

Poems of the Living

To enlarge your screen:

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Compassion, Creativity, Connection

"All that you touch You Change.

All that you Change Changes you.

The only lasting truth is Change."

-Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

Since January 2025, Los Angeles County employees have been on the front lines of the emergency response and are essential to the long-term recovery and rebuilding of our communities. Our shared experiences have revealed the interconnected layers of our collective strength, compassion for each other, and resilience as a community.

Each poem in "Poems of the Living" is a blueprint of healing, capturing the delicate yet persistent growth of human connection. These writings document our collective journey—turning individual experiences into a broader, more detailed narrative.

Our grief is not a lonely experience, but a shared ecosystem we navigate together. These poems map our collective healing—showing how vulnerability becomes strength, how personal stories connect like roots in underground networks, and how creativity can be an act of radical hope.

We write to remember. We write to heal. We write to continue.

Following Pasadena Science Fiction writer Octavia Butler's wisdom, these poems declare that change is inevitable, but how we move through that change—with compassion, with creativity, with connection—is our choice.

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Therapeutic Potential

Scientific research consistently shows the healing potential of creative writing in processing grief and loss. An important study published in the Journal of Veteran Studies (2024) found that expressive writing can significantly reduce psychological distress and improve overall emotional well-being for people experiencing traumatic experiences.

Research by Grace Brillantes-Evangelista, PhD, in Arts in Psychotherapy (2013) revealed how creative writing supports psychological healing. The study highlighted specific therapeutic outcomes:

- Organizing complex emotional experiences
- Creating meaningful stories from loss
- Reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety
- Enhancing psychological resilience

A comprehensive review in the Journal of Palliative Care (2020) examined poetry's impact on healthcare professionals, finding that creative writing helps increase empathy and offers potential strategies for preventing burnout.

The Qualitative Report's 2020 study further emphasized the effectiveness of creative writing for collective healing, particularly among groups processing shared traumatic experiences. This research shows how writing can transform individual pain into shared understanding.

These scientific findings highlight the profound healing potential of the creative writing process captured in "Poems of the Living" - revealing how personal stories can become powerful tools of collective resilience and emotional recovery.

Pope, A. (2024). Exploring the Emotional Landscape of Veterans: An Analysis of Poems About PTSD. Journal of Veterans Studies, 10 (1), 22-26. https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v10i1.511.

• Brillantes-Evangelista, G. (2013). An evaluation of visual arts and poetry as therapeutic interventions with abused adolescents. The Arts in Psychotherapy, 40(1), 71-84. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2012.11.005.

- Schoonover KL, Hall-Flavin D, Whitford K, Lussier M, Essary A, Lapid MI. Impact of Poetry on Empathy and Professional Burnout of Health-Care Workers: A Systematic Review. J Palliat Care. 2020 Apr;35(2):127-132. doi: 10.1177/0825859719865545. Epub 2019 Jul 29. PMID: 31354038.
- Koelsch, L. E., Goldberg, S. G., & Bennett, E. (2020).
 "Am I Telling the Story Right?" Poetry, Community, and Trauma. The Qualitative Report, 25(6), 1540-1554. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4328.

Los Angeles County has many resources for you to continue your healing journey. We acknowledge that the richness of our community requires equally nuanced wellness strategies. We offer these additional resources:

Los Angeles County's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) - County employees and a dependent can attend up to four virtual sessions every six months with the first one being offered on "County time." To schedule a confidential counseling session, call (213) 433-7202 or email EAPOhr.lacounty.gov. For more information, visit https://employee.hr.lacounty.gov/employee-assistance-program/.

Life Assistance Program (LAP) - The Life Assistance Program (LAP) is a free confidential and anonymous counseling service offered by the County of Los Angeles and provided by New York Life Behavioral Health. It is available to all employees, regardless of their medical or life insurance plans. Dealing with anxiety, grief, and fear can be a challenge. You don't have to go it alone. You can get help right away with the LAP. For more information call (800) 344-9752.

Creative Wellbeing is an approach for fostering communities of wellness using arts-based strategies to enhance the capacity of adults to support young people. Creative Wellbeing was developed by the LA County Department of Arts and Culture, Office of Child Protection, Department of Mental Health, and Arts for Healing and Justice Network. https://www.lacountyartsedcollective.org/initiatives/creative-wellbeing.



The Voices of Transformation

"The world is full of painful stories.

Sometimes it seems as though there aren't any other kind, and yet I found myself thinking how beautiful that glint of water was through the trees."

-Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

Poets are the mapmakers of human resilience, navigating emotional landscapes that maps and measurements cannot capture. When faced with system-wide upheavals-pandemics that isolate, wildfires that destroy, economic pressures that wear away-poets transform collective pain into a language of survival and hope.

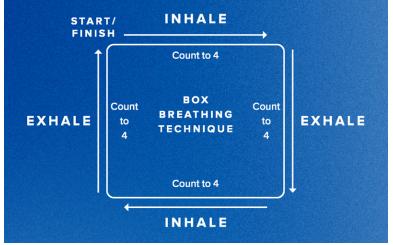
They are more than witnesses; they are translators of human experience. Where scientific reports offer data, poets offer context. Where statistics describe, poets reveal. They dig up meaning from layers of collective trauma, helping communities understand their experiences not as isolated incidents, but as connected stories of human endurance.

Through the precision of metaphor and the beat of real-life stories, poets build strong connections between one person's pain and everyone's understanding. The intent is not to minimize suffering; instead, they shine a light on all its complicated parts. Poets bring depth, layers of complexity, and small details to official stories that make each story more real.

Their work is an act of radical empathy—processing grief, transforming wounds into wisdom, making the invisible visible. Poets understand that language is not just communication, but a form of healing. By naming our experiences, they help us understand them, and in understanding, we begin to recover.

Poets do more than document—they reimagine possibility. They show that our stories, when written with courage and compassion, can become blueprints for collective resilience.

The writing presented in this Anthology is centered on themes of grief and loss and may contain content that some readers may find upsetting. We support you in reading as much or as little as you want. Below, you will find a breathing exercise that may be helpful to emotionally ground you. Pages 6 and 115 include healing resources available to you as a County employee. We recommend you take a break in your reading or practice your favorite form of self-care.



Those Left Behind

Aaron D. Storms

Unexpected
That's what made it hardest
A routine surgery that went well
Cardiac arrest while getting dressed to go home

CPR worked twice, but not the third time Forever the mystery of how this happened A competition of feelings

- Anger and blame
- Or acceptance and letting go Each one has its turn

The persistent image of my mother's tears through a video call
My aunts' shock and wailing on the phone
Nine days of rosaries
And nine days of masses,
like it's always done

An essential other of my childhood, gone. The loss, something that further unites those of us left behind.

Ode to Unconditional Love

Abigail Ea

- I have lost a person with a beautiful smile
 with a love that's unconditional
 who stuck with me through the good and the bad
 and always showed support no matter what

 I have lost -
- a person with unwavering strength that I wish I had who taught me the faith that guided her throughout her life who encouraged me to always believe in my own strength
- I have lost a person who took away my bright smile
 for she took a part of me that I wish I still have
- I have found a deeper appreciation for life
 the rare beauty of the plants and flowers she grew
- I have found that it's okay to be sad when memories strike
 for I learned that grief is as strong as the love that is gone
- I have found that the faith she taught will someday
 reunite me with her and her unconditional love

My Grandmother

Andrea Spencer

Visiting my grandmother in the summer Smelling coffee at 5:00am Drinking hot black coffee Homemade buttermilk biscuits Milking Cows Churning butter Feeding chickens Chasing the hogs The nasty smelling outhouse Catching rainwater Carrying spring water The smokehouse Fresh vegetables Going to church The family cemetery Going to the grocery store once a month Ready to go home to the city This was country life.

To Whom it May Relieve, or Advice for Selves

Andrew Tunks

To Whom it May Relieve,

Understand that I am You, and I have been shattered into a million pieces...There are lifetimes of content that I alone could recite.

Understand that some days you will be all joy and wild experience, and some days you will be covered in blood that is not your own, and it will feel like hell.

But I can tell it to you best with Star Wars. Understand that Luke and Leia are the twin Skywalkers that have to restore balance to the Force, and to be honest, I haven't figured out what they need to do yet, but I think it's us. Adam and Eve, the generation of consciousness that turns our home into Eden, and ends the Empire.

Understand that they were born of Padme, the lotus flower, the virtuous senator who fought with wisdom and insight for peace, and used a laser gun fearlessly. And of Anakin, who went against his kin to try to protect his flower, and in the process lost himself, his flower, and killed worlds.

Understand that he could not help but become Darth Vader, the dark aspect of the Father. His ultimate dualistic master--the overt power structure known as Palpatine, which he served as a Jedi, and as Darth Sidious in insidious lies--had so corrupted the world into war and merciless power, that he took the miracle baby Anakin, a pure gift of the Force, and corrupted him to wipe out the checks of good.

Understand that the Force created him anyway.
Understand that the children of Padme and Anakin, who both tried so hard, have to save the universe from the Dark energy of the Father and Grandfather, by listening to those who have conquered death.

Understand that Yoda gained immortality in yogic Union with the Force by conquering his darkest parts, and his final task was to go to the Sith Temple, where the secret reality of death was known. Understand that Obi Wan had already learned the secrets of immortality, and raised Luke, when Darth Vader sliced him into thin air. It was no surprise when he guided Luke from beyond.

Understand that he was following the Plan, as was Qui-Gon Ginn, who followed the Living Force; who found and delivered the miracle baby Anakin to the Jedi; Qui-Gon who started Yoda on his journey to immortality from beyond.

Understand that these are the ones Luke and Leia need to pay attention to as they dismantle the Empire of their Dark Fathers. They are children of the Positive and Negative Sides of the Force. Leia was raised Organa-cally, Luke was taught by an immortal master.

Understand that when they understand their identity, they are able to stop the lies; that Order 66(6?), the terrible, inevitable programming, cannot be executed; that the ability to destroy planets and wage wars is itself destroyed; that their Fathers' empire crumbles, and the universe has balance.

Understand that you may start to feel this way by listening to the rishis, the agents of the Living Force, the immortal wisdom of Ascended Masters, or to those Hanumans that serve with Bhakti; that is to say, those few so truly in harmony with the universe that they exist in ways that are synonymous with the will, knowledge, and full experience of the universe and the beauty of Pure Consciousness; and if you continue to feel the immortal spark within yourself, the lotus seed of wisdom, peace, and graceful power will blossom, and the Empire will crumble.

Understand that the Empire only exists because we fear loss and death, and believe the lies of war and separation; and that when you are covered in blood that is not your own, and it feels like hell, it is precisely the time that you will best be able to learn from the masters, and understand that you are always an agent and gift of the Force, that the universe is moving through you, and that you can become immortal. Wilder things have happened.

Understand that it will not happen all at once, unless it does, but everyone can do it, and that's why there are saints that are stupid, and sharp, and mean, and goofy, and can fly. Understand that the point is not to become a saint, but to understand what is as best as you can and eventually become immortal. Get zapped by VALIS. Let the Empire end. See through the kaleidoscope instead of being inside it.

Understand that the blood, virtual or real, in every sense, is only there to get you to remember, to be and balance the system. Noticing that, and everything else, with compassion and understanding, leads to the end of the Empire, and the re-creation of Eden, and maybe even immortality.

Use your imagination, it's real. Edenic or Eidetic, call it intention, the choice is yours, and sometimes not, but be like Luke or Arjuna, and realize who is next to you always and why, and which story you are following, because that is reality.

