

## **Event Outline for AWP Virtual Panel**

**Event Title:** “Writing Death, Grief, and the Afterlife Across Cultures”

**Event Description:** In a time when death and grief are heavily present in the global consciousness, this panel asks the following question: How do poets approach writing about death, grief, & the afterlife, & how are such approaches informed & complicated by a poet’s cultural background? Panelists will hold a craft-based conversation about these themes as explored both within their own writing & the work of poets throughout history.

This panel, while acknowledging commonalities in the human experience of loss, aims to emphasize that conceptions of death, grief, & the afterlife vary widely across cultures. The panelists hail from diverse backgrounds (Korean, South Asian, Latinx, Cherokee Indian, African American, Irish American, etc) & draw from a range of literary lineages. Given the cultural tensions present in a time when nationalism is on the rise, we hope that this discussion would benefit writers from all backgrounds & genres.

**Event Category:** Poetry Craft & Criticism

**Event Organizer and Moderator:** Caitlin Doyle

**Event Participants:** Megan Fernandes, Chad Abushanab, Mary Leauna Christensen, Su Cho

**Brief Biographies of Event Participants:**

**Megan Fernandes:**

Megan Fernandes is an Assistant Professor of English at Lafayette College and holds an MFA in poetry from BU and a PhD in English from UC Santa Barbara. Her work has appeared in journals such as *The New Yorker*, *Tin House*, *Rattle*, *Guernica*, *Pank*, and *The Common*, among others. She lives in NYC.

**Chad Abushanab:**

Chad Abushanab is the author of *The Last Visit*, winner of the Donald Justice Poetry Prize. His poems appear in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Believer*, *Best New Poets*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Ecotone*, and others. He holds a Ph.D. in English and Creative Writing from Texas Tech University.

**Mary Leauna Christensen:**

Mary Leauna Christensen is of Indigenous, Latinx, & Caucasian background, & is an enrolled member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee

Indians. Mary received her MFA from EWU & is a PhD candidate at USM. Her work has appeared in *New Ohio Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Cream City Review*, & *The Laurel Review*.

### **Su Cho**

Su Cho (PhD/MFA/BA) is the author of *THE SYMMETRY OF FISH* which won the National Poetry Series and is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Franklin & Marshall College. She currently serves as Consulting Editor for *POETRY Magazine* after serving as Guest Editor.

### **Caitlin Doyle:**

Caitlin Doyle's work has appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Yale Review*, *The Atlantic*, & others. Her honors include fellowships through Yaddo, MacDowell, & the James Merrill House. She is currently Visiting Assistant Professor of English and Writer-In-Residence at Washington & Jefferson College.

### **Description of Panel Discussion:**

As this virtual panel unfolded, the panelists engaged in a wide-ranging discussion centered on the following questions:

- How would you describe your particular cultural background?
- How would you say that your cultural background informs your understanding of death, grief, & the afterlife, and how does your understanding of these subjects shape your approach to writing about them?
- What are some of the craft challenges that you have faced in writing about death, grief, & the afterlife?
- What are some of the specific ways that you have attempted to write about death, grief, and the afterlife in your poetry?
- Are there any other poets, living or dead, who have been particularly influential to you in terms of your approach to writing about death, grief, and the afterlife (these can be poets writing from the viewpoint of your particular cultural background, poets from any background, or a combination of both)?

As we explored the questions above, each panelist addressed a variety of topics specific to his or her background and experiences as a writer. The summaries below draw from a combination of written material provided by

the panelists before the discussion and specific comments made during the discussion.

### **An overview of topics discussed by Su Cho:**

Su Cho discussed her background as a Korean American immigrant who first lived in Queens, NY, after coming to the US, and subsequently lived in various Indiana suburbs. She talked about the experience of speaking English as a second language during her kindergarten years, and she reflected on the fact that, when dealing with grief and loss as an adult, she finds herself returning to her childhood associations with the Korean language. Whenever she experiences an extreme emotion in the present, Su reverts to thinking in Korean, and she believes that this connects in salient ways to the manner in which she often mixes English and Korean in her poems.

