

# **POETRY SAMPLES**

All of the following samples are written and owned by Elizabeth Finlayson.

## *CATHOLIC ATHEIST*

To be a catholic atheist is to have choices made before you could make them yourself.  
Baptized in a bowl of holy water, in front of church-goers whose faces are blurred with time.  
Raised in a building of stained glass, pews, and altars, where thoughts made more sense than words on a page.  
To be a catholic atheist is to look back on a youth that is not your own.  
Your childhood is built from guilt, confession, and sin, like brick and mortar.  
You were brought up to be one thing, but are now another.  
To be a catholic atheist is to fear punishment from a god you don't believe exists.  
Finding yourself is a constant struggle against verses that are no longer your own.  
Wondering if you were to die, whether you would call your mother or pray to "your" god.  
To be a catholic atheist is to betray your history.  
Your memory overflows with incense and ringing bells, as you look back on a past you didn't want.  
You are a double-agent in the war between the blood and the brain.  
To be a catholic atheist is to wish you could believe, but to know that you can't.

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## WAR

I eye my fellow players across the velveteen table, formed into my enemies by the promise of winning it big.

Hypnotized by chips, and cash, and that rush of adrenaline that takes you when you slam your cards down on the table, shouting, "I won! I won!"

My fellow man, now an opponent in a war that can only be won by one.

There is no room for negotiations.

And when I look at their poker faces, their eyes, glinting with knowing smirks:

I know I will not win this battle. I will not win this war.

Maybe that's for the best?

For those chips to go to someone without all these chips on their shoulders, to someone whose hand is not scarred by my sins.

But can anyone *really* deserve to win?

When a win is just a ticket to play again, a pile of cash to throw right back into the pot, who can hold the moral high ground?

Because they can play how they want:

They can cheat, they can play honest, and fair, they can make friends, or enemies...

They can live how they want:

Commit themselves to joy, or sadness, or love, or pain,

But in the end, the house always wins.

The rules have been set longer than you've been alive.

The dealer doesn't care how you play.

The dealer only cares how you win.

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*DEMETER'S GARDEN*

In the garden I pluck plants by their stem  
While mud, grass, and chlorophyll creep up my hem.  
Pinks, reds, and purples comprise a vibrant petal,  
Meanwhile, the breeze dies down and swaying plants settle.  
Skipping to another row, I pick myself a daisy.  
The pollen and spring humidity makes the sanctuary hazy.  
Adding to my basket, I find a pristine, ruby rose,  
The scent wafts sweetly when I hold it to my nose.  
Below the flower, my finger is pricked by a sharp thorn.  
Blood trickles down my hand, which I know mother would scorn.  
Clutching my palm, I hunt for a plant with new leaves,  
When an unexpected visitor arrives to shake my beliefs.  
Leaving my mother's garden with a god to gift my bouquet,  
He takes me down below and leads me astray.  
Born of plants, pollen, springtime, and flora,  
"The queen of the dead," was the fate of Kore.

*MOVE-IN*

Yellow sun in the early weekend morning,  
Sweat and humidity clings to the inside of my car windows.  
When we drive up, the school banner flaps like it's teasing me,  
Coaxing me into a tuition bill that I can't come back from.  
In a room with three private school girls, I start to unpack, left the least-desirable bed in the  
center of the room.  
My dad and I kneel and tear clothes out of boxes, while atomic families decorate with fresh  
furniture.  
Mothers laugh. I carry a memorial card in my pocket.  
A camera clicks and captures my dazed expression.  
Then, my dad and I part ways over some corner store soda.  
His arms embrace me. Always in such a rush.  
The common room holds chattering children, fresh out of high school, like me.  
But the noise grows louder and louder,  
Static and singing and brags about jobs and money and parents and houses.  
I retract.  
At night, crickets chirp in the bushes out of my window,  
And I lie awake beneath a high ceiling, between empty beds,  
Roommates staying in family's boutique hotel rooms.  
In the basement, an unfmuffled piano plays riffs and glissandos.  
I fall asleep when the clock hits three am.  
Ding, ding, ding.  
Ring, ring, ring.  
Beep, beep, beep.  
My alarm rips me from unrestful sleep,  
When the sun has barely risen above the horizon.  
*Stay*, my bed calls, but I cannot.  
And so I get up.

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*ORPHEUS INCARNATE*

I once heard tales of a voice made with gold,  
Hands that could play any chord in the world,  
I dismissed these stories as myths that couldn't be,  
Until I saw the singer lock eyes with me

Catching his attention was a blessing and a curse  
Brought angst, joy and sadness,  
But made me feel precious,  
at least for a small piece of time

You spin gold out of words,  
You make songs out of dew  
The trees sing your music,  
Saying "I love you"

Orpheus incarnate,  
Your fans scream your name  
But when I hear your music,  
Only sadness remains.

The wind carries melodies  
You once sang to me  
I cry as the chord changes,  
And you'll never see

Orpheus incarnate,  
You left me alone.  
All that I can do now  
Is write my own song.

*GO FISH*

The cards swim through my sight like koi in a pond,  
Dazzling suits and scales of black, red, and white—  
I dip my hand in and they dart away like they fear my soft skin.  
Running home to my mother, I tug on her hand,  
Yearning for touch, for affection, for love, for care, for a mother, for a person, for anything,  
But she pushes me away.  
“Go fish,” she says, and I do.  
I lay by the water, and the fish trace the outline of my shadow, keeping their distance.  
On one summer evening, I fell asleep under the starry sky,  
The dazzling lights anesthetize me.  
...  
...  
SPLASH!  
...  
...  
I’m in the water.  
Limbs flail,  
I scream,  
But no sound escapes me.  
Just bubbles.  
For once, the fish don’t fear me.  
And for once, I had somewhere I belonged,  
Below the surface in a backyard koi pond.  
It was the best moment of my life,  
Accepted by the water and the creatures that inhabit it.  
I managed to claw my way out, laying on the tile.  
My mother never knew I fell in.  
But now I have somewhere to go, fish.  
Now I have somewhere to go.

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*LAUNDRY*

“Dear lord, please give me a fresh start,”

I pray. Trying to scrub wine and blood and hope and loss and joy and sadness and frugality and hedonism from my white dress.

I scrub, I scrub, I scrub, until there’s nothing left to scrub.

Until the fabric is nothing but stained thread.

Until the washboard has rubbed my fingers raw, scraping off a layer of skin.

It’ll grow back, one day.

Maybe my dress would never be clean. But finally, my hands would.

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