



Vanderbilt Creative Writing

Fall 2025-Spring 2026 | Volume 4

Vanderbilt University College of Arts and Science

밤 (v) to give death (n) chestnut, night

I clung to my grandfather's back
like a beetle on a sesame leaf
every time he leapt over chasms
to take me mountain raspberry hunting.

He hit trees with a long wooden rod
and chestnuts fell from the sky.
His palms broke the spindly shields
when knives couldn't split the burr.

Once, we picked out the prettiest chicken
and the strangled squawks bubbled
into the best chicken porridge I've ever had.
A trellis of buzzing fly paper always smacked

his forehead and he never flinched. Tombstones
line the terraced hills next to fields of soybeans
and tobacco. Is there no magic from my mouth
when I say that my grandfather is dead—

that I still don't really care? My mouth
dressed in fried breadcrumbs, like the fish
on the table—a low ah escaping my lips
curling over my teeth to say 밤.

--Su Cho

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- VANDERBILT CREATIVE WRITING -



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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

I am tempted to tell you about all the good news and happenings in the Creative Writing Program. I also am tempted to remind us of the importance of writers in a free society and how we actively cultivate an active imagination and purpose of vision in students. But a newsletter is meant to provide a snapshot. Thus, I will let their works speak for themselves. What I will declare outright is the revelatory delight and joy my colleagues and I experience in nurturing future writers.

Each week, in our workshops and seminars, we welcome all the resources and nuances of language and the intensities of human awareness and feeling our students bring to telling stories and writing poems. We coach them to consider the quality of forms, the excitement of the human voice on the page, and the eloquence of precise imagery. We argue and debate words, their various shades of meaning, their ability to both imprison and free us of staid ideologies.

Ultimately, we want our students to aim for more than the bestseller list, for more than glitzy careers as writers, which is sometimes the byproduct of ego and false ambition. With their free imaginations, we want them to make claims on our lives that reverberate into our future as more aware and caring human beings. In our classes, they learn to both listen to each other and how to construct useful remarks free of harm, ostensible skills that are useful in any environment.

Writing takes focus, commitment, discipline, and an unfettered curiosity which we keenly stress is life sustaining, especially when we are curious about each other. Thus, we promote community and care as alternatives to a toxic environment of competition, anxiety, burnout, and pressure. We have help. The Creative Writing program celebrates its partners across the Vanderbilt campus. Over the past couple of years, we have joined up with The Engine for Art, Democracy, and Justice, Special Collections and University Archives, Vanderbilt University Press, as well as renewed our relationships with The Graduate School, The Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy, Office of the Chancellor, Office of the Provost, and The College of Arts & Science. Whatever achievements our students attain in part also belongs to the many administrators and senior leadership who value and help sustain their work.

Last year, we piloted an overseas week-long residency for third-year MFA students at Villa Gillet in Lyon. In addition to learning about southern France's rich culture and history, students worked on their graduating theses and gave a well-attended public reading. In 2026, we return to Villa Gillet with hopes to continue this rare opportunity of celebrating cross-cultural dialogue with our new friends.

The English Department is delighted to welcome poet Su Cho to the creative writing faculty. She is the author of *The Symmetry of Fish*, selected for the National Poetry Series. Su is the recipient of a 2025 National Endowment of the Arts Fellowship. Of her debut collection, *Electric Lit* says, "Cho creates new stories and gives us new language for living in liminal spaces." In this issue, second-year poet Lana Reeves talks with Su Cho; you can read the full interview by visiting our website.

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

We are proud to announce poet Melissa Range as the winner of the 2025 Vanderbilt University Literary Prize for her book *Printer's Fist*, a lyrical account of the 19th century antislavery movement that activates the archive by collaging newspapers, pamphlets, broadsides, and more, into a polyvocal performance of abolitionist voices. In her preface to the book, Range writes, "Like a journalist, I sought to report; like a historian, I sought to understand; like an archivist, I sought to preserve; like an activist, I sought to agitate; like a librarian, I sought to share." Thanks in part to the McEntire Literary Prize Endowment, the Chancellor's Office, Office of the Provost, and the College of Arts & Science, the MFA Program and Vanderbilt University Press will host poet Melissa Range for a week during the Spring 2026 where she will engage undergraduate and graduate students, and the Nashville literary community.

The Nashville community is rich in readers and writers alike. Thanks to the sustaining work of Humanities Tennessee, Chapter 16, The Porch, Parnassus Books, and The Global Education Center, our students experience a literary culture that stretches beyond Vanderbilt's campus. We wish to thank Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs C. Cybele Raver for collaborating with Humanities Tennessee in bringing "hundreds of prominent national authors together in dialogue with fellow writers, readers and thousands of Middle Tennesseans" as part of the Southern Festival of Books. This year, Vanderbilt University served as a presenting partner of the festival that brought in many of friends of the MFA Program to Nashville, including Joyce Carol Oates, Tracy K. Smith, Victoria Redel, and Quan Barry. Mother-daughter literary duo, Alice Randall and Caroline Randall Williams, served as co-chairs and hosts of the festival's gala, Authors in the Round.

Last year, The Gertrude C. and Harold S. Vanderbilt Reading Series spotlighted writers who are of singular vision and talent including Edward P. Jones, Ilya Kaminsky, Ottessa Moshfegh, Paisley Rekdal, and Adam Ross. This academic season, we welcome equally powerful voices: writers Victoria Chang, Mitchell S. Jackson, Marie-Helene Bertino, and MFA alum and Pulitzer-prize finalist Rita Bullwinkel.

