

INTERVIEW WITH SAMIYA BASHIR BY STEVEN G. FULLWOOD

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WHERE ARE YOU FROM, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN, AND WHY ARE YOU HERE (IN NEW YORK)?

I'm "from" Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. Midwestern mix-up girl; Somali nomad meets Detroit native. As soon as I got to have say in where I lived and what I did I took it. I've I've been around the world and I'm thinkin...hmmm ... I may just have found my baby. Lived from California (LA & the Bay) to Chicago to Hot Springs, Arkansas. I riverstone skipped through D.C. on my way to landing in New York almost 8 10 years ago. Why am I here? To do my work. To live and work in an environment that feeds me. I came here to meet the people and experiences that would help me grow. I got to New York ready to take on the world and I did. The world hasn't won quite yet; the battle isn't over and occasionally it even tilts my way.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR WRITING? WRITE IT DOWN IN IAMBIC PENTAMETER.

I.

I hate sonnets; they give me a headache.
All the iambs and rhyme schemes they make me
weak with nausea. These lines they tease and break
my concentration. The time it takes me

to squeeze into its rough-hewn, skin-tight dress
I could have been where I'm going and back
home again. Formulaic wardrobes stress
my slow burning brain cells which clearly lack

the energy to stress my syllables
instead. Writing sonnets? I need a drink
to calm my nerves, make it refillable—
I'll need another if I want to think.

I hate sonnets worse than hothouse flowers.
I have far better ways to waste hours.

II.

I hate myself; I'm always scribbling bunk.
I'm an animal—selfish to the core.
I'm likely to mope about in a funk
eating nothing but junk, sleeping past four

in the afternoon. When finally I wake
you'll wish I'd stayed sleeping. At least that way
you could enter my conscience, try to break
through the fog which blocks every word you say.

Believe me – I want to listen to you!
Can we talk about something vital when
you're through? This very small talk makes me blue.
Buy me a coffin. I'll roll right in.

I hate myself; I'm forgetful and rude
even to poems—the poet obtrudes.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

I'm currently working on three separate projects – poetry and fiction. In each of these projects I seek a way to slice through the layers of barnacled detritus that is piling up on our collective surfaces. I'm working on stabbing through the leather and the microfiber, through the labels and the zippers and the snaps, through episode after episode of neo-vaudevillian minstrelsy

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marketed on every square foot of visible space, through the flesh and the fat and the muscle and the bone, to stick straight into the organs. I'm working on language that can shake loose any of us stuck in an overstimulated stupor into remembering not only how to feel, but how to act both alone and in concert. I'm also working on deciding to quit smoking. I'm working on maximizing my time on airplanes (mission, purpose, destination). I'm working on raising a sweet, willful energetic kitten into proud, diva-hip swinging cathood because, well, that's just something my people do.

YOU ARE ONE OF THE FOUNDING MEMBERS OF FIRE AND INK. TELL US ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION.

[Fire & Ink: A Festival for LGBT Writers of African Descent](#) was first held in Chicago in 2002. It was an historic gathering of over 300 LGBT writers and artists of African descent who came together for readings, panels, workshops and fellowship. In addition to its continuing round of regional events in advance of the next national conference, Fire & Ink has also spawned an online community of folks from around the country and around the world. It is an exciting, affirmative, instructive atmosphere for writers — including the legendary, the established and the fledgling — to come together and share and grow our work.

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR WRITING PROCESS. HOW OFTEN DO YOU WRITE?

I write in bursts. How do you describe a writing process? If it's anything then perhaps it's like breathing for an underwater mammal. I imagine a whale moving through the vastness of ocean, living underwater but breathing air. A great portion of life is spent living it – that's what takes up most of the energy allotted to a body. For the whale, the great portion of life is spent swimming; eating and mating and navigating the waters. In the swim of life, having taken in as much as we can hold, gone as long as we possibly could, maybe we can't even swim another stroke, take another step, without the fear of an absolute failure of the heart, a drowning that will send us slowly sailing to the bottom of the sea. We surface instead, this whale and I. Breath. Blow. Release all of the oceanworld we've collected in our travels through the air straight into the sky. Take a breath of its sweetness for ourselves. Get a bit of extra sunlight for warmth and glide back into deep, ready to swim a bit more. Eating. Mating. Navigating. Life.

Now, of course writing is one thing. That's the easy thing. Like breathing it's automatic – you can control it, instill your own rhythm, guide it, stylize it, but you can't not do it. Try to stop breathing and the best we're gonna do is pass out and start all over. Writing is not the difficult part, the difficult part is completing. Shaping. Shaving. Smoothing. Editing. That's the process, but how often? That probably comes in bursts too, but they're bursts I can control. I have more decision-making capacity over the editing and completion. I just must battle that demon clock and find the time where I can.

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TALK ABOUT THE GENESIS OF YOUR FIRST BOOK OF POETRY, WHERE THE APPLE FALLS.

Where the Apple Falls resides at the intersections between woman / female, both human and environmental, and the concepts to which she is often linked (without her consent): death; rebirth; victim; sexual/perverse. Seasons are crucial: from the birth of Spring through Autumn's final harvest I sought a recasting of the farmer; a reclamation of both fall and redemption, death and (re)birth on her own terms.

WHAT NEXT FOR THE BASHIR?

I wish I knew. I'd love to be able to just know what's coming up. It might relax me more. Might not. I'd like to barter for more time. I do know that I want to dig far more deeply into the oft-ignored corners of our shared histories and illuminate voices and stories pressured into silence. I want to create a poetry that shines a light at once gently coaxing from the damp, then demanding insistent illumination upon, images left for dust and abandoned. I want to share stories held deep in the roots of Georgian peach trees, and caught the shallow breath of Pennsylvania clear cut forests. I hope to pick up a shiny new black pen and create verse as comfortable in the red suede shoes of a 1940s Detroit women's house party as an Oklahoma barn raising or a Memphis mosque. I want to bear witness to worlds undiscovered or forgotten beneath, above and to the side of this other hammered into our steel-drum heads as "the" world.

Or, I might just meet a friend for a drink, and see where the night goes...