

**WILD WILLOW MAGAZINE**

**ISSUE SIX**

**MUMS**







**Wild Willow  
Magazine**







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## **Content Warnings**

Some of our pieces may include some of the following themes:

Cancer

Death

Illness

Adoption

Estrangement

Abandonment

Memory Manipulation

Traumatic Birth/High-Risk Pregnancy



## *Letter from the Editor*

Dearest readers,

Motherhood is a strange and magical thing.

At least, that's what I've been told. At 30, I've had a bizarre and complicated relationship with whether or not I want to be a mother. Something I was expected to do my whole life and yet, now faced with the choice, I falter. There is a lot of fear tied to it of course, it's a life-changing event that completely alters your mind, body, and soul, but there is also that curiosity about the element of "magic" that has been carefully explained to me in a thousand ways. People are always gentle with their descriptions, as if a wrong word in their mouths will wash away the sweetness in which they regard their motherhood. Never wanting to speak ill but never wanting to paint a false picture of simplicity. Altogether: indescribable.

But positivity and preciousness are not always the case. Motherhood is complicated, because mothers are people, and people are inherently complex. I wanted to do this issue to expand the idea of what motherhood means to a variety of people, not just what I've seen in my small world. Immense joy for their children, intense grief over the loss of their own mothers, becoming disabled and still needing to show up as a mother, not wanting to become a mother at all. Rage and grief and loss of identity make up just a small selection of some of the indelible stories in this issue.

To begin this issue, I have included a poem I wrote for my mother the first time I was 3,000 miles away from her, followed by an interview with the most wholesome woman in the world.

With unending gratitude to the readers and contributors of this issue,

Melissa Ashley Hernandez

EIC, Wild Willow Magazine



*Calling Mom – mobile*

*Melissa Ashley Hernandez*

I miss home.

It could be that I miss it most  
when I'm in unfamiliar territory,  
but knowing that doesn't change much.

The skies here are always gray,  
even when the hot sun bakes  
the uneven cobblestone.

Home is plush green grass  
and the cherry blossom petals  
that adorn it every Spring.  
Even the flowers here are different,  
although yesterday I saw one that  
reminded me of mama's smile.

Home is raking up acorns every Fall,  
and laughing as we remind my brother  
of how he used to call them "coconuts,"  
because at six he couldn't quite wrap  
his lips around the right words yet.

Here, it rains more often than not,  
which is not as bad as it sounds,  
at least, if you don't get caught in it.  
Just like home, a cup of hot tea  
can make rain look like magic.

## *Conversation with My Mother*

by Melissa Ashley Hernandez

Militza Hernandez, or as her loved ones call her, Millie, has been referred to by titles such as: “The Mom I Never Had,” “The Neighborhood Mom,” “The Best Titi Ever,” “The Greatest Mom in the World,” “Mama Millie,” and simply “The Best,” among a trillion other well-suited designations. If the readers are wondering where my love for poetry comes from, look no further than my class act mother. She is unendingly kind, exceedingly loving, and incredibly creative. I’ll even add she had the patience of a saint to deal with me through my nightmare angsty teen years.

She is passionate about her hobbies, most of which revolve around scrapbooking. She has been an advisor for Creative Memories for over twenty years and continues to teach people how to preserve their memories in fun and beautiful ways. Reach out on Instagram if you want to give it a try!

[Instagram](#) | [Creative Memories](#)



I often feel like I take my mother for granted. Every year I get older, I think about all the stories she’s lived and all of the wisdom she has gathered that she may never get to share with me before she has to leave for The Great Beyond. (Dramatic I know, blame the acting degree!) I wanted to do this interview with Mami for a long time, and when my WWM team agreed on the Mums issue for motherhood, I knew this was the perfect chance.

I gave her the questions in advance, then I came over a few days later, we poured some wine, and just... talked. Using the questions as our guide, of course. We cried a good amount and had a wonderful discussion about life and motherhood. So please, enjoy this conversation with my mother.

\*\*\*

## Militza Hernandez on “Life and Motherhood”

**MELISSA HERNANDEZ (ME):** Mama, what are some of your favorite memories of Steven and me when we were little?

MILITZA HERNANDEZ (MOM): I have lots of memories. Great memories of just watching you grow and experience new things. The memory that stands out the most is of you, Steven, and Dad playing hide-and-seek.

**ME:** Oh, yeah! When Dad would come home from work, you would say, “Dad’s home, go hide!”

MOM: Yep, and Dad would come home, and you both would hide and say, “Dad, come and find us!” And Dad would check all the rooms before finding you and hearing your little giggles as he looked for you.

**ME:** *(laughing)* Do you remember the one time Steven hid in the dryer?

MOM: *(gasps)* Oh, my God, that was scary! We couldn’t find him!

**ME:** And Dad looked for him for a long time!

MOM: But he was on top of the dryer, not in it. He had closed the little folding door to the linen closet so we couldn’t see him.

**ME:** Is that your favorite memory for both of us? The hiding?

MOM: Mhmm.

**ME:** I think that’s one of my favorite memories growing up, too. That was probably every day.

MOM: Every day. *(laughing)* And sometimes it would be the same exact spot!

**ME:** I could never tell if Dad actually was looking for us or if he was, like, pretending not to be able to find us.

MOM: Sometimes, he would go upstairs and change his clothes, calling out, “I’m looking for you!” And you two would get so nervous while he was looking for you, giggling as he got closer.

**ME:** I remember that! Okay, next question. What surprised you most about becoming a mom and what did you learn from us?

MOM: What surprised me most about becoming a mom was how challenging it was, but also how rewarding it was at the same time. I had a responsibility to keep you safe, healthy, and happy, but sometimes with little sleep, and not knowing what was wrong or how to help you was hard.

**ME:** Was I colicky?

MOM: Yes, Steven had stomach issues, and you were colicky.

**ME:** What does colicky mean? Does that just mean I cried a lot?

MOM: That’s a good question. I think colicky is maybe when your tummy’s upset? I think, with you, it was the milk that you were drinking. It gave you an upset tummy as a side effect.

**ME: Oh, you didn't breastfeed?**

MOM: I did. For the first four months, and then formula. I think you were getting too much air or something. I don't know what was wrong.

**ME: I was a hungry little child!**

MOM: You always wanted more and more and more!

**ME: Oh, that's embarrassing. Made myself colicky.**

MOM: I just googled it. It says "a colicky baby is a healthy infant who cries frequently." You were healthy. "Frequently, loudly, and intensely for no apparent reason. Typically, for more than three hours a day, three days a week, for over three weeks." Yeah, you were crying all the time!

**ME: Yeah. And then I never stopped!**

MOM: I think I talk about that later on.

**ME: (laughing) Oh, no...**

MOM: You said, "what I learned from you", huh?

**ME: Mhmm.**

MOM: What I learned was how to have patience. When things didn't go as planned, take a deep breath and try to understand why. Maybe you were tired or sleepy. I learned how to be a better mom and how to do things differently from what I knew. That's what I learned from you.

**ME: From me, particularly?**

MOM: Yeah, well, you were my first kid. I didn't know how to deal with a kid; I had never

had a baby before! I just saw other people and thought, "Oh, that's easy, I can do that!" And then when it happened, it was much more difficult than I anticipated.

**ME: How was taking care of me as your child different than taking care of your younger siblings when they were babies? Because I know you were responsible for their care, too.**

MOM: Well...

**ME: Well, I know you shared the care with everybody, but Grandma had six kids, so everybody was kind of watching after each other.**

MOM: But with you, it was more personal. More intimate. First of all, I was far away from everybody. I didn't have any help.

**ME: When I was born.**

MOM: Right. It was just you and me, baby! We gotta figure this out!

**ME: Okay then, since you're talking about it being more personal, what was the first year of motherhood like for you? Because I know you were in Massachusetts at that time.**

MOM: Yeah. We moved to Massachusetts. It was just me and dad. Dad worked most of the day.

**ME: Right.**

MOM: (laughing) You cried most of the day.

**ME: (laughing) Sorry!**

MOM: I couldn't figure out what was wrong with you. You were colicky, and you cried a lot, and I was a little overwhelmed.

**ME: And you were *twenty-five*...**

MOM: And I was twenty-five! I didn't have a baby manual or anything to know what I was doing wrong or how to make you feel better. And I felt like I was failing at motherhood. Like, "I can't keep her happy, what's going on?" We tried many things until we found what would work for you.

**ME: Which were the car rides.**

MOM: Yeah, and you used to like being on top of the washing machine. Anything that kept you moving. We learned from the doctors that if I kept you facing down with my hand pressed against your belly and just rocked you, that that was enough to keep you calm. You know, the pressure of it.

**ME: So that was the first year for you, overwhelming.**

MOM: Well, no, not the first *year*. I would say the first couple of months until I got the hang of it. It was just all brand-new, and I was by myself. No family, nobody to help me. Not even Dad, not really. He would come home and he would try to take care of you while I slept, but you would just cry.

**ME: Yeah... and it's difficult, too, because it's not like he could say no to taking that job up there in Massachusetts. That was a big step in his career that helped him support his family. And it's not like you could have said, "I'm gonna go live with *our* baby with mom back in New York, bye!"**

MOM: Yeah, it was tough being a mom and being alone.

**ME: Well, what's your happiest memory of you and me together? That doesn't have to be from my infancy, by the way, it can be from any point.**

MOM: I think the happiest moments of you and me together were when we celebrated the accomplishments in your life. Those are all happy memories, like birthdays and graduations aaaaaand publishing your first book!

**ME: Aw, yeah!**

MOM: You gave it to me on my birthday!

**ME: (*laughing*) You had me sign it!**

MOM: Well, my kid wrote a book! Everybody's got to read it! I told everybody!

**ME: Yeah, you did! Let's go to the next question. What is something that I've done that really meant a lot to you?**

MOM: Everything you do means a lot to me. You know what I'm saying? Everything you do is, like, important.

**ME: Sure, but is there something I've done for you that sticks out a little more, you know?**

MOM: Hmm. You're always doing nice things for me. You always think about me. (*gasps*) Ohhhh... I know! The day you had COVID and you came to see me through the door for Mother's Day!

**ME: I felt so bad... I was like, "I can't believe I can't spend time with my mom for Mother's Day!"**

MOM: Even though you were so sick, you still came and put your hands on the door and left a card there for me.

**ME: Yeah, I left it on the bench and ran away.**

MOM: Awwww, yes!

**ME: For the readers, I did not interact with her at all! I had a mask on! And I was outside!**

MOM: You just put your hands on the glass door and said, “Happy Mother’s Day!”

**ME: Ah, yeah. I do remember doing that.**

MOM: Yeah. But you’re always doing kind things for me. I appreciate you.

**ME: Aw, Mami, I love you! Next question. What do you want or wish most for your kids? So, me and Steven.**

MOM: Oh my gosh. What I always tell you guys! What I wish more than *anything* is that you both are happy. When you are happy, I am happy.

**ME: That’s a very mom answer.**

MOM: I always tell you that. If you guys are happy, I’m happy.

**ME: I believe that.**

MOM: That’s what I wish more than anything for you guys, that you are blessed with happiness.

**ME: (laughs to not cry) Okay, now comes the question that probably made you a little emotional.**

MOM: They sure did.

**ME: What have been the hardest parts and what have been the best parts about getting older?**

MOM: The hardest part of *me* getting older is that *you’re* getting older.

**ME: Really?**

MOM: *Yes*. So it’s not the same as when you were a little girl and, you know, we’re growing together, right?

**ME: Yeah.**

MOM: So... so that’s the hardest part. You’re moving on. You have your own life, you’re doing your own things. We don’t see each other as much, right?

**ME: Yeah... That’s funny because that’s... I think that’s the hardest part of me getting older is the same thing. Everything’s changing. You know, a professor in my MFA once said, “Change is grief.” And, you know, it’s true, because every time something changes, you kind of lament or grieve the way that it used to be. That’s what nostalgia is. You wish things didn’t get so difficult. You miss the things that were simpler back in the day. That’s because you were used to life being that way.**

MOM: Right.

**ME: What have been the best parts about getting older?**

MOM: The best part of getting older is that life has taught me things that now I can share with you.

**ME: Those are really good answers.**

MOM: You like that?

**ME: *(a little teary)* Yeah, that's a good one. It's nice and sentimental.**

MOM: Like, I can give you advice on things that I've been through, and suggestions, just for you to ponder, because you're not always going to do what I share with you.

**ME: Well, you know, I think as I get older, I become more receptive to your advice, too. Like, when I was younger, nobody could tell me what to do, and that really frustrates me now because it really screwed me over.**

MOM: Well, sometimes you think you know more. Like, "She's not in my time, so she doesn't understand what it's like to be here right now." That's understandable. I guess we're all like that with our parents.

**ME: Yeah. Okay, if you could relive one day in your life, which would it be and why?**

MOM: This is the one that makes me cry. *(tears up)*

**ME: *(giggling)* I don't even know what you wrote, so I'm just watching you cry for no reason!**

MOM: *(giggling)* It would be the day that I became your mom. As soon as you grabbed my finger with your little hand and the love I felt for you, I knew we were going to be inseparable from then on.

**ME: You would... you would relive that day?**

MOM: Of course! That was magical. When the doctor put you on my chest and you grabbed my finger right away, I thought, "Aw! We're gonna be buddies forever!"

**ME: Aw! Even though, you know, the pain of childbirth and everything?**

MOM: No, the pain was like nothing compared to what came afterward.

**ME: It cancelled out?**

MOM: Yeah, for sure.

**ME: Aw! Wow, that's so interesting... That's crazy... Oh, my gosh. *(Dear Reader, I'm not sure I can fathom a love like this quite yet.)***

**Okay... let's talk about you. What advice would you give your younger self? At 8? At 20?**

MOM: At 8?

**ME: Like, you as a child.**

MOM: At 8, I would say be yourself. At 20... Hm. At 20, I was always worried about things, so I would say be happy and stop worrying about everything.

**ME: *(giggling)* Yeah, that would have gone over well, probably.**

MOM: Yeah... yeah, no. *(laughing)*

**ME: The next part of the question is, what about your older self? Like 15 or 20 years from now?**

MOM: 20 years from now. I would say, always be there for your family. And be happy. Happy comes up a lot around here, huh? Be happy!

**ME: Yeah.**

MOM: Well, that's the most important thing. Being there for your family. Hm.

**ME: What life lessons have stuck with you the most?**

MOM: *(looks at her notes)* Oh! That's so funny. I have: family first; don't worry, be happy; and there's a solution for every problem! *(laughs)*

**ME: You always do say that. Actually, I started saying that every time I get frustrated about something now.**

MOM: Yeah, I always used to tell you kids that when you were little. Sometimes we just gotta take that breather.

**ME: Yeah... So... what do you want your legacy to be?**

MOM: I want my legacy to be that I was that person who always treated people with respect, love, and kindness. That I did my best. I didn't always have all the answers, but I did what I thought was right at that moment, with the knowledge that I possessed at that time. *(pause)* What do you think?

**ME: I think you're already living that. So, I feel like... I feel like that's a good legacy to leave behind. Especially a "you're not perfect, but you did your best" kind of deal. Right? Like, even if I didn't know what to do, I properly thought about it, and I did what I thought was right.**

MOM: Mhmm, yeah.

**ME: I think that's important to remember too, because I feel like as you get older, sometimes it's really easy to sit in regret of the past. And it's easy to forget that at the time you were working with the information you had, regardless of what it was. Like raising kids and maybe making mistakes as they grow up, or making the wrong investments, or something like that. It's like, you did what you needed to do, and if you made a decision that was right for you at the time, then so be it.**

MOM: That's why sometimes Steven says, "Mom, why didn't you do this? Or why didn't you do that? And I tell him, "I didn't know better." You know, I didn't think that if I did something different, it would have a different outcome. Sometimes you just don't know. You go with what information you have, as you said.

**ME: Okay. Last one, Mama. What's something you want me to always remember even after you're gone?**

MOM: I want you to always remember that I feel blessed to be your mother. How proud I am of all your dreams, aspirations, and accomplishments. And how much I love you. *(teary)* Thanks for being part of my life as we grow together.

