



2024

Why do people read and write poems? When you read a poem for the first time, did it seem shrouded in mystery? Did it make 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.

A collaboration between the Academy of American Poets, the creator of National Poetry Month and Teach This Poem, and 826 National, the largest youth writing network in the country, 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 826 National and nearly a hundred 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 2024—Leila Chatti, Chen Chen, Marilyn Chin, Nicole Cecilia Delgado, Nikky Finney, John James, Mara Pastor, Ed Roberson, and Patricia Smith—followed by selected student letters and the poets' responses.

Happy reading!

**academy of
american poets**



**NATIONAL
YOUTH WRITING**

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books

Leila Chatti

Leila Chatti is a Tunisian American poet and the author of *Deluge* (Copper Canyon Press, 2020), winner of the 2021 Levis Reading Prize and the 2021 Luschei Prize for African Poetry; *Tunsiya/Amrikiya* (Bull City Press, 2018); and *Ebb* (Akashic Books, 2018). The recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, she is the Grace Hazard Conkling Writer-in-Residence at Smith College.

Chen Chen

Chen Chen received a PhD from Texas Tech University. He is the author of *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* (BOA Editions, 2017), which won the A. Poulin, Jr. Poetry Prize and was long-listed for the National Book Award. The recipient of a 2022 United States Artists Fellowship and a 2019 Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, he is the Jacob Ziskind Visiting Poet-in-Residence at Brandeis University and lives in Waltham, Massachusetts.

Marilyn Chin

Marilyn Chin was born in Hong Kong and raised in Portland, Oregon. She is the author of five collections of poetry, including *Sage* (W. W. Norton, 2023); *A Portrait of the Self As Nation: New and Selected Poems* (W. W. Norton, 2018); and *Hard Love Province* (W. W. Norton, 2014), which won the 2015 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. In addition to writing poetry, she has translated poems and published a novel. Chin has received numerous honors for her poetry, and, in 2018, was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. She is a professor emerita at San Diego State University.

Nicole Cecilia Delgado

Nicole Cecilia Delgado is a poet, translator, and book artist from San Juan, Puerto Rico. Her most recent book is *Periodo especial* (Aguadulce/La Impresora, 2019). She currently directs and develops La Impresora, a poetry press and Risograph print shop dedicated to small-scale editorial work and allocating resources to support local, independent publishing in Puerto Rico.

Nikky Finney

Nikky Finney was born in Conway, South Carolina. She is the author of many poetry collections, including *Head Off & Split* (Northwestern University Press, 2011), winner of the 2011 National Book Award. In 2020, she received the Wallace Stevens Award, given by the Academy of American Poets to recognize outstanding and proven mastery in the art of poetry. Finney taught at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, for twenty-three years, and, in 2021, she was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

John James

John James is the author of *Winter, Glossolalia* (Black Spring Press Group, 2022) and *The Milk Hours* (Milkweed Editions, 2019). Winner of the 2023 Treehouse Climate Action Poem Prize, he is also the recipient of fellowships and prizes from the Bread Loaf Environmental Writers' Conference, the Lannan Center for Poetics and Social Practice, the Academy of American Poets, and the University of California, Berkeley. He lives in Berkeley.

Mara Pastor

Mara Pastor is a Puerto Rican poet, editor, and scholar. She has authored six full-length poetry books in Spanish, including *Deuda Natal* (University of Arizona Press, 2021), which won the 2020 Ambrogio Award from the Academy of American Poets. Pastor has worked as a postdoctoral researcher and associate professor. In 2022, she was named an inaugural Letras Boricuas Fellow by the Flamboyant Foundation. She lives in Puerto Rico.

Ed Roberson

Ed Roberson was born in Pittsburgh. Roberson is the author of many poetry collections, including *When Thy King Is a Boy* (Pitt Poetry), which was released in 1970, the same year in which he completed his undergraduate degree. He is the recipient of many prizes, including the Academy of American Poets Fellowship in 2017, which recognizes distinguished poetic achievement. Formerly a professor at Rutgers University, Roberson now resides in Chicago. In 2023, Roberson was elected as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

Patricia Smith

Patricia Smith is a poet, teacher, and performance artist. She is the author of many books of poetry, including *Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah* (Coffee House Press, 2012), winner of the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize from the Academy of American Poets, and *Blood Dazzler* (Coffee House Press, 2008), which was a finalist for the 2008 National Book Award. Smith is a four-time individual champion of the National Poetry Slam and a 2017 fellow from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2023, Smith was elected as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. She lives in New Jersey.

**poems &
letters**

I Went Out to Hear

The sound of quiet. The sky
indigo, steeping
deeper from the top, like tea.
In the absence
of anything else, my own
breathing became obscene.
I heard the beating
of bats' wings before
the air troubled above
my head, turned to look
and saw them gone.
On the surface of the black
lake, a swan and the moon
stayed perfectly
still. I knew this was
a perfect moment.
Which would only hurt me
to remember and never
live again. My God. How lucky to have lived
a life I would die for.

Dear ones,

Attention, wrote Simone Weil, is the rarest and purest form of generosity. Thank you all so much for this generous gift, for spending time thinking about my words and sharing with me your own. I was so moved to read your thoughts and to be given a glimpse into your worlds. I am honored and feel, in language and thought, in incredible company.

The moment I wrote of was a moment in which I was very much alone. I would never have guessed that that small moment, which led to a small poem, would connect me to so many people across many distances. There's an idea I come across often, from students (and I mean this widely as anyone who wants to learn, people of all ages), that their life is too boring or ordinary or insignificant to write about. But poetry, and life, isn't about the extraordinary—rather, it's the extra ordinary, the everyday and all-around, that makes up the miracle of our living, which is the wellspring of our art. These small moments are what add up to a life, and there is nothing more precious, nothing more important, than the one life we have.

There are days, though, when I have to remind myself of this. We live in a time of constant distraction and dissatisfaction, of comparison and consumption, of worry and hurry both. There's so much noise, so much content, pushing in all the time that we lose ourselves in it. Sometimes, for a while, this being lost feels good, as our minds can be a heavy thing to carry around, our bodies a difficult thing to exist in. But there is no greater loneliness than losing yourself, losing your tether to your thoughts, your feelings, and the actual world.

Attention is a form of love, and the work of love includes pain. Like the swan, the lake, the deep quiet, everything I love wounds me a little, because I know it will not always be this way. But how lucky we are, to have so much to love, even briefly! My great work on this earth is to be here, really be here, with all that I have and all that I am. I see you, too, are partaking in this work, even when it isn't easy. I am so glad. We are in this—this painful, miraculous world—together. Thank you for spending some of the precious time you have with me, wherever you are, marveling just a moment at it.

With gratitude,
Leila

Dear Lelia Chatti,

I wanted to take a few moments to write to you about your poem “I Went Out to Hear.” While picking out a poem to write about, I REALLY struggled. I thought to myself, “I cannot write about any of these! They speak of struggling to assimilate to a new culture, of love, of loss and so many things that I can not fully do justice in my response!” I thought that to reduce a poem about struggling as an immigrant in America to something about me moving to a new school just wasn’t right. But then, I saw your poem, and it was simple. There was so much there, and yet it was simple. There was complexity to me—about thanking God for letting you see that moment, but knowing that it will hurt you later to know you will never see it again: “I knew this was / a perfect moment / which would only hurt me / to remember and never / live again.” I thought to myself, “This is it! This is how I feel about life!” There are times, I wish I had cameras in my eyes, so I can capture every moment, and relive it. Simple, mundane things, and yet I want to look back at them. Sitting with my mother, and the light catches her just right, a cat I see on the street, a cloud that is shaped funny, a rock that looks like a heart. So many things I think back to and say, “I am alive, and this is life, and thank you God for giving me a life I would die for.”

To me, your poem wasn’t just a simple message of: “appreciate the little things.” It was so much more. Yes, there is so much beauty in passing moments, but there is also beauty in stopping, commemorating, and remembering. To look back at those moments is to be alive. I guess I realized the importance of remembering through loss. Not just loss of a life but loss of a memory. My childhood friend, her face becoming blurry, despite the years spent together. The layout of my old house, forgotten, even though I spent hours running my hand over every wall. The name of my favorite teacher from second grade. Was it Alex? Addison? Did it even start with an A? I realized that I was forgetting the little things. The things that bring me life. So I began to remember, to run the little, minute details over in my mind, so I may never forget. So I suppose my question to you is: What prompted you to begin to notice, to hear? Would you have appreciated that moment, or any after that, without your friend urging you to? Would you have continued to get stuck in the monotony of work?

My rather presumptuous questions aside, I just wanted to say thank you. Thank you for writing something that helped me put a feeling into words. It might be a little thing, but I've come to appreciate those.

Sincerely,
Ainsley
North Carolina

Dear Ainsley,

It never fails to move me how there are so many people in the world so much like us, which we only discover when we put a voice to our innermost thoughts and feelings. I'm very glad this poem linked us across the distances—I think we are kindred spirits!

I began writing poetry as a child because I was afraid of losing things. I have a compulsion to record—in language, as well as in photographs and video—my life, and have all my life. I unfortunately lost a number of beloved people very early. I also moved a fair amount, including a move to Tunisia, where my father is from, and then back to the United States. What I knew as my life was constantly changing, vanishing behind me, and I wanted so badly to hold onto it. There's an incredible poem on loss by the poet Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art" (add that to your reading list if you haven't read it already), that captures so effectively all we lose in the course of a life—a list not so different from your own or mine. The part that makes me emotional every time I read it (and I've read this poem many, many times) comes in the final line:

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

In the poem, she recounts all she's lost with a reserved, distant tone—she claims she's "mastered" the art of losing. However, at the end, her voice shakes. She wants to be detached, to believe she is beyond being hurt by loss because she's experienced so much of it, but this of course is not true. Loss *is* disaster; we cannot control it, and we cannot escape the grief that accompanies it even though it is unpleasant to feel. That last moment in the parentheses—("*Write it!*")—reads, to me, like an internal

voice, a private struggle to keep up the performance of being indifferent even when it's clear it's an act. She does ultimately write it, but because she let the mask slip, we know the truth: there's no mastering loss.

I write this not to linger in sadness, but to acknowledge how grief is an important part of gratitude, and love—knowing I will one day lose everything I love sharpens my love, and reminds me to act on it while I still can. It's so easy to let our lives (and loves) slip by, and we certainly live in a time that encourages that kind of distracted existence; being present can sometimes be painful. It can hurt to love something deeply. It can hurt to feel the whole of our feelings. But pain doesn't mean something is bad or wrong. It is a necessary, essential part of being fully alive. If you live a life avoiding pain, you live a life avoiding living.

This is something I have to practice—allowing myself to be present, even when it stings. That summer in Ireland had some painful moments; I was upset with myself, with what I saw as failures in my life and career, and I was trying to force myself to write because I felt I had to. One of my coping mechanisms for pain is to distract myself with work. I think that because I'm working, it must be healthy, but when I'm working to avoid *feeling*, it isn't. Good work, the true work of poetry, brings you closer to the world, not away from it—the most important poems I've ever written were not those written in an attempt to escape my life and the world around me, but the ones that led me deeper in. The novelist reminded me that there is more to being a writer than writing all the time, that “productivity” cannot supplant the living that sparks the poems. Going to the lake wasn't something that came naturally, but it was something I knew would be good for me. I knew living meant being in the world more than in my mind. And I knew, too, there was more to me—and my life—than work. Standing in the presence of that swan and the bats grounded me in this. There is so much living happening all the time, and if I don't take time to pay attention, it will happen without me. At the end of my life, I know I will remember the swan, not the thousands of hours at my desk.

I still get lost in work more often than I'd like, but I practice bringing myself back to being present. It will be a lifelong effort, something I'll never “master,” but as with anything, it's easier the more you do it. I gently redirect my attention to attention. I work on accepting the reality of loss instead of running from it, and through my

acceptance, practice gratitude for what currently is. There's so much beauty all around me, all the time. I know it won't last. I know it comes, sometimes, with pain. But I open myself to it. As long as I'm alive, I'd like to truly be.

With gratitude,
Leila

Dear Leila Chatti,

My name is Angelina and I'm a 9th grader. In my language arts class I read your poem, "I Went Out to Hear" and I really really loved it. I really loved the last part of the poem because it reminded me of how I think. I'm always in my head thinking to myself "I am living in this moment and I will be at the next place in the next moment." I play basketball and usually our practices are late so sometimes me and my mom will go to the store to look around if we have time before my practice. That is when I usually think like that. I'll be happy to spend time with my mom right now but at the same time sad because I know it's not forever and I'm going to have to go to practice right after. It really is an interesting way of thinking and sometimes it makes the time go by faster.

While reading your poem, it made me feel very calm and nostalgic. The poem reminded me of spending time at my aunt's house and being in her backyard in the evening. My aunt has a cute little house made in the 1920s and a huge backyard behind it. In her backyard she has many flowers, a lemon tree, a little water fountain, and a huge oak tree. There is also a lot of nature in her neighborhood and it's really nice when me and my family help walk her dogs at sunset and look at all the beautiful scenery. I was actually just at my aunt's house and while we were walking her dogs we heard an owl. I would've never imagined hearing an owl where I live or ever imagine seeing one so it was very special to hear one. What moment did you experience that inspired you to write your poem?

I noticed in your poem you used the phrase, "The sky indigo, steeping deeper from the top, like tea." I really liked this use of metaphorical language because the sky really does look like tea getting deeper in color when it's at sunset. Reading that part of your poem made me think of drinking tea during the spring time in a cottage by a lake. What's your favorite type of tea? I really like chamomile, jasmine, and boysenberry tea.

Thank you for writing this poem, I really loved it. It was really nice to find out there are other people that think like me. I can't wait to read more of your work and I'm even more excited for your poems that are yet to come.

Sincerely,
Angelina
California

Dear Angelina,

It was so lovely just now to get a glimpse into your world—the joy of those precious hours with your mother and your aunt's beautiful backyard. I recently bought my first home, and so have a backyard of my own after a decade of apartments. My husband and I have taken great pleasure in the simple pleasures it provides. We bought a little patio set (light blue) and an umbrella (lavender) and often sit there with lemonade just looking out at the expanse that's ours, all that possibility. We have dreams of planting a lilac bush, a cherry tree, and a magnolia. We sprinkled some wildflower seeds this last weekend. Our neighbors gifted us three sunflower seedlings, which we've planted safely enclosed by a net, having learned the groundhogs that live at the border of our yards devoured theirs overnight. I had no idea we had groundhogs until we started sitting out there. There's so much just waiting to be noticed, if we take the time.

The moment I wrote about in this poem took place when I was in Ireland one summer, at a writing residency. My desk was by a window that overlooked a lake, but because I spent all my time working, I hardly ever looked out at it. A novelist at the residency encouraged me to take a break from the writing to *live*, to leave my room and see all that the grounds had to offer. He thought it would be good for me, and he was right. One evening he told me there were bats down by the water. I love bats. So I went down by myself to see them. The funny thing is I didn't actually end up seeing them—I heard them, zooming past my head, but they were so fast that they were gone by the time I looked. What I didn't expect to see was the swan. If I hadn't just stood there, open to whatever happened, I might never have noticed there were swans in the area at all. I'd have missed that beauty I wasn't looking for. Beauty that reminded me of the preciousness of my life, that so often slips by me.

One day we hope our daughter will run through the yard and enjoy the fruit and flowers that currently only exist in our imagination. Right now, she's squirming away inside me, a dream that's slowly taking shape. I'm thinking, very much, *right now I'm living in this moment, and then I'll be in the next*. These are my last days just as *Leila*, and soon I'll evolve into another version of me, *Someone's Mother*. Time is moving so strangely this summer. I want it to go quickly, but I also know, too, there's a preciousness to this period. I'm trying my best just to be in this moment, to experience it fully, instead of rushing ahead. I'm paying attention to see what beauty there is in this time, a specific beauty I'll never live again. I hope you, too, hold on to these moments you've so beautifully captured and shared with me. These ordinary days are what make up the miracle of our lives.

Oh, and to answer your last question—I love all kinds of tea, but my everyday favorites are jasmine, lavender, and chamomile, and blueberry tea with a bit of lemon. In Tunisia, where my father is from, we drink tea with mint and pine nuts and lots of sugar. We bring it out for guests (we would happily make you some!) and drink it any time of day. There are few things I love as much as those ordinary nights drinking tea with my family, just sitting, being together, overlooking the sea.

With gratitude,

Leila

Dear Leila Chatti,

I first read your poem at dusk. I have lived my whole life in the midwest, a place that seems very boring to me. Nowhere grand like the majestic pacific coast or the historic east. When I finished your poem, I got up to answer the scratches of my dog letting me know she wanted to run outside. Like any typical teen, I had just received a number of snaps and was on my phone while letting my dog out. But as I stepped outside, I glanced at the golden light shining on my feet, taking in the warm glow of fading sunlight bathing my backyard. I paused to think about your poem, what I had just read. I put down my phone and looked up. I saw the familiar patio and basketball court. I saw my dog romping around in the grass. Wow. It was beautiful. The poem allowed me a new view of my world, the echo of your words transforming the lens through which my eyes saw. When I stepped back inside I read your poem

again, slower. The imagery conjured by your language was so elegantly vivid. I loved how perfectly you were able to describe one exquisite moment that was ephemeral and unique, opening my eyes to the wonder that exists in these quiet, unnoticed moments that surround our lives.

The next day, I was on the bus. I had just finished a soccer game and was one of the six girls taking the thirty minute bus ride home. By default, I put my airpods in and began to scroll through video shorts. A few minutes in, I came upon a video of a sunset and reflexively swiped past. It was a classic “heart and scroll” video. But then I remembered a line from the description of your poem: “the moment was so lovely and so easily missed, like most miracles.” I paused before closing out tik tok and playing my go-to music playlist. Then I looked out the bus window. At first, it was just the walls of a bridge we were passing under. But when we emerged from the tunnel, the view hit me. The grassy fields that stretched out to the horizon were gleaming resplendent as they danced to the sway of the winds that swept over them. Again, I was struck by the natural beauty that was always present but imperceivable until you stop for a moment to step out of your world and discover the world around you. I pressed my face to the window and watched as we passed through different towns, noting the unique character, colors and shapes of each place. I was jolted out of musings by raucous laughter. I turned to face my friends, so bubbly and ebullient, hotting [*sic*] over some cute guys’ pictured posts. I wished I could’ve captured that moment, the words of your poem whispering in my ears. The last few lines echoing through my head, the meaning washing over me, the emotions almost painful. I recognized that I was having a unique moment during a part of my life that I could never return to. Yet I relished that painful poignancy, knowing that some small part of me would be diminished without the experience. In that moment, I understood how my new perspective would give me the ability to continue to have these unique experiences, enriching and elevating me. I looked out the window and then to my giggling friends, internalizing the stirring view outside and inside my head and I quoted aloud the last lines of your poem: “My God. How lucky to have lived a life I would die for.”

Claire
Illinois

Dear Claire,

Sometimes the beauty of the world just hits you, doesn't it? There are moments where I feel suddenly awake to my life. But what had I been before that moment? How many days do I walk through half-sleeping, unaware of my unawareness?

I wish I could say I've found a way to be awake, alert, all the time, but I am human, which means prone to distraction and, worse, disregard. But I try, as best as I can, to look up. Sometimes the view is resplendent, as the one you beautifully described. Sometimes it's more ordinary—the uniform gray of a strip mall, swathes of crumbled asphalt, a bus stop with signage faded by time and weather. I, too, am from the Midwest, and once in graduate school, a friend asked me why I never wrote about where I'm from. I immediately replied, "It's boring!" He, both wise and a pain, countered, "Not if you're doing your job right."

So now I write about the Midwest. Every time I'm home, driving or sitting by a window, I look out to be intentionally looking, noticing beauty and non-beauty both, as it's my job. As a writer, but also as someone alive, someone given time on this earth to witness it. The billboards, the fields, the buildings slipping into disrepair. Much gray, some green, a little yellow. The branching trees and streets, chain restaurants, frat houses and Solo cups and rogue tulips, briefly, by the curb. It's not always much, but it's mine, which means, of course, it's everything.

With gratitude,
Leila

Dear Leila Chatti,

My name is Jordan, and I am a sophomore in high school from California. I wasn't expecting to be hit so hard by the very first line of "I Went Out to Hear." When you read that sentence, "the sound of quiet," my head was immediately filled with so many questions. One of them was one I have asked myself multiple times in my life, and it is how can quiet have a sound? I think the first time I heard a phrase like that was when my mom was reading me a story in an attempt to lull me to sleep, and I

tugged on her sleeve and asked her how that was possible. How could something so contradictory be true? It's sufficient to say that not a lot of sleep happened when she couldn't give me a straightforward answer.

The question that immediately followed was, how do you feel about quiet? Is it comforting to you? Or is it something you've had to work to sit with? For me, it's the latter. I hate silence. I'm always the first to fill the lapse in a conversation, always choosing places like breakfast diners, filled with the hum of idle conversation and clinking silverware, and public parks, with their endless array of sounds, to spend my time, always listening to a show, usually one I've watched so many times that I can mouth the words along to it, while working, and always always always listening to music. Even right now, as I write this, I am listening to "Where's My Love" (The Acoustic Version), by SYML. And this is all because, as I've learned, quiet does have a sound. An incredibly LOUD sound. And that sound to me is all my thoughts rushing in, clamoring and clanging, this incessant buzz that won't go away. Moments where my head is fully at peace are far and few in between. In quiet, I feel too big. Too loud. There's too much of me. Like how you say, "In the absence of anything else, my own breathing became obscene," I become obscene.

I want to embody your title. I want to live life with the intention of going out to hear, to be so comfortable with quiet that I seek it out and **revel** in it. I want to find these moments, tucked away from the smog of everyday life, moments that would be so beautiful, it would leave an ache in me to remember. I think that ache makes it even more beautiful. It reminds us how temporary everything is. How could we recognize how great something was if it didn't hurt to think about it after it slipped through our fingers?

You close out the poem with the words, "My God. How lucky to have lived a life I would die for." I had to sit with this for a while. It's both incredibly powerful and incredibly confusing all at once, and it just left me with more questions than I started with. How can I die for something I already have, a life I've already lived? I asked myself, what is this life I would die for? What is my life? And the answer came in the form of another question. Who is my life?

My life is my friends, my brother, my mom, my dad. It's every stranger that's smiled at me, every teacher that's taken the time to help me grow, and it's the people I love the most. That's the life I am lucky to have lived, the life I would die for. What's yours?

Sincerely,
Jordan
California

Dear Jordan,

I have been trying to write you for hours, but could not focus, as my mind's been pulsing with noise. I am staying with my family, helping to care for the newest addition, my three-month-old niece. My father and brother both play their music loud. My mother jokes with my sister. My stepfather mows the lawn. My cat (Siamese) mews incessantly for attention. And the baby, of course, cries, as this is how she knows to respond to the world and her discomfort.

They're all gone now, on a walk, except for my cat, who is napping. It's quiet enough to hear everything else that happens in the background without my knowing. The dishwasher makes a soft, rhythmic sound, a sloshing back and forth. There's a little wind in the trees, and a bird I can't name. Some general electric whirring. I've read that quiet is going extinct—that we fill our world with so much noise just by existing, and that all this inescapable noise might be making us sick. (Not the birds in the trees, but the drone in our streets and houses.) I've read, too, that silence *does* have a sound, or, rather, our mind perceives it as though it does. That time in Ireland was the closest I've ever gotten to a "perfect" silence—so far removed from the hubbub of the human world, it was quiet enough to hear the slightest disturbances, like the air moving when the bats did, or, as you noted, my own body's churnings. It was incredible. I hadn't realized how badly my body craved it until it was present.

I, like you, have tended to fill my life with noise. For years, I've played music any chance I could get. Against better judgment, too often I'll have the TV on in the background while I work. I fall asleep each night to a podcast. And, like you, I've realized I do this for less than ideal reasons. Increasingly, I have tried to fill my mind with stimulus so I will not have to experience my own thoughts and feelings. This

really became noticeable in the last handful of years, beginning during the onset of the pandemic, a time in which the world and my mind processing the world were terrifying places to be. I was terribly anxious. I felt dread about the present moment and dread about the future. I know I was (and am) not alone in this. Being was hard, so I opted for busy. I thought distraction would help. In a way, it did—it certainly occupied my mind during the worst of it. But that time was spent surviving, not living. In a better place now, I've grown tired of that shallowness.

I'm currently reading a book about dopamine and our time's endless pursuit of feeling good. Pain—including anxiety, disappointment, and boredom—is unpleasant, so many people choose now to opt for constant distraction, something that doesn't necessarily feel *good*, but keeps us from noticing discomfort. What I've come to realize, though, is that the more distracted I am, the more generally unhappy I become. I miss the beauty in my life, beauty that requires attention. By stomping out discomfort, I've also closed down opportunities for joy, curiosity, wonder, and connection. So I want less noise—literal and metaphorical. I want to leave space in my mind to experience *my* life, instead of filling it with content from other people's. I want enough quiet to hear the voice inside me speaking my truest self.

Sometimes my feelings feel terrifying, but I've always survived them. Every uncomfortable thought that's ever swelled in my mind has dissipated in time like a wave. I know being—really being, with my whole self—in the world is the only way to live. Distraction seems nice in the short term, but it's not worth the cost. I want a full life, which means I'll take the discomfort that comes with it. I want, at the end of my life, to have lived my life in a way that I'd choose—eagerly, every part, again and again, if I could.

With gratitude,
Leila

Dear Leila Chatti,

In my 9th grade English class, we were told to select and analyze a poem and then write a letter addressed to the poet about what the poem meant to us. Purple and blue highlighters scanned the words of your poem and marked anything I thought

would help me write to you. Words like “simile,” “peaceful,” and “deep” appeared on the page in my handwriting. I didn’t understand what it was you were trying to tell me. It wasn’t until a snow day that I knew I wanted to write to you. The snow day allowed me to reflect upon my childhood experiences, playing outside in the snow, making snowmen, and watching movies. It gave me a bittersweet feeling of what I wish I could experience again today. “Which would only hurt me / to remember and never / live again”

This line made me specifically think about the idea of a birthday; the privilege we get of turning one year older every 365 days. I vividly remember that as each day of my childhood passed, I would dream to be older. When I was eight years old I wanted to be ten, so I could get an iPhone. But, when I was ten, I wanted to be thirteen to finally be a teenager. It wasn’t until now that I understood how I didn’t cherish my childhood enough because I didn’t know how valuable it was at the time. Now, I wish to go back to being eight years old, to a time when my grades and college did not have to be my biggest priority. Life was about who would be “it” during a game of tag and who was the last to be found in Hide and Seek. It was so easy to find joy in the little moments of life when we were younger, and I wish that I appreciated that more.

On our second snow day of the school year, I started to realize how our priorities change as we grow older. As I sat at my cream desk and checked off assignment after assignment, I saw something outside of my window. Three pinky-cheeked children were playing in the snow. They were happily building snowmen and making snow angels with each other. I started to remember my snow days when I was their age more clearly. My sister and I would search for mittens, hats, and scarves to decorate our snowman with.

Our dad would take pictures as our mom watched from afar with her hands wrapped around a mug of warm hot chocolate. We would run inside after the snow froze us over, change into dry pants, and watch movies until it was bedtime. It hurts me to remember these memories because I know that this will no longer be the reality of my snow days going forward. Instead, my joy would be catching up on homework and being productive.

This realization is what allowed me to create a bridge between your words and the distinct memories of my childhood.

As I was trying to learn more about you, I came across something you said while talking about your poem on the Dear Poet Website. You mentioned how you came to experience your perfect moment on a work trip and said, “The moment was lovely and so easily missed, like most miracles.” This stood out to me because I started to understand how it is possible to balance both a successful work and academic life while still finding ways to experience joy. As a student at a rigorous private school, work seems to overcome both my and my classmates’ mental states. But, you have inspired me to find the balance to experience those perfect, joyful moments in life.

An exercise we did in class was listening to the poet read their poem aloud. You read your poem with a slow and careful pace while maintaining sharp pronunciation, which I understand was done on purpose. From what I heard, you may have wanted us to pause to feel the tranquility of your reading. Many of the descriptions in your poem provoke a feeling of serenity. For example, “swan,” “moon,” and “silence,” are all objects or abstract ideas that make me feel calm. If you had read your poem at a fast pace, I would not have noticed these peaceful concepts, and I would have missed the perfect moment that you created.

After reading this poem countless times, which provoked a feeling of nostalgia in me, I have a question for you: Do you find it hard to manage your work life and happiness? Being able to realize that I am not creating that balance is the first step, but now I must take on life in a way that allows me to experience a balance between both my academic life and my happiness because they are equally important. Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed reading your poem over the past few weeks. It has allowed me to realize things about myself and my past that I never knew. For instance, I truly miss memories with my family more than I had thought, and no matter how old I get, I will always be a child at heart. Thank you for writing a poem that has not only touched my heart but touched the hearts of many others.

Sincerely,

Mira

New Jersey

Dear Mira,

I am writing to you a week from my birthday. I will be thirty-four this Saturday, a number that seemed incredibly far away when I was your age twenty years ago (to write “twenty years ago” feels bewildering, too). I smiled—a little sad, but not only—to read your reflection on birthdays. Far too much of my life I’ve spent wishing for it to go faster. I’ve felt, like you, a hunger to reach the next age—to have more freedoms, to have more control. At fourteen (the age I was in ninth grade), I wanted to be finished with high school. Then I wanted to be finished with college. Then graduate school. I wanted to hurry up and have a book written. I wanted to be a professional poet. Most recently, I’ve spent years impatiently wanting a child. Now I am urging the days to pass as I await the birth of my daughter later this summer. She is kicking inside me right now, like a metronome marking time.

I think that, as motherhood and middle age approach, I will soon wish for the reverse—that I will want time to slow, or stop altogether. That’s how it goes, isn’t it? We want what we can’t have. We want what was, or what hasn’t yet been. Just as you regret not fully savoring the years you wished to grow out of in childhood, I fondly ache some days to be fourteen again. You are still so young (I hated to hear this then, but it’s true). I know, in the future, I will look back at myself, now in my thirties, and think the same thing—*Leila, you were so young*. Though not as young as we were, we still have time. And while we can’t return to the days that are gone, there are days ahead, including this one, ready for anything.

I have the life I always wanted, the life I’ve been running toward since my earliest years. If I had, at fourteen, been able to look through the decades and know I would get here, would I have relaxed and savored the days along the way? Though I wish I could pretend otherwise, I can guess the answer is no. I think the human condition is wanting. But I think, too, when we spend more time wanting than living, we slip into unhappiness. The antidote is gratitude. When I am grateful, I can exist in time and not feel stuck or rushed. Gratitude roots me in the present, and reminds me of the gift it is. Do I still struggle with an urge to skip forward? Yes. And do I simultaneously feel sadness, recognizing the present won’t last? I do. But I’d feel deeper grief if I never lived it to begin with, if all the moment’s miracles passed me by in

my distraction and wanting so that I never got to experience them fully even once. Once is not forever, but infinitely better than never. And whether or not we want them to, no matter what we do, the days will pass. I try now to live each one the best I can, knowing how much I miss those that have gone, and how long I waited to get to where I am now.

