AWP Award Series Reading and Reception

4:45–6:15 p.m.

Grand Ballroom D, Kansas City Convention Center, Level 2

Event Outline and Access Documents

4:45  Initial welcome by emcee James Tate Hill: Make yourselves comfortable, grab a drink from the open bar.

4:53  Opening welcome from Board Member and Publications committee Chair DeMisty D. Bellinger

4:56  Official welcome from James Tate Hill, about the AWP Award Series, reminder about 2024 submission deadline of February 28 and 2024 judges

5:00  Introducing Red Hen Press and 2022 Grace Paley Award Winner, E.P. Tuazon, author of Professional Lola

5:03  E.P. Tuazon will read the following excerpt from Professional Lola

Professional Lola

When my mom told me that we were hiring a professional lola for my nephew’s party, I pretended to misunderstand her even though I knew exactly what she meant.

“A clown named Lola?” I said, hoping she had made the more appropriate choice for a five-year-old’s birthday celebration.

When my mom told me that we were hiring a professional lola for my nephew’s party, I pretended to misunderstand her even though I knew exactly what she meant.

“A clown named Lola?” I said, hoping she had made the more appropriate choice for a five-year-old’s birthday celebration.
She shushed me and massaged more salt and lemon into chicken thighs, a habit she didn’t drop since eating food foraged from the Payatas Dump as a child. Even when they came pumped with antibiotics, sterilized twice, prepackaged and freezer-burned here in the States, *manok* didn’t taste safe to her until it was lemon-drenched and salted clean. “*Sus. A lola!* What is wrong with your *tainga*? We will pick her up at nine, *Sabado. Mula sa simbahan!*”

A while back, this strange trend spread through the Filipino community. It started with an ad on TFC. For $100 an hour, a *propesynal na artista* would come to your house and act like your deceased lola. A woman put on makeup in the mirror and crowned herself with a grey wig while the website and number flashed on the bottom of the screen. They didn’t come as anyone else. No one could request a grandma, an abuela, a bubbe, a nonna, or even a nai nai. Just a lola.

I thought it was a joke at first, then friends and relatives started doing it. Pictures of them with “their lolas” staring blankly into the lens, TikToks of others’ “lolas” missing the high notes to “their” favorite Sharon Cuneta songs. They looked and sounded like the real deals. Lolas I’ve only seen in old picture frames, Instagram tributes, and refrigerator magnets were taking on new lives beyond the grave via professional impersonators.

Some say its success was thanks to Facebook. Others, word of mouth and maybe some connection with a casino scheme to get more Filipinos afraid of their own mortality and on the next morning bus to the closest penny slots. Me, I liked to attribute it to the Filipino obsession with resurrection. In San Pedro Cutud, just north of Manila, a man has crucified himself every Easter for the past thirty years. Why would pretending to be someone’s lola for a birthday party be any different from pretending to be Jesus to perform the Stations of the Cross? The acts were more divine than they were ridiculous.
However, despite its popularity, my mom was never the type to get into fads or fake miracles. We were traditional in the way where if it wasn’t broke, we didn’t fix it, and if someone died, they stayed dead. Whenever its commercial came on, my mother would click her tongue, shake her head, and do the sign of the cross, muttering half a Hail Mary and half a curse. I thought for sure she would never hire one, but, there she was, having already paid her $400 contradiction.

“So, which one will it be?” I asked the question while also fishing for a reason. “Lola Basilia.” My mom said, getting under the chicken’s skin.

Her mom, Lola Basilia, was everyone’s favorite lola. It was the obvious choice, but it didn’t answer my real question. “Not Lola Adella?”

“Sobra! You know your tatay couldn’t even stand his own ina. What makes you think people would want to see her? Ay nako!”

“So. What does she do? Is she going to do magic tricks or make balloon animals?” “Ay nako! Hindi ko alam! It’s for the olds. Tama na, I’m cooking. Do your homework.” She said, waving me off with her frustration and chicken juices. I knew if she was doing it for “the olds”—my uncles, aunties, and anyone else older than them—it was out of her control. At Lola Basilia’s funeral, I did a eulogy that killed. It made the whole family laugh, cry, and remember how great she was. I ended it with the first time she taught me how to eat with my hands. Seven-year-old me saw her eating her meryenda of salted shrimp, fermented egg, tomato, and rice and asked her for some. Our kind, wonderful Lola Basilia scooped a little bit of everything and held it out for me with her bare hands. I took it like someone accepting a love letter or $20 to go to the movies. What was dripping from our fingers was her heart.
Throughout her life, she freely handed her love out to me this way. I didn’t even have to ask. Even when I confessed to her what I couldn’t confess to my mom, even when I confessed that I was bakla for boys and not malibog for girls like the rest of her apos, she scooped up whatever was on her plate for me, her balong, her baby boy. How this professional lola was going to live up to that was beyond my understanding.