In any universe you've found a story, realize you are right and you will live it out. Some are better than others, so remember the Force, and the lessons of your Teachers. Eat well and be relieved when others do as well. So little else is more important. Love that others are well, and do not believe any insidious lie that some do not deserve it as much. Do not covet safety so badly that you hurt others, safety is in the well-being and unity of all.

Understand that when I told you that I am You, that You are also Me. When you hurt, I hurt, and as long as that is not the case, the world remains insidious. There you will find your relief. In the Sith Temple, where you most fear to go, but you cannot escape. If Star Wars brought you relief, let this be your lesson:; hell or heaven.

Benedict

Armen Avetyan

As I sit by the window staring,
I see the rain drops bold and glaring.
I wait and wait for the sun's embrace,
When I see an owl by my door, a watcher in place.
In my delusional state of mind,

I open the door and ask for his name, polite and kind.
No response from the nameless guest,
So I prepare to leave him to his rest.
But not until I hear a "Who?" come my way,

Startled and still I chose to stay.
I quickly turn back and look into his chilling eyes,
But not fast enough, as the echoing dies.
"Don't toy with me bird," I say aloud,

But to no effect, as he sits there mighty and proud. Tormented and discontent, I chose the latter, I will turn away and provide him with no further flatter. As I turn away once more,

The echoing returns as soon as I open the door.
"Who?" fills my ears,
Now I know how to resolve this matter; I must face my fears.
I turn back to face the bird,

Waiting patiently for it to say another word. In my wait I chose for him a name, Benedict the owl; the master of this mind game. He looks at me with utter pride,

Daring me to expose my fears, open and wide. Drenched in rain, my thoughts grow wild, How I lost it all, fleeting as a child. "Benedict, for what do I lack,

To be able to bring all of my fortunes back?"
"Tell me who, what, where, and why!"
But he dips his head, and flies away with no goodbye.
I walk inside abandoned and alone,

Wondering how to reclaim my throne.

I look in the mirror, and who do I see?

The person Benedict referred to that would set me free.

The "who" he spoke of was me all along,
Now I know what I must do to right my wrongs.
I must face the tale that began with, "Once upon a time,"
But regretfully ended with, "I wish she was still mine."

Love & Grief & Lucky

Ashley C. Lanuza

When we padded down Rosie's Dog Beach, love was his velociraptor nails cracking at the sand

as he ran from the swash only to chase it back into endless expansion.

When I was eight, my brother and I were at our grandfather's when our mother called,

"I have a surprise for both of you." I opened the door to our apartment. Love was his bark reverberating from the bedroom, igniting my joy in knowing I could bring a companion

for the Blessing of the Animals. When he fell asleep on my bed, he would snuggle his head on my chest. Love was his wet nose leaving marks on my skin.

When our home crumbled into a broken heart, he became a nomad with arthritis. Friends and family took a hand at caring for him. Doggy-bed surfing.

I tried to visit him twice a month so he would never forget me.

When he moved homes, grief was our steady walk across a strange new park. Grief was our visits to the sea as the shore soaked the fur of his paw.

When he died, I believed he waited—his cream-colored chest heaving like a bass drum—to hear my mother and brother's voice on Facetime.

Grief was his black fur splayed across his bed as it swallowed the space in the darkness. Grief weighed ten pounds and five ounces and looked beyond me with his brown eyes.

Grief writes this poem five years later with fluorescent lights from the animal ER illuminating the shadows of this memory, elucidating the definition of grief as

love. When Lucky ran to the kitchen the moment he heard the crackle of a bright blue bag of beef jerky Canine Carry Outs.

What to Do with Tears

Asiya Hasan

Drown them.

They drip down the rim,
of a teacup nestled against her cheek,
blurring the headlines of the morning paper.

Silence them. Clueless sparrows flit on rain-soaked grounds.

Trickle them: sweat, rickety sorrows taking her nowhere.

Rain them.
Cloudy solitude
of a ride home,
tiny rivulets staining
her pale cheeks kohl.

Lose them.
In the poultice of a cushion?
In the arm of a friend?
In the chop-sniff-chop-sniff of a kitchen
In the wake-sleep-wake bedroom
They come back and back and back,
stealthy, sneaky, snickering.

In the tub where she lay, eyes closed—dark sleep?—tears baptizing her relentless shrouds.

Leo Carrillo

Brenda Espiritu

I went camping
got myself invited by being curious
to people's conversations
the organizer, a librarian
read tarot cards for fun
it scared me
the first card said, you have been living in a nightmare
how did she know?
my spouse relapsed 3 years ago
and I've become sick carrying it all.

the model worker room parent every year overachiever fundraiser believer.

"in what ways will I find peace?" is what I asked the cards and what they reflected, i knew was hardship achievement defeat. and the belief that this is not for me to carry

alone
this is not for me to carry
at all.
but addiction, see
runs rampant
indiscriminate
affecting all
binding you
and taking you
away from you
till the essence of you dissipates

I must choose me
And lovingly
detach
from the harm
that addiction causes
love is not enough

I choose to live.

Home

Carey Huh (You Lim Huh)

Home is where I can be myself and unburden When I am alone I look out the window and notice The flowers, green shrubs, clouds and palm trees gently swaying Even an odd squirrel running along transmission lines Quietly the Sun and winds scatter the clouds A smile forms on my lips

In your presence Suddenly a storm cloud might form Air might fill with static A small spark might Turn into a bolt of thunder But just as soon as it rains It can turn sunny again Air sweetened by spring flowers Regardless of weather Home is where love lives

Beetle the Wonder Dog

Chervl Waterford

Wiggle: Spring 2003

Waggle: Fall 2022

In this era of designer dogs like labradoodles and cockapoos there was one dog who wandered into our lives and changed it forever. Beetle was a tan, black and white dog who resembled a Beagle. Beetle was a Harrier breed of dog.

I could never have imagined that I would raise you from a pup along with my children to adulthood.

Fond memories of our journey with Beetle

My first time hearing about Beetle was around the Spring of 2003. Beetle arrived at my mother's home around that time as a pup. My story begins with a phone call to my mom in Los Angeles while I was living in Memphis, TN for about five years. My now ex-husband and I and three children had relocated there from Los Angeles due to his mother being seriously ill and we wanted to spend time with her in her later years. I called my mom informing her that my then husband was cheating on me and the extramarital relationship conceived a child. I further informed my mom I was leaving my husband and coming back to Los Angeles. My mom said, "OK." My mom did not care for him anyway, lol. My mom went on further to tell me about a puppy that my father brought home that had wandered into his mini market. She said, "George brought home another dog for me to take care of." This was around the Spring of 2003. My mom called him "Beagle." Fast forward to the summer. Me and the children arrived by Greyhound bus back to Los Angeles, CA. It was a three-day bus ride. I had shipped our belongings about two weeks prior by Greyhound as well. Me and the children settled in with my parents after arriving in Los Angeles, when we met the puppy. The kids fell in love. They changed the dog's name. They said, "we're going to call him Beetle." Beetle was a rambunctious dog. Beetle liked to run and play with the kids all the time. My youngest daughter was around six at the time, so Beetle was like a pesky little sister. Beetle would steal her toys. One day she was walking outside with a hot dog and Beetle ran by her and snatched her hot dog right out of her hand and swallowed it. My daughter ran in the house crying. Beetle was a handful to say the least. But Beetle was like a therapy dog when therapy dogs were not as popular as they are now. In the Black community, they are basically nonexistent. Beetle 22 was very attentive to everyone in the family. She would sit in front of me after a long day at work and take her nose and make me pet her. At that moment I felt relief from the stress of the day.

Another story we fondly call "The Bowling Ball Incident." One evening, I arrived home from work. I drove up to the house and got out of the car to open the gate to come into the driveway. Just picture our house on the top of a hill and I look up and see Beetle standing there at the top to greet me. I smiled when suddenly my smile turned upside down. I noticed beside Beetle was a bowling ball that she had probably been playing with all day. Before I had the chance to say, "No Beetle" She took her nose and pushed the bowling ball down the hill towards me. OMG. all I could think of was to attempt to stop the bowling ball from passing me and entering the street. I feared that a car would be passing by and cause an accident. Well, the bowling ball rolled past me and rolled down the hill, no cars thank God. So, there I ran after it in my white work shirt, black skirt, and loafers. It was like I was in slow motion, when suddenly my feet went up in the air and so did my black skirt. The ball kept rolling till it reached the corner. As I bent down to try to catch it ,I fell down and the ball turned right and went down another hill. Then my brother came out of the house cracking up saving. "Are you ok? Oopsie. I saw you out the kitchen window running after that bowling ball." I said, "You should have filmed this; we could have been on the funniest video program." After helping me off the sidewalk, my brother proceeded to go down the hill to retrieve the bowling ball resting at the bottom without incident. When we returned to the house, Beetle was standing there as if to sav. "Where have you been?"

Some time later, we moved into a condo complex on the other side of town. The kids loved it and so did Beetle. The kids took Beetle for long walks and to the park. One day, my eldest daughter took Beetle with her to pick up the mail from the community mailbox area. About ten minutes later, I see Beetle at the front door sitting there without my daughter, then about five minutes later my daughter comes running down the hallway hollering Beetle, Beetle, Beetle. Beetle peeks her head out the door as if to say, "Where have you been? I was waiting for you." Beetle was a character in her own way. About six years later we moved back with my parents in the back house because they were getting older. My dad was ill and my mom needed help with his care. By that time my parents had gotten another dog, Spanky, a tan Chihuahua. Beetle and Spanky became instant buddies, big dog, little dog. As my children grew into adulthood, Beetle grew older and a little slower. One day, my daughter was giving Beetle a bath and noticed a large bump on her tummy. 23 We took Beetle to the emergency vet. The vet examined Beetle and ran some tests. The test results revealed a mass on her abdomen. The vet gave Beetle 30 days to live. The vet gave us medicine to keep Beetle comfortable. Beetle was on bed rest for about twenty eight days. The last few days of her life we had to put a ramp on the back steps to help Beetle down the two steps to use the restroom. One day, Beetle would not come into the house; she hid in the garage behind my daughter's car. We knew then that it was time. I returned to the vet hospital along with my children and Beetle. Before we left, my mom brought Spanky outside to give Beetle a kiss goodbye.

When we arrived at the hospital, the nurse took us to a room right away. The room was like a Zen room with plants, rocks, pillows and comfortable chairs. The doctor came in and let us know she would give us some time to spend with Beetle before she put her down. This place was amazing. I had never heard of anyone having this experience being an African-American woman raised in the inner city.

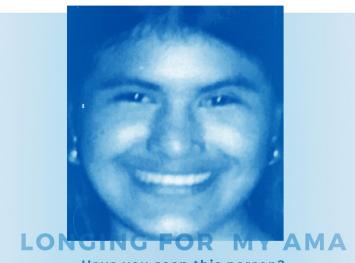
Beetle was an amazing dog. Beetle was about 19 when she passed away. Beetle was literally raised along with my children. I am grateful for the times we had with Beetle. Spanky lived about three years after Beetle.

RIP Uncle Spanky and Beetle aka Evangeline. Although they are no longer with us they will always be in our hearts. We have been blessed to have two new fur family members Cookie and Juice, fellow rescue dogs to carry on the legacy of Beetle and Spanky.

Missing SOUL

Cindy Delgado

SPECIAL BULLETIN MISSING SOUL



Have you seen this person?
You probably haven't since she's in heaven.

She was last seen on February 8, 2019 on this earth.

There are so many important things I didn't get to say to her. If you happen to find her, please tell her that her passing has left a profound sadness in my life.

I miss her deeply, and I wish more than anything that I could be with her now.

