

# an INTERVIEW WITH Kazim ali

Iris Dunkle

*Note: Kazim Ali and I met at the Crooker Art Museum in Sacramento, CA on June 22, 2012. In between yoga sessions and a benefit reading for the Squaw Valley Writer's Conference, Kazim found time to sit down and reflect on some of the many journeys and pilgrimages he has ventured on during his lifetime.*

**K**azim Ali was born in the UK to Muslim parents of South Asian and Middle Eastern descent. His books include four volumes of poetry, *The Far Mosque*, *The Fortieth Day*, the mixed genre *Bright Felon: Autobiography and Cities and Sky Ward*. He has also published two novels, *Quinn's Passage* and *The Disappearance of Seth*; two collections of essays, *Orange Alert: Essays on Poetry, Art and the Architecture of Silence* and *Fasting for Ramadan: Notes from a Spiritual Practice*; as well as translations of poetry by Sohrab Sepehri and a novel by Marguerite Duras. Recently he edited the essay collection *Jean Valentine: This-World Company*. In addition to being associate professor of Creative Writing and Comparative Literature at Oberlin College and founding editor of Nightboat Books, he is a certified Jivamukti Yoga instructor.

IN YOUR POEM "THE FAR MOSQUE" YOU WRITE THAT "A PERSON IS ONLY A METAPHOR FOR THE PLACES HE WANTS TO GO" (17). HOW ARE JOURNEYS AND PILGRIMAGES A PART OF YOUR WRITING LIFE?

A journey is an experience of moving from one place to another with some sense of significance, but a pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place. I'm not sure what I believe about "the sacred" anymore. I think it is wrong to think that the sacred can be located in a specific place, for example, on the altar of a cathedral, or under the Dome of the Rock, or in the western wall of the temple in Jerusalem. To locate the sacred in actual stone becomes a question of real estate and it brings to light the power relationships of organized religion. To me the sacred aspect of a pilgrimage comes from inside the person themselves. I think it is the body that is the sacred thing. Where the body goes when we experience the body consciously, that is the pilgrimage. People who are yogis or long-distance

runners or hikers know that the body itself is the temple. The use of the body—whether you are walking the pilgrim trail in northern Spain, or practicing vigorous yoga or having an ecstatic physical encounter—all of these experiences are spiritual experiences because they are connecting the body of breath and blood with what we call “ecstasy” (which literally means to move outside yourself). The ancient Greeks were on to something—the body is given to us as a gift to use in order to reach further to understand something about the spirit and the soul.

When I say “a person is only a metaphor for the places he wants to go” the word “person” should be in quotes. The original line was “a body is only a metaphor for the places a person wants to go.” I think it’s obvious to say you are not your body; the body is what we see of you. But even in our secular life we acknowledge that a person should be limited by the “limitations” of their bodies. We have rules in our society to protect people of various physical abilities. So, we know this as a society. But what I wonder is this: who you think of when you say “I”—that collection of perceptions in your own mind: your memories, the things that have happened to you and your relationships with other people. You define yourself as a mother, a partner, a daughter, a poet. But my argument is we are also *not* that. There is a part of you that is not just that and your definition of “I” becomes a metaphor.

For example, Roger Bannister was the first person to run a four-minute mile. Before he ran it, there was a physiological opinion that it was not humanly possible to run a four-minute mile. But he didn’t listen and he was able to run it. Then, almost immediately after he ran, it seven or eight other runners from around the world ran it, many of them in much faster times than Bannister. Because he proved that you could run it, suddenly you could. I don’t mean to suggest that the four-minute mile was a mind trick and that once he ran it, the other runners realized that the barriers they were facing were all in their minds. No, what I mean to say is that he actually created the reality by believing it. His belief that it could be done is what changed that in his body. When they heard it, they too believed it. It’s actually much more personal than psychological. It was real. I think that our minds and our bodies are equally real. When we think that a person is only a metaphor for the places he wants to go, Roger Bannister

was a metaphor for what all of these people could do.

