

EVENT TITLE:**Reclaiming Meter: Strategies for Contemporary Poem-Making****OUTLINE:**

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Event Introduction:

In a poetic context where most work is not overtly metrical, metrical poems surprise. They can make room for new modes of being and saying, a potential realized by poets from Millay to Brooks to Patricia Smith. Each panelist will consider a metrical poem that has shaped their poetic practice—including work in non-iambic meters—and will share a prompt inspired by the poem. We’ll explore meter, employed directly and as it informs free verse, as a radical, generative force in contemporary poetry.

Event Category: Poetry Craft & Criticism**Participant Biographies:**

Chad Abushanab: Chad Abushanab is the winner of the 2018 Donald Justice Poetry Prize. His debut poetry collection, *The Last Visit*, was selected by Jericho Brown and published by Autumn House Press in March 2019. His poems have appeared in many magazines and journals, including: *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Believer*, *Best New Poets*, and *Poetry Daily*, among others. He holds a BA in English from the College of Charleston, an MFA in Creative Writing from Vanderbilt University, and a PhD in Literature and Creative Writing from Texas Tech University. He is an Assistant Professor of English at Bemidji State University in Minnesota.

Jenna Le: A Minnesota-born daughter of Vietnamese refugees, Jenna Le earned her B.A. in mathematics before obtaining her M.D. and has worked as a physician

and educator in the Bronx, New York, and Lebanon, New Hampshire. *Six Rivers*, her first full-length poetry collection, was a Small Press Distribution Poetry Bestseller. Her second full-length poetry collection, *A History of the Cetacean American Diaspora*, won Second Place in the 2017 Elgin Awards. *Manatee Lagoon*, Le's third full-length poetry collection, was published by Acre Books in October 2022. Le's poetry, fiction, essays, book criticism, and poetry translations have been published widely.

Anna Lena Phillips Bell: Anna Lena Phillips Bell is the author of *Ornament*, winner of the Vassar Miller Poetry Prize, and the chapbook *Smaller Songs*, from St. Brigid Press. Her work appears in journals including the *Southern Review*, *Subtropics*, and *Electric Literature*. The recipient of a North Carolina Arts Council Fellowship in literature, and the 2019–2022 Gilbert-Chappell Distinguished Poet for eastern NC, she has served since 2013 as the editor of *Ecotone*. She is an assistant professor in the creative writing department at UNC Wilmington, and calls ungended Appalachian square dances in what's now called North Carolina and beyond.

Alexis Sears:* Alexis Sears lives in Northern California, where she teaches sixth-grade English. Her debut poetry collection, *Out of Order*, won the 2021 Donald Justice Poetry Prize and was published by Autumn House Press in 2022. She received a BA in Creative Writing from the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars and an MFA from the University of Wisconsin Madison. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Cortland Review*, *Hopkins Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Best American Poetry 2022*, and elsewhere. [*Unfortunately, Alexis Sears was not able to join us on the day of our recording session. To learn from Alexis, please give yourselves the gift of checking out her wonderful book, *Out of Order*, a powerful example of reclaiming meter as generative and radical force.]

Sophia Stid (Event Moderator): Sophia Stid is a poet from California. She is the author of the chapbook *But For I Am A Woman*, winner of the Fall 2022 Host Publications Chapbook Prize and named as one of LitHub's "38 Best Books of 2022." She received her MFA in Creative Writing from Vanderbilt University in 2019. She is the winner of the Barthelme Prize from *Gulf Coast* and her work recently appears in *Kenyon Review*, *Best New Poets*, and *Poetry Daily*.

Opening Poems Shared

“The Voice” by Thomas Hardy (read by Chad Abushanab)

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,
Saying that now you are not as you were
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,
But as at first, when our day was fair.

Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,
Standing as when I drew near to the town
Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,
Even to the original air-blue gown!

Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness
Travelling across the wet mead to me here,
You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,
Heard no more again far or near?

Thus I; faltering forward,
Leaves around me falling,
Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,
And the woman calling.

“Cleis” by Marilyn Hacker (read by Jenna Le)

(from *A Stranger's Mirror: New and Selected Poems 1994-2014*, W.W. Norton & Co., 2015)

She's sixteen, and looks like a full-grown woman,
teenage status hinted at by the acne.
I remember infancy's gold, unblemished
skin. I remember

every time I scolded her, slapped her, wished her
someone whom she wasn't, and let her know it.
Every mother knows she betrays her daughter.
Does she? Well, maybe.

She was not the builder of model airplanes.
She was not the runner I never could be.
She was not the pillager of my bookshelves,
Rimbaud or Bronte.

She was not the heroine of a novel.
She was only eight, with a perfect body
caught above the swimming pool, midair, leaping
into blue water

(snapshot, 1982, Venice -- she joined me
Air France Unaccompanied Minor). She's the
basic human integer, brown-skinned, golden,
wingless, but flying.

She has breasts and buttocks to keep her earthbound
now. She rereads children's books in her loft bed:
Little Women, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Robin*
Hood and *Black Beauty*

--dreaming herself back out of adolescence
while she talks of cars and her own apartment.
Sixteen is a waiting room: older, younger,
anything's better.

Every day a little bit more a grown-up

face not known yet superimposed on her face
as it turns, a sunflower, out of childhood
"bright and amazing"

like one of her lullabies (by a poet
ragged, old, incontinent, isolated
in a walk-up cluttered with rocks and papers
now, a flamboyant

balladeer once): cats by the fire in winter,
magic cat-king purring beside the singer,
famine and despair in the cries of scrawny
cats on the pavement.