*(both crying and laughing and hugging each other.)*

**ME: I love you so much Mami, thank you so much for doing this interview.**





*The Day You Were Born*

*for Ezra*

*Shirlee Jellum*

cottonwoods speckled the air with floating stars  
blanketing daisies in downy drifts  
white and soft as earthbound clouds

it was hot—the sky a blue scarf  
stretched peak to peak  
snow melt falling like party streamers

after weeks of waiting, the west wind  
skipped across water into the woods  
rippling the lake with whitecaps

trees bowed toward earth

the trail wound upward past granite boulders  
purple asters and Indian paintbrush to a steep  
overlook where water thundered

through a narrow chute into a swirling pool  
spray flung like ribbons of light  
while you slid from darkness into life

later that night it rained, soft and rhythmic  
like a lullaby, your birth announced as the sky  
cracked open, moon painting the clouds gold

*Your Brightness*

*Anna Buynova*

the laundry room's flooded with light  
I follow your brightness  
my head not yet reaching your hands

we lie on your satin blue bed  
your fingers trace circles on me  
to quiet a forgotten pain

you give me cottage-cheese *sirniki*  
carrots and apples sprinkled with sugar  
never a bitter word

the buzz of your sewing machine  
vibrates warmth through the tiny apartment  
the needle threads velvet pants

for my little legs  
your hand shows mine how smooth it is  
to follow the grain

I sing your lullaby to my sons  
and imagine myself  
on the satin sky of your bed

if my voice is louder than yours  
it's because the glow of your presence  
has always told me  
still tells me: I am safe

*When the World Becomes Too Big*

*Shirlee Jellum*

think small—that first bite of cranberry orange scone oven-warm,  
ice crystals fanning the kitchen window, your long-haired cat stretched  
belly up near the wood stove. Watch the woodpecker beak deep in  
plum bark, flickers flipping leaves dusted with last night's snow, the sun  
an opal rising above the bones of wind-blown branches. When the  
world becomes too big, look inside for the story that lingers,  
the time you snowshoed in a blizzard, baby tucked under your  
breast, the beauty of blue shadows in tree hollows. The boy you  
raised, angry tears breaking your heart, worry an echo of your  
own teenage rage. Think of the man he's become, cradling his son  
like fine crystal, seized by a love so deep at the time it seemed  
too much to hold. When the world becomes too big, embrace the hum  
of child's play, the pile of toys strewn on the rug, chubby fingers  
smeared with chocolate, two lopsided snowmen melting in rain.

*Post-Op Notes: My Son Plays Soccer*

*Tracie Renee*

The other parents don't know we aren't supposed to be here, are here only because you were born lucky, on the right side of the tracks, the side with the nurse who noted the blue in your face after the doctor knotted the umbilical cord, the side with machines that could breathe for you when I couldn't, the side

where I knocked knuckles into the wood of waiting rooms and willed you to cry, willed you to keep crying, willed away the panic of silence, the months and years I feared looking away, feared tomorrow, feared you'd shed softly the body you had not yet grown into but

one day you kicked a ball.

Chased it. And

now I'm here, sidelined on this soccer field bathed in thin spring sun, your team ranked last in the league. Zero wins all season; zero goals. You kick and miss, pass to the rival team, inch down the field, forget to score. Forget that you are anything but wholly and wonderfully alive. Forget that we're not supposed to be here, with our dew-soaked shoes and the blue-ribbon sky that guards this now, this moment, this life where each time you score a grass strain, it feels like

we've won.

## *The Mother's Lists*

*Huina Zheng*

Our refrigerator prints a list for my mother at one o'clock every morning. I've never seen it work; I only see the slips grow longer. The first one appeared before I was even a month old. It was shorter than my thumb. By the time I turned fifteen, it reached halfway down my arm.

In the beginning, my mother was grateful. The list reminded her when strawberries had passed their second day, or when the vegetables she'd prepared for me lacked nutritional balance. In my memory, she was always moving in the kitchen, her silhouette dissolving into the drone of the range hood. It's unfair to remember her this way. She owned many beautiful dresses, but at home, she wore only the pink rose-patterned apron stained with oil. She liked to keep the house presentable; even fruit peels sorted into the wrong bin made her frown.

She still moves through that kitchen. Every night before bed, she studies the new list, planning what to buy at the market the next morning. As a battle-hardened "family chef," what more could a list possibly teach her?

During my pregnancy, my symptoms became severe. The doctor advised me not to stay alone, and my mother insisted I come home. That was when I first read her list carefully. It said: *Your daughter consumed 5 food categories today. Minimum required: 12.* My mother gave me an apologetic smile. "My fault. I forgot your needs would increase." Her fingertips trembled, just once, before she steadied herself and began planning the next day's meals.

Three weeks later, when I moved back to my own home, I assumed her lists would finally grow shorter. They didn't.

After my daughter Lan was born, we brought her home from the hospital. On that first night, at one o'clock, a faint printing sound rose from the kitchen. My heart tightened. A thin strip slid from beneath my own refrigerator: *You didn't eat any meat today. Your breast milk will be lacking in nutrition.* My mother-in-law picked it up before I could. The next day, she set a bowl of "nourishing" chicken soup before me and watched until I drank every drop.

That was the first time I resented the lists. And my mother had lived with them far longer. Her slips were ten times the length of mine; her pressure, surely a hundredfold. Yet she never showed fatigue.

Preferences shift, seasons change, needs evolve. No one could meet all the demands. Still, she treated each list as doctrine, checking off tasks with the devotion of an apprentice.

We visited her over the weekend. She bustled in the kitchen preparing dinner, and as I helped, I felt myself becoming a child again. The list hung like a white tongue from the fridge to the floor. She bent to pick up a fallen garlic clove; rising, her forehead brushed the paper's edge. She didn't flinch, didn't notice me watching, only smoothed the long strip and fixed it back under a magnet, as if it were the most natural gesture in the world.

A thought struck me: it's time to replace that refrigerator. If we don't, those ever-lengthening lists will break her. She has already let her career, her friends, even her own self-care wither. After decades of labor, she deserves to retire.

After dinner, I brought it up while helping her with the dishes. "Mom, that refrigerator is getting old. Why don't we replace it?"

Her wet hands froze. Almost instinctively, she shifted to shield the refrigerator, as if I were threatening an old companion. "Don't be ridiculous," she said, her tone sharper than usual. "It works perfectly. Why waste money?"

She didn't look at me again. She simply turned back to the stove and scrubbed it with deliberate force, ending the conversation.

I watched her back, and the thought that followed sharpened into certainty: why does the refrigerator print only for her? When she's away, it stays silent, even though my father can't be bothered to make anything beyond instant noodles or takeout. Perhaps all refrigerators are programmed to serve the woman of the house. This silver-white appliance doesn't just store food; it enshrines the sanctity of her labor.

That night, back home, after feeding Lan, I see my refrigerator spit out another memo, no longer than a fingernail. I crumple it without reading. As I toss it into the food-waste bin, a thought flickers: Such a tiny ball of paper. Could someone accuse me of sorting the trash incorrectly? Then, with something like exhilaration, I think: let them.

## *Hot Sauce*

*Elizabeth Larose*

My mother, may she rest in fun, peace would not have been her first choice. She and I were on a trip to the Holy Land. We had just cruised the Sea of Galilee and were sitting in an open-air restaurant on its bank, enjoying a cooling breeze when a lunch of fish was brought out. Mama, with a deep sigh, said 'This would be a perfect day if only I had some Tabasco sauce'. A young waiter overheard and came over with a small red bottle sporting a diamond-shaped label with green writing that said, 'McIlhenny Co./Avery Island, La./ Tabasco.' Mama in her glee hugged the waiter who turned the color of the Tabasco. And the day was perfect.

Mama, beautiful  
she thought not, but one look was  
noon in July



## *Want*

*after Joan Larkin*

*Yomalis Lourdes Rosario*

The children want sprinkles. I want  
to rub my lower back. They want more more more  
snack. I want a riot. They want to laugh  
and squeal. I want to build something  
with my hands and do more. Do more.  
They want to watch a movie. I'm crying.  
I need the fireworks to stop. They are sleeping  
—no trouble. I trouble all day. I can't stop  
moving: laundry, email, some neglected dusty nook,  
self-imposed deadlines, the list. They ask, "Mama,  
can you sit with me?" If I stop,  
there will never be enough. They want to wrestle.  
I wince watching. I want a house  
because I want a garden. I want income.  
They want to make their own obstacle course—  
see a river between pillows, a monster in the curtains.  
They want the pizza toy made of wood. Playing,  
they make enough food for everyone.

## *Interview with Claire Taylor*

by Melissa Ashley Hernandez

Claire Taylor is a writer for both adult and youth audiences. Her poetry collection, *April and Back Again* is [available now](#) from Publishing Genius. Claire is the founding editor of [Little Thoughts Press](#), a literary magazine for young readers. She lives with her family in Baltimore, Maryland, in an old stone house where birds love to roost. You can find her online at [clairemtaylor.com](#).

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I sent out a query on Bluesky asking for people who wanted to talk about their experience with motherhood to reach out. Three people responded and asked to participate. I conducted these interviews more as conversations, which felt more personal and, by extension, more appropriate for the vulnerability that can arise when discussing this topic. I went in with no prepared questions, just an open mind and a desire for humanness through the stories of strangers.

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## Claire Taylor on “Returning to Writing as a Mother”

**WILD WILLOW MAGAZINE: Hi Claire! Wonderful to be able to do this interview with you. We didn’t talk much beforehand, which means we can jump right into it! What led you to want to do this interview in the first place?**

**CLAIRE TAYLOR:** I am always interested in conversations about writing and motherhood because becoming a mother was the primary catalyst for my return to writing. I was surprised by how much motherhood opened me up creatively and helped me clarify and define what I wanted most for myself and my writing practice. But at the same time, being a mom is the main thing that steals the time and energy that could otherwise go toward my writing. I don’t think I would be writing at all if I hadn’t become a mother, but I’m also often not writing when I wish I could be because I have to prioritize mothering. I think it’s an interesting dichotomy that the thing that inspires me to write is also the thing that keeps me from doing so.

**WWM: What led you to want to write about motherhood? Please talk a bit about that!**

CT: For much of my life I have suffered from depression and have always used writing as way to process that experience and my emotions. When I had my first child, I was very cognizant of my risk of postpartum depression, but was not prepared for the degree of postpartum

anxiety I experienced. My initial desire to write about motherhood was mostly about needing a way to try to make sense of and release everything that I was feeling--the highs and the lows, the love and the rage, the sheer intensity of all of my emotions. Becoming a mother dismantles your being and creates a new and different version of yourself. I needed to work out who that person was and get to know her. I chose to do that through writing.

**WWM: “Becoming a mother dismantles your being and creates a new and different version of yourself.”**

**That’s a really powerful statement. We often go through many metamorphoses throughout our lives, but carrying a child has been proven to physically (and majorly) alter your body and mind. With something as physiological as that, can you explain what you mean when you say dismantled? Having a baby is much bigger than breaking up with a long-term partner or landing a dream job. How different was this new you?**

CT: I think that all major life changes (good ones and bad ones; breakups, career shifts, losing people we love, marriage, illness, etc.) lead to new versions of ourselves. Your priorities shift, your connections to people change and you need different kinds of support and community. How you come to think about yourself and carry yourself in the

world shift in response to all kinds of changes in your life. But motherhood is such a whole body, a whole self change. You have to learn how to care for this tiny, helpless being while also recovering from 40 weeks of increasing physical demands on your body, culminating in the intensity of labor. You have to do it all while sleep-deprived and while your hormones are shifting all over the place in ways you can't predict. I had to be very careful about the stories I was telling myself about myself as I entered into motherhood. I had to find a way to be softer and more compassionate toward myself than I had ever been at any other point in my life. I had to learn how to let other people really, truly help me when I needed help, while simultaneously trusting and asserting that I knew what was best for myself and my baby and the family and life I was building. There are so many ways to feel like you're doing motherhood wrong and so few ways to feel like you're actually nailing it, and I had to learn to just be comfortable with and confident in the effort I was putting out and the decisions I was making. I would stumble more than I would succeed, and that is just the reality of parenting. I think that's largely why I felt like I could take on my desire to write and be published at that point in my life because, through parenting, I was learning how to be comfortable with the idea that I could survive the struggle and the disappointment, take the wins when they came and feel confident about my ability to keep growing through these repeated efforts.

**WWM: How long did it take you to settle into this new personhood and pick up writing again?**

CT: I started writing pretty quickly after having my first baby. I went back to work at 8 weeks postpartum, which was much too soon given the physical nature of my work as a massage therapist at the time. But those quiet hours in my massage studio gave my mind a chance to explore some of what I was feeling and processing and I would come up with story ideas and poems in my head while I was working. When my business shut down during the pandemic, I shifted my attention to writing in an even bigger way, really needing that creative outlet to process that experience, and my writing career has snowballed from there.

**WWM: You say you had to be very careful about the stories you were telling yourself about yourself. Were you the focal point in your creative writing after you gave birth? If not, what kind of subjects did you write about?**

CT: Yes, I wrote mostly about myself and my personal experience and the confusing range of emotions I was feeling on a daily basis. A number of my early pieces about motherhood, though, were written directly to my son, sort of like small love letters to him, something he could read if I died before he was able to form any memory of me that would let him know how deeply I loved him. As I mentioned in a response to an earlier question, I had a lot of postpartum anxiety and it manifested not only

as a fear that my child would die suddenly or unexpectedly, but that I would. I was very anxious about missing out on the opportunity to know him and watch him grow. For the most part, my early writing about motherhood focused on processing the intensity of my emotions--the intensity of the love I felt for my child, the intensity of the overwhelm I experienced from the daily tasks of mothering. Most of this writing came in the form of poetry or personal essays. I mostly put my fears about death into my fiction. I wrote about people who were grieving, who were recovering from illness, who were processing loss in some way. Many of my characters were mothers whose children had died or disappeared, or never came into being. Fiction is a good place to work out your worst fears while maintaining a safe distance from them.

**WWM: When you say shifted your attention “in a bigger way”, what do you mean by that? And I couldn’t help but notice you used the word “snowball”. Could you dive into your work and how it’s evolved since you first entered motherhood, through the pandemic, to now?**

CT: Prior to the pandemic, I had been writing in spare moments, my little pockets of free time around work and parenting. Once the pandemic started and I wasn’t working anymore, the energy that I previously put into my job shifted to writing and it largely stayed that way even after my business opened again. Because I had a young child who was not part

of the initial wave of vaccinations, our family had to continue to significantly limit our exposure, so I returned to work very slowly, only doing a few appointments each month. The balance between the amount of time and energy I was devoting to work versus writing remained shifted heavily to writing, and in the years that followed, it moved further and further in that direction, in part out of desire and in part because of some physical limitations I developed that eventually required surgery to treat and led to my moving on from my massage career entirely. As that shift was happening, I had more and more pieces published, and had two chapbooks come out, and just recently had my first full-length poetry collection published. It’s been nine years since my son was born and that initial shift into more focused writing occurred, so I guess it’s not an insignificant length of time, but the amount that I have written and published in that period is well beyond what I could have imagined in those early days. I don’t know exactly when it happened, but at some point, I allowed myself to envision writing as more than a hobby--it was a career I could pursue, a vocation that could bring a greater sense of purpose and meaning to my life. Once I started thinking about it that way, I was willing to devote more attention and effort to longer and more difficult projects, to think about my writing not as a bunch of single pieces but as an expansive body of work that I will carry with me. I was open to trying out a greater range of genres and formats, and starting projects that will take years to complete.

**WWM: Postpartum mood disturbances are extremely common, with something like 85% of women experiencing some sort of anxiety, but PPD is a bit less common. It's said that about 15% of women around the world develop some form of PPD post birth, give or take 5% depending on the study. And even though there is such a precedent, there is also a lot of shame entangled in it, and because of that, it is all very hush-hush around the topic. Could you speak a bit about your postpartum anxiety (only what you're comfortable with, of course) and how you learned to manage it outside of writing?**

CT: My postpartum anxiety largely took the form of panic attacks. I have always struggled with at least a small degree of generalized anxiety, but not panic attacks like I had after the birth of my first son. I would be walking down the street feeling fine and then suddenly I couldn't move. I felt frozen with fear, convinced that whatever I did next would create a ripple effect that would somehow lead to my death. I would feel like I couldn't breathe. Or I'd go to walk down the stairs while carrying the baby and would have to pause halfway down, sure that if I took another step, I would slip and break my neck and die. Things like that, and I would have to pause and really focus on slowing my breath and calming my mind. I guess one positive thing about having struggled with my mental health since a young age was that by that point in time, I had a lot of knowledge about anxiety and

depression and had a whole host of techniques to fall back on to help manage them. Whenever I was panicked, I would look around and name five things in my environment that were the same in that moment as they had been the day before. It helped pull me out of my mind and back into the physical space and was a good reminder that I was safe, things were the same as they had always been, and I was okay.

