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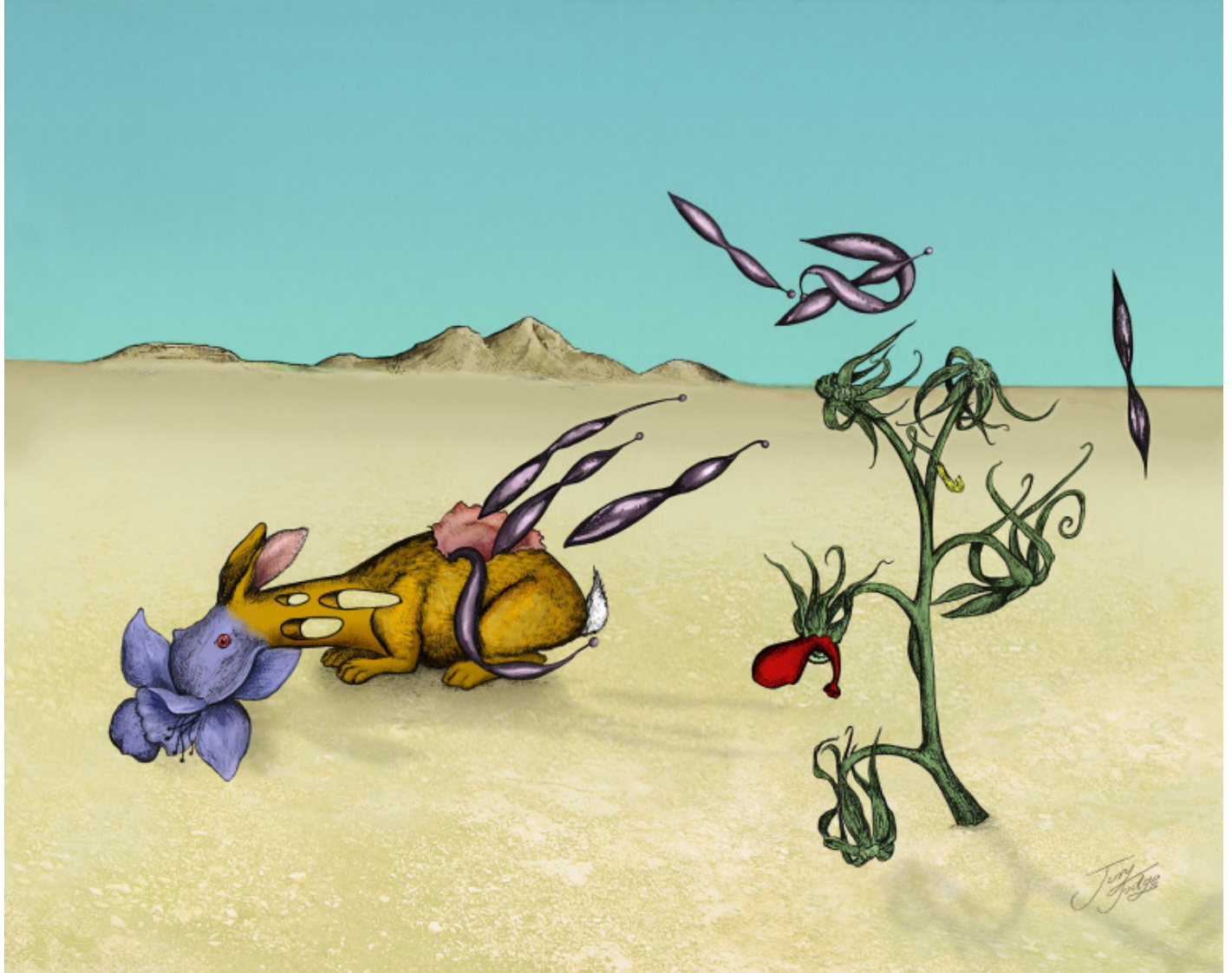
Three Poems by Iris Jamahl Dunkle



Free to Rise

About the sky, I have some opinions;
pin-pricked utterances that sharpen in
to night sky. Had I freedom to rise, I
would hot-balloon out of this far-off field.
What wonders would I see as I rose? Barn,
field, cursive of trees, roads that shoot out like
gray meteors. Then a map that's hedged by
serpentine of river, hunger of sea.
And me, rising in my crazy orbiting.

Had I not swallowed stones as ballast or
worn the leaden moonboots of grief, my myth
may have been found: stitched from the distance
and time that always pulls between stars.



Altered State

The first days after you died sunk like stones.
Sky too cornflower blue to stand under.

I sat, a dormant weed in a dry field,
waiting for the warm wind to rattle me.

