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© Tab: The Journal of Poetry & Poetics. Volume 9. Issue 5. September 2021.

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ISSN: 2169-3013

www.facebook.com/groups/TabulaPoetica





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#### **Design Statement**

The annual, distinctive print issue of *Tab*: *The Journal of Poetry & Poetics* engages the reader with poetry as a material object and asks that the reader negotiate between image and text. The design does not assume a traditional role of quietly framing content; instead, design actively shapes the reading experience and continues to experiment and explore the intersections between form and content, object and space, and reader and reading.

Beginning last year, the 2020 print issue was the first issue that was driven by inclusive design and low-vision principles. We commit to producing an engaging and increasingly equitable experience for all abilities. We developed a new website for online issues that also makes available accessible issue archives, including audio recordings of poems. Visit our website at <u>TabJournal.org</u>.

The 2021 print issue was created during a time of quarantine as the world underwent the isolation and anxieties of the Covid-19 pandemic. During this time, we reflected on concepts of time—as a sense of place, as space, as structure, as visual experience of light and dark. Time has an impact on psychology; we can lose time or lose track of time. Time has a history of visual representation and documentation as well. This year's print issue explores visual expressions of time warping, time traveling, and the chronology and the kaleidescope of time keeping. The images and texts engage in ideas of process over time, such as healing or growth.

While the design for online issues draws from the year's print issue, the issues that follow in March, May, July, September, and November are designed

and formatted for the on-screen reading experience. Decisions about page size, typography, and composition are driven by the online reading experience, rather than to mimic a print version.

To request one or more copies of the print issue, please use the Contact form on the website.



## Imagine (NYC)

```
A day awake longer
                  than the wounds of this island body
Afraid someone will hurt
                         the moist dark of its soul
& cracks
  worn out
          by rhythms
                  of speech & change —
City cracked open
              to the smell of lilacs
City loud
       & anxious in a dream
City ready
         to snatch a bitch's edges if she thinks she's more fly.
This city be an old church sometimes—red doored & iron gated.
Keep the rich out & the needy in.
A firecracker blowing hot
Through concrete.
                  A single sigh of relief come spring.
```

Badass.

Curmudgeon of a thing.

Dowager unfazed.

Enchanted, egomaniacal, egregious elephant of an island—

Endowed with just a smidgen extra for the dreamers.

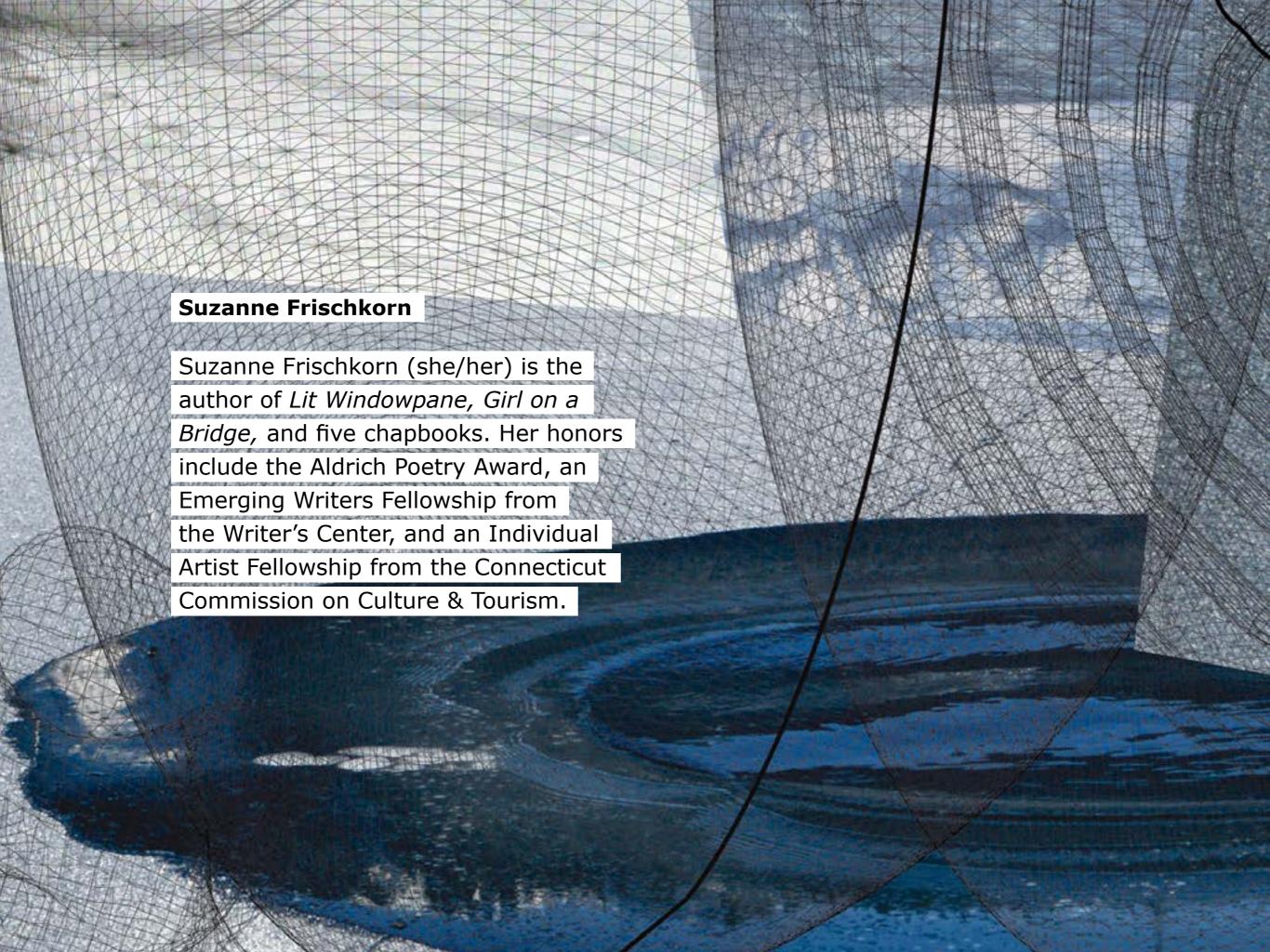


### **Grown Old**

You return, weary as mildew to a door that sags a final hinge, a moonlit slug-trail through a window's puzzled shard. Every angle webbed with cocoons.

How long since morning and your clockless waking? And where have you been? No hat, not even a sweater to soothe your shivered husk.

This is where it ends: your last measure of repose on a leaf-littered bed, starlight for a roof.



### **Home Ground**

This bird call would be mistaken for a fading bottle rocket. & the peepers will sing their Greek chorus.

There is a lot to be said

for the preserve— it has more than a little of a lot of good things.

Water of course ripples.

This is how in geography the low takes the high.

Do you remember the morning after the ice storm?

How the wind through the branches sounded like the parting of bead curtains?

June now, and all over America helicopter blades cut through bird song.

## **Tahlequah**

She carries her grief; she nudges it to the surface for weeks, and when the grief weighs her down,

her sister whales carry her grief for her. Women carry grief too, in their pockets.

