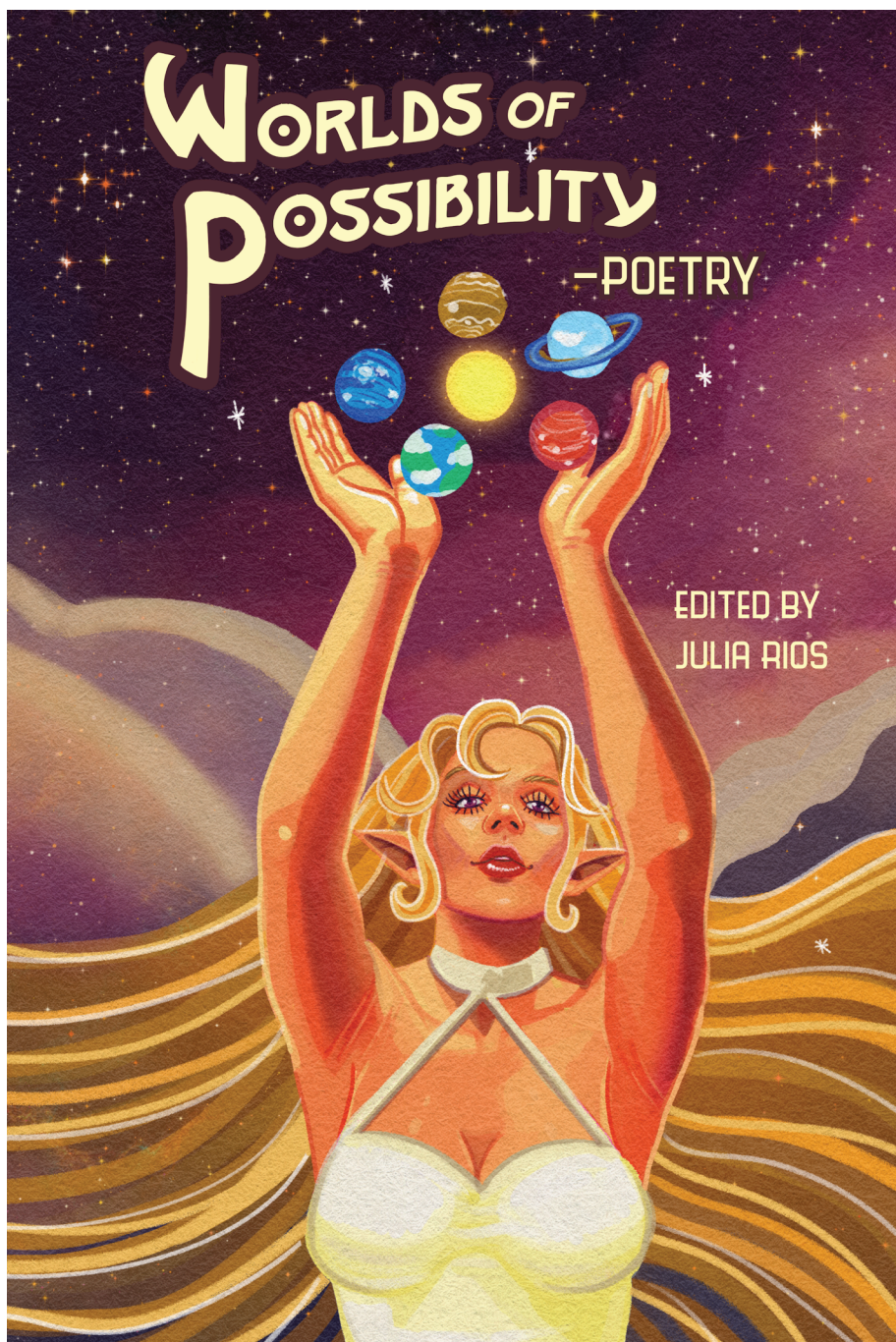


# WORLDS OF POSSIBILITY

-POETRY

EDITED BY  
JULIA RIOS





# WORLDS OF POSSIBILITY — POETRY

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JULIA RIOS



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For more information about *Worlds of Possibility*, visit <https://www.juliarios.com/worlds-of-possibility/>

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## A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

*Worlds of Possibility* has always been excited about speculative poetry. Because I let two full years pass before making the next anthology, I realized we have enough wondrous poems to fill their own volume, and I wanted to pull them all out and celebrate them together. I've also included illustrations for some of them. Where art has been commissioned specifically for *Worlds of Possibility*, the initial image in any given piece is credited, and you can see more about each of the artists in the "About the Contributors" section. If you see images that have no credit, it is because they are designed by me using stock art. To the best of my knowledge, I do not use AI ever.

This year, 2025, there is a special award for poetry in the Hugo Awards ceremony, and I think that's really cool! I can't attend Worldcon myself this year, but I wanted to mark the occasion by offering this anthology of all the *Worlds of Possibility* poems collected since August of 2023 to everyone at the same time that Worldcon is happening. Three of the poets featured in this anthology — Marie Brennan, Angela Liu, and Mari Ness — are Hugo finalists for the poetry category this

## A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

year! Congratulations to all of them, and to everyone reading, I hope you enjoy seeing more of their work!

These poems represent many authors, styles, and subjects. Sometimes they take on difficult things like grief, but all of them also contain some element of hope, happiness, resilience, or comfort. To reflect the abundance of styles and subjects in this volume, I commissioned custom cover art by Grace Chadwick, who makes beautiful and comforting art as well as art that explores difficult things. In this case, she has given us an elven space lady, cupping a group of planets against a starry purple sky. She is inviting you to go from earth to space to fairyland and beyond in these poems!

All Best,  
Julia Rios

# LANDSCAPES / STARSCAPES



# STORY SITS IN PLACES

MARIE BRENNAN

*7 lines, first published June 2025*

A giant bound in stone, that distant peak;  
an ever-sleeping woman curves these hills;  
the tears of parted lovers feed this creek.  
From every place remembered history spills,  
a landscape of our heroes, griefs, and kills.  
When we set out across these weathered stones,  
we walk atop our ancient forebears' bones.

# DRACO URBIS

MARIE BRENNAN

*10 lines, first published June 2024*

Gleaming  
with late-day light  
layered scales of windshields  
along the looping highway coils  
awake:  
dragons  
with bones of steel and concrete flesh  
rousing from urban lairs  
take to the skies  
and roar



# COURIER / THE ONE WHO RIDES THE HEAVENLY CHARIOT

BOGI TAKÁCS

*29 lines, first published October 2024*

*from Jobs for Magical People (That Do Not Involve the Military)*

Walk so fast you could walk away from anything, everything;  
then stay.

Stay within yourself, within the movement, the motion  
that links you to the earth, the earth to the sky, the sky to  
the heavens above. G-d doesn't forget  
and all lands keep count.

Carry the message of a crushed world within  
each footstep in the snow, in the sand, each handhold  
as you whirl up a spiral staircase, soaring  
with the implausibility of a walk  
that connects A to C while skipping B,  
that doesn't line up with the laws of physics,  
the horse-drawn carriage becoming

BOGI TAKÁCS

the heavenly chariot becoming  
you plodding through streets  
laden soft with mud.

They've managed to weaponize  
information itself;  
but not the old bearded saint  
telling his carriage-driver  
to head deeper into  
the old-growth forest,  
nor the secret  
hid in the back of the garden,  
beyond the tiles shimmering  
in the noonday sun  
(do not say *water, water*),  
the entering in peace  
and the exiting in peace

— no, never that.



**A NOTE ABOUT THIS POEM:**

Bogi started working on this series in response to the Israeli military invasion of Gaza. E would like to ask you to consider how authoritarian power manifests the world over (including in the stories we tell), then do something to counteract it.

# A CHAT WITH GRANDMA

MARI NESS



*29 lines, first published August 2023*

**W**hen I was your age,  
we knew it would take  
years to travel  
between the stars.

*And we LIKED it.*

*We made plans  
for the darkness:  
we would learn  
languages, science  
how to dance.*

*We would  
sing  
surrounded by  
the distant stars –  
We wanted  
that journey.*

MARI NESS

*We begged  
for those years.  
And now –*

Grandma. I love –

*You kids  
don't know  
how lucky  
you are.*

– your stories. I do.  
But right now  
I need  
to go dance  
with a star.

# LADY

JEAN GOULBOURNE

*18 lines, first published August 2024*

Dawn sips the night dew  
Holding it in a long stemmed glass  
Turning it between ringed fingers  
Delicately  
Dawn is a taking lady  
She sits on a love seat and taps the rim  
Of her feet encased In glass slippers  
Tap tap  
Tap tap bringing in the light  
Then she must rest in the cool bower  
Under the roses  
During the sun climb  
she will wait out her thirst  
Till the night dew drips  
And she must sip every drop  
From the long stemmed glass

JEAN GOULBOURNE

Held between jeweled fingers  
Which are secret stars



# NIGHT DANCE

ZAYNAB ILYASU BOBI

*18 lines, first published April 2025*

For a long time, the night hasn't drowned  
in me  
like it did yesterday. Can you imagine

the moon crying inside you? I can,  
on rainy  
days. The truth is, darkness dissolves light

to hide its face. There is nothing science  
about it.  
If there is another truth, call it kawaici.

For now, leave shamelessness to loneliness  
& grief.  
You see, the word *reach* is exaggerated.

I reached for calmness in the cloud but met

with a storm.

Who takes a raven to a dove party?

Before the night comes, I want to be

devoured

by the sun to feel the glow but not the burn.

