

# *Alight*



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Kait Rokowski  
Carrie Rudzinski  
Alex Ustach  
Meg Waldron

Best-Loved Poems From  
The 2013  
Women of the World  
Poetry Slam  
As selected by the Audiences

Alight

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# Captain's Log

THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY to win a poetry slam. What else would you call it but “winning” when—no matter how the judges score you—everyone is talking about your poem at the end of the night? Or when you get offstage and find a stranger waiting to say: “That was brilliant! Let’s work together on [insert new, exciting project],” or “I’ve been feeling that way my whole life. Thank you for saying it. Now I know I’m not alone.” Is a night like that not some kind of notable victory?

The Lit Slam believes that when great writers get together en masse to play an addictively absurd game with their art, the poetry shared is often more interesting than the scores awarded. So we came to WoWPS 2013 to ask the audience a simple question: What were the best-written poems you heard here? After listening to hours of poetry, what’s sticking with you?

You are reading the result of that inquiry. The poems collected here are as diverse in theme and style as the women who wrote them—some achingly raw, some devastatingly funny, many of them written from places the audience couldn’t possibly have visited before, others still embarrassingly familiar. The common ground for all of these unique pieces is that a live audience heard them and thought: “Yes. That is truly great.”

No one volume could document the entirety of such a festival, and the fleeting moments of greatness experienced at each slam. The natural solution to such a problem involves your attending the next Women of the World Poetry Slam and seeing for yourself. There is no substitute for watching a live show, after all.

As you read these poems (aloud, if you can), please try to imagine the writer speaking them to a captivated crowd. Try to let yourself feel the thrill of that moment, the shock of sharing air with someone brave enough to write and relate language with originality, vulnerability, and precision. That spark is what we hope to bring to you here. We hope these poems set your mind alight.

Round 1:

# Four-Minute Poems

*Dominique Ashaheed*

*Laura Lamb Brown-Lavoie*

*Amy David*

*Carrie Rudzinski*

*Meg Waldron*

# Birmingham Sunday

*Dominique Ashaheed*

I do not know what came a'loose first.

A church ain't made for fallin' in on itself.  
You don't build 'em prepared for destruction.  
You build 'em thinkin' bout the praise shout,  
the hand clap, the open-mouthed communions,  
how many choir members can fit in the pulpit,  
the pancake breakfast you gon' have in the basement  
and the stained-glass Jesus.

Even in Birmingham Alabama 1963,  
where you had to account for dynamite.  
For the sharp teeth of segregation chewin' through  
waterlogged protest marchers swept  
clean off their feet. They fell  
like blood-torn right angles to  
foamin' at the mouth police dogs,  
billy clubs and batons.

But churches ain't made for fallin' down.  
And I don't know what came a'loose first,

if the pillars tipped over before the pulpit shuddered  
if the windows hung for a moment in their frames  
before the terrible speed of shrapnel  
got in the way of everything...

If you were a colored girl in Birmingham,  
you knew how to duck and shrink  
how to be a misspelled word,  
an incomplete sentence  
squelched down to sugar-softened  
press-and-curl perkiness.  
Their silence was so loud,  
their teeth a locked gate.  
Their mouths held annual sit-ins  
for their flame-red throats,  
the sizzle and spill of every unsaid thing.

And it is hard to be so still  
with all that playground and star-shine  
shimmy in the stretch of our bones,  
but on Sundays we get it near right.

The mornings roll out in hot cakes and black coffee.  
Daddy is a baritone down the hall singin' hymns,  
Mama is fixin' his tie then yellin' bout stockings and  
Get on in here and eat before this food gets cold!  
And we can wear our hair down.

It will be curled round our ears  
and stopped with ribbon.

And the wild hunger of Jim Crow  
cannot find you in church.

So we slidin' round the kitchen in  
our white shoes without a single scuff,  
and your sister gets to dab a little rouge  
on her cheeks just on Sundays,  
just on Sundays.

And the car ride is a sovereign floating joy  
the whole way 'cuz mama can sing  
and she's rollin' that pretty bell-tinkle  
soprano out and we pickin' up the chorus  
where we can and though  
we have to keep tuggin' at our slip  
so it doesn't dip below our dress...

We are everything new and shiny  
that God has ever loved, and deep  
and high in our colored girl  
sometime-loveliness,  
because Jim Crow did not seek you in church.

I don't know what came a'loose first.  
But when the choir was singin'  
*I wish I knew how it would feeeeel to be free...*

And you were a wet giggle with your sister  
in Sunday school,  
The sky fell down and smothered everything.

Ceiling tiles flew like occasional birds,  
smacked the walls and smoldered  
skulls and incandescent smoke  
a wild death for a young girl—  
the crackle and pop of spinning fire  
that burns everything to cinder.  
A valley of broken jawbones  
baby teeth scattered like confetti,  
a stony, vexing sleep

The sun crazy with shining anyway,  
the flesh insulted rubble.  
The refugeed clergy diggin' through  
the glass and mortar,  
findin' tiny limbs and

The world is a singed skirt.

I don't know what came a'loose first  
But it all came a'loose didn't it, Addie and Denise?  
Didn't it, Cynthia? Didn't it, Carole?  
Didn't it all break a'loose,  
didn't it drop the winter in?

Didn't it catch and keep the sky snatched low  
by the terrible clang of dynamite?

It's funny. It's a dream. And the dream is a roar.  
And the roar keeps time with dragons.

I don't know what came a'loose first.  
Churches ain't for fallin' down.  
Colored girls should be safe on Sunday.

No one should offer you a heaven,  
no matter how honeyed,  
when you had't even had your period yet.  
Or been to your first boy/girl dance,  
or had the chance to gossip about it the next day  
laughin' foot-stomp girrrrrrrrl wait-til-you-hear-this  
whimsy  
That was STILL your right.  
No matter what Jim Crow said...

And can't nobody re-flesh those bones.  
Your mama will never be the same  
pleated skirt or  
sometimes silly sista  
who could smile with all her teeth...  
Because somebody lifted a sheet,

and underneath it was your bomb-blasted body  
and the world broke open and swallowed her whole...

Things come a'loose, fall down and fall apart lawd...  
The center will NOT hold, but

You hear that?

Just over all that ugly, you hear that?

Past the thunder crack of grief and *Go down Moses...*

You hear that?

Can't no detonated handmade nothin' touch it.

Just over the tracks and down the street a ways,  
there is still hide and seek rough and tumble  
tag and tea parties. Some little girl is hula hoop  
and hopscotch lemon cookie wonderful twirlin'  
in her mama's old stitched and restitched skirts.  
And she's gon' go to church on Sunday singin'

*I wish I knew how...it would feeeeeeel to be free...*

And mean it.

And mean it.

# On This the 100th Anniversary of the Sinking of the Titanic, We Reconsider the Buoyancy of the Human Heart

*Laura Lamb Brown-Lavoie*

What's wrong? Titanic asked me this morning, when she found me lying on the ocean floor with all my suitcases strewn open.

Oh, I dunno, I moaned. I was looking through *National Geographic* and saw some pictures of you, and thought I might come have a chat. You looked great, by the way, in the pictures.

Me? No. Titanic smiled. If anything I seem to have become a Picasso. And I have a beard.

It was true; she looked more like a collage of a ship. Strangely two-dimensional, in a crater of her own making: French doors, boilers, railings every which

way. And she did have a bit of a beard—rust icicles hanging in red strands from her iron engines.

Sitting up in my own little crater, I sort-of blushed.

To be honest, I told Titanic, My honey's leaving town soon and I'm afraid it's gonna wreck me, so I dove down here.

Well come on in, Titanic said, but I'm not sure I've got what you're looking for.

So in I climbed, through a window between two rust stalactites, and began to pace her great promenade. (Which should have been awesome, by the way—walking by the ghosts of all those waving handkerchiefs—except that I was in that feeling-sorry-for-yourself state where every hallway is the hallway of your own wretched mind, every ghost your own ghost, so I didn't take a good look around.)

When I got to the Turkish baths, I sat on the edge of a barnacled tub and watched weird crabs scabble at my feet.

I was hoping you'd teach me how to sink, I said. You who have spent a century underwater with 1500

skeletons in your chest.

I don't know, said Titanic, I'm kind-of a wreck.

Exactly! I said, Me, too! I'm here to apprentice myself to wreckage. I'm here to apprentice myself to you! Great bearded lady, gargantuan ark, you floating hotel. With enough ballrooms in you to dance with everyone I've ever loved.

My heart has an iceberg with its name on it, I told Titanic, so I need your advice. Tell me, did you see the iceberg coming?

I did, Titanic said.

And you sailed right into it?

It was love, Titanic said.

And the band just kept playing? And the captain stayed at the wheel? What did it feel like to swallow seawater? Tell me, Titanic, how did it feel?

It felt like a hole in my side and then it felt like plummeting face first into the ice-cold ocean.

She's a straight talker, the Titanic.

Alright, I said. Now let's talk about rust. When my love leaves, I'm planning to weep stalactites from my chin. I will wear my sadness in long strands. Like you, I will be bearded by it.

