

Aimee Nezhukumatathil's  
**LUCKY FISH**

(Tupelo Press, 2011)

**READER'S COMPANION**

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## ***Editorial Reviews and Citations***

*Lucky Fish* was named winner of the 2011 **Da Vinci Eye Award** for Outstanding Design, the 2011 gold medal in Poetry from the **Independent Publisher Book Awards**, and the 2011 **Eric Hoffer Grand Prize** for Independent Books.

“. . . Cultural strands are woven into the DNA of her strange, lush, but oh-so-American poems. In ‘The Ghost-Fish Postcards’ she writes: ‘First the perfume of cobra wraps around your wrist — then the bloom & bite: summer,’ and ‘There are stars that are cola-colored. Your word is the window. The window is the word. Each night the quail calls, *Wet my lips, wet my lips.*’ Aphorisms . . . from another dimension.” —*The New York Times*

“In vivid imagery, warm yet penetrating, Aimee Nezhukumatathil’s *Lucky Fish* moves from India to the Philippines to New York state to capture a rich life, richly lived.” —*Library Journal*

“Nezhukumatathil’s fourth book is fascinated with the small mechanisms of being, whether natural, personal, or imagined. Everything from eating eels in the Ozark mountains to the history of red dye finds a rich life in her poems. At times her lush settings and small stories are reminiscent of fairy tales . . . while at others Nezhukumatathil (author of *At the Drive-In Volcano*) speaks with resonance and fierceness. . . . Even as the poems jump from the Philippines to India to New York, they still take their time, stopping to notice that ‘there is no mystery on water/ greater than the absence of rust,’ and to draw small but wonderful parallels: ‘I loved you dark & late. The crocus have found ways to push up & say this/ too.’” —*Publishers Weekly*

## **2011 Hoffer Award Grand Prize Citation**

### ***Lucky Fish, Aimee Nezhukumatathil***

“Aimee Nezhukumatathil writes with ever-present inventiveness in this 2011 collection. By enfolding folk beliefs, tales, or superstitions into contemporary experience, place, or situations, these poems delineate a fascinating, unexpected adventure. Her combinatory poetic and moral grace ranges through varied forms and across subjects and worldwide geography with exuberance, humor, and a lustrous talent for complex transformation. She presents scenes from childhood or her youth with vulnerability and a quirky originality. Occasionally, as in “Inside a Diorama,” a poem will rouse the reader by yoking an impossibly heart-wrenching event like a child’s murder with a cheery, yellow memory of innocence. Throughout her writing, such fusions are possible because this virtuosic poet possesses the enviable capacity for interlacing compassionate universality with a bright-hearted understanding of happenstance. Both poet and readers can be grateful to Tupelo Press for the superb design and high quality production of this accomplished book.”

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## *Discussion Questions*

1. How would you describe the book's organization? Describe any threads that connect the three sections of *Lucky Fish*.
2. Nezhukumatathil has said while the "surface" subjects of the poems in this collection are quite varied—ranging from a two-headed calf, corpse flowers, high school, daughterhood and motherhood, food, folklore, and missing children—*Lucky Fish* is basically a gathering of love poems. Do you agree or disagree? Explain, and give specific examples.
3. In what specific ways do zoological, botanical, and landscape elements affect these poems in their movement and their texture? What are the results of incorporating these kinds of scientific and descriptive materials into poems?
4. Consider the various shapes and forms of these poems (for example lyrics and narratives; short-lined columns and long-lined, extended meditations; prose poems; poems in stanzas or sections; and more). How does the formal variety of these poems contribute to the experience of reading this collection? Where do the poems speed up or slow down, and how does shape affect pacing and sound?
5. Look at the ways the poems in *Lucky Fish* begin and end. How does that influence the tone of these poems? Are they quiet and reflective? Or loud and audacious and joyful? Where do you find shifts of tones and a corresponding mix of emotions *within* a poem?

