Project 19
The Poets

19 Commissions To Celebrate the Centennial of the 19th Amendment
The New York Philharmonic is marking the centennial of the 19th Amendment through Project 19, a multi-season initiative to commission and premiere new works by 19 women composers, from Pulitzer Prize winners to emerging talents. Launching in February 2020, Project 19 is the single largest women-only commissioning initiative in history. In addition to the Academy of American Poets, the Philharmonic is partnering with Catalyst, The Juilliard School, Kaufman Music Center’s Special Music School High School (M. 859), League of Women Voters of the City of New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the New-York Historical Society to extend the reach of Project 19 and further conversations about representation in classical music and beyond. Learn more at nyphil.org/project19.

For this partnership, the Academy of American Poets commissioned work from 19 nationally recognized women poets, including current and former Academy Chancellors and poets laureate. Poetry has played a significant role in encouraging civic and grassroots engagement, and contributed to public debate and dialogue. The poets in this book offer to celebrate and question what it means to be an American woman writing today with the century-old legacy of the suffrage movement behind them.

Project 19: The Poetry

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Project 19: The Composers

To be premiered in 2019–20: Nina C. Young, Joan La Barbara, Nicole Lizée, Paola Prestini, Tania León, Ellen Reid, Olga Neuwirth, Sarah Kirkland Snider

To be premiered in future seasons: Unsuk Chin, Mary Kouguamdjian, Caroline Mallonee, Jessie Montgomery, Angélica Negrín, Maria Schneider, Caroline Shaw, Anna Thorvaldsdattir, Joan Tower, Melinda Wagner, Du Yun

Visit nyphil.org/project19 for more info.
The Family Vote

Dora looks back from the dead

Before my people were required to answer impossible questions in order to vote:

How many bubbles in a bar of soap?
How many jellybeans fill up a jar?
Can you prove that your grandfather voted?

There was a time when black men could vote and black women could not, 1870, five years free, and that vote belonged to the family.

Our families had been sold apart and scattered, defiled, burnt, unraveled. We formed anew.

The vote was not personal property.
The vote did not belong to one alone.
There was no “mine”: The family vote.

I’d gather the gun in the folds of my skirt and walk with my husband to the polling place, sentry the perimeter so he could cast the vote.

We’d learned to read in secret, make soup from a stone, infiltrate, a way out of no way, cut through glass and burn through fog.
Eventually we got the precious vote.
That too was not personal property.

That, too, belonged to the family.
I look back across vast years from this eternal and testify, and sign my name,

Dora, an emancipated slave

The Sound of Their Names

for the Women of the 19th Amendment

Praise their grit and gospel, their glistening brains, their minds on fire. Neurons, numbering the stars.
Praise their bones. Their spines and skulls, the axis, the atlas: I will not and I shall.
Their mouths, praise. Ridged palates and smart muscular tongues, teeth, sound or pitted, their wit and will. Their nerve, resolute and founded within the body. Honor now their wombs and hearts, biceps and blood, deep mines of the flesh where passion is tested.
Thank all twenty-six bones of their feet, arches, heels, bunions, sweat, marching the streets in high buttoned boots. Praise the march. Praise justice. Though slow and clotted.
Their hands at the press. The grease and clatter, the smell of ink. Feel the sound of their names in our mouths:
Susan B. Anthony
Dr. Mabel Ping-Hua Lee
Marie Louise Bottineau Baldwin
Elizabeth Cady Stanton
Wilhelmina Kekelaokalaninui Widemann Dowsett
Praise their eyelids that close and give rest at the end of each long day.
Praise the work that goes on.
A Quest for Universal Suffrage

I.
Suffrage:
In late middle English
intercessory prayers,
a series of petitions.
Not the right — but the hope.

Universal:
applicable to all cases —
extcept those marginalized
and unnamed.
A belief, but not a fact.

II.
In the trombone slide of history
I hear the suffer in suffragette
the uni uni uni in universal —
each excluded ikwe: women
from five hundred tribal nations
mindimooyeh or matriarchs
of ancient flourishing cultures
still disenfranchised by race,
still holding our world together
in the dusky and lawless violence
manifest in colonial america.
Twenty-six million american women
at last granted the right to vote.
Oh, marginal notes in the sweet anthem
of equality, Indigenous non-citizens
turn to the older congress of the sun
seek in the assembled stories of sky
a steady enlightenment — natural laws
(the mathematics of bending trees,
sistering of nutrients — maizebeanssquash,
or wintering wisdom of animal relatives)
each seasonal chorus colored with resilience —
earth voices rising in sacred dream songs.

