Elizabeth Acevedo

An American writer of Dominican descent, Elizabeth Acevedo’s work captures the struggles and triumphs of minority cultures. Well-known in Washington D.C. as a poet and spoken word artist, Acevedo published The Poet X in 2018, her debut young adult novel written in verse. The Poet X won the 2018 National Book Award for Young People Literature.

Born: ca.1988; New York, New York

Principal Works:

Poetry
“Hair” (2014)
“Afro-Latina” (2015)

Long Fiction
Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths (2016)
The Poet X (2018)
With the Fire on High (2019)

Anthologized
Ink Knows No Borders (2019)

Biography

Elizabeth “Liz” Acevedo was born in New York City around 1988. The youngest child and only daughter of Dominican immigrants, she grew up in a family of storytellers. As a child, she was an avid reader and loved hearing her mother’s stories of her childhood adventures in the Dominican Republic. Her father, on the other hand, was a great joke-teller from whom she learned about timing and delivery.

Acevedo was drawn to rhyming and poetry at a young age, writing her first poem when she was around eight years old. When she reached her teens, having initially dreamt of becoming a rapper, she became involved in youth poetry slams, performing her work onstage—something she found empowering. While attending high school at the Beacon School, Acevedo was a member of the poetry club. She looked forward to these weekly meetings, which gave her an outlet to express her creativity.

Following her high school graduation, Acevedo enrolled at the George Washington University in Washington, DC, where she majored in performing arts. After receiving her bachelor’s degree in 2010, she went on to complete a master of fine arts degree in creative writing at the University of Maryland, College Park, in 2015. As a student, she continued to perform regularly, competing in poetry slams and doing spoken-word shows; in 2014, she became a champion of the National Poetry Slam as a member of the Beltway Poetry Slam team. These performances were more than a hobby for Acevedo, who developed a unique style.

In her acts, which involved touring all over the world by 2016, Acevedo talked about her upbringing, the Dominican Republic, and race, particularly about being black in America. Blending humor with personal experience, she discussed contemporary issues in a powerful way—which led to the publication of her first book.

In addition to writing and performing poetry, Acevedo conducts poetry workshops and gives lectures at colleges and universities throughout the United States. She lives in Washington, DC.

Major Works

In late 2016, Acevedo began her career as a published author with the appearance of Beastgirl & Other Origin Myths, a collection of twenty-one poems. Written over several years, the book revolves around the stories surrounding Acevedo’s origins, the place from which she comes. Switching between English and Spanish, these verses explore the history, culture, and folklore of the Dominican Republic. In the poem “La Ciguapa,” for example, she writes about a mythical creature from Dominican folklore. The
poem “La Santa Maria,” on the other hand, explores a history of European conquest.

With her poems in *Beastgirl & Other Origin Myths*, Acevedo pays homage to her Dominican roots. There are also, however, more personal pieces that explore themes such as family, sexuality, and her experience with sexism. In the poem “It Almost Curdles My Womb Dry,” for instance, Acevedo, imagining a fictional scenario, talks about her future daughter. The speaker promises that her daughter will not be silenced by sexism, but will be strong, fearless, and independent.

In 2018, Acevedo published the critically acclaimed *The Poet X*, her debut young-adult novel. In interviews, she has explained that she was inspired to pen the work when she was teaching eighth grade at a school highly populated with students of Latin American descent and some of her students voiced concern over a lack of representation in literature. Set in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, the story follows Xiomara Batista, an Afro-Latina teenager who lives with her immigrant parents and her twin brother, Xavier. An aspiring slam poet, Xiomara struggles between her own desires and those of her religious mother, who wants her to be a good Catholic. It is through poetry, however, that Xiomara gains the confidence to challenge and transform her reality.

Written entirely in verse, *The Poet X* was an immediate success upon publication, spending several weeks on the *New York Times* Best Seller list. Critics lauded Acevedo for representing minorities in her work and for exploring important subjects, such as sex, identity, and religion. In 2019, *The Poet X* was awarded the 2018 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature.

Acevedo’s poems, like her young-adult novel, feature characters from minority communities that are underrepresented in literature. Unlike narratives that leave out people of color, Acevedo’s work has become an important part of a rising generation of authors who advocate for greater representation of people of color—and diversity in general—in literature of all different forms and for all ages.

**Further Reading**


—Maria del Pilar Guzman

**Gil Adamson**

Gil Adamson has written two acclaimed books of poetry, a collection of short stories, and a novel. Her work has also been widely published in magazines and literary journals. She lives with writer Kevin Connolly in Toronto.

**Born:** January 1, 1961; North York, Ontario, Canada

**Principal Works:**

**Poetry**

*Primitive*, 1991

*Ashland*, 2003

**Long Fiction**

*The Outlander*, 2007

**Short Fiction**

*Help Me, Jacques Cousteau*, 1995
Nonfiction
*Mulder It’s Me*, 1998 (with Dawn Connolly)

Biography
A seventh-generation Canadian, Gillian “Gil” Adamson is the descendant of frontier homesteaders, ancestors who had an intimate connection to the land and whose settlement helped shape Canada into the nation it is today. She, too, always felt close to the land, and this strong tie has proved the major influence on her literary output. By 2018 she had written two books of poetry, a book of short stories, and her best-known work, the award-winning novel *The Outlander*, as well as a fan biography of actor Gillian Anderson of the television program *The X-Files*.