Then the day came. We were to pick up Lola Basilia where we usually had: in front of the church by her apartment. I didn’t expect her to actually be there. What I expected was an old Filipino woman who never scrounged for food to feed her family, never kept her nephew’s secrets, and never smelled so much of baby oil everyone was afraid to light a match around her. What I expected was some shadow of what she was, a cheap imitation at best. But, by some miracle, there she was. From the car window, I saw Lola Basilia slouching in front of the steps to St. Dominic’s. She had on her pink knitted cap, her giant sunglasses, her Sulu pearl earrings perched above her red knitted scarf, her faded brown coat draped over her shoulders she only kept because she thought it made her look like Jacqueline Kennedy which she pronounced “Jake-lin Candy”, and her Reebok “Shaqnosis” hi-top sneakers my Kuya Bing bought her in the 90s and never took off. Had I not known already that it was an actress, I might have thought we were picking up a ghost.

5:11 Introducing University of Georgia Press and 2022 Sue William Silverman Award Winner, Jessica Hendry Nelson Joyrides Through the Tunnel of Grief

5:14 Jessica Hendry Nelson will read the following excerpt from Joyrides Through the Tunnel of Grief

An Impossible Mercy
Nevertheless, that second to last morning I grabbed the kitchen trash can, looked inside, and screamed. There, a shredded roll of toilet paper, cardboard included, the mouse splayed majestically in the middle, and beside her five tiny newborns, blister-taut and wriggling, stilled their suckling.

I laughed. I dropped the trashcan.

“Babies,” Jack whispered, having sidled up beside me.

“I was just surprised,” I think I said.

When I say we were giddy, I mean we’d staggered into the mountain cabin in Vermont like novice hikers many days missing. The cabin was on loan from a friend, a benediction offered selflessly, or because she could not stand to see us this way, having come so far only to choke on a patch of false morels three months before the wedding. We were, what, thirty years old? Twelve years attendant at a teenaged love affair to which we had both overstayed.

This was a long time ago now, before the tawdry revelations and clichéd betrayals. Before the months of silence during which we severed, slowly and then all at once. Then the year of solitude I spent marching in circles, barely clad and barefoot in our backyard, watching the stream down the hill disappear beneath leaves, freeze, thaw, then thunder.

Oh, but I was so bereaved! So singularly stricken!

There were dildos in the closet (his) and too many empty wine bottles in recycling (hers). Achy silences while our limbs lost the heft of the other, longer and thicker than they’d ever been: the silences and the limbs. Silence of the Limbs, I thought. Ha.
It is not so baffling now, to understand how we had reached the other side of ten years only find our wildernesses were of different climes. His, a verdant sexual jungle, rife with biodiversity and Tarzanian acrobatics. Mine, a parched desert, he’d insisted more than once.

Ah, but he never found it, did he? My desert wilderness radiant as an O’Keeffe painting: vast, viscous, endlessly unfolding. He saw only abstraction.

Anyway, I could not raise a child in the jungle, and he did not want a child in his jungle.

But back then it had seemed impossible we would split. We had hired an officiant, after all, a former ad exec turned microgreen farmer who lived down the street. Jack wore corduroy, for god’s sake. I ordered Cornish hens from the grocer. We’d bought a house. There were trees in our yard and we owned those, too. I knew his mother’s freckles by heart, his nieces’ favorite bands and boy crushes, had watched his father die slowly one August, having fallen from a tree onto the concrete below like Autumn’s first sacrifice.

It is possible that during those three lovely days in the mountains of Vermont, we were living out the end of our outsized love affair even if we didn’t know it right away. It smacked of naivety and Thoreau, our being there, and it is possible we made love outside and contracted poison ivy in inconvenient places. I’m certain we were playing hooky from work, both of us half braindead from the mindless occupations we’d found to afford us our dwindling days, just as I’m certain we were already grieving. I think he made me eggs over an open flame. I think I called a friend and cried while I snuck a smoke behind the outhouse. I think we played Spite & Malice by candlelight, a card game my grandmother had taught me when I was five-years-old and never lost.

He did not like this game.
That second to last morning, though, twelve black eyes stared up at us, frozen in fear. I wanted to tender the mice into the woods and retain use of the trashcan, but he wouldn't have it.

“They’ll die if we do that,” he said. But of course, I didn’t believe him.

Slowly, gently, he bore them deep into the woods behind the cabin and left the trashcan there intact. He moved so carefully, like a child carrying his grandmother’s fancy teapot. I kissed his mouth, chamomile breath warmed my face, and for a moment I thought maybe.

