

*Some mornings are thin light
through the blinds, a quiet
reminder not to rush.
There is time enough
for what matters most.*

fixed forms (loosely)

*Later, the day will fold
its edges around us,
soft as a well-worn sweater,
and we will be, somehow,
exactly where we need to be.*

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October 2026

fixed forms (loosely)

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Not Quite Right Literary Magazine

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Nicky Bennett, Editor-in-Chief

www.notquiterightmag.com

editor@notquiterightmag.com

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NICKY BENNETT

The Shape of Choice

A Letter from the Editor

A blank page is supposed to mean freedom. No borders or instructions. Nothing between the writer and whatever comes next. I have never found it quite that simple. Sometimes the blank page feels generous. Sometimes it feels like a room with no doors, because every possible choice is still waiting to be made.

Fixed forms change that room. They hand us a number of lines, a syllable count, a refrain, a rhyme, a shape. They remove some choices before we begin. That can feel like relief. It can also feel like being boxed in. The same rule that gives one poem its pulse can make another poem strain against the page.

That is the double-edged sword at the center of this issue. A form can narrow the field of possibility, but narrowing the field can make us notice paths we would have ignored. A poet who has to return to a refrain may discover that the repeated words have changed. A syllable limit can force a sentence to surrender its safest word. A list can make grief countable for a moment. A questionnaire can reveal how little room an official box leaves for an honest answer.

The pieces gathered here approach form from several directions. Some work inside inherited structures: haiku, renga, limerick, nonet, psalm, litany. Some borrow forms from daily life: receipts, shopping lists, recipes, text messages, medical paperwork, customs declarations, social media stories. Their rules are not always literary rules, but they still shape what can be said and how a reader must move through it.

That matters because we spend so much of our lives inside forms we did not design. We check one box when the truth needs three pages. We fit a history into a line marked relationship to patient. We translate pain into an ingredient list or make a conversation alternate between two sides of a page. Sometimes the borrowed structure becomes a kind of pressure. Sometimes it becomes cover. Sometimes it lets the poem say the thing directly because the form has agreed to carry part of the weight.

The word loosely in our title is doing real work. It leaves room for writers to obey a form, bend it, misunderstand it productively, or invent one from scratch. It asks what remains fixed when everything else shifts. It also admits that rules rarely stay pure once a living voice enters them.

Our featured spotlight takes that idea literally. Varimeter Verse, created by Marjorie Shelito, begins with a mathematical formula. The numbers determine the syllabic movement of a call-and-response poem. Its rules are precise, yet those rules can generate expansion, contraction, interruption, and even a zero-syllable

line: a silence that counts. The form does not make choices disappear. It relocates them. Once the arithmetic decides the shape, the poet must decide how language will live inside it.

That is what I keep returning to as I read this issue. Constraint and freedom are not clean opposites. A rule can deny possibility, but it can also create the conditions for a choice we would never have made on our own. The question is not whether form is good or bad. The question is what the form asks of us, what it permits, what it refuses, and what we decide to do at its edge.

Thank you to every writer in these pages for showing us another answer. And thank you for reading closely enough to feel where the lines hold and where they give way.

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the rules we inherit

NATALIA GAMESON

Worst Words for Haiku

Eventually
is the worst word (I find) when
composing haiku.

Additionally
and figuratively are
(alas!) no better.

NATALIA GAMESON

Forgotten Passwords: A Renga Rant

Argh!! If we were just
nicer - as a species - we
could just - sack them off!

Hmmm. But - as it is -
why not write a password up as
a catchy haiku?

Windows supports long
passwords - up to one hundred
and twenty seven

characters! And won't
it endure? Our own, unique,
rare haiku passwords!

NATALIA GAMESON

The Fox from Nantucket

There once was a fox from Nantucket
who was horribly sick in a bucket.
When offered some meds,
she pulled some blackheads
from her nostrils - then sniffed and said f*ck it!

ROSALIND ADAMS

The Perfect Nonet

Perfection puts its foot on your throat

Perfection seizes the engine

Perfection takes the last chip

Perfection cuts you up

Perfection seems real

Perfection lies

Perfection

Is a

trick

T. R. POULSON

There's No Such Thing As a Nobody

The heifer who hurdled the moon
was worshipped by kings and buffoons.
They say her twin sister
was sold to a spinster
who captured those runaway spoons.

PETER DEVONALD

News Haiku Triptych

the news is consumed
as a serial drama
unbecoming truth

news switched off and on
narratives all come and go
good bad and ugly

perspective controls
one singular point of view
news always conforms

aren't we better than this?

AMANDA TROUT

A Sapphic Cicadagirl Poem

should be silent. Female cicadas sing nothing,
can't carry a tune, patron flick and flurry
over identifying screech. Their motto:
be seen, never heard

like their tymbal-filled counterparts—loud
against the leaves, always leading melody,
declaring themselves perfect lovers,
husbands, and sexperts.

In some poems such blatant masculinity
nets the man their girl, but not here.
This is a sapphic cicadagirl poem, and
no men are allowed;

It's just girls, huddled and close, each sycamore
finally quiet. There's no possibility of children
but no expectation of marriage. There are no songs
and no shouting.

For once, there is no shouting.

AMANDA TROUT

The Cicadagirl Joins a Straggler Brood

Sometimes, cicadas emerge in places where they are not expected to emerge in a given year, but the location has a well-established record of periodical cicada emergences on a different schedule- in other words, cicadas emerge in a brood year, but within the known territory of a different brood. These cicadas are best thought of as off-cycle cicadas, or “stragglers.” Usually, the status of these cicadas seems straightforward- they generally occur in small numbers and they do not seem to reach densities that are self-sustaining.

From the Biodiversity Research Collections at the University of Connecticut

Emerged little insect, emerged too early—
too early, little insect. Emerge, emerge
and scream yourself hoarse. Only silence,
and your hoarse self, only silence. Scream
your early emergence. Force silence through
self, emerge screaming little insect, little insect.

