

Poetry in the Woods **2026 Poem Packet**



PITW 2026 Workshop: Workshop Poems

DAY 1 (Sat. 10/3)

1. Ash Kemp
2. Danielle Coffyn
3. Angela Lim
4. Caleb Delos-Santos
5. Bethanie Reid
6. Monty Webster
7. Ripudaman Pachauri
8. Corinne McAfee
9. Holly Elliott
10. Kimberly Kendle Roberson

DAY 2 (Sun. 10/4)

11. Claire Snowden
12. Michaela Thornton
13. Owen Anderson
14. Sarah J. Reilly
15. Eleora Funk
16. Rita Chapman
17. Jon Naskrent
18. Melissa Qualls
19. David Henske
20. Kaylee Salazar
21. Kirby Ewald
22. Clarissa Emanuel

The Summer I Was a Phone Psychic

began with burning out at a call center job-
You know the type-loud and fast paced, no time to breathe or catch up.
Still on the phone,
I dabbled in astrology and tarot reading,
but mostly I listened to the loneliness of people needing connection,
without judgment.
Listened as they begged for advice when what they really needed was companionship and
trust in themselves.
I encouraged a woman to leave her married boyfriend simply by pulling the wheel of
fortune and explaining my interpretation of it-
A chance to start over.
Who doesn't want to unzip their baggage and start fresh?
One call after another, I could feel this pull of interconnection and disappointment.
In life not turning out the way we thought it would and how so many of us have this in
common.

In the Fortieth Year
After Leila Chatti

The sun died. Baptized
the walls in pink papered

sadness. I thought love
would be enough

to weather every
unwanted molting—

womb decomposing
with wordless longing.

I chose to become his
beloved horizon. In every

direction, dead red dirt—
my sempiternal sorrow.

Statistics say the happiest
rarely complain, so I don

a deodorized depression.
Smile sideways. Does this

deserted garden appear effortless?
My life has been nothing

but trying.

Last Run As a 28 Year Old

A kettle is what you call it—
the group of turkey vultures
drawing dark halos in the sky
with oracular wings.
Hard not to read this
as dangerous portent,
especially with the sear
from the side stitch scarring
my tempo for the past mile.

At rest, the group becomes
a committee. This is the word
I fail to conjure in my new shoes,
clipping like a sad horse
along the park trail while blowing
thin plumes of frost
through my nostrils.

New World vultures track
by scent. What they sense
is the cloud of myself rising
hot in the January sky. The stink
of my life sends them soaring
elsewhere. Like an axis, I punctuate
their orbit. I sweat-slip
through the prophecy they spin
like a vaporous baby mystic
unspooling the kettle's stitching.
I divert the committee
with the clamor of pink
that boils inside me
and carries me into
the next age.

Mantra

Cardinals loosen their claws from Joshua branches
and lose themselves in the heavy sky.

And you, too, must loosen your hands. Your hands
still suffocate your language.

You must lose your grip of your mind.
Let loose. Let loss...

...let loss dent the metal
that is your chest. Let loss wallop your breath.

Let it loose. Lose your waterfall of worry.

Lose your mustard seed of stress,
which has made such a mountain out of you.

Let it be, loss. Let it be lost.

Slip through routine, as an estuary loosens its current.

Be current. Be lost...
...Grandfather is lost.

His silhouette was last seen three Easters ago,
as the sun let loose its light and shivered.

His silhouette is now the breath of the sun.
And it is now your breath.

Let him be your breath. His breath...
...is the taste of honey, loose in his dried tea.

His tea is the taste of loss...

Let go. Let God...
...let him be gone.

An Ozark Elegy

For Missouri

For the trees that press back
that used to be *genus Pinus*
shortleaf pines

Their evergreen needles bundled
in twos and threes
in a waxy and resinous amber

Beings coveted for human uses

by those who saw profit
in what was not theirs to fell

Did anyone notice
when the forest stopped burning?