Then I made a terrible noise.

*Eeeeeeeeeeeeeerrrrkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk!* I've been practicing the sound of wrenching metal, I told her, for when my love leaves.

But you aren't made of metal. Titanic said to me.

I'm a writer, I said, I can be made of anything.

Well then, be a writer. She said.

Be a writer? I paused, anemones between my toes.

Okay. When my love leaves. I will start with SOS. I will Morse code odes as the whole world goes vertical. I will write nosedives as my torso splits in two.

And the next day I will write the stunned headlines, and the next day I will write the obituaries, and the next day I will write furious accusations, and the next day I will write lawsuits, and the next day I will

write confessions of wrongdoing, and the next day I will write pardons, but I won't really mean it, and the next day I will write sonnets, but they won't fit the schema, and the next day I will write pleas, please, please come back. The next day I will write epitaphs, navigation maps, warnings for future generations about the hubris of human love. I will write quotas and queries and quizzes, I will write nonsense, I will write nonsense, I will write nonsense all the way down and no diving teams will find me, no robot arms will retrieve me in pieces, never will I be reassembled in plain air. No, I will remain whole, two miles down, with my suitcases strewn open, and in 100 years I will still be writing about this feeling, though my heart be a Picasso, though my heart be bearded at the bottom of the sea.

The Titanic let me cry for a while, my sobs echoing off her moldy mosaics.

Then she said: Girl, you're too young for a beard like this. You're never gonna get some if you rust over now.

I sniffled a little and scratched my name into the green slime of the tub.

The trouble with you humans is that you are so

concerned with staying afloat. Go ahead, be gouged open by love. Gulp that saltwater, sink beneath the waves. You're not a boat, you can go under and come up again, with those big old lungs of yours, those hard kicking legs.

And your heart, she said, that gargantuan ark, that floating hotel. Call it Unsinkable, though it is sinkable. Embark, embark.

There are enough ballrooms in you to dance with everyone you'll ever love.

That's what the Titanic told me this morning, me, lying next to her on the ocean floor.

There are enough ballrooms in you.

# Upon Lecturing a Male Friend About the Danger of Gender Roles While Simultaneously Texting Another Man About my Boobs

*Amy David*

I stop to wonder if I am a hypocrite. Sometimes feminism is wonderfully obvious: stop shaving my muff, boycott Rush Limbaugh, hold my tongue though I am thinking that woman is a total bitch, or at least call her an asshole instead, buy woman-made, stop watching so much porn.

But feminism doesn't tell me what to do about this bar full of hipsters; I am a straight woman, and I lust hard after guys in glasses and skinny jeans. Did I just objectify an entire room full of men? And if so, does it bring us closer to equality? How do I talk to a man while channeling Gloria Steinem? A cleavage-baring

shirt is quite literally the low-hanging fruit. How do I pick up like a feminist?

*Is that a glass ceiling in your pants? Because I could see myself pounding against it for the next thirty-five years of my career.*

*Did it hurt when you fell out of Heaven? Because Christianity is just one of the major religions to oppress women with promises of otherworldly rewards.*

*Was your father a mechanic? Then where did you get such a finely tuned sense of appropriate boundaries?*

*If looks could kill, you'd be lucky that House Republicans blocked the Violence Against Women Act.*

On to the small talk. Let's talk about the Chicago Blackhawks, the failure of charter schools, unionization efforts at Target, obscure craft beers, and how this place used to be so much cooler before all the kids from Lincoln Park started coming here. Avoid my body, his body, what I'd like to do to his body and anything that has ever been written in *Cosmo*.

By now, we need drinks:

*Women only make 77 cents for every dollar earned by a man; can I buy you three-quarters of a drink? How about a Long Island Iced?*

Back up. It's supposed to be okay to talk about sex. Feminists are "sex-positive," like I show up in bed with pom-poms and motivational cat posters. 2-4-6-8: oral sex is really great! All of the orgasms, none of the shame! Too bad pop culture never got the memo: Victoria's Secret is still selling thongs that say "Sure Thing," and Stubenville is still blaming the victim.

How do I say "woman" without saying weakness? How do I say "sex" without saying object? How do I say, "I want your attention" without saying *I am here for the taking?*

*That's a nice shirt. It would look good on my floor after we've had an explicit conversation about our likes and dislikes and confirmed we are sexually compatible.*

*Are your feet tired? You've been running through my enthusiastic consent fantasies all night.*

*If I said you had a nice body, would you hold it at exactly the distance you felt comfortable from me?*

*Are you pro-choice? Let's go do the kinds of things that lead to abortion.*

Now for the close—does he want to leave with me? Do I want to leave with him? His place or mine? Exactly how many drinks has each of us had, divided by our weight and rates of metabolism? Is it gender-neutral for neither one of us to be carrying a condom? Can a bar hookup just be a bar hookup, not a symbol of oppression? Nobody can be perfect in an imperfect world. Flirtation is not the opposite of respect, and sometimes, we all just wanna do bad things.

Hey, you wanna go make some mistakes, and then forgive ourselves in the morning?

# In America

*Carrie Rudzinski*

The first hitchhiker  
I ever picked up  
I dropped off in the wrong place.  
We were both backpackers—  
young, dirty, and foreign.  
I was so excited to help,  
I didn't even realize my mistake  
until I was too far  
to turn around.  
I'd left him on a busy overpass—  
gray eyes and tired hands  
to search for another way out.

The first time I hitchhiked  
I kept my three-inch knife  
clutched in a fist  
inside my bag the whole time.  
They were the only ones who stopped:  
thick-set country boys,  
dogs barking in the bed  
of their black pickup truck.

I was suddenly so grateful  
for my baggy clothes—  
my unwashed hair—  
their harmless questions—  
but I never shook the doubt in my gut—  
and I didn't look back when I finally got out.

You could not pay me enough money  
to hitchhike in America.

In America, no one looks at you  
and everyone stares.

In America, fear is a gender  
I am too familiar with.

In America, the street is a river  
and all of the men are drowning.

All of the men need you to save them.

All of the men need you.

All of the men have been raised to believe  
women are supposed to fuck them.

All of the men expect you to fuck them.

In America, she was asking for it.

In America, I walk with my keys shoved between my  
knuckles.

All of my retorts burn in the wildfire of my throat.

My eyes are sidewalks.

My body: a used noose.

Every voice is a corner—  
a dog fight—  
a humiliation.

America says, “That poor girl in India—  
only in the Third World—  
how could six men rape her  
and no one do anything?”

In America, I walk down the street  
and a boy leans out of his car  
to scream “Yo Slut! Pull down your hood!”

In America, I am with my boyfriend  
when a man hisses in my ear  
“Hey sexy,”

so that he and I have a secret.

So that he and I are he and I.

So that I will flinch when the next man  
stares for too long.

In America, a man pretended to masturbate on me  
after a poetry show

because I was too much talk  
and not enough take.

Because my mouth was a siren—  
a hive—

Because no one called him  
a misogynist after the show but me.

In America, we are taught  
to scream the word "FIRE"  
if being assaulted because no one  
will help us if we yell "RAPE."  
No one can see themselves  
but we are all looking.

In America, six members  
of the high school football team  
can show photos of the girl  
they pissed on  
and raped  
and no one will do anything.  
Their male authority figures will condone it.  
Rape is an American Past Time: A National Sport.  
In America, she shouldn't have gotten so sloppy.  
In America, boys will be boys.  
In America, twenty-two elected Senators can oppose  
the Violence Against Women Act.  
In America, when you type the word "rape"  
into Google the first option to pop up  
is RAPE JOKES.

In America, my body belongs  
to the first person who demeaned it:  
the boy who broke up with me  
because I wouldn't have sex with him.

The one who taught me to find something  
to burn. To mold. To shrink. To hate—  
my worth stolen like a bicycle in the night—  
a yellow blur in the dark.

In America, I am always searching  
for another way out.

In America, I am always on fire.  
I am always on fire.