# IF SOLAR SAILS CARRIED CREATURE COMFORTS

ANGELA ACOSTA

*20 lines, first published June 2025*

Why do the queer kids never go back  
to the star systems and crèches that raised them?  
Why do they instead slide along the backs of solar sails  
like youths lounging seaside in the generous sun?

If solar sails carried creature comforts,  
I'd take a picnic basket of provisions,  
with warm baked goods spread out  
in a weightless lunch for two.

We'd watch nova explosions with binoculars,  
set up hammocks and name uncharted constellations,  
practice words in languages we'd only  
ever cried in before.

ANGELA ACOSTA

If solar sails, so vast as to cross whole galaxies,  
could help us chart out new lands,  
I'd take books, pottery, and blankets  
to make a home on wavelike currents of photons.

If we can only travel across star systems,  
never decelerating to taste moon and station life,  
then let me greet the endless light-years,  
and tell stories of how we became our authentic selves.

# JUNKYARD SPACESHIP

BETH CATO

*12 lines, first published August 2024*

building a junkyard spaceship  
means  
using what you got  
sometimes that means you make-do  
with a captain's seat that's a bit big  
or a bent-up nose cone you got to hammer  
for weeks to get the angles right  
but it also means, at times,  
things work out just fine  
meaning there's a cockpit nook  
the perfect size  
for a cat

# JOCELYN BELL AND THE L.G.M.

LORRAINE SCHEIN

*13 lines, first published August 2023*

Astrophysics student Jocelyn Bell,  
analyzing the chart of a radio telescope  
noticed the recurring marks on its printout.

Not knowing what they meant, she and her advisor  
joked they must be signals from an alien planet  
and so dubbed them Little Green Men or L.G.M.

Now we know that she had discovered pulsars,  
short for pulsating neutron stars.  
But what if pulsars really are sending signals from the L.G.M.?  
A persistent beacon emitted from an interstellar lighthouse,  
radiating through the vast space-time sea  
warning of dangerous shoals of nameless stars  
to help us safely steer our ships to where they are?





**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Jocelyn Bell Burnell was left out of the 1974 Nobel Prize because she was a grad student at the time she made her discovery. If you would like to learn more about her experience in her own words, please check out this speech she made in 1977: <http://www.bigear.org/vol1no1/burnell.htm>

# HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION, JUNE 2099

ANGELA LIU

*26 lines, first published June 2025*

I miss the notes you folded  
into my locker, your face  
and mine in the same changing room mirror

I don't miss the gym shorts, the zero gravity,  
but I miss those narrow legs  
bird-like, longing for solid ground,

the first kiss in the hall between classes,  
we rode a sky limo through Times Square in satin dresses,  
drunk on lights

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION, JUNE 2099

all three thousand channels of the galaxy  
projected across a valley of glass  
our kingdom sprawled across a peaty backseat

we were foolish enough  
to think we would never get old,  
never need anything more.

Sometimes I imagine myself with new legs  
knee-deep in an Enceladusan snowfall  
your bare hand still  
a burning star between my ribs

I remember that time  
in a parking lot when you asked me  
if the moon ever misses the earth  
and I thought I would fall apart if I left you.

We kept the prom corsages with old movie stubs  
and never wondered why  
we clip dying flowers to our bodies when we dance

We scribbled our names into yearbook after yearbook,  
wishing each other good luck and happy times ahead  
still feeling like strangers.

ANGELA LIU

You left the last week of August  
during a summer snowfall  
dragging that hard yellow suitcase to the launch base  
in those same gym shorts, my name  
folded into those lips

I never told you  
that was the closest I ever came  
to feeling like a mirror,

just me  
and the infinite possibility of you.

# A WALL OF KEYHOLES

ANGELA LIU

*26 lines, first published February 2024*

Take your pick  
Each door opens to a town  
where you and I play heroes  
soar across frozen landscapes, trawl the sky  
for lost cities, wipe the tears of imaginary children  
then sleep in the grassy fields outside the old church  
on your jacket, moonlit  
and entangled.

Do you remember your favorite?  
Where we battle the golems,  
sever the hearts of ancient dragons  
toss their claws to faceless kings, and in the morning  
float across a clear pink ocean, the sky  
a wash of fractals and white birds  
and the briny smell of fish  
the size of airplanes

Even when you're gone  
I'm not sad  
There's still one key  
in your old jacket,  
the one you used to drape over me on cold winter nights  
that I still wear like your arms  
telling me I'll be okay  
you left it in there  
a piece of yourself  
so we'd always have a place to go back.

# NAIJA 3000: A GALACTIC HUSTLE

SOLAPE ADETUTU ADEYEMI

*20 lines, first published February 2025*

In the year three thousand, a sight to behold,  
Lagos is floating, its streets paved with gold.  
Danfo shuttles now hover in space,  
Conductors still shouting, "O wa o! Make space!"

The Third Mainland Bridge, now a sky-high track,  
Zooming through wormholes — no potholes, no cracks.  
Yet, in the markets, some things stay the same,  
"Madam, buy data! This one no dey shame!"

Oil rigs now drilling through planets afar,  
Our senators still balling in five-star bazaars.  
PHCN evolved but remains a surprise—  
"Light don go!" echoes through Naija skies.

Jollof pots cooking with fiery delight,  
Still arguing with Ghana's — though ours wins the fight.

AI prophets predicting the rain,  
While okadas weave through the Milky Way lanes.

And deep in Ondo, with stories unsaid  
A masquerade whispers of wisdom old.  
For through all the tech and celestial might,  
Naija still shines with scrumptious delight.




# CREATURES



# ONE DAY, GRAVITY STOPPED

NOAH BERLATSKY

*27 lines, first published August 2023*

ne day, gravity stopped.  
The hedgehogs were very confused.

To start with, they all began to float.  
Hedgehogs are not used to floating.  
Many of them curled into balls, but that did not help much.

Other things floated too. For example, underwear.  
Also rocks, candy wrappers, omelets, and beetles.  
When Aunt Esmerelda floated past she said, “There’s a lot of  
junk up here floating around!”  
And she was right.



Art by Anna Kolischyk

## ONE DAY, GRAVITY STOPPED

Some of the hedgehogs tied themselves to trees.  
Then they drifted up like hedgehog balloons.  
This was undignified.  
But at least they knew where they were when they woke up in the morning.

Another problem was water.  
Without gravity, the water in the pond rolled into balls and drifted into the air.  
This made it hard to drink, even without having to dodge the floating fish.

Also, without gravity, all the air in the world went off into space.  
It is hard to breathe without air.  
Luckily, the hedgehogs had special helmets, so they were all right for a while.  
They lent some helmets to the birds too, if the birds asked politely.

At night, the hedgehogs watched the moon getting further and further away.  
Without gravity, it had gotten cranky and decided to set off on its own.

Then gravity came back. The hedgehogs were very confused.  
Many of them fell down.  
That hurt.  
But overall they were happy to have gravity back again.



So they had a party with cake!

# THE LIBRARY AS A VERY GOOD DOG

C. S. E. COONEY

*61 lines, first published as a Kickstarter bonus reward, July 2023*

the library wriggles like a just-weaned puppy.  
it's always like this in the beginning —  
that ludic, urgent, fresh-from-the-basket feeling:  
come-at-the-morning, get-up-and-go-forth!  
excelsior!

wigglesome, yipsome, yummy, and yes-and:  
the library sticks out its curious nose, and knows  
that the world is adorable and explorable and fragrance-full—

— and *knowing*,  
leaps!

[the library never was a puppy,  
but is acquainted with all the particulars of  
section 636.7: classification, animal husbandry —  
pure canine facts, ma'am, but the library understands

so much more than this.  
its world literature case is mountainous,  
its stacks fountainous, all robust and orotund —  
so much lavished here, of poetry and dogs,  
that the library is assured  
of its similes.]

from out of its basket basking,  
it leaps — our library —  
massive and ecstatic,  
secure in the elastic fabric of space-time  
(the bouncy blanket of its kitchen-corner existence),  
what's more, confident of being caught  
by rhapsodic arms, of being held close  
by those who will love it most.

morning glow, day dawns:  
a wasteland of hardpan and asphalt.  
chainlink horizon, dumpster dump yard,  
abandoned gas station, defunct laundromat,  
weeds in all the cracks.  
A place of lack.

day dawns, sun-sprung,  
and the library sprouts like a succulent,  
wanting no more than wishfulness  
to flower, full-formed  
into a consummate urban branch.  
it settles: brick, mortar, roof, windows,  
door open.

the library doesn't have to wait long.  
the smell of yellowed pages like an old, beloved song



lures the margins inward.

the first to arrive, always first to arrive  
is the librarian, parched  
from long years of library-less dearth.  
once, they were a teacher, a tattoo-artist, a poet, a priest  
once and until now, waiting, with the eagerness  
of the bereaved.

the second to arrive — just behind —  
a child,  
bright and dark as a seed.  
wide-eyed, bird-like  
and in that instant, in love.  
a beast of instinct, drawn by need.

the library barks  
with the sharpness of bliss.  
wags its tail, rapturous —  
panting, panting  
for its people to come home.

# FAMILIAR

DAWN VOGEL

*20 lines, first published as a Kickstarter bonus reward, July 2023*

The cat thinks his human is a witch,  
and he's her familiar,  
even though she doesn't think he knows  
what either of those words mean.

But witches make magic,  
and she can open cans of food,  
and make things appear  
with her little black wand.

And he's certainly familiar  
with how she speaks  
when she's happy, sad, and angry  
(and when she calls him Trouble, it's all three).

## FAMILIAR

And he knows how to help her  
when her moods are low  
with a cute meow  
and deigning to be petted.



Art by Julia Kim

But the best spell she has  
is the one where she sits,  
and he climbs on her lap  
and dreams the sweetest things.