The ground is wet. There are no bodies.
Where the ground is are no wet bodies
huddled, singing beneath warm sweetgum,
singing sweetgum warmth, huddled beneath
the ground. Sweet warmth gums our bodies
singing, huddled, there is no wet here.

Teeth bite at abdomens, beaks against wings
break at abdomens, against teeth biting wings
bare from no swarm to hide in. Again, a screech
blares in again, screech, no hiding from swarm
teeth, swarm beaks, a bared abdomen. Hide
again in screech against bite. No wings,

little insect, no wings, no screech. Scream,
little insect, through your self forced bare, silent,
body puddled there against ground, a bit
abdomen again. Emerge warmed, gummed
teeth, beaks, swarmed in the sweet wet. Hide
the singing; your early emergence is here.

T. R. POULSON

The Heaven of Work

contains no harps. No. It contains many
harps: mislabeled strings, missorted cords,
the missing and misloaded notes. No. Any
sinner knows our heaven shelters words
we used when lost in maps. No. We never
strayed from roads we knew. No. We always
find new ways. No. We snake forever
in forsaken lands, in numbered days—

and yes. Our heaven teems with labeled things:
snakes have numbers on their sides, long
in division. Yes. Our managers still sing
as lists. Yes. Production forks like tongues.
Yes. Wolves lie down with lambs. Yes we request
days off. Bosses fist bump us. Still say no.

JOHN GREY

When You Don't Expect Much

My life has never been
about certainties,
or even plausibility.

So the heart
that expects to be broken
isn't worried by cracks.

And when honey
tastes like castor oil,
I praise my receptor cells
for just being honest.

On a quiet night,
a car backfires.
Everyone drops as if shot.
All except me.

I just stand there
and remove the bullet.

PETER DEVONALD

Billionaires Banquet ~~Of Modern Etiquette~~

Welcome to ~~the Banquet for the beautiful and the blessed~~

The most extravagant lavish feast

~~everyone is invited~~

~~(if you are a billionaire or more).~~

A symphony of succulence

garnished with ~~apocalypse tomorrows~~

~~side dishes of diseases, disasters and destiny calling~~

~~soupeon of carnage and despair,~~

~~views of the end of days, playing perfectly in the tender rare.~~

~~To~~ an orchestra of the finest musicians:

symphonies of ~~atonement songs, entertaining~~ perfection.

~~He who sups with the devil should have a long spoon~~

~~always be mindful of the devil's table~~

~~The meal spread out across the depths of time.~~

plate after deliciously ~~awful~~ plate,

~~a beggar's banquet of unsavoury~~ exquisite things.

Everybody, ~~sooner or later,~~

sits down to a banquet ~~of consequences.~~

~~A crust eaten in peace is better~~

~~than a banquet partaken in anxiety.~~

Enjoy ~~when you can,~~

~~endure when you must~~

~~whilst you still may.~~

Bon appétit toujours



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forms we are asked to fill

ASH MOJICA

In a week

Iced vanilla latte

—whole milk

—large

\$5.12

Iced Spanish latte

—whole milk

—medium

\$6.76

Iced coffee

—Whole milk

—large

\$4.14

Iced matcha

—oat milk

—medium

\$7.10

Iced horchata latte

—whole milk

—large

\$6.75

Iced matcha horchata latte

—whole milk

—large

\$6.75

Iced mocha latte

—whole milk

—large

\$6.15

SANDRA BETH LEVY

I Hate Writing Shopping Lists Because I Forget To Jot Down Essential Items

1. mini painkiller parachutes (safe for ages 12+)
2. edible shower gel (to gently scrub your soul)
3. gratitude enhancing veggie chips – variety pack
4. inspiration boosting ice wraps (apply 10 minutes daily to buttocks for a kick in the ass)
5. organic “clever quips tabs” (for use when life is not funny)
6. powdered love packets (dissolve in ½ oz tears)
7. ethereal scent spray (to magic stale air)
8. liquid peace (made from locally sourced sea-salt)

When I’m busy writing poetry my husband shops for us.

He usually forgets pitted sliced kalamata olives, but arrives with:

1. thickened arms of love
2. songs between his teeth
3. belly-laugh balloons
and
4. Dave’s crunchy homemade potato chips

He’s a keeper!

Serving Size: Unbearable

Ingredients

- 1 cluster of rogue tissue, permanently lost and angry.
- 3 long, invisible needles threaded directly through the pelvic floor.
- A sudden, white-hot sharpness that makes sitting down physically impossible.
- 1 glass of plain water or a single bite of food—it doesn't matter which.
- An instant, hollow ballooning that mimics a five-month pregnancy.
- A deep, paralyzing dread of clearing your throat or shifting your weight.
- 1 complete shutdown of the nervous system, triggered by trauma.

Directions

1. **Poke** the internal lining repeatedly with a dull knife until the entire lower abdomen clenches in defense.
2. **Drive** a sharp stake straight upward the moment the body attempts to sit down, forcing an immediate, breathless stand.
3. **Inflate** the stomach rapidly at random intervals. Disregard what was eaten, when it was eaten, or any attempts made to avoid it.
4. **Squeeze** the abdominal walls so tightly that a single sneeze, cough, or attempt to sit up straight feels like pulling a trigger inside yourself.
5. **Simmer** at maximum intensity until the pain becomes entirely unbearable, forcing the body to finally pass out from exhaustion just to catch an hour of sleep.
6. **Set aside** to wake up stiff, bruised, and completely drained on the rug.

CYPHER

A Text Chat: Hours After Getting Fired by a Company That Gave Me No Notice or Explanation Why

Appa: We should try and sue these people

Me: Appa, be serious.

Appa: I am serious. They didn't train you, didn't tell you what was going wrong every time you asked, didn't give you any benefits, and then they fire you three days after making you move cities?

Me: I know. I hate it

Appa: That's why I was thinking we could look into suing.

Me: Appa, we have no money for that.

Appa: We might. It might not be that expensive.

Me: You know it will be.

Appa: Fuck. Why should we let corporations get away with things like this?

Me: Well they also know that we have no money. That's how they do it. Probably.

Appa: Fuck this. This is so unfair.