## *Ideas for Writing*

1. Using “Kottayam Morning” on page 17 as a reference point, write a poem about waking up in a place unfamiliar to you. What sensory details can you include to help shine light the *exterior* as well as *interior* setting? The locale of your poem doesn’t have to be a foreign country, but can be as “unfamiliar” as a friend’s house, your childhood home after being away at college, or even a place you’ve never been . . . a saloon! a movie set! the lip of a crater on the moon! (Choose your own unfamiliar location. . . . Even the sky is no limit. . . .)
2. Write an *epistle* — a letter poem — to someone (living or not living) who irritates you. Or write a letter addressed to yourself, twenty years from now. Or twenty years ago.
3. Take a seminal event from your life and write a poem about that in sections. Be purposeful in not trying to capture every moment, in other words leave “space” in your descriptions and narration. Be conscious of the silence of the white space of the page.
4. This prompt riffs off a classic exercise from Richard Hugo’s *Triggering Town* (a book that you *must* read if you haven’t already, dear poet!). Use an atlas or map to find a quirky town name like “Two Egg, Florida,” or “Why, Arizona” or “Mosquito Bench, Arkansas.” Try to imagine a day in the life of that town. Do research on the landscape and flora and fauna of the surrounding region and incorporate some very particular details and distinctive information in your poem. More town names can be found at the following website: [www.accuracyproject.org/towns](http://www.accuracyproject.org/towns)
5. Try a poem of *supposition*: in other words, a poem that draws the reader into a deliberate and engaging moment of hypothesis. For example, consider these poems from *Lucky Fish*: “Suppose You Were a Moray Eel,” “Suppose You Chopped Down a Mulberry Tree,” and “Hedgehog.”

## ***Pirene's Fountain* Interview with Aimee Nezhukumatathil**

*by Lark Vernon Timmons, April 2011*

**Tell us, Aimee, did you pick up pen and paper at a young age? Describe that first creative spark if you would.**

I can always remember drawing, or writing stories and illustrating them, writing haiku or acrostic poems about rainbows and unicorns (it was the 1970s, early '80s, after all). I think my parents and most teachers didn't know what to do with me! We didn't own any children's books, so I browsed my mom's medical books and old leather-bound Reader's Digest books of my father. My parents both worked full-time but they always found time to take my sister and me to the library where I'd stuff my bag full of science and joke and magic trick books. I'd finish them, then beg to go back: and repeat that all year-long. In elementary school, I was shuffled off to a "gifted" program where I made dioramas of the Underground Railroad, dinosaurs, various Greek gods, and wrote these little "reports" of the various wives of Henry the VIII. Then I'd return to my regular class after lunch. You'd think this would be a recipe for being a weird little outcast, but I had a sassy tongue and always stood up for the kids who were being teased, so no one ever teased me. If they did, they only tried it once. I also loved chasing (and being chased by!) boys on the playground and was the hula-hooping champion in fifth grade. I say all of this because I firmly believe there is a direct correlation / explanation here for why I was ultimately drawn to poetry: the fun and delight in language, the quiet reading in research and study, the satisfaction in performance and making people laugh.

**I found it poignant that a fifth grade Chicago-area teacher was inspired to present a lesson called "Stanzas, Metaphors, Similes, and Nezhukumatathil" after sharing your poem "First Fool" with her class. When did *you* begin learning the craft of poetry?**

Fairly late, I think, compared to most of my peers. I was a chemistry major in college until end of my sophomore year, and then I crammed in as many workshops and literature courses as I could handle. I took a year off before I went to graduate school, and that was the real serious beginning of digging

into poetics. I felt like everyone was so much better read than I was, in grad school, so I made it a point to *read read read* and try to fill in all the gaps. I'm still doing that. I hope I never stop.

**In a “How a Poem Happens” web interview, you remarked that on your best teaching days you come home excited to write, and on your best writing days you're excited to go back and teach. Can you speak a little about how the two activities go hand-in-hand for you?**

Ha—now that I have two little sons, I'd like to amend that: “On my best teaching days, I come home exhausted, and thankfully, there is a meal artfully prepared by my husband (who is mythic in his generosity because he too is a writer and teaches full-time) or else I would be eating take-out and have no energy left to do anything but play a rousing game of CandyLand (with the baby in my lap) or read the latest *Clifford the Big Red Dog* book with my four year-old. Sometimes I might even remember a great poem idea while brushing my teeth at night.

