



**2025**

Why do we read and write poems? When you read a poem for the first time was it confusing? Did you feel like there was a right or wrong answer? When was the first time you read a poem by a living poet or a poet who looks like you?

Dear Poet aspires to demystify many of the questions and hesitations students and readers face when coming to poetry by nurturing meaningful connections between students, poets, and their work, as well as the world around us.

Dear Poet invites students in grades five through twelve to write letters in response to poems written and read by award-winning poets, including Academy Chancellors, a group of celebrated writers who serve as ambassadors of poetry to the United States at large.

Since its launch in 2015, the Academy has received thousands of letters from students in hundreds of schools and congressional districts in the U.S. and around the world. Each letter is carefully read by staff at the Academy, many of whom are poets themselves, as well as volunteer educators and community members.

We're grateful to the volunteer readers, to the educators for bringing the power of poetry into classrooms, and to each and every student who found time to sit with a poem and took the courageous step to write to our poets.

This booklet contains poems by and letters from the poets who took part in Dear Poet 2025—Jericho Brown, Nickole Brown, Meg Day, Natalie Diaz, Denice Frohman, Kimiko Hahn, Joy Ladin, Anne Waldman, and Afaa Michael Weaver—followed by selected student letters and the poets’ responses.

Happy reading!

*Kat Rejsek, Content & Education Editor*

**academy of  
american poets**

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## Jericho Brown

Jericho Brown grew is the author of *The Tradition* (Copper Canyon Press, 2019), winner of the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and a finalist for the 2019 National Book Award in Poetry; *The New Testament* (Copper Canyon Press, 2014), which received the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, in addition to being named one of the best books of the year by *Library Journal*; and *Please* (New Issues, 2008), which received the 2009 American Book Award. In January 2024, Brown was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

## Nickole Brown

Nickole Brown is the author of *The Donkey Elegies* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2020); *Fanny Says* (BOA Editions, 2015), which won the Weatherford Award for Appalachian Poetry; and *Sister* (Sibling Rivalry Press), first published in 2007 and reissued in 2018. Every summer, she teaches in the Sewanee School of Letters' low-residency MFA program. Brown is currently the president of the Hellbender Gathering of Poets.

## Meg Day

Meg Day is the author of *Last Psalm at Sea Level* (Barrow Street, 2014), winner of the Publishing Triangle's Audre Lorde Award and a finalist for the Kate Tufts Discovery Award. Day is also the coeditor of *Laura Hershey: On the Life & Work of an American Master*, published in 2019 as a part of The Unsung Masters Series through Pleiades Press. They currently teach in the MFA program at North Carolina State University. Day also served as the 2024 Guggenheim Poet-in-Residence.

## Natalie Diaz

Natalie Diaz is the author of *Postcolonial Love Poem* (Graywolf Press, 2020), winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry and a finalist for both the National Book Award and the Forward Prize in Poetry, and *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (Copper Canyon Press, 2012), winner of an American Book Award. In 2021, Diaz was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

## Denice Frohman

Denice Frohman is a queer Nuyorican poet, and the daughter of Puerto Rican and Jewish parents. The recipient of fellowships and support from CantoMundo, Millay

Arts, the Blue Mountain Center, and the National Association of Latino Arts & Cultures, she is a 2022 Pew Fellow and a 2022 Threshold Fellow at the Headlands Center for the Arts.

## Kimiko Hahn

Kimiko Hahn is the author of ten collections of poetry, including *The Ghost Forest: New and Selected Poems* (W. W. Norton, 2024); *Foreign Bodies* (W. W. Norton, 2020); and *The Unbearable Heart* (Kaya Production, 1995), which received an American Book Award. She is a distinguished professor in the MFA program of creative writing and literary translation at Queens College, the City University of New York. In January 2023, Hahn was elected to become a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. In June 2025, she was named New York State Poet.

## Joy Ladin

Joy Ladin has published numerous poetry collections, including *Family* (Persea Books, 2024); *Shekhinah Speaks* (selva oscura 2022); and *The Book of Anna* (EOAGH Books, 2021), winner of the National Jewish Book Award. Ladin teaches at Stern College of Yeshiva University, where she holds the David and Ruth Gottesman Chair in English.

## Anne Waldman

A prominent figure from the Beat generation, Anne Waldman has published more than forty books of poetry, including *Sanctuary* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2020); *Mundo Aparte / Offworld* (Pinsapo Press and Sonámbulos Ediciones, 2019), a bilingual edition of poetry translated by Mariano Antolín Rato and edited by Öykü Tekten; and *Trickster Feminism* (Penguin, 2018). She served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 2010 to 2015.

## Afaa Michael Weaver

Afaa Michael Weaver has published numerous collections of poetry, including *A Fire in the Hills* (Red Hen Press, 2023), winner of the 2024 Paterson Poetry Prize, and *Spirit Boxing* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017). Weaver is professor emeritus at Simmons University, where he held the Alumnae Endowed Chair in English for twenty years. In January 2024, Weaver was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

poems &  
letters



## *Labor*

I spent what light Saturday sent sweating  
And learned to cuss cutting grass for women  
Kind enough to say they couldn't tell the damned  
Difference between their mowed lawns  
And their vacuumed carpets just before  
Handing over a five-dollar bill rolled tighter  
Than a joint and asking me in to change  
A few light bulbs. I called those women old  
Because they wouldn't move out of a chair  
Without my help or walk without a hand  
At the base of their backs. I called them  
Old, and they must have been; they're all dead  
Now, dead and in the earth I once tended.  
The loneliest people have the earth to love  
And not one friend their own age—only  
Mothers to baby them and big sisters to boss  
Them around, women they want to please  
And pray for the chance to say please to.  
I don't do that kind of work anymore. My job  
Is to look at the childhood I hated and say  
I once had something to do with my hands.

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Dear Students,

Thanks so much for reading my work and for thinking about it so deeply and with so much care. Your willingness to encounter poems with such depth of thought proves I was doing the right thing when I was writing them as if complexity and ambiguity do indeed matter.

I don't think a lot about what I want a reader to experience while reading my poems. I don't want my poems to have messages per se. I want them to have inherent value the way trees do, the way our human lives do.

I pray that whatever I do I do it with the love and dedication my ancestors felt when laboring. I want that part of their labor, and so that's what I give to my poems as I am writing them. It's what I'm giving to this letter as I write to you. You are imbued with my sweat. My sweat is my best and therefore my love.

I mean to write poems that are experiences. I want a reader to come out of the last line feeling like they went somewhere else or like something happened to them they couldn't stop because they couldn't stop reading.

Thanks again for doing the real work of reading.

Yours,  
Jericho

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Dear Jericho Brown,

I recently had the privilege to read your poem "Labor," and I just wanted to take a moment to admire the greatness of it. When reading your poem, I felt compelled to its words and emotions. Your poem invoked an emotion in me that I could not explain, but just feel. Unlike other poems, yours deeply resonates with me. Although I am still a young man, your exploration of themes of personal identity, service, and the passage of time struck a chord, bringing me back to my early childhood experiences and what time itself has done to alter my ever-changing perspective on life.

As a little kid, I was often surrounded by those who needed assistance. I was personally raised in an Asian household, allowing me to learn certain skills that would help me support my family when they and I would grow older. As time progressed, these skills turned into small jobs that would earn me a quick buck. I never had an allowance, and was never paid to do my chores. At first, I was upset at my parents for it. And as time progressed, I became desperate for money. Hence, I turned to my skills to earn a small income. Your poem perfectly articulates sweat and effort, reflecting the same feelings of gratification and happiness when receiving the hard earned money, yet angry when receiving little to none.

Additionally, your poem resonated with me when elaborating on themes of aging and adulthood. In my childhood, I viewed aging as distant, and unimportant. But now, even if I'm still a young adult, I can recognise the weight of aging. Time flies by in an instant. I can imagine myself as that 'old' person, asking for assistance for everything: cutting my grass, painting my fence, cleaning my windows, knowing that I was one of those people when I was younger. Your elaboration of 'old' hits hard when you realise that those people were just like you when you were younger.

Your exploration of themes of loneliness among older people is quite touching, especially the line "The loneliest people have the earth to love." I often overlooked the emotional struggles that older people experienced—the weight of good memories, the passing and the fading connections of loved ones. What I love about your poem is that it extends beyond the topic of physical labor, but also dives into the emotional labour of maintaining relationships and companionships. After a while, I realised that most of the relationships I have made throughout my life would eventually fade away, and everything does come to an end. Your explanation of the sense of solitude perfectly replicates the sense of aging, highlighting the reason why individuals feel so detached during the passage of time.

Moreover, your reflections of labour and identity opened my eyes to the world, and made me reconsider my own journey. The line "I once had something to do with my hands" hits hard, as it infers that the general concept of labor is not just 'labor' but rather a part of our identity, helping me find the deeper meaning in life, and helps me look back on life experiences.

Thank you for sharing your voice and experience in “Labor.” It helps me reflect on everything I have done and the universal connections we all share through life experiences. This poem serves as a reminder for the beauty seen in the little things of life.

Sincerely,

Leo

Florida

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Dear Leo,

I am so glad you were moved by “Labor.” I wouldn’t know for sure, but I hope your response (of feeling the emotions brought about by the poem as opposed to being able to “explain” those feelings) has something to do with the way it was made. It’s a poem in which I felt very close to the state of trust. I had to believe in what I was saying that it was worthy of being said because the music of the lines spoken aloud (in many lines informed by various meters) sounded like something I should believe. Composing the earliest draft was a matter of knowing my own experiences and trusting that the music of the language I was using to convey those experiences. I did not write it—initially—trying to make some kind of narrative sense, though I know revision yielded a poem that seems to have narrative sense.

It’s a good thing you are growing up working. It’s a bad thing that my nation seems to believe that human lives are only lived in order to work and most often for someone else.

I have got to get over my resistance to aging. It’s really beautiful, and sometimes I miss out on that beauty in my fight to achieve a supposed physical beauty that wants nothing to do with aging. You didn’t ask for my advice, but I just typed a couple sentences I wish I had read when I was your age. Aging comes with some real physical pains for which no one could have prepared me. I write that knowing I’ve only experienced the tip of this fact.

What you say in your letter about the last line of “Labor” informs me of so much I didn’t know about my own poem. “I spent what light Saturday sent” and “I once had something to do with my hands” now seem like poles that a poet would have planned. I’ve never seen that before your letter to me. I only knew that last line was

right because I knew it was musically right. Your letter proves to me that music really does make sense. I should probably mention to you here that earlier versions of this had “Odd Jobs” as its title. I think “Labor” as a title with the last line you love does deeper and more work in terms of all it leaves open for a reader to think and feel. I never thought “Odd Jobs” was a bad title—only that “Labor” was a better one. Typing the phrase “Odd Jobs” now, though, sours my stomach a bit. The phrase itself is kind of cute. I never want anything as horrific as cute to happen to one of my poems...or anyone else’s.

Yours,  
Jericho

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Dear Mr. Brown,

My name is Arya. I am seventeen years old, and a senior. I stumbled upon your poem, “Labor”, initially out of reluctance to check-the-box on what I thought was a labor intensive English assignment. However, I quickly became so engrossed into the poem and I forgot about the trivial work I was pulling my hair out for just a few minutes ago.

What I admire most about this poem is its ambiguity, and the unsettling atmosphere it leaves. While you begin ranting about “cuss[ing] cutting grass for women”, and shift focus onto the women, I thought surely the poem would reveal a tender heart, or wholesome relationship with them that would romanticize the labor or at least blur its pain. But instead, it’s so discomforting. Your force us readers to sit with the fact that “they’re all dead” because it isn’t only the labor that’s painful, but also the love. I find that so hard to accept most times, and can’t “look at the childhood I hated” without disguising my compulsion to please my mother.

I recognize that this poem also highlights masculinity, but I couldn’t help but draw parallels from this poem to my own culture. I am raised in a community where performing physical labor is generally associated with older women. I’ve written many poems about my mother and her “bruised and broken scaly hands / caress[ing] my face”. I strongly admire the women in my family, but I fear I won’t live up to their legacies and the soil in which they pass will be left untended by my privileged hands. I sought solace in this poem, but I instead found something I needed much more — a wake up call.

I also have a few questions for you Mr. Brown. Is there any particular woman in your life that inspires your work beyond the old women you used to work for? Additionally, I'm not familiar with most of your other works, but I've noticed a trend in the style of your structure. Why do you generally choose to capitalize the beginning of each line and write poems in one stanza?

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I admire your work and look forward to reading more in the future.

Sincerely,  
Arya  
Michigan

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Dear Arya,

I pray you are young enough for this to be the only time you've had to deal with a Game of Thrones reference being attached to any introduction. If it's not the first time, I pray it's the last. If it has or ever does happen to you, I want to apologize for that person and this strange world right now. I'm sorry I even brought it up, but I just thought I maybe could run a little interference between that and your nerves if it's been getting on your nerves.

As you know, Arya has many meanings, one of which is "noble one." How lovely to have a name that can remind you of this fact! You would have been a noble one without that name, but you get called something that's true about each of us that we sometimes forget about ourselves. I envy that you get to hear who and what you are every time someone says your name.

Your letter suggests you took my poem "Labor" quite personally. I love that and think it's the highest and best of compliments. I don't think a lot about what I want a reader to experience while reading my poem, but the fact that I can write a poem that makes more clear to someone their own life's paradoxes or their own familial ambiguities... well that's never been a goal of mine, but it sure does sound like a lofty one right now.

I hope that it doesn't matter that I'm not doing the same kind of labor my ancestors—from the enslaved to the sharecropping free—did in their lives. I pray that whatever

I do I do it with the love and dedication they felt when laboring. I'm sure they felt disgust and exhaustion too. But I think I'm here so someone can inherit the feeling of doing what I love and loving doing it...of even being able to have the choice. I want that part of their labor, and so that's what I give to my poems as I am writing them. It's what I'm giving to this letter as I write to you. You are imbued with my sweat. My sweat is my best and therefore my love.

I'm a really big Diana Ross fan, and as much as my poems are to and from the women in my family and church and neighborhood who had a part in raising me, my poems are to her and to so many other people I love who had now idea that they, too, had a part in raising me. Oh, and to answer you last question: majusculation adds pressure. I ain't scared of no pressure and my readers ain't either.

Yours,  
Jericho

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Dear Mr. Brown,

My name is Ronaldinio and I'm a freshman. I just read your poem, "Labor" in my English class and man it really stuck out to me. Living in Florida is amazing, growing up here I was exposed to many different things and poetry was one of them. Poetry has a way of speaking to the people where I'm from, and reading your poem was an experience. Seeing a successful Black man like you writing things that hit this hard means a lot, so I felt like I just had to reach out and tell you how much I appreciated this poem.

What really jumped out at me first was just how vivid that picture of working hard as a kid was. That whole first part about sweating on a Saturday and learning to cuss while cutting grass – man, I really felt that. I haven't exactly done the same job, but I know that feeling of doing chores or some side hustle. Putting in that physical work makes you feel kind of grown but also kind of annoyed at the same time. The details in the poem felt so authentic, like it was something every black kid experienced. Even learning to cuss while working felt authentic, like a real kid learning things the hard way. It's that kind of relatability that makes the poem so powerful and authentic.

What really hooked me though was how you look back on it now. Calling those women old then, but now realizing they're gone, "dead and in the earth". It speaks about how your perspective changes as you get older. And that line about hating your childhood but later realizing that you at least had something to do. It's like acknowledging the struggle and the parts you didn't like but also finding some kind of value or strength in that past work. It makes me think about my own family, the stories of older folks and the work they did, and how even the things that shape who you become. The poem doesn't bash the past, but it finds meaning in it instead, and this is why I like it.

Reading the poem made me wonder a bit about how it came together for you. Were those memories of cutting grass and helping those women something that always stuck with you? Or did they come back to you later when you started seriously writing poetry? Also, the line, "The loneliest people have the earth to love." Were you feeling that loneliness back then when you were doing that work? Or is that an understanding you gained looking back on that time and maybe thinking about those women you helped? It just feels like there's some meaning in those few words.

I've got a couple more questions, if you don't mind. Seeing a successful black poet is inspiring. As a young Black man myself, I wonder how much your own identity and experiences shape the things you choose to write about. Do your experiences growing up as a black man in America influence the way you word your poems? Is it something you think about consciously when you sit down to write? And do you have any advice for young people, especially like me, who are trying to find their own voice or figure out how to put their own experiences into words, whether it's poetry or anything else?

Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you for writing this poem and for sharing your work with the world. Labor really gave me a lot to think about, and it stood out a lot from the usual things we read in class. Labor was really interesting to decipher, and it had so many different meanings to it, whether it'd been growing up black, or doing things to earn money as a kid. All the usual poems we read in class don't speak to me on a level like this. It was cool to read something that feels like it understands a piece of the world I know and see.

Sincerely,  
Ronaldinio  
Florida



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Dear Ronaldinio,

Thanks for calling me “a successful Black man.” No one has ever before said that to me. People say they’re proud and compliment my work, yes. And something in me does feel that I must be successful. I felt that the day I got the call that my first book would be published. Honestly, Ronaldinio, that one occurrence was all I needed to feel like I am successful for the rest of my life. Everything else—for which I am overwhelmed by gratitude—is lagniappe. And yes, I’m Black. I’m so glad I’m Black, Ronaldino. Hallelujah! I’m a man too. I wish I loved men more. I really do. I do love us, but not as much as I... is it, “want to...” or is it, “should...?” I feel that if I had more love for men in general I wouldn’t be single in particular.

Anyway, I say all of that to say that I know the combination, “successful Black man,” has some meaning and can help folks see their own futures more clearly. Thank you. It is impossible for me to untie my Blackness from my work or from my love. I am Black all the time, so it’s a part of what always come out in anything I’m making, saying, or doing. And I look forward to its outer appearance in my work because I love everything about it and don’t think there could ever be too much of it in the world.

And I’m glad you thought of “Labor” itself as an experience. That is exactly what I want from and for my poems. I want a reader to come out of the last line feeling like they went somewhere else or like something happened to them they couldn’t stop because they couldn’t stop reading.

I feel that whatever I’ve done is what I’m always doing. When I remember things, I relive them always. I have felt lonely my entire life and sometimes while I was quite actually alone. I’m sure I’ve felt its opposite as well, many times and for long periods of time. But my loneliness has always been with me, and I don’t remember living without it. I wouldn’t call it a friend. I guess it’s more like a roommate you can count on to pay rent on time and do their part in keeping common areas clean. What is the opposite of loneliness?

My only advice is that you spend as much time with poems (or anything else you want to write) as you do with music. Come across a poem or poet you don’t like, skip it and go on to the next until you are reading something you like. You have to do a lot of this to get to what you like, but you never know it if you’re not reading as much

as you hear music. And when you do find something you like, concern yourself with the moves the poet made to make you like it and not with its subject matter.

You're clearly a successful Black man too!

Yours,  
Jericho

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Dear Jericho Brown,

I don't usually write letters to poets. I often find poetry intimidating, like walking near the edge of a cliff that I'm afraid I might fall off. But your poem "Labor" felt real. It didn't present a floating dream with no weight; it handed me an old five-dollar bill, with sweat and memories.

I didn't expect it to hit like that. It seemed so straightforward on the surface, yet it is full of quiet thoughts and echoes beneath. It reminded me of those early mornings when life feels like work, not hope. When you write, "cutting grass for women / Kind enough to say they couldn't tell the damned / Difference between their mowed lawns / And their vacuumed carpets," I could almost hear the sound of the mower and feel the heaviness of someone trying to turn gratitude into a joke so it doesn't make you feel poor. That line is funny, then suddenly and strangely, intense. Because it is not about the grass or the carpet, is it? The message is about how people try to say thank you without even fully knowing the labor behind the favor.

There's something soft yet painful in the poem's tone. It's neither angry nor dramatic; it simply knows. And that's what attracts me. Looking at the line, "The loneliest people have the earth to love / And not one friend their own age," I am left wordless. I don't know how to unpack my thoughts and feelings. I kept rereading it, contemplating the kind of loneliness that doesn't cry out. It reminds me of my neighbor growing up, an old lady who lost her husband five years ago and was constantly feeding the homeless cats and caring for the wildflowers in our neighborhood. She never said much. I never saw anyone visit or talk to her. But she loved the cats and plants as if they were the only ones listening. I think I finally understand now. Sometimes love is silent.

I noticed something special about the structure, just one long block of thought, no pause, and no stanza break. It shows how memory works. You're not just telling a story but expressing and crossing hardships. It made me feel like I was sitting next to you while you were gazing into the distance, just talking and not realizing how deep the topic was. The final line strikes my heart: "My job / Is to look at the childhood I hated and say / I once had something to do with my hands." It's like you've finally put into words the juxtaposition of guilt and pride we feel when we look at the things we once swore we'd never miss.

Can I ask you something? When you say you hated that childhood, do you mean the events? The people? Or the way it made you grow up too fast? And when you say your job now is to "look at" it, does facing it make it easier to forgive it? I've been struggling with this lately: how to honor the part of me that survived something, even if I wish I didn't have to from the start.

Another phrase that moves me is "five-dollar bill rolled tighter / Than a joint." The details are small but so precise. This description is frozen in a moment in time, so real. A five-dollar bill isn't just money here; it's almost like a lifeline. Something earned, or maybe begged for, held so tightly it transcends its simple value. I can imagine that hand pinching that bill, maybe shaking. It strikes me how fragile these moments are, and when you stare at these memories for too long, they start blurring and collapsing. The image is simple and small, but the emotion behind it is immense.

Anyway, thank you for writing a poem that is so real and heartfelt. You didn't decorate it. You just told it. And in doing that, you made me think that I will always try to remember this.

With respect,

Oscar

Massachusetts

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Dear Oscar,

Thanks so much for writing to me. Your letter is full of strong and intuitive metaphors, so I imagine you are learning to write literature as I am continuing to learn how. You quite clearly have a lot of talent.

I think it can get difficult for some to talk about writing without it, but I never think of a “message” when I’m writing a poem. And I try not to think of one when I’m reading poems. I don’t want my poems to have messages. I want them to have inherent value... you know...the way trees do...the way our human lives do.

You are very good at explicating poems. When I say “childhood,” I mean that the best way to take care of myself (and my past self) is by generating the kinds of questions you ask. I think asking questions is what keeps a thing alive. And often, asking questions is more important than finding answers.

Yours,  
Jericho

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Dear Jericho Brown,

We read “Labor” out loud in class, and it didn’t just sound like a memory—it felt like one. While we read, I could smell sweat and grass clippings. Not because I like it, but because it brought me back to summer, to my own long hours spent laboring outside.

I’m a high school student still trying to live a life worth writing about, and your poem made me feel like maybe the small, sweaty, underpaid moments are the ones that matter the most, even if they don’t seem like it at the time.

The line, “The loneliest people have the earth to love,” brought back memories, first about those that I lost, but more interestingly, about how I had literally found comfort (even if I didn’t want to do it in the first place) in tending to yards—pulling weeds, heaving rocks, mowing lawns, and much more. Back then, it just felt like another chore—but the memory of long, sweaty days and sore joints stuck to me, like dirt that wouldn’t wash off and scrapes that just didn’t want to heal.

The line, “The loneliest people have the earth to love,” symbolic of death, made me think of the exact opposite—making me think of earth and nature’s beauty and how nature can be both grounding and alive.

There’s a kind of irony in how something meant to feel heavy made me feel light. The dirt on my hands always felt like a chore, but somehow, looking back, it felt like a connection—to the earth, the present moment, to myself. Was that something you thought about when writing this? That death and comfort might sometimes be found in the same place?

The short lines, the way the sentences kept running without a full stop, made it feel like a memory you didn’t want to say out loud but had to. Even the repetition, like in “dead now, dead and in the earth I once tended,” made the grief feel heavier every time you said it. It reminded me that sometimes what hurts most is what you can’t say in just one breath.

It made me wonder—do we ever really leave behind the work and people that shaped us, or do we just learn to live with them a little differently?

Thank you for writing “Labor” the way you did. It made me think about the parts of my life I usually brush off, and realize they were never small at all.

Sincerely,  
Carson  
Wisconsin

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Dear Carson,

There is also the life of the mind. And that life is always worthy and worthy of writing. Sweat works too. But the mind and the imagination make for something to be discovered through writing as well. Dickinson’s work is proof of this, I think.

Yes, I think tenderness and violence are often two sides of the same coin. And I think having an awareness of that can make us better artists.

Memory means we always have the chance to be whomever we once were.

Yours,  
Jericho

## *A Prayer to Talk to Animals*

Lord, I ain't asking to be the Beastmaster  
gym-ripped in a jungle loincloth  
or a Doctor Dolittle or even the expensive vet  
down the street, that stethoscoped redhead,  
her diamond ring big as a Cracker Jack toy.  
All I want is for you to help me flip  
off this lightbox and its scroll of dread, to rip  
a tiny tear between this world and that, a slit  
in the veil, Lord, one of those old-fashioned peeping  
keyholes through which I can press my dumb  
lips and speak. If you will, Lord, make me the teeth  
hot in the mouth of a raccoon scraping  
the junk I scraped from last night's plates,  
make me the blue eye of that young crow cocked to  
me—too selfish to even look up from the black  
of my damn phone. Oh, forgive me, Lord,  
how human I've become, busy clicking  
what I like, busy pushing  
my cuticles back and back to expose  
all ten pale, useless moons. Would you let me  
tell your creatures how sorry  
I am, let them know exactly  
what we've done? Am I not an animal  
too? If so, Lord, make me one again.  
Give me back my dirty claws and blood-warm  
horns, braid back those long-  
frayed endings of every nerve tingling  
with all I thought I had to do today.

Fork my tongue, Lord. There is a sorrow on the air  
I taste but cannot name. I want to open  
my mouth and know the exact  
flavor of what's to come, I want to open  
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that calls all language home.

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July 2025

Hello, hello, dear ones—

Greetings from Sewanee, where I've been pouring over your letters, carrying them everywhere with me for weeks now, deeply grateful for your many enthusiastic, vulnerable, aching responses to my poem. Generally speaking, when poems are published, they have a private life of their own inside the mind of the reader. But lucky me: here I am with your many letters that are not only in correspondence with my poem but are, in their way, poems themselves. What a gift. And what a responsibility, too, as now I'm trying to write you back in a way that might reflect the thoughtfulness you've lent me. I hope to address questions you've asked, many of which are deeply essential—not least of which is the question of how to move forward with hope during this time of ecological crisis.

So, where should I begin? Well, let me begin where any of us can begin: where I am, right this very minute, which is in Sewanee, nestled in the mountains of Tennessee. Every summer, I come here to breathe poetry and eat poetry, by which I mean I'm here to teach. Just last week, my class had a delicious conversation about syntax (which is a fancy way of saying we talked about the magic that happens when you reorder words in sentences), and we've also spent a fair amount of time doing other word-nerd stuff like tapping out syllables and color-coding repetitions of sounds and seeing what happens to a line of poetry when you break it one way and then another and another. It's a passel of fun, and well, while I always take writing seriously, it's even better when that work can be the serious work of play.

Time with those students is my joy, but let me tell you: nothing beats stepping into the woods here to forget words entirely. What I mean is this: I step into these woods, and the words leaf and tree and canopy fall away as light breaks through those things we call by those words, creating something far more beautiful than I could ever write. What I mean is it's in these woods that deer becomes Deer—the Deer, I mean, that one right there, bending her neck down to the wobbly fawn pulling milk from under her. It's also in these woods that the names others call me—Nickole or Nick or Aunt Coe or Professor Brown—are left behind as I move deeper down the trail, becoming just one living, breathing being in the trees alongside so many other living, breathing beings.



When this happens—and it rarely happens often enough in my hectic, computer-bound life—who I am (or who I thought I was) disappears. But somehow, at the same time, I become someone far more alive than I could ever be on my own. When this happens, I become Maple and Sycamore and Toad and Red-Winged Blackbird and Cottontail; I become Squirrel and Salamander and Armadillo and Ring-Necked Snake; I become Cicada and Cicada and then another Cicada, the chorus of them singing from the canopy. Put another way, I'm far less lonely in these woods, no matter how alone in the world I may be. Because there's never a time that I step into the woods here in Sewanee that I don't spot another being—and I don't necessarily mean human ones, though those animals are good to encounter as well.

And the trick to cast this spell? Well, all I need to do is step among the trees. Then I need to put away my phone and pay attention.

The hard part, of course, is finding the time to make this happen. Some days, I can't seem to step away from my desk. Other days, I get lazy or find it too chilly and rainy to go outside. I bet you understand. Even harder is when I'm away from Sewanee, as I am the other ten months of the year. Because at home I'm surrounded not by woods but traffic and strip malls and chain stores and gas stations, and as of now, even the small patch of woods that inspired "A Prayer to Talk to Animals" is slated for what's called "development," which means soon they'll bulldoze the home of that young blue-eyed crow I wrote about in that poem. Soon they'll build a stadium there. Sometimes, it's more than I can take. But for now, I'm here, here on this campus surrounded by some 13,000 acres of trees and caves and streams, all of it managed sustainably. Which means the land here—though changed considerably by us humans, as nearly all land has been—has largely been left unharmed since the university was built some 168 years ago. It means the land here still remembers who it was.

