

FOOTHILL

poetry journal

VOLUME 10



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Engage

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Editor's Note

Poetry in the Pandemic

In the 2001 film *A Knight's Tale*, we encounter a naked Geoffrey Chaucer on the road. Upon being asked what he is doing, he responds that he is “trudging.” He defines the verb for us: “To trudge: the slow, weary, depressing—yet determined—walk of a man who has nothing left in his life except the impulse to simply soldier on.”

The pandemic horse has been thoroughly beaten to death, but it is, of course, impossible to avoid. Little else, I think, will be so emblematic of our lifetime. It is for this reason I bring up Chaucer's definition (which is without a doubt historically accurate). The difficulty that COVID-19 and the current political catastrophe has wreaked upon our communities is devastating, but the determination to continue creating and sharing powerful words—if this journal is any indication—refuses to be stifled. If anything, it seems to be strengthened.

I speak for myself and the rest of the editors by saying that we are thrilled and humbled to publish the poems included here. In that vein, I am also deeply grateful for the poets that contributed to this year's journal; I am in awe of the astounding work that lies within the confines of these pages.

Poets: thank you for trusting us with your work. Readers: what follows will split you open and stitch you back together. It will pain you and soothe you. It will remind you of the fundamentally resilient spirit of the human imagination.

I also must express immense gratitude to our editorial board for bringing their purpose, zeitgeist, and wisdom to the creation of this journal. I owe greatest thanks to my friend, colleague, and fellow Fleet Foxes fan Brock Rustin. Without his support, guidance, and patience, this journal would not exist. I am also indebted to Rowan Ricardo Phillips, the judge for this year's Editors' Prize, and I am reminded of something he said to me about writing: “The poetry will come.”

Keep trudging.



Emily Schuck
Editor in Chief

FOOTHILL

Winner of the 2020 Editors' Prize

New Water

Erika Luckert



There are parts of the brain
that respond to water, parts
of the tongue that do the same.
It doesn't quite taste
like water here, I still have boxes
to unpack, and I have traveled
farther than the water has

Erika Luckert's poem "New Water" takes the reader on a voyage where the quotidian becomes fantastical and where the light and shadows of such a journey reveal themselves in poignant, near-tactile increments of great poise and great feeling.

—Rowan Ricardo Phillips, Judge

Finalists

an anti-creation myth

Chaim ben Avram

Criminal Activity

Kaily Dorfman



Congratulations to the winners of
Claremont Graduate University's
2020 Tufts Poetry Awards.



2020 Winner
Kingsley Tufts
Poetry Award
Ariana Reines
A Sand Book



2020 Winner
Kate Tufts
Discovery Award
Tiana Clark
I Can't Talk About the Trees
Without the Blood

KINGSLEY & KATE TUFTS
POETRY AWARDS

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Poems

ZACHARY ANDERSON

*University of Georgia
PhD English*

Wolf Jewel

I crawled out of one frontier into another

living on rabbits and rosebuds
suckling a rustic knife handle

narrative a mirage on the landscape

cirque, tarn, moraine, glacial tilly
boulders unsocketed in the meadow

I crept in the old-growth forests
hid the babies in the horse's grave

I spooked the roebuck from the grove

having eaten the neck all the way down
to the clavicle and carried away the head

I reported myself to the authorities
wearing the pelt of a higher-order predator

came as a mare dressed as a bride
wassailing with a singing skull

dug a hollow in the slope where I slept
mummified in cold turquoise and silver

I devoured every signifier

the snowfield in the shape of a cross
scratched in the side of the peak

an outline of a body in the pasture
filling up with spring meltwater

something stirs above timberline
the dogs patrol the meadow's edge

I draped myself in wool and killed
the animal with a shepherd's crook

and galloped off under the dark apples



MARY ARDERY

*Southern Illinois University-Carbondale
MFA Creative Writing*

Widowmakers

There are the usual culprits
like heart disease or prostate cancer,

but here in the woods we mean
dead tree limbs. The ones detached

and dangling from other branches,
waiting to fall like a guillotine blade.

At first I took offense to the term.
How it assumes only men are out here

camping, making widows of their wives
back home. Then I thought no,

it's just that men are more likely
to pitch their tents beneath

such a threat. They aren't used to
looking up, down, all around—

having come from a life in the city,
where they take their safety for granted.

They walk home alone at dusk,
rounding corners and passing shadowed

alleys without hurrying or checking
for a loose limb above them.

One that could be disturbed
by the slightest shift in the wind.

See the old trees now, swaying.
Listen to them creak and groan.

CHAIM BEN AVRAM

University of Hawai'i at Manoa
PhD English

an anti-creation myth

In LA the bookstore only carries street atlases
of New York. The crudest cartographer traces. Rain,
that rarest dialect of summer, whets
the desert imprecisely collapsing canyon walls.
The Santa Anas sing the wingspan of angels.
The 405 spans to pry apart their wings. Why color
when you can touch fire
to miles of disused quarry?
The dunes of Lower Manhattan crackle and hiss
like a host of holy
books burned in the rain.
The point is everything piecing you apart
scatters in the Silver Lake Reservoir.
Show me empty-handed, San Gabriel,
like the Book of Exodus in your arms;
for in heaven the bookstore only carries a remaindered copy
of Genesis and at its end the lowly
angels douse their plumage in gasoline.
They stone the display window, torch every last
trace of their radiance.
And when God cries over Southern California his eyelids rust.
Tears surge the sanctuary of tarp and ridgepoles
congregating inside His brain.
Songs of praise empty
inland seas, refuel headwaters.
While in the dry-rot opposite my desk termites begin stripping wing.



passenger manifest

“Never trust a Jew,” they say when your back is turned
but you hear “Never *just* a Jew.”

Never just a Jew.
Disappearing one stone doesn’t lessen the earth; a continent does.

Never a Torah scroll,
but Western history prying you limb by limb from sheepskin
by strappado.

Never just a stitch,
but in every stitch, a sweatshop on fire.

