

INTRODUCING THE *SRPR* ILLINOIS POET:  
TARA BETTS



*Photo by GlitterGuts*

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## Broken Silence

After we were told stay indoors,  
my neighborhood turned so silent.  
My ears rang in the quiet.  
My upstairs neighbor's footsteps  
creaked above my ceiling. Her cat's  
thud to the floor, or an occasional  
door outside my apartment closed.  
Someone bottled all the laughter  
and weekend party music heavy  
on the air around my block, where  
I live on the first floor and hear  
my neighbors exit and enter  
like I'm the nosy old woman  
peeking out of a window  
or sitting on my porch while  
wearing an old green sweater  
and sipping coffee.

My short haircut grew out about a month ago,  
lacking a stylist's snips and touch—  
Touch sounds like some ancient technology  
that I explain to teens, like LPs, rotary phones,  
dial-up, or god forbid, stamps, but  
this is about sound. Its absence filled  
the empty funnels of my ears while I sat  
in my living room and watched some  
unmemorable television show to drown  
out feeling some warm, raw egg of grief  
breaking open in my chest. While I sat there,  
trying not to count the dead, worry the rent,

or wonder if I will have enough food to last,  
I heard glass shatter just beyond my porch.

For seconds, the crash of breaking glass  
meant someone's getting cut, or their house  
being raided, or the shit is about to pop off,  
and there's no graceful metaphor when thumping  
feels faster beneath my collarbone. I look around  
because I have no guns, nothing like my father's  
rifle cabinet to keep my own windows intact.

I take a breath and peek through the blinds' slats.  
There is a girl crouched low and holding potted plants.  
Her two tiny succulents have been salvaged  
from ceramic fragments and loose soil. She cradles  
them while talking into a cell phone.

When I step onto my porch, I explain  
I heard you. I wanted to make sure everything's OK.  
I heard breaking glass.  
She blusters and blushes a bit.  
Her friend is coming, but I know  
she has no idea what terror bears its teeth  
from broken glass, whether it be theft or death.  
My breath gets deeper when I go back inside,  
but I think of how loud a broken silence is.

## Surinam Toads Born from a Mother's Back

the flip and the flail  
on star-tipped fingers,  
the somersaults spun  
until eggs expel swiftly  
caught by the toad  
fertilizing the orbs  
clustered skinless grapes  
that adhere to a birth  
mother's back, glued  
to her slick pond self,  
opening large pores,  
blanketing a layer of skin  
over dozens of embryos.

she is the host, where  
the restlessness seethes  
a roiling pot of tadpoles  
kicking and pushing,  
a throng of legs bent—  
propulsion from her,  
the first starting block  
in the race for survival.

when the babies break  
the veneer of her back  
she molts that mother  
body, pale and aging  
parchment, a remnant  
of that dense rupture  
where a tiny live brood  
emerges whole, a riff

off Athena's skull out-  
numbered by nature's  
prolific eggs.

as she swims away  
toward more somersaults,  
recalls hundreds of star-fingers  
prodding her organs and skin,  
pushing inward and out,  
a heave that she follows  
and may not understand.

## The Animals Are Tired

The animals are tired of humans taking up too much space. Tired of leashes and gates as tiny prisons, pollution floating in the air and water, litter that smacks them in the face, plastic cutting their throats and bursting their stomachs. They don't speak languages that humans understand so humans ignore them, talk over them, tell them to learn to speak human. Animals understand cages and humans who enjoy caging.

Is anyone surprised when swans and dolphins returned to the waterways of Venice when cloudy filth and people disappeared? Goats gallivant on London streets and attack bushes like young punks fueled by The Clash. Elephants in China brunch and nap in fields, intoxicated on peace and corncocks. The rhinos are still hunted on the continent, and how unsurprising is it that even the animals in South Africa get no reprieve with tourists bringing in money to keep the poachers at bay. Where are the rhinos' allies then?

Recall how humans take too much space, how many times white people have crowded out not-white people like animals, so we can't party, eat, sleep, drink, breathe, talk on a phone, or stand in our own living rooms. How people cannot talk

without someone interrupting or mussing your hair,  
or fur, with breath. Yes, animals understand humans  
taking up too much space better than some humans.