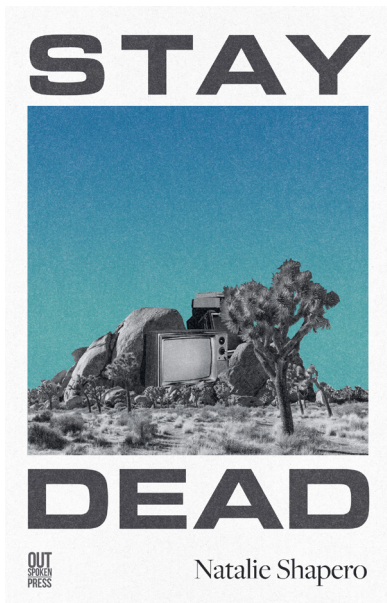


T. S. ELIOT PRIZE 2025 READERS' NOTES

The T. S. Eliot Prize 2025 Readers' Notes offer a selection of poems from each of the ten exciting collections on our Shortlist, plus reviews, reading suggestions, and a writing prompt or two for those inspired to respond creatively. We hope the Readers' Notes will aid your deeper reading as an individual, with friends, or within a book group or writing workshop. English teachers: if you're preparing your students for any Unseen Poem papers, why not hone their skills on this year's Shortlist? And don't forget to check out the T. S. Eliot Prize Young Critics Scheme.



Stay Dead (Out-Spoken Press, 2025) by Natalie Shapero. Visit the Out-Spoken online shop at www.outspokenldn.com

On *Stay Dead*

'In *Stay Dead*, Natalie Shapero leads us out from the wreckage into the brightly smouldering aftermath more precariously mortal, more humane and attentive and vivid than before. Her relentlessly dark, metaphysical poems of dying and not dying, surviving and not surviving, are as bleakly comical as they are halting. Shapero always keeps her lyrics effortlessly turning, veering her syntax, squinting and tacking – from abstract paintings, movie quotations and the private ownership of coastal redwoods, to the ocean hurling itself onto the rocks, the past, the afterlife, the dead that stay dead, and the dead that don't. Shapero leaves a huge dent in oblivion to show us that it's real.' – Jack Underwood, Out-Spoken Press

'Shapero's mordant humour and intellectual agility throw a challenge to the reader: In contemporary life, are we dead or alive? Could we be both, or in between? How could we tell? In a poem titled 'Big Mistake. Big. Huge.', Shapero comes both with sympathy and skepticism to Rothko's grand myth: "Mark Rothko was just too trusting / when he announced I'M INTERESTED ONLY / IN EXPRESSING BASIC HUMAN / EMOTIONS – TRAGEDY, ECSTASY, DOOM, / AND

SO ON. Personally, I couldn't begin / to fill in what the other ones are."

The poem proceeds into a complex pattern of associations, from a bad joke to a quote from Jean-Luc Godard to Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*. Sublimation isn't so easy – contemporary brains, phone-conditioned and easily jarred, lurch from one idea to another, seeking a resting place but unable to find it. 'Basic human emotion' has become a fraught category, even as poets try to clear the ground. (Shapero is an expert at merging high and low references, though she as much as admits that this is itself another kind of playacting.) In other poems, Shapero circles the idea of Method acting, craving the ability to lose one's identity completely: "if I'm unequipped, // as I've been in these times, to recognize just / who I am, isn't there a real risk I'll inadvertently step into someone / I do not realize is me? No further questions." A risk, yes, but also there's an appeal in shedding the burden of the poet's voice, the musical signature that keeps the ego doggedly in the spotlight, soliciting applause.' – David Schurman Wallace, *LA Review of Books*

About the poet

Natalie Shapero lives in Los Angeles and teaches writing at UC Irvine. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *London Review of Books*, *The Paris Review*, *The Nation*, and elsewhere. She is the author of the poetry collections *Popular Longing* (2021), *Hard Child* (2017) and *No Object* (2013). *Stay Dead* is also longlisted for the National Book Award 2025 in the USA.



Photo © Sarah Aintelope

T. S. ELIOT PRIZE 2025 READERS' NOTES

What do you think?

- Is to be a poet to be 'in something'? What does that phrase mean to you? How might a poet accept the findings of the cautionary tale in this poem? How cautious should artists be about giving their audiences or collectors or readers what they want?
- If you have the poem 'Nightstand' do you also need a book about trauma and recovery? Is the poem a self-help manual in capsule form, or something else?
- In an **interview filmed for the T. S. Eliot Prize**, Shapero talks about how when she gives readings of 'Individual Normal Hill', she swaps the names of the featured rivers to those local to the reading venue. That performance technique might suggest a stand-up comic's method of adapting a joke to connect to a local audience, or – to British readers at least – a pantomime script tailored to include regional jokes. What do you make of the balance of comedy and tragedy in Shapero's poems, the 'just kidding' versus the 'death place'?
- Look up Mark Rothko on Wikipedia. If these poems were Rothko paintings, what colour would their colour fields be?

Reply in writing

The notes to *Stay Dead* are extensive and funny and poetic in themselves. In them, Shapero writes 'Sanford Meisner's book SANFORD MEISNER ON ACTING begins with an epigraph from Goethe: I WISH THE STAGE WERE AS NARROW AS THE WIRE OF A TIGHTROPE DANCER, SO THAT NO INCOMPETENT WOULD DARE STEP UPON IT.' Think about your greatest incompetence. Write about it as if it were your greatest skill.