The next morning, our last, we crept over in our sweatpants and reckless hair. We clutched our coffee mugs and shivered. We sipped and sipped.

When I tell you she took mercy on her children, I mean their heads were chewed off. I mean most of their organs were gone, eaten, their fur in bloody clumps, the toilet paper wet and black. It means she pajaeked and chose to save herself.

It means she was gone, baby, gone.

When I say it was a gruesome scene, what I mean is that five tiny skulls were shattered, and all the bones picked clean. She was wretched with mercy, is what I mean. What Jack did next, though, that must have been it—the moment I accepted, finally, that it was time to go—watching him bury those battered bodies in the brush.

We cleaned the cabin and packed our bags. He loaded the car with the precision of an engineer. Already, slipshod bones were becoming dirt. Somewhere, the mother was foraging her next meal; scenting a new partner; one miniature, glistening egg readying the channel.
As we descended the mountain, I took his hand but it was limp. And this, our impossible mercy. Our good love turning over.

5:19  Introducing University of Nebraska Press and 2022 AWP Prize for the Novel Winner Parul Kapur and *Inside the Mirror*

5:17  Parul Kapur will read the following excerpt from *Inside the Mirror*

**Part One**

**The Witnesses and Their Dreams**

**Chapter One**

Inside the gunnysacks were the makings of a man. There were two bags, roughly dividing the bones for the upper and lower halves of the body, and Jaya had not wanted them inside the bedroom. But her father said they should not be stored on the balcony during the monsoons, where she’d kept them last month, because they might start to smell in a heavy rain. The servant boy had climbed a stool and placed the sacks on top of the wardrobe at her father’s instruction, her mother grimacing as the thin boy raised the bundles overhead. Jaya had been told to ask the servant to retrieve the sacks for her whenever she was ready to work in the afternoons. Instead, she had moved the rootless bones once again. She’d removed a pile of household wreckage from the corner between the wardrobe and the wall—a broken towel rack, loose shelves, boxes of
childhood belongings—and pushed the bone-sacks into the space, where she could easily reach them.

Today she had pulled out both bags, not only the one containing the bones of the upper body, which she had to mark up. She hesitated before removing the rib cage and placing it on an old sheet spread over the dhurrie on the floor. She glanced behind her—the door was shut. No one liked to see her laying the bones on the bedroom floor and taking her red chalk to draw a line where a muscle originated, and marking in blue chalk where the muscle inserted. Now she took out the brownish basin of the pelvis, searched for the long shaft of the thigh, and found a fully formed foot, all the knotty bones threaded together. These were new bones to her; she had not dared to assemble them like this before.

The first couple of times she’d set out to do her assignment, she had asked Kamlesh to stay in the room on the pretext of holding open Gray’s Anatomy for her. Searching inside the sacks was frightening, all sorts of forms coming into her hands, rough protrusions and smooth cavities. She’d have to pull out a number of bones until she found the ones for the arm that they were dissecting in college. Her twin had frowned and asked to leave, looking so distraught that Jaya realized she would have to do her work in privacy. If their grandmother happened to be in her alcove at the back of the bedroom, which the three of them shared, Jaya would ask her to shift to another room and Bebeji would rise from her bed, taking with her the many newspapers she read religiously. Bebeji found it indecent for a person to handle human remains.

From her writing table, Jaya fetched her pen and ink bottle and tore a sheet from a tablet of drawing paper. She tacked it to a small plank she used as an easel. She sat on the floor, leaned against Kamlesh’s curio cabinet, and considered the skull with its clenched set of teeth and hollow eyes, the winged whole of the rib cage, the rod of a femur, and beneath a gap of white
sheet the fanlike foot. The morgue prepared the bones from the bodies of the unclaimed dead found in the roads and railway stations; each first-year medical student was partnered with a fresh skeleton.

Here were the pieces of a man. Who had he been? Jaya drew the rib cage with a slower hand. The trunk of the sternum and looping branches of ribs needed close attention to be given form as a whole, with lines and shading. A splotch of ink spread on the half-made foot, the toes sharp as pincers. A thought came to her: How do you become someone? She wrote the words like a banner in a fluttering script and capped the pen, lifting the board from her lap.

For a moment she let herself drift, closing her eyes, as she tried to feel some connection to the man. Moving onto the bedsheets, she slipped a few feet away from the fragmented figure she had laid out. Aligning her body parallel to his, she lay down, wondering if she could assess the man’s height, discern something about him.

The bell rang, the front door banged shut. Heerabai must have answered; Jaya could never hear the maidservant’s barefoot movements in the flat. Clicking steps hurried down the passage. Their mother called out, “You’ve come, Kamlesh?” Jaya was pushing herself up when her sister opened the door and caught her sitting beside the partially assembled skeleton. Her twin made a face, clutching a parcel to her chest. “What are you doing? Making the whole thing up?”

