



VOL. 1

POEMS BY

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“Hmm, very well. I'll let you peruse my vast collection on one condition.
To prove your worth as scholars, you have to contribute some
worthwhile knowledge.”

—Wang Shi Tong, S2E10, “The Library” (via Avatar Wiki | Fandom)

The Library of Elemental Bending (Vol. 1)

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Introduction

In *The Library of Elemental Bending Vol. 1*, seven poets and three multidisciplinary artists use their creative skills and cultural memories to access a library imbued with transformation by responding to the animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* – in relation to the world, and to each other’s work.

*

*Water. Earth. Fire. Air. Long ago, the four nations lived together in harmony.
Then, everything changed when the Fire Nation attacked.*

—Katara (waterbender): opening sequence, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

*

There is something in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* – created by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko with the work of many creative and technical contributors – that connects deeply for folks in my circles – often folks who have lost a part of our connection to our own ancestral stories.

Populating the *Avatar* world are beings who can express and manipulate – i.e. “bend” – the elements. Humans learned bending from them, and some folks in each of the four nations have the capacity to bend their nation’s element, honing their abilities through the practice of martial arts. Cycling through the nations, an “avatar” is born every generation who is able to learn to bend all four elements, and is connected spiritually to all previous avatars. A keeper of balance. But not alone.

The series’ makers weave histories of empire, colonization, and migration into living myth, along with cultural and ethical elements of martial arts. As poet and editor Maria Bolaños once said to me, “It’s a world in which everyone, even those at war with each other, are implicitly, explicitly, and intrinsically connected to everybody else.” By contending in this way, *Avatar* seems to invigorate, even liberate, a sense of connection into being.

This anthology stems from experiential connections: creative communities of online care that sprung up in 2020, responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Three iterations of community especially – BIPOC Writing Party, Community Building Art Works, and The Digital Sala – overlapped to bring our contributors into creative proximity. We were encountering each other in online writing workshops, readings, organizing, and more. No wonder the poems in this collection – which range from persona poems in the voice of characters to poems that bridge experiences of this world with the *Avatar* world, and beyond – have such resonance with each other in spite of the distances they span. And now: invited by *The Capilano Review* to gather together.

*

In the episode, “Bitter Work,” during which Uncle Iroh tries to teach the firebending Prince Zuko how to bend lightning, Iroh draws the symbols for each of the elements in the dirt, and speaks to his nephew about the particular strengths that each element engenders in those connected to it. Questioned by the prince about his intentions, and about the way his observations sound “like Avatar stuff,” Iroh responds: “It is the combination of the four elements in one person that makes the Avatar so powerful. But it can make you more powerful, too.” Maybe this small library, joyfully, as well.

—Hari Alluri

Book I: Fire to Lightning

7	Zuko
8	After Zuko
9	After Azula
10	Dragon Shoots Its Whispers

Book II: Air to Breath

12	Gondeh Bahd
13	Gyatso of Southern Air
14	Filosofia Ekalavya: Airbend × Latantha

Book III: Earth to Sand

16	Earthbend
17	Goleh Sangam
18	Ghashiun

Book IV: Water to Blood

20	(sst):
21	Sokka, at the Crossroads Between the Avatar World and Ours
22	in which we have elemental powers, and all the colonizers die
23	water in my chart

The Avatar State

25	Energy Through Our Bodies: A Gathered Poem in Bending Form
28	Epilogue
30	Card Catalogue
31	Contributors

Firebending, one of the four elemental bending arts, is the pyrokinetic ability to control fire. It is unique among the bending arts, as it is the only one in which the performer can generate the element.

—Avatar Wiki | Fandom

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“Lightning is a pure expression of Firebending without aggression. It is not fueled by rage or emotion the way other Firebending is. Some call lightning the cold-blooded fire.”

—Uncle Iroh to Zuko, S2E9: “Bitter Work”



Book I: Fire to Lightning

When I say firebend, I mean we found a way
to outlive smoke – my auntie’s gathering
as evidence of shrapnel in our laughter,
this too is survival. When I say firebend,
I mean to shape what I cannot control. The flame
in my retina is why we witness hell as a substitute
for living. I mean I burned my life to the ground
when I chased the dragon, hit after hit: I lit my
cigarette with heat as my assassin. When I say firelord,
I mean we belong to the sun. I mean I pray
to the back of my father’s hand, as in my cheek
still burns, as in I collect fire from the scorch
of the wound, burrowed deep in a bruise
dancing on my face, how off my last
bake I fell to the curb, and the temperature
of the block had been cooked by police, and
my laughter flamed all the way to the station.
I mean we survived ridicule from the heckle
of boys, our anger turned kinetic. When I
say firebend, I mean rage licked me.
I mean the pyro in me has never been cool.

