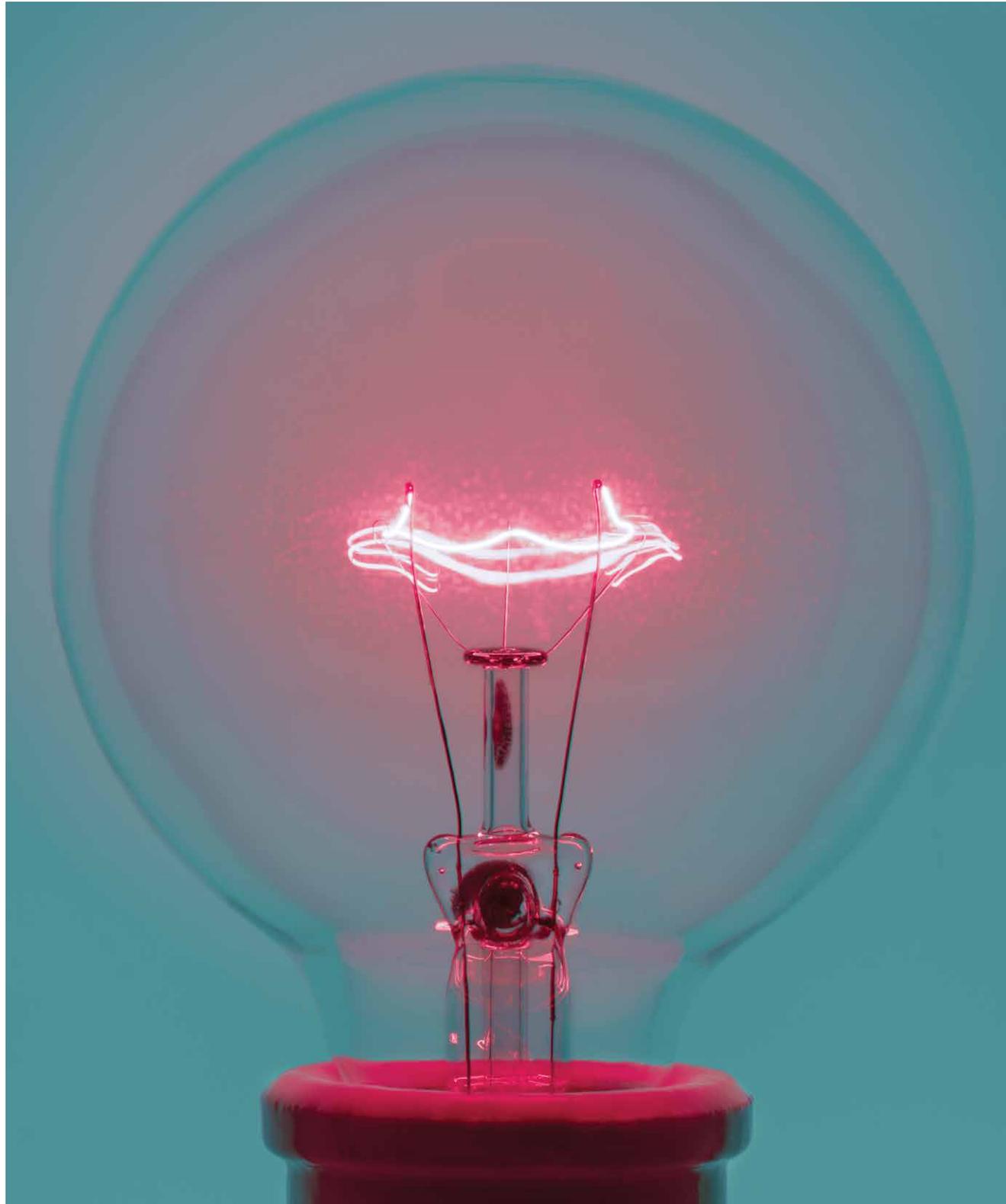


AMANDA MEANS

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MAGGIE PAUL

The Frozen Sea within Us

An interview with
Chitra Divakaruni

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning writer, activist, professor, and speaker and the author of twenty-one books, including *The Mistress of Spices* (Anchor Books, 1998), *Sister of My Heart* (Anchor Books, 2000), *The Palace of Illusions* (Anchor Books, 2009), and most recently, *Independence* (William Morrow, 2023). Her work has been published in over a hundred magazines and anthologies, including *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Best American Short Stories*, and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*, and translated into thirty languages. Her awards include an American Book Award, a PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award, a Premio Scanno, and a Light of India award. She is the McDavid Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

MARGARET PAUL: You are widely known as a novelist, but early on in your career you published four books of poetry: *Dark Like the River* (Writers Workshop, 1987), *The Reason for Nasturtiums* (Berkeley Poets Workshop and Press, 1990), *Leaving Yuba City* (Anchor Books, 1997), and *Black Candle* (Calyx Books, revised edition 2000, first edition 1991). *Leaving Yuba City* earned a Pushcart Prize and the Allen Ginsberg Award. In 1995, your first collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* (Anchor Books), appeared and won an American Book Award. Can you tell us how, and if, the craft of poetry informs your prose?

