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**Author:** Gross, Elizabeth

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[Music]

Elizabeth Gross:

Hi, I'm Elizabeth Gross and I teach Interdisciplinary Humanities for the Honors Program and also serve as the Colloquium Coordinator overseeing those Honors Colloquia courses. And I'm very happy to read to you today from my book, this body / that lightning show.

It's disappearing into my virtual background- but which came out from The Word Works Press in June 2019 and also features the amazing, amazing cover art of my colleague Nora Lovell, also in the Honors Program.

So I'll read a few poems from this body / that lightning show and then I will share some of my other work with you.

I'll start with an irresponsible fragment of sappho, which there are several of these throughout the book.

I say irresponsible because while I do read Greek, much of the Greek is missing in the fragments of sappho and in some places I've taken permission to fill in some of the blanks with the words that I think belong there even though there's absolutely no way to know.

Fragment 20. On the stock brightness and with luck fate will take harbor in the black earth sailors might lift in big gusts to dry land, might sail heavy things like when and everything raining if this work dry land.

Antelopes of Thera. After the fresco of Akrotiri Thera 16th century BCE.

And this one has an epigraph also from sappho but too small for me to translate in any way that changes the beautiful work that Anne Carson did.

Fragment 162. With what eyes? (and it's a question)

One, Atlantis or not accident in the form of a goat discovered the city,

famous unlucky the goat fell through centuries and centuries of volcanic ash, archaeologists followed in all, Did the goat survive?

Do goats have the kinds of eyes that see color?

Two, the only way to make something last is to forget about it for a long, long time.

Three, we just bought a copy of the ancient fresco, a birthday present for my father on a lark, the red orange sky rides heavy on white mountains winding just over the antelopes laughing heads, hung up in the room days before mandatory evacuation, that sky the only solid shape.

Should we take it with us along with the insurance papers the family photos?

No leave it on the wall, that one must be my voice, my family didn't know the story, what they survived, painted animals accustomed to loss.

Four, 21.5 hours to Dallas stopped in our car, an endless line of people waiting to run for our lives.

Five, before Akrotiri spewed into the sea, the citizens kept up their jewelry or whatever and fled their painted halls, if they died in their ships no one knows about it.

Six, then flood, then return, drive to understand what happened here but keep the windows up, no one should breathe this, twisted trees choked by salt water and muck holding up the unexpected chairs, boats, cars, the sky is the limit, tiny pyramids of mold and dust piled up on all our picture frames, not one of them crooked, a hole in the ceiling of my parents house the approximate size of coffin, me underneath thinking lucky, lucky, lucky looking clear up to the blue plastic tarp and the light shining through.

Seven, the strong black marks around the antelope's painted eyes took everything in, as tree bark darkens after rain gathering depth or as the eyes of a living deer recede wetly from this world into other quieter worlds caught by surprise just after sundown which belongs to them.

Eight, when I ran away to the archaeological museum on a one-way ticket to Athens I met those Antelope's original eyes, the top of the stairs, I wasn't expecting them.

I didn't know they'd been transported from what was left of their island, wherever they stand they guard the house, shadowless holding up the walls, I stood under their gaze for a long time, except there was no time, everything was protected.

This body. This body / that lightning show and wide back window, that window box of dirt and last year's roots, that old saw waiting quiet in the shed, that noisy mini-factory of hungers, those counting seconds before thunder, the television remote on low batteries, the metronome, the practice of sight reading, the wind under the floorboards, the hard rain pooling in the windowsills, the reddening of certain kinds of fruit, the handmade bowl with fingerprints left in, the loud cicada dusk, all questions, the thread, the roped off border, the string instrument played pizzicato and off key.

I'll read one more from, this body / that lightning show, which although it came out in in 2019 is quite old work for me.

I had the pleasure of reworking with a very talented editor at the Word Works but mostly these poems were completed in 2010 or 2011.

And much of what was going on then in my work, as you've heard a little bit already, is processing the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina here in New Orleans in my own experience of evacuation and displacement following the storm.

So this one picks up in that story that after returning to New Orleans.

Levy Return. The riverside is quiet as a sleepwalker but overhead there is a racket of green parrots in the electrical transformer grid, invisible except occasional ambassadors coming or going, but loud, either it's the warm that draws them or the hum of power, are they still shut up in houses in their dreams?

The new generation, all wild now, not knowing they aren't from around here, late afternoons I walk the low ridge of the flood wall, from the riverside the city is just wires crossing the sky, a bicycle riding the horizon, horses running circles at the electric tower's base, let the light leave me in tall grasses that sometimes appear when the river is low.