Adamson has long been obsessed with the American West in both Canada and the United States, an obsession that was fueled by her discovery of her ancestors’ stories. In addition to the homesteaders, she is the descendant of Angus Lorne Bonnycastle, who was a judge in Canada’s rural circuit court, and a grandfather who operated a coal mine and telegraph services in Edmonton, Alberta. In her rough and tumble family history, one of her grandmothers grew up as one of five siblings and was uneducated beyond being taught to read at home.

Although all these details figure intimately into her writing, they are somewhat far from Adamson’s own upbringing, which took place in a far more suburban setting, in the Toronto metropolitan area. Born in 1961 in North York, Ontario, Adamson was herself well educated. When she was young, her father would read her stories, instilling a love of books from an early age. The works her father read to her and her brother included not only standard children’s books, but eventually also more complex works such as Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. After high school, Adamson went on to study philosophy and anthropology at the University of Toronto.

Following her university education, Adamson found work in the publishing industry. She landed a job at Coach House Press as an editorial assistant and publicist in 1985 before moving on, two years later, to CBC Radio Guide where she worked as a publishing assistant. She also worked for the Toronto Small Press Book Fair in a publicist role and as an associate editor for *What! Magazine*, where she met the poet Kevin Connolly, who would become her lifelong partner. Connolly introduced her to Lynn Crosbie, Stuart Ross, and other writers who had formed something of a literary circle. At the time, many members of this group employed surrealistic techniques in their writing, a practice that intrigued and inspired Adamson.

Even as she was working in the publishing industry in Toronto, however, Adamson never lost her love of the land. Throughout her life, she traveled frequently across Canada and the United States, maintaining her connection with the West in particular and drawing inspiration for her literary career. Joined by Connolly, she frequently visited Western national parks and other areas, being drawn in particular to well-preserved historic sites and natural landscapes. This travel helped lead her to write and publish her first book of poetry, *Primitive*, in 1991, which she brought out with Coach House Press. Her experience of the West would prove as well to be the chief inspiration for her major work, the novel *The Outlander*. By immersing herself in pioneer life during her travels, Adamson began to dream up a world that existed a hundred years earlier, the world of her rugged ancestors. She started to imagine a character, who first appeared in her poetry. She began expanding this character’s story and eventually it developed into the novel, which took Adamson ten years to write. More time would pass before she sent it for publication and then before it was accepted and released, in 2007.

*The Outlander* brought Adamson immediate acclaim and multiple awards. However, her output was fairly limited following its publication. She lives with Connolly in Toronto.

Major Works
Across two books of poetry and a collection of linked stories, Adamson had probed the nature of the North American landscape, familial tensions, and female coming-of-age, often throwing in some surrealist touches. In *The Outlander*, which takes place in 1903 in rural Canada, a nineteen-year-old woman named Mary Boulton (but usually referred to as simply “the widow”) has just killed her husband and flees across the landscape to elude his two vengeance-minded brothers. A feminist western of sorts, the book unfolds across both the exterior landscape of a violent country and the interior landscape of Mary’s own unstable, hallucination-prone mind.

Drawing on her surrealist background as well as her own family history, Adamson puts together all the tools that she honed over her previous books, crafting a compelling and moving look at the difficulties of coming-of-age in a violent, patriarchal world. She has named a range of authors who have influenced her approach, from icons such as Raymond Carver to contemporaries such as Richard Ford and Michael Ondaatje. In recognition of Adamson’s talents in the crime fiction genre, *The Outlander* won the 2007 Hammett Prize. The book was also chosen in the 2009 Canada Reads program, among other honors.
Marjorie Agosín

As a Jew growing up in Catholic Chile, Marjorie Agosín’s experience of alienation developed her sensitivity as a writer and motivated her to champion humanitarian causes. She has published numerous books of poetry as well as non-fiction and a children book.

Born: June 15, 1955; Bethesda, Maryland

Principal Works:

Poetry

Brujas y algo más/Witches and Other Things (1984)
Women of Smoke (1988)
Zones of Pain (1988)
Circles of Madness: Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (1992)
Sargasso (1993)
Toward the Splendid City (1994)
Dear Anne Frank (1998)
Melodious Women (1998)
The Angel of Memory/El angel de la memoria (2001)
At the Threshold of Memory: New & Selected Poems (2003)
Mother, Speak to Us About War/Madre, hablanos de la Guerra (2015)

Children’s Literature

I Lived on Butterfly Hill (2015)

Nonfiction

Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras (1987)
A Cross and a Star: Memoirs of a Jewish Girl in Chile (1995)

Biography

Marjorie Agosín was born on June 15, 1955, in Bethesda, Maryland, the daughter of Moises and Frida Agosín. Her father, a Chilean college professor, was a visiting scientist at the National Institutes of Health. Marjorie’s grandparents were European Jews who had immigrated to Chile. Three years after Marjorie’s birth, her family returned to their home in Santiago, Chile, where she had an idyllic childhood. As a Jew in a Catholic country, however, she was always aware of her outsider status. Early on, Marjorie began...
writing poetry in her “dream books” and reading her work to her parents.