But first, let me give you a few hints of who she was:

She was honest, caring, resilient, kind, creative, loving,
enthusiastic, courageous, ambitious, loyal —
and above all, a loving mother.

If you have any information, contact hello@thankyoufortrying.com.

A Few More Bars

Daniel Macias

Quick sand dissolving. The longer the periods of pacification, the easier to forget. The ebb and flow of existing in a world of continuous contradiction.

Why do we still talk? And....where is the love? I try to help, I seek to do the right thing. Can a relationship be exhausted? Does the expiration date arrive?

I couldn't compel myself to cry.

The memorial's impostor. Or was the memorial the impostor?
They knew a different version of you. Oh! The stories we could tell.
Two aces under the table. Throwing fisticuffs before dawn.
The anger and ferocity transcribed by a snare and a stick.

Primal. A celebration of chaos. Substances mix. Alchemy, chemistry, synergy and evolution. The swirling synapse and the synchronizing strings of the Oud. A globe spinning in space.

But back to the church. The solemn solace of the established peace. Were it not ordained that you would join him? The one on the cross, with hair long like yours? A crescendo! I still can't cry. I won't cry. Why should I? The establishment said death be a rebirth.

But make it the right kind.

Reconnected. Though one is lost, the cycle renews. The song is extended a few more bars. Bouncing major scales dance across the dunes, unbound by the rigid walls, with nothing left to

lose.

Goodbye, my friend.

Living Love for You and You

Denise Corbett

As I arise day by day, I am sometimes in a brain fog. a delusional thought of what day it is or just feeling like something is off. I come to the conclusion that there is something missing. That "something" is you. Your physical presence is not here for me to gaze upon or to say grand rising to or kiss you goodnight. What I miss most of all is your bright beautiful smile that illuminated my soul. I inherited your smile, but now I smile to keep from crying. It is a bright smile nonetheless. I attract others to smile and it is an expression of my love for you to come join me in the spirit. Your energy will never die. It is transferred through me and your DNA. I'm living Love for You and You because I know your mission was not complete. I love to love. The love that you have given me will be everlasting and everlasting because we were created that way. I'm a little bit selfish. I want you here with me to hold my hand when I reach out for you. You are gone too soon. Living Love for You is my honor. I thank you for giving me your gift. That's all you had to give and I accept it. Life goes on because you first loved me.

Performance Evaluation

Elaine Waldman

A big window before me is what honor feels like Glance up to the broad sky

What can I say to show you and everyone What changes what goodness what light you bring

This is a sacred ritual this is a privilege
This lifting up this glory this centering this hope
A new direction a gift a record
Your history what you have given what you have yet to give

How you are held in my mind felt by the Department with your colleagues with the People
How can I express how special you are how lucky I am to work beside you
To see you

My pen and this form
I choose these words and I wrap them around your gifts

This is the moment
What service feels like what obligation knows
This is a love letter
To a Worker to all Workers

How can I thank you how can I express my awe
How can I accept my responsibility
To see light to know warmth to speak words to write words to
hear words
To be with truth
This is the least I can do this is the best I can do this is
the possible

We create when we embrace what we honor

Budgeting for Goodbye

Elisabeth Nails

```
Grab whatever tool
you can
claw
start scrawling on the nearest scrap of paper
let the projections fall straight out of your heart
plopping down
outside of the lines
you can tidy this mess later
putting order into tiny boxes
now is about gaming the scenarios playing out
mind movies of
last days spent together,
last kisses
last birthdays
last dances
toasts,
and tail wags
the long meandering walks
where we
effortlessly take turns leading
each other toward
this precious contingency
hold it close
spread the damage out across quarters divide each day into every hour into every minute
and keep breaking things down into seconds and
smaller and smaller increments prolong the inevitable
waste time obsessing over a formula to calculate the indirect cost
of care,
just
walk away
and trust
the compound interest
of opening your heart to love
```

Next Time

Eugenia Thomas

She goes on, re-telling the story to herself. Revisiting the night before, the day of, the day after.

Even then, she knew, life as she knows it, would not be the same...

29 30

The Blue Ocean

Evelyn Fierros

I always like the ocean
A salty, cool, yet warm and embracing hug.
Completely blue, vibrant hue
Sparkling and shining through.
The ocean's touch, gentle, smooth, calm and soothing.
The waves so invigorating, creating a gentle yet firm push like a massage.
The smell of fresh fist, seagulls, and seals...
Wow! The blue ocean can heal me!

Monday Again

Felicia Hall

I'm almost there
Road work on the 101
Drink more coffee
It's never fixed
My exit is closed
Go around to 1st
Are you honking at me?
Turn the corner

I'm almost there
I'm in a hurry
I'm here to help
But sometimes I'm not sure
if I am helping...
Make a List

- Help more
- Work harder
- Do more
- Stay quiet
- Smile more
- Complain less
- Don't forget
- Self-care
- · Budget cuts
- Do more

I'm in the facility now
It's ruptured
Musty and familiar
I'm here to help
Go away lady
I'm here to help
I said go away
But, I'm here to help
I've heard that before
But, I want to help
But you never do...
It will work this time
I'm hungry and tired

(Continued)

Here's a sandwich
He talks to himself
Arrested for trespassing
Land acknowledgment?
His smile is shattered
And an unkempt beard
"I like your hair, Ms. Hall."
You are the only one that noticed!
My new haircut.
Not because no one cares
But because...

I'm in a hurry Take your meds Go to a shelter Get a shave Go to the DMV Here's a voucher For EBT Stay quiet Here's a flyer Don't argue with the Judge Smile more Complain less I'm here to help I'm almost there Drink more coffee Self-care It never works Road work on the 101 It's never fixed My exit is closed I'm here to help

La Sexta Avenida

Francis Rodezno-Marmol

Flat, round, and sharp stones Small, big, all sizes... the ground adorned Houses of colors Green, yellow, red, white, and blue Down hill or up Depends where you are Narrow, not too wide Sounds of laughter, sounds of crying Music playing, different kinds Ever loud the wood mill screams Yelling names of missing kids Poor grandmas parents fear Always live with playful youths The time of day never minds The street, my playground Will never pass

33

655 Maple Ave

Heidi Spencer

We stepped out the door

As he fell square to the ground
Medic sirens scream

Haleakala

Jardine Maerlyn Cordero-Pagunsan

summit, bone-chill darkness

rhythms of old part the clouds
behold the Sun, heart-warm!

36

Girl Sprout

Katelyn Ma

```
A wistful wish to return to simplicities,
a time of gullible innocence
a time of unbeknownst injuries - playground knees,
eager and active - awing at adorable petulance.
```

Ignorance is bliss
to a little girl's naiveties
scope a spot and crisscross apple sauce, designated slots of storytime remedies.

Kodak moments capture the essence of what it means to be a kid again.
Everyday now, we count our blessings
in a world, we're grown to represent.

but not the sky

Kat Li

```
Hollow inside and burned out, white snow that is not snow, fog that is not fog, red fire like sky-quiet, in awe of all the little things in life:
```

the emergent flames,
the water drops,
the burned bits,
the smell that lingers, fills my nose,
seeping into everything.

We wait,
we hope,
we yearn
for a future day,

for little things and water drops, without the flames, we're burned to bits-

to sit in awe
on a quiet day,
a blue sky,
not a cloud in sight.

I burn,
we burn,
but not the sky.

The Death of a Marriage

Kirsten Gilbert

Nobody enters a marriage
Intending to get divorced.
The wedding is so filled with
Hope, love, anticipation for the future,
dreams.

Ours was not a typical fairytale wedding A girl might dream of as she grows up. Rather, it was a day filled with packing up And moving into our first apartment, Rushing here and there, Last minute wedding gown shopping, Fulfilling religious, societal, and Familial expectations.

I wore a dress that shifted from Midnight blue to a deep, shimmering, and Opalescent purple.
It mirrored my bouquet of irises From Trader Joe's And it had pockets!

This last-minute wedding gathered together Friends and family amounting to about 150 people with only a day or two of notice, But my best friend wasn't there.

(Continued)

Most questioned if this wedding was real, Or really an April Fool's joke Turns out the joke was on me.

Twenty-four years, three kids, one dog,
Three cats, 13 chickens, countless ups and
downs later,
And here we are stuck in a broken,
Yet still shared home.

Navigating an emotionally, physically, and Financially draining contentious divorce.

Navigating parenting and emotionally Supporting two teens and an increasingly Emotionally dysregulated eight-year-old With special needs.

Who has the words to guide them?
To explain to these ever-changing
Souls we've been gifted with how our lives
Will be forever changed?
How do I maintain my strength and
Endurance to be what they need?
How do I learn who I am to be now?

We take each day one moment at a time, Loving each other as hard as we can.

What If

Lana Medina

What if you took it all The pain Self-doubt The thoughts you keep All the hurtful words that cut so deep And released them What dreams would you wake to Who would you find How much higher would you soar How much more would you rise if you could clear your mind of all the disbelief And what if you relinquished your grief Left the past where it belongs Erased what weighs you down every day What if you found a better way to live your life and love all sides of you To be bold and stay true to who you are Embraced your mistakes and scars Refused what doesn't grow you What if stay in this and there are no limits to what you can do how far you can go Their issues are not your baggage to be packed in or carried around What if you stand up now and fight the demons that tie you to the ground You just might see that you are meant to fly High above your wildest dreams

Madre

Latanya Hill

One in the morning, awake, staring at flecks of light in the dark.

Listening to nothing yet hearing air flow steadily. A murmur, a gurgle, a low cry?

No.

Two in the morning, eyes open, staring at flecks of light moving in the dark.

A whimper, a sigh, an exhale?

Listening to nothing yet hearing air flow steadily. Three in the morning, eyes watching, staring at

movement of light in the dark.

A yawn, a cry, sounds of life? Yes.

Relaxed, eyes closed, brief moment of sleep till feeding time.

Wildflower

Linaria Fifita

Flowers are blooming
In the beautiful spring season
The birds are singing
While the sun is high up in the sky
The wildflower with its vibrant color
Moving to the gentle rustling of the breeze
It brings back the memories
That are so far gone
The silence makes known that the heart is longing
For a place called home
With all the loved one's presence
But life continues to go on

Lost and Found

Lonnie Resser

Lost: One hand-knit sequined sweater made by my Gramma Harriet, initially found in 2021 carefully stored in a closet in her house after she died. My mom and I traded the sweater back and forth over the years; the sweater was at my mom's house when her house burned down.

Found: One wire artwork, originally purchased in New Orleans days before Hurricane Katrina, featuring a living room scene with a cat on a couch. Found hanging askew by a single nail on the back of the fireplace, the only structure that was still standing where the house used to be.

Lost: One herd of collected elephants - wood, jade, metal, and stone - from my brother's childhood. They were displayed, marching forward but never going anywhere, above a bookshelf that held several decades worth of collected books, also lost.

Found: A blue teapot that looks like the genie's lamp from Aladdin. It belonged to my maternal grandmother, who I'm named after. It had been perched on a shelf next to the TV. I found it sitting atop the ashes and rubble where the living room used to be, remarkably intact.

Lost: Countless photo albums, organized by person and year, which had been stored in the garage in bankers boxes. Luckily, all had been digitized.

Found: One 4-inch by 2-inch remnant of a photo album - all burned away except for an image of my Gramma Harriet smiling down at my cousin Monica as a baby. Miraculously found after the property had been completely cleared.

Lost: Two full grown eucalyptus trees that were chopped down after the fire.