Me: I know. I hate it.

Appa: So why don't you want to do something?

Me: Because I'm tired, Appa. Because this whole thing started cuz I reached out to HR and voiced my complaints.

Me: Well, I guess I can't say that for sure. But given that I pointed out my qualms with the company then got fired 4 days later ...

Appa: What reason did they give? Did they give you a severance?

Me: My ex-manager said I was “just not a fit.” And they gave me a week payment. Or I guess they will, it hasn’t deposited in my bank yet.

Appa: I’m sorry, Chellam.

Me: Me too. That place was terrible though, and I wasn’t there too long, so I kind of just want to pretend like it didn’t happen.

Appa: You’re an adult, it’s your call.

Me: Yeah. You know how you told me to pick and choose my battles? Well, I’m choosing to let this one go. I know how it’ll end, and I’d rather keep my sanity at the very least.

Appa: Okay.

Me: Okay.

Appa: Do you want to come home? If so, what do you want for dinner? Let’s eat something nice.

Me: Yeah, I’ll come home. I want some company. And for food, let’s do ramen. I think the soup would help right now.

Appa: Sounds good. There’s no noodles left in the house, so I’ll go to the grocery store now.

Me: Thank you. I’m gonna hang up and drive now.

Appa: Okay. Call me if you need anything. Or just feel like calling. I love you, Chellam.

Me: I love you too, Appa. See you soon.

What I Think as I Watch a Crazy Bitch's Instagram Stories at the End of the Day

1. Footage of one site of rubble in Gaza. A child in a tent, wearing a keffiyah, asking us to press the four buttons on the screen.

It can't be good that this is the first thing she sees when she wakes up.

2. An infographic explaining the racialized history of hair, and how seeped our standards are in white supremacy and colonialism.

I kind of knew this, but holy fuck. I'm saving this to read more thoroughly later. I'll remember this time.

3. Publishing opportunity for disabled creatives - every contributor receives \$15.

Wow, a whole ten minutes worth of rent.

4. An actor on a runway, styled by [], wearing all [], smiling.

His cheeks look so pinchable. I wonder what moisturizer he uses.

5. A rant about how her coworker uses AI to generate his coffee orders for the day.

How does AI generate a coffee order? What kind of idiot relegates thinking about food??

6. Photo of an indie queer creative who is hosting a giveaway for reaching 5000 followers.

Good for them. I'll give them a follow.

7. Selfie - peace sign pose, no makeup.

Oh right, that's what I look like. Weird.

GABY ORTIZ

EMERGENCY CONTACT

PATIENT INFORMATION

Name: _____

Date of birth: _____

Emergency contact: _____

Relationship to patient: _____

Phone number: _____

I stare at the blank.

The blank
stares professionally back.

Forms have no bedside manner.

EMERGENCY CONTACT

I write my own name.

The receptionist looks at it.

Looks at me.

Looks back at it.

A tiny bureaucratic trilogy.

"Someone other than yourself."

She says it kindly.

Which somehow makes
the sentence heavier.

I cross myself out.

Apparently even in an emergency
I am not qualified
to come get me.

RELATIONSHIP TO PATIENT

Mother?

No.

Child?

Absolutely not.

Friend?

There are people I love.

That is not the same question.

The form wants someone
who can arrive.

Love and geography
have been fighting
in my life for years.

Geography keeps winning
on paperwork.

**IF PATIENT BECOMES UNRESPONSIVE,
WHO SHOULD WE CALL?**

Interesting.

When?

Now?

At seventeen?

At thirty?

At three in the morning
when my own thoughts
became unreliable witnesses?

Could you narrow it down?

The form provides
one line.

My life requires
an appendix.

PRIMARY CONTACT

I try my mother.

Too far.

I try another name.

Too complicated.

Another.

Unavailable.

Another.

Would worry too much.

Another.

Would not answer.

Another.

I stop.

There is a cruelty
specific to paperwork:

it keeps asking questions
as though every life
came assembled correctly.

Mother: far.

Father: deceased.

Emergency: local.

Support system:
please print clearly.

RELATIONSHIP TO PATIENT

I write:

self.

Cross it out.

Write:

mother.

Cross it out.

Write:

responsible adult.

Laugh once.

Quietly.

Hospitals dislike hecklers.

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

call the woman
who learned to drive herself home

call the woman
who keeps medication
in three different bags

call the woman
who says I'm fine
with enough accents
to qualify as multilingual

call the woman
who has signed every permission slip
remembered every appointment
found every missing shoe
made every impossible Tuesday
behave like Tuesday
call

Right.

DO YOU FEEL SAFE AT HOME?

☐ yes

☐ no

Different question.

Same pen.

**DO YOU HAVE SOMEONE
WHO CAN HELP YOU AFTER DISCHARGE?**

☐ yes

☐ no

The boxes are so small.

No room for:

probably.

No room for:

depends what you mean by help.

No room for:

*I have people who love me
from very inconvenient distances.*

No room for:

*I got good at being necessary
and forgot to become reachable.*

The receptionist returns.

"Did you find someone?"

I look at the form.

My own name
is still visible beneath the line
I drew through it.

Not gone.

Just officially incorrect.

"Yes," I say.

Because this is a hospital

and there are only so many emergencies

a person can admit to

before triage.

I hand her the clipboard.

She takes it.

For one beautiful second

someone else

is holding it.

CUSTOMS DECLARATION

WELCOME

All travelers must complete this form.

Please print clearly.

As if clarity
has ever gotten anyone
through a border faster.

1. SURNAME

The one on the passport
or the one people shorten
because pronunciation
apparently has a character limit?

2. NATIONALITY

Choose one.

- ☐ this one
- ☐ that one
- ☐ whichever makes the line shorter
- ☐ whichever does not ask me
where I'm really from

Only one box may be selected.

Then your form
is too small.

3. PURPOSE OF TRAVEL

- ☐ business
- ☐ pleasure
- ☐ visiting family
- ☐ returning home

Please define
returning.

Please define
home.

Use additional paper
if necessary.

I will need
additional paper.