When Marjorie was fifteen, her father was appointed visiting professor at the University of Georgia in Athens. She entered Clark Central High School, where, as a Latina Jew, she again felt that she did not belong. In 1972, after the socialist president of Chile, Salvador Allende, was assassinated, the Agosins felt they had no choice but to remain in the United States. Marjorie Agosin attended the University of Georgia, where she majored in philosophy, receiving her B.A. in 1976. At Indiana State University she earned an M.A. in Spanish literature in 1977 and a Ph.D. in 1982. In 1977, Agosin married John Wiggins, a nuclear physicist. They had a son and a daughter. In 1982, she joined the faculty at Wellesley College as an associate professor of Latin American literature. She later became a professor and the chair of the Spanish Department.

“My whole view of the world and my sense of language and understanding, it’s informed by my understanding of poetic language. So I am a poet writing memoirs. I’m not a memorialist making poetry out of memoir, no. It’s the poet that informs, describes, feels, and understands. So it’s really the same self. And I would even go farther that even with essays, which there’s a demand of historical truth, of more linear narrative, I still think I am the poet self speaking.”

Agosín was awarded a Fulbright summer scholarship in 1985, and in 1990 she studied in Argentina as a Fulbright fellow. She received grants from the Massachusetts Artist Foundation, the New England Foundation for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. She won a Jeanette Rankin Award in 1990, a Peabody Award in 1992, a Mexican Cultural Institute Prize in 1995, the Letras de Oro Prize for poetry in 1995, and the Latino Literature Prize in 1995. In 1988, the National Association of Christians and Jews presented Agosin with their Good Neighbor Award. For her human rights work, she was also given a United Nations Leadership Award and Hadassah’s Henrietta Szold Award. As a Jew growing up in Catholic Chile, Agosín’s experience of alienation developed her sensitivity as a writer and motivated her to champion humanitarian causes.

**Major Works**

Although Agosin’s first publications were translations of poems she had written in Spanish, she also wrote short stories and essays. She edited numerous volumes, usually anthologies of women writers. Both her fiction and her nonfiction often deal with the degradation, imprisonment, and torture of women on the fringes of society. Some of her most appealing books combine lyrical poetry and poetic prose in an exploration of what it means to be Jewish in a non-Jewish society. Examples of such work include her mother’s story, *A Cross and a Star: Memoirs of a Jewish Girl in Chile* (1994), *Always from Somewhere Else: A Memoir of My Chilean Jewish Father* (1998), and Agosin’s autobiography, *The Alphabet in My Hands: A Writing Life* (2000).

**Further Reading**


—Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman

**Francisca Aguirre**

*Francisca Aguirre* is a well-known and critically acclaimed poet in her native Spain and beyond, Francisca Aguirre (also known as Paca Aguirre) is the author of numerous collections of poetry as well as works that blend poetry and prose.

**Born:** October 27, 1930; Alicante, Spain

**Died:** April 13, 2019

**Principal Works:**

**Poetry**


*La otra música*, 1977 (The Other Music: Selected Poems from the 1970s, 2011)

*Ensayo general* (1996)

*Los trescientos escalones* (1977)

*Pavana del desasosiego* (1999)


Nanas para dormir desperdicios (2008)
Historia de una anatomía (2010)
Conversaciones con mi animal de compañía (2013)

Memoir
Espejito, espejito (1995)

Short Fiction
Que planche Rosa Luxemburgo (1995)

Biography
Perhaps best known among English-speaking readers for her 1972 work Ítaca, published in English as Ithaca in 2004, Aguirre has received numerous awards over the course of her long career, including Spain’s prestigious National Prize for Poetry, which she received in 2011 for the collection Historia de una anatomía (2010; History of an anatomy).

Aguirre was born in Alicante, Spain, on October 27, 1930. She was one of three daughters born to Lorenzo Aguirre, a painter, and Francisca Benito Rivas. Following the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the Aguirre family fled Spain for France, where they spent time in the city of Le Havre. Following the German invasion of France during World War II, the family returned to Spain in 1940, where Aguirre’s father was imprisoned and later executed under the authority of the new Spanish government ruled by military dictator Francisco Franco. The experience had a significant effect on Aguirre and shaped the development of some of her later poetic works. As a teenager in Spain, Aguirre worked as a telephone operator before obtaining a position as a secretary. She later took a secretarial position at the Institute of Hispanic Culture, where she worked from 1971 to 1994.

Long interested in poetry, Aguirre began composing her own poems as a young woman and at times read them at gatherings in Madrid, Spain. She later destroyed much of her early work before focusing her attention on composing what would become her first published collection. Her debut collection, Ítaca, was published in 1972. One of her best-known works internationally, the collection would go on to be translated into English and published in the United States as Ithaca in 2004.

Over the following several decades, Aguirre published numerous collections of poetry, including La otra música (1977; The Other Music, 2011), Ensayo general (1996; General Essay), Memoria arrodillada (2002; Kneeling Memory), and Conversaciones con mi animal de compañía (2013; Conversations with My Pet). She was awarded the prestigious Premio Nacional de Poesía (National Poetry Prize) in 2011 for the collection Historia de una anatomía (History of an Anatomy), published the previous year. In addition to her purely poetic works, Aguirre is also the author of the memoir Espejito, espejito (1995; Mirror, Mirror), which is told through both poetry and prose, and the book Que planche Rosa Luxemburgo (1995; Let Rosa Luxembour Iron), which encompasses short stories as well as poems.


