

*2026 Teen Poetry Contest Winner*

**Queer in the Middle East**

by Mishti Patel

You're from the land where love  
Is outlawed by the state.  
I'm from a world where hopes of us,  
Are all I have to my name.

You're sunshine through gaps,  
Of metal cages and tight-wire fence.  
The warm tan that spread over my skin,  
Is all I need of evidence.

The whole world could watch us,  
And I'd still dance with you.  
We could just be whispered rumors,  
Circulating through.

You'd be shunned in the name of God  
And for us I'd work all day.  
Because when I come home and see you rest,  
I'd sigh and lay settle down against your chest.

At last I'd have a dollar,  
I'd marry you that night.  
And if they come to get you,  
We'd go without a fight.

I'd be there as they take you,  
As you'd kiss my hand.  
And I'd hope that hell is kinder  
Than man.

*2026 Adult Poetry Contest Winner*

**More Than One Thing**

by Barbara E. Hunt

There must have been a time  
when I met Mother's expectations.  
You see it hinted at in photos of us  
in the garden with matching  
sunglasses. And once I got to

babysit three siblings because  
we shooed our folks out to movies,  
I must have seemed useful; making  
milkshakes and pizza from scratch.  
I shirked her sewing lessons. Bad

skincare, unkempt hair and black  
eyeliner became our hill to die on.  
Into adulthood whether she swore  
I kept grandkids from her or  
whatever my ex-husband slurred,

how brisk my tone or short my skirts,  
everything a matter of contention.  
The calmest moment we ever  
shared was at her hospital bedside,  
me patting her blue hand and

counting breaths she won't  
remember. How I would later  
come to realize, more than one  
thing can be true at once. How  
love isn't easy to give and take.

How often it comes  
in broken packages.

*2026 Teen Poetry Contest Runner-Up*

**I Am Both**

by Sarah Zhao

SECTION 1: On the Contrary

I am a walking, talking, contradiction.  
I crave attention, yet I wilt beneath the spotlight.  
I beg to be heard, yet I flinch when you listen.  
I wish to feel loved, yet I push everyone away.  
I'm utterly paradoxical.

I long to be seen, but only through a filter –  
brightness up, features blurred,  
hiding the true me.  
I wear confidence like a borrowed jacket —  
sleeves too long, collar too high,  
disguising the choke of doubt beneath.

I am both:  
The flame, and the flood.  
The start, and the end.  
The warm welcome and the cold goodbye.

I say I want honesty, but only if it's kind.  
I say I want space, but panic when you give it.  
I say I want everything, but fear to hold the world.

I am both.  
The mask and the mirror.  
The actress and the audience.  
The first truth and all the lies that followed.

And maybe it's weak –  
to be two things at once.  
To be a heart stitched together with opposites.  
To be a soul that sings in two keys.

But tell me –  
who isn't?

Who isn't a collage of past mistakes and future ones to be made?  
Who isn't hiding behind a mask, stitched tight and painted gray?  
Who isn't both – the world and its demise, the truth and all the lies, the smiles and the cries?

So don't try to untangle me.  
Don't peel me down to one clean truth.  
Let me be messy.  
Let me be real.  
Let me be both.

## SECTION 2: A Kind Of Sorrow

There is a kind of sorrow that doesn't sob – it sits.  
Heavy, like a stone on your chest, or a rope around your neck.  
It wears your voice like velvet – soft, but strangling.

It is both.  
The grin and the grief.  
The sparkle in your eyes,  
and the storm behind your teeth.

This sadness isn't loud.  
It doesn't ask for help.  
It asks us to pretend.

Like joy is just around the corner, and the world is more than gray.  
Like I haven't rehearsed every possible answer to "Are you okay?"  
in a tone so light, it might float away.

Because inside –  
I am both.  
The blade, and the bandage.  
The scream, and the silence.  
The ache, and the armour.

Because vulnerability isn't always brave.  
Sometimes, it's exhausting.

So I perform.

Project.

Perfect.

Because it's easier to shine than to show  
where the light doesn't reach.

But still.

Still –

I am both.

I am the pain that will not be abandoned.

I am the softness that hides behind the shield.

I am both.

And I am still here.

SECTION 3: Not One or the Other

I am fear – wearing courage like perfume.

I am chaos – in a clean-lined dress.

I am a scream disguised as silence,  
a wildfire on mute.

I am not confusion.

I am complexity.

Not one shade of truth,  
but a palette of in-betweens.

I am a contradiction –  
but I've never been a lie.

I am split down the middle –  
and both sides are mine.

I will not simplify it.

I will not trim myself down  
to fit the comfort of your expectations.

I am not one or the other.  
I am both.

A quiet whisper and a deafening shout.  
A ghost, with glitter in her hair.

I am both.  
A stitched-up smile and a thunderstorm heart.

So if you call me too much — you're right.  
Too loud, too soft, too wild, too worn —  
too human to be anything else.

I am both.  
And I am still  
whole.

2026 Adult Poetry Contest Runner-Up

**Grief the Hydra**

by Vanessa Evangelista

I can feel it – it sleeps most days  
Snoring low and distant  
Buried underneath my ribs and between a tangle of veins  
Like a heartbeat under wood flooring  
Like an organ, not a heart, but still a tell-tale

It grows like a third thumb, a fifth limb, a second neck  
I slice at the base and more heads appear  
I cannot run, and yet I cannot hide  
So I let it rest  
And it follows me anyway

I reach deep into my chest sometimes  
I fish around for it: *Where are you damned hydra?*  
But I'm always left empty handed and hollow chested  
I can't find her in there  
I don't know where else to look

The princess and the monster that guards her  
A tale as old as time  
But what does the dragon guard when the princess is gone?  
When she has found her true love? Grown old? Died?  
When the hoard is a girl whose life ended too soon  
What, then, does the dragon do?

I bow my head to the hydra that lives in my stomach  
I try to fight it  
I try to coax it out with treats  
I try to fish it out  
I try to leave it be  
I've tried everything, and still it stirs

I do not understand this hydra  
I want it gone  
Then again, I wonder if it feels the same about me, its ungracious host  
I wonder if the hydra is hiding heads of its own  
Ones that hum the same things

They say grief is love with nowhere to go  
But I know exactly where my love lies  
And I think it's wherever she is  
I don't have the love with me  
I think I'm still looking for it

When the hydra claws and blows smoke, I know it's searching  
Relentless, it looks for its precious hoard everywhere  
In my marrow, behind my eye sockets, underneath my toenails  
*She's not here*, I tell it  
But still, the search continues

As frustrated as I am, some part of me sympathizes with the hydra  
I don't ever want to rest  
I want to feel it – I want to sizzle under the heat of its breath, I want to be torn to shreds  
It's the least I can do, the only thing  
If I can't be her friend anymore, the least I can do is carry the pain

My therapist would be mad  
But I don't know what else to do  
Me and this beast are stuck together  
If it truly has nowhere else to go  
I hope it finds space next to the library where I keep her memories

My dear princess, I only knew you for a short while  
But still you are forever archived  
Programmed deep into my chemistry  
The hydra still guards you, even in your absence  
And in your absence, I hope you have found peace  
And if you have found peace, I beg you share it with me