4. LENGTH OF STAY

Thirty days.

Twenty years.

Until the money runs out.

Until somebody says
you sound different.

Until your children
pronounce a word
the way this country does

and you realize
migration has entered
the family bloodstream.

5. ARE YOU CARRYING FOOD?

☐ yes

☐ no

Does a recipe count?

Does the smell
inside a plastic container?

Does my mother saying

eat

from three thousand miles away
count as agricultural material?

Please declare
all fruits, vegetables, seeds, meats,
and other biological products.

Then yes.

I am carrying
a whole ecosystem.

Cilantro.

Coffee.

The muscle memory
of peeling plantains.

Three bottles
of something red enough
to make nostalgia sweat.

Confiscate accordingly.

**6. ARE YOU CARRYING CURRENCY
IN EXCESS OF \$10,000?**

No.

I'm an immigrant.

That was adorable.

**7. ARE YOU BRINGING
ANYTHING INTO THE COUNTRY
THAT YOU INTEND TO LEAVE BEHIND?**

My children's accents.

A few years.

Several versions of myself.

My patience.

Maybe my mother's vocabulary
one forgotten noun at a time.

**8. DO YOU HAVE ANYTHING
TO DECLARE?**

Yes.

A border is a very confident line
for something invented.

A passport is a tiny book
with an outrageous opinion
of itself.

I have been called foreign
in places where I paid taxes.

I have been called home
by places where I no longer have keys.

My mouth has changed countries
without asking me first.

My children carry places
they have never lived.

My dead travel without documents.

Nothing I love
has ever fit cleanly
inside one jurisdiction.

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- ☐ admitted
- ☐ denied
- ☐ referred for further inspection

Officer,

check the suitcase again.

There is another country
folded between the shirts.

No contraband.

Just inheritance.

It keeps getting through

MARA LOVELOCK

Questionnaire for my Rapists

I can't help but think of you.
We are stitched together,
you made it so.

I have questions for you both:

1. Are you still in prison?

☐ Yes

☐ No—

They told me your fellow prisoners
did to you what you did to me.
I didn't want that.

To the second one:

2. Was I your first? You hesitated.

☐ Yes

☐ No

3. Was this a hazing gone wrong or were you just tired that night?

4. Was I the worst thing you'd ever done?

☐ Yes

☐ Not even close

5. Do you regret it because

☐ It was wrong?

☐ You got caught?

☐ Don't regret it.

6. Do you wish you had murdered me and hidden the evidence?

☐ Yes

☐ No

I've waited to feel
red-hot anger.
To smash things
with abandon, but now,
fifteen years later,
I still just feel sorrow
for me, for you.
My therapist says that's okay.

7. What made you do this? Did you live a life of (check all that apply)

- ☐ Abuse?
- ☐ Poverty?
- ☐ Violence?
- ☐ Racism?

8. If you did, would that excuse anything?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

I saw in the news a prison
in your hometown set on fire,
dozens dead.

9. Did you survive?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

I think you are dead sometimes,
but I feel nothing
my body protects me
from a guilt I cannot carry.

Sometimes I hope you are alive
and wonder—

10. Do you think of me like I think of you?

(body / voice)

iii

when the body answers

ALEXANDRA R. LOW

Litany for a Body

Bodies remembered. Bodies forgotten.
Bodies energized. Bodies fatigued.
Bodies of war wielding sharp, glinting silver.
Bodies of peace bearing words of mercy.
Bodies stolen by others, drowned.
Drowned.
Drowned.
Drowned.
Bodies with autonomy, answering to no others.
Breathing.
Breathing.
Breathing.
One body bent on a tile floor.
Bodies that became shells.
Bodies placed in a row.
Bodies haunted by a nameless ache.
Bodies who count blood-stained sheets after sunrise.
Bodies deemed dirty by those in high places.
Bodies beneath the rule of those who never bleed.

KLÉE MARSALIS

How to make morir soñando

Grab a cup of milk and a cup of orange juice
Forget sugar, forget vanilla
Bachata across the entire kitchen
Sing to yourself, hum
Grab ice
Pour it all into a glass
Marry things African and not
Indigenous, nowhere
Choose the proportions
Decide which side dominates that day
Take a sip and hum
Drink, and drink alone
It's too sweet for anyone else
Too sweet
Spot diabetes,
its ghost-body, peekabooing from the corner
Wink,
and just keep drinking.

LAUREN POBOCIK

Vampires Don't Get Postpartum Depression

Scraped knee has Mother—
lips, tongue poised for holy tang
as blood learns to fall.

ARIELLE ARBUSHITES

girlhood/godhood: an incantation

slip into something stronger
perhaps some armor
find the trapdoor over your heart/my heart
not to keep you out, no—

no, no, no

no, no, no

practice your no

it's the place only women know to unlatch—
who knows the door?

we know the door

we know the door

who knows the password?

we know the password

we know the password

our mothers buried it in our mouths—

come in

come in

come in

we can all be granted entry
take what you need
leave what you can
lay down your grief with your rage
with your tenderness
beside mine

mine, yours, mine, yours

our intimacy is solidarity—

yes, yes, yes

yes, yes, yes

name yourselves and one another
repeat until you remember

we remember
we remember
we remember

say it until your bones believe you
until we inherit our language older than fear
look into the door, into my chest/your chest
life flashing before your eyes—
not because anything is ending,
but because it's just beginning—
that's the way it always is
when you realize

girlhood is godhood
girlhood is godhood
girlhood is godhood

AMANDA D'AVINO

Psalm for the Salt-Born

shedding lives like skin
across the Atlantic ocean
buttery summer
eons of winter
dead fox hugging the highway.

each emotion a translucent haunting.

and I,
salt and seaweed, arising from the frigid sea
ocean-wet to the bone,
like a serpent or
dream-turned-ghost,
reborn on the rocky shore.

Please, God.

send me a poem that might save me.

