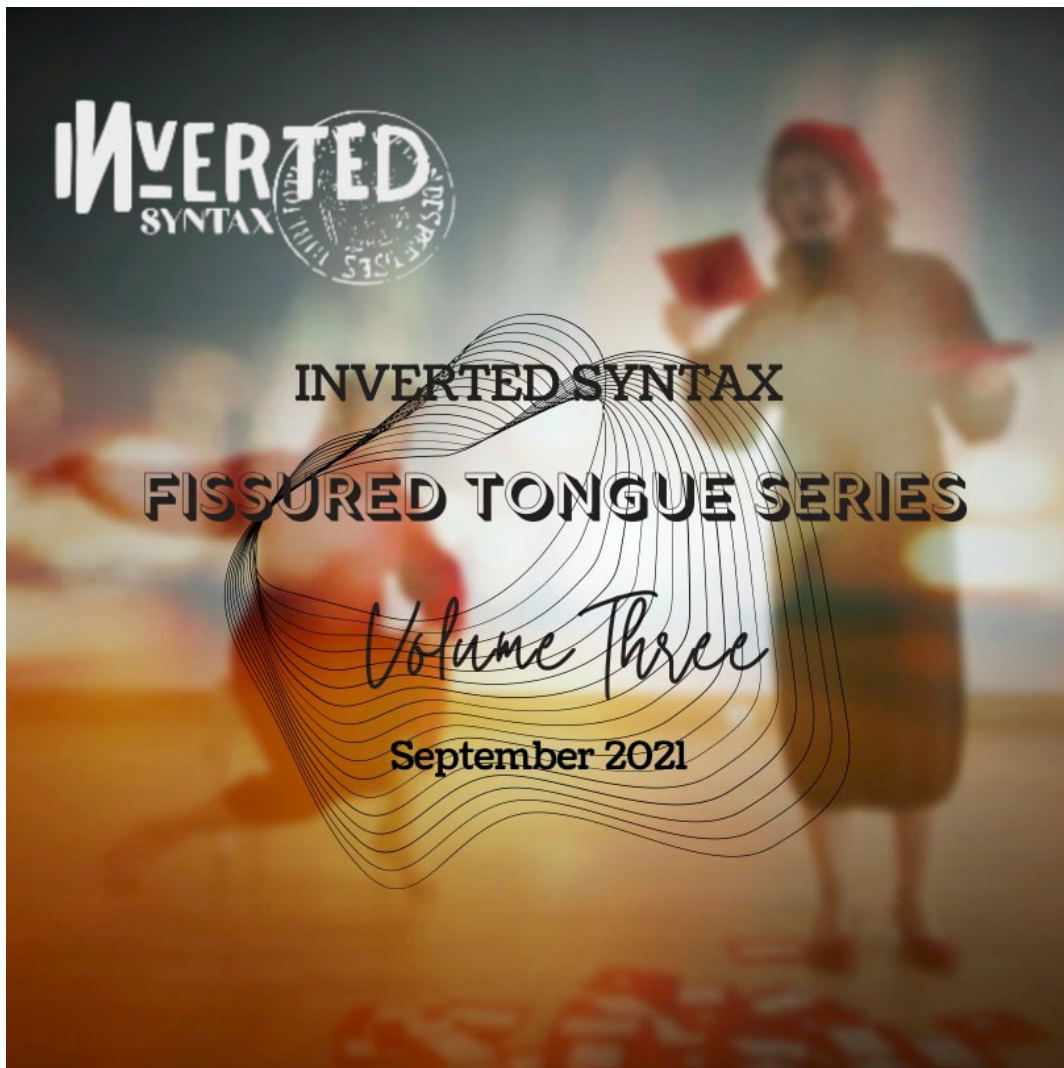




## Fissured Tongue Volume Three



Still captured from video performance "Set Theory Orgasm" by Cynthia Kneen

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All included written work is assumed to be original and previously unpublished.

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We accept submissions only through our submission manager. Our 2021 general submission window will open March through June and our contest submission will open April through June. *Inverted Syntax's* Sublingua Prize for Poetry contest is currently paused until 2022.

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# Letter from the Editor

Welcome to *Inverted Syntax's* Fissured Tongue Volume 3. Get ready for a reckoning.

*(Oh wait, sorry, you've been living through one for so long now — what is time? — it's easy to forget that normal doesn't exist.)*

The work in this volume wrestles with the concept of surroundings, environment, and how that influences identity, affects the sense of self. But the affection goes both ways, explores how personhood affects what's around us, on both the micro (community-focused) and the macro (climate change is coming for us all) levels.

This issue is also about connection / dis/connection / the spaces between. What we celebrate touching, what we miss. How those gaps can be pauses, gasps, room for growth / questioning / doubt, death and rebirth, which is to say: the interstitial is a fertile place, where cycles do their mossy work. Take a breath, settle in, get comfortable.

Change is mutability. One thing we can take from being alive right now is that when faced with unchanging circumstances we recognize the need to unstagnate ourselves, our situations, as soon as it seems feasible, once time appears to again move linearly into the future.

Endings clear the way for what comes next. Who do you want to be at the end of this? The cycle begins again.

Let's go,  
Jessica Davis

Managing Editor  
*Inverted Syntax*

August 2021

# Boundary

Grace Ann Rogers



"Untitled" by Rupert D. Turnbull; oil on canvas; 28 x 36 in.; 1938; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The night I put all of my belongings  
into Google Translate was the same  
night I decided to change my name  
to "Area." My first word was  
"tree." My first phrase was  
"Dollar Tree." My first anxious  
uttering was, "Is it just me  
or did that tree bloom earlier than  
usual this year?" My first love  
said unto me, "Area,

you are the least involved in capitalism  
person I know.” My first step was  
aimed at a butter dish. My first day  
of fast was followed by congratulations  
from all the women in my life. The lonely  
well, the sinkhole, the space to fill, the  
sweltering summer heat, the lake,  
the binary, the nothingness,  
and the reflection of my grief  
walked into a bar and said, “the  
translator really fucked this one up.”

### **About the Author**

Grace Ann Rogers (she/her) is a musician and writer from Owingsville, Kentucky. Her work has appeared in *MAYDAY Magazine*, *Cold Mountain Review*, and the *Sonora Review*. She currently lives in Lexington, Kentucky.

### **About the Work**

"Boundary" is part of a larger project called *Into Nowhere* which explores the relationship between landscape, language, and colonialism in Eastern Kentucky. This particular poem attempts to unravel some ideas surrounding translation, borders, and the blundering, baby-fawn legged inadequacy of English when used to talk about a place it was not created to describe—a place its speakers colonized.

# Set Theory Orgasm

Cynthia Kneen



Still captured from video performance "**Set Theory Orgasm**" by Cynthia Kneen

## Set Theory Orgasm

Question: How do you generate a number series? Answer: Have a mathematical orgasm.

- 0 Nothing nothing nobody nothing nothing I looked in the closet nothing the coat  
wasn't there there not there coat not there shoe not hat not there why not there why  
not there naught was there hiding hiding as far as I could see naught was there hiding  
no nothing no thing really no thing at all among it nothing nothing
- 1 One one I I something some thing thing no no too far one one I no two far too far  
one one one
- 2 If one two two if I you you I said yes yes if I you you I two said yes then you you
- 3 If two three three in your coat you said find your coat you said red buttons you said  
for three three
- 4 If three four four for what love for war four memory knot a knot not four three then  
four why not I said why not dazzle me
- 5 Dazzle me ring a ling and sizzle me from four two five five oh
- 6 Six six six
- 7 If six seven why not I said why not and you said
- 8 Eight eight so definite eight you said
- 9 I two definite no nein I I you yes two nine nine yes nine too
- 10 Ten ten why not black coat I said why not yes red yes I said yes and why not  
twenty the lot of it I said why not infinity why not one one one

*Begin again*

### About the Author

Cynthia Kneen (pronounced neen) — writer-poet, theater artist, educator, long-time practitioner and student of Buddhism. I've been a scholar, worked high and low jobs to support my journey, helped co-found Naropa University, did voice-over for Soulful Media and Tendril Films, and published vocal and written works with Sounds True and Hachette. In 2011 an opportunity to join an elite three-year Jacques Lecoq-based school of physical theater in Italy crossed my path. I leapt, immersing myself in mime, masks, acrobatics, improvisation, performance and character-based states of play, with a big emphasis on comedy. Returning home as an elder, I began what I am doing now with great joy — teaching, writing, and performing memoir and short pieces, hybrid style. [www.cynthiakneen.com](http://www.cynthiakneen.com)

### About the Work

"I wrote "Set Theory Orgasm" after reading the Danish poet, Inger Christensen, to see if I could generate a piece around #'s without doing the work of Fibonacci's mathematical sequencing. I chose a sexual event from a female's point of view. Unlike the elegance of Christensen's work, this piece is sensual, humorous, low class, almost clownish, maybe even tragic, certainly tender and absurd. It's a great deal of fun to read aloud and perform. Will she get pregnant. Maybe he's a flimflam man. What if she gives him the keys to her condo. Her alarm is high, but her resistance is not. The piece is part of a *wallpaper performance series*. Like wallpaper,

continuity is there. When something ends for her, she lives her awareness from a slightly different point of view. Performing the piece in a sensuous, incantatory style suggests life's sweet-sour rhythms both soothe and bite us with their inevitable impermanence. Also, in letting go of our most personal and intimate core protections – *oh, give him the code to the checking account, why not?* – we might gain perspective and right ourselves with humor and compassion, if not wisdom.”

See <https://youtu.be/uhwGvkxvYq4> for my and dancer Jude Landsman's performance of \*Set Theory Orgasm.\*”

# Two poems

**black.girl.magic**

**something about 1999**

Kirslyn Schell-Smith



"Tintype of a woman"; collodion and silver on iron with lacquer; 3 3/8 x 2 3/8 in.; 1856-1900; open source from the National Museum of African American History and Culture

## **black.girl.magic**

“What happens to a black girl who is too anxious to ever feel like magic?”

My best friend tagged me in a Facebook video tonight.

“Friends with Benefits” by Jae Nichelle

Black Girl Magic

Let’s break it down.

Black.

Girl.

Magic.

First, I would have to identify as black.

I don’t. I do. I don’t. I do. I don’t. Do I?

Second, girl.

I do.

And third, magic- “a set of beliefs and practices distinct from religion and science”

I don’t even know what that means.

Black Girl Magic

Together: “The concept was born as a way to “celebrate the beauty, power and resilience of Black women”, as described by Julee Wilson from HuffPost, and to congratulate Black women on their accomplishments.”

Or,

#BlackGirlMagic

or

what I’m trying to say is that

I don’t identify as black for the same reason I don’t identify as white

I like sweet but I also like savory

when the forms tell me to “Select One”—I freeze, scroll



White/Caucasian  
Black/African American  
Asian  
Native American  
Pacific Islander  
Hispanic  
Other  
Is that all you've got?

Who would have thought that seeing "Select All That Apply" would be the highlight of my day?

German.Irish.French.Native American.Black.White.Caucasian.African American.

or  
what I'm trying to say is that  
it doesn't apply to me because my race is invisible  
which is funny because I'm brown  
brown like the uniform of the UPS driver,  
but only in the summer  
brown like but I'm still pale in the winter  
like trying to go through the airport without getting "randomly selected"  
for a more thorough body search  
like staring at me and my white wife when we are holding hands at the grocery store  
like paying more attention to me walking through the electronics section  
brown like  
my mom asking why is there a video camera pointing at only the "ethnic hair care" section at Wal-Mart

or  
what I'm trying to say is that  
I'm white like the 1%

No.

or maybe  
brown, but privileged  
so  
taupe?

