

TJ JARRETT
AXTON VISITING WRITERS SERIES
APRIL 7, 2016

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>>KIKI PETROSINO: Okay, everyone. Good evening. Welcome to this final Axton Visiting Writers Series Reading of the 2015-2016 academic year. I'm Professor Kiki Petrosino, Associate Professor of English and Director of the Creative Writing Program here at the University of Louisville.

Before we begin, I'd like to inform guests that captioning is being provided at this event. If you would like to borrow a handheld device to follow the proceedings this evening, please see Laura in the front row. Okay?

The Anne and William Axton Reading Series was established in 1999 through the generosity of the late William Axton, former

University of Louisville English professor and his wife, the late Anne Axton.

The series brings highly distinguished writers from across the country to the University of Louisville for two-day visits to read from their work and to share their knowledge and expertise with the university and Louisville community.

On Belknap Campus writers give a public reading and Q and A on the first day and on the following morning they conduct a master class where select student work is critiqued. Both events are free and open to the public.

Tomorrow's master class will take place right here in Ekstrom Library in Room W-210. If you would like a copy of the five student poetry manuscripts that will be discussed at that session, please see Jennifer in the front row there. Okay?

It's been a wonderful year for creative writing at U of L. Two of our alumni have received prestigious awards for their writing. Dominic Russ-Combs has been awarded a Wallace Stegner fellowship in fiction from Stanford University, while JD Daniels has received a Whiting Foundation fellowship in creative nonfiction. One of our current MA students, Todd Evans, has been accepted for the master of fine arts program in creative writing at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. And Hannah Rego, an undergraduate poet and poetry editor of our journal, *Miracle Monocle*, won first place in Sarabande Books' Flo Gault Poetry Prize competition.

Issue eight of *Miracle Monocle*, featuring new work by Lawrence Ferlenghetti, Chris Offutt, Lynnell Major Edwards, and many others will launch with a reading and party at 8:00 p.m. on April the 14th at the Monkey Wrench at 1025 Barret Avenue. Come and celebrate with us. Now, since the Monkey Wrench is a restaurant and bar, those under 21 are welcome at that event.

The Axton Reading Series will return in fall 2016 with another great lineup of guest authors. Poet Lauren Haldeman in September, fiction writer Merritt Tierce in October, and novelist Lauren Groff will give the Writer's Block keynote reading in November.

But tonight it's my honor to introduce the Nashville-based poet and software developer TJ Jarrett. Her debut collection *Ain't No Grave* was a finalist for the 2013 Balcones Prize, was published with New Issues Press in 2013. Her second collection *Zion*, winner of the Crab Orchard Open Competition of 2013, was published by Southern Illinois University Press in the fall of 2014.

Books are for sale, by the way, at the Carmichaels Books table at the back of the room.

The Kenyon Review described Jarrett's debut volume as, quote, An ambitious mix of poems that shimmy and ricochet down the page. *Ain't No Grave* is united around those pieces that look back on the atrocities of Jim Crow. Like the song from which the poet gets the title *Ain't No Grave Can Hold My Body*

Down, Jarrett's speaker will not be silenced. Her stories are going to rise up and be heard, end quote.

These poems are more than elegies to memorialize the dead, more than poems that address the dead. These poems teach the reader how to address those lost to time, lynching, crime, fire, and how to listen to them too.

Quote, This is how it works: They talk. You listen. Let them go on at length about the harp lessons and the cataloging of their regrets. Then, let them begin their questions; most often they ask about the minutia of the earth.

The dead want to know about the minutia of the earth, but the living are still obsessed by the limitations of the body. In her latest collection, *Zion*, Jarrett's speaker continually challenges the confines of earthly life. In these poems, the body divides itself from the soul, only to disappear into dream. In the world of *Zion*, the body lays itself down in a river and sets off in a boat for some far shore. The body, in its willingness to be vulnerable, makes itself available for astonishing collisions, such as in the imagined encounter between Jarrett's speaker and the shade of the 1920s Mississippi governor and segregationist Theodore Bilbo.

Quote, Maybe there never was any river. Maybe the only true thing is that I would come back to the island, lift its lush grasses and earth to myself and call it my body.

Please welcome TJ Jarrett.

(Applause.)

>>TJ JARRETT: Hi. Thank you. Thank you for coming out.

Let us begin with How to Speak to the Dead.

Can you hear me in the back? We good? All right.

This is how it works: They talk and you listen. Let them go on at length about the harp lessons and the cataloging of their regrets. And then let them begin their questions; most often they'll ask about the minutia of this earth. They'll ask you to detail the habits of the grass and the trees. They'll ask you to tell them about the current cycle of cicadas: The red eyes, the husks, the sacrament that is sleep. Tell them about your latest visit to the psychiatrist. Tell them how he diagnosed what you experience to be a form of complicated grief. Tell them about your latest visit to the psychiatrist. Tell them how he diagnosed what you experience to be a form of complicated grief, and over their brittle laughter, protest, No, wait, I paid for that. Tell them that your husband left last winter and expect their shrugs.