I was also lucky that a bunch of my close friends and I had all had babies right around the same time, so I had a great network of smart, loving women to reach out to about how I was feeling. Just being in that same chaotic space of early parenthood alongside people you trust is so helpful. Interestingly, this same intense panic returned during my first trimester when I got pregnant with my second child. It turned out that my thyroid levels were really out of balance, and my OB told me that was likely contributing to the intensity of my anxiety, so it's possible that was also responsible for my previous postpartum anxiety and I just didn't know it because once you're postpartum, all care basically stops.

**WWM: It's really great that you had that community to help and alleviate some of that fear. Earlier in our conversation, you said, "I think it's an interesting dichotomy that the thing that inspires me to write is also the thing that keeps me from doing so," regarding motherhood and writing. Can you talk a bit about the balance between making sure you give your writing the attention it needs while**

## **balancing caring for your family's physical and emotional needs?**

CT: It's a hard balance for sure, and one that has, in some ways, become more difficult as my first son has gotten older. He requires less of my time and attention during the day than my three-year-old does, obviously, but he has a lot more going on in the evenings and during the weekends than he used to, and that has diminished my ability to use those hours as additional writing time.

I am very lucky in that I have some childcare help during the week, but it is limited. I have about 18 hours a week of dedicated childcare coverage into which I have to fit my own writing, the work I do for the magazine I run, any additional editing projects I've taken on, and anything I want to do for my own health and sanity. It's a lot to fit into not that many hours, but I use the time well. I'm good at sitting down and getting straight to it, not overthinking early drafts too much and not feeling overly precious about my work. I also carry a notepad and pen with me most of the time, or add ideas to my Notes app while I'm sitting around at my son's sports practices or piano lessons. I think that becoming a mother teaches you very quickly how to multitask and how to move in and out and back into activities in a way that feels pretty seamless. Your attention is so often being pulled in multiple directions at once. So I can start a piece, get interrupted, and then get right back into it without too much trouble.

Sometimes I purposefully tell my kids that I am not available for them because I am busy writing – I want them to see me actively dedicating myself to my work and my passions. I think it's important that they know there are multiple facets of my life that give me a sense of meaning and purpose. But I also will let the writing fall away for stretches of time if my family is in a period of greater need. I know I will get back to it eventually, and sometimes these pauses prove really helpful in solving problems with a piece I've been struggling with, or put me in a different headspace that leads to new project ideas. Stepping away from a piece of writing and giving it some space is sometimes more useful for me than digging in and trying to force it to become something it doesn't want to be.

## **WWM: I can see it being important for your kids to see you managing your passion and a family successfully. Do you feel like that adds extra pressure to you at all?**

CT: No, not pressure really, but I think maybe a greater sense of purpose. It's tough to build a life around a creative pursuit, especially in the US where the arts are so underfunded and undervalued. I have no delusions that I will be able to turn my writing into a lucrative career and I am lucky to be in a position right now where I can still pursue it without having to rely on it financially. I want to model for my children that creative endeavors are worthy pursuits, that doing work that brings you joy and intellectual stimulation and sense of

connection with the world is worth the effort. I want to show them that you can have a happy, fulfilling life that balances a wide range of needs and desires. You can carve out space for creativity and passions--it may not always be as much space as you'd like, but any little bit helps to fill you up, helps to make you feel whole.

**WWM: And some less existential questions: what are your favorite pieces of work? It could be books, specific poems, a short story, or even a piece of visual artwork. Just your favorite!**

CT: Oh, gosh, this is a hard question. There are so many. There are a few books that I come back to again and again, especially when I need to feel inspired or need help reengaging with writing. *Ordinary People* is the first book I read as a kid that made me want to be a writer. It's not a book for kids, and I probably read it much too young, but as a child who was only a few years away from being diagnosed with depression, I really connected with the depiction of sadness and hollowness in the characters, and was amazed by the way writing could convey those feelings.

I love *Evvie Drake Starts Over* and read that book whenever I need a good reminder of how to build romantic tension or write relatable, realistic dialogue.

I love stories about complicated families, and *Flight* is probably my favorite book in that specific genre.

There are too many poems and poets to list here, but Kate Baer's poem, "Idea" is one that really speaks to how I am trying to live my life, especially as I get older. I just want to take everything in, appreciate what I have and what I've learned and whatever lessons are still to come, pull everyone in my orbit into a tight embrace, and find a way for all of us to love our lives a little more.

**WWM: And in the same vein, because of the nature of this interview: are there any pieces of art, visual or written, that you really connect with as a mother?**

CT: "Rain, New Year's Eve" by Maggie Smith. It's in the same vein as "Idea" but specifically tied to motherhood.

*"Let me love the world like a mother.  
Let me be tender when it lets me down."*

Right now especially, I am trying to apply a mother's hope and tenderness to all aspects of the world and my life. Let me not lose my optimism that care and intention lead to healing.

**WWM: One last question: If you could speak to the version of yourself just before becoming a mother, what would you tell her about her writing and about herself?**

CT: About her writing, I think I would tell her that everything you write now is practice for the things you will write later. It's all leading in some way to all your future writing. Every discarded draft, every truly embarrassingly

crappy piece of writing is needed to build the skills that you will come to rely on in the future.

And about herself, I would tell her that the sorrow will continue to come and go but she'll learn how to better manage it, how to turn it

into words that will help her understand herself, appreciate herself and that will bring comfort and understanding to other people in their moments of sadness. I would tell her, don't worry, you build a good life and, more often than not, you are immeasurably happy.



*you can be a mother and a poet*

*after Kate Baer*

*Karen Baumgart*

you can be the kind of mother  
who still packs a lunchbox for her adult kids,  
because cut-up fruit with a fork and napkin  
says *you will never, ever, be too much for me.*

and, you can be the kind of mother  
who is absent for hours, sewing together words  
like stars thirsty for new galaxies,  
secretly thinking *I want more time to write*  
and *maybe it's ok if dinner is late again*  
and *dear god, let them leave me alone,* your hunger  
springing from a tangled, glorious place, because  
two things can be true at once.

*Diagnostic Mammogram*

*Tracie Renee*

When the doctor calls to schedule  
a second mammogram  
and ultrasound  
to diagnose  
the thirteen-millimeter nodule  
in my left breast

first  
I hold my breath

but then  
I say, *yes—I'm available Friday*

and because it isn't Friday yet  
I walk the dog  
make ice cream  
lift weights  
change sheets  
prep lunch  
make lists  
plan dinner  
clock in  
clock out  
run to the store  
return overdue books  
check out three more

and then  
in the dark just before the dream  
or the nightmare  
takes me  
I give my son the last scoop of ice cream  
let the dog lick the spoon clean  
like it is any other night  
and I am not dying

for even while dying  
we live.

## *What to Keep from Today*

*Soramimi Hanarejima*

“Done making your memories?” Mom asks.

I look at her from my bed where I’ve been staring out the window at the moon. As usual, it’s an hour before bedtime, and she’s stopped by my room to make sure I’ll remember the important things from today.

“Not yet,” I answer.

Actually, I haven’t even started because there isn’t much I need to remember.

“But I’ll be finished soon,” I add.

“OK,” she says. “I’ll come back in a bit.”

The moment she leaves, I get to work. It takes me only a few minutes to put things together. The secret Veralene told me after lunch. Her voice kept low even though the two of us were standing in the corner of the playground farthest from the school building. Our teacher at the chalkboard explaining that to divide two fractions we flip the second one over then multiply both together. The video our class watched about birds migrating telling us they fly to “places where conditions are favorable.” My amazement that the warblers we see in the summer have flown hundreds of miles to get here.

“That’s all?” Mom asks when she checks on me.

“The day was mostly uneventful,” I answer.

“No matter how much happened, it’s important to remember what you experienced. The things that got your attention and how you felt about them. Even if they’re small.”

She shows me one of her memories of today. Just a cloud in the bright afternoon sky outside her office window and her admiring that wispy fluff.

Then it’s my turn to say, “That’s all?” Not because I’m trying to use Mom’s words against her but because that’s the easiest way to show my surprise.

“Little memories are important in their own ways,” she says. “Moments are the stuff of life.”

“But those are so easy to forget. What’s the use of making something that won’t last?”

“Making them is good practice, and sometimes the little ones that do last are exactly what you need later.”

“When are you going to need this one about the cloud?”

“Oh, maybe during a meditation session or while I’m waiting in line at the grocery store.”

Her answer sounds wishful, like she’s hoping for a reason to use this memory.

She can tell I’m not convinced and says, “The importance of little memories will make more sense when you grow up. I promise. Now, you promise me that you’ll make three small ones each day. Just three is all I’m asking.”

“OK, just three.”

She smiles, then leaves me to make good on my promise.

I do an easy one first. The tomato candy Maeling gave to everyone in class. A souvenir from her family’s trip to another country. Not really candy. More like a cough drop that tasted like a tomato. Oh, right, then everything felt slightly further away. But just for a second. Does the candy make everyone feel that way? I’ll have to ask Maeling tomorrow.

What else? How about Muxi telling everyone at our cafeteria table about the stories he’s been making using bots. He was so excited while explaining that he uses them on his favorite stories to get new stories that continue the original ones or turn side characters into the main characters of other adventures.

Oh, and toward the end of recess, that gust of wind that seemed to whisk away all my thoughts. It was so sudden, and when it swept over me, there was only that cool rush of air, like it was the only thing in the world.

I have no idea why I’ll need any of them in the future, but it’s easy enough to make these little memories.

I find Mom in the kitchen and show her the three memories, proof that I kept my promise. She nods, pleased, then shows me a little memory she’s made of her stopping by my room earlier. It’s strange to see us talking from her point of view. Everything we said doesn’t seem as serious.

When will she need this memory? Oh right, to remember my promise. I’d better make a memory of what we talked about too, after I get ready for bed.

*I hope you'll always come home*

*for Wren*

*Ella B. Winters*

Pile in unannounced,  
three friends in tow,  
a lover in tow,  
alone,  
pile shoes in the hall  
so I trip on my way  
to fetch the post,  
tell me you're staying  
for the weekend,  
a month, a year,  
tell me your jokes,  
whisper your secrets  
when we sit in the dining room  
at 2 am, delirious  
ribs bruise lungs,  
sipping tea, spilling,  
unspooling with every tick  
of the clock.

I hope you come  
when things are good,  
things are bad,  
things are ordinary,  
to celebrate, cry,  
hang out, sing  
along to show-tune  
soundtracks when I  
drop you off,  
pick you up,  
there will always be  
extra food in the fridge,  
a hallway light left on,  
space.

When you no longer  
call this home,  
I hope you still come  
here, knowing home  
is hot coffee in your  
favourite cup,  
a parent driving  
through the night,  
adrenaline-soaked eyes,  
to get you  
where you want to be,  
a book you'd mentioned  
delivered in the post.  
A place, not just  
a place, to meet  
a feeling, a metaphor  
I hate making,  
but keep coming back to  
like home.



*Mama Told Me*

*Allison Burris*

you pick the best berry by  
letting it fall into your hand

you can try again  
to catch clouds in your teeth

make your own medicine  
by boiling the chicken until

the bones seep out their magic  
you can cry, you can rage, but

you have learn to live in  
your prickly legs and remember

there's no need to change  
your earrings

wear your favorites  
glint in the sun

then pick the weeds  
get dirt under your nails

*The Birthmark*

*Tracie Renee*

My son is ten (almost eleven)  
when I first glimpse  
at the barbershop  
the *cafe au lait* spot  
hiding  
under hair  
now scissored  
sharply  
off,

proof  
that being alive  
means we never stop  
being born.

As I study  
the brown-blushed blotch  
that marks now my child  
a stranger  
to me, who once knew  
every inch  
of smooth nude skin  
on his newborn nob,  
every curve where the bones  
of my pelvis  
molded  
his soft and still-growing  
cranium

I wonder  
where I was looking  
when he freckled and bloomed? and  
when I look away tomorrow  
what more he will dare to become.

## *Interview with Kristin Houlihan*

by Melissa Ashley Hernandez

Kristin Houlihan is a mother, wife, and disabled writer from California and EIC of *Epistemic Literary* and *Nimblewitlit* Magazines. Her poetry has been published in a variety of literary magazines and her book, *Lift the Mask*, is available widely in ebook, paperback and audio.

She is cofounder and poetry editor at [Epistemic Literary](#) and [Nimblewitlit](#) (our kid lit imprint).

You can find *Lift the Mask* [on Amazon here](#). Available on amazon in ebook, paperback , and audio. Alternative retailers: Kobo, Barnes and Noble, libro.fm, and Spotify.



I sent out a query on Bluesky asking for people who wanted to talk about their experience with motherhood to reach out. Three people responded and asked to participate. I conducted these interviews more as conversations, which felt more personal and, by extension, more appropriate for the vulnerability that can arise when discussing this topic. I went in with no prepared questions, just an open mind and a desire for humanness through the stories of strangers.

This was Kristin’s message to me:

Hello! I’m a mom of four (14, 12, 9, 7), a writer, and a litmag editor — and I’ve been mostly bedridden for coming up on four years. It’s absolutely difficult and not traditional, but I’d like to think I’ve learned to be a good mom under the circumstances. The mom guilt is extra heavy, but I’m also, I think, more acutely aware of my value/importance.

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## **Kristin Houlihan on “Momming from Bed”**

**WILD WILLOW MAGAZINE:** Thanks so much for agreeing to do this interview with me, Kristin. Firstly, I want to ask the obvious question: What made you decide you wanted to do this interview?

KRISTIN HOULIHAN: The short answer, I guess, is awareness. I want people to know that moms like me exist, but more than that, I want people to know our reality. It is freaking HARD – for the mom in bed, for the spouse, for the kids. I’m not trying to be inspirational and I don’t want to sugarcoat any of my reality, BUT I also want people to know that it is possible to be a good mom from bed. When I first got sick, I got a lot of “your kids need you,” as if I wasn’t still there for them? I mean, I was a lot sicker than I am now, and I could do even less than I do now, but I also know that what I *was* present for was vital for all of us. I still do it to myself; berate myself for what I can’t do, but there’s an awful lot I do! And I know my worth in my kids’ lives. And my kids do too – and I want the haters and ableists to know about it, and I especially want **other moms in my position to know it, too.**

**WWM:** If you don’t mind, and I realize it may be a bit heavy, but could you talk a little bit about what it was like when you received your diagnosis from the lens of motherhood? I realize there was a ramp-up in symptoms before then, so feel free to

talk about that as well. What was it like for you? What was it like for your family?

KH: So, my actual diagnosis (with MECFS) was a huge relief, but by that time I was already seriously disabled. I got the diagnosis at Stanford and was basically advised to get into bed, which I did, and I’ve been here ever since. It was a relief because the previous year had been an epic struggle and a steep decline in health, and I was struggling to get doctors to believe me, take me seriously, and treat me appropriately. Once I had the Stanford stamp, though! People respect them (for good reason, though the care I received there turned out not to be awesome.) It opened a lot of doors and changed the way my other providers were interacting with me; suddenly, I wasn’t the crazy woman anymore! I got a power chair covered by insurance! A parking placard! My long COVID diagnosis came later – I had no positive test for COVID because I was sick in March 2020, so Stanford wouldn’t even consider it. I had to leave Stanford and Kaiser and seek out really expensive options that weren’t covered by insurance, but eventually, I got testing and treatment specific to long COVID and started to make very small bits of progress. So the diagnosis and being bedridden coincided with one another: March 2022, four years ago (!!). I was in such a terrible place at the time that I don’t really remember how I viewed it in terms of motherhood, except that I had a constant feeling of being a failure as a

mother. I slept a ton, and when I was awake, I was not engaged. I had a kid in diapers and no one to care for him. I do remember getting angry, though -- and I think some of that anger helped change my perspective. It's gotten easier as the kids have gotten older – their needs have evolved into less physical things that I can't provide and more emotional or guidance-based things that I can provide, especially as my cognition improves. But the anger... I had a visceral reaction to people implying I wasn't there for my kids, which made me pay attention to all the ways I am (and was) there for them, all the ways I know I am an essential and integral part of my family's life. Believe me, I am acutely aware of all that I cannot and do not do – for my kids, my spouse, myself, my home – but when the prevailing assumption is that people like me are a useless waste of space (is that harsh? maybe a little hyperbolic but I FEEL it from the outside sometimes) it gets easier to be like, “no, I am worthy, actually!” and pick out the places where I contribute, to pay more attention to those things than to my own perceived failures or moments of “wish I could.”