As an extension of the Reading Series, this year we inaugurated the Vanderbilt Literary Salon which gathers undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff, and the Nashville community just prior to the featured reading for refreshments and conversation, as well as a pop-up exhibit!

So, in the spirit of our new salon, we invite you to peruse these pages. Here is a snapshot of the atmosphere of creativity and passionate exchange that profoundly embodies the spirit of education at Vanderbilt University.

Major Jackson

Professor of English & Director of Creative Writing
Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Chair in the Humanities



Photo by Beowulf Sheehan



FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

Assistant Professor Su Cho

Interviewed by 2nd Year MFA Candidate Lana Reeves

To read the full interview, visit our [website](#).

I'd like to start with a basic question: How are you feeling? Coming to Vanderbilt, this transition straight into teaching. How have the past couple of weeks been?

I had my undergrad class on Wednesday. They're eager. On the first day, I have the class vote on what assignments we're going to do and when we're going to turn them in. For me, it's about instilling a sense of mutual investment and commitment. They were down! They were like, *Okay, this sounds weird, but interesting*. So, I think that's how I feel too. Everything is strange, moving and being in a new place, but it's all incredibly exciting and interesting.

I first wanted to ask you about your book, *The Symmetry of Fish*, which won the National Poetry series and was published by Penguin in 2022. What was the experience of crafting that book? How long did you work on it, and what particular successes or challenges stand out to you thinking back on how it came together?

It took me, from the first poem to the newest poem, about ten years. It feels like a short time, but I realize that's a decade! The most difficult and rewarding part was my stubbornness in keeping a lot of the poems that were important to me when I was first becoming a poet, becoming a writer. I don't tell people which poems, but there are some from when I was a junior in college. For your first book, you just try to pack everything in there, say, *This is who I am*.

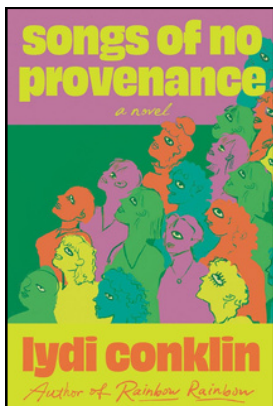
What other poets, contemporary or older, do you see yourself in conversation with? Who do you find yourself rereading over and over again?

I always return to poets I can never write like and who are different from me. I love the book *I Love Artists* by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge. It's very lyric, super associative. I could never write like that. I could never exist in the lyric mind-space for very long. But I'm so intrigued by it. And also Gabrielle Calvocoressi's *The Last Time I Saw Amelia Earhart*. I'm not going to say it's a Bible, but it's my *Oh, this is what poetry is like*. Whenever I feel like my line breaks are getting messy or I'm getting lazy, I read their stuff again. Remind myself that simplicity is good. I'll say that all the time in our classes.

We also get a very intimate and loving portrait of your family through this book. Have they read it? What are their feelings about being in your poems?

My parents read it. When I first started writing, my mom would say stuff like, *Oh, I see the word "mother" in there. It's about me, and it must be bad*, you know, like, *You're disparaging me, so I don't want to read it*. But then it slowly morphed into, *Oh, I guess you're still doing this thing. So it must not be bad*. And when the book came out, my dad put everything through Google Translate into Korean. I don't think he finished reading the whole thing, but he said, *I think I get it. I think I understand*. I was so scared, giving it to my family. But you know, I think other people are far more generous than you think they are.

FACULTY >>> ACHIEVEMENTS



Lydi Conklin released their novel, *Songs of No Provenance*, in June 2025. It was longlisted for Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize. They have a forthcoming story in *The Kenyon Review*. Lydi will be attending six different residencies this fall/winter, as well as speaking at the Texas Book Festival on November 8th and participating in two panels at AWP in March.

Lisa Dordal had two poems published in *Christian Century* and *Whale Road Review*.

Tony Earley has an essay coming out in the winter issue of *The Sewanee Review* called "The Architecture of Despair: How Brad Watson Builds a House in *Last Days of the Dog-Men*".



Association of Writers
& Writing Programs

**The Sewanee
Review**

Didi Jackson received the 2025 Tennessee Book Award for Poetry and she was a finalist for the New England Book Award. She recently did an interview with *American Poetry Review*. Finally, Jackson had publications "Wild" featured in *The Sun* and "After Marth Graham: Lamentation," featured in a Vanderbilt Creative Writing exhibit at Cheekwood Estate and Gardens.

Major Jackson received the inaugural Patricia Cannon Willis Prize for American Poetry from Yale Library. His poems have recently appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Sewanee Review*, and *The Southampton Review*. He wrote the catalogue essay for Vaune Trachtman's exhibition *Now is Always* (Tusen Takk Foundation) and contributed an op-ed on soup that appeared in *The New York Times*' "Finding Beauty" series.

Lorrie Moore's piece, "How Goes the Battle?" was published in *The New York Review*.

Amanda Little was recently interviewed by Provost C. Cybele Raver on Vanderbilt's podcast "Quantum Potential," titled, "How Stories Spark Change." She also interviewed author Jacqueline Woodson about civil discourse and the role of storytelling at Vanderbilt's 19th Annual Lawson Lecture, which took place at Langford Auditorium in September.

Su Cho is a recent recipient of the 2025 NEA Fellowship. She has poems that are forthcoming in *Kenyon Review* and *Strange Hymnal* this fall.

