



Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine

Volume 1 Issue 5 Winter 2025



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Winter 2025

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Cover Art: "Three Red Notes" by Lita Marie Bonciolini

Arvilla Fee
Founder, Editor

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Contributors, Readers, and Community:

Whether you are bundled up against the wind and snow or stretched out on a sandy beach in warmer climates, I hope this winter season brings you peace, joy, and a bit of respite. We can certainly overwork ourselves and over commit ourselves during the holidays, but perhaps, just for a moment, we can also take time to rest, reflect and count our many blessings.

As always, I am delighted to showcase the incredible talents of 60 writers and artists in this Winter Issue. Hailing from all over the globe, these contributors have forged an unforgettable collection of work filled with insight, beauty, emotion, contemplation, and the unyielding perseverance of the human spirit.

I hope you all enjoy these 125+ pages of gorgeous images and words. I will continue to work hard to support your work and our readership in every way I can.

"I dream of painting and then I paint my dream." ~ Vincent van Gogh

Yours truly,

Arvilla Fee
Founder, Editor
Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine



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37 by Romina Allmer

I never wanted to be
a grandmother at the age of 37
the traffic light is red
oh, come on
the same word repeating in my head raped
turn green
i hate
men like this
Turn Green
sometimes they are the worst
i'm gonna find that
man
TURN GREEN
Why is this taking so long?
The child won't wait 5 minutes
Why why why
I never wanted to be—
a grandmother at the age of 37



Romina Allmer is a young poet from Austria who likes to write for fun. She likes to address some serious topics but sometimes also just little writings about her feelings and thoughts. In her future she hopes that she's able to make a living with publishing art, poetry or even books, but that's still a long way to go.



Photo by Vera Curcio: Unsplash.com

Small Revolutions by Abraham Aondoana

And there the cat lies on my notebook,
a revolution in fur.
On the other hand, leaves are blown about by the wind.
they are practicing change like they have been doing.
all night.

I pour tea slowly,
watch steam rise in spirals
that replicate the unspoken gestures.
we carry for one another—
tiny, persistent acts
that remake the world
before anyone notices.



Abraham Aondoana is a writer, poet and novelist. He is a recipient of Idembeka Creative Writing Workshop 2026. His works has been published in Kalahari Review, Prosetrics Magazine, Rough Diamond Poetry, The Cat Poetry Anthology, IHTOV, The Literary Nest, Ink Sweat and Tears (UK), Rogue Agent, Ink in Thirds Magazine, Interwoven Anthology (Renard Press), Writing on the Wall, Alien Buddha, Blasphemous Journal, Rust Belt Review, Speculative Insights and elsewhere.



Photo by Ayush Mann: Pexels.com

Paper Boats **by Abraham Aondoana**

We folded our wishes
of wet paper into little triangles,
have them running down the gutter.
Rain was sprinkling its applause.

One sank quickly,
one lingered midstream,
one disappeared entirely.
We counted the ripples
as if each one might tell
what courage looks like
when it finally drifts
from hand to current.

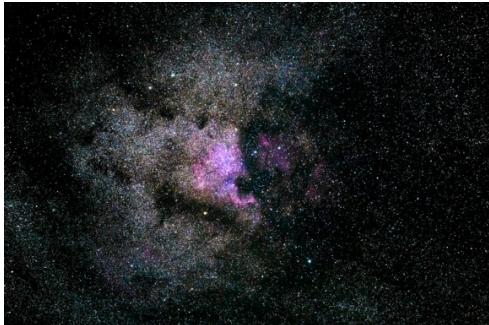


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The Dim-Switch by Marie Anne Arreola

Still searching for some quantum cure, I reach for shimmers across solar systems, the way a child reaches for the glint on a river she can't yet name. Light does this to me—teaches me its dialect, then switches tongues. Even the light in the car keeps changing. My seat gets darker, like I've been handed my own private equinox. Autumn cutting through spring. A future leaning toward me while I'm still wedged in the present-past, staring straight ahead and somehow still avoiding the work I'm supposed to be doing on my own shadow.

There's this cracked mirror in my apartment—leaning, judging, reflecting all the half-promises I've dodged. I avoid it so well the dust has started mapping a negative of my life. Sometimes my face shows up in it anyway, totally uninvited, like someone trying to explain a secret she hasn't admitted even to herself. Even the radio knows too much lately. Songs drifting to some other station, the frequencies slurred with whatever I've been leaking. They sound like strangers who somehow know my private failures.