Major Works
As a poet who published in Spain for more than four decades, Aguirre was widely lauded for her poetry in that country, earning praise for works such as Los trescientos escalones (1977; Three Hundred Steps), Que planche Rosa Luxemburgo, and Historia de una anatomía. The latter work, one of her most critically praised, features poems that—as the collection’s title suggests—use parts of the human body as the basis for broader considerations of humanity that are at times autobiographical in nature. Indeed, many of Aguirre’s works feature autobiographical elements, as is perhaps most obvious in works such as Espejito,
espejito, which is a memoir told through both poetry and prose. Even works explicitly dealing with subjects other than the self, however, often connect back to the poet. Perhaps Aguirre’s best-known work in the United States and the first of her collections to be translated into English (by Ana Valverde Osan), Ithaca, is essentially a retelling of the classical Greek poet Homer’s epic The Odyssey from the perspective of Penelope, the wandering hero Odysseus’s wife, who endures various hardships as she waits for her husband to return home from war. Although largely focusing on Penelope and deeply rooted in classical literature, the sequence of poems presented in Ithaca at times acknowledges the existence of the poet herself. In the final poem in the sequence, “Loom” (“Telar”), the poem’s speaker addresses Aguirre directly by name in its first and last lines, inextricably linking the poet with Ithaca’s subject.

Further Reading

—Joy Crelin

Kaveh Akbar

Kaveh Akbar is an Iranian American poet whose work is best known for taking on issues of addiction, recovery, and identity. His won the prestigious Pushcart prize in 2017, and his work has appeared in the New Yorker, the New Republic, and the Paris Review. He is also the founder of the poetry interview website Divedapper.

Born: January 15, 1989; Tehran, Iran

Principal Works:

Poetry
Portrait of the Alcoholic (2017)
Calling a Wolf a Wolf (2017)

Biography
Akbar was born in Tehran, Iran, to an American mother and Iranian father, both scientists. His father, an agricultural scientist, had worked in the United States, and then taken a position at the University of Tehran. The family returned to the United States when Akbar was two years old, living in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and finally Indiana. Akbar recalls that his parents stopped speaking Farsi, the language that was most familiar to him at that point, and only spoke English from then on. The emphasis on English, a precocity with language, and his mother’s emphasis on building a robust vocabulary gave Akbar an early love for writing poetry. Akbar has said in interviews that his mother has collected poems he has written since he was four years old. Akbar published his first poem about the Green Bay Packers, in the local Oak Creek, Wisconsin, newspaper when he was in second grade. He also recalled that his mother read books of SAT vocabulary words and then wove them into everyday conversation, which both gave Akbar an extraordinary grasp of English and made him self-conscious in school.

“Yeah, I had a professor in my M.F.A. who told me once that my poems only had three subjects: God, addiction, and sex. And that often times all three would intersect in the same poem. And he said it in a kind of joking way, but it’s also not untrue. It’s difficult to speak about one’s obsessions with any perspective. But I think those are certainly mine.”

Akbar’s family then moved to Warsaw, Indiana, and he attended Warsaw High School, where he was mentored by English teacher Steve Henn, himself a published poet. Akbar recalls Henn giving him poetry books from independent publishers and knowing without a doubt that he was meant to be a poet. In 2005, while still in high school, Akbar started a publication, later a literary journal, called the Quirk; he continued working on it in college and convinced many distinguished poets to contribute. While in
high school, Akbar worked at Schoop’s Hamburgers in Warsaw and wrote poetry that he later described as working-man and world-weary, at odds with being a teenager still at home with his parents.

Kaveh Akbar lives in Indianapolis, Indiana, with his spouse, the poet Paige Lewis. The pair met in Florida but were married in Seattle where Akbar’s family now lives, in 2018.

Major Works

Akbar studied poetry at Purdue University in Indiana. He was not, by his own admission, a very promising undergraduate, and eventually struggled with addiction to alcohol and drugs. Despite this, he earned an unfunded admission to the M.F.A. writing program at Butler University. There, Akbar found sobriety, which he chronicled in his poetry. He also founded Divedapper, a website devoted to interviews with contemporary poets, in 2014. Akbar graduated from Butler in 2015 and entered the Ph.D. program at Florida State University. In December of that year he was invited to read his poem “Palmyra” on PBS NewsHour. Over the next year, Akbar’s work was published in the New Yorker and Poetry magazine, as well as other prestigious literary publications, and he won the Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation.

In January 2017, Akbar gained national attention when he protested President Donald Trump’s executive order enacting a travel ban on citizens of majority-Muslim countries by tweeting poems from majority-Muslim countries affected by the ban, such as Iran and Syria. That same month, Akbar published a forty-eight-page poetry chapbook entitled Portrait of the Alcoholic, which chronicled his path of recovery from alcoholism. In subsequent interviews, he discussed how he approaches poetry with the same obsessiveness and attention that he once devoted to his addiction, rising early to write until the early afternoon and then teaching until late into the evening. In 2017, Akbar received the Pushcart Prize for poetry, and in September 2018, he published the full-length poetry collection Calling a Wolf a Wolf to critical acclaim. He has referred to this latter work as the full album, and Portrait of the Alcoholic as the EP, as many of the poems from the chapbook appear in the full-length work as well.