It's a rare privilege to be here, and I know after I leave how I'll struggle to recall the dream of this place. Many of you have talked in a similar way about growing up, saying that you remember a younger time when you felt the world creaturely and alive. You've described how disconnected you've felt from nature as you age, how the gravity of the virtual world pulls you from the gravity of this world. And trust me: I get it. Every day, the obligations of emails and texts and social media nip at my heels, and every day, the good earth I've known all my life has become so diminished

as to become not soil but dirt. And yes, often I grow more lonely just as so many of us grow more lonely. We are, after all, entering what biologist E.O. Wilson calls this era—the Eremozoic. Translated, it means “the age of loneliness.”

So, what can we do? What can any of us do? It’s hard to say, and I’m hoping each of you will have your own answers and share them with me.

In the meantime, let me share with you two things that make a part of an answer I’ve found:

First, I’d like to give you a word that need never fall away, no matter where you are. That word is *adsum*. It’s Latin, and it means I am here. It means I am present, as in I am paying attention, as in I am using my body to perceive what’s right in front of me, right here and now. Sometimes, this means recognizing the beauty of ordinary things—a slice of orange held to the light, a bead of sweat racing down a cold glass of water, the geography of a grandmother’s hand. And sometimes, this also means not turning away from things you might not want to see—a truck-struck animal on the side of the road, the desperate faces of those in a faraway country reaching with their empty food bowls. *Adsum*, as in, I am here. As in your primary job as a writer—because while writing is all about words, it has more to do with your ability to pay attention than anything else. More than anything, your job is just this: to notice, to write it down.

And speaking of your job as a writer—should that be the path you take—let me share with you a definition of hope given to me by an historian named Rebecca Solnit. What she did for me was change my understanding of hope not as a noun (as in hope is something to find or keep or have) but as a verb.

To clarify, let me quote from her book, *Hope in the Dark*. She writes: “Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. It is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency. Hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth’s treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal. . . . To hope is to give yourself to the future—and that commitment to the future is what makes the present inhabitable.”

Do you hear then what she’s saying? Just as courage is moving forward despite being afraid, hope is a verb—is something you do—even when you don’t feel like doing it, even when you’re besieged with despair.

That said, believe me when I tell you that even the small act of writing me a letter was itself an act of hope. You might not have thought much about it when you completed this assignment and turned it in, but here I am, here with your many letters in hand, walking the shore of a lake so happy with frogs that another one seems to jump in the water with every step I take. In a few days, I'll leave here and will be back on the highway again, headed down a clogged artery of traffic that leads into a city that hasn't heard the song of frogs in years. When I do, I've no doubt I'll feel more than a bit lonely and more than a bit sad, especially once I feel the temperature climb as I speed down the interstate and hear the news of the day coming through the radio.

But I assure you: in the cage of my chest will be your letters, your many letters. Your words will hold me up as they hold me now. Because just as I am reminding you to stop, to notice, to pay attention, your letters remind me that stopping and noticing and paying attention matters. That I should keep doing the work of poetry. That I should continue to do the work I do even when I don't feel like it. That I shouldn't quit even when I'm weary, even when hopelessness weighs me down. That instead, I should sit down and write. That today I should write you a letter, just as each of you wrote me.

Do you hear what I'm saying to you? Because I'm telling you: now, it's your turn. Your turn to find your voice and put words to the page. Creativity is a kind of resistance and resilience. Don't give in to anyone or anything that tells you otherwise, and don't give up. Now is your turn to bear witness, to join the chorus of those who want to find the words to protect and repair this climate-changed earth. Now is time to write.

Welcoming you into a joyful rising,  
Nickole Brown

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Dear Nickole Brown,

My name is Adrian, and I am a high school senior in Pennsylvania. I read your poem "A Prayer to Talk to Animals" in class and found it immediately resonated with me. I have always had a love for animals, but it goes beyond that. I was struck by the direct but poetic language and the important message. I could also feel your emotions as you read it.

During certain times of the year, it is quite common for me to see many deer carcasses on the road, having been hit by cars. I always feel very sad for these deer, and angry that humans have prioritized ourselves and our travel to the extent that it interrupts the natural habitat of the non-human animals and puts them instead in a highly dangerous environment where they inevitably get injured or killed. Similarly, raccoons are left foraging in our trash. Pets are left in tiny, unsanitary, lonely cages. Your poem, specifically the line where you request to tell the Lord's creatures how sorry you are, brilliantly described how I feel as well.

I was especially intrigued by your description of your fingernails as "pale, useless moons," and the contrast with the desired "dirty claws" of an animal. In your poem, I read a relatable want to be less selfish, less busy (in the superficial, self-important way humans are sometimes busy), and instead understand the way an animal's survival rests on everything it does, and a lot it has no control over. Animals are humble in a way humans are not. They are punished for it.

I also noticed that, when you were reading your poem, you said "the flash of my damn phone" whereas in the original published version it read "the black of my damn phone" I am curious if you found any significant difference in the meaning of the line with this change, or if you perhaps just felt it just flowed better? Sometimes I find I look too deeply into poems, trying to solve them like riddles, caught in the minutiae, when certain details turn out to serve a much more broad purpose. I do not know if I am doing that in this case.

My teacher also showed me "The Fly" by William Blake which, although published over two hundred years earlier, shares some interesting parallels with your poem. Particularly the lines "My thoughtless hand / Has brushed away. // Am not I / A fly like thee? / Or art not thou / A man like me?" Although your poem of course focuses on some more modern aspects of the relationship between humans and animals, connecting these two poems made me realize that humans (at least some of them) have perhaps always strived to connect with animals in a way we so often don't, or can't. There is something

comforting in this idea. And there is also something disheartening, knowing that we so often fail in this endeavor.

I have been thinking about the ending of your poem over and over: “I want to open / my mouth and sound a language / that calls all language home.” I love how you expressed your desire to understand all the communications of animals. I also love how you describe tasting sorrow on the air, which I find especially true in relation to the things I mentioned in my second paragraph.

Finally, my question for you would be, how do you think most people could change their detached, self-important relationship with animals? Sometimes it seems like it’s impossible to make a difference when there are so many people in power who don’t seem to care.

I do not want to make this letter too long to be respectful of your time, but want to thank you again for sharing your work and taking the time to participate in this project.

Best,  
Adrian  
Pennsylvania

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Dear Adrian,

Thank you for sharing those lines of William Blake! Like most, I have “The Tyger” burned into my memory, especially these lines: “What immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” But I had not yet read “The Fly,” and, oh! The way in which he lends personhood to that creature most consider a pest. . . . I mean, is there another being considered more lowly or dirty? And how common are fly swatters, which are really no more than implements made to kill these critters without thought or hesitation?

It’s fascinating to me that Blake wrote those lines back in 1794, and here we are, some 231 years later, believing the idea of granting more-than-human beings (and in particular, rivers) personhood (which has only been brought forward in the court system in the last few years) to be a radical, unprecedented idea. Along those same lines, it’s heartbreaking to me the way Western civilization has, for so long now, viewed dominion—at least as it’s referred to in the Book of Genesis—as control over nature instead of stewardship of it.

Nevertheless, how heartening to know there have always been at least a few individuals who put their anthropocentric view aside to acknowledge animals with empathy. It seems like you are one of those people, and I thank you for it. In particular, I appreciate the compassion you have for the deer lost to our ceaseless traffic; some accidents are unavoidable, no doubt, but it's important to realize we have options, like building wildlife bridges and corridors to help animals cross our roads without harm. We could also slow down, as few rarely do, especially when we see those "deer crossing" signs that remind us how many other lives with which we share that land. At the very least, when a deer is struck, I wish the incident were told with compassion; on more than one occasion, I've heard folks refer to deer as vermin, or comically suicidal pests whose deaths are inconveniences, hazards, or a source of humor.

How different would it be if we scrubbed the violence from our way of speaking? I think about it all the time, just how many of our expressions carelessly reflect harm to other beings. There's more than one way to skin a cat, we might say. Or: kill two birds with one stone. Or: take the bull by the horns. Sometimes, there's not a lot we can do about the way our culture has been formed but we can, at the very least, scrub our tongues of such sayings. One task for writers is to question the words we use, and it seems to me that's something you're well on your way to doing.

As for your question about how people might, as you put it, "change their detached, self-important relationship with animals," well, I don't know the answer. But I think it might have to do with leading by example, which has much to do with our mouths, both considering what foods we put into them and also taking care about words that come out of them.

I also believe that bearing witness is important. I mean, the bodies of those deer you see on the side of the road—have you written about them? Written for them? Tried in your way to listen to what they might have to say? That's one kind of mercy. Because I'm not quite convinced that so many people don't care—not really. I mean, I've hardly ever met a child that didn't love animals. It's just that as they grew up, they were taught not to care. Either way, hearing another kind of story, considering another perspective, might just give them permission to care again.

That could very well be something you could do, to write those poems. And hey: even if only a handful of readers respond, that's something. Think of how wide a ripple one small pebble can create.

With gratitude,  
Nickole Brown

P.S. You also asked about the vacillation between “flash” and “black” when referencing my phone in different versions of my poem. Good eye! Well, let's just say that's one of the hazards of revision. . . . For me, revising is a compulsion that never seems to stop, even after a poem is published. Because the gravity of our phones represents both of those things to me: a black reflection and a flashing glass. Something made of both darkness and distraction—if only there were a word to encompass both at the same time. Maybe I should write yet another version, perhaps “the flashing black of my damn phone”? What do you think? Either way, you've reminded me that perhaps my work on that poem isn't still yet finished.

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Dear Nickole Brown,

My name is Kate and I am a student from New Jersey. In my language arts class I recently read your poem “A prayer to talk to animals”, the beauty of your words truly touched my heart. I loved the way that you described how human we have all become. As I have grown up, I find myself day and day drifting away from nature. I realize how much I have started to care about things that are inconsequential. Your poem, illustrating the ways that as humans we are drifting farther and farther away from our origin, truly made me rethink how I spend my time.

One of my favorite lines from your touching poem, “A prayer to talk to animals”, was “Would you let me tell your creatures how sorry I am, let them know exactly what we've done?”. With all the angst and corruption in the world, we forget how we are disrupting other parts of our beautiful world. These lines left me with the impression that us humans need to take better care of those around us, not just humans, but animals, trees, plants, and nature overall. Furthermore, the diction you used in your poem was like no other I had read previously. I enjoyed the comparisons that were made in the beginning of the poem. I felt that it truly emphasized what you would

give to retrieve your innocence. The innocence of being a small animal who didn't go through all the overwhelming struggles today.

Another line that I enjoyed from "A prayer to talk to animals" was "Oh, forgive me, Lord, how human I've become, busy clicking what I like, busy pushing my cuticles back and back to expose all ten pale, useless moons." I adored the way you used "ten pale, useless moons" to metaphorically symbolize how disconnected we have become from nature and those that came before us. "Moons" left me with the impression that you were referring to something far, like a distant planet. I love the comparison, between mentioning dirty claws and pale, trimmed moons. It highlights the idea that humans have evolved so drastically from their past. Additionally, "moons" left me with the idea that we are growing so far from animals that we are no longer supporting them. Referring back to your line written on how human we have become, it shows how contrasting we truly are. The style of writing that you have chosen for this poem truly touched my heart and helped me recognize our society a little better.

As I read through your poem I saw myself in you. I saw your ideas and thoughts written down like dreams I had once dreamt. It is heartwarming to see that while life can become profuse, there are others that endure the same emotions. Sometimes I wish that throughout all the troubles in society, I could be a strong lion. Brave and fearless, using their dirty claws to support those in their pride, not tear them down. I recently learned that lion prides are not just a group of the same species living together, it is a network. A network that supports each other, schemes hunting strategies, loves their innocent young cubs, and has equally dispersed responsibilities. Equally. If only humans were able to be like a lion pride; everyone working as one impenetrable unit. If you could be an animal or dream of society acting like one species which would you pick? How would you imagine our world to be, our society to run?

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this wonderful program. Live everyday knowing that you inspire those around you with your words. Possibly one day, if we can all appreciate each other and our origins we will return to our animalistic states, working as one unified pride. Happy National Poetry Month!

Sincerely,

Kate

New Jersey



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Dear Kate,

What a gift of a letter you've sent. *Like dreams I had once dreamt*, you wrote of my words, which reminds me of a definition Donald Hall once gave for poetry, which he deemed as *one person's inside talking to another's inside*. That kind of transmission—that careful, receptive reading—is a precious thing, and the best I could wish for when I send a poem such as “A Prayer to Talk to Animals” out into the world. I thank you for the time you've taken with it.

You gave, for example, such an intuitive reading of my line about my fingernails when I note them “clicking what I like” on my phone and how I’m “busy pushing my cuticles back and back to expose all ten, pale useless moons.” You were absolutely right: in those lines, I was referring to my feelings of disconnection to the woods through which I was walking. Even more astutely, you talk about how those lines “highlight the idea that humans have evolved so drastically from their past.” I do feel as if our technologies have gotten away from us, and what's more, that reference is a subtle nod to the fact that our lives—and all life on earth, truly—began with the stuff of space, since we are, in fact, made of stardust.

That said, here's something to consider: this idea about nature being separate from us, about plants and animals being on one side and us on the other is, in fact, a separation of our own making. Though we as humans may think of ourselves as separate from nature, that idea is false. Put another way, it's important to realize that the very construct of “nature”—in which we deem what is and what is not “nature”—is itself a false construction. That division is one of our own making, too; another hierarchy imposed by the human animal above our non-human cousins.

To give you an example of this, let me share with you something the biologist David George Haskell once pointed out to me: there is as much wildness in the making, formation, and articulation of a human hand as there is in a maple tree. Now, do me a favor: hold up your hand and tell me if you don't see that miracle there within the miracle of bone and muscle and tendons, the firings of all your nerves and muscles, right there under your living skin? That is evidence of the animal you are, all those workings of DNA tailored by millions of creatures that struggled and fed and mated and died before you were made.

On that note, let me answer this wonderful question of yours: *If you could be an animal or dream of society acting like one species which would you pick?*

I've thought a lot about this, and surprisingly enough, I'd stick with who we are—the human animal—albeit with one caveat: that we humans would fully recognize and respect our deep and abiding connection to nature, that we would relish the inextricable links between our own bodies and those of the breathing kin all around us. Did you know, by the way, that the word *Homo sapiens* includes in its translation “wise” or “knowing”? To me, remembering our indelible link to the natural world would be the kind of wisdom that might just assure the survival of this planet, that might hold us as fast together as that lion pride you mention admiring. Even better, it would make for the kind of society that would protect those lions and the land on which they live, that would love them and assure that they and the many other animals great and small would thrive, well into the future.

Again, thank you for your time. I wish you courage and strength beyond that of a lioness; I wish for you to be a courageous and strong person that will speak for them, just as you have in your letter.

With such gratitude,  
Nickole Brown

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Dear Nickole Brown,

I carry all the poems I've ever read with me. Under my skin, in my blood, every day, pumping through my veins as I walk. I loved your poem from the moment I first read it. I loved how you wrote. I felt as though each *frayed ending of every nerve* was *tingling*; I felt like I was reading about something *I could taste but could not name*. And I could tell the words meant something to me, some part of me, that was sleeping. So I tucked the poem beneath my skin, like all the others, and it flowed into my blood and through my heart.

Do you like my metaphor? A bit dramatic, maybe? I guess it comes with the territory: I am a writer. I am cursed with a love of words and all their beautiful peculiarities. My high school has a creative writing program, and I spend two hours after school, four

days a week, learning about the art of words. I love prose and screenwriting. And I love poetry, too. I believe that poems hold a small piece of the poet's soul. Isn't it nice to have a lighter soul sometimes? A simpler one? Do you think so?

I was thinking about poetry, and about yours, and also about dinner, when I was walking out of school one day. We were on the edge of rain. The sky was cloudy and the air was damp. A bird and her friend circled overhead, gossiping. I could imagine her *blue eye*. As I waited for the car, I looked down at my hands and examined the *ten pale, useless moons* beneath my cuticles. Pale imitations — or slivers of the real thing? Is this a body's way of showing that it, too, was once part of the sky? We keep slivers of something beyond us in the ten tips of our fingers. *Useless*, yes, but maybe we *selfish* humans are beyond usefulness, now.

I must have looked funny, staring down at my hands like that, lost in concentration, with a glazed look on my face. Maybe it was me the birds were talking about. And realizing this, I quickly pulled out my phone and stared into its *black*. I pretended to look busy. I pretended to have more on my mind than poetry. *How human I've become*, indeed!

The night had grown deeper by the time I got home. I finished my homework. I went outside. By then the mist had overtaken the trees down the street, the trees where birds nested. I could only see gray. Gray, and my hands. And as I stared out into the void — no, not the void. There were things beyond my sight. Birds in the trees I could not see, squirrels and snakes burrowed away, lone coyotes creeping unseen. I knew that feeling, the one we *cannot name*.

And I won't insult it by giving it a name. It's when you stare into the part of yourself where poetry comes from, the part you can never hope to fully understand. Do you know? Sometimes I feel like my words don't mean anything, can't possibly mean anything in the face of that feeling. Do you feel that way, too? I think animals will understand poetry better than I ever could. They are nature; they are that feeling; they are truth.

And in that moment, just standing and looking at things I cannot see, I wanted to *slit open the veil* of mist and tell the animals it's our fault the nights will get colder and the days will get hotter and their tree will be cut down someday. It's our fault. Ours. And I wanted my *dumb* arms to become wings and my *dumb lips* to speak a *language they'd understand*, so I could fly to their tree and tell them *what we've done*. Tell

them I'm sorry. Tell them that I will never be like them. Tell them that maybe the best I can do is nurture the part of myself where poetry comes from. But my *dumb* legs held me down. And they walked me back inside for dinner.

Thank you for writing this poem. Thank you for sharing it with the rest of us humans. It was wonderful to read. We may both still be wishing to understand the truth of animals, wishing for a *tiny tear between this world and that* – but your poem became a *keyhole* between your world and mine. And as I write this now, with poetry pumping in my blood and beating through my heart, I look down at my furiously typing fingers, at the *ten pale moons*, and hope – hope they are not so useless in the end.

Thank you again for your words and your time,

Linnea  
California

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Dear Linnea,

You're right: your metaphor is a bit dramatic, but even so, it's an awfully good comparison to how poetry can live inside you. I mean, *to carry*, as you say, *all the poems you've ever read with you? Under your skin, in your blood, every day, pumping through your veins as you walk?* Yes, please.

Because I, too, feel as if I'm made of the work that also made that keyhole through which I could peek—that my particular lineage of authors didn't just set the foundation for me as a writer, but their words actually made their way into my body. Thus, like you, I'm made of blood and bone but also of Dorothy Allison and Brigit Pegeen Kelly, of Laure-Anne Bosselaar and Jack Gilbert, of Ada Limón and Ross Gay, of Jane Hirshfield and Camille Dungy and a hundred other voices, all of them rising up in me like a chorus at times, giving me a song by which I survive.

And if my work then is to be part of what's tucked under your skin, too? Well, I consider myself blessed; it means that lineage that makes me now continues through you.

That said, there are many things you mentioned in your letter that I'd like to address, but first let me thank you for your deep reading of that poem of mine. In fact, your letter read like a poem itself, meandering from *the edge of rain* to the moment you

caught yourself by realizing what you first thought of as *the void* was not, in fact, a void at all, but full of creatures unseen. That recognition is such an important one; I can't tell you how many times I hear people refer to untouched, intact lands as being *in the middle of nowhere*, when, in fact, if you stop to really pay attention to all the beings living there, those places could be referred to as *in the middle of everywhere*, absolutely rife with more-than-human lives often overlooked (or underappreciated) by our human eyes.

I also want to commend you for your vulnerabilities in your letter: how you admit that you must have looked funny staring down at your hands, and how, feeling a little embarrassed, you pretended to look busy by quickly pulling out your phone. A recognition of such a tricky, subtle emotion as shame is an important one to admit, because, well, the sooner you do so (and the more quickly you might be able to override that emotion), the better. You see, doing so will allow you to get to what I see as one of the main charges as a poet—to stop and notice things, even when no one else is looking. Even when you feel kind of awkward doing so.

What I mean to say is that, as someone as serious about poetry as you are, a part of your job is going to be to listen to what the birds have to say to each other (and yes, occasionally, to you). It might also mean investigating something you've seen countless times before—a tree, for instance—because suddenly you realize you've never actually looked at a tree, not in the way in which a tree deserves to be witnessed. And trust me: others might find you a little kooky stopping to spend your afternoon in the company of one such as a tree, but it's all part of the work.

Also, before I go, let me say one more thing: you say that the days will get hotter. You're right. But there's one thing I don't agree with; you say that this is all *our fault. Ours*. And I disagree, dear Linnea, because you're too young to take the blame for what humans have done, so don't muddle your grief for this suffering, climate-changed world with guilt you shouldn't have to carry. Take responsibility, yes. Do what you can to, as you say, "never be like them." Nurture your poet self, tenderly and with compassion and a fierce refusal to turn away from the living world. Pay attention and notice all you can. Bear witness and write it down. But don't internalize guilt that's not yours to carry; you were born into the way things are, and it's not your fault.

And listen: if you get tired, just know that you were right in thinking that our fingernails are part of the sky, because you and I and all living beings, human and not, are made of just that: stardust. It's a cliché of a song, I know, but just think about it—how we're all made of the same stuff, how connected we all are. To our mentors and the authors of the poems that live within us. To the birds and squirrels and snakes and coyotes you mention. You hold fast to that, okay?

Thank *you* for your words and your time,  
Nickole Brown

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Dear Nickole Brown,

I am selfish, “too selfish to even look up from the black of my damn phone.” How ironic is it that I quote this poem while writing you a letter on another damn device? I feel bad for picking up a laptop or phone to jot down my thoughts in stanzas, but what else is there to do? Nowadays, nobody ever has a paper or pen to offer. I suppose I could attempt to keep it locked in my head, lit under a spotlight in the forefront of my mind, but wouldn't that just create shadows on everything else that resides there? I pray for nothing to go unnoticed, but I can't seem to stop the noise from taking over.

I keep telling myself to put religion in the spotlight, even just a quick “hey God, thanks, man. Amen” every morning, every night, just so I don't get to the bottom of His inbox. But that feels too easy. Too simple. And honestly, it feels a little empty sometimes, like I'm just checking off a box because I'm supposed to. Maybe that's what makes me feel selfish. When I try to pray or reach out, I feel like I'm asking for something without really listening to what's already been given to me.

Your poem, *A Prayer to Talk to Animals*, hit me in a way that I didn't expect. It made me think about how we rarely listen to anything that doesn't speak our language, how we often forget to listen to the things around us that might have something important to say. I tell myself I'll pray or talk to God more, but when I look around, I forget that maybe prayer doesn't always have to be words. Maybe it's more about *being*—about paying attention, about noticing the things we take for granted. Maybe the animals, the trees, the wind—they know something we don't. Maybe they're in constant prayer, in the way they live and breathe, without needing to say a word.

Sometimes I catch myself lost in the noise of the world—the hum of the phone, the background buzz of traffic, the constant need to do, do, do. And then I'll step outside and see a squirrel just sitting there, still, staring at nothing and everything all at once. For a second, it feels like it's asking me to be still too, like it's showing me something important, but I get distracted. I reach for my phone, or my thoughts wander to schoolwork, or I start thinking about things that are so far away from that moment. That feeling of quiet doesn't last long, but it stays with me, like a shadow I can't quite outrun.

Maybe that's where I'm failing. Maybe the point isn't to fix everything or to have all the answers. Maybe the point is simply to notice. To notice the animals, the trees, the air—everything that's here and has always been here, quietly existing without needing a reason to be seen. Maybe that's how the animals pray, by just existing in the moment, by being a part of the world without needing validation.

I feel like I spend so much time trying to make everything mean something. But reading your poem, I wonder if I've been missing the point all along. Maybe it's not about saying the perfect prayer or asking for something big. Maybe the prayer is in the listening. Maybe the prayer is in the moments when we stop talking and start *being* with everything around us. The animals don't ask for anything—they simply are. And maybe that's enough.

I don't know if I'll ever be as good at this as I want to be, but I'm trying. I'm trying to notice the quiet moments, the little things that might seem small but mean everything. And maybe, in doing that, I'll start to listen to God a little more clearly, or at least to the world He created. Maybe I'll hear the prayer that's been here all along, not in the words we say, but in the way we live.

So, I guess, in the spirit of your poem, I'll say this: Thank you for reminding me to listen more closely—to the animals, to the world, to the prayer that doesn't always need words.

Best,  
Peyton  
Virginia

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Dear Peyton,

What a moving meditation you've written. Ostensibly, you wrote a letter to me with questions to which I should respond, but from paragraph to paragraph, you not only found your own answers, but you also brought me back to something vital to both my practice as a writer and my survival as human: the necessity of staying in my body. Of using all my senses in order to be right here, right now. The heart of this is echoed right there in your third paragraph: "Maybe it's more about *being*—about paying attention, about noticing the things we take for granted. Maybe the animals, the trees, the wind—they know something we don't. Maybe they're in constant prayer, in the way they live and breathe, without needing to say a word."

Yes and yes and yes, Peyton. Absolutely, yes. If you haven't read Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, I'd highly recommend it; that text has been a guiding force of mine for years. Also, if you've yet to encounter the word *ostrananie*, let me tell you—wrapped in the syllables of that Russian word is a practice that parallels so much of what you outlined in your missive to me. Briefly defined, *ostrananie* simply means "defamiliarization," or "the technique of forcing the audience to see common things in an unfamiliar or strange way, in order to enhance perception of the familiar." That defamiliarization necessitates a deep awareness akin to what you're describing, and as such, calls for attention as a form of devotion—a raw, muscular kind of seeking and an unflinching dedication to scrub away one's preconceived notions of a thing in order to see it for what it really is.

Put another way, it means you might try to be in communication and communion with those beings that you perceive to be in prayer—the animals and trees and wind. That you try to be a part of them, or perhaps even *be* them for a spell. As a writer, you might consider your charge not just to notice these beings, but to pray with them; to not only exist alongside them, but through them. And as you say, maybe "the prayer is in the listening." I couldn't agree more. And the prayer is also in the seeing and hearing and tasting; it's in the sensory messaging of your skin as it delivers to you the texture and temperature and weight and shape of other beings; it's in the firings of your muscles as you move alongside other beings, running into the wind as perhaps the wind runs into you.



This embodied attention to creation is, in my way of knowing, one of the most potent ways to worship. A few years ago, I wrote a poem called “Prayer to Be Still and Know.” I hope you’ll forgive me for quoting myself, but I noted in a statement about that poem that its center is an attempt to revise a particular cliché I’ve heard in more than one prayer circle, a distillation of Psalm 46:10 that neuters the text “Be still, and know that I am God” into a platitude of comfort that suggests one need only relax to let the divine into your life. What’s missing from that, however, is the context of this verse, because “to be still” was no gentle suggestion, but rather a command to stop fighting in a time of deep unrest and war—not unlike our world today, especially with such ecological devastation at hand. To me, our charge is not to step into nature and passively receive peace, but to actively pay attention to discover something greater—awe.

That said, in the spirit of your letter, let me say exactly what you said to me: “Thank you for reminding me to listen more closely—to the animals, to the world, to the prayer that doesn’t always need words.” I repeat that back to you, word for word, because that’s what your letter did for me—remind me of what I most need to know. Because like you, I, too, get lost in what you call “the noise of the world.” I get lost in it all just like so many of us in modern society do, and somehow, the trail of poems I’ve left behind reminded you there might be another way to be. Just how, cyclically, your letter in response to those poems reminds me now there’s another way to be.

Isn’t that funny? How what you give is sometimes returned to you? That there’s a circle we can create together, to remind each other when we get distracted, when we get tangled up in all we have to do. This is why, today, I didn’t reach for my phone once—instead I reached for your letter, again and again, marveling at the gift of your words. I thank you.

All good things,  
Nickole Brown

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Dear Nickole Brown:

My name is Rosie, and I’m a sophomore from Texas. I’m not very good at analyzing the meaning of poetry or the use of poetic devices or finding metaphors, but I am

good at analyzing how things make me feel. So strap in because you're about to hear a lot about me.

Growing up, my mom could never tame me. My aunt, Polly, used to call me Monkey. It fit. My favorite movie was Tarzan (Were you talking about Tarzan when you mentioned the "Beastmaster gym-ripped in a jungle loincloth"? I was gonna search it up to see if it was an allusion I was missing, but then thought better of it, afraid I'd get some... weird... results. Instead, I just pictured Tarzan in my head), my idol Jane Goodall, and you could always find me climbing something, be it our kitchen counters or the trees in the park. But over time, that faded. I stopped going outside unless I had to. You see, I grew up in Houston, a city where the summers are too hot and the rest of the year too humid. So when I went inside, I never came back out.

I think the first line that really struck me was when you begged God "to rip/a tiny tear between this world and that, a slit/in the veil." I think that's what I seek when I start a new book. I read a lot of fantasy and I think it comes from a place of wanting to escape into a new reality, but in doing so, I've lost my love for our planet, *our* reality.

I used to chase lizards during recess. I was really good at it. I knew how to catch them by their body, not their tail. I never minded scraping my knees when I dove for them or dirtying my clothes. Then that changed. Instead of going outside during recess, I went to the library and read. I lost that connection I had to the earth, to the planet. So when you pray to God, asking him to give you back your "dirty claws" and to "fork [your] tongue" I know exactly what you mean. I wish, too, to return to a simpler time, when all my worries resided on evading the person who was it in a game of tag. I wish to return to a time when I could entertain myself for hours with the roly-pollies in my backyard and the lizards crawling up the walls. I need forgiveness. Instead of changing my life, going back to the times I desire, I, too, pray to a God, a God I personally don't believe in. When I first read your poem, I thought, "Oh cool! Apostrophe!", but then I read it again and I realised to you, this isn't apostrophe. For someone who has a strong sense of faith, when you pray to God, you are speaking to someone who is always present, though he may never be able to respond. What is it like, I wonder, to have such faith in someone you can never meet? Does it make you feel safer? Or does it help you to change? I wish I could have a strong faith, and while my Mom is a devoted Christian, for some reason, the power to believe skipped a generation.

