



INTERVIEW

KAZIM ALI

Kazim Ali is the author of several volumes of poetry, including *Sky Ward*, winner of the Ohioana Book Award in Poetry; *The Far Mosque*, winner of Alice James Books' New England/New York Award; *The Fortieth Day*; *All One's Blue*; and the cross-genre text *Bright Felon*. His novels include *The Secret Room: A String Quartet*, and among his books of essays is *Fasting for Ramadan: Notes from a Spiritual Practice*. Ali is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing and Comparative Literature at Oberlin College. His new book of poems, *Inquisition*, and a new hybrid memoir, *Silver Road: Essays, Maps & Calligraphies*, are scheduled for release in 2018. During his visit to Butler University as part of the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers Series, Ali took the time to speak with Manuscripts staff member Matt Del Busto.



Knowing that you are a yoga teacher as well as a teacher of writing, I'm interested in this connection that you've drawn between physical movement of the body and movement involved in writing, especially in poetry. I was wondering if you could speak on that.

For me, for sure the body is a physically-structured thing. We don't often live our American lives acknowledging that because we live so much in our heads and we live so much virtually, but the body wants to move every day. It has a shape, the chairs that we have in our house, you know the way that we each are individuals—there's nothing common about any two bodies. Especially when I teach yoga I've learned this, that not any two people have the same biomechanical structures.

Just like you're an athlete in school, you may start out just playing every game, right? And then as you grow older you not only play the games that you like the most, that might have the most appeal to you based on whatever your predilections are, but also you might get directed in terms of what you're the best suited for. So, you might love running enough to know that you want to run and then some coach will say, "Well maybe rather than sprinting, you should do this other thing, or maybe you should do relay or maybe you should bla bla bla," all these different things, so that's how I think about writing.

I think it's also physical; it's born out of our physical experience as people in the world. I know there's something intellectual about it, I know the brain and the cerebral power is coming into it, but it's sensory and visceral, and in particular poetry more than prose, I'm saying, in that the shape of it is and the spokenness of it comes from physical body, breath, and musculature.

To enact in space and the sound of poetry is so important as well and that too is physical. The body is a stringed instrument, basically like a guitar—it works the same way because we have strings in our throat and it resonates in our cavities and it makes sound so we play ourselves. So, I really believe the kind of poetry that one is drawn to or the length of the line or the shapes of the stanzas, the architecture of sound in a poem, all of that is physical and all of it comes from the individual poet. So just as much as you might be a great, I don't know, high-jumper and a sucky long-jumper—I'm just using track examples because I can't think of anything else—you might write a certain kind of poetry really well, like a sonnet, and maybe not some other kind of form. It's about how your mind works, how you experience time, how you experience the world around you. It's all of those different things but we're never going to discover our true gifts unless we are reading really widely and writing voraciously as well to find out like what am I really good at, you know?

That makes me think, talking about writing as a physical entity, I read Sky Ward this past week as I was getting ready to interview you and I noticed a lot of the poems—not all of them, but a good amount of them—have shorter lines and there's a lot of use of couplets as well. I was just wondering, how do your poems physically take shape? When you write them at first is the shape already there, or do you kind of revise into a shape?

It's both, it's both. The couplet is pretty standard for me, that's been a form that I am comfortable in and I understand the shape of it. There's something in my brain that it appeals to me; but, I normally work in the longer line. So, as I've written over the years I've tried consciously to try different forms. In *Sky Ward* you mentioned the short lines—that was new for me. That was pretty new for me. If you look at my earlier books of poetry, that's not there and then in my new book that's coming out in March—my new book of poetry, it's called *Inquisition*—I pushed myself even harder to leave that couplet form and try different stanza patterns

and different shapes of the poem and I did do that.

So, I think it's just each physical structure gives something different to the poem—that's true, that is something that is commonly said, that form and content are commonly related, whatever; but, for me it's also important as a poet just to be excited about what I'm doing and to do something new and fresh and see how it turns out so I also want that. I just want to do a new thing always, always want to do something new, so I'm having a good time with that.

