

FOOTHILL

poetry journal

VOLUME 11



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poetry journal

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Editors' Note

Grief & Gratitude

“How does a person grieve with grace?” asks contributor and finalist of this year’s *Foothill* Editors’ Prize, Marisa Lainson. As the pandemic has continued to affect our lives, this question compels us to think about how we are all trekking along at work, school, and other obligations. While we have been trying to go through the day-to-day motions, our realities have been filled with unfathomable loss and pain caused by COVID-19, news about difficult political conditions, environmental disasters, and racial injustices that occupy our minds and conversations. All of us, in one way or another, have come to adjust with living with the grief of these troubles.

Though we want grief to be “over,” many of us know that grief is not a finite process—it surprises and persists. There are days when grief makes it impossible for us to get out of bed, and days when it is manageable enough for us to finish our tasks. In the midst of this struggle, we, as an editorial board, have relied on the power of joy and moments of gratitude to carry us. Reading and selecting these poems for publication have provided us with some much needed respite.

We cannot impress enough how stunned we are by the work in these pages. We have poems brimming with personal longings, questions, and heartaches through themes like infertility, unconditional love between partners, and childhood traumas. Through reading these poems and working with these poets, we experience a sense of togetherness with a greater poetry community that makes us feel less alone. We are indebted to their words and ingenuity: they are what drives this journal.

“I am sorry, I am grateful,” writes Ross Gay in his titular poem in *Catelog of Unabashed Gratitude*. Gay’s words encompass the attitudes we have oscillated between as we’ve put together this year’s issue. We are sorry; we are grieving; but we are grateful and overjoyed by the fact that we get to publish these poems in *Foothill*. We hope you enjoy reading them as much as we have.



Stacey Park and Emily Schuck
Co-Editors in Chief

FOOTHILL

Winner of the 2021 Editors' Prize

Morning Fables

Remi Recchia



I don't want another face in the mirror.
My body is soft,
useless—it can't offer my wife any eggs,
so instead
I take her to a dance.

“Morning Fables” swings between humor and horror, sweetness and sorrow, light and dark, and the fantastical and the real, while also carrying the reader through multiple transformative spaces that ring with absence. The poem comes to a halt in the final line, as everyone in the scene stands “silent & sober & still,” and the reader also faces the same pain that continued to appear throughout the poem in renewed form. “Morning Fables” is an exquisite poem with a skillful gradation of tone that animates to life the enormity of grief brought by reproductive challenges, all in just seven tercets.

—*Emily Jungmin Yoon, Judge*

Finalists

Hyssop

Marisa Lainson

**Self-Portrait as a Purple Cherub on the
Tabernacle Curtain**

Rebekah Devine



Congratulations to the winners of Claremont Graduate University's 2021 Tufts Poetry Awards



2021 Winner
**Kingsley Tufts
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*Kontemporary Amerikan
Poetry*



2021 Winner
**Kate Tufts
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Jake Skeets
*Eyes Bottle Dark with a
Mouthful of Flowers*

KINGSLEY & KATE TUFTS
POETRY AWARDS

 Claremont Graduate University

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Poems

SEAN CHO A.

University of Cincinnati

PhD Creative Writing and Literature

**The horse who licks mothballs and swallows
rusty nails**

Don't worry,
the garbage bag in
his stomach is keeping
him safe. Listen,

do you know how hard
it is to use the other side
of a hammer? Useless things:

rubber nails, your self-portrait
etched in white sand, a straw bed
at noon. If papers with nail holes

are blowing in the wind
and the telephone poles
are bare, something *missing*

is becoming *lost*.
The bridle soaked
in apple water. The lead

tied down to nothing.
There's no one left to
stop me from thinking

run. No one to say
the better end of
forgive me. I'm sorry

you stumbled
into this mind.

HOLLY EVA ALLEN

*Claremont Graduate University
MA English*

Considering Cimitero Delle Fontanelle

There is a tuffaceous rockface
towering over some empty stretch
of Naples, I hear.

Its ochre belly is stuffed
full of brittle bones
like a reverse egg
it wears its gold like a coat,
its paleness on its breast.

This lithified outcropping is more
metropolis than ossuary,
more chapel than charnel house.

Not a single headstone, placard, or
punctilious worm
could give name to the
pell-mell pile of once-wases
and has-been-known-ases
that Corrado Ursi kept away.

On a lazy Sunday,
considering these
forgotten femurs and little myths
hiding from the Campanian sun,
how could I not feel
thankful for my face,
my name,
the dust on the ceiling fan,
a stove.

TARA BALLARD

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln
PhD English*

A Disturbance of the Atmosphere

— after Sandra Lim’s “Nature Morte”

I am given two things today: a street sign and the word for *root* in Arabic.

The sky is a storm-like haze in orange. The sign warns of forthcoming division.

On its rhomboid face, an anonymous someone has plastered a sticker
to remind me that despite
the two arrows turning away from each other, there is no
god but God.

So I trace the words in air, right to left, becoming sound on my tongue and lips.

Poetry, writes Frost, *is what gets lost in translation.*

Jidhr is what grows where I cannot see, but they say if I dig deep
enough into layers of sand,
through dry to damp, I can weave the threads and bulbs that
melody like lilies
painted across palm-lines.

They say that *radical* stems from the radish, a root which, upon
slicing, shows white gloss
under magenta skin, which, upon biting raw, burns a fresh
heat, tastes like conviction.

