

# ‘A language to make sense of what was felt but remained to be thought’

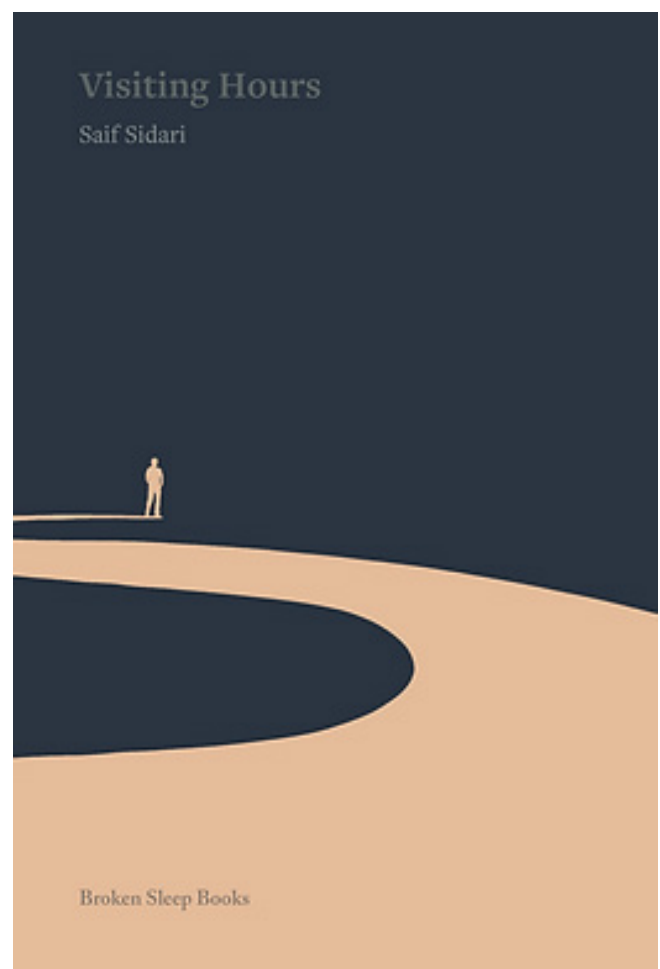
Tom Hull, University of Brighton

Saif Sidari didn’t intend to write poetry – but poetry found him. This might come as a surprise to anyone who glanced through **Visiting Hours**, his debut pamphlet, which employs a deftly chosen variety of forms to reflect on its author’s complex experiences of identity and belonging with candour and precision.

Attendees across multiple countries joined both online and in person on 28 May to celebrate the pamphlet’s launch, which was facilitated by CAPPE co-director and Professor of Critical Theory, Mark Devenney. The event, hosted at the University of Brighton, commenced with Sidari giving selected readings from the collection. This was followed by a conversation about the work with Devenney, and a Q&A from an audience of students, academics, and poetry enthusiasts, before retiring for refreshment and further conversation.

“I started writing poetry as a therapeutic exercise of sorts,” Sidari, whose doctoral research in creative writing takes the form of prose, explains about the pamphlet’s origins. “It wasn’t something I technically considered or planned, and only in hindsight am I able to identify what was happening for me. Poetry situated me in a different headspace to prose, in that

I felt a greater urgency to interrogate my way into the marrow of my life and the world, or certain aspects of it. And that economy of language, where every syllable in every word in every sentence needed tending to, allowed me to really unpick things. Similarly, the punctuation, the line breaks, the rhythm and flow – even as I did not adhere to a rhyme scheme, created a new challenge. Being backed into a corner by form and space made it that I had to stretch the limits of what I thought possible inside of language. But it wasn’t just about writing what I already knew to be true. Poetry offered a language to make sense of what was felt but remained to be thought, and what was thought but remained to be felt. A coherence that seemed to me only possible given this framework of storying practice.”





## **Celebrating the launch of Saif Sidari's Visiting Hours at University of Brighton**

This expansive yet precise play with the limits of form is reflected in the breadth of the work; the poems muddy the lines between childhood memories, adult relationships, griefs and freedoms. *Visiting Hours* spans a range of themes and topics, but returns often to the themes of identity — personal, national, sexual, and familial. As a queer Arab, and as a Palestinian poet who has never been able to visit Palestine, Sidari reflected, much of his life has been spent navigating the contradictions of identities typically presented in opposition to each other; unquestionable lived experiences which are often made into political hypotheticals. Discussion at the event naturally coalesced along these lines, as Sidari reflected with insight on the significant place of his mother in the work, along with the complexity of how language and national identity contradict: the limitations of writing in English and the difficulty of what publishing this work in Arabic would entail.

I first read *Visiting Hours* in a café on a rainy March day in Edinburgh, and found myself blinking away tears and passing the pamphlet to my partner wordlessly when I reached 'I want to write about love' (p.37), a short prose poem of just one stanza. It was heartachingly relatable, reaching out and taking my hand in the way only good writing can. Hearing the poet's own voice a few months later was an intimate matter in a room full of strangers.

I asked Sidari what it was like to read and discuss this kind of quasi-therapeutic work in front of an audience. "I'd be lying if I said it comes naturally to me," he replied. "My gut instinct is still to retreat or disappear. And if I'm honest, half the time I'm not *all* there. It's not the pamphlet's proximity to the intimate details of my history that I find difficult, in and of itself. In fact, I cherish the opportunity to share, to connect. What a gift! But then, it's tricky, this attempt to negotiate my nervous system out of what it knows. The existential threat, given particular realities of my life – past and present included – which relegate the bulk of this work to the unsayable. I am *more* free, but I am not essentially free."

