

# New nonfiction from Rebecca Rolland: "A Letter to My Ten-Year-Old Daughter"

"Something terrible happened today."

"At my school?" you asked.

"No," I replied. "But at a school, yes."

You asked how far away it was. You sat and blinked hard. You asked whether you would be safe. You reminded me that a similar thing had happened before, a week ago, or ten days ago, you couldn't remember. You asked if a person could be shot and still live.

I sat with you and answered your questions. I tried to be as honest as I could.

But what I didn't tell you was that I had looked at the photos of the dead children and their teachers and saw in them your face, saw your upturned smile in their smiles, saw their hope and happiness and honor-roll certificates and thought of you. What I didn't tell you was how ashamed I felt having to have this conversation, how I couldn't in all honesty promise you safety, not when there were active shooter drills and active shooters.

And what I didn't say was how I write about empathy, teach empathy, but how empathy without compassionate action is never enough. It's not enough to feel the pain of others if we simply sit with that pain. It's not enough to have conversations that stay in our individual homes; that don't become broader conversations, and concrete acts in the world.

✘ What I didn't tell you was how much a generation of mothers

and fathers and grandparents and relatives are hurting, with the images of those dead on their hearts, and how much more the relatives of the dead are hurting, the lives of their loved ones become statistics. The number of children lost to gun violence, the number of shootings since the start of the year: all these statistics may be true. But they don't always help us see those children: the boy who wanted to spend the summer swimming, the girl proud of her grades, the gymnast who wore a bright pink bow and stared at the camera, confident of life ahead.

What I didn't tell you was how I can't bear, as part of this generation, to leave you and all the children your age with this crisis, a problem referred to as simply "intractable," as if gun violence were like the weather, and simply existed, no matter what.

Before this letter, I wanted to write about how to talk with children about gun violence, about how to assure them they are safe, but stopped. You are not safe, not completely; this we know but cannot say. You are not protected from the horrors of this world.

And as I think about all the other families across this country, and all the other children and teachers fearful to go to school, I want to make one critical distinction. Yes, we need to sit with our children, to hear them out, to answer their questions as honestly, with as much care, as we can. Yes, we need as much patience as we can muster, and care, and time. But we need to do more than sit in the face of this overwhelming terror and death. We need the empathy to feel the pain of others, and then the empathy to take action for change. We need to promise our children they will be safer, not only because of our empathy, but because of the concrete changes we decide on collectively. We need to be able to face our children and, out of love and honesty and respect, tell them we will do more than empathize. Across the political spectrum, we must gather together, in horror and pain and

grief, and then, we must model for our children that we can act.

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## **New Nonfiction from Dr. Anthony Gomes: “The Gun Culture in America: Will There be a Light at the End of the Tunnel?”**

To fathom the Gun Culture and gun-related violence in the US, it is important to understand *The Second Amendment* (Amendment II) to the United States Constitution, which protects the right of the people to [keep and bear arms](#). It was adopted on December 15, 1791, as part of the first ten [amendments](#) contained in the [Bill of Rights](#). The Second Amendment was based partly on English common law<sup>3</sup>the right to keep and bear arms and was influenced by the [English Bill of Rights of 1689](#). [Sir William Blackstone](#) described this as an auxiliary right that supported the right of self-defense and resistance to oppression, in addition to the civic duty of every citizen to act in defense of the state. It originated during a turbulent period in English history during which the authority of the King to govern without the consent of Parliament, and the role of Catholics in a country that was becoming Protestant was challenged. Ultimately, James II, a Catholic, was overthrown in the Glorious Revolution, and his successors, the Protestants William III and Mary II, accepted the conditions that were codified in the Bill. One of the issues the Bill resolved was the authority of the King to

disarm its subjects, after James II had attempted to disarm many Protestants and had argued with Parliament over his desire to maintain a standing (or permanent) army. The bill stated that it was acted to restore “ancient rights” trampled upon by James II.

There have been several versions of the Second Amendment. As passed by Congress and preserved in the National Archives, the amendment states: “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” The [Supreme Court of the United States](#) has ruled that the right belongs to individuals, while also ruling that the right is not unlimited and does not prohibit all regulation of either [firearms](#) or [similar devices](#) (Epstein, Lee; Walk, Thomas G. September 18, 2012). [State](#) and [local](#) governments are limited to the same extent as the [federal government](#) from infringing this right.

