

# Qalqalah: Tempo Rubato

Serena Lee

Qalqalah is a fictional character created by Sarah Rifky in 2015. She debuted in two short stories, “Qalqalah: The Subject of Language” and “Qalqalah: Thinking About History”, commissioned by KADIST Paris and Bétonsalon - Center for Art and Research for their eponymous online reader (*Qalqalah*, active between 2015 and 2018, see: [Past Life](#)). In 2018, Qalqalah قلقلة was reborn — with a new, multiscript name — as an editorial and curatorial platform rooted in friendships and transnational alliances. Room was made for Qalqalah, the initial, initiatic character, to live multiple lives on the platform, entrusted to various authors.

Artist and researcher Serena Lee — who participated in our exhibition “Qalqalah قلقلة: Plus d’une langue” in 2020-21 — is the first one to undertake this companionship with Qalqalah. Serena’s elusive short story takes Qalqalah — a time traveler, as slippery as a tongue — to a *stolen time*, which is the literal translation from the Italian *tempo rubato*. In music, a field in which Serena also excels, it describes an expressive movement, a rhythmic freedom, allowing a musician to slow down or speed up the tempo at her discretion. Cakes become sensual metaphors for social and racial struggles, and fragrantly embody linguistic and cultural discordance. From a narrative and erotic trick, memory turns into a source of neo-liberal profit and, eventually, emancipation.

On the timeline it is nearly imperceptible, the pause she takes.  
In the editing studio they hesitate, fingers poised above keyboard shortcuts.  
On screen she is immobile, as if a still frame.  
With the drag of the mouse, the editors stretch the timeline and inspect the sonic pattern to see if they’re missing something.  
Starkly illuminated, she sits poised on a grey armchair across from the host. The gleeful studio audience hungry and ready to applaud.  
A question from the host.  
A question hovering over the armchair with standard fire-repellent grey upholstery. The armchair has supported the bottoms of many public influencers both before and after the merging of North Atlantic broadcasters. An armchair nearly as old as she, but its silhouette gives the impression of timeless neutrality.

Could it be that she doesn’t understand the question? Could it be that something is beyond her comprehension, in this or any language?  
“Why’s she just sitting there? Ratings are already going down. Guess what the network is charging per second...”  
On the timeline, the pause she takes is a matter of seconds; for the studio, it costs several hours; for her, it holds a summer.

NOW, THIS IS A FOOTNOTE THAT APPEARS HERE AND NOT AT THE FOOT:

At the time of the interview, the global index values Heirloom™ at eight figures. Within a month she will liquidate her shares and purchase two medium-sized townships under an untraceable name, townships whose local economies are moderately

dependent on data extraction contracts and pulse farming. They are located on the same latitude as her mother's village; she will purchase them in the name of her mother's mother which has no surviving bearers. She vaguely remembers how their village lived around the well, but all that has since been absorbed by the new province.

Twice she has declined the cover of *Time* and this will be her last interview, but they will not have known that, at the time.

Heirloom™ uses an intuition algorithm that was mined by a 14-year old genius; one intern described it as “gossip logic” in the sorority sense, and the developer-cum-marketer called it “feminist” too quickly for her to object.

“We’ll bank on the mnemonic translation between your haptic repository and an accelerated tacit stream to augment the platform for self-learning,” they said, showing her where to sign. “Don’t worry, we have a work-around for privacy.”

Heirloom™ is hosted on an unlisted agile platform; platinum letters in the headquarters entrance lounge boast “Redefining knowledge since 2039”. The Great Conglomeration kicked off more rapidly than predicted, so there’s little else in the HQ than a phone line and folding table, with most principals stacking derivatives from their penthouse treadmills.

Users subscribe because Heirloom™ is advertised as practical and immediate: a *how-to* for everything that the maternal class was expected to perform without messy allusions to gender. After generations of forfeited maternity, the entirety of knowledge that was previously categorized as ‘common sense’ and associated with ‘reproductive labour’ has been made accessible on the Heirloom™ platform in bite-sized *how-to* patches. Simply select a *how-to* patch and synchronize to your neural base for direct absorption. How flax should feel and how yeast should smell are some of the more obvious offerings of the platform. While the majority of users skim the *now trending* patches, the Heirloom™ platform is a seemingly bottomless vault, and the myriad subterranean *how-to* patches that speak to highly localized traditions remain at zero views. Lately, a collateral ache has been reported, an unplaceable longing that has surfaced with prolonged user engagement, but the accounts are anecdotal so they are waiting for solid numbers.