There was one time though, when I could sense something more than myself. I was standing on the edge of a cliff in Ireland. We were in the Dingle Peninsula, and had gotten out of the car to take a hike. On that cliff edge, I closed my eyes and just felt. The spray from the sea misted across my face, the salt sticking to my clothes and my skin. I could feel the sunlight on my back, but it did not burn. Most of all, I remember the wind. It whipped through my hair, my clothes. I don't think I've ever breathed better than I did on that cliff. It was like I could hear a voice in the wind. It spoke to me in a language I understood better than the one I was raised in. I could hear a person who I'd never met, yet I felt like I knew. The language that spoke to me called me home. It told me that this was where I was supposed to be. Was that you? I know you wanted to learn to "sound a language that calls all language home." So, did you? Was it you that called to me on that cliff? Or have you heard that voice too?

I want to be a doctor, to save lives or help bring new ones into the world, but when I blow out my birthday candles, that's not what I wish for. When I get the bigger side of the wishbone, see a ladybug, or lose an eyelash, I always wish for the same thing. *Live, I beg, don't just exist, live. See the world. Explore. Don't hold back.*

Thank you for sharing this poem. Thank you for writing this poem. Thank you for making me feel more seen than a stranger ever has. I don't know if it was you that called to me on that cliff, but the next time I hear that voice speaking a language that sounds like home, I'm going to call back, and hopefully, somebody else hears and is broken from the monotony that is modern life, stuck behind the screen of a phone or a laptop. Hopefully, together, we can spread the word and help people rediscover their inner child who didn't mind getting a bit dirty. The child whose hair was never tamed and their face never lacking a smile.

Thank you,  
Rosie

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Dear Rosie,

Mind if I call you Monkey? Seems to me like that younger part of you—the one given that nickname, the one who romped outside in all kinds of Texas heat and humidity, that tree-climbing kiddo with scraped-up knees pretending to be Tarzan (just as I,

too, pretended to be Tarzan)—well, I bet that wildchild is still within. Why? Because even though you feel like that younger part of you has faded, like the you-that-was-you went inside and “never came back out,” well, I think that adventurer was the one tapping on the window, asking you to come out to play when you read my poem.

Because Monkey’s still there, believe me—not just as a figment of your memory, but someone who makes you who you are today, and might even be ushering you toward who you want to be in the future. What do I mean by this? Well, I know you want to be a doctor, and I bet you’ll make a good one. But that doesn’t mean you can’t hold to the joy you found in childhood, to be fully in your own body and give that body full permission to thrive in the body of this good earth.

I mean, when you say that you blow out your birthday candles and wish to live and not just exist, I bet it’s Monkey that’s making that wish. I bet it’s Monkey wanting to return to that schoolyard of lizards and pill bugs, wanting to stand with you again on the windy cliffs of Ireland, speaking in a language that, as you say, called you home. . . I say this because I’ve heard that voice in the wind, too—once in the steady breeze of Pawleys Island where I spent a day on the shore in the company of crashing waves and horseshoe crabs, and again years later when I stood in the open window of a 12th-century church in Slovenia, gusts of air coming through that small stone aperture brightly singing of something I’ll never forget.

So, what might you need to fulfill that wish of yours? Well, first of all, get yourself outside—right now, if you can. You don’t need a fancy vacation to do so, nor should you wait for the weather to be perfect. Being in that un-conditioned air, breathing it in, even uncomfortably so, is enough. And when you do go, call forth all of your senses to be in that place with you—be there, truly there, asking your nose and eyes and ears and skin to translate what it can. You might find a spot of joy that Monkey remembers well. Or you might find yourself awe-stuck by an encounter with a blade of grass or some small beings scurrying into the bushes. You might even find yourself communicating with creation, which is, in a very real way, prayer. As a philosopher named Simone Weil once said, “Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.”

I say this because this is how I worship. You were right when you said my poem didn’t use apostrophe, because by definition apostrophe in poetry is “a figure of speech where

a speaker directly addresses someone that is not present or cannot respond.” Because when I’m outside, the wind responds. As do the crows and the squirrels, the Hickory as well as the Brown Thrasher who lives there, as do the wood bees who drill into my fence and the woodpecker who finds them there. And sometimes, the response is not something I want to hear—the mosquitoes have plenty to say, as does the rain, especially these climate-changed days, as it poured last September when Hurricane Helene devastated the city in which I live. But regardless of the message, there is a divine presence speaking all around us, living in every being, human or not. There’s nothing abstract about creation—and what better way to get to know a maker than by the life they’ve created?

To close, let me share with you this quote by Mississippi writer Eudora Welty. She said, “Children, like animals, use all their senses to discover the world. Then artists come along and discover it the same way all over again.” I mean, Rosie, you say you “need forgiveness,” but I’m not sure that’s true. Instead, I think you might just need to put down your devices, take Monkey by the hand, and go back outside.

All good things to you,  
Nickole Brown

## *Portrait of My Gender as [Inaudible]*

I knew I was a god  
when you could not  
agree on my name

& still, none you spoke  
could force me to listen  
closer. Is this the nothing

the antelope felt when  
Adam, lit on his own  
entitling, dubbed family,

genus, species? So many  
descendants became  
doctors, delivered

babies, bestowed bodies  
names as if to say it is to make it  
so. Can it be a comfort between

us, the fact of my creation?  
I was made in the image  
of a thing without

an image & silence, too,  
is your invention. Who prays  
for a god except to appear

with answers, but never  
a body? A voice? If I told you  
you wouldn't believe me

because I was the one  
to say it. On the first day  
there was no sound

worth mentioning. If I, too,  
am a conductor of air, the only  
praise I know is in stereo

(one pair—an open hand & closed  
fist—will have to do). I made  
a photograph of my name:

there was a shadow in a field  
& I put my shadow in it. You  
can't hear me, but I'm there.

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Dear Meg Day,

Frequently, my poetry is an attempt to capture a feeling I am struggling to understand in words, however abstract they may be. The moments of undefined emotion that lead to this kind of writing, more often than not, spring from my identity as nonbinary and the disconnects from gender, societal standards, and even humanity that come with it.

Listening to and reading your poem, “Portrait of My Gender as [Inaudible],” felt as if you took each and every one of those disconnects, those unspoken, inaudible, ever-present emotions, and wove them into a poem that resonated with me more and more as I progressed through each stanza.

The lines “I was made in the image / of a thing without / an image” hit me especially hard. For as long as I’ve been trying to define my identity, I’ve realized over and over again that no labels or words could entirely encapsulate what I felt, at least not for long, as I continue to grow in and out of different states of being. Oftentimes I find myself lamenting the fact that there is no guide or set of rules for how I can balance being perceived in the ways I want to with feeling like “myself.” My interpretation of these lines was heavily influenced by that unachievable desire to be perceived as a blank slate, because being something “without an image” feels truest to who I am.

A little less than a year ago at the time of writing this, I worked on a mixed media project for about a month with a focus on silhouettes—especially taking one’s shadow and finding ways to make it appear less human, or at least less recognizable as me. I wanted to play with the concept of fairytales and cryptids and blurry shapes that people wouldn’t know exactly what to make of.

That project was not intended to be an exploration of my gender, nor the detachment I feel from my name as a method of encapsulating my being, nor the ways in which I often feel at a loss for words—but not images—when attempting to define how I want to be perceived.

These are all connections I made instead as I read the last lines of your poem, “I made / a photograph of my name: / there was a shadow in a field / & I put my shadow in it. You / can’t hear me, but I’m there,” once, twice, three times, over and



over again, sometimes with the rest of the piece, sometimes on its own. I was trying to wrap my head around why it felt so deeply and intrinsically connected to my understanding of who I am.

I don't think I'm there yet. I don't think I fully get everything about your poem, I'm not all too sure I have to. I want to start thinking about my gender the way I think about poetry, and vice versa: as something that doesn't have to be completely defined to hold meaning.

Sincerely,

Amalia

California

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Dear Amalia,

Thank you for your letter. I'm writing to you from the cool of the golden hour, watching the wild rabbits & their crepuscular kin emerge outside in the long grass. Sometimes I think every gender must have a season & a time of day, a color palette & a weather system all its own. I know it best at dawn & dusk, sense something settle in me that is beyond language; it makes me feel certain my gender is quieter than most might expect, & slower, too.

You write about the cross-genre nature of perception & how you welcome it: your cryptid silhouettes & the distance one can make between a name & its shadow. You write about the desire to be perceived as blank slate, "without an image," & yet—like me, like so many—are drawn to images to convey the murkiness of being, the ineffable qualities of self. I talk often to my students about the different ways to engage meaning: semantic sense & intuitive sense. Semantic sense, we say, is the meaning in a poem you can point to, can cite. We don't always feel confident about semantic sense, but we can always trace its origin grammatically, linguistically. We have proof.

But then there's this other thing, this intuitive sense. In ASL, it's the sign for INSTINCT: four fingers curved toward the body & tapping at the gut, where one has to assume discernment grows sensitive. Intuitive sense knows something is happening—knows

it, often with confidence—but cannot point to the exact place it occurs in a poem. Cannot say with certainty, here is where it happens. It's a feeling without hard evidence, like a smell that lingers or the hair standing up on your arm. You know it & also you cannot show how it was manufactured.

This, however, does not make intuitive sense less real.

Sometimes I think poems & gender are in cahoots. I think of semantic sense as the kind of information our sex assigned at birth lends us. And I think of intuitive sense as the information we collect & realize about our gender, a truth that is incontestable but also, at times, imperceptible. No, Amalia, you don't have to *get* everything about this poem. But trust your gut—you already sense everything you need to know.

Yrs,

Day

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Dear Meg Day,

On November 6, 2024, I woke up in the morning and did not want to go to school. I didn't want to have to face linear functions and the Renaissance and Odysseus while having questions and hopes and fears and dread about my future rushing through my mind simultaneously. I ended up going home early that day— and on the car ride home, I had a talk with my mom.

Current politics has caused so many people to have to rethink the trajectory of their current daily lives, and even people my age, people who should be *being teenagers* during these fleeting years wonder how they're supposed to wake up in the morning and attend high school as normal if certain public schools are required to not assist with student's social gender transition and strictly refer to them by their government name. 17 year olds who are on prescribed hormone replacement therapy are getting notified that their necessary medication may become inaccessible to them.

My mom and I have lived such different lives, and she has never had to worry about the same issues as I am worrying about them today. Yet, in 1994, as a hearing impaired teenage girl, she can relate to some of the emotions I brought up. We

talked about being different and having to explain– having to explain not just your experience but *why* you live like you do, and *why* anyone should even care to care.

Being trans will always have its dictionary definition, but a book won't ever define the experience. We can resort to metaphors, I could sit someone down and try to put *them* in *my* shoes, but I could ramble for hours and hours on end and never really understand my own words myself.

Every time I read your poem over another time, I feel like I uncover another dimension. In this letter, I'm choosing to focus on specifically the elements of expectations and ideals that come with identifying as transgender. Your poem unifies a lifetime of experiences and describes them as beyond political, beyond simple definition, and even just sometimes settling at *being*.

The lines “Is this the nothing // the antelope felt when / Adam, lit on his own / entitling, dubbed family, // genus, species?” describes the experience of living as trans or non-binary and not having control over what you are dubbed, or expected to live up to, as a certain or specific gender. In Genesis 2:20 in the Bible, Adam names the livestock, the birds and the wild animals. This excerpt takes on the perspective of the antelope, as one of the animals that Adam named, taking its emotions (or lack thereof) and the fact that it is out of control of its own name/species into consideration. This is a comparison to the experience that trans people face everyday– not necessarily referencing “wanting to be another gender” but rather being forcibly defined by the gender or gender roles that have been chosen for you by the binary society we live in, based on someone's physical sex characteristics. Certain labels in our society foster an expectation that everyone with similar characteristics (a family, genus, species) fall under a single label– and yet that label is not just a label, but an expectation for how each person's life must be led. If man decided on the names of the animals this early in creation, they have never been given the opportunity, or maybe have never even recognized the opportunity to make these decisions on their own behalf. For those who experience life differently than the ideal experience based on genus/species, a feeling of nothingness, a feeling of not fitting into either the experiences of the physical body you own or the physical body of the life you experience.

The word “nothing” in your poem challenges the idea of an ‘ideal’ or a ‘right way’ to be a certain thing or even just to live. The antelope doesn’t feel *hurt* or *constricted*– in this poem, it feels *nothing*. A nothingness brings nothing, and bringing nothing, it neither holds comfort or discomfort. The Bible says that God created man in “his own image”, and yet, as a society, we fail to come to a consensus on what God’s image even is. God is personal– some people have an image of a god in their mind and some people don’t, some believe a god but do not assign an image to Him, some people don’t believe in God at all. If God has never taken a definitive form, and yet man was “made in his image”, we were all made “in the image of a thing without an image”. Being made in the image of what could be called nothing, and yet having a societal “responsibility” to fit an image that seemingly doesn’t exist is contradictory. Sometimes settling as what people may see as *nothing* is okay, and if it’s right, then it’s right.

Similarly to the part of the poem earlier referenced, the lines “bestowed bodies / names, as if to say it is to make it / so.” further emphasize the point that although an individual may be labeled as what someone chooses to label them by, by stating that, you have no ability to solidify that statement into truth. This tradition, as you could call it, has carried on for decades, generations, and millennia, the naming of an individual far before it has the ability to create a name for itself. The process of naming a child is important– and is necessary in our society, but it is the first decision, and one of the most important decisions, any adult makes for a child’s life, sometimes before it is even born. “As if to say it is to make it so” describes how although anyone can call anything whatever they please, to “name” something is to decide, but these decisions don’t necessarily equal truth. A name is not a scientific occurrence, but nevertheless it is still important, and willing a title like this into existence can, on occasion, sometimes even be constricting.

The lines “If I told you / you wouldn’t believe me // because I was the one / to say it.” highlights how often, individuals who experience life and, specifically gender, in various ways are often viewed as untrustworthy or their experience is discounted as one that is not true, authentic, or a valid experience. Your poem paints an elaborate picture of a specific individual experience of life, one that is not identical from any other because all experiences differ. Speaking directly and specifically about these experiences is something that will not be relatable to everyone, because everyone’s

experiences vary. However, often people discount experiences that are too unlike their own, because although they have been told about it in great detail and have the ability to comprehend it, they choose not to listen or believe because it is being told only from the person who did experience it. It's almost counterintuitive— what better source is there than a first-hand one? But even so, people find it harder to trust a description of a personal experience by word than numerical data or a universal experience. This can be relatable for everyone in their own individual way— and is one of the reasons why I find myself relating strongly to this poem and appreciating how well the words form into a description of this frustration or difficulty that many people, especially people who are historically or currently marginalized in some way may experience.

This poem deals with both the constraints and freedoms of labels, and lack of labels, in the transgender experience and uses words to carefully sculpt a beautiful representation of experience out of language. There are so many bases to cover and so many ideas that could be explored, and in the process of brainstorming for this letter I felt that every day I was uncovering something new. This, in itself, shows how representative your poem is, as *experience*, *identity*, and *life* cannot be summed up under one simple definition.

Ideas are difficult to harness. Although I love to, sitting down to write can be a difficulty for me, specifically finding a natural way to settle all of the pieces of life I want to contain into words. How do you capture all of the layers that come together so beautifully as they have in your poem? Is it a singular idea that can be worked to be further developed, is it a multitude of thoughts over a long period of time, or is it something completely different and unique?

I've begun to carry around a mini notebook/sketchbook with me everywhere I remember to. On November 5th, I wrote a poem, and on November 6th, I wrote another. Small details that will probably never be shared, but are personal sentiments to important days and transformative times.

Sincerely,

Austen

New Jersey

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Dear Austen,

Thank you for your letter. I'm writing to you after a long & lovely day of recruitment calls, inviting emerging writers from across the country & the world to come make poems with me here in North Carolina. Did you know you can get a degree studying how poems & other works of literature are made? Your letter makes me think you should consider it.

There are so many touchpoints in what you've shared that I'm not sure where to start; our lives cross-over in abundant ways. Isn't it strange how one can be friend or stranger, seventeen or seventy-five, & the labor of being different doesn't really change? It's a heavy lift, explaining. I'm right there with you, lifting.

To me, being asked to explain oneself—to defend or rationalize for others—plays on the double-edge of one's humanity. Language and labels can be reductive, but they can also help us find our people. Feeling witnessed can be deeply affirming, but explaining oneself into recognition can be exhausting & objectifying. Sometimes language makes me feel more idea than human.

And you said it best: ideas are difficult to harness. This is, in part, their power. But when it comes to being a poet—to answer your question directly—I find harnessing is less about control & more about connection. I've often talked about my writing practice as rubbing two bad ideas together until they reveal their spark. What I've come to realize is that I am often asking three or four or even five ideas—good, bad, or otherwise—to bend & braid simultaneously, to play nice on the page in a way that is legible semantically & intuitively.

A poem with many moving parts, running on all cylinders? This is a big ask & takes time (sometimes a lot of it). But I'm interested in making poems that convey experience & don't just describe it. Those dimensions you uncovered while reading? That's what I'm after. I want a poem that's just like the conversation you had in the car with your momma: the more layers you pull back & the more differences you see, the deeper

the connection. And maybe, just maybe, a poem becomes a kind of comrade in the heavy lifting we do. Maybe it makes it possible for you to be understood without having to explain anything at all.

Yrs,

Day

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Dear Meg Day,

My name is Jay-Jay, and I am a current senior in Maine and an upcoming criminology and criminal justice major. I read your poem “Portrait of My Gender as [Inaudible]” and from the moment I got to the last stanza, I knew that you were the poet I wanted to write to. Ever since I was young, my gender and I felt like a beautiful monarch butterfly forever stuck inside its cocoon, and I wish that I could say that I have been able to break free from my cocoon, but I would be lying to you. Since I’ve gotten older, I have been able to stick my fragile Nymphalidae legs out of the silky shell covering me, but I still feel claustrophobic. I have identified as a transgender male while painting my nails and teasing my hair to stick up like a ‘60s teenage girl, longing for the feeling of gossiping with my girlfriends over a landline about which boy from The Beatles is our favorite. I have identified as a cisgender woman while wishing I could be a famous male rockstar in the 80s cruising down the California Sunset Strip on my fire-painted Harley Davidson. I feel that your poem has found me at the right time in my life because I felt caught up in my identity until I read it. Your creation perfectly captured the feeling of being genderqueer in a world of people comfortable with their identity, and for the first time in my life, I felt truly seen in a poem.

Your poem taught me that I, too, can be comfortable with my genderqueer identity. A part that really spoke to me was when you wrote, “Can it be a comfort between us, the fact of my creation? I was made in the image of a thing without an image” because I feel that way. The way I interpreted that part of your poem was that when you are born, you are a living, breathing creature modeled after something, but what? There is no answer because you yourself do not know, yet you are still curious. I strongly connect with this: I am a creation, I have an identity, but it is unspecified, like a sealed, enveloped letter without an address. At the beginning of your poem, I

connected with the part where you wrote, “I knew I was a god when you could not agree on my name & still, none you spoke could force me to listen closer” because I took it as coming out to someone and them not agreeing to the “terms and conditions” of being a transgender person, aka, using your preferred name or pronouns. When you were writing this, was that the message you were trying to get the reader to envision? I want to thank you for writing this poem because it means so much to kids and adults like me to feel acknowledged in media. People like us exist and will continue to exist in workplaces, as family members, lovers, and more. I used to think that I wouldn’t be able to successfully thrive in my major due to my insecurities surrounding gender identity, but after reading your poem, I now realize that I can have a successful future working in the justice system, even if I can’t fully describe what my gender is or how I identify.

Thank you again for your time and creativity,

Jay-Jay

Maine

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Dear Jay-Jay,

Thank you for your letter. I’m writing to you tonight from the quiet of my couch in the home I share with my partner while our child sleeps in the next room. If you had told me in high school that I would ever have these things—love, companionship, joy, understanding, comfort, family—I would not have believed you. As a young person, I felt very confident that the things about my sexuality that I knew to be true—& especially the big questions marks around gender that still seemed so bewildering & unknowable—were indicators that my future would be painful, lonely, and short.

And as you suggest in your letter, it is hard enough to grow up queer or trans & find evidence of a future that doesn’t hurt. But what about when your identity doesn’t fit neatly into a category? What if it shifts & bends, resisting language altogether? I have no trouble understanding you in your cocoon with your legs sticking out, claustrophobic & perfectly in progress—& I’m so glad you find something of a mirror in this poem. Sometimes it feels very heavy to carry the different ends of a spectrum around in one body & mind, doesn’t it?



It took me a long time to understand how the weight of that load comes from others' expectations & not from my own inbetweenity. When I am not pretending to be one thing or another, I feel weightless & full of light. I hoped in this poem to convey a sense of ownership over the multiplicity cocooned in there with you, Jay-Jay: in the end, I care less about what the butterfly still in the cocoon calls itself & more about its right to rest or wriggle.

My partner likes to remind me that, if we're lucky, we get to live a lot of lives. For those of us leaning freely into the flexibility of our gender, I say we are luckier than most. Lean in. You're not alone.

Yrs,  
Day

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Dear Meg Day,

I knew I would write about this poem the second I read the first line. I was sitting in English class, in my Catholic high school where I'm allowed to be nothing but a girl. When I read that line, I felt like something in me had been translated straight into poetry.

"I knew I was a god / when you could not / agree on my name"

It portrays gender as something huge, incomprehensible, and therefore powerful. And how presumptuous of people, then, to try and gather these abstract concepts of self into something simple: how human. When I read this poem, I heard it echoing from my core, like it was already there to begin with. At my school, gender is supposed to be simple. Either you are a girl or you can't enroll. But many of us break this rule, quietly, and without calling too much attention to ourselves. The intersection of gods and gender that exists in this poem is exactly what I needed. It's also frighteningly true: gods have no body, no gender: nothing that can be put into words. Having an abstract concept of gender isn't unnatural or unholy: it's like god. But the world is unable, or unwilling to understand this. Reading this poem, I can almost see you, the author, trying to explain your gender or name to a relative, again and again, just to be met with dismissal. The verses are desperate, angry, and tired.

"If I told you / you wouldn't believe me / because I was the one / to say it"

People have this concept that a person's birth name, given to them before their lives, before anything, is the only name that matters. A name is really a guess. Sometimes people grow into them; sometimes they don't. Sometimes the parents get it dead wrong. And yet people believe that any other name is illegitimate. Like the different religions argue about the name of their gods. Is it Yahweh, Jehova, Allah? All parties believe that their version is correct, and yet none will be able to fully capture the essence of god. This poem feels ancient, with its Torah/Old Testament themes, yet startlingly current. Today in America, transgender rights are being stripped away piece by piece. Most people who aren't transgender themselves don't notice. But *Portrait of My Gender as [Inaudible]* is loud and attention grabbing. It demands for people to open their minds and think. Not all things in life are going to make sense, but people are people. Transgender or genderqueer individuals deserve compassion, effort, and complete respect. Thank you, Meg Day, for writing a poem that saw straight into my soul. It speaks to the experiences of so many transgender people, and forces the rest of the world to bring us into focus. Yes, we may be confusing, but we are humans, and we exist. As you wrote in the last line,

"You / can't hear me, but I'm there."

Thank you for everything,  
Scarlet

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Dear Scarlet,

Thank you for your letter. I'm writing to you today from the warmth of my office window in North Carolina—but for how quickly your missive transported me, it might as well be the small porthole of the third-floor nun's bathroom, twenty-something years & three thousand miles from here. I'd wait there, sometimes, just before fourth period Physics, & write letters like this one to poets & people I loved. The light was good & I was so rarely interrupted; it felt a little sacred & a little unseemly, which continues to be a tension I find illuminating even now.

I, too, went to Catholic all-girls school. It's where I first memorized Dylan Thomas poems & wrote cantos in terza rima after Dante's *Inferno*; where I felt empowered to use my voice, except when it came to who I was & who I loved. And while, over

time, I've soaked in the gratitude I feel for those difficult years, it's true that their pain was often made sharpest by the strict & gendered boundaries around relationships to faith, each other, and oneself. It took years of biblical study & a love of good love to understand, with clarity, the things I've said in this poem. I'm so glad it's reached you. I'm so glad you're here.

You mention the good company you have in your covert failure of gender expectations, your quiet resistance skimming the hallway radars. I'm so proud of you & your comrades for finding ways to harmonize with the melody of your environment. And isn't that what it is, what we are? Added value, complexity in the most beautiful sense of the word? A deviation you can witness, but not name or blame. In poetics, we often talk about inherited form and the power of constraint to create new & unexpected language. You're living praxis of it, Scarlet. What you're allowed to be—& what you've become? Divine, indeed.

Yrs,  
Day

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Dear Meg Day,

Your poem called Portrait of My Gender as [Inaudible] was one of the first poems I could understand, I am non-binary so I could understand how it feels being called someone that you aren't anymore. I thought it was normal and I had to accept being called another name other than my preferred one but when reading your poem it was like being introduced to something new. I never thought about it like you had, being like a God because they couldn't decide which name to call you. That has to be the coolest thing you could have said because it was true, a lot of Gods do have different names, especially those from centuries ago and being compared to God is awesome, it also makes those christians angry so it's funny. However, I know some people don't see it as such, I understand it's harmful especially coming from people whose God follows compassion and love, people refuse to accept others because of their identities, even when it's not being harmful towards them. They believe we are confused or don't deserve to exist at all, their hate for us blinds them from the path they were told not to stray from. I wish I could say more, but in all honesty I can't describe how

it felt listening to your poem, it felt like something in my brain connected the dots but each time I try to think more about it I end up getting blocked with my limited knowledge with poetry, All I know is that I loved it.

Sincerely,

V

Illinois

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Dear V,

Thank you for your letter. I'm writing to you from my front porch in the peak of summer & the air is thick, which often gives me the sensation that I'm in a dream: floating in soft focus, a little aimless. Sometimes, I think, this is the best weather for making poems because my mind goes a little loose & I'm not thinking so much as following my nose. Even if I wanted to, I can't get in my own creative way—it's too hot to be composed.

I recognize a version of this at the end of your letter, when you write about feeling like your brain is connecting the dots, but each time you try to think more about it, you end up getting blocked. "All I know is that I loved it," you write, & that's my favorite part of your letter—not because you loved the poem, necessarily, but because you know a thing with certainty, with feeling, & without explanation. All you know is that you know.

This is often how I feel about gender, which is part of why it felt so important for me to write this poem. I know my gender because I live it, experience its shifts, know how and where it settles in my body, how it lands on the people around me—not because I can give you a specific & static description of it. Sometimes words ending up reducing the expansiveness of that feeling, simplifying it for convenience or clarity. I'm sure many people feel a single word conveys their gender well! But for me, I've tried on many names—been given many names—& still find language to be a thing that can't yet meet the task of capturing the complexity & dynamism of my gender, alive & at play.

This poem is, in part, about making peace with that failure. And want to know something goofy, V? Making this poem—describing the ways language has failed to pinpoint my own felt sense in the world—made me feel as if I understood my gender with even more clarity. I don't know how that happened; all I know is that I loved it.

Yrs,

Day

## *They Don't Love You Like I Love You*

My mother said this to me  
long before Beyoncé lifted the lyrics  
from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs,

and what my mother meant by  
*Don't stray* was that she knew  
all about it—the way it feels to need

someone to love you, someone  
not *your kind*, someone white,  
some one some many who live

because so many of mine  
have not, and further, live on top of  
those of ours who don't.

*I'll say, say, say,*

*I'll say, say, say,*

What is the United States if not a clot

of clouds? If not spilled milk? Or blood?

If not the place we once were

in the millions? America is *Maps*—

Maps are ghosts: white and  
layered with people and places I see through.

My mother has always known best,

knew that I'd been begging for them,  
to lay my face against their white  
laps, to be held in something more

than the loud light of their projectors  
as they flicker themselves—sepia  
or blue—all over my body.

All this time,  
I thought my mother said, *Wait*,  
as in, *Give them a little more time*

*to know your worth*,  
when really, she said, *Weight*,  
meaning *heft*, preparing me

for the yoke of myself,  
the beast of my country's burdens,  
which is less worse than

my country's plow. Yes,  
when my mother said,  
*They don't love you like I love you*,

she meant,  
*Natalie, that doesn't mean*  
*you aren't good*.

\*The italicized words, with the exception of the final stanza, come from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs song "Maps."

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Dear Poet,

I always say that most poetry occurs off the page, and here I am far from my poems, writing to you. One of the many lucks of my life is the ever-growing community of readers and writers poetry leads me to. Gracias for taking the time to reach out with your wonders about my work and about poetry in general.

I thought it could be a helpful way to respond to you, by sharing a few more “luck” or gifts that poetry invites me toward. The first, as cheesy as it might sound, is love. Poetry is the place, the condition, the possibility in which I love myself most fiercely and most generously. This is perhaps why I am so compelled by the love poem and what a love poem can do or hasn’t done yet. Poetry is a place where I can demand that I deserve love and that I am capable of offering love to others, even in the midst of anger, sadness, pain, loss, etc.