CHITRA DIVAKARUNI: The craft of poetry has permeated my prose in crucial ways. I think in images, sounds, rhythm. This has been very helpful in creating my personal style and also in allowing the rhythms of my mother tongue, Bengali, to inhabit my prose when needed.

MP: I understand that your grandfather was an important influence upon you as a writer. Can you tell us how?

CD: My father wasn't a particularly positive male model for me, but my grandfather made up for that. I spent many of my summer holidays at his home in a Bengal village. My first foray into poetry was after he died, when I tried to put my feelings into words. My grandfather encouraged me to read widely. He had a large library, and he allowed me to read whatever I chose from it. If I didn't know a word, I could always ask him what it meant. I think I love books so much because he fostered that love—and because my first memories of reading are entwined with memories of his love and encouragement.

MP: Your work is distinctively rich in sensual detail. Is this ability to recall and document details so vividly a talent you have had since childhood?

CD: Not really! I did not write anything significant until I moved to the U.S. and started graduate school. Immigration was the crucible in which I—to my surprise—became a poet. Using sense details is certainly important in my writing, but if I had had those talents earlier, they were buried somewhere deep.

MP: The poem “How I Became a Writer” serves as a prologue to *Leaving Yuba City*. I read that this is not autobiographical, except for the mother helping her daughter shape letters correctly with chalk on the cement outside. The narrator and her mother take refuge from an anonymous scary figure inside. By the magic trance of learning to write, the child escapes such “iron-fisted gorillas.” Has writing kept its magic for you? Does it help you to escape other “iron-fisted gorillas” in the world?

CD: Actually, there are some autobiographical elements in the poem. My father was a hot-tempered man and our home was not always a safe space. Leaving that aside, yes, writing has been for me both magical and empowering. It may not help me escape the gorillas, but it allows me to shine the spotlight on them.

MP: Phil Levine, “poet and teacher extraordinaire,” is thanked for his encouragement of your work in the same volume. Did you have the opportunity to study with Levine in Fresno? In what ways were his poems and teachings influential?

CD: I can’t say enough about Phil! He has been a true mentor. I was his TA when he taught at UC Berkeley and we kept in touch afterwards. He was so smart—and also very kind to his students, even when they were making big mistakes in their choice of language, etc. When he came to teach at the Foothill College [creative writing] conference, I sat in on all his workshops and even taught one with him. I reread his poems every year, especially the poem “What Work Is,” and his poems show me how to be a better human being and a more attentive writer. I think I was most influenced by his ability to modulate voice and tone and to surprise the reader by having a poem move in unexpected ways.

MP: Your poems are often told from a first-person point of view, but many are persona poems. Do you want us to know which is from your own life and which from others, or is the universality of the material more important than your personal identity?

CD: The universality of the material is the most important aspect of the poems. Except for one or two, the poems are

persona poems. But it no longer matters to me whether people think a poem is about my life—or not. The poem is the important thing; the impact it has on the reader is what matters most.

MP: Maxine Hong Kingston’s book *The Woman Warrior* had a formidable effect on you as a young writer, inspiring you to write stories of the Indian diaspora. Your complex and riveting poem “The Nishi,” from *Leaving Yuba City*, is a poem that has an eerie resemblance to Kingston’s story. The narrator is a little girl whose mother struggles with domestic abuse.

Did you have *The Woman Warrior* in mind as you wrote “The Nishi”? Might this dramatic poem have foreshadowed your direction toward writing fiction?

CD: *The Woman Warrior* was one of the most electric books I read. Yes, it gave me huge permission—especially its scorching beginning chapter, “No Name Woman.” I have credited Maxine Hong Kingston many times for opening a door for me. You are right, “The Nishi” was influenced by her work. And as you can see in that poem, my work is becoming increasingly narrative. “The Nishi” was also influenced by the work I’d already started doing with women in situations of domestic violence.

