glisten

June 2026

Celebrating the Winners of

Rainbow Writes

An Anthology of Selected Works

Inspiring and empowering queer youth to share their authentic stories, uplifting phenomenal LGBTQ+ creative prose and poetry.

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Rainbow Writes

Rainbow Writes Project Director

Via Lipman

Glisten Staff Support

Damon Carbajal

Student Team

Alex P.
Audrey H.
Corwin B.
Evie A.
Levi B.
Penny W.

2026 Judges

Sonido Reyes (Prose)
Robin Gow (Poetry)

Contributing Writers

Ökami D.
Patrick R.
Ari E.

https://glisten.org/students/

FROM THE DIRECTOR

For the past four years, directing Rainbow Writes has been an incredible experience for myself and so many of the youth involved with Glisten's national programs. What started as a small goal to highlight LGBTQ+ storytellers has grown into an annual project of empowerment, showing young queer writers that their voices deserve to be heard, despite living in a time where discriminatory legislation and book bans disproportionately target marginalized voices. Rainbow Writes, in turn, reminds young people that words are powerful, and one of the best tools we have to fight back and reclaim space on the bookshelves and in the broader world.

It's been an honor to shape and guide this program. Every year, reading through the brilliant submissions, I'm reminded of the profound bravery and imagination of LGBTQ+ youth. I'm so thrilled to present the RW 2026 anthology, highlighting just a sliver of the powerful narratives of queer students today.

I want to sincerely express my gratitude for all students who submitted to this program, our incredible judges, and the student team for making this program a reality and helping Glisten share the magic of queer storytelling.

With Pride,

Via Lipman
Rainbow Writes Program Director

MEET THE JUDGES



he/they

SONIDO REYES is the award-winning and bestselling author of *The Lesbiana's Guide to Catholic School*, *The Luis Ortega Survival Club*, *The Broposal*, and *The Golden Boy's Guide to Bipolar*. They also have contributed short stories to the anthologies *Transmogrify!* and *For the Rest of Us*. Sonido writes fiction celebrating queer and Mexican stories in a variety of genres and age catefories. He is also the vice-president of My Galvanized Friend, a nonprofit focused on providing access to and amplifying LGBTQ+ writing, art, and creators. They also co-host the podcast Bidi Bidi Book Pod, which celebrates queer and trans BIPOC authors and stories.



any pronuns

ROBIN GOW is a Lambda Literary Award–winning poet, educator, organizer, and author from rural Pennsylvania, where it lives with his queer family on unceded Lenape land in the Lehigh Valley. Gow earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Adelphi University and is the author of multiple poetry collections, chapbooks, essays, and acclaimed Young Adult and Middle Grade novels in verse, including *A Million Quiet Revolutions* and *Dear Mothman*. An autistic, bisexual, genderqueer advocate, Gow is passionate about queer and disability justice and has trained thousands on LGBTQIA2+ inclusion, neurodiversity, and disability justice through workshops and community education.

Patrick R., Massachusetts

NEAR-HOLY THINGS

we lay side by side on i-95 north
i let their voices wash over me,
across six lanes is a makeshift altar
warping in the heat haze of northeast summer and soaked in red by some snapped-open body
one of us whispers a secret into the air– a confession
the rest start up a chorus,
and tell her to shout instead
there is no sin in our love

a car passes so fast i hear it after it's gone,
and the rushing air reminds me of a candle
lit in the temple and offered
to those gods and goddesses doused in makeup and our oh-so-human sacrifices
not human sacrifice as cutting and praying and begging for a second chance,
human sacrifice, sacrifice as the most human thing– to give because you believe

the boy nearest me says
sometimes he feels like he cannot breathe, because he doesn't know
if he should be allowed to live
and sometimes he thinks
he should choke himself and do the world that mercy
i tell him,
we do not breathe in sacrilege,
but as a near-holy thing
shouldn't any life be a blessing?
and he is the best of us,
the holiest if we dare use those words

NEAR-HOLY THINGS

later, they say,
let's play a game
so we pick up where we left off the day before:
truth or dare, red-green flag, fuck-marry-kill
a giggle rises up at someone's answer, and we knock shoulders all around
one by one by one until we've all twisted into a knot,
tasting dirt and burned gas and still grasping each other's hands
fingers trickling against wrists like water or blood,
we make our own religions
we do not pray to Job's God

2026 ZINE CATEGORY WINNER

Axeton E., Ohio

JACKSON QUEER HISTORY

Read at this link here!