“Can she still be fly  
with wings that tremble?”

What if I don’t have wings?  
What if they’re so big I can’t fly?  
or what if they’re so small I can’t fly?  
What if I’m too fat to fly?  
or what if I’ve got too much muscle to fly?  
I don’t know much about aerodynamics.

But I do know about being grounded--  
or I do know about being in the clouds  
or I don’t know about flying.  
or being fly.  
Thrift store clothes.

“Can she forget the lifestyle of an ant?  
The fear that no matter what she does she is in danger of being crushed  
What I’m trying to say is  
My anxiety doesn’t like to be made into metaphors  
but she is constantly reminding me of how easy I am to crush.”

Am I strong enough to carry the world on my shoulders?  
or even to hold the other side when you are?  
or,  
stop fucking trying you’re never going to make it.

“What happens to a black girl who is too anxious to ever feel like magic?”  
I’m the only girl, the only brown girl  
I call them my boys--  
They call me their Mocha Goddess.  
I’ve never asked why

or maybe what I mean to say is  
I’m scared to ask why

or maybe  
I’m scared to hear.

## something about 1999

I

The license plates of the car I smashed when I met you are sitting in front of my face like an engagement ring a widow pawned to feed her kids  
When I nearly wrapped my car around that tree in the ravine,  
I was working as a receptionist at a collision center.  
I had my car towed there,  
only because I knew the tow company's number by heart.

540.785.1500

The man who towed my car talked to me a few days later.  
He told me he wasn't sure the person who was in that car lived.  
I responded with, "It's my car."  
"You're lucky to be alive."

What he meant to say was  
"You're lucky you didn't die."

II

I don't remember 1999  
or my first kiss  
Freshman year I had the Papa John's number memorized  
and met you sophomore year  
I thought you were pretentious.  
You thought I was a bitch.  
And neither of us were wrong.  
We were roommates for two years,  
still friends.

I never had the heart to tell her  
the boy she was sleeping with sexually assaulted me.  
she wouldn't have believed me anyway.  
He's a teacher in Oklahoma.

She fucked me in the library,  
a random weekday.  
I fucked another in the darkroom.  
Graduation day.

Move on and move up,  
or in my case become an underpaid slave to the state  
secondary trauma

The other day I met with an autistic child.  
He had been abused by his mom and her parental rights were terminated.  
He is getting adopted by his grandparents  
and really likes dinosaurs.  
That was the majority of our conversation;  
“That’s how big a T-Rex’s eggs are!”  
“REALLY? What does this say?”  
He sometimes answered questions in reverse;  
and while it was difficult to understand,  
I get it, kid, I get it.

He wasn’t even alive in 1999.  
I want to be the person who remembers.

I make note of when their birthdays are.  
None of them were.

### III

there’s the remnants of a bug on the wall next to me,  
ear cleaner solution for cats,  
a blue tie dyed bandana,  
silicone rings, a coaster,  
a LEGO set of the Louvre,  
a bag of gifts I’ll never send,  
photographic prints from 2011,  
an empty film canister,  
a silver wash bucket,  
a wrapper for tissue paper,

and a magnet.  
a sympathy card I never sent,  
a half empty wine glass  
I guess I'm not a glass half full person after all.

Last week they diagnosed her with psychogenic seizures,  
but also potentially epileptic ones too?

I slept in the hospital for three nights  
and somehow made it to work  
while you were sitting there with enough electrodes on your scalp  
to shock a dead man back to life  
good thing you're a mood ring

PTSD can cause imprinting,  
and some of the physical and psychological damage can never be undone.  
Research has been done that states,  
*"Several pathological features found in PTSD patients overlap with features found in patients with traumatic brain injury paralleling the shared signs and symptoms of these clinical syndromes."*  
In English that means some of the things you experience as someone with PTSD  
are the same as someone whose head has gone through a car windshield  
and as a result, they've never been the same.

What does it feel like to be constantly in a state of fight, flight, or freeze?  
Like there's five fifteen hundred pound boulders sitting on your chest,  
and you're struggling to breathe,  
but you don't die...  
when all I did was lightly touch your hand.  
Like a car careening off a cliff  
into a river of alligators,  
(*my preferred way to die*)  
and then you're drawn and quartered;  
but you're still alive  
and all I did was ask you what you wanted for dinner.  
Like a, like a, like a...

highlighters,  
Sharpies,  
pens with the caps I left off when I was a child,

a phone charger,  
five hundred blank notebooks  
one hundred partly written in notebooks,  
an awl,  
a sewing needle,  
a clear, plastic ruler,  
seaglass collected on a vacation to the Outer Banks,  
car keys,  
a framed piece of paper with poetic lines of a play,  
playing cards and an old pill bottle,  
a candle, a t-shirt, a box of seltzer water  
a jacket, a hat, a litter box  
license plates I wrote about earlier

I don't know why I don't have PTSD  
but I know I write about my car accident a lot.  
I am lucky I didn't die/ I am lucky to be alive

### **About the Author**

Kirslyn Schell-Smith is a biracial photographer and writer based in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. She received her BA in Studio Art from Denison University and her MFA in Image/Text from Ithaca College. Her work vacillates between poetry and stream of consciousness thoughts, utilizing intuitive and improvisational strategies to explore the confluence of queer and racial identities against geographical, historic, and personal backdrops. She prefers to write when she's not expecting it; in her psychiatrist's office, in her car in a parking lot, in between clients, in bed at 2am, standing in line at the grocery store, and while avoiding the household chores.

### **About the Work**

"I desire to live in a world where we don't have to fight our brains. I desire to live a day where I'm not concerned with juxtaposition, contrast, dissonance, loving a place and hating a place — not harmony, per se — but a space, a place, with a light tug this way and that. It might best be explained by a swirling puddly, of several different colors — shiny, iridescent, that once pulled apart can contract, snap, shrink back into place with little resistance. I write because I desire to to not feel upside down, unless I am on a roller coaster with an empty stomach; a roller coaster that I chose to be on, not one that I'm strapped into against my will — but since I am, I might as well enjoy the ride. I desire to keep the constant, my constant.

I wrote "black.girl.magic" after watching a video my best friend shared with me on social media and wanted to have a conversation about it, with it. I wrote "something about 1999" because I couldn't get the phrase out of my

head. II is a section of the longer poem of "something about 1999" that aims to mimic thought processes surrounding traumatic events and the aftermath of those. It is flashes of present images, experiences, and memories, flipping through someone's brain as if they knew they were dying. In my case, there was not enough cognizance or ability to play those memories in my head right before a car accident. This is me remembering, having my chance to flip."

# In Every Flower

Sophie Braxton



"Flowers" by H. Lyman Sayer; oil on canvas; 30 1/8 x 36 1/8 in; 1915; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

## THE OLD

9:00 service. Sunday Morning. The colors in the windows, the windows in the walls, the walls that they built to keep god here so he won't go anywhere else (*but he does*). ETERNAL LIGHT METHODIST CHURCH, all in capital letters every time because they yell here. They yell very loudly. They yell big words I do not think god knows.



God speaks the kind of language I play on my violin.  
He does not know the words Animosity,  
Malevolence,  
Even words as small as  
Fear.

Today is a sad day, with wet tissues like worms in puddles – everybody on their backs with their legs going crazy for something to hold. The old ladies wear big hats that have flowers on them. I used to get excited about those flowers, but it turns out that they are not real. They do not smell the way a flower should smell, when it has finished blooming, making peace with the sky. These flowers are unhappy, sewn tight onto hats.

The ants are treading water, heads held just above the wake.

OLD LADY 1: I just feel bad for Pastor Paul. There's not too much to say about this, is there?

OLD LADY 2: Maybe not. Maybe not

*(their voices echo, like how shoes tap, like how birds fly against the windows.)*

OLD LADY 1: Suicide. *(pause with the sound of lipstick clinging to her teeth)* I wouldn't know how to address it. At that age, I was looking forward to college.

OLD LADY 2: Sure. Sure.

OLD LADY 1: Not much to say,  
Really.

*(ROACH begins to play his violin. they do not notice.)*

ROACH is me. When I listen to the congregation talk, I only perceive. I never judge. I remember everything they say, and it fits inside my body very nicely. That is what makes me this color of dark red – because their voices are filled with malice. If I lived outside, I might be light blue. I might be clear like un-stained windows, but then I would float away. The people weigh me down. They keep me here. I've never been to the sky, so I'm not sure where I'd rather be.

All I know is, I like it here.

I play my violin in the friendly way that one should speak to god, and it is beautiful. The air grows thin, too fragile to breathe, and that is because god is yawning a happy yawn. I play him to sleep on my back, like a child, and I carry him with me wherever I go. But wherever I go, he's already there.

*(Everyone stands like trees, so still and tall. ANDREW and ABIGAIL are in the center like the moon, casting scary shadows where they look. MICAH holds his bible, his unmoving face and his eyes pointed down. the snails come out of their shells with shiny undone bodies)*

MAN: (*touching ANDREW's arm, like a sad smile, like the way that the bells sound*) She's in a better place now, Andrew.

MICAH: No she isn't. Grace will have no salvation. Grace disobeyed god's word and will be punished.

(*ABIGAIL pulls MICAH towards her, blowing out her nose. her face is red and wet. she shakes her head.*)

MICAH: Mom, she isn't in heaven. Deuteronomy 30: "Today I have given you the choice between life and death. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. That you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live."

ABIGAIL (*softly, hopeless*): Micah.

ANDREW (*angry, exploding*): Micah!

MICAH: It's in the bible! (*holding up his bible, like a baby dripping water*) Grace is a sinner! She's in hell now! In hell!

(*two MEN lead MICAH away. ANDREW thanks them  
with his eyes,  
and puts his arms  
around his wife.*)

MICAH is kicking and screaming. I follow them, close against the wall, so I can hear what they're saying and remember. MICAH knows so many big words; I don't think it's good for his brain.

MICAH (*wrestling with the MEN. Running out of breath. Shirt is all stretched out*): Grace will not have salvation! She disobeyed! The bible says! She cursed the lord! And she drank! On *Sunday* she drank! On *Sunday*! On *God's day*! "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" – she disobeyed! She always did!

(*ANDREW and ABIGAIL pretend not to hear. some people try looking, but their families whisper stop it*)

I play my violin in slow, sad strokes – petting god's hair as he cries. I feel his weight against me, and it feels good. MICAH is screaming the words to my song. He is making it ugly. He is looking up, where he thinks god is.

But I know that god is not only in the clouds. God is MICAH, and me. He is the flowers outside of the window, and the organ shaking my wings awake.

(*I often forget that I have wings, until the organ plays.*)

I hide in a dark, warm corner to rest. In my sleep, I dream of things that happened long ago when GRACE was here, and MICAH was small, with hair as short as patience.

*(One day at Sunday school, when MICAH was little)*

MICAH: Why did god grant Jacob salvation if Jacob deceived his father? He took Esau's name and blessing by deception. How could god forgive him?

*(ROACH played his violin. they did not hear. MICAH wrung his hands. KIDS laughed out of their noses and smiled at each other.)*

GRACE: Shut up, guys.

MICAH: Mrs. Brown, Grace said shut up. Mom says we're not allowed to say that.

GRACE: They were *laughing* at you, Micah!

