

Fred D'Aguiar

In conversation with Gabriel Gbadamosi

Fred D'Aguiar (FD'A): I felt that art, at its most beaten down, its most challenged, was immediately going towards uplift, through song, phrasing, breath. And so I began to value all those things immensely.

Presenter: This is WritersMosaic, In Conversation. Founding editor Gabriel Gbadamosi talks to poet Fred D'Aguiar at a WritersMosaic live event recorded in London in February 2022.

Gabriel Gbadamosi (GG): Fred D'Aguiar is a British Guyanese poet, playwright and novelist; author of eight poetry collections; five novels, including *The Longest Memory*, which won the David Hyam Prize for Fiction and the Whitbread First Novel Award. This could go on a long time, shall I cut it short? He's a great guy [audience laughter] and he's written this fantastic book, *Year of Plagues*, and if you might imagine, we've all

lived through it, the kind of lockdown, the closure of our lives, the sort of foreshortening of our horizons. For a year and a half, I thought, *maybe I've only got a couple of weeks to live if I catch it*. It happened to everybody, but it happened to Fred together with a cancer diagnosis. Plus, living, writing and teaching in the States; George Floyd. That murder of the black body. It's a bit of a pincer movement. And then there's an earthquake in California. A lot of things happened and we're going to be talking a bit about that book. So, can I invite Fred to come up? Please, for a round of applause. [Applause]

GG: Great, I think we're here. As we get started, let me kick off. Fred, reading your book, first of all, I discovered the cancer diagnosis. You didn't tell me when we met, the last time. And within the book, you say there's a lot of people you didn't tell. You didn't tell your mum, who's here. And my mum, from when I was born—when she was 24 till 48, and all that time, she developed cancer when she was carrying me—I never knew. I didn't know until two days before she died that she had cancer. Right? So, I understand that, I get that.

But then I opened the book and this extraordinary thing happens. You know, like those cassettes, when they kind of squeal forward, really fast forward, like that. I thought, [makes tense squealing sound]. This is the

quality of the prose. Of course, the pips are squeaking. You could kind of hear it. So, it really kind of impacts you. But then when I caught up with the kind of rhythm of the book, I kind of heard you say, well, your poetry kicked in. That's what saved you. You were going to attack this cancer. You were going to beat this cancer with a combination of medicine and poetry. You were going to chant down the Babylon that had come and colonised you. Can you tell us about that instinct to say *what will heal me, might be the drugs, but fundamentally what will heal me, is the poetry?*

FD'A: Good evening. Is this on? Can you hear me? Well, first of all: kaiso! Thank you for those tunes. That was fantastic stuff. In the church, of all places. It was so nice to hear your 'sermon'. It's so good to have song in the church, but with politics. Your 'liberation theology' is wonderful. Thank you. Thank you, Melanie, for everything, for tonight. I appreciate it. Gabriel, we go back a long way! [Gabriel laughs quietly] I had an afro when I met you. I had hair!

GG: Yeah, you did!

FD'A: Well, '83?

GG: Er, Sometime around there, yeah.

FD'A: Oh, my God. 1983. Sorry, I've got to say that before you all think, *he's some kind of creature*. And welcome, everybody. There are a lot of poets in the audience. I might got to say hello to some people I know in the audience. I just met Christopher, who's a writer. I didn't know him before. My mum is over there. Mum, I have cancer. No, I'm kidding! She already knows. I had. I told my mum eventually, I should tell you. Hello, Tash. Hello, Matt. John Agard, back there: hello. Juanita Cox from—where is it? The [inaudible] thing, yes, Guyana Speaks. Karen McCarthy Woolf, hello. There are people everywhere. Hello, all the artists. There are more artists than there are audience, and I appreciate it. So I must, since we're in a church, that's my sermon, thank you all, and goodnight! [laughter] No, no.