CYPHER

Final Form

After Adela's 'Sex on the Beat' Music Video

Feet spilling out of a six-inch cage - stiletto
piercing the stage like a needle; a cure. Muscled
ass - cheeks reverberating in slow-mo. Thin -
a hot little skeleton in a human-skin-coat.
Breasts slightly too big for my body's size - biology
defied, fantasy supplied. A pink weave, swaying
up to the heights of stardom. Lashes painted
in baby pink, paired with a lace bra. Clean-
shaven like a plucked turkey.
Strutting all legs, a sexed-up spider.

Hey you - isn't my self-actualization
sexy?

You should watch - have a first-row seat
to my liberation.

Or don't. If you don't want to.

I was doing this for me anyway.

CYPHER

Music Video Girl

I.

Ten dollars. My best friend and I. A shitty camera.
The no-name convenience store across the street.

II.

The cashier couldn't care less about us, and that's
a good thing. I'm leaned
against the fridge with a cold can of Diet Pepsi. The lid *snaps* open;
a small metal mouth ready to fizz. I press its lips
to mine, and we kiss. Languid, sloppy.
My friend and I lock eyes: *are you getting this?*

She sticks her thumbs-up in the air, and I move
away from the fridge, drape myself
against the stacks of chips - *crinkle, crinkle*.

III.

I am a dream
in my yellow dress, swooshing at the knees, flared-out at the chest. This, paired
with my thrift store sneakers - soles dirtied by a life that wasn't mine, is all I need.
The pop girls of the 2010s flash through my memory, slinky,
skimpy
snake-esque, and
hot. So fucking hot.
Their ghosts slither through me, making me think:
fuck, I can do that too.
As my body drips, I transform into the girl I wished to be
when I was seventeen.

+ - - +

iv

a form made new

Varimeter Verse: Poetry Doing the Math

A spotlight on the form created by Marjorie Shelito

FORM CREATOR MARJORIE SHELITO

Opening Note

Some poetic forms are inherited. Others are discovered. Others still are built, almost like small machines: a rule, a turn, a pressure system, a little architecture the poem must inhabit before it can begin to breathe.

Varimeter Verse belongs to that last category. Created by Marjorie Shelito, the form begins not with a stanza count or a rhyme scheme, but with a formula. At first glance, a Varimeter poem may look like a brief lyric with parenthetical interruptions, a call-and-response poem moving between utterance and echo. But beneath that surface, each line is governed by a compact mathematical structure. The poem is not merely counted. It is generated.

In this way, Varimeter Verse enters into conversation with traditional short forms like haiku, tanka, and other syllabic forms, but it does not simply imitate them. It expands the field. Where haiku is often understood through compression, immediacy, image, and turn, Varimeter Verse adds another layer: a visible equation that determines how the poem moves. Its structure is syllabic, but also procedural. Its brevity is not only aesthetic, but mathematical. The poem becomes a small proof, a lyric sequence, and a formal experiment all at once.

For an issue titled fixed forms (loosely), Varimeter Verse offers a useful and compelling example of what a fixed form can be when it is not treated as a museum object. It is fixed, yes, but not frozen. It has rules, but the rules create motion. It borrows the spirit of historic short forms while inventing a new container for contemporary lyric possibility.

The Basic Shape Call and Response

At its core, Varimeter Verse is a call-and-response form. Each poem appears to contain five call positions and four response positions, arranged in alternation:

Call	1
(Response	1)
Call	2
(Response	2)
Call	3
(Response	3)
Call	4

The call lines are the main lines of the poem. The response lines are parenthetical. Visually, this creates a two-part voice, or perhaps a voice and its countervoice. The poem may feel as if it is speaking to itself, interrupting itself, correcting itself, answering itself, or allowing a hidden voice to surface inside the main utterance.

That parenthetical structure matters. In ordinary prose, parentheses often function as aside, clarification, confession, or afterthought. In Varimeter Verse, the parenthetical response is not ornamental. It is structurally necessary. The response lines are not merely comments on the calls; they supply the values that help generate the poem's ongoing syllabic movement.

This makes the form especially interesting because it turns a familiar literary device, the aside, into a formal engine. The parenthetical voice is not secondary. It is part of the machine.

The Formula

Each Varimeter Verse begins with a compact formula, such as:

2+3T

6-3I

5+1I

5-2T

The formula has three parts:

1. A starting number
2. A plus or minus sign
3. A second number, followed by an operation signature: I or T

The first number gives the syllable count for the first call line. The sign indicates whether the poem begins with addition or subtraction. The second number helps generate the fact family that will govern the poem's response values and later call-line calculations. The final letter, I or T, determines the overall operation pattern.

The important thing to understand is that the formula contains more than the two numbers printed on the page. It must be expanded into a fact family.

For example:

2+3T gives us the fact family $2 + 3 = 5$. The three values are 2, 3, and 5.

6-3I gives us the fact family $6 - 3 = 3$. The three values are 6, 3, and 3.

This is the first key to the form: a Varimeter formula should be read as generating three related values, not simply as two numbers and a sign.

The Three-Value System

A Varimeter formula creates a three-number relationship. Those values then behave differently inside the poem.

The first written number establishes the first call line. The two smaller values in the fact family become the active values used for the response lines and for the operations that generate the later call lines.

This distinction matters because addition formulas and subtraction formulas behave differently.

With an addition formula like 2+3T, the fact family is:

$$2 + 3 = 5$$

The three values are 2, 3, and 5. The two smaller values are 2 and 3.

With a subtraction formula like 6-3I, the fact family is:

$$6 - 3 = 3$$

The three values are 6, 3, and 3. The two smaller values are 3 and 3.

This is why a 6-3I poem does not alternate response lines between 3 and 6. It alternates between the two smaller values in the fact family, which in this case are both 3.

That gives us the next rule.

The Response-Line Rules

The response lines use the two smaller values from the fact family. These values alternate, beginning with the second number stated in the written formula.