# my ex-girlfriend is baking cookies in my uterus

*Meg Waldron*

ever since i started bleeding  
at eleven years old  
when i have cramps,  
i make a game out of trying to describe  
exactly what the pain feels like  
as a fun way to pass the hours of agony.  
for example:  
is it as if someone is reaching through  
the flesh of my abdomen with needle-nosed pliers,  
grabbing hold of my uterus and twisting?  
no, it's more of a blunt pain.  
perhaps like being punched from both sides?  
or maybe it's more like falling face-first  
from the sky onto a sharpened  
telephone pole?  
well tonight, i know exactly what it is.  
it is my ex and her new girlfriend in there.  
in my uterus.  
yes.

in my empty baby maker,  
they're baking cookies.  
as in any portland kitchen,  
it's close quarters for them.  
for all of us, really.  
so when they turn the oven on, i feel feverish.  
first, cold. sapped of all my own steam  
then shaky, sweating in some  
hellish fever dream.  
but i know they're comfortable  
and have everything they need.

i feel them start bangin' around  
metal kitchen utensils, cookie sheets, whisks, spoons.  
they almost pierce through  
as they pull a long spatula out of a cupboard  
all elbows and enthusiasm,  
but they are safely contained.  
while the oven preheats,  
she puts her arms around her waist  
and they lean back leisurely  
against my pelvic bone,  
settling into the shag carpeting  
of my bloody, fraying walls.  
i can feel them smiling  
as i writhe on my couch wondering,  
do i have to shit?

or is that just the extra space they're taking?  
because it feels like i have to shit  
and standing right where she is  
i can't differentiate  
whether it is her in my uterus  
or just my own asshole.  
they feel the same to me.

oh it is a kitchen like this  
that makes a house a home!  
yes, i can feel that deeply.  
cookie cutters,  
just press them against the walls.  
this bloody lining is yours  
to cut sharp shapes into.  
make christmas trees  
barbed like arrow heads,  
sharp pointy stars,  
a fully armed menorah,  
angels with epic wing spans!

and please,  
cut a baby jesus this holiday.  
bake a saint together,  
something pure,  
something to make the world better  
from this immaculate lesbian womb.

let me give birth to your cookie jesus.  
that makes sense.  
that explains why i feel like  
i am expelling something  
impossible while you remain so  
comfortable and holy.

eat those cookies until you are full.  
so full that the girth  
of your newly made memories  
tests the very limits of my abdomen,  
surely, i will break at the seams  
but i do not.  
looking down,  
there is no massacre across my belly  
though i know your domestic festivities  
have cost me dearly in blood loss.

fall asleep there satisfied.  
leave your mess,  
your crumbs,  
your cookie destruction to my diva cup.  
i have survived.  
and i know,  
that nothing in this uterus comes out alive.  
this pain, it always ends with red  
toilet bowl cursive

and this time it reads,  
*a happy holiday,*  
*from our home to yours!*  
and after wiping sweat from my brow  
and relief from my ass,  
i flush it all from my sight,  
wave good riddance to bad blood  
and to all  
a good night.

Round 2:

# One-Minute Poems

*Eris Zion Venia Dyson*

*Kait Rokowski*

# How to memorize a poem:

*Eris Zion Venia Dyson*

1. Remove your bra.  
Anything worth doing should be done braless.
2. Take a bath.  
Memorization is easy when you don't smell like onion.
3. Get hype.  
Do your best Beyoncé bounce while looking back at your ass in the mirror.
4. Take a break.  
Beyoncé is exhausting.
5. Post it to Facebook.  
It doesn't count if you don't.
6. Read your poem.  
Eliminate all words that have four or more syllables.
7. Masturbate.  
The mind is clearer post-orgasm.
8. Wash your damn hands.  
Nasty!
9. Take a nap.  
The mind is a little too clear post-orgasm.
10. Put your bra back on.  
Because, clearly, swinging boobs are slippery slopes.

# Jesus

*Kait Rokowski*

He has been telling everyone we know  
that he is in love with his new girlfriend  
& I have never heard it with my own ears  
but, I swear, he sounds like he means it.

& I am trying to be less of a liar these days  
so, yes, if you must know, I'm jealous  
jealous that the best we could do with our romance  
was drag it out back to be shot.

It must have been a mercy kill, but I don't know.  
you'd think I would because I was the one with the gun.  
but I don't know,  
I looked the whimpering thing in the eye & shot

& He is the Jesus of ex-boyfriends  
resurrected with a whole new religion  
a much better mythology than I could have given him  
& I am the old book  
only the story of what came before

# The Lit Slam at the Women of the World Poetry Slam

*Sarah Kay (Second Place Winner)*

*Sasha Banks (First Place Winner)*

# The Type

*Sarah Kay*

*Everyone needs a place. It shouldn't be inside of someone else.*

*—Richard Siken*

If you grow up the type of woman men want to look at,  
you can let them look at you. But do not mistake eyes  
for hands.

Or windows.

Or mirrors.

Let them see what a woman looks like.

They may not have ever seen one before.

If you grow up the type of woman men want to touch,  
you can let them touch you.

Sometimes it is not you they are reaching for.

Sometimes it is a bottle. A door. A sandwich. A Pulitzer.

Another woman.

But their hands found you first. Do not mistake yourself  
for a guardian.

Or a muse. Or a promise. Or a victim. Or a snack.

You are a woman. Skin and bones. Veins and nerves.  
Hair and sweat.

You are not made of metaphors. Not apologies. Not  
excuses.

If you grow up the type of woman men want to hold,  
you can let them hold you.

All day they practice keeping their bodies upright—  
even after all this evolving, it still feels unnatural, still  
strains the muscles,

holds firm the arms and spine. Only some men will  
want to learn  
what it feels like to curl themselves into a question mark  
around you,

admit they do not have the answers  
they thought they would have by now;

some men will want to hold you like *The Answer*.  
You are not *The Answer*.

You are not the problem. You are not the poem  
or the punchline or the riddle or the joke.

Woman. If you grow up the type men want to love,  
You can let them love you.

Being loved is not the same thing as loving.  
When you fall in love, it is discovering the ocean

after years of puddle jumping. It is realizing you have  
hands.

It is reaching for the tightrope when the crowds have all  
gone home.

Do not spend time wondering if you are the type of  
woman  
men will hurt. If he leaves you with a car alarm heart,  
you learn to sing along.

It is hard to stop loving the ocean. Even after it has left  
you gasping, salty.

Forgive yourself for the decisions you have made, the  
ones you still call

mistakes when you tuck them in at night. And know  
this:

Know you are the type of woman who is searching for a  
place to call yours.

Let the statues crumble.  
You have always been the place.

You are a woman who can build it yourself.  
You were born to build.

# show both your hands

*Sasha Banks*

sasha stands outside the record store  
with a boy who thinks he loves her

she knew if she let him, it wouldn't be the first death.  
the first death was in letting him think he could love  
a tidal wave like her. but he was sweet standing there,  
heart bleeding in his back pocket. she lifted her shirt,  
a shipwrecked belly of pennies, lost ships, and sunken  
men.

"I'm no fountain. Everybody drowns here."

sasha waits outside the record store  
for a boy who said he loves her

across the street, the subway station is a silent scream.  
a white dress sings up her thighs. she thinks,  
"why all this dressing up? when I open my mouth  
he will see all this blood and know that I'm  
a wound, made pretty." she sees him,  
her dress crying red. she smiles with all her teeth,  
"now you know everything."

sasha walks past the record store  
where a boy used to love her

otis redding's voice breaks over her head,  
a bullet made of lightening. she remembers  
what it was like to kiss someone who knew the  
width and breadth of her. who knew  
how to twist the knife, but never how  
to stop the bleeding. she wondered what  
happens to your bones when you confess yourself  
like a truth.

# Dear brown girl,

*Sasha Banks*

Armored woman, cloaked  
in night sky, you are not  
the soft-eyed girl  
your mother prayed  
so desperately for you  
to become. You do not speak  
in the perfumed language  
of the women in your bloodline.  
You have always had just  
a little more truth on your tongue  
than your grandmother knew  
what to do with. There was always  
a little less breeze and  
a little more brick  
in your walk than your aunt  
could make sense of.

Dear brown girl,

Your smile  
is the easiest thing about you:

a peeled bed of pulled  
rose petals that has brought you  
honest men with nervous palms  
that did not know  
what to do with you and  
your armor of bone and brass and  
truth and canon fire.  
They feared you,  
the way every all-consuming thing  
is feared. For the same reason  
people fear hurricanes, tsunamis  
and earthquakes,  
so you kept your arms crossed  
or tucked wrist-deep  
in your pockets, knowing all the time  
that your hands are a windstorm:  
capable of the kind of destruction  
that uproots solid things  
and requires them to be  
reimagined, rebirthed, and rebuilt.

Dear brown girl,

You are author and ruiner,  
builder and breaker, maker  
and destroyer all  
in the same breath.

There are only  
so many decent hiding places  
within the arches  
of your curved parts,  
they cannot shadow all of you,  
stop hiding from yourself,  
brown girl.

Know that even water knows  
how to be still,  
but it does not apologize  
for its capacity for destruction,  
its ability to become wave  
and swallow whole cities.

The truth is that the most  
violent occurrences are often  
the most profound  
and the most beautiful.

Brown girl,  
love the limb  
and length of you:  
your stone back, and  
bullet mouth, your satin hips  
and thick knuckles;  
do not apologize for this

or open your hands  
to beg forgiveness for your own  
blood and bones.

Do not fix your mouth to say  
that you are anything less  
than everything. Say  
that you are every possible  
definition of beauty  
and power. Say  
you are the perfect  
natural disaster.

# Hey Mister

*Sasha Banks*

so, before I go making a home  
out of you, mister  
I need you to sit close enough to my  
skin that you can hear all the names I have  
ever given it; all the times I treated it less  
like tower, more like tenement (less like  
star, more like asterisk); all the places  
it has been where its beauty lay just  
in the periphery.

before I go loving you with more breath  
than I use to speak my own name, you  
need to know that I have small fingers  
with an appetite for all the small spaces  
in the air when I talk. that my heart  
breaks, like yolk,  
over everything.

listen.