Never a drop of Manischewitz dirtying
your napkin, but wounds of amber wept by the firstborn slain.

Never by Red Sea; strictly by land
and air and labyrinth.

Never a missing passenger, but a manifest
and a heap of luggage looping the airport conveyor belt with no one to
claim it.



ARIEL BANAYAN

Chapman University

Dual MA/MFA English

Ancestor of the Toilet

In the garden of Eden
Eve sits by a river
Watching the water

The Sun trickles on skin
Water moving like any other water

A foot stirs in its silent motion
The wet touch a new song
A smooth yet cold persuasion

A white pebble
Floats down the river
No heavy splash or flailing limbs

Just humming for the Moon
And nobody else

Eve turns her chin away
Eyes shut
Imagines a dimmer Sun

A wordless feeling passes through
Her virgin body
And merely trickles away

The warmer river slips
Near a tree in the distance—

Bark stained with her new yellow
A subtle sheen of borrowed Sun

Eve smiles
Whispers a poem for the river
In a language we have long forgotten

The waters pause
The whiteness of the pebble
Sinks—

The Moon is the dullest mirror of the universe
True clarity lies in tainted water



Guardian of the Toilet

After losing all its money in Vegas
The Toilet sits alone
Trembling in a grass field

Face hidden and lost
In a drowning green repeating
A sea of drowning greens

The summer air shivers its body
Mind and body moving
Towards a total silent stop

A gecko scampers by then halts—
Cold instinct running like
Cold blood through its padded feet

The grass is uncanny to the touch
Too heavy too silent too honest
Thinks the gecko pausing on the greenness

The brave beast then breathes
And blinks three times
A blink for each limb lost in life

The trembling Toilet is suddenly seen
Its camouflage unclogged
As the gecko crawls up its body

Moving unto the Toilet
As sand moves to a fracture in the ground
And finally crawls into its urethra

To sleep in the air of dried piss and moss
As the Toilet thinks of other things
Like its first kiss in the falling snow



RUTH BAUMANN

*Florida State University
PhD Creative Writing*

On Impermanence

There's this way flowers wilt in the summer,
their bellies full of heat & hunger. I've lost years
like that, chasing an impossible, seeking always
to pause forever at the good part. There's the lie,
there's the spike I put my own head on.



CRISTINA CORREA

Cornell University

MFA English and Creative Writing

how long the night

i don't feel awake anymore am not sure that i am actually alive he is definitely not yet time stretches like a latex glove light steams through cold window panes white as mami's headscarf she wears at night so the sickness doesn't catch her while they sleep it's the first time i realize she doesn't want to die he has turned yellow eyes skin memories will stop asking stop speaking won't need to eat or sip much we keep his lips small moist sponge may also be used to clean inside the mouth and seal the envelope's regret refuses to be nourished no room inside too much already enough on fridays she sits in the carwash for hours as i watch him watch the same episode of gunsmoke impossible to know what is clear from our interaction a cataract growing timorous shit that can't loosen itself a stool trips us up in the hall and we wash morning away from the couch an orchid blooms its delicate crimson joke unfurled as night or answer to something asked



Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico

This is impressionism. A tree
holding itself upright. Subtle procession
guided by warm craving, muscles
materializing the line and its deepening
monochrome of rust. I imagine
Oller this way, trusting lucidity
like a leaf finding refuge.

The guides glance at each of us, offering
a reminder that they will still be
here in this surviving room,
after it all sinks in. What do you call a tempest
renewing itself into another foaming wall?
How many voids will come,
before a landscape's silhouette
remains? I do not ask if

light will still be light,
buried and grown over. Oller
relocated brush and canvas as hours
tinted sight, for a glimpse. Mixed
spirits and paints on the palette, lined
prayers to enter, hopeful
the colors, so exposed, might not bleed.



KAILY DORFMAN

University of California, Irvine
MFA Poetry

Mens Rea

Snaking a hand into my pocket, I find
I've also stolen my roommate's paper crane.
Lately even asleep I'm a thief—

lust seeps from my fingertips, leaves
silver snail slime in their wake, strange shapes:
a double spiral on the fridge, trefoil knots

where I lay my head. I covet what
I can't see, like the echo in this sealed box
and the moon's colder side, the gap

between your fingers when you curl them tight.
I take them all with me to bed at night
and don't wake when the sheets start to shine,

when the white cranes' chanting swells
too bright to hide. They say it's me, yes,
and it won't stop. They say lock your doors

and your eyes, I want the quiet inside them.
The gold in your mouth. The feathers unfolding
crease by crease, coming undone like the promise

I made. Like the streetlight I swallowed
last night, and the penny I swiped
to wish on: to keep it, though it isn't mine.



Criminal Activity

My neighbor stole the moon from the dark
and hung it for a porchlight above her door.
We never spoke, but I was in love with her
for months. How her voice trickled like rain
down the walls when I walked past. My
feet raw with the night shift, my gaze fixed
to that illicit glow, as impossibly swollen
as her expectant stomach. Each night I itched
to palm it. Each night I dream now I go
to her door. She doesn't ask me in. We stand
on the threshold and she points to the smears
of her fingertips on the grieving dark. I tell her
all the reasons I don't want to die. The moon
dangling inches overhead, the moon singing
love-songs to the love-baffled moths.
If she looks away I'll slip it in my mouth.



Snake Song #1

Waking, you found it knotted like a wish under
your pillow: soundless and brownish, a diamond-backed
dead snake still sloughing off its skin. Another wonder
you hadn't known to ask, the flesh cracked

wide with light. Another winding corpse stacked
in the humid catacombs you go to sleep in.
Dead snakes at your feet. Dead snakes piling up, packed
inside crates, your molding suitcase, the kitchen wastebin

spilling snowy snakeskin across the tiles. Snakeskin
flaking in your hair, peeling from your feet. The first
you found in two pieces on Main Street. The second rotting in
sunburnt grass under the bridge. The sixth you nursed

with goat's milk and mice as it twitched. Sang lullabies,
cursed
the way it split you wide, griefbit. The ninth was green.
This one tangles in your sheets, heavy as the sunburst
in your dream. Kiss it once, then twice. Get the gasoline.