Early English settlers in America (Hardy, p. 1237; Malcolm, Joyce Lee (1996). p. 452, 466), viewed the right to arms and/or the right to bear arms and/or state militias as important for one or more of these purposes (in no particular order):

- enabling the people to organize a militia system.
- participating in law enforcement.
- deterring tyrannical government; (Elder, Larry; July 3, 2008)
- repelling invasion.
- suppressing insurrection, allegedly including [slave revolts](#); (Bogus, Carl T, Roger Williams,1998)
- facilitating a natural right of self-defense.

*Excepting for the last, none of the other purposes hold sway today.*

THE NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION (NRA) AND ITS ROLE IN THE

## POLITICS OF GUNS

The NRA was founded in 1871 in New York by William Conant Church and George Wood Wingate. It is headquartered in Fairfax, Virginia and had 5 million members as of 2017. The NRA advocates gun rights and informs its members regarding gun related bills since 1934. Since 1975, the organization directly lobbies the presidential candidates, the US Congress and Senate for and against gun legislation. According to Center for Responsive Politics, nearly 90% of NRA donations went to Republican candidates. The NRA spent \$54.4 million in the 2016 election cycle, almost all of it for or against a candidate but not a direct contribution to a campaign. The money went almost entirely to Republicans. Of independent expenditures totaling \$52.6 million, Democrats received \$265! The NRA's largest 2016 outlay was the \$30.3 million it spent in support of Donald Trump for President. (Mike Spies and Ashkley Balcerzac, OpenSecrets, November 9, 2018). According to ProPublica and the Federal Election Commission, most of the money went to support the Republican Presidential candidate and Republican Congressional races in 2020. Undoubtedly, the NRA is one of the most powerful lobbies in Washington that rates political candidates targeting candidates that are for gun control. Essentially, it uses the Second Amendment as cover to promulgate gun dissemination and profits on gun sales, much at the cost of gun deaths of Americans.



Guns are displayed at Dragonman's, an arms seller east of Colorado Springs, Colo.

## THE IMPACT OF NO-ACTION ON GUN-CONTROL ON YOUNG HIGH-SCHOOL AMERICANS

Since the Columbine High School shooting on April 20, 1999, in Littleton, there have been 229 U.S. school shootings not

including misfires or instances in which a shooter was stopped before inflicting deaths or injuries. In 2022 alone there have been 212 mass shootings. On May 14, 2022, a [racist attack at a Buffalo, New York, supermarket](#) by an 18-year old gunman took the lives of 10 people and left three more injured. And just only 10 days later, an 18-year old gunman killed 21 people including 19 children at an elementary school [in Uvalde, Texas](#). It was the deadliest school shooting in America [since Sandy Hook](#).

There is no purpose in reviewing these ghastly events; however, to mention just two that touched me the most since these were only children, is what happened on December 14, 2012, in Newtown, Connecticut at the Sandy Hook Elementary School, and on May 24<sup>th</sup> in Uvalde, Texas.

There is no doubt that Adam Lanza, the mass killer of Sandy Hook was mentally deranged, but without guns he would be unable to go on a killing spree of innocent first-grade children. Although the states of Connecticut and New York passed stricter gun laws, despite President Obama's highly emotional appeal and repeated appeals after other gun shootings, the US Congress and the Senate did nothing. To me this was and remains unconscionable and speaks of total inhuman cowardice of politicians in front of the world at large. Besides, most of these politicians are of the Christian faith who flaunt their Judeo-Christian faith and the greatness of our western civilization. I have wondered where Christ fits in this equation!

On the night of October 1, 2017, Stephen Paddock of Mesquite, Nevada fired more than 1,100 rounds on a crowd of concertgoers at the Route 91 Harvest music festival on the Las Vegas Strip in Nevada, leaving 58 people dead and injuring 851. He was found dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. This incident was the deadliest mass shooting in the United States committed by a single individual whose motive remained unclear. As usual

it reignited the debate about guns and guns laws. This time around the attention was focused on *bump-stocks* used by Paddock to convert his semi-automatic rifles to fire at a rate of a fully automatic weapon. The usual pictures on TV; the mourning, the flowers, the prayers, President Trumps visit to the injured, but NO action whatsoever!