MP: In the section entitled “Growing Up in Darjeeling” from *Leaving Yuba City*, you describe the experiences of Indian children in a convent school. The contrast between Irish-Catholic culture and Indian culture is articulated in vivid, arresting detail. In the poem “The Walk,” non-Irish students set out on a walk with the nuns, singing “Beautiful Killarney.” The children’s feelings of isolation, homesickness, geographic and cultural dislocation dominate.

Many have reported the punitive, oppressive nature of an Irish education even while admitting the education was of high quality. What, if anything, did you gain from being taught by the Irish nuns? And what have you had, or chosen, to unlearn?

CD: You’ve put your finger on it—the ambiguous nature of my boarding school experience. Yes, I did receive excellent academic skills. I am sure they helped me become a writer. I am grateful for that. Also, being away from

home in such a different world—and being terribly homesick—seared many memories into me which later gave me good writing fodder. For one thing, I was always made to feel my Indian culture was inferior to the Western culture that I was being taught.

However, I don’t regret any of it. Frank McCourt writes, with some humor, of his own growing up, “It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.” Although I wasn’t Irish, or Catholic, ironically, I experienced in my own way a miserable Irish Catholic childhood! However, by the time I wrote the poems, I realized that it had not been easy for those Irish nuns either, in a world so very different from the one they had grown up in, a world where they were deemed strange and foreign, where they did not belong. That’s why the poem ends “all of us, / so far from home.”

MP: *Leaving Yuba City* also includes poems based on paintings, photographs, and films. Do you consider ekphrastic poems a form of translation between artistic mediums? What qualities of a piece of art typically compel you to write about it?

CD: I would definitely consider ekphrastic poems to be a form of translation between artistic mediums. Yes, I see these poems as being in conversation with the pieces of art the poems address. I think what attracted me to these pieces were the characters they depicted. I have always been fascinated by how to make a character come alive. All these artists achieved that, each in his or her way. I wanted to capture the feel of that in my poems.

MP: On Instagram you’ve posted the poems “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley as a favorite and Mary Oliver’s “When I am Among the Trees.” Do you still write poems? Which other poets do you read?

CD: I read poetry all the time. I love sharing poems with my friends/followers on all my social media, hoping that this will get them into the habit of reading and loving poetry. Sometimes I post easier poems, sometimes more

challenging ones. Emily Dickinson is a favorite—both mine and my readers’—and I am delighted to see that her poem “If I can stop one heart from breaking,” which I pinned on my Facebook page, has received 25K likes, 725 comments, and 7.2K shares. I certainly didn’t expect that! I think Mort would be pleased.

As you’ve noted, I love posting Henley, Oliver, and other inspiring and thought-provoking poets, such as Kahlil Gibran, who I think will resonate with readers from diverse backgrounds. I also like to push my readers to look at new voices and multicultural poets they might not otherwise pick up. On Father’s Day, I posted a prose poem by African American poet Clint Smith titled “Waiting on a Heartbeat,” about his unborn son. I love posting Octavio Paz, Antonio Machado, Maya Angelou, and Lucille Clifton, mixing it up with Thomas Hardy and Wordsworth and John Donne. I sometimes post translations side by side with the original text, for example poems by Tagore. I think Mort would have liked that, too!

MP: How did the leap from writing as a lyric poet to developing the full narrative of novels come about?

CD: While writing the poems in *Leaving Yuba City*, I noticed that my poems were getting more narrative in style and content. I was interested in the voice of the narrator, who was often quite different from me. I was also interested in telling stories of my community, and to do that, I had to inhabit different characters and psyches. The “stories” were large, sometimes encompassing many years or several generations. I started writing groups of poems. For instance, the group of poems from which the book takes its name encompasses the stories of Indian immigrants who came to Yuba City, California, as railroad workers and those of their children and grandchildren who live in the area today. I remember talking to Mort about this change in my writing vision, and he encouraged me to move to short stories, and then perhaps explore an even larger form. That’s how, slowly, I wrote the stories in *Arranged Marriage* and then, with much trepidation, *The Mistress of Spices*.

MP: Does poetry offer inspiration for the characters or events that occur in your novels?

CD: Yes, my characters sometimes turn to poetry and poetic songs in resonant moments. This is certainly true in my latest novel, *Independence*, set during India's freedom struggle in the 1940s, when patriotic poems and songs by poets like Tagore and Nazrul Islam were banned by the British. However, these songs/poems were circulated secretly by freedom fighters and used during freedom marches that were brutally put down by the colonial powers. They play a particularly important role in the lives of the three sisters who are the protagonists of the book.