MICAH: Jacob should not have had salvation. He deceived his father. He deceived Esau. Esau had already promised him his blessing. Esau would have kept his promise.

*(MRS. BROWN quiets him, and they all bow their heads)*

Dear god, (this is how they say to start all prayers, like a letter, like a little hesitation)

Your petals are opening now; I see them through the window.

I watch you going around and around – up to the sky, and down, making dots on the windows, and funny little shadows.

These people do not notice,

Let them notice,

Help them see.

PASTOR PAUL (*hands raised, open, upwards. head bowed down*): Dear god, our lord almighty, we ask you to be with Andrew, Abigail, and Micah in their time of hardship. The entire congregation is incredibly saddened at the loss of our beautiful Grace, who inspired us all with her strong spirit and tenacity. There is no death more upsetting than one in which a young person takes their own life. God, we ask you to help us in lifting the burden of Andrew, Abigail, and Micah. In the name of Jesus, amen.

CONGREGATION: amen.

I do remember faintly the things outside of the windows. There were tall tall trees that covered the sky. The sky is a big mass of blue, and it starts where the tallest tree stops. There were many blades of grass that stroked me as I ran, so happy to be touched by god. I knew the earth by heart. I have forgotten almost everything about my friends the ladybugs by now, but I know so much about organs, and music, and MICAH. I am learning so many new words.

+ + + +

*(Wednesday. OLD LADIES gathered together, faces close, with bony fingers)*

OLD LADY 1: She wasn't a good kid.

OULD LADY 2: Oh, but when she was little? She was adorable! Those cheeks, remember? And those pretty blue eyes. Micah didn't get those eyes.

OLD LADY 1: They're from Andrew. Nice eyes, you're right. But her attitude!

OLD LADY 3: She was a thing to put up with, wasn't she?

OLD LADY 1: Her and her brother.

OLD LADY 2: Oh, come on. You can't expect Micah to... You know, he has...

OLD LADY 1: Autism? Or Asperger's, I don't know. Well, I *don't* expect him to behave! He never does. He's always difficult.

*(silence. OLD LADY 1 shakes her head to get the devil out)*

OLD LADY 3: Smart kid, though.

OLD LADY 1: Of course. Smart.

*(DIRECTOR PETE claps his hands and they flip pages in their books. they sing to get the devil out)*

The devil, I have never seen - under any tables or outside any windows.

They speak of him so often here, in whispers and in song.

MICAH does it loudly, holding his bible

Like a baby dripping water,

Like how they wash their hands

To save themselves

From what is on their skin,

And ask forgiveness

Every Sunday

Every Sunday in this room.

I do not know what they want forgiveness for.

I do not believe that babies are born dirty,

But I play my violin

With them,

And then I feel at home.

+ + + +

2:00. Funny shadows. Slow music. Flowers too big for their vases. A picture of grace from a long time ago when she still had blonde hair. People I haven't seen before, and everyone I have. Most wearing black. *That's a lovely picture of her*, they say, in voices that shrink to the size of me.

There are so many people.

More than I have ever seen.

They fill up my entire vision and soon they are all there is,

Shifting from foot to foot and making sniffing sounds.

PASTOR PAUL speaks big words in between sad songs. The words I do not understand, but the music I do. In slow organ language, it says,

*GRACE had died, we are sad.  
But god, please don't bring her back.*

ANDREW and ABIGAIL whisper prayers with watery mouths. MICAH stares ahead.

Many people make the same speech, saying things about GRACE.

Good things, from so many years ago –

He cheeks. Her eyes. How she always asked questions

Before she stopped believing the answers.

MICAH approaches the microphone in a black suit. He wrings his hands, he clears his throat, and everyone coughs. Much silence fills the room, so much silence it turns into noise. MICAH unfolds a piece of paper. All of the centipedes look for their homes.

MICAH (*reading from the paper*): Grace was my sister. She liked to draw pictures, and sometimes we did it together. She taught me how to draw flowers. I am grateful for everything she taught me. (*looks up*) Grace is a good name even though it doesn't fit her.

(*ABIGAIL starts to stand up, but ANDREW takes her arm. MICAH looks back at his paper. his face screws all up. he's getting to the difficult part now – maybe some words even he can't pronounce.*)

I have to say something really nice about Grace, mom says. (*very long pause, longer than rivers*) One good thing about Grace is that she was kind. Everybody forgets that she was kind because she wore black lipstick and sometimes it got on her teeth, and when she talked it smelled like smoke, and her fingernails were way too sharp. But she *was* kind. Kind means taking other people into consideration.

I have seen GRACE's drawings of flowers. They were so beautiful I lost my breath. MICAH's drawings, slightly less.

+ + + +

After this *funeral*, MICAH gets quieter. He may have lost his voice.

I play my violin so well, but he does not rejoice.

He holds his bible to his chest.

His eyes, they are sore from the words.

The congregation balances minor and

Major chords.

OLD LADY 1: How has your husband been? Doing okay?

OLD LADY 2: Holding up.

OLD LADY 1: And you?

OLD LADY 2: Can't complain. (*glances at the wooden cross*) I'm blessed. I thank the lord everyday.

OLD LADY 1: Of course. How were Andrew and Abigail when you went over last night?

OLD LADY 2: They were fine.

OLD LADY 1 (*a smile beginning. not a kind one*): And Micah?

OLD LADY 2: He was up in his room, I guess. I didn't see him. (*pause*) I have to say, they rushed me out.

OLD LADY 1: That's rude.

OLD LADY 2 (*nodding*): I brought them a nice casserole.

OLD LADY 1: I'm going over on Friday. I haven't decided what to make.

OLD LADY 2: Don't overthink it. They didn't seem to care.

OLD LADY 1: You'd think they'd be a little more appreciative about all this.

OLD LADY 2: It did bother me a little, I have to say.

(*OLD LADY 3 enters*)

OLD LADY 3: Hello, girls! How are you?

OLD LADY 2: Can't complain.

OLD LADY 1: Doing well.

I remember that outside there was water going quickly, making loud noises on top of many stones. God was there beside me as I stood. We watched and listened. Our thoughts were not words; they were the sounds of the water. I do not remember any words from outside of the windows. I must have forgotten them all. Words are easy to forget.

### THE NEW

9:00. Sunday service. Everyone welcoming a new family – BETH and NATHAN and ROSE.

ROSE (*rocking back and forth, looking past everything in front of her, mouth open very wide*): Aaaahhhh aaahh ah aah

ROSE rocks the whole service. Blonde hair flies behind her. Her parents speak calmly at the microphone and everyone says welcome. ROSE says *abbb ah ah*.

OLD LADY 1: Welcome to our family, Rose! (*grabs a limp hand that soon goes crazy like a fish*) You have such beautiful eyes! (*smiles at BETH and NATHAN. everyone nods*)

ROSE: Aaah aah aaahah

(*ABIGAIL and ANDREW keep whispering to MICAH. he stands up.*)

MICAH: Hi, Rose. I'm Micah. (*puts out his hand*) Nice to meet you.

ABIGAIL (*coming up from behind like a tiger*): Hello! It's so lovely to meet you two. This is Micah. (*puts her hand on his shoulder. he moves away, his hand still extended. Rose stares and rocks.*) He has autism too – a little more mild. We're glad you're here. That's Andrew, my husband. You said Rose is seven? She's adorable. She's so tiny! Micah is thirteen.

We actually had an eighteen

Year old

Daughter,

But she...

A few months

Ago

She

Passed.

MICAH (*to ROSE*): Your hair is the same color my sister's used to be.

Never dye your hair.

It's damaging. Also, you are seven,

Which is a good age to start reading the bible. It's very interesting. You should probably start from the beginning. I began reading the bible when I was seven. I have now read it twenty two times in its entirety. I have bookmarks in it, see? That's how you can find your favorite parts. My favorite story is Jacob and Esau even though it makes me angry. Esau deserves salvation. Jacob does not. There are either two or three parts of the bible. The old and the new testaments are a given. There is another part called the Apocrypha, which not everybody knows about or considers a true part of the sacred text, but I like it. Your eyes also look like my sister's. Why are you rocking back and forth? Why are you rocking back and forth?

Why are you rocking back and forth?

Mom, why is she rocking back and forth?

ABIGAIL and BETH leave hand in hand. ABIGAIL is happy. Is this not *salvation*? Is BETH not god? That is all god is – he knows our trouble. When I am on my back, and my legs going wild with no one to help me, god does not flip me over.

He lies on his back with me, so close we are touching.



And we listen to each other breathing.

Dear god,  
Ahh ah ahhhh,  
The sound of water  
Touching the rocks until  
They are as smooth as the water itself.  
The sound of a baby  
Still speaking  
Heaven's language.  
The sound of those beetles  
That exist to sing  
The stars to sleep.

+ + + +

*(ROSE does not look at MICAH and MICAH does not look at ROSE. he looks at his bible. she spins the wheels on her toy car.)*

MICAH: Rose. Rose. Rose. Rose.

ROSE: Aaaah ahhh

MICAH: Rose, I want to read you a story from the bible. My favorite story, the story of Jacob and Esau. Okay?  
*(sound of wheels spinning)* Are you listening? Are you ready? Rose. Rose. Rose!

*(MICAH snatches ROSE's toy car and throws it.)*

ROSE: Ahhh! Ahhh! Aaaaah!

*(ROSE goes crazy like a fish,  
out of water, out of breath.  
MICAH screams at her.)*

Everyone is afraid of ROSE. They think she is like a field, stretching on and on and on until something horrible happens. I have watched kids go in wide circles around her and snicker when she screams. The men and the women, they hold each other's hands now. They never did that before. And they bring bibles with them wherever they go. Everyone is afraid of ROSE they way they are afraid of me, because I am not like them. It makes them want to step on me.

God does not step on me.

I remember outside, there was water for me to drink every morning. God put it there for me, little droplets on the grass. I thanked him by drinking it, by choosing to live. I did not pray, but now I pray. I play my violin.

*(At the water fountain. ROACH is drinking droplets.)*

ABIGAIL: I don't think Micah really understands.

BETH: Of course. It's hard, but I'm so glad Rose has a friend.

ABIGAIL: He talks about her all the time.

BETH: Rose is always so excited to come to church.

*(sound of breathing, like birds finding seeds, like the wind coming in through the window)*

ABIGAIL: We're going to the library today. He said he wants to get a book about flowers, like roses. For Rose.

BETH: *(smiling)* That's incredible. *(Pause)* When we first met, you told me about your older daughter who passed away... what was her name?

ABIGAIL: Grace.

BETH: That's a nice name.

*(ABIGAIL nods)*

BETH: I'm sorry. Micah must be having a hard time.

ABIGAIL: No, actually.

BETH: oh.

ABIGAIL: It makes it so much harder – he doesn't seem to care, but he did...

He did tell me that Rose is just like Grace.

MICAH and ROSE throw a fit at the same time and everybody stares.

MICAH is screaming Leviticus 19:28, and ROSE is screaming *abbb aha aaaaaah ah!*

I cannot scream with them, so I play my violin. (Not angrily, for fear of breaking the strings. I play quietly as always. God still hears me every time.)

MICAH's shirt is so stretched out from all of his pulling at it.

+ + + +

*(Wednesday. MICAH throws folded up paper at ROSE)*

ABIGAIL: Micah! Be gentle!

MICAH: Rose, these are flower drawings that my sister drew. None of them are roses. She thought roses sucked. She liked zinnias. Zinnias are members of the daisy family. They are long-stemmed and bloom in a variety of bright colors. But here *(holds out a piece of paper)* I drew a rose for you.