Work can often be a part of this distraction from the present. I work because I want to achieve—financial security and professional accomplishments, sure, but for many years I worked furiously because I believed these things would bring me to a state of final happiness. I thought if I could grit my teeth and sacrifice my living for years, then I'd reach a point of blessed Success, a terminus where I would forever after feel safe and satisfied. This is a myth. There is no threshold of accomplishment you cross over and find on the other side all of your problems are solved. Some of my best years were the ones in which I “failed” or was lost; I couldn't see it at the time, but in those years, I was learning and growing so much, and had many invaluable adventures while trying to find my way. And there were years in which everything “happened” for me exactly as I'd dreamed and I found myself completely miserable, realizing accomplishment hadn't saved me from the grief I was trying to outrun. Work has brought me great joy—being able to read your letter, for instance, is possible because of this work—but it is never all there is. And a life is a terrible thing to waste in pursuit of some unpromised future happiness. As Annie Dillard writes, “How we spend our days, of course, is how we spend our lives.” I don't want a life the size of my desk. I remain ever ambitious, but I make time for tea, for walks, for games with my husband, jokes with my family, cuddles with my cat. When my daughter is born, I will likely have fewer hours to write, but I'll surely have more important things to say. Instead of exhausting myself working toward a mirage of happiness, I know now to take time in the day I have for the joy within reach, which is the only one that exists. I don't need to earn happiness through success; I can have it right now. There's more than enough right here.

It's okay to feel sadness for the years that are gone, but don't miss the moment you're in by forever looking backward. And don't waste your life working or wishing for a later happiness. Remember, the only time you have to live is happening right now,

and you can do anything you want with it—including building a snowman!. I’ve had this in a note above my desk for years, and I share it now with you, in hopes that it may be a useful reminder: *This is the good part.*

With gratitude,
Leila

Dear Leila Chatti,

At first glance, “I Went Out to Hear” probably wouldn’t have intrigued me, considering I’m usually more interested in longer pieces with longer lines, but upon closer inspection, this poem resonates with me very deeply. Your writing is beautiful, the words bleed into one another like a pen on wet paper, smooth and shiny. Of course, I loved that, but I loved the contents of the poem even more.

Your descriptions, they’re so sparse, yet so decadent. When you experienced that moment, or other notable moments in your life, do you find yourself already composing a poem or essay in your head? Trying to come up with the perfect words to sum up what you sense? I admit, I am guilty of that sometimes. In order to keep myself mindful, when something nice is happening, I try to count to fifty over and over again so my mind doesn’t wander. I wish minutes were fifty seconds long. Do you have any mindfulness advice?

Your poem made me feel seen—I’m not sure why, but maybe it’s because I have stories like yours, and I don’t think the beautiful stories take center stage as much as they should. I love to go to the river, as I live near where it runs, in Virginia. It’s especially pretty at night. I ride my bike while the sun sets, maybe snap a blurry photo of the orange behind the trees with my right hand still holding onto the hand bar. I ride my bike behind the school and take a right, all the way up to the grocery store. Then I turn back around, falling across the recently-paved suburban roads, down, all the way to the river past my house and the school. I sneak across the yard of somebody who, unfortunately, felt entitled enough to purchase a whole chunk of the riverfront, and I drop my bike by the fence at the end of their lawn. I climb to the concrete landing and it’s dark by now and I watch the water, so flat, and the stars, and the bridge that roars far away. My feet hang over the edge and when I point my toes they become the centers of perfect circles, spreading through the water away from me in ripples.

I feel so much, playing my music softly into earbuds (it's usually Knumears or Vs Self at those particular moments, in case you were wondering.) What music have you been listening to lately? Of course, I don't hear the bats above my head like you did, but I see them, and that's good enough for me. Especially because bats means it's warm enough to put up my hoodies, and stick to sweaters under T-shirts.

There are no swans on the river. I think I saw one in a zoo once, but never out free, like I presume your swan is. Where do you even find swans in the wild? There is a piece of wood, on its way downstream, and it's shaped kind of funny. I think its silhouette, combined with its reflection and the little flight trail it leaves on the water surface, make it beautiful enough to compare to your swan. The moon is still though, which is expected, considering it's the same rock you saw above your lake. The whole sky sits above me, sliding away, not quite still yet like the sky you saw. My stars are finally shining through the sun rays. I look at the sinking wash of orange, pale chartreuse, and blue. Like you, "I knew this was a perfect moment." I wanted to cry then, but my tear ducts have been so hesitant lately. Have you had any perfect moments in between the time of the one the poem was about and the time you read this letter? I hope you get to hear something else perfect again, and see it too.

Even if it hurts you to look back at it, and look around and forward and see nothing, I think good things are usually worth that aftermath half-missing, half-hurting. Do you think so?

I knew I was willing to die, in order to have experienced that particular instance of living.

We're the same that way.

Sincerely,

Natalia

Virginia

Dear Natalia,

You've described this scene so beautifully that I feel I've just now lived it. I am deeply grateful to you for it, and for your time spent reading and thinking about my poem. Poems gift us the worlds of others—the ones witnessed, as well as the ones held inside.

So much living has happened since that summer by the lake in Ireland, living that has hurt beyond what I'd ever known, and living that has brought me more joy than I could have imagined possible. Standing on this side of these years, as hard as some parts of them were, I wouldn't wish for another life than the one I've lived. Everything that has happened brought me here. I wrote a book and bought a home. I am married now, and we're expecting our daughter this summer. There have been many perfect moments, big and small. Seeing her on a screen, only a few cells big, filled my heart with joy. I am sure that when I get to see her face for the first time, there will be nothing more perfect to me in the world.

As beautiful as these moments have been, I haven't felt a need to turn them into a poem just yet. I think not everything beautiful needs to exist as a poem. I trust my instincts; if I feel moved to write, I write; but if not, I just try to stay in it as long as the moment lasts. (I love your counting suggestion and will try that!) If I feel words begin to bubble up, I take note of them—writing them in a notebook or, if unavailable, my phone—and then try to get back to noticing, to being. I've found that the urge to write straight away comes and goes, like seasons; currently, I'm in a living season, rarely moved to write in the immediate aftermath. In other seasons, I run to capture everything I've experienced before it slips away. Eventually, I think, what needs to become a poem will, even if that is years after the fact.

Usually I am moved to write not only because I want to capture something, but also because I want to *understand* something. I start with the noticing and follow it further. What is there to discover in my appreciation, in my awe? *Why* has what I've experienced ensnared my attention? With this poem, I started with the quiet because that is what originally struck me, and I kept writing until I unearthed what it was I had to say. Writing a poem, for me, is an act of discovery. It teaches me what I don't know I know.

To properly embark on this discovery, however, I need to be present and open enough to delve into the deepest, quietest parts of my subconscious. The world and the conscious mind can be so noisy! This is where mindfulness comes in. While I wish there were a shortcut to it, mindfulness, for me, requires consistent practice and intentional boundaries in the way I live. We live in a time of constant distraction, where our attention is quite literally a valuable commodity. I am vigilant about protecting my

attention, because otherwise it will be hijacked for purposes not in my best interest (almost always to sell me something or stoke my rage). I try to limit my social media use, including a digital Sunday Sabbath. I also have a strict rule that I cannot access social media while in my creative office so that my mind knows instinctively upon entering that it is in a place safe from the clamor and expectations of the world. I go analog wherever I can and make conscious efforts to distance myself from my phone, the locus of impulsive distraction. (I bought a kitchen safe to put it in, which locks with a timer.)

Most importantly, I choose to let myself be bored. A decade ago, when I was a graduate student studying poetry, a professor remarked on how alarming it was to walk through campus and see everyone consumed by their phones—if not looking down at them, listening through headphones—without interruption. He pointed out that when you fill your mind with the thoughts of others, you have no time or room to form your own. This haunted me, and ever since, I deliberately choose to leave space for my mind to wander or just be, forgoing my phone while in line or waiting at my airport gate. It isn't easy, and it doesn't come naturally, but this is why it's called a practice—I practice at it all the time. So while I love music, and always listen to it while driving or cleaning, I don't have anything that particularly comes to mind these days; I've spent more time in my office, where, if I listen to something, it's classical. I'm trying to consciously reserve more space for quiet, so that I might hear my own thoughts begin to speak. (At this moment, writing to you, between my thoughts, I hear birds.)

With gratitude,

Leila

When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities

To be a good
ex/current friend for R. To be one last
inspired way to get back at R. To be relationship
advice for L. To be advice
for my mother. To be a more comfortable
hospital bed for my mother. To be
no more hospital beds. To be, in my spare time,
America for my uncle, who wants to be China
for me. To be a country of trafficless roads
& a sports car for my aunt, who likes to go
fast. To be a cyclone
of laughter when my parents say
their new coworker is *like that*, they can tell
because he wears pink socks, see, you don't, so you can't,
can't be one of them. To be the one
my parents raised me to be—
a season from the planet
of planet-sized storms.
To be a backpack of PB&J & every
thing I know, for my brothers, who are becoming
their own storms. To be, for me, nobody,
homebody, body in bed watching TV. To go 2D

& be a painting, an amateur's hilltop & stars,
simple decoration for the new apartment

with you. To be close, J.,
to everything that is close to you—

blue blanket, red cup, green shoes
with pink laces.

To be the blue & the red.

The green, the hot pink.

Dear Students,

I had no idea when I wrote this poem that I would ever get responses like yours. I'm amazed and so grateful. Thank you for your insights, your questions, and your incredibly generous sharing of every emotion. Your letters remind me of how crucial it is to feel and share our feelings. It may sound unsophisticated, but I go to poetry to feel. Yes, I love language and form and all the types and shapes of ideas one can rethink through poetry, but at the end of the day, I want my heart opened up anew.

That's exactly what your letters have done to me, you absurdly beautiful writers! Your letters have opened my heart up anew, and they've done so better than some poems can, to be perfectly honest. Then it was a bit overwhelming, trying to respond to such honest, vulnerable, and fully alive writing.

This overwhelmed feeling took me back to working on this poem, a process which involved about sixty drafts and three radically different versions. It was a nightmare, and when I sit down to draft a poem now, I sometimes start to sweat, nervous that I'm about to embark on another ridiculously long journey. Some fellow poets had suggested cutting this poem from my first book. I considered doing that. But I'm glad I didn't. (Though becoming glad—and not just relieved, not just *oh thank god, it's done*—about this poem has been its own ridiculously long journey).

Big thanks to Lee Herrick and to everyone who was in that workshop he led back in the summer of 2016 for the encouragement and the helpful suggestions on this poem. Special thanks to Jennifer S. Cheng for additional conversation about it. After trying out two vastly different versions, I went back to something closer to what I had started with. I needed to trust that early direction, that initial energy. I just needed to bring the poem up to a level of craft that I, very much a baby poet still, was only beginning to understand. No big deal. But yes, thank you, Lee, Jennifer, and everyone else who told me to trust in the poem's original core. It really sounded like you all were telling me to trust myself, and for that I can only keep thanking you. Always.

Now I get to keep thanking you, the letter writers. Thank you, each and every student who wrote me a letter. What a true honor to receive these. I'm sad I couldn't respond to every letter, but I think my heart would've collapsed from that amount of being

opened up anew! (And my hands would not have survived all that typing.) “When I Grow Up...” is a list poem, one that taught me how to inhabit the form in my own wacky way. Before working on it, I naively, perhaps arrogantly, thought that I knew what it meant to write a poem. Writing and rewriting (and rewriting) this one showed me that I hadn’t a clue, that I would keep not knowing, that I would eternally have more to learn. Your letters, Dear readers and fellow writers, have taught me the same about letters—and, really, about living. I have more to learn. Thank you.

Wishing you each your own further possibilities,

Chen

Dear Chen Chen,

My name is Alistar, and I am a senior in North Carolina. Poetry is a huge part of my life; I write all the time, attend different expos, and do all that I can to keep the art of writing alive within me. I want to thank you for writing and sharing your poem, “When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities.” So many pieces connected with me in ways I haven’t thought about before. The way you write “To be a good ex/current friend for R.” in the first couple of lines hits me hard right off the bat. It’s taken me a long time to understand that life and friendship are always ever-changing. We want to be the same forever and never go through pain, but we don’t know if it’ll happen or not. I had a childhood friend I no longer call a friend, and every time we fought I just held onto the hope that in the future things would be great and we’d never argue again. It took me fourteen years to learn that it’s okay that we don’t talk anymore.

My mother is someone I’ve looked up to for as long as I can remember. She has been sick for about two years now. She has an aneurysm that sits in her head forever. They can’t remove it, and it hasn’t shown any signs of bursting. But knowing that it’s there, as well as the millions of doctor appointments we go to, hurts. It hurts to watch her get weaker and weaker every day. I watch every night as she can barely move because she spends her energy trying to work and take care of the family at the same time. All I’ve ever wanted is “To be a more comfortable hospital bed for my mother, to be no more hospital beds.” I hate looking at her as she takes her handful of medications knowing that without them she wouldn’t be able to be my mother anymore. I hate

listening to the online doctor's calls as she explains that her headaches are getting worse. I hate worrying for her every second of the day no matter how many times she tells me not to, how many times she tells me "It's her job to worry about me, not vice versa." Reading your line about your mother made me feel more seen than anything. Knowing that there is someone else out there who has the same worry and feeling of responsibility to help out someone closer to you than anyone else.

Watching my little brother grow up, get the hand-me-downs I once got, and go through life the same way I did yet come out as a completely different person reminded me a lot of the line "To be a backpack of PB&J & everything I know for my brothers who are becoming their own storms." When my sister moved out and my mom fell ill, my dad started working pretty much full-time. I became the person my brother looked to for everything. He comes to me for help with homework, for dinner to be cooked, and for someone to watch over him. I wake him up and remind him to get ready for school, the responsibility weighs on me sometimes. I fear that if I can't take care of myself, who will take care of my brother? We were raised by the same parents and got the same birthday cakes and the same cribs, but he could not be further from me in personality.

Thank you once again for writing and sharing this poem; it has such a familiar feeling of uncertainty for the future, it's comforting. Keep writing, you have a beautiful way with words.

Sincerely,
Alistar
North Carolina

Dear Alistar,

Your letter is so moving. Thank you for sharing so vulnerably and honestly with me. You've reminded me of precisely why I continue to write poetry: to spark connections and deepen conversations. And to have fun with words while doing those lofty-sounding things!

I'm glad that poetry is a huge part of your life. Writing has been important to me since I was little, and then it was in high school that I started to really gravitate toward poetry in particular. Poetry was where I could say all the things that I didn't know

how to say to anyone else. I barely knew how to say these things to myself. But in poems I didn't have to *know*, I just had to be open to wherever the emotion and the language were taking me. Poetry is still where I go when I'm feeling lost and uncertain. It's also where I go when I'm overwhelmed by joy. I hope poetry will continue to be what you need it to be.

Loss of friendship can be shattering. I've experienced this, too. I've only recently been able to write about it a bit, and I'm not sure if the resulting poem is that strong, but I'm glad that I wrote it. I needed to. And I learned again that it's okay to admit when things are hard. It's okay to sit with my heartbreak. In fact, it's good to try to talk with the sadness, to keep listening to what it has to say. Loss and grief are a core part of life, after all. Sometimes I really wish they weren't so central, though. Like, couldn't they just go off to one side for a while longer? But ignoring or suppressing them doesn't make them actually leave. Poetry helps me to develop a different, less reactionary, more considered relationship to these difficulties.

It means the world—the entire cosmos—to me that my writing about my mother made you feel seen. She is one of my biggest inspirations. In my cosmos, she will always be a star. A sun.

Please send along my well wishes to your amazing mother. I'm sure she appreciates everything you are doing for her and for your family. You've taken on a lot of responsibility, particularly with looking after your brother. That requires a deep, deep well of strength, thoughtfulness, and resourcefulness. I hope that you're finding ways to rest and to nourish yourself. My wish for you is some additional support, maybe from school or from another community.

It's just a fact that I could not do all the things I do without the support of my partner, my friends, my colleagues, my students, my former (but forever) teachers, and my family, both blood and chosen. I know you know this already, but your well-being matters. And not just so that you can keep supporting others. It matters because your life matters. Your creativity matters. Your heart. Please know that I'm cheering you on, too.

With PB&J and poems,

Chen

Dear Chen Chen,

My name is Chris, and I'm a senior and upcoming theater major from Texas. I read your poem "When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities" because I felt it was the right time to read it. Every day I feel forced to trim another branch off my life. There's never any room for expansion. Here's your major, that is risky at best; here's your job that pays too little; here's your house that is too small; here's your hometown you will eventually return to. I'm afraid that one day I will wake up and the things I love so much will not feel the same anymore. It's like the first sip of a sugary soda; I always feel terrible at the end of the bottle. There's this quote from a theater show I like, *My Dinner with Andre*, that resonated with me for a long time. "When I was ten years old, all I cared about was art and music; now I'm thirty-five and all I care about is money."

After I finished reading your poem, I felt empty. Everything was going to slip through my fingers and join the wind. Then I read it again, and again, and again, and I am never too confident to say "I get it now" (because to define is to kill), but I have a grasp on things for once. Your poem reminded me of the few, few constants that remain in life. The constants that bring joy, despite it all. I thought about the connections I had in my life between my friends and family. The rehearsals, the after-curtain Chili's, the busy set-build days, the wandering in the dark, the late-night food stamp-shopping, the movie nights, the trips to the zoo when the coupons came in the mail. All these things that made me feel whole, your poem reminded me of. Paths are vanishing by the minute, but the blue, the red, the green, the hot pink socks every Texan theater major eventually wears, they stay with you.

I love your metaphor of storms and cyclones to describe this time of life, picking and prodding at what you want to be your nature. It is a storm: your room gets messy, you do weird things with your hair, you make mistakes and think the world is crumbling around you, and soon the ghouls that are every alternate failure-future will become you. This year, this storm took my arms and told me to hold on, took my legs and told me to go forth, took my eyes and told me to see what's really there, took my head and told me to make up my own mind. I lost my father, who I never really knew, and then I felt like I never really knew myself. I kept kicking rocks hoping that they'd smooth

out, but I just ended up bruising my toe. Sometimes it is just hard to be, and staring at the ceiling can make you feel you're spinning. But connections, your siblings, parents, friends, they hold you down, and for just a moment everything seems certain. So thank you, for filling backpacks with knowledge and PB&J, for giving yourself time alone, but also giving time to the ones you love, and for writing this poem.

Thank you for your time,

Chris

Texas

Dear Chris,

Thank you for taking the time to read my poem with such care and imagination. And thank you for writing this absolutely beautiful letter. You've intertwined language from my poem with your own language so well, particularly when it came to discussing your own storm—of grief and of anxiety regarding the future. I'm scared about the future, too. I think that's only natural, given climate change and increasingly horrific governments and, as you pointed out, an economy that seems only to care about immediate profit and not any long-term stability or investment in the arts and humanities.

I don't want to have to think about money so constantly. (*I am* thirty-five, by the way, and that quote you shared from *My Dinner with Andre* resonates with me a bit too much.) I wish I could just write my poems and hang out with my favorite poets all the time. Sometimes this creative path I've taken seems like the wrong one, and I wonder if my super pragmatic parents were right to discourage me from it. At first, I thought they were just determined to see me unhappy, but over time I've come to see that, while they really could've been more supportive, they were ultimately trying to shield me from suffering.

What encourages me is knowing that there are people who are working to change this terrible system and all its interrelated issues. And I try to contribute to this fight however I can, mainly through writing and teaching. It's cheesy, but true: helping others helps me feel more hopeful. Maybe "helping" is not quite the right word, as that can seem patronizing. Maybe it's more that genuinely connecting with others and fighting for a better future together is what gives me hope. Or, sometimes, it's

sitting together, grieving together, and sharing in the frustration—these moments are important, too. That’s also what poetry offers, I think.

A poem can encourage me to keep fighting. Another poem can give me the space in which to sit down, slow down, and actually feel what I’m feeling, including all the sadness and anger, all the difficulty. Your letter’s wonderful honesty reads like a poem to me. Your letter feels like what I often turn to poetry for: an opening into a fuller human perspective. My often broken, yet still going, still goofy heart is full of gratitude for your words.

With hot pink everything,
Chen

Dear Chen Chen,

Hello, my name is Evelyn. I am currently an eleventh-grader from Texas. I am writing this in regard to your poem “When i grow up i want to be a list of further possibilities.” First and foremost I want to say thank you for writing such a relatable and outstanding poem. This poem is unique in many ways, it doesn’t rhyme but it has a meaning behind every line.

I really enjoyed this poem because it signifies the human connection. It also emphasizes that in order to have good relationships with others you have to be okay with yourself first. The line “To be a more comfortable hospital bed for my mother” is the line that carried throughout the whole poem for me. The reason being when my grandpa is in a hospital bed due to cancer I always wish to just be able to take his pain from him in any possible way. I know the feeling of desperation that one feels when a loved one is going through it.

I know what it feels like to want to give the world up for everyone to be happy and live life with zero pain, and I feel like your words were perfectly organized to describe that. “To be a backpack of PB&J & everything I know for my brothers, who are becoming their own storms,” I relate to this line because when I see my parents and brothers struggling to get to their point of happiness sometimes I just wish I could turn into that possibility and make a change for them.

Lastly, I want to thank you for the great title. The first thing I thought about was my parents! They are immigrants and they crossed the border to give me and my siblings everything they could at such a young age, and I always told myself when I grew up I was going to pay it all off! And what better way to do it than being a list of further possibilities.

Sincerely,
Evelyn
Texas

Dear Evelyn,

It lifts me up to learn that you connected with my poem so deeply. Thank you for reading it and thinking about it with all this genuine attention. I'm very grateful for your lovely letter. First of all, it sort of tickles me how you point out that the poem doesn't rhyme. Some of my other poems do feature rhyme, though usually not in any consistent way throughout, and my partner is always saying that I should write more rhyming poems. I think this is because he is a musician and is used to songs having lyrics that rhyme (though he doesn't write lyrics). Anyway, I'm so glad that you enjoyed this poem and found these points of connection.

Please pass along my well wishes to your grandfather. I'm sorry that he's in the hospital. I'm sure he appreciates all your care and support. It's terrible to have to witness a loved one's pain. I've written many other poems about this kind of witnessing, and this wishing, as you said, to be able to just take all that pain away. Writing has helped me to name these emotions, process these experiences. Writing doesn't erase the difficulty of seeing a loved one in pain, but it does offer some measure of solace. And it helps me to return to providing care and support with renewed strength. I hope you have things that help ground and sustain you during this wrenching time.

For me, "When I Grow Up..." is about the fervent longing to be all these different, often contradictory things for everyone in my life—and all the time, which is impossible. And then in the poem I realize that I still have to take care of myself, too. At the same time, I have to let others take care of me, not only in terms of practical support, but also in terms of the emotional, which can be trickier as it involves letting myself be vulnerable.

I don't know if what I've just said is something that resonates with you, but I bring it up because I think it's so wonderful how much you care about your parents and your siblings, how you want the best for them, how you wish for and contribute to their happiness ... *and* I would add that it's just as important that you're supported, too. I'm sure you know all this already, but it's still worth saying. Your own happiness matters tremendously. Yes, you can strive to be a list of further possibilities for your loved ones. But you just can't be everything for everyone every single day. That's okay. (Oh, I just rhymed! I mean, *day* with *okay* is not the most exciting or original rhyme, but it still counts!) And it's vital to remember to be you *for yourself*, too.

With a backpack of joy,
Chen

Dear Mr. Chen,

I have always been the one to push myself off the cliff so I can fly, although I know it's impossible. My ambition is always changing, and my hunger forces me to go all out to be the best I can. Yet my mind remains fickle and is rated low in decisiveness. Always wanting to be the best, yet, never able to. And this frustrates me. Yet your poem has inspired me to continue pushing myself as there is no tether to what I can be except my imagination.

Hello, my name is Slaansh, and I reside in California. In my school, I'm in fifth grade. Your poem, "When I Grow Up, I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities," resonated with me, acting as a guitar string reverberating in my brain after being plucked. Your start of the poem was intriguing, and your talk about your relationship with R and L piqued my interest. My relationship with R would be my relationship with Advik—a long-lost friend of mine. We had been great friends since first grade, but things started going south when I moved into a gifted academic class in fourth grade and continued in that class for fifth grade. Little squabbles at the soccer field, the handball courts, and lunch/recess tables started to enlarge until a mountain was created out of a tiny molehill. He finally resorted to the dirtiest trick a friend could do, which was break or damage my belongings and talk dreckitude about me behind my back. Sprouting from this, the thread holding us together turned delicate and frail, and nothing but an

autumn leaf carried on a high breeze that blew us apart. We parted ways and haven't crossed paths since the day I lost him a few months ago, yet I hope, as you say, "to be a good ex/current friend for R" that he will one day return.

In your other stanza, when you convey your want "to be the most comfortable hospital bed for your mother" and then you say that "you wish there would be no hospital bed in the first place," I understand, as I'm sure no one wants their parents, friends, or relatives to be in hospital beds. Parents have roots like an oak's. They hold strong even in the strongest of winds. And a child would never want to lose that great, towering oak, as they would end up losing themselves, their model, and their shade against the sweltering sun.

Later in your poem, when you write, "To be, in my spare time, America for my uncle, who wants to be China for me," it sounds all too familiar. As an American-Indian, in my community, to oscillate between two identities is called a struggle. Many use an odd acronym, ABCD, which is in poor taste. ABCD stands for American Born Confused Desis (Indians), yet I think this acronym is a misnomer. If you look from my perspective, it would rather be ABED or American Born Enriched Desis. We need to change the narrative of struggling with two identities. America embraces different customs and cultures and strives to be the beautiful salad bowl where each diverse element stands distinct yet together. Overall, the poem, to me, felt like home. The biggest highlight that drew me to your poem was the title: When I Grow Up, I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities. I am cognizant that the different possibilities will change, no matter the situation. At six years old, I wanted to be a police officer. But at the age of seven, I wanted to become a firefighter. Now, at eleven years old, my dream is to become a soccer star. However, how your poem conceived of possibilities definitely new to me: I never knew I could be a better friend, a better son, a better brother, a better grandson, and a better steward of Earth. Thank you for this new understanding, Dear Poet.

There are a few questions that continue to lurk in my mind, and who better than you to help me out of the fog: does the title of your poem apply to reality? Is it possible to have more possibilities? In my religion, it is held to believe that God has a destiny in store for all of us, which is the path we will have to follow in the end. But I'd like

to know if there is a path that leads to a sundry of other paths to follow, these being ones you can choose. Also, can one still be a list of further possibilities if one fails?

Sincerely,
Siaansh
California

Dear Siaansh,

I'm so honored that you found my poem inspiring and resonant. Thank you for spending time with it and for writing this brilliant letter. I, too, feel that my ambition is always changing, and I also tend to go all out when pursuing my various dreams, though these days they are mostly related to writing. But it took a while to fully commit to this path as a writer. I hope you'll give yourself ample time and room to keep growing in all the ways that feel right to you.

What you've said about oscillating between two identities is very perceptive. There's a similar acronym in my community: ABC, or American Born Chinese. That term doesn't actually apply to me, as I was born in China, but I came to the United States at a very young age, so it's like I might as well have been born here. Sometimes that does feel confusing. But I've learned to see how fantastically layered my own experiences are. I have a distinct perspective to share and that's something to cherish.

I'm sorry about the friend you lost. In my experience, lost friendships are one of the most painful things one can go through. Though maybe your paths will cross again down the road. Just as it can take time, a long time, to figure out who you are and what you want to do in life, so it is with friends and navigating how best to understand one another. In fact, I think these things are always evolving, which makes me hopeful. That said, not every loss is recuperable.

Witnessing one's parents age and suffer from illness is also deeply painful. But I so appreciate how you've written about that part of my poem—"Parents have roots like an oak's." What a gorgeous image, what a true statement. And I especially love oak trees! There was a very tall one I remember from my elementary school years—it stood in a playground by the apartment complex where my family once lived. After

school, sometimes before even going home, I would run over to the playground, hop on the swings in front of the oak tree, and with my backpack still on, I would swing the highest I could, trying to reach its long leafy arms.

It was impossible to reach them, but it brought me great joy to try. That's what it feels like to write poetry, too. Trying and trying when often it seems impossible, but it's the effort itself that is full of joy. Okay, sometimes it's a total headache, but still. Oh, I hope that oak tree is still there. I hope someone else is on those swings now, kicking off from the ground, reaching and reaching (like how you talked about wanting to fly at the beginning of your letter).

As for the (amazing!) questions at the end of your letter, I could go on and on, but I'll do my best to be concise. I think the title of my poem does apply to reality. I believe more possibilities are completely, well, possible. And I would say that this belief is compatible with a belief in God having a destiny in store for each person—because maybe that destiny consists of many changes over the course of a life. Many surprises. And if one fails, that failure can actually lead to one of those surprises, perhaps the most beautiful possibility. I feel like I'm constantly failing when I'm working on poems. But then I realize that that's often what growing feels like: uncomfortable, frustrating, uncertain, fraught. Ultimately, though, even when a poem *has* failed, when I as the poet have not succeeded, I've learned something. It could be something very small, but it's still a gift.

With a fresh green leaf,
Chen

One Child Has Brown Eyes

One child has brown eyes, one has blue

One slanted, another rounded

One so nearsighted he squints internal

One had her extra epicanthic folds removed

One downcast, one couldn't be bothered

One roams the heavens for a perfect answer

One transfixed like a dead doe, a convex mirror

One shines double-edged like a poisoned dagger

Understand their vision, understand their blindness

Understand their vacuity, understand their mirth

Dearest Young Readers:

Thank you all for your heartfelt letters. I shall cherish them forever.

I am very grateful that “One Child Has Brown Eyes” has inspired some very personal responses. Many of you opened up about being bullied for the shape of your eyes, the color of your skin, your weight, your broken English, your clothing, the texture of your hair, etc. I am heart-broken to hear that racism and prejudice and downright meanness are still rampant in our communities. Thank you for being so frank and genuine in your letters. Your stories remind me of my own childhood where I was often bullied to tears. That pain can stay with us for a long time.

Some of you had questions about the form of the poem.

“One Child Has Brown Eyes” is a short poem of ten lines, but it is one of my favorites in my repertoire. (I know that I’m not supposed to have favorites among my children.) I see it as an “almost perfect” poem.

The lines are elegantly balanced, using the idea of yin and yang, the unity of opposites, combining complementary forces that are harmonious and not contentious. There are blue and brown, round eyes, slanted eyes—a diversity of colors and shapes that make the delicate balance of our nation. I know that presently we live in a divided country of blue and red states. But through our children’s innocent eyes, we are a beautiful whole. I employed the anaphora, the repetition of “some” to create a mesmerizing chant, linking one perception to the next, hoping to well up toward a larger “vision.”



wikimedia

I remember starting with at least fifty lines which I edited down through multiple drafts, taking out any images that didn't contribute to the central idea. The waxing and waning of emotion in this poem is told in images, not narrative.

II.

Many of you inquired about “what motivated” me to write this poem Well, one day, I walked into my creative writing class in San Diego, California, and saw how beautiful and diverse my students were. Wow! I especially noticed their bright and inquisitive eyes beaming with optimism and good cheer! I scribbled these lines on an envelope: “One child has brown eyes, one has blue / One slanted, another rounded ...”

Two weeks later, when I considered the third line, the muse hit me with the darker aspects of the human condition, and I was moved to change the tone.

Beginning with “nearsighted,” the poem moved from the physical to the “internal.” I realized that a good teacher must also see beyond the beautiful surfaces of her students and recognize struggle, strife, anger, sadness, darker emotional states.