Years now since I stroked her and sang that to her.
Since her breasts grew, I haven't seen her naked.
Infant sweat's like lavender water, hers is
womanly, pungent.

When I was in love with her, with a lover's
tendency to mythify the beloved
did I know her better than I do now, when
we know our limits.

Now she is a traveler like the others,
blonde braid, man's hat, jeans and a gray tweed blazer,
pushing one old duffle bag on a trolley,
free, in an airport

full of haggard voyagers, coming, going.
She stops, sees me. Under the sign ARRIVALS
we embrace, and heft the old bag up, one strap
each, on our shoulders.

“Anthropocene” by Lisa Williams (read by Anna Lena Phillips Bell)
(Published in *Ecotone*, The Climate Issue, Fall / Winter 2021)

We gave each thing its morning dew and went our little blade.
We put our feet on sand and glided ligaments and grains
as eyes so small to us knew only stains that we brought down,
some haze of malformation dulling from our wake of tons.
And every name that closed upon was chosen out of ours
and every thought that chased a thing was excellent in errors
still—we hold our faces up and reconfigure all
we see as if, in front of us, it dented to our will.
How let our body with its wander kill less than it can?
How let our thinking be the wound world’s opening up in?
We gave each thing its morning dew and went our little blade
as every name we settled on was given with a grave.

Moderator Questions:

- 1) Let's start by defining our terms and our approach as a panel. Overall, the general contemporary conversation around meter can be focused on the restrictions and conventions of meter, but this is a group that identifies meter as a specifically generative and surprising, even radical. How has engaging with meter in this way shaped your poetic practice?
- 2) What does the idea of reclaiming meter mean to you? What does it look like concretely?
- 3) To expand from our first two questions, what strategies would you suggest for other poets who are interested in remaking or reclaiming meter for themselves? What are some ways in to a new relationship with meter?
- 4) What would you change about the ways that meter is typically taught? What are your pedagogical strategies for teaching a generative sense of meter?
- 5) Often, reclaiming can begin in the language itself. I've really appreciated the way that I have heard Anna Lena interrogate the language and concepts around "breaking form," a term that we hear so often, as overly patriarchal and simplistic. I'm curious to expand our language here: what words, phrases, or images would you use to describe your specific creative relationship to form and meter?

Closing Poems Shared

“Necessary Rituals” by Chad Abushanab

Dip the pistol's rim in water
taking care to treat
the barrel like a steely lover's
lacerated heart.

You must be firm but understanding.
Now guide its wet snub nose
into the dish of salt, listening—
a crunch like bits of glass,

when steel is pressed into the grains,
cracks in the quiet kitchen.
This is your cue to think of Jean,
your kids, and how you miss them,

and how they disappeared, and left
the house a ritual
of silence. Next, you are to lift
the pistol by its handle,

taking a moment to gaze into
its black and absolute
mouth, knowing you were sure not to
load it with any bullets

this time—this is the ritual
and not the act for its
invention. Then put the shining barrel
into your own mouth and taste

the salt, and think of all that's salt.
Your once-wife's tears, the mar-
tinis you consume without
limit. The salty large-

ness of the sea, where Jean might be,
right now with your only sons...

Stop. The next steps must be taken.
The grief of salt will stand

static until tomorrow night's
ritual. Now set the gun
down. Rise to turn the lights
out, and dip your finger in

the bowl of ink. Make a mark
on the white refrigerator.
A family of tallies, dark
and dripping toward the floor....

Thirty-five nights. A season changed—
summer to fall—the lawn
graying, and autumn wreathes hanging
on every door that's on the lane

but yours.

When the house is dark, sleep.
Fall into the inky milk
of dreams. If there you are bound by rope,
the house on fire, then wake

wake and think of the ritual. Think
of hours passing swiftly
waiting for night.

You will not drink.

Repeat these words.

You will not drink.

“New York Living” by Jenna Le
(from *Manatee Lagoon*, Acre Books, 2022)

My upstairs neighbor
puffs cigarettes
on the fire escape
post-porn-viewing. Lets

the flaccid butts
rain from his hand
so that they pile up
on the first-floor landing

where my downstairs neighbor
has installed a quaint
tub of carnations.
She is no saint

herself, plays horrid
music at bizarre
hours so that my floor
shakes with sitar

wails ad nauseum.
Vacuums her rugs
at 6:00 a.m.
when I still lie snug

in bed and nodding.
Sandwiched between
these two dark gods,
these powers unseen,

the one above
whose hand rains fire
and the one below
with her shrieking choirs,

I think about

how my childhood books
split north and south
between seraphs and spooks,

hell's dread torments
and heaven's bright qualities.
I must invent
a new theology.

“Blood Cup” by Anna Lena Phillips Bell
(Published in *Electric Literature*)

Shape of a shape,
foldable up
and able, in,
to open out,
stay put, collect,
beyond my notice,
riches I have no
further use of.
Latex or plastic
echo of cervix,
funnel without
an exit; held up,
a wine glass without
a stem but with
the wine-dark end
of an egg within.
Each month, washed,
scalded clean, ready
to capture the swell
and wane of me. Ten
years, one lasted,
of stable yet suspect
silicone, till
I overboiled it—
its modest, purposeful
self safe
on the shelf and in
again, ad in-
finitum, I’d thought,
reminded only
then that infinities,
too, end.