Property is best unburned

Did their hearts shudder
their embers lost to memory?

Did the land bleed back?

Wilderness Walk

I'm watching the clock
About to be freed
Perhaps a wilderness walk
is just what I need

I see life everywhere
while out walking around
Look and you'll see it there
in the sky and on the ground

Not far into my walk
I sense a shadow on my face
Somehow that hovering hawk
seems to soar right in place

An eagle that's bald
is also in flight
I wonder if it's appalled
to be seen in that light

From a broken-down bench
along an overgrown trail
I spot a foraging finch
with a notch in its tail

A butterfly basks
on a bright bit of bark
Before anyone asks
it is not a monarch

There's a pool by the brook
where I pause by a log
When I happen to look
I see a swimming spring frog

Beyond that is a waterfall
where the clear water churns
Clinging to the cliff wall
are some gorgeous green ferns

A lone leaf falls down
in a meandering style
I know it could make me frown
but instead I just smile

Sadly summer wanes
although the fall I don't mind
Holes near the leaf's veins
show where something has dined

Proceeding to roam
somewhat aimlessly
I see the path to a home
in an older oak tree

Briefly I ponder
whether a raccoon rests in there
before I once again wander
in the clean country air

When it comes to getting lost
it helps to remember
the North sides are more mossed
on much of the timber

Of course getting lost out here
doesn't sound all that bad
The times I let intuition steer
were among the best I have had

Now it looks like a clearing
isn't too far away
It even smells like I'm nearing
a field of fresh hay

This time it's all talk
A journey just in my mind
Next time I should really walk
and see what magic I find

Immortality

My life!

Oh, how I wish these moments of our love would pause,
right here, on this very breath,
like a flame of a lamp that ceases to flicker,
and becomes eternally still.

My sweet,

I know

that in every life,

I have only hummed around you as a bumblebee,
for a drop of nectar,
but

I could never even touch
the unfathomable depth
of your love.

Today,

my wings tremble,
at the mere thought
of flying away from you again.

Oh, my enchantress,

in this life, I wish to go nowhere,

I wish -

that you become an eternal cedar tree,
and I become a bee pressed beneath your roots,
ensnared in your resin, turned to stone.

Let the resin of your affection,
drop by drop, fall upon me,
let me remain bound there for ages,
draped in the noose of your love,
so that the shadow of another's veil
never reaches me.

Let aeons pass,

let millennia go by,

and when even the gods search for us,
may they find only one story -

One tree, one bumblebee, and the tomb of an immortal love,
of our love.

- Ripudaman Pachauri

Spring Ephemera

Early signs of spring,
Blooming an awakening
Even as I walk the park
Strewn wildflowers, a Noah's ark
Work of thousands human hours
Replenishing nature's nigh lost bowers

Celandine Poppy shining
Amid groves of Mayapple hiding
Shyly under green parasols
While all rhapsody the all in all,
Wild Blue Phlox twinkles
As Virginia Bluebell blossoms swing
A merry melody of color

Child's Flipflop lost
Glowing color and fuzzy fir
Among the vibrant spring ephemera
Foot shaped plastic gaudy pink
Fleeting only in geologic time's link

Range unrestricted by latitude
or longitude, while we live
This blossom will not fade
Much less decay

Of the kingdom nonbiome, carried here by
Chubby pink cherubic foot
Yet stands among the most invasive of all invasives
Already colonizing all earth's shores
This pretty pink forever petal

Along with yellow plastic duckies
May yet make its way to beaches
Where human foot never yet trod
And bouquets of sad bright feathers surround
Arrangements of plastic fishing wire and bottlecaps,
Near sheaths of seaweed tangled plastic grocery bags

In Darkness, She Shines

Drifting off to sleep,
in my dreams I meander
through scenery that fades
into a cradled fear,
hushed by a heavy chain-mail haze
blanketing the night.

To escape the weight of dread,
I turn to the forest
where the wise ones hide,
asking who and what lies deep inside.
Darkness parts the way.

