

# SAILESH NAIDU

POET | PERFORMER | RESEARCHER

*Sailesh is a writer, researcher, and performance artist working in the sphere of migration, gender, and education. Their work interrogates the queer body as territory, ancestral knowledge, and building of queer personal narratives as archive*



# Business Today



Creating a community  
Sailesh Naidu seeks to understand his heritage through poetry. IMAGE COURTESY: SAILESH NAIDU

## Pen, poem and personhood

Sailesh Naidu's poetry workshop, 'The Queering', deftly confronts questions of sexual and political identities through verses

A poetry workshop designed for queer, trans, non-binary and gender conforming people in India is rare. That too one where they feel safe and understood, and are also able to create art out of the pain they carry.

The 'Queering', held in the Max Mueller Bhavan in Mumbai last month, was facilitated by Sailesh Naidu, a gender non-conforming poet and artist born in the US with roots in India. Naidu, a former Alexander Von Humboldt German Chancellor's Fellow, led a workshop on imagining what a queer future would look like through group activities and individual coaching.

We were a group of six, and it turned out to be the perfect number for the kind of intimate sharing we were about to engage in. In the round of introductions, we were invited to say our names and preferred pronouns. The ritual of stating pronouns makes it possible for individuals to define themselves on their own terms with reference to a gender identity that might not be acknowledged, respected or affirmed outside queer spaces. Using the pronouns they choose for themselves is a way of demonstrating allyship in a world where their existence is erased not only through language but through structural violence in families, workplaces and public life.

Naidu, who grew up in New Jersey and now lives in Berlin, regards poetry as a way to unpack personal and public identities. "My mother is from Karnataka and father is from Andhra Pradesh, so I know that a long tradition of poetry thrives here. India is also going through its own queer revolution. I wanted to know what queer voices look and sound like when given the space to be heard. Society has programmed us for self-destruction, and to love ourselves is an extremely radical act," Naidu said.

During the 20-minute exercise that followed, we could write anything that came to

mind. It was an excellent outlet for all that was simmering inside, making me feel unseen, unloved and undesired. It occurred to me that we rarely have queer spaces for this kind of community-based therapeutic work because people prefer to meet at parties, film festivals, pride marches or in activist spaces. The warmth and connection palpable in the workshop room owed much to the energy, intention and care with which Naidu held that space together.

"I piloted this poetry workshop with queer people in Berlin, and it mainly came out of my disappointment with the lack of queer voices within the poetry scene. Queerness pushes our notions about what is true, our imaginations of what the world can be beyond the structures that constrain our bodies, minds, sexualities and genders. Poetry seems like the best way to explore that because it plays with meaning, and our understanding of words and of ourselves," said Naidu.

During another exercise, Naidu placed printouts of queer poems at a few different spots in the room. Some of these were: Blythe Baird's *The Kindest Thing She Almost Did*, Akhil Kanya's *Spring 2016*, Ocean Vuong's *Ode to Masturbation*, Danez Smith's *The 17-Year-Old and the Gay Bar*, Kaveh Akbar's *Portrait of the Alcoholic Floating in Space with Severed Umbilicus* and Audre Lorde's *A Litany for Survival*.

We were asked to read each poem carefully, and note the phrases or lines that resonated with us. These were to later serve as prompts for the poems we would write. It was crucial to recognise the politics of that selection. Naidu had mostly picked out work created by queer poets of colour living and writing in a racist, heteronormative and Islamophobic American society.

The ancestors, or predecessors, invoked in

any queer space provide a good indication of how queerness is understood. Does it refer only to non-normative identities built around gender and sexuality or is the space also invested in the struggles of other marginalised identities based on race, ethnicity, class, religion, and caste? Naidu's workshop falls into the second category. We watched poetry videos featuring poets such as Lucille Clifton and Angelique Palmer, both African-American women who fought discriminatory social structures through language that was restorative. Vuong, mentioned earlier, is of Vietnamese heritage while Akbar is of Iranian heritage. White poets never have to qualify where they come from. Since whiteness is the standard, there are no question marks about whether they are insiders or outsiders.