MP: Another California poet who admires your work is Jane Hirshfield. Of *Leaving Yuba City*, Hirschfield writes: "Let no one think these poems exotic. In their very particularity, the poems hold a universal tale of community and individuation of the hunger for a larger life that remains connected."

Have Hirshfield's poems, essays, or writing practice influenced your work in some way?

CD: Yes, Hirshfield, who often came to the Foothill College writing conference, also influenced my work. I loved her use of nature and her original vocabulary and imagery. She encouraged me to look at things from a different angle, not just from the first/most common vantage point that came to mind. This has helped my use of perspective in my fiction, too.

MP: You seemed to have been experimenting with prose even as you were composing poems. The short stories of *Arranged Marriage* came out between the poetry collections *The Reason for Nasturtiums* and *Leaving Yuba City*, and your first novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, was published in 1997, the same year as *Leaving Yuba City*. Even your early poetry collections include short prose narratives that perhaps prefigured your transition to becoming a short story writer and novelist.

Did maintaining a sustained, fully developed prose narrative intimidate or excite you at first? Whom or what did you turn to when you didn't quite know where to go next in the writing or how to get there?

CD: The poems came first—the publishing of them just happened later. I was quite intimidated when I first

started writing stories. But of course I was excited, too, to take what I'd learned from poetry and see how much of it I could use in fiction. A lot, it turned out—especially imagery, voice, tone, the ability to compress. I turned to other short stories to teach me the craft of fiction. I still have several volumes of *Best American Short Stories* which I'd marked up extensively. I must also thank Tom Parker, who used to teach at Foothill College in those days. I attended some of his evening classes and learned a lot.

MP: You have strong connections to the Bay Area, having earned a PhD at the University of California, Berkeley, and living for some time in the San Jose area. Where was your favorite area to live and work in Northern California?

CD: I've loved all the Bay Area locations where I lived—Berkeley, where I was a student; Castro Valley, where I lived on the edge of a canyon where coyotes and cougars roamed at night; Sunnyvale, where I learned to write while juggling motherhood and teaching. That was a whole other adventure! I must say that Santa Cruz, although I have never lived there, is one of my favorite California locations. I love the vibe of the city, the marriage of nature and culture. And the best indie bookstores! If I could get a job and afford to live in Santa Cruz, I'd do it tomorrow!

MP: What important elements characterize the Indian population in the Bay Area? Are these different from where you now live and teach in Houston?

CD: The Bay Area Indian population is much more tech oriented and very innovative. Many have made their money very fast, and this has changed the vibe of the community somewhat. The Houston Indians are more into oil and gas and medicine, more of an older, settled, temple-going community. I still have wonderful friends from many years back in the Bay Area and visit them regularly, but I have many dear friends in Houston as well. Politically, Californians in general are more left leaning than Houstonians—so, in that respect, I had some trouble settling into Houston when I first moved here. But nowadays I feel I have to be cautious about whom I discuss politics with, no matter what the geography! Houston was a great place to bring up children because people don't move

as much, and my boys still have friends with whom they went to elementary school. Overall, though, I'm the kind of person who looks for things to love wherever I live, so I've been happy in both places.

MP: Many immigrants write and talk about living between two worlds. They are not fully regarded as Americans, nor are they any longer considered a part of their country of origin. How do you navigate your Indian and American identities?

CD: Between two worlds is a good way of describing my situation, too. At first this used to bother me—people in the USA who were not of Indian origin used to look at my writing as something different and "exotic," although really I was writing about everyday immigrant realities. And people in India couldn't relate to some of these same immigrant realities and were annoyed because I was puncturing their shiny vision of America. It was also difficult when I wrote about problems in my community such as domestic violence. At first, Indian Americans as well as Indians were very upset that I was portraying the community negatively. There was some fear—not unfounded—that this would create new stereotypes that the community would have to struggle against. But I persisted because this was important to me, and people have now become less prickly about accepting the truth.

MP: Are the atmosphere and culture in Texas as dissimilar to that of California as I think?

CD: Not really. We must compare apples to apples. So, if you compare San Jose to Houston, you'll see many similarities, as they are both cosmopolitan, multicultural, and largely Democratic. In Houston, for the last twenty years, the mayor has been a Democrat. Obviously, the atmosphere in a small town in Texas will be very different. But isn't that the same in California, too? When people talk about the liberal atmosphere of California, they're really talking about the greater Bay Area and greater Los Angeles, not the Central Valley.

