

CAVE CANEM FOUNDATION, INC

Literary Balms: A Virtual Community Writing Project
Week Three: April 6, 2020

In keeping with Cave Canem's mission to develop Black poets and foster community, *Literary Balms: A Virtual Community Writing Project* is an initiative to help keep writers engaged with their writing process and virtually connected with each other during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Literary Balms* offers three writing prompts generated by Cave Canem fellows and poetry-related suggested readings. We encourage you to share your experiences with these prompts on our social media channels as we release them publicly each week, using #LiteraryBalms and tagging us @CaveCanemPoets. Please return to our website, cavecanempoets.org, for a digital archive of weekly prompts.

The Writing

Prompt #7

So much of who I am is sustained by eclectic local spots—the café around the corner with the leaking roof serving the best chai, that bookstore with the grumpy owner selling radical texts, the happy hour bar that begins at 11. You know these businesses where you live and many are struggling and will not survive our current moment. How do we pay homage to local institutions that are like home? With nuance, write a poem in which a special moment is situated in one of these places. The title of the poem is the name of the establishment.

Contributed by Cave Canem fellow Niki Herd.

Prompt #8

Self-isolation has left many of us with new longings for various yet specific things, people and experiences suddenly denied us. Yet, before this moment, we knew much longing too.

Make a list of things that you longed for pre-Corona, irrespective of Corona. Free-write indulgently about them. Then consider how your awareness/perception of longing during self-isolation has changed the way you might think about those prior longings. Using that as the pivot/turn/volta, write a diffuse poem (maybe a sonnet) with the language as intentionally dispersed and isolated across the page as we have had to make ourselves.

(If sonnets, assuming you can write enough, consider linking them and making a sonnet crown—or corona—a la our own Marilyn Nelson or Patricia Smith.)

Contributed by Cave Canem fellow Kyle Dargan.

Prompt #9

Write a love letter to one (or more!) of the many black and brown womxn who have created things for which they didn't get the credit they deserve. It could be anyone—from Keara Wilson, the 19-year-old creator of the viral #SavageChallenge; to Liyah Richards, an icon of femme queen performance; to your mom (birth or chosen). What did they give? What did they sacrifice in the giving? How has their gift made your life better?

Contributed by Cave Canem fellow Destiny O. Birdsong.

Niki Herd is the author of *The Language of Shedding Skin* and co-editor of *Laura Hershey: On the Life & Work of an American Master*. Her work has been supported by Cave Canem and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and has appeared in *Obsidian*, *Lit Hub*, *The Rumpus* and the Academy of American Poets (Poem-a-Day). She is an Inprint C. Glenn Cambor Fellow at the University of Houston.

Kyle Dargan is the author of five collections of poetry, most recently *Anagnorisis*, winner of the 2019 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize. His debut, *The Listening*, won the 2003 Cave Canem Prize, and his second, *Bouquet of Hungers*, was awarded the 2008 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award in Poetry. He is currently an Associate Professor of Literature and Associate Director of Creative Writing at American University, as well as the founder and editor of *POST NO ILLS* magazine.

Destiny O. Birdsong is a poet, fiction writer and essayist whose work has either appeared or is forthcoming in *Kenyon Review*, *Best New Poets 2018*, *The Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature*, *storySouth* and elsewhere. Destiny has received support from Cave Canem, Jack Jones Literary Arts, The Ragdale Foundation, The MacDowell Colony and Tin House, among others. Her debut poetry collection, *Negotiations*, is forthcoming from Tin House Books in October 2020.

The Readings

[In this audio recorded 1982 interview, Audre Lorde](#) talks to Blanche Cook about survival as an ongoing commitment, Kitchen Table Press and black feminist consciousness. She also reads from *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (1982).

This short conversation between Cave Canem fellows [Julian Randall and Natasha Oladokun, "Does the Volta Slap or Nah?"](#) brings together various topics ranging from "the animal" in poems and poets to the craft essay that has yet to be written. The conversation begins with Randall's thoughts on [Oladokun's essay, "Learning Poetry, Unlearning God."](#)

Published on the first day of National Poetry Month 2020, Cave Canem fellow [Myronn Hardy's "Where Poems May Exist, Now"](#) is about the poet's relationship to poetry and everyday life in the current political and social climate of the United States.

Cave Canem Foundation, Inc. is the premier institution for supporting the many voices of Black poetry: the home of the nation's largest collection of Black writers. Formed in 1996 as a response to the lack of support and resources for poets of African descent, Cave Canem has become the national leader within the poetry community moving toward greater racial diversity, inclusion and accessibility in the field. The organization is entering a pivotal moment in its history and future as we prepare to celebrate our 25th Anniversary. In 24 years, Cave Canem has become an influential movement with a renowned faculty, high achieving national fellowship of over 400 and a workshop community of 950 plus.



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