# PRINCESS AND CROWS

MARI NESS

*26 lines, first published June 2025*

Oh, it wasn't deliberate. Never that. She just  
needed a friend. Rather hard, in that high tower  
with the guards below, with silent servants  
avoiding her eyes after that long ascent. She  
understood, of course: they were tired. And  
a crow waited at the window, watching  
the grounds below. Easy enough  
to slip a morsel or two of the cold remains  
of the food that lingered on the trays,  
to that narrow opening of stone. Easy enough  
to extend a finger, to let the crow  
peck at the jewel shining from  
the golden ring. Easy enough  
to feed a second, and then a third,  
to stroke their heads as they ripped through  
the fast-cooling meat. To teach them  
a word or two. To sometimes join them

## PRINCESS AND CROWS

in roughened song. It wasn't deliberate.  
Never that. But she laughed as they seized the ropes  
she held so tightly in both hands, roughened  
by so many twisted threads, laughed  
as the murder rose in steady beats,  
pulling her from that high tower, laughed  
as she flew away, carried by those murderous wings,  
scattering crumbs for the other chattering birds  
who waited, wings outstretched, below.

# I PUPATED BY ACCIDENT ON A COLD NIGHT

TEHNUKA

*26 lines, first published April 2025*

I pupated by accident: on this cold night, my duvet thin,  
I extruded a nice blanket to wrap myself cosily in.

On this cold night, my duvet thin, I simply wanted something  
warm  
to wrap myself cosily in. I never wondered what might form;

I simply wanted something warm. Since sleep was my priority  
I never wondered what might form — and curled up tight, I  
couldn't see...

Since sleep was my priority, my backbone began to crackle  
and curled up tight, I didn't see 'til my bed started to rattle.

My backbone began to crackle through a blanket I'd extruded  
'til my bed started to rattle — I awoke, alarmed, and brooded.

I PUPATED BY ACCIDENT ON A COLD NIGHT

Through a blanket I'd extruded, long limbs emerged, and then they *flapped*!

I awoke, alarmed, and brooded. How can it be possible? That

long limbs emerged, and then they flapped? It's a dream, and I'm stuck quite bad.

How can it be possible that new appendages could just ... add?

It's a dream, and I'm stuck quite bad to think, in space that was empty,  
new appendages could just *add*! Extruding blankets was plenty.

To think! In space that was empty — in my ordinary backbone—  
extruding blankets was plenty — but something stranger yet has grown!

In my ordinary backbone, I feel the hinge of wings, strong, soft, but something stranger yet has grown — what started as a thick wet cough.

I feel the hinge of wings, strong, soft, though the sky's no warmer up higher.

What started as a thick wet cough? I could warm myself up with fire.

Though the sky's no warmer up higher, this night became a blessing when

I could warm myself up with fire, and evolved to cosy dragon.

This night became a blessing when I extruded a nice blanket— and evolved to cosy dragon, though I pupated by accident.

# A RAHOKAN'S GEM

IAN LI

*16 lines, first published June 2024*

A Rahokan dragon sails through sapphire skies,  
gemstone clutched in his lustrous claws  
like prongs enclosing a diamond solitaire,  
its gleam reflecting in his prismatic scales.

He twists and twirls, dancing mid-air  
with gem held close, eyes glittering with delight,  
wings ushering him homeward  
on joyous airstreams.

His mate stirs, nacre-glossed wings  
stretching, wrapping around their nest  
where no gold or treasure is hoarded  
except their love—

and now the gem,



## A RAHOKAN'S GEM

trembling underneath their warm bellies,  
where its pristine surface fractures,  
and a tiny claw emerges.

# FABRIC HOARD

PRIYA SRIDHAR

*81 lines, first published June 2024*

If you see scorchmarks  
Within the neatly organized cave,  
    Dotting the walls  
Do not fear if they belonged to  
Past adventurers and explorers.  
The patterns were deliberately burned  
    To gleam under ceilings of  
Peaceful, resting glowworms.

The dragon has no thumbs or gender,  
But they make tea using a prehensile tail,  
    The pointy tip stirring,  
    Clockwise, clockwise,  
Steeping the leaves by tipping the pot.  
("They don't make this blend anymore," they  
    tell you  
While offering you a cup.

FABRIC HOARD

"The king annexed the country, and made them grow  
cotton instead;  
I was lucky to save a few seeds and leaves.  
My cousin grows them with fireflies!")  
You sip with caution, worried  
That dragons that don't use fire  
Resort to poison.  
Instead, you drink more,  
Scalding water and all,  
To let pleasant flavors  
Spread over your tongue.

Of course, you are here for more  
Than ancient histories and pleasant company  
That could swallow you in one bite.  
("The prince's betrothed has requested  
A dress made of stars.  
Do you have any miracles in your hoard?")  
You have finely woven silk,  
A brocade that will shine under the glowworms,  
A perfect bargain in lieu of damask.

The dragon scratches their head  
Twisting its front leg to  
Move past the wings.  
("Dragons have no miracles.  
We only collect.")  
You sit in silence, sipping away.  
If this tea were poison,  
Your king would not blame you  
Should the dragon return your body  
With many apologies and warnings  
To not bother them again.

("She doesn't want to marry the king,"  
the dragon tells you.)

("I know that," you reply. "But  
I have a quest. And royals have duties.")

The dragon considers your brocade,  
Sparkling from every angle.  
("May I"?)

Then they lumber to their feet,  
Careful not to spill tea.  
At a distant part of the cave,  
Dustier, and more cluttered  
With stray threads.  
The brocade hangs from a blade  
Rusty with blood,  
Lodged into the walls.

When they breathe fire,  
It's not towards you,  
But swirling around your gift,  
Dancing around the shine.  
You want to scream  
Against the smoke rising  
From the woven silk.  
Then it shines against the black,  
And you understand.

("Tell her a tale.")

("I will.")

You paid nothing but your time

FABRIC HOARD

And a bolt of the finest brocade  
The city's tailors could offer,  
A dragon wove distant  
Stars into a darkened night.  
The king will believe.

("Come back again soon.")

("I cannot promise.")

You hope the princess will  
Also believe in dragons.

# WHEN THE CLUBS CLOSE

JEFF REYNOLDS

*21 lines, first published April 2025*

Medusa and the sirens sway  
Past idling taxies to Bruno's bodega,  
Laughing, brushing white powder off little black dresses,  
And queue on the sidewalk by the front door  
Waiting for the early crew to unlock and fix them spicy churros

The monster boys lurch  
Over to Rudy's at Bleeker and Mulberry,  
Downing cigarettes and Mountain Dew and meatloaf specials  
And talking about their favorite punk bands,  
Henry Rollins and the Nihilists and Failure to Launch

The vampires in satin cloaks  
Sit on red cushioned chairs in Delmonico's,  
Drinking expensive port from glasses made of Venetian crystal  
As show boys and girls drape over them  
To reveal the smooth and delicate flesh of their necks

## WHEN THE CLUBS CLOSE

And when dawn pinks the sky  
To paint the brownstones east of the Bowery,  
The werewolves howl one last time, shivering glass towers.  
And slip into Hank's diner  
For black cups of Guatemalan coffee  
And the lumberjack breakfast

# A GOOD SOUL, REALLY, WHEN YOU KNOW THEM

ELIZABETH R. MCCLELLAN

*15 lines, first published October 2023*

*for Enoch Duncan (OddOblivion)*

People ask them "why the long face?"  
It's frankly rude. They stretched up,  
a wood-knot coming to life,

erupted into a beastie with delicate, useless  
fingers, mouth like a sinkhole, neonate  
milky horrible elephant eyes that see

too much. I welcomed them here, to home,  
don't tease them for things they can't help.  
They eat my nightmares like a spider trio



A GOOD SOUL, REALLY, WHEN YOU KNOW THEM

divvy up the fly population. Bad dreams  
sometimes come alive. That doesn't make  
them bad housemates; they guard while you keep

solid boundaries, social graces, tolerance  
for the sweetheart dream-eater in the bedroom  
corner, the high overhang. Unnature's pest control.

# YOU ARE A MONSTER

BETH CATO

*35 lines, first published August 2024*

when the other little children were  
wishing to be firefighters and teachers  
when they grew up  
you wanted to be a monster  
when your teacher said "no  
becoming a monster  
is a terrible career goal for a child  
as kind as you"  
you were more determined to  
make it happen

you remained as nice as ever  
as you excelled at academic work  
through high school, college  
when through sheer will, you grew  
blue fur all over your body

## YOU ARE A MONSTER

two nubby gold horns framing  
your forehead  
your eyes wide, your lashes long  
nothing about you  
the slightest bit scary



Art by Miyusa Ashibara

you completed your doctorate  
in social work, and now  
you spend your days  
helping children process the deeds  
of the worst of monsters: humans

kids feel more at ease conversing with  
someone like you  
your fur soaks in their tears  
and when every so often one says

BETH CATO

they want to be a monster  
when they grow up  
you assure them they can be  
most anything they want  
but they should always  
strive to be kind

# BINARY / BLOOM

MARGARET E. WINIKATES

*10 lines, first published December 2024*

If robot: then rose  
If learns: then grows  
Fractals, petals, pathways, parts  
Roots, routers, hadron hearts

If seed: then sow  
If spark: then glow  
Cyclamen, sunflower  
Cybernetic, solar power

If dreaming: then thrive—  
If loving: then alive.



WONDER





# TO UNDERTAKE A QUEST

MARY SOON LEE

*15 lines, first published April 2025*

You do not have to be a warrior.  
You do not have to be the hero.  
You do not have to be strong.

You do not need a magic sword.  
You do not need dwarven armor.  
You do not need an amulet.