It is a capacious condition—the poem—in which everything I am and desire, everything I am and desire everything, fear or worry over, everything that makes me strong or joyous—can all exist. I am my fullest self through poetry. Before poetry I played professional basketball, and it offered me the same possibility—to practice, to know my mind and body, and also to use that/those practices to leap or run into the unknown, to surprise myself, to “become” myself.

Practice for me now involves reading, reading aloud, jotting down ideas or images in a notebook, taking notes as I’m reading poems of others, talking with my friends and students about poems ... a little less physically rigorous but toward the same gift that basketball gave me: the possibility to meet the moment, the game/ the day, the world exactly as I am, and then to know I am capable of surprising myself, of change, of becoming new.

I suppose “possibility” is a second thing, separate from love. So I’ll add one more gift, to make three: poetry helps me to never be alone, even if I am feeling lonely or am the only one in the room. As I read, I am in conversation with the other poets’ poems, with their life and how they engaged the world. I try to remind myself of this when I’m reading or sharing new poems:



Poetry is a reciprocity. I, the reader, need the writer. As I write, I write with a conviction toward my world and experiences, not in a way to predict my reader or manipulate my reader, but with an understanding of the stakes: The stakes are our lives. There are fewer greater gifts than to make/write something in which someone might feel their own value and the value of our shared world. So gracias, for writing to me, for reading, for reminding how our makings and our language is of consequence to one another.

I'm wishing you to dream strong.

'Ahotk

Natalie Diaz

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Dear Natalie Diaz,

My name is Caroline. I am a 9th grader in a small town, small school in the potato state of Idaho. I do, in fact, love potatoes. I'm certain that they are the only thing I can cook and never get bored of. I am an identical twin, a guitar fanatic, and a volleyball player. And if I had to introduce myself as a whole with one word, that word would be "curious." I've always loved learning and, therefore, I was an avid reader from a very young age. On top of this, I've always loved poetry. Despite normally having my nose in large fiction books, poetry has always been fascinating. While prose feels like a reliable, steady conversation, poetry is a melody. Poetry breaks that conversation until it's almost unrecognizable and rebuilds it into a song, an orchestra. Prose could be a colony of black ants, but poetry is a kaleidoscope of butterflies. Poetry is the lilting, golden tune from the sunrise songbird, the velvety bays from the neighborhood dog, the dulcet hoots from the midnight owl. Prose is the expressive, readable friend while poetry is the enigmatic, alluring stranger. It hides, but also shows so much more than prose can. That is why I enjoy poetry.

The unit for my English class during the winter and beginning of the spring trimesters is poetry. Of course, I assume you know why I'm writing this letter. I've read your poem "They Don't Love You Like I Love You" and have been engaged with reading it over, and over, and over. In fact, while writing this, I'm playing Maps on repeat. I chose your poem because of many reasons, but the most weighted one was because it was relatable and relevant. Although I am absolutely engrossed in picking apart

your poem like a mad scientist looking at every allusion, every connotation, and every hidden meaning, this poem connects to the reader—connects to me—beyond the actual words. I’m a person who lives by association. Associations are how my brain works, how I think. If I hear an experience, to try and feel the emotion of whoever was sharing said experience, I think of my closest experience. And then I remember that feeling from my life. This poem, to me, represents the struggle of not fitting in, or, in other words, not feeling or being loved because you are different. Everyone, no matter who they are, have experienced some form of feeling like they don’t fit in in some way. Or maybe they feel they aren’t good enough. Now, as a white, comfortable girl in a fantastic school where the sky is truly the limit, I surely haven’t experienced some of the hardships that others have relating to discrimination and oppression. Still, the closest experience I can think of is the fact that I truly, truly love learning. I love school, I do well in it because I care. And that can create a barrier between me and my peers. For me, “They Don’t Love You Like I Love You” represents not the fact that I love you the most, but that I love you, and they don’t. They don’t appreciate you, don’t love you although I do. It’s not the comparison of who loves someone more, but the fact that they see you differently than I do. This would also be something my mom would say about my brain, in a smaller situation. Perhaps I’d be overthinking, or not understanding how my peers around me don’t see the world in the same way that I do. Perhaps I felt unrelatable, and people didn’t like that. My mother would say, “I love how you think, your curiosity, and others may not appreciate it.” In a way, they don’t love me like she does. On a level of my pure interest, this poem was also really, really fun to read. A line that particularly impacted me was, “preparing me for the yoke of myself, the beast of my country’s burdens, which is less worse than my country’s plow.” In all honesty, I re-read this line numerous times. I really like how you use the concept of farming to represent that labor and constant, heavy work. On top, how that work, that labor is worse than the burdens. I also really liked how you described the US as a clot of clouds, spilled milk, and blood. To me, the clouds feel almost non-tangible, the spilled milk is something no one may want (and something not to cry over), and blood of all different people. I think it describes the US perfectly in a melancholy, but refreshingly realistic way.

A question for you would be whether any specific moment influenced you to write the poem? Not as in the past, but a recent reminder of your mother and that history. What is the overall takeaway that you wanted to communicate—like in one sentence?

What was your favorite part of writing the poem, or least favorite? How'd you get from feeling like "They Don't Love You Like I Love You" to winning the Pulitzer prize? How'd you make it out? Also, I want to thank you for writing the poem. Not only was it a joy to read, but also made me truly grateful that poems like these exist. Not just because of the superb writing and magical figurative language (the whole shabang), but because it shares a story. And, as humans, we thrive when we can connect. So... thank you for writing something that can tether all of us together.

Sincerely moved,

Caroline :)

Idaho

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Dear Caroline,

Gracias for your letter. It will arrive to you in your potato state having been written at the foot of Mt. Etna on the volcanic island of Sicily.

I'll start by admiring your love of both prose and poetry. Most of my favorite prose writers either write poetry or read it avidly. Also I love that you embrace your curiosity. I think curiosity is both a sensuality and knowledge system. It is a very important word in all of my classes. In fact, it's possible that curiosity is both a self-love as well as a love for our larger living world.

To answer a few of your questions, this poem is about love. About the power of realizing two things: I am deserving of love and I am capable of offering love. So it was a way of upending who is allowed to be labeled as good. We are all good because we were made good and we are capable of goodness in our next act or gesture.

Thank you again for your letter. It brought a brightness to my day. I'm wishing you continued and unbounded curiosity. Dream strong.

Natalie

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Dear. Ms. Diaz

Hello there! I am writing to say I loved your poem! Your poem was a nice read, I liked the references to the song Maps by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. I love it when poems reference music, especially when the song is good. From what I got out of the poem I appreciate it. I hope I got what you were trying to say and I apologize if I didn't. Deciphering the poem was pretty fun and I enjoyed what you did with the lyrics and the message. I hope I understood the true meaning of the poem.

My favorite part of the poem that I previously mentioned was your use of the song lyrics. I loved that you turned the love song into a meaningful message about a different type of love. One of the lines I liked was lines 6-8, "the way it feels to need someone to love you, someone not your kind, someone white, someone some many who live..." I liked it because the way I saw it, it was about wanting love from the people perceived as better. I can relate to wanting validation from others seen as "better" by societal standards. Sometimes it's difficult to love me especially when currently there is a lot of hate for people like me. I'm a closeted transgender and nonbinary male. It's hard for me to tell people that because they don't understand it. And since I don't look like a cis guy, people usually slip up my pronouns. But anyway, I like this line. The other lines I liked were lines 39-42, "They don't love you like I love you, she meant Natalie, that doesn't mean you aren't good." Again I can relate to this in my current situation. This also feels like a warm thought, it's very comforting. I feel as though anyone can relate to that line. I believe you were writing the poem to an audience full of people who don't feel seen. Who feel as if they are trying to be erased by society like they don't matter. I'm not sure if that's what you were going for, but if it was you did an amazing job. I also liked the effect you had on the reader. To me, the poem didn't feel disrespectful. It felt like you were speaking about your feelings in a way that wasn't trying to hurt or harm anyone. The effect the poem had on me was it made me think. And although you were speaking about America it didn't seem like you were saying how terrible it was. You were speaking your mind. I liked the tone of the poem too. The tone seemed sweet and warm with a hint of loneliness. I feel as if you captured the desire for love nicely. I liked the way you wrote your poem.

I have a few questions for you. Did you use the song Maps because it's your favorite or was there a specific reason? I like the song Maps and listened to it before it became a big trend. So it was cool to see a poem use the song. And I was just wondering why you chose the song. Another question I have is was this poem easy to write? I know poets create their poems at different times but I always wonder how long it took. Hopefully, the words came out pretty easily and you ended up liking this poem that you wrote. My final question is if there was anything you could rewrite about your poem what would you write? Although I love the poem I am curious to see if you wanted to write it a different way at all. Though I hope you are proud of your work because the poem is one to be proud of :).

I have a few questions about your poem. Did you write this poem about an experience you had, or was this a poem about an experience you feel may happen? I was just curious if you had ever felt this kind of emotion in anything that you were passionate about. I was also curious about how long it took you to write this poem. It was short but that doesn't mean it was easy to write, right? I hope the process wasn't too difficult.

Anyway, I hope this letter reaches you well and you have a wonderful day or night! I hope to find another poem of yours that is just as amazing as this one.

C

California

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Dear C,

Gracias for your letter and for sharing your wonders with me. I've carried your letter with me to the volcanic island of Sicily, so Mt. Edna is steaming just out my window.

I have intentionally devoted myself to "the love poem," or at least my version of a love poem, because I realized a lot of this world has denied people like me—and my family and beloveds—even the most simple love. I told myself that in this second book I would demand two things:

1. I would treat everybody in the book as the body of the beloved, even enemies.
2. I would demand that I was seen as both deserving of love and capable of offering love.

There is a dedication at the back of the book that you might find inviting.

I believe the love poem, in whatever form it occurs, can upend our hierarchical or unreasonable definitions of goodness. I believe we are all possible and capable of goodness, it is always just up ahead, in our next action or gesture or word.

To answer some of your specific questions about the poem, it was the chorus that first hooked me—in both the Yeah Yeah Yeah's and Beyonce's versions.

I listened to the songs on repeat for a few days thinking toward how the lyric would be perceived. I wanted to unfold it generously—so less about a contest of greater love and more about a realization of deserving love. Maybe “they” don't love me or their acts against me are acts of un-love, but that doesn't change that I deserve love and that I can also offer it.

Although in the poem the mother appears to speak it, to actually say “Natalie that doesn't mean you aren't good,” there was a real power in writing the line, for me. And when I read it, I am the one speaking it.

It is as if I'm addressing myself—reminding myself. And I can say that when I read this poem out loud in front of people I feel strong and emotional. Poetry is lucky in this way—it offers me a place to love my whole self in all of my flaws and contradictions, just as it helps me love this world which can be unreasonable and even cruel and yet is equally miraculous.

Gracias again for your generosity in your letter. I'm wishing you all the poems that might offer you what this poem offered me.

Dream strong,  
Natalie

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Dear Ms. Natalie Diaz,

My name is Fairouz. I love how you turned what seems to be a surface-level love song into something greater. I love seeing the way you lifted its lyricism into something more. I've been trying to incorporate songs into my work too. Music is a universal language, and much of my work is a call to action so I want it to speak to everyone.

Is that why you chose the song? If not I'm wondering how you got to the point of writing about this song. I am assuming it's a personal experience or connection, but if that's so how did that fuel your writing?

Allow me to address myself as overeager when I say your poetry speaks to me. The maps especially. I am Palestinian, so I am no stranger to the shrinking territory and population on maps. My mom says that I will have written my best work when I capture that feeling. You know, and I think only you really will: that almost indescribable feeling that is both a yearning and an anger. It only comes through heritage and those maps. I was raised looking at them, and raised looking overseas at the destruction. Essentially, I want you to know that when you said "Maps are ghosts" I was holding myself back from tears. Embarrassingly so in my poetry class. I felt like I saw those maps layered on top of each other, the shrinkage of territory apparent. How do you write about something so big but capture it in so few words? Even now, I am being wordy to try and explain the feeling of the line to myself.

How do you brave writing about love and tragedy? Maybe I am just an angry teenager, but I find it hard to write about the former in my poetry. Whenever I sit down to write poetry, I am thinking of Palestine, and I feel that I owe my voice to my people. I cannot write about the sour grapes, the knock-off KitKat Brands, the beaches of Akka, the smell of the markets, my grandmother's thobes, my everything personal. I write about the message and it's unfortunately a sad reality. I feel like the love I hold for my country is only present in my sadness at the loss of it in my poetry. How do you write about love with all these negative feelings around it? Your poem ends with a palpable feeling of love from your mother. Or, rather, I am imposing my mother's love for me on her words. How do you achieve that? There's so much suffering in history; how do your words manage the weight of that without the overbearing feeling of misery?

Finally, a deep and genuine thank you. Your work feels like a human connection. That is to say, it feels alive and lovely. Your poetry can be invasively personal, but you share it anyway. That motivates me immensely. Especially as we toddle towards tougher times when identity may become a privilege not owed to me. So thank you for writing, for publishing your work, and for your time.

With the greatest sincerity the screen can offer,

Fairouz  
Virginia

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Dear Fairouz,

I am writing you from the volcanic island of Sicily, where I've been for two weeks. It has been day-and-dream changing to be at the foot of Mt. Edna and the sheer coasts and crazy-blue sea these last days. And it has been lucky to carry your letter here with me. Gracias for reading my work and sharing glimpses into your heart and wonders about the world and poetry. Poetry is one of many ways I engage the world—sometimes a poem is a question of the world, other times it is a worry, or an anger or a rage, but always I believe it is an expression of love. I'll say more about that.

You and your first wonder about my work and the poem—how I came to use music: I grew up with music. My parents 8-track and vinyl, our small town station KSFE, music blaring out the windows on the rez, all weekend, day and night. Music used as warm-up songs when I watched my older brother and sister play basketball, and then, finally, when I was old enough to play. Music is another poetry. Poetry is another music.

Gracias for sharing the generous, albeit painful, relationship you have with maps. I don't know it exactly, but I have my own map-shaped wounds to unfold and even to follow. One luck I carry with me is that a map is not our land. And the maps were often drawn by un-tender hands, which were not our hands, which were not the hands which have tended our land or planted our lands. In my Mojave culture, maps were originally songs that were sung—great cyclical songs that held the lands, waters and animals in them. Or maps were small markings on stones that gave other travelers information about a journey.

I remind myself often—beneath the colonial map, beneath the colonial architecture, beneath the extractive mine, and the bombs, and the machines and thefts and borders, and the buildings fallen—beneath all that, the land is still good and strong and waiting for us—since we are the seeds which thrive in it, as well the tenders of all its bounties. It is hard to remember this sometimes—reading and writing poetry helps me to remember.

It reminds me of the “indescribable feeling that is both a yearning and an anger” that you write about in your letter. Our lives and this world are woven with and in contradictions—poetry has a capacity to hold these contradictions. Poetry is a place,



an atmosphere, an out-of-timeness, where we can bring what is painful and unbearable of our life and world and set those things alongside the many things that make our lives, and beloveds, and worlds worth fighting. Poetry can hold it all. It is one sensuality with which I engage a miraculous and unreasonable world. It feels not easy sometimes, to have the sensuality of poetry, to see the world with eight-eyes, meaning we see it not just from our singular self but rather we see it from the many selves we are in the world,— a daughter or child, a sibling or cousin, a listener and a voice, a community member, a friend, a relative, etc. We are willing to listen, to see, to speak not just from our singular self but also toward a world that might love and hold us all in safety and joy.

You asked me a very important question for which I am grateful. You asked: “How do you write about love with all these negative feelings around it?”

I wonder if perhaps the best love, or the most capacious love, and possibly all love, has some sadness in it. Because love can hold sadness, as well as anger and worry, along with the more enjoyable feelings it offers us. This too is a gift I find in poetry—it is a place, a condition, where I love myself best, where I can be angry and complicated and contradictory and also offer myself grace in those feelings.

In a poem I am neither good or bad and even the world isn't good or bad. In the poem you are writing about, I didn't plan on my mother, whose name is Bernadette, to appear. But some part of me—the internal part of me—the one who was wandering the deep maze of the poem—knew I needed some grace—knew I both deserved love and ended to know my people and I were capable of love. So the poem gifted me my mother and her voice. I hope your poems gift you many such moments. This world is difficult, it is miraculous, it is contradictory, it is violent and yet it is so filled with loving gestures and it is always always on the cusp of its next action being one of tenderness or joy. I think this must be why your ancestors and my ancestors have turned to both poetry and song for so long, and why they were masters of the love poem, and why they found the most beautiful expressions of our relationship with our lands and waters. And as powerful as poetry can be to resist and fight against what we know as violent and destructive, it is just as powerful to demand love and to celebrate what is beautiful in us.

Gracias for writing me. Dream strong.

ND

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Dear Natalie Diaz,

Hi, my name is Katelyn. I wanted to write to you about your poem, because it stood out to me in ways I could deeply relate to (not only because I love the song) and sometimes feel embarrassed to admit. I'm not quite sure my experience is even worth bringing up to you. It doesn't measure up to yours, really. I notice that your poem is largely affected by your experiences as an Indigenous person growing up in America and that the history runs deep. I can't even imagine living on the soil that my people were massacred on. That to me feels horrifying, and for that I feel a deep respect and admiration for you despite not knowing you personally. I wonder how you face these feelings? Is poetry a big part of facing those feelings? Partly, my nerves in writing to you are because I'm South Korean, and I spent all of my childhood growing up in America, specifically Los Angeles. That makes me feel different sometimes, but not at all like what you must've experienced. Growing up, I couldn't really hide the pieces of me that are Korean. Reading your poem made me think about all the times I wished I could as a kid. I wanted to blend in badly. Especially in kindergarten, when I was beginning to learn English and assimilate into an American school (Korean was my first language and I had attended a Korean preschool). I would beg my parents to buy me American snacks like string cheese and Doritos and hide away the stinky smell of fermented kimchi if any of my white friends came over. I tried so hard to behave exactly like my white classmates, because I wished I were them. I wanted to be seen as they were. I didn't really know why, but something about being one of the only Asians made me feel the need to transform myself and fully integrate into a new culture.

Your lines about "laying my face against their white laps" felt so painfully real to me. The yearning for being liked (because for some reason I felt it was so hard for us to be equal), accepted, or as part of the same grouping. I was waiting for approval as if I was less than a person. When you wrote about your mother warning you, I thought about how my parents tried to prepare me for the reality of America. I realized, they didn't. We never had a conversation about it, and I believe it's because they didn't find it necessary to. I think because of that, I began to gradually not notice the differences between me and other white people. By the time I reached middle school, I often thought of myself as a white person inside an Asian body. I mean, I like the same stuff as all my white friends: Taylor Swift, Modern Family, pasta, you know, that stuff. So

technically, why would there be a difference? I can't help but wonder if the reason why I don't often notice the differences is because I began to merge into the person I am today through American culture. Upon reading your poem, I recognize that you experienced similar feelings, in which you also got used to American culture. If you were like me, you probably also felt like you belonged, at least somewhat. But when your mother warned you about the "weight" in this world, about the heavy burden of racism, history, and survival you must carry as you grow up, I'm curious if this felt relieving or painful to hear? Did you feel more isolated or connected after hearing your mother's words? I know that she had very caring and protective intentions, but I imagine myself hearing the same from my mother and getting defensive or scared.

Of course, it's not that I forgot about the Korean part of me. That could never happen. I still celebrate and embrace my culture, with much less embarrassment than my Kindergarten self.

Your poem helped me feel less alone in my feelings, and it made me realize that wanting to be accepted is a part of being different. Thank you for writing something so honest and beautiful. And thank you for taking the time to read my little story, to take a peek at a glimpse of my life. I loved being able to take a peek at yours.

Wishing you the best on your journey,

Katelyn

California

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Dear Katelyn,

Gracias for your letter. I'll start by sharing something my elder used to tell me. He'd say: "If you need to carry water and there is a hole in your bucket, it doesn't matter if your bucket is larger or smaller than the bucket of the person who is next to you. What matters is only that you have a hole in your bucket which affects how you carry water." I say that to alleviate you from thinking about "worth" when you share your worries or wonders.

South Korea has a deep history of poetry and literature in general. It has been an important toll in speaking of violences and traumas of your people—just as with my people.

I immediately think of the work of Don Mee Choi, but I also think about how important poetry was during the Gwangju Uprising in South Korea. There were many underground poetry magazines and pamphlets that arose during the years of that conflict. A South Korean writer whose work I love—though I’ve only ever read it in translation—is Han Kong. Her book *Human Acts* speaks to me and helps me to think about my own ancestors and histories.

Sometimes it is painful to look back and think about the ways we have tried to find belonging. And yet it is a very human and even an artistic impulse.

This is one incredible gift of poetry. It is where we find others, yes, but perhaps most importantly, it is also a place for us to find and realize different parts of ourselves. And poetry has such capacity—it can hold a complaint or critique of the very things we also love so fiercely—such as family, country, the world. It can hold difference and contradiction, violence and tenderness, love and anger, every thing you know and also what you have yet to know.

I don’t know exactly how you feel but I have my own experiences of bumping up against borders of belonging.

Something my elders have taught me is that our differences are essential to one another. We become ourselves in the midst of the many differences we offer one another. The very act of learning requires us to confront something new, something outside of what we know.

Just like with poetry. I am writing from my singular Native perspective which you do not know, and yet you are able to see your own life in the poem, even without having experienced what I have. And yet it is the poem that helps us meet—the poem shows us that we are of consequence to one another. My experiences matter to you even though our lives are different. You needed my poem so you could remember your own life just like a future reader will need your poem to feel their own life. We rely on one another and our differences.

Poetry also makes me feel less alone. It is also a place where I can offer myself grace in my own contradictions. It is a place, a form, a condition in which I can write about or talk about difficult things and still be capable of love and deserving of love.

It is capacious enough to hold all of who I am and who you are, as well as who we have yet to become.

Gracias for your generous letter.

Dream strong.

Natalie

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Dear Ms. Diaz,

My name is Peyton, and I am a tenth grade student in Texas. I have read, studied, and enjoyed poetry for many years in and outside of school, but never before have I come across a poem that struck me so personally. As an African American girl being educated at a predominantly white, private institution, the title of your poem spoke to me directly because they are words that have literally been spoken to me in my own home. Reading a poem about a topic that a lot of my friends and even my family cannot relate to makes me feel seen and like I am not alone. However reading your poem, a poem that does not just highlight what it feels like to crave that specific kind of validation, but one that challenges it makes me feel empowered, and for that, I thank you.

Upon reading your poem, I could not help but think about our mothers and the wisdom that they have gained from the not so fortunate experiences they have had as women of color in this country. What particularly sparked this thought was your use of ambiguity in the words of wisdom that your mom offered to you. Your mother told you not to stray, to not fall victim to the need for “someone to love you, someone not your kind”. My own mother has had to remind me of this as well, as I tend to seek validation from my white peers, even when they don’t deserve the energy it takes to do so. I was also drawn to your differentiation between the homonyms “wait, as in, Give them a little more time to know your worth” and “weight, meaning heft”, as discerning the difference between waiting for your worth to be acknowledged and acknowledging the weight that we as minorities bear is essential to our development as women who choose to not rely on the opinions of others to be successful. Those two stanzas in particular caused me to reflect on which of those two I have been devoting my energy to, and I couldn’t help but wonder what it was that got you to

realize that your mother meant weight and not wait. What experiences did you go through that allowed you to free the wisdom that your mother passed down to you?

Studying poetry has allowed me to unlock a special place in my heart for metaphors. I love the idea of using an object or concept to strip down something that seems so concrete into something nuanced. You do this beautifully in your comparison of America to maps and maps to ghosts, which are “white and layered with people and places [you] see through“, as well as your comparison of our country to clouds, spilled milk, or spilled blood. What was your process when creating these metaphors? I love that they break down America into its dark past, and although I am not of Native American descent, as an African American, it reminded me that because of the atrocities that took place for centuries before I was born, it is ok to replace those frustrating feelings of longing with feelings of resentment, and eventually, acceptance. The concept of acceptance in your poem is most notable in your final lines when you explain that your mother’s words “They don’t love you like I love you [...] doesn’t mean that you aren’t good”. I think this is the perfect way to conclude this poem because it shows development, and despite the longing for validation and the resentment that comes with the realization that in some cases, longing is fruitless, you eventually came to realize that you are good all by yourself.

I want to thank you for your boldness and bravery. The topic of your poem is not one that is largely accepted in many spaces, so for it to be published by the Academy of American Poets gives me hope that my voice can hold space too. This message has encouraged me to walk through life not as if I need to earn the approval of my peers, but as if they need to earn my attention instead because I, too, am good all by myself. Through your poem, I have come to realize that the power of poetry is not just dictated by the expansive vocabulary or the complicated poetic devices the poet chooses to use, but it is dictated by the way it makes the reader feel. Your poem made me feel anger, acceptance, and even love and appreciation for my mother all at once, which is why I can genuinely say that this has been one of my favorites to read.

Warm regards,

Peyton

Texas

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Dear Peyton,

Gracias for writing me and for sharing your wonders about poetry and my poem. One gift of poetry is that it occurs in places far beyond the actual page of the poem. Here we are—well off the page of the poem—in conversation, yes about a poem, but also about our lives and wonders and the larger worlds we inhabit.

Your letter is generous in that it has given me a realization I don't believe I had until now—I don't feel alone when I write and read poetry, and not just because I either have an audience or am part of an audience, so not technically alone even if I am physically alone while writing or reading. What you help me to realize is that I don't feel alone when I write because poetry lets me engage an other me—a me who deserves both grace and anger, love and worry, knowing and the unknown—a me who deserves to be loved and a me who loves the world fiercely even as I'm critiquing it.

I think it is natural to want to belong, amongst our family, our classmates, our neighbors, our teammates, etc. A large part of our lives in this world—a large part of being a poet too—is trusting that there is power in reaching out to the other, in trying to find ways to be alongside the other even in our differences, in finding those with whom we belong and can stand beside and who will also stand beside us.

I come from a very large family. My mother had 11 children and now has 49 grandchildren! So in some ways belonging feels easy at home and yet can be difficult outside of this wild loving family. Poetry is like this family—when I read other peoples' poems, I feel in conversation with them. Even though I might never know exactly what they mean or exactly how they felt, they offer me a new way to see my own life. That is another gift of poetry, it is a generous way to engage the world and one another.

As you wrote, you are not Native American, but you were able to feel some part of your own life and your experience in the world when you read my poem. That's the beautiful mystery of poetry—even if you don't know exactly what I mean, you do know how it feels in you, what images it conjures, what emotions, where in your body you feel it, the stories of your own that it reminds you of. For these reasons I always tell my students the least of poetry happens on the page, and what I mean by that is that poetry resounds and echoes into our lives—both yours as the reader and mine

as the writer. It changes us. It makes us more attentive, and you said so powerfully it reminds us that we are not alone. Not alone in our worry or pain and not alone in our loves and joys.

There are many constellations, large and small, that make up our experience of the world. My mom is maybe my smallest and yet most powerful constellation. And this poem helps me to keep her close and bright in a larger constellation of my world—a place you know, which is the place/places we won't and need to belong. One thing poetry lets me do is bring the belongings I have and feel safe and strengthened in into the belongings I am still working on. Poetry is a place I love my whole self best, even the weaker parts or more contradictory parts of myself. I don't have to be perfect—I only need to be curious, to love the world fiercely, to remind myself that I am both deserving of love and complexity and also capable of offering love and complexity.

We are good because our god/creator made us good. Yes we error and make mistakes, but just like in a poem, we are always capable of doing the next best thing. Poetry can hold all of it. It can be one of your superpowers. It can be one of your strengths.

I'm grateful for your thoughtful letter which taught me my own lessons about belonging.

Gracias. Dream strong.

Natalie



*once a marine biologist told me octopuses have  
three hearts*

I wonder what I'd do  
    with eight arms, two eyes  
        & too many ways to give  
            myself away  
            see, I only have one heart  
        & I know loving a woman can make you crawl  
    out from under yourself, or forget  
the kingdom that is your body  
  
& what would you say, octopus?  
    that you live knowing nobody  
        can touch you more  
            than you do already  
  
        that you can't punch anything underwater  
so you might as well drape yourself  
    around it, bring it right up to your mouth  
let each suction cup kiss what it finds  
    that having this many hands  
        means to hold everything  
    at once & nothing  
to hold you back  
  
that when you split  
    you turn your blood  
        blue & pour  
            out more ocean

that you know heartbreak so well  
you remove all your bones  
so nothing can kill you.

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Dear Students, Wordsmiths, Storytellers!

Reading your letters these past few days has been the most wonderful gift. Thank you for taking time to sit with my poem and write to me. I'm deeply moved by your keen insights, thoughtful questions and how each of you found different meanings in the poem. You've given it new life. Some of you sent me poems in response (they were so good!). Others mentioned finding some of my other poems online and digging those. I'm so grateful, thank you all.

My journey to poetry has been anything but "traditional," but it has been my refuge. A place to make meaning when life doesn't make sense. Poetry, especially as a young person, was how I turned experiences that made me feel powerless into words that made me feel powerful. It gave me courage to be proud of who I was at a time when I was questioning my sexuality, and so much more. We all have a powerful story that's worth telling and from reading your letters I know you do too.