In a country built on colonisation and slavery, whiteness is synonymously with belonging. Naidu, incidentally, has been working on issues of social exclusion faced by migrants and asylum seekers. I ended up writing a poem about a person who once occupied a significant place in my heart. The relationship was complicated not only because we wanted different things from life and from each other but also because of racial and cultural differences.

As the words took shape on the page, I felt a lightness in my chest. I felt grateful for the opportunity to be immersed in poetry, a medium and practice that is meaningful and healing for me. As I heard the other participants read out their poetry, and speak of their time at the workshop, it appeared that they, too, felt nourished by what poetry could do for them.

CHINTAN GIRISH MODI is a Mumbai-based writer, educator and researcher



## Archiving queer lives in poetry

In a day-long workshop, gender non-conforming Berlin-based poet, Sailesh Naidu, will ask participants to imagine a queer future



On a mission: Sailesh Naidu wants to raise funds to showcase poems in galleries and on digital platforms. © NERISSA

KENNETH ROSARIO

Gender non-conforming Berlin-based poet and performance artist, Sailesh Naidu's work stands at the intersection of sexuality, migration, race and class. In the pursuit to understand their own complex identities, they started conducting poetry workshops in Berlin to provide space to other queer and gender non-conforming people to express and discover themselves.

In the process, they realised that there was a wealth of stories that ought to be archived as personal and collective queer histories. After receiving a positive response in the German capital, Naidu decided to take the workshop outside Berlin for the first time and will be conducting it in Mumbai on Sunday at the Goethe Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan.

A lot of my work is centred around understanding my own queerness as a child of diaspora parents [in the U.S.] and how it has been

### Queers space

shaped by migration," informed Naidu. Funded by the Berlin Senate for Culture and Europe, the day-long workshop is open to queer, trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming participants, where participants will be asked to imagine what a queer future will look like. Through readings of other brown and black poets, Naidu will encourage the participants to find their own voice.

According to Naidu, it is important for queer lives to be chronicled. "Especially in the moment where we are living right now when fascist and right-wing movements are taking shape, queer and gender non-conforming people are at the forefront of being attacked, diminished and made invisible during these struggles," they said. "Queer lives, just by existing, is political."

The goal for Naidu, ultimately, is to build an archive of poems, which currently exists as a personal collection from various workshops that they have conducted. They want to raise funds to showcase the poems in galleries and on digital platforms to generate visibility.

"It's important because when you look at India, there is such a deep historical erasure around queerness through British colonial laws, current ruling governments and education systems. That's why these archival projects are so important in post-colonial countries where we are unearthing our histories and understand queerness, not through Western identities," observed the 35-year-old poet.

Currently working on their first poetry book *Territory*, Naidu often finds themselves at the crossroads of queerness and colonialism. "My dad was a Telugu speaker and my mom spoke Kannada. But growing up in the

States, they didn't want to teach me my mother tongues because they feared I wouldn't integrate well," informed Naidu. "I don't have a command of either my native languages [which] I was denied because of racist practices within the education and social systems, so now when I do this workshop I still do it in colonial language, so there's something to critique there."

Naidu finds it noteworthy that queer archival work in post-colonial countries like India is largely limited to English, a colonial lingua franca. "These are interesting intersections to explore as the project grows, and ideally we want to explore how does poetry look for queer people in their native languages and in languages that haven't been colonised," they concluded.

The workshop will be held at Gallery MMR, Fort, on Sunday from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. Participants can register on [poetsinterritory@gmail.com](mailto:poetsinterritory@gmail.com)

## The New York Times

Newest Young Immigrants Get a Head Start on School



## ZEIT ONLINE

Wir sind hier





**Poesie Festival 2020**

Poetry festival performance,  
Berlin (June 5th 2020)



**DIG (2020)**

Film written & produced by Sailesh Naidu  
Videography by Tony Stewart  
Premièred at the Berlin Poetry Festival  
[LINK TO FILM HERE](#)



**Poetic Healing**

Performance by Sailesh Naidu  
THF Radio Broadcast, Berlin (2020)



**Become**

Poetry Film by Sailesh Naidu  
Commissioned by Oyoun Berlin as part  
of the Ancestral Body Noise Residency  
[LINK TO FILM HERE](#)