Even now listen, put on the moon-scored
shell of turtle, wear this ancient armour
of belonging. In the spiral of survivance
again harvest the amber sap of trees
follow the scattered path of manoomin
the wild and good seed that grows on water.
Oh water, oh rice, oh women of birch dreams
and baskets, gather. Here reap and reseed
raise brown hands trembling holy with endurance.
Now bead land knowledge into muklaks
sign with the treaty X of exclusion.
Kiss with fingers and lips the inherited
woodland flutes and breathy cedar songs.
Say yea, eya, and yes. Here and here cast
your tended nets — oh suffered and sweetly mended
nets of abundance. This year and each to follow
choose, not by paper but by pathway, a legacy:
woman’s work — our ageless ballad of continuance.
The 19th Amendment & my Mama

I always took it for granted, the right to vote
She said
And I knew what my mother meant
Her voice constricted tightly by the flu A virus
& a 30-year-relationship
with Newport 100s
I ain’t no chain smoker
she attempts to silence my concern
only a pack a week. That’s good, you know?
My mother survived a husband she didn’t want
and an addiction that loved her more
than any human needs
I sit to write a poem about the 100 year Anniversary
of the 19th Amendment
& my first thought returns to the womb
& those abortions I did not want at first
but alas
The thirst of an almost anything
is a gorge always looking to be
until the body is filled with more fibroids
than possibilities
On the 19th hour of the fourth day in a new decade
I will wake restless from some nightmare
about a bomb & a man with no backbone
on a golf course who clicks closed his Motorola phone
like an exclamation point against his misogynistic stance
He swings the golf club with each chant
Women let me grab
Women like me
Women vote until I say they don’t
In my nightmare he is an infective agent
In the clear of day
he is just the same
Every day he breathes is a threat to this country’s marrow
For Ida & Susan & Lucretia & Elizabeth Cady
& every day he tweets grief
like a cynical cornball comic’s receipts
like a red light signaling the end of times
The final night of 2019
& my New Year’s Eve plans involves
anything that will numb the pain
of a world breaking its own heart
My mother & I have already spoken
& her lungs are croaking wet
I just want you to know I don’t feel well
& I pause to pull up my stockings beneath my crumpled smile
On this day I sigh
I just wanted to dance & drink & forget about the 61.7% votes
My silk dress falls to my knees with the same swiftness
defiant as the white feminist who said “I’m your ally”
then voted for the demise of our nation’s most ignored
underpaid, imprisoned & impoverished citizens
Every day there is a telephone near
I miss my mother
In the waiting room of the OB/GYN
Uptown bound on the dirt orange train seat of the subway
O! How my mother loves the places she can never go
Her bones swaddled with arthritis & smoke
So she relies on my daily bemoans
The train smells like yesterday, Ma
They raise the tolls & fix nothing for the people
My landlord refuses to fix my toilet, my bathroom sink, my refrigerator
The city is annoying like an old boyfriend, always buzzing about nothing
& in the way of me making it on time to the polls
This woman didn’t say thank you when I held the door
& who does she think she is?
Each time I crack & cap on the everydayness of my day
My mother laughs as if she can see the flimsy MTA card
The yellow cabs that refuse to stop for her daughter
In these moments she can live again
A whole bodied woman with a full mouth
to speak it plain
I ask my mother what hurts?
What hurts?
How can I help from here?
3000 miles away
Alone in a tower between the sea
& the Mexico borders
My mother sighs a little sigh & says
Nothing
I just wanted to hear your voice
They signed The Declaration of Sentiments with nib of rib, the right to suffrage their daring
Called ugly then witch, pretty then weak to be at once woman and voter, their daring
Hunger, headaches, heartaches, hatred, death all this, and more, it cost them, their daring
As men are born, with God’s grace, so are women they urged and argued with brains and daring
With firm convictions and hopes of fallen yokes steadfast they marched nursing dreams of future daring
Sojourner, Dolores, their daughters left behind now work against voter suppression with daring
There is more work on the horizon, more yeast to knead into the bread of their daring
Persist Claudia in mind and body be not ugly, not pretty, but ablaze with daring.

Claudia Castro Luna
Claudia Castro Luna received a BA in anthropology from the University of California, Irvine; an MA in urban planning from the University of California, Los Angeles; and an MFA in poetry from Mills College. She is the author of Killing Marías (Two Sylvias Press, 2017) and, in 2019, was named an inaugural Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellow. She currently teaches at Seattle University and serves as the poet laureate of Washington State.