Once within the forest walls,
rows of armless soldiers
stand rigid, mute and tall,
barren roots still feed
their dimming crowns of hope
as they guard their queen of stone.

Center stage amid those trees,
a warding earthen ring
defends the timeworn tower,
its secret doors now sealed
by meddling moss that creeps
like leeches in the night.

A dire longing to break free
of the ashen view,
I scale the sheltered shrine.
With bloodied fingertips,
I find and free the spark
from a cold and stifling grip.

Fueled by one last drop of might,
I hoist myself to the summit
where waits an empty throne.
Unbound flocks ascend the cresting sun
as night rips off her disguise.

Kimberly Kendle Roberson (she/her)

Mamala Kamala: The BWIC MPIC (Black Woman in Chief,
Madame President in Charge)

Written August 25, 2024 in response to the idea that a black woman might become president.

Boy, I Never Thought
I'd see the day
when a Black Woman
just might get her hands on and
snatch a piece of/pierce the star-lit, moon filled
sky of
Awesome Opportunity
to Become
Madame President.
Yea
I'm sitting here
in my chair
quietly/half starin' off into space, thinkin'
"Am I being Punked?
Naw, Man! This CAN'T BE
REAL?
This can't be what I think is
HAPPENIN'"
oh, but it's HAPPENIN'!
whether I want to believe it's
happenin'
Or NOT.
I guess I'm in such a state of
Disbelief
Because
I just, in the words of the late, great
Malcolm X
Never thought that
America
in all her talks of
Demoncracy
and
Freedom
and
Due Process
and
Hope

and
Justice
Would ever have the
Nerve
the
Courage
the
Wisdom
and
the
Decency
to even consider
Nominating
not even electing (although I hope it comes to that)
the Most
Disrespected
Demeaned
Underrated
and truly, in some circles, Hated
among all individual People
to ever grace God's Green Earth,
(God's Green Earth).
Yes,
I'm shocked, America
that You
Finally
came to
your senses
to Honor
for Once
in my Lifetime that of
the
Black Woman
And if this thing truly comes to Pass
All I can say is
Momala Kamala, Madame President
I Proudly
Salute
You!

– a *KSKR original*

Also known as *Zora Kendle Whitfield*

My Emily

I find the poem which I	have chosen to read
as a part of my sister's	eulogy I find
Emily Dickinson too	So this poem is
to be read at Emily's	funeral which I
do not realize is pro	phesy because it
isn't So I am finding	Emily D with
the biographical note	of Emily B
which relays that Emily	D insisted that
this poem be read at her	funeral So I
read the poem I weep the	poem I am the
poem I will myself to	know the contents the
slim body some narrow glimpse	of mahogany
and oh do I know of those	As we depart Look
<i>there down below the red po</i>	<i>lished wood and the cream</i>
<i>silk lining tapered like the</i>	<i>sun's rays look there you</i>
<i>are leaving her behind Em</i>	ily Dickinson's
Emily Dickinson is	Emily Brontë
and Charlotte Brontë's Emi	ly Dickinson is
Emily Brontë Who is	Emily Brontë's
Emily Dickinson Do	you have an answer
And if I am Charlotte be	cause I am here and
Emily and Emily	and Kate are not then
what can I do but tell the	story that Kate lived
and tell it badly All bi	ography is a
sister's posthumous cowar	dice Autopsy my
body too Let me spill o	pen from the ribs with
every slant poem I'll	ever write for her

Painted Nettle

Discarded limb of painted nettle on the ground – everything new
begins broken – and I stick this accidental three-inch cutting
into last year’s potting soil, where I grew God knows what
last summer: basil, mint, four o’clock flowers from
the library’s seed exchange? Everything bleeds together,
and I am here, in the lower Midwest,
growing tropical plants from places I’ve never been.