**WWM: What was it like for you and your family adjusting to your new normal?**

**KH:** Hm, “new normal” – there really isn't one! Both the nature of my illness(es) as a dynamic condition and the reality of four growing kids means as soon as we think we have a routine, it changes. I mean, there are givens: my spouse worked out a telework agreement for his job because someone has to

get the kids to and from school, and I can't (we have no bus service here). We had two years of everyone in the same school (beautiful thing), but now we have two schools and three different dismissal times plus high school sports... I gave up driving before I was bedridden. This, plus my spouse needing to work and care for us all, means my kids have to do less – a lot less. I used to take them to the park to play outside after school every day--- now they come home. and spend a lot more time on screens. We don't typically have people over for playdates, because Mom is sick and Dad is working. They can't do after-school activities because how will they get there and back?

**WWM: Right, I can imagine how tough that is. I know that you mentioned your cognition is improving, so how is school now?**

**KH:** This school year has been better in that I'm doing marginally better. I'm still in bed, but I can help with homework on a regular basis. I was able to supervise my daughter's required science fair project and guide her and her partner through the hands-on process. I can put frozen pizza in the oven now and occasionally use the stove (or at least supervise a kid using the stove) – I used to shake too much to do any of that safely. I can read aloud to my kids almost every day. The kids just know now. That said, everyone has their turn to have a breakdown about it, you know? Like out of the blue, one of the kids will try to pull me out of bed, or yell that I need to get up or get better. It's like, the pent-up frustration we

all feel has to come out sometimes! We talk about my illnesses a lot, and I'm open about trying new things and when I'm feeling worse or better or whatnot (at varying levels of detail depending on the kid). I'll say the one thing my kids seem incapable of adjusting to is my need for quiet. They are LOUD. And loud is very difficult for me. It just... doesn't seem to sink in for them. Otherwise, we all know this is not a typical life, but we also all know this is our life, and we need to make the best of it. It's hard. And messy. And we all miss out on a lot of things. We use more screens as a family than we did before, we get less physical activity, we order takeout a whole lot more than we used to and don't eat as healthily. Our house is messy, but I haven't been upstairs in four years! How can I teach my kids to keep their rooms clean and organized? I can't. My spouse is a hero – he does more than one human's share of laboring and loving around here, but he is still only one person. So a lot just doesn't get done.

**WWM: Let's talk a bit about your writing. What are you writing right now? Or what is the most recent thing you've written?**

KH: So, my writing! I feel like most of my creative energy goes to the magazines I co-run rather than my writing. But this year I've been doing a very tiny bit better and have been able to focus a bit more on my own writing, which is great!

I rarely set writing goals because my illness makes it near impossible to follow through, but I've been feeling good enough lately to set a

goal of submitting one piece per month this year. Which isn't necessarily writing a new piece, but I put it in the "writing" bin because it's a focus on me and my writing rather than others' writing. So far, I'm on track, which is exciting for me. WHAT am I writing?

Recently, I've been focusing on haiku -- doing some craft reading, working on my form. I tend to write free verse mostly because formal poetry intimidates me and takes a lot of concentration that I don't always have. But haiku feels accessible to me, and I like its focus on nature. I don't get out much, but it's been a great way for me to capture something special about each time that I do manage to get out, even if it's just 20 minutes on the front porch. I also write them to vicariously capture the moments my family tells me about, and that's fun, too. I've also wanted to expand into writing more speculative or idea-based poetry, less of the narrative truth-telling that I more naturally write, and I've been dipping my toes into collaborative work. My most recent publication, in fact, is both of those – with Kathryn Reese, I wrote a collaborative piece that was published in the engine(idling (<https://www.engineidling.net/current> -- *Habitat, Haunted* by Kristin Houlihan and Kathryn Reese). Other than this stuff, I have a languishing draft of a poetry collection focused entirely on my long COVID experience. Languishing because I'm at the hard part: the pieces are drafted, I've had alpha readers, editors, and coaches, and now I have to make the edits and arrange the pieces in a coherent order. I've managed my illness and avoided PEM by basically not doing anything that

"feels hard" -- it sounds lazy and like a horrible way to live (And it is! A horrible way to live, I mean. Never challenging yourself? Blech), and this feels very hard. So it never gets my attention. Sometimes I think about writing an intro that says as much and publishing it/submitting it to presses as-is. But I want it to be good, you know?

I've been awful at updating my website these past couple of years, so while I do have an archive of published stuff on my site ([kristinhoulihan.com](http://kristinhoulihan.com)), it is not at all up to date. You can, however, find purchase links for my book there! I self-published a chapbook of micrometry a few years ago called "Lift the Mask" - all the pieces were written based on one-word prompts from the #vss365 thing on Twitter at the time. I collected a bunch of them and published them; people seem to like them!

**WWM: Let's talk about your favorite pieces!**

**What are your favorite pieces of work? It could be books, specific poems, a short story, or even a piece of visual artwork. Just your favorite!**

**And in the same vein, because of the nature of this interview, are there any pieces of art, visual or written, that you really connect with as a mother?**

KH: My favorite piece I've ever written is called "experimental procedure" and actually

hasn't been picked up anywhere, but it's in my book draft! Of my favorite published pieces, you can find two of them here at Corporeal (<https://www.corporeallitmag.com/kristinhoulihan> - "Conversation with my son" and "enemy of the gods.") I wrote both of these really early in my illness, before I was bedridden. "Conversation with my son," I wrote on my phone in my notes app while sitting next to my son in the other seat of the double stroller, one of the last times I was able to walk to school to pick up my kids. Yes, we did go to the park that day! From my published book, *Lift the Mask*, one of my favorite pieces is "#exist" because it perfectly encapsulates what it was like at my worst. (You can hear me read it here: <https://soundcloud.com/kristinhoulihan>)

What art strikes me, as a mother? We've published a couple of pieces in Epistemic Literary that come to mind. First, by Rachel Woodgate, this poem called "Mother's Shadow" from our Nostalgia issue (<https://epistemiclit.com/past-issues/issue-six/mothers-shadow/>). I can FEEL it, all of it. It even makes me miss it (nostalgia!). Another piece that comes to mind is "Free Drawings" by Megan Hanlon, in our Exclusion issue (<https://epistemiclit.com/past-issues/issue-four/free-drawings/>). Megan writes a lot about motherhood in her pieces published in litmags, but also on her blog, <https://sugar-pig.blogspot.com>.

**WWM: What does your writing process look like on a day when your energy is**

**limited? And separately, do you write differently now, either structurally or stylistically, than you did prior to the onset of your symptoms?**

KH: So, on low-energy days, my writing process looks like not writing! I go long stretches without writing, and I don't force things, mostly because I can't.

Before I got sick, I didn't consider myself a writer at all; I mostly considered myself an editor. I was working very part time as a freelance copy editor, mostly for independent authors. I had a couple of regular clients who kept me as busy as I was able to be, and I loved it! I was writing, though – I was blogging fairly regularly, mostly book reviews. I didn't start writing for publication outside my blog until right around when my symptoms started. It's all a bit of a blur, but it was in that 2020-2021 timeframe when I was homeschooling and starting to experience weird stuff with my body. The biggest change, though, I'd say, is I've mostly lost my ability to write long-form. I gravitated toward poetry, and short forms at that, because I don't have the cognitive stamina to write longer stuff. I can write you these emails off the cuff, but sitting down to write something organized or researched is really difficult, if not impossible. It crashes me, which I despise because I have so many ideas, but I just cannot implement them right now. Hopefully someday.

**WWM: And I'm a little all over the place with questions, so apologies if this gives**

**you a bit of whiplash, but I keep thinking about you talking about being present for your kids and what that means for you. Can you explore that thought a bit more?**

KH: What does being "present" mean to me? Well, that has changed over time, too. At its most basic, being awake with my door open. For the first couple of years I was in bed, I was asleep a lot, and even when I was awake, I wasn't able to do anything or be with people. Nowadays, my door is open almost all the time that I'm awake, and I'm sleeping more typical hours, so I tend to be awake most of the time the kids are awake -- and I hear about it when I'm not! But merely being awake isn't entirely what I mean – I conserve my energy, purposely structure my day so I have emotional energy for my kids. I can't join them in the kitchen for their after-school snack, but I'm here and ready to hear about their day, see and gush over the prizes my kid got in class, commiserate over how sweaty they are from walking home... that kind of thing. I am ready to hear about swim practice when my high schooler gets home, and respond to random inquiries about chickens from my tween. Basically, all that totally random and unpredictable stuff moms end up talking about with their kids throughout the day – I can do that now! They just have to come to me in my room, so it's a little less organic than if I were, say, in the kitchen making dinner while they do their homework at the table or whatever normal families do. I try really hard not to have done something unnecessary during the day that results in me having to say, "I'm sorry, I can't have a

conversation with you," to one of my kids, or, "you can't be in here right now." Because there was a time, and there still are times, when the presence of another person is too much. But they're rare now, and I'm grateful for that.

**WWM: Do you think our culture defines "presence" too narrowly when it comes to motherhood? (I know you have the added lens of your chronic illness, but your unique perspective allows you to look at the question from angles others can't.)**

KH: I mean... short answer yes, long answer... I don't know? I think our culture puts too many demands and expectations on motherhood – or, rather, on whoever the primary caregiver is. We're expected to be everywhere and do everything, and there's an extreme pressure to meet all of your kids' desires (not needs – I hope that I am still meeting my kids' needs). The line between wants and needs is constantly being examined in our home. My spouse can only be so many places at one time and do so many things in a day! But are we, for example, approaching a point where our seven-year-old NEEDS a physical activity outside of school as opposed to "thinks it would be fun/would be good for him"? We might be! So we'll agonize over whether and how to make something happen and hopefully figure it out.

I'm sure there are people who are wondering why they've never seen me at a swim meet (and it seriously BREAKS MY HEART BECAUSE I SO WANT TO BE THERE) - but I cannot be physically present. But my spouse is there, and I'm texting my kid and my spouse and following along with races and personal bests, and I'm the one buying the swimsuits, etc. I'm present, I'm involved - but not visibly. My third grader recently had a wax museum biography project coming up -- I helped her figure out her costume and props and start her research, and I did her hair the morning of, but I wasn't able to show up and see her being the wax figure -- I'm still "present." I'm not seen at school, but teachers hear from me electronically and have been great about doing meetings virtually to accommodate me.

I often feel like I'm failing my kids. I can't teach them to cook or clean, I'm not modeling how to care for a home, they use screens way too much because I need quiet time, they don't get to do nearly as much outside the home as I'd like, and they get less time outside than would be good for them. But do they know that mom and dad are trying their best? Do they know they can come to us with anything? Do they know we love them more than anything? Yes, I'm pretty sure they do. And *that* is presence.



*Early Morning Pas de Deux*

*Laurie Rosen*

I nuzzle my wailing, milk-damp  
newborn, swaddle her in ballet-pink,

shush and whirl.

A thread of light twines

past the door left ajar, enough to save  
me from stumbling against a dresser

or toppling over hastily placed shoes.  
Swaying, my eyelids sag, I pluck

at the window shade, peer out  
to darkened houses that slumber

under a moonless May  
and the yellow glow of street lamps.

I imagine their rooms undisturbed  
while I spiral, spin, twirl

my red-faced infant to silence,  
pause and pose

until her incessant sobbing  
begins again. I resume

the ballet, my baby's sweet-sweaty  
body quieting against my breast,

her pink blanket unfurled,  
tossed askew.



## *To Be a Mother*

*Sarai Nichole*

He sees me for all that I am. He loves me in every way that is palpable, and his hands don't feel like shards of glass. I didn't have to beg for it; I didn't have to change or colour my hair. We did everything right—we went from strangers, to friends, to best friends, to lovers. He's memorized each mole across my back, and he softens his hold around the hips I cannot bear to look at.

*I didn't settle Mom; do you hear me? I didn't settle.*

I took back every negative thing I said about fate, and soulmates, and *Serendipity*, and the clichés. I did not flinch at this flame.

Tonight, it's a brisk summer evening and we've just dropped my niece back off at my sister's house. I've always been thankful for our mutual appreciation for comfortable silence, especially tonight— after spending most of the afternoon chasing after a toddler with sticky fingers and a *need for speed*. My feet are on the dash, my hair is gone to the wind, and I cast a glance over my shoulder. He wears a constant smile. I catch a glimmer to his navy-blue eyes that I can't quite name, but I've learned not to dwell on what I'm not meant to understand.

Ten minutes later and we're pulling into the driveway, and I am reminded of just how thankful I am for my sister living just a mere hop, skip, and jump away. I hear our round-bellied hounds before we've even exited the vehicle, and I silently make note of one more thing to be grateful for.

He comes around to my door, and I giggle as I pretend to open it on my own, watching the panic swirl around his irises. He lifts me up as if I am featherweight, and he doesn't let my feet hit the ground until he's managed to unlock the door, with my body still draped over his shoulder.

The dogs are barking, and I can't catch my breath because I am laughing so hard and the man I love tucks the stray curls framing my face back behind my ears before setting me down. I immediately sink into the floor and perform my duties of belly-rubs and kisses to our fur-children.

This feeling, this life, this *man*—someone heard me. Someone saw me on my knees at the age of twenty-three, praying to whomever would listen, for another chance. Another reason to believe that I am deserving of a love that doesn't leave tear stains on all of my pillowcases in the dead of night.

I don't even realize how much time it's been since I've blinked, until there is an offering of my white wine being held up to my chest—*Jacob Triggs, my favourite.*

“You'd be a good mom, you know?”

I stop blinking once more. Actually, I'm no longer sure I'm breathing. I glance down and notice a steady pulse beating through my shirt, I hear it in my ears. Perhaps I'm drowning.

*Drowning in Jacob Triggs? Perhaps I could let this one slide.*

Maybe I still smell like baby lotion. Maybe that's what set him off.

I don't say anything right away. Just let the words echo against the panting of our dogs and the weight of everything neither of us wants to name.

I take a sip of my drink, let the glass touch my lips for a second longer than necessary.

“*Hmm?*”

I hate when he does that. When he pretends like we both didn't hear him.

*Of course I heard him.*

“I know I would,” I finally say, voice steady. “I would be a good mom.”

He turns toward me. There's that glimmer again, and finally— I recognize it. *Hope.* My stomach turns. I feel the beads of perspiration lining my forehead as he takes a gulp from his glass and nearly finishes off the fresh pour.

*He loves me. I didn't settle. He sees me.*

“I love babies,” *who can be returned,* I say, to no one but my subconscious.

“I changed my first diaper at the age of seven, shortly after my mother gave birth to my sister. I loved her so much, even just the thought of her, I gave her my birthday. *Our* favourite day of the year.”

“I’ve woken up at all hours of the night. I’ve wiped puke off tiny mouths and mashed bananas with the back of a spoon. I’ve scrubbed milk out of cars, and clothes, and every piece of furniture in this house. I’ve witnessed first steps, and I can do a Dutch braid with my eyes closed. I am *capable* and I cover f-bombs with funny, made-up words—of course, I would be a good mother, I would be a great mother!”

He smiles like I’m proving his point. And then I continue.

“I would be a good mother. But I don’t think I would be a happy one.”

His smile drops, just a bit.

“I know how to raise children. I had a strong, single mother and an absent father for God’s sake. But do you know what *else* I know? I know what it looks like to watch a woman disappear. I know how many parts of her get renamed *selfless* when what she really is, is *exhausted*.”

“I was seventeen when I first asked my mother if she ever grieves the woman she could’ve been. And of course, she said no.”

“I was eighteen when I began grieving *for her*.”