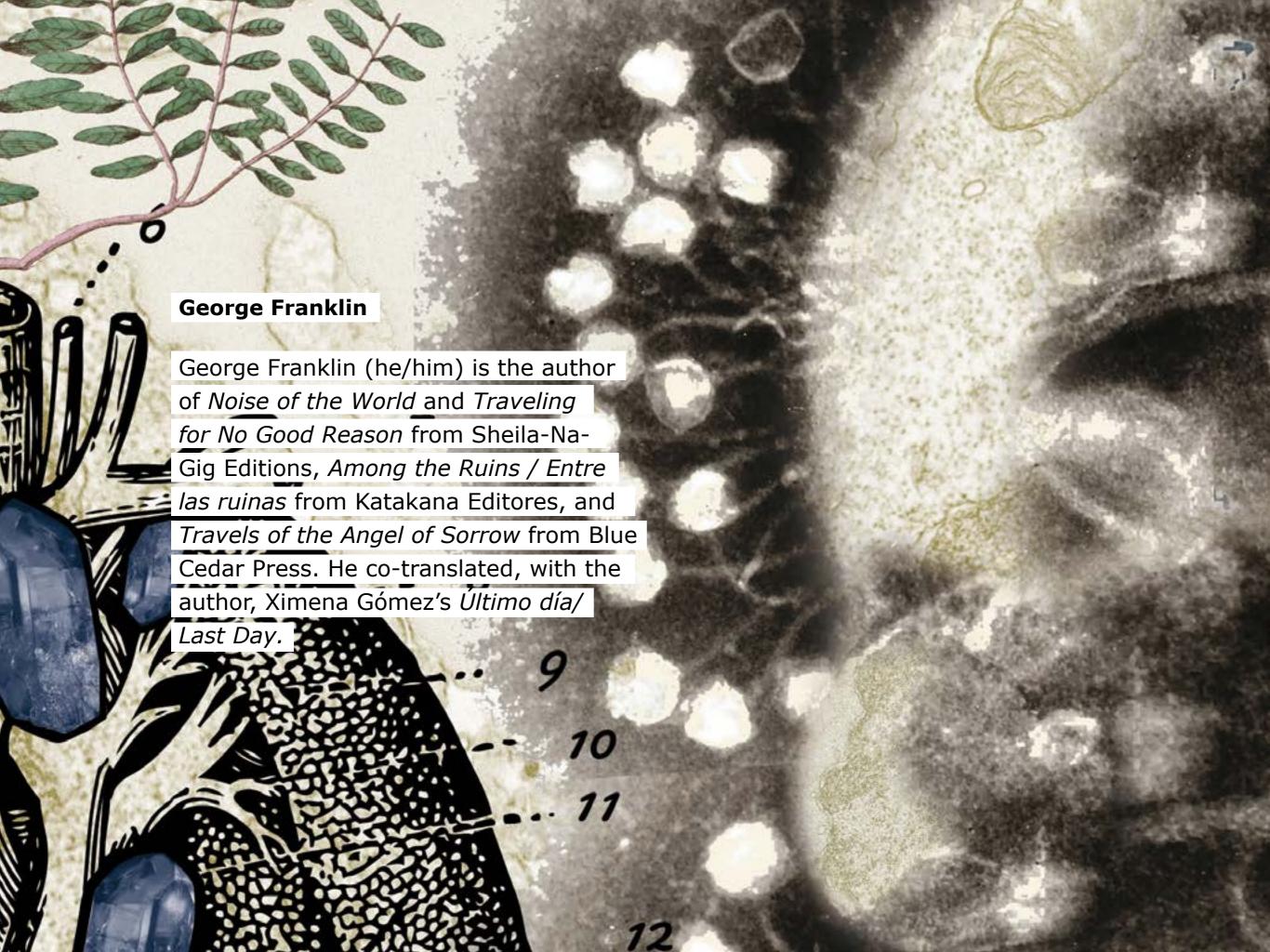
Their grief is like sea glass, or stones, or loose change.

Morning; and fox, or deer, or coyote cuts through our lawn—they still, and turn to look at me while I smoke on the porch.

Tahlequah doesn't know that I see her, that I carry her grief in my pocket.

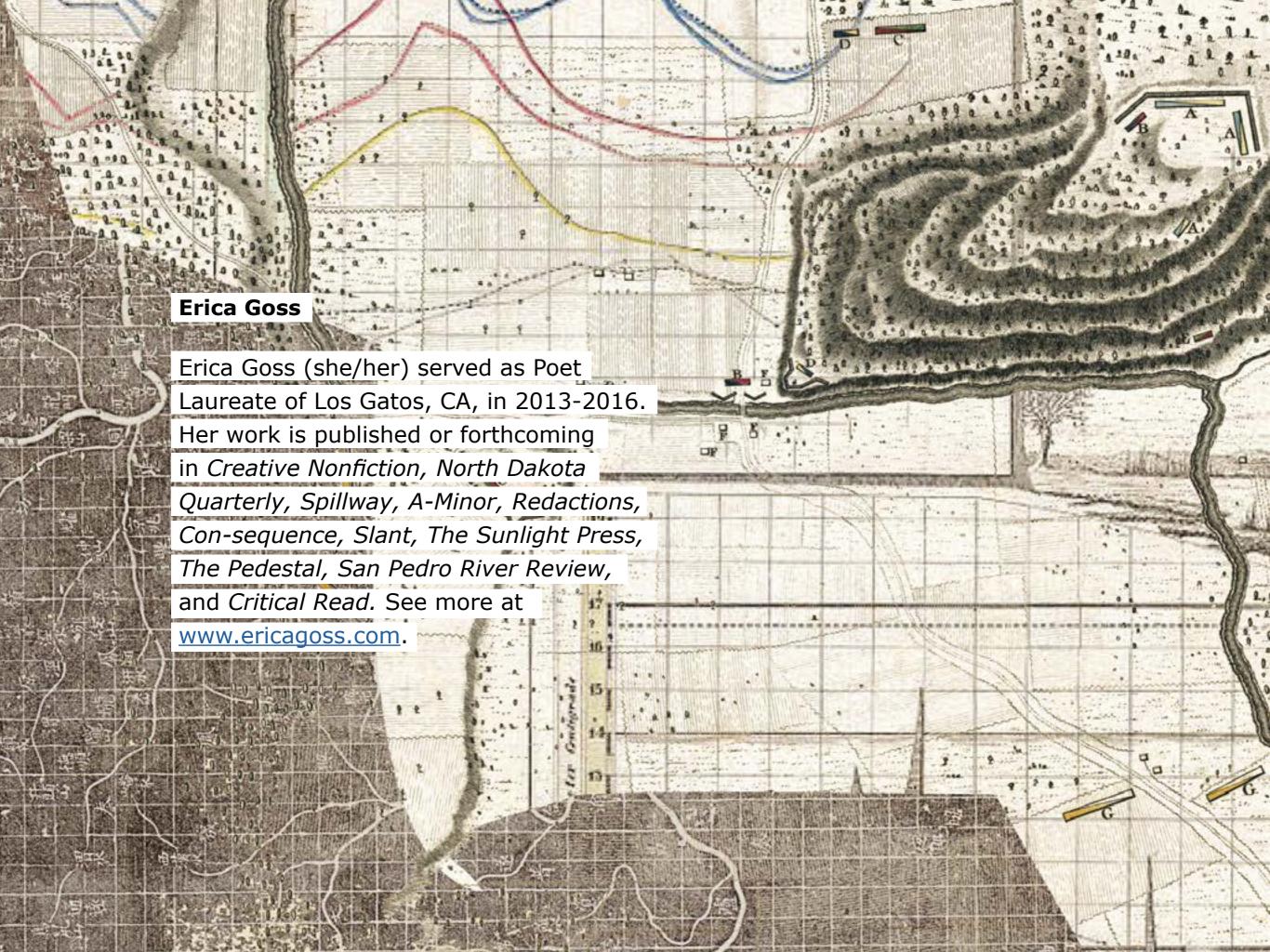
Tahlequah, I carry it.

I carry it. I carry it. I carry it.