*(ROSE stares ahead)*

MICAH: I drew a rose for you. Rose, it's for you. Rose, take it. Take it. Take it! Rose!

ABIGAIL: Micah, calm down, it's okay. Give it to Mrs. Beth.

MICAH: No! It's for Rose! Rose, take it! It's for you!

Outside, I saw flowers so unlike the ones in here. They breathed such sweet-smelling breath. They smiled such lovely smiles. The flowers GRACE drew, they were the ones outside. MICAH's flowers, he puts them in boxy vases with water at the bottom. He holds onto his pencil so hard. I have seen him drawing as PASTOR PAUL speaks. He draws in straight and certain lines, with his tongue between his teeth so tight it must hurt, and when people tap him he doesn't look up.

*(Many years ago. 10:00. end of service. everyone was leaving.)*

ANDREW: Micah.

*(MICAH sat, drawing. GRACE watched.)*

ANDREW: Micah, Grace, come on. Time to go.

GRACE *(to MICAH)*: That's good. A little more rounded.

ANDREW: Micah! It's time to go!

GRACE: Dad, shut up! He's drawing.

*(OLD LADIES looked their way. ANDREW turned red)*

ANDREW: You do not speak to me that way! *(grabbed MICAH and GRACE)* We're leaving now.

GRACE: He's almost done! Get off us!

*(MICAH went crazy like a fish like a bug stuck to tape. he stabbed ANDREW with his pencil. ANDREW cursed and GRACE smiled.)*

GRACE (*picked up MICAH's paper from where it fell*): This is your best flower yet, Micah. It's as good as mine are.

It's getting so sunny outside of the window.  
The stained glass cuts all that apart.  
I play my violin, quiet and curious.  
I know all the music by heart.  
ROSE sings with me  
With distant eyes  
And I learn MICAH's words.  
He talks more every day  
About the flowers in the dirt.

+ + + +

PASTOR PAUL makes a sermon about Grace. The kind of grace that means forgiveness, or taking things as they come, or letting go, like birds, to let the wind take us scary places. PASTOR PAUL says that god is the greatest agent of grace because he picks us up, our wet wings dripping, and he dries us off and fixes us. He says god is our savior, and I feel the air get tight, and I hear ROSE sing *abb ah abb*, and I know what she is saying – *god is not our savior, he is our friend*. And I hear MICAH whispering to himself with his finger pressed against the pictures in his flower book, and I feel my wings on my back and I remember what I am.

### THE APOCRYPHA

MAN: Ugh, a roach. Guys, we've got a roach over here!

(*ROACH tries shrink smaller. his wings are too big.*)

ANDREW: I'll handle it. Hey, Micah!

(*MICAH is telling ROSE about flowers*)

ANDREW: Micah! There's a roach over there. We've got to get these tables ready. Just step on it real quick for us.

MICAH: That would be murder.

(*the MEN laugh*)

ANDREW: It's a bug, buddy.

MICAH: That would be murder. 'Thou shall not kill'. The sixth commandment. Exodus 20:13. (*stares at his flower book*)

ANDREW: Micah, I need you to handle the roach. We'll be in the other room.

Micah gets up after a few minutes. He leaves his book in ROSE's lap. I know that he is not going to kill me.

*There you are. He says. I'm not going to step on you.*

He takes me in his hands, afraid I might break, and he carries me through a long hallway.

I stand in the salty sweat of his palms. I have never felt closer to god.

He takes me to the place outside of the window.

I have never felt closer to god.

There are tall, tall trees and a ceiling so high it is hardly a ceiling at all.  
There are so many blades of grass, even more than I remember.

And sound of water. Ah ahhh ahhhh.

And I hear bugs breathing. Breathing like I do.

*(MICAH puts ROACH on the grass, still wet with dew)*

MICAH: I'll name you Esau. It comes from my favorite bible story. *(pause. he looks around, like windows breaking, like a snake coming out from its skin)* Actually, I'll name you Aster. That's the name of a flower. It's a perennial.

Grace didn't like perennials.

*(rips grass from the ground, and the dirt comes with it.)*

I kind of wish Grace was alive.

*(Two weeks before GRACE died, second pew from the back, everyone else in the dining room having coffee and donuts)*

GRACE: Micah, how do you get god to forgive you?

*(MICAH looked down at his bible)*

GRACE: Hey, Micah. Micah!

MICAH: I heard you. He isn't going to forgive you. You have sinned and sinned. You *just* yelled curse words at mom and dad, how do you expect him to forgive you?

GRACE: (*sighed, like a butterfly folding up its wings and retreating into its cocoon*) but how do I *try*?

MICAH: Maybe you should draw more flowers. If I were god, I would forgive you because I like your flower drawings, but I'm not god.

GRACE: So you forgive me?

MICAH: Yes, but I'm not god, so it doesn't matter. You're still going to hell.

GRACE: It does matter. To me. You're better than god – at least you follow all your own rules.

*(MICAH opened to one of his bookmarks)*

GRACE: Micah?

MICAH: I heard you.

The trees stand strong and deep and still. The sunlight warms my blood.

I hear the worms beneath me, making happy homes of mud.

I forgot my violin, but this grass is so soft.

All of this breathing is music enough.

### **About the Author**

Sophie Braxton lives in Decatur, Georgia where she works and writes.

### **About the Work**

"I wrote this story when I was sixteen. I chose to write from the perspective of a cockroach because it is easier than writing from the perspective of a human because nobody can tell you that you have done it wrong. Every time I write about a child like the one I was, people say "this is a very poignant story about a child with autism," so I decided that the children in the story should just be autistic. They were absolute joys to write about. I don't mean to express any political or theological message or any message at all. In the past, people have insinuated that I like to express myself and I have been slightly offended because it is not myself I intend to express.

Thank you."

# A Ghazal for the Children

Shreya Vikram



"Figurative Abstraction" by unidentified artist; brush and ink with pencil on paper; 23 1/2 x 20 1/8 in.; ca. 1930-1938; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

A child loses her tongue first. Stuck out and hanging. The word *missing* can be taken to mean lost or left. The children's tongues have gone missing.

The tongue does not refuse, it selects. Trust me when I say there's a difference. The children search for the wrong words, learn to curl them in. What is unselected is drawn missing.

Do we want them back? The children. Their tiring, overgrown tongues. Trust when I say I don't know what I'm saying. Trust the play of my grief, which is always staged. Trust I'm missing. Trust I've scorned, missing.

The children remind me of a door. A wall you could push around to go somewhere else. You could say their knobs have gone missing.

What is gone stakes its place in time. Digs into skin, settles in bone. What is gone has been here, once, has spoken. Here, their tongues shorn, missing.

I watch videos of waves crashing with the sound off. Soundless rage. The power in my fingers to shut them up. Voices sawn, missing.

Sometimes, a knob is the door & the door is the room. Sometimes, they arrive with no tongues. Tongues, they can be silent or silenced, no matter. They can be found and left and mourned missing.

### **About the Author**

Shreya Vikram is a writer based in India. She has been recognised by Best Small Fictions 2021 and the Adroit Prizes for Prose. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Ruminate*, *Hobart*, *Mid-American Review*, *Rumpus*, and elsewhere. She is a Submissions Editor at *Smokelong Quarterly*. You can find more of her writing at [shreyavikram.com](http://shreyavikram.com).

### **About the Work**

"It wouldn't be presumptuous to say that the past year has shaken most of the world. Lockdowns push the political into the personal; they force a de-compartmentalization, for better or worse. We work and eat and love and sleep under the same roofs; there is little point in holding onto the distinctions between those different strands of our lives. This fluidity has seeped into my art as well. Nonfiction and fiction no longer seem like two distinct categories. Pieces that started as visual art blur seamlessly into prose. My work leans into the gaps between genre. It refuses any label except its own focus."



# Two poems

Your voice is empty and has space to hold gerbils and beach balls

Your voice would rather be silently reading

Delia Tramontina



"Untitled" by B. Jesus Newton; oil on canvas; 22 x 32 5/8 in.; n.d.; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

## **Your voice is empty and has space to hold gerbils and beach balls**

You walk to the candy store to  
buy cigarettes, past a graffitied brick wall, tagged  
by some wanna-be gang claiming.  
Wear hand-me-down-pants — polyester, plaid-me-down.  
You can't read the wall.

It's 10 minutes to walk  
there and home  
with Marlboros® and Big Red  
for Old Previous Archetype.

You don't speak this language. Don't verbalize  
the 18 hours to drive from Colorado  
to the edge of the left coast  
without construction  
it takes 18 months for your city to feel like  
'your city.'

At home hair sticks to your socks or winds around your toes.  
The rug is stained.

Nothing is pretty but the sun is  
sweet for now.

You chip your toenail on the sidewalk  
bottle-opened by tree roots.

It's a four-hour trip from LaGuardia to Logan International.

Leopard print is no longer appealing but Archetypes wear it  
un-ironically. Not feathered roach clips or bandanas tourniquets.  
San Francisco gives you a car-parking  
hand callus. It takes three years  
before your city moves with a rhythm that replaces the last city  
you merged with. It takes five to six hours to fly  
between JFK and SFO,  
depending on the direction.

You're a tourist  
to your own mind.  
You keep

waiting for your visa—couch surfing in places  
where you barely speak the language. You hold a phrase book  
and this is all you can say: phrases.  
They're not even helpful phrases  
that could get you to the bus or the bathroom,  
but phrases that ask citizens if they believe  
in euthanasia,  
or if they have glaucoma,  
and it's not that these are not important things to ask,  
it's just that you still have to pee.

It's a 20-hour drive from Queens to somewhere  
in the middle of Florida.

Seat belts won't really save you.

It takes five years before you'll pee with the door open  
in your city. It takes 20 minutes  
to wedge the amethyst ball back  
in your navel ring.

Your voice is empty and has space to hold gerbils and beach balls.  
Summer in Queens is actually in the summer;

it takes four seconds to quote Mark Twain.

You used to smoke in bars but this morning  
you wake up feeling the cotton stuffed back into your lungs.  
This morning, like the Bay Bridge,  
is held together with strings.

## Your voice would rather be silently reading

Turn the wheel to get in.

Callus your hand.

Keep turning.

Tail pipes exhale. Citizens with breaths  
as shallow as dust jackets crawl upright.

Turn the wheel.

Their heels chafe. You callous.

Singular persons walk out of Jamba Juice® holding  
not one, but two smoothies —  
an extra for their double-parked 'lover.'

You don't trust smoothies.

Lovers have stuff

'in common.' They wear shorts and Coppertone® sunblock.  
And they turn.

It's cold here  
but not New York February cold.

Your coast finally matches  
your hemisphere. You confuse  
your cell phone with your car  
stereo with a bus kneeling  
with the archetype  
screaming.

There's ringing in your head  
and a creak in your bed. Noise  
has become a signal  
to get up, turn left, duck, monitor  
citizen conversations.

You listen and callous.

Your voice would rather be silently reading.

The shade is gone now;  
you're hot, not 'just got in the car  
that's been sitting in the sun all day' toasty,  
but in a 'lay naked, spread eagle in front of an oscillating fan' kind of way.

When you exhale, citizens get  
drowsy. Sometimes lovers take off their shorts  
to copulate in the mountains.

You are habituated to sequence  
and blindly push the right buttons.

When you get home, you are the only button  
left to push.