What long distance runners are doing is what a yogi or a poet is doing. They are using the actual physical matter of the world to see far beyond it. What poets do differently than other writers is that we use language to understand that is far past that. The things we are trying to understand are very basic, but it's different than writing fiction or an essay. I identify myself as a lyric poet even when there is narrative in my work. In the case of *Bright Felon*, when I wrote it, I thought I was writing my memoir, and it just couldn't be published that way. So I sent it to Wesleyan, and it was published as poetry. It was the readers who identified it as poetry. That relationship between genre and work is a reading practice. It is the reader who creates the genre of a work by choosing to accept it as one thing or another. I've had people come up to me and tell me that they liked *Bright Felon* more when they thought it was poetry. And then I've had other people say that they were glad when they heard I wrote *Bright Felon* as a memoir because they didn't identify the shape (the long prose lines) of the work as poetry. It's too bad because this need to define genre keeps us from identifying art on its own terms. We want to see it the way we want to see it instead of being able to witness and understand. In her book *Art Objects*, Jeanette Winterson wrote about going to a museum, sitting in front of a painting, and allowing the painting to act upon you instead of bringing your own senses to it.

I think that is one of the reasons why I'm so attracted to abstract art in paintings and in writing. Anaïs Nin is one of my favorite novelists and her first book, *House of Incest*, is my favorite because it is so defuse and poetic. And right now I'm reading Clarice Lispector's last book *A Breath of Life*, translated by Benjamin Moser. This book is a short, abstract meditation on art. I appreciate these types of works because you bring your own thinking and thought process to it, but you don't shape the work. The work shapes you. The work comes into you and creates your perceptions instead of the other way around.

YOU HAVE SO MANY INCREDIBLE REOCCURRING IMAGES IN *BRIGHT FELON*. YOUR ABILITY TO INTERWEAVE AND RESURFACE IMAGES, ALONG WITH YOUR CROSS-GENRE WRITING REMINDS ME OF H.D.'S HAUNTING WORK *NOTES ON*

Iris Jamahl Dunkle

THOUGHT AND VISION. YOUR WORK, LIKE H.D.'S, BRINGS UP THE REOCCURRING IMAGE OF ISLANDS AND THE IDEA THAT HISTORY RISES UP AND SEEPS INTO OUR PRESENT DAY EXPERIENCES. CAN YOU TALK A LITTLE ABOUT WHAT THESE REOCCURRING IMAGES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE PAST MEAN? On first read, *Bright Felon* seems diffuse and random. But many parts of it have a secret architecture. The middle of the book is like a little envelope: the chapters are titled "New York City," "Paris," "Corsica," "Paris," "New York City" because I traveled to these cities in this order. But it is significant that the island of Corsica is at the center of this progression. I was interested in it not just as an island but also for its geographic significance. If you look at a topography map which includes the oceans, you can see that Corsica is the end of the Alps. The Alps roll down to the edge of the sea and they keep going—you don't see because there is water there—but they keep going under the water and then they come out at Corsica. Sardinia is the top of the other range from Africa that's coming up, so they sort of meet each other in Corsica and Sardinia. One place I didn't go in Corsica is a small town at its very southern tip—there is a little town that faces another small town in Sardinia just across this expanse of water. Maybe someday when I go back on a Bright Felon reunion tour I can visit it.

I really liked that idea of our lives—*ourselves*—having submerged elements. Have you ever had the experience where you can remember a feeling but you don't remember what the feeling was associated with? You are on a street corner and suddenly feel an intense feeling of happiness and you don't know why you are feeling it. Maybe later you'll remember; you'll remember the actual narrative details about it: that this was the street corner where you came out of an incredible movie or had dinner with an old friend. But the feeling is real even if you don't remember the narrative that accompanies it. Our lives are like this: we have all of these experiences that are submerged in us that come out and then sink back under the surface as we live our lives. It's one of the reasons why it's important for us to live in the moment and behave out of our immediate circumstances instead of basing responses on memories of past actions because those past actions aren't even real anymore even though they still exert a pull on us.

I became really interested in this phenomenon in *Bright Felon* because that entire book is about a tendency to remain silent.

CAN YOU TALK A LITTLE ABOUT THE POET GILLIAN CONOLEY'S WORK AND HOW YOU CAME ACROSS THE EPIGRAPH YOU HAVE IN *BRIGHT FELON*? WHEN DID YOU FIRST READ GILLIAN'S WORK? AND WHY DID THIS PARTICULAR POEM SPEAK TO YOU?