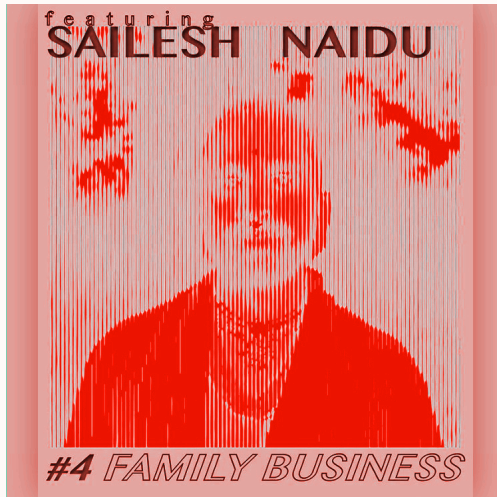


**The Blood of a Poet III**

Performance art piece by Sailesh Naidu  
Volksbühne Theatre, Berlin  
(20th September 2020)

SELECTED PERFORMANCES & WORKSHOP

SAILESH  
NAIDU



**MSG & Friends**

Poetry performance,  
Berlin (December 3rd 2019)



**FUQ: Imaginative Futures**

Poetry performance,  
Berlin (May 2019)



**The Brooklyn Queer Comedy Festival**

Poetry performance,  
New York (December 21st 2018)



**Poetic Interventions: THE QUEERING**

Poetry Workshop  
Berlin (February 2020)

## An Open Letter To The White Woman Who Asked Me If I Was Out To My Family In The Coat Check Line Of Berghain



Written by Sailesh Naidu

DADDY Issues

Art by Gaia Lufrano

I really don't know how to describe the genuine fear that takes my body when I go out in Berlin. The ticktock of inevitability that goes through my head while I wait for yet another racist encounter to happen. And in time it always does, from the innocuous grilling about where I am from, to being asked if I have drugs and then being told that I look like a drug dealer because of my large curly black hair. But there is nothing more insidious than the form of racism that pretends to be your friend, that frames itself in kindness and concern only to be turned around and used as the knife to cut you open and be devoured.

You came up to me to thank me for a performance I had done at ISSA Comedy Show combining my spoken word and comedy. You told me how wonderful and deep you thought my performance was and I thanked you. Hoping that this would be the end of our conversation, hoping that you would leave me in peace to drop my phone in my bag and go back to not having to think about the world that a queer person of colour has to navigate every day.

Not bothering to ask yourself if you had any more business in my space, you stayed and asked me how I have been as if you ever knew how I was. But I obliged, I stayed polite. I told you that I've been great (this was a lie), I told you that I enjoyed being back in Berlin (this also was a lie) and that I had just returned from India where I was visiting my family (this was the truth and I regretted the words as soon as they escaped my mouth). I knew what would happen next. I knew it in my gut, in my bones because it has happened countless times before – and with almost laser like precision you dove in. "Does your family know you are gay?" The words came out of your mouth so effortlessly, like the hooks of a harpoon trying to tear into my flesh to see if I really bled underneath. You stared at me with fevered eyes waiting for a response that would satiate your hunger for my vulnerability. I stood there for a moment, breathing my anger inwards, becoming smaller as to not scare you as to not make you feel threatened by my presence. It is all too familiar tension, the knowledge that my anger in these moments will almost certainly mean my own destruction. The knowledge that as a white woman you will be protected, understood, sympathized and I will almost certainly always be the aggressor.