Allow them to continue: Can you tell us again how it feels to be cold? Can you remind us of the colors the leaves make in autumn? How does it feel to want?

Tell them about the dream you had about the invasion. No, wait, the one about the fire. How there was a fire in the shape of men marching the streets, how the bystanders threw themselves headlong into the pageant, their burning hands

destroying all they touched until there was nothing left in the world but you and ash. Ask them if death is like that. They'll say: Nothing gone stays gone here; you're never alone in death. Listen, they'll say, that's the worst part of all.

I was born in the '70s, so I'm sure that not everyone quite understands that when something came on television that everyone was watching it, and when Roots came on in 1978, I was like five-ish, but not like -- Roots is an important, like, cultural, like, goalpost, and I get that, but I was also five and probably shouldn't have been watching it.

(Laughter.)

And if anyone's not seen it, like the actual owner of the plantation is Robert Reed, who was Mike Brady on the Brady Bunch, so it created a lot of confusion for me. So -- yeah.

So this next poem is called After I Came to Bed, Unable to Understand Why Mike Brady is Beating Kunta Kinte on Television, My Grandmother Explains: A Lullaby.

Hush now. No tears. We lived in the Stone House.

The valley was filling with smoke. The smoke was in the valley.

I was ten years old. The moon was half empty as a bowl.

The house was empty, and I was afraid of ghosts.

Pappy, my grandfather, built the house in the valley. I was alone in that house.

And the valley was a bowl filling with smoke. Pappy built that house with his hands.

Some stones are no greater than a fist. The house was on the lip of the valley.

A fist is what you make of your hands. Light and smoke were filling the valley.

The ghosts passed through. The moon poured out, and I was brotherless and alone. The house choked on the smoke.

The valley overflowed with light. And smoke.

No tears. No tears.

I mentioned this, I'm like -- I wasn't planning on reading this, and I was mentioning this at dinner. When I was five -- maybe I was a little bit older than that. Maybe I was six or seven. My parents gave me my first allowance, and my first allowance was five whole dollars. And for \$5 in 1978-79 money, you can you can just go crazy in like a music store. And so my mom gives me my first allowance, and I had been looking at the Columbia House list for a long time, which is also something from the '70s that you don't necessarily understand.

And so I go to the store and I bought three albums. Well, no, two albums and a 45. The 45 was Xanadu by Olivia Newton-John; Rumours by Fleetwood Mac -- there was something else. I forgot what it was. I knew it at dinner. Oh, and Saturday Night Fever by the Bee Gees. And I was like happy and playing the hell out of them, just wearing them out.

And my dad comes home, because he was working late, and he was like, "She bought what?" And then takes me out again to buy me more, like, black-child-appropriate music. And I remember in that stack of records he bought me Songs in the Key of Life, and this poem is about that.

How to Hear Music With Your Whole Body.

Be five again. Spend your whole allowance on Fleetwood Mac's Rumours. Wait until Daddy comes back home from the ice cream factory after shift. Watch him ball his hands into fists when Mama tells him what you did. Watch a slow shake of his head when he says: White folks done gone too far.

Take his hand when he leads you to the den, draws Songs in the Key of Life out of its sleeve and he puts it on the hi-fi. And wait until you hear the horns on Sir Duke bleating out the speakers. Listen, he says, Baby Girl, this is how you dance. And then he lifts you as the trumpets rise.

This is not the first time he's done this, but the only time I remember being twirled above a room with your grandmamma swinging her cane in rhythm, your brother pointing up and laughing, his brightly colored blocks piled at his feet, and Mama smiling and laughing too, in spite of herself, not even asking Daddy once to stop.

Years later, when your therapist asks when you're happiest, you can tell him this, this, this is what happiness is.

Is that what being dead is like? Everyone you love housed in one room and dancing? You hovering above, your parents, so young and in love and untested.

Before the deaths, before the flood, before all the children you could not have skidded limp and bulbous from your body into the strange air.

When we're dead, can we choose our moments? I choose this: The music playing, the trumpets, my feet not touching the ground.

Something else I forgot. My dad was in grad school while he was working for divinity. My father's a minister. And when I was ten, I don't know why I did this, I got a little notebook, it's a little red notebook. It's like one of those little reporter flat notebooks. And as he had -- it's funny now. As he did his sermons, I would write critiques of his sermons as he did it, and we would discuss -- because my father is a Methodist minister, so you got sent off to like the hinterlands in your first assignment. And we would discuss on the way back the entire time, like, "Hey, Dad, this -- you know, I'm not sure how I feel about this illustration," or, "They said Jesus of that particular verse. I don't feel like it's right."