His brow furrows. He doesn’t speak.

“I know how easily a woman becomes the background of her own story. And maybe I’m selfish, or maybe I’m finally honest—but I’ve had life-long friends tell me from the earliest ages, about how *all* they’ve ever wanted to be is a *mother*. And I’ve never felt that.”

“I spent years convincing myself there was something wrong with me.” I turn to face him.

He opens his mouth, and my ears begin to ring, “I didn’t mean to upset you, I just see it so clearly in my head. I see you; *I see us*.”

I laugh. Humourless. “Am I smiling? In this vision of yours am I smiling, in the presence and the absence of *these children of ours*?”

The words slip off my tongue just as a shiver rolls through me.

“You see me, sure. You see me with eight hours of sleep. You see me after my bi-weekly girls’ night and book club, flushed from the wine on my breath—the version of me you love. You see me on airplanes and runways and train stations, with all the time in the world to *just be*—”

“But you haven’t seen me live a single day as a woman who willingly puts herself last.”

I hang my head and twist the rings around my fingers.

*He loves me.*

“I don’t want to wake up in twenty years and realize I gave everything beautiful about me away just so someone else could bloom. I’ve thought about this. More than you know. And not in passing—deeply. I’ve grieved it already. I’ve stood in the middle of the baby aisles with friends and felt that sharp, invisible thing in my chest. I’ve imagined birthdays and bath times and the first time they say my name. I’ve pictured it all.”

He’s quiet. He’s trying to be strong. I know this man. *I love this man.*

“But every time I imagine it,” I say, softer now, “I disappear. I’m not in the picture. Not really. I’m a ghost in the doorway, holding a camera. I’m a vessel. A cook. A teacher. A shell.”

He leans in, just barely. “I just... I pictured it. I pictured us.”

I nod. A quick pause.

“So did I.”

There’s a silence then. A heavy, unforgiving one. Not angry. Not dramatic. Just real.

## *Dehiscence*

*Wing Yau*

In her collection, her mother's smile was missing.

She wanted to smile like her or make her smile when she didn't mean to—the sincerest kind.

She knew the basics of smiling, like letting blank happiness hemorrhage out of her mind's tenuous membrane, like un-suturing her own wounds with teeth to reveal heart-felt words. She just wasn't sure if love was needed.

*Mother, it's game over for me. Will you help?* She asked, and had to admire her mother's dark red lips stretching into a jagged fissure. *I need to slice these onions into smiles,* her mother said. Her make-up ran down the eyes like broken lines of lies. She knew then that that was the best she had to give her.

When her mother's customers arrived, slamming dollar bills on the table with sly glees, she turned on the camera to document a mother's hard love— how they shoved food into her mouth until it resembled an oversized walnut sculpture. At the same time,

she raised the camera to block her own mouth from the same hands reaching for the visceral source of screams, where her uvula hung like trembling laughter to be stilled.

But her mother stayed mostly quiet. She clasped her legs close, and never too tightly, so there was room for a still life fresh from a dehiscence opened like a smile.

Years later, she'd gathered every smile her mouth could hold; her collection complete. She pressed them flat beneath the pillow so they wouldn't grow old.

Her mother didn't grow old, but she had a rottenness in her mouth when she told her customers who came in for onions every night: *See, she has a smile just like me.*

## *Buying Happiness*

*Ashy Blacksheep*

I chanced a glance at my mother.  
Her face soft with a contentment  
she didn't know she wore.  
A contentment which I knew  
would last as long as her next dollar  
before she'd reach for another  
from the stack of broken singles.  
In that dim gambling arcade,  
where it still smelt of cigarettes  
long since put out and banned,  
she was happy.

Perhaps for that moment  
she had everything she wanted  
and enough ones to stave off  
any thought of the contrary  
for the foreseeable next few minutes.  
But once they ran out, I knew  
she'd look to me like a kid for more tokens  
only tickets away from a grand prize like  
she couldn't possibly go home just yet.

That's what her whole life must feel like, all her  
waking hours echoing with empty tills, bills  
spent on all the voids she can't seem to fill. I  
know this of her because she compelled me to  
know exactly what she felt at any moment since  
she could never be quite sure  
and she couldn't afford to know herself.

*Empty Mother*

*a Fox's Gambit*

*Yomalis Lourdes Rosario*

The children make me.  
We collect leaves yield sky  
I still do not exist enough  
and fill myself with anything I can:  
breath first some worry then books  
I look around: a way to be  
Seeking messages I open a window  
meditate listen only to the voice  
in my mind A nest in the tree  
gazes at me Now, I make nest.  
I remember it all in oregano I smell  
all waste so I make waste  
I tree every tree—capture the gleam  
of me to make you yours see you  
so me becomes wall water parrot  
world me world you we paw  
the edges roar  
more empty ever gorged



*On My Mother's Birthday*

*Michael Hass*

She rowed quietly away from the wreckage of her body  
Always ambivalent about this life  
she wondered, I suspect, how it all turned out this way

Sustained by curiosity  
and a love for adornment  
Especially the color green, which pleased her the most

Echoes of her lost history followed her  
not just the story of loss and melancholy  
but something deeper

An ancestral past of words and song  
that broke through her shyness  
in a gentle smile

Making her a listener  
A gatherer of lost stories  
drawn to her own lost tale

She drew them in  
where they huddled together  
waiting to be told again

*Early Motherhood as Thicket*

*Yomalis Lourdes Rosario*

bush of sleeplessness where even the silicon of a pacifier makes me  
wince i look one way — an edge  
i look the other way — another the rage that missed the cushion  
for the floor and almost broke the hand a stem  
of tiny nails my lower back shredded again my abdomen in stitches  
i drop my mug scalpel startled by silence scalpel  
i don't get up early enough for the quiet don't eat enough scalpel  
moving pricks my skin like a pencil picking at me  
i pull away before the thorns and branches start forming letters on my skin  
i think of all of the ants & worms running away from my giant knees  
the chaos beneath while toddlers crawl through their perfect holes  
greet the rabbits and the leaves they still call *feathers* i follow  
making sure i don't break— i stop to peel the earth from my shins  
stop to say i'm sorry they keep going gather rocks i do the same  
until i become the rustling behind children squeezing to fit  
the sound of dry life fading from a broken off thing my mind stammers  
*be here enough to—* the shadows of green interrupt: *enough here*

*These Foolish Things*  
Valerie Georgoulakos

The Silver Ashtray

My mother wasn't a smoker, not even a social one, although I do have a hazy memory of her smoking a cigarette once, at a dinner party she and my father had. I doubt she inhaled. I don't think she knew you were supposed to. She wore little makeup, just a quick brush of mascara and dash of lipstick, a pale pink shade I can still see traces of in my mind on a demitasse cup of coffee. For a while, she wore blue mascara, which looked smashing with her emerald-green eyes. When I think of blue mascara, I think of the 60s and my mother in her blonde shag haircut and an old Greek song, a waltz from 1945, that goes: "Two green eyes with blue eyelashes have made me crazy." Those eyes, with or without the blue mascara, did my father in, did all of us in. I have kept the demitasse cups, delicate floral ones, and I use them when I drink Greek coffee in the morning or the late afternoon, sometimes with a piece of halvah as my mother often did.

The ashtrays in our house were for guests—so many people smoked then—and for our father, who was a heavy smoker for 50 years. L&M, the red-and-white pack, was his brand for most of those years. He is the only person I know who smoked L&M—most people preferred Marlboro or Parliament or Winston. There are certain objects that survived the changes and renovations that occurred over the years, and one of them is a silver ashtray that has been on one coffee table or another for as long as I can remember—it's even in old black-and-white photos, sitting there waiting for ash to fall. In going through our parents' house after they died, my sister and I took a closer look. It turns out it's not an ashtray at all—it's a metal decorative plate embossed with the Colossus of Rhodes (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world) welcoming ships to the island. *Sheesh*. My mother liked to

collect plates from different places she visited, and she must have picked it up the summer we went to Rhodes. How it ended up as an ashtray rather than in the front hall with the other plates, I'll never know.

It lives on with me now, though I'm not sure what to do with it. For the time being, it's on a shelf in the bookcase in my front hall, propped up against some Agatha Christie paperbacks. It's been there for months and makes me think of a Greek proverb that says: "There's nothing more permanent than the temporary." Perhaps my mother placed it on our coffee table until she could find a place for it on the wall, and in the meantime my father came along and put out his cigarette on it. And that was that. There's really nothing special about it, except its longevity. But now that my parents are gone, somehow that matters. Everything matters.

...

#### The Woodcock & Blackbird

It's the middle of the summer 2019, shortly after my father has died, and I am in my parents' house in Brooklyn where I grew up, going through the drawers of the enormous tallboy dresser in the small bedroom where my father slept after my mother became ill. My father was a saver, and the drawers were packed—piles of OTB tickets, check stubs, rolls of pennies, silver half-dollars, old cameras and tape decks, cards from every holiday from every decade, tax returns going back to 1957. Best of all were the stacks of little black books, where my father noted the date and weather—"Sunday July 13, 1997 hot then windy no good"—and the take (\$) for the day (every day) from his concession in Coney Island for 70 years. No weatherman was more faithful than my dad. I have always loved those little books. There's something about how tiny they are, flashes of the past, and that it's the weather, not sexy telephone numbers. Oh how my father loved his store.

There were fake Rolexes, pen and pencil sets too, things my dad bought from wandering peddlers on the boardwalk. I came across an envelope marked *Pontiac*, which I assumed held papers for one of my mother's Pontiac cars—Catalina, Grand Prix, Riviera, Firebird—but inside were the original passports my father, his parents, and six siblings had immigrated to America with from Greece in 1946. After that, I went carefully through every paper and envelope. It was sweltering, humid, and dusty, there was no breeze and no air conditioning, and I could barely breathe. After hours, tired and filthy, I piled a ton of stuff I wanted to keep or go through into a big neon-blue plastic IKEA tote. Then I went to the dining room and took down the stuffed woodcock from its perch on the china cabinet. It seemed thinner, as if it had contracted, its narrow face looked even narrower, tighter, which made its large round eyes look bigger, and its brown speckled feathers were darker and duller. I placed it gently in the bag and headed out.

After toiling in the heat and the past, I decided to reward myself with an expensive new tote bag, so I got off the subway in midtown Manhattan and headed to the Longchamp store on 5th Avenue. I entered, sweaty, grimy, my hair plastered to my forehead. I held the IKEA tote crammed with what must have looked like junk and, if you looked closely, a long, thin beak peeking out. I was the only customer, and the three saleswomen stopped and stared when I came in. No one moved. No one spoke. Finally, one of the saleswomen, nodding toward my IKEA tote said, "Love your bag." The second said, "I have the same one," and the third chimed in, "Me too!" and then we smiled and were friends. Even more so, after I bought a bag.

Later, I carefully packed the woodcock in a box, which was placed in a container bound for my apartment in Athens. It now stands on a bookcase in my living room next to a cardboard robot my son made out of bits and pieces of junk when he was little.

When I was little, the woodcock stood next to a blackbird. The plump woodcock with its long narrow bill—almost 3 inches—was always to the left of the daintier blackbird with its short, black beak. I thought of them as a duo—Woodcock & Blackbird! The story was that my mother had brought the birds back from a hunting trip in Greece. She spoke enthusiastically of hunting as a young woman, and because I knew she loved horses, I imagined her riding into the hills, rifle in hand, snagging birds left and right. It impressed me to have such a mother—a huntress like the goddess Artemis!—and made me feel safe. Naturally, the birds attracted the attention of dinner guests (I knew of no other family in our neighborhood with stuffed birds in their dining room), and I loved telling the story.

Years later, long after my mother's memory had begun to disappear, I noticed that the woodcock stood alone—the blackbird was gone. I mentioned this one day to my father when I went to visit him at the store. He was by the clam bar, his usual spot, and it was slow that day—when it was busy, chatting was out—and when I asked about the blackbird, my father said he had no idea what happened to it. Clearly no one would have taken it, but perhaps it had started molting, and one of the women who took care of my mother had gotten rid of it. I said how sorry I was that it was missing—it was a part of my mother's history, a tangible piece of her past, lost now. My father got a funny look on his face, a kind of half-grin, then a shrug.

Well, he said, not exactly.

My parents went to Greece for the first time as a married couple the winter of 1960. While they were there, my father said, his cousin invited them to an outing that his son's bank had organized to Mount Parnassus, where hunting was allowed. My father's cousin brought along his rifle, and it was he who shot the two birds, had them stuffed, and gave both to my mother as a gift.

All those years growing up I thought my mother had bagged the birds. Looking back, I can't remember if she had ever said she shot them—I think it was more that she let us think so. And I loved that story, wanted it to be true. Perhaps she didn't want to disappoint me. My mother did know how to shoot, though—that much was true. I recently had coffee with an old high school classmate of hers, Antónios, who told me about the day he showed my mother how to shoot a rifle. It was right after the war, the Germans had gone, school was over, and he and a friend stopped to see my mother, who was staying in her family's country house in the Peloponnese. I got the impression Antónios was sweet on her, and he invited her to go hunting with them. He gave her his rifle, showed her how to hold it, explained about the recoil, and used his cigarette as a target. She was a natural, he said.

One of the things I found rooting through the drawers of my parents' house was my mother's U.S. rifle license for hunting, which she had renewed every year, although she never owned a rifle and, as far as I know, never went hunting in the United States. But the license, as well as the woodcock and blackbird, were part of my mother's dream, and so they are for me, if not a part of her past, a part of who she longed to be.

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### French Toast

Last night I woke up around a quarter to 3. I could hear my teenage son and his girlfriend rooting around in the kitchen, and I wondered if they were looking for the sliced bread they'd bought

a week ago to make French toast. It had gone stale and I'd thrown it out. That made me remember my mother's French toast—light and fluffy, delicious with butter and maple syrup, a treat, not an everyday food—and I woke up for good.

She made it in an electric frying pan, a square one with a lid where the heating element was. My mother used that pan all the time, to broil steaks and chops and burgers, and I think filet of sole too. Chicken and leg of lamb she made in the oven with lemon potatoes. I looked online and found a “Vintage Hoover Electric Fry Pan Broiler Lid Stainless Steel Fry Pan Immersible” on e-bay. I'm pretty sure that was what she had, or something very similar. That pan existed. Check! It sat on the yellow (later black) kitchen counter next to the burners of the stove and the little trivet that said: “A kitchen bright and a singing kettle makes home a place you want to settle.” I don't remember what happened to the pan, but that was its spot.

When my mother's memory started to fail, it was as if she slowly began to fade until she became negative space. The fading lasted so long—20 years—it not only erased her memories and the person she used to be, but my memories of who she used to be. I am trying to remember. I am trying to fill in her image. In a drawing, if you wish to bring an object into focus, instead of drawing its shape, you could draw the spaces around it, and behold!, the object would appear. That is my hope. That is why the pan and all the things, no matter how trivial, in the house where we—my mother and father and sister and I—lived, on East 59th Street, next to the baseball field off Avenue U, in Brooklyn, N.Y., are important. The house is the frame, and perhaps if I can put each thing back in its proper place—the black wrought iron kitchen clock over the oven, the landscape oil paintings in the hallway my mother brought back from Greece, the hanging plants (spider, English ivy, purple passion, inch,

philodendron, fern) in the living room corner by the windows (casement, then double-hung), the decorative plates in the front hall as you enter, the 1950s bedroom furniture, the pale yellow Grand Prix with a black top in the driveway, the stuffed woodcock and blackbird on top of the china cabinet in the dining room, all of it, or as much of it as possible—perhaps then my mother’s form will emerge, will take its proper place in my memory. That is my hope.



*From the Air*

*for Catherine*

*Allison Burris*

*Did you know you could be earning miles right now?*  
It feels an awful lot like I'm spending them. Like  
I'm tossing petals up the aisle and will run out  
long before I get to the front row and the safety  
of Mom's lap. It will be summer before we're together  
again, breaking down her classroom, reorganizing  
the library and scraping the stickers off the desks.  
I ask every travel week to contain a full season,  
but it never seems to stretch that far. I pack  
as much as I can. The mountains out the window  
like crumpled tin foil. The clouds above are fluffy.  
Mom always pulls over to take pictures of clouds  
against the sunset. What is the collective noun  
for a group of clouds? A confusion? A chorus?  
I decide it's a caper of clouds and stare out  
at the toy world below the plane wings, tiny cargo  
ships in the bay, stacked with pez candy containers.  
Mini bridges connect the peninsula like a hand  
stretching between octaves. I pretend I can see  
my house, not just the gnarled yarn of the freeways.  
Mom, I miss you already.