### An Open Letter

Article written by Sailesh Naidu  
Daddy Magazine

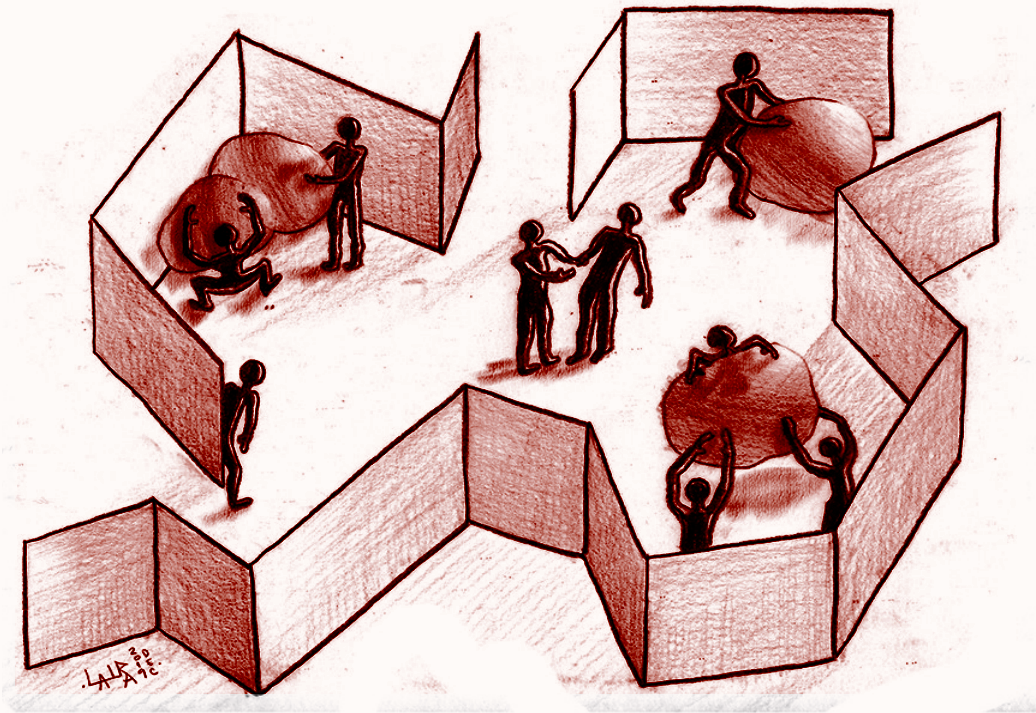


## Shortly After 9/11: On Why Things Are So Tough Right Now

### Shortly After 9/11

Article written by Sailesh Naidu  
Daddy Magazine

# COVEN BERLIN



## **A Return to the Scene of the Crime**

Words by Sailesh Naidu  
Coven Berlin

*“We all have to discover our own paths towards healing but it begins with the painful process of admitting what happened was real and significant. Sex can be fun, kinky, and joyful and hopefully it always is, but there are also times where it can also be scary, uncertain, and painful and that’s ok too. The process of becoming an adult means we are now fully in control of our lives, and we get to determine how and what happens to our bodies, like it always should have been”*



to remember  
what is felt  
is to grasp  
at an echo

for touch  
as the most  
fragile of memories  
can never be held

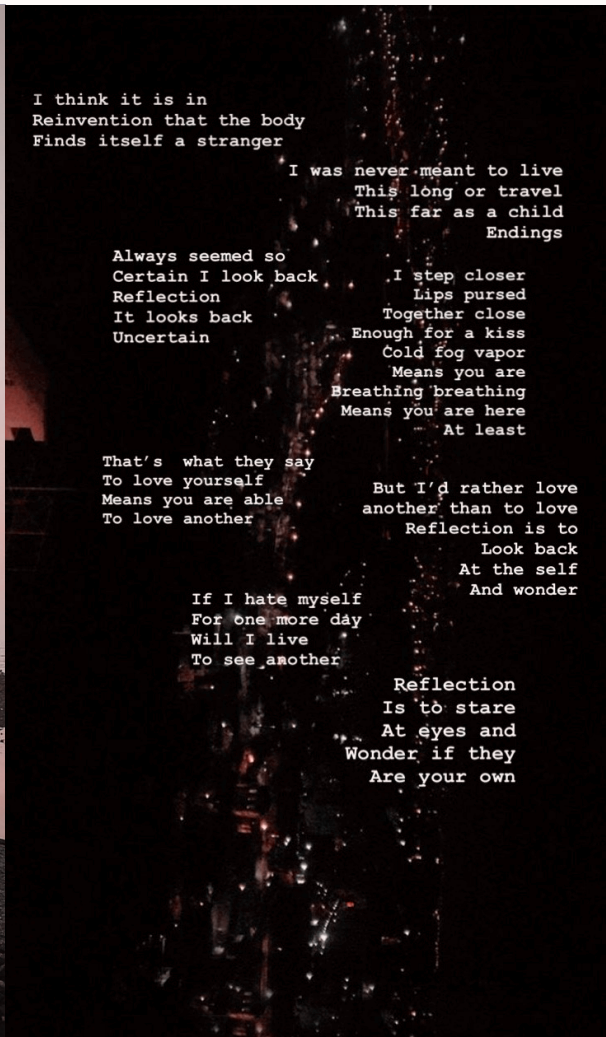
the bevel      the stray hair      the softness  
at the edge    at the edge      at the edge  
of your hip    of your neck      of your ear