JESSICA FREEMAN

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale
MFA Poetry*

Cousin

Is it strange that I was scared
as we guided home into the dock
and tangled rice? My cousin
shook the sides of the jonboat,
water spilling over flecked metal
as he stood in front of me,
nestled in back with fishing poles
and the skunked bodies of dead carp,
their fins sunned in the fine filmy sweetness
of water on a morning when the river
was good to us. We snaked knots around poles
to moor the boat as train smoke rose across
the valley, fog, fading and limp like a tired ghost.
He carried the fish cooler, and me
the poles, staggering through bushes
as if the water still churned beneath
us, as if somehow, we knew parts of us
would soon be broken.

That night he showed me his daddy's pistol
hidden in a box under his parent's bed.
I don't know what he was thinking,
but I saw excitement in his eyes, and the
flush on his cheeks as he reached
for the handle. Minutes later, our parents found
us sitting on the floor, our hands crusted
in fish guts, and the cloying stench of summer
steaming all around us. The rain jawwed down
the windowpanes. Each hard drop amplified
under the rough sound of my uncle's leather belt.



ROBINY JAMERSON

Columbia University
MFA Poetry

Domino

What I want earnestly and first is for this heat to dispel.
I am dogleg height. I am crooked on Domino Park like
the sun who knows herself only in the streak
that panics on unholy water—

Sick hands. Sick hair. Mosquitos. The park people unpeel tacos.
Physics earths me and I feel my weight. Nearby saying to Rosio:
Rosio, a man holds his cigarette to the sky:
the Statue of Liberty is just keeping the smoke from our eyes.

A woman with a water-colored hand works fast
as a factory piece gone wrong, as a limb
caught on the belt. She tries to stain the page with dusk
but dusk is so sleepy—

and lights come on—dawns DAWNS DAWNS O
ENORMOUS HORRIBLE CITY fire existence FIRE existence
how small you are below the sky.
Quick lovers clutch ballistic dusk so losingly.

I have done so much wrong.
I am buried so deep back. Blind backwards. Ipso facto.
Where have the dogs gone? Where is the beaming cigarette?
When will you be coming back?



That One Must Be Oneself So Excruciatingly Much

Please. I am eruptive tonight—
light takes on a spring slant, catching grease fingerprints
on glass like new, sharper teeth. It's
antithetical

to write on uncrinkled paper:
how immobile words are on the page, supplanting
each potential thing. How Hermes
plucks anemic strings.

So I think about glottal stops.
Ambulances and all their chaste advertisements
for what death looks like, or pain. The
train smells of urine.

Yesterday was of charcoal fire.
So much of my mind is taken up avoiding
liquids, conversations, nights, and
public surfaces,

but today I saw you. It was
all words (we've lost so much). Why must we feel so big?
Why the human thought given to
little lives that aren't

real lives? Statues built of statues.
How many violences come from being bodied?
Cast iron bleeds. Leather splits. My
mother's fingers crack.

We buy chairs bolted to tables,
tie back our hair in certain ways, and care fiercely
who loves us and when they do. I,
specifically, care.



CASSIE LEONE

University of California, Irvine
MFA Poetry

Temporal Paradox, or, Love During Pandemic

Holding you is like holding the last apple in all the world. I'm thinking, high on molly, squeezing you in reciprocal silence. Juicing you. Now it's 7:36 pm on the second Sunday of March & we are

eating olives at the only restaurant on the block that is still open. We pierce the green flesh with toothpicks after having our hands sanitized. Now we are back in your kitchen in January. You're cooking us pancakes in just your sweatpants. The hot butter snaps off the pan & burns your

torso. You give me the last of the blackberries & we don't do the dishes. Two months later we're sitting in my car smoking cigarettes at dusk. We look out our separate windows as the clock digitally reorganizes time. We sigh in the direction of Spain as our cancelled flight sits vacant on a distant runway. Now we're

sitting on the grass & you're pressing a blade between your thumbs to make a whistle. Now we're on Interstate 5 & you're pretending to be asleep. Two weeks later you're talking to yourself in the bedroom & your voice resounds until I'm a tree. You're the word for the sound of a saw. The old kind that two men held on opposite ends. I'm

reading a book & wishing you could read it line by line, exactly, along with me. I want you to just read it to me. This is not because I'm lazy about reading. On any of these days we walk to the

park and you tell me that geese look like failed aristocrats. But you're more like the coot, you claim, with the hay-like bones of its wing exposed. We are kissing on the stoop every night & our

butts get stained in the ashes on the dirty cement. You call regular sprouts *Brussels sprouts*. You look like an old photo when you drink. Like a celebrity look-alike of a civil war soldier's portrait. You look like the feeling I got after my dog ate a poison houseplant & didn't die or even barf. It's last

March & you're pulling me down onto you & kissing me for the first time. It's happening then & it's happening now like water rippling in a footprint signifying the approach of a tyrannosaurus rex. It's a mouth full of sharp teeth. It's bigger than both of us. It's Triassic. It's fossils that we are just guessing had scales or feathers. Tomorrow is April 1st. We are in my small apartment. We are expanding

to fill the rooms. Sending little smoke out the windows. Frying eggs in the mornings. Biting our nails. Drawing circles with our bodies.