ZZ Packer has forthcoming work in *Kenyon Review*, *The Believer*, and *Transition*. During Summer 2025, she participated in conferences in Paris, France and Killarney, Ireland. She served as Developmental Editor for Akua Naru's blues opera *Longing to Tell* which premiered at the Kampnagel Festival in Germany. ZZ also presented at The New Yorker's "Seriously Entertaining" event, celebrating 100 Years of the New Yorker in September, spoke at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art in conjunction with Harvard's *Transition Magazine* this October, and appeared on CSPAN, moderating a panel at the Southern Festival of Books.



TSR

THE SOUTHAMPTON REVIEW



Provost C. Cybele Raver and Amanda Little



MFA CANDIDATES



Ayesha Asad (she/her) is the author of the chapbook *Waveborne* (Bottlecap Press, 2022). Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice*, and elsewhere. Her writing has been recognized by awards from UC Berkeley and UT Dallas.

Christiana Castillo served as a juror for the 2025 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. Her poem "Not Your Mother" was published with Justice Reads. She has poems forthcoming in *Poetry Online*, *Lucky Jefferson*, *Epiphany Journal*, and *Black Warrior Review*. She was also selected for a residency with Casa Na Ilha in São Paulo, Brazil.



Langston Cotman spent the month July working on his thesis and communing with fellow artists as a resident of the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson, VT.

Kumari Devarajan attended the Lambda Literary Writers Retreat for Emerging LGBTQ Voices, where they are a fellow.



Ajla Dizdarević's full-length manuscript, *To Belgrade*, was a finalist for the 2025 Ohio University Press Hollis Poetry Prize and the 2025 Michael Waters Poetry Prize. She also received an honorable mention for the 2025 National Post-Secondary Russian Essay Contest. Ajla has poems and translations published in *Southword*, *Hopkins Review*, *Asymptote*, and *Versopolis*.

Kinsale Drake's debut collection *The Sky Was Once a Dark Blanket* (2024) has been named a 2025 Southwest Book of the Year and has been shortlisted for a Reading the West Award. She had two poems published in the March 2025 issue of *Poetry* and has poems forthcoming in *Poet Lore* and *swamp pink* (formerly *Crazy Horse*).



Yevheniia Dubrova attended the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference as the Bread Loaf Katharine Bakeless Nason Scholar. She has translations published in *Literary Hub*.

Danielle Emerson is a Diné writer from Shiprock, New Mexico on the Navajo Nation. She has a B.A. in Education Studies and in Literary Arts from Brown University. She was recently recognized by PEN/America as a 2025 Emerging Voices Fellow.





MFA CANDIDATES



Alexandra Green graduated with her M.Div. degree from Yale Divinity School, where she was the Managing Editor of *Letters* journal. Her master's thesis explored figurations of Christ, and the question of divine sovereignty, in the poetry of Paul Celan.

Noa Greenspan is a writer from southeastern Virginia. She's currently working on a collection of short stories about coming of age and our relationships to place in the first part of the 21st century. Noa studied English, creative writing, and environmental studies at Princeton University.



Sydney Mayes received a scholarship to attend Community of Writers and the Sewanee Writers' Conference, as well as a fellowship to attend Lighthouse's LitFest. Her poems are forthcoming from *The Kenyon Review* and *The Hopkins Review*, and her prose will be featured in an upcoming anthology from University of Iowa Press.

Johnny Nagle is currently working on a revenge/campus novel set in South County, Dublin.



Athena Nassar recently had a book review published in *The Adroit Journal* and she has a poem forthcoming in *The Atlantic*. She is a Tennessee Williams Scholar for the 2025 Sewanee Writers' Conference.

Lana Reeves's poem "Gyotaku of Myself" will be published in the forthcoming issue of *Gulf Coast*. In May, she was named a finalist for the 2025 Iowa Review Poetry Prize. She also received support this summer to attend the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop and the Sewanee Writers' Conference.



Iman Saleem is a second-year fiction MFA candidate from Colombo. She graduated from the University of Kent in 2018 with a BA in Drama & English and American Literature. Since then, she has worked as a journalist, covering the mass anti-government protests in Sri Lanka throughout 2022.

Kanchi Sharma was accepted to and received support for workshops from Tin House, Kenyon Review, VONA, Fine Arts Work Centre, Skidmore College's NYS Summer Writing Institute, Community of Writers, and Napa Valley Writers Conference.





Academy of American POETS

PRIZE CONTEST 2025



Winner: Kinsale Drake, GS, MFA, for “Ram’s Head, Blue Morning Glory, 1938”

Honorable Mention: Lana Reeves, GS, MFA, for “How to Love a Sinking Island”

Honorable Mention: Christiana Castillo, GS, MFA, for “Texas Man Arrested For Trying To Rescue Thicc Latinas From Ice Detention Facility”



The winner of the 2025 Academy of American Poets Prize Contest is 2nd-year MFA candidate, Kinsale Drake. MFA candidates Lana Reeves and Christiana Castillo also received honorable mentions.

Of Drake’s poem, poet and contest judge **Marissa Davis** (BA '17) writes,

“So many elements come together to lend a poem its particular grace. The most striking poems, to me, are those whose language seems to reveal a balancing act between authorial intention and a sacred communion with the poem itself. This poem embraces just that as it unfurls itself, couplet after couplet, paced by striking line breaks, magnificently crafted images of (seemingly) simplistic moments, and the tensions built by and hanging between words (“tea” follows “blood”, “gaping” follows “creamy”). It feels painted onto the page, brushstroke by brushstroke--until it arrives at the lightning bolt of a final line which lands, stuns, and forces us back to the title with a fresh and harrowing understanding.”