#### **Crows**

It's not dawn yet, but a few birds are Already awake—no stars, just clouds Drifting east across a darker sky. I didn't plan to get up early. The words, lo siento, repeated In my sleep. Was I the one speaking? Siento mucho tu pérdida. The sky has opened just enough for The trees to turn black, and the birds Become more persistent. There are so Many losses these days. I could have Been dreaming about any of them. Siento mucho tu pérdida. In a few minutes, the sky lightens. I think I can make out crows flying Above the high fronds of a palm tree, Wing-shapes outlined by fading clouds, but At this dim hour, all birds are crows.



### What to Do With an Empty Nest

Find on sidewalk / carry cupped in left hand / careful watch ants swarm out and crawl up arm resist impulse to scream

Search trees for signs / listen through leaves which branch did it fall from why does this feel dangerous

Wonder about its maker: hummingbird / chickadee / goldfinch leave on kitchen counter for one year lose in morass of shopping lists / mail / chalk / bananas

Find under red stone / breathe out relief / twirl on wet finger bring close to eye / stare at sky through lace of blue yarn bits / spider silk / moss

Imagine it bursting with tiny open mouths amber-edged / bottomless / waiting for a fat caterpillar derricked from parent's beak

Stroke its raveling edges / architecture of wind & flight read love, read terror / hearts beating a secret message meant only for me

Inhale faint aroma of pine / sidewalk / breast of mother bird clean-scented hollow / birth chamber's circumference not meant for winter

Conduct a funeral for it / invite butterfly and bee place on soil where snow fell last year little cloud / already the ants run back

### **Smoke**

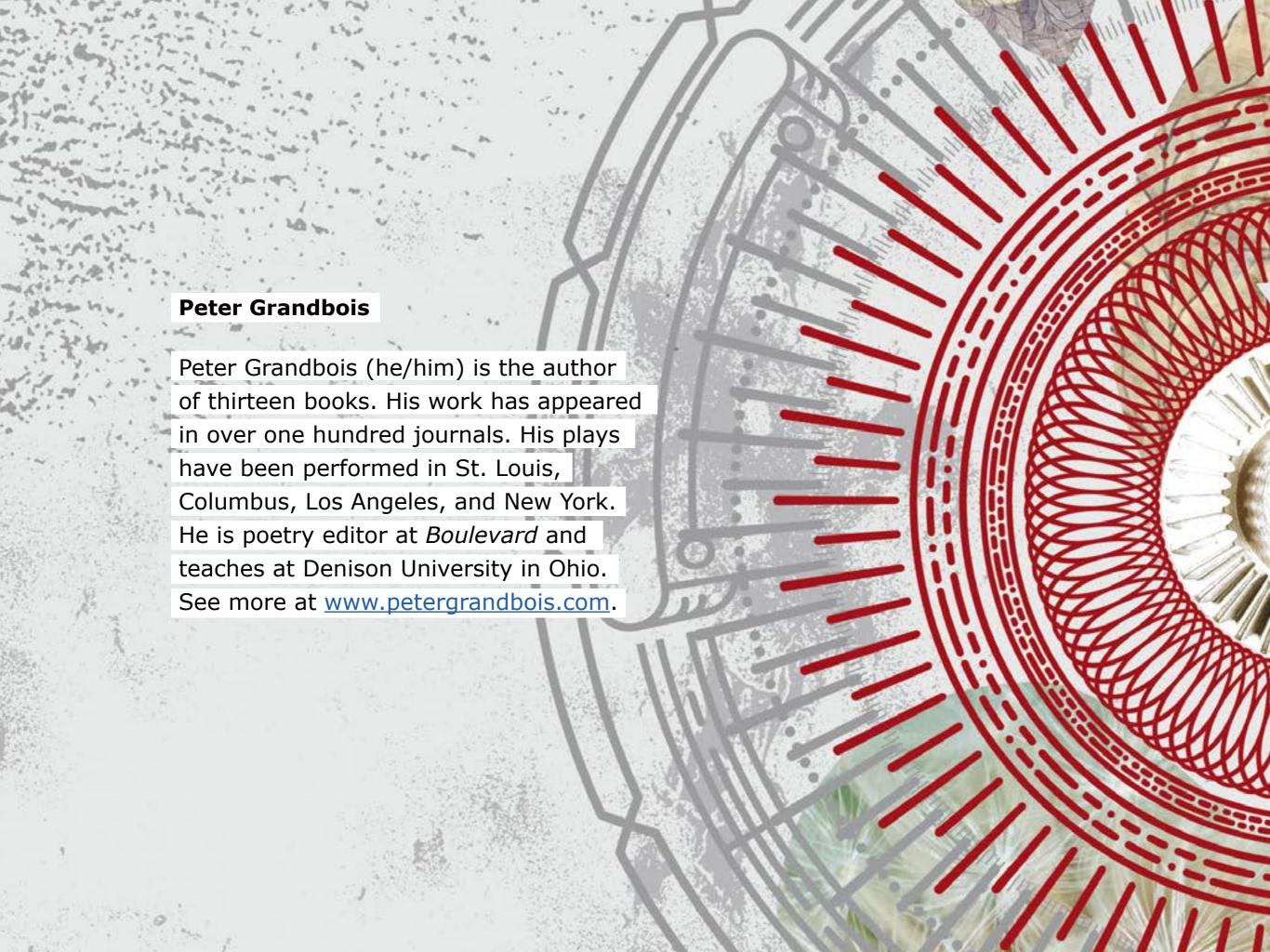
Everything that burns leads a double life. Churches, houses, schools,

are nothing more than smoke, reorganized. In every wall a

pile of ash awaits, weightless with its own impermanence. When

towns and forests float into the deepest parts of heart & lung,

what can we count on? Which version is the truth? The solid shapes of man-made things or fragments drifting in on the burning wind?



#### We are not sentinels here

I wish I could show you my hands— Small, flushed, wrapped in orchards of whispers and dreaming of the proliferation of touch. My feet, too, clothed in fluttering fragments of finches, pushing the earth away as if bounding across the surface of a lonely moon. Because I know these silences are the only real language, this opening is going to hurt, the climbing and descending, one into another, the search for something to keep warm between worlds. From the next room, the sound

of a mouse scratching in the dark as if

all who are hungry may come and eat,

and holiness can only keep us

inside so long, and, damn it, my distant hands

don't remember much anymore.



#### **Ars Poetica**

Whereas the longing for meaning is basic – almost primordial – to the feeling of well-being, the widening gyres of mendacity dower a writer her field of wordseeds, ancient and regenerative.

Levertov, so reticent to heed Duncan's counsel "not to oppose evil, but to imagine it," chose the actual over the cosmic, detail and reckoning during the Vietnam War leading to insight. One writes

"error"

"to get it through one's thick white middleclass skin what is really going on." A proactive thing to do when evil "covert" 1

bellows *monster* of a female fact-delver of color is to write.

"leading"

Think of channeling words to counter hate with truth as song, creating in the space of the poem commerce<sup>2</sup>—I mean, why not?—between myth and fact. "Poetry," Rich said, "has the capacity

"to"

to remind us of something we are forbidden to say."<sup>3</sup> Our white silence condones the evils of racism, misogyny, patriarchy's violent grip on power. I think it was Wm Carlos Williams who said, "Imagination

"unimpeded"

depends upon the ability to take itself literally." I imagine evil, & write to care, the word italicized because an error, accidental discovery of a felt-thought, erring into the actuality of caring, writing to risk revelation.