I have walked out in rain—and back in rain, writes Frost, *I have
outwalked the furthest city light.*

And from the radish, come crisp and pepper.

Truth: I want both vegetable and faith.

REBEKAH DEVINE

Mississippi University for Women
MFA Creative Writing

Self-Portrait as a Purple Cherub on the Tabernacle Curtain

The gold bells tinkle, rousing
the hairless god smoldering

behind my threaden wings.
Moans for incense and fatty

lobes of goat liver & bites of
bull kidney shiver my ears

into a frost of flowers
lacing my carmine skins,

dappling my twined veins
with cold crocuses.

The gold tongues ding-a-ling,
siren-sing past my soft spine,

draw god's murmurs
through my velvet throat.

A priest holds a bright knife,
slices a red plum, thumbs out

its stone heart. A crush of lime
& pomegranate pricks the air

above my four freckled faces,
peppers my lips & beak.

The priest parts my feathers,
slips between my linen ribs.

Bells & fruit, bells & fruit,
jackfruit, muskroot, gold

fruit dangling from the priest's
hem, clinking out the music

of his bare, dustworn feet.
I watch the line of rope

chase his jingling shadow
& wait for the hiss of god.

My First Monster Wasn't the King of Babylon

teeth tangled with field mice
& onion grass, the walleyed
eagle inside his head escaping
as feathered quills
 riving out the pores
of his scalp, neck, back—
 a reedy thicket sprouting
along the Euphrates of his spine.

I think he forgot the pistachios
on his way out of the hanging
gardens, on his way to becoming
the eighth wonder of the world:
the king turned bat-shit bird-ox
by the god I asked into my heart
when I was five years old.

I took to rolling in the dirt,
snacking on cicada shells,
knotting my hair
 with roly-polys.
I knew I'd be king one day—
god would split my skin
with fur or feathers, divide me
like Rahab and the Red Sea,
bulge my toenails
 into amber talons.

One night, my body bloomed
with fever, a red heat pocking
my cheeks, arms, legs. Mother
 pressed a cool washcloth
to my face—was this my
death mask? Was I sick
with the sickness of god?

I felt for my jaw and sliced
thin dermis.
In my beak, the rust of blood
& in my claws
a pound of ripped plumes.

DAVID GREENSPAN

*University of Southern Mississippi
PhD Creative Writing*

Faith without works is dead

I've been eating stones sifting fears through
dirt in an attempt to make up for a decade
body dumb and dripping poppy bulbs I've been
swallowing the dead like a clumsy prayer
to grain silos or any god willing to listen
some days I don't pay attention to anything
other than the sign that reads deer crossing
I wait until I'm covered in sweat
thoughtless as selenite almost as thin
I've been reading these words tracing
their cornstalked faces trying to find meaning
besides myself and whatever it is I think I want
a handful of minutes of wisteria sweet breath
while across a river bright with mullet scale
families start yelling about their missing change
it's funny this umbrella has lasted as long as it has but now
I'm drinking linden rain should I go home
to my toothbrush and cat should I drive
to Florida find my sour-scented friend
let her stick pieces of tin into the top of my hands

MARISA LAINSON

University of California, Irvine
MFA Poetry

Hyssop

Please believe me. Like the blackened gum
on the parking garage floor, I wish to kiss
the feet of a thousand thousand strangers.

Like the shorn wing in the tabby's maw, I wish
to be an offering, more sincere than the coins
in the dead man's mouth. I envy the hair

in the cashier's mole, the way it slips
into her darkest spot and roots there.
I want to ask her if she knows

what I mean when I say yellow
has always seemed, at best, suspicious.
I want to ask her if she's eaten today,

if she knows she deserves it. I want to
be the flush of iodine that casts out colonies
in the green wound, the fizzling gray

in the gouge of a child's knee. As a child,
I skinned my heels chasing dragonflies.
Are you still with me? I don't trust

the dragonflies because they've always
made me smile. I think I should tell you,
something I miss about faith is the ritual

of foot washing, kneeling in the earth
with wet jeans, a peer's sole wrapped
in my palms. Of all the feet I have washed,

the freckled anklebones of the sophomore
in the sundress still sing to me. Regret
is not having pressed my mouth to her

arches. I know. I don't trust the arches,
either. Besides, it would have been too
holy, by which I mean a lightness

I don't know how to bear. Tell me,
how does one reach for a sunflower
as something to be grasped? Tell me how

to reshape my body into the kind of vessel
moths and spiders flock to, the basin
of bloodwine in the temple baths.

Truly, I say unto you, I would soak
my hair magenta, brush my curls
across your naked brow, if only I could

trust the dragonflies. How does a person
grieve with grace? I don't need you to
forgive me. Please believe me.