As the stocks climbed, she never bothered with a sense of betrayal because she never bothered about returning home: there were no mothers, no aunts, no sisters, no cousins to answer to. She has never mentioned ‘back home’, but the official marketing line alludes to her familial inheritance, conveying the miracle of unerring autochthonous matrilineal wisdom saved from near extinction through her prodigious memory and translated for users’ instant access.

On the timeline, there is the option of labelling moments according to colours with names like coral, seafoam, lavender, mango, forest, cerulean.

This morning she looks at the studio audience, their many eyes feasting. Although it may appear so, she is not making eye contact with them. They clutch notepads and wear t-shirts emblazoned with her quotes, but the words are not hers. The truth is, they launched Heirloom™ before ever realizing where the knowledge content of the *how-to* patches came from and she’s never bothered to tell them otherwise. All they know is that the platform is populated, users are happily unburdened from the need to memorize *how-to*’s, and everyone can meet their acceleration target. She has never had the need to write anything down; she could always remember everything worth remembering. In a month from now, she’ll start buying back the land. She knows what it needs.

“She’s still just sitting there? Ok, I’m gonna go get a refill, text me if something changes.”

On the timeline, the pause is imperceptible.  
On the timeline, the summer is imperceptible.  
In the time it takes to inhale,  
it is the summer,  
it is the summer of cold tiles on bare feet,  
it is the summer of looking at cake,

Objectively speaking, hours can be tracked and subdivided between time spent cleaning the library and time spent cleaning the kitchen. At the time, she does not know that it is called a library. It is at the top of the stairs, but there is a subterranean musk of paper and old leaves.

She was not hired to clean, she is here to speak to the children. She cleans, she was not hired to speak to the children. When she is not cleaning, she speaks to the children. She’s always cleaning, and she can only speak to the children because she cannot read. For if she could, she would know whether she was hired to clean or to speak to the children. For if she could, she would have read her contract. She had agreed to the summer job, knowing that her visa would expire by autumn. The writer has likely realized that she cannot read, but the writer is preoccupied.

“Tell the man at the gate that you are coming here to work. Just say the address, not my name,” the writer told her. The men driving the taxis would usually ask when she was going to marry, without malice, because there was little else to say since the dialect they shared she spoke haltingly, gleaned from old movies and only slightly worse than theirs.

When she enters the house she wears the slippers provided for her, but if the writer and the children are out, she discards the slippers to feel the slap of the cool tiles on her feet.

“They need to speak at least three languages by the time they start school in the autumn,” the writer told her, “because everyone else here speaks four, plus dialects.”

The writer introduced herself and said the two children were enrolled in a creative school where they would not learn to read. The key was left under an overturned clay pot in the doorway, conspicuous next to all the other pots, upright and filled with flora.

Not sharing a language with the children, she addressed them entirely in French and they were meant to catch on. It was no small relief that the children could not deride her accent because they had never heard real French for a point of comparison; it is one language that the writer does not know.

The writer is always barefoot. Small footprints matte against the gloss of the freshly polished tiles. She sees them because she has learned to look at an angle, at what the light does not catch.

She gives the contents of the bag to the children: placing the squares on plates, she uses her index finger to scoop the rest of the fudge from the corners of the bag. Eating from the corners, she pauses, considering whether to wash the bag to use again. She runs her fingers under the tap and brings the plates to the children. The bag stays.

“Do you know what your name means?” The writer asks, her voice burnished and unplaceable. The writer defines her name with strange sounds. She will cache these sounds for years and later learn that they are meanings in different languages: names for bitter qualities, minor stars, a variety of spouted earthen vessel, and the evasive flicker of a cat that is not a metaphor.

In the years that followed, she would carry with her a picture of the room at the top of the stairs and every single book on the shelf. She memorized the spines of the books, their sounds read aloud. Lodged in her heart without signification, she would take them out to repeat as if stroking a slumbering kitten until comprehension woke them. It is nearly twenty years later that she comes to know the title of every single book on the shelf, and that no two are in the same language. On some spines there are names of imaginary men, any one of whom could be the writer.