And my dad would just take it. Like he'd just drive, because sometimes my mom wouldn't come with us, and he'd just drive and he'd listen to me for reasons I don't understand. But the only time we ever argued is about Lazarus, which I consider

nonconsensual resurrection. Because if you imagine, you know, being awakened from a nap, it's not pretty. I'm mad as hell when you wake me up from a nap, and I cannot imagine Lazarus, who is like related to Mary and Martha, who were the whiniest two women in the Bible, worrying about whether Jesus can do the dishes, which I think he could handle that. I can't imagine him wanting to come back ever. We actually had an argument all the way from Hampshire Ridge to Nashville, which is about 45 minutes. So this is called Lazarus.

Imagine his surprise, disoriented in the dark and damp of the tomb. All alone, and all at once. Hadn't he quit the flesh, wearied of Martha's nagging. Don't bother yourself Lazarus, don't strain yourself, Lazarus, and his sister Mary's muffled cries? Then the knock. Then the calling of his name. Did he turn his back to the sound at first? Say: It's early yet. Say: Not now. Ask: Why me?

And then the voice of the weeping boy-god who summoned him. Could he not unburden himself of that skinsack with the ribboned muslin that bound him? Did the light from the opened door blind? When he staggered from the tomb, did he first hear the wind's bloated sigh above the land; or see the shapes of his sisters barreling toward him blurred in his sight, or hear the flat-footed cadence of their approach? How could any one sense measure their jubilee?

Did he rejoice with them or was three days long enough to miss any one thing, even the earth? How does a body flooded with air compare to heaven? How small now this earth, how tinny its birdsong. How sloven the tree's corporal array.

1920: In Duluth, Minnesota.

They strung up the clowns because it was already a circus.

Because the musicians were still playing and the bears were common.

Because the harlequin's head perched above his ruff never seemed to belong to him.

Because the clowns laughed at the accusation and turned on their too large heels in leaving.

Because the girl had gone missing.

Because the auguste already knew the finite properties of air and had been spinning in it.

Because the clowns were tumbling toward the train and the town could not bear more loss.

Because the approaching winter was already wielding darkness in its fists.

Because the earth let out a throaty guffaw as the town thrust the clowns in it.

What The Sky Said.

If you asked the stars what they saw --

Do you see what happens here on this earth?

They would tell you quite plainly they were blinded by
the light of heaven.

If you asked the moon, she would say the earth lay in
shadow.

Don't you know I reached for you? You could not be
found.

If you asked the sky outright, if you asked her if even
the sky feels shame, she would say: Yes. Yes. I had to look
away.

It grew dark. It was dark like where the bones go once
we're through with them.

Sometimes, She said, you look into the heart of a thing
and you encounter an emptiness.

Sometimes, this emptiness squares its shoulders and
stares right back.

Listen -- that night, it was dark like that.

What We Say to the Fire.

For Sam Hose, burned April 23rd, 1899.

Negotiate. Say, I will crush lumber with my teeth. I
will spare you labor if you spare my life.

Turn the crowd back with words.

Blame.

Say, you must be hungry & turn the finger from yourself.

Say, I will lift no hand in my own defense.

Run.

Say I will bear you from this place on my back.

How far have I already carried you.

The next poem, I -- the next poem is one of the first poems I actually wrote when putting -- before I knew there was going to be a book, this -- kind of this first poem is what -- this poem is kind of what I -- started kind of my -- was the impetus for writing the book.

I have a thing where I read old newspaper articles, and I read them in part because it's research for what happened at that time and how people contextualize what happens historically in time. But actually, I really find interesting what people feel like they can say in that particular historical moment.

And this -- the name of the poem is called Negroes Lie on Top of Weakening Levee and Save Day Near Greenville, Mississippi April 27th, 1912.

Greenville, Mississippi, if you don't know, is below the water line of the Mississippi River by about 30 feet, but they decided they wanted to build downtown there anyway. I don't even know what that is. And the Mississippi floods about every ten years. Like, it's -- it's like rain, like you just know, like, oh, it's been eight years, you should probably prepare, whatever.

In 1912 it flooded, but it kind of flooded differently than usual, so it -- usually it would flood farther up the

links, and then it happened to flood that year because they had upgraded the levee and it didn't work.

But that night, on April 11th, it flooded. They were out of sand. They had to drive about 60 miles north to get the sand to buoy, to -- like to strengthen the levee, and so they had nothing to hold back the river at that point, so they gathered up all the black men in town at gunpoint and told them to lie on the levee approximately eight hours while they started building it back. And that was in the New York Times on April 11th -- April 12th, 1912.

So that's like the first, let's say, four sentences of that article. The next paragraph begins, "They did that again. They did that back in like 1883 in -- like in Louisiana, and then again," and like there's this listing, this litany of places that people had done this.

In 1883 or 1882, I can't remember which exactly, there was a plantation in Louisiana where the owner gave every single slave one picket from a fence and just shoved them all, with horses behind them, into the levee. And to quote them, only a third died, like there's an "only" in front of it.

So I tried many times to write this poem, probably 50, and what came out were about 30 lines, because that's the best I could do.