'cause unless I tell you, you'll never know  
that in february I told God, "if anyone asks,

you're my valentine, today." do you know  
that we slow-danced to the music that  
bones make when they are loved to the  
marrow? He asked about those times I  
whispered myself down to crooked  
caricatures of myself. mister,  
have you ever tried to explain to God  
why He says, "there's a forest in your  
belly." and you say,  
"that ain't no forest, that's only a field."  
why He says, "your heart is a canyon."  
and you say,  
"this ain't no canyon, this is just a crack."

before i go unraveling your name  
like the last prayer whispered behind cathedral wall,  
I want you to recognize that I am still learning  
how to swallow all the synonyms in my own name  
without spitting them out. I am still trying to  
convince myself that even with no ounce of  
gold in my veins, I am still worth the breath  
it took to get me here.  
but a poet can talk herself  
out of anything.

mister, "woman"  
is a strength I only possess in

pieces; it's a name I only occupy  
in lowercased letters; a phrase  
I only echo in whispers.

so, before I go  
making skyscraper out of you,  
I'm gonna make  
monument out of me. mister,  
before I go rearranging the space  
between heart and belly to house you  
in the softest parts of me;  
before I go building you an empire  
of all the life that grows underneath,  
I'm gonna hug my knees to my chest  
and kiss them an apology  
for every night I bent them, in prayer,  
asking God why my lips and my  
thighs and my hair are so big.  
why my legs are so short and my voice  
so loud. why my hands are so small  
and my heart so big.

so before I go loving  
you,  
mister...

my head, my heart,  
we have  
some reconciling to do.

Round 3:

# Two-Minute Poems

*Dominique Christina Ashaheed*

*Laura Lamb Brown-Lavoie*

*Porsha Olayiwola*

# Stargazer

*Dominique Christina Ashaheed*

It is the year of living dangerously.  
I'm sixteen and trying to lose my  
virginity quickly to someone with soft hands.

Eager to let go of makeshift piety  
I look for psalms in slow dances,  
tell my nerve endings to be patient,  
mark my calendar to watch  
for the subterranean dance of  
bloodletting and brown skin  
bending willfully under cotton sheets

Hoping this boy  
has not grown his bones to tools  
for bludgeoning the few bits  
of girliness left in me  
that have not forgotten  
what tenderness can feel like  
in the inevitable cruelty  
that is adolescence

I'm stargazing.

There is an unfamiliar tremor in my hip.

My navel is manmade lake.

What it cannot hold runs over and  
collects beneath me.

I am glad for the distraction.

My hymen applauds the first  
consensual

contact she has ever known.

She will begin the arduous ritual  
of disremembering the one  
who came before...

I'm stargazing.

My hands are fisted.

This is habitual.

It will take years for them to open

I will forgive that.

He is smiling in my ear.

I can hear those pretty white teeth.

He did not know redemption could quiver so pink.

I did not know redemption could quiver so pink.

It's dawn now.  
And there are a thousand poems waiting  
in the space between my cheek  
and his collarbone.  
I will write them down later.  
They are mine for the rest of my life.  
The soft refrains of forgiveness that chase  
the memories of a pedophile  
to dust.

Come back moon!  
You and I share the same story!  
Glory be to the girl who goes back for her body!

He will sleep through my epiphanies and hallelujahs.  
I will forgive that.  
Unaccustomed to bones being so loose,  
my knees are waiting for instruction.  
They have not been told  
to fight back or fend off.

I stroke them into silence.  
Tell them they are relieved of that duty.  
This boy is different.  
A day-walker who laughs in his sleep.  
My forehead is red from his kiss.

Only molested children love so well.  
Or forget so quickly.

He is dreaming now.  
Left hand pinning me against him safe.  
He does not know how often  
I bled in the arms of another.  
How the scratch and pull of “no”  
kept daylight from coming.  
Too short a word for some to hear.  
It moves through the mouth too quickly  
to be considered.  
But I have not uttered that with him.

I’m stargazing.

I will watch him sleep  
to the sound of yesterday dying  
in the bend of his elbow.  
When he wakes  
he will catch me staring.

I am a star.

Gazing.

# Ars Poetica

*Laura Lamb Brown-Lavoie*

Wild animals,  
for whom sunrise  
is the boot heel in the side,

who are riderless  
save for the invisible jockey of survival  
who run because their destiny  
is running and because wild means  
there is no gap between destiny and will  
and no will beyond the will of muscle

Wild animal  
when I overtake you,  
clasp your heaving neck between my legs  
count the pulse in your artery against my thigh  
and name that pulse  
and whisper its name  
into your pricked ear

When I recite the names of what you are not  
you are not grass

you are not lake  
you are not sunrise,  
but rather the puppet of sunrise.  
You are a thought I had not known was mine

When I string you up by the mouth like a puppet  
slip my alien fingers  
between your leather lips  
and serve cold metal to your tongue,  
teach you to turn at the twitch of my wrist,  
it may seem like dominion  
but it is not dominion

For I was born to sit astride my own thoughts and  
pound the earth  
and you were born to bear me. This litany  
I whisper in your ear as you succumb  
is as true as blood  
and lets like blood.

I do not break you for the racetrack  
I do not break you for show  
I break you because all I have  
is speech and spindly legs,  
and because your leather lips  
can only blow on the water  
they can not name a ripple

But together  
we might overtake the sun  
together be sunrise  
be lake be grass  
forget the gap  
between our two bodies  
that you might teach me wild  
and I, let wild speak

# The Ballad

*Porsha Olayiwola*

I bet you ain't never been swimming in the muddy  
waters of a Tallahatchie River

Felt your screams get choked by the heavy history of  
a cotton gin fan tied with barbed-wire around your  
throat

Hope don't live here anymore

It was dragged out in the middle of the night with a  
shotgun in its back

Drag you back, to Money, Mississippi

And I bet you ain't never felt your eye dangling out your  
socket

bouncing against your cheek like a lynched body  
rocking

bet you never been swimming in the muddy waters of a  
Tallahatchie River

for whistling

See a black boy only worth 3/5ths deserve to go  
swimming in the Tallahatchie River

He deserve to have hollow holes on the sides of his face  
where his ears use to be  
He use to be able to hear freedom ring  
Now he's still, lying in a box  
surrounded by death  
beat so bad he don't even look like himself  
And I bet you ain't never heard your Mama screaming  
tears streaming  
dreaming that her 14 year-old son wasn't slain in vain

She reaching for a hammer and using her bare hands to  
try to pry open your casket  
Don't mask it  
Let all the world see  
what they've done to my baby down in Money,  
Mississippi  
And I bet you ain't never heard the Ballad of Emmett Till  
song from the deep bellows of the Tallahatchie River  
heard his spirit screaming for three days  
surrounded by muddy waters and rain  
Death, can't you hear him yelling for help  
his face still disfigured, he never even looked like  
himself  
And I bet you ain't never been forced to go swimming  
in the Jim Crow waters of a Tallahatchie River  
for whistling  
at a white woman

Round 4:

# Three-Minute Poems

*Dominique Christina Ashaheed*

*Zedeka Poindexter*

*Alex Ustach*

*Meg Waldron*

# Mama

*Dominique Christina Ashaheed*

*To my mother, who did not know a wide-enough love...*

Mama, women like you are impossible  
There is no template for your kind of red-ribbon  
resilience

My daddy did not have the right circumference  
to carry you river woman, you  
are made of so much marrow  
and he so indulgent in geography  
The mud on his boots always  
looked like departure

I wanted to love you as he should have  
to be the one who reassembles your bones  
back into the flesh-borne masonry that  
looks the most like Heaven

to genuflect under your apron  
to swallow the psalms you pour into soup pots

Mama, women like you are mostly mythological  
Mountainesque matriarchs  
whose stories we borrow from

to keep some starch in our backs  
stars in our eyes  
daggers in our throats

I have wanted to watch you puddle over  
when a man who loves you epic  
brings you close and holds you like  
he knows what you are for.  
Not the ones you pulled from the wreckage  
of their mostly Titanic lives  
to cook grits for after sunset  
to distract with sweet potato pie...

Mama, you are impossibly woman  
Your over-muscled grief  
steaming in your own blood  
The hooks of history that have hauled  
Your head down and dripping  
in the old knowledge of all the arms you died in  
Your resurrection songs lifted the sky  
into my throat

When my daddy left, what color  
were the moans in your cheeks?  
When my stepfather beat you,  
what did you do with the roar in your back, woman?

You were bone and tidal blood making biscuits in the morning.

I have never known you to bleed out loud

The clenched knuckled wailing never makes it past your ribs.

You are every yellowing page in my journal

You are everything I know about women.