I used images like “dead doe” and “poison dagger” to deepen this darker tone. Although the beginning of the poem offers the possibility of a balanced pluralistic society, the problems of racism and colorism and injustice are still omnipresent in our culture. A child may also feel sadness and anxiety for personal and familial reasons ... These darker images resonated with many of you and made you ponder the anxieties in your life. Thank you for sharing your heart-felt stories with me.

III. Extra-epicanthic folds.

Some of you commented on “The extra epicanthic folds removed.” I guess I'm on the soapbox on this issue. That line refers to one of my Asian American students who told me that she hated her “slanted eyes” and wanted to get surgery to make them round. In 2017, a report by the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery said that more than 1.3 million people worldwide had double eyelid surgery. One reader said that even her “church grandmas” criticized her “monolid” eyes. We are brainwashed

by social media to believe that double-lidded, large round eyes are more attractive. We are enslaved to Western ideals of beauty. Although this issue is particularly relevant to Asian American women, I believe that everybody can recognize the oppressive beauty standards that the culture imposes on us.

III. “Understand.”

The end of the poem says:

“Understand their vision, understand their blindness
Understand their vacuity, understand their mirth”

The repetition of “understand” is perfectly placed as the last couplet: The speaker/teacher views her students (by extension, other human beings) with compassion and “nonjudgement.” These young students are destined for a bright future, with all the gifts and challenges ahead of them. I end the poem with an uplifting word “mirth” which also means “happiness, joyfulness, merriment” The yin and yang oppositional forces come full circle. Often, one must go through various challenges and stages of enlightenment to find true happiness and unbridled joy!

Dearest young readers, please keep reading and writing, and always be joyful!

Sincerely,
Poet Marilyn Chin

Dear Marilyn Chin,

Hello! I’m Daniel, a current high school senior in Michigan. I first knew about you when I stumbled upon “How I Got That Name,” purely by chance. As an Asian American myself, I found your experiences not only about assimilation, but also dealing with stereotypes, new cultures, and family to be highly relatable and inspiring.

I’m glad to be granted the opportunity to write to you about “One Child Has Brown Eyes.” Hearing your performance of the poem, I can’t help but feel vindicated, as the dramatic tempo and expression you created was exactly how I initially imagined the

poem read. Reading the poem aloud, I found myself connecting with its messages of diversity and perception, immersing myself in its commentary on the human experience and perspective.

I noticed a touch of irony in the multiple usages of one: if every child was truly “one,” why are there so many? I interpreted this as a deliberate message of both unity and separation. People, children, are one-of-a-kind. Blue, brown, slanted, rounded. Yet, in retrospect, this uniqueness also fosters unity, as the threads of human fabric bind people to each other, as one. Even as we bear different attitudes, different backgrounds and histories, there’s a touch of beauty in humanity.

As a tale of mixed perceptions, naturally, I also found themes of empathy in your poem. By using different physical characteristics and behaviors as metaphors for our unique perspectives, I interpreted the message that, in order to truly appreciate the beauty in others, one must acknowledge the differences in our experiences. Whether those perspectives are clear, or clouded by “blindness,” marked by joy or emptiness, they are just as important to be understood.

Sonder. According to Dictionary.com, “The feeling one has on realizing that every other individual one sees has a life as full and real as one’s own.” This is the feeling your poem accurately spoke to me about. “One Child Has Brown Eyes” is a story of children, and of uniqueness, but for readers, is also one of identity. Sometimes, in life, we fail to recognize our own complexities; we cry and we don’t know why, we laugh at things which shouldn’t prove naturally funny, we grieve, sometimes in the best of times, simply because we don’t want to forget. When you told me to “Understand their vision, understand their blindness,” I didn’t just take this as a cue to look at the people around me. Our first metaphysical reflection must be to recognize our own blindness, and understand that our vision is and never will be complete. And that’s okay. By understanding and caring for ourselves, we develop empathy. Life evolves. In the end, who cares about what we don’t see?

To conclude, I wanted to ask you about your inspiration for this poem. For me, deep and meaningful lyrics can sometimes just “appear” after a particularly powerful experience, and I wanted to inquire as to what event, if any, motivated you to write.

Additionally, do you have any advice for an up-and-coming writer who wants to further explore poetry? I'm deeply curious about how you first started your journey as a poet, and what motivates you to continue to love the art as much as you clearly do.

Thank you so much for sharing your verses with the world. I truly found this not just to be a read, but an experience which I can carry into my social life as I transition into college. I hope my letter was meaningful for you to read, as it was for me to write.

With sincere regards,

Daniel

Michigan

Dear Daniel:

Thank you for your amazing, well-written letter. I circled many of your stellar comments.

Hallelujah, you describe the poem perfectly:

People, children, are one-of-a-kind. Blue, brown, slanted, rounded. Yet ... this uniqueness also fosters unity, as the threads of human fabric bind people to each other, as one.

Another brilliant passage:

Our first metaphysical reflection must be to recognize our own blindness, and understand that our vision is and never will be complete.

There are numerous brilliant comments in your short letter. Your sentences are fluid and well-constructed. There is beauty in the diction and rhythm. Your perceptions are as keen as some written by my graduate students. I believe that you have a fine literary mind. Do I see a PhD in literature in the future?

As for my "inspiration" for this poem. You are right when you say "deep and meaningful lyrics can just 'appear' after a particularly powerful experience."

One day, I walked into my classroom in San Diego and was mesmerized by the beauty of my students. I especially saw their expressive eyes. And what a rich metaphor "eyes" could conjure! How physical beauty can lead to a "visionary" exploration.

As for “advice for an up-and-coming writer ...” You are doing it, Dearest young writer. You are reading and writing, asking in-depth questions; and you are honing your tools as we speak. You represent the future of American letters. Please keep reading and writing, my friend! I look forward to reading your published books in the future!

With fondness and “visionary” best wishes,
Poet Marilyn Chin

Dear Ms. Chin,

My name is Isabella. I am a student in eighth grade. Your poem “One Child Has Brown Eyes” caught my attention because it talked about wanting to change who you are to fit into American society’s beauty standards. As a Mexican American young lady growing up in America, I myself have experienced not fitting into the Eurocentric beauty standards. Your poem has made me realize that I am not alone; that none of us are alone and, despite having different cultural backgrounds, we are all being subjected to these standards via social media and television.

After reading your poem I was intrigued to hear your personal opinion on a few thoughts I was left with: Do you believe society dictates or tells us what is beautiful, and do those expectations cause people who do not fit the norms of beauty to feel they have to change or even undergo surgeries? As a teenager who is actively on social media, I have seen many influencers who talk about wanting to change how they look to get more viewers. Often they do change how they look and hide what they cannot change. That being said, why do you think that we as individuals accept these standards versus owning your natural features with pride? In both television and movies, you predominantly see protagonists with Eurocentric features while the antagonists often resemble the general population with various body shapes and facial features. More importantly, what do you think we could do as individuals and as a society to create change in our values for all ethnic and cultural backgrounds? I believe that the television and movie industry should have a social responsibility to portray people of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds in lead roles. This will eventually lead to a society where people can see beauty represented in various forms.

In your poem you have a line that states, “One transfixed like a dead doe, a convex mirror.” With your strong use of vivid imagery, it proves to me that you have a very strong and personal connection to this topic. When I first read the line I did not know what a dead doe looked like, but after I did some research I was able to look at your poem a whole different way. It made me realize that people in our society are so blinded and unaware that they have already been almost hypnotized to fit in. In my school I see many girls who have naturally curly hair like me but are always saying that they do not like their curls and wish they had straight hair, which is a Eurocentric feature. I on the other hand embrace my curls and almost always wear my hair naturally because I see the beauty in curly hair and choose not to change it.

I connect to your poem in many ways. When in your poem you mention, “One child has brown eyes, one has blue [...] One downcast, one couldn’t be bothered,” it reminds me of my experience growing up within a Mexican family. While in your poem you express the difference between eye colors, I experience my own difference with hair color. In Mexican culture there is this value for light blonde hair, while I have brown curly hair. My younger brother has blonde golden curly locks. To this day, my brother gets all the attention for having his hair, even though we have the same type of hair, just in different colors. This made me aware of the Eurocentrism within my own culture, therefore this phenomenon you describe in your poem is really not limited to one culture but really across many backgrounds.

Now that I am aware of the Eurocentric beauty standards across many cultures in the U.S. it makes me realize that we need to find ways to get rid of these values which are causing so much harm in self-esteem and mental health in all. We could start with having more cultural representation in television and movies. To start, major companies need to take the lead on this change by having different ethnic backgrounds portray main characters so that young girls and boys feel that they too are beautiful regardless of their eye color, skin color, or hair color.

Lastly, I would like to thank you for your time and I really appreciate you writing these poems to inspire others to embrace who they are.

Sincerely,

Isabella

California

Dear Isabella:

Thank you for your heartfelt letter.

I love your remark:

“People [...] are so blinded and unaware that they have already been hypnotized to fit in.”

Yes, many of us are subjected to colorism. I am sorry to hear that you feel that your brother gets more “attention” for having “blonde golden curly locks.” We are “blinded” and brainwashed by what the media deems beautiful. We are still stuck with Eurocentric ideals. I remember my grandmother shouting at me for being in the sun too long, fearing that I would get too dark and look like a peasant. Of course, colorism and classism are twin sisters.

I am so glad that you are as proud of your naturally curly brown hair as I am proud of my straight black hair! I love your quote: “[We] are beautiful regardless of [our] eye color, skin color, or hair color!”

Please keep reading and writing poetry!

Sincerely,

Poet Marilyn Chin

Dear Marilyn Chin,

My name is Isabelle. I am a Korean American in my freshman year at a high school in Delaware. I'd like to preface this letter by telling you just how much poetry I've read in the past few months. Our literature class has been reading, analyzing, researching, and scanning poetry of all sorts, and I feel like I haven't *really* been understanding it. The words have just been words and nothing deeper.

Initially, an immediate personal connection drew me to your poem specifically. I will admit, it was very surface level, as has been my understanding of most poetry; the line “One slanted, another rounded” conjured up images of sitting on the rainbow carpet in my all-white first-grade classroom in Dover, Delaware. I could relive the

strange feeling of all those round, wide eyes on me, with my smaller, more angled ones. I felt like a foreigner in the town I was born in, and even at that young age, I couldn't help but compare and wish to be the same.

I then read, "One had her extra epicanthic folds removed," reminding me of the times I considered the double-eyelid procedure after the Korean grandmas at church would comment on my inadequate monolids. I often wonder if my monolids are all anyone sees me to be and if all they can see is what can be "fixed."

My monolids speak to my Korean heritage and identity, and although they are an undeniable part of me, I am often frustrated by their power to limit me. Being an Asian American, it often feels like I need to put in twice the effort to reach my goals as my white peers. And, even among fellow Asian Americans, it is a constant struggle to strive to be "the best," whatever that means. In turn, I liken myself to the others around me, often wanting what their life looks like, never satisfied with my own. But, when I thought more, I realized that I neglected to look beyond the superficial descriptions of the poem; I needed to *understand*. The repetition used in your poem reflected my line of thinking. These different children, "one," are all being viewed as nothing deeper than their eyes in the first lines. Then, the speaker shifts to repeating a new statement: "Understand." This final command to the readers spoke to me, to understand these children's blindness and sight, their vacuity and their mirth. Just like I've been reading poems by looking at the words, I realized I needed to look deeper. The people around me have their struggles and emotions, and, like how I want those to look beyond my eyes, beyond my race, I need to do the same.

The message of your letter will stay with me. And, before I close this letter, I'd like to ask, how would you describe your own eyes? I'd love to hear your answer and thank you for writing this especially insightful poem.

Sincerely,
Isabelle
Delaware

Dear Isabelle,

I am very pleased that your class has been “reading, analyzing, researching, and scanning poetry.” Your analysis of “One Child Has Brown Eyes” is very astute. Thank you for spending valuable time and effort.

Yes, some of us Asian American sisters have “monolid” eyes. And sometimes, in our darkest moments we yearn to get a “double-eyelid procedure,” to get them “fixed” so that we can have “wide round eyes” to conform with Western beauty standards.

Worse, even our own family members judge us by the shape of our eyes. Oh, “Korean grandmas” are treacherous!

I also am very moved by this assertion: “I put in twice the effort to reach my goals as my white peers”; “[i]t is a constant struggle to strive to be the best.” This is so true (and not just a stereotype). Simply, I believe that we are in the quest for excellence and that we want to transcend the challenges before us and realize our goals and dreams. There is nothing wrong with “striving” for our dreams. In fact, it is important that we do so to bring our best minds to the table, be it in the shape of a poem or in a scientific field, or in other disciplines—to help create an awesome world.

As for your question about the shape of Marilyn Chin’s eyes—Dearest Korean American sister, I am very proud of my beautiful “monolid” eyes! Sometimes, I even embellish them with sparkly silver eyeliner.

With fondness and best wishes,
Poet Marilyn Chin

Dear Ms. Chin,

Your poem “One child has Brown eyes” has really made me think about my life. We read your poem and other ones in my Poetry class. I’m a freshman in school right now, and although there were many poems to choose from, I really thought that your poem was amazing. I felt as if the poem was speaking to me.

Part of the reason that I felt like the poem was speaking to me was because I've always felt as if I have to fit in. My whole life I have felt embarrassed for the way I looked, the way I dressed, the way I spoke. I've always wanted to fit in with people, and I still struggle with that today. Throughout this year, I had to switch schools. People there told me I was too loud, so I became quieter and quieter until people told me that I was too quiet. I got told that I was fat and so I stopped eating for a while, and when I became skinny, they told me that I needed to eat. I made mistakes while speaking English, and people laughed at me so I thought that if I just don't speak at all people will leave me alone. But I realized that people will be mean no matter what, so after I switched schools, it became better; people started accepting me for who I really was. So I switched back into me, and realized that everyone is unique and you can't change that. This is why this poem really stood out to me.

I read your poem and understood that people are unrepeatably. Everyone looks and acts differently which is a good thing. I really thought that the first lines brought my attention to what the meaning really is of this poem. "One child has brown eyes, one has blue," this just immediately stood out to me, bringing my attention to the comparison. I started to think of my old school and different looking people. One was built tall, one was small, one's face had a smile, one had a cry. This just really touched my heart, and I thought it was crazy how I can just relate a poem to my own life experiences, because I think I've always thought that poems only apply to the poet, so the person who wrote it. I now realize that this isn't true. I think that you just have to find the right poem and it just speaks to you.

The last two lines of your poem really made me reflect on myself. "Understand their vision, understand their blindness, Understand their vacuity, understand their mirth." Is everyone really that understanding of one another? Because I feel like they aren't, or maybe you just need to find the right people that do truly understand you. Maybe this is why I feel so welcome at my new school—because we are all different but accept one another.

People have bullied me for something that I wasn't, and I didn't realize it until I didn't even know myself anymore. I needed to understand and learn to be myself, and since I'm still going through that, this poem has really helped me understand my

self-worth. I feel like in some way it's boosted my confidence, and it put a smile on my face. Thank you for writing this poem and not only touching my heart but also touching the hearts of others.

Sincerely,
Leonie
New Mexico

Dear Leonie of Albuquerque:

Thank you for sharing your deep thoughts with me. I know how difficult it is to "fit in."

I am very moved by your comments, and in fact, your words made me weep a little. "My whole life I have felt embarrassed for the way I looked, the way I dressed, the way I spoke"—are such heartbreaking words. When I first arrived in the U.S. I was bullied in my school, too. I learned to ignore the hurtful words and find my way through the world.

I am very pleased that you have moved to a new school that welcomes you. It appears that you have become a more "confident" person and don't let other people's opinions bother you as much. "Fat" or "skinny," quiet or loud, blue-eyed or brown-eyed, don't be afraid to express yourself. Bilingual people rock! We have the best of multiple worlds! Dearest sister, always find happiness wherever you go!

With fondness and best wishes,
Poet Marilyn Chin

Dear Marilyn Chin,

My name is Sofia, and I am currently a senior. The second I heard "One Child Has Brown Eyes," I knew I had to write about it. Your poem touched a hidden place in my heart, as it perfectly vocalized this feeling that I have experienced in the past.

Whenever I introduce myself as Asian American, nine times out of ten, I am greeted with the response, "Oh! You don't look Asian." I am half Indian and half Korean. I get my tan skin and big eyes from my dad, and I get my small smile and thick black

hair from my mom. I've always felt pride that I was a perfect mix between my parents. However, because I didn't fit into the stereotypical idea of what a "real" Asian American looks like, there were times where proof of my identity surpassed myself as a person. In those moments, I wish I had a copy of your poem to share with them, because your poem reminds people to take a step back. Look past what they see on the surface, and recognize the complexity and depth of each person they meet. It reminds people to be open, that there might be more to the world than they already know, and that they should embrace it. It makes me wonder, what motivated you to write this poem? Was the reason similar to mine? Completely opposite?

What I think really made this poem impactful for me was the symbolism with eyes. My Ba (my grandmother) had always stressed the saying "the eyes are windows to the soul" to me. It's not an uncommon saying in any way, shape, or form, but your poem continues to prove that, although this is an idea we promote in society, we still struggle to implement it. I also enjoyed how none of the descriptions of the eyes are portrayed in a negative sense. In my experience, normally, writers will show the result of an unaccepting environment with a newfound hatred for an aspect of yourself. In your poem, there is none of that. Even in lines that could be interpreted as negative by the reader, like "One had her extra epicanthic folds removed," it doesn't bring in any negative words or bad intentions.

I am really grateful for your poem. The impact it had on me will be something I can hold onto forever. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Sofia

Connecticut

Dearest Sophia:

Thank you for your kind letter.

I love how you introduced yourself: "I am half Indian and half Korean. I get my tan skin and big eyes from my dad, and I get my small smile and thick black hair from my mom. I've always felt pride that I was a perfect mix between my parents."

Indeed, you are what a “real” Asian American looks like.

We Asian Americans are a variegated lot!

We are proud of our heritage, and we are proud to be a part of this beautiful, diverse, mixed landscape called America.

You ask, “What motivated you to write this poem?” Well, one day, I walked into my class and saw how beautiful and diverse my students were, and I was especially wowed by their eyes!

And you are right, the poem wants the reader to “look past the surface” of our skin and ask larger and more philosophical questions about identity.

No worries about possible “bad intentions” in the words; although there are dark moments with images of a dead deer and so forth, ultimately, the poem is quite optimistic and ends with the word “mirth!”

Best wishes! Many mirthful blessings to you, young reader!

Sincerely,

Poet Marilyn Chin

Wild horse / Caballo salvaje

translated from the Spanish by Urayoán Noel

Wild horse.	Native horse.
Stray horse.	Nobody's horse.
Nameless horse.	Skinniest horse.
Youngest horse.	Night horse.
Sleeping horse.	Street horse.
Scared horse.	Hungry horse.
Phantom horse.	Wild horse.

Caballo salvaje.	Caballo silvestre.
Caballo realengo.	Caballo de nadie.
Caballo sin nombre.	Caballo tan flaco.
Caballo muy joven.	Caballo de noche.
Caballo dormido.	Caballo en la calle.
Caballo miedoso.	Caballo con hambre.
Caballo fantasma.	Caballo salvaje.

Dear _____ ,

Thank you for writing to me about my poem, “Caballo salvaje/Wild horse.” I am deeply moved by your ideas and honored that my poem resonated with you. Reading the letters from the students who participated in this program has been enlightening. I have discovered the multiple interpretations you have given to the metaphor of the horse, expanding the poem’s meaning in directions that I had not contemplated before.

This poem, originally written in Spanish and translated to English by the Puerto Rican poet and scholar Urayoán Noel, was inspired by the population of wild horses that live freely in Vieques, an island off the east coast of Puerto Rico. These splendid creatures symbolize the unconquerable spirit of the human soul in the face of adversity. Vieques, once occupied by the U.S. Navy and used as a testing ground for military practices, endured years of turmoil, ecological damage, and displacement of its inhabitants. “Caballo salvaje/Wild Horse” is a testament to the resilient and rebellious nature of the island and its people, who, like the wild horses, have shown remarkable strength and perseverance in the face of colonial occupation.

I am deeply grateful for the chance to engage with you through poetry. It’s heartening to know that my work has sparked such meaningful connections and reflections. As you continue exploring the vast landscape of literature and your creativity, remember to embrace the journey with an open heart and a curious mind. Pay attention to your thoughts, feelings, and observations with honesty and passion, for your voice is unique and needed in this world.

Sincerely,

Nicole Cecilia Delgado

Dear Nicole,

My name is Gabriela. I am in eleventh grade in Maryland. I really enjoyed listening to “Wild Horse/Caballo Salvaje” because I love how you used the horse; an animal that is free spirited that is struggling with these different situations. I also enjoyed hearing you translate your own poem, which isn’t seen often in the poetry industry. I feel like I can relate to this poem because it is facing new challenges such as “stray

horse” or “scared horse.” My favorite line from your poem is “caballo tan flaco.” This is my favorite line because, coming from a Latin household, my family always comes up with these weird unique nicknames either about my weight, my skin tone, my height, etc., and I’m sure you can understand this. Si soy un caballo tan flaco and sometimes those nicknames get to me just like the nicknames about my skin tone porque soy la unica morenita en la familia so I could just relate to that line. This poem makes me think about the horse symbolizing a person trying to find their own identity despite the challenges they are facing. Did your family ever come up with these weird unique nicknames? If so, I would love to hear them! I really love this poem Nicole, thank you for giving it to the world.

From,
Gabriela
Maryland

Dear Gabriela,

Thank you so much for your honest letter and for sharing your thoughts on my poem, “Wild Horse/Caballo salvaje.”[I’m deeply touched by your kind words and your thoughtful reflections on the themes of identity, self-esteem, and resistance in relation to the poem.

I’m thrilled to hear that you liked the poem and that you appreciated the use of the horse as a symbol of freedom and struggle, and that you were able to relate to its topics on a personal level.

Your insight into the line “caballo tan flaco” and the significance of nicknames within Latin households resonates deeply with me. Indeed, the unique ways in which families express love and affection through nicknames can sometimes carry deeper meaning and emotional weight. I understand the complexities of navigating identity within a family dynamic, especially when faced with challenges related to weight, skin tone, general appearance, or other circumstances. Your ability to find connection and empathy in this line speaks volumes about your inner power.

Answering your question about my personal history, like you, I too was the “morenita de la familia.” I was also short and chubby, and the daughter of a single mother. Although I sometimes felt different and isolated because of this, I was lucky to find a friend and expand my horizons through reading and literature. Later in life, I have been able to talk with my family about the prejudices in my upbringing, hoping that younger generations will have better tools and vocabulary to address these issues, and also feel empowered and supported.

I really appreciate your comment about listening to the poem in both languages. However, I must clarify that I am not the translator of the poem. The talented translator behind the English version is Urayoán Noel, a distinguished writer and scholar from Puerto Rico based in New York. Urayoan Noel’s expertise and sensitivity in translating the poem have been invaluable in bringing its essence to English-speaking readers. I’m forever grateful for his work.

Gabriela, your interpretation of the poem and your willingness to engage with its themes in such a personal way mean the world to me. It’s readers like you who make the journey of writing and sharing poetry truly worthwhile. I’m thankful for the opportunity to connect with you through my work, and I’m inspired by your story.

With deepest gratitude and solidarity,
Nicole Cecelia Delgado

Dear Nicole Cecilia Delgado,

To begin, I would like to say thank you for allowing me to write about your poem “Wild horse/ Caballo salvaje” as it sparked a feeling inside of me when I read your poem. When I read it the first time I didn’t know what to think or feel, but after giving a second read through I instantly knew how I felt.

My name is Lucas, and I am currently a senior in high school. In my Creative Writing class we are looking at different poems and choosing which ones we like the best and writing to the poets who wrote them, and your poem stuck out to me, and so I chose to write to you.

I was born in Guatemala, and I came to the U.S. at around nine months old. I don't remember anything from Guatemala and I wish I did, even if it was the smallest little detail. I have sometimes felt like an outsider and at times I feel as if I don't belong. I feel comfort whenever I am around other people of Hispanic background and this poem brought this comfort. I am ashamed to admit that I don't know any Spanish whatsoever, but just reading the Spanish version of the poem made me feel like I was with people like me.

On the outside this poem just seems like it's about a horse, but to me this poem describes an outsider. One line that really stuck out to me was "Phantom horse." For whatever reason I feel like this line is saying that sometimes people go unnoticed and they are just there and they may be true, but it could also mean that people are just minding their own business and in a sense we are all a "Phantom horse," and we carry on with our lives without caring what other people think. During swim practice, I feel like a phantom sometimes as everyone is messing around whereas I am just minding my own business in my lane, just focusing on me, and at the end of practice people are making conversation and I just go straight to the locker room. Another line that really stood out to me was "Nobody's horse." I originally interpreted this line as someone who doesn't belong to any community or group of people and they have been left to fend for themselves but then I was beginning to think of it like, you don't owe anything to anyone and you are the alpha in your story. One other line that really stood out to me was "Night horse." That line to me meant that you are you when nobody is looking and when everyone is asleep or winding down for the night, it's your time to be how you really want to be. You are free. I think the three lines could be perceived as dark but together they have their own beauty and describe an outsider really well.

This is just my interpretation of the poem, and I would be interested in knowing what the meaning of the poem is to you or if you had an intended meaning or just left it for the reader to decide what it means to them. I also would be interested in knowing what was your inspiration? Did something specifically inspire you to write this poem? And one more thing, why horses?

Sincerely,

Lucas

Wisconsin

Dear Lucas,

Thank you so much for taking the time to reach out to me about my poem “Caballo salvaje/Wild horse.” Your heartfelt words truly touched me, and I’m honored that my poem resonated with you in such a profound way.

Firstly, I want to commend you for your insightful analysis of the poem. It’s fascinating to see how different readers bring their own experiences and perspectives to a piece of writing, breathing new life and meaning into it. Your reflections on feeling like an outsider and seeking a sense of belonging deeply resonate with me, and I’m glad that my poem could offer you some comfort in that regard.

Also, I wish you to have the opportunity to travel to Guatemala someday. I visited your country a few times in the past, and I can testify that it has some of the most breathtaking landscapes I have ever seen. I also know many artists and poets from Guatemala; its artistic and literary scene is vibrant and very relevant. My favorite is Rosa Chávez, a Maya K’iche’-Kaqchikel poet, artist, educator, and activist, and a good friend of mine. Some of her poetry has been translated into English, and I encourage you to seek it out. I believe you’ll find a connection with her work as well.

Regarding the lines you mentioned, “Phantom horse,” “Nobody’s horse,” and “Night horse,” I love how you’ve dived into their significance and drawn connections to your own life experiences. It’s remarkable how poetry has the power to speak to our innermost thoughts and emotions, often revealing truths about ourselves that we may not have fully realized.

I am also a swimmer, just like you. The time alone in silence, just flowing in the water, is very productive for my writing. It helps me think and go deeper into my ideas with ease, not succumbing to the urge of having to do anything in particular with them. During swim time, I often feel grateful to fully disconnect from others, from the urge to be seen or seek approval, especially from the fast pace of social media.

As for the intended meaning of the poem, I believe that poetry is inherently open to interpretation and that each reader brings their own unique perspective to the table. While I had my own inspiration and intentions behind the poem, I always love hearing how readers like you make it their own and find personal resonance within its words.

Why horses? Well, they have always held a special fascination for me. Horses embody freedom, strength, and untamed beauty, qualities that I often find myself drawn to in both nature and the human experience. They represent resilience in the face of adversity and the pursuit of one's own path, unbound by societal constraints. However, I was not thinking of horses in general when I wrote this poem. Specifically, this poem is inspired by the wild horses of Vieques, a small island within the archipelago of Puerto Rico. Vieques, once used as a military testing ground by the United States Navy, has a haunting legacy of environmental degradation and displacement of its inhabitants. Despite this troubled past, the island's untamed beauty persists, with its lush landscapes and pristine beaches serving as a sanctuary for a population of wild horses. These horses, descendants of those brought by Spanish settlers centuries ago, roam freely across the land once occupied by the military base, symbolizing both the island's enduring natural heritage and its ongoing struggle for autonomy and healing.

I'm grateful for your thoughtful letter and the opportunity to connect with you through poetry. Keep exploring, keep writing, and never stop seeking out the beauty and meaning in the world around you. Your unique voice and perspective are invaluable.

Warm regards,

Nicole Cecilia Delgado

Dear Miss Delgado,

My name is Morgan and I am a Tenth Grade Student, located in Texas. We are beginning our poetry unit and your poem caught my attention more than all the other ones, so I wanted to dive deeper! As I read through and analyzed the poem, I grew fascinated with all the concepts presented; in particular, the differences in the translations from the Spanish to English language caught my attention, along with the various connections that could be made with the different horses or even the same horse!

I would like to start with the English translation of the poem. I feel that, in this version, as I understand your background as a translator, I saw a poem of multiple different horses. For example, your "Wild Horse," "Native Horse," "Street Horse," and "Scared Horse" all spoke to me in different ways. As they all start with the altering characteristic of the horse, I saw these four as four different horses, yet all the same. As you start

and end with the “Wild Horse,” I saw these different horses carved into one another in different ways. This had a very deep connection to myself because sometimes I feel that I am a lot of different horses all carved into one horse. I love school, but I also love sports. I love theater, but I also love sleeping. So in this case, my poem could be “Studying Horse, Playing Horse, Performing Horse, Sleeping Horse.” As long as I started and ended with that same identifier, I felt that they all came together in one single way. This really brought some deep thoughts into my analysis of the poem and really pulled everything together in my head. I thought that the diction in this part started extremely strong with a booming “Wild Horse,” and then brought in the other parts as to separate the horses but brought it back in the end with another booming “Wild Horse.” In this part, were you describing yourself, or another person you know? Were you describing your upbringing in Puerto Rico, as a connection to your potential history as being a “Wild Horse”? The structure presented made me think of these questions as you started and finished with the same thing, but never repeated another characteristic in the middle section.

As I moved to the Spanish version of the poem, this brought different yet the same ideas to my thought process. As I am a Spanish Student, I could translate the poem, but I looked more into the actual Spanish language to make some connections. In this language, the identifier or characteristic came second, like “Caballo salvaje” or “Caballo muy joven.” I felt that, in this style, the characteristic being second was like you were identifying the same horse over and over again. Instead of the connection starting at the top and coming back at the end; this time, you brought it all the way through every single line. In fact, I preferred this version because it really pushed me to think of myself and if I am a “Wild Horse” with other characteristics or if I am equally everything that is presented as a characteristic. I want to be one who is equally everything, and this poem brought perspective to that idea and goal of mine. From that, which version would you prefer as a translator and speaker of both languages? Why did you choose to write the poem in your Native tongue, and did you want the poem to be translated for the public?

For some final thoughts, I just want to connect how this poem really made me think about who I am on the inside. I think you did an exceptional job at connecting the reader to thinking that they were the horse, and at the end of the day, whether they are sleepy, tired, they always end up as the same thing. I think it is a reflection of

how there is always light at the end of the tunnel, or at least that is my interpretation of this. I hope in the future to dive more into your poetry because of the way it made me think and connect to my own world and even start writing some of my own poetry. You are an inspiration for myself and others and I wish you all the best in your ongoing journey!!

