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Poem by Jennifer Jean



Manao Tupapau at the ArtSpeak Exhibit and Fund-raiser

"Could it be, then, that we are the spirit of the dead watching? The Tahitian language certainly allows for such ambiguities. The expression, manao tupapau, means either watching the spirit of the dead or the spirit of the dead watching." — Ben Pollitt

There's this one work.

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){(i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o),m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m)})(window,document,'script','<https://www.google.com/analytics.com/analytics.js>','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

You're meant to face this clean mirror.
Let its embedded, frosted bar code
obscure your features—
make you: *For Sale*.

And it's popular! A throng
closes

in, intones, "There
but for the grace of God..." I go

out of the frame—quick—
and think at the next

work of art.

*

Earlier, we
prepped for the exhibit

at a long table in their safe house.
And, as their teacher, I

gifted my book—*The Archivist*—
laid out copies like place mats.
And they
plucked it up, turned it over, hid it
in a purse or pocket. I
said, "Write what you

want." So, they wrote wings
and strength and pride and
stuff I wouldn't dare
touch. They wrote

in present tense.

*

The safe-house ladies
and I
wanted famed Gauguin
at ArtSpeak,

his *Spirit of the Dead Watching*
to sell our little fold-and-staple
poetry takeaway—

On Our Way to a Miracle.

His bright oil on burlap, his
Tehura as our cover,

could raise
awareness
and the little money

poetry can raise.

*

Those ladies saw a power-
ful woman
in his foreground—a belly-down nude
darkening
a white bed and watching out

of the frame. They said she's inviting, wanting
love from
the hoodied man
on the edge
of the mattress.

"There's no man in this picture,"
I said, because I'd read
about the painter and his lurking

ghost crone. "No, no, no," said C,
"this dude cannot paint

a lady."

*

critics say the nude's gaze is fearful of

old Gauguin said Tehura feared the dead and

one of a series of "frightened Eves"

*

Their poems
ignored the artist—

that fourteen-year-old
Tehura was wife or girlfriend
or what.

"She's not scared," said J, "she's
pretty."

J wrote five poems that class—J wrote and wrote
and hid
from her pimp
or boyfriend or what-

ever she called him.

*

Before ArtSpeak, Tehura's glare

made the cover
of just
the sampler version.

The real cover
became a shot of an iron-blue butterfly
ornament
the ladies rescued from
their backyard.

The real cover was gently
decreed
by a safe-
home administrator.

*

In the meantime, I was deadly
numb.

I bought
the girl with crossed ankles, his
oil on burlap—I bought their poems
that way. With his sheen painted on
her ass. I took in Gauguin's gorgeous

fear, and I
admired it.

Publishing Information

- Opening quote: "[Paul Gauguin. *Spirit of the Dead Watching*](#)" [4] by Ben Pollit, Khan Academy, 2015.
- *Noa Noa: The Tahitian Journal* by Paul Gauguin, translated by O.F. Theis, originally published in 1919 (Dover Publications, 1985).
- *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life* by Nancy Mowll Mathews (Yale University Press, 2001).

Art Information

- [Manao Tupapau \(*The Spirit of the Dead Keep Watch*\)](#) [5] by Paul Gauguin (1892); public domain.

Gauguin at the Fund-raiser

Published on Talking Writing (<https://talkingwriting.com>)



Jennifer Jean is managing editor of *Talking Writing*. Her debut poetry collection is *The Fool* (Big Table, 2013), and her poetry chapbooks include *The Archivist* (Big Table, 2011) and *In the War* (Big Table, 2010). She is the recipient of the 2016 Good Bones Poetry Prize. Her poems have appeared in *Rattle*, *Waxwing*, *Tidal Basin*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Mud City Journal*, *Green Mountains Review*, and more.

She is also poetry editor of the *Mom Egg Review* and co-director of Morning Garden Artist Retreats. Jennifer teaches Free2Write poetry workshops to sex-trafficking survivors. For more information, visit her website [Fish Wife Tales](http://www.fishwifetales.com) [6] or follow her on Twitter [@fishwifetales](https://twitter.com/fishwifetales). [7]

Of the event that inspired this poem, Jennifer says:

It refers to the first Free2Write poetry workshop I taught in 2014 at [Amirah](http://www.amirahboston.org) [8], a safe house for sex-trafficking survivors (that is, survivors of modern-day slavery). When the workshop ended, I gathered some of the survivors' poems into a chapbook, which was then sold at an ArtSpeak Fund-raiser organized by Highrock Church in Salem, Massachusetts. Several survivors bravely read their poetry to a crowd of over a hundred attendees.

Source URL: <https://talkingwriting.com/gauguin-fund-raiser>

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[2] <https://talkingwriting.com/talkingwriting-categories/featured-poetry>

[3] <https://talkingwriting.com/tw-channels-and-categories/borders>

[4] <http://smarthistory.org/gauguin-spirit-of-the-dead-watching/>

[5] [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul_Gauguin-_Manao_tupapau_\(The_Spirit_of_the_Dead_Keep_Watch\).JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul_Gauguin-_Manao_tupapau_(The_Spirit_of_the_Dead_Keep_Watch).JPG)

[6] <http://www.fishwifetales.com>

[7] <https://twitter.com/fishwifetales>

[8] <http://www.amirahboston.org>