

D E A R H U M A N

Poems about Reynier LLanes' Passages Exhibition
and Other Paintings in
Gibbes Museum of Art Collection


A Keepsake Edited by Lisa Kerr
Poet-in-Residence
August 19-31, 2024



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EDITOR'S NOTE AND BIO

The “Dear Human” Residency allowed me the honor of spending two weeks with the Reynier Llanes’ Passages exhibition as well as the Gibbes Museum of Art’s permanent collection. During that time, I invited other MUSC writers along with community members to write “postcard poems” to humans featured in the galleries. Collected here are works written by the featured MUSC poets, who also graciously shared their work alongside me at the poetry reading that concluded my residency. My thanks to all these poets for devoting their time and talents. I offer much gratitude to the Gibbes Museum of Art for allowing me to be their first poet-in-residence. Their entire team was gracious and welcoming. Becca Hiester, who coordinated the residency, deserves special thanks for all of her guidance and coordination. Sarah Arnold and Heath Hoffman loaned me a vintage typewriter that inspired me and other poets, and provided a direct connection to works featuring typewriters in the *Passages* exhibition. 

Editor & Poet-in-Residence Bio

Lisa Kerr is a professor of writing and humanities at the Medical University of South Carolina, where she directs the Office of Humanities. As a creative writer, she has won awards from the SC Fiction Project, the Piccolo Spoleto Fiction Open, and the SC Poetry Initiative. She has also been a Pushcart Prize nominee, and has published several books and chapbooks with university and small presses. In 2023, she was a top-10 finalist in Frontier Poetry’s “Hurt and Healing” Prize. From August 19-31, 2024, she served as the Gibbes Museum of Art’s first poet in residence.

Dear Human Figure in Reynier Llanes' *Letters from Home*

If you are here, it is because I found you.
You the traveler, an artist's study. My telling

invites you into this plotted field, a likely story;
but nothing is promised. When we say *likely*:

neither of us is any more certain than a child
who writes on a school desk: *I was here*.

The typewriter is not for or against you.
It exists because I conjured an engine.

The keys might stick, the ribbon grow brittle,
the probability of *here* diminish.

You aren't the subject yet, not the theme.
With each revision, I begin: *This is the story of—*

Backspace, type: *Our story begins*
with the hero arrived and departed.

Lisa Kerr

On Reynier Llanes' *Book Cover*

Books have been coverless. Delicate folios
wrapped in palm leaves, printed with moveable type.
They have had bindings: embossed leather,

embroidered cloth stitched, glued, and stapled.
Have had spines set with stone and ivory,
pages of parchment, vellum.

Born pious, books became ardent, rebellious.
Became gifts, customary and chic. Became romances,
treasures tucked within silken covers that were

easily torn and discarded. I think how
honest these wrappings as I stand
with Reynier Llanes' *Book Cover*.

Where the paint defies the frame that tries to hold it.
Where what might be a red heart unravels. Where the lovers
exist only as potential: translucent, soft-backed.

Lisa Kerr

Dear Reynier Llanes, Regarding Your *Passages* Exhibition

This week, a child came into my studio
and wrote on a borrowed typewriter:

I loved being here.

I thought of you—
your frontiers and hives and seekers—
and kept his wisdom.

Lisa Kerr

Dear Typewriters in Reynier Llanes' *Passages* Exhibition

Without you, we cannot excavate fossils,
practice an archaeology for worlds
these poets and travelers are still
inventing.

Lisa Kerr

Dear Human Figures on a Country Road

*On viewing Two Figures on a Country Road by Louis Remy Minot
at Gibbes Museum of Art*

How right he was, the artist, when he placed
you there for scale, called you “figures.”

I can see now your utility:

the trees age and loom in your presence;
the mountains gain their distance.

The sky sweeps, wide enough to hold
both sun and storm.

But then, too, this:

You stand by a road that we can't help
but give an end and a beginning.

The house becomes a storied home,
four-chambered like a heart.

Lisa Kerr

Fluorescence

“Black light is a stream of invisible energy that causes different materials to react in their own way. Sometimes the energy is absorbed and released in colored light called flourescence.”