You do not have to be outcast.  
You do not have to be desperate.  
You do not have to be brave.

You do not need gold.  
You do not need a horse.  
You do not need a tent.

Of course, the above are helpful,  
but not as helpful as friends  
and comfortable walking boots.

# DRAGON BED AND BREAKFAST

ALLISON BURRIS

*10 lines, first published April 2025*

Fresh roasted sausages! Eggs to your liking!  
(Unless you want poached. That is far too fiddly. Don't ask  
again.)

Spacious, yet cozy cave accommodations  
with glowworm lanterns, pegasus feather pillows (organic,  
first molt!)  
speaking mirrors, mysterious unseen singers, marble baths  
filled with bubbles.

Some rooms haunted! Just ask.

Overnight guests eligible for discounts on the area's fantastic  
attractions.

Tour an ancient horde! Join a hunt! Learn to joust! Weave  
enchanted flower crowns!

Do you have what it takes to shear a sheep in half with your teeth?

No? Well that's okay, we also have scissors to collect wool and a petting zoo for the kids!

# JOURNEY OF A DANDELION SEEDLING

INDIGO RUE

*109 lines, first published as by E. S. Hovgaard, December 2024*

A wishful wind whisks me up high  
into the clear cornflower sky.

And I—

I stumble,  
flip and tumble  
straight into a sun-striped bumble  
bee.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “pardon me.”  
“Good day!” He grumbles,  
buzzing free.

I right myself (right upside down),  
and twirl my lacy cloud-silk gown  
of feathered threads, to keep aloft  
softly upon the wind. I waft  
surrounded by my seedling twins,  
in matching dresses. How we spin!

"Where to now?" I ask the others.  
"Take root here!" calls out our mother  
below, lounging in her meadow,  
blooming yellow.

My siblings go,  
not all at once, but one  
by  
one  
take root beneath the honey-sun.

I follow—

*No!*

The air, it sings!

Catching the warm, easterly breeze,  
I float through forests lush with trees,  
and dance on petals—tulips, daisies.

I pray my destiny's to be  
the air, a bird, a beetle...free?  
But oh, I know the plan's to plant  
myself in soil and that I can't  
just elect not to germinate.  
The weather's whims decide my fate.

The May night breathes a chilly mist  
and raindrops drip.

I twist.

They miss—  
a quick gale's hiss assists  
—and *SPLISH!*  
A drop collides.

Another *SPLASH!*

I cannot hide. The storm is growing,  
throwing raindrops. Wind is blowing  
and I'm falling,  
                  falling, fast  
      —the earth looms near—  
                  and in my last  
moments of flight, I brace to land  
                  and  
                  drop  
                  into a pixie's hand.

She says, "You've saved me from the wet!"  
And yet, it's I who feels in-debt  
For I'd rather be, after all,  
this pretty pixie's parasol.



She whispers that her name is Moss  
then asks me mine. I'm at a loss.

As seedlings we're not given names,  
until we've yellow flower-manes.

"I'll call you Wish, if that's alright,  
for you just granted mine tonight."

The rainy days give way to more,  
For weeks we travel through the storm.  
And when the sun returns to shine,  
I tell Moss that I'm more than fine  
delaying root.

"Well, it's true.

I can shade you from sun too."

Over time, my gown grows torn,  
dirty, creased, and weather-worn.  
Moss offers to plant me in a plot  
of fertile soil. "I know a spot."  
Eventually, I acquiesce.  
We flit off on our final quest.

But there—

What is that in the air?

A sparrow dives.

“Oh Moss, beware!”

There is nowhere for us to flee.

"Throw me, Moss."

It's her or me.

"No, Wish." She holds me tight, "You'll die!"

The sparrow's close. There is no time.

"I'm sorry, Moss."

I launch myself.

into the bird's wide-open mouth.

CRACK—

Its beak snaps off my gown.

The sparrow spits.

I  
plummet  
down.

"I'm sorry, Moss."

I launch myself.  
into the bird's wide-open mouth.

CRACK—

Its beak snaps off my gown.  
The sparrow spits.

I  
plummet  
down.

My land is soft on shining sand,  
Moss comes and takes me—  
*by the hand.*

"Whose hand is this?"

Not Moss's?

"Me?"

My land is soft on shining sand,  
Moss comes and takes me—  
*by the hand.*

"Whose hand is this?"

Not Moss's?

"Me?"

She laughs.

"I sprinkled pixie dust. You see,  
it grants the true wish of your heart."

"I wish to fly."

"Let us depart."

Hand in hand we rise up high  
into the clear cornflower sky.

# THE NECTAR OF THE GODS

J. D. HARLOCK

*28 lines, first published February 2025*

Look to the East  
and turn South. Witness  
its rise — gently, above  
the horizon. There, it shall  
loom, hues  
with gold, ushering in  
the harvest of the beekeepers.

Neath its brilliance, suspend  
in bags of cloth,  
an abundance. Once their  
sweetness is  
drained, crush  
the combs until  
their essence  
is extracted.

At that point,  
draw water from  
the spring. Boil it  
in a bowl. Meld it  
with the honey. Stir it  
with the sacred rod. Flavour it  
with pomegranate  
and yarrow  
and wait.

Then, upon our return,  
in the banquet hall,  
we shall partake in  
the Nectar of the Gods

# SWEET CHILD

AYIDA SHONIBAR

*45 lines, first published December 2023*

When something breaks  
your heart and consumes you  
with bitterness, you'll find yourself  
stumbling into my shop of sweet mishti  
that was definitely not there  
in the middle of your road  
the day before

YOU'LL SMELL IT FIRST, lured  
by the scent of rose, golap from  
the soft pink shondesh, which  
I'll offer if you've received

disappointing news that you  
need help to chew on before you  
can stomach it, a swallow of  
creamy sugar to coat the barbs, to  
help it go down

AND IF THE pain has already festered  
into something more rotten, then  
take a roshogolla, paneer like fresh  
white clouds I gathered lovingly  
in muslin and soaked in a syrup of spices  
that will flood your mouth, heal the hurt  
that turns your tongue sour when  
you speak to your friends and  
seasons your attitude with saltiness  
in response to your family's questions,  
because your loneliness will  
only sting worse

BUT IF YOU'VE already fallen apart, then  
let me fold you back together with  
layers of flaky dough, tuck your  
shattered pieces into the cushion of  
milky filling at the centre, seal you up  
using the same stick of clove  
my grandmother repaired me with  
after I thought she'd left me  
behind, until she appeared in  
a magical sweet shop  
in the middle of my street on  
the other side of the world to



## SWEET CHILD

give me your favourite, her lobongo  
lotika, and a promise of affection  
eternal, passed from her ancestors to  
mine, and from me to  
you, sweet child

# DEFIANCE BY CAKE

BETH CATO

*65 lines, first published August 2024*

some teenagers rebel by  
partying and drinking,  
me, I did what mama  
always said not to do:  
I walked up the knoll  
where fairies were said  
to lurk in wait of humans  
to steal them away to fairyland

and not only did I go there  
week after week  
I carried up a hamper  
to hold my own private picnic  
my meals were lonely at first  
not that I minded that much  
the valley view was gorgeous  
but in the third week

a strange man showed up  
pale, willowy, with yellow eyes  
like a cat  
I invited him to partake  
he did, reacting with surprise  
to the tastiness of my meat pies  
I took that as a high compliment  
as I plotted larger-scale  
and grander bakes  
for my receptive audience

in the coming weeks, he returned  
bringing along fae peers  
they expressed surprise at my baking, too  
to my relief, they made  
no outward efforts to  
lure me away  
not until they offered me an opportunity  
to bake for the fairy queen herself  
an honor rarely granted to humans,  
they said, as they dusted  
biscuit crumbs from their vests and corsets

I politely declined, explaining  
my goal was to be accepted as a contestant  
on a major television baking show  
and that everyone in my family was  
on a diet or shunning gluten  
so I'd had no one to experiment upon  
and that I'd known from stories  
that fairies were said to have  
the best food across dimensions  
I'd figured

if fairies enjoyed my bakes  
well, I might have a chance to win

my new friends  
were amused and supportive  
they said they could lend magic  
to my efforts  
but I said no  
I wanted to win by my own power  
my own alchemy of sugar and spice  
and on that note  
would they be willing to try  
a Sacher torte and opera cake  
next Wednesday?  
they said yes

# JUST A GIRL AND HER STUFFED ANIMALS

BETH CATO

*39 lines, first published October 2023*



Art by Miyusa Ashibara

each night before she climbed  
into her bed, the girl  
kissed her stuffed animals  
and wished them good-night  
she trusted them to keep her safe