ERIKA LUCKERT

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln
PhD Composition and Rhetoric*

New Water

Ask anyone and they'll say
it's tasteless, but in these first
few precarious days, the water
doesn't yet taste like water,
and I'm sure my tongue can tell
the unfamiliar minerals
of this soil, the aquifers,
the fields these rivers pass,
the water treatment plants,
the pressure valves and pipes,
this faucet too—as I turn
the tap, I can taste the ecosystems
this water has streamed through,
the creeks, once crooked
and curled have had their oxbows
clipped, their flow streamlined
and channelized—realize
the taste in your glass is *efficient*
or *economy* or simply fast.
And did this water taste
the same in decades past?
A group of mice spent hours
lapping at a stream of light
to see if this is true.
There are parts of the brain
that respond to water, parts
of the tongue that do the same.
It doesn't quite taste
like water here, I still have boxes
to unpack, and I have traveled
farther than the water has
to reach this kitchen tap.
It might be the taste
of the irrigation, combing

the cornfields row by row,
or the taste of a prairie cloud,
these skies with so much space
they just unfurl.



REUBEN MARTENS

*KU Leuven and University of California, Los Angeles
PhD English and Film Studies*

Dalälven

—till Amber

Telkens als ik bij jou ben
dan vallen de bladeren
zachter, warmer,
lieftalliger, hoger,
trager, dan ze
waaïen, wiegen
schommelen
dan ze
strelen
geven
raken
de
grond
dan ze
dan ze
danze
dansen
dan ik met jou kan dansen

dan mijn pen met jou danst
om jou danst
op jou danst
rond jou danst
in jou danst?
Dan ik ooit met jou kan dansen
kan dansen
kan dansen
ka dansen
cadansen
dansen zoals het vuur, het licht
dat schimmert, schippert,
dat speelt, valt, klimt en verlaat
dat streelt, strookt, stuurt
je (gouden) blonde complexiteit
kan ik met jou dansen? Niet

Every time I'm with you
the leaves will fall
softer, warmer,
lovelier, higher,
slower, than they
wave, wiggle
swing
than they
caress
give
touch
the
ground
than they
thanthey
danthey
dance
than with you I can dance

then my pen with you dances
of you dances
on you dances
around you dances
in you dances?
Then I ever with you can dance
can dance
can dance
ca dence
cadences
dances like the fire, the light
that shimmers, tergiversate
that plays, falls, climbs, and leaves
that fondles, strokes, steers
your (golden) blonde complexity
can I, with you, dance? Not

op deze cadansen, maar mag
ik met je dansen? Zoals mijn pen
wel met jou kan dansen, je
dichtbij nemen zonder aan te
raken, zonder weg te geven of
te delen, dansen we alleen
mijn pen en jou
wat als we, plat,
laat ons eens
dansen

ik vraag me af
of je me kan zien
dansen, om, op, rond,
met en in
ik wil zoals mijn pen
je contouren schaatsen,
schetsen, scherpen,
en met zachte indruk
voor altijd achterlaten
als een palimpsest
in mijn gedachten
zo kan ik dansen
steeds om jou
dansen en hoef jij
alleen mij te vergeven
laat me dansen want
nooit zal ik zo dichtbij
zo drukkend dichtbij
als mijn pendans
voor, om, rond, in
en met jou dansen
alsjeblieft
laat mij met je dansen

on these cadences, but can
I dance with you? Like my pen
can, dance with you,
take you close without
touching, without giving away or
sharing, we just dance alone
my pen and you
what if we, aflat,
let us once
dance

I wonder if
you can see me
dance, of, on, around,
with and in
I want, like my pen,
to skate your contours,
sketch, sharpen,
and with soft imprint
forever vacate
like a palimpsest
in my memories
so can I dance
always of you
dance and you
only must forgive me
let me dance because
never will I be so close
so oppressively close by
as my (re)pendance
for, of, around, in
and with you dancing
please
let me dance with you

bladeren vallen
harder, kouder,
ruiger, lager,
sneller, dan ze
verstillen,
verstikken,
verhangen

leaves fall
harder, colder
rougher, lower,
faster, than they
quiescent,
suffocate
hang themselves

vertragen. Volg mijn dans
om, voor, in, rond, op, over je
heen, zoals de wind, ligt,
streef ik je grenzen, gesloten
af, dicht
bij het licht, en verzink ik
voor je gouden kusten
als het Zweedse koraalblauw
mij van mijn kleren
verlost
schreeuw ik, 'jag elskar dej'

Slow down. Follow my dance
of, for, in, around, on, over you
all; like the wind, lays,
so do I caress your borders, closed
off, close
by the light, and I sink
before your golden coasts
like the Swedish coral blue
me of my clothes does
redeem
I scream: 'jag elskar dej'

en toch, ik dans verder
tussen de Dalälven en de
Leie, verder
verder en verder

and though, so I will forever dance
between the Dalälven and the
Leie, further
further, and further

Wat zeg jij daarvan; zullen we
dansen?

What do you say; shall we
dance?

DELANEY RAE OLMO

Fresno State University

MFA Creative Writing

MMIW I.

Under

The

Indian

Earth

Are

The

Blankets

Under

The

Indian

Earth

Destroyed

Are

The

Women's

Bodies

Creator

Bring

Rainsongs

Creator

Bring

Resilience

Creator

Bring

Resistance

Until

Again

Until

Again

We

Are

Whole

Under

The

Under

The



MAX RIDGE

*Princeton University
PhD Politics*

Mink Oil

I refused to believe touch was a long sea shiver
I had to remind you, no, it was closer
to the repetitious dip
of a cotton ball into olive oil or
like being boyish in the green summer
when, you know, the inlanders come damp-handed
chipped postwar teeth
and part your hair to the side like a bovid tick check.
Remember when I had to explain
that mink oil makes
the brown leather darker? And also, later, that
When you get old the tips
of your eyebrows will droop and you will
get Dust Bowl tired?

This was when the feelings between us were just born.
There won't be, listen, there
won't be a mild grove through which to traipse or a forest to skewer.
You are lucky to have someone so untucked,

so always there at the spit
Because I don't Work
For The Man I
Work For The Guy.
So touch can't be a shiver
because it's about warmth and
melting you down to, I don't know, an ingot
or a dime.