Found: New growth sprouting all around the stumps of the two chopped down eucalyptus trees. The new branches and leaves tender, fragrant, and colorful, doing everything they can to survive and thrive.

Ashes in the Jacaranda Bloom

Marie-Reine Khremian

I have lived in Pasadena for over thirty years—
a city where jacarandas painted the sky purple
and the scent of orange blossoms lingered like a promise.
In my front yard, a jacaranda stood tall,
its branches stretching toward the sun,
always reminding me that beauty rises even after the hardest
seasons.

But now, the smoke rolls in thick, and the fire that took the school where both my daughters learned has left behind ash where there was once laughter. The blooms I loved so much now hold the scars of heat and loss, their petals turned brown before they could fall.

My grandchildren attend school just down the road, where the promise of education feels more fragile than ever, where classmates now test positive for lead, and the air still carries whispers of the fire's rage. Safety here isn't guaranteed—it's fragile, a fleeting thing we hold in our hearts.

born from bloodlines that have known the scent of gunpowder and the echo of bombs.

In Lebanon, I learned the sound of war before I learned how to speak.

We lived in the shadows of curfews,
navigating a landscape of ruins
while my grandmother's candles flickered
as if they too held the hope of something beyond survival.

I am the granddaughter of survivors,

(Continued)

Pasadena was supposed to be the after.
The escape.
But the flames here don't stay out of our reach.
They sweep through the hills,
through the streets,
through the heart of this city we've tried to call home.
And now, I realize—
it's not the flames that burn most.
It's the rebuilding that takes time.

The jacarandas, once purple,
now stand leafless,
like a body waiting for the soil to heal.
But even as the smoke clears,
I see the bloom returning.
And in this city, in this moment,
the healing begins through the telling.
Through sharing the stories of what we've lost
and what we carry.

This poem is for both my daughters, for my grandchildren, for the children of this city who have learned too much too soon.

It's for my own childhood, when war taught me survival over peace.

It's for the jacarandas—

purple, burnt, reborn.

Poem

Martha Irene Barajas

To write is to make bare the *awe-full* work of being

A worthwhile transgression to echo I AM

Calaveras

Mary C Ferguson

I love watching the blue-bellied lizards

Sunning on the steps

Curious

And warm

Feeling the spring breeze

With large puffy clouds overhead

Faint music drifting by

And a half-empty coffee cup

Crumbs left on the plate

Ashes in its wake

An Elegy

Mary P. Ray, Esq, Deputy Public Defender

The sun is shining, here, in Evergreen Park, An ocean breeze brings jasmine and roses, The old men sit and laugh and drink til dark, An easy peace wraps around, encloses.

Cars pass by, steady stream of life persistent Even on this day of rest, Saturn's day. There is no break, we are still existent Persevere we must, even if we betray.

Never could one imagine destruction Here where only tranquility reigns Never could one see the reduction Of our communities' sacred domains.

I remember the blackened dust filled skies The choking fear of ash and smoke and fire. Uncertainty becomes our survival drives, Now suddenly our city a pyre.

I remember being asked, work through While this city of angels was inflamed. The only certainty to help those who Had lost all they had, spirits untamed.

(Continued)

I am lucky, here in Evergreen Park.

The skies are clear, the palm trees gently sway.

I have my home, it waits, a landmark.

For those without we raise our voice to pray.

"Our lady queen of angels we beseech"
Ancestress of those who journeyed out west
Holy surfing mother of blue beaches
Silv'ry goddess of the sacred screen test.

Hold in your heart your beloved disciples Locals here, born sunblock anointed Pilgrims here, those who began outsiders Reinvention, their great gift granted.

Yet all her peoples come together
Our grief expands, all encompassing
Transmutation, angelino's treasure
Sacred gifts; survival, trust and loving.
All of this I see, in Evergreen Park
And I see a future city, better,
Even if dimmed, our city's sacred spark.
To her I pen this hopeful letter,

From the shady grass of Evergreen Park.

Ode to the Ants

Maureen Holland, PsyD

Ok, let's go! Let it go. Put it down. Please, put it down. We're running late.

I'm in my head.
Running through my check list for the morning.
To get out the door.
Just to get me to daycare.
Do I have all the things?
All the things!
I have to remember.
ALL THE THINGS!
Holding it all together.
Always.

Ok, she's out the door. What now?

Hurry up, Please! Pleeease! We gotta go!

But....Mom!

We don't have time right now. I am so sorry.

Strange to think.
I cannot remember a time when I was thiiis tired.
This scattered.
This all over the place!
I didn't sleep in my bed again last night.
I fell asleep in the recliner after singing songs again.
The night before I slept on the coach.
To keep watch on our doggy
Who ate something he shouldn't have!
Again!

Strange to think.
Did I hold so much, at once, in my head before?
My memory used to be as sharp as a tack.
It weirded people out.
I could tell you what you wore to that party in 1995.
And the smell of their garage as we ate iced
gingerbread and chocolate chip cookies.
And the title of the song that was playing on the
Boombox.
And the way it sounded as the batteries were wearing
down.
And it slooococowed down.
And Now,
My memory is like Strawberry Jello.
Just jiggling and wobbling around.

Holding together what I can. As I quiver back and forth.

But Mooomma!

We're already late, Honey. We gotta go!
Gotta, go!
C'mon, let's go.
Oh gosh...Grab your shoes!
No, the other shoes.
Not the flip flops.
Please!

Before

I used to care about the part in my hair
Just the right shoes, to match my shirt.
The perfect shade of rosewood lipstick.
Now my clothes are never clean
Even though I run at least one load of laundry every night.

Sticky substance on my sleeve.
Where is that from?
Or who's hand is that from?
Smells like chocolate.
Maybe?
Let's hope.
No time to change my sweater
Nor her shoes.
Did I take a shower today?
I cannot remember.

Keep calm, And carry on. Although inside my head I am frantic. And checking off my imaginary list of all that I need to bring

and the things I need to do when I get back home tonight. And when I get in the car. And when I get to "School." And when I get to the office.

But.... Moooomma!

I grab another backpack.

As I hoist the baby to my hip.

And I go outside and grab the soft little hand of my 3 year old.

My arms are stronger than they've ever been.

I can carry so many more things now

As we leave the house.

With all the gear.

Like we're packed for a long camping trip.

Just to drive 2.2 miles down the road.

To Day Care.

But....Mooooomma! Please look! Just loooooooooooooooooook!

And
I STOP .
I JUST STOP .
Just for a moment.
And
I finally, really hear her.
And I stop myself.
I pause.
I am still for a moment
I close my eyes.

I take a deep breath and I exhale a big breath out. Like blowing candles off her 1st birthday cake, together!
And the baby laughs.
And puts her small hand on my warm, flustered, rosy cheek.
And I open my eyes.
And look down.

I pause.

I bend at the knees.

My back cracks.

As do my ankles.

They pop.

And I put everything I am carrying down.

Even the happy, bouncing baby, kicking her legs in delight.

I place her gently on her buoyant little legs and feet.

And balance her against me.

As I try to balance on my crackling ankles.

And now I meet my 3 year old.
At eye level.
Her face is now BEAMING!
Her cheeks are rosy with life and vibrance!
Her eyes sparkle with glee!

And I finally soften. For the first time. In a great while.

What is it, my Love?

THE AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAATS!!!!!
Mom, moom, mooom, look at the ants!
Momma, look at the ants!
Mom, are you looking?
Are you really looking?

Now her baby sister is looking.

And now I am really looking as well.

And I REALLY look at them.

My eyes need a moment to understand what I am seeing.

So I blink.

I pause.
I breathe.
I take them in.

So I can focus.

Really focus.

Like I am seeing them for the first time in a really, really long time.

Like my eyes had forgotten the sight of ants.

The long, dark and familiar trail from long ago.

Marching in unison.
On a mission.
On their one lane freeway.

Their den was disturbed by our morning sprinklers. They are now off to find adventure on dryer land.

I take a sip of coffee
I breathe in the scent of the calming elixir.
I taste the bitter and the sweetness.
At the same time.
And feel the warmth on my tongue.
When did coffee start tasting so good?
Like a warm hug.

And I look at her, again.
I really look at her.
And then I see the joy and wonder in her sparkling eyes.

And I really look at those ants!

And they are BEAUTIFUL!
And weird.
And strange.
And so small.
Their tiny bodies.
Some carry white specks on their strong, sturdy backs.

It is their food.

Some are carrying bodies.

On their backs.

Maybe back to their den?

Like warriors.

Carrying the wounded back from battle.

I bend down closer. To hear them. You can hear ants? Since when?

Their tiny parade now makes crinkling sounds, While they trample over some dried leaves on the ground.

The asphalt smells of warm, wet earth.

As if the sun is starting to dry the ground after a light rain.

It's a calming scent.

The damp asphalt no longer bothers the mighty ants. As they trudge along.

Walking with such purpose.

It is beautiful.
To.
Just.
Stop.
Just.
Be.
Just...
For a moment.
And pause.
And breathe.
And be.
And see.

And I really look at those ants. And now I see the wonder and JOY on BOTH my daughters' glowing eyes and radiant faces.

Taking in, Those beautiful ants.

Ode to Marcel

Michael Wai

I have lost Marcel A good friend We always talked and listened to each other He had a hard life But he was happy

But not completely happy He said Why am I here? To collect dust?

He said If God wants us to go to church...
Why is there a pandemic?
It's a good question
It's the Problem of Evil restated

Marcel never went to school
Not even preschool or kindergarten
He was not homeschooled either
(This is educational abuse.)
So his parents told him that he would never amount to much
Because he never went to school

But he amounted to a lot in my eyes He always said, "Talk to me," when I called him on his cellphone.

Marcel's parents kept him isolated for most of his life So he never had friends growing up He was 40 years old when I met him

When he was 25, his parents told him to find a job So he walked down to the Del Taco on Ramona And got a job as a janitor

For the next 25 years, he worked at Del Taco Alternating doing the food prep and cleaning the restaurant He would also unpack and load everything into the freezer room He knew that he was stuck at a dead-end job, because of his lack of education

(Continued)

He said of his parents, "They did this to me!" He's right They did do it to him

Because of his upbringing
He had a lot of hangups
He couldn't talk to people
He was too shy
It was hard for him even to tell customers where the bathroom was

As he was getting older, Del Taco cut his hours I think he was working 20 hours a week He was obsessed with Crystal and Alyssa And he wrote to them But they didn't respond to him the way he wanted

He had to put a new roof on the house, since it was leaking
The contractors took him to the cleaners
\$80,000 to put in a roof for a small house
About 900 square feet
I didn't know about unconscionable contracts at the time
That such contracts are unenforceable

One day in October 2023, Marcel committed suicide.

After his suicide, I have found solace that he will be going to heaven
In heaven, all his hangups will go away
Someday, I will see Marcel again, with a glorified body,
and a purified soul
We will be friends forever.

The Boundless Future

Miguel Santoscoy

The future is so boundless. I can do whatever I want. The chains weigh me down in the present, but in the future I am free.

I carry them around me and god they're so heavy. Their tightness hurts. Each link a limitation. But I know that's where I get my strength. I know in the future they are weightless, they are gone.

I see the world open before me, the dawn stretches past the sky. The pain today seems almost non-existent, it seems almost worth it as I chase the endless end.

My present is stolen and my past is lost. But the free self is waiting for me, tied to me by my determination. I will break these limits. The world will be mine.

Tears

Misti Brooks

Tears - Leaving my body - you cleanse my soul.

Bottled by the Lord, the one who Knows, the essence of each drop as it flows.