Yeah, and in Sky Ward as well as in your reading last night when you were reading a couple of new poems like "Golden Boy," it feels like in your poems your ear is very attuned to the words almost as you're writing, like especially there's a lot of homonyms and a lot of wordplay.

There were a lot more in "Golden Boy" than you could even hear.

Yeah, I'm sure, and I was just wondering, I love when I'm writing doing similar things like that, do you feel like you are drawn to this kind of wordplay?

Yeah, very much, just because I love sound and I love music and I love confusion. I love that senselessness like when all the words start going crazy and you're like, "Wait what's happening? I don't even know." I like that so I wanted to consciously work on that and to create that especially in that poem.

I definitely noticed some.

Yeah, there's at some point in "Golden Boy" he says, "Who sew spoke the craft borne along" and "sew" is "s-e-w," "who sew spoke the craft" and then "space we with one another weight the soul spirit," the "weight" is not "wait" but it's w-e-i-g-h-t like we weigh the soul like we're trying to figure out how much the soul weighs. So those kinds of puns you don't hear them, you just see it when you read it on the page. I do it again: "haul oh star your weight in eons" and it's not "hallow," h-a-l-l-o-w, "hallow star," it's "haul o star your weight," h-a-u-l.

Oh, okay.

“Haul, oh star,” o-h, so, “haul, oh star, your weight in eons,” so it’s like asking the star to drag itself over to me, so that kind of stuff I just enjoy doing because it makes the reader confused, it makes the listener confused, and I want that.

Yeah, and how are you able to find that balance between confusion and senselessness and also at the same time working towards a meaning?

Well I think what you mean or maybe what you are asking me is how does it not just turn into a mess, basically?

Sure, yeah.

I’m not afraid of that. I’m not afraid of a mess. Words always have meanings automatically, I mean we talk about abstract painting like if there’s a painting on a wall and it’s just a white smear or something like that. That’s interpretative, purely interpretative, or music is purely interpretive. You know, you listen to a piece of music and you think it sounds sad and someone else could conceivably say, “Well, I guess it’s wistful, but I don’t really feel sad.” You can disagree about its meaning and words have that slippage, they really do, because you when you say the word “tree” you have a different mental picture than the one I have in my brain, like we’re not agreeing on what “tree” is or “red” or “is” or “the” or “but” or “of”—like any word we’re going to have slightly different consumptions of it. But, words do have connected meanings automatically so even if I veer into too much into confusion and too much away from meaning there always is meaning.

Yeah.

This is something Gertrude Stein always contended with because she was really struggling to have abstraction in language and she realized you kind of can’t really have abstraction in language because language always means.

Yeah it’ll always mean something.

So her abstraction was to abstract syntax and abstract grammar so the nouns would just float and then the meaning would be experienced

anew because the relationships were not the received relationships. So, I guess that's what I'm going for too is like to find some kind of new possibility possibilities in the poem.

Yeah, awesome. So I was reading an interview you had with the Poetry Society of America and you were talking a lot about the idea of, quote unquote "American" poets. I think you talked about that a little bit in the Q&A yesterday, as well.

Yeah, because I focused on indigenous writers.

Yeah, and one thing that you said in that interview was "this odd reality in which our primary responsibility as flesh and bone entities seems to be to consume, to receive and spend money," and that kind of leads you to asking where people could find "spiritual sustenance." I was wondering in this 21st century world that we're living where there's so much about consumption, how are you able to find poetry in just the ordinary or everyday events of your life?

Well it's a struggle because mostly the everyday events of our lives are governed by the clock that tells us when we have to be at work and when we have to be at home. We are spiritually as a society—not as a people, because many of us have rich internal interior lives and rich spiritual lives—but, as a society I feel we are spiritually impoverished and even what spiritualities exist are so convinced in their own rightness and in excluding other people from them that there's no common interfaith spiritual life, and I don't mean religious but the notion of attending to the mortality of our bodies and attending to the temporary condition of this world that we are in.