Okay, now for some serious business. Yeah, you know, I feel lucky. I feel I dodged a bullet. I was in L.A., and it was the lockdown, and I had to try and get an operation during the height of COVID. And what you're hearing all the time on the news was that COVID didn't like black people. America always talks about everything in terms of race. Blacks are the poorest, the loudest. The police always have to handle them. So it's always black people at the front of all the news and how the news is formulated. And so what they're saying was, it's very hard because a lot of

black people are dying from COVID. When I presented with cancer, I was expecting to have a difficult time because I couldn't get an operation in the middle of all the hospitals being full. But the second they realised I was working at the university and I was a professor, I became an honorary white. I was grateful for that, I must tell you.

I didn't want to have a disease that couldn't be treated, that I knew was in my body. That they no longer saw race because of my job. I was thinking, well, thank God for that. I was mad for everybody else who had to come in and present and be seen as racialized before they could be seen. So it was very difficult to get an operation, but I was able to jump the queue. That was a primary thing for me.

The other thing that was major was that I'd always thought the diagnosis was the thing front and uppermost in my mind. And it was, because it was very depressing. But when George Floyd was killed, and I saw the video, which I couldn't watch for a long time, students saw it, they were saying, you gotta see this thing. People were crying. People became traumatised by watching it, as if they'd been there to witness it. And then the streets which were really empty, in L.A. it's all traffic, people could drive from A to B and get there in about a third of the time. And you realise, what has happened to L.A.? Well, imagine those streets, suddenly people were out

in the streets protesting. A lot of people who, students were out in the streets, a lot of white people were out in the streets saying, you don't do this to another human being. I don't care who you are. And so, suddenly what broke out was this amazing civil rights that I—made my disease fly to the back of my brain. I was no longer thinking, *Oh, poor me, what next?* It was suddenly: I had to pay attention to the protests.

I was careful not to get arrested. I went to the demonstration from five past four to ten past four, and I was back home. And before the curfew, I behaved like a professor. I showed my face, waved to the students, and then left. No, I didn't, I didn't wanna be hit by the police or hurt because they were very, very rough. They fired blanks at people, they gassed people. So if you went there, there are a bunch of people who went and left quickly, and then there are a bunch of people who are more hardcore who had, right across America, had running battles with the police; to say *the streets are our streets, not your streets*. And the police are saying, *no, no, no, it's our streets. We have the armoured car to prove it*. And so there was a real thing that made my disease become irrelevant for a while.

So I was grateful for something else to remind me of a social, a communal space in which to operate. I hope that obliquely answers your question.

GG: Yeah, it does, but perhaps for people who haven't read the book, would you read us an excerpt now, just to give people a flavour of the book? [Aside] Right, is this with music or without?

FD'A: Colin said to my mum, 'It was good to read about the courtship at the back of the book'. And my mum said, 'What courtship?' Because she hasn't read the book yet. I have a copy for her to give to my mum, and the bit at the back of the book, which I'm not gonna read, is about her as a young woman meeting my father, and it's the most positive part of the book because they fall in love and make everything possible. So I wanted to put love at the back of the book after all the death of George Floyd and everything that went on. It was very important. I didn't run it by my mum because it's an essay that I spoke to her about. She told me some things about their relationship, and I made up quite a bit of it. The weather, the time of day, the fact that how her hair was done, to do with the 50s, Georgetown, Guyana. So when she sees it, she'll say, 'My hair wasn't combed to the left. It was...,' or whatever, but the rest of it is as true as love can be. And this section has nothing to do with that, Mum. I'm just preparing you for what you're gonna read. Here's the two paragraphs about my body.

