

Hauntology

JULENE KYLE

Kelly Gray's journey into writing, whether it be poetry, nonfiction, or other forms of creative expression, wasn't necessarily inspired by a specific event or moment of inspiration. Instead, it was more of a "survival skill," as she describes it, born out of an environment where her voice and perspective were undervalued. Growing up, she felt the need to communicate with those who did appreciate her perspective, and that's where her urge to write originated. Kelly notes "There was always something about poetry that felt special to me."

When asked about how she thinks poems are meant to be read, she believes that whether poems should be read out loud or experienced silently on the page depends on the reader and the work itself. She personally pays close attention to how she uses the page while writing, but part of her revision process involves reading poems aloud, often in the solitude of her room. Occasionally, she even records herself reading them to "grasp how the sounds are formed in her mouth and how they hang in the air." This duality reflects her ideal audience, a combination of silent readers and those who listen to the words spoken.

Kelly reflects on her favorite poem, Sylvia Plath's "The Rabbit Catcher," which she admires for its tension, hints of violence, and exploration of patriarchy. Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was an American poet, novelist, and short story writer, renowned for her confessional style of writing. She is best known for her poetry, particularly the posthumously published collection *Ariel*,

which explores themes of mental illness, despair, and the struggle for identity. However, Kelly confesses that her favorite poems are constantly changing, and at the moment, she's deeply captivated by Diane Suess's work. Diane Suess is a contemporary American poet and writer known for her hard-hitting and tangible style. Suess was born in Michigan, and her work often explores the complexities of human emotion, relationships, and the natural world. She has published several critically-acclaimed collections of poetry, including *Four-Legged Girl*, *Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl*, and *Frank Sonnets*. Diane's writing is what Kelly describes as "powerful, visceral, and scathing", qualities that resonates with Kelly herself and push her creativity.



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In terms of her own favorite work, she doesn't pinpoint a single favorite poem. Instead, she emphasizes her manuscript *The Mating Calls // of a // Specter*, which was chosen by Justin Philip Reed and *The Tusculum Review* as the winner of the 2024 Poetry Chapbook Prize. She sees her poems as a constellation, interconnected and unable to be separated. They collectively communicate what she wants to convey, and this manuscript represents the most rewarding investment of her effort. "These metamorphoses let themselves out of the vein of metaphor." Reed states in his own words, praising Kelly, "The idea that incredible moments must be—somehow, perhaps by artificial flirtation with doubt—earned does not stand in this book; lose your mind." More of what Reed says about her work is included on *The Tusculum Review's* website.

When asked about his own poetic views on Kelly's chapbook, Professor Josh Martin, instructor at Tusculum University, shares its "complexity" and what makes it so good that "you can't put it down due to the risks it takes on the page. The unique voice and incorporation of surrealism set it apart from much modern poetry." He goes on to share his thoughts about the chapbook's theme: "The exploration of trauma is a huge theme. We don't get a sense of [the speaker] until the end of the poem, that is when we get a chance to hear the specter's voice."

Kelly's upcoming chapbook delves into the theme of hauntology, focusing on a narrator who cannot let go of the traumatic events that

lead to their assault and death. It also explores the themes of rape culture, rural life, and the impact of violence within family lineages. To her, the concept of hauntology plays a crucial role in creating a world that holds the narrator and engages with the notion of ghosts and spirits. She intentionally avoids describing the specific incident of the narrator's death in her work and instead focuses on the lasting impact of traumatic events and the inability to let go of them. "What was most important to me," Kelly comments, "was looking at ongoing incidences throughout our lives that stick to our bodies and end up with a feeling of not being able to let go."

When asked more about the concept of hauntology, Kelly was enthusiastic to respond. "Whereas ontology is the study of 'being, of existence,' in many ways, hauntology stands on the other side of the page—the non-being, the non-existence." This philosophical term was first introduced by Jacques Derrida, who used it to examine how the principles of Marxism return to haunt the West in "spectral form." Hauntology has evolved into a phenomenon where cultural specters from the past resurface because "they can't let go, or because we can't let them go" as Kelly says. Katy Shaw, to whom Kelly refers, wrote *Hauntology, The Presence of the Past in 21st Century Literature*. Kelly quotes from the book: "Hauntology destabilizes space as well as time and encourages an 'existential orientation' in the haunted subject, making the living consider the precarious boundary between being and non-being." She also suggests that



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hauntology has significantly influenced her work and invites further exploration describing it as a “rabbit hole” of thought:

The birth of a ghost is a replacement of anatomy,
a glassing of features,
your breasts, if you have them, become harbingers of wind
swept hair of tulle, the back of a deer’s leg marks your path,
hovers. You only get one hundred handprints a century.

