

## An Interview with Jamaal May

KATRINA VANDENBERG AND TAYLOR (DOC) BURKARD

Jamaal May is a poet, editor, and educator from Detroit, Michigan, where he taught poetry in public schools and worked as a freelance audio engineer and touring performer. His first book, *Hum*, published by Alice James Books in 2013, won a Beatrice Hawley Award and an American Library Association Notable Book Award. It was also an NAACP Image Award nominee and finalist for the Tufts Discovery Prize. Jamaal has also published two poetry chapbooks—*The God Engine* and *The Whetting of Teeth*. His poems have been published in such journals as *POETRY*, *Ploughshares*, *The Believer*, *Kenyon Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *New England Review*, and *Best American Poetry 2014, 2015*. His honors include a Spirit of Detroit Award, a Stadler Fellowship from The Stadler Center for Poetry at Bucknell University, the *Indiana Review* Poetry Prize, and scholarships and fellowships from Bread Loaf Writers Conference, Cave Canem, the Lannan Foundation, and elsewhere. He is the 2014 *Kenyon Review* Fellow at Kenyon College and a recipient of the Civitella Ranieri Fellowship in Italy.

In addition to being a finalist at several national and international poetry slams, Jamaal May is a three-time Rustbelt Regional Slam champion and has been a member of six national poetry slam teams. A graduate of Warren

Wilson's MFA program, he has served as associate editor of *West Branch* and currently co-edits the Organic Weapon Arts Chapbook and Video Series with Tarfia Faizullah.

This public interview with Jamaal May was held in front of a live audience on December 2, 2014, during his visit to The Creative Writing Programs at Hamline University. The two interviewers were Katrina Vandenberg, assistant professor in The Creative Writing Programs, and Taylor (Doc) Burkard, a student in the MFA program at Hamline.

**VANDENBERG:** Jamaal, one of my favorite craft essays is by Seamus Heaney entitled "Feelings into Words." Heaney writes that he didn't *find* his voice as a poet as much as he dug it up, out of himself. He says, "Finding a voice means that you can get your own feeling into your own words, and that your words have the feel of you about them. And I believe that it may not even be a metaphor, for a poetic voice is probably very intimately connected to the poet's natural voice. The voice that he hears is the ideal speaker of the lines he is making up." Part of what made Heaney's voice as a poet, he speculated, was the language that surrounded him as a child and got inside him, and then broke down like compost. He says that it was folk sayings and the list of towns in his region, the weather forecast on the BBC, and the list of saints and phrases in the catechism of the Catholic Church. He wasn't conscious of the language at the time, but it's his, and he can still recall it easily. I'd like you to talk about the language and sounds and soundtrack that surrounded you in your childhood. For example, the litanies of street names or sports team players or church music or books that were read and reread out loud or lists you memorized—what's yours? What ones went into the making of your poetic voice?

**MAY:** That's a really great question to start with. I see Heaney as somebody I look to as a kind of touchstone. Some of those things you just mentioned are things that I—maybe not super consciously—but in a lot of ways I avoided putting in poems. In poetry, I'm always looking for the trouble, the thing that's shaky, that's scary, that's dangerous. In a lot of ways this led me away from some of the sounds of the scenes. Also—I didn't want to go this deep this fast, but—I dug up memories from my past earlier this year that I've kind of pushed down. I'm realizing that a lot of the stuff that people cherish, those sounds and

textures, things that they carry with them, especially artists, are things that I pushed out of my mind in a lot of ways. So, thinking about the first book, and the idea of that voice: I figured out there was a part of me missing, so I started bringing more of the *me* into it, but that me wasn't necessarily reflective. The things that made it in from childhood are the textures, more than the sounds, of childhood. I found that there was something I could pull from to talk about loneliness inside of that.