And it happened again: On February 15, 2018, a 19-year old Nikolas Cruz opened fire with a semi-automatic gun at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida killing 17 and wounding 14 others, five with life-threatening injuries. Apparently, he purchased the semi-automatic weapon a year ago when he was only 18. It is ironic that the legal age to purchase alcohol in the US is 21 years, whereas a semi-automatic weapon can be purchase at the age of 18! As usual we saw the same pictures on TV: students running helter-skelter, parents crying, TV and newspaper correspondents saying and writing and asking the same questions all over again, and politicians offering prayers and condolences.

Mental health has been often used as a scapegoat. Yes, indeed these killer individuals could have significant psychiatric issues, that need to be dealt with, but without a gun and a semi-automatic moreover, they couldn't kill. Yes, they might stab some, and even kill some with a knife or whatever else, but the overwhelming number of killings with a semi-automatic wouldn't occur. Mentally deranged people are all over the world, but they don't go killing innocent people at random, because they don't possess guns! Furthermore, it is difficult to determine which medical condition is associated with a desire for mass killing, and young people with mental disorders unless institutionalized are well known to stop their medications for a variety of reasons.

It seems these killings of young people, and the after-emotions have become routine, and in a few days all of this drama disappears from the radar, until another killing surfaces. All of this despite the fact that the majority of

Americans favor some gun control. Today, as before, parents all over the US agonize over the safety of their children. It is ironic that instead of passing sensible gun reforms, some elected politicians and lawmakers would prefer to further militarize our schools by arming teachers.

Our politicians and gun advocates can take the examples of several countries in the world, in particular Australia, where the current homicide rate is the lowest on record for the past 25 years. In 1996, after a mass shooting in Tasmania in April of that year, Australia passed the National Firearms Agreement. In the Tasmania killing, known as the Port Arthur Massacre, a 28-year-old man, armed with a semi-automatic rifle, shot and [killed 35 people, and injured 18 others](#). Under the 1996 law, Australia banned certain semi-automatic, self-loading rifles and shotguns, and imposed stricter licensing and registration requirements. It also instituted a mandatory buyback program for banned firearms. (Eugene Kiely, *The Wire*, October 4, 2017).

What can be done to prevent gun violence in America?

1: Ban on the purchase of all semiautomatic and automatic weapons, bump stocks, and high-capacity magazines. These are military style weapons and need not be used for hunting or protection.

2: Strict background checks and *uniform gun-laws nationwide*. There is high rate of gun violence in Chicago despite strong gun laws; however, guns in Chicago come from Indiana.

3: Increase age limit for gun purchase to 21.

4: Better attention and alertness to mental health issues. However, this is a difficult problem to deal with in our multi-faceted culture and our dysfunctional health care system.

4: Campaign finance law in the US changed drastically in the

wake of two 2010 judicial opinions: the Supreme Court's decision in [Citizens United v. FEC](#) and the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals decision in [SpeechNow.org v. FEC](#) (Campaign Finance Historical Timeline, 2011). In a nutshell, the high court's 5-4 decision gave a green light to corporations and labor unions to spend as much as they want to convince people to vote for or against a candidate.

Our corrupt political system based on lobbies and campaign contributions by individuals, PAC's, super PCC's, and corporations should end forthright. Each individual should be able to contribute an X amount, and the pool of public money should be divided equally both in local and presidential elections.

5: Regarding the Second Amendment it is important to recognize that at a time when the [English Bill of Rights of 1689](#) was written England had no standing army. And when the Second Amendment was adopted on December 15, 1791, as part of the US Constitution, the US had gained freedom from British colonialism and imperialism just 15 years before, and consequently feared a foreign invasion. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that we have the largest and most sophisticated military the world has ever seen, and we don't need guns in individual citizenry to protect us from a foreign invasion. Those amongst us who feel threatened by our own government, should keep in mind that their guns and militias are no match to our government military forces. Thomas Jefferson believed that unless every generation had the right to create a new constitution for itself, the earth would belong to "the dead and not the living". (Thomas Jefferson to William Plumer, 1816.)

*These arguments in no way means that we should take away guns for self-protection, sport and hunting. One can well understand that for rural America gun ownership for sport is part and parcel of their culture.*

These changes would go a long way in asserting our humane values and our democracy and shall not deprive any person in the pursuit of life, liberty, and property without due process of law.

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Hardy, p. 1237. “Early Americans wrote of the right in light of three considerations: (1) as auxiliary to a natural right of self-defense; (2) as enabling an armed people to deter undemocratic government; and (3) as enabling the people to organize a militia system.”