So now I'd like to read a few poems from Dear Escape Artist, a chapbook that came out from Antenna in 2016.

And it's very close to me because it was a collaboration with a dear friend and very talented visual and book artist, Sara White.

We let her press print it and hand bound the edition, letterpress printed the covers. And the work is also full of her gorgeous ink illustrations.

I'm showing you a few of these in places where it interacts with the text as well.

So I'll just read a few of these as well.

Dear Escape Artist

I was watching underwater for your last big thing, I saw you pick the lock with the same frayed rope they tied you up with, was there a they or do you do it to yourself?

I'm always imagining a vein, perhaps this is something we have in common, I wish we could talk it over, high up on a ledge, feet dangling, just to pretend we're not holding on for dear life, dear escape artist, on a ledge, feet dangling, just to pretend we're not holding on for dear life, dear escape artist, on a ledge, feet dangling, just to pretend we're not holding on for dear life, dear escape artist, on a ledge, feet dangling, just to pretend we're not holding on for dear life, dear escape artist, my research tells me there are at least three ways to die in an escape or die performance, drowning, suffocation, falling, and occasionally electrocution, but this was something else, despair?

The word calls up a phantom couch, the word is weak, there are times the mind invents a rescue helicopter and its ladder flinging out to it like a tongue, just to get anywhere else.

Dear escape artist, I had a dream this morning I was you, the trap was set, it was the kind of dream that feels continued from another dream, mine or someone else's bleeding through.

I was in a ferris wheel in black and white, it was a famous movie, a theory of evil at the highest point, everything so still below, paused almost, except a single kite whipping the gray air, it's hard to watch the struggle as if its neck could break, the dots move slow on the ground, predictable in circles, why not squash them? A man says, who is also me, I had to exit the conversation before we started coming down.

Dear escape artist, lately I can't sleep at night so I construct an elaborate escape, build it up in layers around myself like a wasp.

I start with simple rope and then add chains, then glass, a weighted tank with tiny holes drilled in, open to the tide that rushes in, all inside an iron cave, suspended from a crane, draped in a blanket of bees, balanced at the edge of the world between water and the nearer parts of outer space, the airless dark no one can breathe, I can rest knowing there will be something to do with my hands. (illustration for that one)

Dear escape artist, on the radio I heard about a kind of shrimp that makes light with the snap of its claw, underwater launches a bubble so fast it burns hot as the surface of the sun, can you imagine letting go of a whole star?

I don't know where the light goes, but it must be reflected somewhere, right?

A floating plastic cup becomes a sudden moon, Dogen says the moon does not get wet when it's reflected in the water, nor is the water broken, but here the water is broken after all and any stupid thing can hang on to borrowed light for a second or two. Any stupid thing can hang on to borrowed light for a second or two.

Dear escape artist, tell me another story about the world, I know what I see so make me doubt it, I know what I see so make me doubt it, what the audience remembers is the story you tell after, not the act, whatever they were looking at when they missed everything.

So I'd like to close by reading some more recent works, some unpublished works. This first poem was written in the summer of 2019 when I had the opportunity to teach at Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women through the Newcomb College Institute and Operation Restoration Program.

I was teaching interdisciplinary humanities like a college prep course for students who were just entering the degree seeking program. And yeah, so this poem came out of that experience.

Passenger Side Window, all summer the water is high, just underneath us, where the highway skirts the edge of the swamp, the few trees farther out make v's of moving water, where the current slowly wears them down, halfway between a living thing and the ruin of that thing still standing,

a few last vertical ambassadors between us and nothing, I mean between your car barreling westward down the stream of the elevated highway and the lake, I want to say something about this landscape, what it does to me to take it in and take it in each week, never stopping to and from the prison where we teach, losing the light on the way back in the tunnel of green before we hit the water,

sometimes after we talk and talk, can't stop as soon as we pass the last of the razor wire, we want to remember everything everyone said, each rare human glimpse inside this place we're expected to forget because this isn't where the story is or when, the story that matters is the past, what'd you do to get here, I can't deny wanting to know, but I can leave it in your car with my phone, my wallet, my keys, my water bottle, my hypothetical weapons, anything that doesn't fit in the clear plastic school bag I carry to clear all check points, I open the glove box,

you open the trunk, this isn't the story that matters either, their lives do not go blank like the missing horizon where lake meets sky, other evenings after we just drive, car radio scanning for its preset stations as I search my mind for the words that might help us put away whatever we witnessed inside or understand it, somewhere between what we can't know and what we can't say,