This is generally how I use my life. I'm always looking for the thing underneath the thing in front of me. It's not enough for me just to be thinking about my childhood. What can I take from childhood that's underneath that? Underneath the experience of childhood is the sense, for me personally, of being alone. Like the interesting play between being alone and being lonely, and what the difference is. I wasn't able to name this when I was a child, but I realized I was carrying and wrestling with it my whole life. So when I think back to my childhood, I weirdly get more of the philosophical things than the details—though I am always using details, which has a lot to do with word choice. There's never anything in a poem that's there just because "that was pretty" or "this happened." Everything is trying to work toward the center of gravity of the piece. My personal quirks and interests take a back seat to what the poem is trying to do, and philosophy is what really comes to the surface.

You'll notice there's no reference to Motown, there's no talk about the abandoned car factory, there's none of what you'd most expect from Detroit, because my experience of Detroit was kind of strange, and I didn't want to tell the same story that was getting repeated on the news over and over again. I wanted to tell this *other* part of it, this part about interior lives. And so, a lot of the word choices were more about the textures that echoed, this broader place, without necessarily being my pet sounds or concerns.

**VANDENBERG:** When we were discussing the book, my co-interviewer, Doc, said that he was surprised, given your age, that you had used so many mechanical images and references to cars—Detroit's building them like robots now—because, like Doc, you grew up in the digital age. I've also noticed that the sense of assemblage, the highly physical idea of *making*, hasn't left Detroiters easily. It's still very present, and that ethos seems to extend to art. I'd like to follow up on a comment you made in class the other day, that you think of creation as being something in which we're forever assembling pieces of what

we acquired from somewhere else. You realized how unique the role of the artist is in a city like Detroit, and that developing as an artist there helped you a great deal as you continued to move through your career at a more visible level. Could you talk more about what it means to be an artist in the city of Detroit, and what lessons that community taught you?

**MAY:** Work ethic is huge. I had this idea of thinking of a poem as a machine made of words (of course, I later found Williams' description of such). I found I could build this machine to approximate and approach human connection. I wasn't a touchy-feely type guy; I didn't like people. My biggest fear is crowds. I've grown up with a lot of social anxiety that I've done a good job of dealing with in my adult life, and in poetry. So the idea that you're building something when you're setting out to make a poem—that really served me. I was surprised when I met people who thought of it as more of a wispy experience, like *I'll go out in the fields and the Gods will bestow upon me the poem*. To me, it was all about the making.

I like this quote from C. Dale Young, which he may have gotten from his teacher Donald Justice, which says, at first you're just going out to a field, and you hope you get struck by lightning. Then you study a lot and practice, and you get really good at finding the best place to stand to get struck by lightning. Then the master goes out to the field and calls the lightning down. I feel like the real process is all three of those things. You're kind of waiting for things, while looking for things, while commanding at the same time.

I talked about it a little more with the Master Class, this idea that we're not building parts from scratch. Actually we are assembling parts when we say we're creating something, and so that assemblage, the idea that we're making, is a very Detroit sensibility. If you look at what's going on in the city now, with so much development—urban farming, new arts programs, regreening—it's all about making. We're still a city that's trying to make in a country that's for the most part given up on making.

**VANDENBERG:** It still feels like that when I go home. A recent press release I read said that Jamaal May is one of those young poets who suddenly seem to be everywhere, and it's true. You've had a lot of success of late, which is thrilling. But you mentioned just the other day that people have said you popped out of nowhere, but really you've been working steadily at your craft for over a decade.

Could you talk about some of the years that led up to your recent success, a time when you were working hard but maybe not as visibly as you are now? What was your path to publication like?

**MAY:** I had a really weird route through things. Another way I got lucky is that I didn't know what I *wasn't* supposed to be able to do. You know, like, *Oh, you're not supposed to be able to make a living as a working poet*, or, *Oh, you're not supposed to be able to publish poems that can win slams*. I just didn't care. I found out about all those fights when I started moving through the academy in these weird ways I have. I don't have an undergraduate degree, so I didn't study English. I'm an autodidact: I taught myself graphic design and writing, and then I sought out teachers. So everyone has his or her own arc; getting into a field is almost like breaking out of jail. Once someone figures out a way to do it, that option is gone, so you've got to find your own way to break out of prison. Poetry is very much like that; you're always going to have to find your own way to make a life inside it.

