

**Event Title:** Early Career—at Middle Age? Poets Publishing First Books at 40+

**Type of Event:** Poetry Craft and Criticism

**Event Description:** So, you didn't win the Yale Younger Poets Prize after all. Did 35, then 40, even 50 pass you by—and still you have not published your first full-length book? It is far from impossible to begin a writing career in middle age. Panelists will discuss the paths they took to publication and offer strategies for keeping the faith through the dry spells—and for using experience to one's advantage. They will share their approaches to publishing first books and even winning book prizes in "midlife."

**Event Organizer and Moderator:** Wendy Barnes

Wendy Barnes is the author of *LANDSCAPE WITH BLOODFEUD* (2022), winner of the Juniper Prize for Poetry from The University of Massachusetts Press. She received a 2022 fellowship in prose from the New Jersey Council on the Arts. She is an associate professor of English at Union College in Elizabeth, NJ, and recently served as Artist-in-Residence at the University of Central Oklahoma. <https://wendybarnes.net/>

**Participants:**

Xavier Cavazos is the author of *BARBARIAN AT THE GATE*, selected as part of the PSA's New American Poets Chapbook Series. A senior poetry editor for Poetry Northwest, Cavazos' third collection of poetry, *THE DEVIL'S WORKSHOP*, is forthcoming from Cleveland State University Poetry Center, Oct. 2023.

Shelley Wong is the author of *AS SHE APPEARS* (YesYes Books), winner of the Pamet River Prize and longlisted for the National Book Award. She is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize and fellowships from Kundiman and MacDowell. She lives in San Francisco and works in university communications.

Joel Dias-Porter was the 1998 & 99 Heads Up Haiku Slam Champ, he has been published in; Time Magazine, POETRY, Mead, The Offending Adam, Best American Poets 2014, Callaloo, Ploughshares, Antioch Review, and Red Brick Review. His 1st book is *IDEAS OF IMPROVISATION*. He lives in Atlantic City, NJ

Sarah Browning is the author of the poetry collections *Killing Summer* and *Whiskey in the Garden of Eden*. She is co-founder and past Executive Director of Split This Rock and currently teaches writing workshops with Writers in Progress. Browning received the Lillian E. Smith Award and fellowships from the DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities, Yaddo, Mesa Refuge, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She holds an MFA in poetry and creative nonfiction from Rutgers University Camden and lives in Philadelphia. More info: [www.sarahbrowning.net](http://www.sarahbrowning.net)

## Opening Remarks:

I began to conceive of this panel last year, after my manuscript, *LANDSCAPE WITH BLOODFEUD*, was selected for the Juniper Prize for Poetry. At that point, I had received my MFA from California Institute of the Arts more than 20 years prior. Cal Arts is an amazing incubator for artists and my focus there was critical theory and hybrid text. But something never quite gelled for me in the writing that I was doing there. I moved to France after graduation and went through some years where I didn't write, then some years where I tried my hand at a novel. In the late Aughts, I lived in New York and started writing poetry again, but I realized I didn't know much about writing poems—traditional, experimental, or whatever—as opposed to the theory-based, bloodless little language machines I had been constructing. I was almost 40 when I decided to try to learn what a poem was by most people's estimation, and I was lucky enough to live in NYC before there were many workshops online, as I was able to take poetry classes at Poets House, the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y, and the Poetry Project. In fact, I wrote the first poem in my collection in a workshop with poet Brian Teare.

Wanting the dedicated time to write and more training, I pursued a doctorate in Writing at Drew University with the goal of writing a dissertation that would work as a volume of poems. The workshops and program allowed me to build a network of friends and fellow writers—a community that has supported me and pushed my work forward all these years. It took me about 8 years to finish my first book. During most of that time, I was pursuing my doctorate. I was also fighting some of my own psychological blocks. My subject matter, which in part has to do with whiteness and my obligations as a white southern writer, fed into my insecurities. It also presented real challenges about how to handle this material and the stories of the humans that comprise it in a way that was ethically responsible. I also struggled with various types of illness—including a battle with cancer—at some pivotal points in the composition and revision of the manuscript. I submitted the manuscript for two years, choosing my contests and calls carefully and submitting to many more than once. Before receiving the Juniper Prize, the manuscript was a finalist for the Crab Orchard Prize, but otherwise it was crickets.