Sugar

The universe breathed through my mouth when I read the first chapter of patience.
I held the book away from my body when the illustrations became life-like:
the kite flew over the grass, a child tumbled down a hill and landed at the mouth of neon waters.
The fox curled into itself under the tree and an eagle parted the sky like the last curtains.
I found myself wandering the forest, revising the stories as I worked the heavens.
I lived inside the candied house and hung the doors with sweetness.
I devoured the windows and I was greedy.
With all this sugar, I still felt trapped.
I sought to change the moral so I filled my baskets daily with strawberry, thorn, and vine, piled my home with pastries and the charge of regret.
I placed those regrets inside the oven and watched the pie rise. I wanted everything in the pie and yearned all the discarded ingredients.
I kept myself in the kitchen for years. Everything up in smoke and yet my apron was pristine, my hair done just right.
You can say it was perfection, a vision from the past, waving a whisk through a bowl as if it were a pitchfork. When I left the house made of confection, that’s when I began to live, for everything I gave up was in that house.
I remember you there. Your fingerprints vaguely visible in the layer of flour on the table.

Tina Chang

Tina Chang is the author of Hybrid (W. W. Norton, 2019). She has held residencies at the MacDowell Colony and Vermont Studio Center and has received awards from the Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation, New York Foundation for the Arts, and Poets & Writers. She is the poet laureate of Brooklyn and teaches at Sarah Lawrence College.

Vindication

The universe breathed through my mouth when I read the first chapter of patience.
I held the book away from my body when the illustrations became life-like:
the kite flew over the grass, a child tumbled down a hill and landed at the mouth of neon waters.
The fox curled into itself under the tree and an eagle parted the sky like the last curtains.
I found myself wandering the forest, revising the stories as I worked the heavens.
I lived inside the candied house and hung the doors with sweetness.
I devoured the windows and I was greedy.
With all this sugar, I still felt trapped.
I sought to change the moral so I filled my baskets daily with strawberry, thorn, and vine, piled my home with pastries and the charge of regret.
I placed those regrets inside the oven and watched the pie rise. I wanted everything in the pie and yearned all the discarded ingredients.
I kept myself in the kitchen for years. Everything up in smoke and yet my apron was pristine, my hair done just right.
You can say it was perfection, a vision from the past, waving a whisk through a bowl as if it were a pitchfork. When I left the house made of confection, that’s when I began to live, for everything I gave up was in that house.
I remember you there. Your fingerprints vaguely visible in the layer of flour on the table.
Birthday, birthday, hurray, hurray
The 19th Amendment was ratified today
Drum rolls, piano rolls, trumpets bray
The 19th Amendment was ratified today
Left hand bounces, right hand strays
Maestro Joplin is leading the parade
Syncopated hashtags, polyrhythmic goose-steps
Ladies march to Pennsylvania Avenue!
Celebrate, ululate, caterwaul, praise
Women’s suffrage is all the rage
Sisters! Mothers! Throw off your bustles
Pedal your pushers to the voting booth
Pram it, waltz it, Studebaker roadster it
Drive your horseless carriage into the fray
Prime your cymbals, flute your skirts
One-step, two-step, kick-ball-change
Castlewalk, Turkey Trot, Grizzly Bear waltz
Argentine Tango, flirty and hot
Mommies, grannies, young and old biddies
Temperance ladies sip bathtub gin
Unmuzzle your girl dogs, Iowa your demi-hogs
Battle-axe polymaths, gangster moms
Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton
Lucy Burns and Carrie Chapman Catt
Alice Paul, come one, come all!
Sign the declaration at Seneca Falls!
Dada-faced spinsters, war-bond Prufrocks
Lillian Gish, make a silent wish
Debussy Cakewalk, Rachmaninoff rap
Preternatural hair bobs, hamster wheels
Crescendos, diminuendos, maniacal pianos
Syncopation mad, cut a rug with dad!
Oompa, tuba, majorette girl power
Baton over Spamalot!

Tiny babies, wearing onesies
Raise your bottles, tater-tots!
Accordion nannies, wash-board symphonies
Timpani glissando!
The Great War is over!
Victory, freedom, justice, reason
Pikachu, sunflowers, pussy hats
Toss up your skull caps, wide brim feathers
Throwing shade on the seraphim
Hide your cell phones, raise your megaphones!
Speak truth to power
and vote, vote vote!

WARNING:
Nitwit legislators, gerrymandering fools
Dimwit commissioners, judicial tools
Toxic senators, unholy congressmen
Halitosis ombudsmen, mayoral tricks
Doom calf demagogues, racketeering mules
Whack-a-mole sheriffs, on the take
Fornicator governors, rakehell collaborators
Tweeter impersonators, racist prigs
Postbellum agitators, hooligan aldermen
Profitteering warmongers, Reconstruction dregs
Better run, rascals better pray
We’ll vote you out on judgement day!
Better run, rascals better pray
We’ll vote you out on election day!
Natalie Diaz is Mojave and an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Tribe. She is the author of Postcolonial Love Poem (Graywolf Press, 2020) and When My Brother Was an Aztec (Copper Canyon Press, 2012). A 2018 MacArthur Fellow, Diaz is Director of the Center for Imagination in the Borderlands and is the Maxine and Jonathan Marshall Chair in Modern and Contemporary Poetry at Arizona State University.