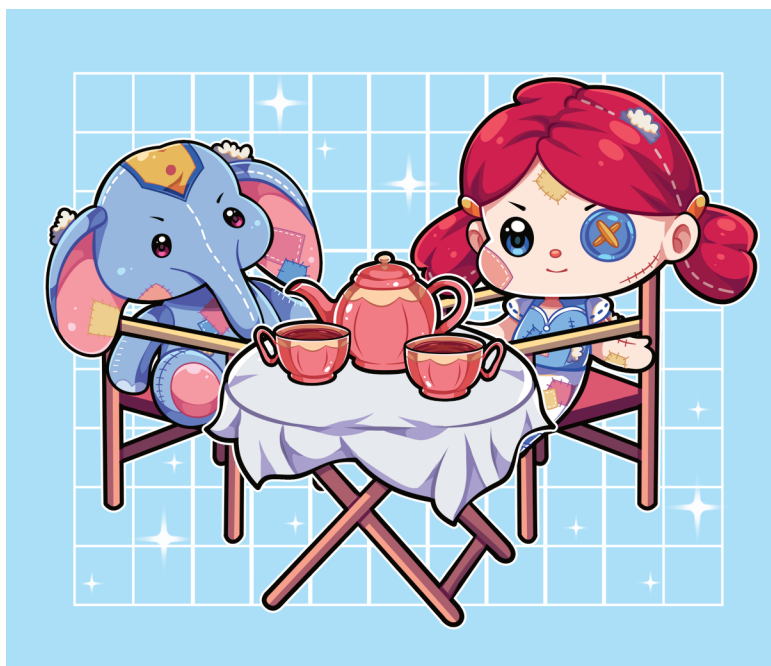
in the morning as soon as  
her light was on, she checked on them  
still in their guard positions  
by the windows, and assessed injuries  
some concerns were superficial, like  
matted fur from some monster's slobber  
while others had more serious wounds that  
bled white cotton or bean filling  
fortunately her grandma had already  
taught her to sew and provided a kit  
for moments just like this

if injuries were complex or numerous  
sometimes she could only  
provide her stuffed animals some  
extra hugs and reward stickers  
to help them endure the day



## JUST A GIRL AND HER STUFFED ANIMALS

after school, as soon as possible  
she finished patching up her army  
and fortified them for nightfall  
that often meant she had to find  
the knife sharpener somewhere in  
her big sister's room because  
Magritte could never put things away  
a few times a week the girl scrounged  
for new projectiles, too  
like pebbles or tacks or marbles



then if there was time, after homework  
the girl would set up her tea set  
she and her menagerie would enjoy a nice chat  
about the school day and battle tactics

BETH CATO

(which sometimes didn't seem so different)  
while sipping the finest pretend Earl Grey  
with fresh-baked vanilla bean scones  
that always ended the day on a nice note





# CHARMING

CISLYN SMITH

*46 lines, first published April 2024*

there was no curse, no spindle-pricked finger  
no blood spilled for sleep and a wall of thorns  
just my magic  
and a deep yearning  
to be left

alone

and yet  
here you are  
at the gates  
sword in hand, working your way past the bone piles  
are you like the others  
allegedly here for love?  
(love is rose petals on the wind  
raindrops on the window  
silence

space to be  
me  
and rest -  
they did not come bearing those  
gifts  
and they found my lips poison  
when they tried to steal kisses)  
why come here  
when I sent everyone else away  
(nobody sleeps in the courtyards  
gathering dust -  
those are more lies to fertilize those foolish desires)  
the entwined thorns  
the moss crumbling walls  
the magic  
that I cannot wield without being called a witch  
in the outside world  
it all says to stay away  
and yet  
I hear your steps on the tower stairs now  
steady  
light  
(I always was a restless sleeper)  
and there you are, princess  
sword at the ready  
smiling  
"Dream easy" you say, taking position  
in the doorway  
"I won't let them disturb your slumber again."  
I think I might be smiling  
as I slip deeper into dreams

# RELIABLE GIRLS

SARA CLETO AND BRITTANY WARMAN

*23 lines, first published June 2025*

Listen, I can't carry a tune,  
But when we need money,  
I sing a stupid cereal jingle,  
Or the national anthem,  
And a huge toad will plop out of  
My sister's laughing mouth as she  
Chases diamonds across the linoleum.

We've named them all —  
Fred, Araminta, Cleopatra, Hans.  
Of course, once you name something  
It's your responsibility to care for it,  
And whatever the tales may say, we've  
Always been reliable girls.

We consulted with a local zoologist and  
Built them an environment

With plenty of cool water and  
Large insects, studded with diamonds  
And toadstools.

After all, we have the means and,  
Though the princes knock  
Ceaselessly, though the fairies sigh,  
The toads bring us both  
Delight.

# IN WINTER, A WEDDING

SARA NORJA

*293 lines, first published February 2024*

## **1. The Magpies**

Come, follow our chattering  
feather-strewn way.  
Snow lingers, winter's fingers  
are still clenched  
around this land.  
But stranger, never fear  
winter's cold – tonight  
is a wedding-night.



## **2. The Stranger**

The trees' gentle filigree  
of branches blossoms  
against the crimson-as-anger  
sunset sky

(crimson as my eyes  
a year-and-a-day ago when  
my truelove left me  
and my memory stutters –)

The magpies lead me  
to a farmhouse, abandoned,  
dwarfed by the great stone  
standing still before it.  
I hesitate behind  
the flurry of outlandish guests  
warbling and whispering.

What wedding this?  
A stranger congregation  
of guests I've never seen:  
sparrows and blackbirds  
and owls beyond counting:  
barn owls, little owls, owls with tufted ears,  
tawny owls. And among the birds  
fair-folk all a-shimmer  
in their dizzying guises  
of gossamer. Their ember eyes.

Whose wedding? Whose?



### **3. The Prince of Owls**

Tonight the fearsome Lady  
of Darkness shall claim me  
for her own. How I long  
for my truelove! but she

is forever lost, all memory  
of me dimmed. My curse  
obscures me. As tawny owl  
I'm doomed to flutter  
these winter lands.

Had I the power  
I'd curse the Lady  
for tricking me like she did,  
but I have no magic  
save that which binds me.  
My hour of transformation  
draws near, but before  
I become a man (once a year  
on the day of my cursing),  
I'll be married, forever locked  
into this feathered form.



#### **4. The Lady of Darkness**

Truly, an owl  
shall suit me well as husband.  
A feathered addition  
to my collection!  
He'll hunt for me,  
claw my enemies' eyes out.  
Mine to keep. Soon. Soon.



### 5. The Oath-stone

His hands were on me, swearing fealty to his truelove, that day  
when the curse fell upon him with the rage of feathered things.  
Sundered from his family, from his truelove, from the world  
he'd known, he screamed as hands turned to wings, as feathers  
sprouted and javelined through his skin. Prince, the owls  
named him. Dead mice they gave him.



### 6. The Faerie Officiator

Up onto the oath-stone –  
let the marriage-rites begin.

Here the bride, a cloud  
of mist around her,  
her eyes wolf-yellow.  
Here the groom, still  
as a tombstone effigy,  
eyes round, feathers flat.  
I clear my throats. Twin-voiced, I utter:  
“We’ve gathered here  
at the Oath-stone to witness  
the joyful marriage-rites  
of the Lady of Airless Climes,  
she of many names (all of them dire),  
and the Prince of Owls.  
Before their hands are joined  
in matrimony...”



## IN WINTER, A WEDDING



art by Eliseeva Elizaveta

### 7. The Prince, Eyeing the Crowd

I avoid the Lady's glance.  
My bird-eyes are sharp  
as a whetted spear, and there –

Among the crowd  
of birds and fair-folk –  
a human, puzzled.

My owl's heart  
flutters. *It's her.*  
Eleri. My truelove  
here. How?

Magpies dance around her, wink at me.  
But it's too late. How could she  
break a spell she cannot see?



### 8. Eleri, No Longer a Stranger

An owl and a fay-woman:  
a strange marriage the magpies  
called me to witness!  
The owl's staring at me  
with those dark-pooled eyes  
as if we were old friends.

As if a lock  
placed deep inside me  
were clacking open  
turned by an unseen key



**9. The Officiator, Interrupted**

The words patter from my mouths  
familiar, the marriage-spell  
from Her kingdom beyond the veil.

“I shall bind you two  
in a covenant  
unbreakable. If any  
in this congregation  
give objection, speak now –”

I never expected it. No one  
dares cross the Lady.  
But a shout rings out  
in the winter air,  
brittle as first-frost –



**10. Eleri, Understanding**

“I object!”

The words ring out  
before I’ve realised  
they were mine.

But why  
do I object?  
The fair-folk stare, baleful,  
the birds are restless.  
I’m trembling, stomach clenching

but the unseen key

twists. Opens up a memory  
that was wrested from me.  
Yes. My truelove was cursed  
into owlness. He can't marry  
this faerie queen,  
not before I've heard  
from his mouth  
that he loves me no longer.

Heedless, heart-sore,  
I run to the bridal pair  
leaving a fluttering of feathers  
and shuddering of cobwebs behind me.  
The owl hoots, his eyes alien.

But I remember him.  
"The prince of owls  
is under enchantment  
and cannot consent. Free him!"



### **11. The Lady of Rising Rage**

What  
does this human girl  
think she's doing?  
I scream at the officiator  
to continue her spell-words,  
for I want this prince  
to grace my halls.  
The officiator shakes  
her heads. "She objected.  
Law must run its course

even in Faery.”

I care not for laws.  
I am my own law.  
I want this marriage  
and no human wench  
can stop me.



## **12. The Prince, Constrained by Feathers**

She remembers.  
She remembers, but even that  
is not enough to break the curse.



## **13. Eleri, Breaking**

Mad gleam in the Lady's eyes,  
her fingers spinning a spell.  
I should fear her  
but now that my heart's door  
has been wrenched open, now  
that memories have drenched me  
with their sunfire, I can't  
hold back.

The prince of owls  
flutters to my outstretched arm.  
“How do I break the spell?”  
“To-whoo,” and grieving “to-whoo!”  
If he knows, he cannot tell.  
Desperate, for the Lady

has murderous magicks  
up her gauzy sleeves,  
I summon all my strength:  
*change. change. change.*

He doesn't change.



#### **14. The Birds, an Army**

The Lady of Darkness  
is threatening our own,  
our Prince of Owls.  
We fly – to attack,  
a beating of wings  
and gnashing of beaks –



#### **15. The Lady, Disgusted**

Oh, sod it all.  
I've had it with birds,  
dirty stinking things  
ripping my sleeves to shreds!  
This marriage isn't worth  
such indignity.  
Come, my people!  
Let's away to Faery  
and calmer climes.



