

Close Talking Episode #119

“Family Ties” by Diana Khoi Nguyen

February 12, 2021

Show Notes

(Close Talking theme music)

Connor 0:08

Hello and welcome to Close Talking, the world's most popular poetry analysis podcast from Cardboard Box Productions Incorporated. I am co-host Connor McNamara Stratton and with my good friend Jack Rossiter-Munley, we read a poem,

Jack 0:22

talk about the poem

Connor 0:23

and read the poem again.

Jack 0:25

Before we get into today's selection, a quick note that if you like what we do here at Close Talking and you have a spare minute, it would mean the world to us if you would give the podcast a rating and review on Apple podcasts.

Connor 0:36

Those ratings and reviews help boost us up the algorithm and find new listeners.

Jack 0:42

And, if you have suggestions for future episodes or comments on this one, you can send us an email at closetalkingpoetry@gmail.com

Connor 0:50

You can also find us on social media, on Twitter this show is @closetalking, I'm @connormstratton and Jack is @jackrossitermun.

Jack 1:01

On Instagram the show is @closetalking and on Facebook it's facebook.com/close talking.

Connor 1:08

And our website, where you can find all our past episodes is closetalking.com.

Jack 1:14
On with the show

Connor 1:19
Hello and welcome to an all new episode of Close Talking. I am one of your co-hosts Connor McNamara Stratton.

Jack 1:28
And I am your other co-host Jack Rossiter-Munley.

Connor 1:32
And we are greeting you today in lovely February, although currently it is January. Time as my wonderful mom recently said is amorphous. And as such Close Talking's recording practices reflect such a blob-like relationship to time.

Jack 2:00
It's like Doctor Who said it's a wibbly wobbly timey wimey thing. That's a famous thing. At the when you started talking, it sounded a little bit like you were doing your Yates impression.

Connor 2:12
Oh god. Oh, geez.

Jack 2:15
I was wondering if that was the direction we were headed in early in the episode.

Connor 2:20
If I'm leading with a Yates impression, you gotta cut me right off the air. I mean, that's, I can end with it sometimes if it's justified but like, no, I can't start with it. That's yeah, it's unacceptable, inappropriate.

Jack 2:35
It's a marathon, not a sprint. Let's save good stuff for the last five miles. Don't hit the wall.

Connor 2:40
Exactly. But yeah, we've got a wonderful poem for you today as always. The poem is called "Family Ties," is by the poet, Diana Khoi Nguyen, the poem comes from her collection, "Ghost of" which was a I believe that came out in 2018, was a finalist for the National Book Award. It won the Kate Tufts Discovery Award, I believe, and it's a really remarkable book. And we'll get more into all of that after we read it. One bit of like context that might be helpful, and a bit of a content warning is the book and also the poem revolves in some way around her brother died by suicide, and the book is sort of grappling with that. And this poem is to a certain extent as well, so just thought I would mention that before before reading it. This is

"Family Ties" by Diana Khoi Nguyen

Gradually, a girl's innocence itself becomes her major crime
A doe and her two fawns bent low in the sumac along the bank of a highway,
the pinched peach of their ears twitching and the heat
Into the disordered evening my brother cut out only his face from every
photograph in the hall, carefully slipping each frame back into position
What good does it do?
Decades of no faces other than our own chipping faces
What good does it do, this resemblance to nothing we know of the dollhouse
New parents watch their newborn resting in a sunny patch of an empty
Room, the newborn making sense of its container –
And from the road a deer ripened in death and a tuft of fur – or dandelion –
tumbled along, gently circled, driftwood, shaking loose, gathered,
dissolving into the mouths of jewelweed nearby
Earth is rife with iron and blood is rich in stardust
Immediately, I spotted one hoof print, than nothing, as if this was where she
dragged herself out of the body
Strips of tire torn from their orbit
Is it right then, that we are left to hurtle alone

Jack 5:39

Yeah.

Connor 5:41

Yeah, this is an intense one.

Jack 5:44

Very, it's an intense book, too.

Connor 5:47

It is. Yeah.