I started working with a poet named Vievee Francis in Detroit. She schooled me on the bigger picture. When I started off, I could tell there was a broader thing happening that I wasn't seeing. I knew that people who like poems read books. So Vievee gave me everything, from here's what metonymy is all the way to here's how you format a letter to a journal. And she gave me places to send my work—my first publications were in journals she thought would respond to my work. I got really lucky to have stumbled across super generous writers. The thing is, there's never been an actual arrival—there's just the process.

I feel really fortunate because more and more I'm realizing that so many people's mindset is like *I've just got to get there*. If I was trying to get to where I am right now, I wouldn't have made it. Basically, you've got to look at the horizon and make every step toward it count, make every step enjoyable, make it thorough, make it resonant so it leaves a footprint. And when you're doing that, you don't get caught up in *Am I getting in that journal, am I getting that award, are my peers doing better than me?* I set out with this notion that if you make good work, if you make it available, and you're a decent human being, the rest of the stuff can sort itself out. I just never imagined it would sort itself out this well.

I mean, even just a few years ago, I described myself as somebody like, *I'll never win book prizes or anything, but I have my little readership and I'll get the creative work out, and I'll cobble together my existence doing things I love, which*

*has always been the broader goal. If I can make a living doing what I do for free, I'm good.* That really served me, because you always know what the next step is: to write deeper, write harder. That's where I developed what I call the get-off-the-bathroom-floor conversation. Because it literally got me off the bathroom floor a couple times, where I was just wallowing: *I'm a fraud, I'm terrible, I don't know what I'm doing*. But then the logic part took over and I thought, *Okay, well, what now? Are you just gonna stop writing then? I was like, well, no, I've got to write. So, what are you gonna do? Well, I guess you've got to write better poems.* That's the thing that kept me going when I hit that wall hard. I told myself, *Well, you're here to make. You're not here to beat people and succeed.*

I've been talking to students about this impulse to perform humility to the point where you're actually holding yourself back. At some point you've got to say, *I have a skill at something and why did that work?* You actually figure out what people like about it and do more of it and try to love what you do. Once I started to really get inside loving what I do, that's when things clicked into place. And I've basically been arriving for a decade.

Every year that I've been out in the world with this art, people have been pulling me aside to say, *Yo, this is it, man. This is happening for you right now.* And then the next year, they're like, *Oh, this is your year, son!* I just kept doing the work, just revving and amping up until it was like 2012, and it was like, *Yo, this is your year, son. The book got picked up, you won this thing, you're a finalist—it's happening.* I was the finalist for a lot of stuff for a few years. I called it bridesmaid syndrome.

**VANDENBERG:** I'm going to skip back to Detroit for a minute. *Hum* is dedicated in part to the interior lives of Detroiters, which is a wonderful dedication and is really unusual for a first book, because so often first books are dedicated to parents or a spouse. But it deeply establishes the book as being wedded to a place, I think. I'm wondering whom you write for, if you have a specific audience in mind when you sit down to write or after a poem's done.

**MAY:** That's another one of those things where I didn't realize what I wasn't supposed to be doing. Years ago, I looked up and thought, *I want to write something for everybody.* And it was stupid and childish, you know, but it's like, why not? I want to write something that has space for people to get inside of. And the thing that was so shocking about *Hum* was that it worked. Once it

had been out for a few months, I would get emails from these avant-gardist academics that were like, *Yeah, this is it right here*. Then I got emails from these people, like, *Yo, my grandma's never read a book of poems before, but she won't give yours back, so I just let her have it*. I was ping-ponging between—is this going over people's heads or is it too simple? I was really worried about one or the other at various times.