### **16. The Prince, Transforming**

Then the pain screeches through me.  
Wings become arms,  
feathers fall away  
as a cloak around me.  
Beak becomes nose, and my eyes  
turn over in the darkness. I can't see.  
"Eleri, come to me!  
Were we married now  
we could break the curse."



### **17. The Oath-stone, Shuddering**

An opening of the land: the fair-folk depart. On the heels of  
their leaving it comes, the time of change, the moment when  
day becomes next, when an owl becomes a man for one day a  
year. Who will witness this marriage? Who officiate the rites?  
I'm cold stone, speechless, muttering to myself in three  
languages. Yet I witness. I witness.



### **18. Eleri, Breathless**

Him. Transformed. I swirl my cloak  
to cover him. Hold him close,  
his human self dizzying  
after so long apart.  
"Marry me, my love.  
Let this oath-stone be our witness.  
Let the smallest owl officiate."

The stone's silent in the darkness.

The smallest owl hoots his last.  
We're married. I think.  
Tomorrow will tell  
if the transformation's true.  
If my love becomes owl  
with another day's turn,  
well, we'll wait another year  
for now I've found him.



### **19. The Prince, No Longer of Owls**

I trace her jawline with my human hands,  
hold her close with human arms,  
whisper to her with human voice.

We walk towards the dawn and our future.



### **20. The Magpies, Chattering**

We couldn't guarantee her  
happiness. But we pushed  
and she took to the air,  
her deeds like wings.



# RESILIENCE / EMPOWERMENT



# AFTER

JENNA HANCHEY

*14 lines, first published April 2025*

“After” is inspired by those in my life who have the bravery to be soft and vulnerable in a world that makes that dangerous and scary, and the deep and beloved connections we've formed together across differences, dreaming of collective change that can enable worlds where such softness and vulnerability don't have to be so risky — emergent worlds of reciprocity and care.





After by Jenna Hanchey, a collage illustration featuring stars and planets and moons and rugged landscape. The collage text forms a poem, which is transcribed on the next page.

AFTER

after.

all speak up,  
rampaging  
changing the world

happily we  
think outside the box.

Beyond your dreams.  
Give in to spontaneous creativity  
desire

you'll  
get caught up in the mystique and magic  
take care  
be a softie

psssst...  
— it's far from over

# IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

ALETHEA KONTIS

*24 lines, first published December 2023*

I kept her Mint-in-Box  
Tied up tight  
Safe and dusted  
Some fool would pay a ton for her someday  
Enough to buy a better car  
A better house  
A better life  
Someday  
In case of emergency  
And then came Pestilence  
and War  
(Famine and Death were already here to begin with)  
Volcanoes and earthquakes  
Storms and asteroids  
Rockets that couldn't leave Earth fast enough

## IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

So even though no fool wanted her  
I broke the glass and untied  
Emerged from that box  
Got in a car and drove into the storm  
Lived that life  
Unsafe, unapologetic  
With gratitude for this Earth  
and that Chaos  
(The emergency was already here to begin with)

# TITHE

HÉCTOR GONZÁLEZ

*24 lines, first published October 2023*

I just caught our 8-year old sitting on a chair on our porch.  
Again.  
I felt a faint breeze. The door was open. He was sitting there,  
Staring and smiling at the pounding rain outside.  
So now I am too.  
Chores can wait.  
Work can wait.  
Life can wait.  
I am watching the rain with my dear boy.  
He died on this day, 7 years ago.  
He sits, mulling the rain, silently.  
[I missed his smile]  
I sit next to him, doing nothing.  
I have never asked anything. I just accept this.  
As always, after a few minutes, he touches my hand.  
It isn't cold.  
It is relieving.



## TITHE

Slowly, my heart feels lighter. My years feel younger. My eyes  
shine brighter.

I've stayed at this old house, just for this.

He feeds off my grief.

My tears flow freely. My eyes are closed while I weep and weep  
and weep.

And as every year, I just feel a light kiss on my forehead.

I wipe my tears and the rain is still going.

I am alone on my front porch, happily grieving and smiling.

# CYCLE OF LIFE

MANNY CARTAGENA

*12 lines, first published December 2024*

## Sunny Day

Watch as the bee lands.  
Smell as the petals extend.  
Sun centers this meet.

## Rainy Day

Even dark May clouds  
Give the water needed to  
Keep bud's bloom on pace.

## Summer Falls

July heat can turn  
flowers brown. Fall's chill can too.  
New life will follow.

# GOSPEL FOR THE OLD

HOPE JOSEPH

*13 lines, first published April 2024*

You would think they're daisies  
swaying to the melodious notes of the wind.

It doesn't matter how;

dancing is more of the soul  
than of the body—

you danced best  
when you dance old  
and happy.

Inherited traumas, &  
eternal reign of despair—

HOPE JOSEPH

That you lived to see another  
possible trouble  
is good news.

# I CHOOSE

HOPE JOSEPH

*17 lines, first published December 2024*

Better than gold—  
This ethereal breeze  
against my skin,  
this glittering moon,  
this breath.

To be here is a big victory already.  
All my life—  
I have tricked death,  
survived the unknown,  
and outlived my fears  
like a pair of old shoes.

Tonight I choose what chooses me.  
I choose luck. I choose God.  
I choose earth. I choose Goodness.

HOPE JOSEPH

I choose people — good people.

I choose peace for a planet.

I choose my right to be alive.

# AFTER LOSS

JONATHAN CHIBUIKE UKAH

*25 lines, first published October 2023*

After an unexpected loss,  
Dismantling a great expectation,  
Like stripping a statue of gold,  
Or dimming an inner light,  
Like the singing of a caged bird;  
There comes a cooling period  
Of reconciliation, of reconstruction  
Of old times or striped heart;  
The mind struggles to repair  
The broken walls, torn parts,  
Patch up the dissipated bits of hope  
And make life worth moving again.

After a great loss  
You will know where to rise,  
Though no star dances before you,  
The tide ebbs and water returns to the sea;

JONATHAN CHIBUIKE UKAH

The sun falls upon the piled rubble  
Upon shards of bottomless glass  
Spinning on the floor like paper,  
The parts of your frazzled heart  
Must learn to fly around like a feather  
Holding no grudges, scattering calm  
Without the spill of blood;  
In the silence that ensues,  
Love is reborn.



**JONATHAN CHIBUIKE UKAH** lives in the United Kingdom with his family. His poems have been featured and will soon be featured in *Ariel Chart*, *Boomer Literary Magazine*, *Compass Rose Literary Magazine*, *Daylight Zine*, *Ephemera Literary Review* and elsewhere. He is a winner of the Voices of Lincoln Poetry Contest 2022 and a finalist of the African Diaspora Award 2023.



# ALL THE LIGHTS WE CANNOT SEE

JONATHAN CHIBUIKE UKAH

*38 lines, first published April 2025*

The day my grandfather reincarnated,  
after about seventy years of death,  
during which their graves were on a cusp of ruin.  
He said that it seemed like seventy days.  
He narrated his odyssey to my mother,  
who in his previous lifetime was his daughter.  
He returned with the same obsession with tobacco,  
the same hunger for cassava,  
the same passion for cigarettes and piping.  
He asked about the blue long-sleeved shirt,  
black trousers, and black shoes  
he wore for his daughter's traditional wedding.  
It was as if he went to another town  
and returned, remembering the things he left behind.  
He told her about what he saw,  
though one which stuck on him like the clouds to the sky  
was the dream he had of a burning flame.

He dreamed that his uncle, who died twenty years earlier  
appeared from an ambush to push him into a burning bush.  
The fire emitted dark smoke,  
his skin was melting like butter,  
but there was a miracle that allowed him to escape.  
My mother smiled, relieved to hear  
that even the dead do dream,  
and there are miracles where death prevailed  
without harnessing heaps of broken bones.  
The dry bones will resurface with fresh muscles,  
the brown and broken roots,  
though on the cusp of ruins and death,  
will become a home for green flowers,  
empty ponds will be a valley of fresh water,  
and the dead will return wearing new apparel  
and the glorious clothes of victory.  
Darkness is a veil; the night is a curtain,  
and within the shield of blackness,  
there is gold glittering in the light.  
That we cannot see the light does not make it a night,  
as truth is a sword that pierces through a mirror.

# A SLICE OF CAKE

JONATHAN CHIBUIKE UKAH

*22 lines, first published August 2024*

Life is a slice of cake.  
It's a confetti of sharing;  
we cannot eat and cling to it.  
All that we hunger after is the glory,  
which comes hereafter if we survive.  
In pursuit of glory, there is no fear,  
for it is the perfection of love  
which entertains no anger.  
With the excitement of love, there is a future,  
but where sorrow conquers, love is dethroned.  
If I had feared the coming of the future,  
I had not loved enough for victory,  
since the courage to win over fear and hate  
comes from the depths of love and hope;  
In the face of victory, we tremble like a boiling kettle,  
our mettle oozes out like vapours toward the sky.  
Life is like a piece of cake,

JONATHAN CHIBUIKE UKAH

It's for sharing, not eating alone,  
else when it gets stuck in our throat,  
there will be no one to drag it out.  
And for that, we must all be brothers,  
so that our anger will not get to our bones



Art by Miyusa Ashibara

# T'LL BE YOUR BALLOON

ALINA SIDOROVA

*13 lines, first published April 2025*

You know,

apples don't always have worms in them  
words aren't always

long opulent caterpillars

It doesn't always rain and

stories aren't always altars to woes

We don't live in static;  
we live in motion

So you bring your dim days and tiny tragedies  
the prickliness of life

ALINA SIDOROVA

But I'll bring my dandelion elves and eyelash-wish gnomes

Your raindrops draped in my fairy lights

We'll make the world a fuller place

# CONTENT NOTES

“Story Sits in Places” by Marie Brennan implies painful histories and mentions bones.