DANIELLE P. WILLIAMS

George Mason University

MFA Poetry

What Walking and Poetry Have in Common

If someone
were to direct
a movie about
Amiri Baraka,
it would probably
begin with the word
NIGGER.
All caps, cus
that's how that
nigga liked his
art—loud as fuck.
Cross cut to LeRoi,
then Baraka, walking
down the street.
Walking Black.
Walking proud like
no motherfucker can
bring 'em down.
Like they not afraid
of pavement. Better
hope there ain't no cops
in these shots. Better
hope their bodies don't
bulldoze longways
across footways. Up
close and personal.
Close-ups of concrete
grating the side of
Jones' face. Baraka's
face. Face it, they can't
walk for shit. Better

run. Better hope
they don't get got.
When LeRoi became
Amiri, he said,
"We want poems that
kill." Well, shit!
Do we all gotta die?

Art

Amanda Mears



Cling

photo transfer, acrylic, charcoal,
oil, and spray paint on canvas,
70" x 48" 2019



Strata

photo transfer, acrylic, charcoal,
oil, and spray paint on canvas,
70" x 48" 2019



Closer

photo transfer, acrylic, oil, and
spray paint on canvas, 70" x 48"
2019



Tidepool

photo transfer, collage, charcoal,
acrylic, mica, and spray paint on canvas
96" x 70" 2020





*So You Think
You Can Tell?*

acrylic, oil, and photo
transfer on linen

12" x 16"

2019



A Perpetual Possibility

photo transfer, charcoal, and spray paint on canvas

48" x 60"

2020

Through

acrylic, spray paint, oil,
and collage on canvas
48" x 36"
2019







Everything That Stands Between Us

photo transfer, collage, acrylic,
and oil on canvas

96" x 96"

2020



Night Vision



spray paint and oil on linen, 12" x 16", 2018



There in the Mountains

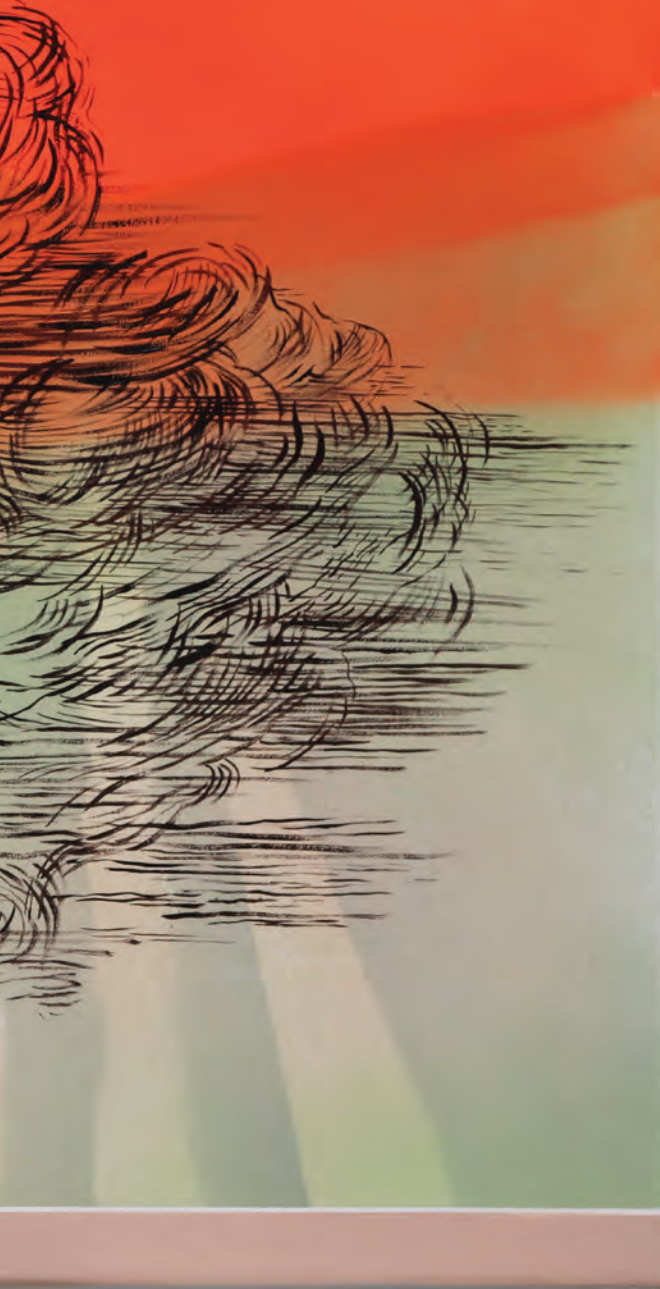
oil pastel and oil on linen

12" x 16"

2018







*My Lover Laid His Arm
across My Shoulder*

spray paint and oil on linen
12" x 16", 2018

*Wish You
Were Here*

acrylic, oil pastel,
and oil on linen
12" x 16"
2018





Interview

Prageeta Sharma



PRAGEETA SHARMA

was born in Framingham, Massachusetts. Her collections of poetry include *Bliss to Fill* (2000); *The Opening Question* (2004), which won the Fence Modern Poets Prize; *Infamous Landscapes* (2007); *Undergloom* (2013); and most recently, *Grief Sequence* (2019).

Sharma's honors and awards include a Howard Foundation Award. She has taught at the New School, Goddard College, and the University of Montana-Missoula. She is the Henry G. Lee professor of English at Pomona College as well as the founder of the conference Thinking Its Presence: Race, Creative Writing, and Literary Studies.

FOOTHILL

Your work is intimately personal, starkly honest about your experiences around the death of your late partner, Dale. I am always amazed with poets that are so unabashed in the honesty of their lives and work and awed by that kind of bravery. I imagine this takes some serious introspection—what is this process like for you?