Jack 5:48

And it's a book. I mean, like, the last line of the poem, I guess we should say is italicized, the rest is not. And at least for this poem, there isn't any particularly super noteworthy, concrete aspects to it. But throughout the book, there are a lot of concrete, like ways that the poems are displayed. And a lot of that reflects out of the fact that what is described here, "my brother cut out only his face from every / photograph in the hall," that's a real event, her brother actually went through all the family photographs and cut himself out of them a couple of years before he died. And so that's reflected throughout the book in a lot of different ways. But it's like, yeah, it shows up in literally described in this poem. But in other poems, it's displayed visually in the book. So if you get a chance to see the book, or look online, there's different media in

which, like, the pages of the book are shown that is, like a whole other level of intensity and power that gets added on to the subject matter, and also to the artistry in terms of how she as like, a poet, but also just as a creative person was approaching this subject.

Connor 7:04

Yeah, completely. It's such a wonderful book. And so unlike anything I've really read, yeah, and it's like one thing that that kind of is recurring, is there, these kind of actual images of like family portraits that are kind of printed, and then there are these like, text, that that are sort of visually laid out in the kind of outline of those, you know, pictures, like visually, but then, you know, in the kind of representing the act of cutting out the face. In both the poems, there's this thing that happens a lot where, you know, there's like a gap, a literal gap, in the sort of shape of a circle in some of the poems. And actually, if you listen to the Verses podcast, interview with Diana Khoi Nguyen she reads one of them that has that, and she, I was like, because it's so interesting, because it's both visually, like, you know, striking on the page. But it also, you know, when you're reading it, it's like, it stops in the middle of words sometimes, but she actually like, reads it really deliberately, in this kind of rhythmic way that I couldn't do justice to. So I really recommend you listen to that.

Jack 8:30

There is a video on the Ours Poetica o-u-r-s Poetica YouTube channel, that is the audio of her reading the poem "Triptych," which I think is the poem that you're referencing, and they display the text being written out as she reads it. And the combination of the two is really, really striking. And it's interesting to have, oftentimes, we struggle on this podcast with the fact that it's hard to replicate the physical nature of the poem. And the sort of all the things that audio can add to the poetic experience are there but there's also something that can feel like it's lost when you don't see the form. And watching that video, the way that the form takes on a whole other aspect when you read along with hearing it or when you see it forming as she's reading it is something that I haven't really seen in that way before. And admittedly, partly that's because there aren't a lot of places where poems are displayed that way. But it's also because not a lot of poems are constructed the way that she has put together many of the ones that are in this book, and it is incredible hearing her alone would be enough, but like, seeing it and hearing it simultaneously in that way. Whoa, like, really? Whoa.

Connor 9:55

No, it's true. Cuz we oftentimes I feel like I often harp on like, how contemporary poetry is sort of like, you know, poetry on the page is like this awkward form where it's like meant to be read aloud, and it, it's like musical and all this stuff, but it's like on the page, and it's printed. And so it's like, it's not like a not a purely oral form, you know what I mean. And so it makes use of the, the visual and the kind of the elements of the stanza, and linebreaks, and all that stuff. But she is like, using both of those dynamics actually, like in a, taking what I have often called awkwardness, and, you know, kind of like, making the most out of its potential to be like, occupying those spaces, because also a lot of times like visual, sometimes visual poems, you know, poems that, that use the space in that kind of way, are hard to read aloud too. And what is so striking is that it's both kind of intensely musical and intensely visual. And there's actually

you know, so Terrance Hayes the poet Terrance Hayes like selected the poem, for the, I guess it was like Omnidawn Press's prize, I just found what he said about it, to kind of resonate, you know, amazing poetry happens inside visual innovations where quote, "there is nothing that is not music, the pouring of water from one receptacle into another, a coat of bees draped over the sack of sugar caving in and on itself. You know, poetry is found in the gaps, silences and ruptures of history. These poems mean to make a song of emptiness in the spaces we house, they sing to and for the ghosts of identity, exile in history, they sing like a ghost, who looks from the window or waits by the door. Lyric fills in the holes in the story. "Ghost of" is unforgettable." Which yeah, I don't know, lyric fills in the holes in the story.