In the fall of 2017, Akbar joined the faculty of his alma mater, Purdue University, as a visiting assistant professor. He was promoted to a tenure-track assistant professor position the following year. In 2018, Akbar joined two other poets to write a new feature for the Paris Review called “Poetry Rx,” where readers are invited to submit particular emotions that the poets then find poems to match.

Further Reading


—Bethany Groff Dorau

Meena Alexander

A poet, essayist, novelist, and scholar, Meena Alexander produced a varied body of work over her career that reflected her cosmopolitan upbringing and adult life. Her work was intimately concerned with crossing borders, literal ones as well as linguistic.

Born: February 17, 1951; Allahabad, India
Died: November 21, 2018; United States

Principal Works:

Poetry
Stone Roots (1980)
House of a Thousand Doors (1988)
The Storm: A Poem in Five Parts (1989)
Night Scene, the Garden (1992)
River and Bridge (1996)
Illiterate Heart (2002)
Raw Silk (2004)
Quickly Changing River (2008)
Shimla: A Poem Cycle (2012)
Impossible Grace: Jerusalem Poems (2012)
Birthplace with Buried Stones (2013)
Atmospheric Embroidery (2018)
Long Fiction
*Nampally Road* (1991)
*Manhattan Music* (1997)

Nonfiction
*The Poetic Self* (1979)
*Women in Romanticism* (1989)
*Poetics of Dislocation* (2009)

Biography
Poet, essayist, novelist, and scholar Meena Alexander produced a varied body of work over her career that reflected her cosmopolitan upbringing and adult life. Born in Allahabad, India, in 1951 as the oldest of three girls, when she was a child, she moved with her mother to join her father in Sudan after he had been given a job working in the recently independent country. While living in Sudan, she went back to visit India every year, and the languages of the two countries blended in her mind. She would go back and forth from one to the other, and this linguistic fluidity would prove a huge influence on her subsequent work, of which a main feature is polyglotism. These multicultural experiences and her struggle with a sense of place would also stay with her as she began to write.

Alexander graduated from Unity High School in Khartoum and began her undergraduate studies at Khartoum University when she was thirteen, studying English and French before graduating with honors in 1969. At the age of eighteen, she moved to England to pursue her doctorate in English at the University of Nottingham. After graduating from that program, she moved back to India in 1973, where she taught briefly at the University of Delhi until settling in Hyderabad for the rest of the decade, working at such institutions as the Central Institute of English. Her return to India coincided with a turbulent period in the nation’s history, when civil rights were withdrawn between 1975 and 1977 before being restored.

In 1979, Alexander relocated with her husband, whom she had met in Hyderabad, to the United States to take a job as an assistant professor of English at Fordham University in New York. She stayed there for several years before moving to the City University system, where she continued to teach at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center. During this time, she also began publishing a wide range of books, establishing her bona fides as a poet and producing volumes of theory and other nonfiction and fictional works. Along the way, she has won numerous awards, including Guggenheim, Fulbright, and Rockefeller fellowships. She married David Lelyveld in 1979 and had one son and one daughter. She died on November 21, 2018 of undisclosed causes at the age of 67.

Major Works
As someone who has migrated from country to country throughout her life, picking up different languages along the way, Meena Alexander logically has produced a body of work that is intimately concerned with the crossing of borders, both literal and linguistic. As Ruth Maxey noted in an interview with Alexander for the *Kenyon Review*, heteroglossia is a “very important” aspect of Alexander’s work, and specifically, this linguistic fluidity is a chief characteristic of the rhythm of her poetry. In addition, her poetry is characterized by a sensual imagery and a tendency to juxtapose images from the natural world with the more brutal images of a human world given over to oppression and violence. Such is the case in her lauded 2008 book, *Quickly Changing River*. In this book, mystical transformations are a key part of the world she portrays, as when the song of a bird becomes the sound of a girl in a café; this is also another form of border crossing. However, even here, the wondrous always rubs against the violent and earthly, as Alexander never shies away from the disruptions of the modern world.

“I n a time of violence, the task of poetry is in some way to reconcile us to our world and to allow us a measure of tenderness and grace with which to exist.”

Meena Alexander

Meena Alexander (Photo courtesy of Tjlee101)
These tendencies are felt in Alexander’s later work as well, as she continued to probe the nature of the planet through the vantage point of the four continents she has called home. In her 2013 collection, Birthplace with Buried Stones, she takes the reader from India to New York City, recording the intimacies and horrors of contemporary life. In this collection, she displays her wide-ranging curiosity and reach, imagining the lives of other poets and taking the reader into the grim world of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Wherever she turned her attention, she brought a full commitment to understanding the workings of the world, breaking down barriers—formal, linguistic, geopolitical, and interpersonal—as she proceeded.