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Thomas Jefferson to William Plumer, 1816. ME 15:46

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## **“All. art. is. political:” An interview with Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales**

Our two featured poems for the month are selections from Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales’s anthology, *Pulse/Pulso: In Remembrance of Orlando*. Here, WBT editor Andria Williams interviews the two editors about this unique, gorgeous, and necessary passion project. As Morales describes,

*The pieces in Pulse/Pulso came from the initial days and months after the shooting. We needed to hold and sanctify those moments so we could have each moment that followed. So we could feel love and pride again. That is the passion I had and still have for this project.*

**ANDRIA WILLIAMS:** Roy, one entry point into this discussion might be to start with your 2016 poem, [“Restored Mural for Orlando.”](#) The poem is beautiful and gutting. You have a

masterful way of building the emotional investment with each turn, opening with the shooting itself, and then moving into a fond, pragmatic, and even tenderly humorous portrait of your family on vacation in Orlando. On that trip, you reflect that Orlando is where kids go to “fantasize about the childhood [they] didn’t have;” you’re surprised by the sight of your mother on a rollercoaster (“because she’s always been ashamed of her weight”), and note somewhat humorously that your parents ended up “buying a timeshare by mistake/ not really by mistake...”

As a non-poet but a fiction writer, I was simply impressed by the way you allow the “character” of yourself to guide us through the poem, which somehow, almost counter-intuitively, increases the intensity.

Can you talk a little more about the myth of Orlando for you, as a child, and how this mythos worked its way into your thoughts about the tragedy?

**ROY G. GUZMÁN:** First of all, thank you for your generous reading of my poem and, as a fiction writer, for noticing these rich aspects about the poem. I think one of the most important things I had to negotiate during the writing this poem was my position in all of this. I kept returning to that image of the club, to the colors, to what the victims and survivors might have been wearing, to the sounds. Those sensory details invited me into that space, but I had to figure out what I’d be doing in the reimagining of that space. I had to turn the gaze on myself. That is when a lot of these autobiographical details suddenly became important to my approach to the poem. I had to honor the victims and I had to be as clear as possible about my relationship to Orlando. As someone who grew up in Florida, I was affected in so many ways.



Pulse/Pulso editor and poet, Roy G. Guzmán.

The mythos of Orlando was important for me to talk about. I can't remember how many times my friends and I would just drive up from Miami and stay in a hotel and do all kinds of stupid things. Most of us were teenagers. I probably went to Orlando a few times before I even set foot in Disney World. The timeshare event affected my family and me greatly. I'd just gotten my first job out of college and I wanted to treat my parents to something meaningful. I remember being in the info session for that timeshare and running all kinds of figures in my head to possibly work out this possibility. Obviously, I was naive and the people running the info session took advantage of that with false promises. Till this day my mom tells my stepdad and me that she never wanted to sign that contract, that we pushed her to. And she's right.

## 2) AW:

In "Restored Mural for Orlando," you write:

"I am afraid of attending places  
that celebrate our bodies because that's also where our bodies  
have been cancelled / when you're brown & gay you're always  
dying  
twice"

What was the particular importance to you of publishing an anthology – specifically of Latinx and LGBTQ+ writers – about the shooting?

In their poem "straight partner of ten years and anyone else," Nicole Oquendo writes,

"do not erase my grief. there is a galaxy of this  
spreading out inside my chest."

Did you feel that the stories, the grief, of members of your community were not being heard in the aftermath of the shooting?

**RG:** We were totally not being heard. We still aren't. It's appalling how that's always the case when tragedies affect marginalized communities. Again and again we see scholars and researchers build careers out of Black and brown pain, and whatever money they make hardly ever makes it back to our communities. This year, for instance, marked the second anniversary of the massacre. Instead of promoting queer and trans voices of color that responded with care and tact, most of the writing community decided to promote another cis white writer and what they've written about others' pain or how they want to make the world a better place. I'm tired of this pattern. It's enough to make me feel cynical. But we're told to shut up and be grateful we're still alive. That's what the writers in this anthology are trying to resist.

**MIGUEL M. MORALES:** Pulse affected us all in ways we'll be discovering for years to come. QTPOC weren't being heard before the shooting, in the aftermath, or even today. But just because we aren't being heard doesn't mean our voices aren't out there.