I do a lot of layering with word choice. I'm kind of precious about my word choice because I'm trying to create extra layers so that, if you start unpacking what's all in the poem, there's a specific reason I chose that word. Actually I was not writing about Detroit when I worked on *Hum*. I was trying to write about interiority. Everything coming out about Detroit was really lazy and superficial: *Oh, Motown used to be here, and here's the photograph of the abandoned train station*. I thought, *Well, I want to write about the interior and the interpersonal, and these are inside things*. When I had all the poems together, I was like, *Oh, all of these people are Detroiters in some way*. There were a lot of textures there. The book, like you said, reads as very Detroit even though the majority of the poems have nothing to do with Detroit. I knew that if I put that dedication there, and early on in the book had a poem called "A Detroit Hum Ending with Bones," followed by "On Metal," with guys standing around a car, all the poems would feel like Detroit even when I'm talking about a field medic in Afghanistan.

Art for me is a participatory event. To do that, you have to leave some work for the readers to do, and there's a wide scale gradient of how much work you can give the reader. I'm trying to give a challenge and leave some space for readers to get inside and think, so they have their own experience working through it.

**VANDENBERG:** When Doc and I originally read the book together, we saw it at the time as an aesthetic choice. A lot of the proper nouns of Detroit were not, for a book about Detroit, present in the way they might be or like they are in David Blair's *Detroit*.

**MAY:** It was probably an aesthetic choice. There are no direct literary quotes in the book; there are no epigraphs except from a twelve-year-old's poem. And some of that was an aesthetic choice and kind of a statement. I remember reading an Albanian poet, Luljeta Lleshanaku. A lot of Detroit poets really have an affinity for Eastern European poetry—read some Eastern European poetry and then read some of the hot work that's coming out of Detroit now—francine j.

harris, Vievee Francis, Matthew Olzmann. You can see this weird synchronicity that I can never put my finger on. At the beginning of Luljeta's book she had this afterword about how she was in America writing all these poems that she ended up throwing out because they had the wrong sensibility. She felt she was writing as if she were doing the American thing of adding another brick to the wall of literary history, where she's feeling like, *but I come from a country where you have to rebuild your house every day*. That's when the Detroit–Eastern European connection really clicked to me, and I wanted to get a sense that we're never building from scratch; we're always using the pieces of what's left over. So I wanted the recycling to happen more beneath the surface and not be so overt. And signifiers such as street names, pop culture references—these were all things that would get really dated. I'm always trying to make sure I'm using word choices that will make sense thirty, forty, fifty years from now.

The poem I finally wrote directly for Detroit, "There Are Birds Here," is going to be in my next book. I chose the word "bird" because every country can say "bird." But that's a different kind of word choice. I realized the difference between specificity and precision. The most specific thing isn't necessarily the most precise thing. For instance, Sylvia Plath had this line in "The Arrival of the Bee Box" where she describes the box as "square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift," which is the language of approximation. The language of precision would say it's ninety-seven pounds. But who in this room can accurately imagine what ninety-seven pounds would feel like? Everyone can actively imagine something that's too heavy to lift. And when I saw that, I was like, *Oh, that's precise, but it's not specific*. So precise would be to name all the streets: *and I was on this avenue and I was over by the barbecue shack*, but that's not enough to make a poem. It's a more complex project. By not being so specific, I feel like it made the poems precise.

**VANDENBERG:** I'm going to turn things over to Doc Burkard.

**BURKARD:** This is probably something you can sum up somewhat quickly, so I'm sorry about that. Who are your touchstone poets, and, as young poets, who should we be reading?

**MAY:** Okay, cool. I mean, that list gets crazy, right? I always find myself going back to Larry Levis, Sylvia Plath, Robert Hayden, and lots of contemporary

cats, like Ross Gay, Li-Young Lee, Louise Gluck, whom I talked about earlier tonight. People should be paying attention to the young writers that are coming up because these new generations of writers that started in high school or college, they kind of have this—I think of it as old school, but some people describe it as this newfangled thing—this idea that poems should work on the page and make you feel something in the air as well. And I see in this generation young poets who are really old school. Poetry predates literacy by thousands of years. I do believe it's the genre that exists between prose and song.