Coleus means sheath in Greek, a snug protective cover
for something sharp, and I think of you, your tongue,
your cupped jaw in my sun-damaged hands. Who protected whom?
I still listen to songs you arranged for me a year ago, straining
to hear your mouth whisper words you once sang.

I found the missing orchid earring you gave to me in Chicago,
on the weekend we stumbled into the National Dahlia Show,
holding hands amid a rainbow of capitula, multiple florets
circling a central disc to create a single, prize-winning flower.
I thought I had lost this dried purple-pink petal in resin last fall:
a preserved beauty buried under 16 inches of snow
on the streets of Reykjavik or in a field in Laugarvatn, where I watched
the aurora dance green and pink as I cried in gratitude and wonder.

I kept this solitary earring just in case you returned through the garden gate,
just in case you wanted to see how the painted nettle thrives.

Twin Plagues

Ouija board on the floor
spells twin plagues as lights flicker. Go
to bed naked, wake up with a rash the shape
of his stain in your bathroom.

Twin plagues echo down the alley of
your hometown as I hide in his room. Bang
on the door. Diminished in the
shadow, I lie to this day.

Ouija board on the floor
spells twin plagues as the gas stove turns
on. Watch the mute TV so you can
talk to me, wake up bruised and deaf.

Twin plagues whisper to me in the
dark. It is inside everyone. I come
outside and still hear my whisper
'please don't tell anyone.'

The seance was easy. Pink barefoot down
a flight and wait. A shout, a push, I fall down
on my knees and wrestle to
get you off.

I smiled when you came.
I lie on the floor.
I call for you again.
It is inside everyone.

We butcher orange

all the time, I think,
watching the watercolor's
birth. The sunset, of course,
the pumpkins, the poppies.
Nature's gradient, not the
blocky sans-serif typography
trying to sell us things, or
worse, the idea of a thing.
When the orange obscures
the white watercolor paper
underneath, I remember
my middle-grade years, the
quick span in which I said
orange was my favorite color.
I remember my first love,
too, doubting myself for the first
time. I think his favorite color
was orange. At least, it was.
At least, that's how I remember it,
now paling at the edges

Having Second-to-Last Listened to “What’s Love Got to Do With It”
on a High Horse

I must’ve wanted to be
a video vixen at fourteen,
fifteen, though my clothes
never went so far, and I still
can’t dance.

Glimmer, slither, playing jealous.

One ought to want to be wanted.

Practiced hard towards being
the singer through my end-teens,
man or woman, whoever longed
so glorious they turned to saints
from heartbreak.

Wept, churned baptism,

One mourning one another’s not being gods.

I’ve been hurrying past
songs, the lament of the body
sold as our souls’ laments.
Been listening over those singers,
fasting plastic.

Styrofoam’s rubbed.

One now knows the best pity for Tina Turner

isn’t how she was singing for it.
So I’d been minding her voice for her.
Despite that habit, when I hear you,
I listen for you. You’re no Ike.
Synths and snares I’m needing past.

One can be blessed through the sold second hand.

The Robins

Late July and part
of the acoustic spectrum
has disappeared. The squirrels,
cardinals, cicadas, grasshoppers --
each creature continues to
claim how it is heard,
but the short-hopping robins
have left now,
done with the sharp green
of spring, done waking me
from the streetlight at three a.m.,
done side-eyeing me for the easy
worms raised by weed pulling.
When I realized I missed them,
they'd probably already been
gone a week – more?
Like the stars in my city sky,
I hadn't noticed when,
drowned in light, they'd
winked out. Yet the stars are
always there, waiting to shatter
over my head – as are the robins,
who will begin the new year
by sliding the incandescent Jupiters
of bittersweet berry after berry
down their fat throats.
If the icing-sweet stars
can wait for me to find them
and the robins insist
on returning to place
their songs in my hand,
perhaps I, too,
can wait for green to come back.

Ode to Japanese red maple

I

Threads of red luster
woven into branching path-
ways I've stopped taking.