Su described her decision to write poems containing both English and Korean as a craft challenge, but she emphasized that she has always viewed this challenge as galvanizing because it allows her to invite readers to interact with linguistic and cultural complexities on the page. As the conversation unfolded, Su also highlighted some of the specific ways in which she has engaged with death, grief, and the afterlife in her work, including writing about the cheonyeo gwishin, a Korean virgin girl-ghost, and composing a poem about her grandfather, who died in Korea after she

had already emigrated to the US. At the end of the panel, Su read and discussed a poem about her grandfather's death titled “**밤**: (n) chestnut, night (v) to give death,” which explores the connections language, memory, and loss.

### **An overview of topics discussed by Mary Leauna Christensen**

Mary Leauna discussed her background as a multiracial woman who is Caucasian, Latinx/Chicanx, and Indigenous (she is an enrolled member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians). She emphasized that, when writing about the topics of death, grief, and the afterlife, she views grief as generational in nature, a form of inherited trauma that is often connected to other losses such as the loss of one's ancestral land or original language. In addition, Mary Leauna talked about how she explores the unexpected deaths of her grandmother and mother in her work, and how the importance of the maternal line for Cherokees impacts the way that she writes about losing both women.

In her discussion of the craft challenges that come with writing about death, grief, and the afterlife, Mary Leauna described how she endeavors to mirror the non-linear nature of grief in the structure of her poems. She aims to formally capture grief's chaotic elements, which she sees as particularly pronounced when that grief is linked to losing someone in a

violent, sudden, or unexpected manner. Mary Leana characterized herself as influenced by the way that Natasha Trethewey and Layli Long Soldier write about grief, and she emphasized the complexity involved in reconciling the pain of losing someone with memories of the pain that individual may have caused for others while alive. She also discussed her mother's beliefs about the human ability to communicate with those who have passed, and she illuminated the fact that, despite her own skepticism, she often finds her mother's spirituality informing the way that she approaches writing about death, grief, and the afterlife.

### **An Overview of Topics Discussed by Chad Abushanab**

Chad talked about his background as the son of an American mother who is a non-practicing Christian and a Palestinian father who was a devout Muslim. He and his brother were raised to practice Islam. His father taught him to believe that, for good Muslims, paradise waits beyond death, and therefore the death of a loved one should be viewed as a cause for celebration rather than mourning, while an eternity of torment waits for those who have failed to be good Muslims. Because Chad always gravitated more to the fear of Hell than the possibility of heaven, he developed a sense of alienation from Islam and religious faith in general. When his relationship with his father later became fractured, that caused him to further question the role of religious faith in his life. He described himself as having been a firm non-believer for the last twenty years, and he

characterized himself as a secular humanist. These complicated aspects of his relationship to faith and spirituality, Chad emphasized, have shaped his work in a variety of ways. When it comes literary influences, as far as poets whose approaches to writing about death, grief, and the afterlife have impacted him, he mentioned Mark Strand, Thom Gunn, James Wright, Philip Larkin, Victoria Chang, W.B. Yeats, and Richard Wilbur

Chad also discussed how, despite his eventual departure from the religious beliefs of his early years, he still finds himself longing for sense of certainty about what waits after death. When he tries to write about death, he sometimes feels extreme anxiety because approaching the topic on the page makes him grapple with fears about the possibility that there's nothing beyond death. As a result, Chad explained, he will occasionally let a poem pull him in an entirely new direction because he's not keen on facing that anxiety, and one of the ways that he allows his poems to redirect him is through the use of rhyme and meter. While he often relies on craft elements such as rhyme and meter to pull him toward subject matter, he sometimes finds those elements providing an escape hatch when he's approaching something on the page that scares him too much.

### **An Overview of Topics Discussed by Megan Fernandes**

Megan discussed the relationship between diaspora and grief with an emphasis on examining what it means to bury someone far from home.

She mentioned that she views poets Meena Alexander and Hayan Charara as influences on her own work in terms of how they approach writing about death, grief, and the afterlife. Megan also talked about her interest in writing about the role of food in the grieving process, particularly when it comes to the notion of food as a means of cultural transmission across distances. In addition, she spoke about how the COVID-19 outbreak has upended many traditional notions of how to grieve a loved one's loss.

Note: The summary for Megan is shorter than it is for the other panelists because she provided less written material prior to the panel, and the details above have been culled from the moderator's memory of discussion topics that arose while Megan was speaking. In this case of this outline, because AWP's virtual panelists cannot view their pre-recorded events until closer to the date of the conference, the summaries above are based on the moderator's recollection of the discussion and on any written materials that the individuals panelists shared before the conversation took place.

We hope you enjoy the recording of our virtual AWP panel!