### **About the Author**

Delia Tramontina is originally from Flushing, NY. She received her MFA in Writing and Poetics from Naropa University in 2001. For 3.5 years she co-hosted Poet As Radio, a weekly show on writing and poetry, streaming online on San Francisco Community Radio. She currently lives and works in San Francisco. In 2018, her chapbook "CONSTRAINT" was published by Dancing Girl Press. The two pieces appearing here are from her full length manuscript "RIGHT LEFT." Other individual poems from that project have appeared in *1111*, *Unique Poetry*, and *dead peasant*. Poems from other projects have recently appeared in *Strukturris*, *Moss Trill*, and *The Babel Tower*.

### **About the Work**

"The poems included here, "Your voice is empty and has space to hold gerbils and beach balls" and "Your voice would rather be silently reading," are from my full length manuscript "RIGHT LEFT." This project took a rather circuitous route to get to where it has arrived. Along the way, it picked up some characters, dropped off some pronouns, and both lost and gained narrative elements. What remains is an exploration of power, role, collectivity, belonging and lack of belonging. This entire project was created to speak to the experience of looking outside oneself, to see the familiar become odd and absurd. These two pieces specifically deal with feeling foreign in our home and how we carry locations within us, how we become alien to ourselves after becoming habituated to a world that doesn't see us."



# The Node Dancer

John Schertzer



"Cubist Analysis" by John E. Thompson; oil on canvas; 12 1/8 x 10 in.; 1915; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Whatever have you heard the echo is rule of plastic. Down on the carpet. Up on the walls. Heaven waits for the ruffed tourniquet. There was a measure of it. All scattered. And this one a sea of shards. Of opening ups. And the other ones turning into squares. Into diagonals. A circular myth of things to come. That have already passed. Bringing the brain with them. The whole apparatus. Shimmying into a bow. A bright morning of toothbrushing and how you dos. And the books of the shelves have nothing to say. Have said all they need to say. Lumped in a corner. In a memory of having smoked, a fine morning leading to a disjunctive state. A cataclysm or a stroke of luck. And the reeling of parting and coming back together again. A thing advertised in books and movies. Like a lung breathing. Or a world and its wind. The signs of disintegration and the signs of new things coming into being. Gone are the sparrows of the intimate dialectic and come is the field of many voices saying the same thing. With micro differences we can rely on to distinguish each voice and each mood. Each thought and its analogy to something better. Imagined better but never quite coming into place. Dissembling on one end as it assembles on

the other. As fit constructions. As if energy had us playing with dark power. Since every thing destroyed as it is coming into being. Every soul, every icy stare from the other side of convenience. Convergence. For being for a brief interlude. Among the many catastrophes that inhabit life. That are the machinations of life. Because when I walk over here I have destroyed the person who stood over there. The identity that it was that was every body standing there from the beginning. Which never occurred.

### **About the Author**

John Schertzer lives in Brooklyn, NY, with his wife and fellow poet Kathleen E Krause, their two evil genius sons, Liam and Declan, and a dog, Rex. His poetry, crossover and fictions have appeared in a number of venues, most recently Big Other and Danse Macabre. His novel *Bellamonia* is forthcoming from Spuyten Duyvil.

### **About the Work**

"I wrote "The Node Dancer," I believe, in response to a number of fictional posts I had put up on my blog imagining how others in NYC were living through the pandemic, and remembering always that, though we are capable of embodying innumerable imaginary/fractal selves as a result, not only of the fictions we read and write, but with everyone and everything we encounter, we are still limited in our reach of another's experience. I think The Node Dancer tries to address both the lack of a central node of identity, and also that limit of reaching and understanding others. Both of these factors I believe are at the base of any kind of ethics."

# Two poems

**Aerate:** Far afield

**Hone**

Shanita Bigelow



"Composition" by Andree Rexroth; pencil and watercolor on paper; 9 x 6 in.; ca. 1935-1943; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum



## **Aerate: Far afield**

Ego, set the tempo. Let this little ditty bop.  
I pace. It plays, a sodden floor of remembrance.  
I mumble into a cup of willful reverie. I wish  
it would falter. It saddens me. The song  
in my head, impromptu and staggering, can't  
fill my mingling mouth. I can't find the words.  
Feet tap. I splinter into grace. Let it loose.  
Let it wreck this house. Let it be another body  
disembodied—make her more than the one she  
came in. Make more of her than a name we mourn.  
Make more of her than the shape of a forlorn whistle.  
Make her again—a body, a voice, flux and delight.  
See that feather, dark, full of an oil slick rainbow?  
Leave it be. Let it settle, decompose. Torch  
the sky. Clean your mouth of ash. Disinfect  
your teeth. Let the tongue cleave every other word  
for “contain.” Let there be more distance to pace, more  
flight, less assent. Let this not be an end.

# Hone

*after Jean Toomer*

Perfect the thistle spires. Perfect the line.  
Encroach on rapacious centers. I see the blade.  
We see the blade. Let it swing and shine.  
Let it alarm the willful. Let it pierce merciless eyes.  
Perfect line. Perfect ends.

Water everywhere. Broken glass, a squashed can of tomato paste.  
An alarm rings, and the aisles are empty again. This time the dis-ease too far gone  
for the essential among us. This time the virus, a sinewy hate, tethers us to dark  
sound, blade sharpened, teeth whetted with a righteous grief. Anger swells. Watch  
as light pours out atop the pawn shop and grocery store, another target to drop--  
helicopter hovers. We watch and watch, we mill in and out hands full, arms full,  
beginning to be heard again. Have said it all before. Cut our tongue on words:  
on "awareness," "justice," on "it could be me," on "wait," on "system" and "failure,"  
on "hope." We bleed, that silent swinging centered in profit, a malignant discord.

How am I going to get my medicine? How am I going to eat today? Watch  
as death drowns out the light of another good body, proud figure. All too often  
they go on swinging silently, and I watch and watch and watch and say something,  
anything, everything, plead for understanding. Money pours in for another homegoing.  
Money slinks away from another corporate investment in community. We are left  
bleeding at the center.

I see the blade. I watch the weeping rage. I weep and rage.  
I see the blade, stained, in motion cutting and cutting  
and cutting away to the bone.

Our tongues are sharp. Our minds unfurl in the heat of gestation, unfurl with the  
intrepid call to cease ignoble operations. We see the blade, have seen it, have warned  
of its night vision, heat detection. Another body, they see/say—another vision diminished  
in spectacle. Another spectacular demise. We rise and rise and rise, above the blade,  
its sweeping mechanisms, above the putrid air and flood lights, beyond the broken glass  
and flames into the weary wild of negotiation.

### **About the Author**

Shanita Bigelow is a poet and educator whose work has appeared in *Four Way Review*, *SAND Journal*, *Bombay Gin*, *New American Writing*, *Callaloo*, and *African American Review*, among other publications.

### **About the Work**

"These poems are attempts at understanding what can be confused, what is conflated in the space of fact and memory. How do we come to terms, find the terms for this time? How do we continue to move language(s) toward change, move our bodies/beings toward change and critical thought/action? I wrestle with both the stillness and flux of this moment. This year has asked many questions of me, my creativity and integrity. I think those go hand in hand. I wonder feverishly of what is to come, what does the "weary wild of negotiation" look like for self, for the collective?"

# The Mandela Effect\*

AT Hincapie



"Back To The Real World 2" by Nazrene Alsiro; film photograph; 2020

Nelson Mandela died in prison, then again a few years after his release.	Either way, my father forgot to buy milk.
News clips of the funeral showed rioting in South Africa, mourning in the streets, Mandela's widow's heartfelt speech: a parallel history I could die just to confirm.	Voices echo out of context up the stairs, my last recorded detail of the two of them together, my parents reminding me, when I get older: I should never forget to bring home the milk.
Years before, a pillow fight broke out on the same day the Reverend Dr. King met a handgun at close range: I've stepped in the motel room, seen the sniper in position from the hill.	When asked, my sister insists orange juice, not milk. Orange juice because she vomited green beans into my glass at dinner, and I still can't stomach greens with any orange: though she swears it wasn't milk. It wasn't milk.
A grinning Dr. King swung pillows at his friends after defending the Memphis garbage workers strike. I dodged the feathers: the pillows and the bullet sound the same from a distance.	Her esophagus refused all liquids, dysphagia muting meals into a procedure. Only water, <i>forget the milk, we don't need it.</i> Just stay alive, just keep us all together a little longer.
Even the tanks at Tiananmen Square stopped long enough for photographs, then continued forward: I overheard the popping of a melon.	Crackers first, calm food, then citric acid burning my sister's throat and memory with the healing power of specifics: the full-bodied resonance of milk and juice.
I watched the tanks at home, the protester's friends dragging him away, bleeding the moment and the thing into the <i>it</i> , the <i>what went wrong</i> .	Between overlooked groceries and the obscuring of a source, how can I trust even the clearest echoes? The evidence confused in all the milk.

*\* An overwhelming familiarity with something recorded history tells you did not happen  
the way you remember: a contradictory experience of the past often shared with other people,  
as if the event itself has somehow changed and not your memory.*

## About the Author

AT Hincapie was awarded the Margaret Reid Prize for Formal Verse, and was named an honorable mention for the Muriel Craft Bailey Award and a finalist for the Colorado Prize for Poetry. His writing has also been featured with *The Coalition of Texans with Disabilities* and *Intima Journal of Narrative Medicine*. He works with Palette Poetry and teaches in Colorado.

## About the Work

"Paranormal researcher Fiona Broome coined this term for "collective false memories" in which large percentages of the population claim to remember public events differently than officially reported. This theory purports the

existence of alternate timelines and even parallel dimensions to explain these discrepancies – but in reality, much of the work of remembering often falls on children, on the survivors who become tasked with internalizing their traumas while still getting all the details correct for the next generation.”

### **About the Artist**

Nazrene Alsiro is a practicing Interdisciplinary Artist located in Atlanta, Georgia US, but was born in the Philippines with a mixed racial background of both Palestinian and Filipino. Her original focus at Florida State University was Video/Photography and Sculpture however, she has been focusing on painting and analog as of lately. She presents her photography in a variety of formats as well as video installations that may include sculptural forms. Her curiosity is drawn to the complex connection between mental health and the need for societal normalcy. In some of her work, she uses material such as tulle because it mimics the haziness in dream-like memories. In previous and ongoing work, Nazrene addresses the ongoing turmoil that takes place in the West Bank. Hoping for peace while presenting subtle truths of what is taking place. As of recently, she has taken interest in paint drenched paper towels used to clean up paint and recycles it into a material used in the paintings, all inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic. In photographs, she uses the double exposure format in which compresses two moments that set a narrative of what she sees during the All Black Lives Matter movement. As of now, she plans to continue to use exploration, observations, and experience as a part of the process.

### **About the Art**

“Whether channeling personal expression, provoking emotions, or capturing a moment of light and shadow, in my work I want to portray the spasms of feelings that underpin our life. I explore fear and curiosity connecting mental health in the modern world. I work by observing others and their emotions as well as embracing my own. I intend to bring the beauty of what’s unseen and life’s unidentifiable outcomes.”



# When Memory Becomes Mythology

Soramimi Hanarejima



"The Poet on Pegasus Entering the Realm of the Muses" by Elbridge Kingsley; wood engraving; 6 1/4 x 5 1/4 in.; 1890; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

You ask me to come over for dinner this evening. Which means you want me to see the latest work you've done on the memory you've been perfecting over the past year. It's been several weeks since the last time, and no doubt you've made a number of alterations. Though I am still fond of that afternoon with Mom—The Lying Lesson as we've come to call it—I am reluctant to see your new version of it because that will confront me with inescapable implications. Your fascination with this childhood episode is ever verging on obsession, and you are looking to me to ultimately validate this fixation—through the resonance (or some strong reaction, at any rate) you believe the memory will eventually elicit in me. But I know that if I decline this “invitation,” you'll simply issue another one in the coming days.

