

# National Poetry Month Featured Poet: TC Tolbert

written by Entropy | April 25, 2017



Stay tuned all month for poet interviews in honor of [National Poetry Month](#).

---

## 1) Why poetry?

Glossolalia is another word for speaking in tongues. For Pentecostals, it is considered one of several gifts of the Holy Spirit. The grace of no longer being burdened by linearity. A momentary relief from the expectations (persuasion, explication, or sense making) of everyday speech. I grew up Pentecostal and at 20, I finally had my own experience of glossolalia. Before this, all of my previous encounters had been a bit terrifying, even if I couldn't look away. In the church I grew up in, Sister Hazel's body regularly rose from the pew like a snake – her right hand trembling in the air above her head, her voice a song of strange, while the rest of her body buckled and jumped as though she'd been hit. There was a lot of crying back then. I thought my queerness was a devil. I wanted it out of me but then again, I didn't. Krista Tippett says most churches think of *the body as an entry point for danger*. I didn't disagree with them. Let me say it plain.

For most of my life I've felt broken, not just tarnished. There has long been a kind of geographic darkness, a landscape of violence in me that I have feared (and that feels, to me, particularly Southern and religious) and of which I am deeply ashamed. This is less about being angry that someone did something awful to me as a kid (although they did and god did not protect me from it) and more about being afraid that I deserved the awful and that awful is what I create. As Adam Phillips points out in an essay on agoraphobia, "James' open space is full of potential predators, but in Freud's open space a person may turn into a predator." The open space is always writing. Always the body. Always other bodies. Always the voice. Always the page.

As a protection from this fear and this pain, I've spent plenty of time contemplating suicide – sometimes more actively than others but the gist is this, I've always held onto it as an option. There was something about

knowing I could leave this body if I needed to that made me feel safe. Thus, much of my writing (and my living) employs, enacts, or encourages erasure. Or at least hide and seek. It is slippery. It enjoys white space. On some level, no doubt, transitioning was a way of killing my most vulnerable, marked self and an attempt to make peace with men – a group of people I've long considered the enemy. I'm trying. Indeed, as my embodiment changed so rapidly (I suddenly really was "the man"), I was frozen by a multifaceted terror that, at its heart, was simple. I was afraid of becoming the thing I longed to be, needed to be, hated to be, and asked to be so named.

The cadence of a good Pentecostal preacher denies contradiction. There is a surety there, a solidity that exists in absolute tension with the logical ambivalence of so much in the Bible. My writing often depends on this sort of false confidence – or rather, a confidence that is real but that is based not on knowledge, per say, but on trust – a faith not so much in consistency but change. The uncertainty of a miraculously confounding world is resisted (or complemented) primarily through the rhythm – a driving – where the full bore of language becomes a comfort. I saw my Papaw have hands laid down on him and be healed of cancer. Tongues, healing, prophecy. If there is poetry in that, let it rain.

## **2) Do you feel like poetry is more or less important & relevant today?**

For me personally? Both. I'm assuming this will become liberating one day but for now it feels quite disorienting, if not devastating.

For fellow writers? No idea, but I'm seeing a whole lot of poets try out prose genres (primarily nonfiction) (and I include myself in this group) lately and I can't tell if that's a statement on the importance and/or relevance of poetry or if it has something to do with the "professionalization" of poetry (via the MFA) and the subsequent emphasis on poetics and/or marketability, or maybe we're just looking to scare the shit out of ourselves by writing lines that go all the way out to the right margin or maybe we've got some fear of commitment or maybe we're curious about form and what one allows that another doesn't. Probably some combination of these and some other things I haven't thought of yet but I'm curious (concerned?) about the expectation (one I'm seeing a lot now in creative writing positions) that poets be able to teach some form of prose as well. Perhaps this last sentence is pointing less to writers and more to academia which, as a profit-driven institution, of course loathes poetry but loves poetry programs. It's all very confusing.