Best Regards,

Morgan

Texas

Dear Morgan,

Your letter touched me deeply, and I feel honored that my poem “Caballo salvaje/Wild Horse” resonated with you in such a profound way. Thank you for opening up and sharing your thoughts and reflections with me. Your words have truly illuminated the beauty of connection and the shared understanding that poetry can foster.

As I read through your letter, I felt a sense of kinship between us. Your interpretation of the poem, with its exploration of the different facets of the “wild horse” as reflections of your own multifaceted identity, struck a chord within me, showing me new meanings inside my own poem. I love how poetry has the power to illuminate the depths of our inner worlds and provide solace in moments of introspection.

I must say, your insights into the English and Spanish versions of the poem were truly fascinating. It amazes me to witness how language and translation can shape our understanding and interpretation of a piece of literature. I had not really thought before about the fact that the position of the noun “caballo/horse” in each language can actually change its meaning or interpretation. The English version’s structure, with the identifier or characteristic coming first, indeed invites a different perspective, emphasizing the diversity and autonomy of the various facets of the “wild horse” and the complexity within a singular identity. I’m grateful for your keen observations, which deepen our appreciation of the poem’s universal themes.

I want to clarify that, while I deeply appreciate your analysis and insights into the poem’s translation, I am not the translator of “Wild Horse.” The talented translator behind the English version of “Caballo salvaje” is Urayoán Noel, a Puerto Rican

writer and translator based in New York. His skill and sensitivity have brought the poem to life in English. “Wild Horse” is indeed in my recent book *adjacent islands*, published in 2022. I’m grateful to Urayoán Noel for his exceptional work in translating the book and for his dedication to preserving its essence while conveying its meaning to a wider audience.

I’d like to provide further context regarding my book, which explores the landscape and history of the islands of Vieques and Mona, both part of the archipelago of Puerto Rico. Once occupied by the U.S. Navy, Vieques endured years of turmoil, displacement of its population, and ecological damage. However, amidst these challenges, the island’s wild horses are a symbol of resistance and the enduring spirit of its inhabitants. Their presence inspired “Wild Horse,” the poem we’ve been discussing, which seeks to capture the essence of struggle and perseverance in the face of colonial extractivism. Through *adjacent islands*, I aim to shed light on the interconnectedness of these landscapes and their impact on the collective identity of the Puerto Rican nation.

Morgan, I believe that poetry has the power to bridge the spaces between us, connecting people across distances both near and far. Your willingness to dive into the world of poetry with such enthusiasm and openness fills me with hope for the future of literature and the power of human connection. I encourage you to continue exploring the depths of your creativity and to embrace the beauty of your own unique voice. Poetry has a way of weaving together the threads of our experiences and emotions, inviting us to embrace our vulnerabilities and celebrate our strengths. Don’t be afraid to write!

With warm regards,
Nicole Cecelia Delgado

Hola Señora Delgado,

My name is Nicholas. I’m a student in New York. I was first exposed to your poem in my English 11 class where we were tasked to pick one out of nine poems that we read and then write a response to the author. “Wild Horse” is not the easiest of poems to decipher. My interpretation of the horses in your poem is that each horse represents something that someone is going through. For example, “Skinniest Horse” could be someone who struggles with an eating disorder and how they view themselves, and

“Nameless Horse” could be someone who struggles to figure out who they are, someone who is unknown to others because they don’t know themselves. I can understand that feeling. Once upon a time when I first moved to America, I attended school in Brooklyn, and I was that nameless horse. When I first came to America, not only did I not speak the language, which alienated me from my peers, but the culture was so different that I didn’t feel comfortable participating in school even after I had started to learn the language.

When first reading this poem, I had trouble understanding the poem; however, after rereading and analyzing it with my classmates, I felt empowered. I realized that many people have been through the same struggles I’ve been through and that this struggle helps define who we are. Although my analysis of the poem might not be completely accurate, I wondered if an event like the one I described caused you to create the poem? Did you have any other particular reason that served as a foundation for your poem? Furthermore, the repetition of the word *horse* and descriptions of each horse make this poem stand out. I was curious, what motivated you to use this repetitive structure, and what were you hoping to achieve with it? Lastly, what do you hope that readers will take away from your poem? Are there any deeper emotions, ideas, or thoughts that you wish to convey through your writing?

Thank you so much for your time.

Sincerely,
Nicholas
New York

Dear Nicholas,

Thank you for reaching out and sharing your bright ideas about my poem “Caballo salvaje/Wild Horse.” It warms my heart to know that my work has sparked such thoughtful analysis and reflection in you.

Your interpretation of the horses in the poem is both astute and deeply empathetic. You’ve beautifully captured the essence of the deeper aspect of what I aimed to convey—that each new description of the horse represents a facet of human struggle and resilience. Your personal connection to the theme of feeling like a “nameless

horse” upon moving to America adds a layer of complexity to your understanding of the poem. It’s through our shared experiences of adversity and self-discovery that we forge the strongest connections with literature and with each other.

Your perseverance and determination to understand the poem, even when it presented challenges, are commendable. Literature, like life itself, often requires multiple readings and discussions to fully grasp its nuances and depth. I’m thrilled to hear that, through this process, you felt empowered and discovered a sense of solidarity with others who have faced similar struggles. That, in essence, is the power of poetry—to illuminate shared human experiences and foster empathy and understanding.

As for your questions about the poem’s inspiration and structure, I’m touched by your curiosity. While I didn’t experience exactly what you described, the poem is indeed rooted in personal experiences and observations. I was inspired by the wild horses that roam the landscape of Vieques, an island off the east coast of Puerto Rico. These majestic creatures, resilient and free, symbolize the indomitable spirit of the human soul amidst adversity. Vieques, once a site of military exercises by the U.S. Navy, endured years of turmoil and ecological disruption. Yet, like its wild horses, the island and its people have shown remarkable strength in the face of hardship. The presence of the U.S. Navy on Vieques, with its complex history and dire consequences, served as a backdrop to my reflections on struggle and perseverance. The repetitive structure, with its descriptions of each new angle of the horse, serves to underscore the universality of the symbol. Through repetition, I hoped to create a rhythm that would linger in the reader’s mind.

Ultimately, what I hope readers will take away from “Caballo salvaje/Wild Horse” is a sense of empathy, resistance, and the realization that even in the face of adversity, there is strength to be found. I aspire for my poetry to serve as a catalyst for introspection and dialogue, inviting readers to reflect on their own journeys and connect with the experiences of others.

Nicholas, your analysis of my poem and heartfelt questions have truly brightened my day. Please, never hesitate to delve deeper into the stories that resonate with you.

Best wishes,

Nicole Cecilia Delgado

Dear Nicole Cecilia,

All throughout my life I've heard stories of my family, about their ranchos and especially my grandmother. Seeing your poem "Wild Horse" struck a chord with me. Talking about her magnum opus, of all her livestock and caring for each of them as if they were her own kids. The most she talked about were her chickens and horses, a large dazzling black one was her favorite. With his gorgeous black hair, his loud neighs that would wake up the whole family, and hooves rough as steel, he was her pride and joy all through her life in Mexico. With my mom growing up on the farm alongside them she learned to care and love all of my grandmother's animals. The first thing that caught my attention was the title itself. Written in both English and Spanish, the short yet fascinating poem holds so much for interpretation and ideas about the horse and the meaning of it being free without an owner.

Its idea of struggling throughout until it turns into a "Phantom Horse" by the end of the poem really gave me chills. How it's a lawless being without any one to look over it. "Nameless horse" gives it a sense of mystery about who this horse belonged to or why it lacks an owner. To be free is to be living without any rules, and surviving on your own can be a nerve racking experience. Which is sadly how a lot of animals, as my family said, lived in Mexico, where they would roam around until another animal came by and killed them or a person would take them to keep as a pet or leave them dying after an injury. They always looked over some sort of wounded one to save them and slowly aid them back to their best selves.

I question a lot over and over again during my rereading and while writing this letter, why a horse? I understand that a horse is an animal that embodies a lot of things, such as freedom and strength. I like to think of it as showing us the life of this horse, of it being free away from everything and slowly over time it begins to struggle as it ages and eventually succumbs to its death. Such a marvelous poem that is written with the intent of depicting their lives, however it can be corralled back ourselves in a way. That I find truly beautiful and awe inspiring.

Kind Regards,

Noe

California

Dear Noe,

Your letter truly touched my heart. Thank you for sharing such intimate and Dear memories of your grandmother and the life she led on her ranch in Mexico. It's incredibly humbling to hear how my poem, "Caballo salvaje/Wild Horse," resonated with you and brought to mind the stories and experiences passed down through your family.

Your reflections on the poem's themes of freedom, struggle, and ultimately, transcendence, are profound. It's remarkable how a simple image of a wild horse can evoke such complex emotions and ideas. Your interpretation of the horse as a symbol of untamed liberty, yet also of vulnerability and mortality, adds a rich layer of meaning to the poem.

I can sense the depth of your connection to the land and the animals that inhabited it, as well as the deep reverence and love your family held for them. You are lucky to treasure your abuela's favorite black horse, with its strength and spirit, as a poignant emblem of resilience and beauty amidst life's challenges.

As for why a horse? You've articulated it beautifully yourself. Horses embody so much more than just physical strength; they represent freedom, grace, and the untamed spirit of the wild. In their struggle for survival, they mirror our own journey through life, navigating obstacles and finding moments of fleeting freedom and beauty along the way.

In addition to all of this, the horse in my poem represents, specifically, the wild horses that roam freely across the island of Vieques, nestled within the archipelago of Puerto Rico. These horses embody a similar spirit of untamed beauty amidst a tumultuous history, which resonates deeply with the themes of freedom and resilience present in your family's stories.

Vieques, once a site of military occupation by the U.S. Navy, has since been reclaimed by nature and its people. Amidst the remnants of a military past, the island's wild horses are a living testament to the resilience of life in the face of adversity. These great creatures, much like your grandmother's beloved horse, embody the strength of the human spirit, inspiring us to persevere against all odds.

Thank you for your thoughtful reflection and for allowing me to glimpse into your world. Your appreciation for the beauty and complexity of life, as expressed through my poem, is truly inspiring. Your wisdom and insight at such a young age are outstanding, and I have no doubt that you will continue to inspire those around you with your unique perspective.

Warmest regards,
Nicole Cecilia Delgado

Estimada Señora Nicole Cecilia Delgado,

Me llamo Randy y soy un estudiante en la preparatoria, aquí en California. Los poemas siempre me han encantado desde niño. Mi madre siempre me las leía. Me gustaría tomar el tiempo para decirle que su poema me tocó el corazón, y de verdad creo que usted escribió algo muy especial para la gente de hoy.

La verdad es que su poema es tan simple que la primera vez que lo leí trate de entenderlo sin pensar mucho en ello. Pero nada me llegó a la mente. *Caballo Salvaje*. me encanto por su sencillez. Aunque no tiene muchas líneas, lo que me atrajo más fueron las palabras que escogió usted para describir al caballo de qué habla usted como, “Caballo tan flaco”, o “Caballo miedoso”. Lo bonito de su poema, es que se puede entender de muchas maneras diferentes, y creo que muchos pueden relacionarse con el caballo debido a las descripciones usadas. Algunos quizás lo entienden de una perspectiva diferente, algunos quizás han vivido las cosas que usted usa para darle vida a su poema y por esa razón se sienten conectados a su poema tan especial.

Algo que me gusto también qué hizo usted, es que usted le dio emoción al poema también con las palabras que escogió. De verdad, la sencillez de su poema me fascina. La manera que yo lo interpreto es que el caballo es alguien que no tiene hogar, alguien que fue ignorado por la sociedad y por eso tienen las emociones que se menciona y otros sentimientos como, “Caballo miedoso”, “Caballo con hambre”. Lo ven como algo salvaje aunque tenga sentimientos como nosotros y lo ignoran, por eso se siente el caballo como un fantasma debido a que la gente no ve al caballo como alguien “normal”, simplemente está allí. Esto refleja la realidad de cómo la sociedad actúa

cuando ven a alguien que no tiene nada, prefieren hablar mal de aquella persona en vez de dar una mano para ayudarlos aunque sea algo de tomé poco esfuerzo, y creo que su poema ojalá, abran los ojos de muchas personas para cambiar.

Me gustaría dejarle unas preguntas pendientes. ¿Cómo es ser poeta, es algo difícil? ¿Qué hay de trabajar en una impreza?, ¿Cuál fue su motivo de escribir *Caballo Salvaje*?, ¿Cuál es la verdadera manera de entender su poema?, ¿Fue a propósito?. Una vez más, muchas gracias por este poema tan bonito, y gracias por tomarse el tiempo para leer mi carta.

Atentamente,

Randy

California

Querido Randy,

¡Muchas gracias por tu carta! Me siento muy honrada de saber que mi poema, “Caballo salvaje”, ha tocado tu corazón de una manera especial. Es un verdadero privilegio para mí saber que mi trabajo resuena contigo. Me encantó saber que tu madre te leía poemas desde niño y que te has quedado con el gusto por ellos. Agradezco que me escribas en español, ya que es mi lengua materna y el idioma en el que escribí el poema originalmente. La versión en inglés es una traducción del poeta Urayoán Noel.

Me llama la atención que la simplicidad del poema fue lo que más te atrajo. La simpleza es un valor que persigo en mi poesía. Creo que se puede alcanzar mucha profundidad usando palabras simples y que la complejidad de la idea no necesariamente recae en el vocabulario.

Tus apuntes sobre cómo el poema refleja la manera en que la sociedad trata a personas que son ignoradas o marginadas son muy conmovedores. Al leer las cartas de los y las estudiantes que participaron de este programa, me ha resultado revelador descubrir las múltiples interpretaciones que han dado a la metáfora del caballo, ampliando el significado del poema hacia direcciones que yo misma no había contemplado. Verás, “caballo salvaje” está inspirado en los caballos que habitan la isla de Vieques en el archipiélago de Puerto Rico. Esta isla fue ocupada militarmente por la Marina de los Estados Unidos durante muchos años, dejando tras de sí un gran desequilibrio

ecológico y social. La población de caballos de la isla es numerosa, ya que se han ido reproduciendo libremente en los terrenos que antes estaban restringidos para los habitantes de la isla. Son un símbolo de supervivencia y fuerza en un territorio marcado por décadas de lucha y resistencia civil.

Respecto a tus preguntas, ser poeta requiere dedicación, pasión y una conexión profunda con el lenguaje y las emociones. Mi trabajo como poeta se complementa con mi labor como editora y artista de libros en mi pequeña editorial artesanal, La Impresora, ubicada en el pueblo de Isabela en el oeste de Puerto Rico. Disfruto mucho el trabajo en La Impresora: creo que trabajar editando poesía me ha hecho ser más cuidadosa con mi propia escritura, y además me encanta diseñar, imprimir y encuadernar libros a mano.

Randy, gracias nuevamente por tus reflexiones y preguntas. Es a través de la interacción con lectores como tú que el trabajo de un poeta cobra vida y adquiere significado. Gracias por tomarte el tiempo de compartir tus pensamientos conmigo y por permitirme ser parte de tu experiencia literaria.

Sinceramente,
Nicole Cecilia Delgado

Dear Randy,

Thank you very much for your letter! I feel so honored to know that my poem, "Wild Horse," has touched your heart in a special way. It is a true privilege for me to know that my work resonates with you. I loved knowing that your mother read poems to you since you were a child and that you have always loved them. I appreciate your writing to me in Spanish, since it is my native language and the language in which I originally wrote the poem. The English version is a translation by the poet Urayoán Noel.

It strikes me that the simplicity of the poem was what attracted you the most. Simplicity is a value that I pursue in my poetry. I believe that a lot of depth can be achieved using simple words, and that the complexity of the idea does not necessarily lie in the vocabulary.

Your observations on how the poem reflects the way society treats people who are ignored or marginalized are very moving. As I read the letters from students who participated in this program, it has been surprising for me to discover the multiple interpretations they have given to the metaphor of the horse, expanding the meaning of the poem in directions that I myself had not contemplated. You see, “wild horse” is inspired by the horses that inhabit the island of Vieques in the Puerto Rican archipelago. This island was militarily occupied by the United States Navy for many years, leaving behind a great ecological and social imbalance. The horse population on the island is large, as they have been breeding freely on land that was previously restricted to the island’s inhabitants. They are a symbol of survival and strength in a territory marked by decades of struggle and civil resistance.

Regarding your questions, being a poet requires dedication, passion, and a deep connection with language and emotions. My work as a poet is complemented by my work as a book editor and artist at my small independent publishing house, La Impresiona, located in the town of Isabela in western Puerto Rico. I really enjoy working at La Impresiona. I think editing poetry has made me more careful with my own writing, and I also love designing, printing, and binding books by hand.

Randy, thanks again for your thoughts and questions. It is through interaction with readers like you that a poet’s work comes to life and acquires meaning. Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with me and for allowing me to be a part of your writing experience.

Sincerely,

Nicole Cecilia Delgado

Heirloom

Sundown, the day nearly eaten away,
the Boxcar Willies peep. Their
inside-eyes push black and plump
against walls of pumpkin skin. I step
into dying backyard light. Both hands
steal into the swollen summer air,
a blind reach into a blaze of acid,
ghost bloom of nacre & breast.
One Atlantan Cherokee Purple,
two piddling Radiator Charlies
are Lena-Horne lured into the fingers
of my right hand. *But I really do love you,*
enters my ear like a nest of yellow jackets,
well wedged beneath a two-by-four.
But I really didn't think I would (ever leave),
stings before the ladder hits the ground.
I swat the familiar buzz away.
My good arm arcs and aims.
My elbow cranks a high, hard cradle
and draws a fire. The end of the day's
sweaty air stirs fast in a bowl, the coming
shadows, the very diamond match I need.

One by one, each Blind Willie
takes his turn Pollocking the back

fence, heart pine explodes gold-leafed in
red and brown-eyed ochre. There is practice

for everything in this life. This is how
you throw something perfectly good away.

Dear Young Poets,

Thank you for taking the time to read poetry and to write about it with such honesty and care.

Your time and attention are mighty precious to us all. The world is spinning fast. It needs your passion and kindness and the specificity of what you feel and think. We need your brilliance now. Keep making room in your life for conversation with others and for travel and for the wondrous library. Make sure you keep growing and asking questions even after your favorite teachers are in your rearview. Keep poetry close!

Nikky Finney

Dear Nikky Finney,

I just want to start off with saying how much of an honor it is to be writing to you! My name is Cayla, I am a ninth-grader in Maryland. My English teacher set multiple poems around my classroom, and she told me and my classmates to analyze every one of them and yours just so happened to be the one that I felt completely touched by. Your work spoke to me on a variety of levels starting from love and from the mistakes I have made and will make in my life.

The parts of your poem that speak to my soul are, “But I really do love you enters my ear like a nest of yellow jackets.” This deeply connects with me because it is hard for me to accept love. Whenever I get told someone loves me, it is like a stab in my heart. I do not want to believe it, the unlovable feeling consumes me, or that the three words someone tells me are true. I am terrified they will leave me or rip my heart out with no remorse whether it is when my mother is telling me or my boyfriend. All I feel is a scared little girl who has been proven that love is not true. Another one that connected with me is, “But I really didn’t think I would (ever leave).” I feel as if I have a wall built up around my heart that pushes people out when they get too close. The wall shoves and grows taller when I get hurt. When someone hurts me all I want is them to hold me and let me cry in their arms but my defensive mechanism tells me to leave, to forget that they’re my flesh and blood, to forget that my heart longs for him, to shut down and isolate. I feel angry and like I am trapped, and I do

shut down and I never want to, but I do. The third piece of your work that I love, even love the most is, “This is how you throw something perfectly good away.” I may just happen to believe in “too good to be true” or I so happen to be an anxious freak but whenever something seems perfect to me, I cannot help but make up so many negatives, even if it means I must completely lie to myself. I just get so terrified of something bad happening once I get too attached, so to me it ends in throwing something perfectly good away.

This poem impacted me in such a way that opened my barrier and let myself feel. It made me realize who I am and why I am. It’s like one of those where you’re all alone with someone who you may not know really well and it is chilly out and maybe a bit dark and you don’t even think you just talk, you talk until your lips go numb and your tongue cannot bear to move and your mind goes blank because you feel as if you took your brain out and it just got examined. What I am trying to say is thank you, thank you for letting my heart be poured and my brain examined. Thank you for being talented and for feeling all the emotions that make so many kids like me feel less alone in this world. Thank you for your work. I wish you absolutely nothing but the best! Take care!

Sincerely,
Cayla
Maryland

Dear Cayla,

I really needed to read your letter this morning. I read it three times. A poet spends so much time with her head down at her desk trying hard to find the right words in order to say what she deeply wants to say. This is the very important and necessary work that all poets must do. This is our job as poets. But reading your letter was also important and necessary. I needed to know that the poetry that I work so hard on just might inspire a young ninth grader to realize who she is and help her know that she is really never alone in the world! All she has to do is stay curious and open and stay on the hunt for poetry and books that aren’t afraid of the truth. Keep looking for poems and books that invite you into their world. There are so many other human beings working hard to say clear-eyed things about what it means to be human in this

world. Don't worry about the mistakes you have made or will make. Stay focused on each new day being filled with new possibilities. Being human and alive always means there are days where things might not go as planned, but there are also days filled with wonder and surprise. Stay on the hunt for those magical moments!

All good things your way,
Nikky Finney

Dear Nikky Finney,

My name is Max. I frequently read poems for English Class, but your poem "Heirloom" changed my perspective on poetry. Before this, I had never been intrigued by the thought of analyzing and annotating a poem in order to understand my own life. I would come into class the day after the work was assigned, and everyone would point out things I barely noticed. This time, I reread your poem after class and used the insights of my classmates to fuel my imagination. Bit by bit, I uncovered the pieces of a puzzle, and the complete picture showed me compelling personifications of objects, similes between every nook and cranny, as well as an important conflict in someone's life seen through a metaphor. Yet even after my breakthroughs, I was left with questions: why do you personify tomatoes? Why do you isolate certain italicized sentences? Is the ladder you speak of meant to be a metaphor for something bigger hurting you?

Your poem reminded me of a complicated time between me and two of my friends. I started seeing a newer friend more frequently, leaving the older one in the shadows. I grew further apart from the person I had been friends with for such a long time, honestly "... I really didn't think I would (ever leave) ..." Until I did. We did not speak for an extended period until I saw him at a family gathering. As we exchanged looks he came up to me. In what felt like milliseconds, I was bombarded with questions as he took "a blind reach into a blaze of acid," and hurled sentences at me. He made sure to identify everything that I had done wrong, so after a long sigh I let out my true sentiments. I only left him because I watched him do the same to me.

He wouldn't admit that we were both in the wrong, and his persistent nagging entered my ear "like a nest of yellow jackets." I darted to my bedroom and started throwing a pillow at my bed just as your narrator does with tomatoes. I had hurt the friendship.

I guess this is how you “throw something perfectly good away.” Your ideas of heart-break throughout the poem are brilliantly told through imagery and an overarching metaphor that allows me to reminisce on these hard yet consequential times.

While reading “Heirloom” I noticed a feeling of darkness throughout the piece that evoked my feelings of sorrow around my lost friendship. The poem begins with “Sundown, the day nearly eaten away.” Later on, you say “the coming / shadows.” While this refers to the end of the day, for me it also connects to the dread I feel over another day listening to a once-loved friend say things I’d rather not hear. Your descriptive language creates a timeline that shows a relatable struggle. The last line of your poem, “This is how / you throw something perfectly good away” represents not only the destruction of a tomato but also a complicated relationship between the main character and her boyfriends, and as such it reminded me of my complicated relationships. I remember thinking about my two friends and arguing with myself about which one would make me a better person. In my mind, I created two scenarios. The old friend reminded me of pajamas, while extremely comfortable they are not what you wear around others. The newer friend was like a popular brand T-shirt, it might be less comfortable at first, but it is exciting. Just like how you lured the “Radiator Charlie” instead of the “Boxcar Willie,” I chose the brand logo over the worn out pajamas. The fact that the narrator is practicing throwing these “perfectly good” things away, suggests that perhaps she will be the one to leave next time, and I can learn from that. Perhaps next time I will choose friends that I know I can trust so that I don’t have to throw them away.

As I have already mentioned, your poem will never cease to amaze me. The riveting storytelling leaves me all but speechless. Similar to the tomatoes that were thrown away, your piece threw away my original perception of poetry.

Best,
Max
New York

Dear Max,

What an honor to think that “Heirloom” might have given you a new perspective on your own life. That is the ultimate compliment when anyone reads one of my poems. When I was your age, I was a proud, hungry bookworm. I preferred reading quietly over talking with my friends. I found books to be less judgemental than people, less hurtful, so I tended to stay close to them. Then, as I kept reading, I discovered books that helped me understand why people hurt other people. I loved how poems and stories put me on their backs and let me travel with them through the good, the bad, and the ugly. I feel like I developed a trust for books and for the literary arts. As a young reader and thinker, you have such a bright and curious mind for delving into poetry that speaks to the human condition. Thank you for reading and rereading the poem. Poems are meant to be read a few times before the full meaning reveals itself. I, as a poet, am not trying to make a puzzle. I’m not trying to keep something from you, the reader. But because poetry lends itself to short lines or compressed themes sometimes there is the necessity of the reader to dive into the world of the poem more than once in order to be totally submerged in the world of that poem. That’s one of my favorite things to do as a poet, to thoughtfully and carefully build that lyrical, compressed world. I see that you appreciate metaphor and symbolism. Two of my favorite tools as a poet. One of my favorite lines in your letter was this one, “In my mind, I created two scenarios. The old friend reminded me of pajamas, while extremely comfortable they are not what you wear around others.” That line shows how creative and insightful you really are! Thanks, Max! Stay on the great road of curiosity. It won’t let you down!

Nikky Finney

Dear Ms. Finney,

My name is Nina, and I am a tenth-grade student. I am writing to you to discuss and express my appreciation for your poem, “Heirloom.” I watched countless videos of poems, but none of them resonated with me except yours.

The first and second time I read this poem I took away very different meanings. At first glance, I figured this poem was about a literal family heirloom, like a necklace or a painting that had been passed through your family for generations. I pictured you throwing it and smashing it against your fence. However, once I came back to it a few days later I realized that I had misinterpreted the poem, at least to some extent. Your poem is about tomatoes. Fresh, juicy, home-grown tomatoes. I pictured you stepping into a night so heavy that at some points it could feel like it was strangling you with discomfort, but at other times hugging you with warmth. It was one of those nights that only occurs after a long week of rain or right before a storm. As I look out my back door, I can see your fence dripping with the guts of tomatoes. Seeds and skins are on the ground, but the color of the juice will stain the fence until someone brings a scrub brush and bucket to it or the sky opens up and pours. After further thought, I realized this poem is about a mix of the two. It is about throwing tomatoes, but it is also about throwing away love. A love that is so meaningful it feels like it has been a part of you forever, like an heirloom.

When my eyes first crossed over your poem “Heirloom,” they immediately went to the two italicized lines, “But I really do love you,” “But I really didn’t think I would (ever leave).” Before even reading the first lines, I read those two lines as a poem. I never considered that a two-line poem could encapsulate such a full idea. The parentheses are the most important part of these lines to me. They pull the lines together while leaving the reader with a question. I was left with multiple interpretations of this line. Does it mean I love you, and I didn’t think I ever would? But now I do and I am leaving and I didn’t think I would ever leave? Also, the soft and gentle sounds the “I” brings with “love” and “leave,” contrasts with the harsh sound from the word “but.” The word “but” brings an immediate sense of sharpness. Whenever the word “but” is said, it conveys doubt and brings everything into question, like the “acid” of the tomatoes. These lines are still lingering in my mind, as they are so short but packed with substance.

I am wondering if you wrote the poem or the title first. Did you work off the idea of “heirlooms” referring to tomatoes and treasured belongings? Or did you start writing the poem and then come up with this double-sided title? My final question for you is, what inspired you to write about tomatoes? Was it the fact that you grew these

tomatoes, the same way you developed this love then smashed them both? Or was it just the simple fruit, sweet but acidic? My favorite part about tomatoes is the smell of a fresh tomato plant, it is one like no other.

I hope you kill those yellow jackets once and for all.

Sincerely,

Nina

Massachusetts

Dear Nina,

One of my favorite things to do as a poet is to make a poem using a word that is often used in our everyday life (in only one particular way) and ask the reader to hear it in a new way. This is what I think happened when you saw the word *heirloom* in the title and immediately thought of some precious piece of jewelry or a painting. My tenth-grade English teacher, Mrs. Singleton, is responsible for making me such a “keeper of words.” Mrs. Singleton kept a two-ton Webster’s dictionary on her desk and would often fling it open in the middle of class and ask me to find a word on that page that I didn’t know, a word that “stuck” to me for some reason. I would choose the word and she would urge me to read all the definitions of that word aloud. I learned very early that words were not one-dimensional, lifeless things. Human beings can make words simple, by dumbing them down, or they can recognize them as incredibly complicated windows leading to a wide magical world. I am so very grateful for Mrs. Singleton. I do not think I would have become a poet without her early guidance. You are such a wonderful reader. How many times did you read the poem before you wrote this insightful line: “I realized this poem is about throwing tomatoes, but it is also about throwing away love. A love that is so meaningful it feels like it has been a part of you forever, like an heirloom.” Nina, you asked so many great questions. One of them was about the title. You asked which came first, the poem or the title? For me the poem always comes first. I have no idea what the title is going to be until I have composed and crafted the poem. After many years of writing poems, I have learned that the title is always waiting for me somewhere in the hard work of the

poem. I have learned that if I don't work hard at building the poem, then the poem will not have a title that invites a smart reader like you to read it. Thank you for the precious time and attention you gave to "Heirloom"!

Nikky Finney

Dear Nikky Finney,

My name is Pepper, and I'm a seventeen-year-old from the part of Virginia that's only known for two things: farming and reminiscing. I'd like to think I only participate in the farming side of things, but then again I don't like to lie. Most would say there's not much for a seventeen-year-old to reminisce about, until they realize I go to an art school, and then they get quiet.

Speaking of quiet, when my Poetry III class read this poem, there was a peculiar sort of quiet I hadn't felt since middle school. It was that sort of quiet where everyone stares at the one kid who's supposed to know everything about the topic at hand, that quiet somewhere between a showman's minute and suffocating. The point I'm getting to is, speaking as someone who plants their garden each year by the old advice from wise grandparents, I loved the beautiful way you described a simple thing. As a poet, descriptions are my defaults and I'm still learning how to pace properly, and I cherished seeing such steady pacing without excessive descriptions.

Your descriptions were faded yet tangible, the starting lines giving readers time to soak into sundown's shades between the acid of tangerine, dusted scarlet, and the childhood innocence in hues of mulberry. It reminded me of the old botanist drawings and diagrams I've seen in the bottom of trash bins because people thought of them as useless. It reminded me of pretty, paper-thin excuses, folded into cranes, absent of flight but perfect for cutting kindness. I like to think of poetry like a garden, and some people's flowers are brighter than others, but I like my little herb garden in the corner.

My favorite part of this poem is one word: Pollocking. It's such a fun word, thank you for using a fun word.

Even though I've grown every type of tomato you named in your poem, I admit I was more excited about the garden parts of the poem than the emotional side. (Ignoring the emotional aspect is a key part of being a farmer and a high school poet). Maybe it's an odd thing to struggle with, but how do you write such a wonderful scene in such a small amount of time? I have a habit of writing lengthy poetry, so if you have any advice on how to nip the bud without withering the flower ...