Marissa Davis (BA '17) is the author of *End of Empire* (Penguin, 2025) and *My Name & Other Languages I Am Learning How to Speak* (Jai-Alai Books, 2020), chosen by Danez Smith for Cave Canem’s Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady Chapbook Prize. Her writing has received several honors, including a Tin House scholarship, a Rona Jaffe fellowship, and publication in *Best New Poets*. She has previously served as a judge for the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation.

Previous winners include Sydney Mayes (2024), Caroline Stevens (2023, 2022), Maria Isabelle Carlos (2021), Hayes Cooper (2020), Carlina Duan (2019), and Joshua Moore (2018).



STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES



Yevheniia Dubrova, Danielle Emerson, Noa Greenspan

GRADUATE PUBLICATION:

NASHVILLE REVIEW

UNDERGRADUATE & OTHER PUBLICATIONS:

The Vanderbilt Review
Undergraduate Literary and Arts Magazine

**THE VANDERBILT
HUSTLER** 

SPITFIRE

OTHER OPPORTUNITIES:

VANDY WRITES



To learn more about each magazine
and to submit your work, please visit
the magazines' websites.



Photo by Danielle Emerson

The Vanderbilt Review

Poetry Award

Jenna Weber

Prose

Katerina Krizner

Art

Samara McLain

Spitfire Magazine

Fall 2024 Winners

Phoebe Cao (Prose) - ghost of my memories, rose of my dreams

Joshua Uterstaedt (Poetry) - hawks from the moonlight

Amanda Dai (Comics) - Angels

Spring 2025 Winners

Aiste Austrevicius (Prose) - The Order of Fish Balls

Rafael Rodas (Poetry) - Popsicles

Will Growdon (Comics) - I'm Not Buying a Flip Phone, John

2025 Merrill Moore Prize

Fiction

Davis Works

Nonfiction

John Hague

Poetry

Amanda Maeglin

THE GERTRUDE C. AND HAROLD S. Vanderbilt Reading Series



The Gertrude and Harold Vanderbilt Reading Series is named in honor of Vanderbilt founder Cornelius Vanderbilt's great-grandson and his wife. Each semester, the series brings several professional writers to campus to read from their works and visit classes. This unique and extraordinary program gives English department students and faculty, the Vanderbilt community, and Nashville's citizens a chance to meet and talk with some of the best writers of our day.

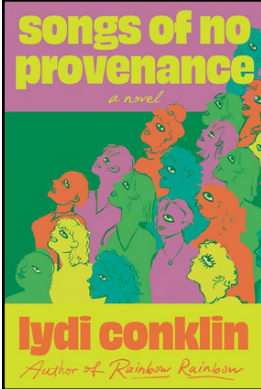
We greatly appreciate our friends Mary McSparran, Tim Gollins, and the Special Collections and University Archives Library personnel for hosting our events. Special thanks to Cheryl Dalton, Ralph Schuller, Mark Harmon, and the Vanderbilt Bookstore personnel for their support of the Reading Series and our program. For more information, visit our [website](#) and follow the Creative Writing Program [Instagram page](#).

**ANNOUNCING
FALL '25 &
SPRING '26
READINGS**

Readings and
Book Signings:
Thursdays at 7pm

Locations TBA!

FALL 2025



SEPT 4: LYDI CONKLIN, FICTION

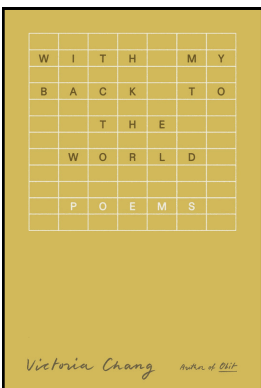
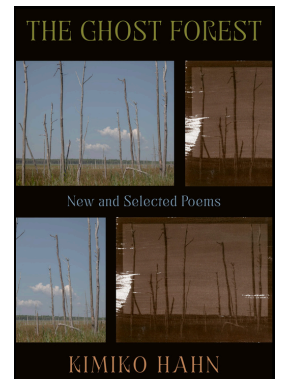
Special Collections Library, 1101 19th Ave S
Introduced by Iman Saleem and Kumari Devarajan

Lydi Conklin is an Assistant Professor of Fiction at Vanderbilt University. They've received four Pushcart Prizes and numerous tuition scholarships/fellowships from Bread Loaf, MacDowell, and Harvard University, among others. Their fiction has appeared in *Tin House*, *American Short Fiction*, and is forthcoming from *The Paris Review*. Their latest novel, *Songs of No Provenance*, was longlisted for the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize.

SEPT 18: KIMIKO HAHN, POETRY

Special Collections Library, 1101 19th Ave S
Introduced by Kinsale Drake

Kimiko Hahn is the author of ten books of poems, including: *Foreign Bodies* (W. W. Norton, 2020); *The Narrow Road to the Interior* (WWN, 2006), and so on. Her honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship, an American Book Award, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the N.Y. Foundation for the Arts.



OCT 2: VICTORIA CHANG, POETRY

Special Collections Library, 1101 19th Ave S
Introduced by Lana Reeves

Victoria Chang's most recent book of poems is *With My Back to the World*. It received the Forward Prize in Poetry for Best Collection and was named a Best Book of the Year by *NPR* and *The Guardian*, among others. She has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship.