[Reading]

I cannot wear a wristwatch anymore because of what time has done to my body. I look at wall clocks and see them as portals that open pathways into our minds and hearts, not with a routine to be obeyed and ordered by time, but as a chance to let all that go for this other way of living, as if on a short fuse, that you can see burning out as it approaches you with its invitation to extinction. Imagine a large jug of wine decanted for the interaction of the grapes with the air. Now pour that wine into six glasses and raise them in a toast. The time it took for those grapes to grow in the vineyard and mature and get pressed and bottled and left to stand again in a slow march toward maturity to end up in that jug is time not seen, whose surface is barely scraped in the brief duration of that toast. In similar fashion, the time that takes my body from me for an all-night party, one where everything goes, squanders all the time put into keeping my body healthy. All that preparation seemingly to prime my body for that night of adventure.

GG: Fred, the book is very full of reflections and refractions of your experience with the illness and really should be read to hear the voice of the cancer speaking to you, to hear your replies to it. It reminded me of many other books; of course, Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, but also Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*. But there's a particular move

that you make in the book that I'd like to ask you a question about. At a certain moment, you make an equivalence between cancer colonising your body and cancer as slavery, infecting the body of the enslaved and continuing down through history as a kind of a colonisation of the body. But you have, in a way, an answer to that, drawing on that 300-year history of transatlantic slavery and plantation slavery, which is the Anansi stories of your childhood. Could you tell us something about how you see Anansi helping you to bear and to outwit this disease?

FD'A: Yeah. Can I have the hand—I don't wanna lean forward. Can I have the hand mic again, please? Thank you. Yeah, I—This is okay, right? My voice is terribly quiet tonight. I don't know what's going on. Louise Bennett has a wonderful poem called Colonization in Reverse. So, this idea that we would arrive from the Caribbean to the metropolitan centre and recolonise Englishness on our terms. And then Ngugi has this idea that you have to decolonise yourself before you can become independent because the system is material, but it's also spiritual. And so, he asked for decolonisation of the mind. Those two things were in my head when I thought of the colonised body, when I thought of how it is the slavers, not the enslaved, actually are themselves colonised by their brutality, by how they behave, by their profiteering, by seeing another

person as less than human, by twisting Christianity to reconcile it with slavery.

So, I felt because of what was happening to my body, I could easily see it as a body politic thing, an outside thing, a bigger than me thing. And that society was sick and ill because they voted [laughs] for Trump. Trump came into power and we were very worried that he would get a second term. We felt people were unpredictable. We didn't know how they would gerrymander things to make sure they won. So, we felt that the cancer was—I felt my cancer was actually evident and prevalent because of the way society was going and behaving, because of George Floyd and so forth.

But my purp—the whole thing about that was this idea of a spiritual awakening too. I felt that if you could take away the frame of your colonised thinking, you could get to a centre that was enduring and nurturing. I'm not so sure what that centre is. If there even is—it's like an onion, you peel it and there's nothing, or if there really is a centre. But I knew that there was something where colonisation hadn't reached and where some of the Calypsonians, you know, Sparrow and everybody else, the reggae singers, the soul singers; the way they were singing, it was from a source, not just to do with the pain, but from something that

seemed to see beyond it and turn the pain into some kind of artistic process that was healing. So, I took from that, just from my listening habits, that there was something about my own illness which shouldn't become me, Fred, downtrodden, but some kind of lesson, some kind of, there should be some kind of awakening to go with it. Also, you get very depressed when you get cancer. So, that was largely—it was a self-medic—medicinal thing, too.

GG: And angry! [they laugh] I'm going to persist with this Anansi image because there were several moments at which you enter it. One, when you're on a bus on Blackheath Hill and you misjudge jumping off the back of the open—do you remember those old Routemasters? Jump off, he misjudges it, and he falls, rolling over and stands up on both feet and saunters off and gets a round of applause. That kind of Anansi that can outwit, kind of, gravity, in a way, also has a number of other qualities. One of the qualities is of the spider exactly. You know the way the spider has a million eggs and it splinters its body into its young? You present an idea of the communal body as a way to escape some of the problematics of 'If I die as an individual, is that the end? Is there anything afterwards?' No. There is always us. We are a communal body; you are one of us. We survive. It seems to me extremely kind of, not only resilient but very resourceful, what you do there.