All these cats in their twenties, they're writing really close to the bone, and I'm watching what they're going to do to the field. I think that twenty-first-century American poetry is going to be very much about synthesis, whereas the twentieth century was all about division. It was, *Okay, everybody use form! Okay, nobody use form! Okay, now everybody rhyme. Okay, no, rhyme is bad; rhyme is bad. Stop.* Now, we want to do it à la carte. We've got these slam poets that write sonnets and are shutting down bars with sestinas. It's a really exciting time for American poetry. Check out a lot of the first books that came out in the last few years: Natalie Diaz, Roger Reeves—I'm gonna plug my girl Tarfia Faizullah; she's my favorite poet. And francine j. harris, Matthew Olzmann, and—actually, just Google Detroit poets and figure out who's been publishing out of Detroit for the last five years, and you're gonna find some really exciting stuff. Detroit is a touchstone for the country.

**BURKARD:** You're a two-time Detroit slam champion, and a two-time Individual World Poetry Slam finalist. You've also coached three Brave New Voices youth slam teams. Do you think there's a difference between being a poet of the page and a poet on the stage?

**MAY:** There is if you decide to be one or the other. If you decide there's a division, there is. When *Poetry Magazine* published me, I was the only currently competing slam poet to be published by them. A year later there were five. That's because of the young cats who were raised to go into poetry through slam. They're all super literate. I watched the culture of slam change from the way it was early in my career, when people were asking, *Yo, you got a CD out?* to *Yo, where your book at?* That made a huge impact. Slam poets started going to MFA programs. They already had a lot of the unteachable knowledge when they got there; you can teach craft, but you can't teach vision. So these people who had

been touring the country and having conversations—a lot of them are deep into social justice—are coming to poetry because they have something to say. They sit down and hone their tools to get the vision out. It's turning the field upside down in ways that we're not even going to see for real for another five years.

It's a very old mentality that the poem is this thing you carry inside of you and share with someone outside of you. We just happen to live in a very fortunate time where we get to have two kinds of experiences. We get to have the stereo-sound-bass-hitting-us poetry reading, and we can have the headphones-intimate experience of sitting alone with a book. And they're two very different things that happen. This is where a lot of division comes from, with people picking one or the other because there really are different skill sets to make someone's mind and heart vibrate. There's all this stuff I have on a microphone that I just don't have when the reader is alone with her book. Again, I always go with what's underneath, the spirit you can get reading alone versus the spirit you can get in a participatory setting. When people say, *I hate slams; they're loud. I just want to be quiet, alone with my book*, they're really saying, *I want an intimate experience*. I'm trying to create an intimate experience in public. We see it happen at good poetry readings; we see it happen at a good chamber ensemble with thirty or forty people.

We don't need to toil over which is the right kind of poetry. We can have both. We get to hear the poems in the air, because there are more poetry readings now in this country than there have ever been, and we get to sit alone with that intimate, resonant experience. The way I figured out how to do both was by starting with the differences. By looking and saying, *Why not?*, I started seeing, *Oh, I can say something really weighted, in a kind of flat line, or I can say it weighted with my tone of voice on the microphone*. On the page if you say something like *I have something to tell you*, it's a flat line that doesn't get you into a poem. But if you lean into the mic and say, "I have something to tell you," it's like I'm saying it directly to you. So now you're participating. When you're reading a book by yourself, you're not participating yet.

That's where metaphor and interesting syntax and line breaks and ambiguity and all these other poetic elements come in. It's where participation happens when you're reading alone. So I thought, *I want to make people participate like that in public, too*, and I realized the way to do that was to let the poems do what they do. In really good poetry recitation, you're just watching someone get out of the way of the words. Because the words already have music, the words already

have interesting combinations and juxtapositions and pauses, and the human voice naturally has all this range of inflection, and it moves around a lot. When you watch someone give a monotone poetry reading, they're actually performing really hard, because nobody talks like that. So if you're talking and speaking in a way no one speaks, then you're performing.