So, in 2+3T:

Fact family: $2 + 3 = 5$

Two smaller values: 2 and 3

Response pattern: 3, 2, 3, 2

In 5+1I:

Fact family: $5 + 1 = 6$

Two smaller values: 1 and 5

Response pattern: 1, 5, 1, 5

In 5-2T:

Fact family: $5 - 2 = 3$

Two smaller values: 2 and 3

Response pattern: 2, 3, 2, 3

In 6-3I:
 Fact family: $6 - 3 = 3$
 Two smaller values: 3 and 3
 Response pattern: 3, 3, 3, 3

This creates a remarkable feature of the form: the parenthetical responses are both lyric and numeric. They have to make poetic sense, but they also have to carry the form's arithmetic burden.

The Call-Line Rules

The first call line begins with the first number in the written formula. The later call lines are calculated by applying addition or subtraction using the response values.

In other words, the call lines move through the poem by doing the math.

This is where Varimeter Verse differs from many traditional syllabic forms. In haiku, for example, the commonly taught English-language version often emphasizes a fixed syllable structure of 5 / 7 / 5, even though that simplification does not fully capture the Japanese form's history or linguistic basis. Still, in many contemporary classrooms and writing communities, "haiku" is understood as a short poem organized around a predetermined syllabic pattern.

Varimeter Verse is also syllabic, but its syllable pattern is not merely assigned. It is produced. The formula does not simply say, "Write this many syllables, then this many, then this many." Instead, the poem's later lines emerge from the operations of the form. The call lines are generated through sequence, relation, and return.

The result is a poem that does not only sit inside a shape. It performs the process of becoming shaped.

Operation Signatures I and T

The final letter of the formula tells us the operation signature. Based on the working rules of the form, there are two primary signatures: I and T.

The I signature indicates symmetry. The T signature indicates asymmetry, or top-heaviness.

The sign in the formula determines whether the poem begins positively or negatively. The letter determines the shape of the operation sequence.

This gives us four general types:

TYPE	SIGNATURE	OPERATION AND SHAPE
Positive Symmetric	+I	+ - - + rises, contracts, contracts again, returns upward

TYPE	SIGNATURE	OPERATION AND SHAPE
Negative Symmetric	-I	- + + - falls, expands, expands again, returns downward
Positive Asymmetric	+T	+ + - - rises twice, then descends twice
Negative Asymmetric	-T	- - + + falls twice, then rises twice

These operation patterns are what give different Varimeter poems their internal motion. Two poems might both have nine positions and use the same call-and-response architecture, but their formulas can produce very different emotional and rhythmic trajectories.

A positive asymmetric poem, for instance, may feel like ascent followed by descent. A negative symmetric poem may fall, widen, widen again, then return. These movements are mathematical, but they can also become expressive. The poem's arithmetic can echo the poem's emotional logic.

Worked Example 2+5I

A formula such as 2+5I begins by creating a simple fact family:

$$2 + 5 = 7$$

That gives the poem three related values: 2, 5, and 7. The first number, 2, becomes the syllable count of the opening call line. The two smaller values, 2 and 5, become the active values that move through the rest of the poem.

Because the formula is written 2+5, the first response line uses 5 syllables. From there, the response lines alternate between the two smaller values:

$$5, 2, 5, 2$$

The final letter, I, tells us this is a symmetrical form. Since the formula begins with addition, its operation pattern is:

$$+ - - +$$

So the call lines unfold this way: the poem begins with 2 syllables, adds 5 to reach 7, subtracts 2 to arrive at 5, subtracts 5 to arrive at 0, and then adds 2 to return to 2.

The full structure becomes:

$$2 / 5 / 7 / 2 / 5 / 5 / 0 / 2 / 2$$

Or, arranged as call and response:

Call: 2 syllables
 Response: 5 syllables
 Call: 7 syllables
 Response: 2 syllables
 Call: 5 syllables
 Response: 5 syllables
 Call: 0 syllables
 Response: 2 syllables
 Call: 2 syllables

The zero-syllable call line is important. It is not a mistake or a missing piece of the poem. It is a structural silence generated by the formula itself. On the page, that means the poem may appear to move from one parenthetical response directly into another, but mathematically, there is a silent call position between them.

In this way, 2+5I creates a poem that begins small, widens quickly, narrows, disappears briefly into silence, and then returns to its opening measure. The movement is symmetrical, but not static. It gives the poem a shape of expansion, compression, absence, and return.

Two Varimeter Verses in Practice

Both example poems in this section are by Marjorie Shelito, creator of Varimeter Verse.

Once the formula is understood, the form becomes easier to see in motion. The following two poems show how different Varimeter formulas create different lyric shapes. One expands and contracts without disappearing. The other falls all the way into a zero-syllable call position before returning.

Example One: 5+2T

In “On: June,” the formula is 5+2T.

The fact family is:

$$5 + 2 = 7$$

The two smaller values are 2 and 5, so the response lines alternate:

2, 5, 2, 5

Because this is a positive asymmetric form, the operation pattern is:

+ + - -

That gives the poem this full syllable structure:

5 / 2 / 7 / 5 / 12 / 2 / 10 / 5 / 5

On: June

Soon the air will seize

(A haze)

Upon my ignorant gaze

(The fields will glow, bold)

Imagination will wane impotent, then grow

(Though slow)

The sun will curl away into the west

(I will watch it wilt)

And I will sweat wind

Here, the formula creates a swelling motion. The poem begins in a five-syllable call, expands toward the twelve-syllable center line, then contracts back to its opening measure. That movement fits the poem's atmosphere: heat, glare, growth, exhaustion. The long middle line feels almost overgrown, as if the sentence itself is stretching under June's pressure. By the final line, "And I will sweat wind," the poem has returned to five syllables, but the air has changed.

Example Two: 11-5T

In "On: Ten," the formula is 11-5T.

The fact family is:

$$11 - 5 = 6$$

The two smaller values are 5 and 6, so the response lines alternate:

5, 6, 5, 6

Because this is a negative asymmetric form, the operation pattern is:

- - + +

That gives the poem this full syllable structure:

11 / 5 / 6 / 6 / 0 / 5 / 5 / 6 / 11

On: Ten

The other frame for all this cheer is labor

(Lightning from the vault)

He is draining my stores

(Except he settled me)

(Truly he freed me)

But here I am silk

(Surely he salvaged me)

I own nothing but mountains of light for him

This poem makes visible one of Varimeter Verse's most interesting possibilities: the zero-syllable call line. Structurally, the call position is still present, but it contains no spoken syllables. On the page, that absence creates a small silence between "Except he settled me" and "Truly he freed me." The main voice drops out for a beat, while the parenthetical voice continues.