When academic institutions platform independent creative endeavours, we expand the possibilities of what can be expressed within these frameworks and open up new ways to express it. As Sidari puts it in the poem 'The Stranger': "I find my-self, writing a genealogy for the new world" (p.24).

I carried out this interview within the framework of this issue, with *Interfere*, and wanted to know what Sidari's position was on the overall theme, as well as some of the suggested topics, such as "language acts and grammars of resistance". To this he replied:

"It's easy enough to imagine why so many find themselves turning away from the world, from one another – and, therefore, from themselves. Certain horrors are much too abject to conceive, let alone internalise and confront head on. This is not a personal failing. We strive to do what we *must*, because this is the hand we've been dealt, and because it is the right thing to do. But it is overwhelming. Everywhere you look there is injustice and another call to action. I cannot fault anyone for craving pockets of dull reprieve.

But this turning away becomes highly problematic when it is protracted. The far-right thrives in these individualistic vacuums of disconnection, of moral and relational apathy. They capitalise on overwhelm and passivity. They underfund/defund universities, who are quick to cull their scholars, educators, and programs, especially – and prejudicially – from the Humanities and Social Sciences. They stoke fear of those they have othered and undermine the *human*. They make us estranged from one another, in part by embedding and amplifying a grave logic of scarcity – that life is inherently zero-sum, such that a person/group outside oneself couldn't possibly flourish without a detrimental, personal cost.

We cannot dispense with human languages – with creativity and storying practices. Because we *need* one another. There is no path back to our own humanity without connection. And we cannot hope to address the dangers of far-right ideology in the anti-human silos they have constructed for us. This urgent appeal for interdependence may not be unique to our time, but it is urgent all the same.

Cultivate the languages that will enable you to name a wound, and to love and be *in-relation*. And if yours is an endless suffering, then let your suffering be a bridge. Never underestimate the reciprocal value of this kindness. It will not be a silver bullet fix, but it is a meaningful victory – a *good* act of self-preservation that ripples beyond borders, affecting new worlds and future futures. In the end, this is a fight to (re)claim our collective humanity. And what is more *essentially* and *historically* human than the practices of storytelling and poetry? What better way to begin – or begin again – so we may forge these bonds?

As such, I'm truly honoured to have been invited by Mark and CAPPE for this event; for this opportunity to connect. Their efforts are invaluable, particularly at this juncture in history, in this unsettling political climate. And I'm equally grateful to Interfere, for the space and time they have carved out to engage with my work."

### Editor's postscript

Natasha Jane Kennedy

The political is everywhere. When working on a commissioned interview, we initially wondered how explicitly linked to the issue we needed to make this piece. But we quickly realised that we didn't need to fit Sidari's work into any kind of tight box for it to go above and beyond what we were looking for. In this issue, we focus on featuring writers, thinkers, and artists who are indispensable to the effort of understanding our contemporary political situation. We wanted to name where we are, how we got there, think through what remains, and imagine where to go from here.

As a début collection by a transnational poet and researcher, *Visiting Hours* lives in proximity to political situations that confront the very possibility of its arrival. A text which appears, like the poet, to be searching for solid ground—reprieve from estrangement. With candour that is reasonably self-conscious, Sidari's work is an intimate exploration of what it can mean to be human in a world that is primed to make you forget, often under sustained dehumanising circumstances. Every piece is in some way an attempt to write towards identification and embodiment; an attempt from the poet to penetrate his own life as more than a spectre, who "visit[s] in-time with [his] ghost tongue" ('Visiting Hours', p.21).

Sidari's acute awareness of the context in which he writes underpins the collection in filigree; what a privilege it is to write, speak, and exist freely in the public domain. The poetry is urgent, and unforgiving. It is true, *Visiting Hours* is a personal witness statement: its author Palestinian, born in the diaspora, a queer man, an Arab immigrant residing in today's England. But one not need belong to the situations depicted to relate and glean important human insights. Personal truths exhume for this reader a democratic responsibility to question the histories we inherit—contexts we take for granted, and ones we often find ourselves inexorably tangled up with.

## HOMEWRECKER

"Does a dream fall sick like the dreamers? ...

Can a people be born on the guillotine?"

Mahmoud Darwish, *We Are Entitled to Love Autumn*

I only ever know myself hanging, in a tempest untouched  
by nativities—the possibilities of my name  
emptied to the firmaments, which could not care to claim me  
yet feed my vapour body, back to the greying  
furies. My own jettisoned at waysides. A bay of white  
polyester sheets, illuminated by ornate house keys, bandaged  
after Catastrophe. A world  
disappearing from my grandfather's memory—exit wounds. *I can't find  
your grandmother.*

I cradle his hand, stitching up time. *She died three years ago, seedi.* He recalls  
his own key, cloaked in his jubbah, wields it like a prayer, the copper Right  
of Return remains, welded to his frame, this despite  
the bulldozer, rending our home in its maw. Hatchet season, entitled  
homewrecker, who kneads our histories into spoils tragedy-capital to make  
victim of an-other,  
blood mixing in the mortar. A communion of myths  
migrating at the beak of an arrow, toward new beginnings, new ceaseless  
wounding, 'cleansing' means cleaving. The net at my lips gathering  
dreams—generational springs  
nurture me. A stone to resist the tank, cast like going back  
in Her arms, where in this mourning we might sing, as we always had,  
a song that is ours. A key  
longs for turning locks, unspooling the brow, till I am no longer  
scattering, everywhere a ruin meandering through the trees  
or immigration offices.

(from *Visiting Hours*, p.42)



*Visiting Hours* by Saif Sidari is [available now from Broken Sleep Books](#).