When I say prince, I mean
Cast down from a blazing throne
Speak truth into the dark –

When I say hero, I mean
Scaling glaciers, scouring seas,
Struggling with your nature –

When I say struggle, I mean
Wear the battering with pride:
Shroud to shield, collar to cape –

When I say bend, I mean
In a relentless universe Love is
All elements of injury: scar, fire.

When I say villain, I mean
Everyone is a hero to someone
That's no defense, just a trick of the light –

When I say obedience, I mean
We've all got rage within us
Tried to be blade, cut down
Everything as was asked of us –

When I say bend, I mean
We're made of raw materials
Ozone, flash, fire
And asked for ourselves only –

A little love for the kindling

Dragon Shoots Its Whispers

Hidden Scroll  The voice of lightning

Airbending, one of the four elemental bending arts, is the aerokinetic ability to control and manipulate air. To an airbender, there is always another path to take, as air flows wherever it can.

—Avatar Wiki | Fandom



Book II: Air to Breath

When I say airbend I mean my father
 kisses his mistress on Saturday nights,
 whispering dynamite in the bedroom,
 silk prayers on his tongue,
 his breath a steady wind of apologies.

When I say airbend I remember
 Dr. K in anatomy class
 telling us, “if you inject air into your veins
 you die from a venous air embolism.”

When I say die, I mean
 the mosque my great uncle attended
 was blown apart by Mujahideen. When I say
 Mujahideen I mean the Lucas County Court
 of Common Pleas granting a dissolution
 of my parent’s marriage in ten months.

When I say divorce, I really mean
 I flow wherever I can, my body
 a breathing bloodline
 yelling *Gondeh Bahd*, fleeing Sylvania
 tornado weather for California chemo wards,
 snatching onyx-carved scarab beetles
 off the shelf of the comic shop
 or my grandmother watching
 every greedy bite of *berenj*.

When I say mouth, I mean exile
 is a language of the teeth, like my uncle’s
 ankle monitor he charges twice per day
 while chained to the wall socket – the big empty.

When I say empty, I mean a punctured lung
 is full of prayer in the same way my words
 are stale against my lips. When I say
 airbender I mean I’m sorry
 for killing the truth.

Ma’zerat mikhaaham.
This is what I tell myself to survive.

When I say air, I mean breathe
huminga, inhale. Fill my lungs with
levity, steady, like a falling leaf

hangin, the wind. I mean breeze
Amihan, ibon that awakened our ancestors
first one to ride the currents, one within the currents

one within myself, joyously enraptured
with existence, with presence. I mean laughing and fighting with every breath,
hinga, exhale, a hurricane in a sealed room.

For when the invader comes I will not stop
until my last hinga becomes their final hinga
and together eternal, we rest. I mean hinga.

EKALAVYA

When my father told me we bend air, I rejected
that it means the triple crossroads of loss

in an arrow. Mountain's. & tree's. & bird's.
As in, what it costs for one archer to aim. I wanted it

to only mean how bird teach mountain when to turn
in sky; tree reminding bird how instinctual the earth

wants us all to rise. Transform? I just wanted to get better.
I just want to walk jungle to palace, meet my guru, convince him

teach me. I don't want to learn
both sides of piercing. I want, picture it, the single smile

in all three elements when my aim is truest true. Tatay said, *what it is,*
it does. Say grieve, say breathe,

say love. I leave the village with those words
in the air behind me. Spinning

feather, heart of stone, an aerial root that swings, leaf-blade
as my *from*. I will be the one rejected before my arrows

show me my way is a statue
shaped into a mantra: not stillness but prophesy. My father wants

my chakras open, memory smoke as temple. What I'm leaving
is a teacher who doesn't demand my thumb.

Earthbending is the geokinetic ability to manipulate earth and rock. Waiting and listening for the right moment to strike. Earthbenders usually endure their enemy's attacks. The power of earth bestowed on the inhabitants of a city.