She catches the writer's gaze upon her. A moment robbed when she sees herself as she is seen by the writer. The moment carves a luminous space around her, cuffs her breath and torques her heartbeat. She sees herself being recognized as one with presence, one who prefers, one with opinions, one who exceeds function. Feeling herself held in the writer's gaze, suddenly warm, a small flame alights, spreads and licks her insides.

The writer began to leave books open and she would feel a hot coiling inside her whenever she saw them lying there for her. Not biting, she would close the books and clean around them, re-align them with a vase or coaster, as if they were things to be arranged, things that were neither open nor closed. A rectangular thing in dove-grey cloth, perpendicular to round crystal, adjacent to cork tile, flush with ceramic square.

The homework assignment was to last the entire summer.  
They were to look at the cake for one hundred days.  
The cake was to be looked at for one hundred days.  
The cake and the summer were to last one hundred drawings.  
It was forbidden to draw from a photograph of cake, a screenshot of cake, a video still of cake, or any other such flat cake.  
The children were to learn the principles of mass, volume, and contour.  
On the 50th day, they were to cut out a slice of cake and draw the interior.  
There would be no summer holidays, the dry months would transpire around the cake's decay.

The writer does not know how to make a cake; the writer consumes only a vanilla-scented chalk that is blended with nut milk. The empty chalk sachets are retrieved by a drone that returns with replenishments on a weekly basis.

She ate the first cake alone. Rising rage choked with yellow chunks of fluffy dough. The cake had come out of the steamer, a fragrant golden dome. The children had shrieked in disgust. She had interpreted the word 'cake' as a buttery mound with a halo of vanilla, pandan, and coconut. As the children spat in tantrum she knew she had wasted the ingredients that had taken weeks to arrive from the peninsula.

"Don't you know what a cake is?" The child shrilled, "Don't you know anything?"  
The child shoved the smartphone into her face, pointing to image search results for 'cake': a crude cathedral in white and pastels against the blurred backdrop of marbled rose, buttressed with minarets and capitals of frosted flowers. The children wailed until the same-day drone landed delivering the new batch of ingredients. The drone had the mouthless face of a touchscreen. It required a signature and she drew a vine.

With ease, she imagined disappearing with the writer. They would conspire wordlessly and one morning at dawn, she would take the writer's hand and they would leave, closing the door behind them, the children still in bed. People would guess that they were sisters or cousins, the eldest and the youngest. With ease, she imagined that they could be alone together, for she was certain that her own cousins and sisters would never know anything beyond what she told them.

On the tram, it is as though the contents of her ears fall into rank and file, realizing that she understands what they are saying about her. She does

not mention this when, years later, an interviewer asks about her first career as a translator. Knowing that it is a tangent the editors would cut — no time for detours — she guards those early years before literacy claimed her.

A book is left open with wide spaces and small words. The writer offers her a chiffon dress, saying that she has outgrown it and it is obvious that she has not. They are both suddenly shy, alone in the writer's bedroom. She refuses the dress and the open book, stepping around the shape that the writer would have her occupy.

It was raining, the day that she realized the writer could be writing about her.

The writer lets her know that there are many ways to spell her name, ways that she is unaware of. Will she meet these versions of herself on the writer's page? They call her to meet them more than halfway as if she should be the one to walk further. *Wear the dress*, they say. *Take my shape*, *say my words*, *have my thoughts*, *fill my ledger*, *look my way*. But never knowing if it is her or a portrait of her that the writer sees, she keeps her own name silent but alive on her tongue.

It was unimaginable that the shoddy white cathedral was not only a cake, but the real cake; that hers, the golden steamed dome, was something else, something less. She would have to give up her cake, surrender its name and defer to the school assignment because she was not in a position to define things.

She waited at the park until the woman arrived. They had nodded to each other on numerous occasions, also acknowledging that others likely mistook them as interchangeable. Today she crossed the playground to ask the woman for her help, relieved that they shared enough of a dialect.

She asked her to repeat the instructions and immediately went back and opened the oven. Reciting the numbers by drawing their shapes into her palm, she turned the temperature dial until the numbers that appeared in the display matched the shapes in her palm and she inserted the next cake.