“One Day, Gravity Stopped” by Noah Berlatsky briefly refers to hedgehogs not being able to breathe (but everything turns out okay in the end!).

“Princess and Crows” by Mari Ness features a woman imprisoned in a tower.

“I Pupated by Accident on a Cold Night” by Tehnuka describes pupation, and even though it is not itself about insects, may trigger the same kinds of feelings for people who have insect aversion.

“Fabric Hoard” by Priya Sridhar refers to blood, implied violence, and forced marriages.

## CONTENT NOTES

“You Are a Monster” by Beth Cato acknowledges trauma and children who need social workers.

“Reliable Girls” by Sara Cleto and Brittany Warman shows toads coming out of a woman’s mouth.

“In Winter, a Wedding” by Sara Norja contains a description of a human being transformed into an owl including feathers piercing skin.

“Tithe” by Héctor González is about the ghost of a child, and refers to the death of a child and to parents grieving.

“I’ll Be Your Balloon” by Alina Sidorova mentions worms and caterpillars.

“All the Lights We Cannot See” discusses death and reincarnation, and includes a sequence about being burned by flames.



## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

**ALETHEA KONTIS** is a storm chaser, adventurer, and New York Times bestselling author of over 20 books and 50 short stories. She has received the Scribe Award, the Garden State Teen Book Award, and is a two-time winner of the Gelett Burgess Children's Book Award. She was twice nominated for both the Andre Norton Nebula and Dragon Award. She narrates stories for online magazines and reviews books for NPR. Born in Vermont, Alethea currently resides on the Space Coast of Florida where she watches K-dramas with her teddy bear, Charlie. Together they are ARMY, VVS, and Black Roses. Find out more about Princess Alethea at [aletheakontis.com](http://aletheakontis.com)

**ALINA SIDOROVA** is a student by day and a writer by night. So far, her work has been published in the Blue Marble Review. She likes to hang up fairy lights and squish her fat cat.

**ALLISON BURRIS** grew up in the Pacific Northwest and currently lives in Oakland, California. Her poems embrace the whimsical and cozy, explore human connection, and affirm the power of stories. She received her MLIS from San Jose State University and her poetry appears or is forthcoming in various journals, including *Instant Noodles*, *Heartline Spec*, *Muleskinner*, *After Happy Hour Review*, and *The Marbled Sigh*. Connect with her via <https://linktr.ee/allisonburris>.

**ANGELA ACOSTA, Ph.D.** (she/her) is a bilingual Mexican American poet and Assistant Professor of Spanish at the University of South Carolina. She is a 2022 Dream Foundry Contest for Emerging Writers Finalist, 2022 Somos en Escrito Extra-Fiction Contest Honorable Mention, and Utopia Award nominee. Her poetry has appeared in *Copihue Poetry*, *The Acentos Review*, *Shoreline of Infinity*, and *Radon Journal*. She is author of *Summoning Space Travelers* (Hiraeth Publishing, 2022), *A Belief in Cosmic Dailiness* (Red Ogre Review, 2023), and *Fourth Generation Chicana Unicorn* (Dancing Girl Press, 2024).

**ANGELA LIU** is a Chinese-American writer/poet who writes about intergenerational trauma and weird things. She is a two-time Nebula Award and 2025 Astounding Award Finalist. Her work has also been nominated for the Hugo, Locus, Ignyte, and Rhysling Awards. She previously researched mixed reality storytelling at Keio University in Japan. Her stories and poems are published/forthcoming in *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, *Uncanny Magazine*, *Lightspeed*, and *Logic(s)*, among others. Check out more of her work at [liu-angela.com](http://liu-angela.com) or find her on Twitter/Instagram @liu\_angela and on Bluesky @angelaliu.bsky.social

**ANNA KOLISCHYK** is an artist from Ukraine. She's annarycracy on Instagram, and you can commission art from her on fiverr at [https://www.fiverr.com/anna\\_draw](https://www.fiverr.com/anna_draw).

**AYIDA SHONIBAR** (she/they) writes dark and wistful speculative fiction about misfits, monsters, mischief-makers. A Lambda Literary fellow and previous We Need Diverse Books mentee, they've also received support from the Horror Writers Association and Dream Foundry for their writing. Spanning genres and age categories, their short stories, essays, and poetry

appear in various publications, including *Silk and Sinew* (Bad Hand Books), *Heartlines Spec*, *The Skull & Laurel*, *Wilted Pages* (Shortwave Publishing), *Luminescent Machinations* (Neon Hemlock), *Nature Futures*, *Night of the Living Queers* (Wednesday Books), and *Transmogrify!* (Harper Teen), among others. You can find more information at [ayidashonibar.com](http://ayidashonibar.com).

**BOGI TAKÁCS** (they/them or e/em pronouns) is a writer, poet, critic and scholar of speculative literature. Bogi is a Hungarian Jewish immigrant to the US, a winner of the Hugo and Lambda awards, and a finalist for other awards like the Ignyte and the Locus. Eir second short story collection *Power to Yield and Other Stories* was published earlier in 2024 by Broken Eye Books, and eir poetry collection *Algorithmic Shapeshifting* is available from Aqueduct.

Nebula Award-nominated **BETH CATO** is the author of *A Thousand Recipes for Revenge* and *A Feast for Starving Stone* from 47North plus two fantasy series from Harper Voyager. She's a Hanford, California native now moored in Red Wing, Minnesota. She usually has one or two cats in close orbit. Follow her at [BethCato.com](http://BethCato.com), on Blue Sky at [@BethCato](https://twitter.com/BethCato), and Instagram as [@catocatsandcheese](https://www.instagram.com/catocatsandcheese).

**C. S. E. COONEY** is the World Fantasy Award- winning author of *Bone Swans: Stories*. Other books include *The Twice-Drowned Saint*, *Saint Death's Daughter* (nominated for the World Fantasy Award in Novels), *Dark Breakers* (finalist for the Locus Award, and nominated for the World Fantasy Award in Collections), and *Desdemona and the Deep*. Forthcoming from Outland Entertainment is *Negocios Infernales*, a TTRPG she co-designed with her husband Carlos Hernandez. Find her online at [csecooney.com](http://csecooney.com).

**CISLYN SMITH** likes playing pretend, playing games, and playing with words. She has been known to crochet tentacles, write stories at odd hours, and study stone dead languages. She is occasionally dismayed by the lack of secret passages in her house, and often inclined to make lists and puns and lists of puns. Her poems and stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Diabolical Plots*, and *The Deadlands*, among other places else-internet. Cislyn is a graduate of the Viable Paradise workshop, and co-editor of *Small Wonders Magazine*. When she's not writing or editing, she spends time behind the scenes at the Dream Foundry, helping creators across the speculative arts to connect with helpful resources and level up their craft. She is co-convention chair for *Flights of Foundry*, an annual virtual convention.

**DAWN VOGEL** has written for children, teens, and adults, spanning genres, places, and time periods. She is a member of Codex Writers. She lives in Seattle with her awesome husband (and fellow author), Jeremy Zimmerman, and their cats. Visit her: [historythatneverwas.com](http://historythatneverwas.com) or Twitter @historyneverwas.

**ELISEEVA ELIZAVETA** is an artist from Ukraine. You can find more of her work on Instagram where she is @eeva\_veta, and on Behance at <https://www.behance.net/eliseeva96veta>

**ELIZABETH R. MCCLELLAN** is a white disabled gender/queer neurospicy demisexual lesbian poet writing on unceded Quapaw and Chickasha Yaki land in what settlers call the Mid-South. In kan other life, ka is a domestic and sexual violence attorney. Ka is a previous winner of the Naked Girls Reading Literary Honors Award, a 2023 Rhysling Award finalist, and recipient of the Judi Neri Scholarship for Disabled Poets. Kan work has appeared in *Utopia Science Fiction*, *The Future Fire*,

*Strange Horizons*, *Nightmare Magazine*, *Apex Magazine*, *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*, *Chrome Baby*, *Apparition Lit*, and others, including *Salt, Sand, Blood: An Anthology of Sea Horror* and the Bram Stoker Award nominated *Mother: Tales of Love and Terror* anthology. Work from kan is forthcoming in *Kaleidotrope*, *There Used to Be a House Here* and the *Utopia Science Fiction Best of Utopia* anthology. Kan can be found on Twitter and Bluesky as @popelizbet, on Substack at popelizbet.substack.com, and on Patreon at patreon.com/ermcclellan.

**GRACE CHADWICK** is an illustrator, painter, and writer from Port Arthur, Texas with a BFA in painting from Lamar University creating fantasy artwork. She has created illustration work for various clients in the entertainment industry and has worked with partner and artist Gonzalo Alvarez (Gonzzink) to create graphic novels. In 2022, she co-founded Studio Tecuanis designing games and merchandise.

Dealing with mental and physical health and trauma, she uses her artwork to escape into other worlds illustrating the beauty and pain of her life experiences. She is also finishing coloring and co-writing a graphic novel ,“Polloman,” to be published by Harper Collins in 2026.

**HÉCTOR GONZÁLEZ** (they/them) is a queer nonbinary Mexican speculative writer living in Austin, TX. They regularly explore the messy Venn diagram of emotions with other things, like immigration policy, gender norms, food, and whatnot. Their first comic, Florescent, part of the Chispa Comics universe, will be released in February but can be pre-ordered through your local comic shop. You can find them on Instagram as @mexicanity, cooking up a storm and talking again about feelings.