*

The Sandbender Tribes are named for their special style of earthbending that involves bending loose sand instead of solid earth, and have adapted to their hostile and barren homeland by becoming nomads, raiders, and scavengers.

—Avatar Wiki | Fandom



Book III: Earth to Sand

My ability shapes land with
listening,

waits for the sound
a house makes when the guards break down the door.

I live with the pulse
of escape when footsteps give me caution.

When I say earthbend I mean my ancestors
fell in love in underground tunnels,

which means they practiced the art of living
by remaining unseen.

I mean I live on American soil
on a road drilled with names of captors.

I mean I wish there was a way
to stop the ground from swallowing my family,

how at every funeral I am a stone – wishing I could cry, the way a rock
knows more about dreaming than a country.

When I say family I mean the double helix of my shadow
is a braided way to die:

sand reflection of skin, loss as a language of hands.
I mean the shape of gravel mimics the censor of a buried cemetery.

The state split my family into numbers in a file.

I mean by document I am citizen, by rock my bloodmark is a stain
I cannot remember.

To live between a cluster of mountains
swallowed by another country
is what I mean.

When I say sandbender, I'm trying to pronounce
the word grief properly,
my voice tempering a reserve of loss
spilled through vocal cords made by the earth.

When I say reserve of loss, I mean
I search for water in a jagged city,
I mean I am hostile towards a culture
of forgetting, tied to a land that offers
blood memory as currency for home.

When I say blood I mean my family is from *Ahwaz*
by way of Turkmenistan and Yerevan,
I mean I am loose with my loyalties,
and might as well have said
I have a bomb under my skin
or that scrawling the word asylum
into the status box
of an immigration form
is how we vanish.

When I say vanish, I mean my grandmother's hands
lay out the *Sofreh Haft-sin* on the dining table,
the distance between immigrant and ghost is measured
by acting out our survival, I mean I am
a nomad of dust, a poor adaptation of exile
choking on storms built by fathers.

When I say father,
I mean the day I was born
he knew his marriage had already died.
I mean if you say the word *God* in my family
what you really mean is revolution –
Ayatollah and British Petroleum.
I mean I am the flower
that grows within the stone,
scavenging only to survive.

When I say alive, I mean my bones are barren dunes
kept together by trading strength for escape.
When I say escape, I mean my heart is a caravan
packed with stars, I mean I helped my father move
out of the house and still got back in time
to build a dam around my mother's eyes.

When I say sandbend I mean deception as a way to live. I mean the subversion of language can be a small triumph. The way my father dubs American films into Farsi to better the story he's been given, the scar of his smile brushing the surface of the screen. When I say mother tongue, I mean leaving. In every doorway I see him nodding his head, a two-finger salutation. The skull of his goodbye outweighs the prayer beads clutched in my hand when I summon my ancestors. I mean dialect broken into boats of English sailing out of my father's mouth, benediction buried in his lungs, and the dust of a whole city fragmented in his Farsi –
tamameh sayamo karrdam – *I did the best I could.*

There is no word to describe the residue of my father's absence, the scratch of his key on the door lock. His laughter hangs in the air like a lost tree. No. There is no word for the imprint of his body lying next to my mother. I mean I've kept their lies inside me, next to the child who keeps running into a room where his parents yell over money. Parents who stay together but divorced from within, parents who sleep in separate beds, whose wedding dissolved over time inside them. Parents who try to love the earth even when it breaks them down.

When I say earth, I mean we are fragile like the day I fell in love with Nazineh in science class when we learned how lightning turns sand from silica to glass. When I say fragile, I mean my therapist is a temple of lies who keeps me from sinking, a shrine of wounds. I mean the desert walk to meet myself, to see the future in my war dance.

This is the loss I try to fill with late-night strangers smoking cigarettes in my bed. We turn the lights off, and I see a tower of promise sinking in my father.

Waterbending, one of the four elemental bending arts, is the hydrokinetic ability to control water in all of its various forms....Water is the element of change. The moon is the source of power in waterbending, and the original waterbenders learned to bend by observing how the moon pushed and pulled the tides.

*

Bloodbending is a specialized sub-skill of waterbending that allows an extremely advanced waterbender to take hold of and manipulate fluids within an organism's body, allowing the bender to move the person's muscles.