*Lovers in the Used World* was the first book I read by Gillian. The musical beauty of the lines struck me. It's a lyric book that is musical in its intentions, like a pop song that you can listen to over and over again without hearing the words until one day you *hear* them. I've read *Lovers in the Used World* thirty to forty times (my copy is falling apart!) but there are still times that I read it when my understanding of a line will rise out and strike me in some way. Conoley's poem, "Love's Portfolio" reads:

*A fragment  
of a fair copy would undo our slant meeting,  
[...]  
I approach  
as an alias, a trachea  
without sound, my signature, bright felon.*

I love the "trachea without sound"—a voiceless voice and an alias implies I'm going to disguise myself a little bit. The signature is the representation, the poem itself. So I thought about everything I'd been pouring into the three books of poems and two novels I'd written before I wrote *Bright Felon* and I thought about how my signature as a poet was like a bright felon. The phrase sounded so Dickinsonian to me that I wrote to Gillian and asked her if it was from Dickinson. She said she had no idea, so I combed through Dickinson to try to find it, but I couldn't find it. A bright felon is a criminal who burns brightly like Lucifer, the bringer of light, and I thought, well, I'm a bright felon as well as a gay Muslim as well as someone who is just trying to live my life making space for myself and others like me. Everything just came together perfectly, so I wrote to Gillian and asked her if I could use the phrase as the title of my

Iris Jamahl Dunkle

book. Gillian is an inspiration to me. She continues to write these very powerful, musical books. And she said something about poetry in that book that I still believe: "Thus I carpentered our entire relationship to go upstream."

MANY OF YOUR WORKS ARE FILLED WITH REFERENCES TO OTHER POETS: RUMI, SUSAN HOWE, EMILY DICKINSON, STANLEY KUNITZ AND OLGA BROUMAS. YOUR WORK ALSO SEEMS IN INDIRECT CONVERSATION WITH THE POETRY OF JEAN VALENTINE. TALK ABOUT YOUR LIFE AS A SCHOLAR OF POETRY. HOW DOES READING INFLUENCE YOUR WORK?

I'm really excited that you mention those particular poets, because they are poets who have meant a lot to me. When I first read Jean Valentine's work, I was getting ready to go to NYU where I'd applied because I wanted to study with Philip Levine who I'd read and thought was fantastic. I read a bunch of Jean's poems and I didn't understand her. So a good friend of mine, told me to read them out loud so that I could feel them in my body. But I still couldn't understand them. But feeling poetry in the body isn't just about rhythm and sound (though it is about that also), it is about trying to manifest physically the energy patterns the poems move in. Usually in poetry, we want it to remain on the mental level. Wanting to know "what" a poem is "about," for example. So when some people see a performance poet using excessive body movements as a means of expression, they see that as performance taking away something from the art instead of seeing it as a constructive art of creating meaning.

Jean Valentine's work is very quiet. Her work outlines the silent spaces. If you enter a dark room, you can see after fifteen minutes as long as there isn't any light. This is the metaphor I use to explain Jean Valentine's poetry. If you stay in that darkness, you will start to see the shapes. If you read the body of her work, you can learn to see. In the work of Jean Valentine, and Jane Cooper, Susan Howe, Emily Dickinson, you have to give that work time in order to get the reward of following the poet's way of thinking, of understanding the world. It's not the same as "meaning."

Olga Broumas is very different. Her work taught me about the sounds of the body. She taught me about vowels and what the mouth can do and unfolded for me the true physicality of poetry. I've heard several poets

## CHAUTAUQUA

including Robert Pinsky and Marie Ponsot talk about talk about poetry in the body and poetry's relationship to dance but it wasn't until I started reading and studying Olga Broumas' work that the relationship between poetry and dance unfolded in my own body. The body is the consonant and the dance is the vowel. The words of the poem are consonants; the breath that moves through it is the vowel. The vowel is the spirit and spirit is breath. Poetry and dance are arts of breath.

I'M SURE YOU'VE HEARD JEAN READ HER POETRY.

She reads her poetry very quietly, she trusts those words. Her accent and her mouth is small as compared to Olga Broumas who reads large. The shape the mouth makes is the consonant. Jean does not open her voice out and declaim. She reads those poems like she was reading a letter to you or reading you directions or a recipe.

HAVE YOU HAD ANY RECENT TRAVELS PRIOR TO COMING TO SACRAMENTO?  
WHAT WERE THEY AND HOW HAVE THEY AFFECTED YOUR WRITING?

This past year I've been on leave from Oberlin, and I've traveled to Hudson Valley doing a month-long yoga intensive training with Jivamukti Yoga. I went to Washington D.C. for the Split This Rock Festival, Pennsylvania, Europe and India. Last summer I was in Israel and the Palestinian territories with a delegation called the Interfaith Peace Builders, and I wrote a lot during that time.