Jack 12:09

Yeah, I mean, count on somebody like Terrance Hayes to write such an evocative review. There's a lot of poetry just in that review of poetry. I'm like, that's something that I find really captivating about this poem, and about the book as a whole, as, like sort of a cohesive, not statement, because that's exactly what it's doing so well. It's not a statement about something, it is an exploration, and it's an occurrence, you know, which I know you've talked about, like every poem sort of feeling like it's a happening sometimes. And I feel like that's very much what's going on, in this book, and in this poem is you feel that uncertainty and that personal work that's going on, in terms of thinking through and trying to represent in some way what this kind of a loss means. And it's represented in so many different ways, both in presence and in absence and in confusion, both in words and in confused images. I don't know the the freedom that poetry allows, because we've also, something we've talked about is how like, not every poem has to have a narrative, the way that almost every story, no matter how disjointed it may be, there's usually a narrative of some sort, that's kind of what makes it a story, you know, and when you're writing prose, it's much harder to break out of those constraints. And when you're working in the realm of verse or lyric, it creates more white space, sometimes literally, but always figuratively. And in that kind of freedom, you find a lot more space for exactly this kind of an exploration of something that is so hard to name, and in fact, might be unnameable. And there's a lot to explore even in that. It's that's part of what I find so incredible about the book, and certainly this poem.

Connor 13:58

Yeah, I really agree. There's a grief and trauma and loss and, and sort of complex feelings that also, you know, like, get at this one sense of self are not easily contained in narrative, sometimes, and I think poetry can be a place and a shape for, you know, all of these other kinds of complex feelings. But sort of tidy narrative structures often, you know, maybe aren't the best suited and so, you know, at the same time, there are, there are kind of two narratives that are happening here in this poem. And, you know, we often we sort of start off by gushing about the book because it's incredible and so good, but we usually do a kind of play by play narrative of the poem, just like literally what's happening. And there's kind of like two happenings that are that are going on. On the one hand, this kind of car crash incident of some kind with deer. So you have like a doe and her two fawns bent low along the bank of a highway, you know, and that kind of like those deer come back periodically over the course of the poem, you know, and from the road "a deer ripened in death and a tuft of fur", "Immediately, I spotted one

hoofprint, then nothing," "Strips of tire torn from their orbit." So that's kind of like one track. And then the other track that alternates is sort of the incident that we were that is one of the preoccupying themes of the whole book. But you know, is the sort of personal biographical of the speaker and of Diana Khoi Nguyen, you know, "Into the disordered evening, my brother cut out only his face from / every photograph". And then it's kind of a reflection on the consequences in the import of that, like, "What good does it do?" Decades of no faces have no faces other than our own stuff like that, which already, you know, any claims I'm making about narrative is not a dis to my narratively oriented people. And there's many complex things that narrative do. So it's just sort of a rough place to get going more to think about the possibilities of poetry rather than the lack of possibilities in narrative. But even as we identify, like, identify those two stories, like the poem never really, like, joins those stories together, they kind of just happen simultaneously alternating. And so one of the kind of central moves that the poem is making that I think is like, really interesting and complicated is like, basically, what's the what's the relationship between, like, what is this deer car incident, you know, have to do with the speaker's like, personal story that's being related and thought about in the poem, like, what is the, the deer dying have to do with the brother dying, and also the brother cutting out only his face. And so that's, that's kind of like, that tension, that kind of, like, gap between those two things, is, yeah, is like, really, really interesting. And like one, like, like, so there's family. And so there's, you know, the doe and the two fawns are like a family unit, in some sense. So maybe there's a connection there with the speaker and speaker's own family or something. And then maybe there's, I don't know, this, the the violence of the scene feels in some way to capture some of the violence of the brother's act, in some ways, either the brother's suicide, or but I think, more specifically, in this poem is the brother's action of cutting out his face. But at the same time, it's not like a clean one to one, you know, it's like, you can't say that doe is the brother or something. But you do get this very visceral, like, intense scene that then feels like it, the feelings of the scene sort of move into, you know, the personal story. The other thing that I think about, you know, in terms of like poetry making space for these complex things, is like, one part of this poem that, like, I love so much, and that I think is like, really interesting and not I feel like not often explored, at least from what I've read is like, so you can have like, a metaphor, right? Or you can say, the deer is, is a planet, and it's orbiting or whatever. And there's a kind of, you're making a relationship between the deer, which is the thing, and then the planet, which is, you know, being compared or love is a rose dat da dat. And oftentimes, in poems, the metaphor is kind of like made explicitly, you know, where it's just like, this is that and you're like, okay, it's a poem, it's like, I know, planets aren't dear, but like, I'm running with it. And this poem doesn't do that but it has a kind of metaphorical, what I kind of, here's my metaphor for the metaphorical texture is like, sort of like a web trampoline that's like under the poem. You know, as one example, there's this kind of space language that happens in different parts where you have like, at the end you have "*Is it right then that we are left to hurtle alone*," by itself could mean whatever, but then "Strips of tire torn from their orbit." Okay, so then we have orbit, like planets orbiting a sun, then if we go up and I don't know why I'm doing this in reverse order, but we have "Earth is rife with iron and blood is rich in stardust". So then we have Stardust, and we are getting more of that kind of galactic stuff. Yeah. And then like, then we have this, you know, the "deer ripened in death", where there's like the circling and the shaking loose and this dissolving, which, when you first encounter it, the space language hasn't