This poem is personal, reflecting clearly on something perfectly good being thrown away, but I relate to it in the way I can sympathize with the violet growing through sidewalk cracks. Tell me, when you wrote this, whether on a computer or on a piece of paper, were there vines blooming from your fingertips? Was it a newly discovered ability to pour the greenery out of your veins and let it flourish into something literate?

"Heirloom" was my first introduction to your work, and I have to say it's better than the first time I tried tomatoes. I do not like tomatoes personally, the texture is odd and not exactly a welcome to me, but this was much more of a wonderful experience than that. It was more like that time in life when the lie that only roses smell nice is betrayed, the sweet smell of other flowers invades belief. The small mention of love weasels its way into the garden imagery but it is not unwelcome, it's more subtle like the biting into an apple till the texture changes and you know you're close to the core.

At this point, I believe this letter is a reflection of my own exhaustive poetic habits, but I do hope to grow a bit more and possibly bloom to the level of writing you have so effortlessly. How do you choose the topics you write about? How do you avoid or rewrite the overused cliches that are thrown around so much?

If you use a specific weedkiller for the cliches and procrastination, I'd love to hear your gardening tips.

As a final note, I'd like to say this letter took me an unreasonable amount of time to finish, and it's probably still a little under-fertilized. But sometimes, the best tomatoes are grown green.

Best wishes from a little piece of Nowhere,

Pepper

Virginia

Dear Pepper,

I think the first line of your letter reveals your wise poet's heart. "I'm a seventeen-year-old from the part of Virginia that's only known for two things: farming and reminiscing." Wow. When is the book coming out? I too, spent my early years on my grandparents' farm in South Carolina, and I've been accused of thinking too much about the past and the present. That land in South Carolina—and my wandering across it every summer—really shaped me into a poet. It really taught me the power of composing ideas in my head and how to "keep them on the telephone line" as I moved and did my chores and my homework. It took me thirty years to understand the powerful connection between wandering and wondering and wanderlust. Your use of language is also rich in the honey of poetry. The way you spoke of the sensory world also revealed what you care about and easily notice. I love that you noticed the word, *Pollocking*. Most people see that word and scrunch up their faces. But not you! You asked me some great questions. One of them was about how to not write long poems. Oops! I'm not the right person to ask that question. I'm the queen of long poems! "Heirloom" is actually one of my shorter poems. But I don't think the question is, how do you "nip the bud without withering the flower"? I think you ask yourself, is it a tall flower or a short one? Is it a rose or a peony? Then you ask, what does it need to live (on the page)? Shade? Sunlight? Then you make sure the fragrance and color of the very tall flower runs vertically and horizontally and not just in the first four lines. Does that make sense? Writing long poems is about pace and rhythm and making sure you are not just "talking" but really composing something. Art is when you make something, not when you go on and on about it. I love green tomatoes too—especially with sea salt, fresh ground pepper, and a dash of olive oil. Stay close to the earth, Pepper. It listens to a poet's heart so well.

Nikky Finney

Dear Nikky Finney,

I first heard your poem "Heirloom" when my teacher assigned us to read and watch five poems that jump out at us, judging by whatever we want. The whole seventh grade participated in this (I go to a private school, so that was only about thirteen people).

I chose yours (judging by the title alone) because I was expecting it to be a literal heirloom, passed down through generations of people. That sparked some curiosity in me. What could the heirloom be? Was it something precious, like a sterling silver mirror? Was it something ancient, like a book signed by every U.S. president? What was it? What was it?

Then I realized it was a tomato.

That only made me curiouiser.

I recall the way you read it was not slow, per se, but very controlled. It was like I was in the moment. The way the words portrayed the nagging feeling of a second chance and how it was tossed away in the swing of the protagonist's arm was very detailed. The line, "Both hands steal into the swollen summer air, a blind reach into a blaze of acid, ghost bloom of nacre & breast," really drew a picture for me of a humid summer evening, not only hot with the dying sun, but also with feelings of frustration, and hands tearing into the air to get their anger out on tomatoes.

This links to something in my life, too. I remember, in November of 2023, I was out in what little snow we got with one of my friends. We were playing in a drift and we were throwing snowballs at each other. I would pop my head up over the drift and throw one at him, then he would do the same as I ducked to avoid it. He then stopped, suddenly, and said that he wanted to go inside. It was evening as well, just like in your poem, and the moon was coming out. I said no, I wanted to stay and watch the sunset. He shrugged, said, "all right," and left me there, trudging back toward the house, across the snowy plain with only a few trees. Being stubborn, I dug in my heels and watched the sunset by myself until the air was still and moonlight-drenched, all the while chucking snowballs at the nearest tree in indignation. They stuck, and then my feelings cooled, and I made a game out of it, trying to get three snowballs in a row to line up on the trunk. It was merely a fleeting sense of anger which slowly went away after every snowball left my hand.

Afterwards, we joked about how I had pretended the tree was him. I wonder if the protagonist felt the same way when they were throwing the tomatoes at the fence.

It's strange to think about relationships as concrete things. It feels so *easy* when one has just begun one; don't fight, don't insult them, love them above all, etc. Once one loses that human, whether it was they that ended the relationship, or the other person—nevertheless, it still leaves a hole in their daily norm, even if it wasn't that serious. That ties in to the line, "This is how you throw something perfectly good away." When I read this poem, it made me reconsider my perception toward relationships and how, when the initial love has grown old, it's commitment that keeps the bond together. It's also not easy.

Lastly, as an aspiring poet, I hope to sculpt poems as wonderfully as you did with "Heirloom." I want to perfectly convey emotions onto paper, and I feel you demonstrated that flawlessly. What moved you to write this poem? Were you in a process of change when you wrote this? I would love to fully grasp this concept.

Thank you so much for composing this poem.

Sincerely,
Wren
Virginia

Dear Wren,

One of the things about poetry that compels me to keep writing it but also teaches me to never try and settle on any one understanding of what it takes to write it is the realization that the making of poetry is always accompanied by a world of super surprising things. These surprising things wait for me line by line as I compose the poem. I never know what the finished poem will look or sound like at the very beginning. I never know all of what I will use or need to build or make the poem. I keep my poet toolbox filled with different things. Grammar. Punctuation. Emotions. Questions. The sensory world. I often begin with an emotion or something strikingly visual because I find that visual world really stirs my curiosity. My eyes often bring poems to my mind and my hands. The line in "Heirloom" that you wrote about, "This is how you throw something perfectly good away," was a line that had been circling around my head for weeks. It was a concept that I had started to think about every day. Wastefulness. I don't like to be wasteful. I think we live in a country that is very

wasteful. That bothers me. I think we could do so much better if we didn't waste food, resources, kindness, and people, too. So, there I was with my tomatoes in hand thinking selfishly about my own broken heart when I looked up into the sky and there was that old idea about wastefulness. It had been following me around, like a pesky mosquito, when it suddenly appeared in my poetic thoughts. If a poet is mindful and thoughtful and curious, she doesn't have to look too far to find what she needs to do her work. Thank you for your wonderful questions!

Nikky Finney

Lullaby

for Wendell

Algae pushes north
and further north.
The plankton follows,
and with it, a biome
of multifarious
sea creatures: microbes,
mollusks. Charismatic
megafauna. All of them
now breed at higher latitude,
which means the things
that bred at that higher latitude
now breed elsewhere
and elsewhere
eat. I linger at the end,
the edge of it. I tread
the precipice
of the abyss. It is Friday,
early, and my son
is newly born. In the dark
he coos and grunts. The slowing
stream of morning
news murmurs in his ear.
It cradles him
in a sound, like some

object of history.

Outside, berry brambles
glisten in an almost
absent wind, here

and there starting up
to toss pollen from a node.

The starlings, always
starlings, tighten

like fists along a strand
of telephone wire.

My son, he's sucking
on my finger. He's looking

up at me with two bulbous
slate gray eyes that hardly
let me scrawl these words.

I think of the beluga

whale stitched on his shirt, the fishy
taste of the milk it feeds
its own young, born in warmer
waters, which push them

toward the pole. Here, sun
pummels the windows
and the exposed planks of the house,
summons tiny seedlings

from the mud. It desiccates
the herbs left hanging
on the porch. My son
writhes in my arm, a single

muscle almost, slacking
and contracting as he throws
another wail. The end, it's moving
toward us. His future's set

in an unreadable script.

Through glass
I watch starlings shuffle
and drift, displace

grubworms from the dirt.
My neighbor shaves
a bristlecone pine toppled
in the morning heat. He drops

the limbs in piles
and soaks the wood in flame.
Somewhere in the distance
plankton colonies dissolve.

Whales go with them.

The oak trees
burn in Spain. My son
rolls his eyes over curtains

and patterned sheets, gazes
at the azure
light of the TV. At his lips,
a milky bubble. He moves

his tiny head. He dozes
to the changeless whir
of the machine, gogging, I presume,
at its slow and secret ministry.

Dear Readers,

Thank you for reading and responding to “Lullaby.” It moves me deeply to know that many of you engaged with my writing so carefully and that the poem affected you so much. Truly, I am honored. Moreover, many of you asked intriguing and inspiring questions. How did I come up with the idea for the poem? Why did I shape the stanzas in the way that I did? Why did I call it “Lullaby”?

I’ve answered some of these questions in individual letters, but here I want to emphasize the importance of lived experience to the writing of this poem. I wrote the piece in the early morning hours, during nap times, and in the evening, while my newborn son slept in the crook of my arm. Much of it I typed out with a single hand. While the poem underwent a great deal of revision, elements such as shape and line length seemed to demand themselves of the poem. Even the title, “Lullaby,” I stumbled upon, but once I found it, something seemed to click. I realized only later that it was, in a sense, a kind of dystopian “Lullaby,” soothing the reader in the midst of an oncoming planetary disaster. In short, I couldn’t have written the poem without living out its predicament, and sometimes the best prompt, when you are struggling to write, is simply to live your life.

Importantly, one of you asked: “Do you believe we have gone past the point of no return?” I am not a scientist, and there are probably people out there who could give you a more objective answer, but my response is: it’s complicated. Do I think culture will persist? Yes, in one way or another, I do think so, perhaps for many hundreds or even thousands of years, so long as the planet remains habitable. But will that culture remain unchanged? I think not. Unfortunately, the poorest people on our planet—those who already suffer most from economic exploitation—will likely bear the brunt of human-induced climate patterns. Already, many island nations, from Kiribati to the Solomon Islands, are losing ground annually to rising sea levels. These places have already been the victims of European and American colonialism, but also, paradoxically, they contribute least among sovereign nations to carbon output. Low-lying countries, such as Bangladesh, are likely to see a crisis of water management. Elsewhere, drought will prevent many people—many of them in the

Global South—from accessing safe drinking water. In many ways, then, a crisis of environment is very much a human crisis and, as with many human problems, those with access to resources will be most shielded from its worst effects.

That being said, I sincerely believe that, as communities, as nations, and as a species, we bear a responsibility to care for one another. Sometimes, such care is immediate, but sometimes—and this is the real challenge with climate change—that responsibility is abstract. It is difficult to comprehend how small actions in our own communities can impact people across the globe, but they can and do. My hope in writing “Lullaby” was, in part, to make that connection palpable—to help readers feel the interdependence between themselves, the natural world, and people living very far from them. I hope that, in doing so, you will carry that sense of responsibility with you, perhaps long after reading the poem.

Thank you again for your wonderful letters. It was a joy to hear your many thoughtful perspectives. I hope each of you will continue reading, and I urge you all to try out writing poems of your own. You never know what will show up until you sit down to the page.

Warm wishes,
John James

Dear John James,

As I read your poem, “Lullaby,” it took me to a place of serenity and peace, one that I often find in nature. The expressive details and imagery made me feel as if I was there in the moments you described. I really connected with the theme of nature in the poem. In fact, one of my favorite things to do is sit on the beach and watch as the waves crash against the shoreline, carrying multitudes of life within each swell. Now that I’m older, my appreciation for the beauty of nature has deepened and it makes me wish I was able to see it a lot sooner.

“The plankton follow, / and with it, a biome / of multifarious sea creatures: / microbes, mollusks. Charismatic / megafauna.” At my family’s lake house, we often take the boat to a certain part of the lake to watch as the curious fish swim by the boat and the beautiful birds fly among the trees overhead. I often take the boat or jet

ski out by myself and just idle in the water in this area. It is so peaceful to listen to all the natural sounds of the birds singing their songs, the leaves ruffle in the wind, and the water flow beneath me. I wonder what special, personal connections you have with nature. Are there any specific places in your life that you go to feel peace and serenity and feel the awe of the beauty of nature?

My favorite lines of the poem must be: “Somewhere in the distance / plankton colonies dissolve. / Whales go with them. / The oak trees / burn in Spain.” The beauty of nature is always dissipating around us. As citizens it is our responsibility to preserve the beauty we call nature and do everything we can to aid in its survival. Could you imagine a world where one day nature just died off? Where would we find peace in it? Where would we be able to stare in awe at its immense beauty? Nature is such a precious thing and the driving force to much of the life that lives on the Earth. Although it is easy to take the beauty of nature for granted, there are so many ways to admire and fight to keep those special places, those safehouses, to be our true selves. Who knows, maybe one day we’ll realize we depended on them a lot more than we thought.

Sincerely,

Chase

Cincinnati, OH

Dear Chase,

Thank you for the kind words about my poem. It sounds as if we share this connection to the natural world. I, too, feel grounded—and, often, at peace—when surrounded by plants and trees and waterways. Just yesterday, I was at the Falls of the Ohio, an ancient fossil bed just outside of Louisville, Kentucky. Walking along piles of driftwood and century-old trees whose spidery roots have been exposed by frequent flooding, I couldn’t help but be reminded of the ongoing evolution of natural environments and my own changing place within them.

The Falls themselves are preserved by a massive levee, which makes this part of the Ohio River passable for barges, where even in the nineteenth century it was not. People had to pull their boats ashore, remove their goods, and transport them by land to the other side of the rapids. As human beings, we have irrevocably shaped that

landscape and its waterways, largely for the sake of commerce, but also in order to derive drinking water from it. These are not bad things, of course, but they remind me of how powerful our species is and how thoroughly we have used that power to shape the world we inhabit.

You ask a crucial question, though: “Could you imagine a world where one day nature just died off?” No, I quite seriously cannot. I say this not to be facetious, but because it is a very genuine possibility, one that seems distant but which our civilization makes more real every day. What would happen, then, not just to the natural resources we depend on but also to the beauty from which you and I draw significant peace? What world could writers draw upon? And how would we make art? Would we have any reason, at that point, to make it at all?

While “Lullaby” might not ask these questions directly, I’ve tried to embody that inquiry in the poem by intertwining beauty and catastrophe. The natural imagery draws readers in, but the crisis of the poem begs readers to ask the questions you and I have already encountered—and to make more conscious choices moving forward.

Because you are in Ohio, not too far from my own home state of Kentucky, I want to recommend to you the poet Wendell Berry. He writes with a careful eye toward the natural world and lives out those ethical principles in his own life. I think you would find much to enjoy in his work, if you are not reading him already.

Thank you again for your thoughtful letter. I hope you’ll continue valuing the natural world in the ways you express here—and, perhaps, take up that subject in your own writing, which can be a more powerful tool than you know.

Yours sincerely,
John James

Dear John James,

My (absolutely) wonderful English teacher loves poetry, so she wanted my class to participate in the Dear Poet project. She would play us videos of the poets reading their poems every Thursday, and so my first exposure to your poem was by hearing you read it. I think “Lullaby” first stood out to me the most because of your wildly

vivid imagery. Writing this letter now, I still remember staring up at the projector screen, and it was almost like I could see faded images of all the algae, the plankton, the “multifarious sea creatures,” drifting, as if lost, up north.

I will admit I initially was not entirely sure where you were taking me. Was this a poem about nature? The mysteries of the ocean? It did not strike me at first that this was a poem about climate change, much less a poem about the mystery of your son’s future. But reading your poem again afterwards, as well as your personal commentary, it felt like everything clicked. That just made me like your poem even more. It has made me wonder, what did my parents think when I was born? When they could still cradle me in their hands, the way you could hold your son in one arm and write a poem with the other? Did they see the same things in my serious dark eyes that you see in your son’s slate gray ones? What did they imagine for me? Hope for me? What did they dream for me when I could not yet?

I remember seeing a video somewhere of a woman who broke down because she had found out she was having a daughter. She was happy of course, but then why was she crying as if her heart had been broken? I couldn’t understand it at first. Other people in the comments—many of them mothers, I think—shared how they had also been joyful, but also so very sorry for their future daughters. They knew the way this world treats girls and women is too often far from kind. That made me think, did my mother feel the same way when she knew she was having me and when I was born? Older now but not much wiser, I think she probably did. Having read your poem, I think she must have.

I am still years away from becoming a parent, if I ever even have kids, but it’s as if your poem has already taken me there to those first fragile emotions of parenthood. You have already lived much of life, and your son has just begun his. I think the best parents are the ones who, with all their love and all their regret, cradle their newborns because they want only the best for them and know deep down that maybe their babies will never get the best. But we just do the most we can right?

I especially found the connection you drew between your son’s future and the increasing reality of climate change a certainly unique one. I am curious as to how you came to it. Was there a catalyst of some sort that made you, when holding your son, think of faraway plankton colonies dissolving or oak trees burning in Spain? I personally

interpreted it as your son's future being as uncertain as the Earth's future. I interpret it also as the fear that your son might one day grow up in a world without beluga whales like the one stitched on his shirt. And that makes me inexplicably sad.

Thank you for sharing such a beautiful poem, for sharing a vulnerable moment on the precipice that is fatherhood. I wish you and your family all the best. I hope your son will get to see beluga whales, porpoises, seas of algae, glowing plankton. I hope they never ever dissolve before his eyes. Let us dream for him when he cannot yet.

Sincerely,

Giang

California

Dear Giang,

Thank you for your lovely letter. It thrills me to know that “Lullaby” impacted you as it did. I especially love the way you narrate your experience of the poem, as you moved from a state of uncertainty—“Was this a poem about nature? The mysteries of the ocean?”—to a more consolidated interpretation: this poem considers the possibility that the speaker's son “might one day grow up in a world without beluga whales like the one stitched on his shirt.” This is beautifully put and precisely captures what I thought as I composed the piece.

Your letter made me realize how much we often romanticize parenting. Often, we discuss the beautiful or fun moments, and there are plenty of those, but we don't always talk about the troubling realities you underscore: that, as parents, we can't control for many of the outcomes that befall our children. We can dress them in clean clothes and place outlet covers on the walls. If we're lucky, we can raise them in good neighborhoods and send them to good schools. But we can't control the state of the world they grow up in. That's as true for their political or economic reality as it is for their environmental one, but the trajectory of the environmental future is especially precarious at the moment. I hope that it'll change; I'm not holding my breath.

But I also realize that these things do not change without us as individuals participating in that change. Of course, we need large-scale systemic change if we are going to reverse our impending climate emergency; but even small decisions, in the

meantime, can make a difference: building a garden, growing your own food, buying ethically sourced clothing and goods, if your budget allows. Moving into adulthood, other personal decisions can significantly impact your carbon footprint, from buying an electric vehicle to installing solar panels on your roof. Again, as your resources permit. These are not all things I've been able to afford doing myself, though I hope to be able to do them all soon.

One thing this letter exchange reminds me of, though, is that an act as simple and seemingly miniscule as writing a poem can also have a big impact. If others read the piece and grow more conscious or contemplative through that process, the poem can have an impact on that person's decisions—and thus, on the state of our planet. I don't know if you are an aspiring writer yourself, but I encourage you to try out writing a poem or two—or five! Or twenty! And even if that does not work out for you, I urge you to continue finding small ways to consciously shape our shared environmental future, because even small acts can give way to large ones, and whether you have children or not, we all have a responsibility to leave this world a better and greener place than we found it.

Thank you again for writing such a kind and beautiful letter. It was a pleasure to read. I wish you best of luck in your studies and, I hope, your continued writing endeavors.

Yours sincerely,

John James

Dear Mr. James,

My name is Hannah, and I am eighteen years old. I am from a small town on the sea-coast of New Hampshire. I have lived in this one town my whole life and were it not for the wonders of the Gulf of Maine, my town would not be standing here today. It is a town whose backbone was the fishing industry and profited from whaling back when the creatures swam in abundance. Now, very few fish in this town, but seafood is still advertised to tourists over the summers as the thing to try. It is not that we have forgotten what we were built on; it is that people don't care. They don't care about our symbiotic relationship with the ocean like they used to because it doesn't serve a purpose to them. If we let down the ocean it has the power to destroy, and people seem to forget that until their cars have been totaled and basements flooded.

Some of my very earliest memories are of the ocean. My grandmother would take my brother and I on sunny summer days when my parents were working. She would make sandwiches, cut copious amounts of fruit, and pack snacks into her blue bag. We would spend the day swimming and playing in the sand. My family would take long walks on the beach with our dogs during COVID to escape. Now as I prepare to leave for college in a few months, I can't help but find myself longing for the quiet of the ocean. Sometimes I'll go sit on the wall and blast music through my headphones (Noah Kahan is my go-to for beach listening) and just stare at the blue, the birds, the Isles of Shoals off in the distance.

I was very surprised by the content of your poem after reading the title. I expected a sweet, soft story. Instead, readers were given a stark reality check, which I thank you for. A lullaby is the song for the end of a day to drift a baby off to sleep, and your poem was a lullaby for life as we know it if we do not stop the climate crisis. It truly feels as if we are "treading the precipice of the abyss" as you wrote. We could all fall into the dark with one subtle gust of wind throwing us off the cliff, or we could make a big leap and save ourselves.

I thought the use of your son to represent the entire population of young people in the world was a fascinating use of a rhetorical device. You were able to take something you knew very well and connect it to emotions to make the reader feel something. How did you come up with the idea to write a poem about climate change where the main focus was a baby? My interpretation when reading was that children tend to be a topic many people have a soft spot for, and using them as a way to bring awareness to climate change is extremely smart. It is true that climate change is going to change the way your son lives in the future, hence the line "his future's set in an unreadable script." I feel this way sometimes, too, when thinking about my own future. I have spent thirteen years going to school here in my town and will soon spend another four years of undergraduate study. After that I will attend medical school for another four years, then a residency program, and then finally become a doctor. And for what if we are doomed by climbing temperatures and rising oceans? Why do I try so hard in my studies if we will meet our downfall? I sit in chemistry class listening to the solutions being poured out in front of me, it just seems so simple, but our leaders refuse. I guess those in power don't care about our green earth because at least they'll still have their money to remind them of the color.

Your poem was a reminder that adults do care about how they are leaving the world. It seems that those yelling the loudest about “the hoax of climate change” are those who won’t even be alive in the next fifteen years. I want a successful life, like what you want for your son, and to have that I need to be alive. We won’t be alive if the sea reclaims what we took and floods the lands. We won’t be alive if deforestation takes more trees from the ground. We won’t be alive if the temperatures increase. I don’t want the life I’ve pictured for myself if we are all to end in a fiery blaze of doom. I don’t want to spend my years studying to not be able to save anyone because they’re all dead after our Earth finally rebels. I don’t want to have children if they never know the look of the evergreen forests where I spent my summers. Your poem reminded me that some people do still care, even if it seems like a hopeless battle at times. I was able to acknowledge my own fear of the future and our devastated climate and think more deeply about what a real solution means.

Thank you,
Hannah
New Hampshire

Dear Hannah,

Thank you so much for writing. I am pleased to hear that “Lullaby” affected you as it did and thrilled that the tension I sought to generate is coming through in the poem. I share your sensibility that people, sometimes especially our leaders, tend to disregard the impacts of our changing climate. Indeed, I grow incredibly frustrated, because it seems that so few people value the kinds of things I value: gardens, art-works, poetry, culture. The natural world, for its own sake, and not for the profit we can derive from it. My hope is that poetry can change that, though I’m not entirely confident that it will.

Thanks, too, for sharing your experience growing up in New Hampshire. I relate to it on a deeply personal level. Aside from my very early years, which I spent in Southern California, I grew up in Kentucky, first in the suburbs and then in what I increasingly hear described as the “ex-burbs” of Louisville. My family cared for thirty-two acres outside of the city. We had a rushing creek, a small lake filled with catfish, and rolling hills marked by trees and open meadows. It was an idyllic place to live, not unlike

your hometown, I imagine. Our land blended seamlessly into that of our neighbors, in what seemed an endless expanse of forests, orchards, and horse farms. Over time, though, I watched more and more of that land sold off to developers. The trees were ripped out and replaced with neighborhoods. Grasslands were paved over. An apple orchard, where as a kid I used to wander, was flattened for housing lots. (There's a poem in my first book about this.) Pretty soon, hardly any of that land remained available to natural ecosystems. Nature and culture overlapped, often violently, with little apparent care exhibited by the people who profited most from this change.

But some version of this is happening everywhere. In Brazil, rain forests are constantly demolished for cattle ranching. Elsewhere in Kentucky, people are giving up family farms and leaving the hollers to pursue opportunities in cities, sometimes far outside of the state. To your point about fishing: I was recently in Port Royal, Jamaica, a small fishing village outside of Kingston, where it seems people are increasingly abandoning traditional practices in favor of the tourist industry. You can't blame them for doing this. Jamaica is not a wealthy country—too much money is funneled out of the country, mostly to American and European companies—and people have to make ends meet. The fact that someone can make more money working an hourly job at a resort simply doesn't incentivize traditional agricultural practices or the relationship those practices facilitate with ocean habitats or with the forest ecosystems of the island, which are more fragile than those on the mainland. It is frustrating, isn't it?

You asked how I came up with the idea for "Lullaby." Well, I'm a teacher and a scholar by trade, and a lot of what I do is to think about literature from an ecological vantage point. I often ask myself and my students: how did people in a particular time or place think about themselves in relation to their environments? How does their poetry reflect or model this thinking? So the idea of ecology, and of environmentalism as a political movement, is never far from my mind. But then, it was the biographical experience of holding this week-old baby and thinking about his future—an environmental future which seems so woefully predetermined—that prompted the first few lines of the poem. He really did have a shirt with a whale stitched on it. And, generally speaking, a ton of children's books and toys depict "charismatic megafauna": recognizable animals, such as lions, giant pandas, or polar bears, which you probably see on TV or in a zoo. I kept thinking to myself: *This is a lie. It's misrepresenting our relationship to these creatures. It misrepresents their emotional wellbeing. It misrepresents the*

spaces they inhabit. So I began riffing on that idea, expanding on it, but also drawing on the world around me (the “berry brambles,” for instance, are right outside the office window) as well as the news (“the oak trees / burn in Spain”). I just kept doing that until I ran out of steam, I suppose, but I let the poem take me where it wanted to go and allowed it to surprise me along the way.

You ask why you should “try so hard in [your] studies” if climate change is simply going to destroy the world we currently live in. This is an excellent question. Despite my frustrations, things are getting better. The auto industry is moving more and more toward electric vehicles. I see more solar panels on my neighbors’ roofs every week. When I drive across the country, I see those enormous white turbines, which you never would have seen a little over a decade ago. So, for all of the doom and gloom, things are progressing, if not as quickly as they should. But importantly, we need people like you to step into leadership positions: to lead the way, as I’m sure you will, in sustainable medical practices, but also to direct environmentally friendly infrastructure and develop cleaner energy—and, of course, to write environmentally conscious poems! So I think the answer is, keep doing what you are doing, but as you do so, remain critical of the world you inherit and aware of the ways you can change it for the better.

Thank you again for this letter. It is such a joy to discuss these ideas with smart young people. Your observations make me optimistic for the future. Best of luck as you move onward toward college and, one day, to medical school. I know you will alter our world for the better.

Yours sincerely,

John James

Dear John James,

My name is Lucy. I am in Eighth Grade, and I am from Washington. I have always loved poetry, both reading and writing it, trying to understand the intentions of the author, finding the hidden meanings. When I read your poem, “Lullaby,” I was immediately drawn to it. It paired vivid imagery with amazing concepts. There were a few sections in particular that stood out to me.

First, this section caught my eye: *I think of the beluga whale stitched on his shirt, the fishy milk it feeds its own young, born in warmer waters, which push them toward the pole.*

I loved the connection this drew between the personal intimacy of your relationship with your son and the incomprehensible vastness of global warming. The dynamics are incredible. I think it's important to understand the interconnectedness of us and our personal lives, and the huge, surreal events of our globe. We, tiny specks of dust in a giant void, are given a chance to make an impact on something much bigger than us. We can influence the world, even in tiny ways. Also, it can be hard to imagine that these inconceivable, larger than life problems are going to affect *us*. Sure, we can regurgitate facts about rising sea levels and believe it, but understanding how it's going to affect *us* is different. How it's going to change the way *you* live, how it's going to affect where *you* can live. The future is so bleak it's easier to block it out, to push it off as something that's going to happen eventually, but won't happen to *us*. Think of it like how we picture death, the idea that our names will one day be etched onto a tombstone feels surreal, sometimes downright impossible. Other people will die, but *we* won't. Other people are going to be affected by climate change, but me and my family will be fine. This poem showcases the line that so many people miss, divulges the misconception that leads to so much of our world's inaction.

I loved your choice of description here: *Sun pummels the windows.*

It's a short section, but I think selecting the word "pummels" as the verb tells a lot. First of all, purely sensorially, it's a very good description of the sun beating down on your back. However, it becomes even more interesting when we look at it through the lens of the rest of the poem. As humans, we've come to think of the sun as something that warms us at the beach, that grows our crops. It's our savior. This poem (and even more specifically your choice of the word "pummels," which has a very aggressive tone) shows that while the sun does help us, that's not the whole story. Sunbathing by the waves is amazing until you walk away with skin that's lobster red and stretched tight with pain. Crops grow amazingly until the drought hits, and they are left limp and dehydrated, scorched by the sun's harsh rays. This phrase recognizes that while the sun is the root of life on our planet, it plays a vital role in the slow warming of our planet.

I wanted to mention this excerpt: *My neighbor shaves a bristlecone pine toppled in the morning heat. He drops limbs in piles and soaks the wood in flame. Somewhere in the distance plankton colonies dissolve.*

Humans are the culprit behind climate change. Most everybody knows this, but even so, it's hard to imagine that us as individuals have anything to do with it. That long shower you took last week isn't going to affect anything, right? It's that kind of thinking that is our downfall. Thinking that your personal impact is so tiny, it won't do anything. However, in this excerpt we see a correlation between your standard next-door nobody and *real world impact*. While your carbon footprint is indeed irrelevant in the grand scheme of things, so is everybody else's—and look around, see where that got us. EVERYBODY is insignificant. That makes it even more important that we *all* take action, that we *all* take responsibility for what's coming out to be the biggest hurdle humanity has had to face yet.

I thought “Lullaby” was amazing, and these sections are only the half of it. The poem as a whole comes together to paint a picture, detailed down to the minute, but zoomed out enough to see the global patterns. The tone and voice of the poem was incredible, with ominous hints sprinkled throughout. The frequent line breaks make the reader slow down, almost replicating the steady and slow trudge of climate change. The sensory descriptions were great, and the personal connection with your son was displayed with transferable emotion. Thank you, Mr. James, for such an amazing poem.