fragments      when i wake  
do not fit      it is the absence  
together      that weighs beside me

a dimple in      intangible as the moment  
wrinkled sheets    after a first kiss

fading on  
tingling tongue

aching for  
what is to come



I think it is in  
Reinvention that the body  
Finds itself a stranger

I was never meant to live  
This long or travel  
This far as a child  
Endings

Always seemed so  
Certain I look back  
Reflection  
It looks back  
Uncertain

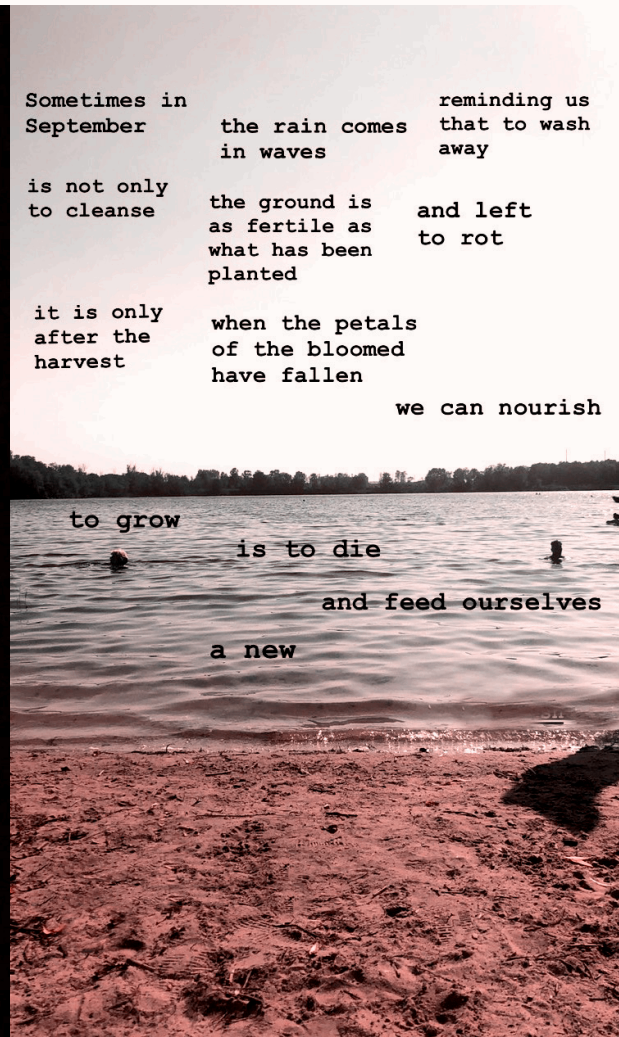
I step closer  
Lips pursed  
Together close  
Enough for a kiss  
Cold fog vapor  
Means you are  
Breathing breathing  
Means you are here  
At least

That's what they say  
To love yourself  
Means you are able  
To love another

But I'd rather love  
another than to love  
Reflection is to  
Look back  
At the self  
And wonder

If I hate myself  
For one more day  
Will I live  
To see another

Reflection  
Is to stare  
At eyes and  
Wonder if they  
Are your own



Sometimes in      reminding us  
September      the rain comes      that to wash  
in waves      away

is not only      the ground is      and left  
to cleanse      as fertile as      to rot  
what has been  
planted

it is only      when the petals  
after the      of the bloomed  
harvest      have fallen

we can nourish

to grow

is to die

and feed ourselves

a new



# CONTACT

 NAIDU.SAILESH@GMAIL.COM

 SAILESHNAIDU.COM

 @SAILESH\_N

P O E T | P E R F O R M E R | R E S E A R C H E R