really like been, like, brought up, sort of properly. But like reading it again, you're like, oh, it there's kind of like, the deer has sort of been in this being hit or dying, then like removed from the orbit, right. And then you can think about the title, where there's like family ties, and you have this sort of, there's the orbit of a kids to a parent or some kind of like, the gravitational pull of family, or, or whatever. But there's never a moment where the poem says, parents are the sun, and kids are the planets, and we orbit them or whatever. Rather, there's these kind of like, these images that have connotations or feelings associated with their meanings that are like happening, sort of creating this metaphorical underpinning, right. So there's like stardust orbit hurtling alone, which then kind of touches on family ties when you think about it. And it's like a metaphor of connotation. Sort of through like, repeated associative connections, if that makes sense. And I feel like, yeah, this poem does that and it's like, it's another way in which the kind of complexities of association and, and metaphor which are like just really open and poetry can like kind of create this space of experience that a tidy narrative can't sort of as easily do, I think, and so you can kind of bring lots of different unlike things to create this kind of really charged, meaning soup, or something. And I'm just, we're, and you can mix your metaphors and you can do any goddamn shit with it that you want. But you know, by the end, you have like, personal story, deer scene, space, hurtling metaphor, like, all together in this profound, but sort of unclear way. And I think that I feel like that that lasts, like, "*Is it right then that we are left to hurtle alone*", it's just so devastating. You just think about like, like a planet that that gets off, or a moon or an asteroid or whatever, that loses the orbit, and then it's just in the vast universe by itself. And like, that's the experience that the speaker has, either because of what the brother has has either losing her brother or just being in this family, by the nature of being in this family. You're just hurtling alone. Yeah, like any one piece of that would only get some of that feeling. And it's like, really, I don't know. So it's, it's like, because there's, it's like this bloody deer scene, and then also this space, like, cold isolation that's, like paired together. And, yeah, it's like really intense. But just I don't know. It's like, it's astounding to me.

Jack 24:32

Definitely. And it is, yeah, it's really intense. And exactly what you're talking about it does become sort of this meaning soup because the degree to which you can pull out these narrative threads, they very much do not fit together naturally, as you're reading through the poem the first time at least they didn't for me, and I could tell that they were in conversation with each other, but I had to work pretty hard to figure out how they were bouncing off of each other in a way that made any sense to me. Even knowing kind of what the poem's project was, it took a few reads to kind of order them into a reasonable conversation with each other. And some of that is, I think, deliberate confusions between them. So you have this instance where you're talking about the deer, right? So it goes from the girl almost immediately into the deer. And then it goes to the brother. But then you get into the middle of the poem. And you have this line, "New parents watch their newborn resting in a sunny patch of an empty / room, the newborn making sense of its container", and that linebreak for me, when I start reading that line, I think I'm back with the deer because when I hear that there's a newborn, that's not a human word that we use, we usually just say, baby, we don't say that you're with your newborn. Unless you're reading like very baby specific literature, that's usually a term more reserved for the natural world. And then I find out oh, no, it's it's actually taking place in a