But let me expand that communal body as something you propose in the book. You also say that that's world history, that's world politics, that's world literature. All of this is gathered into me, but doesn't end in me, even if I die. It's something that can re-explode into the world. I feel you've done that with the book, so I'm not gonna turn that into a question.

I'm gonna go to another question, which is something I couldn't quite agree with you about. In a way, you say it was prostate cancer. It's a man thing. And maybe I got this from my dad, whom I only ever saw once in my life. For the first time and the last time, that was when he was a corpse in his coffin. And in some ways, you re-enter, towards the end of the book, a dialogue with an absent father in order to kind of understand him, bring him close, but then part from him, and not, as it were, kind of have the overhanging cancer of, *who was my father, what went wrong there?* I didn't know why exactly, even with that background, why you would so firmly plant the causation of your cancer in that past relationship, or failed past relationship. Can you explain that a little bit?

FD'A: No. [Audience laughs] Well, I want you to read the book. Part of my reason for not talking about Anansi is because it's very complicated right through the book, the idea of shape-shifting and survival. So—and it's an

experience from the beginning of the book right through. My father is that Toni Morrison thing she talked about: the absent presence, the abiding force that is not there, but is informing your actions, and hereditary as an absent presence in my life. I mean, I know my grandmother on my mum's side had cancer, and she died in her 40s, right, Mum, 40s? So I know that, and I name her in the book, in passing, I say, yes, there is that, but my father's death, because I didn't know him, and he died when he was 53, and I wasn't sure exactly, you know, bad heart, and so we had all kinds of ideas, but I felt there could have been a secret thing that killed him, who knows? Because I didn't know him, but it was a pretext for talking about him as an absent presence, and about the hereditary of disease, and if genes trump understanding, they don't, was one of my arguments in the book. And I was interested in the father-son thing, mother-son thing as well, that runs through the book; about healing and forgiveness, understanding. But again, at the very beginning, you'll hear me wonder about it, but by the end, I hope it's resolved in that story; about the courtship, because the courtship is a declaration of love. You pool your resources together, you walk into an unknown future together. My mum did that with my dad, and I wanted that to be the celebratory last card that I put down against cancer, saying, do something with that, if you can. Cancer can't, cancer has to run away. Love, I haven't got a chance.

So, and it's also a love song to my mum, who is alive and who is here, to let her know I'm grateful for some things. [Laughs] Hey! Life, love, the fact that she ran with my dad, literally took his trust and his courtship and together fell in love. It's slightly romantic of me to do that, but, you know, it counted for me when my body was desecrated to believe in certain things that don't change, that are enduring. I mean, I sound like a pop song saying that, but so be it.

GG: It's fine. Then, I wondered whether I should kind of persist by shifting to the mother-son axis. There's a whole section in the book, which is, as far as I can work out, either an imagined or a verbatim account of Emmett Till's mother lamenting his corpse. For those who don't quite remember, Emmett Till was a 14-year-old boy living in the north of the States, sent back to the mother's family for a summer to get some country air. And apparently, it was claimed that he'd whistled at a white woman. They came to the family house. They took him away, tortured him, beat him, killed him, threw him in the river. And when he was fished out of the river and sent in an open casket that the mother demanded, she's asking the whole world to come and see what they did to her 14-year-old boy. What function does that play within the economy of your response to cancer?

FD'A: Good question, thank you. It's a good question because Emmett Till's body, reclined and brutalised, it's there for all time, as is George Floyd's death; will be there for all time. And because it's 1955 and George Floyd is 2020, I wanted that hop of 70 years to look like nothing in terms of how black bodies are viewed. And then, because I had never had surgery before in my life, I was lucky, my first encounter with medicine, I now have some scars to show for my operation. It was robotic surgery, as they call it, where they make incisions in the stomach and so on. And so I've had a daily reminder, these little places where I think, oh, wow! But it's nothing compared to what happened to Emmett Till.