The thing I figured out was to just get better and better at being present with the work. I feel like my readings have gotten better this year because I've found a way I can read from a place of joy instead of fear. Fear got me through most of my writing life, but fear will only get you so far. At some point, actually believing that there's something to this and being willing to read it with that—people can really connect to it. Not because I've figured out a great performance angle, but because I found the humanness that's in the words by getting out of my head. I don't need to connect to the audience; I need to connect to the work. And the work is the conduit that connects us. That's what art does.

**BURKARD:** You've touched on this in a lot of your answers, but I just want to straight-up ask you: Why do you write? What does poetry mean to you?

**MAY:** Oh, that's a big one. Somebody said, "If I could give you a definition of poetry, it would have changed by the time I finished saying it." What I'm trying to capture with poetry is the sense that things are in motion, in flux. I get into all the different worlds when I'm looking at poetry. So we got some physics, like in class we were talking about how waves work and how in quantum physics one of the weird facts of science right now is that a photon is a particle when we look at it and an energy wave when we don't. Why is that? What does that even mean? And then there's a thing that happens to waves, like interference patterns. We get an interference pattern, and the wave partially cancels out, but in the other part, it creates a harmony. For me, poetry is a way in which we find the hidden harmony of our language. And specifically American poetry, and poetry in English, because the way English as a language was constructed gives it a whole other life. If you look at more ancient languages, sonically they're very different. I'm realizing how much a role sound plays even when the poems are written down.

I'm trying to capture that intrinsic, core thing that happens with sound but doing it with language that carries other kinds of information. It's almost like

trying to overload the senses. There's all of these things a poem can do, and if you can get them all working in harmony—the music, the meaning, the word choice, the ambiguity—you get something that's like a good classical piece of music, where it just moves. If you listen to Mozart's piano pieces, they move all over the place while still being part of this one thing. Just look at the human ear. It's shaped like a Fibonacci spiral. If it were shaped like a cone, we wouldn't be able to hear octave changes. We would just hear sound in a linear way. But we've evolved a raw, rhythmic table to translate music. And so language gets this music that we're constantly carrying with us and dealing with every day. You don't walk around with a paintbrush so that when people ask you a question you can do a mural real quick. You walk around with language. So, poetry is this art form that takes the making materials we all carry with us to shape a pattern that is outside of us while still being deeply internal. That's the definition of poetry for me.

**BURKARD:** I'd just like to ask if you would read the closing poem in the collection, "Ask What I've Been," which is my personal favorite, and then I would like you to address the speaker in the poem and why you've chosen to close the collection with this poem.

**MAY:**

*Ask What I've Been*

I think cast stiff  
around ankle, plaster poured  
into a chest-shaped mold.  
I think wet cement.  
I say stone, and you think pebble  
in stream or marble  
fountain or kimberlite.  
I say gravel or grave

or ask me later. There are days  
I mourn being built  
from this. Made

of so much aggregate  
and gravestone, so little  
diamond and fountain water.  
When I was a construction  
crane, my balled fists

topped buildings of boys.  
I rifled through the pockets  
of their ruins.  
Ask what I've been. Detroit  
is a stretch of highway littered  
with windshield,  
a boy picking the remains  
of a window from his hair.  
I say Detroit;  
you think glass.  
I say glass; you think atrium;  
I say atrium beams  
warped by heat;  
think cathedral. My shoe soles  
say stain. Glass between treads,  
treads imprinted on gum.  
*Everything finds its bottom,*  
say the sewers.  
*Don't come any closer,*  
begs a map of collapsed veins,  
while the burnt-out colonial,  
this empty lot,  
and this alley-dark cavity  
all say the shelter is sparse, yes,  
but there is space here for bones—  
a ribcage, brimming like yours.