room. And particularly going from newborn to resting in a sunny patch. It's like, no, they're resting in a crib or something like not, even if it's in the sun that's not the primary thing that you talk about because they're indoors like it's, it's, it's, you know, I'm looking, I'm thinking meadows here, okay, like this is a woodland glade of some sort. But no, it turns out those new parents are human parents, not deer parents. But very shortly after that, the newborn making sense of its container, boom, and from the road, "a deer ripened in death". And so it does jump you right back into the deer after that, which is really interesting, because it's kind of preparing you for the jump back to the deer by introducing this language. But also it injects this little bit of confusion, the first time you're reading through, at least for me, where I was like, already back with the deer before I'm then back with the family before I actually go back to the deer. And what happens for me there and I love the focus you put on some of the celestial language because it creates this idea of family as this incredibly naturally occurring thing. Deer have families, humans have families all around the natural world, you can see this gravitational natural pull, which looks different in all different species, and some eat their young and all kinds of like it's complicated cause it's nature. But like family as an idea exists and even a lot of the language that's used for families has natural world corollaries outside of just human society. So you can even have something like the nuclear family partially came out of the nuclear era. But that's also about literal elements on the periodic table. There are nuclear elements that have protons and neutrons that spin around in the atoms. And it's just like another level of this kind of natural world natural family thing. And that tension that is then brought up at the end is exactly what you're describing. It's that competition that's always happening between the gravitational pull and the centripetal force of orbit. Like that is a constant, natural world tension that's happening. And you feel that in the poem, how connected versus how hard is the pull away? And I feel like that comes through in a couple different places. But yeah, especially at the end, "Strips of tire torn from their orbit / *Is it right then that we are left to hurtle alone*"? Which is like, yeah, that line lands so hard because I don't know. It's, it feels like it is a line in which it's focusing on the cosmic stuff. But it feels like it's the place where that cosmic stuff really fully meets the project of the poem. To examine grief and examine family like that is, that is big time stuff. And I feel like even like, some of the lines like specific lines even will have confusion or reverse orders baked into them, you have "Earth is rife with iron and blood is rich in stardust". Normally, that would be reversed, like, blood has iron in it. And Earth is made out of starstuff you know, that would feel like a more natural pairing of those ideas. But reversing them gives you this whole other world of meaning possibilities that crash into that next line that is about you know, "Immediately I spotted one hoof print, than nothing, as if this was where she / dragged herself out of the body". And then that line that came before, you're not necessarily thinking about, you know, all the blood that's in the pavement and it's seeping into the dirt. It's like a whole other kind of, you know what magic is in the blood like blood ties, family ties, the stardust, the gravitation connections of family in, you know, someone's blood, it begins opening up this whole other world of meaning beyond just tying in some cosmic ideas. It's doing a lot of other work when it's reversed in order like that.

Connor 30:18

Yeah, and then it by following that line, which I love that you point that out, it was such such a striking line "Earth is rife with iron and blood is rich in stardust". It almost like comes out of

nowhere. It's such a pronouncement too, tonally, you know, but then yeah, to like, to sort of introduce those kind of like, animal, Earth, human, stardust, those connections, and then move from that kind of setting all that up to "Immediately I spotted one hoof print, then nothing, as if this was where she / dragged herself out of the body". And then "Strips of tire torn from their orbit". And so we like, we get these different severances where there's the dying of the deer, and the kind of like soul or the self of the deer sort of leaving, finally, from the body. And in some ways, like, like the orbit of the body, or you know, the pole of the body or something. And then "Strips of tire torn from their orbit", you you can imagine, literally, you know, say it's like a car hitting a deer, which we don't totally know. Because that's not stated. But

Jack 31:42

Which is interesting itself, just because that's another, like, presence of absence kind of situation. You don't hear that explicitly happening, but you intuit it the same way that if someone's family picture is missing an individual, you can intuit that it was cut out, whether it was by that person or someone else, like you still know, it was cut out when you see a picture with someone cut out of it. And that's like, something's happening here.

Connor 32:07

Yeah, no, exactly. And then and then you by like, sort of intuiting that, then you get the image of the car swerving, and then the car hurtling, and then the car is like its own container of a speaker maybe and then the speaker is encountering this thing. But then so but it's like, it's, it's all of these different violent collisions that are resulting in the removing of you know, because the car is, like, tied to the road in some kind of way. And so when you see the, the tire marks, like swerving off, it's, it's, it's leaving, it's, it's pull. And you can see it so vividly. Because it's such like an iconic image, especially and just like, you know, it's like, if you're watching a movie or a show, and you just see like, a road with swerving tire tracks, you're like, fuck, someone's been killed. And you know, you know, like, it's so in that setting, it's like, so cliché, but because of its visibility, like adding it in there, it just, it's able to do a lot of work, but then also when you reread the poem, because the first line is like, sort of strange at first, I think, like, "Gradually a girl's innocence itself becomes her major crime", where it's like, I don't know, like what is the crime basically, and then by the end, maybe you can deduce that there's this sense of like, a girl's innocence. It's like, like, I feel like I begin to see that the speaker is sort of wrestling with could I have done which is sort of a classic sort of thing when it's it's the topic of suicide is like, Is there anything I could have done? Or like, could I have seen it coming? I mean, all of those impulses are are sort of natural but also like often, like an unfair burden to put on oneself. But you can see how the innocence which also has such a you know that and there's such a gendered like "a girl's innocence becomes her major crime" like component to it but like in the beginning it's like oh, I had no idea that you know, he was feeling this way or whatever, but then over time, and then you know, kind of like I think you had mentioned this but to me earlier that there is an interview like the photos are like still in the house like an actual life without so so there's a lot

Jack 34:46

I don't know if they still are right now but at the time of that interview, which was after the suicide yeah, the the photos stayed up in the house with the image removed from them, which is like a whole bunch of stuff and and in that interview, she talks about, you know, what the family can and cannot express with each other.