Ökami D., Maryland

CONSTELLATION PROSE

This story begins with a whisper, a scandal, a who in the shine of the dark where hushed up girls tell their crushes. The buzz boy humming passion through the halls. Wanderers into this reality, this society that makes our galaxy. Regardless. The queer body sinks itself into the margins where identity goes without highlight. That identity arrives a theory before its own name is introduced, a mark that needs no introduction, called body. Its song plays rhythms of insistent difference without resistance. A proof of humanity past its binary; effortlessly its protest is as natural as aqua strands of hair, woven metal through its face, and fabric that lays on all the right curves. The spotlight on loving hands feels like contraband when under restless night skies. Breathless this beat echoes with every new step, new confession, new explanation on just exactly who you think you are.

Queer survivalrequires improv, its dress code fashions armorfrom humor, and glamorfrom
grit, laughter becomes a tactic, a track that's quick to keep despair from making a home in our dressing rooms.

Queer survival is joy refuting erasure, a dance that makes planets out of community where we discover gravity in each other's orbit. Every comet is a story, a rhythm of self love ever changing to include what humanity is. Our pride is a prophecy painted on asphalt streets, it's the birth of a star, recognizing expression is a gift, it binds child to parent, family to friends. Fusion is the opal haze that repeats their name until the ground they walk becomes a movement, until practicing pronouns settles in the syllables of our language, and until voices preach vigilance without violence. We will continue to paint our names.

With this alone, we are rumors, a hidden living. This is a fragile ego of the human mind. We are rebellion against the human body becoming something beyond this universe of body, breast, hip, or mug. Because when they read your cover they don't tell your story.

This is our queer constellation, generations of its harmony change it everyday. It's waking up and choosing your own truth again.

Ökami D., Maryland

ANGELS CAN WRITE POETRY

My Jesus would love me.
Would touch my page,
Its ink defines spaces the world tries to erase.

He would rub his womb to me.
Cradle my becoming, a space between
the whispers the echoes, of man and women
and even if God is frightened of bodies.

Does this God believes in that color,
that thick haze of properly pronounced poetry.
Its coloris light,
reflecting golden heavens rays.

My naming does not erase, itreveals
change as the rivers wash the sins
through prayer, its my death
my souls destiny born again
So,
save me, from the sermon
its sharpened scriptures of stone
shame its creation.

This is the doctor's doctrine, documented by Cain.
Treat yourlaws to breath,
Your words to open with fact.
Care for your money to feed its kingdom,
And love more than words, but its need to thrive
In God's image; A people.

THE CLIMB

Jonah doesn't know why Cee sat next to him, but he knows it's important. He pauses his game and turns to his younger sister, who sits with her legs to her chest on the opposite side of the couch. Their parents are out tonight, so he has to make sure they both eat and go to bed, but in the liminal hours between dinner and sleep, they usually go their separate ways— Jonah to the basement to play a game, and Cee to her room to— he doesn't know what she does. Tonight, though, is different.

"Do you still play Stardew?" Cee asks.

"Not really." Jonah hasn't thought about Stardew Valley in months.

He waits for Cee to speak again, but the silence stretches on until Jonah vibrates with the need to *do something*. He has so many questions, some kinder than others. He chooses a simple one, mostly because he doesn't have the patience to think of anything better.

"What's up?"

"I..."

Cee's hands are shaking, so he shifts over until he can reach one and squeeze it. "It's ok. You're ok." The words serve to reassure Jonah as much as Cee.

She looks back at him, her deep brown eyes, his same eyes, wide. Their brown curls obscuring her eyebrows. Their mouth open, their wavering jaw.

"I have to tell you something."

Jonah's heart, already racing, picks up speed. Pounds in his ears. His mind runs in a million directions, uncovering every possibility in the vague statement. The bad, the worse, the horrifying, the dangerous. Cee's twisting fingers and tapping foot don't help his nerves.

She stares at him, and waits. Her eyes are so wide, it's like she's staring into the face of a lion instead of her older brother. He tries to get his heart and mind under control with the breathing exercises he's always told work wonders. Sure enough, they get him calm enough to listen again.

"I'm trans too."

Jonah blinks. In everything he wondered about, that never crossed his mind. Cee is trans. Like him. Warmth explodes in his chest and seeps out into the rest of his body. It's another thread between them, one that was always there but invisible to him until now.

Though, was it invisible, or did he just never pay enough attention to see it? Were there signs growing up, signs he could have picked up on? He knows what it looks like, what it feels like. But he didn't notice.

Cee breaks the silence between them. "My pronouns are they/them, and my name is Cedar. But you can still call me Cee."