--Excerpted from “The Secret Lives of Paintings” exhibit at Gibbes Museum of Art that inspired this poem

When I hide, it is in fear of fluorescence. That
you, like a black light, will illuminate me.

Don't tell me we are more beautiful where we are broken.
Don't mention the tradition of painting fault lines gold.

I wanted you always to see me the way you did the day
you asked, *Maybe this?* I was told everything I wanted

was on the other side of *don't go*, and I went.
Maybe we all want to be absorbed, whole, at least one time.

I think that is accurate.

But shut the light when you are done, love.
Let the world think less of me.

Lisa Kerr

Reds

Collected and assembled from Gibbes Museum of Art's Permanent Collection, August 2024

The ~~red~~ head on the *Carolina Paroquet*. Three ~~red~~-sweaters under *Lavender Notes*. ~~Red, with gold and turquoise, in~~ Mrs. Francis Dallis Quash's scarf. ~~Red~~ chimneys under *Rain in Charleston*. One half-hidden ~~red~~ bloom in *Wisteria and Peonia*, another in a featured role at bottom. ~~Red~~ velvet linings in the miniatures of *Rosetta* and the nearby daguerreotype of the *Unknown Sitters*. *The Sisters*—one with ~~red~~-trimmed sleeves, the other in beads of ~~red and~~ coral. Corene's wide-brimmed, ribboned ~~red~~ hat. Barely-there ~~red~~ lips in *Skillet Portrait Emma*. ~~Red~~-hand-painted letters naming *Dr. Y.B.* The ~~red~~-scarf that complements *The Green Fan*. ~~Red~~-rosed curtains of *April* that take backstage to (*The Green Gown*). The ~~red~~ roof of *Cagnes-Sur-Mer*. ~~Red~~ brooches worn by (*Sarah Reeve Ladson*), ~~the red in~~ her headdress. ~~Red~~ boots on the Manigault child riding a dog in Rome. ~~Red~~ shoes on the Moultrie boy leaned on his mother. The ~~red~~ cross in *The White House: King Street, Charleston, South Carolina, ca. 1945*. ~~Red~~ flesh at the center of *Still Life with Watermelon*, surrounded by red assorted fruits.

FEATURED POETS

The poets whose works are featured in this section were invited to read with Lisa Kerr at the reading that concluded her two-week residency at Gibbes Museum of Art.

The poems are presented in alphabetical order by author last name.

Author bios are available at the end of this booklet.

Related to “Desires”:

Dear Human,

To trade the wild waves – the near misses
and thrills – for something more sedate;
to slip down a slope of cotton-candy blooms
which burst against the blue
like confetti in a neighborhood parade
is a free fall into something new.

Eunice Cho

Related to “SOS for a Shipwreck at Sea”:

Dear Human,

One would not judge, if you were to
lean back in that wide-brimmed hat,
loungue in the cradle of June’s thick perfume
to the raucous chorus of crickets
and the cheers and clinks of ‘59 wine aged
to perfection.

One would not give it a second thought, and yet
you choose a new route.
You seek the sting of salt in your eyes,
take it with your morning coffee,
take it, with a grain of salt.

No need for sunny-side-up
or for pink-throated blooms when you have
brown clouds and screaming steam
and a current trying to pull you in its wake.

Amidst all this, you float.
No need to test the tread, sickle the seam,
toe the line.
Only the desire, Dear Human,
to paint it all,
as if the sky and the sea
were nothing but a threshold to cross.

Eunice Cho

Untitled

Response to Reynier Llanes' The Thinker's Utopia

Maroon afterthought
 caught in brown and black.
I see you,
 and I see your blues,
and your train that never tracked.
Carry coffee beans and cut cane
 but don't unpack.
Because that house is not your home.
I said...
 That house is not your home.
And without you,
 the house remains intact.