This is why I abandoned drums. Why I leaned over my guitar—dust-colored, fingerprinted, always a little out of tune, the instrument that asks nothing except presence. I wanted to play without being seen, and the guitar allowed that: hours spent touching the same hums, listening with my belly, as if I could coax a second life out of the vibrations. I played softly so as not to wake the driver. Whispering with my hands. As if stillness might find a detour through me. As if patience were something you could learn by holding a map against the scriptures in the sky and naming the constellations wrong on purpose.

What is the route to fate? Is it a road, or a repetition, or an unraveling?

Sometimes I fear I'll die in a car accident after driving myself insane, stacking boxes labeled "cold" and "dark," never once considering opening them. Never once admitting that my metaphors of space, the nebulae, the star charts, the coordinates, were just code for being afraid of getting closer to myself. Easier to be an orbit than a center.

Now, among the Big Dipper and Orion's Belt, I see little me, fogged onto the window, offering me a gummy bear like it's communion. The gesture feels ancient, sacred, ridiculous, like a child-priest presiding over a sacrament of sugar and self-recognition.

On the I-95, I watch a couple silently mouth Bowie, probably Life on Mars. Their quiet feels tragic. Looking at the past like that—suspended between altitude and azimuth, it hurts in that very specific way that only comes from feeling a constellation rearrange itself.

There must be brighter days. There must be some string-song waiting to be born from the umbilical cords of my guitar. New music blooming the way orchids bloom from air. And then there's you—texting me to fave your tweets while I'm scrolling under fluorescent lights at work, your digital confessions bleeding onto my shift:

I'm autumn all year
life is knowing what it's like
oh no my heart feels bad
everyone needs to get out of my body

I swear there's a Samhain roaring inside you—the shadow-mirror of that Day of Flowers and Skulls we celebrated half-naked in the bathtub, watching TV while biscuits dissolved on our tongues. You'd hand me the lighter; we'd exhale toward the ceiling fan like we were training the smoke to behave.

Meanwhile people our age are blacking out at brunch under those ailanthus trees—the ones that grow where nothing else wants to. I don't want to kill the trees; I want to kill the afternoons that let rot thrive. The hours that collect our younger selves like unwanted mail.

But yeah, there's something beautiful about being half-alive in a city that thinks motion equals meaning. I feel like a serf in the bed you make me, soaking in some imaginary barrel in the backyard while my body begs for rest. A simple mind with complicated drives, like a jar of bees with the lid slightly open.

Half the time I don't even understand what you're saying when you blow smoke in my face and start quoting philosophy like you're summoning a ghost. And yet it makes a kind of sense, breath becoming text, desire translating itself into theory.

You say:

Ashes,
What if I had met you in the store?
What if I had met you in subway air?

You say it like a lament you refuse to call a lament.

You hate any word that admits vulnerability.
We keep insisting our time has no rules.

Maybe that's why I keep thinking about sending you a Linda Pastan poem, or imagining us standing someday in front of the most terrible amber, sap holding centuries of tiny dead things, and finally understanding something about permanence we've been too restless to name. Nature begs no indulgence. It claims no rights. But the lichen—God, the lichen always turns on you. Thrives where nothing else will. Turns stone into soil grain by grain.

A slow, relentless appetite. A lesson.

We invent the rights and lefts of spring, dancing under the crack of street lamps. The visible spectrum becomes a confession booth, what colors we can bear, which wounds fluoresce, which memories only show up under ultraviolet longing. Our addictions laid bare. Anemic embraces on the thoroughfares. A sustenance diminishing by the day.

After the suspension of rain, lying down feels like an act of faith. The quiet in me, God, is this me?, keeps rearranging itself into the rhythm of craving and ill will, which is somehow song-like. We pretend no explanation. We simply live at the precipice of nature's rights, for better or worse, for as long as our bodies insist on being here. Still: the question circles back, the way light circles a dying star.

What brings us closer?

In 2020, this meme started circling around—a photo of a forty-year-old stuffed animal everyone began calling the Well-Loved Garfield. You might've seen it. Flattened, dulled, practically melting into itself. And the wild thing was that it looked like Garfield had simply . . . closed his eyes. All that rubbing and squeezing over the decades had erased the white and black of his pupils, but because the makers had painted those colors over the same orange as his eyelids, the disappearance didn't read like damage. It read like peace. Like he'd drifted off into some long, earned rest, glowing a little with the proof that someone had loved him hard enough to wear him smooth.

People went nuts for him. Thousands of comments, shares, confessions. Someone even got a tattoo of the plush and captioned it, *To be loved is to be changed*. And honestly, that's not a kind of change museums usually celebrate. In museums, the gold standard is stasis. The less something shifts, the more precious it is. Even when they do talk about metamorphosis or "object afterlives," it's usually the dramatic kind, like a lapis-lazuli empress turned into Christ, or French love poems pasted into the guts of a bishop's hat.