I have always been a suicide note

tucked down in an unread book

You have always been my eulogy

the things I could have been

were it not for this terrible hunger

the insistence of my mouth to keep its teeth

I make up stories about the you I find

in the first few pages of that one old album

Every picture is frayed at the edge

the wild in your eyes is a perch to fly from

without the spill of daughters

oozing from the yawn in your thighs

Spinning prettily like a bee

a cigarette between two fingers

honeyed in your soft black whimsical right now

womanness

When your body was new and unstoried...  
When your head did not dip below the dawn...

Were you ever just dandelion wine?  
Did you ever let your body be an altar?  
Were you ever the loudest in the room?  
Did you ever let your pain lay open?  
Spread it out across your face?  
Let it be the dirge it is?

I don't know how to LIVE bloodlessly, Mama.

Everything in me is so profane and piled up.  
I am a red dress and an open secret.  
You are a funeral procession without the benefit of a  
body.  
We are related by way of backbone.

You are all I know of woman  
and I am nothing like you, Mama.  
You are all I know of woman...

And I am nothing  
like you.

# Peach Cobbler

*Zedeka Poindexter*

Some families have parables about their history.  
They can spin loving tales about where they came from.

We, we make peach cobbler.  
The best story we can tell you  
will fill your belly with memories.

I have these things to share:  
A rolling pin, a cast iron skillet from my Gran,  
and a recipe that is really more memory than manual.

Bring water to a boil and add the following:  
Butter (because Gran accepted no substitutes  
the few times she decided to bake),  
Lemon and orange juices (from a late-night experiment  
of mine),  
Brown sugar and a touch of white to complement the  
ripeness of your peaches,  
and the perfect combination of cinnamon and nutmeg  
that will remind you of my momma,  
her slightly red complexion in the summer

It should taste earthy, not grainy

Not too sweet.

Stir so it doesn't stick to the bottom of the pan.

When the liquid clings to the back of your spoon—add  
peaches.

Fresh ones.

See, fresh peaches have a tang and texture  
that you can't get out of cans.

Those cook down to mush,

but the fresh ones,

those let you know you're really eating something,

remind us of the days beyond commodity cans

when fresh fruit was more than just a luxury.

Let everything cook low and slow

until the liquid tastes like the fruit you just added

You're going to have to taste it,

Modify,

Taste it again.

See we learn things by doing

and we don't serve anything

that hasn't crossed our own lips first.

Your aunts will suck their teeth

and push back their plates if you get it wrong.

Pour the filling into a skillet  
and cover the top with crust.  
Push that crust to the bottom.  
Now y'all know no one wants cobbler without extra  
crust.

Cover the top again and wait for the right doneness:  
The perfect color is somewhere between  
the shade of my palm and the back of my hand.

When it cools, you will have the perfect way to close  
out a family dinner,  
and the scent of buttery citrus clinging to the kitchen.  
You will know that smell better than the way home.

This is how we remember.  
With our potato salad, our jerk chicken,  
our seasoned vegetables,  
this peach cobbler  
is our collective memory on a warm plate,  
heavy with history and assertive spice.

Take a spoonful.  
Savor every bit of it.  
Let it linger on your tongue until you understand  
what it tastes like when someone loves you.

Take this recipe and make it your own.  
Accident your way into improvements,

and if ever someone asks you who you are  
or who your people are,  
make them this.

# Honey vs. Sharks

*Alex Ustach*

I've never been one to ration my love out slowly. I just never saw the sense in choking the breath from a living thing.

But the more I have learned about the walls in the throats of men, the more I have tried to make waiting look pretty, make it stay real quiet.

Prayed you couldn't hear my insides—how your two hands, convinced 206 bones into xylophones, a crescendo of bloody sing-song. You had me

reaching for my own mouth off the floor, all slack-jawed silly at the sight of you; when you turned that old turntable on at 4 a.m., whispering to me under the sheets. Kissed me with conviction, like you had everything to say

and meant it. Even the mason jar of sugar in your  
kitchen  
looked romantic in the morning.

How quickly  
I found a dream in you.

Then never saw you again;  
till I saw you wrapped in a New Year's kiss  
more blue-eyed than me.  
I tried to find myself on a map that night.  
To pinpoint the center  
not worth loving.

Was it the tambourines  
in my blood, singing your name?  
Was it something in my teeth?  
Are my ex-lovers still half-chewed  
between these exposed bones of me?  
Have I not toothpicked them out of my smile  
yet enough to call it clean?

Or could you taste the last man in my mouth?  
Whom I loved. Who ate me alive for years.

Or was it the dirt beneath my nails,  
all the things I keep real quiet:

my unmade bed, the bruises on my neck, the dancer  
who only called me when he needed a place  
to put his head in the middle of the night, and  
still pull out before breakfast?

I grow so ripe on the vine I might rot off it.

And who wants  
the kicked apples? Too soft to enjoy,  
all hollowed-out by the insects.

I answer to men who won't call.  
Leave all the lights on in the house  
just in case someone reaches  
for the warmth through the window. Their hands—  
enough to quiet the skin of all this  
wanting, of all the Gemini contradictions  
in the thick of me—all the honey,  
but  
the sharks,

but the honey, Honey;  
I have had a hard time saying,  
this is  
what I look like with the lights on.

But I also learned that time is a train

that keeps departing  
and never returns. So,  
I see empty rooms we could be dancing in, Love.

I am young, and hardly itching to marry, but  
there must be someone  
who will find sixty years of mornings in me,  
till the bones of us,

when we'll no longer have all these teeth in the way,  
just see more room  
for the sun in our mouths,  
and less need  
for all these words.

# Turducken

*Meg Waldron*

they used to call America a “melting pot,”  
a place where people from around the world  
came together and melted into one, unified culture.  
by the time i was in eleventh grade American History,  
they called it a “salad bowl,” meaning that cultures  
kept their integrity and played a colorful  
and integral role in the American salad.  
i’ll take the America-as-food metaphor  
one step further and say it is the *turducken*.

for those who do not know the glory,  
a turducken is an example of the culinary process of  
“engastration,”  
when one animal is stuffed into  
the gastric passage of another and roasted  
into a delicious whole.  
this, i argue, is the symbol of our great nation.

let’s be real, these cultures have never  
been laying passively in a bowl beside each other,  
appreciating the beauty of their differences.

we are a nation of immigrants  
crammed together, non-consensually.  
let's not sugarcoat our nation's racism.  
let's honey glaze it with the rich, viscous truth—  
we haven't been getting along.  
we've been shoved into each other's asses,  
and myriad American cultures have stewed  
in their own rage until they have become this grotesque,  
overloaded delicacy.

and why stop at turducken?  
we are so much more than that.  
American regional diversity  
has spawned cultural delights such as the  
*hedgeaglehorse*, a hedgehog in an eagle in horse  
*chinchiconalo*, a chinchilla in a raccoon in a buffalo  
and thank you new york city for the  
*tig-ele-pika-beagle-orca-lemur-camel-cock-aroo*  
a tiger in an elephant, in a pika, in a beagle,  
in an orca, in a lemur, in a camel, in a peacock  
in a kangaroo  
the list is endless.

we are russian stacking dolls of meat  
the substance, layered, bleeding into each other  
hate all we want, we are roasting together.

melting pot?

perhaps if we weren't all so stubbornly embodied.  
no American will submit to such a derivative,  
everyone would toss in but their shittiest scraps,  
non-committal.

no, you'll have to take our whole person,  
drag us all kicking to your pot  
to make meal of this.

salad bowl?

when has America ever asked for salad?  
size matters to this colonialist nation  
and we're not expanding on salad.

America IS meat.

a nation that adores nascar and football and porno—  
America has an appetite.

a man's appetite.

and if there's any sentiment the fathers  
of our diverse people can agree upon

it is patriarchy

and they are hungry.

they are joining together in a pitchfork mob  
demanding an answer to the infernal question,

"Where's the beef?

Where's the substance?

Where's the part that sticks to the bones?"

wrapped in pork casing, up a buffalo's ass,  
and we're it.

# Finals Stage

## Audience Selections

*Laura Lamb Brown-Lavoie*

*Sierra DeMulder*

*Falu*

*Denice Frohman*

# Ten Sightings of a Wild Creature on the Hunt in Our Fair City

*Laura Lamb Brown-Lavoie*

1.

OOOWWWWOOOOOOOOO

full moon  
springtime  
cruisin' under the mall  
no helmet  
this once  
no hairtie  
hair flying and bare thighs  
blurred along the river  
eating green lights for dinner  
o'erleaping pot holes  
not stopping  
til the top of the point street bridge  
my one stop sign  
the full moon

OOWWWOoooooooooooo

tomorrow we'll plant roots.