And then I have a long meditative thing. I became interested in the gaze. Can you look at something long enough? Or do you have to avert your eyes and do a kind of Emily Dickinson thing and look at it at a slant because the gaze is too burning directly for the art to stand up? She has a lovely technique about that that allows you to come at the thing by looking at something else because that other thing relates to it. So I—But I thought in cancer's case, you've got to stare it down. And I felt it was, just as the mum thought it was important to have Emmett Till's coffin open so people can see what people do to children when they don't see them as human. I thought, well, *let me see, all I have is cancer. I'm not Emmett Till.* He was 15 when he died in 1955. I thought, you know, *I can at least look*

at cancer directly. Imagine this had—open coffin. And so I have a section which was based on a short story that was broadcast on Radio 4 about talking about the photograph of my son, Emmett Till, that she's telling somebody else about. So it's about taking one slide, a moment from 50s history, fast-forwarding to George Floyd's reminder of his slow nine minutes and 29 seconds lynching in public with lots of witnesses and trying to talk about the cancer of the society when black people are seen as not people, black lives don't matter, and so forth, and how that hasn't changed. So I wanted it to serve as a ti—a marker, a time placeholder, a marker of lack of progress.

In fact, we've gone backwards in terms of the treatment, actually, because now, at least, when it happens now, there's so much work at covering up. For example, the coroner who is employed and works in the police, but the police said that George Floyd may have had a pre-existing condition, which is why he couldn't withstand nine minutes and 29 seconds of a knee on his neck with his hands handcuffed behind his back and a policeman pinning his legs down and one pinning his midriff down. And it was that kind of thing where the society will try and talk their way out of it, using the force of the law, which they've designed to preserve their power. So—and I wanted that to be a part of the book so people didn't see me as, you know, crying in the soup of my cancer, as it were, but still

engaged politically and socially, still concerned and provoked by those questions, especially if they're happening and unfolding in front of me.

And then finally, for me, the pandemic is something I had never lived through. I was shocked by how it suddenly became this thing that would close the streets down. And the National Guard was in Mid City where I live. There's a local supermarket called Ralph's. I was on my way to Ralph's supermarket and I couldn't cross Venice because the National Guard had cordoned it off with these big vehicles. If you haven't seen National Guard in the U.S. and you see them for the first time in the streets, it's actually a real shock. All the usual signs are there. And then you see these guys in military fatigues and it makes you slow right down and look and look again. It was a physical shock to see them in these public spaces with their—fully armed. And I thought, *Whoa, this society definitely has cancer*. Something is going on. I better pay attention to it. So the Year of Plague became Year of Plagues and a kind of plural riff, a shape-shifting. I did it to survive cancer. You've got to be like Anansi.

I'm going to go to Anansi because I didn't want to say anything about it, but now I will. You got to go to Anansi because, when I was young, it was always a story about mischievousness paying off for a little while, but not all the time. And mischievousness being a lesson and a fable to help the rest of us watching it unfolding, not to repeat the mistakes, to be

generous, not through trickery and tomfoolery, but only if trickery procures resources for everybody. So I told a story about Anansi sharing the bananas. It's in the book. And Juanita, I was saying, when she interviewed me for Guyana Speaks, I repeated a part of it. I'm not going to tell it again, but there's something about sharing where Anansi procures lots of riches by trickery and through a shape-shifting habit, but he comes a cropper, as they say, because he's not into doing the social thing with his horde, which is to share it and distribute it and get even and feel even better. In some of the stories, he does. He shares, he feels better. But a lot of times, Anansi wants to get something from you that you've got, and he's got to find a way to get it from you without you realising. You're giving it up. So as kids in Guyana, in Erie Hall, and in Georgetown, when we heard these stories and we told them in school, they were fantastic tales. We wanted to try them out on adults and see if they would work. They didn't work. You got licks because it didn't work.