The result is not only mathematical. It is expressive. The poem falls from eleven syllables to six, then into silence, before beginning its return. By the final line, it has rebuilt itself back to eleven syllables: "I own nothing but mountains of light for him." The form creates a disappearance, then a restoration.

What Varimeter Verse Borrows from Short Forms

Varimeter Verse is not haiku, but it speaks to some of the expectations readers often bring to haiku and other traditional short forms.

It values brevity. The poem is compact, controlled, and highly compressed. Each line has limited space, which means each word must carry weight.

It values syllabic attention. Like many short forms, it asks the poet to hear language not only as meaning, but as count, rhythm, and measure.

It values juxtaposition. The call-and-response structure naturally places utterances beside other utterances. A main line may be clarified, complicated, softened, or undermined by its parenthetical response.

It values turn. The operation patterns create built-in shifts. Depending on the formula, the poem may rise, fall, contract, expand, vanish, or return. These mathematical movements can support lyric turns in thought, image, or feeling.

It values smallness as intensity. Like haiku, Varimeter Verse asks whether a small form can hold a large perception.

But Varimeter Verse also changes the terms.

How Varimeter Verse Expands the Convention

Traditional short forms are often defined by visible containers: three lines, five lines, fourteen lines, a set syllable count, a repeating refrain, a prescribed turn. Varimeter Verse is different because its container is not only a shape. It is a process.

The poem is generated by a formula before it is filled by language. This shifts the poet's relationship to form. The poet is not simply choosing a preexisting pattern. The poet is choosing a small mathematical seed and allowing the poem to unfold from it.

That makes Varimeter Verse feel contemporary in an important way. It understands form as generative rather than merely restrictive. The rule is not a cage. It is an engine.

The form also expands the idea of voice. In haiku, the poem often depends on juxtaposed images or a turn in perception. Varimeter Verse uses juxtaposition too, but through call and response. The parenthetical line may behave like an aside, whisper, echo, doubt, conscience, ghost, or counterargument. The poem's structure creates a built-in relationship between what is spoken directly and what is spoken indirectly.

This is especially rich for contemporary poetry, where speakers are often fractured, layered, self-aware, or in conversation with multiple versions of themselves. Varimeter Verse gives that internal multiplicity a formal body.

It also expands the role of silence. The zero-syllable call line is one of the form's most striking possibilities. Many poetic forms use white space, caesura, or line break to create silence, but here silence can be mathematically generated. The blank line is not simply expressive spacing. It is a required structural position that happens to contain no syllables.

In that sense, the form literalizes something poetry often knows intuitively: absence can count.

A Form for “Fixed Forms (Loosely)”

For fixed forms (loosely), Varimeter Verse offers a way to think beyond the opposition between tradition and experimentation. It is not a rejection of fixed form. It is a reimagining of what fixedness can mean.

The form is fixed because the formula matters. The syllables are predetermined. The call-and-response structure is stable. The operation signatures create defined patterns.

But it is loose because the poem's experience can vary widely. One formula may create symmetry; another may create imbalance. One may produce a zero-syllable silence; another may build toward a longer center. One poem may feel meditative, another eerie, another playful, another elegiac.

This elasticity is part of the form's appeal. It gives poets a structure that can be learned, tested, and repeated, while still leaving room for surprise.

Varimeter Verse also helps us ask a larger question: why do poets keep making forms?

Perhaps because form is not merely constraint. Form is a way of thinking. A form teaches a poem how to move. It creates pressures the poet would not have invented alone. It asks the poet to solve problems, and sometimes those problems lead to lines stranger or sharper than the poet might have written freely.

In that sense, invented forms are not lesser than inherited ones. They are evidence that poetry is still alive enough to generate new rules.

Closing Note

Varimeter Verse begins with arithmetic, but it does not end there. Its formulas matter because they create pressure. Its patterns matter because they produce movement. Its numbers matter because they force language into relation with measure, silence, and return.

That is what makes the form exciting. It is not merely a novelty, and it is not simply a puzzle. It is a reminder that poetic form can still be invented from the ground up, using whatever materials a poet brings to the table: syllables, equations, parentheses, breath, absence, echo.

In a literary culture that often treats fixed forms as inherited artifacts, Varimeter Verse insists that form can still be made. It can be playful. It can be peculiar. It can be mathematical. It can be tender. It can be strange.

It can be, in the best sense, not quite right.

What Comes Next

If something in these pages made you notice the shape around a poem, we're glad you stayed.

Thank you for reading with us, writing with us, or finding us by accident. Not Quite Right exists because writers trust us with work that does not always fit neatly elsewhere, and because readers are willing to meet that work on its own terms.

We are always looking for contributors in poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, hybrid work, and visual art. Visit www.notquiterightmag.com for upcoming issues, open calls, and submission guidelines.

Contributors and Biographies

Nicky Bennett (@nicky.bennett.writes)

*Nicky Bennett is an American poet, essayist, librettist, and lyricist. He has written several collections of poems and essays, including *Strong Enough to Be Soft* and *every feeling i could name*. He recently completed his first full-length musical, *Roanoke: A New Musical*. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *Not Quite Right Literary Magazine*.*

Alexandra R. Low (@alexandrarlowauthor)

*Alexandra R. Low is a midwife, endometriosis survivor, and author whose work explores the intersection of folklore and women's health. Her written work has been published in the *Lost Bodies* anthology and in *Local Wolves* and *Baucite* literary magazines. Her personal narratives have appeared in publications of the National Association of Nurse Practitioners in Women's Health.*

Amanda D'Avino (@fleurals.exe)

Amanda D'Avino grew up under the Florida sun and now lives by the sea on the south coast of England, where things feel just gloomy enough. She enjoys poems that sit somewhere between tenderness and discomfort. Her work has appeared in publications by Arcana Press, Livina Press, South Broadway Press, Anarkiss Zine, and Four Tulips Magazine.