Further Reading

—Andrew Schenker

Kazim Ali

The prolific and constantly surprising poet Kazim Ali produces works that reflect his diverse background and span multiple genres. He has published six volumes of verse to date. Currently, he is a professor of literature and creative writing at the University of California, San Diego.

Born: 1971; London, England

Principal Works:

Poetry
The Far Mosque (2005)
The Fortieth Day (2008)

Sky Ward (2013)
All One’s Blue (2016)
Inquisition (2018)

Short Fiction
Uncle Sharif’s Life in Music (2016)

Long Fiction
Quinn’s Passage (2005)
The Disappearance of Seth (2009)
Wind Instrument (2014)
The Secret Room: A String Quartet (2017)

Nonfiction
Fasting for Ramadan: Notes from a Spiritual Practice (2011)
Anaïs Nin: An Unprofessional Study (2017)
Silver Road: Essays, Maps & Calligraphies (2018)

Biography
The prolific and constantly surprising poet Kazim Ali produces works that reflect his diverse background and span multiple genres while always drawing on the techniques of poetry. Born in England to Muslim parents of primarily Indian, but also Iranian and Egyptian, descent, Ali was raised first in Canada and then in the United States, eventually settling in western New York State. After graduating from the State University of New York at Albany (SUNY Albany) with both a bachelor’s degree and a master’s in English, he worked for four years as an organizer for various political and social justice causes. During this time, he served as president of the United States Student Association (USSA) and as a trainer for the Midwest Academy training school for progressive organizers, among other roles. Ali’s commitment to social justice and interest in world politics, which would later find him spending much time in the Palestinian territories, vied with literature as a primary interest and would come to inform his future verse.

Turning his attention back to the written word, after spending time away from school, Ali decided to pursue his M.F.A. degree at New York University (NYU). Both the school and the city proved highly influential in his development as a writer. While at NYU, he studied with celebrated poets Sharon Olds and Philip Levine, both of whom helped shape his emergent poetics. At the same time, he immersed himself in the Lower East Side arts scene, which, he told
Kazim Ali’s body of work is wide ranging and diverse, crossing genres and drawing on odd, compelling combinations of different types of materials. It is marked by a penchant for fragmentation that, according to critic Benjamin Myers, “hints at a fullness irrecoverable, poignant in its unsettling allusiveness.” He often draws on specific source materials as a basis for his work, such as Greek mythology (his 2013 collection Sky Ward is based on the myth of Icarus), or the facts of his own life.

This latter source forms the basis of one of his most celebrated works, his difficult-to-classify volume Bright Felon: Autobiography and Cities (2009). Combining memoir and verse, Bright Felon traces the author’s many wanderings in what has been a highly peripatetic life. Each of the book’s fifteen sections details a different city in which Ali has lived, crafting prose poems that are rich in images and steeped in the narrator’s keen reflections. His concerns in the book touch on his diverse background, probing questions of religion, sexual identity, and the calling of the artist. Bright Felon is just one of many books that Ali has written that productively break down genre distinctions. In an essay for the collection Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction (2013), Ali explains his poetic approach to prose, writing, “What poetry—in its queerness of structure, language, intents, and appearance—can offer to prose is life, the same thing that queer life has always—throughout all cultures, ancient and modern—offered to heteronormativity.” As a gay man, Ali has had plenty of experience breaking down boundaries, and he applies this to his poetic practice; as a poet who also writes prose, he is keenly attuned to the ways that one can enliven the other. Just as queerness can complicate heteronormativity, so can genre-queerness complicate the staid practices of generically corralled writing. In works such as his collection Silver Road: Essays, Maps & Calligraphies (2018), a hybrid text that combines essays, diary entries, and verse fragments to get at further aspects of his lived experience, Ali proves that such a trans-generic approach can be a uniquely effective means of communication.

Further Reading
Jack Anderson

Jack Anderson, a contemporary New York City poet and dance critic, has published over a dozen poetry books and several popular books on dance history and theory. A gay New York City writer with a postmodern sensibility, Anderson’s experimental verse tends to be quirky, surreal, or comical, although his poetry can also be serious and written in more traditional forms.

Born: June 15, 1935; Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Principal Works:

Poetry
The Man in the Deck Chair (1960)
Tourist (1961)
The Hurricane Lamp (1969)
The Invention of New Jersey: Poems (1969)
City Joys (1975)
Dust Dancers (1977)
Toward the Liberation of the Left Hand (1977)
The Clouds of That Country (1982)
Selected Poems (1983)
Field Trips on the Rapid Transit (1990)
Getting Lost in a City Like This (2009)
Backyards of the Universe (2017)

Nonfiction
Dance (1974)
The Nutcracker Ballet (1979)
The One and Only: The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo (1981)
Ballet and Modern Dance: A Concise History (1986)
Choreography Observed (1987)
The American Dance Festival (1987)

Edited Works
The Dance, the Dancer, and the Poem: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Dance Poems (1972)

Biography

Jack Anderson was born on June 15, 1935, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Eleanor and George W. Anderson. He attended Northwestern University and Indiana University, where he earned a master’s degree in creative writing in 1958. His master’s thesis consisted of a collection of poetry entitled “Ways of Saying: A Volume of Poetry.”