FALL 2025



OCT 16: QUAN BARRY, FICTION

Alumni Hall, Memorial Room 202

Introduced by Yevheniia Dubrova

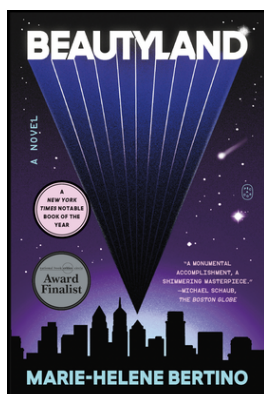
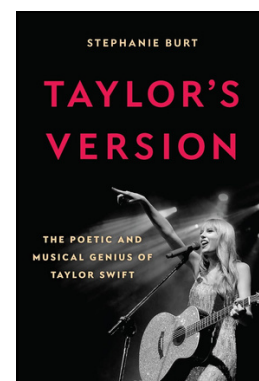
Barry is the author of nine books of fiction and poetry, including the forthcoming novel, *The Unveiling*. *The New York Times* named her poetry collection, *Auction*, one of the five best poetry books of 2023. Barry is one of a select group of writers to receive NEA fellowships in both poetry and fiction.

OCT 30: STEPHANIE BURT, FICTION & POETRY

Special Collections Library, 1101 19th Ave S

Introduced by Athena Nassar

Stephanie Burt is the author of numerous books of poetry, including the most recent *Super Gay Poems* (Harvard University Press, 2025). Her essay collection *Close Calls with Nonsense* (Graywolf Press, 2009) was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. The recipient of a 2016 Guggenheim Fellowship, Burt's writing has appeared in the *New York Times* Book Review, among others.



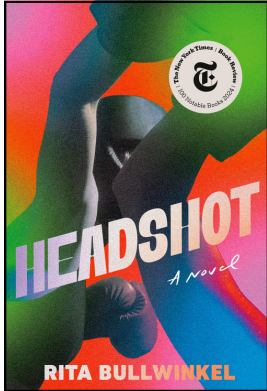
NOV 6: MARIE-HELENE BERTINO, FICTION

Special Collections Library, 1101 19th Ave S

Introduced by Kanchi Sharma

Marie-Helene Bertino is the author of, most recently, *Beautyland*, a National Book Critics Circle Finalist and a *New York Times* Notable 100 and *Time* Magazine Top 10 Book of 2024. A 2025 Guggenheim Fellow in Fiction, some of her most notable honors include the Pushcart Prize and the Iowa Short Fiction Award.

FALL 2025



DEC 4: RITA BULLWINKEL, FICTION

Special Collections Library, 1101 19th Ave S
Introduced by Noa Greenspan

Rita Bullwinkel is the author of two Books: *Headshot* (2024) and *Belly Up* (2018). *Headshot* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, and the Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize. She is a 2025 recipient of the Addison M. Metcalf Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a 2022 recipient of a Whiting Award.



Victoria Chang signs copies of her books



Lana Reeves, Ayesha Asad, Kinsale Drake



Kimiko Hahn

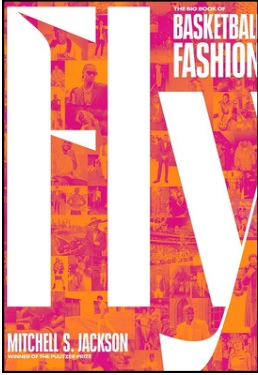


Rick Hilles, Su Cho, Victoria Chang, Major Jackson



CF Watkins

SPRING 2026



JAN 29: MITCHELL JACKSON, FICTION

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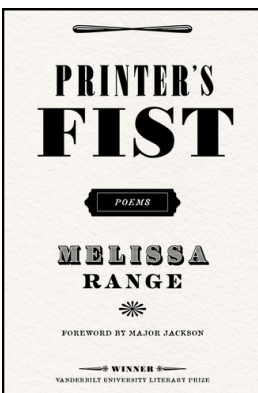
Mitchell S. Jackson is the winner of the 2021 Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing and the 2021 National Magazine Award in Feature Writing. His debut novel *The Residue Years* won a Whiting Award and The Ernest J. Gaines Prize for Literary Excellence. His essay collection *Survival Math: Notes on an All-American Family* was named a best book of 2019 by fifteen publications. Jackson is also the author of *Fly: The Big Book of Basketball Fashion*.

FEB 19: PRAGEETA SHARMA, POETRY

Special Collections Library, 1101 19th Ave S
Introduced by Christiana Castillo

Sharma's collections of poetry include *Bliss to Fill* (2000), *The Opening Question* (2004), which won the Fence Modern Poets Prize, *Infamous Landscapes* (2007), *Undergloom* (2013), and *Grief Sequence* (2019). Her honors and awards include a Howard Foundation Award. She is the Henry G. Lee professor of English at Pomona College.

Prageeta Sharma
Onement Won



APR 6: MELISSA RANGE, POETRY

Special Collections Library, 1101 19th Ave S
Introduced by Sydney Mayes

Melissa Range is the winner of the 2025 Vanderbilt Literary Prize for *Printer's Fist*, forthcoming from Vanderbilt University Press in 2026, as well as the author of *Scriptorium*, a winner of the 2015 National Poetry Series (Beacon Press, 2016), and *Horse and Rider* (Texas Tech University Press, 2010). She is the recipient of awards and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rona Jaffe Foundation, MacDowell, and others.

SUPPORT CREATIVE WRITING AT VANDY



Students converse



Lydi Conklin converses with friends



Students share their commentary on Lydi Conklin's work



Quan Barry



Quan Barry's *The Unveiling*

GIVING REMINDER



Gertrude C. & Harold S. Vanderbilt

Please consider making a donation to the Vanderbilt Creative Writing Program to support future events like these. To do so, go to the Vanderbilt Giving Page, enter your donation, select "Other", and search for "Creative Writing Program."