So Negroes Lie on Top of Levee and Save Day Near
Greenville, Mississippi. April 11th, 1912.

Harold first. Walked right up when they asked him.
Unfolded each limb, drew the earth up into his haunches, carried
that body up and lay down.

Clarence too. There was a heaving in that earth. Body
after body raised up.

There was a give in that earth. And they came. Lumbered
up the levee's flanks. Silent as stones.

Through the night, they lay atop the levee.

Dreamed their stony dreams. In the night the levee built
itself of eyes and teeth. And when sun came, it sang.

I spent a lot of time thinking, actually, what would
cause me to lay on the levee. And I don't think you'd actually
have to have a gun, that's the kind of crazy thing, because your
master's house is here, yeah, that's true, but your house and
your children and your children's children are behind that levee
and you'd do it anyway.

And the very fact that they had to treat them as if they
were not a part of the community, which they were integrally a
part of the community, is what really confounds me every time I
think about it.

What We Say to the Water.

For Laura Nelson, raped and hanged May 25th, 1911.

Be still. No further. Apologize to no one.

If the water says stay, then stay. Wither to nothing.

Let the shores thirst, red as a wound. If the water says
run, take the fields back, charge the banks, bring back what
they brought you. Answer to no one.

If the water says rain, don't dignify the ground.

Astronauts.

Monroe Sr's funeral was just like Monroe Jr's wedding,
and the kitchen still echoes open laughing women's mouths.
Junior's twin boys, now about five or six, were out front,
wrestling in the dirt and then running.

You shout out the front window, Boys, don't mess up your
church clothes!, and your brother takes his cue, heads out to
the stoop to smoke and brush off their dust.

Junior leans into the piano, his tie still untied,
standing amid too many hothouse flowers, and he mouths thank
you.

Down the narrow hallway, in the back room, you find your
cousins Willie Mae, Tiajuana and Lestine telling you to hurry.
Everything in that room was aloft and spinning: the black
dresses, arms, stockings, lipsticks. Willie Mae asked Lestine
for the fourth time if she took her medication. Lestine just
nods and Tiajuana sits, her limbs folded neatly as linens.

Lestine points out that tattoo you'd forgotten twirling
around your spine. Their fresh dead dropped like an anchor.
You're hurtling forward in space.

They ask questions: where did you have it done, which constellation is that, how was it you were in the Arizona desert wanting to mark your body?

It is then Lestine, older than you by twenty-five years, drops her panties and shows you an arc of stars shimmering over her venus mons. Willie Mae gasps.

Lestine says: Mother of two, I think you've seen woman parts before.

She'll tell you about a mean streak of time under an angry star when she was laid up in that crack house. How she did it for some man who's dead already; and only of this she is certain.

Hearing the ruckus, Mama and Willie Mae's daughter Rochelle will walk in to see you and Lestine thusly bare assed.

Willie Mae and Tiajuana laughing and pointing, asking how Tiajuana stayed so skinny, how you got tits for the whole family, and we're all giggling like first love.

Rochelle will drop her pants then and show the mark of sankofa on her hip, and you and Lestine and Mom and Willie Mae will chastise her. She'll protest, But Tonya and Lestine are grown. And your mother will say it then: But Tonya and Lestine are grown, and this is the very first you've heard of it.

The brother is grown, stands guards over the twin boys in their church clothes, watches the horizon from the steps, and rises.

The twins too, fidgeting from the back of their heads where the brother thumped them, tired of all this waiting.

The father, fumbling a double then half Windsor knot in his hands, strangling on the pollen from those damned hothouse flowers, distracted by the space he gazes, rises, three sisters, laughing about pranks and seasons in a room where entire childhoods and dresses and sugarbread sandwiches were shared, that laughter those bodies all rising.

The daughter and the aunt, your mother, chase after.

The grandmother, your grandmother they call little mama comings behind saying what's taking so long?

Puts her hand in the small of your back and pushes you forward and upward.

You belong to these women all in their second marriages, you belong to the brother and the man and the boys, squinting and blinking without recourse from the light, your bodies gleaming in space, burning figures, constellation of mourning.

I may come back to this.

My second book I wrote, while my grandmother was dying, and she was like, you know, 96, 97. I mean, it was the kind of thing where she was dying, my grandmother -- my mother acted surprised I'm like she's ninety -- actuarially speaking, grandma's lasted a long time, it's fine. And we were talking to

my grandmother, and my grandmother's like, "We have a black president, I'm good." It's like it was -- it was like 2012. She's like, "I've seen one, I don't have to wait for the next time." Like I don't -- yeah, it was very funny.

But I spent a lot of time with my grandmother in the hospital for someone who was 97 dying pretty slowly.

So as my mother grew up in Meridian, Mississippi, and Meridian, Mississippi is kind of almost the epicenter of the civil rights movement, but that's something my family never talked about, ever.

And probably fatigue. More than likely fatigue.