PRAGEETA SHARMA

It's been a deeply painful and personal process, and I don't think people realize how hard it is to recover when you face that your spouse—whom you were madly in love with, and so loyal to—wasn't honest and struggled with addiction. I realized how serious the addiction was after his death, and I had to analyze a lot of his personality changes—what was cancer, what was alcohol, what was prescription medication? So, I had to grieve losing who I thought he was after his death along with his death. A month after he died, I discovered issues of fidelity and unearthed the levels of his addiction. It hurt me deeply, and I didn't have the opportunity to address it with him, so I had to address it on my own. I had to look at my own denial—I enabled him and his dysfunction in so many ways. This was what also disrupted my sequencing, was the trauma. I also had to organize the second Thinking Its Presence conference in March 2015,

two months after his death. It was too much. I also wished I could have explained this to the board when we did the third conference. I was still processing so much trauma from recovering from Dale; and five years out, I'm still processing but am in a more reflective state, for which I'm grateful.

FOOTHILL

Your collection, *Grief Sequence*, engages with grief in so many wonderful and fascinating ways as entry points: into poetic utterance, the shock of loss, the reimagining of priorities, and new insights into friendship and love. This is connected with the twinned concepts of complicated grief and the definition of a sequence. What drew you to thinking about grief as a sequence?

SHARMA

After Dale died, I was struggling with my memory: how to grieve, how to accept loss, how to retrieve the memories of him when he was healthy and we were making memories together. I was so traumatized by the effects of esophageal cancer, hospice, the pain and suffering he endured, his harrowing death cycle, which was so hard to witness—his Morphine was switched to Propofol because by day five of his dying he was still holding on—that I didn't know how to organize my feelings and had to think about a way to build sequences, to build order, to process my disbelief. I needed to start somewhere, and I found a journal entry from November 2014, after his diagnosis.

FOOTHILL

Along the lines of grief, we have been grappling and struggling with the ramifications of a global pandemic, and *Grief Sequence* has been a point of solace for me. How can poetry help us in these trying times? Do you have any recommendations for poets or writers that have brought you consolation in the past year?

SHARMA

I have been thinking about Raymond Williams's *Keywords*. Maybe we can create pandemic keywords*? I started wanting to write one. I think books that have been helping me are those that I've been

excited about celebrating: works that have come out during the pandemic.

I've also been drawn to the essay form and thinking about writers from the South Asian communities I'm a part of; particularly, Sejal Shah's *This Is One Way to Dance* grounded me in thinking about identity and the self. I feel the poems in Divya Victor's *Curb*, which comes out next spring, have a vital discourse: She explores the invisibilities and violence in our minority communities, particularly through a South Asian lens.

Reading Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* for Pomona College's Orientation Book helped me think more deeply about the dystopic times we are in and the significance of writing through this genre.

I was thrilled to read *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through* and cherish the collected and expansive poems I am finding there. They energize me.

I think I've been so immersed in teaching through the pandemic that I will say my students' work has been helpfully grounding; I have been learning so much and that has also brought me back to work I was doing several years ago. Teaching the poets Evie Shockley, Camille Dungy, and their collaborations with Alison Saar was transformative. We all were in awe of the installation works and the poems. I was able to teach the poems, writings, and films of Rowan Ricardo Phillips, Srikanth Reddy, Vidhu Aggarwal, Bishakh Som, Shin Yu Pai, Vera Brunner-Sung, Jake Skeets, Jibade Khalil-Huffman, Mark Nowak, Trace Peterson, TC Tolbert, and so many others; and some of them visited our classroom, which was enjoyable for all of us.

And then there's prose and community, which has nurtured me alongside poetry! I have been having a vibrant correspondence with the Canadian/UK writer Joanna Pocock about her book *Surrender*: A fascinating exploration of the American West, the environment, and personhood, which will be released in the US soon. I have been rereading parts because of the way she orients my thinking to a deep

ecological and philosophical space. And right before the pandemic, I was able to read at Colorado State, staying with the writers Andrew Altschul and Vauhini Vara. I am enamored with Altschul's *Gringa* and Vara's forthcoming *The Immortal King Rao*, which we were discussing because it explores class and caste in India and the United States. Incidentally, my student Ahana Ganguly recently recommended I read *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and Annihilation of Caste, the Debate Between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi* and it's helped me synthesize the intersectional work of class, caste, and fundamentalism in India. Before Dale died, I was teaching a class on South-Asian representation in film and media and wanted to return to some of the themes I was beginning to explore then. My Pomona community is so diverse and rich, that I feel like I've resumed studying these interests again and can think through the relationship of caste to examinations of Vedic culture that I have taken for granted as a Hindu. There are poems about this that I need to write.

FOOTHILL

I was hoping also to ask about the formal choices you make in *Grief Sequence*. Much of the collection is prose poetry (however one might define that) but there's also a formal choice of actual sequences: numerical representations—I am thinking specifically of “Sequence 2.” Later in the collection, in “Glacier National Park & the Elegy,” your form changes significantly. In your work and in general, what can formal choices like these add to contemporary poetry?

SHARMA

I think I was really trying to be honest to the writing process I was in—some of my elegiac turns were found in prose and in some I wanted to see how they were held in the lyric or conceptually. The book was really about my trying to find an honest way to think through craft and grief.

This was in keeping with what I felt about the elegy. So many elegies in poetry felt false to me—rife with a polish to the sentimentality that I wasn't in dialogue with. I just wanted to think deeply about what was real to me. I wanted to honor that I was changing right before my

own very eyes and wanted to figure out how to mark this in poetry. I'm grateful that poetry is one of the only places that can locate the liminal, the strange, and affective work on its own terms.

And just yesterday I was having a conversation about grief and writing with Khaty Xiong and Victoria Chang. We discussed how white and canonical the elegy is, and we agreed that its white tradition—so craft-oriented—pushed us into our spaces where we were writing different sort of elegies from what we had been trained to write.

FOOTHILL

Speaking of conventions—your work also has sometimes-scorching and always-searching criticisms of the academy and conventional poetry, which seems to be sharpened by your personal tragedy. There's a beautifully navigated exploration of both the cannon and the constraints of academia. How are academics and poetry in conversation with one another in this way? How does this help or hurt the barriers or gatekeeping that these communities historically adhere to?