**THIS SPEAKER SERIES IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A CONTRIBUTION FROM
THE GERTRUDE C. AND HAROLD S. VANDERBILT FUND.**

LITERARY SALONS



This fall, the Vanderbilt Reading Series began hosting Literary Salons prior to the readings. The Salons allow members of the creative writing program to converse, and for undergraduate students to participate in roundtable discussion of the writer's work. The Special Collections and University Archives Library also crafts a small exhibit of art, photographs, manuscripts, and other archived pieces to accompany the writers' books being celebrated that evening. Thank you to Mary McSparran for crafting such beautiful exhibits and to Tim Gollins for capturing such great photos!



Mary McSparran, Lydi Conklin, CF Watkins



Kinsale Drake and Kimiko Hahn



Exhibit featuring pieces based off of *Ghost Forest*



Undergraduate creative writing students share their observations of Kimiko's work

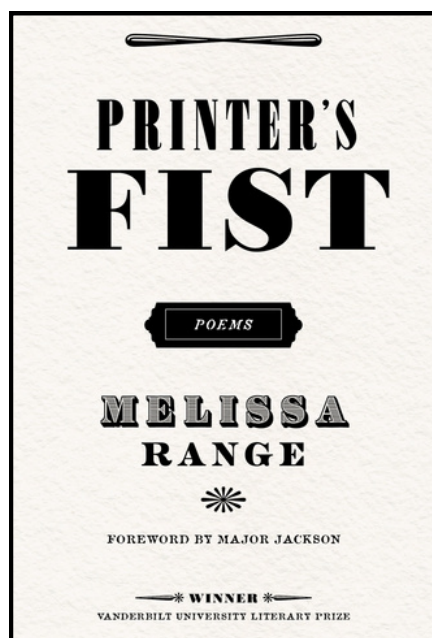


VANDERBILT LITERARY PRIZE

Melissa Range, Poetry



Vanderbilt University is pleased to announce **Melissa Range** as the winner of this year's Vanderbilt University Literary Prize. A panel of jurists selected ***Printer's Fist***, a collection of poems about the abolitionist movement in the 18th and 19th century United States. Drawing upon archival research into 19th century antislavery newspapers, pamphlets, broadsides, songsters, children's books, poetry, letters and more, this collection tells the story of a political movement—its strides and setbacks, its unity and fractures—with a particular focus on its print culture.



The Vanderbilt University Literary Prize was launched in 2023, in celebration of the institution's Sesquicentennial. It is awarded annually to the sole author of a full-length collection of poetry that demonstrates great poignancy combined with rigor in form, language and artistic vision. The contest drew more than 250 entries. The prize includes the publication of the winning manuscript in print, electronic and audio formats, a publishing contract with Vanderbilt University Press, a \$10,000 honorarium, an invitation to read in the esteemed Gertrude C. and Harold S. Vanderbilt Reading Series at Vanderbilt University, and a one-week residency on campus to engage students and writers in the Nashville community.

Major Jackson, the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of English and director of creative writing, said, "*Printer's Fist* reasserts the bedrock principles of freedom and human dignity and centers the many individuals who contributed to our country's understanding of itself as a nation built on equality and justice."

MCENTIRE LITERARY PRIZE ENDOWMENT

The Vanderbilt Literary Prize is made possible with the support of the **McEntire Literary Prize Endowment**. A collaboration between Vanderbilt University Press and Vanderbilt University's English Department and MFA Program, the annual contest seeks to identify works of poetry whose originality is immediately identifiable in how the book, in some combination, renews our relationship to language and expands our conception of poetry; delves into underexplored areas of human experience; makes claims on our lives that are urgent and aesthetic; or promotes historical, social, literary, political, or spiritual awareness.

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING POET TRACY K. SMITH VISITS VANDERBILT

Pulitzer Prize Winner and Poet Tracy K. Smith visited with members of the Creative Writing Program on Friday, October 17. She served as the 22nd Poet Laureate of the United States from 2017-19, during which time she spearheaded *American Conversations: Celebrating Poetry in Rural Communities* with the Library of Congress, created the American Public Media podcast *The Slowdown*, and edited the anthology *American Journal: Fifty Poems for Our Time*.



Major Jackson and Tracy K. Smith



Photos courtesy of Elizabeth Chagnon



Major Jackson, Tracy K. Smith, Lana Reeves, Rick Hillis, Su Cho, ZZ Packer



CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM

RECENT NEWS



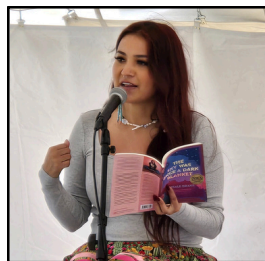
MFA Students Give Reading of Work at The 37th Annual Southern Festival of Books

Presented by Vanderbilt University and Humanities Tennessee

First and second-year MFA students read from their latest works at the festival in October. Featured poets included Ayesha Asad, Kinsale Drake, Alexandra Green, Athena Nassar, Lana Reeves, and Kanchi Sharma.



Ayesha Asad, Alexandra Green, Kinsale Drake, Athena Nassar, Lana Reeves, Kanchi Sharma



MFA Faculty & Alumni Featured in Exhibit at Cheekwood Estate & Gardens

Ekphrastic poems by third-year MFA students Sydney Mayes and Ajla Dizdarević, Alum Carson Colenbaugh ('25), and Assistant Professor Didi Jackson were featured in Cheekwood's exhibit titled *Verse and Visions*, which ran from July 12-October 5. The poems were written in response to twelve works of art from Cheekwood's permanent collection.