Because they lived through it, but I think also it was a measure to protect us as the children. It's like they don't need -- I mean, we did get -- it did come up every time we didn't want to make our beds. It was like, "We walked uphill both ways in the snow to school where there was like -- where, in addition to the uphill both ways to school, there was also the National Guard out front, and you're lucky to have schools."

But it was a very strange kind of thing to talk about my grandmother as what is now. I mean, she was in her forties and I'm in my forties now. It's a very strange thing to imagine myself in now, making the kind of decisions that one would have to make.

So this is called At the Hospital.

As she lay dying, we were left alone together while she was swimming with the voices of the dead; I dared not listen because she was never talking to me. But then, she propped herself on an elbow and said to me: I asked so much of her, so much of you and your mother and some would say it's too much. And I just can't, I can't yet say I'm sorry for it. And she lay down again, drowning in that river.

There it is. Sorry.

When They Say You Can't Go Home Again.

No one tells you the road is endless, but you will not starve. The road is strewn with apples; trees no longer able to contain their fruit or their beauty. They will not tell you that what you've called home is unrecognizable, a jumble of fallen leaves, burning. It's all consumed, and it's we who have consumed it, even its ember and ash.

Like I said, you will not starve. No one tells you this nostalgia is a kind of poison or how long, how long you must wander and despair. They never report the bodies, split from root to throat, split from bloat and want.

Meridian, Last Night.

Last night, I dreamt I went to Meridian again, and in the dream, a slight dark girl darts from the side of the house, her arms waving and waving, while a woman inside resists the building's collapse on its own emptiness.

The house is still standing and in ruin. As it always was. As always.

Of these things on earth I know: There is no time, even now, that was golden above another. Every epoch has its trials. We are human and we are falling. We are always falling down.

The past was always more menace than I had imagined. The past is both retribution and reward now that we have endured it. And it's right that we stand in its ruin, among all this longing and decay.

I was in Mississippi on Super Tuesday, which is like, what, six weeks ago or something? And it was one of the moments where there's -- I'm in this hotel that's this -- it's called The Graduate, and it's this like kind of nostalgic hotel, and it's built like kind of a circa '50s and '60s in Oxford, Mississippi, which is great in circa '50s and '60s if you're not black. And I don't think they thought about that.

So like every time I would go to my room, I felt like I was breaking and entering, like every -- and because, like, there were no black people in that hotel, probably because they knew that before I did, because I got free -- I got free hotel rooms at Hotels.com, that's how I got there.

Everyone would ask me for things, because they just assumed I was their domestic patsy, and all like the black people who were on staff were super nice, like would knock on my

door in the middle of the night, like, "Hey, I think you need pillows."

I'm like, "Didn't ask for pillows."

Like, "No, I think you'll need the pillows."

And they're right, I did need the pillows, I'm not going to lie. But I really started thinking about like how disturbing nostalgia is and like how we -- you know, the things we cut out and the things we leave in to maintain these moments that are wonderful when maybe there are no wonderful moments, it's just like the one you happen to find yourself in in that particular spot.

But, yeah, it was hell uncomfortable. And if I hadn't -- like if I had been paying for it, there would have been like a lot more words, but it was a free night at a Hotels.com, so that's what you can do to, like, look out.

Meridian, Mississippi 1951: Vice in Proper Form.

There would be a hole in the earth where a town should be. And we would be dead or low to the ground.

Dark Girl, if the world took proper shape: we would not be sheep; we were never lambs led toward slaughter. Some would take form of rodent, reptile, bird of prey. The wolves would come. Dark Girl, there are no noble creatures of this earth. If there were lions to be found, they would be lean and flesh hungry. You did not come to this world dewy and translucent

with newness; you were a kick, a shriek, a clawing in the gut to be let out.

And I am charged to guide you, show you signs for hunger, symbol for teeth. There will be lessons in camouflage and stillness. Lessons of the switchgrass and the snakes therein. There will be lessons for the blood, a lesson for the fire. Signs for stay and go. A circling: the way we hold you now, and the raptors overhead, descending.

Meridian, Mississippi 1963: My Mother Considers the Mechanics of Flight.

I want to save you, dark girl of thunderhead, dark girl falling upward. I want to tell you the voices fluttering in the dark of your body are all true:

You will leave this place, and those who would harm you will pass over. Dark Girl, even now you can't be held within your soft, slight bones. There are synapses firing all at once. First the aura, then borealis of red and yellow lights sparking your firmament, your body thundering, writhing and then thundering against the ground. What did you find in those liminal places? Consider the jewel-throated hummingbird; keep your wings by beating them faster than the human eye can see.

Did your mother stand guard, gently thrust a stick into your mouth to hold the tongue to save it?

Once upon a time I had a bad relationship, I think like everybody, and we broke up. It was one of those weird

relationships where like you're not -- it wasn't this like horrible big -- like there wasn't a scene in a bar and there was no -- like there were no bad emails. It was just like one day we looked at each other and it was over, and I just kind of like let go, like Jack at the end of Titanic, like just, phoo, and, you know, I kind of imagined him being swallowed by icy water and him just being dead to me.