Sincerely,
Lucy
Washington

Dear Lucy,

What a joy it is to receive your letter. You are a close and careful reader, attentive to details large and small—to the interdependence of image, technique, and concept, and to the intertwining of heart and mind which, I think, the best poems manage to perform. I can tell from your wonderful sentences that you are also quite a good writer yourself. It's even more impressive that you are *only* in the eighth grade!

Your observations track much of what I was trying to do in “Lullaby.” Indeed, I aimed to capture what you call the “dynamics” of the poem, which swerves between “personal intimacy” and the “incomprehensible vastness” of climate disaster. I hope that the poem makes this very abstract, distant conflict *feel* personal and immediate. In fact, if poetry has a role to play in the so-called “real” world of politics and economics, it is its capacity to help us sense our place within larger, often destructive systems and to move us to act on that sensibility. As Percy Bysshe Shelley puts it, “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” I hope the poem—or poetry, in general—can inspire some kind of action on the part of the reader.

More than sheer scale, however, I also wanted to address some of the other conflicts you note—for instance, to dispute the impersonal logic that so often governs our behavior. As you put it, “Humans are the culprit behind climate change,” but “it’s hard to imagine that us as individuals have anything to do with it.” In making this conflict feel personal, and in grounding it in the minutiae of everyday observations, I sought to demonstrate the personal culpability we all share in this conflict and the extent to which those seemingly minor decisions—the long shower, the engine left idling—really do impact the future of the people we love most. I also wanted to underscore forces that are simultaneously harmful and life-sustaining: how the sun pummels the window or our backs, providing us with vitamin D and initiating photosynthesis (totally necessary to agriculture) but also warming our planet and, as you point out, burning our skin, leaving us “tight with pain”—a great phrase.

But I am talking about these things as if I planned them all out, and what you’ll learn, if you decide to pursue any kind of creative writing yourself (which I hope you will!) is that we poets often stumble upon these kinds of questions without necessarily meaning to do so. Before writing the poem, I had done a lot of research on climate-related issues, often by exploring how people in the past have thought about their own changing climate, whether it changed by human-induced means or not. So the question of climate emergency was certainly on my mind. But it wasn’t until I sat down at a computer, with my son in my arm, that the situation of the poem—and, really, the main crux of it—came to me. Then it was simply a matter of getting the language onto the page, which I guess is supposed to be the difficult part, but this one came together quite easily.

If I can offer a piece of advice then, from one writer to another, it would be to continue looking closely at the world around you—to remain open to experience and observation, as you clearly already are. Often, that is the place where the most crucial conflicts come to a point in our lives—and from which the best and most personal writing often emerges.

Thank you for your kind letter, and best wishes to you as you make your way in the world, as perhaps a writer and most certainly as an astute citizen of the planet.

Yours sincerely,
John James

Dear John James,

My name is Tesia, I am a junior. I send this letter to you in order to send my appreciation for such a well-written, descriptive poem. “Lullaby” reminds me of the many anxious thoughts about the future that people experience. These thoughts, expressed throughout the poem, clash with the tranquil scenes in the present time of the narrator, showing how said worries engulf one’s mind.

I wanted to know more about your decision to utilize enjambment and cut your lines in the way that you did. Did you space your stanzas with a specific intent behind it all? Your nontraditional approach shows your creativity, and I’m interested in your thought process.

My favorite devices included in this poem are your usage of imagery and sensory details. As a reader, I can close my eyes and almost visualize the poem rather than simply viewing words on a page. Your writing style not only allows for the audience to hone in on the smaller, vivid details, but for many readers to “see the bigger picture” that you’re trying to illustrate. I interpret this as hyperfixation, especially with the first few stanzas. It reads as if the narrator is overanalyzing his environment, focusing on such microscopic details that many wouldn’t notice within their daily life and magnifying them.

“Lullaby” reminds me of my own thought process, as someone who has the tendency to absorb the little details of life. My worries spiral from such miniscule things as the hopping of a robin or, as you describe it, “berry brambles / [glistening].” These are details that tend to be passed over, but when we fixate on them, they enlarge in importance. We realize that the world is so intricately sculpted and interconnected. We eventually realize that its latticework is steadily crumbling as a result of environmental changes and natural disasters. Eventually, such a habitual task of cradling a child to sleep evolves into thoughts of the world at large and the many problems that exist within it. The human brain is truly interesting.

If you happen to read this letter, thank you for taking the time to do so. I appreciate your efforts in creating this poem and truly revere your ability to gather each and every thought of yours in such an instantaneous moment. Based on the background information that I have read about this poem, you were holding your son, Wendell, as you wrote this poem. How impressive! You seem like you’re good at multitasking. Personally, I find that poems come to me spontaneously, too, except my thoughts tend to get swept away quite quickly. In terms of poetry, I hope to, one day, allow my mind to wander as you have in this piece. Thank you, again.

Tesia

New Jersey

Dear Tesia,

It was a serious pleasure to receive your letter and, as I read it, to learn so much about my own poem. Thank you for spending such time and care on it. I’m especially intrigued by your question about why I “cut my lines” the way I did. I love that verb, *cut*. It’s a great way to think about the editing process, especially for this piece.

Interestingly, the current structure is not how I originally planned to format the poem. Starting out, I used long lines, probably averaging twelve or thirteen syllables each, and alternated those between couplets and tercets (so, two- and three-line stanzas). I brought that version to my writing group, where a fellow poet suggested that the alternating line structure modeled a kind of rocking motion. I loved this idea, but the poem felt a little too bulky to my mind—too slow and languorous to capture the

anxiety you rightly detect within it. At the time, I had been reading a then unpublished book by Jorie Graham—*To 2040*, now out from Copper Canyon Press—where she uses very short-lined quatrains (four-line stanzas), and I thought to myself: why don't I try out this form? As I started “cutting” the longer lines into shorter, faster units, something just started to click and I knew this was the right form for the poem.

Since then, I've tried this form with other poems and it never quite fits. This is often the case for me: what works in one poem often does not work for another. Every poem is its own ecology—its own little system of ideas and sounds and images. It's like an organism: all parts have to work together. Rarely do two of them work the same way, since no two ever share the same parts. The short-lined quatrains just happened to work for this piece.

I love, too, what you say about “hyperfixation.” There is something to this—in this poem, but in many of my other poems as well. I strive to dial in the reader's attention: to focus vision (or sound, or touch) to the most minute level possible, or at least the most minute level appropriate to the focus of the poem. In doing so, I often find myself revealing very large objects or systems. I'm interested in fractal patterns, for example, which replicate themselves at levels both micro- and macroscopic: from our cells to the stars. In “Lullaby,” particularly, I wanted to focus on personal and intimate details in order to place the speaker (and, by extension, the reader) in the midst of an unfolding climate catastrophe, with the hope that this might implicate the reader in this catastrophe and, maybe, inspire some kind of action or change.

But the whole process always is one of “wandering,” as you point out—of looking in one direction and finding something shiny or interesting, and then looking elsewhere, for something else. Each time, I try out new combinations of sounds, new images, new ways of forming the poem. So, keep wandering, and keep yourself sensitive to the spontaneity that drives your own poems. It is a valuable perspective, one we do not value enough in our culture, but it is necessary to ground ourselves in the workings—and the beauty—of the physical world that surrounds us.

Thank you again for your kind letter and I wish you the best in your studies. I hope one day to read your own poems.

Yours sincerely,

John James

Flora numérica/Numeric Flora

translated from the Spanish by María José Giménez

One hundred and seventy-three out of every thousand women
in Alabama were named Rosa

in nineteen fifty-five.

One of them sat in a bus
that carried all of us women to a future of jobs
and museums but with an idea of justice
that roamed around the seams of the car industry.

(Some Rosas were not counted in the census
because they had just crossed the border
or just germinated.)

A girl born by caesarean who wasn't breastfed
was the last one named Rosa
in nineteen eighty-nine.

That same year Rosanas stopped being born.

In the eighties Rosarios went extinct.

In the year nineteen ninety
not one girl was named Rosemary.

In two thousand five, one out of every thousand women
in the United States was named Rosa.

There is residue of the Big Bang in roses,
residue of radiation, there are fewer bees
on the planet pollinating those roses, there are fewer Rosas.

Flora numérica

Ciento setenta y tres de cada mil mujeres
se llamaban Rosa en Alabama

en el mil novecientos cincuenta y cinco.

Una de ellas se sentó en un autobús
que nos llevó a todas a un futuro de posiciones

y museos pero con una idea de justicia
que rondaba las costuras de la automovilística.

(Hubo Rosas que no contaron en el censo
porque recién habían cruzado la frontera
o habían germinado).

Una niña que nació por cesárea y no lactó
fue la última en llamarse Rosa
en el mil novecientos ochenta y nueve.

Ese mismo año dejaron de nacer Rosanas.

En la década del ochenta se extinguieron las Rosario.

En el mil novecientos noventa
ninguna niña se llamó Rosemary.

En el dos mil cinco, una de cada mil mujeres
en todos los Estados Unidos se llamó Rosa.

Hay residuos del Big Bang en las rosas,
residuos de radiación, hay menos abejas
en el planeta polinizándolas, hay menos Rosas.

Queridas y queridos lectores:

Muchas gracias por tomarse el tiempo de leer y reaccionar a mi poema “Flora numérica.” Estoy muy conmovida con las formas tan originales y hermosas en las que han interpretado y respondido al poema. Siempre que leo respuestas a mis poemas, aprendo muchas cosas que no había pensado sobre lo que escribí. Hay algo en la poesía que hace que lo que escribimos signifique mucho más de lo que a veces somos capaces de entender quienes lo escribimos. La poesía trata de hacer asociaciones entre cosas que no parecen estar relacionadas. Es el asombro que nos crean estas asociaciones el que produce ese efecto que llamamos poético. También sucede que cuando esa asociación se vuelve universal o es demasiado usada, perdemos interés. A veces, los poetas intentamos devolverle el asombro a una imagen o a un símbolo que ha sido asociado a una sola idea por demasiado tiempo. Pienso, por ejemplo, en la asociación de la imagen del corazón con el amor, la imagen de la paloma con la paz o de la manzana con la tentación. Lo mismo pasa con la imagen de la rosa, que asociamos a la bondad y al amor. Esa fue una de mis motivaciones al escribir el poema, devolverle el asombro a la rosa y pensar en formas en las que no la hemos imaginado.

En segundo lugar, siempre he pensado en la importancia que tiene tener un nombre y no otro. Ser nombrado. Todos tenemos una historia que contar sobre por qué nos llamamos de una determinada manera. Nuestro nombre es esa palabra que nos inscribe en la sociedad y también es el primer sonido que asociamos con lo que somos. Los nombres también tienen un relojito adentro que nos dice qué estaba pasando en el mundo cuando nos nombraron. Por eso, hay generaciones en las que hay más personas con un nombre determinado. Desde pequeña me encantaban los datos como la rotación de los planetas, el tiempo de gestación de los mamíferos o la cantidad de personas con mi mismo nombre. Saber estos datos me daba una satisfacción difícil de entender. En este mundo regido por datos y números, disfruto devolviéndole el asombro a la matemática.

Por último, la poesía también sirve para despertar nuestra conciencia y llevarnos a querer hacer cambios concretos que nos acerquen a la sociedad que soñamos, como nos enseñó Rosa Parks, y para crear las condiciones que permitan que generaciones

futuras disfruten de una sociedad más justa y con mejor calidad de vida. Gracias por el regalo de saber que hay tantos jóvenes con la capacidad de conmoverse con este deseo.

Con los mejores deseos,

Mara Pastor

Dearest Readers,

Thank you so much for taking the time to read and react to my poem “Flora numérica.” I am deeply touched by the original and beautiful ways you have interpreted and responded to the poem. Whenever I read responses to my poems, I learn many things that I hadn’t thought of myself about what I wrote. There is something about poetry that makes what we write mean much more than we, the writers, sometimes understand. Poetry seeks to create associations between things that don’t seem related. It is the wonder that these associations create which produces the effect we call poetic. However, when an association becomes universal or overused, we lose interest. Sometimes, poets try to restore the wonder to an image or symbol that has been associated with a single idea for too long. I think, for example, of the image of the heart with love, the dove with peace, or the apple with temptation. The same happens with the image of the rose, which we associate with goodness and love. That was one of my motivations for writing the poem, to restore the wonder to the rose and imagine it in new ways.

Secondly, I have always thought about the importance of having one name and not another. Being named. We all have a story to tell about why we are called a certain name. Our name is that word that inscribes us in society and is also the first sound we associate with who we are. Names also have a little clock inside them that tells us what was happening in the world when we were named. That’s why there are generations where more people have a certain name. Since I was little, I loved facts like the rotation of the planets, the gestation period of mammals, or the number of people with my same name. Knowing these data gave me a satisfaction that is difficult to understand. In this world ruled by data and numbers, I enjoy bringing a sense of wonder back to mathematics.

Lastly, poetry also serves to awaken our conscience and lead us to want to make concrete changes that bring us closer to the society we dream of, as Rosa Parks taught us, and to create the conditions that allow future generations to enjoy a more just society with a better quality of life. Thank you for the gift of knowing that there are so many young people with the capacity to be moved by this desire.

Best wishes,
Mara Pastor

Dear Mrs. Pastor,

Your poem “Flora Numerica” reminded me of all the reasons I want to pursue a career to change the world. I’m a seventeen-year-old, mixed-race girl who has great passion for being the change I want to see in the world. I want to one day be in a position where I have the opportunity to give people who look like me, but also those who do not, the chance of a life greater than the one I have now. Truly I want to see in the world, people from all backgrounds, all walks of life, everyone and everything to have the chance to live a prosperous life.

In your poem, there are five social issues I was able to identify (though I’m sure there were many more) that resonated with me strongly. These were civil rights, immigration, healthcare, assimilation, and the environment. Your ability to effortlessly and thoroughly transition from each of these topics was remarkable, and each time you did it, you captivated me even more. The use of the word *Rosa*, and its ability to progress through each of these topics, starting from Rosa Parks and its connections to civil rights and going all the way to the environment by changing *rosa* to *roses*. Being able to showcase the versatility of one word, specifically one name, was absolutely fantastic construction on your part and what makes this such an impressive poem. Additionally, the mention of these issues in this way indicated to me that there is still so much progress that has been made, and yet there is still more that needs to be done to live in an optimal world.

Being mixed with black and Puerto Rican, there’s not many times I get to enjoy both English and Spanish writing, but your poem not only introduced me to this, but displayed to me how much language can affect literature. With English being

my first language, it was easy to identify the complex sentence structures, the repetition, allusions, and other literary devices being showcased, but also having the opportunity to read the Spanish version, I noticed something very interesting: With the English version, some things weren't a perfect translation, but nonetheless the meaning didn't suffer because of that, though reading the last line of the poem in Spanish," *hay menos abejas \ en el planeta polinizándolas, hay menos Rosas.*" The ending was so much more fulfilling in Spanish than in English. With the name Rosa and the word for roses being *rosa* in Spanish, this made the poem tie together beautifully at the end and connect everything together in a more concise way than the English version did. This being the first time getting to read something in English first, then in Spanish, aided to the learning that I'm making to increase my fluency in Spanish. Knowing that I can use this poem and other poems of yours to diversify my reading, practice skills, and maintain knowledge of the world is another reason for your talent as a poet.

Thank you for writing this beautiful poem and shedding light on me and millions of other readers to the issues that need to be addressed in our society. Hopefully one day our world will be a place of equality, empathy, and beauty for both people and nature alike. In the future I would love to be a part of this change for the better and by then, hopefully, my literacy in both English and Spanish will help me advocate for all people and every issue that I can.

Sincerely,
Ajale
New Jersey

Querida Ajale,

Muchas gracias por enviarme tu carta y por haber leído mi poema con tanto detenimiento. Me alegra saber que el poema interpela la complejidad de tu origen. Yo también vengo de un trasfondo mixto, pues mi familia paterna es de España y la materna de Puerto Rico. Esto me hizo darme cuenta desde joven de las complejidades de crecer negociando y entendiendo mi identidad. Creo que esta fue una de las razones que me llevó a escribir desde pequeña.

Te felicito por tener tan claro tu propósito de hacer una diferencia en la vida de quienes te rodean. Confío en que así será. Te invito a que sigas escribiendo con este propósito.

Por otro lado, me emociona tu lectura y la forma en que identificas los problemas sociales que aborda el poema. Escribí el “Numeric Flora” mientras era estudiante en Ann Arbor, Michigan. En aquel momento, reflexionaba sobre lo que significaba ser una latina inmigrante proveniente de una de las últimas colonias del planeta viviendo en un pequeño pueblo del Midwest. En esta experiencia, me interesé en aprender cuáles eran esos puntos de contacto entre las luchas de las comunidades negras y latinas en Estados Unidos. Creo que en el poder de buscar los puntos de intersección de nuestras luchas comunes como vía para adelantar el bien común.

Por otro lado, como sabes, la rosa siempre se asocia con el amor y la bondad. Me interesaba complejizar todos los posibles significados que asociamos a este símbolo e intentar darle un nuevo significado.

Pienso que el hecho de que puedas leer el poema y entender sus significados a partir de tu experiencia interseccional te da un superpoder. Te invito a que sigas explorando la poesía contemporánea de poetas puertorriqueños como Pedro Pietri, Willie Perdomo y Ángela María Dávila, si todavía no los conoces. Estoy segura de que leerles fortalecerá y enriquecerá tu propósito de vida.

Tu retroalimentación y la profundidad de tu lectura me han enseñado algo nuevo sobre mi propio trabajo, y por ello te estoy muy agradecida.

Sigue explorando y compartiendo tus pensamientos, ya que tu perspectiva es verdaderamente valiosa.

Sinceramente,

Mara

Dear Ajale,

Thank you so much for sending me your letter and for reading my poem so attentively. I am glad to know that the poem resonates with the complexity of your background. I also come from a mixed background, as my father's family is from Spain and my mother's family is from Puerto Rico. This made me aware from a young age of the

complexities of growing up while negotiating and understanding my identity. I believe this was one of the reasons that led me to write from an early age.

I congratulate you on having such a clear purpose to make a difference in the lives of those around you. I trust that you will achieve this. I encourage you to keep writing with this purpose.

On another note, I am excited about your reading and how you identify the social issues the poem addresses. I wrote “Numeric Flora” while I was a student in Ann Arbor, Michigan. At that time, I was reflecting on what it meant to be a Latina immigrant from one of the last colonies on the planet living in a small town in the Midwest. Through this experience, I became interested in learning about the points of contact between the struggles of Black and Latino communities in the United States. I believe in the power of seeking the intersections of our common struggles as a way to advance the common good.

Additionally, as you know, the rose is always associated with love and kindness. I was interested in complicating all the possible meanings we associate with this symbol and trying to give it new significance.

I think the fact that you can read the poem and understand its meanings through your intersectional experience gives you a superpower. I encourage you to continue exploring contemporary poetry by Puerto Rican poets such as Pedro Pietri, Willie Perdomo, and Ángela María Dávila, if you are not already familiar with them. I am sure that reading their work will strengthen and enrich your life purpose.

Your feedback and the depth of your reading have taught me something new about my own work, and for that, I am very grateful.

Keep exploring and sharing your thoughts, as your perspective is truly valuable.

Sincerely,

Mara

Dear Maria Pastor

I'm a student in 9th grade, I'm also a 13 year old who loves music and fiction books and movies. Thanks to my class I was able to read this poem after we were assigned to read a poem created by a female class, and I decided to choose yours, not only because I, like you, am Hispanic, but also because after reading the other poems, "Numeric Flota" was my favorite since it talks about us women and some of our struggles, even mentioning the event where Rosa Parks was involved. I also read your biography and I found impressive and admirable that being a Latina/Hispanic woman, which limits us from some things and especially in the past, you have been successful in your work.

Just as you were given the option of having a translation of this poem, it would be very comforting

to be able to read the great and creative work of more Latinas having success out of their countries knowing that their words are heard and admitted by other people apart from our own community. Through the whole letter I asked myself why exactly you decided to choose the name "Rosa." It could have been something else like "María" or "Isabella" which are very common names among Latin/Hispanic people, which could have been the reason to chose it, or was it due to a specific situation? which is also common for some authors or even artists to take their inspiration from.

I really appreciate the time you spent on reading my letter and other student's letters. I'm pretty sure you will make a right decision when choosing a letter. Lastly, since your way of expressing is through your poems, what advice will you give to a young person like me who is still choosing wether to express their feelings through art or focussed on a normal job for the future? Wise words are always good to the heart and mind.

Sincerely,
Nahomi

Dear Mara Pastor,

I'm a student in ninth grade. I'm also a fifteen-year-old who loves music and fiction books and movies. Thanks to my class I was able to read this poem after we were assigned to read a poem created by a female, and I decided to choose yours, not only because I, like you, am Hispanic, but also because after reading the other poems, "Numeric Flora" was my favorite since it talks about us women and some of our struggles, even mentioning the event where Rosa Parks was involved. I also read your biography and I found it impressive and admirable that being a Latina/Hispanic woman, which limits us from some things, and especially in the past, you have been successful in your work.

Just as you were given the option of having a translation of this poem, it would be very comforting to be able to read the great and creative work of more Latinas having success out of their countries knowing that their words are heard and admired by other people apart from our own community. Through the whole letter I asked myself why exactly you decided to choose the name Rosa. It could have been something else, like Maria or Isabella, which are very common names among Latin/Hispanic people, which could have been the reason to choose it, or was it due to a specific situation? Which is also common for some authors or even artists to take their inspiration from.

I really appreciate the time you spent on reading my letter and other students' letters. I'm pretty sure you will make a right decision when choosing a letter. Lastly, since your way of expressing is through your poems, what advice will you give to a young person like me who is still choosing whether to express their feelings through art or focused on a normal job for the future? Wise words are always good for the heart and mind.

Sincerely,

Nahomi

Florida

Querida Nahomi,

Gracias por escribirme y por leer mi poema con tanto cuidado. Me alegra saber que compartimos la experiencia de ser hispanas y que mi poema inspira a jóvenes como tú a cuestionar las formas en las que la sociedad intenta limitarnos.

Te felicito por tener la curiosidad de leer a otras escritoras latinas. Sin duda, muchas de ellas han sido mis maestras en la escritura. En la poesía de Puerto Rico, te recomiendo leer a poetisas como Julia de Burgos, Angela María Dávila y Margarita Pintado. Además, te gustará conocer a escritoras del resto del Caribe hispano, como Chiqui Vicioso de República Dominicana o Legna Rodríguez Iglesias de Cuba, por mencionar algunas.

Sobre por qué escogí el nombre Rosa, era un nombre que me interesaba porque, además de ser común en las comunidades latinas, la flor que lleva este nombre simboliza muchas cosas que quería cuestionar, como la idea de bondad o su vínculo con el amor. Además, comencé a escribir este poema mientras esperaba un autobús, o como le dicen en Puerto Rico, una “guagua”, lo que me hizo pensar inevitablemente en Rosa Parks.

En cuanto a tu pregunta sobre qué le recomendaría a una joven escritora que aún no sabe cómo expresar sus sentimientos, mi consejo es que explores todos los medios que puedas. Estás en una etapa maravillosa en la que tus sentidos pueden reconocer con franqueza lo que te sienta bien. Tu cuerpo te dirá cómo expresar tus emociones, así que escúchalo. Recuerda que no tienes que decidirte por uno solo. A mí, por ejemplo, me encanta escribir, pero también me fascina bailar, y busco espacios para expresar mis emociones de esa manera.

Muchos artistas, incluyéndome a mí, tienen un “trabajo normal” que les permite ser solventes y dedicarse simultáneamente a la escritura. Es importante equilibrar ambos aspectos para mantenerte solvente y comprometida con tu arte. Si sientes una vocación artística, no la ignores; explórala mientras también consideras las necesidades prácticas. No esperes demasiado para darte esa oportunidad.

Agradezco tu carta, y ha sido un placer recibirla, junto con las de otras personas que se tomaron el tiempo de escribirme. Espero que mis palabras resuenen con tu corazón.

Un abrazo literario,

Mara

Dear Nahomi,

Thank you for writing to me and for reading my poem so carefully. I am glad to know that we share the experience of being Hispanic and that my poem inspires young people like you to question the ways in which society tries to limit us.

I congratulate you on having the curiosity to read other Latina writers. Many of them have undoubtedly been my teachers in writing. In Puerto Rican poetry, I recommend reading poets like Julia de Burgos, Angela María Dávila, and Margarita Pintado Burgos. Additionally, you might enjoy getting to know writers from the rest of the Hispanic Caribbean, such as Chiqui Vicioso from the Dominican Republic or Legna Rodríguez Iglesias from Cuba, to name a few.

Regarding why I chose the name Rosa, it was a name that interested me because, in addition to being common in Latino communities, the flower that bears this name symbolizes many things I wanted to question, such as the idea of goodness or its connection to love. Furthermore, I began writing this poem while waiting for a bus, or as they call it in Puerto Rico, a *guagua*, which inevitably made me think of Rosa Parks.

For a young writer unsure of how to express her feelings, my advice is to explore all the mediums available to you. You are at a wonderful stage where your senses can candidly recognize what feels right. Your body will tell you how to express your emotions, so listen to it. Remember, you don't have to choose just one form of expression. For example, I love writing, but I also enjoy dancing, which also helps me express my emotions.

Many artists, including myself, have a “normal job” that supports their artistic pursuits. It's important to balance both to stay solvent and dedicated to your art. If you feel a calling to the arts, don't ignore it—explore it while also considering practicalities. Don't wait too long to give yourself that opportunity.

I appreciate your letter, and it has been a pleasure to receive it along with those from others who took the time to write to me. I hope my words resonate with your heart.

A literary hug,
Mara

Dear Ms. Pastor,

My name is Rebecca. I live in California. In English this year we've read Emily Dickinson's poems, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and now we're starting F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. I really enjoyed *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, I loved how, despite the criticism she received, Hurston still published her book and now it's become a staple in school curriculums. The sheer determination she had to get her story out is inspiring.

I connected with your poem the most because my middle name is Shoshana and its English translation from Hebrew means Rose. I liked that even though you wrote about how as time moves on there are fewer and fewer Rosas they're still so distinct. That even though there are different variations of the name—Rosanas, Rosarios, Rosemary—we're still all one in the same. I thought the part of "there are fewer bees on the planet pollinating those roses, there are fewer Rosas" was powerful because you're comparing the critical nature of global warming to the need to have Rosas. That without attending to and preserving, the world wouldn't be able to survive. Additionally, the quote of Rosa Parks, "One of them sat in a bus," made me smile because I loved how, without even writing who it was about, everyone knows exactly who you're referring to.

If your name isn't Rosa, why are you focusing on it so much? I was given my middle name because I was named after someone. Do you have a Rosa to whom you look up to and aspire to be like? Also when did you decide you wanted to be a poet? How did you decide? Were you always into English and reading and writing or was it something you got good at after you worked on it? (I understand that everyone gets better with practice but did you have that initial natural talent for it in the beginning?) Thank you for taking the time to read my letter and I really hope to hear back from you! Have an amazing day!

Rebecca (Shoshana)
California

P.S.: Don't worry about Roses going extinct, I'm here and planning to make something big of myself one day.

Querida Rebecca,

Te agradezco muchísimo que te hayas tomado el tiempo de escribirme. Me encanta que me platiques sobre los libros que estás leyendo y lo que te atrae de ellos. Creo que ese deseo de dialogar sobre lo que leemos es una de las razones por las que me volví escritora. A través de la escritura, puedes establecer un diálogo asincrónico con los autores que te inspiraron.

De los autores que mencionas, a mí me apasiona la poesía de Emily Dickinson. Creo que de alguna forma mi poema dialoga con el de Dickinson titulado “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers.” Así como Dickinson redefine la esperanza de una forma original, yo también quería devolverle el asombro a las rosas. Siempre me ha gustado cómo Dickinson logró ser tan fiel a su subjetividad y a su manera única de ver el mundo. En aquel momento, pocos la entendieron, pero hoy en día no dejamos de redescubrirla. Por eso también digo que la literatura es un diálogo a través del tiempo. A veces, no es hasta mucho después de que escribimos y dejamos este plano que nuestra escritura recibe a sus lectores soñados. Tengo suerte de recibir esta carta ahora que puedo leerla y responderte.

Para contestar a tus preguntas de por qué me enfoco en la imagen de la rosa y si hay alguna rosa en mi vida que me inspiró a escribir el poema, te cuento un poco del contexto en el que lo escribí. Escribí este poema mientras esperaba por un autobús, cuando era estudiante doctoral en la Universidad de Michigan. Ser latina y vivir en un pueblo del Midwest me había confrontado con situaciones que nunca había experimentado mientras crecía en Puerto Rico. Esto me había hecho interesarme en las luchas comunes de las comunidades latinas y negras por conseguir adelantar las agendas de sus comunidades para crear contextos más justos.

Simultáneamente, estaba enamorada y buscando quedar embarazada, así que había comenzado a buscar posibles nombres para esa potencial personita que deseaba engendrar. Encontré una base de datos que te decía con una gráfica cuántas personas se habían llamado de determinada manera a lo largo de los años. Como el símbolo de la rosa es tan mencionado en la poesía, quise jugar con ese símbolo o nombre para darle un nuevo significado.

Me preguntas también cuándo supe que quería ser poeta. La verdad es que no fue algo que decidí de forma tan consciente. Sabía que quería ser escritora desde que tenía 8 años porque me encantaba escribir, ¿adivina qué? ¡Cartas! Estando en la universidad, entré en la carrera de literatura comparada y comencé a tomar talleres de cuento. En uno de estos talleres, la profesora me pidió que escribiera unos poemas. Acepté la invitación. De ahí, seguí escribiendo poemas y noté que incluso los cuentos que deseaba contar se volvían poemas. Un par de años después tenía el manuscrito de mi primer poemario. Siempre me gustó leer, pero no fue hasta que comencé a escribir poemas que me empecé a interesar de manera formal por leer poesía. Por otro lado, escribo y leo principalmente en español, aunque a veces me salen algunas cosas en inglés.

Me encanta que me cuentes sobre tu segundo nombre y que significa rosa en hebreo. Shoshana se parece mucho a “Rosana”, que menciono en el poema, y que al combinar las palabras Rosa y Ana significa algo así como “Gracious Rose”. Me parece que ahí tienes un poema tú misma que contarnos.

Por último, me alegra poder despreocuparme por la extinción de las rosas. Estoy segura de que su propagación está en buenas manos.

Un gran abrazo literario para ti, Rebecca Shoshana,
Mara

Dear Rebecca,

Thank you so much for taking the time to write to me. I love hearing about the books you're reading and what attracts you to them. I think that desire to discuss what we read is one of the reasons I became a writer. Through writing, you can establish an asynchronous dialogue with the authors who inspired you.

Of the authors you mentioned, I am passionate about Emily Dickinson's poetry. I believe my poem somehow dialogues with Dickinson's "‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers." Just as Dickinson redefines hope in an original way, I also wanted to bring wonder back to roses. I've always admired how Dickinson remained true to her subjectivity and unique worldview. At the time, few understood her, but today we continue to rediscover her. That's why I say literature is a dialogue through time. Sometimes, it's not until long after we've written and left this plane that our writing finds its ideal readers. I am fortunate to receive your letter now that I can read it and respond to you.

To answer your questions about why I focus on the image of the rose and if there is any rose in my life that inspired me to write the poem, I'll tell you a bit about the context in which I wrote it. I wrote this poem while waiting for a bus when I was a doctoral student at the University of Michigan. Being Latina and living in a Midwestern town confronted me with situations I had never experienced while growing up in Puerto Rico. This made me interested in the common struggles of Latino and Black communities to advance their agendas and create fairer contexts.