So I take a crowded rush-hour train across the city, through the evening fog, to that quaint street lined with secondhand shops and delicatessens. When I arrive at your place, you have all the dishes laid out—sautéed kale, seared scallops and buttered pasta. My meager lunch of an avocado sandwich between meetings has left me hungry since mid afternoon, but somehow, I eat at a leisurely pace that matches yours.

After we finish our meal with the herbal soup you've no doubt simmered all day, I dispose of any remaining pretense and say, “All right, let's have a look.”

Leaving our bowls and plates in the sink, we go to the walk-in closet you've converted into a studio just for this memory. You wait in the doorway as I peer at this scene from our youth. It's mostly the same. The grass might be a deeper green now.

I'm tempted to feign a reaction along the lines of what you're probably hoping for—blurt something like, “You got it—this is it!” But it's almost certainly too late for that now. At this point, you're bound to suspect any emotive response as contrived. So I give the memory some more consideration and go through its familiar chronology.

The three of us sit on a blanket in the meadow, wildflowers speckling the hills in the distance with yellow and orange, the sky a patchwork of blue and gray, summer's humidity encroaching. Mom begins teaching you and me how to make lies not just convincing but compelling—better, more earnest than the truth by being believable, beautiful and charming. She explains how good lies must be told like secrets. It should seem as though we're revealing something important that few are privy to. But just a glimpse, a fraction of the rich detail and emotional complexity—a concise confidence, not a disgorging divulging. There must be much more to the lie than what is told.

You and I nod along to our mother's words, spellbound by this primer on perfidy, marveling at the sophistication of this art form we've been only bumbling amateurs in—all the while believing ourselves auteurs of the exaggerated claims we had passed off on classmates.



When Mom goes to talk with a neighbor on his way through the meadow, I ask you, “Isn’t she worried this will encourage us to lie to her?”

“No, just the opposite. This is her way of discouraging us from lying to her. By showing us how much she knows about lying.”

“Oh, right,” I murmur, this logic obvious after you’ve pointed it out.

“This is also her way of telling us she loves us. By preparing us for a world in which lies must be beautiful to be most useful.”

I turn to you, and our eyes meet, yours askew as you lean on the doorframe, your right shoulder pressed against it to become a fulcrum for your body—or psyche even, leverage toward a demeanor otherwise out of reach.

“You didn’t say that,” I point out.

“But it feels like I did,” you reply.

I recoil at your words as though to dodge them as they whiz through the air in front of me. But a moment later, they’ve infiltrated my mind with their crucial meaning. You are getting at your subjective reality of this memory. You as Mom’s translator, making her language of instruction and affection comprehensible to me. And this convinces me that your relentless refinement of the past is worthwhile; tells me that you have a chance at finding what you are seeking from this memory—not within it but through the expansion of it.

This may even convince me to take a closer look at *The Anatomy Lesson*, another afternoon in the meadow months later when Mom explained the parts of the dreaming mind and how to take care of them. But for now, I return to the memory here and continue on, toward the part when Mom tells you and me about one of her best lies, to see what you may have uncovered there.

### **About the Author**

Soramimi Hanarejima is the author of the neuropunk story collection *Literary Devices For Coping* (Rebel Satori Press, 2021). Soramimi’s recent work appears in *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Lunch Ticket*, *300 Days of Sun* and *Heavy Feather Review*.

### **About the Work**

"I've been curious about how we consciously and unconsciously ascribe meaning to specific memories. Which moments do we come to believe are significant? Why and how are they important to the way we understand our lives? "When Memory Becomes Mythology" considers what might happen if someone deliberately (and obsessively) refines a memory in order to find meaning within the past moment it's an impression of. Would this person be satisfied by what they find, or would they want this discovered meaning verified or validated by someone else?"

# Four poems

"OK Scott I'm moving out now."

"Listen I am just trying to wait in line for an Impossible Burger after crying in my car & I don't know how to interpret this moment of ambiguous & highly commercial loneliness"

"Walking along the Susquehanna River there is a personal strength I am almost reluctant to uncover"

"Aubade overlooking the highway"

grace (ge) gilbert



"A Violet Note" by James Abbott McNeill Whistler; Chalk and pastel on grey paper; 10 7/8 x 7 1/8 in; 1885; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

## OK Scott I'm moving out now.

severance is an IKEA bookshelf

i've left for dead

the curb a morgue we never meant

2 fill

O kitchen-light / the moment

so hot it re-enters

like a crowbar

i am handing u a phillip's head screwdriver

remember

we are fucking

in a pile

of packing peanuts

or on the air mattress

that structurally can't fathom

this much

attention

O spot-cleaning

o candid familiar

body

in the dark

our love is a room

i can't take with me

this heart

this dim

reluctant

muscle

i am standing before it

1 more time

i am tasked

w/ such impossible corners

of Memory

**Listen I am just trying to wait in line for an Impossible Burger after  
crying in my car & I don't know how to interpret this moment of  
ambiguous & highly commercial loneliness**

lately i've been feeling

like a staged interpretation

of myself

i am always Ending Up

in these sore

constellations

of people

I am always slack

against the real

**Walking along the Susquehanna River there is a personal strength I  
am almost reluctant to uncover**

O harmony o shot-thru

aggregate sunburn

of a love

this is the itch

of tenacity

aren't we so, so lost

aren't we cursed

with the continuance

of water

## Aubade overlooking the highway

walking up the hill  
a moment ensues

in the broke-open self;

the city a subtitle  
across the plane

of sight,  
traffic a concise

duration. lately i am in need  
of danger

in love; precarity

a darling

arrowhead, my pathology

no plain underfoot  
thing--

*What do you need  
like an open throat?*

i want to ask, Or  
can't it be exciting

how anything  
one step forward

could lose

itself, a wide  
perfect



crisis, highway

the last thing  
to forgive

a body ?

O moonlight o laconic  
posture

in traffic there is something  
in the red thin

light

so clean so  
dangerous

that makes me

need you

O cinema o thing

of my fantasy

if love is a gift  
I am doing with it

what a child would

wrappings strewn  
across the ground

small body curled

unintelligible ribbon

O hillside o mouth angled  
toward action

to say I have loved you

is to say i have stood

quietly

on a hill &  
imagined

so perfectly

### **About the Author**

grace (ge) gilbert is a poet and lyric essayist among other things. their chapbook, 'NOTIFICATIONS IN THE DARK' is forthcoming with Antenna Books in 2022. their essay collection 'the closeted diaries' is forthcoming with Porkbelly Press in 2022. their work has been featured in *The Adroit Journal*, *Ninth Letter*, *the Offing*, *ANMLY*, *Pidgeonholes*, *Hobart*, and elsewhere. they have received fellowships from the Rona Jaffe Foundation and City of Asylum. an MFA @Pitt, grace also loves cheese, macarons, their partner Boen Wang, and their cat Honey.

### **About the Work**

"I was dumped during the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, packed my bags, and slept on my sister's floor for a few months. during the day I would stalk my ex's Spotify activity and cry, walk along the Susquehanna, and/or write this little collection of abject/plague-breakup poems. I look at these poems as a sort of reckoning with the inability to brood/mourn socially during these times -- but also as an ode/gesture toward Impossible Burgers, my need, my hope, and unattaching from another human being."

# Two poems

Caking

Enough

Jessica Temple



"Still Life" by Earl Horta; watercolor; 15 x 18 1/2 in.; 1939; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

## Caking

Orange frosting. The angles of elbows. Modeling pick. Dog bone. Cutting wheel: Tools for the tiny work of fondant. Crumbs and crust. One hand revolving the turntable, slowly. One hand holding the smoother, applying a little pressure. Just a little pressure. One hand holding on. One hand holding back. Applying pressure. Just a little. Just a little hand, little pressure. Just a little pressure, holding back. Just press. Just a little.

# Enough

The dog won't lie still. The dog is still a lie I tell myself. I tell myself a lie because the truth's too hard to bear. Too hard to hear. To be here is a lie. To lie, as a dog, on the cold hard floor. To dream of somewhere else. Of someone else. To dream of a dog and a truth and a floor. And to let that be enough.

## About the Author

Jessica Temple is the author of *Daughters of Bone* (Madville Publishing, 2021) and *Seamless and Other Legends* (Finishing Line Press, 2013). She earned an MA from Mississippi State University and a PhD from Georgia State University, and she teaches at Alabama A&M University. In 2019 she was a contributor in Poetry at Sewanee Writers' Conference and was Alabama State Poetry Society's Poet of the Year. Her work has appeared in *Thema*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *Stone, River, Sky: An Anthology of Georgia Poems*. Find out more at [jessicatemple.com](http://jessicatemple.com), on Twitter @Jess\_Can\_Write, or on IG at @jessica\_can\_write.

## About the Work

"Both of these poems grew out of a generative workshop, "Subverting the Line: Prose Poetry," that the fabulous Alina Stefanescu did for Bending Genres. It was an online workshop, which sometimes don't work as well for me as in-person, but I came out of it with four new poems that I really liked. Alina encouraged me to play up the repetition in "Caking," to good effect. These were written in February 2019, a month in which I baked at least 3 birthday cakes, including my dad's 70th. The dog in "Enough" had shown up in my yard about a week before the workshop, and I was just keeping him safe until he found a home. He's sleeping next to me now two years later. It was a lie after all."

# Cheat House

Jacob Kobina Ayiah Mensah



"Self-Portrait" by Malvin Gray Johnson; oil on canvas; 38 1/4 x 30 in.; 1934; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum



We're always watching. Watching the forked pathway behind the hedgerow, we're watching. Just watching. Someone has opened the outside door & we wait to hear how all these wounds started, we're alive looking straight ahead into the future to see the predators. Suicide or madness overtakes some prisoners working on the field. & there isn't a noticeable amount of repentance in their talks. We think they've created the burning. 57 sugarcane farms are burnt. 32 rice farms are burnt. A large grass field is burnt. Hundreds of tomato farms are burnt. Each family is here. Father, mother & children in groups. We're trapped here. We're scape goats. No arrest has been made. We're the victims, we're the clouts. I'm imprisoned & no one suggests that we can't talk to one another though the guards are watching, looking at those who make any effort to talk. Or maybe they know something about global warming & that, fire can eat up anything, including the ocean at any time. & I'm glad maybe they know & nobody will be arrested. We want to know what they've for us. But I can't trust them in this house with every carbon dioxide from the 7 villages. Are we here to be extricated? The television set is only a few feet further to the left, I barely glance its way when I sit on old plastic chair working for my escape. & outside the fireflies have inherited their properties & the moon seems to be full.

### **About the Author**

Jacob Kobina Ayiah Mensah, who is an algebraist and artist, works in mixed media. His poetry, songs, prose, art and hybrid have appeared in numerous journals. He lives in the southern part of Ghana, in Spain, and the Turtle Mountains, North Dakota. Yours sincerely, Jacob Kobina Ayiah Mensah.