With such recognition under his belt, Anderson went on to publish in Poetry, TriQuarterly, the Nation, Prairie Schooner, and many other magazines and journals. In 1976, he was named a Pushcart Prize winner for his collection City Joys (1975), published by Release Press. The award included the publication of the title poem in The Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses (1976).

During the next few decades, Anderson completed several more volumes of poetry, held a poet-in-residence position at the University of Kansas, and received a creative writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). He was included in dozens of anthologies that range from collections of gay poetry to experimental poetry, prose poetry, and alternative writing. In 1998, his collection Traffic: New and Selected Poems won the Marie Alexander Award for prose poetry.

While Anderson has achieved a modest level of recognition among poetry enthusiasts, the general public associates his name more with dance books, articles, and reviews. The popularity of his introductory dance book, Dance (1974), led to his longstanding position as dance critic for the New York Times. His continued works in the field of dance include Ballet and Modern Dance: A Concise History (1986), Art Without Boundaries: The World of Modern Dance (1997) and The One and Only: The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo (1981), which won the De la Torre Bueno Prize in 1981. He has also taught dance history at the University of Adelaide in Australia, the New School for Social Research in New York, and other colleges.

Anderson is especially recognized in New York City, where he has been involved with the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church and is a popular figure in dance and literary circles. In July 2006, he married his longtime partner, George Edward Dorris, at a ceremony in Toronto. He and Dorris founded and co-edit Dance Chronicle.
Major Works
Jack Anderson is known mostly for humorous, irreverent, edgy, and/or quirky poems that feature an original voice and imaginative scenarios. His experimental techniques and styles, as well as some subjects and themes, fall under the umbrella of postmodernism, an all-encompassing term for most of the major avant-garde poetry movements after World War II, including the Beats, the New York School, Confessional, and Language poetry. His poetry reflects queer subjects and themes and urban sensibilities. He also writes about many other subjects, including travel, families, and dreams. He has written few poems about dance, although he has pointed out similarities between dance and poetry: “They are both arts of rhythm...and arts of movement, either of words across a page or bodies across a stage.

Anderson’s city poems tend to involve impressionistic glimpses of the people and landmarks of Manhattan, although they often point inward rather than focusing on external phenomena. In “City Joys,” “cars on the Outer Drive / sweep by like thoughts. In “A Poet’s Guide to the Subway,” “One sees a dark tunnel” and “a wall with cables and pipes, / one’s projected likeness riding the wall. His passion for the city, however, usually shines, and the poems are often comical, although he doesn’t hesitate to confront the worst aspects of urban life.

Anderson’s queer-themed poetry, published as early as the 1960s, puts him near the forefront of the contemporary gay literary movement. His most personal love poems come closest to imitating the Confessional poetry of John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, and others who were writing while Anderson was still a college student. While Anderson poems don’t usually offer the same depth, and tend to be much lighter in tone, the subject matter itself is Confessional, as prior to this time, the topic of homosexuality was relatively taboo. Not all of his poems about gay themes are personal, though. Many are observations, commentaries, or imagined scenarios, such as “A Not Uncommon Case: A Melodrama,” in which a father shoots his gay son.

Many of Anderson’s poems don’t look like poems and, therefore, challenge pre-conceived notions about the meaning of poetry. For example, “Social Studies Problems,” a narrative about an underage, homosexual relationship and a robbery, is set up like an essay test, with statements followed by questions. In “True-or False-Quiz,” which some may read as a love poem, the narrator plays with the reader by offering the opportunity to guess whether he is telling the truth or not. “A Partial Index to Myself” is merely a listing of subjects or qualities arranged from A to Z that represent personality characteristics or items associated with the poet. They range from the mundane (“Christmas,” “piano lessons,” “manicure scissors,”) to quirky things (“huggermugger,” “gnus fit to print,” “you and the night and the music”). Overall, they create a lighthearted and humorous portrait of the artist.

Many of Anderson’s poems also demonstrate the postmodern sense of “artifice.” They deliberately call attention to the fact that they are poems, or that the poet is inviting the reader to interact with the poem-techniques used by such Language poets as Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, and Lyn Hejinian. For example, the first lines of “At Memphis Station” claim, “This is a poem you probably do not know. / I, too, do not know it. In “A Way of Happening,” he writes, “I shall not conceal / anything / in this poem. Referring to the subjects in that poem, he asks,

Does anyone know whatever became of anyone I’ve mentioned in this poem?

If so, please contact me in care of this publication.

Anderson is known also for his prose poems, a common postmodern style. These dramatic narratives or observations about the world are written in paragraph form and conversational English. Often the subject matter is surreal, as in “Thimbleism,” about a woman who can make the stars twinkle by wiggling her fingers, or “Gnats Swarming Above the Bed at 3:30 A.M.,” in which images as diverse as “dinosaurs,” “the sex life of chickens,” and “pickles” enter into his stream of consciousness.

Further Reading

—Sally Driscoll
Kofi Anyidoho

Modern Ghanaian poet Kofi Anyidoho works in both the English and Ewe languages, bringing oral Ewe traditions into a contemporary poetry practice.