At the same time, I was in love and hoping to get pregnant, so I had started looking for possible names for that potential little person I wanted to have. I found a database that showed with a graph how many people had been named a certain way over the years. Since the rose is such a frequently mentioned symbol in poetry, I wanted to play with that symbol or name to give it a new meaning.

You also asked when I knew I wanted to be a poet. The truth is that it wasn't something I decided so consciously. I knew I wanted to be a writer since I was eight years old because I loved writing... guess what? Letters! In college, I entered the comparative literature program and started taking short story workshops. In one of these workshops, the professor asked me to write some poems. I accepted the invitation. From there, I continued writing poems and noticed that even the stories I wanted to tell turned into poems. A couple of years later, I had the manuscript for my first poetry collection. I've always loved reading, but it wasn't until I started writing poems that I formally became interested in reading poetry. On the other hand, I write and read mainly in Spanish, although sometimes I write in English.

I love that you shared your middle name with me and that it means rose in Hebrew. Shoshana is very similar to Rosana, which I mention in the poem, and which, by combining *Rosa* and *Ana*, means something like "Gracious Rose." I think you have a poem yourself to tell us there.

Lastly, I'm glad I don't have to worry about the extinction of roses. I am sure their propagation is in good hands.

A big literary hug for you, Rebecca Shoshana,
Mara

Dear Ms. Pastor,

My name is Samaira and I am eleven years old. I am not well-versed with poetry as a subject, but your poem, “Flora Numerica” has made me stop and think about poetry. It has lit a candle, so I can see life in a new perspective, through the eyes of a writer.

Usually poems are about love, life, heartbreaks, and all of those things. But you broke the mold of a traditional poet and dedicated a poem to empowering young girls from around the world.

You opened your poem in such a beautiful way, just like William Shakesphere once said, “What is in a name?” You could call the person anything, but their character would stay the same.

I believe that your poem supports the fact that anyone can be a trailblazer as long as they put their mind and resolve to it. I also realized that your poem has inspired me to be more like the powerful females who have forever changed the world.

All of us have the power to properly cultivate and grow the seed of goodness that has been planted deep within the folds of our minds and hearts, but few rise up to the challenge like Rosa Parks did. To be able to spread kindness, honesty, virtue, and integrity far and wide, but truthfully doing so, is a sign of being human rather than just being a *Homo sapiens*.

So now I have a few questions on how to improve my own writing skills:

Do you ever face writer’s block and how do you overcome such challenges? Do you have a particular subject you like to write about and, lastly, how do you draw inspirations for your work?

Thank you for sharing your work with us and passing the torch. I have written a few stories myself and would love to share them with you. I know, your time is precious yet I am hoping that you might be able to share some tips on how to be a better writer.

Sincerely,

Samaira

India

Querida Samaira:

Gracias por escribirme y compartir tus pensamientos conmigo. Para tener once años, eres una niña con una gran capacidad de análisis y de reflexión. Me alegra tanto saber que mi poema despertó esa pequeña vela en tu interior. A eso le llamo vocación, y me atrevo a decir que la tienes.

Sí, muchos poemas hablan de la vida, del amor y el desamor. Sin embargo, lo maravilloso de la poesía es que puede tratarse de cualquier cosa. Te invito a que pienses en el poema no como una cantidad de palabras que espera ser descifrada, sino como un lugar que, al atravesarlo, te deja diferente.

Me emociona saber que el poema te inspiró a reconocerte como una fémina poderosa. Lo digo así porque, por el modo en que escribes, sé que ya lo eres. Atesoro que me comuniqués esto, porque siento que le da sentido a toda la poesía que he escrito.

Sobre tus preguntas, comienzo con la primera. Es cierto que hay momentos en que la escritura no fluye con tanta facilidad como en otros. Sin embargo, siempre hay procesos poéticos mediante los cuales desbloquear la creatividad. Mi consejo es que, cuando la escritura se resista a ser escrita, dediques la energía creativa a otras actividades que te generen la satisfacción que da el asombro de la poesía. En mi caso, me encanta investigar, bailar, hacer ejercicio y estar en contacto con la naturaleza. Así como hay tiempos de siembra, también los hay de cosecha. Conectar con el placer de estas acciones aligera mi espíritu. Muchas veces, los poemas se van escribiendo en mi mente antes de plasmarlos en el papel. En este sentido, el solo hecho de desear escribir o de pensar en escribir es una forma de escritura.

Sobre tus cuentos, me encantaría leerlos. En tu carta hablas de empoderar a niñas jóvenes alrededor del mundo. Te confieso que escribí este poema soñando con tener una hija. La tuve y le llamé Isla, que significa “Island”, y ahora tiene seis años. Ojalá algún día tus cuentos la inspiren a ella.

Finalmente, mis tres consejos principales para una escritora joven como tú son: primero, lee todo lo que se cruce en tu camino, pero especialmente aquello que te despierta asombro y pasión. Segundo, sé parte de una comunidad. Busca a quienes

están publicando en tu ciudad y a tu alrededor. Por último, mientras más el texto se parezca a ti, más universal será. Escribe sobre lo que mejor conoces, y eso hará que tus textos toquen el corazón de más personas.

Saludos y abrazo literario,

Mara

Dear Samaira,

Thank you for writing to me and sharing your thoughts. For an eleven-year-old, you have a great capacity for analysis and reflection. I am so glad to know that my poem ignited that little candle inside you. That is what I call a vocation, and I dare say you have it.

Yes, many poems talk about life, love, and heartbreak. However, the wonderful thing about poetry is that it can be about anything. I invite you to think of a poem not as a bunch of words waiting to be deciphered, but as a place that, when traversed, leaves you different.

I am excited to know that the poem inspired you to recognize yourself as a powerful woman. I say this because, by the way you write, I know you already are. I treasure that you tell me this because it gives meaning to all the poetry I have written.

Regarding your questions, I will start with the first one. It is true that there are times when writing does not flow as easily as at other times. However, there are always poetic processes to unblock creativity. My advice is that, when writing resists being written, you should channel your creative energy into other activities that give you the satisfaction and wonder of poetry. In my case, I love researching, dancing, exercising, and being in touch with nature. Just as there are times for sowing, there are also times for harvesting. Connecting with the pleasure of these actions lightens my spirit. Many times, the poems start writing themselves in my mind before I put them on paper. In this sense, merely desiring to write or thinking about writing is a form of writing.

As for your stories, I would love to read them. In your letter, you talk about empowering young girls around the world. I confess that I wrote this poem while dreaming of having a daughter. I had her and named her Isla, which means island,” and she is now six years old. I hope that one day your stories will inspire her.

Finally, my three main pieces of advice for a young writer like you are: first, read everything that crosses your path, but especially what awakens wonder and passion in you. Second, be part of a community. Look for those who are publishing in your city and around you. Lastly, the more the text resembles you, the more universal it will be. Write about what you know best, and that will make your work touch the hearts of more people.

Greetings and a literary hug,

Mara

Dear Ms. Mara Pastor,

My name is Unaisah, and I'm a sophomore living in Texas. This poem stood out to me for a multitude of reasons that all lead me to call it absolutely *beautiful*. I'm actually Pakistani American and not a native Spanish speaker, but I have been taking Spanish classes ever since Pre-K. Because of this, I have a deep fascination and love for the language, and I hope to one day become fluent! When I heard your recitation of "Flora Numérica" in Spanish, I immediately fell in love with it. Although the English translation is also incredibly beautiful, I discovered something truly, truly beautiful and unique in the Spanish version that you wrote which is why I chose to discuss it in my letter. Just to preface my letter, I want to warn that I use the word *beautiful* many, many times, but only because it is so befitting for this literary piece.

I think the beautiful rhythm and use of repeated sounds, such as alliteration and assonance, really speak to me, and I think you did a beautiful job intertwining the two. Firstly, I love your use of alliteration as shown in the multiple words that begin with the letter "R." Not only do you utilize female names beginning with "R," but you connect them to verbs and nouns that do the same. For example, you mention the names Rosa, Rosana, Rosario, and Rosemary. These names, aside from creating beautiful repetition, act as a vehicle to move us through time as you mention different related dates and events. I'm left aghast: how did you come up with such an ingenious alliteration scheme? Where did you get the idea to write about women with names starting with "R"? Was the decision to write about women with those names what led you to carry an "R" pattern throughout your poem?

I also absolutely love the line “una idea [. . .] que rondaba las costuras” where you use the verb “rondaba” to continue this “R” alliteration. In the last stanza, you beautifully weave five “R” words all together, using nouns like “residuos,” “rosas,” “radiación,” and “Rosas.” You ingeniously conclude the poem, returning to the first mentioned “R” word, “Rosa,” and connect it to the flower from which it gets its name, and thus, from where the poem gets its title. On the other hand, the fact that in Spanish, an “r” is always rolled if it is at the start of a word, creates a beautiful rhythm to which the reader flows with. I also loved your formation of an “n” alliteration in “el mil novecientos noventa ninguna niña.” I am amazed by your attention to detail—by the way you write in so *many* repeated sounds in your poem.

Personally, for most of my life, I thought good poetry relied on the use of end rhyme, but your poem shows me this isn't always true. Yes, end rhyme can be cool, but honestly, a poem that only utilizes end rhyme and no other poetic tool is lame. I like that your poem achieves beauty and rhythm without the typical approach of a rhyme scheme. I like the little assonance you throw in with “se llamaban Rosa en Alabama.” When I first read your poem, I didn't see this internal rhyme. Only upon further inspection did I see the genius of this inclusion. Now I recognize why this part seemed to roll off the tongue!

Ms. Pastor, I want to thank you for sharing your poem with me. To be honest, I haven't read much poetry outside of those written in English. There were instances in the past where I read some Arabic poetry but always the English translation. Often, the essence and beauty of a poem is lost in translation, which is why I think I never enjoyed reading the English-translated Arabic poems much. Thankfully, I can understand Spanish pretty well, so with some assistance from SpanishDictionary.com and my Spanish teacher, I truly got to understand your poem. I want to state that the English translation is absolutely stunning. I think María José Giménez did an outstanding job in maintaining the beauty and essence of your poem, and reading her translation helped me understand your work, but I'm glad that I didn't just revert to my usual, “use the English version” this time when studying your poem. I genuinely have a love for languages and reading and dissecting your piece has truly helped me

understand that further. Thank you for making me realize the beauty in exploring poems and other works in their original language and for allowing me to experience the beauty of your poem, “Flora Numérica.”

Warm regards,
Unaisah
Texas

Querida Unaisah,

Gracias por tomarte el tiempo de leer el poema con tanto cuidado. Me emociona y honra que tu lectura tan minuciosa y generosa incluya tantas veces la palabra “beautiful”. Intentaré responder a tus acertadas e inteligentes observaciones con una pequeña historia.

Desde pequeña siempre he sentido una gran fascinación por el lenguaje y por la matemática. Encontré que la música era ese lugar que reunía ambas pasiones. Comencé a escribir poemas cambiándole la letra a las canciones que me gustaban. Siempre me ha gustado la forma en que las oraciones funcionan como ecuaciones. Por ejemplo la metáfora funciona como las equivalencias entre variables ($a = b$), las símiles como aproximaciones ($a \pm b$), etc. Pienso que en la sociedad consumista que vivimos, se le quitado a la matemática mucha de la belleza que la hermana a la poesía. Esta ha sido una pregunta a la que he intentado responder en varios poemas, cómo devolverle la poesía a los números. Sin embargo, este juego con la repetición que señalas, la aliteración y la asonancia, es algo que salió de manera natural. ¡Espero que no te defraude saber esto!, pero creo que en el fondo hay algo bello en esto y es que la poesía posee un conocimiento que trasciende a su creador y que la hace de quienes la leen. Tú me has enseñado algo hoy de mi poema. ¡Gracias!

Por otro lado, el juego con los nombres sí lo investigué. Tomé los datos de unas gráficas del registro demográfico. En aquel momento, buscaba nombres para la que luego sería mi hija, a la que llamé Isla, que como sabes significa “island”. Me gustan los nombres

que significan cosas. El tuyo, por ejemplo, según busqué en un diccionario significa “alive and well”. Creo que los nombres nos acompañan y que aquello que simbolizan cambia como cambia el lenguaje con cada generación y hasta con cada encuentro. Sobre el uso de los distintos nombres derivados de Rosa, quería jugar con dos cosas, la relación entre lo particular y lo general, así con la idea de cómo resignificar un símbolo que se ha asociado por tanto tiempo con el amor y la bondad.

Yo también considero que María José Giménez y Anna Rosenwong hicieron un trabajo extraordinario traduciendo el poema. Por siempre les estaré agradecida porque en ocasiones creo que resuelven cosas de formas tan hermosas e ingeniosas que superan el poema.

Me alegra tanto saber que mi poema te hizo reconsiderar lo que pensabas que era la buena poesía. Me gusta pensar que un buen poema es aquel que, al atravesarlo, te haga cuestionar algo que dabas por sentado o que te asombre. Gracias por esta hermosa revelación.

Ojalá que de aquí en adelante sigas leyendo poesía escrita en español desde el Caribe.

Mi abrazo literario,

Mara

Dear Unaisah,

Thank you for taking the time to read the poem so carefully. I am thrilled and honored that your meticulous and generous reading includes the word “beautiful” so many times. I will try to respond to your insightful and intelligent observations with a short story.

Since I was young, I have always been fascinated by language and mathematics. I found that music was the place where both passions met. I started writing poems by changing the lyrics to songs I liked. I have always enjoyed the way sentences work like equations. For example, metaphors work like equivalencies between variables ($a = b$), similes as approximations ($a \pm b$), etc. I think that in our consumerist society, mathematics has lost much of the beauty that links it to poetry. This has been a question I have tried to answer in several

poems: how to return poetry to numbers. However, this play with repetition, alliteration, and assonance that you point out came naturally. I hope you won't be disappointed to know this, but I believe there is something beautiful about it: poetry possesses a knowledge that transcends its creator and belongs to those who read it. You have taught me something about my poem today. Thank you!

On the other hand, I did research the play with names. I took the data from some demographic registry charts. At that time, I was looking for names for what would later be my daughter, whom I named Isla, which, as you know, means "island." I like names that mean something. Yours, for example, according to a dictionary, means "alive and well." I believe that names accompany us and that what they symbolize changes as language changes with each generation and even with each encounter. Regarding the use of the different names derived from Rosa, I wanted to play with two things: the relationship between the particular and the general, and the idea of how to re-signify a symbol that has been associated with love and kindness for so long.

I agree with you that María José Giménez and Anna Rosenwong did an extraordinary job translating the poem. I will always be grateful to them because sometimes I think they solve things in such beautiful and ingenious ways that they surpass the original poem.

I am so glad to know that my poem made you reconsider what you thought was good poetry. I like to think that a good poem is one that, as you go through it, makes you question something you took for granted or that amazes you. Thank you for this beautiful revelation.

I hope that from now on you will continue to read poetry written in Spanish from the Caribbean.

My literary embrace,
Mara

Come On in The Song of the Changes

it's the listener determine what it is
be singing that come on ain no siren

in that song 'cept going off in the hearing
if you can't sing how you know a song

from anything else what you think
be callin' you but song —

the sound of your thoughts' running come on
baby don't you want to go —

and everything pulls over to the side
traffic lights stop sayin' what they sayin'

and suddenly sally ride sally's ride
right on by —

peoples wives and children disappear out of nowhere
some drive their gold teeth back home a deepened run in gear.

you can come on in that kitchen
if you willing to let rain scare you to.

outside be coming down its cats and dogs
at each other bright as gold as is its in

-escapable cache of day its pots and pan sky ringing
its belly purses fat full or not — the song

rain or shine. or
you better come on in that kitchen.

that siren not a devil that mercy seat less
savior than common sense calling you to right
your seating rather than fall over your chair
ship voted out flat on yo misled ass — not up in the air
any throne any call's adventure leads you
to pay attention to the ground your standing come on in

Dear Each of You,

Thank you so much for your keen, inquisitive, and honest letters. I was heartened by your response to my poem “Come On in The Song of the Changes.” Every poem has its own rhythm, and this poem wants you to pick up and carry on with its music. You delighted me by doing exactly that.

In one way or another, each of you was curious about why I wrote the poem like I did. Your observations make me realize one way I *could have* written this very musical poem but didn't. What is a siren's song? We typically think of it as something that draws us toward something new, unfamiliar, distant, and future-oriented. But a siren's song also shows what is lacking in where we currently are. It unsettles our present. This is at the heart of its music.

Your letters get at the ache of this unsettlement. You are being called out of youth into a new phase of growth. You are grappling with both sides of the siren's song—the way it reflects back on the present *and* casts us forth into the future. And you are taking great courage in your own writing to imagine just how far you might extend yourself into an unknown future. The daring of that imagination is striking.

My poems ask questions and seek a response. Sometimes they sit in the condition of not receiving that response. That's where readers of courage and daring like you come in. You add your thoughts and emotions to the thinking and feeling that happens in the poem. It's like the old church tradition of “call and response.” You get up and join *in on* the poem. The prepositions there matter. You are present *in* the poem just as much as you are reflecting *on* the poem.

That kind of responsiveness, your letters show, requires attention and discipline, not just free association. To meet the poem on its own terms as well as you do, a reader needs to be on their toes. That's how you feel the rhythm, how you join the dance. And that's how you go where the siren's song is calling you.

Yrs.,
EdR

Dear Ed Roberson,

I have participated in the Dear Poet project for my entire high school career—and when I think of my major (Literary Arts), this assignment is one which comes to mind. It was a pleasure to experience your piece, “Come On in The Song of The Changes,” and it has been a poem whose voice has stuck with me since the first read.

It has always intrigued me, how personal and cultural language can completely change the meaning of poetry, books, etc. The dialect of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is prevalent in this poem, and I must say that is what made me connect to the work. As a Black woman in primarily White writing spaces, I have always felt like using slang or dialect was something I personally could not pull off, but seeing your careful craft has inspired me to give it a try with less of the worry I had before in trying to make a White audience understand. Do you have a specific time/poem in which you realized a White person does not have to “get” your writing, or have you always known that?

One of the questions which came to my mind first was how you went about the enjambment of the piece? I often write a poem then go back and revise the line breaks until the original draft is nothing like the next. Did these line breaks come naturally to you or was this something you had to work on continuously? The couplets were a good jumping off point for me to attempt to understand the landscape of the poem—did those form first? Or were they, too, something the poem revealed to you?

The music in your prose is exceptional (my favorite line from your poem is, “in / -escapable cache of day its pots and pan sky ringing / its belly purses fat full or not—”). As this is a blues poem, I was wondering how you refine your work to create the ultimate symphony with your sounds? I must admit, I never think about sound until the end of my process (something which I am trying to work on), so any tidbits are welcomed.

Thank you for this opportunity to read your work, write to you, and feel inspired once more.

Aaliyah
Virginia

Dear Interlocutor,

You are grappling with the very difficult question in poetry of who is allowed to say what to whom. Throughout my writing life, I never felt I had to write in such a way that white people had to “get it.” Perhaps I could pull them into the poem by the coattails. Better yet, maybe I could open their eyes with an image or set of images to something they weren’t expecting to get when they started reading.

Traditionally, diction was thought to govern who could say what to whom. Bringing in the vernacular upends that kind of censorship. My goal has always been to let the poem itself speak. I write for the revelation that the poem offers.

You’re taking a new step in your own endeavor to write with and through the vernacular. You’re conscious of your different audiences and how they might or might not be in tune with you. What you’re describing we nowadays call code-switching. But I go back to the older concept of signifying. As you continue to experiment, let the poem itself speak in its own colors and rhythms.

Years ago, a critic asked if my poetry was an attempt to write a new language. I responded that I was trying to un-white-out the language we currently have. I stand by that. And I always encourage students to write from what it is that their raw materials give them.

Your question about enjambment is really about the rhythms, sounds, silences, and hesitations that come from the sources we bring with us into our poetry. We manipulate those halting sounds in order to make meaning. Each poem’s suspicion will tell you how to lay down your line and how to break it.

Yrs.,
EdR

Dear Mr. Roberson,

My name is Agatha, and I am a high school senior. I'm not the biggest fan of poetry. I find myself rereading the same line over and over again in order to find some sort of hidden meaning. I usually find the flowery descriptions of nature to be a bit obnoxious. However, your poem "All at Once" was different. The beginning lines which describe the streets as "trees have whole streets." Trees line the street consuming them and creating a visual flare that I really enjoy. "A natural bomb" is the perfect way to describe this poem. The comparison between fall leaves as "blood collection" and the "rings of a tree" as a way to calculate time feels incredibly fresh.

I'll be attending university this fall, and it's really terrifying in all honesty. It feels as if my once youthful life is being ripped apart. I've told myself all my life to grow up, but this time it feels real. I've been thinking about my future death. Which might seem dramatic coming from such a young person, but it feels like the moment I enter the school gates my young self will cease to exist. So when I read the idea that "we all die at once," I felt a bit more at peace. Nature feels like it'll last forever. The idea that nothing will last forever, not even nature, is a bit comforting.

I have a respect towards poets that transcends the normal amount. Something about creating something out of nothing feels incredible. I wish I could pursue a more creative career. I don't think law school will allow me to recite Shakespearean sonnets. It's inspiring to see other people pursue and succeed in this field. Writing is something that anyone can do, but to be good at it is something entirely different. I'm not sure if I'm good at it or not. My grammar skills are subpar, and I have no real understanding of punctuation rules. Still, I think that in another life I went down a similar path. I hope you know that your work is special. Whether people understand it or not.

Sincerely,

Agatha

Florida

Dear Not a Fan,

Thanks for writing this letter just the way you wrote it. I'm glad you admitted you're not a fan of poetry. What poetry needs isn't fans but participants. Fans are people who get so enamored of the aura of the art form or the glamor of the performer that they lose sight of the art form itself. Art is there for a discussion, not for adoration.

As a poet, you want readers to leave the poem with something different than what fans take away from the arena after they've heard the concert and bought their T-shirt and left. Poetry gives you information about your world, which equips you to work in your world. This is something just a ticket or a T-shirt could never give.

Here's another way of saying what poetry gives us. Your letter mentions thinking about your future death. And you say it seems like nature goes on forever. But consider this. We are a part of nature, and a part of that forever. In this relationship to nature, we know death. That's because we can grasp the forever, the eternal, but only from the position we hold as just one part of it. We try to take hold of the infinite in our small way.

If this sounds like double-talk, well, it is. But that's the truth of poetry. It lets us better understand our small place on this earth, *and* it lets us see that we belong to something, to something far beyond what we see, hear, touch. Poetry doesn't need fans because it's bigger and deeper than any individual person.

Yrs.,
EdR

Dear Mr. Roberson,

What? was the first thing that I thought of when I read your poem *Come On in The Song of the Changes*. I've never read a poem that was so conversational, almost like I was sitting down and talking to you directly about whatever you wanted to say.

Your style of writing is very unique, as I'm sure a large number of people have told you, ideas jumping from one to another. Whenever I write about something, I tend to write whatever comes to mind, not really around a central idea or manuscript.

Whatever is burning in my mind will find its way on that paper, no matter how odd it is. I think that is what also made your ideas stand out more; your style allows you to know exactly how to craft your poem to make it stand out in a sea of incredible poems. The way you write, you don't clearly tell the reader what to feel, you give the reader ideas and let them run with them.

So here's the idea I came up with after reading your poem. I'd like to think that your poem was about change, considering it is in the title. You've lived a lot more life than I have, so let me ask you: When do you get used to change? I'm seventeen and I've lived in three different states with a huge range of people, from good to bad to ugly. I've met and made good friends with people who had a lot of love in their heart and also met mean, ugly people who do nothing but hate since it is all they know in each state. College is on the horizon and even more change will come. Change is very prevalent in my life, and I still can't get the hang of it. Everything always feels so messy to me, and I can't ever seem to plant my feet; some things are always changing in my life.

I think that an idea in your poem is to accept that change, such as "that siren not a devil" or "you better come on in that kitchen." Change'll come whether you want it to or not, like "full or not — the song rain or shine." But it's also up to you to determine what it means, "the listener determine what it is / be singing that come on ain no siren."

It's how I interpreted the poem, at least. Your ideas are chaotic but they stuck with me, and I wanted you to know that they confused me and made me ask myself: *What the hell is he talking about?*, which is a great thing. Thank you for making me question the poem and look at it many, many times to completely get it.

Cheers,

Cole

Wisconsin

Dear What?,

Your mention that you found the conversational tone of the poem so surprising says to me that you have been taught to regard poetry as a special language, which it is; that's good. The ritualistic forms of prayers and praise poems, the inspirational or instructional sounds of "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," the seductions of love poems—you recognize these as special language with specific intents and means different from the daily banter. That you hadn't regarded the conversational, or vernacular, as also one of those formal constructions is something I want to call to your attention.

You say reading my style of writing was like sitting down and talking to me directly about whatever we want. It allows you to follow how I put things together; it gives you the idea for you to run with it. Indeed, this is a style whose construction makes use of the *point of address* at which the writing gets next to the reader; in Street terms, that would be like "where I'm comin' from," or how address, ("know what I'm sayin?") identifies you as the knowing.

Diction is one of the manipulable elements of language that carries its own thesaurus of special meanings and social spaces and intimacies. 'Code shifting' is what I just ran on you: my language shifted, then changed back, from explanatory, to intimate-inside street (as clarification), back into explanation. Those changes of level of knowledge that we negotiate: like knowing which brother you can call a brother, and in which neighborhood, when. You say you've lived in different states in the U.S. You know what I'm talkin' about.

I have the feeling that you've already got your answer as to when someone gets used to change.

I don't think we can. There are more possible changes than we can possibly get used to. This is not a mess, however; it is simply more than we are equipped as humans to handle. We live with uncertainty as part of living. My life, which is my poetry, is not meant to be chaotic, but rather to investigate and demonstrate the sense that can still be made within all this indeterminacy.

Yrs.,
EdR

Dear Ed Roberson,

The first time I listened to your poem “Come On in the Song of the Changes” I was enthralled. There was something almost musical about the way one line led into the next, a careful rhythm. But while I understood the words, the meaning was elusive. Poetry usually seems elusive to me at first, but this poem was different. Even after reading it again, I still felt lost and unfamiliar. So I recentered myself and to my surprise, reread “it’s the listener determine what it is / be singing that come on ...”. The first two lines threw open a door, and I realized maybe it’s less about exactly what you meant, and more about what this poem makes me think about myself. I saw this again with “... sing how you know a song,” and I realized this poem has the effect it does because nobody will read it the exact same way. It will mean something different for me than it will for anybody else, and that’s why it’s so powerful. And then I thought about it more, and I think the impact of different interpretations is present in all types of literature.

The idea present in your poem about deciding whether to come in during a rainstorm reminded me of when I went swimming in the rain with my sister simply because we thought it sounded fun, and also when my history class all ran outside shrieking excitedly in the middle of class because it had started hailing. I’m smiling writing this just thinking about it. But in your poem I think the idea of ‘coming in from the rain’ is about more than just weather, it’s the idea of defiance and staying true to your own ideas and experiences, to “pay attention to the ground your standing ...”.

The funny thing is you may have an entirely different view of this poem. I wonder what inspired it and why you wrote it. I am also incredibly curious about how you chose where to end one line and let the next one begin, because sometimes it seems to be in the middle of a thought, and I love how it makes the poem seem to cascade down the paper. This poem encouraged me to allow myself to interpret the literature I consume in my own way. I can take something away that you may not have intended, and it may pull on memories you didn’t know existed. How beautiful are the unprecedented ways an author’s work can influence somebody unbeknownst to them?

Thank you,
Ellen
California

Dear Listener,

I was so gratified to read in your letter that in listening to my poem “Come On,” the first two lines made you realize that the poem is less about exactly what I mean, but more about what the poem makes you, the reader feel about herself. That really is the purpose of my way of writing, my *ars poetica*. I am so glad you picked up on it so immediately.

Yes, the poem is about deciding whether to come in, to accept, to respond, and participate in what the siren is singing her listeners into, be it the big city or that island in *The Odyssey*. The poem, as any come-on does, challenges you to try, to test some other state of being. It enlists your spirit of defiance with ingratiating vernacular and music. Also, in calling you to leave, to *be* separate, the come-on helps to solidify your sense of your own standing, who and what you are. Then, the inducing lure sets you to question where you are going, your future. The come-on, any come-on is a deeply complicated song.

You asked what I was thinking that led to this poem. I live in Chicago’s Bronzeville section, about twelve blocks from the home of Gwendolyn Brooks and about five blocks from the historically preserved recording studios of Chess Records, the home of blues recording. When you get off the plane at Chicago O’Hare Airport, you are greeted with the sound of Chicago Blues: “Come on, baby don’t you want to go, back to that livin’ life city, good ol’ Chicago.”

I love the blues. I love its challenge, and I am reminded always of Chicago’s historical call to Black people in this country, not only for refuge from the killing South, but also its offer of progress.

As to the fulfillment of the call; all the come-ons, from Homer’s sirens in *The Odyssey*, the biblical temptations plaguing the righteous, political propaganda seducing the belief of your vote, advertising culture—even social media calling you into a world that is not there, all sirens have that ambiguous chorus. My poem is a verse of *that* song. I hope you take from it something beyond what I may have intended. I hope you have taken something from it for yourself.

Yrs.,

EdR

Dear Mr. Roberson,

My name is Sammy, and I felt a strong connection to your poem “Come On in the Song of the Changes.” I’m from New York, having spent my whole life in this small town. Because of my parents’ strong interests in classic rock, I have grown very fond of that genre. The fact that most of the lines in this poem are songs amazes me. I love the way you express music in the poem.

To me, music has been the most important, influential aspect of my life. From playing saxophone at the age of ten to picking up the guitar two years ago, to my deep love for classic rock, I enjoy and incorporate music into my life at all times. Ever since I got my driver’s license, I have enjoyed the strolls down the road. I felt a personal connection when you mentioned how “traffic lights stop sayin’ what they sayin’.” You described how much I appreciate a ride down the road with music blasting, forgetting where I am. You talk about songs covered by amazing bands. “Come on in that kitchen” shows how music is welcoming and embraces learning, which I am pleased to agree with.

Throughout my life, I have always been more interested and better at math and science-related subjects. That is why my favorite topic and future career goals involve computer science. Unfortunately, this topic is not in any way related to English and poetry, so I never engaged with that aspect of art. Poetry is a majorly important topic in the world as it covers various topics. It’s so important because poetry is a way of life and a way to express difficult things. It is a way to attempt to make peace with the world. Your poem about music expresses how it can influence one’s life in a way that is unexplainable through words. It shows how everything around us involves music through images not possible from facts. Poetry’s peace motives are expressed when you describe music being a welcoming topic that people enjoy as a group. Your poem influenced me because I relate so much to music, even though I would never have seen myself enjoying a poem.

I would like to know if you pictured a happy, busy scene in the first section or a sad one. What is your connection to music in your life? Did it influence you like it influenced my life? How has your perception of music changed as it has evolved throughout your life?

This poem was extremely fascinating for me. I love how you broke up the lines—creating fragment-like structures. It makes me feel like you were creating a song. I could feel a beat, a pace, and a refrain. I wonder if those people with the gold teeth are enjoying life? I like how you describe how people can decide to open their lives to music. Personally, it took me a long time to choose to love music. Until I was in seventh grade, I neglected music, I never listened to it; but now, I can't live without it. I chose to learn and join the welcoming of music, and it has changed my life ever since. I enjoy how you express the distraction and the different parts of the music.