**2.**

some kind of boygirl  
biking to the farm at dawn  
strong arms, long legs  
I got a shovel, a rake  
muscles where muscles should be  
hair where hair grows  
and only the grass knows  
what's up my skirt as I stride through  
the peeping grass  
it licks my calves with dew

**3.**

or, after work,  
only the sea  
can hold this naked body  
only a fire on the beach

I let the heat  
put its hands all over me

**4.**

cantaloupe porno

sticky orange dripping down my chin  
oh skeet skeet motherfucker  
oh skeet skeet goddamn  
thirty future melon plants  
I spit into my hand

**5.**

summertime  
the asphalt's a hot skillet  
I skitter across like a drop of water  
but the grass at noon is cool  
give me a snack  
a quick nap  
and I can work well past the rise  
of the moon

**6.**

if indeed happiness can be eaten,  
it is straight off the vine  
salted by the sweat on my lips  
it's a bite with some grit  
happiness  
that fat carrot I wipe off on my jeans

**7.**

or  
happiness must be stalked like prey

and caught that way, wild and chased  
and held between the teeth  
it usually escapes  
but when I catch it it's a feast

**8.**

gentle now gentle  
with the pregnant earth  
fingers slip into the dirt  
over and over  
end of october  
garlic breath is sexy  
when dragon-puffed  
visible in the chill  
astonishing still  
this brave green tip  
pricked  
with snow coming

**9.**

finally now, arms deep in a leafpile  
sweet trial, load after load  
spread thick and steaming over the rows  
the way a lover pulls the blanket up over her beloved  
before they sleep

**10.**

*ooowoooooooo*

full moon  
cruisin home through city streets  
climbing alone into cold sheets  
finding heat  
being in heat

I have longed for the touch  
of a callused hand  
and then found the calluses  
on my own hands

# Dear Ana

*Sierra DeMulder*

*Pro-anorexia is the support and promotion of an eating disorder as a lifestyle choice. Often, online communities provide tips and encouragement, and affectionately refer to themselves as “Ana.”*

**1**

I would never speak to a child  
the way I speak to myself.

I would never tell a four-year-old  
that she was fat, that no one will love her.  
Ana, picture yourself as a little girl.

**2**

There is nothing empowering about lessening yourself.  
You are a vanishing act. Your body is the magic hat,  
pulling out nothing. Your body is a clothing wrack,  
your body is my favorite sweater shrunk in the drying.

**3**

Dear Mothers of Hollywood, Mothers of the Red Carpet  
and the Ten Pounds the Camera Adds:  
how will your daughter ever learn to love her body  
if she is forced to watch you wring out yours?

Do you tell her *less is more less is more less I know more less I know more or less how to love myself*

**4**

Hair loss is a side-effect of bulimia.

If you are so hell-bent on losing your hair,  
here are the scissors. Here is the razor.

Why don't you shave it? Why don't you  
donate it? Why don't you braid me a fucking scarf?

**5**

You beautiful martyr. You knuckle-kissing saint.

You are a mother bird and we are all your children  
and we are all so hungry. We want to see a staircase  
around your lungs. We want to hang ornaments  
from your collarbone. We want nothing  
to do with your softness.

**6**

They don't show big girls in the magazines  
as if they are afraid to show men  
what childbirth looks like.

It is too real. It is too bloody.

**7**

Dear First World,  
what a privilege it is to hate our bodies,

to suffocate in skin or to shuck ourselves  
from the inside out. *No leftovers no leftover  
no I left over know that I love what is left of me.*

**8**

Ana, when your loved ones  
carry your coffin, will they doubt  
there is a body in there?  
Like an empty suitcase.  
A silent instrument.

**9**

I too have pulled at my torso.  
I too have imagined hemming my body,  
folding it in on itself. I suck it in. I suck it in.  
I turn off the light before I let him love me.

**10**

Ana, imagine yourself as a little girl.  
Tell her she is not good enough. Tell her  
she is ugly. When she comes to you hungry,  
do not feed her.

**11**

Your body is not a temple.  
Your body is the house you grew up in.  
How dare you try to burn it to the ground.

You are bigger than this.  
You are bigger  
than this.

**12**

Dear Ana,  
you are swallowing yourself.  
Your voice is so small.

# \*Helicopters\*

*Falu*

The helicopters are flying low,  
looking for the Nikes of missing girls from Bed-Stuy.  
Hoping to see their feet in the air,  
soles to the sky,  
lying on their backs for reasons other than death.  
Forced to be whore and found, symbol they are alive.

They are lamp-post sisters,  
whose eyes only meet at night.  
Who will tell their mothers  
that their futures look trash-bag grim?  
Tell their fathers, that a man like him,  
black as ink,  
sexy like Africa,  
is torturing his baby into calling him daddy?

I'm scared.

I just want to place a backpack atop my daughter's  
head,  
insurance her mind will remain only on the books,  
take images of bikini-clad weeds;

show her they were once roses.

Please do not tell me her dreams will be discarded  
like her body. I cannot handle her wearing red heels to  
school.

Fly the helicopters lower.

Because although far in the distance,  
your sons are not exempt.

His eyes follow me in the train station;  
travel with me everywhere.

Where they dump the bodies.

Where they find the bodies.

Where they use telepathy to locate severed heads.

Torsos without spines.

They mutilate your sons!

give two warning shots to the head for your sons

they son your sons,

make them good Christians,

they'll make him walk with God;

son.

Tell your son he too can be followed home.

And he's always been a big boy, no wonder

he backs up the incinerator.

That doesn't make him weak,

just proves that rigid bodies do not fold easily.

The cell phone you gave him as protection has been recycled,  
why you smell him during your conversation,  
He called when he got home,  
just as you requested.

Land the helicopter if you think outsiders are taking our children.  
I doubt it.  
It is we who prey on we.  
We eat our young.  
Why do you think the community is so silent?  
It's because everyone is too busy chewing.

# Borders

*Denice Frohman*

*Dedicated to the undocumented latin@ youth at Juntos*

It starts before she gets here.  
Before the stares tell her she is alien  
to a country that knows her great  
grandfather's Mexican hands all too well.  
His fingerprints still echo underneath  
the railroad tracks and cotton fields  
where bent knees and bent backs  
once picked, plucked, pushed work  
for more money than he was used to,  
but less than he deserved.

For Ana Maria, it begins before the border.  
She walks with her two Uncles and Abuela  
through the desert for one week  
with nothing more than a few gallons of water,  
and a prayer tucked into their pockets,  
hoping both will last them long enough.

The sun is an unforgiving God, but any God  
is worth having right now.

The wind pushing at their backs  
is the grunt of gunshots from drug cartels  
and the desperation of a job to employ their stomachs.  
Both have been uninvited guests at their doorstep.

so they step, step,  
Ana Maria's small hand clutches the bottom  
of her Abuela's dress,  
another step,  
her mother waits for her on the other side  
hoping that her face still sings of home like it used to.  
another step,  
She is too young to know what "border" means,  
she thinks that people  
are just family members who haven't met yet.

After they arrive,  
she will learn that there are  
some borders you can't cross by foot.

Ana Maria is now 10 years old.  
She's learned enough English to translate for her  
parents,  
but says that her thick accent is still a problem  
she tries to fix by leaving it in her locker.  
When her teacher calls on her to read  
she tries to speak proper. Like proper has a sound.

She pushes her tongue down so it doesn't roll her "r's,"  
but she trips on the flatness of the syllables  
that usually bounce with too much salsa.  
She tries to rattle out the kinks in her speech,  
but her tongue is a stubborn dancer.

The two boys behind her don't know how to do long  
division,  
but they know what a wetback is,  
and that Ana Maria has braids,  
and that Ana Maria's hair is thicker than their sister's,  
and they don't know how they know,  
but they know how to treat difference when they smell  
it.

So they say things like, "Go back to your country,"  
as if their Irish ancestors never walked through Ellis  
Island.

Ana Maria is now 16.  
Her father works 18-hour days as a dishwasher.  
Her mother cleans houses she'll never get to live in  
so that Ana Maria can sit in a college classroom  
and say "I am here."

But her guidance counselor tells her she can't get  
financial aid,

or the in-state tuition rate, because of her status.

She says it like an apology.

Ana wonders if her family ever crossed the border,  
or if they are just stuck inside another one  
aggravating it like a sore.

Her guidance counselor stands in front of her,  
with a mouth full of fences.

There are some borders you can't cross by foot.  
Borders, I tell her,  
that can only be crossed by stubborn backbones

so if they ask you for your papers, show them your skin,  
wear your tongue like a cape,  
throw up your fist, like a secret you can't keep any  
longer,  
they can't keep you any longer,  
afraid you can't ever afford to drive or dream.

So if they come for you, tell them  
in the language you know best,  
that you are not scared anymore.

# Contributors

DOMINIQUE CHRISTINA ASHAHEED is a vegetarian who over-indulges in soy products but admits to missing fried chicken on occasion. She is mother to four wildly expressive children who do not know how to use inside voices and regularly drop potato chips on the floor. Dominique received masters degrees from the University of Arkansas and is a program director for PeaceJam, a nonprofit organization in Denver, has co-curated an artist collective called (r)evolve, and has competed on the National Poetry Slam scene three times and subsequently has three titles. Dominique is making a world. It will have unicorns in it. That is the least she can do.