In many nights we made the lake—a labor, and its necessary laborings to find the basin not yet opened in my body, yet my body—any body wet or water from the start, to fill a clay, start being what it ever means, a beginning—the earth’s first hand on a vision-quest wildering night’s skin fields, for touch like a dark horse made of air, turned downward in the dusk, opaquing a hand resembles its ancestors—the war, or the horse who war made, what it means to be made to be ruined before becoming—rift glacial, ablation and breaking lake-hip sloping, fluvial, then spilled—I unzip the lake, walk into what I am—the thermocline, and oxygen, as is with kills, rivers, seas, the water is of our own naming I am wet we call it because it is a happening, is happening now imagined light is light’s imagination a lake shape of it, the obligatory body, its dark burning reminding us back, memory as filter desire as lagan, a hydrology—The lake is alone, we say in Mojave, every story happens because someone’s mouth, a nature dependent—life, universe Here at the lake, say she wanted what she said to slip down into it for which a good lake will rise—Lake which once meant, sacrifice which once meant, I am devoted, Here I am, atmosphere sensation, pressure, the lake is beneath me, pleasure bounded a slip space between touch and not slip of paper, slip of hand slip body turning toward slip trouble, I am who slipped the moorings I am so red with lack to loop-knot or leave the loop beyond the knot we won’t say love because it is a difference between vertex and vertices—the number of surfaces we break enough or many to make the lake loosened from the rock one body’s dearth is another body’s ache lay it to the earth, all great lakes are meant to take sediment, leg, wrist, wrist, the ear let down and wet with stars, dock lights distant but wanted deep, to be held in the well of the eye woven like water, through itself, in and inside, how to sate a depression if not with darkness—if darkness is not fingers brushing a body, shhhh, she said, I don’t know what the world is I slip for her, or anything, like language, new each time diffusion—remade and organized and because nothing is enough, waves—each an emotional museum of water left light trembles a lake figure on loop a night-loop, every story is a story of water before it is gold and alone before it is black like a rat snake I begin at the lake, clean once, now drained I am murk—I am not clean everything has already happened always the lake is just up ahead in the poem, my mouth is the moon, I bring it down lay it over the lake of her thighs warm lamping ax hewing water’s tender shell slant slip, entering like light, surrounded into another skin where there was yet no lake yet we made it, make it still to drink and clean ourselves on.
Girls on the Town, 1946
[ELVIRA H. D., 1924–2019]

Rita Dove

Rita Dove is the former US Poet Laureate, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, and the author of numerous books, including Thomas and Beulah (Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1985). Her numerous honors include an NAACP Image Award, the Hurston Wright Legacy Award, the National Medal of Arts, and 28 honorary doctorates. A trained classical cellist and gambist, Dove is Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia.

You love a red lip. The dimples are extra currency, though you take care to keep powder from caking those charmed valleys. Mascara: check. Blush? Oh, yes. And a hat is never wrong except evenings in the clubs: there a deeper ruby and smoldering eye will do the trick, with tiny embellishments—a ribbon or jewel, perhaps a flower—if one is feeling especially flirty or sad.

Until Rosie fired up her rivets, flaunting was a male prerogative; now, you and your girls have lacquered up and pinned on your tailfeathers, fit to sally forth and trample each plopped heart quivering at the tips of your patent-leather Mary Janes. This is the only power you hold onto, ripped from the dreams none of you believe are worth the telling, instead of mumbling, why not decorate? Even in dim light how you glister, sloe-eyed, your smile in flames.

Interior, 1917

Linda Gregerson

Linda Gregerson is the author of Prodigal: New and Selected Poems, 1976–2014 (Mariner Books, 2015). Her awards and honors include the Consuelo Ford Award from the Poetry Society of America, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship. She is the Caroline Walker Bynum Distinguished University Professor of English at the University of Michigan.

The dining hall for instance: open roof beams, open screens, and yard upon yard of clean swept hardwood flooring, it might almost be a family camp. And likewise in the sleeping room: expanse of window, paneled wall, and the warmth implied by sunwash, only softened here by half-drawn shades. You know the kind?—dark canvas on a roller, in my memory the canvas is always green. What I couldn’t have guessed, except for the caption: the logic behind the double row of well-made beds. I’d like just once to have seen his face, the keeper of order who thought of it first: a prostitute on either side of those women demanding the vote. And “Negro,” to make the point perfectly clear: You thought your manners and your decent shoes would keep you safe? He couldn’t have known how much we’d take the lesson to heart. At the workhouse in Virginia they’d started the feedings with rubber tubes. Not here. Or not that we’ve been told. The men all dying in trenches in France. A single system, just as we’ve been learning for these hundred years. Empty of people, the space looks almost benign.
Lines for the 19th Amendment Centennial