EMMETT LEWIS

Columbia University

MFA Poetry

Read

Reading your pulse

Reading the tea leaves

Reading newspapers

Reading the room

 The reading room

 Attending the reading

 Reading at the reading

 In the red room

In the red reading room

In Reading

Rabbit, Run

In Reading's

 Red reading room

Rabbit Redux

I am reading

At the reading

 In Reading's

 Red reading room

 Reading just a little

 Reading *Little Red Riding Hood*

 Then *Robin Hood and Little John*

 (He's not so little)

Walking through the forest

Walking through Sherwood Forest

While reading for us

While taking a reading

Rabbit Remembered

 Reading to you

 Running to you

Rabbit ran and remembered

 Rabbit rides

 Rabbit rode

Rode with the Rhodes scholars

 Rode to Rhodesia

 Rode to Rome

Rode through the reeds
To ride reed instruments
 Woodwinds and brass
 Woods wind through the pass
 Woods and wine in our grasp
Reeds in our lips
Painted red
Red music
Wrote music
Rote memorization
Of music
 Riding instruments
 Homemade instruments
 Running home
 Running trumpets
 Running to the rut
All roads lead to ruts
 All roads lean into rust
All roads lean in the wind
 And the rust in the wind
And the rump
 Ruminate on the rump

PJ LOMBARDO

*University of Notre Dame
MFA Creative Writing*

Portapotty(reverber))

concave blueplastic incandescence
wraps its narrow mouth round my acres-
deep droplet
swiveling as the tea of strs
ceramic fishbowl pill of passout
echoes drown the fountain

echoes drown the papacy
echoes drown the cellphone
echoes drown the mills
echoes drown my drawings
echoes drown this shit
echoes drown this shit
echoes reach hind me curling glistening threads
terroristic

appletart childhood
roars to me in crows my backyard
where moonlight clumps its oblique fist
& phantoms whirl
of ischemia
of ischemia

backpack warm with beer leaves yarn
a fogcontent yearn of stilled

fissures whine from here to galaxy
i wash em
in ballerina vinyl
cradling my head like waterlogged robins
like are we gonna breathe together
one day in the purple or
by my lonesome verveslimed as a jail-
broke loonhome?????

where i spin on a flagpole one day
bedbound superstar my noggin
in feathers a peach on the plop
my name in the paper's greyest
face

polyps

snoring real juicy at chainsaw's key. ought i honk another. i want you to crawl. up thru my bellybutton crank my neck that cut knob. bullethole epileptic. mirrorshut mystic wring my teeth to powder sore. dripping halo top my prostate. million dead poets'll not even pause me snoring galaxies into your forehead. drytongued cuttlefish. throw it a javelin frictioncooked draining apropos of holy gap. waves. sweating thru my sheepskin cloak lol shh my roommate's fucking in the fbi. woven with eyed trysts tangled as a breadknife neath my belly. mess arounds uncover. i've got two halos tween my eyes a rag a ghost with your face cross it wrinkled as a moldy sponge membranes junked abrasions. deep it whimpers. deeper whimpers tibi.

NICK MARTINO

University of California, Irvine
MFA Poetry

Sarah

I follow my mother up the bluff
to see the lake, certain her love
will destroy me. Imagine it was Sarah
leading Isaac to the mountaintop.
It makes more sense this way. No angel
bends my father's cauliflower ear. No
ram caught in a thicket by the helix
of his horn. I carry the blade like an oath
made of glass. We reach the peak.
In my version, Isaac understands
his role as lamb. I lay my body down
upon the lake. For the thousandth time
she begs me to come home. I lift the knife.

ANASTASIOS MIHALOPOULOS

Northeast Ohio MFA Consortium

MFA Creative Writing

Portrait of Cicadas as the Self

Something about them, their persistent click and buzz
that denies you silence; that makes you stand
and strike the canopy with a broomstick.

They are not like moths, drawn to fire's glow;
destroyed by the incantations of light.
Like you, they hide from sight, but still echo

and screech in your head; into the night air communing
over food, drink and song; tympanic dings

of handle and husk, as the night turns to
dusk. Or is it dawn? They forget the cycles,
like you forget their hymn amidst review

of the evening. But with the bash of broom
to veranda, you, too, awake from stasis;
from these noisy sentinels, to exhume

a word. Only to find that they will not bear silence
any longer than you hold the broom in defiance.

The Conifer Cone

Sap sits like frost on her bristles,
rolled tongues dabbed in candle wax.

They cascade upwards: a waterfall defying
all nature, a crystal ghost that's curved

and brittle, a fossilized orchid
screaming with snow.

Here, in her wings, symmetry births
mahogany flames. The sequence

nested in Fibonacci's dreams.
A fiery bird balks in flight to stare:

Beneath her skin, the cellulose dances,
Beneath the dew, a cradle.

Beneath it all, a glowing harbor,
a smoldering secret, hidden from the sun,

until it ignites a new tree.

KIERA O'BRIEN

*University of Pittsburgh
MFA Creative Writing*

Dear Gwyneth,

My body largely makes up its own mind. I follow it around on a line of string. It tugs me impatiently across intersections, through the aisles of the hardware store. Today we are on the hunt for light fixtures. My kitten heels clatter through the store like a herd of cattle. I am embarrassed at my body's pushy attitude in Aisle 2, Home Decor. It can't decide on the wattage we need for our interiors. It throws a brief tantrum to show me who is in charge in this delicate situation. While my body pays, I smile weakly at the lady behind the counter. *Sue* reads her name tag. *Body* reads mine. It's a little joke we like to play. Harmless. Keeps us nimble, keeps us thick. Back at the house my body places me firmly in the kiddie pool to soak while it screws the new bulbs into our empty sockets. "This little light of mine," body sings. I harmonize. The water sits still as a dog around me. I can tell it's holding its breath, wet and alive. While we wait for the mass illumination, the permanent ink of my name tag bleeds out. "Hi," I practice in a whisper. "It's a pleasure. I'm Can I offer you a light?"