In the fall of 2010, I did a reading tour through the western states and kept a journal while I was traveling. While I was writing them, the journals began to take the shape of *Bright Felon* chapters, and I realized they were more than journal entries, they were creative pieces. I've been working on those. They are in a group called "The Western Journals" and made up of entries called, "The Portland Journal," "The Newport Journal," "The Laramie Journal," and "The Boulder Journal." They are one section of a new untitled manuscript of lyric prose that is sort of a sequel to *Bright Felon*. It doesn't have a title yet, but it has the same subtitle, *Autobiography and Cities*.

Iris Jamahl Dunkle

WHERE DID THE INNOVATIVE FORM OF *BRIGHT FELON* COME FROM?

My formal inspiration for *Bright Felon* came from many different influences: Carole Maso, David Markson, Nathalie Stephens (in particular her book *Touch to Affliction*), Gertrude Stein (her prose), and Laura Moriarty (her prose) amongst them. The composition strategy Lynn Hejinian's used in her book *Border Comedy*, where she wrote without looking back at what she had written was something I used when I wrote the first few chapters of *Bright Felon* in order to let images reoccur and rise to the surface on their own accord. Then, after the book was written, it was revised very carefully. Joshua Marie Wilkinson read the manuscript and edited it extensively. In fact, he edited almost every line of the book (almost like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot working on "The Waste Land"). He really helped me see how to build texture, or an intentional topography between the discursive and the lyric. It was a very generous editorial reading. I don't think I've yet managed to thank him properly for it.

THE LAST CHAPTER OF *BRIGHT FELON* ENDS VERY LYRICALLY. I LOVE THAT LAST CHAPTER—THE EPILOGUE SET IN BARCELONA.

The book runs backward in time and so the last chapter, "Home," is the earliest. But the epilogue was written nearly last. It was written a little while after most of the rest of the book was finished. I did not write it as part of *Bright Felon* nor thinking I would include an epigraph at all. I only added it later. So, it makes sense that it feels different than the other chapters. My cousin Aneesa, who knows me pretty well, said she thought I should have ended the book with the last sentence of "Home." She might be right. Or not.

WHEN I WAS LIVING IN OIL CITY, I BECAME OBSESSED WITH THE HISTORY OF THE PLACE. THERE WAS A SMALL OIL BOOM TOWN NEARBY CALLED PIT HOLE AND I SPENT A YEAR READING AND WRITING ABOUT ITS HISTORY. PART OF THE REASON WHY I BECAME OBSESSED WITH ITS HISTORY WAS BECAUSE I WAS LIVING IN A PLACE THAT WAS COMPLETELY ISOLATING. THE DIGGING UP OF HISTORY—LEARNING AND QUESTIONING IT—GAVE ME A WAY TO NOT ONLY UNDERSTAND THE PLACE IN WHICH I WAS LIVING BUT ALSO MYSELF AS I WAS

## CHAUTAUQUA

LIVING IN IT. BASED ON SOME OF THE CHAPTERS IN *BRIGHT FELON* IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU HAD A SIMILAR EXPERIENCE IN PLACES LIKE CARLISLE. CAN YOU TALK A LITTLE ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE WRITING THIS CHAPTER?

Carlisle is a really good example of a city built on top of a city—a place where the history of the place rises up to meet its present. There is history that has happened in a place and that history isn't linear. It's happening all at once, so the physical karma of a place is more obvious. In Carlisle, what I talk about in *Bright Felon* is the slave cemetery that was plowed over and made into a park. This is historical or psychic karma of the people who once lived in a place. What happened there left an energy. Marianne Moore lived in Carlisle, the University is there, the Carlisle Indian School was there, and it manifests itself physically. Physicists have proven that time and space bend; we don't understand the mystical aspects of history and how it is connected to the physical. When you go to a place where a massacre occurred, these places maintain their power. That's why the train tracks near Auschwitz contain power. That's why sacred places like the Western Wall or the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, where I was last summer, are so intense because of what may or may not have happened there and because of the people who go there seeking reunion with that place.

So, Carlisle is a very complicated place because it contains complicated historical sites such as the Indian School, which had a brutal re-education program. Native American children were sent there, to have their hair and their culture “groomed” out of them, until their connection to their culture and language was lost. At the same time, you also have the great treaty that was signed there (and quickly broken) between the citizens of the new city of Carlisle and the Native Americans. The town was founded with this intent that this will be the frontier, but we will slowly build out to control the pass. It's a very powerful place and the people who live there know it. To me that historical complexity and power was in the air. One can feel history in that way. One of the reasons why I love Susan Howe's writing so much is because of the way she experiences history in this way. She has this ability to see ghosts in a place—like in her poem “Thorow” in *Singularities*. I think American readers don't like to have this type of relationship with place. They want to have a level of amnesia with

