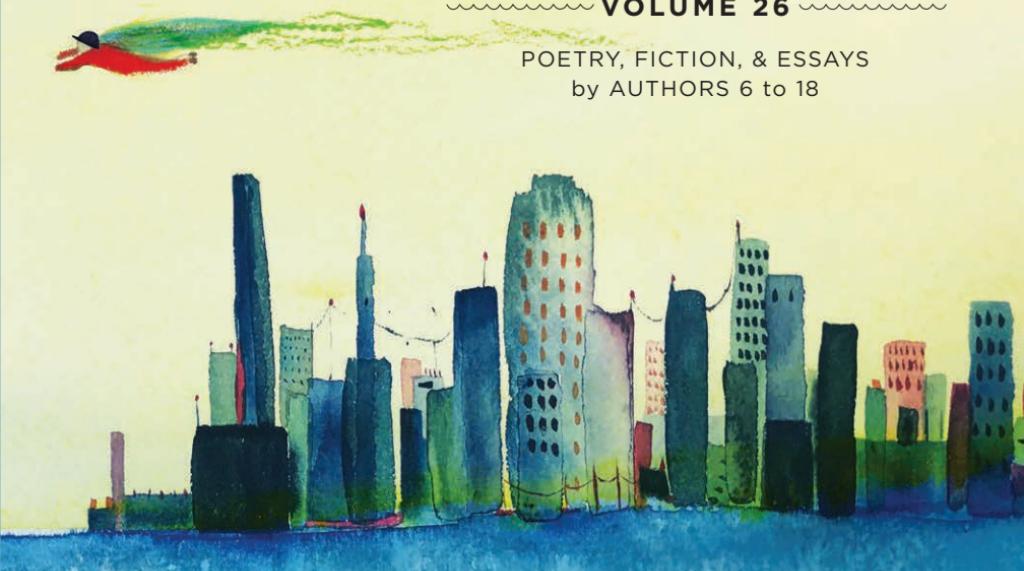


the **826**
Quarterly 

VOLUME 26

POETRY, FICTION, & ESSAYS
by AUTHORS 6 to 18



FOREWORD BY

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY

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Mystery!

SEJAL H. PATEL * Lawyer/Writer

Do you know what I love most about my job? (I'm a lawyer, by the way.) It isn't that I get to say, "Objection!" That feels awesome, but that's not it. Guess again. It isn't that when I listen to people's stories, I shoulder some of their pain. Those parts of my job are amazing, but they aren't the best. Give up?

It's that every case is a *mystery*. Not just one big mystery, but thousands of mysteries, like a twenty-one-layer cake with different flavors in every layer. I never know what is going to happen. Who will I meet? What will they say? What did they do? What didn't they do? Will we win, lose, or come to some middle solution? When the case ends, what will happen to everyone as they scatter away into the wind? I love the mystery of it all because from start to finish, I hold on to a fuzzy purple blanket I call "hope"—hope that after all these grown-ups are done fighting, it's all going to be okay. That hope is the best thing about my job.

No one, and I mean *no one*, masters the art of mystery like the featured writers in this edition of *the 826 Quarterly*. I have been volunteering at 826 Valencia for years. I do it because after many years of doing my job, I suddenly felt tired one October day. I needed to take those smudgy lawyer glasses off and refill my imagination bucket. I thought, *who can refill my life with*

mystery so that I can help some upset grown-ups feel more hopeful? I need people who are clever, funny, wise, and inventive. Ah hah—kids! That is my secret to being a great lawyer. Now you know.

As I was reading this work, I found myself wishing, hoping, and nail-biting (oh no, don't do that!) in mystery after mystery. We have, for example, mysteries about friendship. Asma A. writes in her poem that a star teases that black sky: "You are not as bright as me." The black sky responds, "You are making me feel sad and left behind." I know what this author is saying about differences, feeling "left behind," and courage. I wished, hoped, and bit my nails (NO!) that the black sky knew its power. Right here, mid-poem, was a mystery! The black sky laughs and says, "Without me, you wouldn't be as bright as you are now." "That is true. Black sky, without you, I wouldn't be bright," the star concedes. The star feels thankful for the black sky. And I put a daisy of hope in my inspiration bucket. Sophia K. writes about how close she is to her mother and how she has moved many times. She writes, "You have enough fresh starts and changes, and you have to figure out how to be okay with the parts of yourself you can't get rid of." Another daisy—here these authors are telling us that they know they are precious and never alone.

Then, there are the international mysteries. Keira V. squeezes into a giant, red envelope. What does she see? It is a mystery! She sees a big crowd with confetti all over and Chinese words and symbols. She is in China! Hilda H. writes that her grandmother came walking to San Francisco from El Salvador. That grandmother is my hero. How did she do that? These authors tell us about countries that are as much a part of them as America is. I know what they mean. My family is from India, but I was born in New York. I speak English, Spanish, and Gujarati. I feel like a stir-fry of so many ingredients. That's a mystery that we often think about, isn't it? *iClaro que si!* These writers taught me that these double and triple identities give our lives that much more richness. It's confusing in the most awesome kind of way. Add a few pink tulips to the bucket.

There also are the mystery-mysteries. Zach A. writes, “His hands clenched, flexed, and the shadows stuck tight to his skin like tar at his unique power’s command.” Oh boy, how are these characters going to work it out? Will the character in Amina F.’s piece be able to deliver the final line in the school play? She sure does! Laurence G. advises that if a black hole comes our way, we should do everything we would like to do “before it comes and devours us all.” It’s a good thing I am reading this amazing work now instead of saving it for later! Just when I am scared that these characters are doomed, the authors show me hope. Orange rose petals in the bucket.

With every flavor of mystery here—the chocolate bonanza layer, the lemon meringue layer, the kale banana with quinoa layer (“Ew, mom!” my kids would say, and I didn’t even add the broccoli yet!)—these authors showed me the same hope I see in my law practice, the hope that everyone will be okay. We hear scary grown-ups fighting in the world, but thanks to young artists like these, I think everyone will be way more than just okay.

Sejal H. Patel has been a public interest lawyer for about twenty years. Whoa. Yahir A. is right—that twenty years feels like only two! It took her a long time to find her way to writing. She started writing essays and fiction as a grown-up, after that inspiration bucket went empty. The editors of Creative Nonfiction, The Rumpus, Literary Mama, and Harvard Divinity Bulletin have been nice enough to publish her work. She has had plenty of rejection, too, but she keeps on writing. Like Opal the Bookworm, Sejal read millions and zillions of pages as a graduate of Northwestern Law School and Harvard Divinity School. School rocks! She lives in glorious San Francisco with her superhero daughters (uh oh, Lucia D.I.) and her husband who just can’t stop eating La Luna de Queso from Vanessa Perez’s second grade class. Hey, man, save some for the rest of us! She also volunteers at 826 because she thinks what Kwan B. wrote is true about all 826 writers—on top of the world, you can never be beat!