II

I know why the maple's leaves sob
evergreen beneath. And by ripeness signal
organic fires ending. Fall won't come now
but folks start early in this land and country.
Everything in its own time, says the maple's knotted
bough. Its seeds are the mealstuff of songbirds,
and the red-faced finch who hymns
each morning presently is flying in circles overhead
before resting in his nest in the trunk.
The Japanese red maple provides sheet music,
but not the necessary arrangement. Especially not
with the pea gravel scattered like buckshot
and the measured sway of its red hanging branches.

III

Anyway. Here's "Ode to Japanese red maple."
Sorry I've been so quiet.
Been murmuring it
since you said
you loved the light
wind through red branches
on our walk
while the weather
was wonderful,
warm.

Common

In the birdfeed aisle at Lowe's
a woman tells me, "If you buy the cheap stuff, you'll only
get sparrows. And they're just so...common."

And I think of you, how plain and small and brown you are.
And she's right. You have filled our backyard birdhouses with your young
and their loud sharp hunger. No need to look up from my book.
I know exactly when you are perched on the edge, doling out seed.

I know without opening the blinds when the sun tips over
the rooflines of our suburban neighborhood,
the air punctuated with your declaratives of joy,
of renewal,
of persistent reminders to fill the feeders
with our cheap millet.

You have none of the hummingbirds' delicacy.
Or the finch's shyness.

Instead you resemble my ancestors
who ate potatoes
animal intestines
gruel.
Who wore the sturdy drab clothes
of farmers, of the working class, covered in
dirt and soot.
The men and women too poor for pretense.
Too busy taking care of their young for fine food and frills.

You share society's scorn for the white tufted dandelions growing in my yard,
the tiny happy faces of yellow wood sorrel,
the proud orange ditch lilies thriving in inhospitable dirt
where nothing else prospers.

How I love you, you commoners who refuse to be pulled,
to be pushed aside.
You who have the audacity to live.

David Henske (he/him)

A meandering creek is an exciting place
I watch a lone leaf skate on its surface
And imagine the towering tree it left behind
And the journey it has left to make
I see those tiny minnows in the shallows
So naive of the banks that lie beyond
And I wonder if they have friends like I do
But most of all I love the water
I watch the iridescent rocks sway in their bed
As wheat leans in a breeze but is never uprooted
I look at it's surface to see the trees and the stars
The vines that they hold and their constellations
And I roll up my pants and wade through it
I kick up the dirt and mud and it trails downstream
I imagine myself a giant as I raze and wreck a city
And that dirt is smoke that pollutes the air
I reach the adjacent bank and lie in wait
To admire what transient disturbance I have made
The leaves still float and minnows still swim
The dust settles and I see again the earth and the heavens
My car is parked on the other side
But I am happy to cause havoc again

Piedras Blancas

Macará, Ecuador, providence of Loja.

Tell me, Max,
 what did you know about living then?
When life was no bigger than a bird
between the forked branches
 of your slingshot's eye,
no heavier than the stone shooting it down.

A life shorn by the rooster at dawn—
climbing up the farmhouse,
spurs clipped off, feet thick and scaly,

 finding where old claws etched grooves
in the roof's wooden beam—crowing
until the sun lowered the covers from its face.

By tuna-can dinners with cousins after catching
frogs leaping from mud. Dried-out gourds

 to carry river water to the empty tire
pigs ate slop from. Milking that mean heifer,

seeing how long before she charged farmhands
off her pasture. And at night, the creaking

 of your uncle's guitar strings
as his fingers necked a new chord for the fire—
 that must have been the sound of youth.

Cross-legged, dog in your lap teething the thorns
dug into your skin. Your brother and sister
huddled next to you. Three small faces smiling

 into the licking heat, waiting for your father
to sing. Rasp-chested. Head tilted to the sky's
star-dappled donkey flank. Songs of unmarked graves,

 of the Inca, the Quichua, the rivers of gold
churning, warming the earth underfoot. Embers lifting

through choked smoke. Glowing ash
lost against the mountain grain,
melting into the cool night's mist,
 rising higher, higher...