If you came here because you've been writing poems forever, welcome. But if you've never been a fan of poetry, and connected to one of the poems you read (maybe for the first time ever) and are now feeling *curious* about poetry. I'm so glad you're here—because I was you when I was a teenager.

I come from the school of: "Poetry, like bread, is for everybody" (shout out to Roque Dalton who wrote that poem). But I didn't always see a place for me. When I was in high school, most of the poems I read felt confusing and far from my own reality growing up in a multi-cultural home in New York City where rats were the unofficial mayors of the block. But I loved storytelling and fell in love with language through hip-hop and salsa. Little did I know, I had been listening to poetry all along. I came to poetry through the stage, mesmerized by how poems live in the body and can build community when shared aloud with others. I still feel that way. Only now, my poems stretch their limbs (or appendages!) across pages, and if I'm lucky, find brilliant young readers, like yourself.

I wrote this poem trying to figure out how to hold onto my own tenderness in a world that doesn't always feel tender. In the octopus I gained a new perspective, a way to hold it all. Poems can arrive in surprising, unexpected ways. They can curl up to your

ear or smack you in the face. Both were true with this piece. Who knew that having a conversation with a marine biologist would turn into a meditation on gratitude, survival, and the gift of love, no matter the outcome? I sure didn't.

Feelings can be messy, but the good news is that poems have the ability to hold that mess. They're made to hold more than one truth at a time. And what a relief! Dear reader, I know the world can feel overwhelming. I know there are so many horrors that deserve our attention, but poetry invites us into the language of possibility. It expands our world, the way that you have expanded mine. I'll be rooting for each of you wherever you are. May you never let go of your wild imagination. May you never stop questioning the world around you. And may you never stop telling your story.

In peace and poetry,

Denice Frohman

Dear Denice Frohman,

My first read of your poem confused me, but I  
came to understand  
that it was about far more than just  
an octopus.

I figured out that this is about  
the cost of intimacy and the strength of softness.  
The octopus seems to be a mirror of the human  
heart, yet they  
presumably have three of  
them! I still wonder where you  
came up with the name of this poem.  
At first I thought maybe the title serves as an  
opening line for the  
poem and I tried to connect the pieces together,  
but I'm still left in wonder.

The end of the poem gives a new shape to heartbreak.

I'm glad this  
poem doesn't have the reader turn away  
from pain but instead leans fully into it with eight arms.  
One thing I definitely walked away  
with from this poem is the willingness  
to feel my feelings and a little less fear  
of being soft.  
Thanks,  
Aaron, a 10th grade  
student from  
Wisconsin

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Dear Aaron,

A friend once told me that it's always easier to move *with* energy than *against* it. I think writing about the octopus taught me about that too. I've never seen one up close (they actually seemed kind of scary), but I was inspired after having a real-life conversation with a marine biologist who shared how brilliant they are. I'm not a scientist, but I was blown away! That's also where the title came from. Have you ever written a poem based on something someone said to you? If not, try it! At the time I was thinking about how to preserve my own tenderness in a world that doesn't always feel tender. Having one heart is a lot, but imagining three felt otherworldly. Look at all those feelings! I was inspired by the many ways octopuses survive and was hoping I could learn a thing or two about what it means to endure.

I had no idea what the ending would be or where the poem would go, but using the phrase "I wonder" and then asking questions helped propel the poem forward into new and unexpected places. One of poetry's essential elements is surprise. You can use phrases like "I imagine" or "what if" or "perhaps" as a way to explore new possibilities, or as you so brilliantly wrote, "new shapes." Yes, that's exactly what poetry can do!

Your interpretation of the poem is spot on ("the cost of intimacy and the strength of softness"). We're not always taught that being soft is a superpower, but I think it is. It means so much to me that my poem inspired you to feel your feelings with

less fear. On my best days, I try to lean into being vulnerable, because I know that's what brings connection—and don't we all just want to feel seen? Thank you again for writing, Aaron. I hope to see your poems out in the world one day!

Wishing you the very best,  
Denice Frohman

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Dear Poet Denice Frohman,

Pagbati mula sa bayan ng mga bayani ng sining!  
(Greetings from the land of heroes of arts!)

“that having this many hands  
means to hold everything  
at once & nothing  
to hold you back”

This is my favorite part of the poem “Once a marine biologist told me that octopuses have three hearts.”

My name is Juri. I am a 13-year-old incoming Grade 9 student under the Creative Writing program in the Philippines. I chose Creative Writing because I am curious and passionate about learning the art of writing. My school dedicates itself to teaching students about different art forms, their origins, culture, and more.

My journey with poetry has been a bit bumpy. I had a hard time writing poems because I struggled with using images and metaphors. I was not very good at writing poems, but I have always been fond of reading them. I think poetry is one of the most meaningful forms of art, which is why I aspire to create poems as meaningful as yours.

When I first read the title of your poem, “once a marine biologist told me that octopuses have three hearts,” I was both hesitant and intrigued. After reading it, I developed a deep appreciation for it. I was amazed to find that it was about love, not science, as the title suggested. It made me wonder: how do you come up with ideas like this, with phrases as specific and random (to me) as a marine biologist telling you that octopuses have three hearts?

I also saw how certain words were set apart from the rest of the sentence. For example, in the line “& too many ways to,” the word “give” is on a separate line. At first, I thought, “Why not just put those together and let the line ‘myself away’ take its place?” But then I thought maybe it has a deeper meaning, since this happens a lot throughout the poem, even in your other poem, “The Art of Shooting in the Dark.” Maybe the way the words are broken apart is like how feelings do not always come out smoothly, like how love or heartbreak can feel scattered, or how thoughts do not always arrive in full sentences. The poem felt like it was about giving so much of yourself to someone you love that you start losing parts of yourself, and even though you keep reaching out, it is like nothing’s there to catch you. I also got the feeling that the octopus was not just a sea creature here. It felt like a symbol for people who love deeply, especially in a world that does not always make space for that kind of love. It made me think about how some people, like the members of the LGBTQIA+ community, learn to protect themselves by becoming soft or shapeless, like the line that says, “you remove all your bones / so nothing can kill you.” That part stayed with me.

My interpretation of the poem is that it is about loving someone so much and giving them everything you have, even if you do not have a lot, and learning to adjust just to make them feel comfortable, but they still end up hurting you. For me, I felt the willingness to become someone else for the person you love, and more. I also thought the octopus in the poem was not just there to talk about animals. It felt like a symbol for people who love deeply and give too much, especially people who might not always be accepted as how they love. It is like the octopus knows heartbreak so well that it had to remove all its bones just to survive it. The way you talked about love made it feel soft and dangerous, like how someone can give and give until there is nothing left. It also reminded me of myself a little, as someone still figuring out how much of myself I can give to my writing, to my family, to my friends. I guess sometimes I give too much, too, even when it hurts. That is why the poem felt so personal to me.

Another line that struck me was, “you turn your blood / blue & pour / out once more ocean.” That image made me think of how we sometimes have to start over, even when we have given everything. Like bleeding back into the world, hoping we do not lose ourselves completely.

What experience or feeling made you write something like that? How did you relate the theme of the poem to your own experience or emotions? And why did you choose to write about that specifically? Did a certain experience or emotion ignite a creative spark that brought you to writing that poem?

Your poems are very interesting and well thought out. I want to ask: what message do you want to share through your work? What are your goals in most of your poems?

I believe your poems are beautifully and creatively written, and I hope to one day learn how to write poetry that gives life to deep and meaningful ideas, just like yours. Writers like you inspire young people like me to stay passionate about storytelling and to write with honesty. Thank you for sharing your words with the world, and with students like me.

For now, I will keep writing and continue striving to become someone who can also move hearts through poetry. This poem will definitely stay with me for a long time.

Kailanman,

(Forever,)

Juri

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Dear Juri,

It was such a gift to read your letter today, thank you for writing. I hope the creative writing program at your high school is going well (9th grade is a big deal!). I was really impressed by your insightful interpretations of my poem, some that I hadn't even considered myself! I'm also really honored that my poem reached you in the Philippines.

You shared that your journey with poetry has been bumpy and I really identify with that. When I was in high school I loved storytelling, but poetry felt like a series of puzzles I couldn't quite figure out. I didn't see my world reflected in them (at least not the poems I read at the time) and I wasn't sure there was a place for me. I also felt insecure about reading aloud in front of others. But then, I found poets like Nikki Giovanni and Pedro Pietri. Their poems *sang* in a way that I felt in my bones. They inspired me to share my own story, in my own words and I think that's what I want



to encourage you to do. As you build your poetry toolbox and grow as a young writer (and you will!), remember that the most important thing is that you write a poem nobody can write but you.

That leads me to something else you asked: how do I come up with specific ideas for my poems? For me, writing is about listening. And if you listen deeply enough, you'll find that poems are everywhere! In your mother's kitchen, on the way to school, dancing in the pouring rain while wearing your favorite red shoes. All of it is poetry! One of the things I love to do (and you can do this too) is to write a poem based on a word or phrase you heard someone else say. It can be a family member or a stranger. It can be a song lyric or a meaningful word from your culture. Then, write all of the things it makes you think of. How many different ways can you interpret that phrase? What meaning does it hold in your life?

When you talked about the line breaks in the poem as "how feelings do not always come out smoothly" or "how thoughts do not always arrive in full sentences." I love that! Breaking up a "sentence" into two (or more) lines can do so many things. It can help slow the reader down, it can offer suspense (what comes next?) or it can create more than one meaning (as in each line can be read on its own and all together).

I was really impressed by how the octopus became a symbol for "people who love deeply, especially in a world that does not always make space for that kind of love." That really struck me. Sometimes living our truth out loud is not always easy, but it's so important to stay close to the people who love and accept us. I started writing poetry as a way to understand the different parts of my identity, including my sexuality. Poetry became a safe harbor for me, a place to make meaning even when I didn't have the answers; it still is. I hope my poems help people feel a little more possible. A little more brave to be themselves.

I'm grateful my poem resonated with you in such a personal way. Keep writing, keep reading and most importantly, keep being you! Rooting for you, Juri!

Sincerely,  
Denice Frohman

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Dear Frohman,

It rained today. The best kind, the most beautiful and deeply peaceful kind. The type that lulls you quickly into a sleep, the kind that smells like Earth and tells you spring is coming, the type that brings life out of hiding. I can't help but find it ironic that the same rain that brings this beauty also lies to worms "it's safe, you can come out".

In your poem, you wrote, "You remove all your bones / so nothing can kill you." (26-27) Do you think that this is akin to what the rain told the worms? The fact that they are bound for harm, either by suffocation under the wet Earth or by dehydration above it? To me it seems both "you" and the worms are bound for anguish.

On the walk to school today I saw the corpses of those worms, their dying bodies writhing about as the sun cooked their soft skin. I picked up a few. I touched their dry rubbery skin as I scooped them up and laid them in the wet dirt just feet away.

I used to pick up every one. Yes, on the way to school I'd be late as I saved every single worm. Do you think I'm foolish? Childish? To take my time and sacrifice my time for a couple of invertebrates? Or do you feel as though it's the rest of the world that is heartless?

I'm still undecided.

I know you must be thinking, well, what a horribly morbid child, what in the world has this got to do with my poem? And, well, yes, that's actually a fair question. I bring this up in response to your assertion that "...loving a woman can make you crawl / out from under yourself, or forget / the kingdom that is your body." (6-8) See, unlike you I haven't fallen deeply in love with a beautiful woman, but I suppose you could say I have fallen in love with the Earth, wanting to give every bit of myself to the sun, and the dirt, and yes, even the worms.

You said "I wonder what I'd do / with eight arms, two eyes / & too many ways to give / myself away." (1-4) I also wonder what I could do with more. If I had eight arms and three hearts I wonder if I would walk miles every day it rained and pick up each worm four times as fast. Or, would I sit inside and wonder if I would ever meet One who would mercifully save me and many others from death in the same way. I wonder if I would have a heart that wouldn't stop giving to the Earth, and if it did I wonder if I'd be happy to bleed from two more. Or, maybe I'd wake each day with

one of my hearts even more broken because I would know One could never love me the way I would love them. Do you think I'd be fulfilled just simply giving? Maybe it's all about perspective?

I'm still unsure.

I am supposed to ask you questions, and I believe I have well surpassed my quota, however I have one thing I am still dying to ask. Why do you use "&" instead of spelling out "and" in many of your poems? Interestingly enough I started doing this too a couple months back, but that's because I like how it feels on paper. If I had to guess I would say that it makes your poetry feel approachable or sets an almost conversational tone, but I am truly uncertain. No need to explain if you would rather not, I just felt the need to ask.

On a personal, less artistic note I wanted to mention that I quite enjoyed your poem. I know, yes, it was implied but I felt it should be stated clearly without any bells and whistles. I also found your poem "Dear Straight People" quite enjoyable to read as a queer person myself.

Thank you very much for your time and beautiful poems,  
Nox,  
Minnesota

Dear Nox,

Can you believe it rained today in Philadelphia too? That's where I live. I've visited Minnesota a few times to perform poetry over the years and had a wonderful time. There are so many amazing poets in the twin cities! One that comes to mind is Danez Smith. Have you read their work? They're an incredible non-binary, Black queer poet. You should check them out!

Back to the rain. I can tell you're a poet when you write "the type [of rain] that brings life out of hiding." Snaps! Sounds like the beginning of a poem. I think it's awesome that you used to pick up every worm you saw on the way to school. We live in a world that screams, *Rush! Rush!* And yet you slow down. That's what poets do, they slow down the world. You asked if I think that's foolish. Not at all. In fact, I think you're

holding close to what it means to be human. We need more of that in our world.  
More Nox's who say, *Hey, look at that! Another Earth miracle!*

Since you wrote about worms in your letter it reminded me of one of my favorite poems: "Ode to the Maggot" by Yusef Komunyakaa. I'm sure you already know this, but an ode is a praise poem. The best odes celebrate things that often go uncelebrated. In this case, maggots. I won't give the ending away (it's a gut punch!), but the poem is such a good example of lifting up and honoring what some consider unworthy. I think it's also a poem that questions power and hierarchy (are humans *really* at the top? Who knows!). I think you might enjoy it.

One of the questions you asked about my poem "once a marine biologist..." is about my use of the ampersand (&). Great question! There are a couple of reasons I used it in this poem. First, I love the shape it makes on the page. I like how it loops and squiggles, almost like an octopus' appendage. It makes me think of the poet Aracelis Girmay who has a whole poem about the "&" (the first line goes "& isn't the heart an ampersand"). Another reason is that I'm drawn to how this little symbol collapses space, how it brings the words (worlds) in the poem closer together. A kind of intimacy. A way to fold me into the octopus' knowing. The "&" as a reminder to keep going & keep growing.

Thanks for your letter, Nox. Connecting with young people like you makes it all worth it. I hope you never stop being yourself and sharing your unique gifts with the world!

P.S Thank you for the kind note about my other poem "Dear Straight People." I'm so glad you found it or perhaps, it found you :-)

With warmth,  
Denice Frohman

---

Dear Denice Frohman,

From the moment I read the first stanza of "once a marine biologist told me octopuses have three hearts", I was intrigued. Fascinated. There was something about it that just screamed *connection*. I love to write poetry, and I make sure that every poem that I write has a real deeper meaning to it that connects with my heart and soul, and I'm sure you do too.

There have been many times in my life, especially in the last few months, when I have felt like I have had too many ways to give myself away. And yet, at the same time, I wonder: What do you think it truly means to *give* oneself away? I think it means to surrender to what other people may think of you, or what your inner thoughts and brain want you to really *be*. At the same time, we are all of one species, so how infinitely different could we all really be?

When I think about comparing humans to the complexity of an octopus, maybe I think about basic things, like their increase in arms and how they live in the water instead of on land. But your comparison to the heart is stunning. I realize, as I read and write this letter, that maybe we are of two different species, but the heart isn't a factor that sets us apart, but what brings us together. And this helps me discover that love is a real form of *connection*. Because even though blood and muscle come from the outside of the heart, there is no doubt that spirit comes from within it.

I lost a friend a few months back. I'm not sure and will never know why. But one theory in my head is that he never really thought he fit in. He may have felt like he had everything within his grasp at once, but one slip and he was held back, just like the octopus. And I know in my heart what my real heartbreak may be, and like the octopus I can bounce back. Because I can recognize that, while we may be apart, I know that he is able to connect, whether it may be with an octopus or anything else in our universe, because the heart may break, but it never truly dies.

I know that you and I may only have one heart, but in this world, I've discovered, and I'm sure you have too, that one heart can be everything. Thank you for writing this beautiful piece of literature, for writing words that I know I will connect with forever.

Sincerely,

Pierce

California

---

Dear Pierce,

It was so lovely to read your letter and hear about how much heart you put into your own writing. I admire that and try to do the same. Even though it can be scary, that's the only way to create art, right?

I'm grateful you found my poem meaningful and connected to the metaphor of the octopus. This poem really surprised me! I grew up in New York City with very little understanding of the vastness of the underworld. I had no idea I'd connect this much to a creature I found pretty visually unappealing (eek! sorry!). But as soon as I learned that octopuses have three hearts I was hooked; I needed to know more. I wrote the poem trying to imagine what the octopus (a creature fluent in adaptation) might say to me about vulnerability and survival in the face of personal loss. How do they do it?! Well, clearly the octopus had a lot to teach me. You asked what I think it means to "give oneself away"? I confess when I was younger, I thought it meant abandoning myself in service of what other people wanted me to be. But this poem offers a different perspective. It explores what it means to be so rooted in yourself that you can take risks and survive no matter the outcome.

I'm also sorry to hear that you recently lost a friend. Gosh, that's tough. I wonder if there's a way you can honor them? Maybe write them a poem, just for you, even if you don't share it? Is there a marine creature that could help you carry the grief? I'm sending you care.

In your letter you mentioned connection and it got me thinking about how poetry invites us to look beyond ourselves, our little corner of the world, to what's beyond our reach. It reminds me to stay curious about what feels unfamiliar while questioning the things I *think* I already know. It reminds me to look, and look again. Maggie Smith, a wonderful poet and writer, once wrote: "Attention is a form of love." I don't have any tattoos yet, but if I were to get one that would be a real contender. I hope you'll continue to write the things that matter to you, Pierce. To put more tenderness and wonder out into the world. We need it.

Stay curious, poet!

-Denice Frohman

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Dear Denice Frohman,

I think I started writing this letter long before I ever read your poem. Maybe years ago, when I first wondered if feeling everything was a flaw, or worse, a burden. I didn't know I was waiting for someone to put it into words until you did.

I came across your octopus on a day when I felt particularly overwhelmed. I was stretched too thin, in too many directions (school, family, drumming, trying to be enough for everyone). I remember sitting in my room, trying not to cry over something small but sharp, and then I read:

***"I wonder what I'd do / with eight arms..."***

And suddenly, it wasn't just me anymore. It was this creature, this voice, this tenderness. Your words reached in and gave shape to what I've been trying to name for so long.

I've spent so long feeling like I'm too much and not enough at the same time. Your line ***"too many ways to give / myself away"*** curled up in my chest and refused to leave. I think about how often I love so hard it empties me. How sometimes, loving someone feels like forgetting myself, like pulling pieces off my own ribcage to build them shelter.

And then your octopus spoke. And I listened.

There was something *holy* in that voice.

That idea, that the octopus knows heartbreak so profoundly it shed every bone so nothing could kill it? That *line*. That line. I had to put the poem down and cry.

Because yes. That's it. That's what it feels like when you've been hurt over and over, you grow *soft*, never hard. You melt your armor down into something tender. You choose vulnerability because it's easy, because it's the only way to survive and still feel.

I've always felt ashamed of being sensitive—*ashamed* of having big dreams, of feeling too deeply, of never knowing how to hold back, of living every moment, of *crying*. But your poem made it feel *sacred*. That maybe having this many hands (to hold, to love, to ache) isn't a weakness. Maybe it's strength. Maybe it's *evolution*. Maybe it's the only way we make it out alive.

I wonder, did you write this in a moment of grief? Or maybe in a moment of clarity after love bruised you in the softest way? Did you write it to comfort yourself? Because it comforted me. It made me feel like softness is a kind of survival. That being held is less important than still reaching.

Thank you for showing me what it means to break open, and pour out more ocean.

With every trembling limb of my heart, yours sincerely,

Yonhi

Spain

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Dear Yonhi,

It always amazes me how far poems can travel, let alone one of my own. Thank you for your heartfelt letter and for sitting with the poem with such care. There's so much you shared that I want to respond to!

You wrote that after reading the poem you realized "it wasn't just me anymore." That means a lot to me. I first came to poetry many years ago, because it helped me feel less alone. As a young person, I dealt with a lot of insecurities of not feeling enough. My sexuality only made those feelings of shame deeper. But as a freshman in college, I stumbled on a poetry book by Nikki Giovanni in the school bookstore and felt my world break open. Never before had I seen a poet put their heart on the page like that. I thought, wait, you can do that?! From then on, I started writing poems of my own and built a world where being different was celebrated.

Speaking of feelings, your letter made me think of something one of my favorite poets Patricia Smith said at a literary festival (and I highly recommend you read her work!). She said, and I'm paraphrasing here, that as writers when the feelings are big, you have to make the room smaller. For me, that means anchoring myself in the details whether it's an image or a metaphor. I try to remind myself of this when I write toward anything that feels overwhelming. Maybe this is helpful for you too?

You asked if this poem was "born from a moment of grief?" I remember that I was nursing an old wound that, at the time, felt impossible to move. I was sitting with larger questions, like the ones you shared, around tenderness and survival. How do we



stay soft in the face of heartbreak (both personal and global)? How do we feel a thing fully without leaving ourselves empty? At the time I was reading a book by adrienne maree brown called *Emergent Strategy*. In it she talks about biomimicry, which is the idea that us humans can learn so much about how to survive from the natural world around us. I was exhausted by the world above ground, so instead I turned to the underworld. When I learned that octopuses have three hearts I was stunned! And then I thought, look at all those feelings! My goodness! How do they do it? I found their ability to adapt, to grow back appendages and change shapes inspiring in my own life. It all felt like a call to lean in.

I know sometimes it can feel like being vulnerable is a weakness, but it truly is a superpower. We all feel disappointment and sadness at some point in our lives, but I hope the octopus reminded you, as it did me, of the sacredness of being heart full. That no matter what, it's such a blessing to feel anything at all. Thanks again for your letter, Yonhi!

With care,  
Denice Frohman

## *Foreign Body*

This is a poem on my other's body,  
I mean, my mother's body, I mean the one

who saved her braid of blue-black hair  
in a drawer when I was little.

Meaning one I could lean against —  
against not in resistance. Fuzzy dress

of wuzzy one. Red lipstick one.  
Kitchen one. Her one to me,

*bad-ger bad-ger* —

or so I heard. The one body I write on

like Daddy's blank studio wall  
with my colored pencils.

About seeing her skin

as she bathed in the afternoon —  
was I five? It was summer.

Then today's winter where again  
I call that bath to mind.

I cannot leave her body alone.

Which is how I found Mother in the bath  
escaping the heat of a 1950s house,

Father on a ladder with blowtorch  
to scrape the paint off the outside.

•

*badger badger*

•

The sun in the suburbs  
simmered the tar roof over our rooms  
  
in the town where only wasps lived  
inside paper cells beneath eaves and roots.

And they hurt very much, the wasps.

•

Now I am sixty. Sweet as dried papaya.

My hair, a bit tarnished,  
my inmost, null.

Memory is failing away  
as if an image shattered to shards then  
recollected for a kaleidoscope:

I click the pieces into sharp arrangements —  
*grouse, crow, craven*  
—no, now, my own daughter turns sovereign

Thank you for tending to my lines. I am delighted that you took the time to step inside this poem, pause with the words, and respond with your thoughts and questions. It's funny because I don't believe poets are always the best people to talk about their own work. Why? Because, for me, when I am creating a draft, the draft itself takes over. The writer writes without thinking. Later, they will return to the drafts and thoughtfully revise. But even then--how much control do we want when it comes to what has been unconsciously conceived?

Okay. That said, I can start with a little background to the writing of this poem. I was actually working on a long poem prompted by Dr. Chevalier Quixote Jackson (1865-1958), a pioneer in the medical field of laryngology. Or, to put it bluntly, he removed stuff from children's upper respiratory systems. And--here is what caught my curiosity--he extracted over 2,000 foreign bodies (stuff) that he later donated to the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia. I was intrigued by the literal and figurative act of extracting these objects; I was fascinated by the idea of saving them all. After writing this long poem ("Object Lessons"), I began to play with the phrase "foreign body" and realized that I should write a poem about my family's immigrant past. In other words, I gave myself a writing prompt.

A number of comments and questions revolve around my use of words that have multiple meanings. This is an aspect of my poetics--to make a word explode and change the course of the poem. I love words like pine, rose, hedges. They are plants found in nature and also verbs. I also love "mishearing" that can convey what we call a Freudian slip, i.e., a slip of the tongue that reveals an unconscious aspect. "Badger" is an animal and a verb "to pester." It also sounds like "bad girl."

The version you have is not the final draft so it is especially interesting for me to revisit it. The version in the book *Foreign Bodies* has a several changes, most notably the closure:

[2018]

Now I'm sixty. Sweet as dried papaya.

My hair, a bit tarnished,  
my inmost, null.

Memory is failing away  
 as if an image shattered to shards then  
 re-collected for a kaleidoscope:

I click the pieces into sharp arrangement--

*grouse, crow, craven?*

No, now my own daughter turns sovereign.

[2020]

Now I'm sixty. Sweet as dried papaya.

My hair, a bit tarnished,  
 my inmost, null.

Memory is falling away  
 as if an image shattered to shards then  
 re-collected for a kaleidoscope:

I click the pieces into sharp arrangement--

*bad bad girl girl*

In turn, a daughter turns sovereign.

Regarding “failing” and “falling”: I love that changing one letter suggests the other. The meaning is the same for both. The difference for me is that “falling” is more physical. And shards can fall.

Regarding the closure: as I wrote in another reply, I am interested in getting a little lost in order to find my way to something. And the line *grouse, crow, craven* is meant to give a clue as to how to read the early “badger.” The first two words are animals and “craven” sounds like the bird “raven” --but the three “animals” are also very loaded verbs: *grouse* means *grumble*; *crow* means *loat*; *craven* means *cowardly*. But the playfulness felt like it might confuse more than invite. So, I went with clarifying the “badger” references.

And the revised last line? The first declares that my own daughter would assume

dominance (over me? the world?). In the 2020 version, the little article “a” suggests that any daughter, even myself, has what it takes to take over.

Although the poem has been published, I wonder if I should change anything back?

All best wishes,

Kimiko Hahn

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Dear Kimiko Hahn,

I feel the need to start this letter by saying thank you. Reading your poem “Foreign Body” stirred a deeply personal reaction in me. While I know your poem carries its own meaning, I found myself reading with the perspective of my personal experience: I lost my mother when I was seven. It’s hard not to find even the smallest association with her death and then run with it, shaping my own story out of the one on the page. Please forgive me if my interpretation differs from your intent.

When I read your poem, I find the experience of grief written in an incredibly profound way. Lines like “I cannot leave her body alone” (18) and “Memory is failing away/as if an image shattered to shards then/recollected for a kaleidoscope” (32-34) capture the complicated way memory works when grieving. These lines convey a deep longing: the longing for the past and for a clear memory of it. The metaphor of a kaleidoscope shows how memories do not stay whole or accurate as time goes on, yet we still try our hardest to preserve what remains. This idea of memory not staying whole has moved me; I see it in my own grief, how I’ve tried to hold onto the memory of my mother even as her details slip away. For example, I once confessed to my grandmother that I sometimes fantasize about my life before my mom’s death, how perfect it all would have been if she had survived. My grandma told me that that type of thinking never gets anyone anywhere. I agree with her. You can’t change the past.

Because of my experiences, what I especially admire about your writing is how it represents grief and memories as a complex experience without dramatizing it. It feels honest, like I’m there with you, watching you age and your memories change. This depth isn’t unique in *Foreign Body*, either. Your poem, *Ode to the Whitman Line* “When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom’d,” beautifully communicates loss. The line in

this poem, “-to hold, to hold you, to memorize fast-” (8), once again expertly conveys the experience of grief. Attempting to “memorize” what I can remember about my mom is an experience that I feel too often. However, I have found that this is nearly impossible; there is nothing one can do to stop memories from fading, a finding that your speaker also comes to realize at the end of *Foreign Body*.

Your work has left me with some questions: How do I continue my legacy when my mother has already passed? Your poem ends with the speaker realizing that her daughter has “turned sovereign” (37) as she was thinking about her mother. As someone whose memory of her mother has nearly completely faded, how can I carry her forward, especially if I have children of my own one day? Finally, as someone who has written about memories, do you recommend I continue trying to memorize my mom, or is it better to let some things go as I age?

Thank you (again),  
Juliet  
Minnesota

---

Dear Juliet,

Thank you for your candor and close reading of my poem. When you wrote at the start of your letter “I found myself reading with the perspective of my personal experience”--that is exactly how I read and I hope that my readers do as well. This perspective makes your initial reading fresh and without preconceptions. If the poem interests you, subsequent readings will be for the poem. And, your subsequent readings “*Foreign Body*” really moved to the core themes--grief and memory.

Yes, the grief is for my mother who died suddenly when I was thirty-eight. But the intense emotion also encompasses a general feeling that I’d lost her early in my childhood. (Maybe when my little sister was born?) The poems written before her death often have a sense of her turning away from me. So, my memory brings loss in various “kaleidoscopic” ways. “I cannot leave her alone” was and is my constant and continuing search for her.