Damage-as-destiny. Repurposing-as-finality. But the Well-Loved Garfield, he's doing something entirely different. He hasn't become a new object, and he hasn't stayed faithful to his original purpose either. He's just followed a path that was always quietly available to him. Cats close their eyes when they're content. Cartoon Garfields do too. And because of the way this plush was constructed (black and white painted over orange), he was materially capable of that evolution. The architecture for tenderness was literally stitched into him.

So now he feels almost animate, like he's participating in his own becoming.

As a painting conservator, this kind of animism hits me in the solar plexus. It scrambles the hierarchy. If unexpected change can extend an object's authenticity instead of draining it away, then authorship gets softer, more communal. Conservation stops being about freezing a moment and becomes more about tending—less museum, more ecosystem.

Less "stop the clock," more "let time have its way." And isn't

that the part we're terrified of? How time has its way with us?

I was thinking about this one afternoon when I was supposed to be resting, but instead fell down a rabbit hole of memory. I kept going back to an exhibit I saw at NYU's Institute for the Study of the Ancient World: "Time and Cosmos in Greco-Roman Antiquity." I swear I remember almost nothing from it except a sundial shaped like a ham. A ham. That measured light. A joke in stone from people who also mapped the stars.

They understood that reverence and absurdity often share a spine.

Back then I was a corporate copywriter by day and a bartender at night, which meant time moved in totally contradictory registers. In the office, it accumulated like debt, stacked Stevia packets beside my phone, the two o'clock slump, the four o'clock "yoga or happy hour" debate. The hum of the fluorescent lights became its own calendar.

When I was telefundraising for the Met Opera, time calcified into official units: fifteen minutes off every three hours, forty-five for lunch. Hayley in the next cubicle recited her pitch with the precision of a metronome: "Each time the curtain goes up, it costs us at least a million dollars."

And I'd finish the next line without thinking, both of us wired to the minute:

"And we've got some really fabulous productions this season."

But at the karaoke bar, time just slipped its leash. Nights starting at nine and ending... whenever. I learned to read people: how polite faces warmed, then liquefied; how someone drinking alone eventually abandoned the fiction of "waiting for a friend" and began smiling at the corners of the ceiling instead; how couples kissed like exhaustion had choreographed them. Somewhere in all that neon blur, I stumbled into a tiny truth about myself:

*i see now i was an obdurate rain in this urban suburb
i discovered how free i felt when i stopped taking cover*

I resurrected myself in the alcohol of perfume. Talked with dusk until the sky dropped its whole magenta body over me like it knew what I needed. I carried the choreography of my heart on a crumpled 8x11 sheet, its folds like small tectonic

shifts. And at some point, quietly, I forgot what had been taken from me the moment I stopped tallying the world.

It happens like that. The forgetting. The way a creek loses its name the second it merges with the river. You don't realize until you're already downstream.

And lately I keep wondering if we're guided by the big things—star charts, cosmic diagrams, childhood icons taped to windows, or if maybe it's simpler. Closer. Maybe the real navigation is just the willingness to let the day do whatever it's going to do with you. The way gravel becomes smooth under years of passing feet.

I don't know. I'm talking myself in circles here. But it feels true that wear can be a kind of revelation, that erosion might be the body's way of telling the truth it couldn't say when it was newly painted and trying too hard.

Some days I think about how even the most foolish creatures seem to understand this—how they soften when held, how they give in to being changed by contact. It's embarrassing, really, how long it takes us to learn the same lesson. To be loved is to be revised. Not corrected but altered in the direction of openness.

And being altered, however subtly, however inconveniently, is the pulse of being alive at all. And maybe that's the quiet task: to participate in our own becoming with enough honesty to recognize ourselves as we're being made. To look at the life accumulating around us and say, *Alright, I'm listening. Show me what I'm supposed to become next.*



Marie Anne Arreola is a cultural journalist, editor, and writer from Sonora, Mexico. She is the founder and editor-in-chief of PROYECTO VOCES, a digital magazine amplifying emerging voices across art, literature, music, and design. Her work—featured in Latina Media Co., Hypermedia Magazine, Lucky Jefferson, and other outlets—explores identity, memory, and grassroots cultural practices throughout the Americas. She is the author of the debut novel Sparks of the Liberating Spirit Who Trapped Us Back in Woodstock (Foresore Publishing, UK, 2025). Writing across journalism, poetry, essays, and hybrid forms, she is committed to fostering inclusive, transnational conversations that honor community histories and cultural transformation.



Photo by TheOther Kev: Pexels.com

For Julie by Lita Marie Bonciolini

We were both still learning
how big the world could be—
between girlhood and womanhood,
blue jeans and sun-kissed hair.

