



PROFILE

ANIS MOJGANI, POET

Anis Mojgani is Oregon's first Black and Iranian poet laureate. A two-time National Poetry Slam champion, worldwide performer, and visual artist, he aims to get poetry beyond the page and to the people in new and different ways.

Words: Amy Souza

Images and poetry: Anis Mojgani

One hot, windy September evening, a hundred or so people gathered on a quiet Portland block for Poems at Sunset Out a Window—the brainchild of Oregon Poet Laureate Anis Mojgani and his friend, Jenn Batchelor. Earlier, the National Weather Service had issued a red flag warning for the weekend, and wildfires already burned in surrounding areas. Smoke would blow into the city the next day, causing hazy skies and hard-to-breathe air, but Friday night’s wind felt perfect—a warm caress against the skin—and the cloud-strewn sky looked only peaceful.

The audience settled into the street and sidewalk tucked between a community park and a mostly empty commercial building, facing a sliding glass window dimly lit by electric candles and framed by slanted plastic blinds. People leaned against cars, trees, or bikes, rested on camp chairs or the curb. One person lounged on a living room pouf. Many flipped through the giveaway Mojgani created, a photocopied zine containing a cut paper collage and handwritten poem that he’d placed in a repurposed newspaper rack earlier that evening.

Just before sunset, a small outdoor speaker crackled with Mojgani’s voice reading his poem “Out of the Garden” while four of the Olivia Darlings, an experimental collective of land-based synchronized swimmers, provided interpretive dance. Dressed in emerald green cotton swim caps, pale yellow smocks, and glittery green sashes, they hopped like rabbits, embodied rocks, and mimed being warmed by the sun.

On paper, this description smacks of a *Portlandia* skit, but the experience itself had nothing affected or mockable about it. In fact, the words that come to mind are pure, welcoming, heartfelt. The audience was engaged from the get-go.

“There are two types of vulnerability,” Mojgani told me a few weeks later. “To be without

any artifice at all or to pile on artifice without caring whether it’s scary or stupid or dumb.”

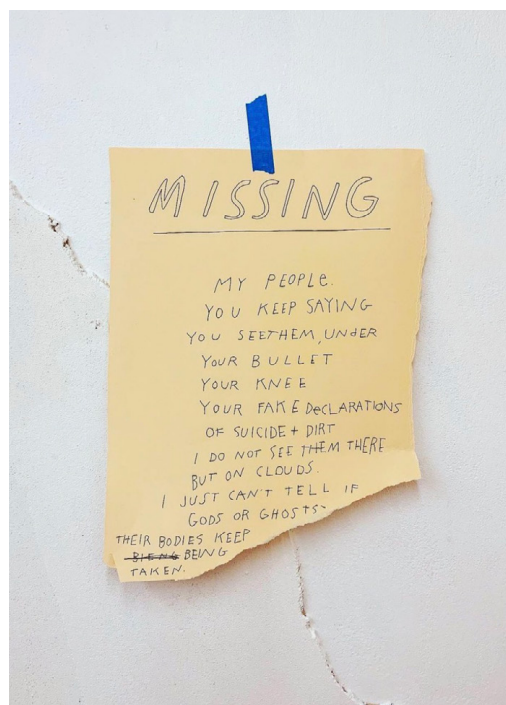
Poems at Sunset seemed to offer a bit of both.

After the first poem, the Olivia Darlings stood aside as Mojgani slid open the window and leaned his body out a little ways. Now without mic or speaker, he shouted into the night to welcome the crowd. Immediately, a hound in the nearby park interrupted with a plaintive bark.

“That dog!” Mojgani said to laughter, and then gave a short howl in response. He told us he’d heard the same bark many times around the neighborhood and it annoyed him until one day he saw the dog trying to get its owner’s attention to throw a toy.

“The dog just wanted something and he only had one way to get it,” he told the crowd. “Whether he’s happy or sad, he only has that one sound.” Mojgani softened toward the dog that day, and now so did the audience.

This sincerity, this easy sharing of his heart, is what endears Mojgani and his work to so many.