You also wrote “without dramatizing”--*thank you*. This is the aim for most poets writing about their own lives. I’d like to pull you into the experience--show you my experience--rather than tell you I was sad, angry, etc. An often-used suggestion for writers is “show don’t tell.”

“How do I continue my legacy when my mother has already passed?” The first year that my mother died, I wrote a lot. Mostly paragraphs that resembled journal entries. Some ended up in poems or *zuihitsu* (a Japanese form). This is from “Sewing Without Mother”:

A chartreuse circle skirt motherhood pinned for hemming was  
draped on a chair when I arrived after the accident. It has hung  
on a chair in my bedroom now eighteen months. Forever. Not a long  
time at all.

I wouldn’t have remembered this moment if I hadn’t jotted it down. The image is one that has survived my failing memory. Of course, not everything a poet writes is actual fact. But the feeling behind the images are genuine.

I am offering this paragraph as a suggestion to jot down memories in a notebook or even in texts to yourself. I know you were a small child but whatever you recall now may be important to preserve for later years. And to ask others. I wish I had asked my father more about my mother’s life.

But, you may ask, what if your memory is faulty? In writing there is *the truth*--what actually happened--and *the Truth*, that is, the essence of the experience. What has this to do with my poem or any other poem? I hope that when someone reads my poem, they experience it. Not as a literary activity, but as a realm that offers a space for uncovering. Whatever you recall, will be the essence of that experience.

Take good care,  
Kimiko Hahn



---

Dear Kimiko Hahn,

Hello. I recently read your poem *Foreign Body*, and it stirred something in me that's hard to put into words — like a memory quietly unfolding in my heart, then gently folding back in again. I want to thank you for writing such a piece: it felt like a memory one can gaze into, or gently lean against.

What I loved most is how you placed the “mother’s body” at the heart of the poem — not as a forced symbol, but as something naturally seen, remembered, clung to, even written upon. Especially the lines “the one body I write on / like Daddy’s blank studio wall” — they made me think about how, as children, we remember people not by facts but by colors, scents, sounds, or the way afternoon light falls in a bathroom.

As I read, I felt the poem itself was a kind of puzzle of memory — not meant to restore “truth” but to call forth emotion and shadows from within. This way of “reassembling the world through fragments” made me rethink poetry’s role in memory — as both witness and imagination.

May I ask you: in this poem, is the blurring of memory a limitation for you, or a kind of freedom? Also, you mentioned your daughter “turns sovereign”— I loved the shift in that line, which felt like both release and understanding. I wonder, when writing about your daughter, do you also feel a kind of reversed gaze, as if she is now the one observing you?

Thank you for preserving such tender and difficult intimacies through poetry. After reading your work, I found myself being gentler toward the things in me that I haven’t yet learned how to write about.

Wishing you peace and honesty, always — like poetry itself.

With deep gratitude,

A reader who was truly moved

(Tzu Ying)

California

Dear Tzu Ying,

Thank you for reading my poem with such openness. I very much appreciate your description of the experience of reading the poem--that is, “like a memory quietly unfolding ...” Poetry is often read for the sake of figuring out what the text is *about*. But art is offered as an experience. An experience for the whole self. So yes, the mother’s body is central--as suggested in the title--the fact and memory of the mother’s body but also the symbolism of it.

When I write, I do not usually aim for a symbol. Whatever theme that I happen to be swimming around in becomes apparent. For me, usually some aspect of loss. And I suppose that memory is a way to hopefully control or mitigate, in my case, that loss. And yes, I am not trying in this poem to restore the “truth” but to lay bare my experiences of loss and experiences of memory.

You ask if “the blurring of memory” is a limitation or freedom. I haven’t thought of blurring in this way. What I actively do is open up with the aim to be clear (the little girl hears “badger” which is both an animal and a verb meaning “to pester”) and then allow ambiguity to reveal some other things (“badger” sounds like “bad girl”). To write “on” something is to write about it as a subject but also to physically write on the thing. This kind of play opens up spaces of which I am not necessarily aware. The act of writing itself is meaning.

As for the closure: the line “No, now my own daughter turns sovereign” is from an early draft. I think I hoped that this female--the daughter--would take over. The version published in my book reads

I click the pieces into sharp arrangement--

*bad bad girl girl*

In turn, a daughter turns sovereign.

I wanted the italicized line to echo the “badger badger” instead of introducing new animals (whose names present double meanings). And the “In turn,” makes for a softening after feeling like the bad girl.

I don't always feel that a poet is the best person to speak about their poems. I hope I have opened up spaces for you.

Take good care,

Kimiko Hahn

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Dear Kimiko Hahn,

I'd be lying if I said I understand this poem. But my literature teacher tells me to go with my instincts, so I am doing just that. I like the playfulness, with "other" and "mother", "foreign" and "sovereign". Poetry is *fun*. Your words bleed into the heat, into the bathwater, and crept under my skin and stayed there.

I took a break to think about this. The wallowing, the curvatures, and the suburbia that lies in the sun, slower than time. Shanghai is a *city*, there's just no other word for it. I live, skirting along the suburbs of Shanghai, where every tall tree looms over, the sun spilling through the leaves, and life seems to be forever stuck in that purgatory between years ago (seventeen to be exact) and now. I remember when the backyard was full of grass, my world seemed so much bigger then, pigtails and running around in circles, doted upon, in pretty dresses. Suburbia feels like home, and yet it feels detached from the "上海" I know and breathe. I used to call my hometown a city split by a river in the middle, named "on the sea"; a city that has a street named "淮海", which is a homophone for "missing the sea". The sentimental part of me felt that it was fitting — as if the cold, grotesque metropolis had a soft spot, a longing left unspoken.

And since I already mentioned a homophone, why not another? My name sounds like "没根", no roots. I'm used to feeling like no pieces really clicked when I talk about home. I'm Singaporean on my dad's side, which was quite confusing as a kid, being brought up in international schools, which erased some semblance of identity (and I have an irreversible American accent): not quite fully Chinese, not quite fully Singaporean. What you said about an Asian American aesthetic stuck with me. I tried to ignore my culture when writing poetry, simply because it was so overdone, seeing the phrase "Yangtze flows in my veins". But I see a clearer picture now — it takes time and work to figure all this identity out, and I'm okay with that.

Your poem felt physical and visceral in the most serene way possible. I physically felt it — the leaning against, yet “against, not in resistance”. I suppose the fondness trails in the wind that blows my mother’s dress up, hot wind, clinging to the ends of her scabby dress. The material was opaque, lined with silver threads, and not at all cooling. I suppose as a child, leaning against was the norm, usually the back lined up to her calves, spine curved to rest better. It was harbor, it was comfort. It still is comfort.

But everything is “shattered to shards”, and no matter how hard I try, memory fails me. I suppose we all grow out our roots and some parts are left awkwardly hanging.

Do you think that there’s a world out there, in which dust never settles on the windowsill, where the kaleidoscope catches light forever?

I used to write poetry on my hands. Not sure why I did that, but the oil-based pens (that I constantly lost caps of) worked marvelously, gliding across skin. I liked that the words fade as a day fades into another, and there’d be layers upon layers, scrubbed and faded just enough for the new to come in, and imprinted just enough to piece it all together, recollected. And I wouldn’t want it any other way.

Truly,

Maegan

Shanghai

---

Dear Maegan,

Thank you for being so honest from the start of your letter! I appreciate your willingness to say you are not sure you “understand this poem.” I also appreciate your teacher’s advice to “go with your instincts.” Honestly, not understanding a poem right away isn’t necessarily a negative. There is so much going on all at once. And that’s where one’s instinct or intuition comes into play. (It took me years to feel comfortable with my take on Emily Dickinson!)

Speaking of “play” --you are right. I aim for play to make way for serious stuff, or really all stuff. From the opening line, the speaker (me, in this case) makes a Freudian slip calling her mother an “other.” I am having a bit of fun but very seriously setting up the notion of the mother being the psychological “Other.” You might find it interesting

that I changed the line “against not in resistance” to “against as in insistance.” I realized that I wasn’t pushing up against my mother psychologically; I was trying to get into her sphere, insistantly so.

Homonyms and homophones--very important in Japanese aesthetics. And although I am not fluent, my own poetics are very influenced by the Japanese. Most readers don’t understand that haiku uses words with multiple meanings. With such economy, the poet depends on words that can do double duty, that is, to burst out of a sheerly linear experience. In such a way, I want the speaker’s hearing of “badger” to come into focus as “bad girl.” When my words feel “like bathwater” --I know the poem is working.

Thank you, too, for adding your own landscape to the letter. I was able to get a sense of your reading experience with a sense of the scene around you. Keep writing!

Take good care,

Kimiko Hahn

Dear Kimiko Hahn,

My name is Vanya. I am a student in New Jersey writing in response to “Foreign Body” and I really enjoyed the style of this poem. I enjoyed your use of words with different meanings, specifically badger. At first, I was a little confused, as I was only thinking about the animal, but rereading it again, I realized it was the act of pestering someone, and not the animal. I liked how it challenged me and gave me an open mind. This line really helped me think outside the box. I particularly enjoyed the last stanza: “I click the pieces into sharp arrangements — grouse, crow, craven— no, now, my own daughter turns sovereign” (Hahn 35-37). I liked how the woman is trying to reminisce about her childhood, but her thoughts interrupt her and her focus turns to the present with her daughter using the words ‘craven’ and ‘sovereign’. I personally think this shows how sometimes when we think of random things, they can lead to a totally different thought. I also enjoyed the symbolism of kaleidoscope fragments to explain the complexity of our thoughts, as well as the act of trying to piece together early memories that we forget as we get older.

I can relate to the theme of a child reminiscing their past, as I often do this myself. It's my way of wondering 'where has all the time gone?'. I find myself going back in time often, no matter the time of day. I'll be in bed, and suddenly I'll remember something that happened to me in 2nd grade for no reason. Reminiscing makes me happy, but it also makes me wish I could travel back to that simple time, where all I had to worry about was what game to play next. As I get older, I'm realizing more and more how stressful life is! As I read your poem, I see now that it's a universal thing, to reminisce. Your poem makes me wish for the simpler times in life. I take your use of "badger" to symbolize how these memories 'badger' us and sort of make fun of us for living in such a complicated lifestyle. It's sort of like they're saying 'weren't you the one who wanted to grow up so fast?'.

A few questions I have are:

Why do you like to use words that are the same, but have different meanings?

What is your favorite childhood memory?

Thank you for participating in this program! I really enjoyed your poem. It gave me something to think about and comforted me, even in this complicated and crazy world. Happy National Poetry Month!

Sincerely,

Vanya

New Jersey

Dear Vanya,

Thank you for spending such care on this poem. I am delighted that you opened your letter with the word "badger" and your experience, first thinking of the animal and then, in a moment of confusion, realizing the verb "to pester." I am particularly interested in how confusion can lead to curiosity. Further, in my mind, "badger" sounds like "bad girl." Did she (*me*) feel like a *bad girl bad girl*? I am interested in getting a little lost in order to find my way. And the line *grouse, crow, craven* is meant to give a clue as to how to read the early "badger." The first two words are animals

and “craven” sounds like the bird “raven” --but the three “animals” are also very loaded verbs: *grouse* means *grumble*; *crow* means *gloat*; *craven* means *cowardly*. Then again, maybe I asking *too much* of the reader.

The poem that you have is not the final version. The last stanza reads:

I click the pieces into sharp arrangement--  
*bad bad girl girl*

In turn, a daughter turns sovereign.

I traded in one kind of playfulness for a bit more clarity.

Thank you, too, for your words on reminiscing. It really is a frame of mind that can be pleasurable or even a bit melancholy. Like dreams, I think it’s a way for us to make sense of the past. And writing can be a part of that.

My favorite childhood memory? That moment when I walked in on my mother was very confusing. It is a memory that keeps returning in my poems. A pleasurable one is playing with Trolls dolls in the schoolyard with my friend Barbara. We were in third grade and we’d make little homes for them in the gnarly roots of hickory nut trees. And there is another favorite memory: cracking those nuts open and eating them! Thank you for asking. I haven’t thought of those activities in a long time.

Why do I like to use words that have multiple meanings? I like to play with language and allow words and images take me somewhere unexpected. And when I look at a draft, I often see words or lines that can work harder. That can mean more. Sometimes the meaning has to do with a definition, sometimes the music of the language, etc. Also, I learned that in Japanese poetics, there is a great emphasis on words that have multiple meanings. Imagine reading a haiku, a mere seventeen syllables, and picturing a snow-covered pine tree, then suddenly realizing that the speaker is waiting for a loved one (the word “matsu” means “pine tree” and “wait”).

Growing up too fast! I am so glad that a poem gave you room to pause and stay in that pause to let your mind play.

Take good care,  
 Kimiko Hahn

## *Survival Guide*

No matter how old you are,  
it helps to be young  
when you're coming to life,

to be unfinished, a mysterious statement,  
a journey from star to star.  
So break out a box of Crayolas

and draw your family  
looking uncomfortably away  
from the you you've exchanged

for the mannequin  
they named. You should  
help clean up, but you're so busy being afraid

to love or not  
you're missing the fun of clothing yourself  
in the embarrassment of life.

Frost your lids with midnight;  
lid your heart with frost;  
rub them all over, the hormones that regulate

the production of love  
from karmic garbage dumps.  
Turn yourself into



the real you  
you can only discover  
by being other.  
Voila! You're free.  
Learn to love the awkward silence  
you are going to be.

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Dear Students,

Thank you so much for choosing to read “Survival Guide,” and for taking the time to write to me about it. I wish I could respond to each of your letters, to respond to your writing as generously as you have responded to mine.

As so many of you have said, I wrote this poem to express the struggle, the turmoil, and the joy of becoming who I really am. Though the poem was speaking to me, while I was writing it, I hoped that others would also identify with the “you” in the poem, and use the poem to understand their own feelings and experiences, because while few people go through gender transition, all of grow and change in ways that sometimes astonish and sometimes trouble those around us. I hope this poem helps you not only survive but celebrate your own processes of becoming who you really are.

For most of my life, being trans made me feel different from everyone around me. Your responses show me that being different can not only separate but connect me with others. I hope the poem helps you feel connected too.

Have you ever written a message, put it in a bottle, and thrown it into the ocean, hoping someone you would never meet would eventually get your message? That’s what writing poems is like for me. Thank you for receiving and opening and taking in the words of “Survival Guide” – for making my deepest wish as a poet come true.

Gratefully,

Joy

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Dear Joy Ladin,

My name is G, I am a transmasculine senior in high school. Your poem meant a lot to me as someone who often feels out of place when with the part of my family that doesn’t accept me. I spent my early teens hiding who I was because I was scared of how my parents would react. I denied myself the chance to even think being trans was an option until I hit high school and realized I couldn’t lie to myself anymore.

Your poem resonated with me in a way most poetry can't. We both share such a uniquely trans experience and I finally found someone who was able to put it into words. The way it feels to be someone you are not and then finally being able to shed the fake you and be who you really are. Oftentimes I still feel like an outsider during family events, like a distant cousin no one really knows and I'm ok with that because those people don't want to learn how interesting the real me is. And believe me when I say I'm an interesting person.

It's not easy being who you are in America, especially not now, but you motivate me to continue to be true to myself even when life tries to strike me down. Your living proof that trans people get to grow up and be happy adults, that we are not a phase. Thank you for this.

Sincerely,  
G  
Wisconsin

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Dear G,

Thank you for your deep response to "Survival Guide." You're right that the poem is about the experience of "shedding the fake you and being who you really are," and that it reflects the pain and isolation both of living as someone we know we aren't, and showing up as who we are to those who can't accept or understand why we need to present our authentic selves rather than "mannekins" that look like who they wish we were.

You and I have both been there and done that, and I am so sorry that you are still having to endure it. Being true to ourselves is never a phase, even though, as Ralph Waldo Emerson says in his famous essay "Self-Reliance," being true to ourselves means growing and changing, including in ways that unsettle those we love.

Though it can be hard to feel it, particularly these days, I have learned that there are many people who will cherish us not despite but because of who we are. Happiness

comes and goes for everyone, but whether I'm happy or not, I'm always grateful that being true to myself has enabled me to leave the mannequin behind and feel truly present and alive.

Best,

Joy

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Dear Joy Landin,

I enjoy your poem "Survival Guide" because it has many universal messages. It stirs memories within myself and compels me to think deeply about my future. Your poem inspires me to continue to look for adventure and accept my imperfections and identity.

My name is Nicholas, and I am currently a junior in high school. In my English class, we had the opportunity to look at a variety of poems and yours stood out the most. Your utilization of a second person perspective was refreshing and drew me in, making me think about my own life. It specifically makes me think about the change that has occurred throughout my life. The poem reminded me that although I am the same person, I am also different than I was yesterday and will be tomorrow. Your poem is a reminder to me that everyday is a new chapter in the story of your life.

Your poem resonates with me because I struggle with my identity as a ethnic minority in the environments around me that feel very monochrome. I undergo the challenge to act a certain way and to conform to social and cultural norms everyday. Although I face challenges surrounding my ethnicity, I know the importance of individuality. The world would be a dull place without differences that make us unique. One phrase in the poem that jumps out to me is "So break out a box of Crayolas and draw your family looking uncomfortably away from the you you've exchanged." This phrase incorporates a shared experience many people had when they were a child. I interpret the part with the family looking away to symbolize that a change has occurred in the family dynamic. After changing your ways of living, some people may look down upon you, but you must remember to stand tall and celebrate the joys of being yourself. It is also the things you don't change, the things you cherish about yourself, the things that make you unique.

Another line that captivates my attention is “You’re missing out on clothing yourself in the embarrassment of life.” I think the meaning of this phrase is to just “go with the flow”, letting life take you as you sail across your journey, not worrying about the waves ahead. I would like to know more about your personal story and what inspired you to write this well crafted poem. I also recognized that you wrote in three line stanzas and was wondering if there is any significance to the number. Last but not least, I am confused on what “frost you lids with midnight and lid your heart with frost” means and do not know how to interpret it and would love to know.

Sincerely,  
Nicholas  
Wisconsin

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Dear Nicholas,

I am so glad you liked “Survival Guide,” and that you connected with it so deeply and personally.

As you pointed out, I wrote it in the second person, even though I was expressing my own feelings and experiences, because I hoped that readers would take “you” as an invitation to find their own lives in the words. I’m grateful that you accepted this invitation. You really understand what it is trying to say about the way we constantly change, and how our own changes can affect our relationships with others, and the need, as you say, “to stand tall and celebrate the joys of being yourself” even when it feels hard. You are right about what I meant by “clothing yourself in the embarrassment of life.” I sometimes get so caught up in what is hard about being different that I lose sight of the gorgeousness of being alive. As you say, we need to “go with the flow,” to embrace the process of becoming ourselves without fear or shame.

I often write in three-line stanzas, because they focus attention on small enough chunks of poetry that readers can feel the breaks between lines (I’m quite fond of my linebreaks), and because the uneven number of lines makes me like they are opening out into the future rather than making complete, closed statements.

I am pretty ambivalent about “frost your lids with midnight/and lid your heart with frost.” I love the repetitions in those lines, and the way they make images which, like many of Emily Dickinson’s images, combine concreteness with abstraction. But I’m not sure what they mean, other than expressing a sense that when we are becoming ourselves, we have to include the darkness and winters that are also part of being human. Actually, I never even got that specific about the meaning before you asked me. When I was working on the poem, I kept cutting those lines out and then putting them back in - they sounded right for reasons I couldn’t, and probably still can’t, explain.

Thank you for reading and responding so deeply, Nicholas, and for sharing your own wisdom about being human with me.

Best,  
Joy

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Dear Ms. Ladin,

When I first read this poem I felt a strong connection and honestly I’ve never had a real connection with a poem before! My first reaction to this poem was that I understood that the poem was about being you and not what other people expect you to be.

What inspired you to write this poem? When I write my poems it’s either about me and other stuff but your poem “Survival Guide” teaches people a great and wonderful lesson. I wonder if this poem meant anything strong or big in your life? I wonder how you came up with the title “Survival guide”? Because when I write books or poems I get stuck on trying to figure out a title for it. Do you have any advice on figuring out a title?

I really liked how you added “from the you exchanged for the mannequin they named.” That line made me think of the word “you”. I thought that meant a version of you and that line was one of my favorites! And another line I liked was the part when you said “Voila! You’re free”. When I thought about what that meant I thought really deep at the end. I thought it meant to take charge of your own life instead of someone else taking charge of your life.

A personal connection I had was my family always tells me to act mature and want me to be smart and intelligent. I really want to achieve their expectations and try to get a good score on tests or quizzes. I learned now from this poem to try my best and to do it for me and not to do it for my parents. Thank you for teaching me that lesson!

My big goal is to be as good as you when it comes to poetry. You can express your big feelings and emotions when you write a poem. And I hope I can also be a great poetry writer. Now you might be wondering what I do and all about me!

I have four family members in my family including me. I'm 11 years old and I love soccer. I don't have any favorite color at the moment. I'm a fifth grader who loves her teacher. Enough about me! I really thought about how your poem inspired me and I was thinking maybe I should write a poem that people would be inspired by too! Do you think that's a good idea?

Sincerely your reader,

Riya

Connecticut

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Dear Riya,

I can't believe that in fifth grade, you are already such an engaged, thoughtful, articulate poetry reader! I certainly wasn't when I was your age - I wrote a lot but I didn't start seriously reading poetry until I was in high school. You are off to a great start toward becoming a great writer - we learn so much about our own writing from reading others' poetry. And yes, you should write an inspiring poem! I think people need inspiration these days.

I'm honored that the first poem you've connected with is mine, and grateful that you understood it so well. I was inspired to write it by my complicated experiences of gender transition - of becoming who I really was, of the sometimes painful changes ways that affected my relationships, and my struggle to deal with the difficulties and embrace the joys of becoming. "Survival Guide" is in the second person, addressing "you," because the voice in the poem is speaking to me about my life, but in ways I hoped would also speak to other people. I have a hard time with titles, but by the time

the poem was done, I knew that it was not only encouraging me to become who I really am – that it was meant to encourage everyone who is struggling with that process.

The lines you liked are favorites of mine too! And I like your reading of the end, and that you find more in it than I realized.

Speaking of which - your goal shouldn't be to be as good as me. It should be to be a great poet in the ways only you can be.

It's wonderful that you love your teacher - I feel sure your teacher loves you too.

Best,

Joy

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Dear Ms Ladin,

I personally felt connected to your poem "Survival Guide". The way you talk about "missing the fun of clothing yourself" really reached me because I too can't fully dress the way I want. When I do, people say I look like a boy, or they want me to wear more "girly" clothes. I just want to do what makes me feel the most confident in myself but everyone else worries about some sort of image it might create for me. I also liked where you brought up how being a child was easier and it's funny how for some reason parents are more accepting of this behavior when you're a child because they can just say you're a "tomboy" or "girly girl" and feel that they have time to change you.

I'm just curious to how your transition was perceived by the Jewish community and if it was positive or negative? Is it hard to work in a Jewish school where people tend to be closed minded? Has your family grown to accept you and if not how is your relationship now? Is Joy your birth name or is a. Name you personally picked, why'd you choose joy?

I think you're really brave for writing this poem about your struggles. I agree with how people expect you to fit or change to their standards. I prefer to have short hair and not wear girly clothes. I find them more comfortable and just feel good in them. Every time though people always form an opinion on it and make sure to let me know. Family or friends or even just people at my school tell me how I should grow my hair



out or wear more feminine clothing and do my makeup. They say how people might think bad things about me if I don't, as if the style has defined me. I don't wear what I wear or look the way I do for others to form an opinion on me or try to create a deeper meaning to it. I look the way I do and dress the way I do because that's what makes me feel best. I'm still forced to wear and do what I don't want to, like wearing dresses for religious events or doing my hair and getting my nails done for something fancy but I do it for my family and to hold back the chaos that would happen if I didn't. I think it's very brave of you for being your true self.

Thank you for the poem sincerely,  
Shayna  
California

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Dear Shayna,

I'm so glad "Survival Guide" spoke to you! It's amazing how many people, even people who don't identify as trans or nonbinary, have experiences like those you describe, of feeling uncomfortable living in the ways that's expected of them as boys or girls, men or women. I think that's why some people are so insistent in trying to get others to conform to their gender expectations: because they feel forced to conform to avoid being judged or whispered about or rejected.

You ask great questions about my experiences transitioning in the Jewish community. If you want details, I talk a lot about that in my memoir of transition, *Through the Door of Life: a Jewish Journey Between Genders*. But the short answers are that there is no single Jewish community - there are many quite different ways of being Jewish and practicing Judaism, and lots of Jewish communities. In terms of the communities I was connected to during my gender transition, all were uncomfortable with me showing up as a woman after they had known me as a man, but some found it easier to accept me in this new incarnation. I didn't find my Orthodox students close-minded (those who were avoided my classes), even though they didn't understand my relation to gender - I was the first trans person they had ever knowingly met. In fact, they taught me something I've tried to live up to ever since: because they couldn't understand my gender, they looked past it, and related to me as a human being. That worked!

Each member of my family had different responses to my transition, and those responses changed over time as my children grew up. But my transition ended my marriage, and was difficult for everyone, though not as hard for my children as the divorce.

Fortunately for me - I'm terrible at naming - my best friend gave me the name "Joy." I was miserable when she gave it to me, but I accepted the name as a mission statement: to experience joy, and to bring joy.

Thank you so much for reading and responding so deeply to "Survival Guide."

Best,

Joy

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Dear Joy Ladin,

My name is V, and I am a freshman in high school. When I read your poem *Survival Guide*, I felt a connection to your words. I felt like your poem resonated with me deeply because, like you, I am a transgender individual—but I am not open or proud about it. I've struggled with feeling ashamed of who I am. There are days when I wish I could just be "normal," and I am often wondering why I have to hide such an important part of myself. A big part of my fear also stems from my family members and friends, who are openly transphobic. I remember one day, my mom was talking about how selfish transgender people are, and if her kids were ever a part of that community, she would kick them out of the family. I've struggled not only with hiding my identity but also with feeling ashamed of it. Growing up in a family that is openly transphobic has made it hard for me to accept myself. It was both comforting and saddening to see my own experiences reflected in your writing. It showed me that I am not alone in feeling this way, but it also reminded me of how heavy this burden can be. Your poem gave voice to emotions that I've kept repressed and hidden. When you wrote, "*You're so busy being afraid to love or not you're missing the fun of clothing yourself in the embarrassment of life,*" the line almost spoke to me. I've been so afraid of rejection and judgment that I've convinced myself it's safer to stay hidden. But in doing so, I feel like I'm missing out on truly living. I realize now that my internalized transphobia has kept me from accepting myself.

When reading your poem, “Survival Guide”, I felt a strong and deep connection that relates back to my own life. In your poem, you write about the experience of being Transgender, and the paralysis and fear of rejection that comes with it. Through visual imagery and metaphors, you capture the fear of rejection when hiding one’s true identity. You use metaphors such as “clothing yourself in the embarrassment of life”, depicting the internal struggle of living as yourself in a world that encourages conformity. I realize how important it is to express yourself, because if you stay hiding in fear and shame of your identity forever, you will be trapped, trapped by another version of yourself, the person others want you to be.

This is heavily emphasized in the poem, when you say, “And draw your family looking uncomfortably away from the you you’ve exchanged for the mannequin they named.” This stanza specifically further explains what it’s like to be transgender. Describing yourself as a “mannequin” because often, they are shaped and changed to whatever another person would want them to be, but the mannequin itself is soulless and forced to be ordered around, being controlled by what others expect from them. This is connected to the theme of being transgender, because all of your life you’ve felt so different from everyone else. When writing, “Family looking uncomfortably” it related back to how in most cases, it’s unacceptable to be transgender. The line serves as a reflection of how many transgender individuals feel when they express their true selves. In many cases, the act of revealing one’s transgender identity can lead to strained or even severed relationships with close friends and family. This line describes the discomfort and even rejection from loved ones when they are confronted with something unfamiliar or ‘unacceptable’ to them. By describing this internal experience with such vivid imagery, Ladin highlights the emotional cost of expressing one’s true identity in a world that is still grappling with accepting gender diversity. To express that part of someone’s identity is to sacrifice your relationships with people close to you. Your friends and family members will view you differently, negatively, solely because someone is transgender.

Another line that touched on this topic was when you wrote, “You’re so busy being afraid to love or not you’re missing the fun of clothing yourself in the embarrassment of life.” This explores the fear of vulnerability experienced by closeted trans people. This fear often is from the belief that, if they reveal who they truly are, they will face rejection, not just from society, but from friends and family who may not understand

or accept them. The word “embarrassment” in this context carries a heavy connotation, as it suggests not just shame but the feeling of being forced into a role that doesn’t reflect who you truly are. When you are closeted, you wear a mask—a “mannequin” of sorts—that is shaped by others’ expectations rather than your own sense of self. This mask becomes a kind of armor, shielding you from potential hurt but also preventing you from fully experiencing life. The act of “clothing” yourself in this way means you are constantly covering up parts of yourself, afraid to reveal them for fear that they won’t be accepted. The phrase, “afraid to love or not” expresses the fears of rejection that comes with the expression of one’s true identity. The metaphor of “clothing yourself in the embarrassment of life” suggests that embracing what you’ve been shameful and embarrassed of is necessary for true self acceptance.