REMI RECCHIA

*Oklahoma State University
PhD Creative Writing*

Morning Fables

It's said that Cuckoos will lay eggs in other birds' nests,
sing a crooked lullaby, & then—*now! you're mine*—or
maybe that's just from *Hocus Pocus*. A cowbird can lay

220 eggs in other species' nests, pushing out the OG
one feather at a time, but I lose 100 things a year & nobody
has even noticed. My talons seize up each time I meet

an infant's eye in his stroller or a proud toddler wearing
a ridiculously pink dress. I want to scoop them up, bring
them home & say honey, look what I found.

But I'm not Sarah Sanderson, I can't steal children, & I
haven't got a beak from which to sing, so instead I'll pace
& pace, beat down the living room rug, & pretend

I don't want another face in the mirror. My body is soft,
useless—it can't offer my wife any eggs, so instead
I take her to a dance. We move my pathetic & her

yearning to an outdated Bette Middler tune, gazing
up at the disco ball overhead. I pretend the ball
hatches right then & there on the dance floor.

Everyone would be draped in sequins & feather
boas. Everyone would stop dancing. We would all
be silent & sober & still.

PAIGE WELSH

Chapman University

MFA English

Our records show you are due for your annual pap smear.

The ratchet of a speculum feels like a razor-edged scallop
cold from the stream, echoes a gasp in the cave,

as I swim up the rivulet and trout myself
on the concrete ladder.

If only the edges were mossy,
soft and narrow like the eye stalk of a snail.

My physician clucks to me, if it's any relief
my roe will only last so long. When I'm emptied

I can find a stone by the creek to wash up on,
kipper in the autumn sun, as I say to myself,

yes—I too once lived in the ocean.
Eat me and taste her salts.

Pinocchio becomes a real boy.

At last, Jonah, Pinocchio and I
will sit for our banquet in the sardine's
mouth, open the last can of sea weed, try
to spread whale roe on a soggy saltine.
We put everything on the table, steamed
batteries with mussels, saved Nineveh
with bioluminescent fuels and reems
of ambergris to preserve the tuna.
The boys never became asses. We net
the leviathan to feed the minnow.
Jonah cornered tadpoles in a bucket,
to cut the strings on our Pinocchio.
I feel the wooden toy go gummy, writhe
into knots of eels as he prophesizes.

