

WHAT TO KNOW about Diana Khoi Nguyen



A poet and multimedia artist, Diana Khoi Nguyen is the author of *Ghost Of* (2018) which was a finalist for the National Book Award, and *Root Fractures* (2024). Her video work has recently been exhibited at the Miller Institute for Contemporary Art. Nguyen is a Kundiman fellow and member of the Vietnamese artist

collective, She Who Has No Master(s). A recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and winner of the 92Y Discovery Poetry Contest and 2019 Kate Tufts Discovery Award, she currently teaches in the Randolph College Low-Residency MFA and is an Assistant Professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

For more information, access dianakhoinguyen.com/other-writing

QUESTIONS: *Ghost Of* (2018)

As a sort of prologue to her book of poems *Ghost Of*, Nguyen opens her collection with “A Bird in Chile, and Elsewhere.” It looks like this:

There is no ecologically safe way to mourn.
 Some plants have nectaries
 that keep secreting pollen even after the petals have gone.
 Like a flower that grows only in the visible
 The whole world of its body noiselessly shaking against the dust.

- How can such a brief poem contain, to paraphrase another famous poet, such multitudes?
- How can five lines of poetry introduce the tone and theme and mood for an entire collection?
- Upon closer examination, how does this poem directly address the point of Nguyen’s collection?
- What is the central metaphor of this short poem and how does it “work” in relation to the rest of the collection?
- To borrow from Virginia Woolf’s notion that all books/works of art continue each other, does this poem bring to mind any other poems that “continue” it? What does this poem have in common with any other poems that come to mind?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

- What happens if we look at Natalie Diaz’s “The Beauty of a Busted Fruit,” from our Common Reader selection *When My Brother Was an Aztec*? Is it possible to see these two poems as “companion” pieces? If so, what are the common elements they share?
- Both poets are writing about/out of each of their own brother’s suicide and the impact that action had on each writer and their family members. What are the common elements they share? How do they differ?
- Is it possible for grief to be both personal and universal at the same time? Is this a special trait shared by art (written and visual and aural), something particular that only artists understand?
- What common space do the flower in Nguyen’s poem and the cracked pomegranates in Diaz’s poem occupy?
- How can grief be poetic?

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- [Alcoholics Anonymous](#) (AA)
- [GLADD](#)
- [The National Center for PTSD](#)
- [Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) (998 Lifeline)
- [The Trevor Project](#)

Nguyen, in an October 2019 conversation with Peter Mishler in Literary Hub, reflects on *Ghost Of*:

“I believe my role was to introduce it as an offering, to help others read and hear it the way that it reads to me—the way that I hear it in my head. But then, it’s a beautiful thing for the book to continue on without my mediation—and necessary, too.”

- Does her book or any single poem from her work—such as “A Bird in Chile, and Elsewhere”—feel like an offering of sorts? In what way?
- If grief is a shared part of our existence, how do writers “share grief,” if you will, in their work?



LITERATURE AS PRAXIS

- In light of the attention brought to media by groups like Trevor and GLADD, drawing attention to the issue of suicide, how do these two poems offer us ways of understanding the need to discuss issues of mental health?
- Is there room to discuss mental health in the space of art and literature? Does criticism allow for the logical discussion of these topics?
- What can our chapter do to continue this discussion on campus or in our community?

ADDITIONAL READINGS

- Jill Bialosky, *History of a Suicide* (2012)
- Judy Collins, *Sanity and Grace: A Journey of Suicide, Survival, and Strength* (2006)
- Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* (2015)
- Michael Thomas Ford, *Suicide Notes* (2019) and *Every Star That Falls* (2023)
- Nina LaCour, *Hold Still* (2019)
- Andrew Solomon, *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity* (2013)
- Andrew Solomon, *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression* (2015)