Opposite page photo by Heather Brown

The 45-year-old New Orleans native is a mix on many levels. He's Black and Iranian. Southern and northwestern. Untethered and grounded. Soft-spoken and animated. Funny and serious. His words might get an audience laughing and then swerve right into grief, betrayal, or death.

"I'm not a person who knows how to be all of one thing," he said. "I'm a pretty happy person and I lean toward joy and light if I lean more in one direction, but I don't forget that there's sadness in all things. To be human means there's an inevitable end to whatever this chapter of whatever life is, and that means there's an inevitable sorrow wired into us while at the same time an inevitable joy."

As a young boy, Mojgani was obsessed with architecture and particularly loved large spaces. The middle of three children, he spent much of his time drawing. His parents—civil engineer dad and children's bookshop owner and librarian mom—encouraged his creativity and his dream of becoming an architect. But by fourteen, Mojgani worried what that career might look like: hours and hours stuck behind a desk doing un-fun work when all he wanted to do was "design a shit-ton of cool houses".

His first taste of poetry came during senior year of high school, courtesy of a creative writing class. Soon after, he read an article about poetry slams that lit him up inside.

"It was my first time reading poetry with hurdles and challenges connected to being a person," he said. "The energy in the poems was different from what I had been exposed to prior."

In 1995, the internet hadn't yet opened the world, so learning more about slam wasn't easy. When Mojgani stumbled upon a used CD of the 1991 poetry slam finals, though, the variety he heard there further stoked his interest. He loved

slam's format—three minutes, any tone, any topic—and its democratic nature, where all are welcome to perform and everyone in the audience is allowed an opinion.

At the Savannah College of Art and Design, where he studied comics—his other childhood pursuit—he kept working on poetry and attended sporadic local open mics. Though he never considered himself a natural performer, he still longed to enter a slam competition.

"I'd practice my poems aloud in the college bathroom to see how they felt in my mouth, how they sounded, how they made my heart feel and my body feel," he said. "By the time I had the opportunity to do a slam, nervousness wasn't part of the equation. I was so hungry to do this thing."

He followed his passion to slam competitions, eventually becoming a two-time individual National Poetry Slam champion and International World Cup Poetry Slam winner. In the ensuing twenty-ish years, he has built his skill—and ultimately a career—as a poet and touring performer. In addition to publishing five books of writing and art, Mojgani has spoken at multiple TEDx conferences, performed in places as disparate as the United Nations and the House of Blues, and recently wrote the libretto for *Sanctuaries*, a jazz chamber opera by Darrell Grant, which explored urban displacement in Portland's historically Black neighborhoods.

Mojgani ended up in Portland the way so many do—he came to visit college friends for a few months and stayed, first in a live-work loft on the cusp of the city's Pearl district (back when it was more industrial and less upscale) and then across the bridge on the city's east side.

"Very quickly I found myself falling in love with the Pacific Northwest," he said. "New Orleans is a flat city; there's no rise to the land. To move to a place with mountains in the distance and flora that's lush in a completely different way

than home was magical. Autumn’s crispness and spring’s rejuvenation bring an imaginative energy, and being in Portland felt like that.”

Oregon’s poet laureate program has existed since 1923 but took a long break between 1989 and 2006. Mojgani received his first appointment from Governor Kate Brown in early 2020—possibly the worst timing for a post that entails traveling throughout the state—and was subsequently renewed for another two-year term in 2022.

His appointment is a pretty big deal for a very white state with a frankly racist history, but it doesn’t necessarily represent a sea change. Some social media responses to his nomination garnered less-than-open-minded comments.

“So no, we’re not a progressive utopia, but this appointment is still rad,” said Mojgani. “It’s awesome to feel like, oh not only do I get to be the poet laureate of Oregon, but I get to be the first Black poet laureate of Oregon and the first of Iranian descent.”

For at least a year, the pandemic limited what Mojgani could do as poet laureate, but it also sparked ideas like Poems at Sunset—a safer way for people to gather outdoors with ample space around them. Mojgani approaches creativity as problem solving anyway, so parameters and challenges don’t faze him. Plus he’s constantly looking to bring poetry off the page and to the people, both in Portland (an easy sell) and beyond.