Connor 35:05

Right

Jack 35:06

And we'll link that interview and everything. But yeah, that becomes such a big part of it is like, yeah, what what is the word innocence containing there? Is it willful, unseeing? Is it more akin to an ignorance? And why is the accusation kind of coming back on on the speaker, it feels like a little bit. But you know, naming that as a major crime feels like a really big and important statement. And I think as you're saying, that can be such a natural feeling and response to some kind of an event like that.

Connor 35:41

Yeah, and you do have in the poem, like, it's not sort of spelled out like that, but like, you have "Decades of no faces other than our own chipping faces". So you have this sense of, there has been decades of, you know, the foot the photos in the house being this way. And so you have this huge scope of time, suddenly, that the poem is kind of dealing with, which also is like another way in which, as a poem, I think it's like, it's able to grapple with these things in such a unique way, in the sense that the moment in the past, the moment before the past, the present, and like all of the decades in between can like be co-occurring, you know, at the same time in this poem, I don't know, it's, it's in that word gradually too starting off the poem, it's like, oh, my God, like, like, I think about the way certain sort of difficult topics or things are often represented in like, sort of more mainstream media and, you know, in film and TV and stuff, and, you know, often, like, suicide is, so it's, it's represented so heavily on the moment itself, or, like, what led up to the moment, like, what are the causes, you know, and maybe, you know, the dealing with the immediate aftermath or something, you know, we go to all of these forms for representation of different experiences. And like, I think one of the less represented aspects of these kinds of like traumatic events and also, its difficulty to express is like, the constancy of, of dealing with it, right? It's like, "Gradually a girl's innocence itself becomes her major crime". It's like, not like the one thing that did it, and then that ruined everything. And then it was resolved. And now you're okay, or something. It's like, this continual kind of, I don't know, hurtling?

Jack 37:53

Yeah, I think that's so right. It's there's such a temptation to make that one event, the event. And I think there's a temptation in a lot of media or just the way that a lot of media represents it, makes it feel like some kind of summation, or some kind of either it's like fated to end that way, because it's teased at the beginning, or as you were saying, it becomes this err event that explains the psychology of a main character, or it comes to encompass all of how a certain character is represented. I actually recently watched the HBO documentary The Weight of Gold,

which I assume was meant to coincide with this summer's Olympics. But it's basically about mental health and athletes, which, unsurprisingly, when they're pushed to succeed from a very early age, and they have one chance every four years in many of these sports to prove it on a global scale and narratives are created around them for the public about this person is the great gold medal hope of the nation, and then they maybe they fulfill it, and that's great. But then they're watched under incredible scrutiny, like Michael Phelps for every single time, he's gonna screw up he's on the front page. And he also feels like he's under immense pressure. And he can't go anywhere, because everyone recognizes him. And it's this whole celebrity issue, or there's examples in the documentary of people who had huge hopes pinned on them, and then won nothing. And everybody's like, oh, what a disappointment. What an underachiever. It's like, well, he was like, fifth. That's still elite. It's still great. Like he didn't plan he didn't try to lose. He, he wanted to win too, the real point, and what this documentary does so effectively is it talks about several different athletes who have either struggled with suicidal ideation or who have died by suicide. And there's one particular person who, over the course of the documentary, you eventually learn that they have died by suicide, but they are interviewed just like all the other athletes up until that point. So you don't know unless you already extra-texturally know this person's story. You don't know that's going to happen to them. So what you actually learn about is how they like all of these other athletes are struggling with their own mental health and trying to come to terms with how they need to be in the world, coming to better understanding of what their struggles are. And then you find out about two thirds, maybe even more than that through the documentary that this person actually died by suicide, and allowing that process to be shown. And for this person to be using the same language as all these other people who are still here, creates such a different viewing experience, it's kind of so-so documentary overall, but that one aspect of it really raises it up in terms of how it's handling its subject matter and how it introduces the topic. And it's exactly what you're describing in terms of using a word like, gradually, it's a process, it's ongoing, it's not one event, you know, and it's the same with winning a gold medal, that person has a whole life before that 20 minutes and after. And they also make the point with some of these sports, the difference between first place in eighth in something like speed skating can be tenths of a second. And that's what your entire worth comes down to, and whether or not anybody knows who you are, and whether or not you're like, fulfilling your childhood potential or not, you know, so yeah, that lens of gradual-ness and of ongoingness and of a story, you know, a kind of jumbled narrative a meaning soup that goes after this issue, adds another kind of layer in terms of how the poem is constructed, because it's not taking you from a beginning to an end, it is bringing you into a place where this subject is gradually explored. And I think that that does a real service to the to the topic.