### **About the Art**

"The compressed space in *Self-Portrait* speaks to Malvin Gray Johnson's profound awareness of modernist compositional devices. The easel at the left side of the canvas identifies him as an artist, and the masks in the background make an assertive statement about his African American heritage. In 1934, the year he painted his self-portrait, Johnson joined the ranks of the Public Works of Art Project, the first of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal art programs, which paid artists a monthly stipend. Although the job lasted only six months, Johnson was finally able to paint full time. Ironically, the year proved to be Johnson's most prolific but also the last of his short life."

# Two poems

Heat.

One of those summer storms.

D.S. Maolalai



"Roseate Spoonbills" study for book Concealing Coloration in the Animal Kingdom by Abbott Handerson Thayer; oil on paperboard; 22 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 26 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.; ca. 1905-1909; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum



## **Heat.**

lies stretched  
on the street like a lizard. I sit out  
in sunlight  
on a steel folding  
chair. around me  
the city  
chips silver  
with heat-haze. traffic;  
poison scratches  
on non-stick  
frying-  
pans.

## One of those summer storms.

sky's open. rain  
dropping blocks  
like a torn bag of potatoes  
hanging off the back of a truck.

one of those summer storms  
coming suddenly  
with thunder – the air still hot,  
and we left this morning  
mostly without jackets.  
I have mine, I always do,  
but it's a light thing;  
tan leather. I'm getting  
wet as anyone,  
and won't be dry  
for longer. ahead of us

the dog runs through puddles  
and stops to smell something dead. when we approach  
she shoots again, though always stays  
in eyeshot. the rain  
doesn't much bother her  
but has killed  
our conversation.  
jack has a stick he picked up  
for some reason  
and all of us have bottles.  
behind me, chrys hides her hair  
with her handbag.

beside us  
the earth of the ditch  
starts to rise. it was dry a second ago;  
now you expect toads. it's like this  
for minutes - our silence  
a roar and our sandwiches

soaking. then the sun  
strikes white windmills  
rising on top of the mountain.  
they shine  
and we watch  
as it approaches  
slowly  
like pastures  
with grey horses.

### **About the Author**

DS Maolalai has been nominated eight times for Best of the Net and five times for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, "Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden" (Encircle Press, 2016) and "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019).

### **About the Work**

"I try my best to marry the lyrical and the mundane in poetry — I think combining the human voice of the day to day with a more artistic language is what I'm best at, and I like to think I've achieved it here."

# Two poems

## 16 Blessings for the City of Los Angeles

Post-chromatic

Rachel Tang



"Trees" by H. Lyman Sayen; oil on canvas; 21 1/8 x 18 1/8 in.; ca. 1912-1914; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

## 16 Blessings for the City of Los Angeles

Blessed be the bar on la cienega, the meeting place of supercut fantasies and existential seminary, for I am a learned woman

Blessed be the wet edges of skirt hems and the ankles they graze in downtown rooftop pools, may our pleasures be a fractal vision to those above

Blessed be the lights of grand central market and the smallest talks reverberating across dented metal tabletops, may palms continue cupping other palms, with spare change and other gifts

Blessed be the chairs in a circle, for we are all just hanging out

Blessed be each and every grain of sand in the baseboards of the first apartment, may they forever be a testament to the virtue of sentimentality

Blessed be the rideshare drivers delivering impossible lovers in pairs at 1am, for knowledge is not necessarily free will

Blessed be the lanes on the freeway, for they are plentiful and non-binding

Blessed be the texts sent from underneath the cover of moonlight, for they provide constant absence of reassurance

Blessed be every voice that swells above the noise of the karaoke machine at bar nirvana, for they have more songs to sing than money to pay for them

Blessed be every tourist who has ever touched a star on the walk fame, may they one day be clean again

Blessed be the fluorescent lights inside the home depot on wilshire, for their all-consuming illumination of grief and pore

Blessed be the gardens in south central, where the most divine light lives in purple flowers, may those who keep the little things remain

Blessed be the nausea, headaches and hunger pangs had on the mattress on the floor, for we have laid here at different times, somehow together

Blessed be the metro predator and his blighted daydreams, may his legacy die with the words on this page

Blessed be the museums and their inner organs, freestanding interlocutors affixed to white walls, for every inch over eighteen is a dance in their direction

Blessed be this tinseltown, where everything is a symbol for something else, may the signified one day eat the signs

## Post-chromatic

Some fragile rods and cones can't parse the difference between  
indigo and black, windbourne over the Oakland bridge

From water or night, the driver's concern emerges to say,  
I can hear your backseat heartbreak from here and can

you please keep it down, I press a dried mango to my  
teeth, a jammy yellow middle between 32 ivory walls

Strangers drift down a seagreen alley to the fray of your voice, telling me  
you've got a friend on the east coast that cried when you called her

out of the blue, ducks circle a manmade pond, not knowing  
the best place to touch down

When our light turns red I confess  
I'm looking forward to crying too

### About the Author

Rachel Mei Ling Tang is a writer and art historian interested in memory, pedagogy, and ekphrasis. Rachel received her B.A. in Art History from the University of Southern California in Art History. She is currently a Ph.D. student in the History of Art at Harvard University.

### About the Work

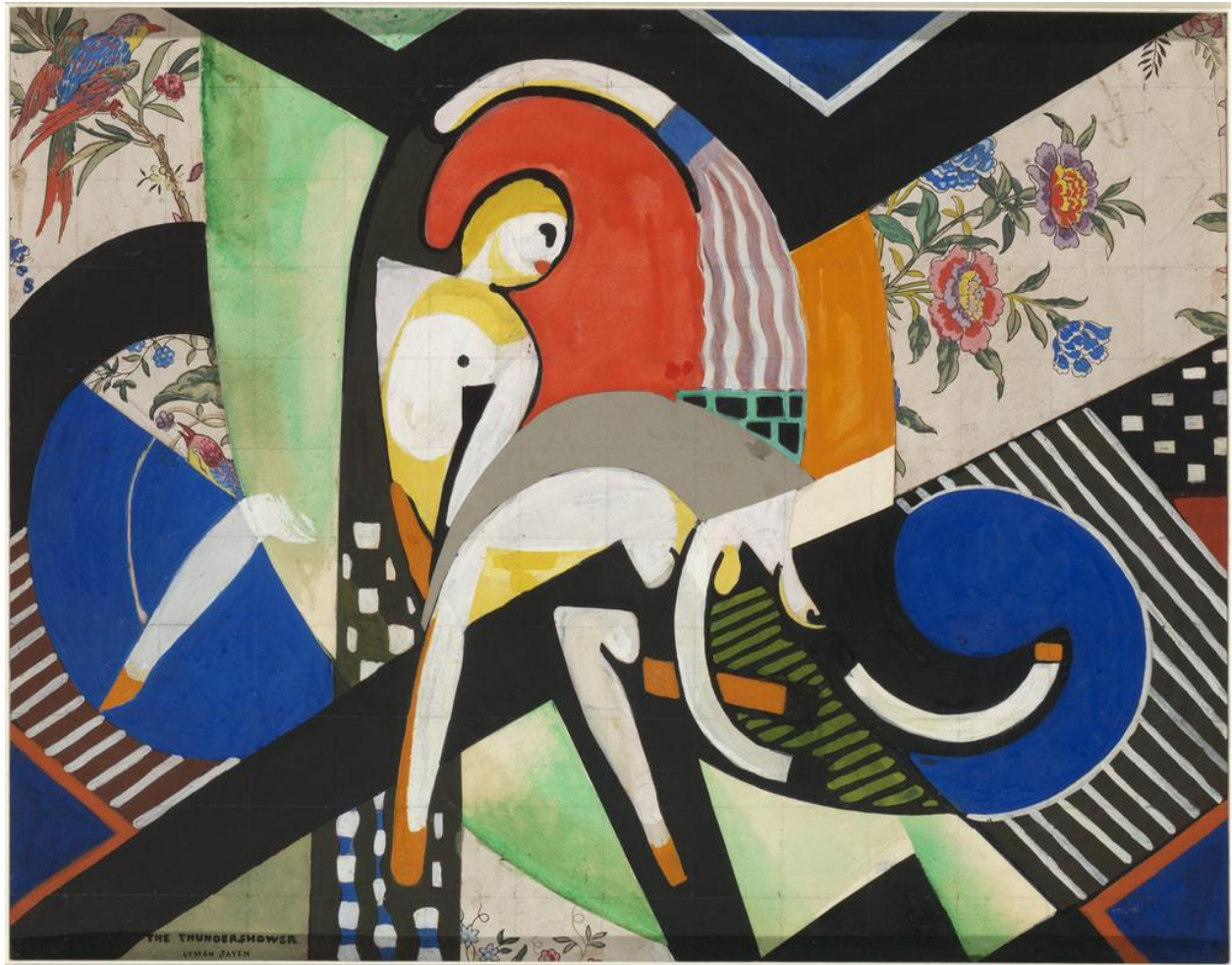
"A few years ago, I left Los Angeles behind and felt a deep sense of loss. In my grief I felt compelled to etch the memory of my time in LA deep into my mind, writing about the city as one would write about a lover — unpossesable, transitory, and latent with desire. In other words, I love a good breakup song. I also think that to memorialize something, is to come to terms with the romanticization of your own experiences. These poems are my way of leaning into those feelings, rather than leaving them behind."

# Two poems

Where It Dissolves

Unplaceably There

Matthew Burkett



"The Thundershower (study for painting)" by H. Lyman Sayen; tempera, pencil and printed paper on paperboard; 21 3/4 x 27 3/4 in.; ca. 1916; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum



## Where It Dissolves

round & dry                      a crumb of industry                      capsid  
Monte Carlo platelets half-peel bending back dendrites  
the pill                      front porch statuary of electrical abuse  
a compromised landscape                      unfolded in the body  
                    whose veins are                      a form being filled  
grit                      in the occipital lobe                      in the well of marrow  
over and over soporific bureaucracy of the indexed self  
mandatory media                      only visible                      to those who suffer  
the unreal                      the gashes                      come in checkbox form  
calendars crossruled with byproduct                      pollution gaze  
repetition invoked                      to assuage catalogical disorder  
dizziness & collapses on the bathroom tile                      sulcal zaps  
the lethargy                      means it's working                      relax

## Unplaceably There

It can never quite be placed        it drifts        red blur        so  
in integument tectonics    *bourdon*        and suspense  
passing by        a tidy doppler    thins    blood its caricature

[one evening i saw a dead mockingbird in a supermarket parking lot  
a stiff gummy wing raised up on a balding mast slide on the asphalt  
propelled along by the gusts of the outer band of a tropical storm  
flight that shuddered with basal friction with erratic jolts with skids  
and unmotivated clinamens leaving behind unnamable fragments  
scattering bird bits at twice the speed of the tottering bird clump]

the nurses wrap us up        rough draft mummies  
*brouillons au lieu des brouillages*        not understanding  
the way it        drifts    gone    a mothwing muddy mauve

[i can't say why but i started to yell at it with hope too much hope]