Yeah, I write across genres. It's not new. You have a poem. The poem behaves like a short story. You have a short story, behaves like a poem. You're told to stay in your lane a lot in publishing, and I think I was always interested, not just me, but it's been going on forever, Martin Wilson Harris, Martin Carter, all kinds of writers. Angela Carter, you know, there's so many writers who've been writing across genre and writing across

forms. Resistance was—the one thing I thought about, initially for me, was Martin Carter's book called *Poems of Resistance*, which he wrote about how to be an artist in 50s Guyana as it was transitioning from British rule to independence. What is the role of the artist? I wondered if art could help me at a time of politics and a threat to my body and life. I thought, this is all I know as a writer and teacher. Can it help? And then I felt the practice and repetition of art, just practising, practising, practising, practising, was itself a kind of university for wellness and for knowledge of some kind, if I could find the language for it. And I turned that against my disease, which I felt was omnivorous. I felt cancer was attacking my body, but the cancerous society was attacking my mentality as well. I looked out the window and saw National Guard and the way they're talking about George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, Ahmaud Arbery. There's so many people who have died in all these technical ways at the hands of so-called white supremacy. And I was interested in resistances to that. It's a plural idea, resistance.

And then about survival. I love life. I wasn't ready for the Grim Reaper. I don't think anybody is, but I wasn't particularly ready for, and you know, I have a certain amount of time. I know all that stuff, but I wasn't ready to have somebody bring me a receipt. [Laughs] *Time's up, get out of here!* And then I rolled my sleeves up and said, let's go! I didn't say that, I can't

fight. I did say, I'm not taking this lying down. I did decide art has to help me. I did feel there was a resistance of the spirit and artistic practice. I did think music, a different language, had written into it ways of being that—that is fluid. We have a saxophonist and a keyboard player here. You know what I mean? When you hear a piece of music, especially if you're dealing in words and it's music, you're thinking, *whoa, how do I represent that? Let me have a go at this poem.*

And immediately the white page says, you know, don't touch me unless you know what you're doing! Because you have to use the whole field because music, especially jazz, new jazz, it's everywhere, moves in circles and straight lines and quantum leaps. I thought that was a form of resistance to convention. I thought it made me feel good. I said, *why am I feeling good listening to Coltrane's A Love Supreme?* And I questioned it and thought about it. And I decided it was because of that invention and slippery nature, the Anansi quality of the music. I didn't want to talk about it, but that's the thing. I want them to read the book.

GG: Read the book, people!

FD'A: Thank you! That the music itself was a kind of embodiment of Anansi's values by its inventiveness and shape-shiftingness, movement of

sound, the kind of canvas of emotion that I felt listening to music. It might have been too that I was myself a little bit primed by the disease. For example, there's a track I always listen to called Love and Hate by Dennis Brown. I've known that track since I was 14, 15. Whenever I put it on, I can sing. I can't [laughs], but it was always a track for me that when the cancer diagnosis came and Dennis Brown said, 'Love and hate, will always [corrects himself] will never be friends. Oh, oh no'. And then he takes off. I was gone with Dennis Brown. And then when he got to the Psalm 23 bit, [claps hands] I was airborne. It was, you know, *Let's go!* It wasn't the stallion anymore galloping. It was something about—jazzy about it, something uplifting about it. And yet he was singing about a lot of pain. And amid—so I felt that art at its most beaten down, its most challenged, was immediately going towards uplift through song, phrasing, breath. And so I began to value all those things immensely, which is why I put my mum's courtship at the back of the book. Her declaration of love very early on. She was a teenager. I thought, *Mum, you did that? You're good!* [Laughs.]