4, 3, 2, Alone: An Ode to a Pink Palm Tree

Monique Simpson

July 2005: I save my soul and leave the USA. I know staying would kill my spirit, my ideas, my emerging voice. My pink palm tree roots are planted on the flight from Los Angeles to Tokyo to Nankoku-shi, Japan.

My friends are happy for me. They cheer me on as I follow a writer's dream to see the world, to hear the people, to write the Next Great American Novel.

August 2021: I move back home to Los Angeles as a fully-grown palm tree. I have the bruises of a life abroad as a single, American woman. Now I know how to speak my thoughts, pursue my goals and bounce back from my failures. My friends welcome me back in disbelief that I have finally ended my globe-trotting lifestyle with 35 passport stamps, 5 residency visas, and too many to count literary rejections. We are content for they see a palm tree like themselves, but they don't fully understand what a pink palm tree means in LA, in the world.

June 2022: I work a boring cubicle job in a boring government building. On the weekends, I develop my small business, I submit my original plays, I explore LA like a tourist. My palm tree leaves sway in the winds of life, but I'm rooted in a strong sense of self soil. My friends and I sip tea. They complain about their American Dream. They chant: I can't afford my house, I can't afford children, I hate my job, I hate my kids, I can't stand my spouse, I can't find a man, I want a new American Dream.

Mother's Day 2024: I lose my first friend of 20+ years. She complains about her parents and parents-in-law. I say I'm going to therapy with my mom. She doesn't like my pink color anymore; she thinks all palm trees are brown and green, so why can't I be like all the other palm trees in LA. I'm stunned and saddened by our abrupt end.

July 2024: I make slow but steady progress in my small business. I'm glowing in the sun of possibilities. My palm tree is grooving with Cali. I lose another friend of 15 years as she tells me: "You are different with your pinkness. Selling, writing, working, drawing- I can't keep up with you. Stay bland and boring like the rest of us...We single ladies get face enhancements; we don't adopt kids. No one wants to adopt, you're special." My heart sinks as our friendship dies over lattes and scones in West LA.

October 2024: My first play is read on Zoom by professional actors. I'm excited to work with a friend of 20+ years. But she has a problem. "Where is my name on the flier? I can't see my name! I only see your pink leaves. That's not fair." I suggest coffee after the Zoom reading. She declines coffee and repairing our friendship. I'm left a single pink palm tree amongst pages of unproduced scripts.

April 2025: LA Times Book Festival is a yearly highlight. I attend with book dreams, literary dreams, writer's dreams. My dreamy palm leaves bruise my fragile friend of nearly 30 years. I try to prop up her sagging leaves with my dreams, but she is weighed down by her store bought American Dream, her unfilled Ivy League dream, her self-bankrupting capitalistic dream.

May 2025: I mourn the deaths of a young woman's friendships, knowing you can only save yourself when El Imperio is crumbling. Each person must plant their own palm tree to survive and thrive in '25. Palm Trees can withstand the wild fires, the storms, the riots, the shootouts, and now the fall of democracy. But will you plant yourself pink and rise up?

July 2025: The newest tsunami of life is coming: will you watch the roaring waves rescind or will you climb a palm tree to save yourself? Climb the tree girl!

61

Dear Choir Member

Noemi Camacho

Dear Choir Member.

Thank you for your interest in one of the section leader positions for the upcoming year. I know you work very hard (heck you are the only student I know that works past midnight to get that perfect song - and one you have worked on no doubt, but that still needs last minute tunings - - in your words).

Although you have been in choir for a few years now I seem to be fundamentally drawn to theatre kids (blame my mother's obsession with Grease!) and hence my favoritism (I hope it is not too obvious) with these students who, I have to say, work quite hard and really know how to express themselves fondly (making my job easier) and well, they also worry about me (not every student spoils their favorite teacher with Krispy Kreme donuts every week - - twice a week - when I am having boyfriend issues).

I would have picked you many times over any of them. Perhaps if you had joined but one school play (too bad you dislike theatre) and become part of that special click that (although obnoxious at times, I must admit) bring about so much joy to me (every play has been dedicated to me, after all :)

Good luck senior year. You truly ARE one of my best students and a hell of a singer (that is, minus those thoughtful gestures that my theatre kids seem to innately possess).

XO Mr. Burro

The Cosmic Wheel

Olivia Soto

forward motion, growth

I sing a slow song to you

to make time stop course

grey day

Pamela Saelieb

thick rain clouds above
a crash of thunder, silence
Earth awaits a drink

Care Instructions

Salette Amador

100% organic, handwoven Made in Philippines

Wash (me) in a delicate cycle
It (I) can withstand gentle agitation
More so may result in frayed ends
Fabrics (I) tend to wrinkle in the wash
Don't neglect items (me) too long in the machine
After wash cycle is complete immediately remove and lay
(me) flat to bask under the sun But not for too long
Reshape gently
A cool iron may help with (my) appearance
Especially after a rough day

66

Highway 395

Sarah M. Savage

Two-lane, wind whipped, tumbleweeds, abandoned shack, ancient lava blast, deep fault line.

Sierra Wave, granite spikes, bygone cowboys, Alabama's Hills, Independence. Schat's sourdough, Spellbinder, Looney Bean, Sage to Summit, Rusty's. Bristlecones, Aspen trees, boulder field, alpine lake, golden trout, shooting stars, graupel surprise.

Black bear, Orange Bowl, blue jay, hot spring, water fall.
Whitney Portal, John Muir, Intake 2, Sherwin Grade, Sabrina.
Ghost town, gold mine, skinned knees, wagon wheel, killer quails, scorpion bite, Paradise.

Ed Powers, motorcycle drive by, skateboard deluge, brazen ground squirrel, the Buttermilks.

Belly laughs, deep reflection, fistful of tears, stillness, final rest and last goodbyes.

Elements

Sean Kim

While driving home, it was very windy. It was unusually very windy. If you were to let go of your steering wheel, your car would change lanes. There were a few close calls so I decided to get off the freeway and go home the rest of the way via local streets. To my surprise, I have never seen so many trees and branches in the streets. It became an obstacle course. Also, there was debris littering in the streets. There were downed power lines and store signs. It was one of the strongest winds that I could recall. When arriving home, the lights were out.

Not long after, you could see an ominous silhouette of light coming from the bottom of San Gabriel mountains. It was not from the moon nor from the stars, but from a fire that began to burn. While the fires burned, the wind carried the smell and ashes for miles. After the fire was moot, the rain began to fall. Uncertain if it was for sadness or to mock the loss.

Mostly gone. Will we remember things that once stood there? Can memories still carry on when the fallen buildings are unable to help with your reminiscence of what once stood there? It may be a new memory that people did not ask for. Is it regret? I wish I had appreciated more the things that once stood there.

Violent Winds Pass
Rain comes regretfully
So all is too late

Hospital Walls

Shaili Patel

"Asthma, she can't breathe," says a Spanish-speaking mom, of not one but three. The girl shivers and groans, "I left my albuterol at school yesterday." But fires are here today, schools closed, kids home, parents frazzled, what a storm. They wait in line, patiently, although they're number thirteen in the ED. Oxygen, inhalers, IVs. Get this girl into bed 3. Asthma attacks like crazy, overwhelmed MDs. Why does this place reek? I can smell smoke in 8B. How do we protect, how do we prevent, when our resources and our buildings can't keep us away from it?

Asthma, she can't breathe Smoke seeps into the ED Wind chills down my spine

Loosing Myself ... (to Alzheimer's disease)

Sylvia Guerrero

Angry at the thought of losing myself
Because sometimes I believe I am still here.
Is it easier to go on living without finding peace of heart?
The need to find a glimpse of hope before disappearing
Into nothingness, loneliness, and sorrow
Losing hope and wondering if there is a tomorrow
When I am gone and forgotten and cannot remember
My own name.

Grief Walks With Me...

Sylvia Soto

Grief walks with me... You have been with me longer than I wish. Met you before I knew what loss is, I knew you when all the other kids had their dad, and I did not. I knew you when at 14 my sister lived for only two weeks. I have known you through my mom's emptiness and sorrow. Through her attempts to live with a smile while a piece of her heart was taken forever, Replaced by an Angel in heaven. I met you again at 16 when my brother was born, thank goodness healthy without harm, Like the doctor had warned. However, my mom lost so much blood, that this time instead of visiting my baby sister in a NICU I was visiting my mom in ICU. Eves so swollen she looked like a frog in her state of sleep. Would she wake up? Our relationship was so conflicted at the time, but I still needed her. She could not leave. I saw you again a month later when my great grandfather lost his second leg. Damn Diabetes. Gangrene. Constant complications. He did well after the first amputation, and managed to continue to get around on his own. However, with the two legs gone everything changed forever. He lost hope. No longer my strong great grandfather who carried me with him everywhere. It was him now who was physically carried, moved from one place to another. I met you with a slap at my face when he left me just two weeks before my prom. I cried in AP European history class, as I listened unconsciously. Not feeling the stream of tears down my cheeks or the stares of the students around me. Physically present, but emotionally outside of those four walls. I don't even know who was in the room or if anyone tried to console me. I just know the mighty, Mr. Woesner, kept me after class. Consoled me with the words I have shared with so many others lost in their own grief over the years. "You keep them alive by teaching and doing for others what he taught and did for you." Those words helped me keep living at a time when I just wanted to bury myself in the hole right next to him. Be with my great grandfather and not feel the pain of losing him, my sister and so much more by the age of 18.

I graduated without him. From Garfield, then from UC Davis. He visited me once in my dream.

My First year at Davis. A few months after I arrived. Sleeping in the dorm.

(Continued)

Living beyond the grave.

"I'm proud of you. This is all because you worked hard. Your accomplishment." I woke up with so much peace in my heart. The words I needed to hear. We both looked forward to my graduation. He pushed Education as my way out and he wasn't there to see it. That dream reassured me that he was still there watching over me now, in a different form. He visited me 400 miles away from home, at a time I was trying to find my place all alone. His teachings with me, still getting me through today. He is still there in everything I do. In my work, My community, My family, In my travels, In my photography. In my life, every moment of the day. The hummingbirds that visit when I am struggling. In the two-tone roses. In the smells.

Dear Inner Me

Thandiwe Gregory

Dear Inner Me,

There's a lot going on inside however, you have learned to compartmentalize to thrive One can only keep matters separated within for so long; at some time you are unable to be strong Today, my inner me was a catastrophe Like the branches that fall from a tree during a windstorm, The emotions took a humongous gasp and began to swarm The waterworks began and were uncontrollable at times my poor inner me was inconsolable My inner me just needed to be She was consumed with all that was stirring within the inner crevices of her soul Immersed in the raw, vivid, reality that circumstances in life are unfair was the ultimate goal My inner me exhaled in solidarity You had been riddled with strife and acrimony until you found your peace and harmony Your mind is clear, your heart is exultant, the joy you feel is triumphant

UNTIL

Trace Richardson

The day turns

The night calls

The month and another season falls.

A year has come and gone.

Until

We rise, clap our hands, sing amen... until

Love returns and the flowers bloom.

Until...

Life is a Roller Coaster

Vanessa Aguilera

Sometimes it's breezy, sometimes it's sunny
Sometimes it's cold sometimes its hot
Sometimes there's rain and thunder
Sometimes there's pain and better days but
In the end of this ride everyone has their own
roller coaster to ride
Just remember to always enjoy the ride. No
matter how hard it gets.

Ode to Prayer

Veronica Kung-Lumiba

I have lost.

I have lost so much, my friends and my relatives.

I have lost so much because of these fires.

Though no one passed, they are immersed in sorrow and loss.

Much of their faith was now in question.