MP: Americans tend to associate the mention of Calcutta with Mother Teresa. During a visit to Darjeeling in 1946,

she felt a calling to serve the poor. Since you were born in Calcutta and spent your childhood in Darjeeling, I wondered if Mother Teresa was a figure you were familiar with growing up.

CD: I have a rather close connection to Mother Teresa, so perhaps I can't be very objective here. As a college student in Calcutta, I used to volunteer at Shishu Bhavan, her orphanage in the Taltala area. I remember her as an amazing person. She was a tiny woman, but when she walked into a room, you could feel the surge of energy—I want to call it spiritual energy—around her. She was most compassionate and loving to the children in the orphanage—I've seen her playing with them. They would come and hug her, all of them together, so much so that she would disappear under an avalanche of children! She wanted the best for them. And though, as a Catholic, she believed in converting people, she did not convert the kids because she knew this would reduce their chances of being adopted. I learned a lot about compassion and love and empathy just by watching her.

MP: Can you speak about how being a Hindu enters into your writing?

CD: Being a Hindu is central to two of my most ambitious works, *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* (HarperCollins, 2019), where I retell the stories of the epics the *Mahabharat* and the *Ramayan*. I grew up with a deep love for Hindu mythology. But I often felt that in our epics and Puranas, women were relegated to the edges of the canvas. Especially in our epics, the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat*, the heroines, Sita and Draupadi, have been deeply misinterpreted down the ages. This has led to misogyny and victim shaming, with women being instructed to be docile and to put up with mistreatment and abandonment. This patriarchal interpretation of women's roles troubled me and led me to reimagine the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat* with Sita and Draupadi being the narrators of their tales. I was worried when I wrote *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, but to my surprise—and relief!—they have been very well accepted and taught in universities both in India and the U.S. Many women readers have written to me

stating that these books expanded their view of who they could be in the world.

MP: I understand that the novel *The Mistress of Spices* was partly informed by your interest in Ayurveda, the ancient Indian science of preventative, curative, and holistic healing. Is this the method you grew up with as a child?

CD: My grandfather was a doctor, and although he was trained in Western medicine, as he grew older, he went back more and more to our indigenous traditions. So when I was young, I was regularly dosed with turmeric, fennel, ghee, and bitter melon juice! I remained interested in spices, and they seemed the right element to add into the novel, as they are, at once, very ordinary—Indian women use them unthinkingly every day when they cook—yet also special and powerful.

MP: The music and sensuality of Toni Morrison's prose makes me think of your vivid imagery and lyrical prose style. What might you have adopted from Morrison that contributes to your approach to your own novels?

CD: I love and admire the works of Toni Morrison. I have learned so much from her. I hope I have learned from her amazing style, but what I have tried to learn even more from her is her unflinching portrayal of the difficult and heartbreaking experiences her characters—especially girls and women—are forced to undergo, and the scars this leaves on their bodies and their hearts.

MP: The theme of female relationships, and the ways in which women come to each other's aid in dire circumstances, permeates your novels. How does the novel form allow you to build characters and examine relationships more deeply than poems or short stories?

CD: The novel gives me a larger canvas, and this allows me to develop relationships over lifetimes, even across generations, as in my novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* (Simon & Schuster, 2017), which presents the story of a grandmother, her daughter, and her granddaughter. It also allows me to move from India to the USA and sometimes back again, as in novels like *Vine of Desire*

(Doubleday, 2002), where in the wake of a failed marriage, Sudha escapes from India to join her dearest cousin, Anju, in the USA. But by the end of the novel, Sudha realizes that America holds more danger than promise for her and that true growth lies for her in the land of her birth.

MP: When you complete a manuscript, do you take time in between to rest, or are you already looking forward to composing a new one?

CD: It depends. Ideally, I would like to rest and recharge the creative batteries. But if an exciting idea strikes me, I can't resist jumping right in! I think a part of me is afraid that if I don't welcome the Muse, she might not choose to appear again.