*The Last Time (for Nana)*

*Danielle Bonnici*

I almost didn't recognize you  
fragile girl  
undone hair  
in tiny braids  
made by the nurse,  
trying to keep you neat  
your lips thin  
strange tubes running the length  
of your arms  
into your nostrils

You- always so meticulous  
setting your hair with  
old-fashioned mesh rollers  
and painting your lips  
hot pink with a twist up brush  
I still see you that way,  
superimposed over your gray countenance  
knowing that you are  
slipping through my fingers,  
like the dream you had

the one where everyone  
you loved seemed to be  
fading away from you.  
I wish you were a  
journal-writer and a record-keeper  
revealing to me all  
I will never know  
you sacrificed yourself;  
offered your soul up  
to the forbidding words of your parents

saying no to art school,  
to being a fashion designer  
dreams you deserted  
sixty-four years ago  
before marriage  
before twin babies  
before sick husband

before cancer  
The undone paintings  
undone designs

in the corners of your mind  
lighting your face from  
behind your eyes  
and turned into doodles  
of butterflies and winking faces  
for your grandchildren  
they are lost  
in the glare of fluorescent hospital light  
heat of radiation sessions  
and the garbled whispers

that have become your voice  
how can you,  
my accomplice in all my teenage rebellion,  
my confidante of first love,  
hold so unintelligible and gigantic  
a thing as death?  
Releasing your hand  
I know it is the last touch  
of your skin  
I will feel against my own

when I say goodbye  
I know it is for real  
know now  
that always  
I have loved you,  
as my truest friend in the face of all things-  
how can I face losing you?

I know that you are ready;  
that you are waiting  
to see your  
husband, a ghost to you  
these twenty-five long years  
waiting to run to him,  
so handsome and healthy  
like the day you first met.

## *Marriage Is Sacrifice*

my mother often says, and I wish  
I didn't know what that meant.

I wish she hadn't waited  
to tell my father of the lump  
in her breast, the one that began  
with my grandfather's death  
and didn't stop growing.

To save my father the worry  
and heartache, she stayed quiet,  
let him mourn his father.

She rubbed his back  
and held his hands in hers  
as he wept about death.

She never once considered  
the weight of her own.

*Renee Kalagayan*



## *Hypnagogia*

*Laurie Rosen*

In these heavy, cloud-filled days  
I could use  
a guardian angel.

I look everywhere;  
none of my dead have bothered  
to show their faces

since the time I flew  
in a plane shortly  
after my mother's death.

At take-off, I shut my eyes.  
Between wakefulness and sleep,  
Mom materializes.

Hands on hips, black pants  
and cardigan, red t-shirt, black hair--  
decades younger than when she died,

her hair not yet bleached  
or in its final stage of grey.  
She speaks to me

but all too soon my eyes flutter  
open and though her impression  
lingers, she disappears.

Now each time I board a plane, I close  
my eyes, like in prayer, believing  
I might conjure her

up in those high altitudes,  
nearer to angels,  
only reached by flight.

*Lives, Rearranged*  
*Shanti Chandrasekhar*

A tinge of unease dampens my anticipation while I wait outside my home. A fly buzzes in front of my face. I ward it off with my hand.

The black Acura SUV pulls into my driveway. My daughter-in-law, Manisha, emerges from the car. “Hi, Ma,” she says, her voice lacking the usual warmth.

The moment Manisha helps Simi climb out, the six-year-old, adjusting her backpack, runs to me. “Gramma!”

Unable to scoop her up as I used to, I lean over and put my arms around her.

“See, Gramma? My new Frozen backpack.” Simi wriggles, trying to move the backpack to the front. “I’ll show you Anna and Elsa.”

I’m not likely to remember the names of these fictional characters, let alone who’s who. My mind is elsewhere.

Manisha wheels a blue Delsey spinner, carry-on-luggage size you’re allowed in flights. Holding her other hand is the other girl—blond hair with streaks of red, like natural highlights. I’m unsure of how to greet this beautiful little stranger.

*Oh, that fly again.*

“Gramma? Becky’s my sister.” Simi beams with pride, as if she has invented Becky. “Becky, come.”

“Say Hi, Elizabeth,” Manisha says to the girl, who hides behind her new mother.

Her golden ponytail and the pink-and-lavender floral backpack are all I can see. “Hi, sweetie!”

Becky clings to Manisha. Manisha and I exchange glances, mine faltering, Manisha’s steady. Then, she steps forward and gives me a one-arm sideways hug, not her usual. Unfamiliar emotions wall us off.

Simi giggles. “Becky’s shy.”

Like a doll she’s picked up at a store on a whim, Manisha has brought Becky into our lives, and I can’t fathom the reason. Why is she a mother to this child when she could’ve had her own?

*When she could've had her own.* Why now? Why after Vivek? Thoughts of my son are broken pieces of my own self, broken clavicles, poking, stinging, choking.

“C’mon girls, get inside,” Manisha says.

Carry-on luggage and two backpacks. To hide anything akin to disappointment, I chuckle as we enter the house. “Close that door. That fly might get in. Summertime. Flies, gnats.”

“And sunshine and flowers.” Manisha points her chin at the blue and pink hydrangeas and shuts the front door.

Should I have removed Vivek and Manisha’s wedding picture from the mantle? But I haven’t changed a single thing despite two tragedies shattering my life—first my husband, then my adult son. Memories don’t vanish with removed objects. Twenty-fifth wedding anniversary with my husband, Vivek’s high school and college graduations, Vivek’s wedding, three-month-old Simi visiting her grandma-grandpa for the first time—all those precious moments still breathe here. I wouldn’t rearrange anything, wouldn’t move out of this house, my home for over two decades.

The girls, tired after the drive from New Jersey to Virginia, watch cartoons on television for a while. Manisha and I chat about my retirement, my hip-replacement surgery, her climb up the ladder in the IT firm, Simi’s new hobbies. Everything, except Becky.

Those whys run through my mind yet again. Why adopt when Manisha has her own daughter? Why a girl who doesn’t look like Simi? *Why now, why now, why now?* Stab, stab, stab. Those broken bones.

“I made spaghetti for Eliz—Becky. Wasn’t sure if she’d like *daal-rice* and *bhindi*.” Yellow lentils, rice, and okra, I’ve cooked Manisha’s favorite Indian meal.

“Becky’d be fine with anything,” Manisha says, “she’s not a finicky eater. You didn’t need to go overboard.”

“Coffee?” I suggest.

“I got it, Ma. You sit.” She saunters to the kitchen and sets the coffee pot.

More than the chance to relax, I welcome that hint of affection in her tone.

She picks up the glass jar next to the coffee maker and turns it around, inspecting. “Ma, these pistachios. They aren’t salted, are they?”

“No.”

“Can I give Becky some? She loves ‘em.”

And Simi hates it. Like her father. Vivek, as a child, hated nuts; all, except peanuts.

“Of course.” *Since when does she need permission?*

I catch her sidelong glance. That trickling sound from the coffee maker and the aroma of the drink we love to chat over do little to bring back the warmth of old times.

At lunch, Manisha doesn’t fuss over Becky but noticeably pays more attention to her than to Simi. She doesn’t need to worry about Simi, not here. At their home, I hope the girls get equal attention; the girls, only seven months apart. How I had wanted Vivek and Manisha to have another child, for Simi to have a sibling. But whenever I broached the subject, always in person, oxygen got sucked out of the room. Manisha needs to focus on her career, Vivek had said.

*So what’s changed now?*

After lunch, Simi succeeds in her incessant attempts to get Becky to play. The girls start running around.

“Simi, not here,” Manisha says, “Grandma’s house is always so neat, don’t mess things up. Or worse, break something.”

“Just let them play.” Then I say to the girls, “Do you want to color? I got new coloring books and crayon packs. For both of you.”

“Say thank you,” Manisha says, and the girls do. “Simi, go grab the open crayon pack from your backpack.” She clears her throat. “Ma, I encourage them to share. And they’re good at it.”

Simi is, I know. She’s always readily shared her toys with her friends. Just like her father. Even as a child, Vivek never had an issue with sharing.

Simi leads Becky to the bedroom, the one reserved for her, this time to be shared with Becky. And there’s one I tidy up for Vivek and Manisha for their visits. This time, just for Manisha.

Silence falls like a precarious bridge between us when the children leave the room. We start clearing the dining table. For the leftovers, Manisha pulls out Pyrex containers from the kitchen cabinet she had moved them into during her last visit—each time, she rearranges my kitchen to make things easier for me. No bending, no reaching up too high.

I rinse the dishes. Manisha loads them in the dishwasher.

“Gosh! So clean. Might as well hand wash,” Manisha says, as she always does. But this time, not teasingly. There’s an edge to her tone.

Handing her the cups and glasses, I watch her arrange them perfectly in the upper rack, with no space wasted.

She’s thinner than she was. Her straight black hair, with that sheen, is shorter now.

“So tell me more about Becky.” I wipe the counter dry. “All you said was some woman at Vivek’s hospital wanted to give up her child for adoption.”

“What’s more to tell?” A matter-of-fact response; decisive, not dismissive.

*She’s dodging.*

“You never had time for another child. Now you’re trying to fill the void Vivek left behind. With Becky. Is that what this is, Manisha?”

“No one can fill the void Vivek has left behind.”

*That’s true for me, I’m his mother.* “You’re still young. In a while, you might want to—”

“Oh, please!” Manisha pushes the dishwasher start button, hard. “Simi and Becky are my life. And there’s you.”

That she still cares enough to include me in her life is a breeze displacing some of the stuffy air between us.

Ever since she emailed me about her decision to adopt a girl around Simi’s age, so soon after Vivek at that, I’ve been perturbed. Emailed. Not called. When I asked to talk, Manisha said she was in the middle of a million things with the adoption process. I read it as *back off, I have my own life to live as I want*. Essentially, that’s what she was telling me. Not to interfere in her decisions. Not to ask questions. With my hip-replacement surgery as a valid reason for not driving three-plus hours to Edison, I left her alone. And I stuffed all the questions within, spending sleepless nights sobbing for Vivek, worrying about Simi, wondering about Manisha. At one point, my heightened anxiety led me to the idea of asking for custody of Simi, so Manisha could live her life, free of her past. But how could I violate a mother’s love?

And a grandmother’s love? Simi and Becky. One is my blood, the other’s not.

“I don’t mean to pry, Manisha, but you happen to be Vivek’s wife and Simi’s mother,” I now say. “Did you and Vivek ever discuss adopting a child?”

Manisha pulls off her apron, tosses it over the barstool, and strides out into the backyard.

*Now what?* I take a deep breath and wait for a few minutes for her to return. She doesn’t. I find her on the porch, sitting on the wicker chair, staring at the oak trees lining the wooded backyard.

“Manisha?” My hand hovers over her shoulder.

Her palm shoots up. “Just stop with your hundred-and-seventy questions.”

I withdraw my hand. “These aren’t questions triggered by curiosity. We’re family. You seem to accept it and yet—”

“You *are* curious. About Becky.”

“If she’s carrying our family name, I have a right to know.” I wish I hadn’t mentioned *rights*.

She says nothing.

“Is the biological mother one of Vivek’s patients?”

She lets out an audible sigh.

I get impatient now. “Does the woman even know who the father is?”

Manisha rises abruptly, knocking down the throw pillow. “Vivek,” she almost yells. “Vivek is the father.” She throws that *you-happy-now?* look at me.

Her raised voice is merely the handle of the knife, what jabs into my chest is what she has uttered.

“You’re saying Vivek had an affair? My Vivek wouldn’t do that. I know him.”

“IVF, Ma! IVF. Ever heard of it?”

No connection, romantic or otherwise, between Vivek and his former surgical coordinator’s friend in Brooklyn, a single woman, who desperately wanted a child; no violations, legal or ethical, Manisha tells me. It was when this woman was dying of leukemia that she reached out to Vivek. Vivek was on his way to Brooklyn, to meet Becky and her mother for the first time, when the accident happened.

So, not to attend a conference in Brooklyn as Manisha had told me then. I find myself sitting, unaware of when I lowered myself into the chair. Manisha remains standing, as though sitting would deprive her of the strength she needs.

Silences seep into the unfolding details of events like fatigued hands pausing while undoing a tangled skein of yarn.

“Why didn’t Vivek tell me about Becky?” My voice is weary, strained. My tone, not angry or demanding.

“Cause he knew how you’d react.” She skips her usual remarks about my old-fashioned values, my *Indianness*. “But he would’ve. Eventually.”

*Eventually*. Except, he didn’t wait. Like he didn’t wait for me after the accident. He was gone before I reached there. “And you? Why didn’t *you* tell me?”

No response. But I know that’s why she’s here.

“Were you okay with the...the donation?” I ask her.

“Vivek and I never made major decisions without discussing. Without agreeing upon things.”

Northern cardinals chirp somewhere among the trees, as though to fill uncomfortable pauses in our conversation. Pauses that never before existed between us. We had always chatted nonstop like mother and daughter, like friends.

“At the hospital...after the accident, he tried to say something. He couldn’t speak. I promised him I’d take care of Becky.”

Maybe Vivek tried to tell her to tell me about Becky.

My knee buckles as I stand up. Manisha holds my upper arm in a gentle grip.

“It’s like...like she’s Vivek’s last gift to me.” Her voice is hoarse. “How can I not love that child like my own?”

In the following day and a half, Becky warms up to me—first, during our outing to the mall, then some more while Manisha has the girls help with the project *Rearrange Grandma’s Walk-in Closet*—but not as much as I would’ve liked. I imagine having Becky all to myself for a week, a month. Then a thought occurs to me. Had Manisha not adopted Becky, with the biological mother having no close family, I would’ve filed for custody.

Before they leave, Manisha embraces me, then says, “Becky, give Grandma a hug.”

Becky allows my arms around her for a moment, then wiggles herself free, leaving me with a spasm in my chest.

I stand outside. Three hands, one big, two little ones, wave at me from the SUV that reverses from the driveway, goes around the cul-de-sac, and then is out of sight. A golden-yellow butterfly flutters away from clusters of blue and pink hydrangea flowers.



*Why Adopt?*

*Cindy Bousquet Harris*

It's easy,  
like pushing a semi uphill,  
wading through swamp mud  
as it sucks your legs.

It's fast,  
like etching granite with the wind,  
telling squash to grow  
because you're hungry.

It's painless,  
like silence of the empty room,  
pulling your guts out  
and watching them dry.

But children dance on cushions for a stage,  
and there are giggles coming from that room.

*First Day*

*Cindy Bousquet Harris*

*I'm hungry can I have  
some milk it spilled  
can I have more  
cereal I can't reach it...*

What have I done?

I've become a slave—  
actively, willingly,  
become a slave.

Later, three-year-old Joseph  
runs through the house  
gleefully naked,  
shouting, "Bath time!"

I can do this.

## *Interview with Sara Rauch*

by Melissa Ashley Hernandez

Sara Rauch is the author of *What Shines* from *It: Stories and XO*. She gets up at 5:30am every morning to fit in writing time. She is the Poetry Program Coordinator at The Care Center in Holyoke, MA, where she encourages teen and young moms to find their voices through writing. Her home overflows with books, and her sons are all avid readers. Every day she is grateful for a life full of wonder, family, and words.

[Website](#) | [Substack](#) | [Bluesky](#)



I sent out a query on Bluesky asking for people who wanted to talk about their experience with motherhood to reach out. Three people responded and asked to participate. I conducted these interviews more as conversations, which felt more personal and, by extension, more appropriate for the vulnerability that can arise when discussing this topic. I went in with no prepared questions, just an open mind and a desire for humanness through the stories of strangers.

This was Sara's message to me:

Prose writer here and mom to two, stepmom to one--my first story collection explored the decision to become a mom from a bunch of different angles; would LOVE to be a part of the issue!

\*\*\*

## Sara Rauch on “The Woven Tapestry of Motherhood”

**WILD WILLOW MAGAZINE:** Thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview, Sara. Can you talk a bit about why you wanted to be interviewed about this topic?