**You have said that you take your cues from Mother Nature, “the greatest poet of all.” Have you always been inspired by the physical world?**

I'm not sure if “inspired” is the right word, but yes, I have always felt a pull and push to record the landscape, first starting as a way of remembrance, I think. My family moved five times before I started high school, and this was my way of remembering the smell of creosote shrubs in Phoenix, the catalpa seeds and wide skies in Kansas, the fruit and veggie stands and showy maple displays of Western New York. And then I had the same impulse to record and try to make sense of my travels to India and the Philippines, lands where my parents are from, and where I feel both strangely at home and yet very much a stranger.

**Would you share the research process used in your poetry and why it's important?**

I love the play and re-shaping/imagining that goes on when I craft a poem stemming from any of my actual experiences, but one thing I won't fudge—I feel like I owe this to the reader—is that if I mention an animal or plant in my poems, you can rest assured that I have thoroughly researched that element (if not my own direct observations) then through field guides, photographs, videos, or various botany or zoology books. I'm still very

much that girl who loved to read science books and make dioramas, only the dioramas are now poems.

**Aimee, your name appears among a stellar group of writers on a list of “20 Top Asian Americans in Literature.” Quite an honor! Which writers, past or present, have had the greatest influence on you and your work?**

This answer will never be finished and I know I will think of others even an hour later, so for now, at this moment, let me just say: the late, great David Citino, Naomi Shihab Nye, Lucille Clifton, Sei Shonagon, and every single book from Ingri and Edgar Parin d’Aulaire.

**The apt and beautifully titled poem “Overwinter” was written for inclusion in *Starting Today: 100 Poems for Obama’s First 100 Days*. What was the process and experience of writing for our Commander-in-Chief like?**

The beauty of that project is that those poems were written on the day we were assigned, so there was an almost electric charge to celebrating this historic event while it was happening. My day/poem was scheduled fairly early in his presidency and I just wanted to capture the sigh and approval of not just millions of people around the world, but also . . . various insects, mollusks, birds—things that obviously can’t speak and express their relief.

**Your charming website is where I discovered, among other delights, that your pet dachshund is named after a poetic form, the Villanelle. Do you utilize poetic forms often, and if so, do you find them challenging, limiting (or both)?**

I love forms and don’t use them enough. For me, they require long stretches of concentration and quiet—but my favorite form, which I never tire of, is the Japanese form of the haibun. I adore its shape visually and the intimacy of it for the reader: you get this intense prose block of lines, and just when you think it’s done—you get a sort of whisper in the haiku at the end. Even on days when I’m too busy or tired and I think I can’t write, I can always find fruit in a haibun. Thanks, too, for asking about Villanelle, my (former) dog. She passed away at the ripe old age of seventeen this past spring. She definitely was the “heartbeat at my feet.”

**We’re all excited about your collection, *Lucky Fish*. Can you tell us**

**about it?**

This collection was started in 2007 in the months after the birth of my first son, and I wrote the last poems for the book about two months after my youngest son was born in the summer of 2010. Obviously I was semi-delirious (but joyful to be writing, and *wanting* to write at all) in those heady early days, but my editors at Tupelo Press very wisely helped me sift through and cut poems that I was too protective of to see that they were still unfinished and even a bit raw. But it would be wrong to say this book is about motherhood and pregnancy. The voices and personas in this book are more confident, surer of themselves, than in my other two collections, and pretty much bursting at the seams with happiness and love, which not so coincidentally mirrors what was/is going on in my personal life. I think ultimately that this book is a collection of love poems—to Nature and all her delights underwater and in the garden, to family and dear friends—and I feel that this book is the most honest document I’ve ever written about what it means to be grateful in this world.

*Link:*

[http://www.pirenesfountain.com/showcase/aimee-nez\\_interview.html](http://www.pirenesfountain.com/showcase/aimee-nez_interview.html)

Editor’s Note: This interview has been slightly revised from its original version.