1
The century speeds along
Sound & dust & color & light
Clouds speed over ballgames & wars
Nerves hanging off them   Women watch
early election results   Stressed-out women
in hats & choirs   Women sitting under
suburban stars   Women with husbands
or wives   Housed or unhoused women
with herbs or guns   Women with
friends & cats   who are always tired
New medium or old   to the world order
Who pull their masks tightly after the fires

2
Over 52,000,000 minutes... ...since the 19th Amendment...... Over 26,000,000 women voted after that :::::::: mostly only white women because of the poll tax... Now let’s just think about that....
There are 53 minutes in a micro-century:::
We place extra dots as eyes for extra vision: ::
There are two periods in the 19th Amendment
I place them here , , for women
who want to be women or don’t
We were dodging the little zeroes between mystery
& meaning... history & hope  We were walking or driving  I was flying left till my left wing broke

3
Some women vote with armed guards   Some have their forearms stamped   The branches
of the oak are breaking off   The particle
spirits are being used up   There are two
men in amendment   There is gerry in gerrymander
There are eyeless vans from Amazon outside
like hearses carrying the corpse of profit
Some women do not like to vote   They think
the revolution will come faster   The land
is blighted Muriel   Is weather better if you
order on line   Is earth’s orbit polyethylene
I thought of not voting but there isn’t time

4
The great dead teach the living not to hate or
to try to love imperfectly   At what point
did voting really begin   Wyoming (oddly)
was the first state   Some practiced law
but couldn’t vote   Seneca Falls 1848
Lucy Stone abolitionist could not vote
Impossible to reconcile   what you want
with what you are ...... I’m voting extra
with my shoe ✓✓✓ Applying text corrupter
here for how long justice takes

We leafleted in 1968   Come out of your
house & stand now   You count too

5
The right of citizens to vote,... ’’ shall not (she’ll not)
be denied or abridged / / / ; ; ; ; ;
[I’m adding 46 marks of punctuation for 46 years till 1966 Voting Rights Act]
by the U**** nit ed States or by any State
...>>> >> & the names will survive
Frances Ellen Watkins Harper,.... Hallie
Quinn Brown . . Mary Church Terrell
& Congress shall not remove cage kill & undo
citizens because of age ability gender race
etc.   Some vote despite perfectionism
Messy marks in tiny tiny hollow squares

6
i voted first in 1972   tear gas My Lai   Weather
Underground mostly voted against things then
Agent Orange the draft had gone
to the trailer park with leaflets   We were new to
the Pill nice sex or terrible   with skinny stoned boys
Smog in LA   We stayed in the dorm burning incense

continued
Joy Ladin
Joy Ladin’s most recent books are Fireworks in the Graveyard (Headmistress Press, 2017) and The Future Is Trying to Tell Us Something: New and Selected (Sheep Meadow Press, 2017). She is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, and the American Council of Learned Societies, as well as a Fulbright Scholarship. She teaches at the Stern College of Yeshiva University, where she holds the David and Ruth Gottesman Chair in English.

A Bridge on Account of Sex:
A Trans Woman Speaks to Susan B. Anthony on the 100th Anniversary of the 19th Amendment

We hold these truths to be self-evident... (The Declaration of Independence)
The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. (Amendment XIX)

In Rochester, New York, you were buried and I was born, and both of us voted for the very first time...
you devoted your life to making
the kind of trouble
I spent my life avoiding,
speaking out, getting arrested, refusing to pretend
to be other or less
than the woman you were,
an unabridged citizen
determined to make America as true
as Frederick Douglass and you
to the “We”
that created her.

II
In Rochester, New York,
it was against the law for you to vote,
but still, it wasn’t easy
for a white lady like you, well-schooled and well-connected,
to get sent to jail.
First, you had to brave the barbershop
and bully the election inspectors
into registering you.
Hair was being cut, razors stropped,
the beards of patriarchy trimmed.
The boys weren’t moved by your citation
of the 14th Amendment and the New York Constitution
until you threatened legal action.
You had a judge behind you, you said.
You did.

Fourteen women altogether
made it onto the rolls, prompting a newspaper to proclaim in
panic:
“Citizenship no more carries the right to vote
than the right to fly to the moon.”
“Well I have been and gone and done it!!"
you wrote your bff, Elizabeth Cady (“Mrs.”) Stanton—
not flown to the moon, but “positively voted”
on the fifth of November, 1872.
A week and a half later, a warrant was issued for your arrest
for voting while female
(maximum penalty: three years imprisonment).
A deputy marshal appeared in your parlor
wearing a beaver hat; said the weather was fine
(not likely, given the beaver hat and Rochester in November)
and invited you (you were a white lady, after all)
to call on the election commissioner.
“Is that the way you arrest men?” you asked. Demanded
to be led out in handcuffs.
You won that argument too.
The embarrassed young man
brought you, you would later say,
to “the same dingy little room where ... fugitive slaves
were examined and returned to their masters.”
A grand jury was impaneled.
You were delighted, hoping to be imprisoned,
and twice refused bail.
No such luck. Your own attorney bailed you out
because, he said, “I could not see a lady I respected
put in jail.” The good news was
the grand jury, twenty men, indicted you
for voting, the charges said,
being then and there, as you well knew,
a person of the female sex,
contrary to the statute
and against the peace
of the United States of America.