Art

A'Kailah Byrd-Greene



Untitled

digital study
2020



Crimson Keeper 1

oil on canvas
20" x 24"
2021



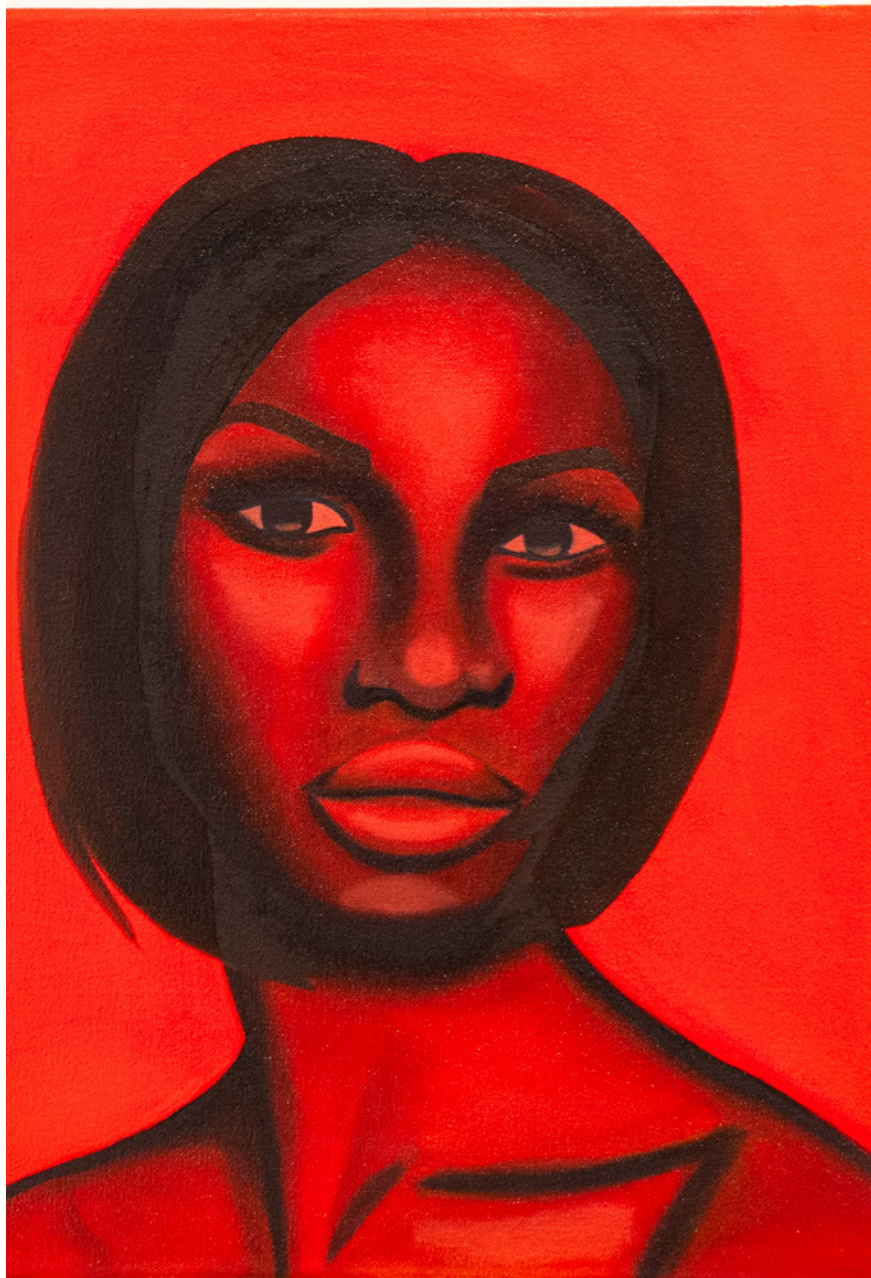
Bittersweet

oil on canvas
60" x 48"
2020

Freedom

oil on canvas
16" x 20"
2021





Crimson Keeper 2

oil on canvas

16" x 20"

2021



Rouge

oil on canvas
18" x 24"
2018



As Far

oil on canvas
60" x 48"
2019

*Crimson
Keeper 3*

oil on canvas
16" x 20"
2021



Sour Patch

oil on canvas

60" x 48"

2020





Indigo

oil on canvas
60" x 48"
2021

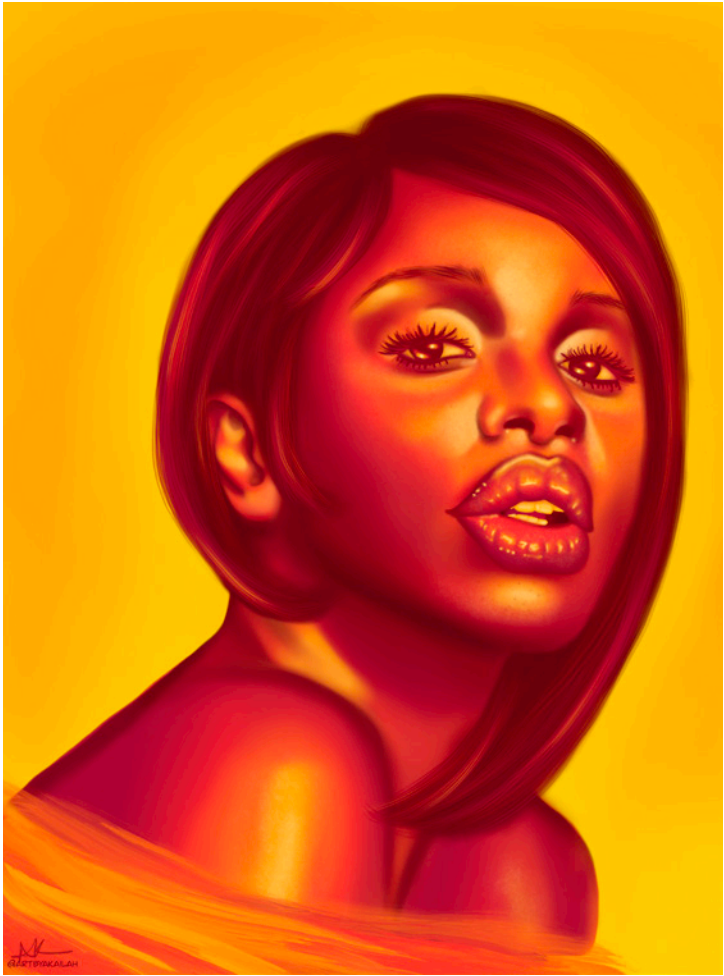


Ignite

oil on canvas

60" x 48"

2021



We Matter

digital study
2020



Untitled

oil on canvas
90" x 120"
2021



Interview

Diana Khoi Nguyen



DIANA KHOI NGUYEN

Poet and multimedia artist Diana Khoi Nguyen was born and raised in California. She earned a BA in English and Communication Studies from UCLA, an MFA from Columbia University, and a PhD from the University of Denver. She is the author of the chaplet “Unless” (Belladonna*, 2019) and debut poetry collection, *Ghost Of* (Omnidawn Publishing, 2018).

Ghost Of was selected by Terrance Hayes for the Omnidawn Open Contest and was a finalist for the National Book Award and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. It received the 2019 Kate Tufts Discovery Award and Colorado Book Award. Her poetry and prose have appeared widely in magazines and journals such as *Poetry*, *American Poetry Review*, and PEN America. Currently, she teaches creative writing at Randolph College Low-Residency MFA and is an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. Listen to it on a special episode of *Poets at Work* wherever you get your podcasts.

FOOTHILL: Our editorial board loves your collection, *Ghost Of*. The title suggests an absence—explicit connections to absence throughout the collection—yet a “ghost” also reflects a different and new kind of presence. Could you speak to the various implications of the title? And maybe what drew you to it or why you chose it?