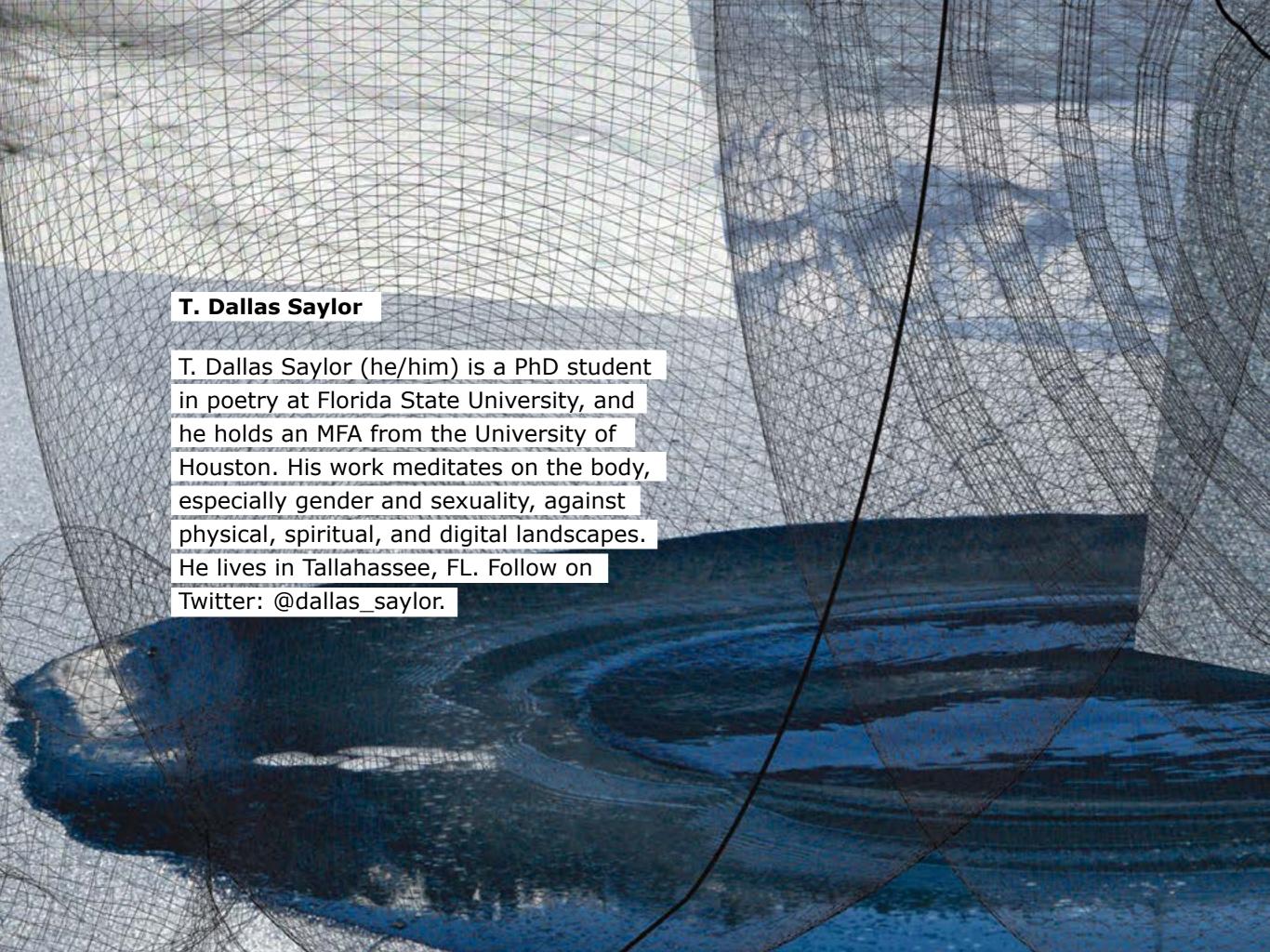
"risk"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Words in the margin are a quotation from Kathleen Fraser, discussing "accidents" and "errors" as principles of invention in her poetics. The technique itself—words in the margin as parallel text—is one of her innovations as well.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Duncan spoke of the meeting of words in a poem as a longed-for communion. "Commerce" is from Whitman's lexicon.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Adrienne Rich, from a defense of poetry published in *The Guardian*, 18 November, 2006. Slightly misquoted.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> I intended to write something else, and was in the act of writing another word, but the unconscious disrupted my conscious train of thought with emotion. Derailed by happenstance into an embarrassment of feeling.



#### A Kind of Viaticum

Mom Mom you break artichokes with pink acrylic nails at the antique table where I join to fetch ingredients & you'll use me you're too weak too short of breath to hunt it all down so again I'll serve the chair bowing hunched beneath your weight you shine in diamonds rhinestoned blouse washed and styled hair as we work you watch TV through a mirror angled toward the living room armoire the rap of Judge Judy's hammer on the guilty hide of artichokes

the body green & brown & open
to heat & hard justice
on a wooden chair pinned to the tile
like a covenant
on fire among your fallen
leaves & if I find them growing
how do I harvest the bunch without
killing us Mom Mom I can still smell
your genius in ground spice
that cracks like an old book spine
spilling its words into the oiled pan
or the boiling pot as you ask me for
the jar that smells like letting go of life or
that tastes like forgiveness

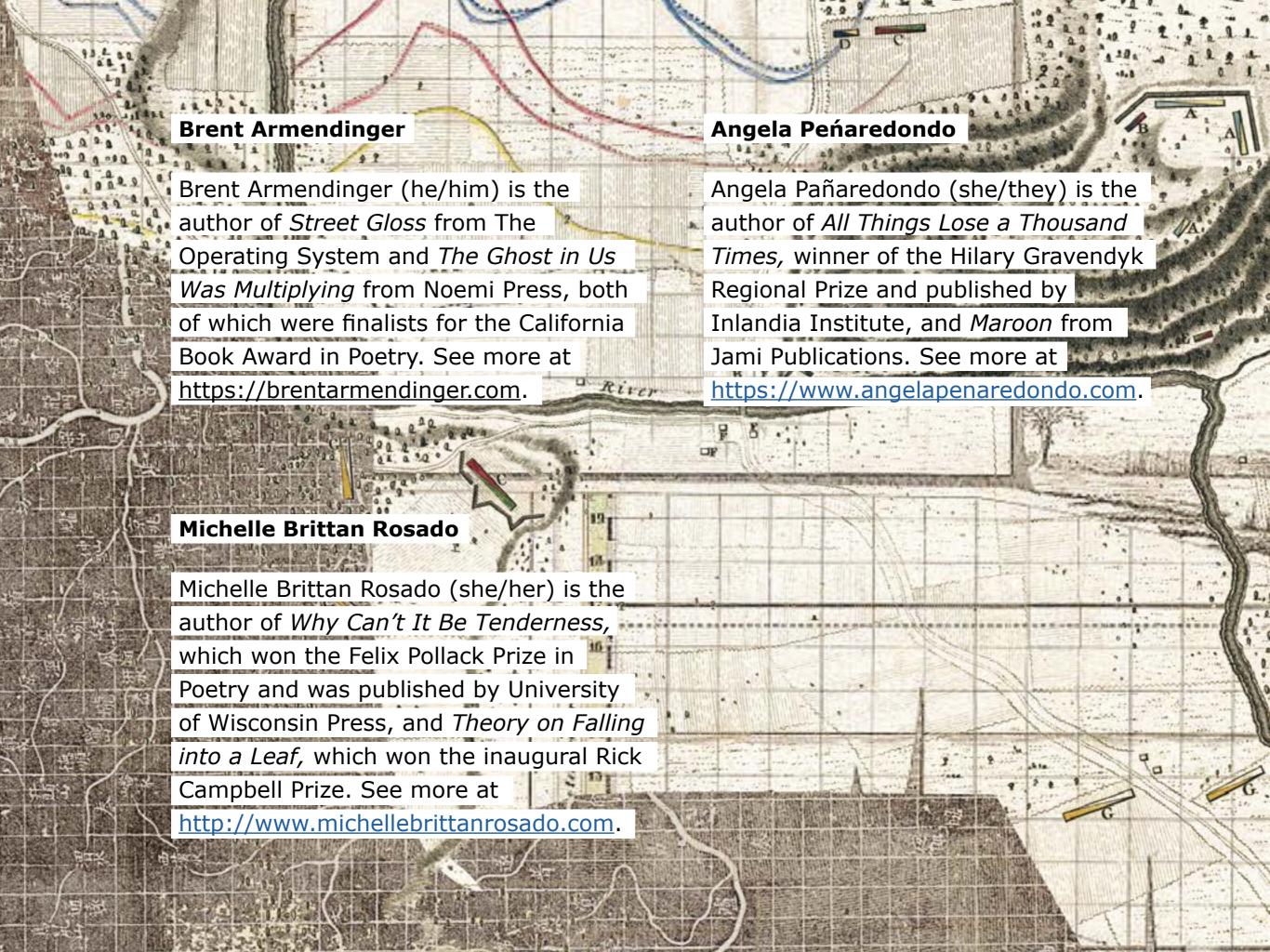
we breadcrumb stuff their plump flesh in a glass pan then give them over to the waiting 400 degrees for half an hour that I keep alone in my dark room after calculus still I hide leaving you alone at the table to face as you haul your hull the beeping timer over a hill of jolting joints grasping whatever gravity hasn't horsed away from your gulping lungs you are brave for their tender bodies we will sit and eat their tender bodies tossing toothed husks to a shared plate between us which we'll try to overlook as we eat