There came a moment that would be the last time she made eye contact with the writer. On that day, she would not have known that it would be the last time. She cannot remember if it was out of pride or diffidence or the terror of her own desire. *Don't go looking them in the eye*. Would this advice have come from her mother, or her sisters, or her aunts, or her grandmothers? She cannot remember what they would have done.

One thing that she will not admit to herself is that she sends what she thinks her mother deserves, not what she needs. She does not call her mother because she guesses that she would be interrupting her favourite TV show. Her favourite TV show plays whenever she thinks of calling. Were she to call her mother, would she even have advice for baking a cake? Where do cakes come from? Where do ovens come from? Why do some things rise? Does knowing make it taste better?

The child shrieks, the second child shrieks, pointing at the oven's pulsing maw.

*But we will cover it, you see? Don't cry, we will cover the cake in icing and no one will see how brown it is.*

*This doesn't mean you will fail, not if you draw what you see.*

*It's not burnt if no one tastes it. And if no one sees it. You don't need to draw colour where there is none.*

*Just draw what you see.*

There was the cake that did not rise. She brought it to the park and showed it to the woman, and the woman looked at cathedrals on her phone and tried to think backwards step by step about how things

become what they become. They laughed and ate the sweet brick and drank free tea from styrofoam cups until the woman had to fetch her charge from a violin lesson.

After mixing the writer's meal in a glass she drinks the residual vanilla chalk milk, relishing the sip sliding through her, committing it to memory, to recall every time she brings cold water to her lips, returning the writer to her lips.

With no dust visible she goes through the motions of cleaning. Wrenching clothes from the washer she disentangles their cold wet appendages; it is the submersion in churning water that pulls everything into a knot, whereas dry, they would keep their distance. One cannot pull at any single shirttail without tightening the whole. It is not completely true that she cannot read: she knows where she is and is not allowed to go in the city based on signs. She decides what signs to read and goes where she wants. But the writer's writing pulls her in wet directions. In discarded notes, she scrutinizes the shapes of the lines to sense the writer's moving hand. She wills them to say her name, the one thing that she can read and write. This one thing of hers that when the writer spells it out, Qalqalah does not recognize it.

Imagining that she and the writer would leave wordlessly, she considered practicalities: that the children could eat everything in the kitchen until they were found. They could use up all the clean forks and spoons and then eat with their fingers. Squeezed by their small hands, tomato ketchup would miss the plate and smear across the granite. She would pull everything out of the fridge in advance and lay it out on the table where they could reach. She would cook all the rice and dish it out in portions, filling all the bowls in the kitchen. When everything else was gone they could eat the cake.

Raising cold water to her lips she feels the creamy click of the spoon stirring vanilla chalk milk, thick and dull against the glass.

She does not check to see whether the writer ever described this summer: she does not check in ten years, and not in thirty years. She does not know which man the writer is known as nor the language of her writing, she does not know if the writer has died in a car crash, she does not know if the writer went bankrupt and took a job as a cashier, she does not know if the writer lost her papers in a house fire, she does not know where she might find this summer as told by the writer, a version she may or may not recognize, if it ever happened in words. She does not remember that nothing happened.

She blinks. The studio lights are hot.  
She raises the glass to her lips and takes a slow sip.  
"Let me see," she starts,

Serena Lee would like to thank Daniella Sanader, Joan Jan and The Voice of Domestic Workers.

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Serena Lee

Serena Lee's practice stems from a fascination with polyphony and its radical potential. She works across disciplines, collaboratively and aleatorically. Serena also works with Read-in, a collective researching political, embodied, and situated practices of reading; and SHATTERED MOON ALLIANCE, a collaboration with artist Christina Battle. Recent projects have played out at CRAC Occitanie (Sète), Cubitt (London), transmediale (Berlin), Mitchell Art Gallery (Edmonton), Museum of Contemporary Art (Toronto), and Whitechapel Gallery (London). Serena holds an MFA from the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam, an Associate Diploma in Piano Performance from the Royal Conservatory of Music in Canada, and is currently based in Vienna as a PhD researcher at the Academy of Fine Arts. Serena was born in Tkaronto/Toronto, Canada and at one point her first language was Cantonese.