Did you see them like I did? Our family—
our ghosts, sitting up there with legs swinging,
 leaning in to listen too.

Dearest, Undammed

When can we pause?
Underneath my red lip
reflection, I see the skin
of a forgotten will.
But what is given is wholly
unlike a wall, wholly unlike
the stopping of rush and running
that beat back the mountains
to carve this country up,
for little people like me.

My lunch tastes like silicone,
and I crave a nail, put inside
where I could have grown
a Master's Degree. Imagine
a woman born to carry two by two
across the waves, growing
hollow under such conditions.
Imagine before it is too late,
a current, her worn sole
entering its body, and the rush knowing
to ask permission.
Imagine a choice.

Where are we now?
Piled cushions on a pea.
The world upon the river
we stilled

Inside four plastered walls,
vinyl flooring, a box fan.
I hold the will of bidding
vigilance goodnight, and waving
ripe, rich, oozing wild bites
goodbye with it.

All to keep my body
from doing any damn work
evermore. Something to swallow
on my high seahorse.

No support within
cushioned pined walls,
can still the gears in my head.
Built brick by battery
Nothing withstands a vacuum.
My foot tapping, rechecking
outlets in a room, these
unbridled remnants are not set.
She would not be either.

How do we stop
an eternity leveling
each skinned knee.
Come with me, dearest,
before the world
cannot be inconvenienced

I see her answer, my answer,
floating through the flotsam,
beside the bloated timber,
above the school of fish.

Liturgy of Holy Communion-Remix:

Theotokos, in your womb we gather to celebrate the life, death, and resurrection of God. We honor your blessed role as mother of God and mother of the lowly. We ask for your protection on this liturgy. May it reflect the vocation of your child.

Reader and Respondents

On the third day there was a wedding* in Cana* in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding. When the wine ran short, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."

[And] Jesus said to her, "Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servers, "Do whatever he tells you."

Now there were six stone water jars there for Jewish ceremonial washings, each holding twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus told them, "Fill the jars with water." So they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter." So they took it.

And when the headwaiter tasted the water that had become wine, without knowing where it came from (although the servers who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves good wine first, and then when people have drunk freely, an inferior one; but you have kept the good wine until now."

Jesus did this as the beginning of his signs in Cana in Galilee and so revealed his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him. After this, he and his mother, [his] brothers, and his disciples went down to Capernaum and stayed there only a few days.

O Mary, who initiated the first miracle. We ask for your help. May your child help us work miracles in the lives of others when it is unexpected and overwhelming. May we be witnesses to work God does in hearts, minds, and bodies. May your presence be known in this moment.

O God, whose compassion compelled you to heal us, feed us, and be with us, bless us in this meal and turn our rations into your Body and Blood. May the food we eat sustain and give us life in this age and the next.

Focus on spirituality and social justice:

Reader and Respondents

When Jesus heard of it, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. The crowds heard of this and followed him on foot from their towns.

When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, and he cured their sick.

When it was evening, the disciples approached him and said, "This is a deserted place and it is already late; dismiss the crowds so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves."

[Jesus] said to them, "There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves." But they said to him, "Five loaves and two fish are all we have here." Then he said, "Bring them here to me," and he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds. They all ate and were satisfied, and they picked up the fragments left over—twelve wicker baskets full.

Those who ate were about five thousand men, not counting women and children. (Matthew 14:13-21)

The congregation: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

Come forward for the reception of Holy Communion. All are invited to receive.

At the distribution of communion, the giver of the eucharist says "The Body of Christ." The receiver says "I am."

At the end of the liturgy

Reader: When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things. At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known. (1 Corinthians 11-12)

Congregation: "So faith, hope, love remain, these three;h but the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13)

Live Jesus in Our Hearts, *Forever*