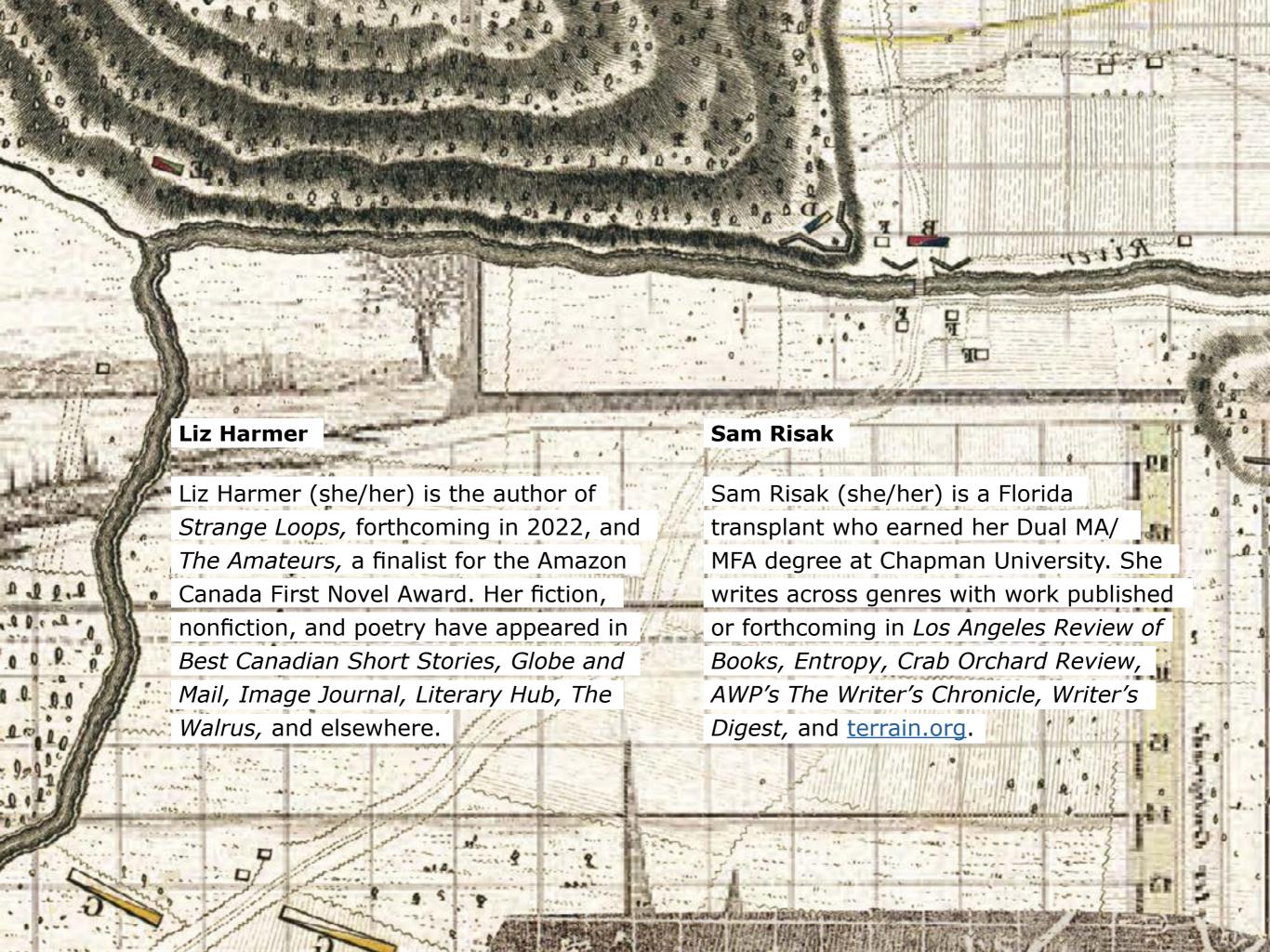


#### **Untitleable**

I seek a thin
Unbroken, threaded-needle strain
To bind my straying sputterings
Each to the other by the toes,
Like the man on the Monday train
Who, by chattering of good things
Kneads and unifies mortal foes.

For the moment I think of it,
My poems begin to perish
In the constricting of my throat,
Leaving only a crumb, a bit
Of language, that not quite English,
Quite anything, for it to gloat
Over and in.





## In Conversation: Brent Armendinger, Angela Peńaredondo, and Michelle Brittan Rosado with Liz Harmer and Sam Risak

In 2020, the Tabula Poetica Reading series featured visiting poets Brent Armendinger, Angela Peńaredondo, and Michelle Brittan Rosado. The series hosts a poetry talk and a poetry reading by each poet. We found these poets so compelling that we extended the conversation here for *Tab Journal*. As we developed this interview, we became especially interested in the relationships between large cultural forces and individual lives of artists.

**Liz Harmer & Sam Risak:** During your visits last year, we were intrigued with the ways each of you engaged with borders and boundaries in distinct ways. Whether in relation to the body, identity, or geography, many of your poems depict some sort of boundary being crossed. Is this a theme that inspires your initial conception of your work, or one that reveals itself through your writing process?

**Michelle Brittan Rosado:** This is an interesting question to me because the idea of crossing a boundary sounds so active. I'm more invested in the aftermath of the crossing of boundaries, of integrating on the other side of what it means to be carved up into races and nationalities. As a child of an immigrant, for instance, crossing the boundary from one country to another is never only the crossing; it's a return of the journey that took place before I was born. And as someone who is mixed-race, it's a state of being rather than doing.

**Angela Peñaredondo:** Yes, these themes inherently and organically enter my work. Identity, body, and geography are subjects that are inescapable entities that influence, inspire and at times, uninvitedly cross the threshold into my creative process. Sure, I believe art is so intertwined with personal life. As someone who is a queer/Filipinx person, the act of boundary crossing as well as boundary rebuilding is necessary for survival. Sustenance for the imaginary.