And so I put it, I thought to myself, to put love back on the table, even if—and when the book was finished, I hadn't finished my second bout with cancer. It actually, this is not a spoiler, Lucy, it came back. It came back after the operation and I had to have 40 sessions of radiation. And

so I kind of hung up my spurs, thinking I'd won. And then when I got—when they tested my blood and they came back and they said, 'Now we have to have radiation', I'd finished the book I wanted to—still, I thought, *you're kidding me!* And that's when love and hate can never be friends. Oh no. And then the music does this thing. That's when it really counted. A Love Supreme really counted because I never expect there to be another bout, a third round or a second round or whatever, to get up off the canvas. So music and art became crucial for me. I did change my diet a little bit. I had a hamburger just now because I don't eat beef anymore or meat, red meat at all. I've gone off it. I stopped doing that. I used to always enjoy a burger. I started doing much more yoga than before, much more breathing. I used to run a lot. I now try and comb—mix running with a lot of other movement stuff that I now value for my entire head to toe. I never scare up sweating anymore and endorphins come on. I used to love the end of a run when you're exhausted and then serotonin and endorphins kick in. You know what that's like, those of you who've run. So all that stuff, I think, well, there are other ways of getting this. For me, it's now much more of a philosophy.

And then I'm also aware that it's possible for it to come back. And I've had an operation and I've had radiation and I don't have a third option. There might be, who knows? So if it were to come back, I would say to cancer, now I'm ready for you because I've done those days that you thought I

was gonna waste. And this is where Anansi comes and I hope he comes to my aid.

GG: Someone a bit less metaphorical almost than Anansi and a real hero within the book is your young teenage daughter, who's an extremely vivid character, almost a world champion at being able to feel what she feels as she feels it. And the dialogue between the two of you in the car as it's going forward made me think, you know what, Fred? She's reminding you of yourself. She's bringing you back to yourself and maybe this is the change to, as Elliot would say to—

FD'A: —Thank you for mentioning Liliana. Actually, Liliana, Natasha is here, who's my niece; John my brother's daughter. And Natasha looks just like my daughter, Liliana. Liliana is really brash. If she's feeling something, she will tell you. And she felt that my cancer was taking over her life [laughs]. She said, 'I have my life to live. Get out of my face with this disease!' And she was having an argument with a friend. And so I said to her, 'Look, I'm gonna put you in this book.' She said, 'Can I see it first?' And then I wrote it up and she struck out all the adjectives [laughs]. The way I wrote it, you can see the style changes. It's very much how she is with me. We have a very good relationship. So I say, I'm so glad to have her in my life. She's 15. She's incredibly smart. But during my cancer, she was a

go-to person for a reminder of the quotidian, the everyday. Doesn't make it ordinary at all. And I kind of valued every moment with her. Every time I drove her to school or whatever we did together, we'd talk and have these sessions. And one time I had to pull the car over because I was driving along Venice Boulevard heading somewhere. And we got arguing. Not arguing, debating. And she was crying and I was crying. I could not see. I took off my glasses so I could see better. [Laughs] She said, 'You can't see without your glasses. Pull over!' And so I pulled over and we shared a handkerchief. And it was about the weight of my diagnosis on her life. Suddenly it changed her thinking about what she thought was important to her. And I realised this burden. I'd kind of done something I didn't want to do, at all, about my disease. And I regretted it. And this is why I was upset. I changed her thinking, the weightlessness of her thinking that youth—young people have. I've always protected her against brutality. I said, 'Don't watch this.' I have blockages on the thing to stop her watching people being torn apart on TikTok, or whatever it is. I said, 'Don't do that yet because there'll be plenty of time to see that. Right now you're in a special time when you're gonna be cultivated. So you can come up against that hard stuff and the valuelessness of it.' George Floyd was a university moment for both of us. We talked about it ad infinitum, so she can understand why they would do what they did. I go into her school. I do things with 15-year-olds in high school. I go to prison to do

things with prisoners; workshops at once a year. I haven't been all of last year because of COVID. Once or twice a term, actually, because our department has three or four professors who do that. So I do try and reconnect with life and forms of resistance in the system and keep alive and whole something about a life that's been, kind of, whipped, as cancer tried to do with me.