QTPOC communities across the country immediately felt connected to the shooting because so many times we've been relegated to the occasional "Latin Night" and even then, those spaces are filled with others trying to exoticize or fetishize us. No matter how comfortable we try to make those spaces, we are still being policed, attacked, and victimized. But through it all, we always – *always* – have each other. Honestly, it hurt to see so many commemorations of Pulse exclude our voices but we did what we always do, we buried our dead and made our own space. That's what we wanted to convey with *Pulse/Pulso*, we have each other.

**3) AW:** Miguel, I know that you grew up in Texas and worked as a migrant farmworker beginning quite early in your childhood, that you lead writing workshops for farmworkers in Missouri and Kansas, and that you're also an accomplished poet and fiction writer. Can you talk about how you initially connected

with Roy to work on the Pulse/Pulso anthology, and about your own passion for the project?)



Pulse/Pulso editor and poet, Miguel M. Morales.

**MM:** I followed Roy on social media, but we didn't interact much. Not long after the Pulse shooting, my friend and poetry sister, Sarah A. Chavez, asked if I knew Roy because he had a piece about Pulse that was going viral on the internet. It was "Restored Mural for Orlando" and I didn't even finish reading it before I sent him a message thanking him for the piece. We began chatting and I shared with him how I wished someone would put together an anthology of brown queer voices responding to Pulse. That's when he said a press approached him about doing that very thing. He said he was wary because he wasn't sure how much he could commit to it because he was in school. But, like me, he wanted something to happen. I'm not sure who brought up the collaboration first but it was obvious that we were meant to work on this together.

Many of us endured sustained losses of loved ones during the AIDS crisis of the '90s. Some of us have never come to terms with those losses. I didn't want that to happen with Pulse. All I could think about in those first hours and days after the shooting were of the names of the victims. I wasn't prepared for how similar they would look and sound to the names of people I loved. I had to do something even if it was simply to encourage/nag/beg action from more accomplished Latinx writers. As with most forms of activism and leadership, it didn't come down to big names. It came down to us.

Everyone in this book stepped up when presented with the opportunity to honor the victims. Each of us relied on family, friends, and strangers for help. The enduring legacy of Pulse and of the lives lost is not of grief but of gratitude for the communities that sprung up across the country in the

aftermath. The pieces in Pulse/Pulso came from the initial days and months after the shooting. We needed to hold and sanctify those moments so we could have each moment that followed. So we could feel love and pride again. That is the passion I had and still have for this project.

**4) AW:** I love the variety of the poems in Pulse/Pulso; some are quiet and sad; others, like Maya Chinchilla's "Church at Night," has moments that I would love to hear performed out loud ("Queerly beloved, we are gathered here today to get through this thing called life...") How did you decide how and where to place the pieces? Did an order reveal itself as you were editing, or was it more like fitting puzzle pieces together at the end?

**RG:** The organization of the anthology felt very natural in how it came together. As we accepted pieces, we'd add them to a file. I remember mixing a lot of these pieces and not thinking much about order. What was interesting is when Miguel and I came back to the document, months later, and found that somehow the order we'd put the work in worked. We came up with a lot of reasons for why Chinchilla's "Church at Night" would go where it ended up and, for instance, why Chen's work appears where it does. I'd like to believe something greater than us helped us with that order.

**MM:** I don't remember us officially having to plan out the order, much less have a disagreement on the pieces we selected. It's easy for editing teams to agree on which pieces make it into a collection. What really tests the team is when they come to pieces on which they disagree. I was waiting for us to have that disagreement but it didn't happen. I think that's because we stayed focused on honoring Pulse and while there are some pieces I wish had made it into the collection, I'm extremely happy with what we curated.

From the beginning, Roy and I worked to have our submissions include new, emerging, and established QTPOC voices. We worked

even harder to make sure those voices filled the anthology. Of course we had to examine those terms because someone like Joe Jimenez is seen as emerging but many of us in the community know Joe as an established voice. And since we put out the call in 2016, some of the people who submitted have since become important and emerging voices. We also included writers who have never submitted work anywhere. Including them was essential to the tone of what we wanted to reflect. I'm so proud of everyone who submitted work whether it made it into the anthology or not. They all helped shape *Pulse/Pulso* into what it is.



**5) AW:** Julia Leslie Guarch's poem, "Shh. Shh. Be Quiet" uses the last text messages of victim Eddie Jamoldroy Justice, sent to his mother as he hid from the shooter in a bathroom. ("Mommy I love you./ He's coming. Im going to die.") The effect is brutal. But such messages have also become familiar, as one public shooting after another rocks the US. How do you think Orlando fits into the larger discussion of gun violence in this country?