Much is lost in all materiality. I was not there, but the weight of the aftermath fell upon $\ensuremath{\mathsf{me}}$

like a brick wall.

Instagram reels and social media posts cried out for help! Then, I saw that through the Holy Spirit and prayer, I had lost none.

He guides me into the living and breathtaking moments of solidarity in numbers.

People volunteering to bring water and food for the displaced families. People offering their homes. People offering money.

Most of all, people in worship and offering prayers. Indeed, all is not lost, because we have found our family, friends, and the birth of a

community of believers, in our minds, who can create a stronger unity for members of our clan.

The Greatest Grief

Zarine Ibranyan

No one had your gift of kindness.
With your soft and healing hands,
With your warm smile, strength, and wisdom,
With your beautiful and caring grace,
You made our world a better place.

Then, darkness fell, the world turned over, Shocked and broken, we became.

The greatest grief was overcast,

The sky turned black and down poured,

Rivers from our tears, regretted the past.

Our hearts and bodies now heavy and cold,
As though boulders lay on our hearts,
Dazed, in denial, like zombies roaming about.
Irreparably stabbed by life's betrayal,
Our fists clenched and jaws tired from cries and shouts.

My beautiful Mom, a warm ray of sunshine,
Anyone who crossed her path was blessed,
Not all deserved her unconditional love and light,
And, yet, she made all feel special,
Embraced the world and made life bright.

The person who believed in us, cheered for us, She exuded optimism, enthusiasm, and joy, For life, her family, friends, even strangers. Always full of warmth and generosity, My Mom was taken from me, from us, from all of us.

My family's beacon of love and ultimate supporter of dreams.

(Continued)

This unbearable heaviness of the emptiness we bear,
The loss of all losses intensified our fears, self-doubt,
and guilt,
Gave rise to questions of God's existence
Left in shambles the confidence we had built.

After a decade of this endless loop
Of self-loathing, denial, anger, and sadness,
Being grateful for our blessings is the only survival.
To soften the blow of our greatest heartbreak,
I now see this is our best revival.

Being like her is the only redemption:

A kind mother, daughter, sister, wife -- human.

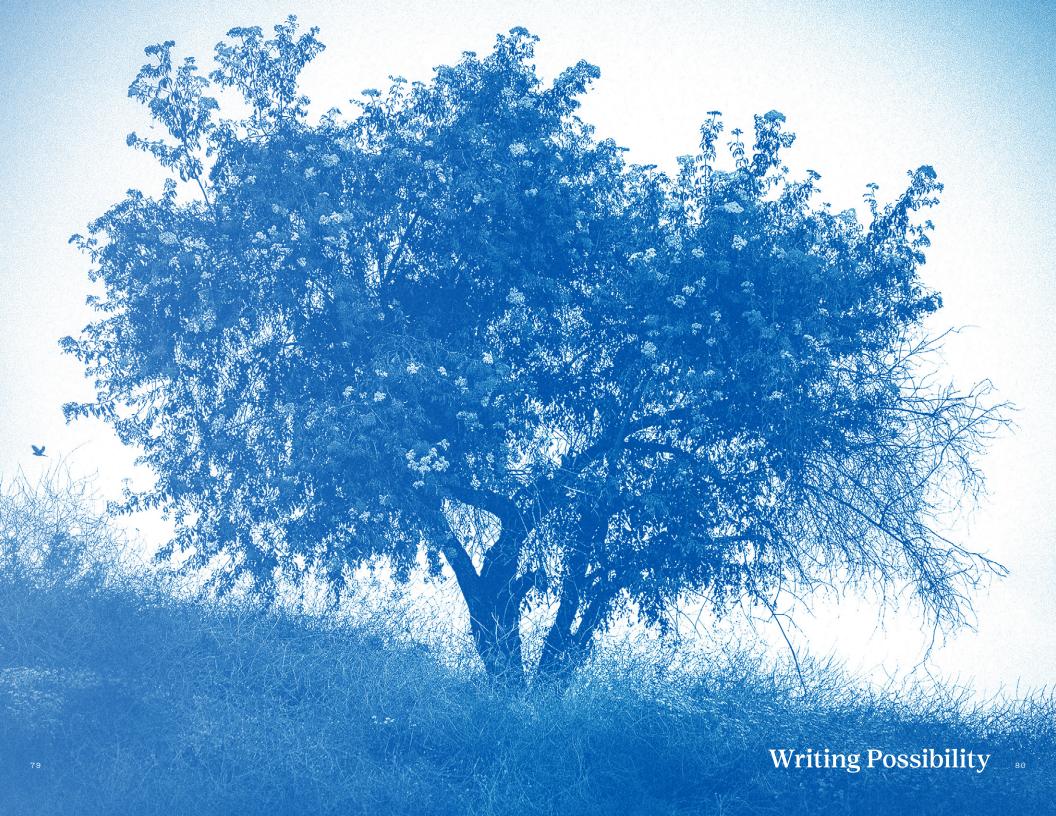
With our heads held high, feet firmly on the ground,

The way she would want to be kept alive,

Our carrying her torch, her legacy, would make her proud.

She continues to light our way in our hearts and minds, Now, as our guardian Angel, fills our hearts with love, For She was and is an amazing gift from above. Thank you for being ours, my Mom, Gayane, even so briefly, For you are truly one of a kind.

-- Your Zara (4/11/25)



"We can,
Each of us,
Do the impossible
As Long as we can convince ourselves
That it has been done before."

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents*

Writing Possibility

In this powerful section, we honor the poets who not only guided our healing but have been transformed by loss and resilience. Raffi Wartanian, Teresa Mei Chuc, Niku Kashef, Sehba Sarwar, Dr. Alene Terzian-Zeitounian, and Carla Sameth are more than creative writing workshop leaders—they are witnesses, survivors, and architects of hope. Forged by direct experiences of loss, these poets have transformed pain into a language of survival. Their poetry reimagines possibility.

By facilitating the Healing Through Creative Writing Workshops, these writers offered County employees more than a writing method—they provided a compassionate philosophy of healing. They understand that poetry is not just an art form, but a form of collective resilience, a way of bearing witness to our most challenging experiences.

Representing diverse cultural backgrounds and poetic traditions, these writers are united by a singular commitment: to use language as a tool of transformation. Their poems in this anthology are bridges of understanding—invitations to collective healing that show how creative expression can change personal tragedy into communal strength.

These are poems that do not just speak about loss. They transform loss into something entirely different—hope, connection, and survival.

Does This Poem Have to Suffer

Alene Terzian-Zeitounian

like an old Smiths song or buck like a horse caught in a burning barn? Does it have to rebuild itself again and again, revise the way you looked the morning after, the night before?

If this poem lost everything, would firefighters excavate a wall to find two wedding bands in velvet boxes? Would this poem cry then or later in the bathroom of some convention center

where you beg it to go away or show itself?
Will it give you the words to explain the hole
your doorknob made in the wall when you threw it
open in fury or the pink flamingo bathroom wallpaper

you peeled off in disgust? Will it exalt the lovers in and out until a baby was born and you cradled her in the room next to the stairwell for quick evacuation? Will this poem crescendo like a sonnet or repeat,

repeat, repeat like a pantoum caught in a backdraft? How close is the end line from holding you under or saving you--the poem wrapped around your soaked body, thrashing?

Ode to Living *After the Eaton Fire*

Alene Terzian-Zeitounian

To the young tendrils shooting up around a charred fence, the lonely rebar in mud, the overdue library book resting in a sink-hole, the handsome neighbor's kaftan at half-mast, the Holy Spirit votive's audacity; to the couch stuffing, particle board, wood chips, and glueto everything that remains and sullies.

To the cleanup crew and their iron lungs, the store owner's stubborn mop, the inevitable sun that ganders days later, the bulldozer's haul, our ceramic dinner plates, the cash in the Coke can, velvet wedding ring boxes, the rooster crowing at midnight, the hands that grab a water bucket to douse and smother, the neighborhood baker who leaves pies in open windows, the window, a pile at our feet, the mulch and straw wattles; to the watery ash floating like bodies down the Ganges—watching it all go is the same as loving it.

Love Letter to a Burning World

Carla Sameth

Praise the dark that covers us with ashes, this morning's tears, reminding us why we cherish the not-burning baby cry of awake, not heartbreak.

Mom, I need a hug, please,
I just can't seem to do anything right.
Raphael, the angel name, should we have birthed
a warrior instead, one who could fight the demons?

I can't say for sure I'm an addict but I'm doing too much.
He gets up, then decides he'd rather smoke,
not feeling OK right now.
I am twisted up, feel the same way. Not OK.

No, son, what you are feeling are singed embers after six months of shutdown. Broken glass.

Murder after murder of men and women the color of your skin.

At traffic stops, in the dark, in bed, while jogging. Anywhere.

Praise the path that brought you here today, a boomerang.

Mom, I can't make it, I'm at the car repair, I need

to keep looking for someone who can fix this.

The drop like we hear in music, I hear it in his soul.

My face is wet as he leaves in a gust: I have to meet my friends at the demonstration, I'll feel better.

More purpose. Do you kill a child by holding or letting go? Ashes, ashes as he runs out the door.

Doesn't he know this is an emergency? Like the blare of fire warning, Pack your bags comes from the evacuation order.

Today his voice searing into my chest. Praise his tears for crying with me. Praise the seat that holds me fast.

Unspooled

Carla Sameth

Sometimes I feel as if I'm undone, a big spool of yarn rolling down a steep hill and out into the street, down the garbage-gathered drain.

Other times, I'm standing in front of Ramon's apartment building in Mexico City. Remember when I broke that bottle of Tequila Herradura. It shattered in shards and slivers. ¡Hijole, y fue uno de los Buenos! the doorman lamented, watching the smooth white liquid spill onto the sidewalk. Lost. I wonder what people would say about me as I fall and crash to smithereens.

I want to laugh out loud when I see
I'm as solid as a snow cone.
As if I could be slurped up, tossed out or simply melt away.
As if I could be a sweetness craved, a crying child's prize on steaming summer days.

Prescription: Wrap arms tightly around chest, imagine freshly baked challah, imagine a Friday night when you allow yourself to rest your shredded senses, and put on that white lace Brazilian dress. Do not think of shards, think instead of strong vigas, high ceilings, an unobstructed view of the Big Dipper, Leonard Cohen carrying your darkness in his secret chords. Sing Hallelujah.