Amanda Trout (@atrout2972)

*Amanda Trout is a Midwestern US writer with a love for sounds, received forms, and cicadas. Her work has appeared in *Blood Tree Literature*, *RipRap*, *Barzakb*, and other publications. She studies poetry and reads for the *Cimarron Review* at Oklahoma State University.*

Arielle Arbushites (@writingthewayhome)

*Arielle Arbushites is a licensed social worker who has been a writer all her life. Her work has appeared in *Persephone Magazine*, *Maudlin House*, *The Hemlock Journal*, *The Healing Muse*, the *South Florida Poetry Journal*, and elsewhere. She is a poetry reader for *The Table Review* and has a poetry chapbook forthcoming from *Finishing Line Press* in 2027. She lives and writes in Pennsylvania, where she balances motherhood, hospice work, and poetry as a means of understanding what it is to be alive.*

Ash Mojica (@therealamojica)

Ash Mojica is a nonbinary Mexican American writer from Santa Ana, California. You can usually find them at a cafe, writing and enjoying an iced coffee.

Cypher (@cypherspace_101)

Cypher (she/her) is a self-taught and community-taught brown, queer, working-class Tamizh diaspora writer in Canada. Her style is musical, political, philosophical, and introspective. Her full-length poetry collection, The Self is an Ocean, is out now. Find her at cypherspace.ca.

Gaby Ortiz (@gabyortiz)

Gaby Ortiz is an Ecuadorian-born poet based in Canada whose work explores migration, motherhood, grief, language, and belonging. Her poetry has appeared in literary journals and on stages including New York City's Bowers Poetry Club and Nuyorican Poets Café. She writes in English and Spanish, usually somewhere between tenderness and a sharpened edge.

John Grey

John Grey is an Australian poet and US resident, recently published in Midnight Mind, Willow Review, and the Pennsylvania Literary Journal. His latest books, Bittersweet, Subject Matters, and Between Two Fires, are available through Amazon. His work is forthcoming in the MacGuffin, Touchstone, and Plainsongs.

Klée Marsalis (@kmarsalis28)

Klée Marsalis is a music major transferring to the University of Maryland from Howard University. Originally from Hanford, California, he self-published the poetry collection California Dreaming in September 2024 under the previous pen name Kanye Marsalis. His work has been featured by the WILDsound Writing Festival, Washington Writers Publishing House, PoetsChoice's anthology Florizia Florica Fleur, and elsewhere, and is forthcoming in the Lighthouse Writers anthology All the Lives We Ever Lived, Vol. 6, 2024-25 and UPenn's Coloured Pages. He was selected as an Honorable Mention Poet for the 2025-2026 Los Angeles Youth Poet Laureate Program and is working on manuscripts, short plays, compositions, and other projects.

Lauren Pobocik (@laurenwritesshit)

Lauren Pobocik (she/her/hers) is an autistic writer and mother living in Grand Blanc, Michigan. Her poems, essays, and fiction on neurodivergence, spirituality, and motherhood live and breathe on her Substack, All That I Am Not.

Mara Lovelock (@maralovelockpoetry)

Mara Lovelock's (she/her) work explores trauma, illness, bisexuality, and motherhood. Her poetry has appeared in Gnashing Teeth Publishing's Poem of the Day and Chainmail Poetry and is forthcoming in Stanchion's Elegant Variations, Third Moon Press's anthology The Museum of Human Hearts, Blade and Bloom, Unendurable, and COPE MAGAZINE. She facilitates a community mindfulness group. Originally from East Tennessee, she lives in Northern California with her husband and four-year-old.

Marjorie Shelito

Marjorie Shelito is the creator of Varimeter Verse, the mathematical call-and-response poetry form featured in this issue.

Natalia Gameson (@nataliacgamespoems)

Natalia Gameson is a poet and writer based in the UK's West Midlands.

Peter Devonald (@peterdevonald)

Peter Devonald is a multi-award-winning poet and screenwriter whose work has appeared in six Broken Spine anthologies, The Spectator, Broken Sleep, Abridged, Alchemy Spoon, IS&T, Seventh Quarry, Full House, Shine, and Acumen. His honors include the 2025 Broken Spine Readers' Choice Award and the 2025 Loft Books Best Poem award. He is a former senior judge and mentor for the Peter Ustinov Awards, poet-in-residence at Haus-a-Rest, poetry editor for Post newspapers, and a nominee for the Forward Prize, Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and Children's BAFTA.

Rosalind Adams (@midlifehalfife)

Rosalind writes as autism, motherhood, midlife, and hormones collapse on her. The words in her head repeat and sometimes form groups of poetry or prose. Finding rhythm in walking, yoga, and river swimming, she hopes they reach other people from time to time.

Sandra Beth Levy (@slevy43)

Sandra Beth Levy, Ph.D., is a retired psychologist, spoken-word artist, and author of more than fifty published poetry and creative nonfiction pieces across the US and internationally. She was shortlisted for the 2026 Rough Diamond Poetry Prize, twice nominated for a 2027 Best of the Net award, and will launch her debut poetry chapbook, Unfurling the Scroll of Seven Decades, with Finishing Line Press in February 2027.

Tamara-Lee Brereton-Karabetsos (@tamaraleewrites)

Tamara-Lee Brereton-Karabetsos is an Australian-Greek writer based in Glyfada, Greece. She has a background in medical and health science, business, and education. Her work has appeared in print and online.

T. R. Poulson (@trpoulson and @trpoulsonlimericks)

T. R. Poulson is a University of Nevada alum and proud Wolf Pack fan. She has spent a large part of her life delivering for UPS in Woodside, California. Her work appears in Best New Poets, Quarterly West, Gulf Coast, American Literary Review, Barrow Street, Booth, and other publications. She is seeking a publisher for her first manuscript, tentatively titled Workhorse. Find her at trpoulson.com.