**MM:** It is clear that so many of us, especially QTPOC, are not safe living our lives, telling our stories, dancing in clubs, shopping, walking, driving, standing, sitting, praying, laughing, or breathing. Gun violence is the focus of so many these days due to the immediate and imminent threat of death that it poses, and it should be. We have to shut that shit down. Gun violence is violence.

The Pulse shooting is just another example, though a rare and extreme one, of the violence queer people, especially queer/trans people of color, face daily. Violence against us is dismissed by the authorities and eventually even by ourselves. Trans women are being slaughtered. Our vulnerable queer youth and queer elderly face violence and threats by those who are supposed to take care of them. We are targeted

for sexual violence and other forms of sexual assault that go unreported, unacknowledged, and unrecognized.

In some places queer people are not legally safe in our workplaces or walking down the street or using a public restroom or in our homes. And even in the places where we are legally protected, we're still not safe.

I am not attempting to dismiss the loss of the 49 lives and the injuries of the 53 others that happened on June 12, 2016. I'm saying that our survival is much larger than gun violence. If we only focus on bullets, we ignore the beatings, the bashings, the bullying, and hundreds of other ways the blood of LGBTQIA+ people is spilled every moment of everyday. Ignoring these forms of "everyday" violence gave permission to perpetrate the violence that happened at Pulse.

**6) AW:** Roy, in an interview in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, you have said, "[Intersections of identity] are something that unfortunately in the U.S. [do] not get to exist simultaneously. Either people want you to wave the immigrant flag and that's it, or wave the student flag, or wave the poet flag, and a lot of institutions prevent people from having all these different identities coexist. And for me it's like, because I exist, I exist already within all these different identities."

Can you speak a little more about this? Do you have any insights into how this problem might have developed, and whether any progress is on the horizon?

**RG:** Thank you for bringing me back to what I said in that interview—for which I remain grateful. I just got back from a research trip in Honduras, so a lot of what I experienced there is going to speak to how I respond to these particular questions. I find that a system built on colonization, classification, surveillance, torture, and power is going to want to control and stratify identity. Although I noticed

these problems in Honduras, in a place like the United States, where people care so much about individuality and wealth, you can't have layers of gray. Complexity isn't valued because American society wants the world to speak only American English. Privilege isn't recognized when people obfuscate different levels of hardship. Something that gives me lots of joy is seeing Black women, for instance, run their own successful businesses. But immigrants, at least those from Central America, are still treated like disposables. Our laws continue to see us as barbaric, social leeches, and unable to govern ourselves. The progress I want to see happen has truly yet to come.

**7) AW:** Miguel, you had a fantastic poem, "This is a Migrant Poem," a couple of years back in Vol. 29 of *The Green Mountains Review*.

"This poem is a gift of a strong back, of sturdy legs, of silence, of patience.

And a never-ending work ethic  
a never ending work ethic  
a never ending work of ethics."

We are, as a nation, failing to deal ethically with people trying to enter this country, and now are being led by an administration that seems obsessed with and increasingly hostile to immigrants altogether. Can you talk a little about your understanding of the "zero-tolerance" policy, the effects you've seen? Has it been hard to keep writing and making art in a national climate that's this openly hostile, or do you feel that the hostility has always been there and it's only the openness that has changed?

**MM:** I grew up in Texas but I live in Kansas. While the first is a border state, the second acts like it is. They are remarkably similar in their geography and in their approach to

immigration and to those they regard as “others.” Kansas is one of the states receiving migrant children forcibly separated from their parents at the southern U.S. border. Like any other community we are doing our best to keep eyes and ears on these children, hold each other up, and push back against those who advocate for this monstrous policy and shame the cowards who keep silent.

Because hate and hostility have always been there, and will always be there, the Latinx community has learned to pick and choose its battles. Though now we’re facing what we thought was far behind us – emboldened, willful, vile ignorance and an increase in extreme anti-brown violence. As an artist, it’s hard to find the moments to create in this environment. But I came of age in the AIDS activism of the 90s and that oppressive, destructive, and deadly time gave us some of the most powerful and creative moments in queer history. That’s the challenge Latinx artists, and all artists, face in these exponential series of crises. We’re also learning to embrace our anger and our rage. We’re channeling it into something positive.