one night the moon burns huge and orange like a thumb over the camera lens through rare breaks in the trees, high and cool and bright by the time we reach the swamp where we can really see, just now when I mentioned the moon, I felt a moment of relief, like I bent the thing I meant to say into a metaphor accessible to anyone who's tried to take a picture of the moon or explain exactly how the moon had changed them, impossible, inside the prison the classroom is a classroom and the students are students around an ordinary table discussing what it means to be human, as if humanity isn't something outside this classroom, they are asked to prove over and over with their bodies, even here lining up in the hallway for the guards to pat them down, as you and I take our seats on the far side of the classroom so we don't have to watch, and now if I were to mention the roses in the prison yard everyone would read them as a metaphor for hope or worse, some thorned beauty of survival, wrong, because these roses are real, intended by women most forget are alive, and if I were to mention the birds tilted and soaring, wild and uncountable, would that image of freedom be enough to free us? throw us back into looking away.

These last two are my only pandemic poems which seem fit to share in this strange virtual format.

So these are the newest. Housework, May 2020.

As the world narrows our dominion grows, finally the world is all women,

the home is everything, everything now,

keeping track of which vegetables are likely to turn next in the fridge, sweeping, and planting, and feeding, tending to elders by phone,

the weariness we carry in public places too, are those footsteps too close? and yet I find myself following the moon, usually I wouldn't walk at night, beep, beep, a man says somewhere, didn't want to scare ya,

he throws back one more warning wheeling by on bike, watch yourself in this weather, the moon I say,

but he's already turned the corner, by now perhaps you've noticed I contradict myself, or perhaps you ran outside to gape at the moon over the cemetery like I did, Penelope waited almost 20 years to see her household piled up with death, she ruled quietly even as the plague of suitors infected the house,

ate everything, meanwhile she orbited her own life as a satellite so they couldn't touch her, where is the epic of her life indoors?

like us, her work was slowing time and grief, heading home the street lamp shines brighter than the moon, churning with wings, it's May, I'm too late

to shut out the lights to keep the termite swarms out already warming through the house's seams,

I watch from the porch as darkness swallows the neighborhood,

tomorrow I'll sweep their spent bodies into the tub and down the drain, but I'll find their wings flashing back little scraps of light for weeks.

This last poem that I'll read I just learned won the 2020 Words in Music Contest from the Faulkner Society and Podunk Review. So that's very exciting.

This was also a pandemic poem, one of the two that I managed in this time.

And it's in a form called the guzzle persian form. And actually it's my very first attempt at this form, so very exciting to win a contest. (very first go)

Okay, Guzzle at the End of the World,

April 2020. Don't tell me you don't feel it too, relief, something finally stopped all of us at once, like a whistle in the schoolyard, freeze, on one leg balancing finally stopped, the clear green waters of Venice flowing with dolphins and swans are just a fantasy glimpse of a post-polluted world, our high emission flying finally stopped,

experts say the mask I wear protects you more than me, but they don't know the pleasure I feel not recognizing my own reflection in car windows when out walking, that mirror gazing finally stopped, erasing my spring calendar I dimly recall how many times I've wished to slow down time,

not like this of course, now the future begins somewhere years from now, when this suffering finally stops, one of my neighbors died, the rest of us stood on our porches watching paramedics float around the purple house in their protective gowns trying to guess whose breathing finally stopped, my concentration is shot, I'm not writing, I can only read the things my students ask me to,

soon I'll submit their final grades and this hydra headed semester will be done, teaching finally stopped, alone in the house for months I lose the sense of where my edges are expanding until I imagine draping these walls around my body like a robe, all other daily dressing finally stopped,

it was hours before Mr. James stepped out of his purple house to say his nephew passed, relatives arrived, distant until a downpour drove them close,

the rain long passed when they're wailing finally stopped, on another endless video call, the birds outside trigger my microphone to unmute as my days

stretch on, screen-bound, indoors waiting for someone else to finally stop the Zoom, I focus on my virtual backgrounds, dolphins light moving against green leaves, aquarium scene, I can make parts of myself disappear by drinking from a glass, reverse genie summoning finally stopped, I lost my job, not right away like so many I love who are struggling now, but after quarantine I'm never going back to the

work, the office I love, our thoughtful planning finally stopped, from here summer is an unthinkable hot blank and yet I long to leap for it, I try to explain to an internet friend that I don't have to be this Elizabeth anymore, all that performing finally stopped.

Thank you very much for your attention in my reading. I just read and read and didn't really talk about my work but my understanding is there will be an opportunity for Q&A and yeah, I'd love to talk about anything there.

It's a real privilege for me since I, I'm a poet and have been a poet for a long time but that's not my role at Tulane.

To be able to share this other side of my work with this community, so thanks again to the library and especially Amanda for reaching out to me to participate in this.

[Music]