It doesn't matter even if you are an atheist—you have concern for the planet and you have concern for the people in your life that you love and you want the society to be strong and nourishing for them. So to me, that's what I'm defining as spiritual pursuit. We live now in what the philosopher Byung-Chul Han calls a "burnout" society where we just live to work and to experience pleasure and we burn out because we don't have the life of the interior as much anymore; or, we buy into what other people live. We pay other people to live our lives of the interior so we can watch movies or television programs or something like that where

the narratives are told to us.

We're not living our own stories anymore or creating our own because the creation of art, whether it was writing, poetry, or creating dance or creating beautiful objects, either artworks like paintings or just for the home like craft objects—all of that was and always has been part of daily life in human civilization. So, we need to bring it back to what we're doing, yet we live in a time where people are wanting to take music education out of the school system and cut funding from arts programs and doing all of this kind of stuff when that's a vital part of life.

Yeah, yeah. I agree.

Yeah.

I saw also along with writing your own original works you've also done some translations of the poet Sohrab Sefhiri. So how does translating a work kind of allow you to interact with poetry and language in a different way that creating your own work wouldn't?

Well, it was great. I mean it was amazing. I mean these poems are so beautiful and writing them in English, translating the poems into English, means I was writing the poems again myself using my own words and my own language. But, the poem already existed so it was a wonderful exercise and I was able to work on poems that I never could've written myself and yet ventriloquizing them in my own voice brought that quality into my own poetry.

I have a lot of aesthetic affinities with Sefhiri, but I was also translating another poet at the same time, from French, named Ananda Davie, that book has not been published yet, but her voice is very different than mine. Her voice in poetry is very different than mine and translating her affected my writing more strongly. That came into my own work in ways that I would not have had access to unless I had been translating her, you know?

Yeah.

So, that was more of a change for me. With Sefhiri it refined me and I

mean it I felt like I achieved fruition in terms of directions I had been going already in my own work that I had not been able to achieve on my own that I was able to achieve through him. But, it wasn't as much of a redirection. With the Davie poems it was like a redirection for me, it was an introduction of new elements into my own writing. I think you have to dare to, you have to be brave enough to be changed to allow someone else to influence you and change you.

Yeah.

It's not easy.

How do you find that balance between translating between keeping what the poet said and meant in the original poem but also you know making the poem still come alive in its own right?

You know I think the writer wants the poem to be alive so I think they would forgive a little shift here and there. You change things up a little bit because you want the rhythm and the energy, whatever the qualities of poem to come through. So, I don't believe the translator should completely change the poem and rewrite the poem, I think you are trying to imitate the poem in the new language. The translation is never going to be correct, it's always going to be an approximation or an imitation. You really do the best you can. You do the best you can knowing the original language, knowing the sounds of it, knowing the rhythms of it, maybe knowing the poetic traditions of it, maybe knowing the social and political and literary context that gave rise to the original poem and then you try to reinvent it with all of that knowledge; you bring your own creative powers as an artist to bear and you try to recreate the poem in the new language.

Yeah, and talking about the literary history and the history of the time just makes me think back to when you were speaking last night, talking about the importance of you know when you were driving into Indianapolis thinking—

What is this place? Where am I? What happened here?

Yeah.

When was it founded? Why?

Yeah, I feel like those are questions to be asking that most people don't think about.

Yeah, I mean was there a river here? Was it founded on the river? When was it founded? How long has it been going?

Going back to Sky Ward, you have three poems there that include "bright felon" in the title and are kind of a call-back to "Bright Felon" in a way—

Yeah.

And I almost kind of made the connection in my mind that just like you kind of push against what people would call boundaries of the genre, a lot of your works cross between genres and can be interpreted as different genres. Reading Sky Ward, it almost seems like even the works themselves seem to blend into each other in a way. Can you speak on that at all? I just find it really interesting.

Yeah, I had a great time with both of those poems. It was sort of like "Bright Felon" was such a serious book and *Sky Ward* is such a serious book that I guess connecting them in that way made it a little playful for me like to do the deleted scenes or the DVD extras kind of concept so I liked that idea. But, the idea of the works bleeding into each other, I think I really do have a unified sense and themes from different books will come into other books and sometimes even titles from other books will be used again. There is a sense of a unity for me and not just among books of poetry but among books of essays to books of fiction to books of poetry. There's a kind of passage for me like they all came out of my body, they all came out of my mind, so I can't really exclude.