—Avatar Wiki | Fandom



Book IV: Water to Blood

* When we said “blame me,” we really meant her.
 When we said “melt,” we stood here and didn’t move.
 When we said “pssh,” we gathered together to pray.
 When we said “bahala na,” we pretended to knit and watch soap operas.
 When we said “leave me alone!” we pressed our fingers against the peep hole.
 When we said “drink,” water dribbled from the corners of your mouth.
 When we said “eat NOW,” we busied ourselves with hot oil and dilis.
 When we played music, the voice sang, always, always change.
 When we pasted photographs into their albums,
 we looked later for the smudge of our thumbprints.
 When we texted “LOL,” we really wanted to feel the heat of the real.

*For and After Reem Ali Badwan & Khaled Nabhan / After Rachele Cruz /
After Adonis, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Suheir Hammad, and Faisal Mohyuddin*

When I say believe, I mean this South-pole Water boy
seeing Yue's face. At all. For the first and every time,
thanks be to the moon. And, right after the moment I wished most
that I could bend an element – any element I mean –

to stop the invading admiral's raised up arm
from fire-striking the sacred koi, draining the moon of light.
"I have to do this," Yue says, and slips
her hand from mine. When I say touched, I mean

her, by the Moon Spirit's life. I mean
her hands to the dead fish, giving herself to it. I mean
me. By her spirit – glowing blue into our final full embrace. I mean

my lips, by hers. Yue disappears. The smallest water-drop
surrounded by ice, that sound. Holding the tunnel of it –
the tunnels we become. The koi begins to swim again; I look up at the light
returning to the moon, and make a wish.
When I say my wishes don't come true, I mean

in a world whose elements have already lost their benders,
a man will cradle his dead grandchild after they are bombed,
kiss her Palestinian eyes, say, "she is the soul of my soul." And in
a painting of this moment, her spirit will place
forehead to his forehead, glowing blue. Ameen. I mean,

here is another someone
also in the swirl, whose fingers I wish I could hold,
which also remember braided hair –
an altar to the weave in every form of life. I don't mean,

by destiny, that admiral
who said it's his to destroy the moon, and with it
our whole nation. Our invaders also
need the moon. Say balance, lost. Say gravity, say bend. I mean

my knees. Me – begging to the water, help me find the precipice
within my reaching body, my fingers tracing
the symbol of memory (admit it, Sokka,
you tried to stop her offering) into the crossroads
of this water's edge, where moments ago Yue,
the moon – soul of my soul, I mean –

was laying, her full weight: against me, in my arms.

in which we have elemental powers, and all the colonizers die

After Hari Alluri, "Holder of Shadows: Hama, at Cavern's Mouth"

I found a way to become.

a residue of moon,
a prison designed to render
the invention of another form of key.

When I say bloodbend,

I mean moon

I mean you don't need to speak planets and stars
to plumb down to cruelty: empire

The catastrophe of breaking,

to live with surviving the end of my own people
to bend towards our enemy as puppets
to bend towards power

They're blood too:

the hands that would extinct me
can be rendered useless, can be torqued
can bend towards the moon, arrested

When I say bloodbend

I mean the tides, I mean we dance
I mean ourselves, realized and full
I mean we don't need to bend.

“The Avatar State is a defense mechanism, designed to empower you with the skills and knowledge of all the past Avatars. The glow is the combination of all your past lives, focusing their energy through your body. In the Avatar State, you are at your most powerful, but you are also at your most vulnerable.”

—Roku to Aang, S2E1: “The Avatar State”



The Avatar State

Energy Through Our Bodies

A gathered poem in bending form

When we say elemental
we don't need to bend –
we, ourselves, realized and full.

We mean the tides, we dance
the heat of the real.
When we say bloodbend
they're blood too:

To live with surviving the end
of our own people.

When we pasted photographs
into their albums,
we looked later
for the smudge of our
own thumbprints

When we say sandbend,
we're trying to pronounce
the word *grief* properly,
open & a floating
leaf-blade as *from*.

When we say airbend, we mean
huminga, inhale, hangin –
the wind, we mean to wind
together eternal, we rest,
exhale, a hurricane in a sealed room,
we mean laughing and fighting
with every breath.

When we say alive,
we mean bones are barren dunes
scavenging the distance
between immigrant and ghost,
a dam around our mothers' eyes.