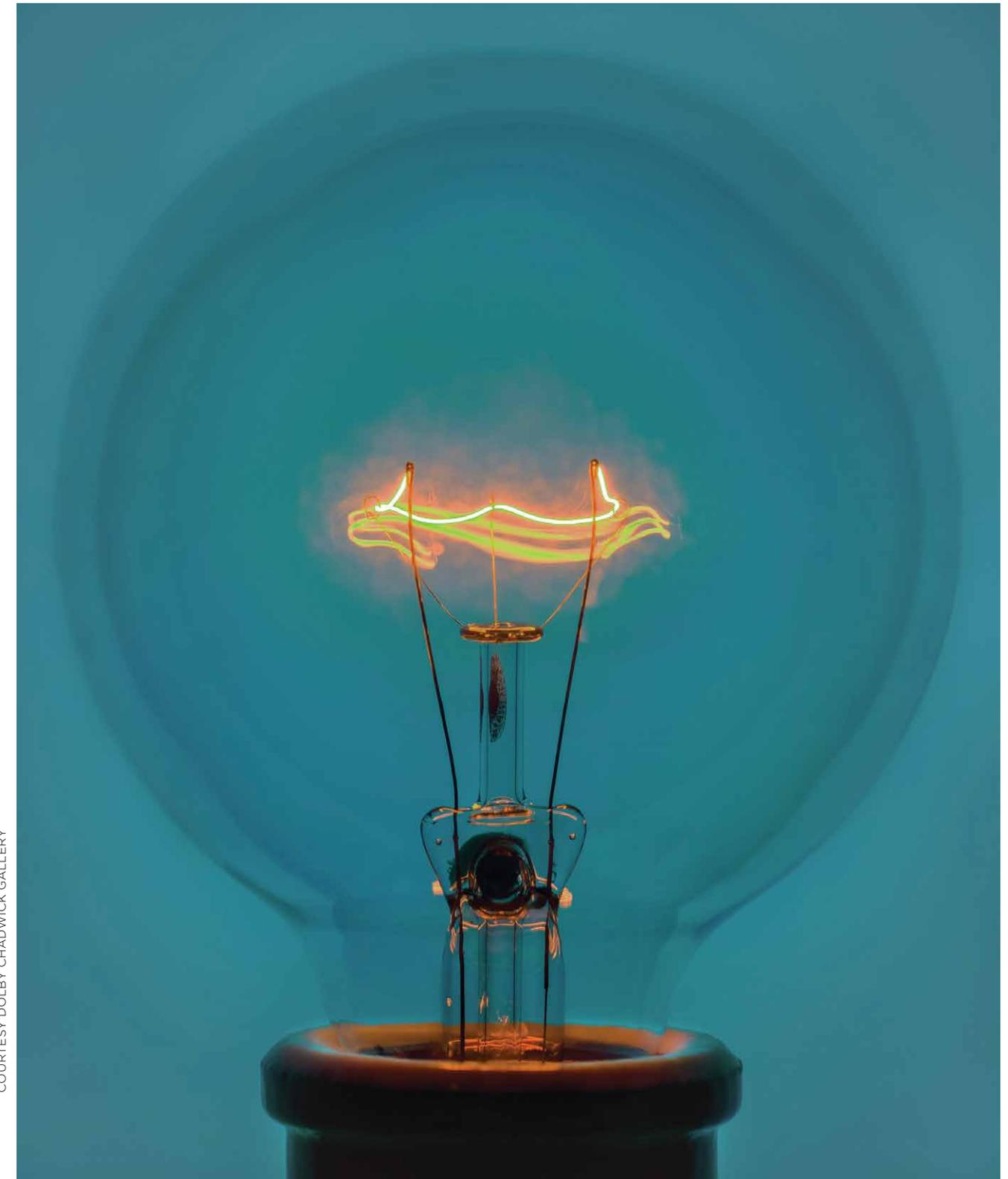
MP: Your body of work brings to mind Kafka's famous saying that "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us."

CD: Thank you! If even one of my books truly acts as an ax for the frozen sea in my reader's heart, I will be grateful beyond measure.

Maggie Paul is the author of *Scrimshaw* (Hummingbird Press, 2020), *Borrowed World* (Hummingbird Press, 2011), and the chapbook *Stones from the Baskets of Others* (Black Dirt Press, 2000). Her poems appear in *Caesura*, *Phren-Z*, *Porter Gulch Review*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *SALT*, *The Jung Journal of San Francisco*, *Moonstone*, and other journals. Interviews and book reviews appear in *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Rattle*, and *Valparaiso Poetry Review*. A cofounder of Poetry Santa Cruz and a member of the Morton Marcus Tribute Reading Committee, Paul has taught writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz; Cabrillo College; California State University Monterey Bay; and De Anza College. She is currently an independent writing coach. More can be found at www.maggiepaulpoetry.com and www.dasulliv1.wixsite.com/hummingbirdpress.

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