In a grey silk dress, white lace collar, and neatly knotted hair;
you spent the months before your trial
giving speeches the prosecutor feared
would persuade every potential juror
to find you innocent. He needn’t have worried.
The Supreme Court had been busy
continued
narrowing the 14th Amendment
to preserve the right to discriminate
on the basis of sex. The judge sustained the objection
that you, as a woman, were “not competent” to testify
about your own opinions;
barred you from taking the stand;
read the guilty verdict he’d written
before the trial began.
He didn’t let the jurors say a word,
but though he kept trying,
he couldn’t stop you from declaring
that you’d been convicted according to laws
written, interpreted and applied
by and for the very same men
who, not long before, had made it a crime,
“punishable with a $1,000 fine
and six months imprisonment”
to give a fugitive slave
a swallow of water or crust of bread.
“As the slaves who got their freedom,” you said,
“over, or under, or through
the unjust forms of law,
now, must women, to get their right
to a voice in this government, take it.”
Over every objection, you did.

III
In Rochester, New York,
I grew up in the America you insisted had no right
not to exist:
slavery abolished, voting rights
unabridgeable, at least on paper,
on account of race or sex,
child of a card-carrying member
of your descendants, the League of Women Voters. My mother
who thought I was her son
taught me nothing
about how to be a woman,
but she taught me to vote
and how to drive a stick;
stood up for herself in supermarkets,
spoke in a low voice (she’d trained for radio)
and showed me how to live
without being ashamed
of being different. A magazine on her nightstand
taught me the word for what I am,
though it was forty years
before she heard me say it,
a word you never learned,
a word that didn’t exist
for a way of being human
you probably couldn’t imagine.
I guess I’m not a truth
you’d hold self-evident.
I wonder if you’d think I was created equal,
was created at all, in fact,
or am just another outrage
perpetrated by men. I wonder if you’d see me
refusing to be abridged
and tell me, as my mother did,

“Whatever you look like,
you’ll always be my child.”
No. You wouldn’t say that.
You didn’t have people like me in mind
when you fought your country to redefine
what it means to be a woman,
but here we are
and here I am, abridged, like you, on account of sex, wrapped
in education, money, and whiteness
that have so far kept me from being jailed,
evicted, beaten, burned or tossed in a ditch
as my sisters have
continued
for defying, like you, statute and form
and every decree and argument
that we are created less,
created to hide, created to cringe, created to accept
that we’re excluded, by definition,
from the unabridgeable “We”
by whom, for whom,
America was created.
As you said in your suffrage speeches,
I’m not arguing the question.
America needed you to refuse
the unjust forms
you dragged her
over and under and through.
Whether or not you see us
as your daughters,
America needs us too.

What It Must Have Felt Like

Palm-sized and fledgling, a beak protruding from the sleeve, I have kept my birds muted for so long, I fear they’ve grown accustom to a grim quietude. What chaos could ensue should a wing get loose? Come overdue burst, come flock, swarm, talon, and claw. Scatter the coop’s roost, free the cygnet and its shadow. Crack and scratch at the state’s cage, cut through cloud and branch, no matter the dumb hourglass’s white sand yawning grain by grain. What cannot be contained cannot be contained.
One Vote
After reading a letter from his mother, Harry T. Burn cast the deciding vote to ratify the 19th amendment of the US Constitution

My parents are from countries where mangoes grow wild and bold and eagles cry the sky in arcs and dips. America loved this bird too and made it clutch olives and arrows. Some think if an eaglet falls, the mother will swoop down to catch it. It won’t. The eagle must fly on its own accord by first testing the air-slide over each pinfeather. Even in a letter of wind, a mother holds so much power. After the pipping of the egg, after the branching — an eagle is on its own. Must make the choice on its own no matter what it’s been taught. Some forget that pound for pound, eagle feathers are stronger than an airplane wing. And even one letter, one vote can make the difference for every bright thing.