Marilyn Murphy (American, b. 1950), *House Afire*, 2004, Graphite on paper

SUMMER 2025 CONFERENCES



Danielle Emerson

Summer Tin House Residency:

"I got to spend two weeks in Portland, Oregon, writing out the first draft of my young adult novel in progress, while also exploring an amazing, artistic city. I got to connect with the Tin House community through a small reading at Bishop & Wilde Books, alongside Halee Kirkwood and a cute orange neighborhood cat. So much writing got done and so much exploration!"

Sydney Mayes

Sewanee:

"This summer I had the privilege of attending Sewanee Writers' Workshop and the Community of Writers Poetry program. While both programs are very different, with Community of Writers' workshop being generative and Sewanee's being centered around refining older poems, I left each workshop with new friends, new mentors and new ways to approach my work. I hope to bring all that I've learned to the page and to my students as I continue to work on my thesis and teach."

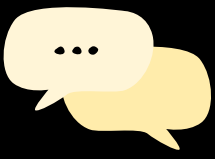
Lana Reeves

Kenyon:

"My week at Kenyon was a truly magical one. I found it to be an extremely generative and supportive retreat on a gorgeous campus, surrounded by fireflies and deer. My workshop was with Felicia Zamora, and I would highly, highly recommend working with her. Her approach to poetry fostered deep community, centered decolonial and indigenous perspectives, and refreshed my relationship to language."

Sewanee:

"The Sewanee Writers' Conference is a truly remarkable experience—two full weeks nestled in the Tennessee hills, surrounded by a large cohort of creatives, professors, and professionals. Highlights include the incredible lecture series and readings, swimming in the nearby lake, and meeting with editors of top literary magazines. Plus, baby goats(!) and many, many rounds of competitive corn hole with Kinsale, Athena, and Cortney Lamar Charleston."



ALUMNI ADVICE



To read the full interviews, visit our [website](#).

Max McDonough (MFA '17) and Bakar Wilson (BA '99) Share Their Wisdom

What advice would you offer current students who are working on future books/publications?

Max: Most importantly, cut out all the boring parts. And there's really no rush to publish. This is the last thing any student wants to hear, my younger self included, but if you want to be really edgy, just write. Don't worry about getting this or that or the whole thing published. This won't apply to everyone—I did my MFA straight out of undergrad, so I was particularly young and eager to publish, and I'm so grateful for that, but also I could've dug deeper into the craft itself, cultivating what I feel I have now: a deep affection for process, rumination, revision, and play.

Bakar: My advice for students who are working on current books or publications is to not give up on the work. Rejection is a part of being a writer and artist. Although we do tend to be sensitive souls, getting used to people saying "no" is a skill one should learn as to not take that rejection personally. The work evolves, and a writer with perseverance will eventually reach their goal. As someone who published his first collection of poetry at 48, I can say it is still thrilling. So, stay the course. You will get there.

What were the most exciting parts and the most difficult parts about the process? About publishing?

Max: The submission fees are worth bemoaning. Exciting most of all was the surprise "yes" call ten years after I started sending my manuscript out. Particularly emotional was seeing the digital galleys for the first time. The dedication in italics. Suddenly, as they say. Suddenly! Alongside the submission fees, the perennial rejection and self-doubt those "no's" engendered was one of the most difficult parts of sending, sending, sending.

Bakar: To be honest, the most exciting part was signing the book contract. There was a relief that washed over me as I had finally reached that goal of publishing a book. The most difficult part was all the decisions that had to be made after signing the contract. I published with Get Fresh Books, which is an independent press based in New Jersey, so I was very involved with the decision making, choosing the artist for the cover, for instance. I cannot say how many times I edited, read and reread my manuscript.

What has been your experience post-MFA? Do you have any advice for current third-year students?

Max: Please laugh at this, because I'm crying: as soon as humanly possible, figure out how to live. After the MFA, with my long beautiful uninterrupted education, I became 1. an Amazon warehouse worker, 2. an Uber driver, 3. a ditch digger at a boutique golf course, and 4. a clerk at a local YMCA. There were other jobs in the mix there as well. For years and years. You will not make any of these same mistakes, because you are bright and beautiful. But just in case, make a plan. Please make a plan.

Bakar: I graduated as an undergrad in 1999, so it's been a while! Vanderbilt didn't have a Creative Writing MFA program at the time, so I moved to New York City when I was 25 and went to the City College of New York, which also didn't have a MFA program at the time, but they did have a MA program in Creative Writing. (They now have a Creative Writing MFA.) I chose CCNY because I wanted to work with Marilyn Hacker, the great formalist poet, and I also got to work with Wayne Koestenbaum and Elaine Equi. I think it's important to think about who you want to work with when looking at programs.

VANDERBILT MFAS ANCHOR DOWN OVERSEAS

VU-MFA x VILLA GILLET



Michael Carlson, Anika Potluri, Alissa M. Barr, Didi Jackson, Carson Colenbaugh, Nathan Blum, Lela Ni

In Spring 2025, Third-Year MFA Creative Writing students participated in a writing retreat, titled VU-MFA x Villa Gillet. They visited Paris and Lyon. The trip was a partnership with the Office of the Vice Provost. The Villa Gillet is a European and international house of contemporary writing. A place of meeting and creation, it gives a voice to writers, thinkers and artists to make literature and human sciences a common language. It is a laboratory for reflection on practices related to books, writing, speech and debate. Special thanks to Claire Campbell, Beth Porter, and our friends at Villa Gillet: Luc Angelini, Lucie Campos, and Fabienne Pont.