SHARMA

I think it's changed so much in the last eight years, but that's not such a long span of time, right? Poetry 20 years ago felt very much like it was keeping a lot of voices and styles out, and I think many of us were affiliated with or starting our job searches during this time of precarious gatekeeping. We were figuring out how our writing invited us in or kept us out. Now, I think it's more inclusive, less white. I find that some of my early work is thinking through these periods through the poems. I know I was exploring gatekeeping and racial work in *Undergloom*.

FOOTHILL

It has been a wild year politically, and I have always believed that poetry is political. How can poetry contribute to a political narrative?

SHARMA

I think we are continually contributing. Again, I've been rereading a lot of Raymond Williams this year; and in *Marxism and Literature*, Williams talks about the inability to separate language from reality. Obviously, this year has been such a strange one in thinking about how much language has been separated and estranged from reality—or defamiliarized—and has deeply polarized our country. I think in poetry we are afforded the ability to integrate, offer, and engage with the nature of our ideas; we can turn to poetry to prioritize the value of engaging in truth, clear-sighted realism, storytelling, and intellectual work. This has become deeply political because of the anti-intellectual, anti-educational, and anti-critical race theory we are faced with by right wing people, white supremacists, and conservatives.

FOOTHILL

As the founder of the conference Thinking Its Presence: Race, Creative Writing, and Literary Studies and Art, how does race influence all of these three—distinctly different, though connected—activities? What inspired creating this conference?

SHARMA

This conference came out of particular institutional experiences of a legal discrimination suit and deep racial trauma for me; I also wanted to name it to honor the scholar and vision of Williams College professor Dorothy Wang, whose new book (at the time) *Thinking Its Presence* gave voice to thinking through theory, race, and innovation. She gave the first keynote and has been collaborating with me on every conference thus far. I am grateful for her thinking and deep intellect, and she has always helped me conceive of the work in this area of study.

But the seed of this: I was given some funding to invite a BIPOC person to the University of Montana-Missoula campus, and I was horrified by this gesture. I needed to transform it into something I could believe in, into some way to build community where I was. I held two conferences in Missoula and then put an informal BIPOC

board together to help me with the third one, because I was in deep grief then and couldn't do it alone. I actually should have waited a lot longer to do the third conference in Tucson because it was too much work for even a group to do. And yet, the conference was joyous and transformative for many and we, the informal board, worked extremely hard. I relished in our spirit of bringing our communities together. Yet, I was also worried that we were becoming too mainstream and too poetry-centered through this last iteration. (Don't get me wrong, I love poetry and my community, but I think we can get too insular as a group.) There was also an inability for the group to agree on a shared mission. This felt painful to me as this was not where this conference started for me. I felt like the board was reproducing the pain and power dynamics of the institution that I was trying to get away from. I pulled back from the work to reflect because this whole conference came out of deep trauma and grief for me, and it was the only thing I had left from a discrimination suit and a dead spouse—too much loss. I wanted to protect my earned autonomy—it was keeping me strong. This conference was not something that was part of my career-building self—it was work that I felt extended from caregiving, kindness, and real solidarity.

I think for the next conference, which I will do through Pomona College, I want to think about what our community of BIPOC scholars, writers, poets, artists, historians, etc. in the Claremont Colleges, Los Angeles, and California wants to solve, nurture, and examine. I want to celebrate their work and invite keynotes that celebrate this work. We will envision more intersectionality and more interdisciplinarity, and more BIPOC avant-garde work, which has always been my mission.

FOOTHILL

What is on your poetic horizon? How have contemporary events shaped the poetry you are writing now? (In other words, what can the Prageeta Sharma fan look forward to?)

SHARMA

I'm writing two books right now. One through poetry—about healing, whiteness, new age appropriation(s) of the East, The Upanishads, abstract expressionist art, love, truth, pain, etc. These poems are working through being honest and struggling with who I've learned to be now amidst whiteness, sorrow, and new love. I'm also writing a memoir titled *Expiration Date* about racial grief and spousal loss.

I have come to realize that I have found a hard-won peace I didn't have for a long time, an amazing and patient partner, and I'm finding room for more of my interests to grow and teach me. Ultimately, both books explore the lyric form and how it can engage with South Asian identity, social justice in my communities, and leaving a family behind—Montana and my world with Dale. I'm loving my new life in Claremont, a new and exciting chapter.

**[“First published in 1976, Raymond Williams’s highly acclaimed Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society is a collection of lively essays on words that are critical to understanding the modern world. In these essays, Williams, a renowned cultural critic, demonstrates how these key words take on new meanings and how these changes reflect the political bent and values of our past and current society. He chose words both essential and intangible—words like nature, underprivileged, industry, liberal, violence, to name a few—and, by tracing their etymology and evolution, grounds them in a wider political and cultural framework.”]*

Contributors

ZACKARY ANDERSON holds an MFA from the University of Notre Dame. His book reviews appear in *American Microreviews and Interviews*, *Harvard Review*, and *Kenyon Review*. His poems have recently been published in *Fairy Tale Review*, *The Equalizer*, and *White Stag*. He currently lives in Athens, Georgia, where he is pursuing a PhD in English.

MARY ARDERY is originally from Bloomington, Indiana. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *RHINO*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Missouri Review's* "Poem of the Week," and elsewhere. She holds an MFA from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, where she won the 2019 Academy of American Poets University Prize. You can visit her website at maryardery.com.

CHAIM BEN AVRAM currently lives, writes, and teaches in Honolulu, Hawai'i. His work has appeared in *RHINO*, *14 Hills*, *West Branch*, *Tin House*, *Chiron Review*, *The Boiler*, *softblow*, *decomp*, *LUMINA Journal*, and elsewhere. For projects old and new, and for the occasional installment of his translation of The Palestinian Talmud, visit www.cbavram.com.