“I wanted to try drawing it.” Jaya stood up and arranged the pleats of her sari. Her nervous hand went to her hair, which was bound in a neat plait down her back.

“They want you to draw the full skeleton?”

“No. I wanted to see how the bones fit together.”
“Just like that?” Kamlesh squinted at her.

“Yah—just like that,” said Jaya, bending over to gather her art materials, then the bones.

5:25  Introducing University of Pittsburgh Press and 2022 Donald Hall Prize winner Sahar Muradi and *Octobers*

5:28  Sahar Muradi will read the following poems from *Octobers*

*words by which to tell time*

صلح

*peace*

a word that ends silently

a word whose feet never touch the ground

۸۳

سال

38 *years*

not unlike

۰۳

اشک سال

30 *ashk sal*

thirty tears old

بیوه

*widow*
could be

without

and

without and

without her and

her conjunction

the coincidence of two heavenly bodies

at the same celestial longitude

without her heavenly half

2 million

2 million halves

in heaven

weapon

so near

how one might

use one

for the other

as in drone
bomb

a word that ends silently
a word whose feet never touch the ground
here

بمب

a word with a tail
in another country
a tail that lands clearly, firmly

a sound that splits
their mouths
My father was an idea from Afghanistan. From Kabul. From Chindawol. Home of the Qizilbash. The red-hatted. The crimson-crowned. A balloon in twelve parts. One for each imam.

In my mind,
I trace your bony cheek.
Two bumps of earlobe.
God is as close
as the soft of the ear.
Photographs erupt:
The long space
in my eyes.

Had I known them. Or how to lay my head on the stone. To drop my arms at my side in prayer. Had I known how they’d wash his body. Or that only the men could carry him. Or how to wail like a good woman. How to answer when they said “zindagi saret bashad.” May life keep over you.

I rubbed your feet
under the sky blue blanket.
Six blankets.
The oval of your mouth,
drying.
We took turns.
The yellow sponge.
Your teeth
in the styrofoam
cup.

Wouldn’t it have been different if I were not in these un-United States? If family were not marbles scattered. If I hadn’t grown up so far from the community. A community. So lacking of a net, that I mirrored my father in his interiority, in his unsettledness in his own being. Wouldn’t it have been entirely different had we remained in Afghanistan? In so many ways, of course. And yet, somehow, wouldn’t we have lost so much less? Wasn’t that what he was always saying, circling the wormhole of his regrets?

His regrets coupled with romance the way exile courts imagination. What could have been. What should have. And shadows the present. On if only’s he raised a family.

You that what?
That once?
That long?
That should forever?
You what?
You—my.
Irrelevant—all.
I keep coming back.
Faithfully.
To empty.

Had he not left Kabul. Had he not left New York. Had he not worked like a dog. Had they not left us long hours to work like dogs. Had we spoken right, dressed right. Had we not left for school. Had we returned home. Had we married right. Had he not smoked, drank, gambled, faced Qibla so late in life. Had we ever faced Qibla.

Had he not wished into the vacuum of his own father. Had his father touched him except with the back of his hand. Had he not worked for his father. Had he not worked for him for free. Had he not watched his father bring women to the house. Had he not watched his mother draw them baths and
serve them tea. Had he himself, with his beautiful bride, not frantically checked behind the doors of their new home. Had he not left his home to squeeze into the trunk of a Volkswagen in the dead of night. Had he not crossed so many borders to freedom. Had freedom not meant becoming a dog to new masters.

“Why do we blush before death?”

Trauma is a door simultaneously open and shut.

*It’s true—I saw you shy.*
Ghazal for Mothers & Tongues

It may be a broken, a shrill mother tongue,  
But I’m raising my daughter in my ill mother tongue.

Translating Seuss and Nagara on the fly.  
“Siya-o-safyel” I’m fine, but at “zebra” I’m still, mother tongue.

The air is English, the water too.  
How will you get past her gill, Mother Tongue?

Morning and night, I call maadar.  
What’s the word for guilt, mother or tongue?

A bat is a leather butterfly; turtle, a stone frog.  
Dari, 1; English, nil. Mothertongue!!

We are writing our own kitab, you and I:  
Oh, the Things They Try to Kill: mothers & tongues.

“You climb zeena, get moon,” she instructs.  
I’m over the mahtaab—each sprinkle of mother tongue.

In a breath, a fist. In its bill, a mother’s tongue.

5:36 Closing remarks from James Tate Hill, reminder to pick up award-winning books here or at the bookfair, reminder to enter the 2024 Award Series

5:40–6:15 Book signing and conversation; open bar remains open