I was trying to create connections to a lot of disparate things, and part of that was creating a bookended through line. So the first poem in the book is a

third-person look at a child in a cityscape, and the last poem is a first-person adult in a cityscape. The second poem is a sestina that uses the six repeating words that appear as phobias throughout the book, and then the penultimate poem is a sestina using those same words. The third poem is the first phobia, and the third-to-last poem is the last phobia. I shaped this bookended structure to create through lines for these different threads that were braiding through.

By having a Detroit poem early and a Detroit poem really late, it's impossible not to read the whole book as a Detroit book. Another part was the sense of invitation and closing the poem had. It's the author talking to himself in a lot of ways, and it's also turning to the reader, saying, *Here's a lot of stuff you didn't think about the city in this way. I hope you'll come check this out.* It's the most referential, urban decay-y kind of poem in the book, and so I saved that for the end, from a standpoint of saying, *No. This isn't a bombed-out, empty, desolate place. This is a place where we live.* The vibration that's running through the book is the vibration of song, of community, of machinery. The ribcage is so physical, so immediate. And so it ends: "a ribcage, brimming like yours." It felt to me like it closed the book without tying a bow around it.

The second book is called *The Big Book of Exit Strategies*, where a lot of movement happens. It goes places in a way that's physical. There's a poem called "Ode to the White-Line-Swallowing Horizon" that's straight up about driving. This book feels like it's going out of the city while still holding the city here, so you get the ribcage and this movement out of the book.

**VANDENBERG:** We've got time for a couple of questions from the audience.

**QUESTION:** Did you choose the sine wave image in the book, or was it your publisher?

**MAY:** That was my choice. The press was really awesome about giving me creative control. That's one of the reasons I'm sticking with Alice James for the second book. I had a great experience with them. The artwork was in my head for years before the book was published. Because I do book design for the little press I run, I did a mockup of the cover of *Hum* with that painting ("A Vexing Quiet" by Brian Despain) on it. So it was a big deal for me that they got permission for it. And the sine wave thing. I knew that there wouldn't

be numbered sections in the book. Part of what I'm doing is *not* arguing for linearity. I didn't want to imply that this was sequential, so I asked if we could have a design feature for the section breaks.

I sent one of the sectioned poems with my designed sine wave so the designer could get a better idea of what I was going for, and she created a more polished version. I like having all those details moving toward the center. You start really big, and once you have a fulcrum, you start moving things around that fulcrum. I like the detail work. Little things happen, like a miscellaneous body of water in a poem becomes the Detroit River. Poems that would have flat titles like "Stone," "Bolt," and "Hammer" become "Hum for the Bolt," "Hum for the Stone," "Hum for the Hammer," to draw more links. The sine wave was one more of those little details that subconsciously hints at this constant vibration that connects us all, you know, whether you're from Detroit or wherever.

**QUESTION:** One of the things we were talking about yesterday was how long it takes to write a good book, that this is both the reality and the lament of being a writer. Can you talk about why that is and how you make it not so discouraging to students?

**MAY:** There's a really cool video essay called *The Long Game, Part 1: Why Leonardo da Vinci Was No Genius*, in which this cat is talking about how advertisers figured out in the 1950s that they should market to young people, like youth was the jam. But almost none of our art gets made by young people. It gets made by people who sat down for a long time banging their heads against the wall. And so when we look at da Vinci, we look at, you know, *The Last Supper* and think, *Oh, this is the work of a genius!* But da Vinci's actual story is that by the time he was thirty, he had botched his first big art commission, couldn't get hired, and basically made his living drawing hanged criminals. He spent twelve or fourteen years or so just working on his art. We look back and see his paintings—history remembers the accomplishment—but his "big break" was in his forties. It took that long for him to figure out zero point perspective and bring this new thing to art.