Find out more

Other work by Natalie Shapero

Today Hamlet (Out-Spoken Press, 2023)

Popular Longing (Copper Canyon Press, 2021)

Hard Child (Copper Canyon Press, 2017)

On screen & further reading

Find our interview with Natalie Shapero and hear her readings on the '**Current Prize**' page of www.tselijot.com/prize. Look online for her recent **reading for Poets House, New York**.

www.natalieshapero.com

If you like Natalie Shapero's work, try...

- **Patricia Lockwood**
- **Jack Underwood**
- **Ella Frears**

About the T. S. Eliot Prize

The T. S. Eliot Prize, which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2023, is awarded annually to the best new poetry collection published in the UK and Ireland. The Prize was founded by the Poetry Book Society in 1993 to celebrate the PBS's 40th birthday and to honour its founding poet. The T. S. Eliot estate has provided the prize money since the Prize's inception, and the T. S. Eliot Foundation took over the running of the Prize in 2016, following Inpress Books' acquisition of the PBS. It is the most prestigious poetry prize in the world, and the only major poetry prize judged purely by established poets. The judges for the 2025 Prize are Michael Hofmann (Chair), Patience Agbabi and Niall Campbell. For more information, visit tselijot.com/prize

T. S. Eliot Prize 2025: join in

- Join our shortlisted poets live at the celebrated **T. S. Eliot Prize Readings** at the Southbank Centre, London, on Sunday 18 January 2026. Hosted by Ian McMillan and British Sign Language interpreted, readings are simultaneously live streamed to a worldwide audience. Book for in-person tickets at bit.ly/eliot25readings or for the live stream at bit.ly/eliot25livestream
- Look out for the latest additions to our amazing **video archive of interviews and poems** with Eliot Prize poets on our YouTube channel: bit.ly/tselijotprizeyoutube
- **John Field's authoritative reviews** of all the shortlisted titles will be published on the T. S. Eliot Prize website over the coming months. Read them online at bit.ly/eliot25shortlist
- Browse the brilliant **Writers' Notes series**, devised by our partner the Poetry School, in which Eliot Prize shortlisted poets reflect on the writing of their nominated collections. Visit poetryschool.com and search 'writer's notes'
- **Sign up to our weekly newsletters**, packed with information and insights about all ten shortlisted poets, and specially commissioned features and giveaways. Subscribe at tselijot.com/prize
- Follow the T. S. Eliot Prize on **Instagram, Bluesky, X** and **Facebook**: @tselijotprize

In Something

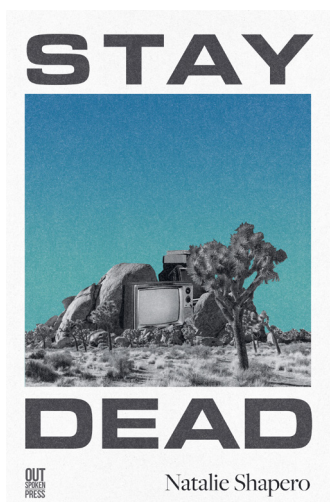
Acting does have its pull. Who doesn't want to be
in something? I PAINT VERY LARGE PICTURES...

TO PAINT A SMALL PICTURE IS TO PLACE YOURSELF
OUTSIDE YOUR EXPERIENCE, TO LOOK UPON AN EXPERIENCE
AS A STEREOPTICON VIEW OR WITH A REDUCING GLASS
HOWEVER YOU PAINT THE LARGER PICTURE,
YOU ARE IN IT (Rothko).

I've wanted to be in something. I've been terrified
of the converse. To anyone who would listen, I've recited
the sequence of conditions that gave rise to the SoHo Loft:
the industries' exit, the artists squatting in the hollowed-out
factories, how the sheer size of the spaces allowed
for the production of larger and larger works.
How this shifted the vogue –

salon-style decor giving way to the ONE-PICTURE WALL,
the collectors clamouring not only for paintings of increasing
dimension, but also for the loft layouts that were ideal
for their display. The buildings acquired and sold,
the artists priced out. A cautionary tale about painting
oneself right out of one's own life.

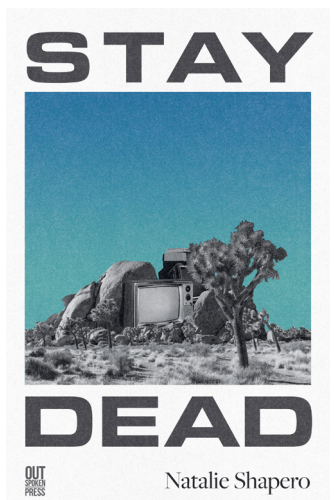
Rothko told the story of summer at home
with the windows pushed up, overhearing one passerby
to another I WONDER WHO LIVES IN THIS HOUSE
WITH ALL THE ROTHKOS?



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Nightstand

I keep picking up the book about trauma and recovery, but right
when I get to the end of section one, the door rings, the dog pukes,
the heater blows, fraud alert, tornado drill, get out
here fast, you gotta see this truck that ignored the height sign
on the underpass and now it's lodged like an overlarge pill
in the throat of the off-ramp, tangling the city where I poison
myself with the past, cough it up, cough it up –



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Individual Normal Hill

in the same way your friends are the family
you choose your death place
is the birthplace you choose Monet
in Giverny and Mark Rothko in New York City and me
at the winter employee mixer just
kidding I didn't die I only struggled
like a bug in an eighth inch of rain and then randomly
smacked my way out I couldn't
die I had too much to do I had to hold
all incoming calls I had to outdistance
at least some detractors I had to tune in
to watch ski jump every four winters I had to get away
from the snobs in my life
who would drown themselves only in the Seine
I had to cement and declare my principles
the Scioto the Ohio the Olentangy any of these
is good enough for me

STAY



DEAD

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Natalie Shapero

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