead. I'm staring at the words *No history of mental illness*, trying to move my feet, and leave the world where this is taped up, natural as the moon.

Will the Norman Rockwell of our time paint me standing here before it? In my jean cutoffs, finishing what's left of a soggy cone, drugs in my blood, unwished for by strangers.

## 89 Lines on a Bruise

The Former Poet Laureate of the United States

wrote an eighty-nine line poem about clouds & I

want to write about clouds but all I can see

is this bruise on the inside of my inner-elbow the needle left

when posing a question about my toxicity level.

One review calls the book “mesmeric...cryptic...profound”

& my bruise could be described as such but who has time

or stomach for it, indeed as the poet said, “Words about clouds

are clouds themselves” & I for one agree. Meanwhile someone smushed a honeybee

in three squelches in my elbow crook while a blueberry vein trickles

in the background — could that count as a line about clouds?

I want so badly a day, nay a minute, devoted to capital N Nature

while she tousles her hair free of sparrows & suggests mountain-y cleavage

but the bruise is a diva of seventeen costume changes:

Alice Walker purple, underbelly-of-log green, dried-vomit yellow.

You don’t make this easy, cloud.

My bruise returns to chat no matter how hard I try to leave

illness out of this, which is what’s been suggested after all

by gatekeepers: *But why so many poems about it?* You know

what they say, “Words about bruises are bruises themselves.”

The poet writes in lovely, often playful snippets

I easily & delightfully comprehend

while my dribble of islands hide the radial, brachial, median

nerve after secret nerve as if to say we walk already buried.

Not a cloud on this body, but a dollop of queasy green, unreadable



map, trail of disfigured kisses.

I'm alive with jokes the needle told & a nurse so overworked  
I consoled her while she plunged.

Today I rest my fingers on the keys  
brimming with lust to see the sky change.

I'm sorry, sky, this little puddle  
steals my eyes & all eighty-nine lines.

Line 1 is about the purples

Line 2, the greens

3-10. crush of melon

11-16. blue before it hits the light

17. the nurse's small talk

18. if she counts up or down

19. the snap of gloves

20-42. skillful quiet or quiet skill (sometimes it's hard to tell)

43. the waiting room overflowing at 10 a.m. on a Wednesday

44-60. I'm held captive by a vial filling with me

61. flesh mood rings into another color

62-72. strangers who notice

73. family who doesn't

74-81. lover avoiding the spot with her mouth

82. the results of the toxicity test

83-87. the psychiatrist's voice delivering the news

88. press down

89. the tenderness

## Conversation with K.

friend I rarely see / bowl of coffee between us / daffodils shaking  
out of concrete / lone / pigeon circling / our ankles / for scraps / he

told me of sleeplessness / the fucking / maxed out credit cards / entire  
family at rope's end / cheated-on girlfriend more worried than mad

the Ecstasy / the drinking / the Ecstasy / punctuating the conversation  
"But I don't want to take medicine" / spoke of God / not wanting to

change who he was / all roads I'd sown / but stable now / for years / thriving  
even / I listened / thinking I knew something / blunt / told him what I took

saw his eyes simultaneously flicker yes & distance / I outlined  
his hand / titled each finger / with what might need attention / *sleep / food /*

tactic / I'd learned in group / & books / just months ago I'd made  
the choice: down on my dose to a barely / traceable amount / felt

healthy enough to try / but was still fiercely protective / of you  
defended you / listed all your gifts / secrets / knowing you'd want me to

knowing you lived / to serve / I sat tall with facts / while he closed  
door after door in your face / still / I'd call him open

inside the outline / of his wide palm / we sketched options  
me I guess / in the position of storyteller / sage / decade of hospital stays

doses / living-through-it / I thought I knew something / later his friends  
thanked me / family thanked me / he'd made an appointment / was

thinking about you / (tho ultimately would opt against) / what did they know / what did  
any of us / know / me especially / me / just weeks later / side of the tracks / screaming

at a freight train / in the sharpened air / mindmouth / unable to  
stop weeping / inconceivable speeds / no sleep / pushed a ghost

back with my palm / told it to get the fuck / away / the train screaming  
back / I should have told him / this is how it happens: how it shouldn't