I am here.

dig

Niku Kashef

i dig with pointed shovel and gloved hands what has been erased, ash made of lead, paper, metal, emulsion, and our stories

then i find proof of life,
skeletons as metal boxes,
lenses as cracked clay,
unearthed before this ancient civilization is overwritten
by armored wheeled angry machines
why do we hurry to what comes next
why isn't this fire torn landscape also our place
why not in the viewing of the ruins, can't we find wonder

what if this, too, is our story

sunflower

Niku Kashef

what is the purpose of this life if not the tiny glimmer of freedom from sunlight on our bare skin if not the breath that raises the crown of our head a little closer to the sky if not holding and being held in - care, pleasure, sorrow each touch raising the hair on my flesh a little differently - a frog shaped lump in my throat, butterflies in my belly, rumbling in my gut, numbness in my knees what is the purpose of this life if not to feel disjointed like a pile of broken branches preparing to become kindling -- waiting for a message to come what is the purpose of this life if not to celebrate the frequency that perhaps only dogs and I can hear calling to us what is the purpose of this life if not to grasp past memories left in ash and soot. things that one does not think they can imagine at the bottom of a fireplace what is the purpose of this life if it is not to feel the worst bits of ache and the best bits of smooth soft arrival what if it is only one fleeting moment holding all things perfectly as the sunflower turns her face the light caresses her many seedlings

Phantom Tongue

Raffi Joe Wartanian

Somewhere in the world

my history is erased

my name is changed

Րաֆֆի Վարդանեան կլլա Րաֆֆի Վարդանեան glla Raffi Vartanian becomes Rayfee Wartaynyin

Wartanian Like the tan on your wart Stylized melanoma Signifying the end

Or Wartanian
A song of war
Death, destruction, murder
Nothing I stand for
Mixed into the moniker

Not here: Վարդանեան
Valiant sons and daughters
Defiantly defending a people
Only to have their nom de guerre lathered
Like suds swirling down the drain
Of the car wash on Jackson Street
Under an American sun baking flesh white
Calls for change, or at least a discount, stifled by the heat

(Continued)

Somewhere in the world
my ancestor's creations are destroyed
crosstones of a medieval Armenian necropolis
on the banks of the Araxes River reduced to rubble
a stone church, Խուլավանգ, in the golden wheat fields
of Kharpert,

on its crumbling column defiled with
a spray-painted swastika
homes in Hajin, Adana, Zara, and Kumkapi never to be known
only to be evoked
during visits, with maps, in verse
their names are ghosts who saunter in meadows
of the amnesia I recall
so that sometime in the future
I can sit down with my boy
look him in the eye

Will the news destroy his innocence The day I tell him That we were, are, will be Objects of genocide?

and have "the talk"

How will he come to understand the unfathomable?

A series of moments...by osmosis...

Lighting candles at the church

The old typewriter hanging on the wall

A grainy image of emaciated corpses

Their sunken eyes somehow familiar

Protestors demanding recognition from violent nations

We now or once called home

(Continued)

Or will he already know? Was it coded in his bones?

When will he learn that the imposed tension
Between erasure and endurance
Is not just a thing of the past
But a choice today
Between internalizing the oppressors' will,
And facing the question
Answers illuminating a path
Fraught with the promise of truth's daggered thorns

Poking holes in our language
"Endangered" like a fading phantom living in my throat
Ununnu, Lunu
Spoken to my child
Hearing him voice the revenant

On his tongue does she live or die?

Maybe both. Maybe none of it matters, especially once we're erased.

Have we already arrived?

And once we've arrived, can we finally begin to return?

Mama's Dream

Raffi Joe Wartanian

My mother told my grandmother and me About a dream she had Last night.

Her deceased father Visited And said, "Have you forgotten me?"

"No, I didn't,"

My mother protested,
In her dream.

My mother is silent.

"What happened next?" I ask.

"That's it," she says with a shrug.

Then my grandmother inquires, "Did he ask about me?"

Octavia E. Butler: Electric Energy Crossing Time

Sehba Sarwar

In science class, she gazes out the window onto Lincoln Street where she steps off a bus each morning navigating the labyrinth of past-present-future: ceasefire violation by ceasefire violation, most of the peace talks broke down. It is easier to make war than peace.

Octavia E. Butler, a kindred spirit, soars like a black electric pole one head above giggly high school girls. Along Muir High School's stone staircase. I walk the hallways of her old school, visit her diaries and writings in the colonial garden that sweeps the redlined streets of Pasadena, the city she called home.

In her books, she tells us stupid wars will kill people, maim and impoverish still more, spread disease and hunger, and set the stage for the next war."

A visionary,
perhaps she knew
her stories would be textbooks
and her face would be painted
in her high school library mural.
Perhaps she knew
her eyes like a telescope
would gaze upon students
in 2024, the year she predicted the truth:

genocide for water an land - and resistance for survival.

Rotation Dedicated to my mother

Sehba Sarwar

She heats oil Rolls puri Drops flat flour into bubbling oil

You conquer
enforce rules
han travel

In another pan She pops coriander seeds Tosses sliced potatoes

You build walls
deport passengers
obstruct asylum-seekers

She serves flaky puri With crisp potatoes —we devour together

You demand documents

collect fingerprints

require face-identification

Our choice: eat, speak, wear Practice as we please Where we wish

You cannot hinder climbs
prevent tide
stop earth rotation

Like waves we cross
We fly
We roar
We stay or leave
—our movement permanent.

Papercuts Nomad issue, edited by Sorayya Khan. DesiLit, 2019. https://desiwriterslounge.net/articles/papercuts-nomad-sehba-sarwar/
Altadena Poetry Review, Eds. Hazel Harrison and Teresa Mei Chuc, Shabda Press, 2020, p. 228.
Earthkeepers Handbook, Eccospace, editor Kim Ables, Whitefeather Hunter. 2023, p. 176.

My Sadness is as Great as a Mountain: A Haibun

Teresa Mei Chuc

I was a two-vear-old child lost in the seas of the aftermath of war; my family and I, Vietnamese boat refugees, who started a new life in Pasadena. Growing up in the City of Roses, I attended Marshall Fundamental Jr./Sr. High School and soon found my second home in the stones and stream that flowed through Eaton Canyon, where I learned to balance, jumping from rock to rock up the stream to the waterfall. In these mountains, I learned to fall and to get up again. Learned that sometimes climbing down was more difficult than climbing up, because gravity could make you slip. The oak trees and bay laurels wrapped their arms around my sadness and I felt loved. The deer taught me about the possibilities of life. The canyon gave me a silence that I could not find at home. The bird chirps offered me hope and joy, a counter to my father's PTSD and rage after fighting in the Vietnam War and spending nine years in a Vietcong prison. My family and I lost our Vietnamese Motherland and so much more. In these mountains. I found my other home. When the fires burned in Altadena in the New Year of 2025, my mountain burned down. The trees, trails and streams that offered me friendship, that strengthened my body, mind and spirit, not only in childhood but throughout my life, were engulfed in flames, as was my heart. Black bears, squirrels, deer ran frantically. The wings of birds caught on fire, the fur of coyotes burned. Many friends lost their homes and many had to evacuate as the fire raced down the mountain. But I know, in time, the mountain will return again and so will we. Life, like pine cones opening to release seeds after a fire, will grow from the ashes. Indian paintbrush, mariposa lily, native chia, black sage, fire-followers.

my heart the Santa Ana winds today branches fall to the ground

Fire Diary

Teresa Mei Chuc

I.

The day after the wind and Eaton firestorm, January 8, 2025

I drive to work, the streetlights are down. When I arrive at my school and step out of my car, ash is twirling in the air and falling down landing on my hair and clothes.

I wonder why school is still open and why
I need to be outside breathing in this toxic air.
What is our health and well-being worth?

About two hours into the school day, our school district shuts down our school.

We could leave after all the students are picked up in the auditorium. Parents line up outside. As I get ready to leave, I see the maintenance crew sweeping and cleaning up debris; they have to stay and keep working. Their coats are covered in ash.

The sky is filled with smoke and it is hard to breathe. There are no birds to be seen or heard.

II.

Five days after the fire, January 12, 2025

the hummingbird with the fluorescent pink neck bright against the gloom of bare gray branches has returned to the garden and is drinking nectar from the peach blossoms and aloe blossoms

the Eaton fire is 27% contained and has moved north burning over 14,000 acres and thousands of homes

I can't stand the pain... against my window

christy roberts berkowitz

"9 hours of pain to fall asleep to"
Pain playlists, pain remixes, pain rereleases

"I can't stand the pain... against my window."

I love that song.

We don't go outside when there is pain and we complain about driving in the pain,

but, there is pain every day.

Wear protection from the pain, but even if you do the pain finds its way to your freckles, eyelashes, fingernails, hair,

to the teeth.

The sky looks like pain. You feel it in your bones, your prayers. Pain storms

scar the dry Earth.

Pain is exported on long ships and wide planes to where there is little to no pain. Pain is

an industry.

People collect pain and use it in their homes and gardens.

They shower themselves in pain, split their lips and drink it.

Become deep valleys and pain carved canyons.

Caves hollowed out by pain.

Some people do not survive the pain.

Flash floods of pain have carried me through my city.
Drenched in pain, I have learned to shield, secure, and swim, but...

I can't stand the pain... against my window
I can't stand the pain...

Panta Rhei

christy roberts berkowitz

When Dad died, you didn't mind that "Panta Rhei" appeared in black ink on my forearm

to remind myself the only permanence is *Change*.

Hereclitus taught me this is where I would find Truth. Octavia taught me this is where I would find G_d .

In asphalt perfume
In shopping mall ghost towns
In ash clouds
In dissolving ground
In filtered waterfalls
In desperate signals
In bubbling insecurities
In a shipwrecked inner girl
In summer rising
In sinking sweat
In these eruptions of
Everything

Like you with Parkinsons,
I can't stop it.
It keeps coming.
This violent unraveling
skipping down a cobblestone hill with weak ankles.
The gravity will win.

All I can do is sing songs you taught me, hold your hand, indistinguishable from mine. Wait for my turn for everything

To Change.

Nature as Living Language: Healing through Ecological Wisdom



"There is no end To what a living world Will demand of you."

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

Nature as Living Language: Healing through Ecological Wisdom

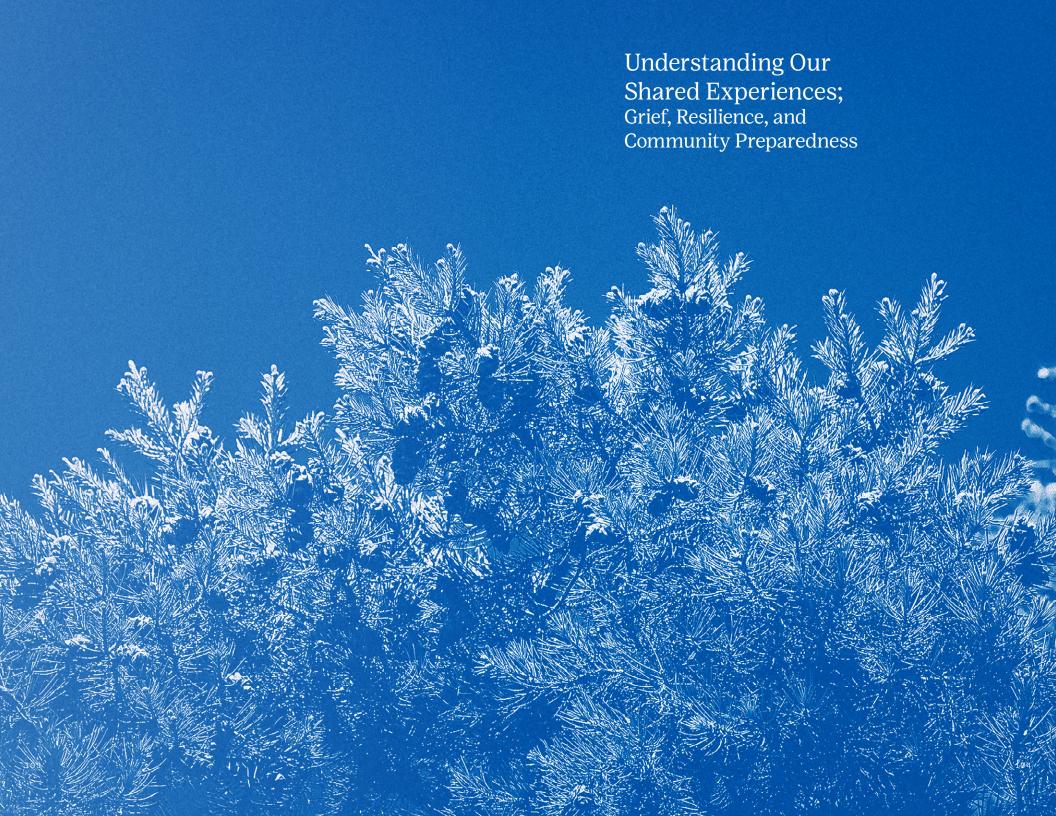
Nature speaks a language of bouncing back that goes way beyond what humans understand. Indigenous Peoples and modern science help us understand that landscapes are living systems that are deeply complex. Each ecosystem tells a story of survival and renewal.