While I have since learned they did exist, I never attended a panel like this one or read an article that encouraged me to keep plugging away at what our society considers an “advanced age” for a debut writer. Our culture's perverse obsession with youth influences the way we evaluate our own capabilities as writers, and there was a little voice that told me, as it tells many of us, that if I hadn't published a book yet, I just couldn't possibly be a “real writer.” A few people actually spoke these words to me: “You are not a real writer.” In fact, the idea that publishing one's first book after forty is even rare seems to be just another cultural myth. When I began to investigate this on social media, I was inundated with responses from people who had published first books after 40. There are plenty of us! I wanted to raise awareness about this fact and present some examples of talented poets—Xavier Cavazos, Shelley Wong, Joel Dias-Porter, and Sarah Browning—who could share their own stories of perseverance. I hoped to provide the kind of encouragement I could have used down that often long, always lonely road to publication.

## Participant Initial Remarks:

### Shelley Wong

I will share my story of taking workshops before and after my MFA, getting my MFA degree full-time in my 30s, and working on my book manuscript for a decade.

Some key topics:

- Developing an artistic practice that fits your life, needs, and wants (including residencies)
- Finding community, affirmation, and readers for your work
- Being informed about the ways to publish a book (contest, open reading, query, networking) and be strategic in your submissions
- Maintaining confidence when dealing with rejection and it feels like so many younger folks are rushing ahead of you (your time is coming!)
- Being kind to yourself and others – poets need other poets for support

My journey to debut poet:

- Undergrad English major (graduated 2002)
- MFA in creative writing (graduated 2014)
- Diode Editions chapbook (2017)
- Full-length debut collection through YesYes Books (2022)
  - My book won the YYB Pamet River Prize (the third time I submitted to one of their contests) and was longlisted for the 2022 National Book Award (a first for the press).

### Sarah Browning

- I was discouraged from writing political poems when I was a young poet – the bad old days of the 1980s and 90s – and so did not start writing seriously until my 30s.
- For that first decade it was still hard to publish socially engaged work. It was not until I moved to DC in 2002 and got involved with the city's poetry community that I found a publisher for my first book, *Whiskey in the Garden of Eden*, The WordWorks, which published it in 2007.
- Finding that community and organizing within it, first as DC Poets Against the War and then as Split This Rock, sustained me during publishing droughts, including during the breakup of my long marriage when I was also super busy with Split This Rock and raising a teenager.
- It was in part my literary citizenship that landed me a publisher for my second collection, as Sibling Rivalry Press specifically wanted to support middle-aged poets who'd been amplifying others' voices for some time. In addition to me, they published Martin Farawell of the Dodge Poetry Festival and Katherine Sullivan of YesYes Books. So being a good literary citizen is good in and of itself but is also good for one's own visibility.

- As in any art form there are fads in poetry. Political poetry was OUT in the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s. Now it's IN and my third book is less political than my first two – it seems I'm out of step...

#### **Xavier Cavazos**

- **RISK.** In my initial remarks I'll talk about the career choices I made at age 35 to quit a decade long career as a tattoo artist to begin an undergraduate degree so that I could eventually apply to MFA programs in writing, and the **financial risk** I was taking in **believing** in myself as a **writer**.
- **STRESS.** I will then talk about the **emotional stress** one goes through in the MFA application process as a middle-aged candidate, and how often I felt alone in that process which seemed to be littered with young adults in their mid-twenties and my uncertainty of acceptance. **FAITH & COURAGE.** Once in a program the **courage** it took to be vulnerable with students who were often half my age. I'll continue by sharing stories about my process and the **faith** it took to continue on my path in **forms** and **experimental craft** with my writing, which often was not understood by youthful participants. **DIRECTION.** Was my work moving in the right direction, especially when most of my cohort didn't understand what I was trying to do in my aesthetic approach to craft. **Reward.** 2013 Poetry Society of America National Chapbook Fellowship New American Poet Series, 2015 Ice Cube Press Prairie Seed Poetry Prize, 2021 Editor's Choice Award Cleveland State University Poetry Center.

#### **Questions:**

Note: Our panel is not dependent on moderator questions, but below are some questions we intend to ask each other to direct the conversation.

1. In what ways do you think your poetry has benefitted from your maturity and experience?
2. Poetry can be very isolating and inequitable, especially for older poets of color without a book who have faced barriers to becoming a writer. There's gatekeeping and prohibitive costs to submitting to book prizes and the poetry world can be quite ageist (fellowships for emerging poets who are under 32, 30 under 30 lists, lack of representation of older poets in full-time MFAs, book prizes, etc.). How do you stay confident?
3. What aspects of the the writing and/or publishing process do you think is made more difficult by age?
4. How do you handle rejection?
5. How did you deal with envy and/or bitterness in the years you were not publishing?
6. How does the poetry world benefit from older first-time writers?
7. How have you have found community? Mentors?

8. What advice would you give to your younger self in terms of either reassurance or things you would have done differently?
9. What positive trends do you see in the poetry publishing biz?
10. What's bringing you joy in poetry?