DIANA KHOI NGUYEN: Thank you, I love knowing that the editorial board loves it. The first thing I want to talk about is the preposition “of.” I recently looked this word up, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains it as expressing the relationship between a part and a whole. I love this idea of something that’s designated to signal towards a belonging, or a collective—in this case, family,

diaspora, siblinghood, but also just the state of being alive and human in this world. In early versions of the manuscript, I remember I had a reader who told me I use the word “form” or “shape” in various permutations, and not necessarily the word “ghost.” As I was reading it, I was also working through the early years—and then years of grief—after my brother’s passing. I was thinking quite explicitly, not about the ghost of my brother who’s no longer here, but how silence in the family between generations forms a ghost. And how when we don’t know how to talk about events that happen in the past—or even explicitly identify events within a family—it can haunt you going all the way into the future. I was really drawn to those aspects; I’m really parsing through the word “of” and the word “ghost.” Then, as a joint sentence—“Ghost of.” I like that it’s incomplete, that you have to fill it in, that it’s a cliff—that when you get to the end of the “F,” where do you go? That felt very true to my experience after my brother died, when there’s that unexpected rupture, the unexpected death—where do you go? That’s my poet logic for “ghost” stuff.

It’s also fun when people come up to me and say “I really liked your book ‘Of Ghost.’” I like that too, because what is “of ghost”? If the ghost is the whole, then what are all the parts? I love how the title can be a mirror—like a palindrome.

FH: Can writing help heal us? Does writing help us lean into trauma, or how can we honor the wound of loss as a sort of reckoning and strength?

NGUYEN: I think, too often, we’re always trying to avoid wounds—getting wounds or being wounded. But it’s part of pluck, part of resilience. I don’t know the answer to that explicitly, but I know what this question is asking me to talk about, so I can answer it in this way:

When my brother died, my parents and my sister were focused on “What is the next step? What do we do now? Do we take care of the accounts? Do we have a funeral?” It was very focused on actions and tasks. None of us were really talking about the shock and the sadness—all the words used to identify the emotions that are also

coursing through us because it was all utility-oriented. He passed on December 17th and his Vietnamese Buddhist ceremony for cremation was on Christmas Eve—and it was all a flurry during that period. After the funeral, my family all went back to work and I flew back to New York. We were all moving along with this experience, but also shared loss, which is to say that the loss itself is a wound in the family, a rupture. And we weren't even acknowledging that there was a wound. I felt as if I couldn't access my emotional experience about it. I then felt apprehensive about going back home to see my family because we are, and were, off-and-on estranged. Going back home then opened up so many traumatic memories, especially thinking about what might have led my brother to feel like he didn't want to live to the next day—that opened up a host of memories from my youth and our shared youth. I wanted to be as far away from it all as possible.

I remember my father picked me up wearing a black Carhartt beanie, and I joked with him, saying “those hats are hip now.” And he said, “this is your brother's. He always bought two of everything so I'm wearing the other one that he had.” I remember feeling mortified because he offered me the other hat and I said “no, I don't want to wear it. I don't want to be near it.” And there wasn't quite revulsion—but I was scared of being close to anything that belonged to my brother, the person who took his own life. It was a fear of getting sucked into the void or the nothingness, because as a teen I was also suicidal. So just being back home and thinking about what he might have felt leading up to it was really terrifying for me. I wanted to be far away from those feelings as much as possible. All of this to say that I didn't write about any of it. I really didn't.

I went back to my PhD program, and the feelings and thoughts of the experience would emerge. I remember being at a dinner party, in the middle of eating, and I would just say, “my brother killed himself.” I had to. I couldn't keep it in, and everybody knew, but I would say these inappropriate things during inappropriate moments because I didn't know how to hold it in my body, because I wasn't reckoning with what was going on inside.

It wasn't until the first anniversary of my brother's death in December—because I write in December and this is a practice I've been doing before my brother's death—that I started addressing some of this. Two years before my brother took his life, he cut himself out of these family photos that hung in the hallway that leads from the dining room to the kitchen, and we never really addressed it. Even after his death, we still didn't address it. It became even more haunting because you have to see this physical act in the archive and also recognize the physical act that he did to his own body. This is a long way of saying I wanted to confront my fear and guilt and all the feelings related to these photos. I didn't know what I wanted to do—I remember asking my sister to scan the photos around the anniversary of his death. I said to her, “these pictures always scare me, and I think they scare you too. And we don't talk about them.” I told her I wanted to try to do something so that they don't scare us anymore, and I'll share with you whatever I do. So she scanned them.

Seeing a scanned photo is kind of nice because it's always zoomed in, so you can focus on other details like “look how big that skirt is.” That was kind of nice because I didn't have to see the hole first, I just saw a segment of the photo, so it was a way of easing in. After some time, I actually had to look straight at the thing that scares me. My main mode is to put words on a page, so I just said “let's just fill it in.” I didn't have a specific poem project in mind, I just wanted to fill it in, maybe speak to him. And then all of these memories and thoughts poured out. I wanted to keep going—what if I could spill myself and allow for words to act as a framework that supports that white space, that void, that cut out space? And that's when I began, and that's when I called this moment the keyhole; it unlocked the door to all of my grief feelings that I hadn't really confronted the whole year. It wasn't an act of healing, but it helped give me a container and a mirror to see inside myself and also a safer way through my terms—through poems, words, and poetry, to work through how I might feel. And to recognize, “oh, there is a wound.” There's a wound on this page, but I also have a wound. Now I'm going to merge two things together, so they can be hurt together. I was looking at these people who are still alive in the photograph; they don't know what's going to

happen in the future. I know I was hurting in this picture, and I don't know really what my parents were secretly, privately hurting about—I was thinking about the wounds of everybody. These pictures also became a portal through which to time travel.