But it was a very strange ending, because we were together for much longer than to just ghost each other, but it was kind of like -- it was a mutual like we're done and it was over. So when I think of the last time we saw each other, which was actually not a bad memory, I tried like -- I used this poem to kind of curate that, like it would be a better memory if it were like this and not like this, and so I kind of explored it.

And this is called The Peonies at the Bodega.

Were this a poem, and I were just arranging the sound, we would be standing in rain and not snow.

I would have left on foot and gathered my coat against weather; I would not hail a taxi. I would not raise my hand against the glass as if to gesture against mourning.

And you would not be left standing among the hothouse flowers at the bodega near Mott and Broome. When we made love that afternoon, we would have taken all our clothes off. You would have removed your left sock, for example.

In the poem I would write, the women on the street would not have noticed how much we loved or that we fairly glowed with it. Nor would they bustle by cluck-clucking and smiling knowingly.

In that poem, you would have hailed the cab yourself. You would have opened the door and shut me up in it. And I would have kept my eyes forward. I would not have watched you grow smaller and smaller through the rear window, and you would not have waved and waved and waved.

In the poem, it would be near dusk and there would be some kind of metaphor about how the earth participates in the end of things. And I would mention that the owners of bodega with were an old married couple restocking the produce as if to guard against decay. And I'd mention the flowers, and they would be peonies, and peonies would stand in for something else.

The Trouble With Lightning.

The trouble with lightning is it travels without resistance through any body of water.

The human body is just another body of water to lightning.

The trouble is that it can miss you entirely, pace the earth beside you and be drawn up your running legs and bead off your fingers like pearls.

The trouble is it won't sit in a corner and wait for you to gather it like a javelin to hoist in the direction of the deserving.

The trouble is mostly in what a man deserves.

On any given Thursday afternoon, lightning can find you sitting in the car on the highway, and bore through the sky above.

The trouble with lightning is mostly how rarely it kills a man.

If anyone has seen the movie Mississippi Burning, three men, James Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, three men who worked at the Freedom School were killed after being called about a church burning in Philadelphia, Mississippi, which is about, ah, three and a half miles north of Meridian.

What I didn't know until my grandmother was dying was that my mother and James Chaney knew each other extremely well. There actually were like three -- they lived like three blocks away from one another and had come back and forth, and sometimes James watched her and sometimes James did some stuff for my grandfather at the store. My grandfather owned a store. But I didn't quite know how intensely they knew one another.

And so my mother -- my grandmother had this question, of course, because she's kind of self-absorbed. Well, she was dying, so I guess I can give her a bye for it, but she

was -- she asked my mother like, "What was the happiest moment you had with me?"

And my mother stops for a second, and her response is, "It was that night that you taught me and my friends to dance."

And my grandmother kind of scrunched her face and realized that that night was the night that James Chaney went missing and all the men came to the house, and she took the kids to the back room and turned on the radio really, really loud and taught a dance lesson so they wouldn't have to hear what was happening in the front of the house.

And it was this moment where they kind of looked at each other like, "I can't believe that this has happened," like that this was that moment, that that was the happiest moment my mother had and this moment of absolute panic that my grandmother had. And how we remember things and what moments we remember so differently.

So this is called Meridian, Mississippi 1964: They Moaned So Much They Called It Song.

And to that music we swayed. And we called the music sweet and we measured our days between our sorrows and our joys.

Dark Girl, so great were our joys, we named you for them, prayed you would live long so that your joys would outweigh our troubles.

Do you remember the night we counted our missing, how
after the house emptied of men, I took you to the back room, I
turned on the radio and we danced?

Do you remember how they found the bodies, stacked like
lumber against the earthdam?

Did you know I came to you in the night? I watched you
in your sleep and I reached out to stroke your hair.

I went from room to room in the dark counting and
recounting my children.

Boys -- girl, those boys were stripped of their bark, and
they were huddled together as if from cold. Outside, the
women's cries bleated against the windows.

To say what I felt wasn't joy would be a lie. You were
accounted for, you were held in the walls of this house, and for
that reason, I sat in the chair in the parlor, I sang my songs
of praise, I watched the street from the inside, and I rocked
myself to and fro.

This is my two-poem warning, just because everyone needs
to know when they can go home and digest their food and maybe
watch some Empire. Is it Empire night tonight? No, it was
yesterday. But it's Hulu to Empire night. It's my Empire
night.

This is called At the Repast.

When we gathered at the house, while the men all looked
at their shoes and the women whispered baby, baby, baby, she sat

down with a fist full of paper napkins and she folded them into birds. When she filled her hands, she crossed the room to the hearth and she threw the bird into a flame, and then another and another until she destroyed all that she had created. Years later when I asked her what she meant, she couldn't remember. The worst has already happened to us, she said, what good is metaphor now?

After Forty Days, Go Marry Again.