Yeah. And when you're writing these things, whether it's poetry or prose or something in between, do you try to write hoping that you're readers come away with something or do you just try to express fully what you're trying to express?

It's probably both. I haven't thought about who is actually reading this stuff very much but I hope that there is someone out there who will so

it's more of an aspiration than a real plan.

*Is it a challenge to be patient for years as things are slowly coming together?
Like how do you do that?*

Yeah, it's painful. You work on those poems and just set them aside, they were just sort of junk. I was not going to publish them, I didn't think I could publish them ever. I didn't think they were good enough so they just sat. I didn't destroy them, I didn't freak out about them, you know, whatever. I just left them, same with the other stuff. I wrote those journals and I kept trying to, you know the ones that I read, I read the "Newport Journal" and the "Laramie Journal" and there's a bunch of other ones, there's six or seven more, I kept trying to stick them into different books and they just never fit.

Sure.

And I just kept pulling them out, pulling them out, and I finally put them in, I finally realized that they would go in this book.

Yeah, yeah. And putting things aside makes me think of in a different interview you were talking about how it's kind of hard in creative writing workshops because you know you'll workshop a student's piece and they're supposed to revise within a couple of weeks or within a month to turn in something later that semester.

Right, it's quick, whereas I'm taking years, years and years and years.

Right, and I think it's important for a lot of work that you give it time.

But when you're in class, you're in there specifically for the education of it so you kind of have to do things a little differently to get the maximum benefit of having this community for this one semester.

Yeah, that's true.

But once you get out of that and you're out doing just working, writing because you want to and because you love it and because you have something to write about—maybe not everybody does, some people

write just because they love it and that's good enough. It's good enough for me. So then you can take your own time and you should take your own time.

Yeah, okay. I heard you say it a couple of times yesterday and have also seen it in interviews, just you saying, "You know, I don't know what I'm doing," or just different things like that. But, you also talked about the importance of lingering in this kind of confusion in our lives. Even when we were talking earlier about form and poetry, about trying new things and trying things that could maybe be uncomfortable at first—

Yeah.

I guess both just as a person and as a writer, are you hoping to come to like a greater understanding as you continue to grow or do you hope to remain in this kind of confusion?

No I don't I want to be confused—I don't know if I want to be confused forever, I just think I'm not going to force the issue. I think I just am going to try to live my life and try to learn as much as I can and try not to make too many mistakes and see what happens. I don't want to try to be smarter than I really am because I want to be smart because I think that's a mistake. Fake it 'til you make it is like, it only goes so far. Sometimes you just have to work and make it for real, and it takes a while and it sucks and we wish we were better than we were and we wish we were smarter than we were, wiser than we were, stronger than we were. But, we aren't, so I don't know.

It's true, it's true.

Yeah.

Life is hard.

We just gotta do, we just gotta get, live our best life, and do the best we can with what we have at the time.

Yeah, and kind of talking about coming to understandings, you've mentioned that we categorize and simplify things in our lives so that we try to understand

them, but as soon as we start categorizing we're excluding because things in life don't fit in these easy boxes.

Right.

Do you have any idea as to how we can both probe and start to understand the world while also being open to the fact that we don't know everything or that we can't explain everything?

That is precisely why poetry is the most important kind of writing to me, because poetry for me lives in that mystery, in that place of questioning and doubt. In questioning comes true knowledge. The answers are many.

Yeah, that's kind of like I've heard sometimes you don't have to learn the answers, you just have to learn the questions that you should ask. How about, what is maybe one or a couple pieces of advice or things that you feel that you know now as a writer that you wish that you knew 10 or 20 years ago or when you were just starting to write?

I would say read a lot, read out loud, have friends that like poetry that you can read to each other and talk about poetry and talk about writing, talk about the kinds of writing that you love. Having a community is really good and outside of classroom. The classroom is okay, like you're learning and you're working under the auspices of a teacher or getting guidance, but having community means you have a peer group of people that you can share your writing with or talk about your writing with and that is something that I think is so important.