**HOPE JOSEPH** is an essayist, and poet. He writes from Nigeria, West Africa. His works are forthcoming or already published in *Notre Dame*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Augur*, *Stormbird*, *Solar-Punk*, *Riddlebird*, *Reckoning*, *The Sunlight Press*, *A Longhouse*, *MukoliMag*, *Flute*, *Wizards in Space*, *Curio Cabinet*, *Speculative City*, *Timber Ghost Press*, *IBUA*, *SprinNG*, *Evening Street Press*, *Zoetic Press*, *Spillwords*, *Writers Space Africa*, and more. A Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize nominee. A finalist for the SEVHAGE Prize (nonfiction). He's a reader for Reckoning Press. He was a fellow in the 2021 SprinNG Writing Fellowship.

**IAN LI** (he/him) is a Chinese-Canadian writer and poet, who started writing in late 2023 after a lifetime of believing he could never be creative. He also enjoys spreadsheets, statistical curiosities, and brain teasers. Find his work published in *Nightmare Magazine*, *Small Wonders*, and *Strange Horizons*, among other venues. Learn more at <https://ian-li.com>.

**INDIGO RUE** (they/she) is an author of speculative fiction and definitely not a hue of blue masquerading as a human. Indigo lives in California with their half-orange and three-cat salad: Basil, Olive, and Feta. Indigo's work has previously been published under the name E. S. Hovgaard. Find more of Indigo's work at [indigorue.com](http://indigorue.com).

**J. D. HARLOCK** is an Eisner-nominated American writer, researcher, editor, and academic pursuing a doctoral degree at the University of St. Andrews, whose writing has been featured in *Business Insider*, *Newsweek*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Strange Horizons*, *Nightmare Magazine*, *The Griffith Review*, *Queen's Quarterly*, and New York University's Library of Arabic Literature. You can find him on LinkedIn, Bluesky, Twitter & Instagram.

**JEAN GOULBOURNE** is a poet, short story writer, novelist, and educator from Cross Keys, Manchester, Jamaica. She worked as an educator in secondary schools and colleges, and was part of the writing team for The Butterfly Series, now known as The Blue Mahoe, a 25 book series for reluctant adolescent readers. She is also the author of several other books for children published by a variety of Jamaican and British publishers, including the young adult novella *When the Bitter Bush Blossoms*.

Her books for adults include the short story collection, *The Parable of the Mangoes*, available through Abeng Press, which (under the title *Caged Birds*) was runner up for the Una Mason prize in 1995, a poetry collection, *Woman Song*, and a novel, *Excavation*, both available through Peepal Tree Press.

Individually, her stories and poems have appeared in *Savacou*, *Bim*, *The New Voices*, *The Caribbean Writer*, *Nimrod*, *New Poets of Jamaica*, *The Literary Review*, *Focus*, *Pathways*, *Dreamrock*, *Facing the Sea*, *Caribbean Poetry*, *Caribbean Poetry Now*, *New World English*, *Bite In*, *Oxford book of Caribbean Poetry*, *The Daily News*, *The Jamaica Record*, *The Jamaica Herald*, *The Sunday Gleaner*, *The Sunday Observer Arts Magazine*, *The Children's Own*, *Scribbles*, *Metamorphosis*, *Caribbean Challenge* and other magazines throughout the Caribbean.

Her poetry collection, *A New Day* is available from Worlds of Possibility.

**JEFF REYNOLDS** is a writer from rural down east Maine, a fabulous place that is really real and not a dream of Stephen King's. He's co-editor of *Trollbreath Magazine*, as well as creator of the Speculative Fiction Magazine Database, a place where readers can connect with and support short story publishers. His short stories have appeared in magazines from *Clarkesworld* to *GigaNotoSaurus*, and his work is strangely

popular in Australia. You can learn more about him and his writing at <https://www.trollbreath.com>

**JENNA HANCHEY** (she/her) is just discovering that getting a C in 5th grade art doesn't mean she's not an artist. She engages with collage, watercolor, acrylics, and photography to explore grief, imagine possibilities, center intimacies, and engender hope. Find more of her work at [www.jennahanchey.com](http://www.jennahanchey.com).

**JONATHAN CHIBUIKE UKAH** is a Pushcart-nominated poet from the United Kingdom. His poems have been featured in *Propel Magazine*, *Atticus Review*, *The Pierian*, *Unleash Lit*, *The Silk Road*, *Lucky Jefferson* and elsewhere. He won the Alexander Pope Poetry Award in 2023 and the Second Prize of the Streetlight Poetry Prize in 2024. His poetry collection, *I Blame My Ancestors*, won the Second Runner-up at the Summer Poetry Slam Prize of *Kingsman Quarterly* in 2024.

**JULIA KIM** is on instagram as mulanartist. She says, "I'm from Mykolaiv, Ukraine. I love to create cute little designs that help me to donate to charity organisations of Ukraine."

**LORRAINE SCHEIN** is a New York writer and poet. Her work has appeared in *VICE Terraform*, *Strange Horizons*, *NewMyths* and *Michigan Quarterly*, and in the anthologies *Wild Women* and *Tragedy Queens: Stories Inspired by Lana del Rey & Sylvia Plath*. *The Futurist's Mistress*, her poetry book, is available from Mayapple Press. Her book of stories and poems, *The Lady Anarchist Cafe*, is out now from Autonomedia.  
<https://autonomedia.org/product/the-lady-anarchist-cafe/>

**MANNY CARTAGENA** is a writer from idyllic Berks County, PA. He has been a regular of the Eastern and Central PA arts and



literary scenes for years. Manny's work ranges from poetry to short story to novel-length fiction.

**MARIE BRENNAN** is the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Award-nominated author of the *Memoirs of Lady Trent*, the *Onyx Court*, other fantasy series, several poems, and over ninety short stories. As half of M.A. Carrick, she's also written the *Rook and Rose* trilogy. Find her at [swantower.com](http://swantower.com) and on Patreon.

**MARGARET E. WINIKATES** is an author/poet, parent, and museum professional from Massachusetts. She likes to write works full of optimism and whimsy, and has stories, poems, and essays published in a variety of markets including *all the sins*, *Zetetic: A Record of Unusual Inquiry*, and other places, including public art such as the "Raining Poetry" temporary installation created by the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, MA. When not taking her kids to museums or reading them stories about lovable robots, Meg likes to play music, craft, and travel. Find more of Meg's work at [mwinikates.com](http://mwinikates.com) or follow her on Bluesky at [@winikat.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/@winikat.bsky.social) or Instagram at [@megwinikates](https://www.instagram.com/megwinikates).

**MARI NESS** is a queer poet, author, and now, Hugo Award finalist for "Ever Noir," a poem combining fairy tale and noir films. Other work appears in multiple zines and anthologies, including *Reactor*, *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *Uncanny*, *Nightmare*, *Apex*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Strange Horizons*, *Haven Spec*, and the forthcoming *Silent Nightmares* anthology from Saga Press. Ness lives in central Florida, occasionally chatting with live oak trees, and watching alligators rest near waterways. For more, visit [marikness.wordpress.com](http://marikness.wordpress.com), or <https://bsky.app/profile/mariness.bsky.social>.

**MARY SOON LEE** is a Grand Master of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association, and winner of the AnLab Readers' Award, Dwarf Stars Award, Elgin Award, Rhysling Award, and Utopia Award. An illustrated edition of her epic fantasy told in poems, *The Sign of the Dragon*, was published in 2025. She hides behind a cryptically named website (marysoonlee.com) and BlueSky account (@marysoonlee.bsky.social).

**MIYUSA ASHIBARA** is an artist from Indonesia. You can find her on instagram as @miyusa.ashibara.

**NOAH BERLATSKY** (he/him) is a freelance writer in Chicago. His full-length collections are *Not Akhmatova* (Ben Yehuda Press, 2024), *Gnarly Thumbs* (Anxiety Press, 2025), *Meaning Is Embarrassing* (Ranger, 2025) and *Brevity* (Nun Prophet, 2025).

A 2016 MBA graduate and published author, **PRIYA SRIDHAR** has been writing fantasy and science fiction for fifteen years, and counting. Capstone published the Powered series. Priya lives in Miami, Florida with her family.

**SARA CLETO AND BRITTANY WARMAN** are folklorists, teachers, and writers who co-founded The Carterhaugh School of Folklore and the Fantastic, where they teach creative souls how to re-enchant their lives through folklore and fairy tales. They earned their PhDs in English and Folklore from The Ohio State University in 2018. They have authored more than four dozen publications and lectured at venues such as the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Maryland Renaissance Festival. You can find their poetry and prose in *Uncanny*, *Corvid Queen*, *Star\*Line*, and others, and you can find them online at <http://www.carterhaughschool.com>. Their first book, *Fairylore*, is forthcoming in 2026.

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**TEHNUKA** ([www.tehnuka.dreamhosters.com](http://www.tehnuka.dreamhosters.com)) is a writer from Aotearoa New Zealand who calls on all of us to use our wonderful, unique minds and/or bodies in whatever ways we can to refuse and resist the genocide of Palestinian people and the colonisation of Palestine. Resist with every breath and deed until Palestine is free — until we are all free.

**ZAYNAB ILIYASU BOBI**, Frontier I, is a Nigerian-Hausa poet, artist, and a Medical Laboratory Scientist from Bobi. She is the author of *Cadaver of Red Roses* (O, Miami Books), winner of the 2023 Derricotte/Eady Chapbook Prize, and *Uncensored Snapshots*, forthcoming with Chestnut Review in 2025. X @ZainabBobi.