**SARA RAUCH:** To answer your question about why I wanted to be interviewed on the topic of deciding to become a mom and what that's looked like in my life and in my fiction, partly what drew me to your call was wanting to share the experience of my decision as something other writers might relate to.

For a really long time, from the time I was a teenager until into my mid-30s, I did not want kids. I wanted a creative life, and it seemed impossible to have kids be a part of that (I laugh a little at this naivete now!). In my 30s, around the time that a weird little nagging voice started to pipe up with ideas about "starting a family," I was in a long-term, committed relationship with another woman. She had originally wanted kids, and I'd always said no to that, but when I expressed the possibility that I might be changing my mind, she balked. I can only see this in retrospect, but because I couldn't talk with her without fighting over what I was struggling to understand, all my questions and worries came out in my writing.

Writing fiction was still pretty new to me at the time, but it turned out to be a really fertile (pun intended? lol) place to explore what was

essentially an identity crisis. After all this time swearing I never wanted kids, who was I to start wanting them now?! At least half of the stories I wrote during that time (ultimately published in *What Shines from It*) had to do with pregnancy and/or babies in various forms -- abortions, miscarriages, fertility issues -- babies that wanted to be born but couldn't, for whatever reason. During this time, I got caught up in a (mostly, but not entirely, long distance, emotional) affair with a married man (not a secret; my second book, *XO*, is an autobiographical account of those years) -- again only with retrospect, I can see that part of me was "borrowing" his life, trying it on in an emotional way. Eventually, both of those relationships ended, and I was single for a while.

During this time, I did a LOT of soul searching. But my desire for a family didn't ebb -- honestly, some days I am still surprised by this. But I met my husband, who already had a son from his first marriage, and we had two sons in fairly quick succession. I wasn't wrong to think that it would be hard to balance motherhood and writing: it very much is! Balance, as a writing mother, is an impossible word. At no point has it been easy to keep writing a part of my life (though, honestly, that was true even before kids), but I've kept at it, mostly because I want my kids (now 7, 9, & 18) to see me honoring and valuing a creative life.

**WWM: Your story inspires me with so many questions! In your first publication, why did you specifically focus on difficult topics during your struggle to understand your initial desire for motherhood?**

SR: This is a really good question, though I fear my answer is somewhat boring! When I was writing the bulk of the stories in *What Shines from It*, I was in an MFA program, learning how to plot and how to raise stakes and how to give my characters secrets and... all the things. So I suspect it was purely by (perhaps subconscious) accident that I gave my characters such emotionally thorny situations to deal with. It was such a fraught decision for me; perhaps I felt that the only way to fully represent that struggle was to make my characters struggle even more mightily.

**WWM: And how did writing about these difficult and emotional aspects of pregnancy and motherhood shape your decision to become a mother? Because, as you said, you did later end up having your kids, but did those thoughts that you explored in your first collection follow you years later when you were experiencing your first pregnancy?**

SR: It's interesting, because I wrote the stories (mostly) during a two-year period, then three years passed, and the collection was accepted while I was pregnant with my first kid, and I was editing it when he was a baby, so I was reengaging with the material in a very different

way. But I found that the emotional aspects of what I had written held true, even if the circumstances were different. My first pregnancy was uneventful, but early motherhood was different from what I expected: it was exhausting, but also a little boring. That surprised me! My second kiddo arrived seven weeks early and spent his first three weeks in the NICU – a situation I hadn't written about (and still haven't) – and then having two kids at home was its own whirlwind. I don't remember a lot of those days. But when it was hard, and it often was, I thought of the stories. How much I had put my characters through, and how they represented pieces of me: the surprise of changing my mind, how much I had wanted a family, and what I had given up to get to motherhood. The big difference, I suppose, is that stories end. Being a mom doesn't.

**WWM: What is your favorite piece of work themed around motherhood? I know that's a bit of a loaded question given that you've written so much from different viewpoints, but I'm also wondering if having children changed this answer. Like, if I asked you in your 30s versus now, would the answer have changed?**

SR: For a long time, pre-children, my answer to this question would probably have been *Beloved* and *To the Lighthouse*. Two remarkably different narratives about motherhood, what family is and can be, how history/time impact what it means to mother, to face loss, to let go. I still love both books,

and they both still feel tapped into some essential truth about motherhood. Since having kids, I might add *Terrace Story* by Hilary Leichter, *The Changeling* by Victor LaValle (this book is narrated by the father, but allows the mother's grief and belief to drive the action, which is refreshing), *Sea of Tranquility* by Emily St John Mandel, *The Book of Form and Emptiness* by Ruth Ozeki, and Grady Hendrix's *The Southern Book Club's Guide to Slaying Vampires*, which features a group of bad-ass suburban moms kicking vampire butt. You probably noticed I didn't mention any nonfiction here; much to my chagrin, I have not found a whole lot of memoir or essay that really speaks to me as far as motherhood goes. I did enjoy Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, but not enough to call it a favorite. I don't necessarily think my experience of motherhood is unique, but I haven't been able to find much resonance in contemporary nonfiction accounts. Perhaps this will change with time. Oh, and I would be remiss to not mention poetry: pre-kids, Anne Sexton's work was some of my favorite – loved her clear-eyed, confessional tone about mothering her daughter. More recently, Rebecca Hart Olander's *Singing from the Deep End* and Jenny Browne's poems really hit home.

**WWM: So many books and stories! I love that. With your craft, have your children directly inspired any pieces of writing?**

SR: Perhaps related to my previous answer, kinda-sorta? I don't write directly about my

kids. They appear occasionally in my nonfiction because it would be ridiculous to try to pretend they're not there. Perhaps especially because they are still young, it feels like it would be an invasion of their privacy to write about their lives in any specific way. That said, being a mom and having a family has influenced a fair amount of my newer fiction – I feel a lot freer to play with and/or push ideas and struggles about mothering and children when I can invent things. Even if those inventions are rooted in experience. I am put in mind of this Robert Flaherty quote that I happened upon recently: "One often has to distort a thing to catch its true spirit."

**WWM: During your journey in discovering this new side of you, you ended up dating a man (your current husband) who already had a child. What was that like for you to be put in a mother-like position at that point in your life?**

SR: This is a really interesting question! I remember feeling really unprepared for anything mother-like. (Has that feeling changed? LOL, not really!) My husband and his ex-wife remain on cordial terms and custody is shared, so I wasn't really expected to step fully into a mother role. But it was important to me to have my stepson understand that I cared for him and wanted him to be a part of my life. I tried really hard not to disrupt the father-son relationship that I had become a part of: that was important to me, too. There is no real playbook for

stepmothers (except as wicked) and that makes sense, because each stepmother's role is different depending on what dynamic they're entering into. So I did my best to adapt as we went along, and I think that's gone okay.

**WWM: What's something that terrified you before having kids that ended up being nothing to worry about? And alternatively, what's something that you worry about now that you have children?**

SR: It's funny because I can't think of anything that terrified me before having kids. I grew up with an anxious mom, and either as a reaction to that or just innately (or some combination of both), I tend to lean toward being the type of person who thinks: "I'm not going to worry about the disaster until it happens." Did I develop anxieties and do I worry now?

ABSOLUTELY. All the freaking time. I worry about losing my sense of self in the seemingly endless tasks of motherhood, I worry about gun violence in schools and too much sugar and whether my kids know I love them and which video games to let them play and if they get enough protein and if I yell too much and if there will be world for them to live in when they're my age and and and.

**WWM: Motherhood is so different from person to person. Is there anything specific you wanted to speak about that maybe I haven't touched on?**

SR: You know, while I agree that motherhood is different for each mom, because we are individuals and our children are individuals and each family is unique, I also think that there is so much commonality across experience and how we tell our stories. I work with teen moms (as a poetry and ELA teacher), and I find that, despite the (sometimes very big) differences in culture, age, lifestyle, being moms gives us a very particular connection. When a student comes in tired because their baby is going through a sleep regression, I know exactly what she's talking about. And when I share the kinds of back-talk I'm getting from my own kids, my students laugh – because they're going through it too, or will be soon. My personal story is twisty, and very much my own, but I also strongly feel that I am part of a larger tapestry of experience. All these threads woven together create something unendingly rich and beautiful.





*The Witching Hour*

*Maria Pianelli Blair*

Despite  
rising mortality rates  
and diminishing autonomy.

Despite stagnating  
ambitions and  
crippling costs.

Despite the nausea,  
the heartburn,  
the headaches.

Poking.  
Prodding.  
Testing.  
Stressing.

Despite it all,  
arms,  
womb,  
wallet,  
my everything  
are spread  
wide open  
for  
this tiny  
beautiful  
terrifying  
life.

Induction.  
Episiotomy.  
Epidural.

Second-degree tears  
and  
sleepless nights.

Pumping.

Dumping.  
Latching.  
Sucking.

Bleeding.  
Cracking.

3am feeds  
like private vigils  
for who I've been  
and where we're heading.

Unlatch.  
Relatch.  
A quick caress.  
Her tiny hand slips in mine.  
A wave of peace.  
Gentle.  
Serene.

*The World Awaits*

*Sarah Das Gupta*

Her tiny fingers grasp my hand;  
dark pools of eyes follow me.  
The first light creeps beneath the curtains.  
Black curls like tendrils wind round  
shell-like ears with rose-pink lobes.

Outside the world waits impatiently.  
The dew on the grass is burning off.  
In the distance, tongues of surf,  
lick lazily up the wet, smooth sand.  
Out at sea, white horses fret and foam.

I lift my daughter gently from the cot.  
A tentative smile hovers on puckered lips.  
My hands support a strengthening neck,  
already through my fingers I feel the muscles tense.  
Bare feet are kicking now against my waist.

A ray of sun touches the bed;  
her eyes focus on the path of light.  
Tiny, clenched fists wave excitedly.  
I feel a determined grip on my collar.  
In the garden the magnolia 's in bud.

## *Turning Over New Leaves*

*Soramimi Hanarejima*

On my 13th birthday, Mom gave me a handmade book, just as I knew she would. On her 13th birthday, she'd gotten a book like this from Granma, and ever since then, she had only come to love it more and more, turning many of its pages into the stuff of my bedtime stories. So of course Mom would continue this tradition of parents handing down their stories of growing up as a way to help their children grow up. Luckily, there was nothing in this tradition that said I had to accept this help right away. So I squeezed the book between a dictionary and wildflower field guide on the shelf above my desk, and I decided it would stay there until I was ready to read about the hardships Mom had been hinting at for years.

A couple weeks later, a sunbeam slanting across my room lit up the book's spine, like the world was telling me to take a look inside. So I opened the book to a random page and read about how Mom kept using the name she had in sixth grade, even though she'd been assigned a new one for seventh grade. She was afraid of getting into trouble, but the old name went so well with her best friend's new one, and in secret, they'd say these names together over and over, feeling like a superhero duo.

The next day, I told my best friend that Mom had to change her name every year and we were lucky we got to just use our own names and whatever nicknames we wanted. She said that I was lucky I got to find out about growing up in a different time and place through Mom's book. And that made me think that Mom had been lucky to have had a best friend she could share secrets with. So when I got home, I looked for another part of the book about their friendship, but a numbered list got my attention instead.

### **How to Become a Fairy in 5 Easy Steps**

1. *Get a wand.* Whether it's forged for you or passed down from a retired fairy godmother, the best wand is the wand you have and know how to use.
2. *Learn to cast spells.* Pick up whatever easy spells you can, even if you don't think they'll ever be useful.

3. *Practice flying.* Whether with wings or by floating, flying is the fastest and most reliable way to get to those who need you. Once you're good at it, going by horseback or coach just can't compare.
4. *Choose a fairy name.* You can name yourself after just about anything (where you live, what your specialty is, how you dress), but you need a unique name so people will remember who you are and know who to call upon when the time comes.
5. *Introduce yourself as a fairy.* Using your fairy name when you meet people tells them that you take yourself and your magic seriously.

After reading these instructions in a novel, Mom wanted this sort of straightforward path to becoming something special. So she came up with one and followed it, recapping what she did with her own list.

1. Got binoculars: Dad's old pair (chunky but durable).
2. Learned to identify birds: used field guides from the library.
3. Practiced moving through the world like a birder: listened for birdsong and looked in tree branches for anything perched or flitting.
4. Chose a birder name: The Wandering Warbler Watcher!
5. Told people at school about my interest in birds: first mentioned it to my science teacher, and she wrote down a few places where I could see cranes during the fall migration.

Now I knew how Mom had become such a good birder, always able to spot and name birds whenever we were outside. And I wondered what I could become in 5 steps—what could my wand be?

Then it hit me in social studies class when we were discussing how there could be tension between people whose cultures have different tempos. "Isn't this a case of dyssynchrony?" I asked, and when the teacher complimented me on having a good memory, I realized I already had a wand and had been using it for a while. My attention. I'd had my attention on the teacher when she offhandedly mentioned dyssynchrony the week before, and that word had become part of a memory—a piece of the past I could use in the present.

So I started using my attention more actively, noticing—really noticing—comparing, finding patterns and just wondering. Then I wielded my attention while trying to move through time in different ways, like gliding through moments, lingering in moods, hovering alongside a friend and following the flow of a teacher’s explanation. Soon my memories felt like places instead of images, the way they used to, and I wanted a name for this new me making and visiting memories. But nothing I came up with sounded right, and I had to ask my best friend for help. After thinking for a moment, she said, “How about Memiranda?” Which was perfect.

Then, as we raked leaves on a Saturday afternoon, I told Mom that I was getting good at remembering things. Still dragging leaves across the dry grass, she said that was very mature of me, like I was doing something advanced for my age. So I asked if part of being an adult was having a good memory. “That certainly helps,” she answered. “But an important part of being an adult is being serious about what’s important to you.” *Right, of course*, I thought, what’s an adult if not someone serious?

But writing about this now, I know more clearly than ever what she meant. I’m serious in a way I couldn’t have been before, and I can’t wait to find out what you’ll become serious about.



## *Blow*

*Wing Yau*

Mama sits by the window every night to contemplate the difficulty of this ghostless country. Because it is ghostless, she needs to learn what this country speaks. In the dark, she listens to the most powerful language that speaks to her.

He has forgotten Mama's voice. After she arrived here, she folded her tongue in half, and refused to call things by their names. Mama sits by the window, sharpening her words with the treetop serrations as the wind blows.

Outside the house, Mama speaks in agreement as precise as a legal document. In public, Mama uses simple phrases such as *how are you* to express genuine love. Likewise, she'd reply *I am fine thank you* to hide regrets or to fulfill a duty as a newcomer.

Neither he nor Mama grew up in this house. So they don't know its trees, or how twisted their roots can be. Each night, Mama sits by the window and watches dirty stained underwear going mad on the clothesline. Her body turns to a leaky mass of needs. He could feel it: the wind was up to no good.

Mama didn't know the word "rage" back then; she thought she was too old for it. But she knows it comes from throats clogged with piercing breathlessness by the window. Night after night, she listens to the wind until the sky beads blood, its warped nocturne becomes a home-calling cry full of vowels. She repeats after them.

He knows Mama will eventually find out all cries ask the same thing: why don't we know where we're going? Once she figures that out, it will become her last secret.

When the wind blows Mama has to speak louder. She sits by the window; presses her cheek against the greasy pane. Her tongue flaps rapidly like a national flag.

He is a good son. He wants Mama by his side. He goes to work everyday, and smiles at her at dinner. Life is self-sufficient because there's nothing else looking back at him. Just trees, and not enough windows .

What he has to say is just part of a larger glossolalia every rootless one shares, like breathing in what someone else breathes out.

But Mama always wants what's best for him.

Mama's reflected face, melted into the tree trunks outside, becomes one with the tree. Because the trees love their wind and would give their limbs and heart for an answer. He reaches out for her hands, her fingers spread on the window digging in with tiny roots.

Outside the house, the wind couldn't care less. So focused on rattling a sack of bones through the fogged glass, it forgets its humanlike sound. He watches the wind unravel the eucalyptus tree, tearing its barks piece by piece from its corpse, dragging Mama's roots sideways into its own relentless pain.

He waits for everything to pass.