Top photo (left to right from back row to front): Didi Jackson, Major Jackson, Claire Campbell, Carson Colenbaugh, Alissa M. Barr, Anika Potluri, Nathan Blum, Lela Ni, Michael Carlson

MFA NEWS

Chad Abushanab ('12) joined the MFA faculty at University of North Carolina Wilmington as a tenure-track assistant professor.

Alissa M. Barr's ('25) poem, "Ambulance Ride-Along Through a Maternity Care Desert," appeared in *Frozen Sea*. She has two poems forthcoming in *West Branch*. Alissa also made the Fine Arts Work Center Fellowship shortlist.

Nathan Blum's ('25) short story "Outcomes" was published in *The New Yorker* in October 2025. His story "Here Now" was published in the Spring 2025 issue of *Ploughshares*. He was recently nominated for the PEN/Robert J. Dau Award, named a finalist for the Tickner Fellowship, and awarded a Staff Scholarship to attend Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.

Tiana Clark ('17) was named a finalist for both the National Book Award and the New England Book Award for her latest poetry collection, *Scorched Earth*, which was published in March 2025.

Carson Colenbaugh ('25) has poems forthcoming in *The Atlantic*, *The Southern Review*, and *Terrain.org*.

Lara Hughes ('22) received a 2025 PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize, and her story "The Faraday Cage" is forthcoming in Catapult's Best Debut Short Stories 2025.

Kanak Kapur's ('24) short story "Prophecy" was published in *The New Yorker* in January 2025. Her debut novel is forthcoming from Riverhead Books in 2027.

Lela Ni ('25) received an Emerging Writer Fellowship to Aspen Words, a Tin House Summer Workshop scholarship, and a Blue Mountain Center residency.

Daniel Perez's ('23) *Kenyon Review* story "Block Party" was selected for the Pushcart Prize and appeared in the 2025 print anthology.

Kiyoko Reidy's ('22) debut book, *Black Holes and Their Feeding Habits*, was published with Terrapin Books in April 2025. It was recently included on *Electric Lit's* list of "most anticipated debut poetry books of this year."

Pallavi Wakharkar's ('22) debut novel, *HOUSESITTING*, is forthcoming in 2027.



Mary McSparran ('17) and Max McDonough ('17)



Alissa M. Barr ('25) and Em Palughi ('24)

DEPARTMENT ACHIEVEMENTS



Bryan Byrdlong (BA '15) published his debut poetry collection, *Strange Flowers*, with YesYes Books in September 2025.

Lecturer **Jared Harvey**'s novel *Soft Lighting* was released with Asterism Books on October 1.

Marissa Davis (BA '17) released her book *End of Empire* with Penguin Random House in July 2025.

Fifth-year Ph.D. student **Grace LaFrentz** has a forthcoming article in *English Literary Renaissance*, scheduled for publication in 2027.

Assistant Professor **Alex Dubilet** published the edited volume of his book, *Political Theology Reimagined*.

Bakar Wilson (BA '99) released his debut poetry collection *Daddy Show* in April 2025.

Liam Betts Virott (BA '25, MA '26) won the 2025 Dell Award for science fiction.



SEND US YOUR NEWS



Please email any publications, fellowships, residencies, awards, or other writing-related accomplishments to english@vanderbilt.edu so we can celebrate with you!



Congratulations



To our Class of 2025 M.F.A. graduates!



Michael Carlson, Carson Colenbaugh, Alissa M. Barr, Anika Potluri, Nathan Blum, Lela Ni



Michael Carlson



Anika Potluri



Alissa M. Barr, Lela Ni, Sydney Mayes



Tony Earley, Carson Colenbaugh, Didi & Major Jackson



Nathan Blum



OUR COMMUNITY



Graduate Students and Faculty at the Welcome Back Brunch in August



Magdalena Campos Pons, Kamaal Malak, Didi Jackson, Vesna Pavlovic



ZZ Packer and Edward P. Jones



Major Jackson and Lorrie Moore at Vanderbilt NYC Campus



MFA Friends at the Nashville Poetry Party



Kumari Devarajan and Iman Saleem



Jen Fay, Candice Amich, Emma Palmer, Langston Cotman, Arianna Pappas, Jay Clayton



Yevheniia Dubrova, Ayesha Asad, Kinsale Drake



OUR COMMUNITY



Nancy Reisman, Sugi Ganeshanathan, ZZ Packer, Sheba Karim, Tony Earley



Victoria Redel, Ben Tran, Allison Schachter



Stephanie Niu and Didi Jackson



Major Jackson, Jacqueline Woodson, Amanda Little



Kinsale Drake at The Southern Festival of Books



Tiana Clark ('17) and Sydney Mayes



Ann Patchett and Lorrie Moore speak to students and faculty



Sydney Mayes and Iman Saleem



Ben Tran, Huan He, Arianna Pappas, Shoshana Adler



ZZ Packer

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Department of English

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Student Worker

Department Resources

Special thanks to **Arianna Pappas** and **Danielle Emerson (MFA '28)** for contributing to this newsletter. To view it digitally, please scan the QR code below or visit our website.

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[Undergraduate Course Offerings](#)
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FACULTY

Fiction

Lydi Conklin, Tony Earley,
Lorrie Moore, ZZ Packer

Poetry

Su Cho, Rick Hilles,
Didi Jackson, Major Jackson

Lecturers

Lisa Dordal, Sheba Karim,
Justin Quarry, Amanda Little

VANDERBILT CREATIVE WRITING: ALUMNI BOOKS 2008-2025

