

CAVE CANEM FOUNDATION, INC

Literary Balms: A Virtual Community Writing Project

Week Two: March 30, 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](http://cavecanempoets.org), for a digital archive of weekly prompts.

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The Writing

Prompt #4

Make two columns on a sheet of paper or a word document. Without thinking too hard, in one column, write all the modifiers you can think of (adjectives, adverbs, etc.). In the other, write all the nouns you can think of. Write a 12-16-line poem using as many combinations as you can. Focus on locating a refrain that allows you to rove out into strange or jarring territory and then return to that repetition. The goal is to see how far you can stretch sense and subject matter and still have it hold together through sound and through repetition.

*Contributed by Cave Canem fellow Quenton Barker.*

Prompt #4

Using Lucille Clifton's "poem to my uterus" as an example, address a specific part of your body. Meditate on the memories you associate with it. Think of a central image that can serve as a metaphor for the chosen place in your body. What urgent occasion in your life (past, present or future), warrants an intimate, inner dialogue? Does the story you need to tell derive from a celebration or a mourning: a coming of age event, a disappointment, a close-call, something you're looking forward to or something that you remember fondly and with tenderness? Tell your truth, but don't forget to play.

*Contributed by Cave Canem fellow Omotara James.*

Prompt #6

A recipe is an instantly recognizable form: the first part is a list of ingredients, and the second, a set of instructions. Put another way, half a recipe is verbs, and the other half nouns. Choose a title, maybe something you wish could be ("Recipe for Forgiveness"). Make two columns:

- 1: a list of unfinished things that your title brings to mind.
- 2: a series of movements, verbs, or transformations.

Don't feel especially inclined to link the actions to the list too closely: one joy of a recipe is knowing, somehow, it will all come together.

*Contributed by Cave Canem fellow Keith S. Wilson*

**Quenton Baker** is a poet and educator. His current focus is black interiority and the afterlife of slavery. His work has appeared in *The Offing*, *Jubilat*, *Vinyl*, *The Rumpus* and elsewhere. He is the recipient of the 2018 Arts Innovator Award from Artist Trust, and was a 2019 Robert Rauschenberg Artist in Residence. He is the author of *This Glittering Republic* (Willow Books, 2016).

**Omotara James** is the author of *Daughter Tongue* (Akashic Books, 2018) and has been awarded fellowships from Lambda Literary and Cave Canem. She is the recipient of the Discovery Poetry Prize, the Bread Loaf Katharine Bakeless Nason Award in Poetry, the Nancy P. Schnader Academy of American Poets Prize and a Luminaire Poetry Award. Her poetry has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *The Academy of American Poets*, *Literary Hub* and *Poetry Society of America*. Omotara holds an MFA in Poetry from New York University.

**Keith S. Wilson** is an Affrilachian Poet and a Cave Canem fellow. He is a recipient of an NEA Fellowship, an Elizabeth George Foundation Grant and an Illinois Arts Council Agency Award, and has received a Kenyon Review Fellowship and a Stegner Fellowship. His book, *Fieldnotes on Ordinary Love* (Copper Canyon, 2019), was recognized by *The New York Times* as a best new book of poetry.

## The Readings

Over three essays for the *Poets & Writers* series on craft, Cave Canem fellow [Cameron Awkward-Rich](#) discusses "[Revising the Archive](#)," "[Writing 'After'](#)" and "[Elegy](#)," in reference to his latest collection *Dispatch* (Persea Books, 2019).

Cave Canem faculty [Elizabeth Alexander delivered "New Ideas about Black Experimentalism"](#) as the University of Michigan's 2011 Hopewood Lecture.

In this three-part interview, [Cheryl Clarke details her relationship to history and HIV/AIDS, form](#) and [revision](#) for her collection *By My Precise Haircut* (The Word Works Press, 2016).

*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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