**Brent Armendinger:** A number of my poems are grounded in queerness and in the sense of the body as perforated, connected to others through sex and politics. At the level of language, a fair amount of my work pushes against the conventions of syntax, making use of fragmentation and collage. Boundary crossing isn't necessarily a theme I initially begin with, but I do feel it's important that there's some kind of risk, something that heightens my attention and makes me more receptive to what surrounds me and what I don't know. For this reason, I've been incorporating more ritual and somatic procedures into my work. What this risk accomplishes, or where it's heading, makes itself known more gradually throughout the process.

**Harmer & Risak:** What do you mean by this, Brent? How does that play out in the writing process?

Armendinger: On an intuitive level I think I'm interested in pushing against what

we conventionally think of as boundaries; for instance, the notion of the body as somehow separate from language. In Street Gloss, I was thinking about language as being connected to the bodies of people who inhabit a particular place (in this case, the city of Buenos Aires). To complete my translations of poems by contemporary Argentinian writers, I created an intricate set of procedures that required that I follow the words I didn't know into the streets of the city and ask strangers what those words meant to them. Later, I formed my notes from these encounters into prose poem "definitions" that accompany my translations of the original poems. In this case, language quite literally was moving my body (some of the poems required me to walk for several hours throughout the city). Language is always moving the body, of course, through breath, the vibration of the vocal cords, the book held in the hands, etc. In this case, I suppose I wanted to exaggerate that, partially because I felt it was important to really live with these poems (and with the city) in the process of translating them, not to just engage with them at a comfortable remove. I was also trying to push against the limits of translation, pointing quite intentionally at the failures in language, and making space for what might open up from that.

**Harmer & Risak:** In thinking about what might open up in poetry in a wider sense, what are some current shifts and evolutions happening in poetry? What are you excited about on the poetic horizon?

Peñaredondo: For me, the most obvious shift is the visibility of poets of color and

queer poets of color. This is not to say that these communities have not existed for ages, both regionally and globally. I'd like to believe that poetry is circling back into the greater public sphere. I've always been curious about (and at times, have practiced) different artistic forms and mediums because so much of it informs my work, informs my hunger, and my many identities. I'm a poet, a writer, but I'm also many things and there are moments that I'm not following the current trends of poetry but instead immersed, distracted, or caught up in other things. Passion can be cyclical and oceanic. When it comes to poetry or something like Creative Writing Studies, I'm invested in the ways educators are radically revising their curricula to center feminists of color, Ethnic Studies, interdisciplinary, justice-centered pedagogies in their classrooms.

**Armendinger:** I feel that poetry is always in a state of evolution. On a very practical level, it's now possible for people from multiple cities and countries to attend the same poetry reading given the use of Zoom during the pandemic. Whereas I find many other things on Zoom somewhat disappointing or exhausting, the poetry readings I've attended have been magical. While I miss actually being in a room with poets, these Zoom readings seem to be creating more inclusive spaces, breaking down some of the impulses towards gatekeeping in the literary world. There's also some very necessary reckoning with the material conditions of poets, as last summer saw many call on the *Poetry Foundation*, an organization with very deep pockets, to do more for poets who are struggling during the pandemic, and in the fall many spoke out in solidarity with staff who were laid off from Poets'

House. While poetry and politics have always been connected (whether people have recognized it or not), there seems to be a growing emphasis on the relationship between poetry and social movements, especially in the light of last summer's Black Lives Matter uprisings, and a call for publishers and literary organizations to be more accountable to anti-racist work.

**Harmer & Risak:** How has the pandemic changed your writing life?

**Rosado:** My poetry life has been on a twisting path for several years now as a parent to a young child, so I hadn't even established a baseline for my creative life when the pandemic happened. For over a decade, I handwrote all my drafts, but as a parent I lost much of that uninterrupted time to caregiving and graduate school and teaching. I began sporadically composing on my phone, sometimes through dictation during rush hour traffic coming to or from work, and usually only carved time for revision with the pressure of a deadline. Now, working from home and without a commute, I steal a minute here or there with my phone screen to type out a line in the hallway or on the porch after an evening walk. It's a much slower accretion of quieter observations.

**Armendinger:** It's honestly been harder to write this last year because of the groundlessness and upheaval surrounding not only the pandemic but the political climate.

**Harmer & Risak:** The pandemic has affected our public lives too as poets and also our teaching. Can you speak to that as well?

**Peñaredondo:** As a college educator, it is always difficult to find time to write and honor time and space in your creative life. The pandemic has definitely changed my writing life and performing life. It has impacted my performing life the most, for obvious reasons. Like many other creatives, the pandemic has changed the way I physically engage with the environment and so much of my artistic process, my excitement for innovation involves a sensorial collaboration with people, nature, and movement.

**Armendinger:** Teaching online has also been extremely time-consuming. I try to keep up with a morning meditation and writing practice, and that nourishes me and helps me stay connected to poetry. My classes do that too. In fact, I'm currently teaching a course, Poetics of Correspondence, primarily through the postal mail, and it's been an absolute delight to read and respond to my students' letters in this slower, more deliberate form. On a practical level, Street Gloss came out several months before the pandemic, so I was able to do a number of in-person readings before Los Angeles issued the first Stay-at-Home order. I've done four class visits over Zoom that have gone surprisingly well.

**Rosado:** As far as performing goes, I've only had one event, as childcare is harder to arrange in these times. I think many parenting creatives are in similar

circumstances, and it would be interesting if there were more asynchronous and recorded events—although synchronicity is such a core part of the magic of performance. These times seem marked by a diffuse magic I'm learning to find.

**Harmer & Risak:** Which direction is your curiosity leading you in right now? What kind of reading, research, and ideas are exciting you?

**Rosado:** One positive of the pandemic is that it has encouraged in me the beginner's mind that was more elusive before. I'm studying my pandemic life more than anything, and don't have room on my plate for much other than that. I have a couple books from before the pandemic that are mostly gathering dust, though occasionally poems filter through to me via social media or I find my way to one in the current *New Yorker*. My main text right now is simply life and the present moment. Every day I am curious about what has changed and what has stayed the same. I am also in wonder while raising a young child, currently four years old; I wonder what he makes of this world, given that he has such a limited memory of "before." This has been a creative time for me not because of creative output (there hasn't been much of that!) but because of all the internal spaces I find myself creating, and I trust that the poems and research and reading will come someday from those new places.

**Peñaredondo:** At this moment, subjects of interests: Monogamy as a settler colonial form of oppression. Queer diasporic imaginaries and futurity seen through

science fiction and fantasy and the erotic. Investigations of what radical joy means to me—queer radical joy as a form of transformative justice and healing. I continue to be interested and engaged in different genres, subgenres and experimentations of hybrid literature. Currently, I'm working on my book (forthcoming on Noemi Press) that is sort of a combination of poetics, creative non-fiction and scholarship.

**Armendinger:** I continue to work with ritual and site-specific practices, but lately I've been attempting to move beyond an anthropocentric focus in my work. Instead, I want to attend to the presence of non-human entities in spaces considered the province of humans. To this end, I've written about the Jurupa Oak, a tree on a hill in a suburb of Riverside that has survived for an estimated 13,000 years by cloning itself; it's on unprotected private land above an illegal dump near the old Crestmore Quarry. I've also written a number of poems out of a daily ritual of sitting with trees, collaging the language of multiple visits; a selection of these were published as "The Afterforest" by *Conjunctions*. I'm currently reading Brandon Shimoda's *The Grave on the Wall* and Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's *The Freezer Door*, both of which are amazing, though very different, approaches to the ever-changing shapes of memory and the relationship between individual and collective experience.