**Born:** July 25, 1947; Wheta, Ghana

**Principal Works:**

**Poetry**

*Elegy for the Revolution* (1978)
*Earthchild, with Brain Surgery* (1985)
*Ancestral Logic and Caribbean Blues* (1993)
*The Place We Call Home and Other Poems* (2011)

**Nonfiction**


**Biography**

Kofi Anyidoho was born in the village of Wheta in eastern Ghana to a family of poets; his mother and two uncles were active cantors in the oral Ewe tradition. Until middle school, he spoke and wrote exclusively in the Ewe language but, in preparation for exams for higher schooling, was forced to learn English. Anyidoho pursued a formal education in teaching at Accra Training College and the Advanced Teacher Training College, Winneba. He later obtained a bachelor’s degree in English and linguistics from the University of Ghana, then relocated to the United States. There, he studied folklore at Indiana University at Bloomington before finally completing a Ph.D. in comparative literature at the University of Texas at Austin. With expertise in both English and Ewe literary traditions, he returned to the University of Ghana as a professor. Anyidoho quickly became a leader in social and literary movements, serving as the executive producer for a series on African heritage for Ghana Television, as the president of the African Literature Association in the United States, and on the editorial board of numerous literary magazines. Primarily residing in Ghana, he has continued to spend occasional semesters in the United States as a visiting professor.

**Major Works**

Anyidoho is celebrated as a poet who bridges the oral traditions of Ewe literature with the written word, with many of his greatest works released as audio recordings as well as printed books. In line with these oral traditions, his poetry is often deeply rhythmic and musical, relying on powerful symbolic imagery and on elegiac modes, all familiar to Ewe audiences who might listen to rather than read his work.

Anyidoho’s first collection, *Brain Surgery* (published with Earthchild in 1985), frequently praises the traditional role of the poet in Ewe society. “My Song,” its opening poem, aligns Anyidoho with the Ewe singing poet, announcing,

> The gifts that bestows at birth
> Some had some splendid things
> What was mine?
> I sing....

In acknowledging the tremendous role Ewe literature has played in Anyidoho’s writing, it is important to avoid suggesting that the modern poet is old-fashioned. Rather, his work is concerned with making contemporary the role of the oral poet, updating that powerful tradition rather than letting it die, as he shifts toward printed and English work (most poems are written in Ewe, then translated into English by Anyidoho). His 1978 collection *Elegy for the Revolution* provides a clear example of this practice. In it, Anyidoho confronts General I. K. Acheampong, who took control of Ghana in a coup that he claimed to be a revolution but that Anyidoho saw as another violent regime. The poem “Ghosts” from this collection declares:
watch revolution of worlds
load guts of goats with power of
bulls, the fools we were
we would seek refuge on wings of their visions
deserting the dream we placed among the thorns.

There are similar qualities to his early poetry here, including the musical repetition of sounds and the positioning of the poet as one person among a collective society (“we”). But this is also a modern voice, words echoing with complex histories (“refuge,” “deserting the dream,” “thorns”) as the poet confronts the contemporary politics of Ghana.

Whether directly facing the political, celebrating the cultural, or singing the personal, Anyidoho ultimately succeeds because of his musical gifts, the lyricism of the spoken word providing an endless fount of optimism and inspiration. This musicality connects the love poet of “Do Not Give Too Much Your Love to Me,” declaring, “Long ago I chose the rainbow upon my soul / I am the bird in flight / The arrow through your night”, with the Ewe poet of “PraiseSong for TheLand,” announcing,

I want to sing a PraiseSong
for TheLand
I must sing a PraiseSong
For OurPeople.

Such words move the lasting tradition of Ewe oral poetry into the modern day, the lyric rhythm and rhyme of language an endless playfield, with Anyidoho proving oral poetry to be as powerful and relevant as ever.

Further Reading

—T Fleischmann

Simon Armitage

In 2019, Simon Armitage was named the United Kingdom Poet Laureate. Born in 1963 in Huddersfield, England, Armitage and his poetry are strongly rooted in the language and personality of his home in the north of England. A versatile artist, he has also published novels, non-fiction essays, plays, and song lyrics, and has received numerous awards and accolades for his varied work.

Born: May 26, 1963; Huddersfield, England

Principal Works:

Poetry
Human Geography (1986)
The Distance Between Stars (1987)
The Walking Horses (1988)
Zoom! (1989)
Around Robinson (1991)
Xanadu (1992)
Kid (1992)
Book of Matches (1993)
The Anaesthetist (1994)
The Dead Sea Poems (1995)
CloudCuckooLand (1997)
All Points North (1998)
Killing Time (1999)
Selected Poems (2001)
Travelling Songs (2002)
The Universal Home Doctor (2002)
The Shout (2005)
Tyrannosaurus Rex versus the Corduroy Kid (2006)
Twilight Readings (2008)
Out of the Blue (2008)
The Not Dead (2008)
Seeing Stars (2010)
Stanza Stones (2013)
The Unaccompanied (2017)
Flit (2018)

Drama
Mister Heracles (2000)
Tachograph (libretto; music by Diana Burrell) (1993)
Eclipse (1997)
Jerusalem (2005)
The Assassin Tree (libretto; music by Stuart MacRae) (2006)

Edited Text(s)
Short and Sweet: 101 Short Poems (1999)