**8) AW:** Miguel, in a 2014 blog post, after the Ferguson riots in St. Louis, you wrote

“... there is... beauty in pain. We ... have a gift and sometimes that gift requires sitting in our pain, processing it, and putting it through the artist’s lens.

It means taking what’s inside our hearts, inside our heads and on our tongues and putting it in words, on canvas, or in clay – that’s our ability, our gift. It’s our super power. In doing so, we can help others process their feelings. We can stand as examples to young people on creative ways to deal with these difficult emotions that make so many turn to, and live in, rage or to simply shut down.”

I'd like to close with [both of] your thoughts on what it means to write with a political consciousness. What does political art achieve when it is doing what it does best?

**MM:** All. art. is. political.

People who say otherwise speak from a place of invested privilege where their politics are so deeply inherent that their positions are seen as default and apolitical. Those individuals are deluding themselves and desperately want to conscript you into any and all efforts sanctioning that delusion.

For me, art has the most impact when it meets and merges with activism. As artists, we are tasked with holding a mirror up to society. We reflect its darkness as well as its beauty. Right now, in this moment, we have an abundance of both. Every artist strives for the apex of creativity. We are there. We are standing in a vulnerable sacred space that comes along once in a generation. We just have to be bold.

**RG:** I've been writing poetry consistently for about 6-7 years, though I've been reading it for much longer than that. Most of my first poems primarily came from restlessness and a need to heal. I'm not sure how much has changed for me since. I think the best art operates between imminence, urgency, and compassion, as the works in this anthology claim. However, I strongly believe that any kind of embodiment must begin away from the page. If you are not doing the work your words claim you do, then it's hard for that work to connect with readers. It's hard for you to even connect with what you're talking about. I'm not implying that fiction writers engage in fiction because they themselves can't do the work urged by their words; on the contrary, the best fiction does not come from the "best gaze" but from the best embodiment of those words. You can't claim community if you've never provided community for others. If we are saying that all art is political, what we are also saying is that our words carry all kinds of

responsibilities and possibilities.

One time I met with author Jeanette Winterson and she said that anything she writes, regardless of the genre, is an extension of herself, a preoccupation she wants to unpack, the self wanting to grow and learn.

I think about that often. How do we want to grow? What are we consuming? When will you be ready to give back?

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## **New Poetry from Nicole Oquendo and James A.H. White**

The following poems are reprinted with permission from the anthology [\*Pulse/Pulso: In Remembrance of Orlando\*](#) (Damaged Goods Press 2018), edited by Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales.

### **to be born**

by Nicole Oquendo

my spine is queer, curved enough  
to hold me up while the news bends  
and sways us. every day we die, and  
one day it will be me, though statistically,  
according to these headlines,  
it's more likely to happen soon.

but there's new life to look forward to.

last year, my family taught me how  
to press my chest and sculpt my own form.  
i make love now by giving and taking in equal measure.  
my brothers and sisters and those in between  
see me standing next to them, signing all of my names.



## **Stained Glass**

by James A.H. White

Fifty—the number of years my mother has lived. The number of  
paper clips currently  
interlocked in a small tin bucket on my work desk. According  
to motivational speaker  
Gail Blanke, the number of physical and emotional ties you  
should throw out of your  
life in order to find it again.

Some say many of them knew each other. It's often like that in  
our community. It's  
often like that in a nightclub. We recognize each other.  
There's no darkness dark enough  
to interrupt that.

The Orange County Medical Examiner's Office, with assistance  
from Florida  
Emergency Mortuary Operations Response System, identified,  
notified, autopsied (if  
needed) and released all bodies to next of kin within 72 hours  
of the incident. That  
is, all but one victim, whose father wouldn't claim his gay  
son.

Phonesthesia is the term for sound symbolism, or, relating shapes to sounds. I see shame played like tetherball, see it shaped like the tennis ball as it flies, bound, around that metal pole, hear it on the slap of the child's open hand or deeper-chorused fist. I see shame falling on that victim's burial like the kind of rainstorm written into movie scripts—dark and heavy. I think of it registering unfairly on the faces of the closeted's families when they saw their loved one's body and recognized it for the first time.

An installation at Chicago's Contemporary Art Museum featured a row of bodies lined across a gallery and blanketed by white sheets that peaked at the noses and toes hidden but assumed molded beneath. A girl nearby says it all makes her sleepy before she falls to the floor and pretends to sleep—like the dead. On the morning of the shooting, I think of my brothers and sisters inside, not lined but scattered, sleep I imagine made clearer to the young as something much nearer, perhaps much whiter.