After analyzing *Survival Guide*, you perfectly encapsulate the feeling of embarrassment to yourself and others around you. In the poem, when you wrote, “*Draw your family looking uncomfortably away from the you you’ve exchanged for the mannequin they named,*” hit me the hardest. I know what it feels like to be that mannequin, to feel like I have to perform a role just to be accepted. Your imagery perfectly captures the pressure to be someone you’re not just to make others comfortable. Society has these rigid expectations, and anyone who doesn’t fit neatly into them is often pressured to conform. I’ve felt that pressure every day, often hiding my true self out of fear of being judged or rejected. Your poem made me realize how exhausting it is to live this way. When you wrote about exchanging yourself for the mannequin they named, it made me question how much of myself I’ve sacrificed just to fit in. How often do we all change ourselves just to be accepted? Is it worth losing who we truly are for the comfort of others? Your poem challenged me to think about these questions in ways I hadn’t before. Especially today, there are many campaigns that target transgender people, making everything harder. But your vulnerability has made me think about how I present myself, and reading your poem is a comfort to me, reminding me I’m not alone in my experiences as a transgender teenager, and I hope one day, when I’m older, I can express my identity openly, the same way that you do.

Take care,

V

New Jersey

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Dear V,

Thank you for your deeply personal response to “Survival Guide.” I rarely find out if my poems have connected with someone else, and it is especially meaningful when a poem about being transgender speaks to another transgender person. We have so little language for our feelings and our experiences, and creating more of that kind of language is one of my goals as a poet.

I am sorry that you are in such a tough place - both in terms of your family and culture, and, as I only realized when I was much older than you are, in terms of internalized transphobia. Like you, I grew up hiding who I was from those around me, but I stayed in hiding much longer than you have so far, into my forties, long after I was safer than you have ever been. I clung to my internalized transphobia, my sense of how awful my trans self would seem to those I loved, because I had to in order to stay attached to my family. I knew my life depended on hiding who I was, but, adding insult to injury, I was also ashamed of myself for hiding.

Transition has taught me that I can be loved for who I really am, and that I don't need to internalize the transphobia of people I love. I feel compassion for the child I was who needed to hide from those around me, and I recognize the strength and courage it took to survive those years, when hiding was the only way I knew how to take care of myself as a trans person. I now see that my hiding wasn't erasing or betraying my trans identity - it was an expression of my identity, one that enabled me to maintain a sense of who I really was even when I couldn't express it openly.

I hope you can feel compassion for yourself, V, and recognize the qualities that are enabling you to survive in this heartbreaking, painful, and dangerous situation.

Your strength, courage, endurance, and intelligence - and the hard work you are doing to stay connected to your family - shine through every line of this letter. You should be proud of yourself for doing what you have to do to survive, for doing what you have to do so that your future self, the one who doesn't have to hide, can one day blossom. You should be proud that you have what it takes to endure what you endure every day - and you should remember that if you can get through this, you can get through anything.

There's another thing that I am trying to express about transgender lives in "Survival Guide": the ecstatic joy and sense of rebirth we can experience when we finally get to live as who we are. That joy, that rebirth, the ability to be recognized and loved for all of who you are - they are all waiting for you, V, when you are safe enough to embrace them.

Please feel free to write to me any time. My email is [joyladin@gmail.com](mailto:joyladin@gmail.com).

Here for you,

Joy

## *Anthropocene Blues*

sound de-territorializes  
weather  
and my love clings to you  
sings to you  
in the “new weathers”  
within a tragedy  
of the Anthropocene

nothing  
not  
held hostage  
by the hand  
of Man

can we resist?  
will we fail?  
to save our world?

we dream replicas of ourselves  
fragile, broken  
robotic thought-bubbles

inside the shadow  
a looming possibility  
this new year  
to wake up  
could it be?

an anthropoid scared  
from the forest  
slow in development  
now infantilized  
much like us

stressed yet  
perhaps  
ready to resist  
this scenario?

the forest made the monkey  
& the cave & steppe: the human  
and now  
what makes us suppler  
more human?

climate grief?  
a fierce tenderness toward  
the *destruction* of our world?

questions  
or actions?

*[my love for you  
sings for you, world  
I've got those Anthropocene....  
Anthropocene....  
blues.....]*



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Dear Students,

I am moved and in awe at the depth and thoughtfulness of your letters and how deeply you care for the planet and the world around you.

Your desire to help the earth is heartening and a bright light forward along the path of climate and societal justice. In your letters you strike the same chord as my intention behind *Anthropocene Blues*: How to make the world safe for poetry, and then as I try to conjecture, other things will be safe too. And I wanted it to be vocalized, as well, beyond the page.

I encourage you to write your own *Anthropocene Blues* poem unique to you. A good place to start is with a melody, a song-like lullaby to drive the message home. And specificity of detail, whether that's an animal you love that is endangered or a tree that gives us beauty and refreshed oxygen that you breathe every day.

At the core of many of your letters was a sadness for the destruction of the planet and a query on how to cultivate joy in the midst of the ongoing degradation of human beings and the beauty of the natural world in regards to global warming. Notice what is working and how to maintain that.

The grounding mantra of the summer writing program I directed at Naropa University this year was *Do No Harm Poet!* And our overall theme was "*The Living Thread*".

You can challenge the status quo, mutate and evolve beyond this world-system, and its current trajectory toward brutalizing catastrophe if you conjure all the way the people and the systems of the world are inter-connected in a positive way. How people band together in catastrophes.

The eco-system is hurting- and we feel this and observe this as well. Our consciousness is hurting too. War seems unending and we are all complicit. How do we resist and stay attentive? Acknowledge the suffering and idiocy and not get paralyzed just standing by as sadistic torture of peoples and flora and fauna and institutions and language and art itself are so cruelly executed? What kind of Satanic Mind is this? I remember a student who had joined the army and was hiding in a foxhole in Afghanistan asking for a poem!

To contemplate Frank O'Hara from his poem "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island," the Sun is saying to us we should look up more often.

It's time for poets & artists to look up again more often between the crises/chaos and the static. To help create antithesis realities for ourselves. To see the constant "living thread" that binds us with wild imagination and conjures our "pratitya samutpada" (interconnectedness) as an ongoing mantra. And see where we are – in what construct or space of liberation. Can we meditate and do tonglen practice, which is a secular Buddhist-based practice focused on cultivating compassion by breathing in the suffering of others, and breathing out relief and healing. It can benefit yourself and others simultaneously. Can we initiate a conversation about the things that matter, join a class or group that is dedicated to fighting global warming/climate change, can we commit to & resolve to write a personal mini-epic for our Time? Or write a short Haiku in the vein of the poet Lorine Niedecker (1903-1970) if that's more appealing:

The radio talk this morning  
was of obliterating the world  
I notice fruit flies rise  
from the rind  
of the recommended  
melon

I encourage you to give it a whirl! Or reinvent a new "enlightened government". May we please have a Peace Czar or an Environment Protection Czar for our times. Not erase the history or beauty or power of awareness or cancel the humanitarian vow to benefit others. And a democracy that benefits everyone and respect our freedoms.

May we also create the inventory to preserve a historic archive of our arts and cultures and other practices of intelligence and consider what is worth saving, the flower and fauna, the precious human heart? Our amazing musical instruments? Our beautiful subtle paintings? May we save the artifacts of sanity and help heal and have new methods to teach children – so many already unconscionably at risk. May we be teachers as well. Read a text from another culture than your own and its omens of hope and fear. Research, teach something that people need to know. Celebrate gnosis and multiplicity.

We intend consciousness and communication as a thread, community as thread, hard work as a thread, and a shelter made of tender and fierce poetic “fiber” to house the multiverse.

We can’t do it alone but together. “This is the urgency: Live! And have your blooming in the noise of the whirlwind. - Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000).”

With warmest wishes,  
Anne Waldman

Dear Anne,

Thank you for believing.

“Believing” is a funny word, used in many ways: Do you believe in God? Do you believe in leprechauns? These questions are very different but both ask about things we can’t exactly see.

On the other hand, climate change, destruction, and the Anthropocene—those we can see. You acknowledge that in your poem, “Anthropocene Blues”, which felt refreshing in a world that tends to bury its guilt beneath distraction.

My name is Annika, and when I was 12, I saw a video about plastic and in the words of my 12-year-old self, it changed my life. It gave me a goal: I needed to save the world. But of course, that is a child, and I now, as a senior in high school, know that “saving the world” can mean many things, and is not done alone (my goals now are very different). Still, after that day I knew God’s purpose for me was to do something good for the environment. As I went and announced my purpose to my dad, he wasn’t all that happy. See, my dad doesn’t “believe” in climate change.

But the Anthropocene isn’t imaginary. It’s not divine or made up. We can see it.

It’s been six years since I found this passion, and while my dad has somewhat adjusted to the idea, I know deep down he still doesn’t believe it. And I ask myself: Why do some people, like my dad—someone so intelligent—refuse to acknowledge the consequences of this problem?

That's the question I asked myself when I read the stanza: "an anthropoid scared/ from the forest/ slow in development/ now infantilized/ much like us." I saw a human being bright with light but afraid because they've lost touch with their true nature: nature itself. The tension in your verses made me feel that separating from Earth left us lost. Your poem made me feel the same guilt I've felt since watching that video. It made me think that we, as humanity, are accountable—the villain in this Anthropocene.

I often think about how far we've come as a species. Airplanes fly. I can listen to music through tiny earbuds. The exit sign above the door glows endlessly. But I also think: why would anyone throw industrial waste into the ocean? Did they not feel bad? I sure did, as a kid, when I tossed a candy wrapper on the street. I'd walk a few steps, then turn back to pick it up, because I will not kill my mother. Our mother. Nature.

You wrote, "my love clings to you," and later, "held hostage/ by the hand/ of Man." This imagery sits in stark contrast. One is tender and gentle. The other is cold restraint. The juxtaposition is loud and honest. It's our own hands that want to be kind, yet it's our hands that caused the damage. We didn't consider the Earth... but now, we must.

Your poem made me long for a lullaby—a song I wished my dad would sing. It's a lullaby for all the people who say they don't care about the planet. And then, at the end, you gave me that lullaby. One that doesn't ignore the damage but sings gently through it. One that holds both guilt and love. That says: yes, we've hurt the Earth—but we still care. We can still try.

"[my love for you/ sings for you, world/ I've got those Anthropocene..../ Anthropocene..../ blues....]" I am afraid for my future because there are so many not-so-good things humans have caused, but in your lullaby there is hope that I will remember. My love for the Earth is going to carry me through the skepticism around climate change as I study Environmental Engineering in college and later when I find something, a solution, an alternative, anything, that my 12-year-old self would be proud of.

There is so much more in your poem that I wish I could talk over with you Anne, your punctuation is deeply thought of, only capitalizing Man—to show how we as humanity have been narcissists and only prioritized our species over everything in the world—your rhetorical questions hold so much tension, and your use of the word "suppler"—if there is always an after, what comes after humans? Will it be better than humans? Or are humans just going to become suppler instead? Thanks for taking

these decisions and highlighting that in hard times, acknowledging our humanity—our ability to fail and still feel deeply—is powerful. But most of all,

Thank you for believing.

Annika

Massachusetts

Dear Annika,

I am very moved by your letter. Poetry is able to hold the contradictions, both the protest and the lullaby. I am a believer in the power of language and poetry to “help wake the world up to itself”. Not scheme and manipulate us toward more shopping or negative decisions that further illness, death, cruelty. Not make us MORE intolerant. Not everyone can hear that I’m afraid. But we do our best...You certainly seem sensitive to this “open” form of poetry, its morality as well. I am very appreciative of your response. I often start a morning meditation where I touch into my “broken heart” and all the broken hearts for the suffering in the world. And read a poem by Emily Dickinson or Audre Lorde or Walt Whitman. Or Garcia Lorca. But also count the blessings. And chant some of the words out loud.

Perhaps you have heard of the Romantic English poet John Keats (1795-1821) who used the term “negative capability” to describe the mind’s ability to hold two contradictory thoughts “without any irritable reach after fact or reason”. Meaning that you can hold the truth of both possibilities. But of course you have your own ethos about how to live your life, direct your energy and you know the difference between right and wrong. They can both exist. And writers like Shakespeare can present powerful characters in their plays we hate or love. The point is both of these kinds of characters and kinds of persons exist, and greedy corporations and the Capitalocene do indeed exist and might well “bury guilt beneath distraction”. We still have choices. But we need to try to make a difference but not be naive and alienate others if we are too doctrinaire. The Anthropocene where nothing is not affected by the “hand of Man” is very complicit in many ways that effect our health, quality of life, and kill in addition to ourselves, other forms of life. We are totally interconnected in the Biosphere. This is serious. And this is a scientific fact.

There is a wonderful anthology called *Technicians of the Sacred*, poetries from all over the world with some wonderful explanations of origins. It includes poems as rituals. It covers a lot of experience in our existence as beings.

I run a program in the summers and our theme this last year was: “The Living Thread”.

I don’t mean to preach, but it is good to stay friendly with your family and try to focus on things you all care about and share experiences that are meaningful.

The poet can be a kind of guardian of things- persons, animals, plants etcetera & policies that need help – the fauna, flowers, children, the whole, environment, and our institutions, archives, libraries that further our humanity.

I’ve written a whole long book length poem *Manatee/Humanity* that looks at and investigates the endangered sea creature. I did a lot of research, swam with a manatee, visited the Aquarium in Miami, visited a Museum of skeletons in Paris. The manatee is very close to the elephant, so amazing!

They share an intelligence (“more grey matter in the brain than man”) and a sense of empathy. The word “manatee” comes from an indigenous word, “manitou” that means “breast”.

The manatee often drowns in canal locks of man  
 man who makes no concession to manatee  
 the manatee often dies in flood control structures  
 man who makes no concession to manatee nor cares of manatee  
 life manatee fortune  
 the manatee dies in collision with water craft  
 man who does not protect the manatee  
 what steward of the earth is this unnatural man?  
 man who makes no concession to manatee  
 the manatee dies with the ingestion of fish hooks  
 man who unnaturally, makes no concession to manatee  
 the manatee dies from litter and monofilament lines  
 man who is rank in attitude has no use for manatee  
 the manatee dies entrapped in crab trap lines

the manatee dies from loss of habitat claimed by man  
the manatee is maimed by man, the manatee could be aided by man  
man oh aid the manatee man come to the manatee heart.

Environmental engineering seems like a good course of study. And I am sure you can help the world this way. How technology can help us, not just lead to more battles over land and air and space & water. Less lethal weaponry! I hope. “What comes after humans?” You ask?

I think AI is NOT going to save us or ever create beings “that have a heart” or an enlightened POV. And we don’t want them to go to war if humans control them. Maybe they can be helpful with medical procedures and health care. But I do think we need to raise the level of our consciousness and empathy etcetera, in ourselves. And become more conscientious and benefit others. We need to nourish kids with love and beauty and education that is not biased and centered instead around good hope and the joys of art making, and poetry.

All the best & warm wishes,  
Anne Waldman

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Dear Anne Waldman:

My name is Alex, and I’m currently a sophomore living in Texas. The moment I read “Anthropocene Blues,” I was struck by its beautiful use of personification. At first glance, I didn’t know how to feel, but after a few more reads, I felt like the poem was directed at me, and that I had to make a difference. As someone who was deeply intertwined with nature as a child, I’ve watched the connection slowly fade away. When I go back to my childhood memories, those places aren’t the same; your poem perfectly captures the emotions that come with this realization – grief and confusion – in a way I have never seen expressed before.

Growing up, I went on frequent road trips with my family – we loved going to new states and exploring nature at different national parks, whether in California, Arizona, or Maine. These trips were of endless discovery, where I could experience all the sights, sounds, and smells that our world has to offer. From the vast mountains in the

Sierra Nevadas to the murky waters of the Everglades, each new site I visited offered me a new experience and perspective. However, I've noticed that as I grow older and have less time to travel, the summers are hotter, there are fewer animals, and trails are sometimes closed off due to wildfires. As our world slowly, but surely, begins to change, I wonder if my children, or any other children, will be able to receive the same experiences that I did. Though the future seems dim with the defunding of our national parks, withdrawal of the Paris Climate Agreement, and continued pushes to 'drill, baby, drill,' I do think we still have room to negate some of our actions. Your use of personification in describing our world as "held hostage / by the hand / of Man" is beautiful, as it perfectly characterizes the grasp we have on our world, and how we can stop the destruction if we wake up, and release the hostage. Do you think, with all the recent events, humankind still has time to turn around? And if we do, do you think it is possible for us to come together as a society and work together? Your vivid language prompted me to look at some other lines that deeply intrigued me.

The first two lines, "sound de-territorializes / weather" interested me as a unique metaphor, and my interpretation is a more philosophical one. I interpret it as the loss of a relation between a real, geographic territory, and its cultural connections, which is similar to what the philosopher Deleuze coined. In this scenario, deterritorialization could be concerning the "sound" coming from the pollution, destruction, and crisis on our planet, which uproot us from our connection to nature. Specifically, I think the word "weather" implies our climate, however, it is different from nature in the sense that climate change is long term, whereas we see effects on nature short term. Why did you choose to use the word weather? At the same time, Deleuze explains that with deterritorialization always comes reterritorialization, in which there are new connections being formed which bring new meaning to our world. I think you perfectly encapsulate this with your statement of us having "a looming possibility / this new year / to wake up," which makes it seem like our last chance to restore that connection is now, but questions whether we will be able to realize it. What can this new meaning be and will we form new ways of loving our world?

My favorite lines of the poem have to be "we dream replicas of ourselves / fragile, broken / robotic thought-bubbles." These lines can serve as a poem by themselves. It felt like a wake up call to me, and helped me realize that while we damage the planet, we're also losing a piece of ourselves at the same time. Your words made me reflect on



how easy it is to go numb or just drift through life in a “robotic” state, especially in a world full of distraction and detachment from nature. That line gave me a completely new perspective on what it means to be human in the Anthropocene – I believe that it’s not only about saving the environment, but also maintaining our emotions. One thought I had was why did you use the word dream? If our minds are becoming more disconnected from nature and increasingly automated with new technology, are our actions really a dream, or are they becoming a reality? Does this “dream” refer to our future, and what we envision of ourselves if we further ignore our actions?

Thank you for sharing such a beautiful and thought-provoking poem that encapsulates the emotional and environmental state of our world right now. Reading it has made me pause and reflect on the disconnects that have occurred, and how we can reverse, or at least mitigate, some of our actions. Your words gave voice to feelings I can’t find words for yet, and I appreciate the care and honesty you put into your work.

Sincerely,

Alex

Texas

Dear Alex,

Yes, hold onto childhood memories and you can make a difference.

Thank you for such a close reading of “Anthropocene Blues”. And I appreciate your invoking Gile Deleuze and the sense of “de-territorializes”. Indeed I was intending problems as “sounds” “tones” that come from destruction, pollution, interference of the Capitalocene that haunt us all the time. Not sure what is going on in a state of relative immanence but it doesn’t feel transcendent. It is easier in NYC to get that ghostly sense when there is so much concrete and toxins lying about. This feels more permanent, absolute.

And the standards have gone down...replacing Nature. Which feels like the absolute deterritorialization- where immanence occurs of and by itself. And it doesn’t seem to change. The sorrows of the “new weathers” are man-made, careless, extending themselves, inflicting non-transcendent.

Greed seems to rule. Money over safety etc. And so dangerous as our environments regress. Feels static or more like decay to me.

And ignorance as if there is nothing we can do about this mess. Being a fan of *A Thousand Plateaus* I went to this to this description online. I am intrigued by the “plane”, more flattening ground of Immanence. Not about good or evil.

[Gilles Deleuze](#) and [Félix Guattari](#) note that deterritorialization and [reterritorialization](#) occur simultaneously. The function of deterritorialization is defined as “the movement by which one leaves a territory”, also known as a “[line of flight](#)”, but deterritorialization also “constitutes and extends” the territory itself. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, they distinguish between [relative](#) and an [absolute](#) deterritorialization. Relative deterritorialization is always accompanied by reterritorialization, while positive absolute deterritorialization is more akin to the construction of a “[plane of immanence](#)”.

An ethics of immanence will disavow its reference to judgments of good and evil, right and wrong, as according to a transcendent model, rule or law. Rather the diversity of living things and particularity of events will demand the concrete methods of [immanent evaluation](#) (ethics) and immanent experimentation (creativity).

I have an anthology of essays by poets edited with a Catalan-American poet Emma Gomis called *New Weathers* which refers to a change of many things including the disastrous effects of “man” in mucking with just about everything. And a new book just out called *Mesopotopia*, invoking Mesopotamia and the notion of “from cradle of civilization to the grave”.

I envy all the travel you did as a child. I grew up in New York City and we didn’t have a car and I didn’t learn to drive myself until later in Colorado where I went to work with something called The Jack Kerouac School (named for the Beat Generation writer (originally from Quebec, Kerouac) who wrote *On The Road*. I worked with poets in Boulder so close to great natural beauties of mountains, greenery, lakes and streams, night skies and gorgeous sunsets and plenty of recreation. The community including Beat icons Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Diane di Prima, Joanne Kyger, Gary Snyder and others. All conscientious and active thinkers on the provocative issues of our time.

And many of us, students and faculty as well, got very involved with protesting at Rocky Flats especially focusing on the use of deadly plutonium for manufacture of the triggers used for nuclear warheads. Eventually the plant was shut-down although there is still toxic soil on the premises not far from where I lived. And much of the waste got relocated and is still toxic (New Mexico).

I found poetry could be effective in this kind of agit prop work, and I have a video of a song “Uh Oh Plutonium!” on YouTube. [Uh-oh Plutonium! Video](#)

And a whole book that investigates the endangered manatee, *Manatee / Humanity*.

Our actions are becoming a reality, but I feel like we are living in a “version” of a reality. It really doesn’t have to be this way. “Dream” can be an escape hatch and suggest for me a surreal experience, but also the sense of a better place, a better world.

I hope you continue your critical studies and interests because these generative ideas are close to the avenues in poetry.

I wrote a poem called “Orca Mourns”= which began from reading an article in *The New York Times* commemorating the death of an orca whale and her calf. Here is a section of the poem that illustrates a way in which we can channel pain into writing:

Orca Mourns

or:

camera, sad

watches

this is the

sylvan-like-water-grief

this is denoting

a fraction of you

such royal sport

set aside to hunt

thin light is a queer time  
 so struggle on. In secret  
 waves & staves

few worse stern worlds. Stem worlds

All the best,  
 Anne Waldman

Dear Ms. Waldman,

As I read your poem “Anthropocene Blues” I could only sit and smile. Not about the content of the poem as it’s not something that should be looked at and perceived as a cheerful poem, but that we share the same views. I am a very invested person when it comes to conflicts/problems with the world.

I am a sophomore in high school who lives in Wisconsin. I am Native American and have grown up to appreciate the earth. From praying to even eating we learn to appreciate the earth, what was given to us, and to give back.

As I am part of the 5% of Native Americans in my area, I tend to forget about my Native heritage as I look white and nobody could tell by looking at me. Reading this poem though, almost reconnected me with myself and who I am. I would like to thank you for that. Since reading this poem I have started thinking about what I could do for the environment. I’ve started the process of giving back to the community and those in need and it’s all thanks to you.

However your poem was something else. While I was reading it I could only think of it in kind of a stern tone and very serious. But when I listened to a recording of you reading it, I was shocked to hear that it wasn’t that at all. The poem was practically sung throughout its entirety.

As I continued to read the poem and think about how you presented it, I almost found another beauty. The beauty of humanity. That although “nothing not held hostage by the hand of Man” and although “we dream replicas of ourselves fragile, broken robotic thought-bubbles”. We as humans are all broken.

The quote from the poem “stressed yet perhaps ready to resist this scenario?” made me think most of how while I was in my middle school years I always felt like I couldn’t do anything to fix anything. Until one day when my teacher told us “If you don’t like something, fix it”. Are we as a society just waiting until someone else fixes things for us? Just like how I was waiting for someone to solve my issues when I was younger?

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to read this poem and letting me ask questions about it, and I hope this letter finds you well!

Sincerely,  
Emma

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Dear Emma,

So wonderful to read your letter and thank you for the important observations.

I feel often feel like as a poet I am “on assignment”, as a kind of “field poet,” and need to document or at least respond to what’s “out there” beyond my own personal / emotional life details and angst and language. That poetry can actually matter, and be relevant to the terrifying and crucial issues of our times. That a few lines of poetry can enter the mind stream and set off some bells!

As a young student I had a strange reaction hiding under my desk in a kind of bomb shelter, clasping a metal identity tag – called a “dog tag”. And then getting up to look out the window and seeing anti-nuke protesters with “Ban the Bomb” signs marching around a park in New York City where I grew up. Later I was arrested protesting the illegal machinations at Rocky Flats (in Colorado) where deadly plutonium was brought into making the triggers for nuclear warheads. This was just miles from where I worked and lived at the time. There were already visible signs of the toxicity. Animals born blind or hairless.

I wrote a poem /song “Uh Oh Plutonium!”

The plutonium was in the water. Incidents of higher rates of cancer near the Rocky Flats plant. I do believe we helped close it down but at the time it was quite a challenge so near to humans, the deer, the rabbits, horses.

Animals roamed and people lived there, and there were also endangered species of plants. Later I made an MTV-style video for “Uh Oh Plutonium!” (with backup singers).

We and hundreds of other protestors helped close the plant down. In that we brought attention to it. The revelations of wrongdoing brought the FBI onto the premises with a raid and investigation, and ordinary citizens were joining in protests. Students, teachers, doctors, nurses, bus drivers, grandmothers etcetera.

There’s a great poem by the British poet William Blake (1757-1827) that I read in high school that seemed to address so directly the importance our own responsibility in such ethical matters around health and harm and outright endless war.

It must be up to the human consciousness – mind and heart to pay attention to our own humanity.

The Human Abstract, William Blake (1794)

Pity would be no more  
If we did not make somebody poor;  
And Mercy no more could be  
If all were as happy as we.

And mutual fear brings peace,  
Till the selfish loves increase;  
Then Cruelty knits a snare,  
And spreads his baits with care.

He sits down with holy fears,  
And waters the ground with tears;  
Then Humility takes its root  
Underneath his foot.

Soon spreads the dismal shade  
Of Mystery over his head;  
And the caterpillar and fly  
Feed on the Mystery.

And it bears the fruit of Deceit,  
 Ruddy and sweet to eat;  
 And the raven his nest has made  
 In its thickest shade.

The Gods of the earth and sea  
 Sought thro' Nature to find this tree;  
 But their search was all in vain:  
 There grows one in the Human brain.

I am so interested in your Native roots. My Indigenous poet friends are very clear about the damage of toxins and disrespect to our planet Mother Earth!

They seem to have more of an ancestral code to respect and protect all life forms.

The anthology is called *When The World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through*, A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry, edited by former Poet Laureate of the USA: Joy Harjo.

“This anthology is revelatory and stunning.... It shows the remarkable strength and diversity of Native poetry, which vitalizes all of American poetry. It is essential reading,” writes Arthur Sze, National Book Award–winning author of the collection *Sight Lines*.

I hope you will continue to read and listen to poetry. And know that it does have beauty and hope some positive effect on our entire humanity. And we nourish children at an early age to enjoy the beauties of all the natural wonders. The Anthropocene is caused by dereliction, an ignorance. And a materialist approach. That the planet is there for us to rip off and abuse. We don't need to feel so “broken” if we can help reflect the world back to itself, and as you say, include “what was given to us, and to give back.”

Thanks again and warmest wishes,  
 Anne Waldman

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Dear Anne Waldman,

My name is Keela, and I'm a freshman from California. I write to tell you how deeply your poem "Anthropocene Blues" touched me.

One of my earliest memories is of my mother running into my preschool classroom, her Irish skin red and blotchy from stress. "I'm here to collect Keela", she said, uncharacteristically ignoring my art. "The fire is close." My mother was ahead of the game, for by the time we arrived at my older brother's elementary school, the school was in full blown emergency mode, kids sitting criss-crossed against the wall, covering their mouths in an effort to avoid the smoke. Although we were evacuated for several days, we were lucky and returned to a home that was whole.

As I grew and understood more about how climate change is the catalyst for these wild weather patterns—indeed how our actions as humans are the catalyst, I couldn't help but experience the blues that you so vividly describe. As a young person who will hopefully share this planet with others for some time, your questions echo in my head: "can we resist?/ will we fail?/ to save our world?" At times I wonder why I dance at football games when I might be better-suited cheering for the world. I look around at the adults in the stand and wonder if they are okay leaving this mess for us.

A question I have for you is if, and how, you find joy when you have the "Anthropocene Blues." Are you able to compartmentalize the anguish from everyday life? Does your work mitigate the suffering?

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter, and for sharing your gift with us.

With gratitude,

Keela

California



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Dear Keela,

I think it's healthy to dance at football games. Football games are not the war machine.

And the sportsmen and women train and work hard and bring a symbolic pleasure and maybe help to work off atavistic steam! for the huge crowds that enjoy the game.

Thanks for your probing letter. I guess I try to work with issues in a positive way. I just can't stand idly by. I believe that poetry can help wake the word up to itself? Maybe it's in a small way compared to the powers of the Capitalocene. So as a writer one can express certain views and facts and heart felt issues that affect every one of us. I refuse to be totally cynical! We can't give up. I work with younger people. Have children and grandchildren. And many friends who are fighting for their freedoms as people living in a democracy.

Who can learn about climate change and have a role to play. We can't condone poisoned water, unsafe architecture, polluted lakes & rivers & land grabs can we, forever?