I followed orders. Sit. Breathe. Stand. Breathe. Sign
here. Decided which parts of your body

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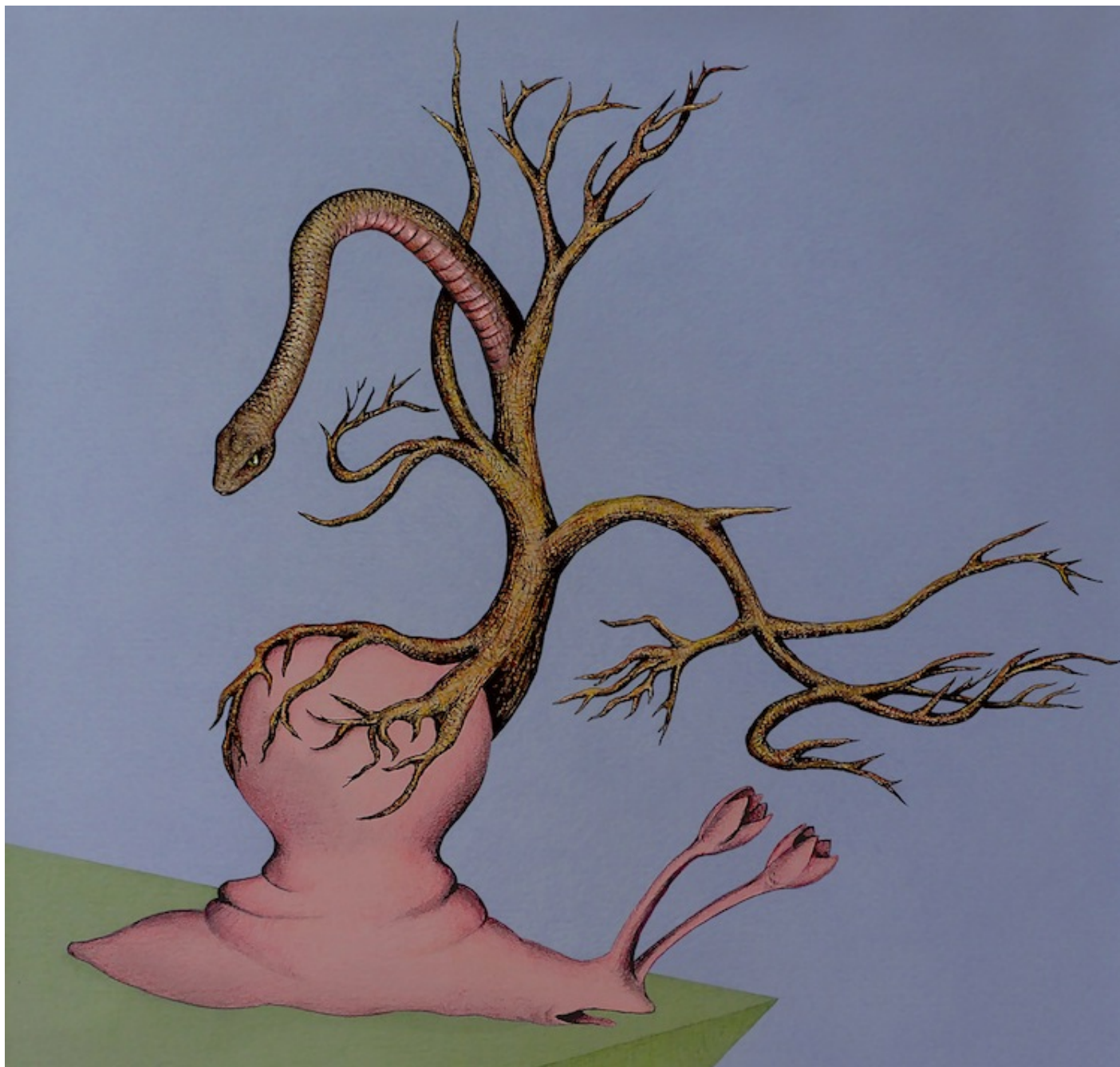
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you wanted to give away (eyes, skin, heart).
What you would wear into the roar and fury

of that last fire that would consume you.
What color of glass box you would want to

encase your ashes underground (something
the color of the deep sea). While the days

lumbered forward like giant dogs and the world
hummed too loudly. An apocalypse of bees.



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I count my breath in shifts of eight: in and
out and in and out. Breath held and expelled
like raw sea blooms of ghostly jellyfish
propelling underwater. In one angle,
I am looking for God: blue sky pressing
down like a terrible sea I am under.
Don't rise too fast, or you'll get the bends. In
the other angle, I am looking for
the direction of grace without compass.
How to fold the two together without
losing the propulsion of now? What strange

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blooms will spin out, and spark fur of fire,
before I face myself in the mirror?

Art Information

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Iris Jamahl Dunkle was the 2017-2018 Poet Laureate of Sonoma County, California. Her poetry collections include *Interrupted Geographies* (Trio House Press, 2017), *Gold Passage* (Trio House Press, 2013), and *There's a Ghost in this Machine of Air* (Word Tech, 2015). Her work has been published in *Tin House*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *Fence*, *Calyx*, *Catamaran*, *Poet's Market*, *Women's Studies*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and *Talking Writing*.

Dunkle teaches at Napa Valley College and is the Poetry Director of the Napa Valley Writers' Conference.

For more information, visit [Iris Jamahl Dunkle's website](#) [4] or follow her [@irjohnso](#) [5] on Twitter.

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