Dear Human, Dear Dad

Response to Reynier Llanes' Dear Dad

As you appear before me a contour, willowed away,
I'll project myself into your form.
I'll assume your most ancient relationship, maybe fraught.
Let me draw in the peculiarities.
Maybe I'll scrawl in expression and detail with crayon.
Doodle two circles and a triangle for your visage.
It's elementary, no need for patterns we have trained.
Unburdened unlike letters with unfinished--
Let's not meditate on how to write to him.
I'll forget the years with scratched out ink.
We'll send him easy, easy words or none at all.
Like the coloring pages I used to fold into paper planes
and fly into my dad's office.

(Letters from Home)

Remember everyone
you once held dear. Human beings
in their past tense—humans were.
Your body is both a single history
and a genetic collage. Your home,
at once, both destiny and geographic fluke.
Lean back, at first to brace yourself.
And then to be astounded—yes,
there's ground beneath.
Even though childhood
as you know it got lost
in the weeds and the waves.
Sitting there, the sea, like a memory,
looks unimaginably deep,
and offers many ways to fill your lungs.

(I Nurture a White Rose)

In nature, dear human,
white rows of houses
bloomed in the field.

The wood was painted white
by someone paid in beer
and cigarettes.

Time has a way of standing still
the second you commit
to make a stand.

There is standing room
among white rows of blooms.
White roses bloom among

the standing boy. Dear boy,
looks like your father. Looks like
you're the one who stayed.

Looks like you're still
learning to bloom
in someone else's garden.

Dear Human,

Response to Reynier Llanes' The Spell

You are like a mythical goddess in human form. The stars twinkle at the sight of you. The quasars roar in excitement at the slightest mention of your name. You hold the secrets of the Universe deep within your being. Dearest human, take comfort in knowing that not only is the Universe on your side, but the entire Universe also resides inside of you.

Tanjanika “Tan” Shivers

You, Without

On seeing Reynier Llanes' New Sun and Study for New Sun, in that order

Without you, there is no subject
except

maybe that universe in the dark corner,
so smooth, simple, and far.

While in here with me
are the violent whats
and cakepaints you made—

frenetic everystrokes
single touchswats
quarkspin of splat—

a local chaos bouquet.

And beyond the universe,
modestly sleeping, around the corner,
there you are,
subjected to preliminary study—
New Sun's dawn—

our museum's perpendicular, framing enjambment.

You are—the face!
far enough in the distance from me
to be—
Asleep? deceased?

Simply relieved.

You are—
the stuff of stars in the distance.

You are, in smallness, becoming—

paint pulled over canvass across
some atomic horizon—

one nuclear wind blown spot—

at once predictable and
precarious.

You are—that chaotic place
where symmetry's solace seems to sleep,
somewhere in space.

POET BIOS

Eunice Cho is a medical student at MUSC. She has published poems in various medical and literary journals and plans to go into Psychiatry.

Denzil Coleman is a healthcare administrator and educational technologist currently serving as Program Manager of Digital Innovation at MUSC's Office of Innovation. He is a New York City native of African-American and Caribbean descent who worked as a music journalist with *XXL Magazine* and other prominent outlets. Denzil later helped Apple Music develop its earliest training datasets for reggae and dancehall music. Upon relocating to Charleston, SC, Denzil studied improv at Theatre 99 and became a company member in 2011. His hobbies include basketball, music production, and chess.

Isabelle Doan is a medical student at MUSC and the current Editor-in-Chief of *Humanitas*, MUSC's enterprise-wide literary journal. Before medical school, she was the News Editor for V.114 of The Duke Chronicle and interned for Greenpeace USA as a media and communications fellow.

R.J. Lambert teaches writing and academic success at MUSC. In addition to publishing his own poetry in literary journals and book form, he has co-founded and edited national literary journals and served on MUSC's Septima P. Clark Student Poetry Competition for three years.

Tanjanika "Tan" Shivers is an IT Specialist with MUSC's College of Medicine. Tan's work has been published in many literary journals, including MUSC's *Humanitas*. In addition to writing poetry, Tan plays rugby with the Charleston Hurricanes Rugby Club.

Tom G. Smith is Professor and Director of the Center for Academic Excellence and Writing Center at the Medical University of South Carolina. He has been a learning and writing specialist at MUSC since 1999. He's an academic and a recreative writer who has published a few poems in small journals.



“Dear Human”
A Health Humanities Collaboration