Or toxic food. Or bad medicine.

And I believe many of the joys of living and the beauty of this multi-diverse Earth can still be expressed. And one can learn to appreciate this kind of stuff is nourished at schools with all the arts and traditions and music can be presented without total rage and blame.

We can still stand up and still try to convey the gifts and dignity of the human who can communicate images and words and sounds that make poetry or a beautiful movie or concert.

I grew up in the Fifties where one was still recovering from WW2- (in which my father fought against the Nazis) and the reality of the unleashed atom bomb that harmed and maimed so many thousands of innocent people was very clear. Why would we want to this ever again? And yet we don't seem to learn from the past horror, still resort to the atavistic core of humans their worst. Is there art beyond atrocity? A philosopher asked after World War II.

And one had to say- there must be. I am not sure I could enjoy literature without poetry!

Flight / fight survival. Or it's "me or them" mentality, etcetera. Or the gun lobby wants everyone to feel the power of the superman & keep buying more weapons.

I was taught to hide in a bomb shelter in first grade clutching a metal dog tag, presumably this would identify my body if a bomb dropped in New York City. Now we have guards at schools and metal detectors and we have to be super careful. Why can't we break the habit of a death wish and vow to DO NO HARM. We need to be vigilant to take care of others.

We put up with too many depictions of violence.

When I was working in Colorado, in Boulder near the Rocky Flats Plutonium plant it was a full-time situation beyond protesting and being arrested at the site. And it's gone now, although the weapons industry isn't over and more bombs will be constructed... But we definitely helped close down one place that had de-regulated itself. We can still teach and nourish a participatory ethics to younger people.

Best to you & thank you for kind note.

Anne Waldman

Attaching a poem by the poet Gary Snyder.

For the Children

Gary Snyder

The rising hills, the slopes,  
of statistics  
lie before us,  
the steep climb  
of everything, going up,  
up, as we all  
go down.

In the next century  
or the one beyond that,  
they say,  
are valleys, pastures,  
we can meet there in peace  
if we make it.

To climb these coming crests  
one word to you, to  
you and your children:

*stay together*  
*learn the flowers*  
*go light*

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Dear Anne Waldman,

My name is Sara, I'm in 9th grade, and I go to school in Idaho. I've always been a dreamer. Ever since I can remember, my aspirations have been more than limitless—which, of course, is certainly not uncommon—but mine have always meant the world to me. Making a difference is one of my largest ones, but doesn't everyone want to live an impactful, meaningful life? And what exactly is that difference? I suppose the definition is different for everyone. However, I've always known that the difference I want to make is one that helps our earth, specifically regarding climate change. That goal of mine compelled my 4th grade self to become vegetarian, and after my parents became worried about my lack of iron, that goal was the reason I haven't eaten beef for almost six years. I'm not sure how impactful my dietary restrictions have actually been.

However, I know that everytime I've chosen not to eat a steak or a burger for nearly half my life, the difference may be small, but at least there is one. And it means a lot to me. I hope that as I grow older, the differences I make to reduce climate change will grow alongside me.

When I first saw your poem, it was the title that caught my eye. "Anthropocene Blues." Admittedly, I had to search up the meaning of the first word. As I've read and listened to your poem, I've realized that it perfectly mirrors the "blues" I feel when thinking about the worsening state of our planet. I can only describe it as an emotion of melancholy, weaved in with strings of remorse and helplessness. But tied in with it all, there's also a strong feeling of love and hopefulness. I thought your use of question marks as the only punctuation throughout the majority of the poem illustrates that feeling: that even though there is the tragedy of climate change, it lacks the certainty of permanence, like there's still something we can do before it becomes too late.

I especially liked the songful part at the end. Did you write that on your own or was it inspired by something? Why did you choose to include it? The poem also reminded me of a lullaby. Oftentimes, lullabies have a warning included in them or contain a darker meaning. Such lullabies include “Rock-a-bye Baby,” “Humpty Dumpty,” “Jack and Jill,” and “Ring Around the Rosy.” Your poem was both melodic and beautiful, but also carried a sorrowful but real message about the devastation of global warming. And while lullabies are normally meant for children, I think humans are just like children in certain ways, because we have a lot of learning and growing to do.

One of the stanzas that stood out to me particularly was, “climate grief? / a fierce tenderness toward / the *destruction* of our world?” Before it, you mention the relationship between ourselves and our primate relatives. It got me thinking, what makes us any different from apes? Is it the realization of the consequences of our actions? Seeing the *destruction* we are causing, not only to ourselves, but to all species on our planet—the only known planet to harbor life? Does being “sympathetic” to earth’s issues make us human if we don’t do anything about it? If we can’t even evolve and fix the problems we are creating—problems we are fully responsible for and aren’t just “part of nature”—are we really that different from monkeys? I believe we are, because I know humans have the power to change things. I think your next two lines, “questions / or actions?” reflects this. We shouldn’t question the reality of climate change. Instead, we should do something about it. Even if it’s small, it helps. And if everyone does something small, the difference would be unimaginable.

That is why your poem stood out to me; it reflected my own beliefs. The role of humans in the increase of global warming should not be ignored. Everything else in nature has a purpose; everything else takes part in a delicate balance. And it seems that humans are the outliers. But does it have to be that way? Could we make these anthropocene blues into anthropocene yellows? I sure hope so.

As a whole, I thought the poem was very inspiring, comforting, and prompting. It’s an understatement to say I’m really grateful to have read it. It made me feel a lot less alone in my beliefs. I’ve written a lot about the parts that stand out to me, but I wonder what your favorite parts are? Do you have any other poems addressing climate change? If so, I’d love to read them!

With much appreciation,  
Sara

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Dear Sara,

Thank you for you for your powerful and moving letter. And your wish that *the difference you make to reduce climate change will grow with you*. This is so important.

If everyone expressed this, we as a civilization would be in less trouble. It is so OBVIOUS with the suffering and loss of normal climate in so many parts of the world. And in our own hearts and psyches.

The sadness and guilt so many feel. If we were just better educated about all this stuff!

It should not be a partisan battle. When some things disappear, they never return.

And the suffering with loss of life for friends, family, homes, livelihoods, hospitals, businesses and all the rest is unmeasurable. Look at all the examples in recent months of tornados, fires, floods, not to mention endless war and strife that we are complicit in supplying deadly armaments.

I have felt the Anthropocene as very real. We can look at the science. People have been tracking this.

People say “well my parents don’t believe in climate change.” Clearly they must be living on another planet!

Yes we should know better. We should learn from history. Apes can’t go beyond a certain perspective nor have the tools to help a huge range of species...They need us too.

Yes, I do include song and chant in my readings. An early book called *Fast Speaking Woman* is inspired by a Mexican curandera, and a book entitled *First Baby Poems* written years ago during the pregnancy and birth of my son, Ambrose, has very musical parts.

Also a book called *Manatee/Humanity* investigating an endangered lifeform – the manatee- that had been taken off the endangered species list by politicians, is also quite musical. I had first encountered a wounded aging female manatee in a water tank in Miami Florida. She looked me in the eyes and seemed to have greater compassion for me. And I vowed to write a poem about her empathy.

Here's a screed against the toxic plutonium used in the triggers for nuclear warheads:

[Uh-oh Plutonium! Video](#)

Albums where I sing and have musician accompaniment include EXTINCTION ARIA and ASTRAL OMENS and can be found on Bandcamp etc. And there is an AUDIBLE recorded version for my newest book *Mesopotopia* (a book from the cradle of civilization to the grave- Anthropocene.) It features The Tower of Babel on its cover.

I got to Idaho, a small town named Independence some years ago...and a poet friend, now passed had come from there, Ed Dorn, a very experimental writer.

I hope there is a way you can share poetry and views on climate change etc. with friends, etc. and have a conversation.

It's not going away and it will be up to younger generations to contend with the fallout.

I like the idea of changing "blues" to "yellows"

Warmest wishes,

Anne Waldman

## *Losing the 440-Yard Dash*

If he hits the curve before you do, all is lost  
is all I remember when the coach yelled out  
to start, to kick it down the short straightaway  
  
into the curve, the curve a devil's handiwork,  
with Worsenski ahead of me, two hundred sixty  
pounds, one hundred pounds more than me,  
  
and all I could see were the Converse soles  
of a boy I dusted in my dreams on the bus  
out here to make the track team, letters  
  
for my sweater, girls going goo-goo over me,  
coaches from big-league schools with papers  
to say I was headed for glory, my unkempt  
  
disappointment in me now sealed by winged  
feet beating me in the curve, Worsenski as big  
as the USS *Enterprise* sliding through Pacific  
waters, parting the air in front of him that  
sucked back behind just to hold me in my grip  
of deep shame until I wished I were not there.  
  
I wanted more than being human, a warrior  
of field and track would be bursting out now  
ripping open my chest with masculinity  
  
to make Jesse Owens proud or jealous,  
or inspired or something other than me  
the pulling-up caboose slower than mud

running like an old man really walking,  
all the most valuable parts of me inside  
my brain in wishes, in dreams, in things

not yet born into the world, in calculations  
of beauty, in yearning for love, for the word  
of love, for some adoration from Wanda,

the most beautiful girl in the whole block,  
black like me and wondering just what  
life had to give those of us who can fly.



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Dear Reader,

It is such a wonderful feeling to know my work is being shared with readers much younger than myself, to know I can write something you can relate to in some ways. In writing to this memory of not making the track team, I had to travel in time, and time travel is one of my favorite things. In creating “Losing the 440-Yard Dash,” I zipped across sixty years of my life to a place I remember in some ways, and had to create in other ways.

My high school was devoted to science, math, and engineering, and I was in an advanced placement track. There were no classes in poetry, but we had a good introduction to Shakespeare. Poetry comes to me from many places, from songs, from visual art, and from conversations. This poem came from a wish of mine to look back on that difficult race with some kindness, and a sense of humor. I have not seen Worsenski since our high school days. I hope he is well and happy.

There are so many ways to write poetry, and for this one I chose to be more narrative, and in that way offers a story that can be appreciated by all kinds of people. It is only in participating in the Dear Poet project that I have become more aware of how the theme of competition is so relevant, and that surprises me. After all, I have grandchildren and many other younger relatives. So being a part of this project is an awakening for me. It is always possible to increase one’s awareness.

When we look around us at our world, there is so much to see, to hear, and to witness. When I think of competition, I think also of cooperation, and commitment because my hope is that those three energies will help people everywhere. That is, I believe, a healthier way to live.

If I can offer one suggestion it would be to keep a poetry journal. Read poetry whenever you can, and when you find a favorite, put it into a journal. You can copy it by hand. That helps to deepen your appreciation of the poem. You may even be inspired to write poetry.

Thank you for reading my work.

Sincerely,

Afaa

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Dear Afaa Michael Weaver,

My name is Akshara and I adored your poem, “Losing the 440-Yard Dash.” I love to play videogames and most importantly, favor playing outside as well as participating in sports. I am in fifth grade and I live in Washington. I play some sports at recess in school, but I play soccer at a club. I like basketball too, but I’m a fan of soccer more. I admire the way you wrote this poem because it flows cleanly and it spreads an opportunity for everyone to try something new. Like you stated, you signed up for track instead of football because your mom wouldn’t let you play it. This showed that you tried something new and decided to try instead of quitting and trying to ask your mom for football clubs the next year.

I really cherish this poem because I can relate to running and playing sports outside and mostly being behind half the class. It doesn’t feel too good. We do many running tests in P.E., but I usually perform quite well. I normally don’t try to be competitive, but attempt to be at my own pace. In your poem, you wrote, “Worsenski ahead of me, two hundred sixty pounds, one hundred pounds more than me.” This made me visualize that you couldn’t beat Worsenski because he was bigger in size. Additionally, when you wrote, “To make Jesse Owens proud or jealous.” This meant Jesse Owens would at least appreciate you for being you, a warrior, but still a human too. I relate to this as well because no one cares about if you run slow behind others, they care if you try your hardest.

I have a poem I created based off of yours:

The air is brisky with a slight breeze added. And... she blows the whistle; the mile run has just begun. Many go sprinting, but the smart ones start at a steady jog, I would consider myself as one of “The smart ones.”

I jog and glare at the football and baseball boys and just sigh, they are really fast. I start running, soon enough my partner says the words I have been scared, but also dreaming of hearing, “Lap one finished, four more to go!”

I almost stop, but resist, knowing that won’t end very well. In about no time, it is the second lap. Some of the kids are already on the third lap and almost done with that one! I start walking instead of jogging and running, my partner screaming, “Quit it, start jogging, speed it up!” I quickly finish my third lap and I have a side ache.

Some boys are already done, quickly following with few girls. I then finally finish my five laps. I pant, pant, pant and pant. “9:28!” The coach calls. I sit down on the bench, saying to myself, “I finally did it.”

I think the idea of “Losing the 440-Yard Dash” was that even though you may have been beat, you can always try again, while staying a warrior. I wonder if you ever got the chance to win a run or dash. Did you ever feel like there was always another chance to do it just one more time? Did you ever have to run the 440-Yard Dash again, if so, did you beat Worskensi? It is like we all think that one is better than another and the other is worse, but the key to both track and life is confidence and perspective.

Sincerely,  
Akshara,  
Washington

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Dear Akshara,

I am so impressed by the sophistication in your letter, in your response to my poem and in the poem you included in the second half of it. You clearly have a real talent for writing, and that is incredibly important because it carries with it an ability to think things through, to reason. In your first paragraph you say soccer is your favorite, and basketball is your second choice in favorite sports to play outdoors. Video games are fun. However, to go outside and play soccer or basketball is a way to have a whole experience, physically and mentally.

Competition is a complicated matter. Even when I think I am not competing, it seems sometimes that other people think I am being competitive. We live in a competitive society, so I think the attitude you have is the one that impresses me the most. When you say it allows a person to feel competitive when they choose to feel that way. That observation is so impressive to me.

Your poem is amazing. It covers the whole race, and all along the way your courage and sensitivity are so clear. The fact that you see yourself as one of the “smart ones” is so important. As the one mile race proceeds, you reveal your internal world as you observe the other students also run, some of them the football and baseball boys.

When you think of quitting, you resist the idea and continue. The whole poem shows you value being both the warrior and the human.

The poem is your prize. It is the gold medal of your experience.

Losing the race meant I did not make the track team. I was fourteen years old. When I was in my twenties I took up jogging with a friend for a year, but I gave up jogging for Tai Chi Chuan. I loved it right away, and I have continued my practice up to today. When I was in my fifties, I began to go to tournaments to compete. I was never able to win a medal for my Tai Chi, and I accepted that. There were a few judges who thought I was a gold medalist, and that was nice to know. I thought to myself, “I am over fifty, and here I am competing. This is wonderful.”

Thank you for helping me to think again about how important it is to be a warrior in some things, and that the best warrior is human in all things.

Sincerely,  
Afaa

Dear Aafa Michael Weaver,

Self-worth. Isn't that what most teenagers strive to sense in their lives? The chest pattering, deep feeling in your stomach, that you got what you worked so hard for. The rumination of said failure that brings honest identity and meekness from pride. A race of expectations and respect that takes time, effort, and true plasticity. All eyes are on you with so much pressure, you already feel as if you've lost. So what is the point, they say? Just don't let it get to you, they say. You will move on, they say. Well, not all can make such traditional morals evolve into success.

As someone who is not very familiar with the innovation a poem takes to compose, your poem, *Losing the 440-yard Dash*, truly was a beacon for me that I just had to write to you about. As an only child to two parents who didn't pursue college, they have always had high confidence in me. These reckonings go beyond my parents, and through generational lines, including my grandparents, who presume I could cure cancer. They believe in me so much, by why don't I believe them? Being their “perfect girl”, who makes all A's, has many extracurriculars, and seems to be visibly

thriving. I want them to see that I try, I desire to be that person, but in conclusion, comparison is the bad man in my nightmares. These dreams help sober a personal realization that commences a shift. True resilience lies not in outward prosperity but in self-acceptance.

This aspiration, especially in masculinity, is exceedingly apparent in your poem through an increased musical tone. The first line, “If he hits the curve before you do, all is lost”, expresses the weight of being titled a man can hold. This struggle goes beyond a mental state, and into even physical circumstance, as the line, “Worenski ahead of me, two hundred sixty / pounds, one hundred pounds more than me”. The free verse poem aids in reflecting this rhythm of confusion and knowledge.

My potential is yet to come, so I will not make a veracious definition for myself anytime soon. The central objective that your poem has shown me, Mr. Weaver, is that all it takes is internal motivation to gain external validation.

Karlana  
North Carolina

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Dear Karlana,

In reading your letter I am reminded of how life blossoms from inside of us. When you write as you do at the end of the second paragraph that self-acceptance is the way to outward prosperity, I see that blossoming. I agree with your closing sentence, too. Internal motivation is really important.

I would like to share a little of my view of the process of writing a poem. We have hummingbirds that visit us occasionally. They come to our little farmhouse and flutter around our window with their wings moving so rapidly that I am always amazed that their wings move with blinding speed even as they hover in one spot. If I were to try to write a poem about a visit from a hummingbird, I would have to gently remind myself that I am color blind and move on from there to try to capture some of the excitement of the visit.

So Worsenski did win the race. He beat me, and he did it with strategy and strength. His sneakers might have been better than mine, too. However, the important point right now, this evening as I write to you, is that I think of Worsenski and myself with a definite compassion. When I do things with a sense of ease I enjoy what I am doing. I celebrate myself internally, and that makes it easier to accept whatever celebration does or does not happen outside of me.

If I can feel a sense of joy as I start to write a poem, the celebration begins inside of me when I know I can be kind to myself. As Walt Whitman wrote, “I celebrate myself...” I am happy to know “Losing the 440-Yard Dash” is a beacon for you. That poem began with a smile that appeared inside of me, in my own heart. I hope it will continue to be a beacon for you.

Sincerely,  
Afaa

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Dear Afaa Michael Weaver,

Reading your poem “Losing the 440 Yard Dash” deeply resonated with me and left a lasting impression. It provided a refreshing and relatable perspective on failure, something many experience in their day-to-day lives. I especially appreciated the line, *“I wanted more than being human, a warrior of field and track would be bursting out now ripping open my chest with masculinity.”* It describes the reality of craving something that is unreachable and unattainable, a feeling that tears at hearts and nerves and cannot be contained. You did a fantastic job capturing this indescribable feeling.

Reading this poem instantly reminded me of the saying “comparison is the thief of joy.” In high school, I constantly find myself surrounded by girls who seem prettier, smarter, or more worthy of love, and this comparison eats away at my self-esteem. It feels like being trapped in this box of picking every small piece of me apart until it feels like there is nothing left. This cycle reminds me of the “curve of a devil’s handiwork,” as perfectly described in your poem. Growing up feeling different or set back because of the way I look is isolating and destructive, and reading this poem made me feel a little less alone.

Cute outfit? Not good enough. Feeling pretty? Not pretty enough. Acing a test? What happened to that one point? The disappointment of feeling uncomfortable in my own skin is overwhelming. I'm constantly missing the academic mark that I've set for myself, and it mirrors losing the 440-Yard dash daily. This is a reality for many teenagers in high school, living through an uphill battle of comparison to those that are "better."

Thank you for making a difference and making that crushing feeling a little smaller.

I'd love to know what inspired you to write "Losing the 440-Yard Dash," as well as how you chose to use this specific metaphor? Do you believe there is a way to escape The Devil's Handiwork as you described it?

Thank you again for sharing such a powerful poem, it truly made a difference in my perspective,

Mira

Massachusetts

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Dear Mira,

As I read your letter, I was so heartened to see how poetry can bring light to the things that matter most to young people. It's inspiring to know you can read this poem and feel less alone, knowing other people have had or still have the same struggles.

What inspired me to write "Losing the 440-Yard Dash"? It was my sophomore year (1966-67) in a public high school devoted to engineering and science. Having been placed in an advanced track when I was eleven years old, I was being prepared to enter university life a year earlier. My grades were very good, but I wanted to be more than a nerd. It was an all boys high school, with our sister school downtown. I wanted to have one of those athletic letters and be cool.

For track and field we had to go to a public park. The buildings of our old high school were in a business district. So we took the bus to a park which had a quarter mile track. A newer pair of sneakers might have helped, but the truth is I was just not a good runner. The student I ran against had the uncanny talent of being both big and

fast, fast enough to beat me to the second curve, which left me struggling for breath, and struggling against the fear of losing. On the bus back to our school I was teased terribly, and this was not helped by the fact that I had acne.

Nowadays I can chuckle at this incident, and I can remind myself, as I do regularly, that being able to take such things lightly is part of having compassion for myself. It is important to have compassion for others, too. I have grandchildren, and the issues of comparisons and teasing are ones I take seriously. So I am so happy to be able to make a difference in your perspective.

In my twenties, a friend convinced me to go jogging with him, and I enjoyed it. I even ran a seven mile race in decent time, fifty-six minutes. There was no medal and hardly anyone there because it was a fourteen mile race. My friend finished the whole race. I was happy for him, and he was happy for me. Around that same time I discovered Tai Chi, and that still brings me joy, and makes my poetry possible. So I am an athlete, one who moves in slow motion.

Sincerely,  
Afaa

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Dear Afaa Michael Weaver,

The second I read the list, my stomach dropped. My name wasn't on it. I reread the list, hoping I had somehow missed my name. But I didn't. I didn't make the team. I am in 9th grade, and this was the year I decided to try out for my school's dance team. Endless practices had filled my day. I repeated the routine over and over again: melting into pirouettes, hitting each leap with power, letting my arms flow through every transition, until I felt like I could do the entire routine while asleep. I imagined myself on the team, on stage, in our black and purple sequined uniform, hair slicked into a high ponytail, and lashes curled sky high under the stage lights. Then, just like that, it was all over. I didn't make the team.

In your poem, how you described Worenski, "as big as the USS Enterprise," connected with me personally because, during my audition, I remember watching the other dancers perform and thinking, They're so good. How am I supposed to stand



out? They were effortlessly able to do five consecutive pirouettes, and their jumps seemed to defy gravity. Even before the audition ended, I knew I wasn't the best in the room. That realization settled like a weight in my stomach, and when the results came, it wasn't just a sting of disappointment. It felt like all those hours of practicing over and over again had been poured into something useless, like choreographing a dance for a stage I would never get to perform on.

The moment when the speaker imagines winning, like getting the letter, impressing the girls, and catching the attention of colleges, was similar to how I felt. For me, it wasn't just about making the team but about proving to myself that I was good enough, that all the hours of practice meant something. Not getting in felt unreal. I had worked, I had dreamed, I had hoped. But sometimes, like in your poem, wanting isn't enough. Sometimes, trying your hardest still doesn't mean you win.

For weeks after that, I wondered if I should keep dancing. If all the effort I had put in wasn't enough, would it ever be? I avoided watching the team perform at home and away sports games, at pep rallies, and competitions. I convinced myself that I didn't care, that it was only one audition, but deep down, I knew I wanted to dance. Eventually, I found myself back in the studio, not because I had to, but because I wanted to. I truly missed dance, and in that moment, I realized that not making the team didn't mean I wasn't a dancer. It just meant that I had to try even harder.

The last lines of your poem were: "wondering just what / life had to give those of us who can fly." These lines showed me that the feeling of losing is real, but that feeling pushes you to try harder, to work harder.

There's more to the story than just that one competition, that one moment. Maybe the speaker didn't win, but that doesn't mean they won't find another way forward, and that resonates with me, especially with my experiences with dance.

Your poem reminded me that the race, audition, or tryout we think matters the most is just a warm-up for something bigger. Thank you for writing something so relatable.

Sincerely,

Raiva

California

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Dear Raiva,

It has been such a pleasure to read and think about your letter. You have an ability to reconstruct the whole world inside a memory, and with such clarity and emotional commitment. Reading about how my poem about losing inspired such hopefulness in you inspires a sense in me of having done something truly valuable.

Imagination is so important when we devote ourselves to something like dance. To read how you imagined yourself on the team, on stage, and under the lights reminds me of the fundamental importance of imagination and how it relates to hope. In one sentence in particular, you express something that I see as a victory in itself. These are your words:

“Eventually, I found myself back in the studio, not because I had to, but because I wanted to.”

I am seventy three going on seventy four years old, and I hope you believe me when I say I get it. In my poem I relate the experience of not making the track team, but I never gave up on being good at something athletic. It turned out to be Tai Chi Chuan, which looks like a slow motion dance, in case you’ve never seen it, but I bet you have seen it somewhere, if not in person more likely in the media. It can be really beautiful. I practice it for health, relaxation, and meditation. It all began when I was a youngster and wanted to do something athletic, and to be good at it.

Poetry can do so much for us, and I see that in how you found my poem to be so relatable. This is an important part of what it means to be a human being. You say my poem reminded you that “...the race, audition, or tryout we think matters the most is just a warm-up for something bigger.” I am so moved to know the poem did that for you, and so impressed to see how well you express yourself. I hope poetry will always inspire you this way.

Doing Tai Chi is like dancing, and the slow motion gracefulness of it has helped me grow as a poet for nearly five decades now, and that growing continues, as it sustains the feeling of being at peace enough to be a helpful presence for other people.

Sincerely,

Afaa

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Greetings Mr. Weaver,

My name is Steven, a high school junior who recently studied your poem “Losing the 440-Yard Dash.” The vivid description of yours sincerely brought me back to moments in my own life when the collision finally happened between reality and expectations.

As I read through your poem, I pictured myself in my old days back in China. Similarly to yours, I spent most afternoons circling the red rubber track, training myself for the 200 and 1000 meters run—a requirement of 26.4 seconds and 3:21 minutes for my high school entrance exam. I could still smell the dust in the air, hear the whistle in the coach’s lips, and feel the dread when I stepped on the track. Your opening, “If he hits the curve before you do, all is lost,” threw me straight into those memories of dizziness in my mind, striving to reach the curve first—the arc that decided my destiny.

Your description of Worsenski “as big as the USS Enterprise sliding through Pacific waters” accurately mirrored how I used to stare at that strong guy in the lane to the left of mine, telling myself there was no way I could beat him. When you wrote “the pulling-up caboose slower than mud,” it felt just like those laps when my legs were the Internet Explorer of my body—had stopped working. The last 50 meters were endless, the cheering noises of my peers echoed in my mind—I was racing my own doubt more than anyone else.

After that season, I noticed a quiet transformation inside me. Instead of binding my worth to the stopwatch, I began to value the push factor the track applied on me. If I could go back in time onto the curve and whisper to my younger self, I’d cheer him up and say “Hold your lane, trust your steps. The race is only a part of a much longer run, but the real victory is learning how to carry your own heartbeat and breath past that white finish line.

Here’s a question for you that I’m curious about: when you look back on that race at UMD, do you see it differently than you did the moment you were defeated? Did the writing of the poem shift your relationship to the memory, maybe even soften it?

Thank you for putting that mix of ambition and disappointment on the piece of paper. Your poem reminded me of the good old days, with all their pain and joy, and still shapes how I overcome challenges beyond the track: drive hard into the curve,

keep running even if someone more powerful than you cuts in front of you, because the game isn't over yet.

With all the best wishes,

Steven  
New York

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Dear Steven,

A few weeks ago, I ran into an old friend from high school and college who said he had a special memory of me losing a race at track and field practice. I was amazed that he held onto that memory, and what is more important here as I write to you is that he knew nothing about the poem. One day I will send him a copy.

Truthfully, if I were to speak to my younger self, I would encourage him to be kinder to himself, to see sports as play, and not as work, to look more for the joyfulness that comes with running. I would even advise him to walk over to Worsenski and congratulate him. After all it is a sport and not a life and death situation.

At the time of the race, I was nearly sixty years younger than I am as I write to you. In my seventies, I am happy on any day that I can move around with even a hint of being spry or light on my feet. Walking is more important than running these days, which is not to say people my age do not run. Of course, they do.

There is a reason the word “play” is used in referring to someone who is involved in sports, unless it's professional sports. That's a whole other matter. I've watched videos of LeBron James training for basketball, and it looks awfully serious, not to mention painful. However, he is amply rewarded for his talents. It's his career.

I admire your attitude toward the challenges of your younger days, and how your view of that time helps you now as you move through life's challenges. You are able to lift your spirits. Maybe fifty years from now that wisdom will deepen even more. There is so much joy to life, even with all its seriousness.

“Losing the 440-Yard Dash” has gone into the world and come back to me with wonderful responses such as yours, and if I were to speak to the poem itself about whether it is enjoying this dashing out into the world and bringing messages back to me, I would like to imagine it would look at me with a smile wider than anything I have ever seen.

Sincerely,

Afaa

# About the Academy of American Poets

Founded in 1934, the [Academy of American Poets](#) is the nation's leading champion of poets and poetry with supporters in all fifty states and beyond. The organization annually awards \$1.3+ million to more than two hundred poets at various stages of their careers through its [prize and fellowship programs](#). The organization also produces [Poets.org](#), the world's largest publicly funded website for poets and poetry; established and organizes [National Poetry Month](#) each April; publishes the popular [Poem-a-Day](#) series and [American Poets](#) magazine; provides free resources to K–12 educators, including the award-winning weekly [Teach This Poem](#) series; hosts an annual series of [poetry readings](#) and special events; and coordinates a national [Poetry Coalition](#) that promotes the value poets bring to our culture. To learn more about the Academy of American Poets, including its [staff](#), its [Board of Directors](#), and its [Board of Chancellors](#), visit: [poets.org](#).

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