She was only just here. That's her, that's her in the red dress, that's her, too, her fists full of balloons as if she would fly away. That's her at the bottom of the hill. She ran as fast as she could to the top, her arms wide, her cheeks flushed. She met me breathless, and she toppled the both of us. That's her, and her again, her black hair in pigtails held in yellow ball-stay barrettes. Girls of that age are particular about such things. I sleep in her room some nights with all the lights on, and everything as she left it.

There she is in Biloxi, there she is and there she is and there she is. There she is: Bits of black hair and the earrings. They say: Maybe that's not her. Look. There. The ball-stay barrettes. Yellow, with a flower stretched around. There she is at Christmas. There she is that summer she grew three inches. They say: After forty days, go marry again. But there she is, and there she is again with her friend from class. That girl is dead too. There she is at the carnival. There she

is. Her fists clenched on the balloons. There she is at the door, lunchbox in one hand and waving with the other. At night, I pretend to sleep, and there she is standing over me as if there are words left to say. There she is. There she is in the dark.

Thank you.

(Applause.)

Oh, Q and A. Sorry. My bad.

Are there any questions?

Yes.

>>PARTICIPANT: I know your, I guess, profession is a software developer.

>>TJ JARRETT: Uh-huh.

>>PARTICIPANT: But I was just wondering, what's your background in poetry, how you kind of got started writing.

>>TJ JARRETT: Actually, the background in poetry started before the software. The software design is just accidental, and it's great because I can feed myself.

My mom's an English professor, and so I read a lot, and my godmother was Paula Rankin, who is a poet and was an amazing poet and died really -- she was 45 when she died. So I would write every day, and so after a while I guess Paula thought -- because their office space -- my mom's office is here, and like Paula's office was here.

And I would write every day, and I guess Paula thought that was not going -- it was going to pass one day, and then finally she was like, "Okay. Let me look at it." And she looks at it, and then like to my face she was like, "This is awful."

And so she would give me these assignments, when I was like 12 and 13. So she'd like, "This week we're going to work on line, this week we're going to work on this" but, you know, as much as a 12-year-old or 13-year-old could do that.

Or she'd just be like, "Wow, this is really horrible." And it was always horrible, like that was her thing. And then she would pass me a book that I needed to read at that time that probably dealt with this a little better.

And so, yeah, I did that pretty much through childhood and then like, you know, wanted to have like a life and stuff and went to college for an English degree, actually. Software development happened as an accident because I can't teach children, because really I had this traumatic experience with 16-year-old girls, which that's my first class of 16-year-old girls, and they were mean, they were so mean. And I quit my job and then happened to get a job in software development because it was like the dot com era and everybody did it. Like everybody was like, "You'll make an bajillion dollars," which you don't, but they thought you would. And I had taken some, like, coding classes in college, because I went to a liberal arts college, a liberal arts school. Yeah.

Yes.

>>PARTICIPANT: I want to ask about music.

>>TJ JARRETT: Uh-huh.

>>PARTICIPANT: There's three poems in particular that I'm thinking of that you read.

>>TJ JARRETT: Uh-huh.

>>PARTICIPANT: The first is the Stevie Wonder poem.

>>TJ JARRETT: Uh-huh.

>>PARTICIPANT: The second is the poem about the levee, which concludes, if I am remembering correctly --

>>TJ JARRETT: With song.

>>PARTICIPANT: -- with song.

>>TJ JARRETT: The last word.

>>PARTICIPANT: And the third is the Mississippi Burning poem.

>>TJ JARRETT: Uh-huh.

>>PARTICIPANT: And the question is this: Do you think that there is a skepticism towards the power of song in your poetry? Is it the case that you think that the power of song is necessarily distorting of the historical record, and does that explain your own poetry's proximity to speech, or am I missing something?

>>TJ JARRETT: I do think I have a certain skepticism for memory. I'm absolutely skeptical of memory and any kind of instrument that tries to harness that, in the same way that that

moment with my mother where mom's like, "This is the happiest moment I had in my life," and my grandma's like, "What the fuck you talking about?" I think that's exactly what you said, and how those moments are curated and how we curate those moments.

And I think of song, in particular kind of like I think of epic poems, of they're recordings, they're memories, they're like they're curating that moment, and so I am always skeptical of how we talk about particularly memory, how we curate history and how we pass that from place to place. I think there absolutely a deep skepticism that I have.

>>PARTICIPANT: Can I ask a follow-up?

>>TJ JARRETT: Uh-huh.

>>PARTICIPANT: Which is given the investment in song as a vehicle for the transmission of cultural memory in African-American culture, do you see yourself as kind of making a critique of like a normative account of song, or is this just something that it's sort of more idiosyncratic to me.