## *Motherland*

*Ashy Blacksheep*

What's it matter where you were born?  
You didn't pick the place, had no say.  
Your mother didn't really pick it either.  
Preference of hospital was the last thing  
on her still-teenage mind.  
Perhaps she was hopeful, grateful  
for you to be the only thing  
on her freshly twenty-year-old mind.  
Not that it mattered because you both left  
that hospital, that town, that prairie.  
Too hurt to stay, too wary to stray  
too far from what she knew  
so, she walked out on a limb of the family tree  
with no leaves to shade you in the desert.  
Your hair lightened and your skin tanned.  
Your ears perked at the mention  
of your mother's homeland.  
Where her mother still lived  
    —your fairy grandmother  
Where it had all the seasons  
    —you'd never seen snow  
Where a river ran  
    —but never ran cold.

## *Waiting For Baby*

*Beverley Stevens*

After the first dose of meds, my daughter, Anna, messages *All very fun and relaxing so far*. She and her partner, Tessa, are both outside, walking around the car park of the provincial hospital on a sunny December day as they wait for the labor to begin.

But a little later, *Not fun, don't like*.

Then it's Tessa who sends the messages. She's timing the contractions, counting the minutes between them, as Anna breathes through the knotted pain. Deep breath in. Slowly out. In. Out. And again. Over and over.

A hundred and fifty miles away in my cottage in the city, I'm keeping track of the four rows in the knitting pattern (knit; K1, P1, repeat; knit; P1, K1 repeat) that intertwine to form a fine lacy texture.

I'd cast on the fifty stitches in soft, charcoal-gray baby wool at about the same time the birth was induced. After only a few rows, several dropped stitches meant I'd pulled it undone and started over. But for Anna, the oxytocin in her system means no going back. Baby's head is down, but facing the wrong way, putting extra pressure on the spine. There's laughing gas, though it's no laughing matter, followed by fentanyl and an epidural.

It's only three days after Christmas and as I wait for news, the words of a nativity song go round in my head: "The hopes and fear of all the years are met in thee tonight." My mind won't lie still but I keep knitting, an act of faith that all will be well, yet a tangle of worry entwined into the garment that's taking shape. I wish the knitting needles in my hands would turn into a magic wand. Three interwoven threads have gone into the making of this baby: the most viable of Tessa's eggs, harvested at a leading fertility clinic; donor sperm, the donor chosen from a dozen profiles, no photos though; and Anna's womb, prepared by hormone supplements to welcome the fertilized egg.

I wonder if I should jump in the car now and make the four-hour drive. To be closer, just in case. But I don't. As I'd packed up to leave their place on Boxing Day, Anna had said, "You're welcome to stay a couple more days until baby comes." Instead, I'd made a run for home. I was sure the birth would go smoothly. It didn't occur to me that Anna might really want me around – not at the birth itself, but there before and after. That in putting my own needs first, I might be behaving like my mother.

Evening stretches into night, and night into early morning. As the knitting grows apace, I hold the needles in an ever-tighter grip and struggle to keep the tension even. I realize I've gone wrong; got the knit one, purl one, out of order. I have to reverse knit to unpick two rows, stitch by painstaking stitch, the way my mother taught me.

By the time Tessa reports, *Good progress on the cervix now*, the back of the baby jersey has enlarged to a sixteen centimeter swathe. More messages come.

*Anna is a bit hot. Bloods are being taken.*

*The midwife is in the room; several doctors too.*

Then things go quiet. *Several doctors?* My stomach spasms as if poked and prodded by the sharp tip of the knitting needles that are still in my hands, still restlessly looping and twisting yarn. My great-great-grandmother died in childbirth, my niece almost did. And sepsis is still one of the main causes of maternal death everywhere. A small brandy loosens the tension, unravels the tears. It's all going on so far away. I promise myself that when the next child comes along, I'll be close by.

Then a message arrives on my phone with good tidings.

*It's a baby!*

A flurry of photos follow.

My tears turn to sobs of relief.

The waiting is over. My first grandchild has been pushed and pulled, delivered out into the world. They stitch up Anna's episiotomy tear, baby lying swaddled against her chest.

I run my hand over the silky soft square that was no more than a ball of wool some hours before, breathe deeply.

The birds are waking by the time everyone is ready to settle for the night. Tessa sends a picture of the newborn babe, its eyes shut tight, tucked up in a hand-knitted shawl. With my mind arcing to the tender new life, safely arrived and ensconced in a hospital crib, I drift into sleep.



*Gift Wrapped from Some Heaven*  
Sandra Beth Levy

I could not say I believed in God  
before I touched your tiny fingers  
while you laid across my belly  
after I birthed you from my body

your eyes fluid ocean blue before bronze  
pigmentation arrived, your lips pursed  
to latch life – before warm milk  
engorged my breasts

pillows for your buttered skin  
you, gift wrapped from some heaven  
sent to quell bruises I carried so long  
a new chance for love

that would not skitter away  
to leave me bathed again in grief  
How could someone as small as you  
alleviate pain, instill faith, I only know

I am seventy now by the pain cracking  
my neck, fingers refusing to bend  
the sight of your manly frame, velvet timbre  
of your voice – deep as a thickened forest

reminding me I raised you a lifetime:  
It did not heal all my bruises  
or spare you yours – but awe remains  
even if I do not say I believe in God

I can still breathe the vision and warmth  
of your sweetness hours after your birth  
and through this journey of raising you  
hold a love that did not skitter away

but continues to weave and mend  
each hurt that encroaches upon us  
between us, a faith born and reborn  
beyond the limitations of our bodies

## *The Quirkiest of Eaters*

*Nancee Cline*

My mother, the quirkiest  
of eaters, afraid of food

unless she ate it as a child.  
Rural depression Texas,

never enough, mostly ate  
the simplest fresh food, straight

from her grandparents' green farm.  
Blue plums, she remembers, taste

best while eaten in the tree,  
in the heat of summer, and

watermelon with salt. She  
remembers every Christmas

the gift of one fragrant orange,  
dreamt of it all the next year.

She always loved radishes,  
cut them in pretty rosettes,

red and white, crisp and sharp.  
Leaning against the kitchen sink,

she ate them with her face  
soft, and her brown eyes closed.

## Meet the Editor-in-Chief

**Melissa Ashley Hernandez** is a Latinx writer, editor, and performer from the South Jersey/Philadelphia area. She has her BA in Acting and Directing, and two MFAs in Creative Writing and Publishing from Fairleigh Dickinson University. She is also the founder and Editor-in-Chief of Wild Willow Magazine, formerly The Minison Project!

Her prose can be found in two short stories published in 2021, “The Rum Keg Girl” in the Cemetery Gates Media collection, *Paranormal Contact: A Quiet Horror Confessional*, and “Lady Killer” in Volume 4 of Kandisha Press’ Women of Horror Anthology, *Don’t Break the Oath*.

Her poetry can be found in *the minison zine*, The Daily Drunk Magazine, Fahmidan Journal, and Bandit Fiction, among others.

## Wild Willow Magazine

Formerly The Minison Project, Wild Willow Magazine is a literary magazine founded by Melissa Ashley Hernandez that intertwines nature and the human experience, showcasing the wonderful, weird, and wild aspects of the human condition.



## Contributor Bios

**Allison Burris** writes whimsical and subversive poems from Oakland, CA. Her most recent publications are in *Redheaded Stepchild* and *NonBinary Review*. You can often find her at the library looking for a magic portal or getting up to some kitchen witchery. She writes about creativity on *Substack at Ink in the Archives*.

**Anna Buynova** was born in Russia, has spent many years in the U.S, and now makes her home in Thailand with her husband and two sons. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *The Dewdrop Literary Magazine*, and *Tar River Poetry*.

**Ashy Blacksheep** is a writer who finds her place in the world between the lines of poetry. Her kaleidoscopic perspective allows her to see life informing and building upon itself like fractals. A Pushcart Prize Nominee, Ashy's poetry is published in *The Minison Project*, *Sylvia Magazine*, and *Ample Remains* among others.

**Beverley Stevens** is a Kiwi writer from Wellington, New Zealand who's working on a memoir in essays. She's been published in *Short Reads*, *Sad Girl Diaries*, *Dorothy Parker's Ashes*, *Landfall*, *Headland*, and the *Brevity Blog*, among others.

**Cindy Bousquet Harris** is a poet, the editor of *Spirit Fire Review*, and a licensed marriage and family therapist. Her poems can be found in *California Quarterly*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Black Bough Poetry Christmas & Winter Edition Volumes II and III*, and in several anthologies. Cindy has given poetry readings and has lead poetry workshops for youth and adults. She and her husband adopted all three of their children and live in Southern California. Her full-length poetry collection, *Rain Shadow*, is forthcoming from *Kelsay Books*.

**Claire Taylor** is a writer for both adult and youth audiences. Her poetry collection, *April and Back Again*, from *Publishing Genius*, is out now. Claire is the founding editor of *Little Thoughts Press*, a literary magazine for young readers. She lives with her family in Baltimore, Maryland, in an old stone house where birds love to roost.

**Danielle Bonnici** taught for 17 years in New York City public schools, abroad, and as an adjunct lecturer for adult learners. She completed a Master of Fine Art in Fiction Writing at Fairleigh Dickinson University. She lives in Forest Hills, Queens with her family and is working hard to finish her first novel. When she's not writing, you may find her exploring the woods somewhere or chilling out on her yoga mat.

**Denise Bossarte** is an award-winning writer, photographer, and artist based in Texas, USA. When she's not immersed in writing, she turns her lens to the world around her, exploring visual spaces with a keen eye for the unexpected. Her photography captures the powerful imagery that can be found in unusual places. She enjoys writing, exploring new art forms, and teaching contemplative photography workshops. She lives in Texas with her husband and literary cat, *Za' Ji*.

**Elizabeth Larose** is a visual artist from New Orleans with shows worldwide, including in NYC, The San Francisco Bay Area, Istanbul and Cartagena. She has also worked in education, from teaching to administration at international schools in Columbia, India, Turkey, and the U.S. Her poetry has been published in *TheNewVerse*.News, *Leas Lit*, *Resilience in Writing*, *A Poetry Anthology* and *The Ekphrastic Review*.

**Ella B. Winters** (she/they) is a social worker, researcher, and writer, living on the South-East coast of England with her partner and their sausage dog. Her poetry often explores themes of identity, memory and belonging. It has been published in *The Aftershock Review*, *Full House Literary*, *Black Iris*, *Wildscape Literary*, *Outskirts Lit* and elsewhere, and was twice nominated for the Pushcart prize. She is an associate editor at *Shadow & Sax*.

**Huina Zheng** holds an M.A. with Distinction in English Studies and works as a college essay coach. Her creative work has been published in *Baltimore Review*, *Variant Literature*, *Midway Journal*, and other literary journals. She has received multiple honors, including nominations for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, and Best Microfiction. She lives in Guangzhou, China, with her family.

**Karen Baumgart** lives in Australia and adores beautiful quotes, pink things, cats and chai lattes. She grew up with immigrant parents and a beloved Abuelita (grandma), and loves working in human services policy, especially when it enables marginalised people to have a voice. Karen used to be an English teacher and is quite certain that writing is the best way to survive being human in a messy, precious world.

**Kristin Houlihan** is a mother, wife, and disabled writer from California and EIC of *Epistemic Literary* and *Nimblewitlit* Magazines. Her poetry has been published in a variety of literary magazines and her book, *Lift the Mask*, is available widely in ebook, paperback, and audio.

**Laurie Rosen** is a lifelong New Englander. Her poetry has appeared in *One Art: a journal of poetry*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Oddball Magazine*, *The New Verse News*, *Minyan Magazine*, *The Inquisitive Eater: New School Food*, *Zig Zag Lit Mag*, and elsewhere. Laurie was nominated for a 2025 Pushcart Prize.

**Maria Pianelli Blair** has had prose appear, or forthcoming, in *Querencia Press*; *Rawhead Journal*; *Jersey Devil Press*; *Blood + Honey*; *Rat Bag Lit*; *Lost Balloon*; *Pile Press*; and elsewhere.

**Michael Hass** is a poet and Professor Emeritus at Chapman University. His work has appeared in *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Calliope Art & Literary Magazine*, *Psychological Perspectives*, and *The Brussels Review*. He lives in Long Beach, California, where he also practices as a psychologist working with children and families.

**Nancee Cline** is a lifetime reader, writer, teacher, tutor with a master's degree in Interdisciplinary Humanities. Her newest chapbook is titled *Blurry Things*. Cline lives with her husband in Hawaii where she also dances hula, bakes peasant bread, and gardens her half acre of wild green.

**Renee Kalagayan** Renee Kalagayan is an Asian-American writer and editor. Her work is featured or forthcoming in, among others, *Euphemism*, *Relief*, *About Place*, *SoFloPoJo*, *Carolina Muse*, and the city-wide GVL Poetry Trail installation in Greenville, South Carolina. She is the assistant poetry editor of *South 85 Journal*.

**Sandra Beth Levy** (she/her) is a retired psychologist who resides in Rhode Island and passionately practiced psychotherapy for forty years. She is currently immersed in creative writing after raising two biracial sons while honoring her Jewish-feminist identities. Her unique social and personal histories weave their way into her writing as she explores love, loss, aging, sexuality, and awe of nature. Sandra has published with *Anomaly Poetry*, *Local Gems Press*, *Arcana Poetry*, *A Curious Moon*, *The Vagabond's Verse*, *SHINE*, *Viridine Literary*, *The Orange Rose*, *Red Rose Thornes*, *Azarao Journal*, and has forthcoming pieces with *The Poetry Lighthouse*, *Quillkeepers Press*, *Cosmic Daffodil* and *Rough Diamond Poetry*. Her debut poetry chapbook with *Finishing Line Press* is scheduled for release in winter 2027.

**Sara Rauch** is the author of *What Shines from It: Stories* and *XO*. She gets up at 5:30am every morning to fit in writing time. She is the Poetry Program Coordinator at The Care Center in Holyoke, MA, where she encourages teen and young moms to find their voices through writing. Her home overflows with books, and her sons are all avid readers. Every day she is grateful for a life full of wonder, family, and words.

**Sarah Das Gupta** is a writer from Cambridge, UK who has taught English in India, Tanzania and UK. Her work has been published in anthologies and magazines in over 25 countries. She has been nominated for Best of the Net, The Pushcart and a Dwarf Star.

**Sarai Nichole** is a Black Canadian writer whose work explores grief, womanhood, and emotional inheritance. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *JMWW*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Neon & Smoke*, and *Jerry Jazz Musician*. She is the author of the Amazon bestselling poetry collection, *Excerpts From My Journal*.

**Shanti Chandrasekhar** is a Maryland-based writer whose words have appeared in *The Sunlight Press*, *Literary Mama*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Persimmon Tree*, and elsewhere. She finds joy, purpose, and fulfillment in motherhood and writing.

**Shirlee Jellum** is a retired English teacher who publishes fiction, nonfiction and poetry, most recently or upcoming in *Flash Frontier*, *Culture Cult*, *Gleam*, *Elm Leaves Journal* and *Intervals*.

**Soramimi Hanarejima** is the author of the neuropunk story collection *Literary Devices For Coping*. Soramimi's recent work appears in *Pulp Literature*, *The Offing*, *Black Warrior Review*, and *The Cincinnati Review*.

**Tracie Renee** (she/her) is a librarian, a *Publishers Weekly* book reviewer, and a BOTN-nominated writer who lives and dreams in sort-of Chicago. Her poem, "Pre-Existing Conditions," earned second place in the 2025 Passionfruit Poetry Prize competition. Find Tracie in *HAD* and *Orange Blossom Review*.

**Valerie Georgoulakos** was a copy editor for *People* magazine for 18 years. She now works as a freelance copy editor and translator, and divides her time between New York and Athens. Her work has previously appeared in *Grub Street* and on [scarymommy.com](http://scarymommy.com).

**Wing Yau** is a Hong Kong-born poet currently based in Australia. Wing's recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Dark Poets Club*, *Space and Time Magazine*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, and more. Their debut collection *The Fiction of Flying* is forthcoming in 2026.

**Yomalis Lourdes Rosario** (she/her) is a Black Dominican poet who was born and raised in Washington Heights, NYC. She is a graduate of the 2025 Brooklyn Poets Mentorship Program and serves as the Managing Editor for *WE THE SOIL*. You can find her poems in *Epiphany Magazine*, *ROOM Magazine*, & elsewhere.