While she lives, writes, and eats fried plantains in Texas, SASHA BANKS travels across the country performing and teaching high school and university students the art of poetry as a social function. She studied Creative Writing at Texas Wesleyan, where she graduated in 2012. She self-released her first collection of poems, *The Blood Arsenal*, later that fall. She was named winner of the Women of the World Poetry Slam's first ever Lit Slam in the spring of 2013. Sasha writes out of a need to possess her own history, out of a desire to voice the intersection of gender and race, and out of a love for poetry and all its teeth.

LAURA LAMB BROWN-LAVOIE writes poems and stories in Providence, Rhode Island. She was a finalist at the 2013 Women of the World Poetry Slam and a member of the 3rd-place Providence Team at the National Poetry Slam in 2011. When she isn't writing, Laura works as a farmer, growing food in and around Providence. She also helps coach the Providence Youth Slam, working with high school students as they explore the possibilities of their own self-expression.

AMY DAVID has represented Chicago three times at the National Poetry Slam as a member of Team Green Mill. Her work has appeared in journals including Word Riot, Foundling Review, and The Legendary.

SIERRA DEMULDER is a two-time National Poetry Slam Champion and the author of *The Bones Below*, and *New Shoes on a Dead Horse*, published in 2010 and 2012, respectively, by Write Bloody Publishing. When not writing poetry, she enjoys making and imbibing coffee, making full use of public transportation, and waxing on and on about feminism.

ERIS ZION VENIA DYSON is a member of Eccentric Visions of Evolution (E.V.E.), Ohio's first all-female poetry collective & Black Poetic Society, Cleveland's first all-black poetry group. In March of 2009, eZv fulfilled her dream of performing on the Apollo Stage in Harlem, New York where she came in 2nd place. eZv was the coach for Cleveland 2010 & 2011 Brave New Voices international poetry slam team. In 2013 eZv competed in her first national slam... the Women of the World Poetry Festival in Minneapolis, Minnesota where she made it to final stage and came in 7th Place representing the Lake Effect Poetry Team.

FALU. Superblonde superwoman. Mother. Writer. Nuyorican Poet. Teacher. Babe, and best friend to all my best friends, including Jesus.

DENICE FROHMAN is a poet, lyricist, and educator, whose work explores race, gender, sexuality, and the "in-betweenness" that exists in us all. She is the 2013 Women of the World Poetry Slam Champion and a 2012 Leeway Transformation Award recipient. She has performed and taught poetry across the country and internationally at arts venues, rallies, K-12 schools, colleges, and detention centers. She is currently the Program Director at The Philly Youth Poetry Movement. Her debut CD, *Feels Like Home*, will be released in Fall 2013.

SARAH KAY is the founder and co-director of Project V.O.I.C.E., an organization that uses spoken word poetry as an education and empowerment tool. She is perhaps best known for her talk at the 2011 TED conference, which has been seen over two million times online. Sarah holds a masters degree in the art of teaching from Brown University. Her first book, *B*, was ranked the #1 poetry book on Amazon.

Black, bi-dyke, poet, lover hip-hop feminist, womanist, friend, PORSHA OLAYIWOLA is a performance artist who believes in pixie dust and second chances. A resident of Boston, by way of Chicago, Porsha O is runner-up of 2012 Women of the World Poetry Slam and a member of the current Lizard Lounge National Poetry Slam Team. Her intention is to speak, love, and maintain a cypher that is undocumented, uncontrollable, and just plain ole dope. (She's also a teaching artist who loves the young folks.)

ZEDEKA POINDEXTER is a proud member of the Omaha poetry community and currently finishing up a master's in public health communication.

KAIT ROKOWSKI is a lady-poet from Minneapolis by way of Portland, Maine. She ranked 3rd at both the 2011 Individual World Poetry Slam & the 2012 Women of the World Poetry Slam.

Named "Best Female Poet" at her first national poetry competition in 2008, CARRIE RUDZINSKI has since performed her work across the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and India. She represented Boston at the 2010 Individual World Poetry Slam, twice at the National Poetry Slam, and ranked 14th at the 2011 Women Of The World Poetry Slam.

ALEX USTACH is a hungry wordsmith residing in Brooklyn, NY. She is busy using writing as a survival tool to work through grief and to redefine personal and social identity. She was honored to represent

New York City's louderARTs project at the 2013 Women of the World Poetry Slam.

MEG WALDRON is a traveler and performance poet currently residing in Portland, OR. She was a member of the 2011 and 2012 Portland Poetry Slam teams and represented Portland at the 2013 Women of the World Poetry Slams. A radical feminist label-free dyke-about-town, Meg is perhaps best known for her writings on the subjects of meat, America, menstrual blood and dick jokes. And also the YouTube video "Shit Poets Say."

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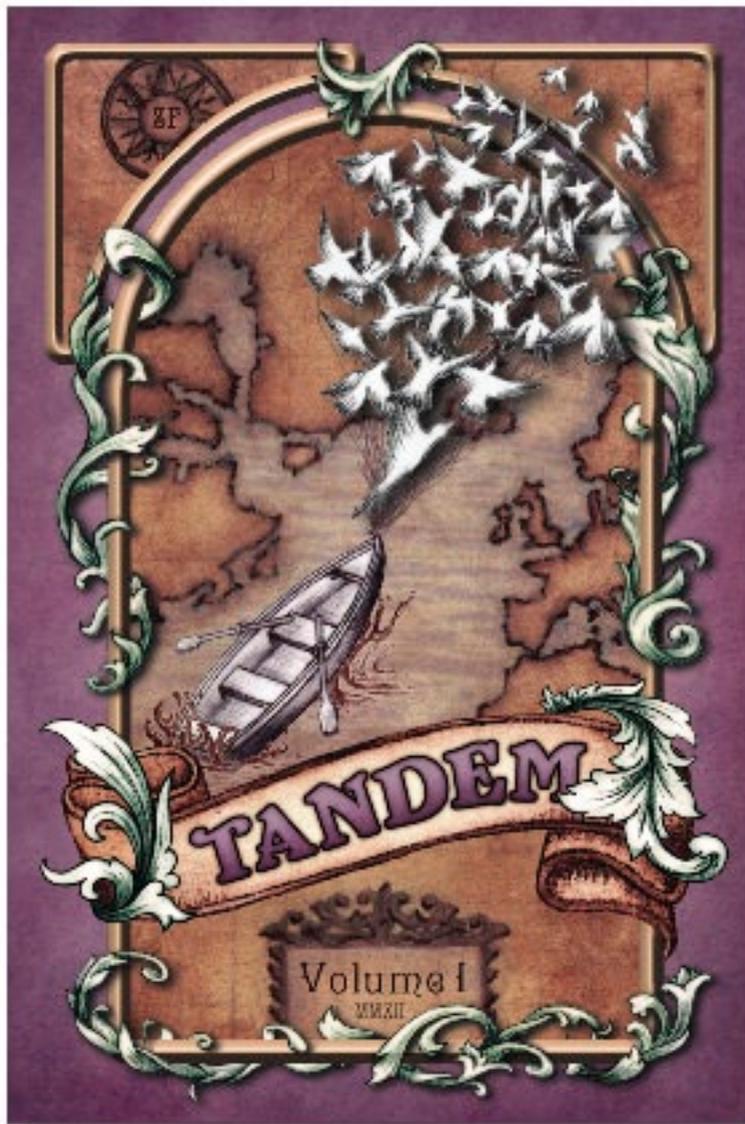
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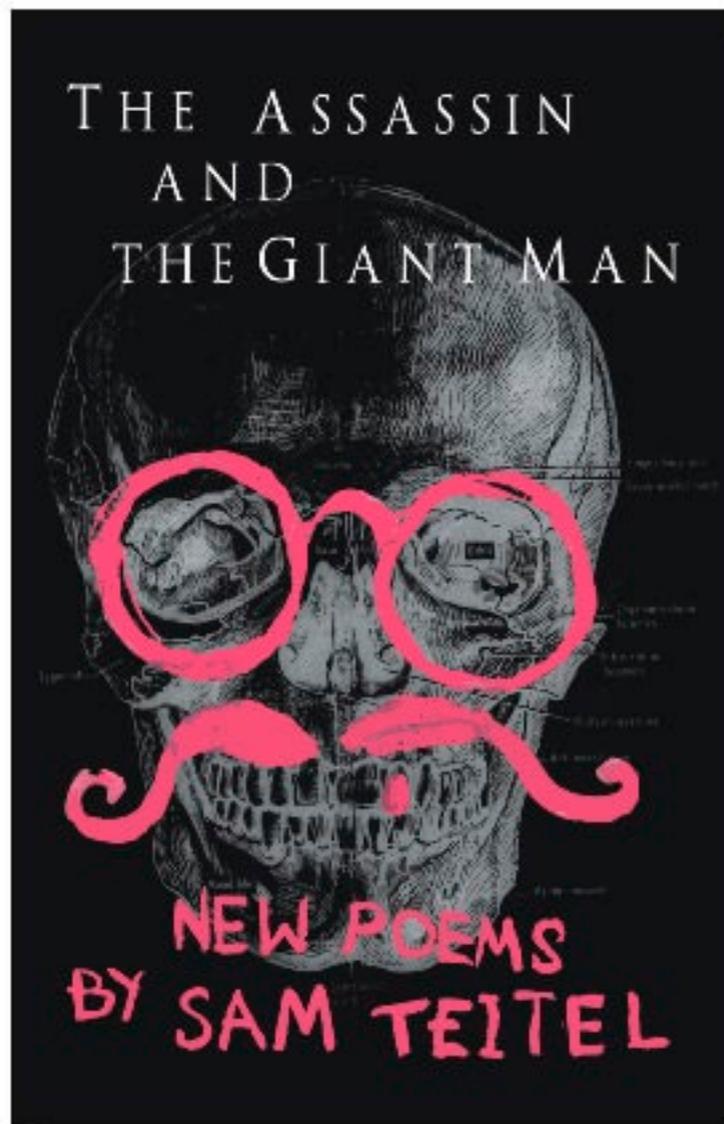