Connor 41:44

I really agree. It also makes me think of this other the last kind of like, major aspect of this poem that I really love, which is kind of a topic that we've talked about probably in a number of, of episodes, the way that the South is sort of, sort of portrayed, or conveyed or articulated, or is like pretty interesting in that it reminds me a bit of when we talked about the poem, "Private Property" by Jenny Xie, which is just a wonderful poem. But one of one of the kind of aspects of that poem is that there's no first person singular, like, there's no 'I' mentioned in the

poem, there's an us and then there's kind of like, you know, the first sentence of that poem is "Exhaustion slides from the body through the lips first" it's not my body, it's not my lips. And in a similar way, with this poem, you know, we have "Gradually a girl's innocence itself becomes her major crime". And, you know, by the end of the poem, the speaker is probably the girl being referred to, so the speaker is kind of referring to herself in that moment, in the first person. And then throughout, there's only one I that happens, which is toward the end, "Immediately I spotted one hoof print, then nothing". And then there's, you know, there's some we's, so like, and there's some my's, you know, into the disordered evening, which, by the way, I just love that phrase, beginning "Into the disordered evening my brother cut out his only face from every / photograph in the hall," so my brother, so we get, we get some of that, but like, there are these other moments where like, you know, like, "*Is it right then that we are left to hurtle alone*", the use of we so the use of the plural there, the fact that much of the deer and doe scene does not have the I, like I see a doe, you know, it's that only happens that one time. One of the kind of problems, or the kind of things that the poem is grappling with is in the title, which is like "Family Ties," and how necessarily foundational family or, you know, whoever you grew up with, those people are to who you are as a person, right? And so there is in some sense, no 'I' without the 'we.' So anyway, what I'm saying is like the way in which the poem shifts its sort of pronouns and the speaker in this way, the speaker refers to herself sometimes in the third person and uses a lot of first person plural. And then in the deer scenes, like the other aspect for the deer scenes is that it gets you really close to the scene, right? There's no 'I' that's like separating you from the scene, right? Which is sort of similar to how it works in "Private Property," where there's no 'I', it's like in a video game where like the camera's not like hovering above the character as they're like going through the world. It's like you're looking through their eyes directly. So there's that kind of a visceral immediacy but then there's also this shifting sense of like, what is, you know, is it she, is it I, is it we, especially since there's this family ties and also like this image of orbit and kind of like, do you lose yourself when you lose like someone in your family, a part of yourself or something like that. So, I feel like that's another kind of subtle way in which this poem is like, really grappling with the sort of big painful questions of its subject, sort of through the use of, of language and like, sort of like formal questions of, like perspective and things like that. Should we read it again?

Jack 45:47

I think we should read it again.

Connor 45:49

All right. This is

"Family Ties" by Diana Khoi Nguyen

Gradually, a girl's innocence itself becomes her major crime
A doe and her two fawns bent low in the sumac along the bank of a highway,
the pinched peach of their ears twitching and the heat
Into the disordered evening my brother cut out only his face from every
photograph in the hall, carefully slipping each frame back into position

What good does it do?
Decades of no faces other than our own chipping faces
What good does it do, this resemblance to nothing we know of the dollhouse
New parents watch their newborn resting in a sunny patch of an empty
Room, the newborn making sense of its container –
And from the road a deer ripened in death and a tuft of fur – or dandelion –
tumbled along, gently circled, driftwood, shaking loose, gathered,
dissolving into the mouths of jewelweed nearby
Earth is rife with iron and blood is rich in stardust
Immediately, I spotted one hoof print, than nothing, as if this was where she
dragged herself out of the body
Strips of tire torn from their orbit
Is it right then, that we are left to hurtle alone

(Close Talking theme music)

Jack 47:25
So Connor.