Warmest Regards,

Sammy

New York

Dear Computer Scientist,

I am pleased that you find “Come On” to be welcoming and embracing learning, and amazed that you are so attuned to the music of the poem's composition. What is most gratifying to get from your letter is how you see art—you say poetry, but you imply music, hence art itself—as a way of life, a way to investigate and express the difficult, what is not possible within the limitations of word or observable fact. You see art as a way to resolve, to make peace with the world. Those precisely are my own conclusions.

That is very impressive for someone seemingly so young; except you go on to say that because you are better at math, you are then pursuing a career in science which has no relation to poetry or art! It is here that I want to impress upon you—give you the come- on—of a different train of thought. Art has always been a major aspect of science, if not maybe its major drive. In science, mensurate proof is its form, its pattern; for poetry, pattern, association, entanglement is also its own truth to be solved. Both seek a commensurate accuracy; then notice how respectfully scientists apply the term *elegant*.

I was raised hearing the blues, African-Methodist-Episcopal-Zion slave spirituals, and gospel. I took to John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Thelonius Monk like nothing new. My whole sense of art went through the same evolution.

I break the lines of my poems according to the question I have within the statement the whole line is making, thereby according the hesitation of thought, the pauses and indeterminacies. This fragmentation creates multiple lines within a single line of thought. The statement is not then straight forward, but rather is propelled as a pulsing ambiguity. This is the dynamic of music. The music of my poetic line.

The poem is about the decision to come on, or not; to decide to participate, to drop one thing for another, yes, but the poem also comments on the feeling of this ambiguity, its sway, its music. I live in Chicago's Bronzeville section, nine blocks from the historically preserved recording studios of Chess Records, so I had the blues lines,

“Come on, baby don't you want to go,
back to that livin' life city, good ol' Chicago ...”

But I also had Homer's sirens calling to Ulysses, biblical temptations distracting the righteous, propagandistic political persuasion, and advertising campaigns from which to recall. Finding one's footing in all this is the science of poetry, as much as it is the poetry of science. Accuracy to be cool. To be elegant.

Yrs.,
EdR

When the Burning Begins

for Otis Douglas Smith, my father

The recipe for hot water cornbread is simple:

Cornmeal, hot water. Mix till sluggish,
then dollop in a sizzling skillet.

When you smell the burning begin, flip it.

When you smell the burning begin again,
dump it onto a plate. You've got to wait
for the burning and get it just right.

Before the bread cools down,
smear it with sweet salted butter
and smash it with your fingers,
crumple it up in a bowl
of collard greens or buttermilk,
forget that I'm telling you it's the first thing
I ever cooked, that my daddy was laughing
and breathing and no bullet in his head
when he taught me.

Mix it till it looks like quicksand, he'd say.

Till it moves like a slow song sounds.

We'd sit there in the kitchen, licking our fingers
and laughing at my mother,
who was probably scrubbing something with bleach,
or watching *Bonanza*,
or thinking how stupid it was to be burning

that nasty old bread in that cast iron skillet.
When I told her that I'd made my first-ever pan
of hot water cornbread, and that my daddy
had branded it glorious, she sniffed and kept
mopping the floor over and over in the same place.

So here's how you do it:

You take out a bowl, like the one
we had with blue flowers and only one crack,
you put the cornmeal in it.
Then you turn on the hot water and you let it run
while you tell the story about the boy
who kissed your cheek after school
or about how you really want to be a reporter
instead of a teacher or nurse like Mama said,
and the water keeps running while Daddy says
You will be a wonderful writer
and you will be famous someday and when
you get famous, if I wrote you a letter and
send you some money, would you write about me?

and he is laughing and breathing and no bullet
in his head. So you let the water run into this mix
till it moves like mud moves at the bottom of a river,
which is another thing Daddy said, and even though
I'd never even seen a river,
I knew exactly what he meant.
Then you turn the fire way up under the skillet,
and you pour in this mix
that moves like mud moves at the bottom of a river,
like quicksand, like slow song sounds.
That stuff pops something awful when it first hits
that blazing skillet, and sometimes Daddy and I

would dance to those angry pop sounds,
he'd let me rest my feet on top of his
while we waltzed around the kitchen
and my mother huffed and puffed
on the other side of the door. *When you are famous,*
Daddy asks me, *will you write about dancing*
in the kitchen with your father?
I say everything I write will be about you,
then you will be famous too. And we dip and swirl
and spin, but then he stops.
And sniffs the air.

The thing you have to remember
about hot water cornbread
is to wait for the burning
so you know when to flip it, and then again
so you know when it's crusty and done.
Then eat it the way we did,
with our fingers,
our feet still tingling from dancing.
But remember that sometimes the burning
takes such a long time,
and in that time,
sometimes,

poems are born.

Hey! Everybody!

When I was a wee one growing up on Chicago's West Side (the side they told everyone to stay away from), mesmerized by the music threaded through ordinary words and the bluesy narratives in Motown songs, I never thought anyone would be reading anything I wrote AND asking questions about it! I can't believe how many letters came in, and I also can't believe that I couldn't find a way to answer them all personally.

But I can say this: Poetry is my lifeline, my solace, and the road to answering so many of life's questions. I can't remember who I was without it. From the first time I took the stage (shivering inwardly) to belt out my poetry in a slam to the moment I accepted an award that had previously been won by so many of my heroes, poetry has been that perfect way to examine and celebrate my life.

It hasn't kept me from making mistakes, but it has helped me to learn from and overcome them. It hasn't shielded me from sorrow, but it has taught me how grief can make you grow. It hasn't stopped friends from gossiping behind my friends, but it has shown me what true friendship is. It hasn't stopped war or racism or ignorance, but it has given me the language I need to challenge what goes wrong in the world.

And now I have thousands of new friends, friends whose curiosity and spirit reach me from all corners of that world. Thank you for reminding me why I write.

I write to reach you. And you. And you. Because I know that you too will write, and reach. Until you've reached the next poet. Until you see how the light continues.

Stay strong in the word,

P

Dear Ms. Smith,

My name is Isis. I am fourteen years old and a student in my fourth year of secondary school (year ten/high school freshman). I read your poem "When the Burning Begins" and I truly find it beautiful. This poem touches my heart and brings me to those moments of you with your father as a child, making messy memories in the kitchen.

Your poem really paints the picture of the scene, especially where you talk about the bowl with blue flowers and just one crack. This little detail stands out to me and helps with the imagery of this memory, a memory you love to reminisce about, which I adore. I also see that you used repetition when you talked about sniffing the air for the burning, which I think really helped with the imagery as well because you are constantly checking in anticipation of it. My dad, my sister, and I cook together every Sunday (if we remember). I have so much fun with them and we learn to cook new things. Last Sunday, I cooked carbonara. And even though I got annoyed because my sister got in the way a bit, and even though I had to help clean up the mess afterwards, and even though I wanted to just order in that night instead, it was still pretty great. But still, I wonder, why are the moments you spent cooking with your dad, out of all of your moments with him, so special?

Additionally, reading your poem really brought up a feeling of reminiscence in me, a reminiscence of something I didn't experience but can feel through the snippets of your conversations, like I was there with you two, with the childishness of "licking our fingers" and when you two would "dance to those angry pop sounds." But, with all this happiness, I also felt quite heartbroken knowing you and your dad were so close, so his death must have affected you a lot; the way you write about when you were together rather than how you are apart is really inspiring and sweet. I have a question: does it still hurt as much? Do you still feel sad about it sometimes? Did it ever go away? Do you ever wish it did? You don't have to answer these questions if you don't want to, but, even though I don't know you or what happened, I just think it's good to get checked up on once in a while because these things hurt.

I really think your poem is great, and I'm not looking to criticize, but why did you write a poem that doesn't rhyme? I know other people write poems like that, yet I've never truly really liked a poem that doesn't rhyme as much as yours. I'll be honest: I'm not completely used to non-rhyming poems, and it's hard to distinguish one from a short story, but this one I can tell is a poem. I just can't place my finger on why. Maybe it's the rhythm? Maybe it's the words you choose? Or maybe it's the way you read it, like how you breathe in when the poem says "she sniffed" or "he sniffed the air," or how you say it like you're telling me a story you know by heart with your heart rather than reading something you know. I think you really did a great job getting your audience to miss your dad like you do, so thanks for this poem.

I know this is a lot of questions, but I just have two more, even if you never, ever get this poem from a used-to-be-better-at-making-friends, used-to-be-bright, used-to-read-more fourteen-year-old girl who's writing this while sitting at a kitchen table that's too small to sit at because it's been with her her whole life and she's grown. Have you passed this recipe to someone young and special to learn like you did? Did they have as much fun?

The best wishes a girl like me can give,

Isis

Portugal

Dear Isis,

I smiled and smiled when I saw how you closed your letter: "The best wishes a girl like me can give ..." That's a beautiful sentiment, and one I think I'll adopt for the ending of my letters!

And no, you can never ask too many questions! I absolutely love talking about poetry—about where the ideas come from, choosing the right words to communicate that idea, seeing poetry in everything, learning poetry in all its forms, and understanding how it can change your mind, your life, and the world.

I like how the poem made you remember the fun you had in the kitchen with your own family! And, speaking of the "blue bowl with only one crack," you're good at details too. I can practically smell that carbonara! The details—and yes, even the repetition—leave the reader with images that keep coming back long after they've read the poem.

Why were the moments I spent cooking with my dad so special? I'm an only child—it was just me and my father and my mother. My mother wasn't as outgoing, affectionate, or funny as my father. I spent most of my time with my dad—we sang, laughed a lot, kept secrets, toured the candy factory (where both my parents worked), and created his own stories to tell me after work and at bedtime. Every moment I spent with my father was a moment I spent learning about the world.

So yes, it still hurts. A loss that big will always hurt, and sometimes every bit of the sadness comes back in a rush. But I have poetry, and when I write poetry I can bring

my father back. I can write about everything he was, and I can smile remembering it. I don't have to make losing him the most important part of the poem. I can concentrate on life, not death.

Do I ever wish the hurt would go away? No, because if I didn't hurt, I wouldn't realize the depth of the hollow he left behind. Hurting means that I still remember him as he was, and that there's very little chance that memory will fade.

I do write some rhyming poems, some that don't rhyme, and some prose poems that look more like little poems than stories. Just like there are millions of different stories, there are millions of ways to tell them. That's true in poetry. Whenever I decide what I'm going to write about, I ask myself what form will work best. This time, it was free verse.

And just because the poem doesn't rhyme doesn't mean I don't pay attention to sound. I began in poetry by performing it from the stage, and because of that, I'm always concerned with how the poem "reaches the air." It's not just the way the poem looks on the page, or the rhyme, or the subject matter, it's the music.

I've passed the recipe along to just one person, and that's my granddaughter. It's a traditional recipe from the American South, so lots of people know it. The important thing is who you cook with and what happens when you do. It can be practically any recipe, as long as the preparing and cooking give two people who love each other a chance to spend time together.

Isis, it's been fun getting to (kinda) know you. Thanks for all the kind words about my poem, and I wish you all the luck in the world with writing your own.

Your poetry friend,
Patricia

Dear Patricia Smith,

Hello, my name is Lily, and I'm fourteen years old in eighth grade. I really enjoyed your poem "When the Burning Begins." The writing was extremely passionate and I could relate to it which made it personal to me. I think that writing a poem so others can experience your memories and connect with your father is super creative. Since

everyone interprets writing and ideas in different ways, everyone can have their own personal experience through your poem. Writing to not only share your experience but also to have others develop their own is something I would never think of.

One thing I loved about your poem was how you correlated everything to the cornbread. I also loved the tiny extra details you added that brought the poem to life. I was wondering if the cornbread itself was a metaphor for something. The reason I thought this was when you repeated your instructions on how to make the cornbread, previously you were simple about it, skipping from one step to another, but at the end it made it seem like it had deeper meaning. Like you have to wait for the burning in life to know to change. Could this be referring to when you have problems in life and need to change? Or is it describing how bad things will always come and after the burning, while you can always flip, you will be forever changed because of that burning situation? Or is the burning guilt and mourning? How right after you lose someone, you mourn and it can take a long time. When you say, “But remember that sometimes the burning takes such a long time, and in that time, sometimes, poems are born,” are you referring to when you are in grief, you write your feelings and they turn into poems and that “When the Burning Begins” was born during your time of grief? I also really like how you wrote “poems are born” in its own separate line. It adds meaning and emphasis to how powerful it is.

Another line that I felt was powerful was smiling with “no bullet in his head.” It paints a strong and powerful picture to the reader that foreshadows the future. It is one of the strongest parts of your poem, and to add it in twice helps emphasize the power within the words. It resembles a time of peace and happiness in a very creative way.

I really enjoy how you convey your feelings and experience in a descriptive way so it’s easy for others to relate to. I also liked how you jumped from first-person to second-person like when you said, “You take out a bowl, like the one we had.” I think it’s a very different and unique way of writing that makes it more personal to you.

I appreciate that you wrote this poem since the topic of a parental death is one that most people overlook and isn’t talked about a lot. It’s sadly something that I can relate to personally. My own father was diagnosed with a stage four brain tumor two years ago and only has a few months left to live. Mixed with all of his medications, he doesn’t do anything and is constantly agitated. Because of brain cancer, his memory is also

faulty, which is a hindrance to my family's life. I'm an only child so when a member of our house was suddenly inactive 24/7 I had to take on a lot of responsibilities that have overwhelmed me tremendously.

One line that really touched me was "everything I write about will be about you." When my father dies, I also want to honor him. He was an extraordinary person who accomplished many things and for the world to not know him bothers me. I want to make my father proud even after he dies, and expressing it through a published poem is a great way. Another line I loved was "if I wrote you a letter and send you some money, would you write about me." It seems like you are trying to convey that your father felt that he had to pay you or ask to be written about because he wants to be in your life even after death. I feel that I get too upset with my father and don't spend enough time with him even though I still could. I hate that I will lose him and I will have all these regrets. In fact, the downside to losing a parent at such a young age is you don't have a lot of memories, and I've realized that I'm already losing lots of them. It seems that both of our fathers want to be in our lives. That is really hard on me because I hate myself for not spending time with him. While I know I could, with managing school and trying to keep myself presentable to everyone it's really hard to face the reality of everything.

I tend to push my feelings away and that makes people think that I don't care when in reality I do, and it really bothers me. I feel that I can't express my feelings for fear of rejection or being weak. Reading your poem helps bring up these emotions which I think is good so I can acknowledge them (my feelings) and know that someone shares the experience.

In conclusion, I really enjoyed your poem and sharing your father with the world. I really connect with stories that I can relate to, and I want to aspire to write in ways that move people like you do.

Sincerely,

Lily

Washington

Dear Lily,

One of the reasons I wrote “When the Burning Begins” was to reach out to other people who’ve lost a family member and help them remember the special moments spent with that person—things like cooking and laughing in the kitchen, watching late-night horror movies, learning to ride a bike. I also hoped to help those dealing with that tremendous grief to feel like someone else knows how they feel. I wanted to let them know that the sun always waits somewhere.

I hadn’t really thought about the cornbread being a metaphor! (That means it probably is.) In the beginning, I just picked the one thing my father enjoyed cooking the most. The recipe is insanely simple, we never measured anything, and the cornbread always came out just right. But yes, “sometimes the burning takes a long time,” means you can live and live and laugh and laugh, but there’s always some kind of heartbreak looming—and poems that are “born” during that time can help you get past the hurt.

Why is “poems are born” on its own separate line? Because I started out getting up on stage and reciting my poems, and I always paused before saying those three words. When the poem made it to a book, I wanted the reader to say it the same way (I assume everyone reads poems out loud). Plus, I hope the reader also thinks about how many *ways* poems are born, and how they help us move sanely from day to day in our lives.

Jumping back and forth between first- and second-person carries on the instructive voice of the recipe. I wanted that subtle shift to say, “I am telling you something, and I am showing you how to *do* something.”

I lost my father suddenly. When I was twenty-one, he was killed in a robbery. I’m an only child like you, and I didn’t have nearly as close a relationship with my mother, so I was pretty sure that I wouldn’t survive losing my best friend. Everything was blurred, and I lost interest in just about everything. I can’t imagine how difficult it would be if circumstances were different and we spent his last days together knowing he would die. Plus, I know it feels like your father is becoming less of the father you remember. It’s hard to spend time with someone who’s becoming a stranger.

My heart aches for you.

Don't wait until your father dies to honor him. Write those poems now, while the memories are still within reach. Share them with him, even if you're not sure he understands them the way you do. The "if I wrote you a letter and sent you some money, would you write about me?" line was my father being his brand of funny. He knew that we had the best and closest relationship a father and daughter could ever have, so the idea of having to "pay" for that love was hilarious.

You know what poems are best for? Expressing feelings out loud (on the page) and holding them close. No one else has to know or see unless or until you want them to. And finally, sharing your poem can help someone else facing the same kind of loss feel less alone.

I wish you the best life, Lily. I'll be thinking of you. And I wish you memories that comfort.

Your poetry sister,
Patricia

Dear Ms. Smith,

My name is Rachel, and when we explored your poem "When the Burning Begins," I was deeply moved by the imagery and your ability of pulling memories that I haven't thought of in years. Your writing style is magnetic, and I felt as though I was being drawn into every line. I knew that I had to write to you and learn more about the process of creating this piece and just share some questions I had.

When I read your poem, I immediately connected it with the relationship between me and my Safta, or Grandmother. When I was born, she was first to hold me after my parents, and since then she has always held the title of "first." Every birthday party, her bright red car was right outside fifteen minutes early, and she'd jaggedly sway as she walked up to the house, one arm holding a bag filled to the brim with wrapping paper and in the other, a statement purse in the other. First to see my artwork in the third- grade show, snapping photos, oo-ing and ah-ing at every colorful abstract crayon masterpiece. First to call me every Sunday and pepper me with questions about Hebrew School, regular School, new hobbies. I see us in her kitchen with the yellows and blues, defrosting Eggo waffles and dancing around to ABBA as she

haphazardly threw on butter and “maple surple.” I can still see her spinning, her arms above her, smiling as the music washed over her, singing the wrong words every time. I was free with her. I would dance just as wildly, sing just as loudly, feel just as fully. She was a light and everyone in the warmth of it was blessed. The fact I am able to call her my Safta is a gift, so when we lost her, we were left freezing in the shadow of what once was.

Reading this line, “Mix it till it looks like quicksand’ he’d say, ‘till it moves like a slow song sounds.’ We’d sit there in the kitchen, licking our fingers and laughing at my mother who was probably scrubbing something with bleach, or watching *Bonanza* or thinking how stupid it was to be burning that nasty old bread in that cast iron skillet,” I was stunned. I read that line over and over, sinking into the current of words. Not only was the writing style beautifully abrupt, it also reminded me of the relationship between three generations of women in my family: Me, my Mother, and my Safta. My Safta and I would be cooking and dancing like that quicksand, embracing everything in our path, always churning, but my mother was the ground, the return to reality. She was loving, determined, and realistic (usually in that order). She loved my Safta and I’s relationship but would always bring us back if we drifted too far away, she was my grounding point in my light and flowy time with Safta. She was writing her papers or thinking how stupid it was to be burning that nasty old bread in that cast iron skillet. How stupid to be dancing like a tornado and hollering seventies music. To be honest, I was never dampened by it, it was helpful and necessary. The balance of airy and hopeful and down-to-earth and focused did me well. It made me more understanding, adaptable, and open, but when my Safta died, the wonder in me seemed to be crushed as the real world came tumbling down into me. With that balance gone and that light fizzled out, everything turned black and white. As my parents became distant and I shut people out, I was consumed by grief and I let myself sink into a deep depression. Without the balance of hope to combat my fears, I was overcome with them. But time heals all wounds, and it left me with the faintest scar. As I began to view my time with my Safta as guidance and not something to shy away from due to fear of pain, I was able to appreciate the ways that she changed me for the better. I attribute my love of old comedies to her, my explorative personality to her, all the small but amazing details. Reading this poem with its lyrical beginning,

powerful middle, and the comforting and profound conclusion brought me such peace. The journey to get to the poem, or my healed state, was grueling but worth it, and the pain shaped it.

Of course in class we analyzed the poem and looked a bit deeper into some quotes and wording, but I was still left with a question about one phrase. I wasn't confident enough to voice this in class because I wasn't sure if I was reaching for a meaning in a word where there was none, but when you describe the bowl you'd use to make the hot water cornbread in, you mention that it has only one crack. At first I thought that maybe it was symbolizing one bullet, or one child, or one moment to ruin a whole lifetime, but I couldn't think of something concrete. I was wondering if there *was* a deeper meaning in regards to that description and if so, what was it?

Gratefully,

Rachel

Massachusetts

Dear Rachel,

So good to hear from you! And so happy to talk about one of my favorite poems! One of the goals in much of my writing is to resurrect memory, so I'm glad that your Safta came to mind.

First of all, I must say this: Your writing is phenomenal! The paragraph in which you describe your grandmother is full of heat and motion and light and amazing sensory detail. I teach writing at Princeton University, purportedly the home of the "best of the best," and your writing runs laps around some of my students. I'm in Greece right now, working beachside, reading your letter. I stopped and read that part of it to my husband, an award-winning author of crime fiction novels. He was WOWED.

So, that first. You, Rachel, are a first-class talent.

I'm in awe of the depth of your memories, all the sweet, small details that turn your grandmother into a living, breathing light. It's clear that you've got the eye of a poet and the words to match.

I understand the depth of grief you experienced after your grandmother's death. When my father died, I wanted to write an all-encompassing poem that explained his whole wonderful life, how creative and funny he was, and how we had the best and warmest relationship a daughter and father ever had. I wanted everyone to know about the huge hollow he'd left in the world.

But sometimes the best way to write a massive story—one that involves the whole of your heart—is to write a tiny one.

So instead of trying to craft a poem to contain everything my father was, I chose a small tender moment to concentrate on, one that said everything without saying it all. I hoped that "When the Burning Begins" would siphon away a little of the power of the loss and instead celebrate the moments that made our lives together so unique. I hoped it would pull readers closer to their own memories, which it seems to have done for you. The moment I wrote about couldn't belong to anyone else but me. The moments you cherish with Safta couldn't be anyone but yours. And those moments are infused with life. You've conjured a world where death is almost incidental.

Now on to your question. I'm sorry I'm probably going to disappoint you, but the "crack" is just a crack. Our family grew up without much money—certainly not enough to replace a bowl simply because of a little imperfection—and that phrase was a quick way to indicate that.

Can't tell you what a joy it was to read such a lyrical and heartfelt letter. I'll look for your book on the shelves soon!

Your sister in poetry,

Patricia

Dear Patrica Smith,

When my teacher told me we were going to be picking out poems, my first thought was to pick a random one. You see, I have never been a person who really loved poems, I don't know, I guess they have never really stuck with me. And after listening to all of them except one, my mind was still set on that until I heard yours. The second I

heard you start reading it, I knew I was going to love it. Your voice was so strong, but calming at the same time. It made me feel like I was a part of your story, even though I was just sitting at the back of the classroom.

Let me introduce myself, my name is Sahana, and I am a sixth grader. I love to play soccer and bake. To me, your poem “When The Burning Begins” feels like a memory that you have been searching for but haven’t quite remembered yet, and that is what I love. I love that it feels like a mystery but a soft warm hug at the same time. And I realized that I keep rereading this poem over and over again because I love it. I love it so much, and each time I read it again I understand why I love it so much.

One of the many quotes that stood out to me was “but remember that sometimes the burning takes such a long time, and in that time, sometimes, poems are born.” This quote reminds me of COVID. When I was nine, COVID hit, and my first thought was, Yay! I get to skip school. It seemed like a dream, but as the weeks went by it got worse and worse, and I started to miss my old life more and more. COVID was my burning, and when I finally escaped, poems may not have been born, but I felt like I was reformed, becoming a new person, like a poem had sparked inside of me. I just didn’t know yet.

Thank you for writing this poem and for inspiring me. If it wasn’t for you, I still would have been the girl at the back of the classroom waiting for that one poem to finally come.

Many thanks,
Sahana
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sahana,

I love that process of listening and listening until something (or someone) reaches out to you! And I’m so thrilled that you were drawn to one of my favorite poems!

It’s really hard to write sentimental poems about family. A lot of those types of poems use the same language, and you never really get any sense of the poet or the poet’s relationship with that family member. I’m an only child, and I was the dictionary definition of a “daddy’s girl,” so my days spent with my father were some of the most memorable days of my life.

When I was twenty-one, he was killed in a robbery, and I felt as if my own life was coming to an end. I made a promise to write the most spectacular poem about my father, one that told the reader about his whole life, what a generous and funny person he was, and about our relationship—a relationship that I was sure no other father and daughter had had or would ever have.

The effort to write that poem eluded me for years. Yes, I would write about things my father did and said, but I believed that writing the words “He’s gone” would take away any chance of magic happening. I knew he wasn’t coming back, but—

Finally, I decided that telling a tiny story would tell that larger story. I picked one of my favorite moments with my father—our “cooking lessons,” which were more gossip sessions, life lessons, and fits of laughter. The result was a poem that didn’t give the power to his loss, but to our lives together.

And the line I love the most is the last one. It makes me think of all the things that do (or should) spark poetry in our lives.

Good to “meet” you, Sahana! I hope your life is full of sparks!

Your poetry pal,
Patricia

Dear Mrs. Smith,

I am writing to you to let you know that I really enjoyed your poem “When the Burning Begins,” and it resonated with me deeply. Your poem gave me a sense of comfort because, like you, I also have fond memories of my dad that I will cherish forever. I am a senior in high school and will head off to college soon. As time continues to tick toward my graduation, I get more anxious about leaving my family. Your poem has given me comfort and made me more comfortable with becoming independent. Your poem made me realize that I will always carry memories of my family, and I will be with them always, even if I am not with them physically.

Like you, some of my favorite memories come from baking with my siblings or cooking with my dad. Your use of imagery made me reminisce about the times I spent in the kitchen with my dad. You are not just sharing a recipe. Your imagery invites

readers in to share the special moments you had with your dad and establishes a special connection with the readers as they remember their own special moments with their loved ones. I can clearly envision you and your dad in the kitchen when you say “before the bread cools down, smear it with sweet salted butter and smash it with your fingers.” I also like the simile in the third stanza “mix it till it looks like quicksand,” and the other simile, “till it moves like a slow song sounds.” This reveals that the process of making cornbread takes a while; however, the memories created with your dad are worth the time it takes to make the bread. This also shows that the best memories are often the ones that evoke great emotions, no matter what activity you are doing at the moment. I find this to be true as some of my greatest memories with my dad come from long car rides, walks in the park, or cooking traditional food from his home country—activities that are mundane, but that I remember fondly.

The importance of the emotions created during the time spent with your dad is felt when you describe how he was “laughing and breathing.” We may not remember all the details of our experiences, but we will remember the emotions felt, which is why it is best to live in the moment and create memories that you can happily look back on in the future. Your poem reminded me of the importance of family and creating memories with the people I love and cherish. You mention how you used to “tell stories about the boy who kissed your cheek” or “how you really want to be a reporter.” These details of your conversation with your dad while you cook together interested me, as some of my best memories come from just talking and opening up to my dad as we spent time together. Your poem is a reminder to me of the importance of opening up to parents or loved ones. I realized I should open up more to my dad, as soon I will not be in the kitchen or the car with him and will be spending less time with him.

Lastly, I like how you repeatedly referenced the word *burning* throughout the poem. To me, the sensation of smelling the burning of the cornbread in the beginning of the poem sets the scene of your memory with your dad. Then as the story progresses, the “burning” memorializes the fondness you had for your dad when you write “we’d sit there in the kitchen, licking our fingers and laughing at my mother ...” Finally, in the last stanza where you write “but remember that sometimes the burning takes such a long time and in that time, sometimes, poems are born.” I think this burning is not only about the moment you shared with your dad, but also about your remembrance of him, which may be a way of coping with the pain of losing him.

The burning develops from an action of cooking to an intense feeling of love and finally to a memorialization of him in the form of a poem. I believe you included this to show readers how the pain or hurt you experience will slowly go away if you give yourself time to process and heal and replace the pain with the fond memories of the person you loved. I like this imagery because it adds to the meaning I picked up of the importance of looking back on the memories that shape us and using special moments we share with others in remembrance of them. This poem is very powerful to me and evoked a lot of emotions. This wonderful piece of work made me realize the importance of creating memories with my dad and loved ones as I am going to be leaving home soon. I also realized that my parents aren't getting any younger so it is important that I create memories that I can look back on in the future when they are no longer on this Earth.

Thank you for putting this poem out into the world and reminding people of the importance of creating memories with loved ones. I struggle with the idea of leaving my parents and having to hold on to the memories shared when they are gone. How did you cope with the loss of your father? Do you believe writing this poem and putting it out into the public has allowed you to overcome his death? Like you, my mom is also the serious one, while my dad is the easygoing parent. How were you able to interact with your mom and open up to her after the death of your father? Do you believe that creating memories allows people to cope with loss and death? I believe spending time with loved ones and creating memories that will last for a lifetime is important as it allows us to remember the ones we love who have passed on. Thank you for showing me the importance of opening up to my family. I now understand from reading your poem that being reserved from my friends and family will prevent me from looking back on memories and feeling a sense of warmth when remembering the people who have helped shape me as a person. I have learned a lot from your poem, and for that I am appreciative. Thank you for creating and sharing this touching piece of work.

Sincerely,

Zahra

New Hampshire

Dear Zahra,

So good to hear from you! And I'm honored that you read my favorite poem so closely! It feels wonderful when you send your work out into the world and someone reaches for it.

So many of us take advantage of our family members until it's time to leave—or until they leave us. We leave for camp, we leave for school, we leave to take jobs in other cities or countries. Or suddenly, someone dies. When I lost my father, I wasn't sure just how I would survive the hurt or fill the hollow he left in the world.

But yes, we hold tight to memories of special moments. And those special moments can be anything—snuggling up for a late-night movie, scouring flea markets, zoning out at the beach, reading a bedtime story, romping in the park. Every second is cause for celebration, for cherishing the bond between people who care for each other.

I'm happy that one of your special memories is also one of mine.

I hope the poem does two things—gives the reader a glimpse of the depth of the relationship between my father and me, and sparks recollections of those types of memories in your own relationships with family and friends. When my father died, I tried to write a poem that would tell the reader everything about him, everything about what a singular soul he was, everything about a father and daughter relationship that was better than any father and daughter relationship ever was or ever would be.

Then I realized that the best way to tell such a huge story was in a very small way. I picked my favorite time and let that poem do all the work. I didn't want to give my father's death the responsibility of defining his life. That way, anyone could look at that poem and see their place in it. They could see themselves in the kitchen, the way you did. They could remember conversations and confessions and laughter. They could smell the lusciousness from the stove or oven. For those reasons, it's the poem I'm closest to. It brings back my father's voice.

You noticed the repetition of the word *burn*. I wanted to talk obliquely about what can go wrong to spoil the picture painted by our memories. Food can burn. Remembering the people we lost can burn through us. But in the end, the poem is about joy, about how both good and bad memories can spark poetry.

And poetry is what it's all about, right?

Right?

Zahra, I wish you the right words, always.

Patricia

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