The Encounter with the Goddess
There is one story and one story only. That will prove worth your telling — Robert Graves, “To Juan at the Winter Solstice”

That one story worth your telling
Is the ancient tale of the encounter
With the goddess
Declares the poet Robert Graves

You can come and see
A sublime bronze avatar of the goddess
Standing in the harbor holding a book and lifting a torch
Among us her name is Liberty

She has many names and she is everywhere
You can also find her easily
Inside yourself —
Don’t be afraid —
Just do whatever she tells you to do

Alicia Ostriker
Alicia Ostriker is currently the poet laureate of New York State and a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Her most recent collection, Waiting for the Light (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), won the National Jewish Book Award. She is professor emerita of English at Rutgers University, and teaches in the low-residency Poetry MFA program of Drew University.

Aimee Nezhukumatathil
Aimee Nezhukumatathil is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently Oceanic (Copper Canyon Press, 2018). She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing as well as prizes from The literary Review, Shenandoah, and Poetry Northwest. She is currently a professor of English in the MFA program at the University of Mississippi.
I am known, if at all, for a moment’s pride: first American woman in the modern nation to vote though at the time I wasn’t considered American by all. Not modern, either, but Mormon, one the East Coast suffragists had hoped would vote Utah’s scourge of polygamy out. But plural marriage was on no ballot I ever saw. Why would it be, my mother asked, when men make laws and shape their women’s choice in freedoms? And how changeable those freedoms are denied or given certain women, she knew, who saw a Shoshone woman one day selling ponies from a stall: watched, amazed, her pocket all the earnings without a husband’s permission. I wouldn’t be a white girl for all the horses in the world, the woman scoffed at her astonishment: my mother who never sold an apple without my father’s say-so. Like my mother, I married young, to an older man who believed—like certain, stiff-backed politicians—to join the union, Utah must acculturate, scrub off the oddities and freedoms of its difference, renounce some part of politics and faith:

our secrecy and marriage customs, and then my woman’s right to vote. All gone to make us join the “modern” state—And so perhaps I might be known for what I’ve lost: a right, a home, and now my mother, who died the year we moved back East. How fragile, indeed, are rights and hopes, how unstable the powers to which we grow attached.

My husband now can barely leave his bed. As he’s grown ill, I’ve watched myself become the wife of many men, as all men in the end become husband to a congregation of women. When he dies, I’ll move back West to where my mother’s buried and buy some land with the money that she left—To me alone she wrote, who loved me, and so for love of her I’ll buy a house and marble headstone and fill my land with horses.

Wild Horses
Seraph Young Ford, Maryland, 1887
First woman to vote in Utah and the modern nation, February 14, 1870.
Evie Shockley

Evie Shockley’s semi-automatic (Wesleyan University Press, 2017) was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. She has won the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award in Poetry, the Holmes National Poetry Prize, and fellowships from the Radcliffe Institute, Cave Canem, and Macdowell. She teaches African American Literature and Creative Writing at Rutgers University-New Brunswick.

women’s voting rights at one hundred (but who’s counting?)

Eenie meenie minie moe
catch a voter by her toe
if she hollers then you know
got yourself a real jane crow

one vote is an opinion
with a quiet legal force ::
a barely audible beep
in the local traffic, & just
a splashless drop of mercury
in the national thermometer,
but a collectivity of votes
/a flock of votes, a pride of votes,
a murder of votes/ can really
make some noise.

one vote begets another
if you make a habit of it.
my mother started taking me
to the polls with her when i
was seven :: small, thrilled
to step in the booth, pull
the drab curtain hush-shut
behind us, & flip the levers
beside each name she pointed
to, the Xs clicking into view.
there, she called the shots.

one vote's as good as another
:: still, in 1913, illinois's gentle
suffragists, hearing southern
women would resent spotting
mrs. ida b. wells-barnett amidst
whites marchers, gently kicked
their sister to the curb, but when
the march kicked off, ida got
right into formation, as planned.
the tribune’s photo showed
her present & accounted for.

one vote can be hard to keep
an eye on :: but several /a
colony of votes/ can't scuttle
away unnoticed so easily. my
mother, veteran registrar for
our majority black election
district, once found — after
much searching — two bags
of ballots /a litter of votes/
stuffed in a janitorial closet.

one vote was all fannie lou
hamer wanted. in 1962, when
her constitutional right was
over forty years old, she tried
to register; all she got for her
trouble was literacy tested, poll
taxed, fired, evicted, & shot
at. a year of grassroots activism
nearly planted her mississippi
freedom democratic party
in the national convention.

one vote per eligible voter
was all stacy abrams needed.
she nearly won the georgia
governor’s race in 2018 :: lost by
50,000 /an unkindness of votes/
to the man whose job was
maintaining the voter rolls.
days later, she rolled out plans
for getting voters a fair fight.
it’s been two years — & counting.