Connor 47:39
So Jack

Jack 47:42
So what have you been reading watching listening to what? What? What new recs have you got for moi and our audience at large?

Connor 47:53
Jack? I've been watching some TV because it's very cold in Minnesota. And there's really not much to do. And this show has been very delightful for me. And I don't know if you've seen it. But it's called Zoe's Extraordinary Playlist.

Jack 48:13
I have not.

Connor 48:14
Jack hasn't seen it. Oh my God, this never happens. Wow. Okay, I think it's very fun. Sarita found it, I'm pretty sure. And it's about Zoe, who is a kind of, you know, rising star in a Silicon Valley type company called Sparkpoint. And it's sort of like, company itself is BS, but she has this ability to basically read people's emotional states. But the way that she does it is like, they basically break out into song. And, and basically start doing a musical number of like a pop, like a pop song through the years. (sound clip from Zoe's Extraordinary Playlist) But it's like, wherever they're at emotionally so you know, (music clip) But no one else. It's like just happens in the normal course of day. So like, she's just like, watching it. And then everyone else is just doing their own business. And it's very fun to me. And it's also very poignant at times because

one of the in the first it's in the second season now, but her father has has a brain disease and it's sort of slowly getting worse. And so a lot of it revolves around dealing with that not wanting to deal with that. And, but anyway, it's like, I personally love musicals, but the the form of the musical has been moved to the screen in ways that are at times not super fun or a little cheesy. And this is definitely like cheesy, but i don't know I I it's fun. I just think it's fun, the music's good. How about you Jack? What are you watching? What are you reading? What are you listening to? How you getting through these days?

Jack 50:05

Oh boy, I have been getting through the days. So it hasn't been quite as cold here in Vermont. It was for like two days, but we got over it in a way that it sounds like Minnesota has not and will not for quite a while. But it's been cold and snowy and stuff. So I've also been indoors and finding ways to like, keep warm. One great musical related thing is that I found out about the newsletter Flow State, which sends you like good background music to work to. You get a new email every weekday except for Tuesday. And it's just like nice, cool instrumental stuff. And I've been watching yeah, like I guess it's sort of TV except it's on YouTube, the radical TV for cool kids. The PBS Digital Studios Channel Eons which has all sorts of great information about past era's, which is pretty cool. And everything from like the Titanoboa, which is exactly what it sounds like. It's a massive snake to where did flowers come from and what are eons anyway? Turns out there been four of them. I can name them now because of watching so much eons.

Connor 51:16

There have been four eons precisely.

Jack 51:18

Yes. The Hadeon, Archean, Proterozoic and Phanerozoic eons.

Connor 51:23

Wow.

Jack 51:25

Yeah. There's also there was a stretch of time that professionals in the fields called the boring billion, because nothing happened on Earth for over a billion years. Which is like, I can't even begin to think about what that means. But it's, it's something I learned from Eons. So check out on YouTube. It's pretty cool. And on the pop front Driver's License all day. Can't get enough of that song. It's a great song by Olivia Rodrigo. But it is also wrapped up in teen drama, drama. That is a whole other situation. And it's great. Oh, how do you up (Olivia Rodrigo Driver's License song clip) cuz it's a driver's license.

Connor 52:17

Oh, like cars. (Olivia Rodrigo's Driver's License song clip) Last week, just like we always talked about, cuz you're so excited for me to finally drive to your house, but they drove through the summer crying.

Jack 52:46

So yeah, that's Driver's License. And it's amazing. There's this awesome thing that's happening. And it has been for a little bit with like Gen Z musicians and popular music right now. Where the kind of low key hyper earnest stuff that I really respond to in Bruce Springsteen's music is now back in pop with a whole generation of new people like this song. And the Bruce Springsteen song Stolen Car, are like, (Bruce Springsteen Stolen Car song clip) this is the teenage woman version of that man in his 30s.

Connor 53:21

Oh my gosh.

Jack 53:22

It's like it's all there. It's yeah, it's big time. Yeah, so anyway, Driver's License also in heavy rotation.

Connor 53:32

I have not heard the word suburbs said that earnestly before you're right.

Jack 53:39

I know it's it's it's a bold lyrical choice that I think works for the song.

Connor 53:46

I've I've cried driving to the suburbs, before, I get it.

Jack 53:53

Yeah, who hasn't you know, driven to the suburbs crying because you weren't around. Speaking to our hearts. (Olivia Rodrigo's Driver's License song clip)