place and the reason for that is because such a violence was perpetuated against the original possessors of the land that an erasure had to occur. In many places, it is an ironic erasure because so many of the names are the same. In New York, you have the towns of Onondaga and Onieda—places that are named after the absent people. The Oneida people now live in Wisconsin, but their name remains also in New York. Historical erasure has taken a number of different forms in America, but almost always it includes a physical inscribing on the landscape of the new. For example, Mount Rushmore in South Dakota wasn't merely carved on any mountain. It was carved on a mountain that was sacred to the Dakota people. The mountain was called the Six Grandfathers because it had six different crags. When construction for Mt. Rushmore began, two of the crags were dynamited off and the remaining crags became the four presidents that were carved onto them. This was an intentional, strategic writing of American history onto the sacred stone of the Lakota people. In the Lakota language the word for *stone* and *mountain* are the same word and the word for *grandfather* is derived from that word.

And that's how you do it, that's how you erase history.

AND THAT'S WHY WE GET TO DIG IT UP AND WRITE ABOUT IT.

Yes, that's why we have to!

RECENTLY, I HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF READING *BRIGHT FELON* AND YOUR OTHER POETRY COLLECTIONS AGAIN STRAIGHT THROUGH AND THIS EXPERIENCE MADE ME REALLY HEAR THEM TALKING TO ONE ANOTHER. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *BRIGHT FELON* AND *THE FAR MOSQUE*?

*The Far Mosque* was written between 1999 and 2003. Then, I put the book away for a year because I was having trouble publishing it and I wanted to start on a new project. A year later I opened it up and saw it completely new. *Bright Felon* was written really quickly between November of 2006 and March of 2007. I wrote the first draft, put it away for about a year and then I revised it for about five months. It was published shortly after that. *Bright Felon* describes the time periods when I was writing *The Far Mosque*, so it makes sense that the works are talking to one another. The poems in *The Far Mosque* and the prose of *Bright Felon* each eschew tradi-

tional rhetorical aims and attempt to create a texture—almost visual—with language. I think of *Bright Felon* as a sculpture or as installation art, and there's lots of *The Far Mosque* that I think of as painting or music.

There is another conversation between *Bright Felon* and my novel, *The Disappearance of Seth*, which I wrote at the same time. There are a lot of interlocking themes and I view them as companion books. The main character is a young Muslim who is gay and struggling with his sexuality (just like *Bright Felon*). There are things I could not say directly in *Bright Felon* that I put into *Seth* and called it “fiction,” not necessarily actual narrative events (though there are plenty of those, indeed) but also impressions, emotional truths. They really are two versions of the same story. They each also share the inane structural tricks of non-linear time, non-spatial loci, and non sequiturs in thinking and description. Though, in a fashion, *The Disappearance of Seth* is much more complex and more intentional than *Bright Felon* in which I was writing, literally it sometimes seemed, to save my life.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE CONFLUENCE THAT OCCURS IN THE POEM, “HOME”? THERE’S YOUR PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, THE BEAUTIFUL STORY OF THE BLANKET, MEMORY AND THE PRESENT AND IT ALL SEEMS TO COME TOGETHER IN THE MOMENT OF THE POEM. HOW DID YOU BRING THIS ALL TOGETHER IN THIS SPECTACULAR POEM?

When I remember lines from this book, they come from this chapter. For me, this chapter is the heart of the book.

“God’s true language is only silence and breath... I want to be those stairs, the hunger I felt, the river inside.”

Home is the home source. It is the earliest part of our lives, but home is also our source. For me, I want my home to be my life wherever I am. I want to be at home with the people of my life, and the places of my life so that it doesn’t matter where I am, I will be at home. Whether I’m at my house in Oberlin, OH, or at a museum in Sacramento, CA, I am will be at home. When I look out the window here at the museum, I am reminded of places I’ve been in Paris, Jerusalem, or Mumbai because I’ve been in places like this: museums, coffee shops, yoga studios. These places make wherever I am home for me. A place becomes sacred because a person is

Iris Jamahl Dunkle

there, because you are there. Home is a confluence. “You should travel so much that you become a stranger in your own land,” Nerval said. Or he said something very like that. But I want to do the opposite of what this quote subscribes. I want to travel so much that everywhere I go becomes my home. That nowhere am I a stranger and nothing is strange. I want my body to be my home. Your body is a beautiful part of you that should be worshiped, preserved and celebrated. If we just knew our bodies, we would be utterly incapable of selfishness, greed and committing violence against other people. That’s what I dream about.