>>TJ JARRETT: I think it's more idiosyncratic to me, and I don't think it's a big thought that I wandered into. I mean, I know that I am at root a cynic, because I don't -- there are a lot of poems where like, you know, I'm -- like there's the one, like the poem I read, the Astronauts poem, which is actually one of the very few autobiographical ones that I read or that I write. I rarely write autobiographical poems. I had to actually call somebody for, like, give me a lifeline, is this

kind of how it happened. Like, is like this -- so I could contextualize it, because you never really know, as an individual, what your context is. Like you kind of need to think about the audience and how to transmit that and how to get that to someone else, so --

Questions? Yes.

>>PARTICIPANT: I guess piggybacking off of that and the idea of memory, you mentioned reading old newspapers and clearly talking with older family members. So how does -- I guess how does research play into your writing process, or is it --

>>TJ JARRETT: It's a lot. It's a lot. It's a lot. There are plenty -- I mean, I do a ton of research before I even think about -- before I can write poems about a moment, I have probably read three books around that moment before I even think about putting it to paper, and because there's a -- there's the intellectual part and then there's the actual like physically -- I consider like writing a poem is like physically embodying it and then wanting to transmit that, so I want to make sure that the facts are right because I'm -- one needs to respect that in the same way that we talked over dinner, like one has to respect the persona. If one is like talking about a historical figure, I need to know exactly what that historical figure has done over time in the same way that I need to know that moment. But apparently that -- history is just my obsession. I'm going to obsess about that. I'm letting

that -- I'm accepting that now. I'm just kind of embracing this is who I am.

But there's a ton of research that goes in. There's stacks and stacks. When I was doing the lynching poems, there were books and books and old newspaper clippings and sitting on my kitchen table that every -- because I had not written a book, it's kind of creepy when someone walks in your house and like "What the fuck are you doing? Why are there so many" -- like, "Why are there lynching photographs on your kitchen table?" Like it's a hard thing to explain, but I needed to like have that. I needed to see it and touch and know what that was and kind of -- I would actually take the photos and have, you know, copies of newspaper articles from different locations for each one so I could actually kind of know exactly what that was and research it very well. And sometimes you have poems that come out that are like, you know, ten lines, that's the best I could do. But I'd have to know that so that not only can I understand it, but I can lead an audience through it as well, and as historically accurate as I know how.

>>PARTICIPANT: Thanks.

>>TJ JARRETT: Questions? Yes.

>>PARTICIPANT: So, and this could just be of what you've read for us tonight, but it seems like a lot of what you have read you do very well, you treat the history with respect and skepticism, but it seems -- it's been interesting for me, as a

software writer, it's all very pre -- I mean, it has to do a lot with civil rights, and rightfully so, but is there more recent skepticism that you see as far as this new digital age goes, because a lot of it's writing in newspaper and news and like the Bible and whatnot.

>>TJ JARRETT:

Are you talking about the digital age and how I --

>>PARTICIPANT: Yeah.

>>TJ JARRETT: Yeah. Like you can't, like, re-post anything on Facebook. I mean, like wait, wait, whoa, whoa, whoa, like is this real? Is that -- I've gotta double-check and make sure that it's not satire or something, because we're like -- we fall for everything.

>>PARTICIPANT: And my question is: Is it so much more powerful trying to connect with something so much farther away than it is trying to connect with something in this moment?

>>TJ JARRETT: I think it's, again, context. It's really hard to get -- like I have these moments and just like -- and this is just me. I'm like, "Donald Trump, what the hell? Like how did we get to this place?" And trying to think about and contextualizing outside of my lifeline is not easier, but there's less noise as contextualizing what has happened. Like that moment I'm sitting at like, you know, this horrible nostalgic building that I feel like I'm breaking and entering to, and listening to the Super Tuesday results in Mississippi,

listening to Donald Trump like winning by a lot, I'm just like how? Where? I never saw this happening, which is kind of creepy. And I think it's just the noise that we bring to our lives. Like we're not like -- no one is necessarily being historian to their own life ever because you don't know what -- and this is like -- this is my software mind working. You don't know what data you're pulling into the moment until after you're far away from the moment enough to actually contextualize and figure out, "Oh, this happened here and this happened. Oh, this is how this happened." I still haven't figured out Donald Trump, but like "These things happened" happens over really kind of figuring out what data we're pulling from moment to moment, and I just don't -- I still haven't figured out how to do that on a personal level.

Any other questions? Yes.

>>PARTICIPANT: Do you write every day?

>>TJ JARRETT: Hell no. I got a job. I write -- I do read every day, though, and there's a -- I think reading and writing are very similar. They are very similar errands. I need about two to three hours to get a full thought, for me to download my whole thought into something, so I will write notes about what I'm going to write about or I'll be like, well, that's a really cool line. I have a notebook that I write the notes in. But I don't, no, I don't write every -- good for

them. Good for those people. There are people who do, but no, I do not write every day.

Any other questions? No?

So thank you for having me. Thank you so much.

(Applause.)

>>KIKI PETROSINO: All right. If you would like to buy books, they are back there at the Carmichaels table, and I think that TJ would be happy to sign anything that you might want to bring to her.

So thank you again, and we'll see you next fall for another Axton Reading Series semester.