**Harmer & Risak:** What is your favorite metaphor in someone else's poem? Of the poems you've written, which metaphor is your favorite?

**Peñaredondo:** This is the hardest question in this interview. Honestly, I don't really

want to answer it. There are just too many to choose from and my mind cannot, off-the-cuff, limit myself to one metaphor that I can call favorite. I can share this story that might answer this question in some way. This week, when one of my partners showed me a sculpture, "The Absent Body," a large sculpture they created of pounded metal into the shape of a large adult-sized humanoid lump mounting a child's sized bed (@torresambriz), I thought of my last poem in my book *All Things Lose Thousands of Times* titled "A Primitive Toy." I feel the relationship between their sculpture and that poem investigates the painful narratives of rape-culture especially when this kind of violence is historically acted upon child, young and/or femme bodies. In "A Primitive Toy," there is a body that moves/shifts/transforms from the fragility of a toy to that of an enormous animal. This kind of body morphing can be violent and when I saw the weight and roundness of that pounded metal sculpture, I saw the metaphor in my poem in three-dimensional form.

**Armendinger:** This is an impossible question, but okay. I recently subscribed to Mathias Svalina's wonderful Dream Delivery Service. In "The Fifty-Fifth Dream," Svalina describes a dream in which you're sailing across the ocean on a wooden raft, trying again and again but never quite succeeding at painting the ocean. He writes, "You have a sudden idea: you hold the paint-laden paintbrush out to the canvas & try to keep your arm still, allowing the movement of the waves to move your arm & to move the paint across the canvas, allowing the ocean to paint itself." When I read this, it moved me a great deal, and it seems such a fitting metaphor for our practice as poets/writers/artists. Here's a metaphor about metaphors that I wrote, and while

I won't say it's my "favorite," I do like it: "Above our heads / we hold our metaphors, umbrellas / fading in the sun."

**Rosado:** It's hard to choose a favorite metaphor I've read—there are so many. An early, formative one for me that I often come back to is in Sharon Olds's "The Glass," in which the speaker's father dying of cancer spits into a glass by his bed throughout the day. She takes a terrible image and elevates it so that the room becomes a "model of the solar system / turning around the gold sun." I come back to that poem often because it casts such a wild spell and reminds me that poetry can turn anything into anything else. I can't say I have a favorite metaphor of my own, either, but one I've been thinking about is in "Poem to My Unborn Son the Morning after the Election," which I wrote in 2016 and feels full circle after living through the 2020 election cycle. The poem is about a house being painted and the windows papered over, making the interior dark the way the speaker imagines the unborn child must experience the beginning of eyesight. It's a part of my current manuscript, and as time has passed, I've been thinking that the poem title might need some more context, as I wrote it with the impending Trump era in mind, but it strangely seems just as appropriate now in the midst of a pandemic. Where are we going and what values will guide us? Poems can be living things that change in meaning and significance along with us. How fortunate that they, and us, can be transformed like that.

Harmer & Risak: I wonder whether many poets are looking at older poems and

drafts from new perspectives or, perhaps, have a heightened sense of how context matters and changes. Especially in this last year of so many remote interactions, we've also been thinking about the role of social media in writers' lives. Have you ever gotten into a heated, public argument about poetry or even a literary feud? If not, what issue in poetry would be worth fighting about?

**Rosado:** I'm not very active on social media as a poet. Occasionally, I catch wind of something on Twitter, but more often, a personal poetry friend posts a screenshot of a poem in their Instagram stories that grabs my attention. I find the interesting conversations are what happen in private messages, in group texts, in exchanged links over email. The public discourses are more engaging to me when taken into intimate conversations with the poets I am fortunate to know as friends. I appreciate the public conversations and the exchanges they spark.

**Armendinger:** Thankfully, I have not gotten into any public arguments about poetry. Most of the arguments I get into online have to do with the policing of leftist critique of centrist Democrats. I've certainly witnessed the poetry skirmishes, however, and while I think they often rise out of legitimate concerns, it can be disappointing at times to see how quickly sides are defined and nuance dissipates. Maybe this is naïve, but ultimately I'm more interested in poets fighting together rather than poets fighting each other.

Harmer & Risak: If we're going to fight together, maybe social media is part of

that. We're both on Twitter and Instagram, and *Tab Journal* is getting up to speed on Twitter @TabJournal. What are your favorite poetry accounts to follow on Instagram or Twitter?

**Armendinger:** My favorite poet to follow on social media is CAConrad—@ CAConrad88. I find their online presence to be deeply generous and inspiring. At the beginning of the pandemic, they posted a poem accompanied by a photograph every day for their CORONA DAZE project on Instagram (resulting in a total of 100 poems). I also follow Worker Writers School @workerwritersschool, a project by the poet Mark Nowak, which highlights the voices of activist and working class writers.

**Peñaredondo:** I have been very excited about the recent release of books by queer AAPI writers: Randa Jarrar's *Love is an Ex-country* @randajarrar, Kay Ulanday Barrett's *More than Organs* @brownroundboi, Muriel Leung's *Imagine Us, The Swarm* @murmurshewrote, and Kamala Puligandla's *Zigzags* @thatkamala.

**Harmer & Risak:** Thank you all for your generosity in this conversation. Let's close, then, with a call for engaging with poets in fruitful exchanges like this one and for getting excited about the new poetry books and collaborations that are making their ways into the world.



## **Book review**

If This Is the Age We End Discovery by Rosebud Ben-Oni Alice James Books, 2021

With her third book, *If This Is the Age We End Discovery*, Rosebud Ben-Oni obliterates the conventionalized notion that most poets tend to shy away from the sciences. In this 2019 Alice James Award-winning collection, Ben-Oni's algebraic form spreads across space and time as the poems detail experiences with life, love, and loss. The book is divided into three sections (each with its own central theme of family, loneliness, and romance, respectively) and framed by one introductory poem and one outro titled "{POST} :: LUDE."

The opening poem, "Poet Wrestling with the Possibility She's Living in a Simulation," begins by taking the traditional flush left margin, save for a couple of indented lines. Upon turning to the second page, the reader is swept into the words' flow like a wild stream down the page.

Most of the poems' titles begin with "Poet Wrestling with..." denoting internalized struggles. The poems convey pain points in a way unique to this poet:

I never made it through a single night. It wasn't without design. The *brxght Brxght xyxs.* & still the border. Night. Unfurls.

Ben-Oni's poems read as the dreams one struggles to remember upon waking, disjointed memories boiled down to sharp visuals one desperately tries to make sense of in the long after. While abstract in nature, there's nothing confusing about Ben-Oni's poems. She cultivates her memories and presents them unadulterated:

Consider this a death & listen. In the showers we strip naked {until there's zero}. Gravity. & no stress but.

Its jaws. Are straining. Our necks. Consider this bloodsucking. Alien. We can't.

See. Buffering. You're lying. On top. Coming off. Our leash.

This fragmented style runs throughout the book, which can be uncomfortable for the reader unaccustomed to this formal experimentation, though it is connected to the book's overarching theme of loss. The patterning mimics the struggle to speak while sobbing, the battle to form words in a steady stream of tears, and the ability to speak clearly and coherently. The poems use the familiar language of grief to communicate Ben-Oni's interpretations and experiences.

One of the more emotionally potent poems, "Poet Wrestling with an Ode to Her Brother," exudes the speaker's despair:

Rest, now, my brother.

Though my thin.

Shoulders stretch.

& bend. Haywire.

& Rusted.

& Shrugged.

Of all.

Or most.

Other.

Cares.

Rest, precious one.

This poem resonated with me as someone who has lost a brother. Even though everyone grieves differently, its shadow remains the same.