ARIEL N. BANAYAN is an Iranian-Jewish writer born and raised in West Los Angeles. He received a BA in English from University of California, Los Angeles in 2017 and is currently a fellow at Chapman University's dual MA/MFA program in English and creative writing, where he teaches a class on the rhetoric of memory. His writing has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Diaphanous Micro Press, and elsewhere. Before joining Chapman University's dual MA/MFA program, Ariel previously taught children reading and writing skills, piano musicianship, and karate.

RUTH BAUMANN is the author of *Thornwork* (Black Lawrence Press, 2020) and *Parse* (Black Lawrence Press, 2018). She is also the author of five chapbooks, including *A Thousand Ars Poeticas* (Sixth Finch, 2018), *Retribution Binary* (Black Lawrence Press, 2017), and *I'll Love You Forever & Other Temporary Valentines* (Salt Hill, 2015). She holds a PhD from Florida State University and an MFA from the University of Memphis. Poems are published in *New South*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Third Coast* and more listed at www.ruthbaumann.com.

CRISTINA CORREA earned an MFA from Cornell University. Her poems were recently published in the Academy of American Poets' Poem-a-Day series, *Hobart*, and *Missouri Review*. Her poem "Reflection from a Bridge" was selected by former US Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith in the *Best New Poets* series. She has received fellowships from CantoMundo, Hedgebrook, and the Whiting Foundation. She is a writer and educator living in New York.

KAILY DORFMAN was born and raised in Santa Cruz, California, and she is currently an MFA candidate in poetry at University of California, Irvine. She holds a BA in English literature from University of California Berkeley, and an MA in the same field from University of California, Santa Barbara. She has previously been published in *Strange Horizons*, *The Scrivener Creative Review*, Ibbetson Street Press, and *The East Bay Review*.

JESSICA FREEMAN writes poetry and creative non-fiction. She has poems in *Mississippi Review*, *McNeese Review*, *Tinderbox*, *UCity Review*, *Dovecote*, and others. Her master of arts degree in English is from Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, and she currently is in the MFA Poetry program at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, where she received an honorable mention in the Academy of American Poets Graduate Prize, was voted Outstanding Graduate Assistant 2019, is an Instructional Mentor, and teaches creative writing, English composition, and technical writing. She teaches poetry workshops at the Carbondale Public Library and the Women's Center in Carbondale, Illinois.

ROBINY JAMERSON is a poet from Buena Vista, Colorado. She is an MFA candidate at Columbia University in New York City.

CASSANDRA LEONE is an MFA poetry candidate at University of California, Irvine. She is originally from the Bay Area in California, and she completed her undergraduate degree as a "non-traditional student" at Smith College in Massachusetts. Her poems have been published in *The Roadrunner Review* and *The Milvia Street Journal*. Additionally, she has self-published two limited edition letterpress chapbooks at Smith College's Apiary Press. She has been awarded the Lynn Garnier Memorial Award for poetry, the Nora Folkenflik Award for Excellence in Poetry, and the Academy of American Poets Prize.

ERIKA LUCKERT is a poet, writer, and educator. Her work has appeared in *Denver Quarterly*, *Indiana Review*, *CALYX*, *Room Magazine*, *Tampa Review*, *F(r)iction*, *Atticus Review*, *Boston Review*, and elsewhere. A graduate of Columbia University's MFA program in poetry, Luckert has taught creative and critical writing at public schools and colleges across New York City. In 2017, she was awarded the 92Y Discovery Poetry Prize. Originally from Edmonton, Canada, Luckert is currently a PhD student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Find her online at www.erikaluckert.com.

REUBEN MARTENS is a PhD candidate in English and film studies at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium and a BAEF fellow at the Department of English at University of California, Los Angeles. Martens's creative work, which tries to interweave minimalist soundscapes with poetry, aims to unsettle and recreate those small, fleeting (life-changing) moments we all experience, without melancholia or sadness, but in celebration of them. If anything, to capture the *unheimlichkeit* of normality in an attempt of disconnecting materiality from these little moments and to meanderingly find them a home (which Martens himself is still looking for).

AMANDA MEARS is a British-born, Los-Angeles based painter and printmaker. Mears has filmed and directed many hours of television for the BBC, Discovery Channel, History Channel and many others. She was trained in film making at the BBC in England and the American Film Institute. Mears studied painting for three years at a traditional Atelier School in Los Angeles and at 'Turps' - Marcus Harvey's London-based independent painting school. She was awarded the Dean's Fellowship and the Walker/Parker Memorial Fellowship and received her MFA from CGU in 2020. Mears's paintings explore the idea of landscape as something ephemeral, fragile, mediated, specific, and intimate. Rooted in her practice of spending time drawing from life and photographing textures and shadow patterns, the paintings weave together elements of these drawings and photographs with reconstructed scenes from memories. Her paintings engage with human's intertwined—and increasingly destructive—relationship with the natural world, investigating materials, mark-making, and color choices how we inscribe ourselves onto an idea of landscape. Find her online at amandamears.com.

DELANEY RAE OLMO is a poet currently living in Fresno, CA. She attends the MFA program at Fresno State University. Her work can be found in *Visual Verse*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Hmong American Ink & Stories*, and *Flies, Cockroaches, & Poets*. She is the recipient of the Mireyda Barraza Prizes for social justice writing.

MAX RIDGE is a writer from New York. His work has recently appeared in *Dovecote Magazine* and *Hoxie Gorge Review*. He is currently pursuing a PhD in politics at Princeton University. He previously earned an intercollegiate MA from Queen Mary University of London and University College London.

DANIELLE P. WILLIAMS is a poet from Columbia, South Carolina. She is an MFA candidate at George Mason University in poetry. She strives to write poetry that gives voice to unrepresented cultures and has a passion for understanding and connecting with the past, making it a point to expand on the narratives and experiences of her Black and Chamorro cultures. You can find her poetry published online and forthcoming at The Pinch, Sinking City, Verse Daily, ucity review, and elsewhere.

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Directed by students at Claremont Graduate University, *Foothill Poetry Journal* is an annual print and online publication that features the work of emerging poets enrolled in graduate programs around the world.



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