

(More than) Crisis and Loss: Writing Female Mid-life

Description: Illness, grief, divorce, burnout: the years between forty and fifty (and beyond) can be particularly fraught for women — but female mid-life and its attendant crises and discoveries are rarely depicted honestly or directly in popular culture. Join us for a reading by poets whose work addresses the realities of these years, which may include epiphanies and crises of love and faith, but also feature a second coming-of-age and a more confident and assured sense of self.

Category: Poetry Reading

Organizer, Moderator & Participant:

Sarah Kain Gutowski (brief bio below)

Participants:

Julie Brooks Barbour (brief bio below)

Mary Biddinger (brief bio below)

Cynthia Marie Hoffman (brief bio below)

Michelle Whittaker (brief bio below)

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Welcome to **(More than) Crisis and Loss: Writing Female Mid-life**. My name is Sarah Kain Gutowski and I'm the organizer and moderator of this panel. A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.

- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone's use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Thank you to everyone for attending today's reading, with special thanks to our authors for sharing their work in fabulist and speculative literature this morning.

I'd like to direct everyone to our event outline which has biographies for each of the participants, the order of the readers, and some initial questions for the Q&A that I'll pose to the readers before we move to taking audience questions. We have 10 physical copies of the outline available, but it's also available using the QR code posted at the end of the aisles.

We've also included two supplemental handouts with some additional information that may be of help. We have 10 physical copies of the supplemental handouts available, but they are *also* available using the QR codes posted at the end of the aisles.

The first supplemental handout includes author photos beside full bios, which may better assist you with keeping track of who is who during our time here today. It also contains contact, social media, and publication information for each of the panelists.

The second supplemental handout is a visual aid for some or all of the material that will be read here today.

And now I'll give brief bios for our panelists in the order they'll read here:

Julie Brooks Barbour's most recent poetry collection is *Haunted City* (Kelsay Books). A collection of essays co-edited with Mary Biddinger, *A Mollusk Without a Shell: Essays on Self-Care for Writers*, is forthcoming from The University of Akron Press in 2024. **Today she'll read poems** that

interrogate roles of women and the aging body, and examine the past in order to connect more fully with the self in the second half of life.

Mary Biddinger's most recent poetry collection is *Department of Elegy*, and her novella in flash, *The Girl with the Black Lipstick*, is forthcoming with Black Lawrence Press in 2025. She is co-editor, with Julie Brooks Barbour, of the essay collection *A Mollusk Without a Shell: Essays on Self-Care for Writers*. **Today she'll read poems** steeped in nostalgia for a past life, presented from the standpoint of a fortysomething Gen X woman experiencing boredom and survivor's guilt.

Cynthia Marie Hoffman is the author of four collections of poetry. Her newest collection, *Exploding Head*, is a memoir in prose poems about her lifelong journey with obsessive-compulsive disorder. All four books are published with Persea Books. She lives in Madison, WI. **Today she'll read poems** from her brand new, published-this-week fourth collection, *Exploding Head*, which views the anxieties of middle age through the lens of OCD—aging parents, the threat of one's own mortality, and impending empty nest.

Michelle Whittaker is a NYFA Poetry Fellow and author of the collection, *Surge* [great weather for Media]. She is an Associate Professor in Creative and Expository Writing and poetry editor for *The Southampton Review* at Stony Brook University. **Today she'll read poems** that delve into the intricacies and intrigues of middle age, exploring how reproductive challenges can impact the dynamics of a marriage and identity.

And I'll read last. Again, my name is Sarah Kain Gutowski, and I'm the author of *The Familiar*, a fabulist, absurdist narrative-in-poems about midlife crisis, particularly from a female point of view. **I'll be reading** a selection from this book, which is about 6 days old, and is being launched here at AWP.

Following our reading, we'll have an audience Q&A.