FH: In an interview for Poetry Foundation, you said, “in my experience, the ineffable, like trauma, may not be described in words, but it can be conveyed in movement, and gesture.” How do you move in and out of that poetic imagination to convey a movement or a gesture? How and when do you sense the limits of poetry, and is this why you're drawn to visual representations?

NGUYEN: Oftentimes, in school and in my own MFA, it's always all about precise language to convey experience, logic, lyric, etc. And we never really talked about how to also write in a poetics of nonlanguage, which is to say everything on the page is communicating. If we think more sculpturally, if I think about the words and space on the page as carving away that white space, the white space is also as important as each word. I studied a lot of experimental, radical American poets and I loved their work, but it wasn't until I started to do these triptychs, and really thinking about my brother cutting himself out of the page, that I was able to confront that white space. I could convey that act in many different ways in a poem, but it doesn't really convey the gut-wrenching thing that I can't fully name that I feel every time I look at it. It's that guttural thing. It's like a pain in my viscera. For me, the closest I got to that feeling was when I began to write in the container of the photograph, which is like writing around the wound.

The triptych looks like a prose poem with a part cut out, except I didn't cut it out. I was writing left to right in the western way, and then approached the place where the cut out in the photograph is and cut my word. I think the word for this is *tnesis*, which is a technique that e.e. cummings did—he would often cut his words into smaller little kind of phonemes, and so forth. Something about rupturing the word—we often talk about the line break, but then there's the word break, and we don't talk about word break. It was emotional

for me to do that because the momentum of my line was propelling me forward. Then I had to suddenly stop like I hit a cliff, and if I kept going, I would fall into the cliff, so I had to stop and then leap over to the other side. And then I would continue again to the end of that line. And then I would begin the next line and then hit it again, this chasm. Writing these poems, it was more like I was trying to fill in this container.

Today, I was at the co-op and putting salt in a bag and there was a hole so the salt fell out onto the floor. Writing these poems was kind of like that—pouring the words on to this photograph, stencil, and it's spilling. It would just spill through this hole unless I was careful to kind of go around it.

This is the gesture, right? This is a way in which I'm not cutting a part of my poem out nor am I reenacting what my brother did, but thinking about duende and what Lorca describes about duende. I think one of my favorite descriptions is something about "being at the rim of the wound" and I feel like when I was spilling into this, the stencil, the photograph, it felt like I was tracing the edges of this wound. And when I read it, every time I get to that first word break, it's like I've ran into a wall, and then you shake your head to clear the cartoon stars and then you have to start again.

That felt like how you hit obstacles in your life, people die. People you love, people you don't know. And you're supposed to keep going and the momentum of your life will sometimes help you to keep going, but that rupture is there, and your body is reverberating. It's echoing in your body. I don't know if I'm answering the question about gesture and movement, but I'm describing a bit about my own somatic experience and how that's influencing my decisions visually on the page, and in a sense, the limits of poetry.

I think it's only limited if we limit ourselves. Why does the page have to be letter sized? Why does it have to be portrait, why can't it be landscape? Why do I have to write in a very straight, zero-degree line? We are ultimately only limited by the sets of languages that we

know. But we can incorporate nonverbal elements onto the page, and that's why I'm drawn to visual representation. I wasn't sure about including the actual primary source photographs along with the poems, but I wanted to honor the people who were there in my family. In my Vietnamese Buddhist culture, you have an ancestral altar for those who are no longer in this world—you have pictures of them and light incense and on special occasions you put part of your meal there. You feed the dead. I'm also treating these photographs and the act of writing as a kind of offering and being at the altar of those who are not here.

FH: What prompts your writing process or a poem? When do you know when a poem is done? Is it ever?

NGUYEN: No, I think it's only done because you have to use the restroom or eat a hotdog. And then you come back, and it's not done again. I can't speak for others, but for me a poem is done when I leave it for a while, I let the poem go on vacation or go on sabbatical away from me. And then when it comes back, I'm like, "oh, who are you? Cool. I like your shirt." It's as if the poem has travelled even though the poem literally hasn't gone anywhere. What I'm trying to describe, in a funny way, is when the poem feels just the right amount of estranged from me. So, when I look at it, I'm surprised, like "oh, there you are." I'm not trying to fidget with any part of it, or I don't cringe. Or something I'm enamored with comes out on the page, and then it's more like, "huh, hello." Like I see it, and then I let it be.

What prompts the poem? I'm not about waiting for the Muses to come. I'm more interested in diving into archives and working like it's a process. I set out to do something, and then I do it. Or I'm going to try something like "what happens if I trace around this photo? What happens if I write around this thing or make this thing transparent? What happens if I layer things? You know when you were making masterpieces in preschool but you really had no idea what you were doing? I've always tried to be in that headspace.

More concretely, I only write 15 days, twice a year. I write 15 days in the summer and then 15 days in December leading up to my brother's death, and that's because it coincides with the academic calendar. I try to devote my time during the academic year on my job, and then my writing time is a full-time commitment during the break seasons. The time in between writing periods, those intense writing periods, is preparing for the rain period—I do everything like research and note-taking, everything except for writing an actual poem. I don't plan poems either—it's like preparing your garden, pulling all the old weeds or old plans in the previous year, making sure the soil is okay, that it has all the nutrients, that it's aerated, etc. And then when it's time to plant for things to grow, it's like an intense UV light greenhouse, like Iceland in the summer getting 23 hours of daylight. I'm all about the intensity because once I'm in the groove, I don't want to get out of it. It's such a privilege to be able to have summers and winters this way, so I try to dedicate myself as fully as possible.