* * *

rich gal, poor gal
hired girl, thief
teacher, journalist
vote your grief

* * *

one-mississippi
two-mississippis

* * *

one-mississippi
When you enter the booth through the door marked ladies, listen for the click and turn — levers and gears designed to conceal. Don’t trouble yourself, they say, with the say you aren’t allowed to have, not yet. Where the partial precedes the whole, how not to feel partially human, not quite a self? When you enter the booth, you will hear years — years clicking away, the grate of metal on metal. The whole is coming. Listen for the turn.

Decades I have waited to make sunlight for all of this to matter, a mark built to rest and a mark laid living. I am sworn to my worth even when the scales weep their own little swords, slanting outside the song and full of soothing to speak each vowel. Everything happens toward its own making, an infinite becoming from all that is yet to be faced. When it seemed as though I had touched the arm of love, little did I know, I had found a door with which to enter the sky. And to the sky, little did I know, the door would open for me. All, as it will be, as it should be, in effort of The Great Balance.

Voting-Machine

In 1899, Lenna R. Winslow of Columbus, Ohio, applied for a patent for a “Voting-Machine.” He had created a mechanical system that adjusted the ballot the voter would see based on whether that voter was a man or a woman. — David Kindy, Smithsonian.com

Mai Der Vang

Mai Der Vang’s debut collection, Afterland (Graywolf Press, 2017), won the 2016 Walt Whitman Award, was longlisted for the 2017 National Book Award, and was a finalist for the 2018 Kate Tufts Discovery Award. A Kundiman fellow, Vang is a member of the Hmong American Writers’ Circle and an assistant professor of English at Fresno State.

That All, Everyone, Each in Being

Decades I have waited for all of this to rest and a mark laid to my worth even their own little swords, the song and full vowel. Everything making, an infinite is yet to be faced, as though I had touched little did I know, with which to the sky, little did I open for me. All, in effort of Five days ago, I stood shifting between fenced yard. What could a fairness of wings, restoring theirs to have, steeped myself with sprouting from the cloud where the arrow leads, Until now, to make sunlight matter, a mark built to living. I am sworn when the scales weep slanting outside of soothing to speak each happens toward its own becoming from all that When it seemed the arm of love, I had found a door enter the sky. And to know, the door would as it will be, as it should be, The Great Balance, under a flight of egrets, field of mud and factory they have guessed of stability, what had always been Like them, I have others, for so long my roots of this fight, daring to follow until it is my turn. my turn.

Maggie Smith

Maggie Smith is the author of Good Bones (Tupelo Press, 2017), which won the 2018 Independent Publishers Book Award Gold Medal in Poetry. She has received fellowships from the Sustainable Arts Foundation, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts, and is an editor at large for the Kenyon Review.

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The New York Philharmonic connects with up to 50 million people around the world annually through concerts, broadcasts, recordings, education, and free or low-cost performances, including the Concerts in the Parks, Presented by Didi and Oscar Schafer; Phil the Hall; Philharmonic Free Fridays; and Young People’s Concerts. In the 2019–20 season, the Philharmonic reaffirms its commitments to serving as New York’s orchestra and to championing new music through Project 19, marking the centennial of the ratification of the 19th Amendment with commissions by 19 women composers; hotspots festival, spotlighting new-music centers Berlin, Reykjavík, and New York; and Mahler’s New York, examining the composer / conductor who spent time in New York as the Philharmonic’s tenth Music Director. The Philharmonic has commissioned and / or premiered works by leading composers from every era since its founding in 1842. Highlights include Dvořák’s New World Symphony; John Adams’s Pulitzer Prize–winning On the Transmigration of Souls, dedicated to the victims of 9/11; and Julia Wolfe’s Fire in my mouth. The New York Philharmonic is the oldest American symphony orchestra and one of the oldest in the world. Jaap van Zweden became Music Director in September 2018, succeeding titans including Bernstein, Toscanini, and Mahler.

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academy of american poets

Founded in 1934 in New York City, the Academy of American Poets is the nation’s leading champion of American poets and poetry, with members in all 50 states. Its mission is to support American poets at all stages of their careers, and to foster the appreciation of contemporary poetry. Each year the charitable organization connects millions of readers to poets’ work through its many programs and publications that, in addition to Poets.org, include Poem-a-Day, the first place of publication for new poems by 260 poets annually; National Poetry Month (April), which the Academy founded in 1996; American Poets, the biannual literary journal for members; the American Poets Prizes, which provide more than $200,000 to 150 poets each year; Poetry & the Creative Mind, a celebration of poetry’s influence on other artists and public leaders held at Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully Hall; the Fall Conversation Series, which features poets and other artists; and an education program that provides free resources such as lesson plans, the award-winning weekly series Teach This Poem, and the Dear Poet project for K–12 teachers and students. In addition, the organization coordinates the Poetry Coalition, an alliance of more than 20 poetry organizations across the United States.

poets.org