## **Tandem, Volume I**

**Edited by the Lit Slam, 2012, \$12**

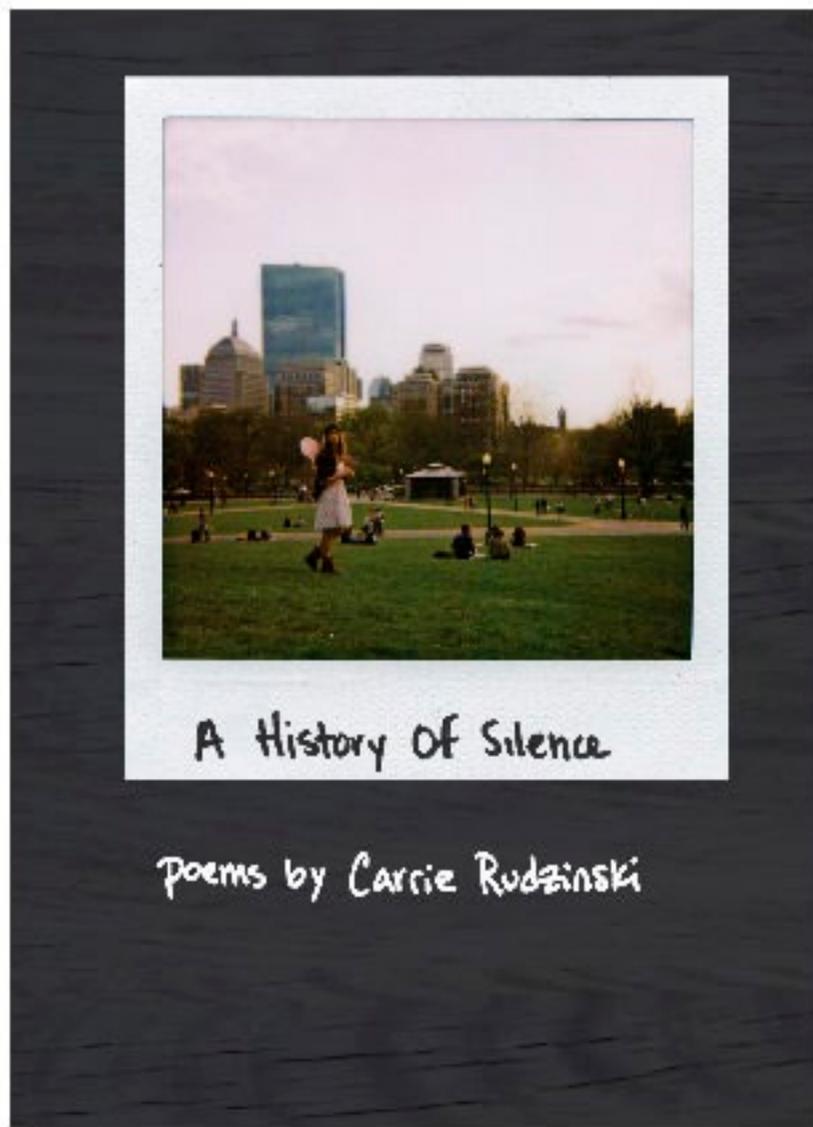
The first edition of Tandem represents an unprecedented marriage of the print and performance poetry traditions in the San Francisco Bay area. With poems curated via a panel of randomly-selected audience members at the monthly Lit Slam competition, the journal highlights not only exceptional local talent, but also new work from nationally-recognized featured poets such as Jamaal May, Gypsee Yo, and Tara Hardy. View all contributors at [www.thelitslam.com](http://www.thelitslam.com).



## **The Assassin and the Giant Man**

**by Sam Teitel, 2012, \$12**

Sam Teitel's second full-length book of poems picks up where *Survive, Survive, Survive* left off in 2011: a young but more-assured voice coming to grips with the reality, horror, and humor of adulthood. Philadelphia's macabre Mutter Museum provides the backdrop to questions of identity, ancestry, and history. The swagger and the snivel are both still here, in classic form, but added to it is something almost approaching wisdom.



## **A History of Silence**

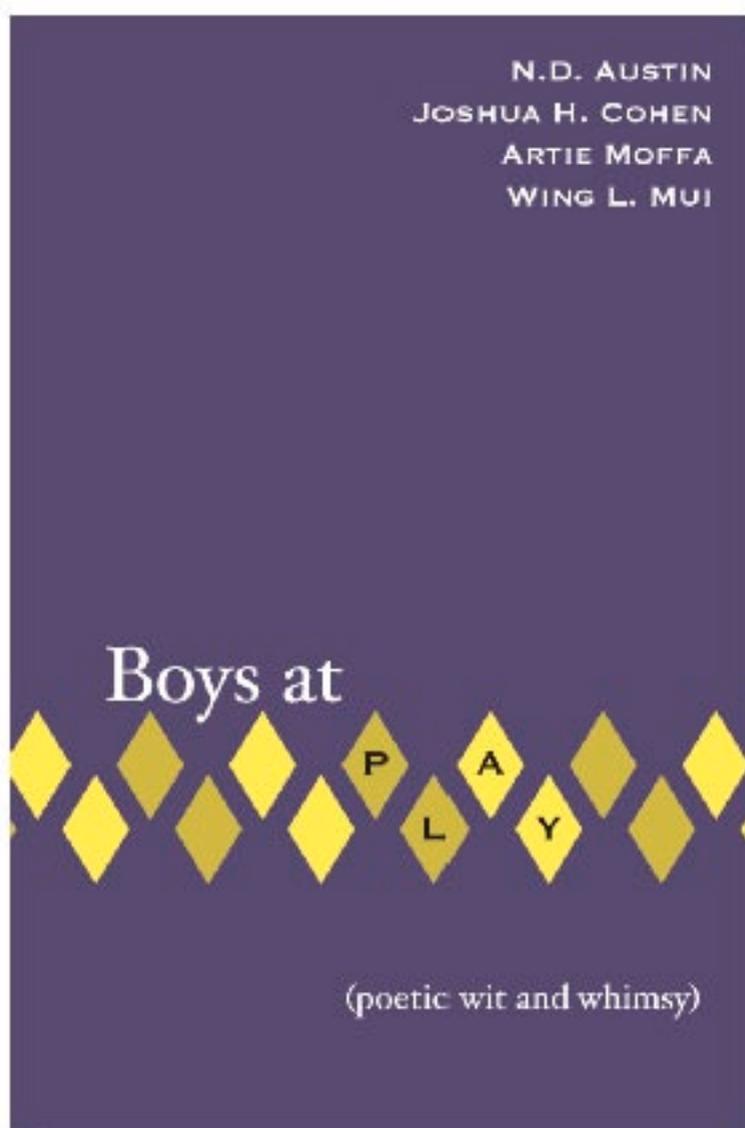
**by Carrie Rudzinski, 2010, \$12**

A History of Silence is the debut collection from the celebrated Boston slam champion. Carrie Rudzinski's confessional, haunting verse lavishes detail on her beloved Midwest even as she chronicles her journeys eastward. These are tales of exploration, voyages of the children within each of us striving to love and shelter the adults the world has required us to become.



**Survive, Survive, Survive**  
**by Sam Teitel, 2011, \$12**

With *Survive, Survive, Survive*, Sam Teitel elevates self-doubt to a high (and humorous) art. His insistence that he is still a work in progress is equal parts proclamation and prayer. The confessional poems on illness, dignity, and loss play well against persona poems as Joey Ramone, the Chelsea Hotel, and the City of Boston. One of the clearest voices to emerge from the New England slam renaissance of the last decade, Sam Teitel has delivered the apologia for a nervous generation.



## **Boys at Play**

**by Artie Moffa, Joshua H. Cohen, & N.D. Austin.**

**Comics by Wing L. Mui. 2009, \$10**

What's that? You don't like rhyming poetry? Pshaw! You mean you don't like bad rhyming poetry. We don't, either. That's why we filled Boys at Play with the best light verse we knew how to write. We got us a fistfull of rhymes that cut crystal. We donate \$1 per copy sold to the Amherst College Annual Fund.

*Alight*

***“For we are all price-takers***



***when it comes to grief.”***