

## Q&A with Elisa Gonzalez

*2020 Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer's Award Winner*

**Who or what has been the greatest influence on your work and in your life?**

When I asked a friend how they would answer this question for me, they said “Louise Glück, or the Bible.” We laughed, and yet, why not? The first time I read Glück’s poetry, I was twelve and sitting on a concrete berm at a gas station in northern Ohio. I’d read poetry before, but it was this particular encounter with it, with *Descending Figure*, at dusk in high summer surrounded by the smell of gasoline, that redrew me. Long before that, because my family was devoutly Christian, there was the Bible, first in Sunday school stories and then in different translations. Its language settled in me early; I still sense it in my writing. And I have contested with its ideas and images for years. Both these answers point to another, larger answer being an action: reading.

**What book have you read this past year that really surprised you—stretched you in some way?**

Several months ago, a dear friend, the poet Jameson Fitzpatrick, lovingly foisted upon me the poems of Tory Dent (another Rona Jaffe recipient!), with “You *must* read this.” And Jameson was right. After I read Dent’s poem “R.I.P., My Love,” I immediately bought her *Collected Poems*. Her poems are startling, dark and complicated. Their emotional intensity and range amaze me, but it’s her representation of the movements of a brilliant mind on the page that has truly stretched me. I want to do that half as well as she does.

**Who is one of your favorite characters in literature and why?**

When I read this question, the first people—and they did emerge as “people,” not “characters”—to appear were women who collided with restriction and reimagined the boundaries of their lives. Sula, for instance, whom I love for many things, but especially for her boredom. Elizabeth Bennet, whose clear-eyed vivacity and wit I have tried to mimic (often unsuccessfully) since I was young. Both Lila and Lenú from the Neapolitan Quartet. Lila, from Marilynne Robinson’s book of the same name, one of those who are “wild, more life in us than we can bear, the fire infolding itself in us.”

If I have favorites among all the women materialized by books, though, they are the ones who failed, who ran up against what Vivian Gornick calls “the taste of iron” in the mouth, the ones who become “the creature trapped, caught, stopped in place.” So, for instance, Diana from *Diana of the Crossways*, Antoinette Mason of

*Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*, Lady Laura Standish from *Phineas Finn*, Ibsen's Nora, and Lily Bart and Ellen Olenska. (Edith Wharton was a virtuoso of the enclosed woman.) And of course Isabel Archer, one of the best women ever written by a man and one of the first characters in whom I recognized myself intensely, as "a young person of many theories." In his preface to *Portrait of a Lady*, James calls Isabel "a young woman affronting her destiny." He closes the preface: "There is really too much to say," and there is—about her, about all women who have a "fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action" and what happens when the world's uglier aspects contradict that determination.

**In addition to writing and literature, what else informs your days?**

The pandemic has obviously and unavoidably changed the structures and motives of life. To approach what's "outside" without fear is memory and dream. Wandering, even in Green-Wood Cemetery near my apartment, becomes an immense gift. I feel a desperate need to *observe*, since it's impossible to engage in all the ways it once was. I think a lot about strangers, what I can know and never know, and about the casual, often painful beauty of the world amid its blight. Never before have I derived so much joy from contact with friends and relatives. Though they are far away, my sisters, ebullient and ever-untamed, revive me whenever we talk. It also feels even more necessary than "before" to contribute in material ways to the world: in protest, in aid. I think all of this may be a form of saying that although literature and art have not lost meaning, I turn toward the exterior world and my responsibilities to it.

**What has been your greatest challenge so far as a writer?**

I am torn between saying "self-doubt" and "financial privation." Self-doubt limits my imagination, but growing up without money and remaining financially insecure has perhaps most directly interfered with my life as a writer, forcing my mind and energies in other directions. Although they can and do exist independently, they feed each other—a have-not ouroboros.

**What project(s) do you hope to work on with the help of your Writers' Award?**

A collection of poetry and a novel.

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*Celebrated novelist Rona Jaffe (1931-2005) established The Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Awards in 1995. The program identifies and supports women writers of unusual talent and promise in the early stages of their writing careers. The Foundation has awarded grants to 164 outstanding emerging women writers. [www.ronajaffefoundation.org](http://www.ronajaffefoundation.org)*