We mean, when we say vanish,
grandmother's hands
scrawling the word *asylum* –
blood memory as currency for home.

When we say bend, we mean
we're made of raw materials
ozone, flash, fire:
We mean we pray
this, too, is survival.

We mean collecting
from the scorch
of the wound
dancing inside ourselves
when we say bend.

When we say firelord,
we belong to the sun.
as in how water longs for moon,
as in when we played music,
the voices sang, always, always change.

When we say obedience, we mean
we've all got rage within us,
everyone a hero to someone.
We mean, when we say villain
our anger turned kinetic,
the healing we found
a way to become,
shrapnel in our laughter,
love for the kindling

In which the contributing poets of *The Library of Elemental Bending Vol. 1* reflect on the process of writing their elemental bending poems – gathered together from several threads of emails and text messages between Christian Aldana, Hari Alluri, Rachele Cruz, Arthur Kayzakian, Tara Sarath, Joseph “Butch” Schwartzkopf, and Cyrus Sepahbodi.

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Hari: I’m taken back to all the makeshift organizing – not unlike the makeshift group of friends that makes up “Team Avatar” in the series – how the relationships and the spaces we began to make in 2020 felt like sustenance to me. And they still do.

That spring, rewatching *Avatar: The Last Airbender* in text-conversation with Rachele, one day I ran across a few threads on social media, at turns attacking and defending the character Hama. I almost commented, but instead I turned to my notebook and drafted a reflective poem from her POV (published in *Mariás at Sampaguitas* as “Hama, at Cavern’s Mouth”), inspired by Rachele and including a reference to something Arthur had recently written.

Arthur: It all started with the Hama poem for me. I paid attention to your repetition of “when I say bloodbend, I mean” and a firebending poem just flowed out of me. And then I called Cy and read him “Zuko” because I literally wrote it right after I saw you perform “bloodbending.” He said “holy f****” and wrote “sandbend” (“Goleh Sangam”) and it was on.

Tara: At a BIPOC Writing Party, I heard you read a draft as a prompt. That first line of the poem is electric – “when I say . . . I mean . . .”

Hari: That line is from Rachele! Her poem “(sst):” must have embedded the phrase in my psyche, so that when I went to write my initial draft it was already guiding me.

Cyrus: The form created an anaphora for us to latch onto. For me the juxtaposition of interchangeable meaning helped propel the language down the page.

Butch: I took the structure and applied it to a style of bending (air) that I felt connected to. I’m very into the relationship of air and breath/breathing, and lines of poetry as measures of breath, and so poetry as breathing – where does the breathing lead you?

Cyrus: We are grappling with intended meaning. We attempt to take an opaque emotional state into the realm of internalized precision. That is to say, we find out what we really mean by bending our way through the complicated nature we all have to our inner truths.

Tara: And that arc of the *Avatar* story that speaks to visceral impacts of colonialism, it's so thoughtful and moving: to contend with how bitterness poisons the well of our strength, and would make of us all monsters.

Christian Aldana: Something I really spent time thinking about was how to stay true to Hama's spirit, and the quiet rage of your original poem in the new iteration of my cento, weaving that into the kind of poem I would write. Play and experimentation . . . and weaving . . . Like a cento is a tributary of the original river of the source poem, you know?

Hari: It felt like that for me working with Rachele on the collective cento at the end . . . gathering language from all of us, from all four elements, and how the weaving began to take on its own voice even as everyone's poems moved us.

Rachele: We gathered words from this collection's benders onto a single field where they crackled, shook the ground beneath them, flowed, and channeled a great deep breath. Then they sang a collective, planetary force of a song – wind crackling into lightning, dirt rumbling into wave – we watched the words bend themselves.

Arthur: The elemental bending poems are crucial for me because they allow me to access a wild zone within myself. I mean a deeper level of survival that the form allows. They are visceral, therapeutic, and necessary. I really hope to continue writing them.

*

“Zuko,” “Earthbend,” and “Ghashiun” are by Arthur Kayzakian.

“After Zuko” and “After Azula” are by Tara Sarath.

“Dragon Shoots Its Whispers” is written, choreographed, and performed by Hari Alluri and scored, filmed, edited, and directed by Ruby Singh. Produced in residency at the Shadbolt Centre for the Arts.