Our healing is closely tied to how we understand natural processes. Just as writers turn experiences into meaning, nature turns destruction into new growth. The wildfires that burned through our region were not an endpoint.

Nature is an active web of connections. Root systems talk through underground networks, sharing resources and information in ways that show remarkable interdependence. Trees and plants exchange nutrients and warnings, creating a communication system more sophisticated than our human languages.

These poems translate nature's wisdom—showing how loss can become opportunity, how destruction can lead to new growth. They invite us to understand our place in a larger, more complex system of life.

We are not separate watchers of nature. We are part of its ongoing story of renewal.



"Purpose
Unifies us:
It focuses our dreams,
Guides our plans,
Strengthens our efforts.
Purpose
Defines us,
Shapes us,
And offers us,
Greatness."

-Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents*

Understanding Our Shared Experiences; Grief, Resilience, and Community Preparedness

How we handle personal grief directly affects how we handle shared challenges, including the environmental changes facing our region. This collection reveals an important insight: emotional resilience is a key form of community preparedness.

Los Angeles County recognizes that emotional understanding is as important as infrastructure and emergency planning. By developing our ability to process complex experiences, to witness suffering, and to move through painful transitions, we build the mental strength needed to address system-wide challenges.

These poems show how individual healing practices become group survival strategies. Each story serves as a blueprint for community strength—showing how personal experiences of loss and renewal can inform our broader approach to environmental and social challenges.

Grief is an ongoing process that builds adaptability and hope. By understanding our individual experiences of loss, we develop the emotional tools needed to respond to broader community challenges. These poems invite us to see vulnerability as a source of strength, and personal healing as a pathway to collective resilience.

Our goal is to transform personal pain into collective understanding, to recognize that our individual stories are interconnected, and that our ability to support one another determines our ability to face future challenges.



A Note on Octavia Butler

"Kindness eases Change.
Love quiets fear.
And a sweet and powerful
Positive obsession
Blunts pain,
Diverts rage,
And engages each of us
In the greatest,
The most intense
Of our chosen struggles"

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents*

In Pasadena writer Octavia Butler's important novel, Parable of the Sower, main character Lauren Olamina understands that survival depends on adapting together and caring for each other. Her philosophy of "Earthseed" - that "God is Change" - deeply connects with the creative process of these poems, which come from Los Angeles County employees' experiences of collective trauma and resilience.

Writing, like community building, is an act of transformation. These poems represent more than individual expressions of grief; they are shared testimonies of survival, connection, and hope. By sharing our stories, we create pathways of understanding that connect personal experiences with broader community stories.

Butler's work teaches us that healing isn't a lonely journey, but a shared practice of listening, witnessing, and reimagining our shared futures. The poems in "Poems of the Living" show this principle-each verse proves our ability to rebuild, to support one another, and to find meaning in our most challenging moments.

Through these poems, Los Angeles County employees have created a living document of resilience, showing that our greatest strength lies in our ability to listen, to heal, and to continue moving forward together.



More Information & Resources

Los Angeles County's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) - County employees and a dependent can attend up to four virtual sessions every six months with the first one being offered on "County time." To schedule a confidential counseling session, call (213) 433-7202 or email EAP@hr.lacounty.gov. For more information, visit https://employee.hr.lacounty.gov/ employee-assistance-program/.

Life Assistance Program (LAP) - A free confidential and anonymous counseling service offered by the County of Los Angeles and provided by New York Life Behavioral Health. It is available to all employees, regardless of their medical or life insurance plans. Dealing with anxiety, grief, and fear can be a challenge. You don't have to go it alone. You can get help right away with the LAP. For more information call (800) 344-9752.

Creative Wellbeing is an approach for fostering communities of wellness using arts-based strategies to enhance the capacity of adults to support young people. Creative Wellbeing was developed by the LA County Department of Arts and Culture, Office of Child Protection, Department of Mental Health, and Arts for Healing and Justice Network. https:// www.lacountyartsedcollective.org/initiatives/ 113 creative-wellbeing.

This anthology was developed by christy roberts berkowitz during her Creative Strategist residency with the Los Angeles County Department of Human Resources. A recommendation of the Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative, the Creative Strategist program places artists, arts administrators, or other creative workers in County of Los Angeles departments to work alongside staff and community stakeholders in a collaborative process to develop and implement artist-driven solutions to complex social challenges. The program is administered by the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture. To learn more, please visit https://www.lacountvarts.org/.

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christy roberts berkowitz

Creative Strategist

christy roberts berkowitz (whose name includes her maternal family's surname and is intentionally presented in lowercase) is an interdisciplinary artist, musician, writer, and educator working for care and dignity in a world of constant man-made crisis. The native Southern Californian serves as Creative Strategist for Los Angeles County, founder of KCHUNG Public at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, and President/CEO of KCHUNG Radio (Creative Capital Award recipient, MOCA artist-in-residence).

Her conceptually guided work has been exhibited at institutions including MOCA Los Angeles, Getty Museum, Hammer Museum, and LACMA and she has completed residencies at Espronceda Institute, Centre Pompadour, and Chrysler Museum.

With degrees in philosophy, religion, studio art, and an MFA from Claremont Graduate University, her writing appears in Art21 Magazine, Lambda LitFest, and numerous publications.

As a musician, she released the experimental "Score" as Glitzer and her album "WOLVES" (co-produced by Grammy winner Jahi Sundance) under the name "christy" on Alpha Pup Records in 2022.

Dr. Alene Terzian-Zeitounian

Guest Writer / Workshop Facilitator

Dr. Alene Terzian-Zeitounian is a globally minded leader, poet, and educator with a deep commitment to advocacy and identity. She currently serves as the Humanities Department Chair and teaches creative writing at College of the Canvons. Dr. Terzian-Zeitounian holds an M.A. and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, with a concentration in poetry, and a doctorate in Education, specializing in Leadership and Innovation. Her debut book, Deep as City's Ache, examines the Lebanese Civil Conflict through both environmental and psychological lenses. Her work has been featured in esteemed publications such as the Bellevue Literary Review. Colorado Review, Mizna, and Rise Up Review. In addition to her academic endeavors, Dr. Terzian-Zeitounian serves as a Principal Advisor and Senior Facilitator at Culturally Intelligent Training and Consulting, where she empowers people to develop cultural curiosity, lead with empathy, and create atmospheres of belonging through compassionate action.

Carla Rachel Sameth

Guest Writer / Workshop Facilitator

Carla Rachel Sameth was the 2022-2024 Co-Poet Laureate for Altadena and a 2023 Poet Laureate Fellow with the Academy of American Poets. Her books include the memoir One Day on the Gold Line, the chapbook What Is Left, and the poetry collection Secondary Inspections. Her writing on blended/unblended, queer, multiracial, and single-parent families appears in a variety of publications and has been selected three times as Notable Essays of the Year in Best American Essays. Her story, "Graduation Day at Addiction High," originally appeared in Narratively and was selected for Longread's "Five Stories on Addiction." A Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee, a Pasadena Rose Poet, a West Hollywood Pride Poet, and a former PEN Teaching Artist, she teaches creative writing to high school and college students, incarcerated youth, and other diverse communities.

Niku Kashef

Guest Writer / Workshop Facilitator

Niku Kashef, MFA, CMT-P, is an interdisciplinary artist, writer, and educator working across studio art, relational practices, site-specific installation, participatory projects, public speaking, mindfulness facilitation, and advocacy. Her work examines geography, biography, and place-both as physical location and our perceived relationship to home/site. Informed by personal experience, her scholarship addresses identity, scientific inquiry, collective memory, and care through community-building via shared experiences: healing, loss, motherhood, displacement, environment, sacred practices, and the ephemeral. Kashef has exhibited and taught internationally. With over twenty years producing arts programming, she has served on the College Art Association's Board of Directors, is past-President and Advisory Council member for the Southern California Women's Caucus for Art, and emeritus Board Member for the National Women's Caucus for Art. Niku is a Lecturer at California State University, Northridge and has curated for organizations including the USNC for UN Women in Los Angeles, where she lives and works.

Raffi Joe Wartanian

Guest Writer / Workshop Facilitator

Raffi Joe Wartanian is a writer, musician, and educator who teaches writing at UCLA and serves as the inaugural Poet Laureate in the City of Glendale, California. His writing has appeared in The New York Times, University of Texas Press, Los Angeles Review of Books, The Baltimore Sun, Miami Herald, Outside Magazine, Lapham's Quarterly, No Dear Magazine, and elsewhere. Raffi has taught writing to numerous groups including veterans at the Manhattan VA, incarcerated writers at Rikers Island, and youth in Armenia. As a musician, Raffi has released two albums of original compositions: Critical Distance and Pushkin Street.

Sehba Sarwar

Guest Writer / Workshop Facilitator

Sehba Sarwar is a multidisciplinary writer and artist whose work has been published in Asia: Magazine of Asian Literature, Poetry in English from Pakistan, Altadena Poetry Review, LA Times, The New York Times, and elsewhere. The second edition of her novel Black Wings was released in 2019 (Veliz Books), and her short stories have been anthologized in Feminist Press, Akashic Books, and Harper Collins India. Sarwar designs and teaches workshops at all levels and spaces for communities, universities, and high schools. Born and raised in an activist home in Karachi, Pakistan, Sarwar is the recipient of multiple artist awards through organizations including LA's Department of Cultural Affairs, Pasadena's Cultural Affairs Division, Mid-America Arts Alliance amidst others. She serves as Altadena Co-Poet Laureate (2024-26).

Teresa Mei Chuc

Guest Writer / Workshop Facilitator

Teresa Mei Chuc was born in Sài Gòn, Việt Nam shortly after the Việt Nam War and grew up in Pasadena and Altadena, California on unceded Tongva Territory. Altadena Poet Laureate, Editorin-Chief from 2018 to 2020 and Pasadena Rose Poet since 2016, Teresa Mei Chuc is the author of three books of poetry, Invisible Light (Many Voices Press, 2018), Keeper of the Winds (FootHills Publishing, 2014), and Red Thread (Fithian Press, 2012). Her recent poetry chapbook, Incidental Takes, was published by Hummingbird Press in 2023. Teresa is a public school English teacher in Los Angeles in her twentieth-year teaching. Teresa sits on the Beyond Baroque Board of Trustees (Secretary) and is the Youth Engagement Committee Chair. Teresa also sits on the Board of Directors for the San Gabriel Valley Community Land Trust.

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Carolina Ibarra-Mendoza

Design Consultant & Book Designer

Carolina Ibarra-Mendoza is a Chicana graphic designer and feminist creative strategist from East Los Angeles. She holds a double BA in Gender Studies and Design from UC Davis and an MFA in Graphic Design from Otis College of Art and Design. Her independent practice blends visual storytelling, cultural preservation, and community engagement across mediums — from brand identity and printed matter to digital spaces and archives. Carolina partners with artists, activists, small businesses, and nonprofits to support work rooted in care, belonging, and social change. She currently serves as Board Secretary for both the Feminist Center for Creative Work and the Montebello Historical Society. Through thoughtful design, she aims to amplify underrepresented voices and reflect the rich cultural landscapes of L.A. - IMCarolina.com





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