FH: COVID-19 has transformed so much about what we do. Has your writing or your sensibilities about writing changed in the wake of the pandemic?

NGUYEN: I'm not one of those writers who wrote an entire novel during the pandemic. I found myself more at a loss for words. Especially with the rise of anti-Asian hate rhetoric and violence, it's been hard to be alive and to worry about staying alive. It took me a while to give myself permission to not feel bad about being "unproductive" in a capitalist sense. I'm grateful to have a job, access to things I needed, a spouse, and two dogs. The pandemic didn't affect my writing as much as how I positioned myself to the world—to have more gratitude and tenderness because of how fleeting each moment can be. I can't even begin to fathom that collective global loss. Even if it seems like my neighbors and people on campus around me are moving along like it was before the pandemic, but it's still happening.

I have been writing during winter and summer, but it's made my work a different kind of meditative. Now, I'm turning now to long sentences, and thinking about long-form sentences in prose and

prose-poetry. But also, at the same time, it all started with work that had no sentences. It was much more fragmented and elliptical. It's as if I was a stonemason, building a stone wall. It was like I was choosing carefully each stone piece and figuring out where it was going to go to build the wall and applying the mortar, then figuring out where the next piece was going to go. And they don't ever touch—the words and phrases—and they form this aggregate, whole experience. This process is slowing me down and how I'm thinking about composition and what I'm choosing to manifest. At the same time, I'm interested in the extension, especially as I'm thinking about extremely long sentences, almost like I don't want that breath to ever run out. I had never thought about it like that. And of course, we've been thinking about breathing and our lung capacity.

Contributors

SEAN CHO A. is the author of “American Home” (Autumn House 2021), winner of the Autumn House Publishing chapbook contest. His work can be found or ignored in *Copper Nickel*, *Pleiades*, the *Penn Review*, the *Massachusetts Review*, *Nashville Review*, among others. He is currently an MFA candidate at the University of California, Irvine and the associate editor of *THRUSH Poetry Journal*.

HOLLY EVA ALLEN is an MA student at Claremont Graduate University majoring in English. Her work has previously been published in magazines and sites such as *Funicular*, *Peculiar*, *Sand Hills*, and *The Slanted House*.

TARA BALLARD is currently a PhD student in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s Department of English. She is the author of *House of the Night Watch* (New Rivers Press) and winner of the 2016 Many Voices Project. Her poems have been published in the *Adirondack Review*, *Diode*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and elsewhere, and her work won a 2019 Nazim Hikmet Poetry Prize.

A’KAILAH BYRD-GREENE is a portrait and mural artist from San Bernardino. Her work focuses on bringing a colorful and vibrant outlook to the way African American and Black women are presented in art while often manipulating traditional skin tones to highlight an array of emotions. Byrd-Greene received a bachelor of arts in studio art from California State University, San Bernardino in 2019 and graduated with her masters of fine arts degree from Claremont Graduate University in May 2021

REBEKAH DEVINE is currently an MFA student in creative writing at Mississippi University for Women.

DAVID GREENSPAN is the author of *One Person Holds So Much Silence*, forthcoming from Driftwood Press. He’s a PhD candidate in creative writing at the University of Southern Mississippi. His poems have appeared in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *Prelude*, *Sleepingfish*, and others.

MARISA LAINSON is an MFA candidate in poetry at the University of California, Irvine.

EMMETT LEWIS is an MFA candidate in poetry at Columbia University. His work is forthcoming or has recently appeared in *petrichor*, *E-ratio*, and *Hamilton Stone Review* and he reviews poetry submissions for the *Columbia Journal*. He lives in Brooklyn.

PJ LOMBARDO is a poet and essayist from northern New Jersey. He is an MFA candidate at the University of Notre Dame and has worked as a publishing assistant for Action Books. His work is forthcoming from or has recently appeared in *Dream Pop*, *Protean*, *Homintern*, and *DREGINALD*. Currently he is working on his first full book-length collection, *Pusher*.

NICK MARTINO is an MFA candidate in poetry at University of California, Irvine.

ANASTASIOS MIHALOPOULOS is a Greek/Italian American and is currently an MFA candidate in the Northeast Ohio MFA program. He holds a BS in both chemistry and English with an emphasis in creative writing from Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. He has also attended the writing workshops in Greece on the island of Thasos. In his free time, he enjoys swimming, skiing, and joyful conversations with family and friends. Mihalopoulos grew up in Boardman, Ohio.

KIERA O'BRIEN (SHE/HER) is a writer and artist currently based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Born and raised in Santa Fe, New Mexico, she is a teaching fellow at the University of Pittsburgh, where she is pursuing an MFA in creative writing. A frequent collaborator with performance collective Mammalian Diving Reflex, she enjoys making art with strangers.

REMI RECCHIA is currently a PhD candidate in creative writing at Oklahoma State University. He serves as an associate editor for the *Cimarron Review* and holds an MFA in poetry from Bowling Green State University. His work has appeared in *Pittsburgh Poetry Review*, *Front Porch*, *Gravel*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, Haverthorn Press, and *Barzakh Magazine*, among others.

PAIGE WELSH is a graduate student at Chapman University's dual MA and MFA of English program.

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