Oh. Cedar. Like the tree in their backyard in Connecticut, before they moved when Jonah was 10 and Ce— *Cedar* was 6. The one they climbed together. The one Jonah coaxed them up the first time, grabbing their trembling hands to lift them up to the highest branch they could sit on, where they first saw the view that brought them back to that branch for years.

"It's a great name. It suits you." The words encompass so little of what he means.

"Thanks."

"Have you told anyone else?" Have you told Mom and Dad, he doesn't ask, but he can see in Cee's eyes that they heard it.

"No."

"No one?" Not their parents, sure, but not even a close friend?

“No one."

Jonah's heart nearly bursts out of his chest. Cee told him first. Trusted him first. He knows how difficult it is to share this, especially the first time. And they chose him to share it with.

He remembers the first person he told— his best friend at the time, also trans. The first trans person he met. The person who showed him it was possible for him to be a guy. He sort of... overshadowed their coming out with that realization, and they grew apart over the next few months. But Jonah remembers them, and how important they were to his life. If he's anything like that to Cee...

Jonah looks at his little sibling and smiles, because they're family, and they're trans too. They're someone in his family who understands. And he's the same for them, because they let him in.

"Thank you," he says.

"For what?"

"For telling me. For trusting me." Jonah doesn't have the words to express everything happening inside him, but he hopes he gets at least some of it across.

"Of course I trust you."

Jonah remembers when he was 8, and Cedar was 4. He doesn't remember why they were alone that afternoon, but it was a beautiful spring day, soon after he first taught them to climb the cedar tree. He wanted to go up again, but Cedar's fear of heights lingered. They climbed all the way up together, but when it was time to go down, Cedar saw the ground, so far below them, and froze.

Jonah descended first, and reassured his sibling that it would be ok, that it wasn't as far as it looked, that they got up, so they could get down. He remembers urgency, the need to get them down *fast*, and the struggle to keep panic out of his voice. In the end, they only came down when Jonah promised he would catch them if they fell.

They didn't fall, of course, but he stood there below them, arms outstretched, ready, the whole time.

They trusted him then, and they trust him now. They still trust him, even though he hasn't done anything like that in years.

They didn't tell their parents first. They told him. This isn't the kind of secret that stays secret for a decade before they laugh about it over Christmas dinner, but it's not one that can be rushed out either. He thinks he knows the answer, but Jonah still asks—

"Do you want to tell Mom and Dad?"

Cedar's eyes drop to their lap and they lean away like they're trying to disappear into the couch. Fear descends on him as the silence stretches forward into a minute, then two, then three. He shouldn't have pushed it, shouldn't have mentioned it in such a sensitive moment. He's never known when to shut up; he thought he was getting better but apparently not. He prepares to apologize, to take the question back.

Then, so quiet he almost misses it— "I should tell them."

"Do you want to?"

Cedar pauses, then nods.

"Can I help?"

Another nod.

A sick feeling floods his stomach. He has no idea what to do. How to help. His coming out wasn't exactly traditional, or something Cedar would do. He didn't have a plan. He learned that being a boy was an option, and he knew he wanted it, so he told his parents. It caught them off guard, and they floundered at first, but they always loved him. They've come a long way since then.

But that doesn't mean it isn't terrifying, especially to Cedar, who always takes things seriously. "There's no rush," he assures them.

"There's no rush," he assures them. That would only make things worse. "We'll be here whenever you're ready."

Cedar nods again, but their eyes flutter open and shut, like they can't decide which they want, and a tear rolls down one of their cheeks. Jonah doesn't want them to cry. He wants to make it better.

"It's going to be ok. They know what to do now."

Cedar's face cracks. Tears flood down their cheeks and their mouth contorts in a silent wail. Jonah reaches for them, and when his fingers brush their arm they lean in and cling to his shoulders like they're pieces of wood in the open ocean.

Jonah doesn't understand. What was so upsetting? He wishes he thought about it more before he said anything, but it seemed fine. Normal, reassuring words. But he miscalculated. He can recognize that; he can fix it.

"I'm sorry."

"No, it's not—" Their words are choppy, broken up by sobs that heave against Jonah's steady chest. "What if they don't understand? Being non-binary, I mean. It's more... confusing."

Jonah hadn't considered that, but of course Cedar did. Of course they worry. Despite all their similarities, this difference between them could mean everything. When he came out, he explained that he was a boy, like any other boy, that he wanted to do all the boy things. That won't work for Cedar.

"It might take a bit, but they'll get there. And... you won't be alone. I'll help." He isn't sure what he's promising, he doesn't know how to help them, but it feels right. It's what his sibling needs, so it's what he needs to do.