## ***The 1/2 Dozen Interview*** with **Aimee Nezhukumatathil**

*by Julianna Baggott (aka Bridget Asher), March 2011*

### **Current obsessions — literary or otherwise?**

The poetry of two Sarahs: Sarah Vap & Sarah Gambito; writing haibun; anything glittered or sequined—I'm a regular bower bird; Sunday evenings: making a rainbow of purees for my ten-month-old and watching him *delight* in the joy of trying new foods; peacocks (the national bird of India); listening to my almost-four-year-old narrate his day to his baby brother: "Today we found shadows. Sometimes, I have a big shadow, sometimes a little shadow. Your shadow is probably very, very small."

### **Writing Tip #17 for Aspiring Writers:**

Your mama was right: saying *please* and *thank you* will get you far. And more than that, I believe in the sweetness and civility of the thank-you note. With a bona fide stamp and carefully lettered address. Listen to the paper take the ink. I believe in Happy Mail.

**What's your advice to a writer who's looking for a lifelong partner? Any particularly useful traits to suggest in said partner? (Do you want to tell us a brief love story here?) and (next question): Have you learned to strike a balance between your writing life and the other aspects of your life?**

I was involved in a tumultuous grad-school / then long-distance relationship on and off for most of my twenties. I didn't start dating my husband until I was almost thirty and my first book had already been published a couple of years before that. But before I met him, I was totally unsure of what the future would hold, kids-wise or husband-wise. *Totally* unsure and doubtful. . . there's so much you can't control, even if you have type-A tendencies like I do. The guys I dated (my grad school boyfriend notwithstanding) never understood the importance of writing to me, or frankly, could handle any of

my writing or teaching success (I got my first tenure-track job when I was twenty-six)—and I dated lots of writers, many of them “successful” themselves! So what I thought of my future in the love/romance/family department was pretty bleak, or at least nothing long-term.

I took great pride in buying/renovating a house by myself, thinking I would be the single lady with the small dog always fixing up her house and that’s that. I never knew that in less than a year from buying the house, I would meet a super-talented writer whom I deeply loved and who understood and put up with my mercurial tendencies (and whom I wanted to father my children—that last tidbit weeded out a *lot* of guys, hee hee)! Most importantly, we genuinely *like* each other’s company. There’s something to be said for being able to travel around the world together with excruciating long delays or crazy situations (accidentally abandoned together in a city square during rush hour with no restaurant or place to even sit down in hot hot southern India, anyone?) and we still emerge being able to laugh together, with nary an argument between us.

I don’t have all the answers, but I do know it’s far too easy to think (and society doesn’t do the greatest job of showing there are other options, which is one reason why it is important for me to mention my two young sons in interviews or in my writing) that women (maybe especially minority women) have to make a choice between career *or* family. But I’m here to say you *don’t* have to choose (if you don’t want to). It’s not easy, but I wouldn’t trade any sleepless nights or applesauce-crusting blouses for easiness.

**If you teach the craft of writing, why do you do it — other than for cash?**

My favorite part of teaching poetry is that “light bulb moment” that happens in a student’s writing where everything kind of clicks and their metaphors land from outer space or next door and they find a space to put into words what they couldn’t say before. When they realize their writing is above and beyond anything they ever imagined writing could be. And then watching them *want* to read more, and more, and more—on their own, not for any assignment or extra credit. I think students are hungry for poetry but sometimes that hunger has been suppressed for so long, they just about forgot it entirely. But all of us can remember the joy we had when we were

first reading rhymes and metaphor and filling in pictures in our minds for the parts that weren't illustrated in children's books.

I love getting my students to that moment where they unplug, step away from the computer, and read because they *want* to. Because they are hungry for it. One of my greatest privileges as a professor—and I do consider it a privilege, really—is introducing them to new poets of all colors and backgrounds whom they wouldn't normally find on their own, and helping them join the poetry conversation mid-dinner party, so to speak. Having students return to the joy of reading, not just for a class, not for any writing assignment—but for the sheer happiness of reading again. And of course, that naturally creates the best writers, the ones who are willing to take risks, to try new forms, new subjects, etc. I also teach environmental writing and literature, and those classes are especially near and dear to my heart. I tell my students, “If *you* aren't writing about this planet (that fishing hole at grandma's, those mountains you hiked as a kid with your parents . . .), who else is going to do it?”