“Gondeh Bahd” and “Goleh Sangam” are by Cyrus Sepahbodi.

“Gyatso of Southern Air” is by Butch Schwarzkopf.

“Filosofia Ekalavya: Airbend x Latantha,” “Sokka, at the Crossroads Between the Avatar World and Ours,” and “water in my chart” are by Hari Alluri.

“(sst):” is by Rachele Cruz. The poem first appears in *God’s Will for Monsters* (Inlandia Institute, 2016) and is reprinted by permission of the publisher.

“in which we have elemental powers, and all the colonizers die” is by Christian Aldana. The poem first appears in *The Water We Swim In* (Sampaguita, 2023) and is reprinted by permission.

“Energy Through Our Bodies: A Gathered Poem in Bending Form” is gathered and arranged by Rachele Cruz and Hari Alluri, from language that appears throughout this volume, including that of Christian Aldana, Arthur Kayzakian, Tara Sarath, Butch Schwarzkopf, Cyrus Sepahbodi, and their own.

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Christian Aldana (they/she) is the author of *The Water We Swim In* (Sampaguita, 2023). They are a Filipinx artist, educator, and community organizer based in Chicago. Christian founded Luya, a poetry organization that centres the voices of BIPOC. From Palestine to the Philippines, stop the US war machine!

Hari Alluri (he/him/siya) is author of *The Flayed City* (Kaya, 2017), chapbook *Our Echo of Sudden Mercy* (Next Page, 2022) and, forthcoming, *Tabako on the Windowsill* (Brick Books, 2025). Word to Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples and to the T'uubaa-asatx Nation, on whose unceded lands siya is seeking—community, collaboration: here, beyond.

Rachelle Cruz is the author of *God's Will for Monsters*, which won an American Book Award in 2018 and the 2016 Hillary Gravendyk Regional Poetry Prize. She co-edited *Kuwento: Lost Things, an anthology of Philippine Myths* with Lis P. Sipin-Gabon. The second edition of her comics text resource, *Experiencing Comics: An Introduction to Reading, Discussing and Creating Comics*, was published in 2021. Her work has also appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Poets & Writers Magazine*, *the San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Yellow Medicine Review*, among others.

Trinidad Escobar is a poet-cartoonist and author of *Arrive In My Hands*, a collection of lesbian poem-comics. She has been published by legacy media like *The Washington Post* and *The Nib*. More importantly, she focuses her attention on indie storytelling and community projects. Her next book is *Of Sea and Venom*, a 300-page graphic novel inspired by the history of Southeast Asia and the South Pacific islands.

Julay is a queer tattoo ritualist, antingero, and multidimensional artist. They offer guidance through energy work and diagnostics through tawas. They also offer a mentorship program for tattoo ritual and folks stepping into their spiritual path. Julay continues to study traditional filipinx medicine with the Hilot Academy of Binabaylan. @sacred.spirit.ink.

Arthur Kayzakian is the finalist for the 2024 Kate Tufts Award and the winner of the 2021 inaugural Black Lawrence Immigrant Writing Series for his collection *The Book of Redacted Paintings* (Black Lawrence, 2023). He is also a recipient of the 2023 Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Tara Sarath is a writer and karaoke enthusiast based in NYC. She has read around town and co-organizes SubDrift NYC, a ten-year-old monthly open mic (@subdriftnyc). @bsides_the_wench.

Butch Schwarzkopf (he/him) is a Dharawal Country, Australia-based Filipinx poet and filmmaker. His debut collection, *Pagong Cannot Climb Trees*, was published by Sampaguita Press in 2022. His biggest claim to fame is appearing in the background of *Shang-Chi* (2021) for 0.5 seconds. His favourite word is pie.

Cyrus Sepahbodi is an Iranian-American poet and experienced host of various poetry readings. His work has been published widely, and he has performed across the US. A co-founder of Madmouth and former CSUN slam team member, he mentors student poets and resides in Los Angeles with his wife and cat.

Ruby Singh is a multi-award-winning performer, composer, and producer residing in x^mməθk^wəy̯əm, Sḱwḱwú7mesh, and sə́lɪlwətaʔ territories. His creativity crosses the boundaries of music, poetry, photography, and film engaging with mythos, ecology, justice, and fantasy. Singh believes in art's ability to reimagine futures, to repurpose aesthetic freedoms toward civil and environmental justice.

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