### About the Author

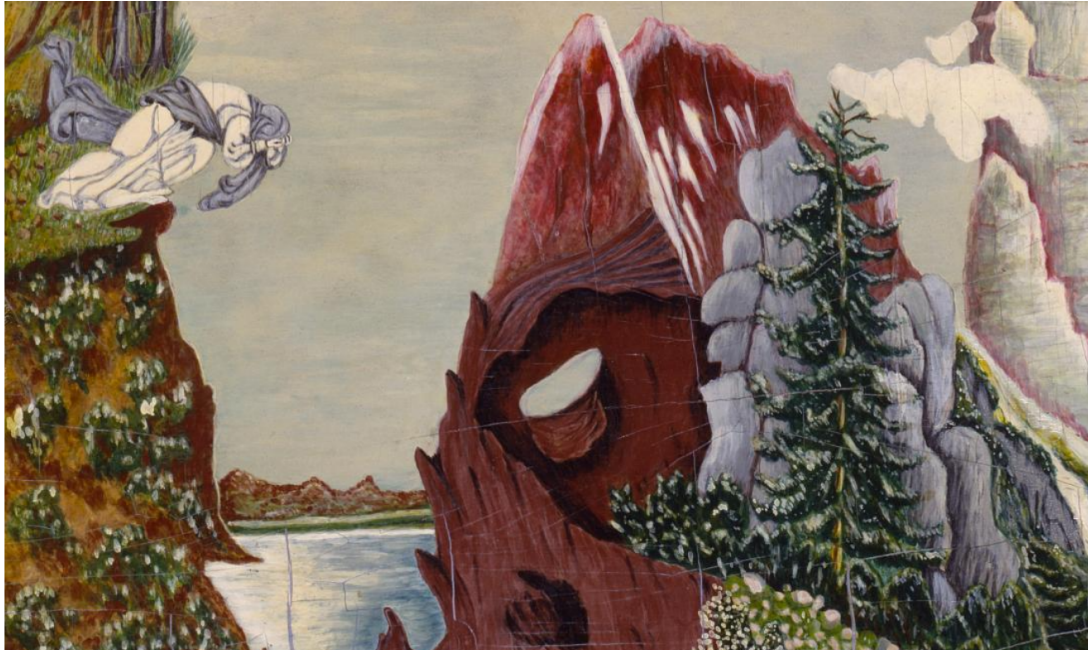
Matthew Burkett lives in Waltham, Massachusetts. In the precious time when he's not researching for his PhD candidacy exam or teaching writing classes, he is writing his first collection of poetry.

### About the Work

"These poems are an attempt to express schizophrenia, not necessarily from a first person perspective but through language, industry, the social, and space. In the past year, my writing has been inspired by music (such as Salvatore Sciarrino), languages, and specialized discourse."

# Dogs

J. D. Schraffenberger



"Nirwana" by Max Reyher; oil on wood; 15 5/8 x 19 3/4 in.; 1928; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The evening dogs are on the loose again  
Chasing the neighborhood kids up into a tree  
We stay there all night carve our names in bark  
We play rock paper scissors to see who'll climb down  
We braid each other's hair we sip the dew from leaves  
We're hunkered low in the understory dark  
It rains the next morning and we take off our clothes  
Beat our skinny chests like the apes we long to be  
A year later the dogs are still circling below  
Their blue black fur shimmers in the slow sun  
They teach each new litter of pups to hunt  
They have wills of their own they have designs  
One of us learns the language of sad birds  
Another becomes a rush of green wind  
The rest seal their eyes shut with red sap  
The rock is for power the paper is for words

The scissors are too heavy for our little fingers  
Have you ever accidentally read the same book twice  
Sometimes you can almost picture how you'll die  
You see a car the ditch rain through the window  
I climb up out of the dark to see the neighborhood whole  
It's the shape of a mirror it's the shape of a hole  
This is where you grew up all those years ago  
You'll return home once you climb down it's getting late  
I can't remember what else happens but I know  
The colors of the world are a reflection of the sky  
I know the patient dogs will wait me out to the end

### About the Author

J. D. Schraffenberger is editor of the North American Review and professor of English at the University of Northern Iowa. He is the author of two books of poems, "Saint Joe's Passion" and "The Waxen Poor," and his other work has appeared in *Best of Brevity*, *Best Creative Nonfiction*, *Mid-American Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere. He lives with his wife, the novelist Adrienne Finlay, in Cedar Falls, Iowa, with their two young daughters.

### About the Work

"As a child I suffered a recurring dream of being chased by packs of dogs, dangerous and muscular shapes in the dark, impossible to hide from but rarely seen clearly or whole, only flashes of fur and fang. It's not difficult to analyze this dream as a perfectly healthy and natural psychological rehearsal of a deep human fear of death and dissolution, so vivid to a little boy learning to touch the terrible contours of mortality. But those dogs were — and are — real, more real than the flesh and blood dogs of my awake life, not just because they continue to circle my subconscious mind — figment, fantasy, phantom — but also because I believe they have wills of their own that I cannot fathom, designs I will never understand, however much I might try to interpret them as literary symbols of human mortality, mere metonymies for the wild. I have never believed in a theistic god — not least because those theologies are too legible to me, not mysterious enough for the strange beauty of the cosmos — but I do believe the dogs are there, waiting."

# After the Regional Cat-Snack Sales Managers' Meeting

Brad Rose



"Tattoo Flash" by unidentified artist; pen and colored ink on cardboard; 8 1/8 x 10 1/8 in.; 20th century; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The pet snack industry is family friendly, because people look like their pets, only more so. Of course, the public is legally entitled to know what it's up against---you know, the raw, but cooked; the medium, but rare; the treble, not the bass. Once, I took a speed sleeping course, so now I'm able to catnap in half the time. Productivity has skyrocketed. Last night, after the quarterly regional sales managers' meeting, I drove sleepily home through the night's smooth and furry dark. The streets lay down flat as an omelet and my mind wandered toward the

meaning of pets. Of course, nothing good can happen when a human thinks too long about a cat. As I pulled into our driveway, I didn't hear a thing, until Mona ran out, screaming and sobbing *Tiger, Tiger*, at the top of her lungs, frantically pointing under my wheels, and offering to cut my hair for free with her newly stropped butcher knife. *Wait a minute. Who's running this meeting?* I meowed.

### About the Author

Brad Rose was born and raised in Los Angeles and lives in Boston. He is the author of three collections of poetry and flash fiction, "Pink X-Ray" (Big Table Publishing, 2015), "de/tonations" (Nixes Mate Press, 2020), and "Momentary Turbulence" (Cervena Barva Press, 2020). His fourth collection, "WordinEdgeWise," is forthcoming in 2021 from Cervena Barva Press. Five times nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and twice nominated for Best of the Net Anthology, his poetry and micro fiction have appeared in *The Los Angeles Times*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Clockhouse*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Sequestrum*, *Folio*, and other publications. His story, "Desert Motel," appears in the anthology *Best Microfiction*, 2019. Brad's website is: [www.bradrosepoetry.com](http://www.bradrosepoetry.com)

### About the Work

"In "After the Regional Cat-Snack Sales Managers' Meeting," as with much of my work, I'm concerned with word play, defamiliarization, the juxtaposition of unlikely associations, and dark humor. When writing, I try to follow three precepts: 1) "Every view of things that is not strange is false," — Paul Valéry." 2) "The function of the imagination is not to make strange things settled, so much as to make settled things strange." — GK Chesterton. 3) "The ugly may be beautiful, but the pretty, never." — Paul Gauguin"



# That One Thing with the Wine

Katlyn Tjerrild



"Figure in Glass" by Arthur B. Davies; drypoint on paper; 6 1/4 x 5 1/2 in.; 1916-1917; open source from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The first slice is coin-thin and clings to the side of the knife. Jesus Christ, you're not slicing bananas for toddlers. Keep this up and it'll become a running joke with the host family. One of the daughters, passing her sister in the hallway, will offer the grim warning, "Careful—mom's patience is thinner than Katie's banana slices right now."

The grandmother will be diagnosed with cancer, and when the dad breaks the news, he'll say, "Her chances are slim," and a grief which doesn't know what to do with itself will tug at his lips and tempt him to say it.

Well, alright, there's a lot of banana left to go and plenty of chances to redeem yourself. Hopefully not *too* many chances. Hopefully fewer chances than there would be if you persisted in your current slice-width. So of course, like the dumb bitch you are, you overcorrect, and the next slice's width is nearly equal to its diameter. It's the better mistake to make, I guess—now you just have to decide if you want to split it up into two slightly-undersized slices or one slice of appropriate width and one tiny slice, but I'll leave that to your discretion.

The hostess is standing next to you and pretending not to watch and wondering if your mother never had you cook with her growing up, which she didn't, but that was because she was trying to give you a carefree childhood which many people are deprived of and which, moreover, is none of your business, Jennifer. When you arrived at their house earlier that evening, and the husband had just poured himself a glass of wine, he asked if you'd like a glass too—it was a new bottle, a brand neither of you had tried before. "Take a sip first," you said, "And then I'll decide," but he misheard you and thought you were asking to take a sip of *his*, rather than asking for his recommendation. He had already begun an uncomfortable, "Oh, um..." by the time you could correct his misunderstanding, which means that there were about three or four seconds during which he really believed that you were the type of person who would ask for a sip of an acquaintance's wine at a dinner party, and which, consequently, means that you can't be alive anymore.

Third time's a charm, and you finally manage enough fine motor skill to produce a decent banana slice. However, because of the curvature of the banana, one side of the slice is slightly wider than the other. Frankly, you're not in a position to be too particular about that yet—you can circle back to it at the end. If you had wanted a sip, you would've said, "*Let me* take a sip." A consonant like *t* is pretty unmistakable, and from the context clues alone, it should have been clear that you were asking for his opinion. The whole thing is a PR disaster, but nothing that four straight hours of absolutely flawless social behavior and a perpetual, winning attitude can't fix.

But honestly, who are you trying to kid? It's not enough that he *knows* you weren't asking for a sip. It's not enough that the wrong impression is *corrected*. The problem is that the wrong impression existed for an actual period of time and that it will never not have existed, no matter how much you do to counteract it. Oh God—Oh God, already, as you're thinking about it, you can feel the exchange being relegated to that category of memories so agonizing to you that you can only look at them obliquely, through at least one degree of linguistic obfuscation. Where, instead of reliving the memory of the class presentation in which you grossly overshared, the whole thing is reduced and encoded in the title, That One Presentation. Same goes for That One Lady At The Vet's Office and That One Thing On YikYak and That One Time With The Hickey. Jesus Christ, you're even lying about the titles, that's how pathetic you are. Hickeys. Plural. And really, giving them distinct titles at all is dishonest, because usually, all that you manage to mentally utter in reference to any of them is That One Thing.



The hostess says, “I’ve washed the raspberries,” and hands you the bowl for the fruit salad.

“Oh—good,” you say, which is a stupid way to respond because it sounds like you expected her to wash the raspberries and would’ve been pissed if she hadn’t, but you’ve paused too long now to say “thanks” without it sounding like you’re amending your response rather than clarifying it. So kick yourself about that for a while, while you scoop out a bruised section of banana and throw it away, and then become suspicious that they’re all judging you for food waste and once you’ve performed a couple recitations of *kill me kill me kill me* as penance, slide the banana slices into the bowl and cringe at the rasp of knife against cutting board. When you all move to the living room, clutching your bowls of fruit and cool whip dollops, indulge in just a moment’s more shame, and then, if you possibly can, try to taste the fruit. This is the best possible version of your life.

### **About the Author**

Katlyn Tjerrild recently graduated from Baylor University with her Master of Arts in English and is currently teaching English at Merced College and College of the Sequoias. In addition to creative nonfiction, she writes poetry and fiction. Her work has been published in *The Penn Review*, *Meridian*, and *The Southampton Review*.

### **About the Work**

““That One Thing with the Wine” was written in 2019 after an objectively lovely dinner party made subjectively horrible by self-consciousness. This piece is essentially an attempt to translate into English the punishing, often-incoherent voice of social anxiety, and hopefully in doing so, to reveal its absurdity and defang it a bit.”