Last April for National Poetry Month, for instance, he created Oregon’s “tele-pome” line, which allowed people to call and hear a different poem each day by an Oregon poet laureate. In the first week alone, at least 1,000 people from twelve US states and Canada phoned in.

“It was rad to see the response. I felt like folks were really tickled by it.”

Sprig in December

In the dark I followed
your birds, they brought me

here, to this spruce, see
the sprig of it, brought back to you,

that I am holding in
my hand, it is from your tree

--Oh sprig of my heart

I have broken
off for you

I saw your heart
when you thought
no one would

you saw my heart
when I thought no

one was looking
I saw

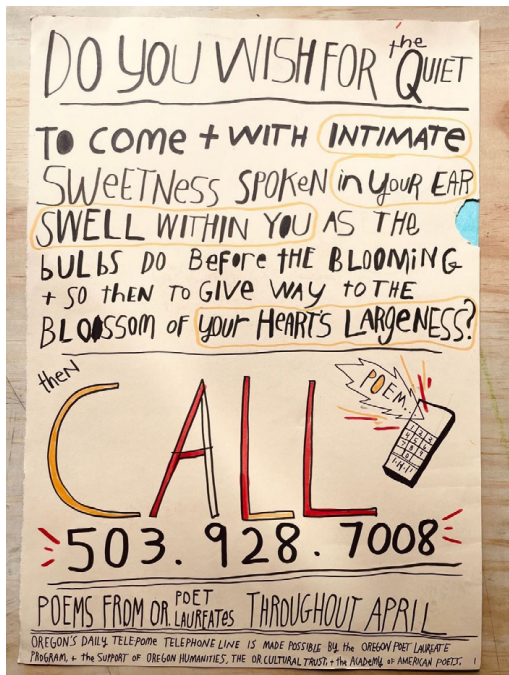
your heart smile at that color
you love when it thought no one was looking

we are walking home on
the backs

of our ancestors
we are walking back

to get home.
“In here,”

he said, pointing to his chest
“You smell like spring.”



On neighborhood walks, he's attracted to the potential of blank walls and empty storefronts, and he'd like to see poems emblazoned across buildings and distributed to broader audiences in unusual ways. Recently he procured thirty out-of-commission newspaper boxes from a local alternative weekly and is working on a way to deliver them statewide. He dreams of creating a poetry newspaper, something along the lines of a pamphlet or zine, that includes poems from established poets alongside work and poetic observations from people living within each community.

"The thing I love about a newspaper is it's so regular. Yesterday's news is used to wrap today's fish," he said. "And at the same time, print has become something that is special and different. It's interesting to have this thing that is both special and completely regular."

Mojgani likens his creative process to turning over stones. What's trying to talk to him and how does

it want to come out—as poem, visual art, or an amalgam? Raised in the Bahá'í faith, he doesn't consider himself a faith-based poet but says the religion's tenets of unity and equality have shaped how he lives and writes. He takes clear joy in sharing his own work and experiencing others'.

"I love a good poem that is so utterly simple and makes you kind of stop inside of your chest," he said. "Something that feels both familiar and unheard at the same time. You didn't see it, and then as soon as it was pointed out you think, oh yeah that building is right there. I've been looking at it the whole time. It exists. Of course, it exists."

He also loves expanding people's view of what a poem can be.

"If you thought poetry needed to be angsty, all I really want to do is make you smile. But while I'm making you laugh, I don't want you to forget that there's things inside you that hurt. There are things inside me that hurt, too. The distance that rises between all of us might get a little bit smaller in that moment."

At September's Poems at Sunset, he read words about love and childhood, told us about growing up in NOLA and how he sometimes hated his name. He stepped aside and let the Olivia Darlings take center stage for a dance featuring sharks and audience participation. He loves this event, he said, because it's a show yet not a show, a place where "human beings can come together in a shared space to experience something that's not transactional". As he finished reading his last poem, the wind got stronger and carried with it hints of wildfire smoke. Mojgani thanked the crowd for coming, twisted off the electric candles, and slid the window shut. He disappeared into his darkened studio and the crowd slowly scattered.

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