I know some young poets who had that rocket ship. They have careers in poetry and they're just twenty-three. I was fortunate to be successful enough to keep going, but I never had that breakout stardom that halts you. I had to keep

grinding and doing the work. The work became what I was really passionate about. The faster a young writer can become about process and not focus on arrival, the better off they'll be, because the arrival never happens. There's no such thing. There's always room to grow; there's always a next step. Life is just a wave form, motion. It is what we're making, where we're going, and when you're in that mentality, it takes a long time.

Long before *Hum* was published, two presses asked if I had a manuscript to send. Being patient in the moment was the smartest thing I ever did. I had one mentor saying, "Yeah, go for it! The work is solid, the work is strong, it's a good press. Just go for it." I was at Warren Wilson at the time, and I knew I had two more semesters coming up, and I thought, *I'm working out some new stuff. Let me finish this up and see where I'm at.* Another person advising me said that some people say to put the weaker poems in the center of the book. He always thought, *Why don't you just cut those and keep working until every poem is as strong as the others?* That's when I knew I had to figure out how to like my own work. How do you know what's your best work if you hate all of your writing? When you read other people's poems, you know a line's working when it sings to your heart. If you can't do that with your own work, you'll always be limited in how far you can go in your editing process. What's important is patience and finding the joy in the making and the discovering and the learning.

You make your process part of one big machine. My revision process is my creative process; it's not me changing what I created. I don't have submission days; I have editing days where I spend the whole day editing, and when I'm done, I just hit send. Then even submission becomes secondary to what I'm doing. The reason it takes that long is because work that can sustain the test of time doesn't come except with time and practice.

It's harder to learn when you're on a certain level. I'm going to use video game terms: you level up. If you've ever played video games, that's how leveling up works. The first three, four levels, you level up like every five minutes. Then, after you've been playing for a while, the levels get harder; it gets harder to level up. You will be defined as an artist by what you do in those moments when you feel like you're plateauing. The longer you feel like you've plateaued, the harder you have to work, and the bigger the next step is.

**QUESTION:** Tell us a little bit about your teaching in schools with children.



**MAY:** I'm not doing Inside-Out right now. Inside-Out is a literary arts project in Detroit, which is an amazing experience. I did that for some years: basically, go in once a week, take over somebody's English classroom, and bring the poems to the kids. If you've ever been inside a school that has a poet who comes in, you have no sense that poetry's in trouble. It just doesn't exist. Kids *love* poetry. They don't like stuff that's dusty and doesn't resonate with them. Most kids don't even know contemporary poetry exists, because most of their teachers don't. They think poetry is this thing a bunch of dead people used to do once upon a time. But when you bring contemporary poetry into the classroom, and you give kids the craft tools to start making their own, and they see how music can seam them together, they love it. That's really encouraging as an artist.

Once a week I was being reminded that poetry has a future generation coming up behind us. There was a snow day one time when I was supposed to come in, and the teacher told me that when the students came in the next day, she had to give them writing assignments because so many were just livid that the snow day that they dreamed of had fallen on poetry day.

I've learned that if you have the tools, you can get out the vision, even if you're still figuring out what the vision is. The act can teach you the meaning of the act. I learned how to learn through the study of poetry. Now I can build websites, I can do book arts, I can do graphic design, I can produce music, shoot videos, do photography. I learned, through poetry, discipline and patience. I learned about not skipping steps, trying something new, being willing to fail.



## Tendencies of Walls

JAMAAL MAY

My nostalgia is an arsonist  
insisting I follow him  
into a condemned nightclub,

as if there was a dance  
left in any of us.  
As if we'd find ourselves

in the charred formica  
and internal ponds of rainwater.  
My ears, pulling my name out

of a single-syllabled wind howling between  
tarp and roof, is as presumptuous as ever.  
This is how my feet get involved

in the business  
of finding a laminate wood dance floor  
beneath debris—involved in wanting more.

My father might've pulled a woman  
onto a floor like this  
and there had to have been