### **What's your take on touring?**

Whenever possible (and as long as it is not disruptive), I bring my sons to various campus events and sometimes they even travel with me to readings across the country.

Once, my then almost eleven-month-old eldest son came along to an end-of-semester poetry gala reading for my graduating seniors, and it was my husband (who also teaches in the English department) who held him in the back of the room, read picture books with him, and yes, even fed him a bottle—all while I was emceeding the event, taking pictures, and meeting the parents. I do think it is important for students to see us as a family unit at these events, especially when they are held at what is normally “family time” for us in the evenings. But most importantly, I think it's healthy for them to see my husband with the baby.

And some of these are women and men who have been accepted into MFA/Masters/PhD programs, or who are just starting out teaching, so they very well might be in academia long term, and isn't that an awesome thing for them to see it is in fact possible that a future partner may be able to do this for them? And there's a partnership, of course. When my husband has a presentation in our campus-wide Research Expo in a few weeks, you can bet

that it will be *me* who is carrying our infant around and trying to keep our now-toddler from toppling trays of cheese cubes so that my husband can emcee the event and mingle freely.

But I'd be lying to say I don't sort of relish those times I travel alone, having that alone time and quiet in a hotel room, catching up on my own reading and sometimes—if I'm lucky—my own writing. I keep connected with my family via the wonders of Skype, but I do enjoy having that separate identity, the living out of a suitcase, indulging in the glories of room service, and (I'm often giving readings in high school assemblies or as a visiting writer at colleges) making students of all stripes laugh and laugh and not take themselves too seriously, hopefully making them want to rush back to their own rooms and quietly put pen to paper.

Link:

<http://bridgetasher.blogspot.com/2011/03/12-dozen-for-aimee-nezhumatathil.html>

Editor's Note: This interview has been slightly revised from its original version.

## *Links*

**Recordings of Aimee Nezhukumatathil reading,  
from the online audio archives at From the Fishhouse:**

[http://fishhousepoems.org/archives/aimee\\_nezhukumatathil/index.shtml](http://fishhousepoems.org/archives/aimee_nezhukumatathil/index.shtml)

**from The Rumpus Poetry Book of the Month Club:**

Review of *Lucky Fish* by Camille Dungy: <http://therumpus.net/2010/12/why-i-chose-aimee-nezhukumatathil's-lucky-fish-for-the-rumpus-poetry-book-club/>

Transcript of a lively “round-table” interview and online chat with Aimee Nezhukumatathil: <http://therumpus.net/2011/01/the-rumpus-poetry-book-club-interviews-aimee-nezhukumatathil/>

**from The California Journal of Poetics:**

Review of *Lucky Fish*, by Gina Barnard: <http://www.californiapoetics.org/reviews/298/lucky-fish-by-aimee-nezhukumatathil>

**from Harriet, news blog of The Poetry Foundation:**

Review of *Lucky Fish*, by Rigoberto González:  
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2011/04/lucky-fish/>

**from Poets.org, the website of The Academy of American Poets**

Craft essay by Aimee Nezhukumatathil, “The Poetry of Superstition and Supposition,” with eight writing prompts:

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/21841>

**Backyard Birds:**

These birds hang out in Aimee’s backyard:

<http://www.google.com/search?q=blue+winged+warblerh>

**Funny Video:**

This video always cracks Aimee up.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gx-NLPH8JeM&feature=youtu.be>

**The pleasures of old-fashioned writing:**

Aimee is in love with stationery and glass pens.

<http://distinctivestationery.net/shop/customer/product.php?productid=2127>

**Follow Aimee on Twitter:** [@aimeenez](https://twitter.com/aimeenez)

**Visit Aimee Nezhukumatathil’s own website:** <http://aimeenez.net/>

**Visit Aimee Nezhukumatathil’s pages at the website of her publisher, Tupelo Press, with more links and film clips:**

<http://www.tupelopress.org/authors/nezhukumatathil>

**Visit Aimee Nezhukumatathil page at the website of Blue Flower Arts:**

<http://www.blueflowerarts.com/aimee-nez>