When asked about her creative journey writing *The Mating Calls // of a // Specter*, she says it was an intricate process marked by evolution and introspection. It began with a collection of murder ballads in poem form; however, as she delved deeper into the genre, she started to feel distanced away from it. “It felt gendered and harmful in a way that I was uncomfortable with.” She wrote through email, “I submitted a few of the poems and ended up withdrawing them . . . I felt like I was subjecting people to unjustified violence.” Yet, from this trial of uncertainty, she began to find a voice through other themes. “The estuaries, coastline, a young ghost, injustices upon a body, sensuality. Cows and barns and football teams. Puberty! Desire! I started to move murder off the page and ended up with a specter who was full of interrogation.” Kelly began to embark on a journey to give life to

a spectral figure who transcended narratives of death. This specter was no longer defined by her death but by the multitude of smaller “deaths” she had experienced. And as Kelly listened and contemplated in barns, a sense of memory’s collapse and reconstruction emerged, connecting her the haunting presence surrounding her. “Even the edifice of ranching culture has always seemed intoxicating to me. I was haunted by how beautiful and grotesque it all was.”

Despite her extensive poetry writing, Kelly doesn’t exclusively identify as a poet. Her writing style is flexible, allowing her to write poetry when time permits, but she gets consumed by the process when working on fiction or creative nonfiction. Balancing her writing with other responsibilities, such as making a living and parenting, can be challenging.

She describes a period in her life when she refrained from sharing her writing because of past experiences in high school, where her work was critiqued not for its craft but for its content. “I didn’t see myself fitting in with a world of writers that seem to only come from academic backgrounds,” she admits. It was only later in her adult life that the urge for her to be read matched with her urge to write.

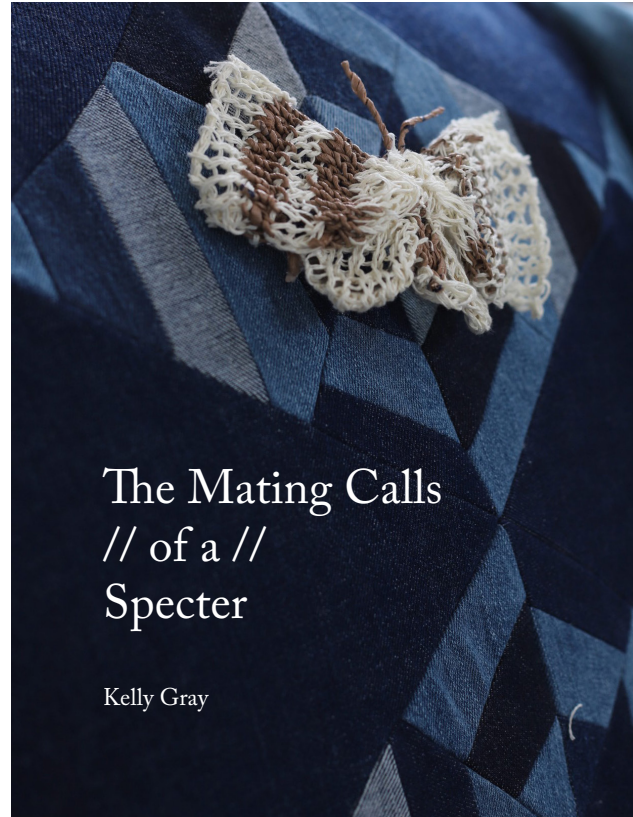
In addition to writing, Kelly wears many other hats in her life: teaching poetry in elementary schools, writing content for nonprofit organizations, and even having a background in childbirth education. She tells me she’s been a doula, a union organizer, and

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a raptor handler, which involved working with birds of prey for educational purposes.

When asked how she feels about her upcoming chapbook being published through *The Tusculum Review*, she expresses her excitement stemming from the prospect of having Justin Philip Reef read her work. “Even if this chapbook wasn’t selected to win, just the opportunity to have Justin read it was worth the admission fee.” Not only has she shown gratitude for the judge but also for the care and attentiveness she received from the editors of *The Tusculum Review*. She is also excited about the collaboration with fiber artist, Sarah Castellon to incorporate visual elements into her work. The whole experience itself has raised her expectations for future publishing ventures.

Kelly Gray is a writer and educator living with her family nine miles and seven fence posts away from the ocean, on the ancestral territory of the Coast Miwok and Southern Kashaya Pomo people, deep in the redwood forest. Her writing has most recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Lake Effect*, *Witness Magazine*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Passages North*, *Rust & Moth*, *Newfound*, *Permafrost*, *Action*, *Spectacle*, and numerous other journals and anthologies. Her collections include *Instructions for an Animal Body* (Moon Tide Press) and *Tiger Paw, Tiger Paw, Knife, Knife* (Quarter Press, Gold Medal winner from IPPY for Outstanding Design). You can read more about her work at writekgray.com.



Julene Kyle is a young writer from Greeneville, Tennessee majoring in English and concentrating on Creative Writing at Tusculum University. She will pursue further education in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). She was the Assistant Nonfiction Editor for her university’s literary journal *Sit Lux* and international journal *The Tusculum Review*. She has a year of experience in journal production, templating, and website design for *The Tusculum Review*. When her attention isn’t focused on her pet pig and catching up with life, she works on a collection of short essays and poems that are still finding names of their own. Her work explores the apocalypse and broken relationships: themes of impending doom.