Cedar's face is still buried in his shirt when they whisper, "It's hard, sometimes."

"Yeah." It is. So hard.

"I hate looking in mirrors. I close my eyes while I brush my teeth." Jonah shivers with recognition. He still showers in the dark. He's used to it now, but that little twinge of discomfort persists whenever he catches a glimpse of his body. He's learned to work around it, to carry on. He's had lots of practice.

"When someone calls me my *other* name, I want to disappear." Jonah remembers every time he's called them that— clarifying it's them he's talking about, or calling them to dinner, or naming them to friends. He wishes he could erase that name from everyone's minds, or speed up the process of forgetting, so Cedar could reach the point he's at now— with friends who don't know his old name, his new one in all the doctors' files and school forms. It used to sting every time he heard the name, a sharp reminder of everything he was running from. Now, he's detached. It's not his anymore, just a name. A relic from a past life.

"I think about you going through it, all the way back then. Before we knew. It must have been worse, because you didn't have anyone like... like *you*, to show you what it's like." Yeah. It was hard. It felt like he was failing, like he would never be who he wanted to be, but couldn't be who everyone else wanted him to be either. He felt like he was failing Cedar, too, because he cried himself to sleep and shouted at their parents and spent as much time as he could at his friends' houses. He didn't want Cedar to see him like that. He wanted Cedar to see him as a real boy, but they would always know how he used to be a girl. He thought it would be better for them to not see him at all than to see him as a failure. But the distance was another failure.

He didn't run away, but he left. Stayed late after school. Ate dinner at his friends' houses instead of here. Started playing video games alone. Stopped taking care of his little sibling. Sure, they've lived together, but Cedar has a whole life outside of this house. Birthday parties, friend drama, bad teachers, hard classes— he doesn't know about any of it. He doesn't know their favorite TV show, or what they did on their last snow day, or the best way to make them laugh. He knows the 8-year-old version of them, but he doesn't know who they are now.

He wants to know.

So badly, it could burn him up from the inside.

He wants to know every detail of their life, every pet peeve, every crush, every struggle, every success. He wants to be a good brother, one who deserves Cedar as a younger sibling.

And for the first time, he's *grateful* that he's trans, because it led him here. Here, holding his sibling, comforting them, *helping* them again. It's why they trust him to help them, and why he knows how to. He might not know exactly what to do, but he knows enough. And the rest... maybe it's time to trust himself as much as Cedar does.

Something brushes Jonah's arm and snaps his focus back to the moment. That something is Cedar's hand, which hovers inches away from him, like they can't decide what to do with it. Right. Now isn't the time for his own revelations. Right now, Cedar is what matters. What they need to hear. What will make them feel better.

He wants to reassure them that it will all be ok, that their parents will be perfect, that everyone will understand and nothing will go wrong. He wishes it could be easy for them, that he had the power to make it easy for them.

But he doesn't. And he won't lie to his little sibling.

So all he can say is what he knows is true. "I'll be here for you. You'll have me, no matter what. I promise."

Another wave of tears rolls down Cedar's cheeks. They bury their face in his shirt and whisper, "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me." It's no burden. It's the least he can do. He wants to do it forever. He wishes he never stopped.

"I want to."

Joy floods Jonah's throat and eyes. He didn't know he could feel this way, this close to crying because of something so good.

"Thank you." He wants to say so much more. *I'm sorry. I want to play Stardew again. I don't want to leave you.*

But the words stick in his throat, too big to vocalize. Cedar only nods, accepts what he did say, doesn't ask why, and he can only hope that's because they already understand.

"You don't have to thank me."

Jonah stills, and looks at Cedar, whose face is blank for a moment, until their shoulders begin to shake and their mouth splits into a grin.

Jonah smiles. "You're so—" He could finish that sentence in so many ways. Ridiculous. Funny. Adorable. Perfect.

Cedar laughs, and laughs, and laughs, and soon Jonah joins in, until they're flopping over each other and wheezing, gasping for breath, then, finally, exhausted.

It's late, and they have school in the morning, so Jonah makes himself get up, then pulls Cedar to their feet. At the bottom of the stairs, he pauses. Looks at Cedar. He hasn't said it for years, hasn't thought to say it for years, but now the truth spills out.

"I love you."

Cedar's smile grows. "I love you too." They look away, then back up, right into his eyes. "I'm glad you're my brother."

Jonah grins. "I'm glad you're my sibling."

He nudges them with his shoulder and steps onto the first stair. Cedar copies him, and they climb side-by-side, bumping into each other on every step. Jonah wouldn't have it any other way.

RAINBOW WRITES

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