[A solo saxophone starts playing, joined after a few phrases by a keyboard playing long, vibrating notes.]

[Quiet applause]

FD'A: Coltrane's A Love Supreme on a loop.

A blank page,

with one line that starts in a corner at the top of the page

wiggles, writhes and jives its way down

that playground of white space

to fill the place with joy.

I chase after it

and I seem to catch up

and run along with it for a stretch.

[One note plays on the keys]

For it soothes ahead of me.

Leaves me reaching for its coattails,

[One note on the keys]

Exhilaration pulls and pushes me [One note on the keys] to keep up
with where Coltrane leads me.

For even Coltrane

[One note plays]

appears not to know at times, as he forges ahead,

[One note plays]

Trusting in discovery

as an impetus for breathing more notes.

[The keys play a sustained note] Cancer, I wish to lose you now

As I follow 'Trane

I hope my cancer cannot keep up

with this flood of positive energy.

Cancer finds that it is too much

like trying to drink

from a firehose.

And I suppose that it burns cancer as well to touch it

Like a red-hot brand.

So Cancer shies away from Coltrane.

[Notes on the keyboard are interspersed every few words quietly in the background]

Me, I head right for that burn, that blaze

that lights a path not seen before,

and one that beckons me

onward, to go

Follow, where 'Trane leads.

Trust what 'Trane trusts.

[The saxophone and the keys continue to play quietly]

FD'A: Thank you!

[Applause]

FD'A: I wish I had a playlist to go with the book! Thank you. All good. This poem is for Jean Breeze, who died in August. And we knew each other really well in the late 80s and early 90s, before I moved to the States.

[The keyboard plays gently in the background, more or less throughout this piece]

Jean Breeze.

I cannot, in this life,

figure that middling day

outside of the summer

South London basked in,

that made me squint up at your blinded window
as I rang your bell twice,
waited for you,
rang two more times.
'Me not no mornin' person,' you yawned,
as I glanced at my watch,
hands aimed at noon.
I was on time for lunch.
You waved me in, sleepily offered tea, saying,
'Taaaayy?' As if dispensing a 21-year-old Appleton.
I forget the rest.
In that terraced house in your upstairs flat
back in the late 80s when poetry readings
were gigs in back rooms.
And you got piss for pay,
if you captured less than a sad handful of patrons.
All our roads were forked, no knives.
We took both,
drank pints of warm lager,
gave our fingers to chips wrapped in yesterday,
talked mouths-full,
sorted apartheid, sorted Palestine, Greenham Common,

Burned, Baby, Burned the proverbial candle
that may have been a badly rolled,
outsized spliff, at both unfiltered ends.
'Aid travelled with a bomb,' you said.
That was a transistor
broadcasting on the transmitter buried in your head and
'My psychiatric training could diffuse it,'
you said,
'but I could not refuse it.'
You were a breeze to us.
You grabbed audiences by the hand, by the waist,
whirled us to a swoon.
Breeze turned lyrical,
verandas whose afternoons passed your gate.
'Greetings, ma'am!'
Now I take you up,
under the over of your days,
above the hungry doorbell pools of such moments
across our decade,
one decade after another,
pooling lives, hours, or ours
passing unawares.

[The saxophone and keyboard play together]

FD'A: Last piece.

For you, this cloud directly over my head,

more sound than cover,

movement more than cloud.

These Mid City ghetto fly-by parakeets,

though not your beloved Janáček,

they warm the instruments of necks, tongues

and move in a symphony.

They pin the morning to the trees

where some settle,

less than cumulus,

magic our sleek palms with fruit.

How much music they promise us

matches their unnumbered breakout.

For you,

grace, I stop.

What I see of you,

you view through me.

[Keyboard plays]

Fred D'Aguiar was in conversation with Gabriel Gbadamosi.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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