I break down hearing about the group that hid in the bathroom but were found then fired on, a couple in a stall injured not only by bullets but shrapnel from the wall and door. Suppose the bathroom stall like a closet. Do you remember huddling? How about holding onto yourself beneath a traditional Jibarro straw hat or flower bonnet? How long did you wait before the car horn outside announced it had come to take you out dancing?

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# The Racist Arguments For, Against Gun Control

Gun violence is deeply entrenched in America. Chances are, if you've spent any time outside the Upper East Side of Manhattan in the last 30 years, you've been touched by gun violence personally—someone you've met or know personally has been hurt or killed by guns. It's a problem that affects us all.

It's also a complicated problem, in the sense that the two groups of people who are most enthusiastic about the issue are the ones making certain that nothing happens to change the status quo. On the one hand, you have on the right the numerous NRA-member, 2nd Amendment-quoting survivalists, who think that far from the US needing gun control, what the US needs is more guns, everywhere. These people are dangerous. On the other hand, you have a smaller but equally vocal group of people on the left—the precious, very-well educated shop-at-Whole-Foods-for-their-vanity-illness types—who think that the only people who should have guns are the police and the military. These people are dangerous.

And both groups may be racist.

The 2nd Amendment, which provides for a “well regulated militia” was written with several things in mind. One was an organic, community-level response to attacks by hostile states and nations. Another was attacks on colonists at the peripheries of U.S. territories by Native Americans (then called “Indians” or “Natives”) who often disputed settlements (for understandable reasons). Another was the prospect of a tyrannical government arising in America itself—a guarantee provided to each State against the possibility of a large

entity destroying the small, at a time when that seemed more plausible and immediate than it does today.

One of the most important considerations at the time, well documented in other publications, was the fear that slaves would gain access to guns, enabling them to organize a rebellion. As time went on, this concern diminished in the North (where they did away with slavery and indentured servitude in favor of more benign methods of employment, such as wage slavery and the systematic exploitation of immigrants in factories). Meanwhile, demographics made the problem (from the politically-dominant White population's perspective) much more immediate in the South. There's a fairly convincing argument to be made that the tradition and legacy of gun ownership in the South is tied directly to fear of a massive racial uprising.

So when the NRA people say they want guns to protect themselves, they're saying they want guns so they can *feel safe*. The legacy of that feeling of safety in the South is tied directly to slavery, and the worry that a large group of angry black people—dslaves, or, in today's parlance, former slaves / criminals / thugs—would come after white people. The only way to protect oneself from that fear—the only way to be *safe*, according to this way of thinking—is to own guns.

On the extreme of the progressive position, the urban, largely northern “nobody should have guns except the military and the police” advocates of gun control, racism is more benign, but based on the realities of life-as-it-is, undeniably present. This group, typified by intellectuals like *The New Yorker's* Adam Gopnik are operating on the same basic assumptions as their southern and Midwestern countrymen—they want to be *safe*—and the best way to be safe from gun violence, according to this small but vocal group, is to take all the guns off the street, absolutely prohibit them from personal use, and only permit them to the military and police.

While the military is about as white as the population – the combat branches, officers (the leaders and the ones with the guns, so to speak), and senior officers are disproportionately white. Most of the police are white, also disproportionately so given the populations they patrol. So when the extreme left says “the guns should be in the hands of the police and military,” actually what they’re saying—whether they’re conscious of this or not—is that they feel *safe* with the military and police they have, and that those people should have guns. That is, they feel *safe* when the people in authority have guns, as long as the people in authority are just like them.



On the other hand, while there are black advocates of better gun control, their idea of gun control rarely includes a more perfectly-armed police force and military. Their idea is—like that of most of the left, many moderates, and centrists on the right—simply that guns should be more difficult to procure, to keep them out of the hands of mentally unstable or those with criminal tendencies. It’s difficult to imagine a less objectionable idea: guns are available and restricted like cars, with various permutations to handle different types of weapons.

In summary, citizens who believe that nobody should have guns are probably racists. Citizens who believe that everyone should have guns are probably racists. Citizens who maintain that while it should be more difficult to have guns, law-abiding, mentally sound tax-payers in the United States of America should have access to them do not exhibit any explicit or implicit racial biases, at least when it comes to this issue.