Amidst the free energy that flows over the pages, Ben-Oni takes command with her pacing and visual style. The last poem, "Poet Wrestling with Reverse {Re-verse} String Theory," spans nineteen pages. She brings it to several possible endings only to continue. Such is the nature of grieving. It never truly ends; it only changes form over time.

If This Is the Age We End Discovery isn't completely melancholic. It's darkly

## romantic at times:

```
I'll collapse your veiled
{& throbbing}
battlements

nothing can strike at nothing
like the vibrato of cello
& violin I'll be
whispering
& holding
you {down}
in every
note my
prince
```

And it's also a little weird, with several references to bunnies, particularly of the vampiric and monstrous kind and as metaphors for lovers, as in the following lines:

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Maybe I am writing this to get you to stop pursuing me, my little vampire bunny— & maybe these questions aren't meant to be solved. Maybe they are playing you & me like a fork a little too sharply
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tuned. Is the true nature of Dark Energy.

The peculiarness of Ben-Oni's writing offers a reprieve from the heaviness of it. "Poet Wrestling with *Rick and Morty* but Mostly Rick," a poem influenced by the popular show on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim evening programming, appears at roughly the halfway point. For anyone unfamiliar with the show, *Rick and Morty* grapples in an unusual manner with mature themes such as depression, unstable relationships and broken homes, lacking a sense of belonging, and profound loneliness. *If This Is the Age We End Discovery* echoes the strangeness of *Rick and Morty* while maintaining the poetry's originality.

There's a dark, ethereal energy that runs through "Poet Wrestling with *Rick and Morty* but Mostly Rick," as is the case with several other poems that challenge one's sense of what is natural and what is magic. In this book, they are one and the same.

It's all about the heart they say—that cross, that shine to compromise. Either you are creator or you die

on some pagan holiday. Most everything we get twisted. Most everything is either science or shockwave

of endless favor. The asking. The ridiculous heart getting lit

on blood that never dries on marked doors of unrequited sin. Who do you think you are. I've wed

my own body vermilion.
Blushing & brickish electric-

Additionally, a couple of poems early in the collection make allusions to the Irish rock band the Cranberries and late painter Bob Ross. The pop culture references give an air of nostalgia while simultaneously presenting an opportunity for readers to bond with the speaker over shared passions and pain.

Drawing on her dual heritage, being of Mexican and Jewish descent, Ben-Oni weaves poetic tales of her Aba and Abuela and features enlarged Hebrew script leading into Part III. The three Ben-Oni chooses to include are *efes* ("zero"), *ayin* ("nothingness"), and *tohu* ("chaos")—themes that run deep throughout the book. On *efes*, she writes:

(3) Poet's proposal: responsible for Dark Energy, vampire bunnies & insomnia; insatiable lover; enemy of mathematics & elegant equations; Creation's Twin; presents *Nullification* proprieties as possible *Transformation* (rather than destruction) of the quantum & the "real" worlds; reveals Itself at the singularity of a black hole; does not abide by

## any law; changes the riddle

And that's what some of these poems read like: a riddle, but they are only confounding if you've never felt the feeling.

If This Is the Age We End Discovery is art, and it defies physics in a way I've never seen a poet do. The chemistry allows the book to be out of this world and grounded at the same time. Ben-Oni is both mystical and mortal—confounding me as a reader and yet intermittently drawing me in more deeply. While the title refers to the end of discovery, this book exudes an energy of newness and mystery waiting to be discovered.



## **Book review**

The Dolphin House by Richard O'Brien Broken Sleep Books, 2021

As an undergrad studying marine biology at UC Santa Cruz, I once had the privilege to see the university's research dolphins, Puka and Primo. I remember being startled by how large the dolphins were in person and then how small their pools seemed by comparison. The researchers who worked with Puka and Primo were adamant that the dolphins were happy. I never doubted their devotion. They tended to the dolphins for hours every day of the year with meticulous enrichment regimens—no holidays, no sleeping in, no exceptions. I did, however, wonder if their love was enough. I certainly wouldn't want to live the rest of my days in what amounted to two, albeit deep, swimming pools, I thought. But maybe that was me projecting. I didn't know the dolphins. This is the unknowing Richard O'Brien contends with in his new poetry collection *The Dolphin House*, published by Broken Sleep Books. In roughly chronological order, O'Brien narrativizes a NASA-funded project that attempted to teach dolphins English in the 1970s. As a non-human intelligence, dolphins are a profound other. A writer must say something poignant enough to cut through established feelings. O'Brien's collection responds by asking readers to turn inward.

The poems at the beginning of the collection move freely across the page. Notably, the first untitled poem rolls from left to right and then resets like a wave.

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In a flotation tank, the god Apollo crests the black brine.

Thought is a surging shoal: whistles in clicks.

The rest of the poems soon settle into almost entirely a left-justified format with no indentations. I suspect that O'Brien was trying to capture how the dolphins were constrained once brought into the research tanks. If the dolphin could never return to the sea, why should the speaker indulge the reader with aesthetic pleasure in the look of the poem on the page? The form fits the content, but as a reader, I am unused to having the poems that I find most beautiful only at the beginning of the collection. That first poem is my favorite. I craved another glimpse of the beginning somewhere else in the collection.

The layperson who has heard of the research project through one of the numerous documentaries or feature-length articles on the subject usually remembers two things. First, Margaret Howe, who lived with the dolphins in a flooded-out apartment, formed a close relationship with a dolphin named Peter and helped him masturbate. (Howe is adamant that it was strictly a matter of pragmatism.) Second, after funders learned about the project director's heavy drug use, notably LSD, they binned the project. Peter died shortly after parting with Howe by choosing not to surface to breathe in what appears to be a suicide. (Most

researchers say Peter's death had more to do with being moved to a small pool with no natural light than grief.)

The bond between Howe and the dolphin is ripe for poetic interpretation. Sexual relationships between humans and animals like Leda and Swan are taboo but frequent in mythology, likely because they invite a certain voyeurism of the imagination. Howe's story is memorable for the same reasons. Still, the poems manage to be sympathetic to Howe, a version of whom is often a speaker. "Things I left out" shimmers:

the fritzing phone line, the siphon, the weight of my walk through the slosh of my life with six men in coats leaning over the side, and the prospect of wading—salt shrill in my blood—to bed ineluctably clammy and damp

The "s" and "sh" sounds take a special significance in the poem and the collection. They are the sounds of a splash, a rough tape recording, and a dolphin's whistle. The dolphins are immersed in the human world, but Howe is also immersed in the dolphins' world. She becomes a research subject herself. The difference being, of course, Howe could exit the study if she chose to. Of the relationship between Howe and Peter, the speaker says:

There were no terms to it - no edges, no end.

The sheet, the shower, retreated into the black of the balmy night; light from the possible stars chimed on the water. Those were the moment we spoke, as tender as lovers, in awe of what we could become.

The touch in the dark of night and the uncertainty of their relationship or their bodies' shapes evoke Cupid and Psyche's marriage. The verse also captures how Howe and Peter are hybridizing to something not quite dolphin or not quite human, under the clinical gaze of the researchers.

The final poem of the collection, "cccccxxxxxxccxxxx xxx," titled to be as indecipherable as clicks and whistles, gives voice to a dolphin, presumably Peter.

you want to hear that you were right you saw me through the aquatint

but if my world was too wide and too wild to shunt

into the traps of consonants and I began to make you understand what would you see the sea meeting the logic of the land.

The excerpt sums up the problem with bringing dolphins into the world of human signifiers and language. The researchers could not make a dolphin speak without metamorphosing it away from its dolphin-ness, but that did not stop them because they were never interested in the dolphins. They were trying to know themselves.