For folks who aren't writers? I don't know – it seems to me the percentages are consistent in terms of who turns to poetry, who reads it regularly, etc (I don't see evidence for any so-called death of poetry) but I will say I've spent the last year in the company of more non-writers than ever in my life and in those circles, too, there are just as many assholes and generous folks (and some combination thereof) as in any poetry community I've been a part of.

## **3) Tell us about one poet who has greatly influenced you as a writer and a thinker.**

Akilah Oliver. Her book, *A Toast in the House of Friends*, and the recordings on her [PennSound](#) page have been, at times, the equivalent of breath.

**4) Tell us about one lesser-known contemporary poet who you'd like more people to know about.**

I was recently asked to be a judge for Tucson Youth Poetry Slam's Championship event and the featured performer was Toluwanimi Oluwafunmilayo Obiwole, youth poet laureate of Denver. About half way through her set, I realized my mouth was open and I was pushing my hand into it. I wanted to both cry out and never speak again.

<http://youngfuturists.theroot.com/toluwanimi-obiwole-1792933718>

[https://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/crossroads/own\\_words/page\\_40/](https://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/crossroads/own_words/page_40/)

**5) Share with us one of your recent poems and tell us a little bit about its context.**

Dear Melissa

A gray horse painted  
on the side of a building –  
holy – to be caught

abandoned – inside  
the self – every neck and back  
muscle quivering

~

My white face over  
my white face – who  
would not crack

if they needed to  
the shell of a walnut with  
the heel of a boot

~

I love the fully  
inflated tire upright in  
gravel – near the car

the finches threaten  
one another simply through  
acts of moving close

~

I long to meet who  
I most fear – my mother and

her body in mine

tracing the boy I  
see his mother – her hand out-  
lined under us both

~

the empty garden  
partially tilled – everything  
hurts to be so loved

the gate is inside  
of me – I am holding it  
open with a rock

Dear Melissa

The unbroken neck  
turning to hear the last leaves  
of stargazer fall

Every morning god  
I make of my body a  
bridge, a cat, a corpse

Last spring I was in a car accident that displaced 4 ribs. The healing process, although still ongoing, was at its most intense during the 6 months following the accident. During that time, I couldn't sit for any extended period of time (anything over 15-20 minutes was excruciating) and I couldn't read, type, or write. In other words, I was completely cut off from the tools I use not only to make a living but to understand the world and my place in it. There's no beautifying it – in addition to the physical pain, that was an emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually demanding time. Anyway, as I lay in bed (and on the couch, and mostly on the ground), I would watch and envy the birds. I learned their names and behaviors and began to notice (wake up to, fall in love with) the many slight shifts which precede and then create large movements. I became a student of accretion and accumulation. I wrote haiku by speaking 5, then 7, then 5 syllables into my phone.

All of this waiting and watching for my body to change brought to mind my experience of going on testosterone (and thus entering into a physical gender transition back in 2006). Although there are, of course, many differences between a gender transition and recovery from an accident or illness, some things they seem to have in common are the need for interminable patience, surrender to asking for help, accurately seeing the flaw in capitalism that says we are only worth what we produce (and rejecting that logic), in addition to holding the heart open for whatever might come and then change.

Lying there, I kept wanting to talk to the girl I had been – Melissa – and get her take on things. I wanted to know what she made of the life I was living, had I made her proud. This turned into several epistolary poems to Melissa – a way of bringing her into my world and showing her around.

---

**TC Tolbert** often identifies as a trans and genderqueer feminist, collaborator, dancer, and poet but really s/he's just a human in love with humans doing human things. The author of *Gephyromania* (Ahsakta Press 2014) and 3 chapbooks, TC is also co-editor (along with Trace Peterson) of *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics* (Nightboat Books 2013). S/he is currently studying to be an EMT and spends his summers leading wilderness trips for Outward Bound. TC was recently named Tucson's Poet Laureate. His favorite thing in the world is Compositional Improvisation (which is another way of saying being alive). [www.tctolbert.com](http://www.tctolbert.com)