We talked quietly as we entered.
their domain—a cool dim barn,
horses neighing in greeting,
the scent of hay and oats.

They knew our voices
as we called them by name,
ears flickered inquisitively,
as if listening to our girl-secrets

We rode bareback when we felt
bold enough for a wild ride—
knees pressed against warm sides,
guiding by the shift of our weight.

They danced sideways,
tugged at the reins, eager to
stretch legs meant to run
with a surge of powerful muscles.

Dirt kicked up as we raced full-out—
becoming one with the horses,
not just two girls holding tight,
but streaks of wind and laughter.

In the quiet, afterwards,
we leaned against sweaty flanks,
shared apples and dreams,
talked about who we might become.

We didn't yet know
how life would scatter us
or where we would land,
but we were certain of one thing—

whatever awaited us beyond those days,
we had learned, on strong backs,
with dusty smiles and fearless hearts,
how to be brave, side by side.



Lita Marie Bonciolini is a writer, artist, and jewelry designer originally from South Dakota. She has been nominated for Best of the Net 2026 Anthology. Her poetry accompanied the Robert Indiana: A Legacy of Love exhibit at the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio (2020); and has been published in two anthologies—Pandemic Puzzle Poems (2021), and Yellow Flag Poems / Life in the Time of Covid-19 (2022); as well as in Arts Alive San Antonio (2022, 2025). Her poetry, prose and art have been included in three editions of Soul Poetry, Prose & Art Magazine (2025, 2026). She illustrates book covers and children's books. Lita lives in San Antonio, Texas.



Photo by Pat Kwon: Unsplash.com

The Red Necklace—for Vanessa by Lita Marie Bonciolini

“What we wear in dreams is often what we need awake.”

She said to me,
“I had the strangest dream last night.”
I listened as she described the setting,
*“I was in a Victorian house,
sometime in the 1800’s.”*

Her husband was in the dream,
solid as waking life,
but still he was leaving—
faithless in the quiet way dreams know first.

At her throat was a red necklace.
Not her color, she said—
but she loved it.
It burned there, a small, deliberate flame.

She woke with the dream
still holding her wrist in that soft borderland.
She told her husband every detail,
her emotions slipped into the dream’s shoes,
not yet able to tell where the floor began.

“It wasn’t me,” he said, gentle as an alibi,
and for a moment he felt the weight
of a story he had not lived,
of a betrayal spun from sleep alone.
He reached for her hand, unsure,
knowing a dream could hurt as much as truth.

But the necklace stayed.

All morning it hovered—
red as warning, red as want—
until she went looking for it,
half-expecting it not to exist,
half-daring it to.

And there it was.
Waiting.
As if the dream had left a trail of breadcrumbs
between worlds.

She laughed then, startled and alive,
and told her husband that he better buy it for her! —
a charm against imagined betrayal.
A tangible proof of loyalty.
She smiled to me,
“Valentine’s Day is just around the corner.”

Love sometimes asks
not for apologies but for color—
for a bold thing worn openly,
saying: *“I am here.*
I choose you awake,
I choose you now.”

Love in Flight
by Lita Marie Bonciolini



Three Red Notes
by Lita Marie Bonciolini





Photo by Céline |: Pexels.com

Paris, One Winter Night

by Ken e Bujold

*It is not the man who vanished, but the fantasy of dreams.
Charles Baudelaire: on news of Gerard de Nerval's suicide*

It is winter. Night is falling.
The moon, an ashen half-sou
pale against Aurélia's powdered gown.
People are in a hurry; rushing
home to their austere little houses
before the darkness swallows
what's left of the dreary day.
Perhaps this is why
no one notices the odd little ghost
hanging on for dear life
to the black-crêped lamppost—
his blue lobster mourning over
the muddle of muddy-green letters
sinking into the brown sludge of a merciless river.
Or maybe it's just that we've grown weary
of so many absinthe-laced fabulists peddling moonlight
along the no-nonsense paths of the Palais Royal.
Deux fois quatre-vingts years
ought to have been long enough to forget ...
les étoiles mortes of a moon-weary
night in the city of lights.



Ken e Bujold is a Canadian poet residing just outside of Toronto. He is the author of two collections: a private, limited edition, In the Key of Musica (2022), as well as The Landscape of Three Small Words (2024).



Photo by Tara Winstead: Pexels.com

Poem for a Missing Line **by Ken e Bujold**

The dream always has the scent of absence.

Thirteen abject roses in need of closure.

No matter how deep Orpheus burrows—

Eurydice never leaves her door unlocked;

Melanthē never unbuttons her verbs

for the tripping feet of a callous rogue;

a baker's dozen sun-singed orchids

scattered at the foot of an unmade bed—

Sigmund stuttering over his muffins,

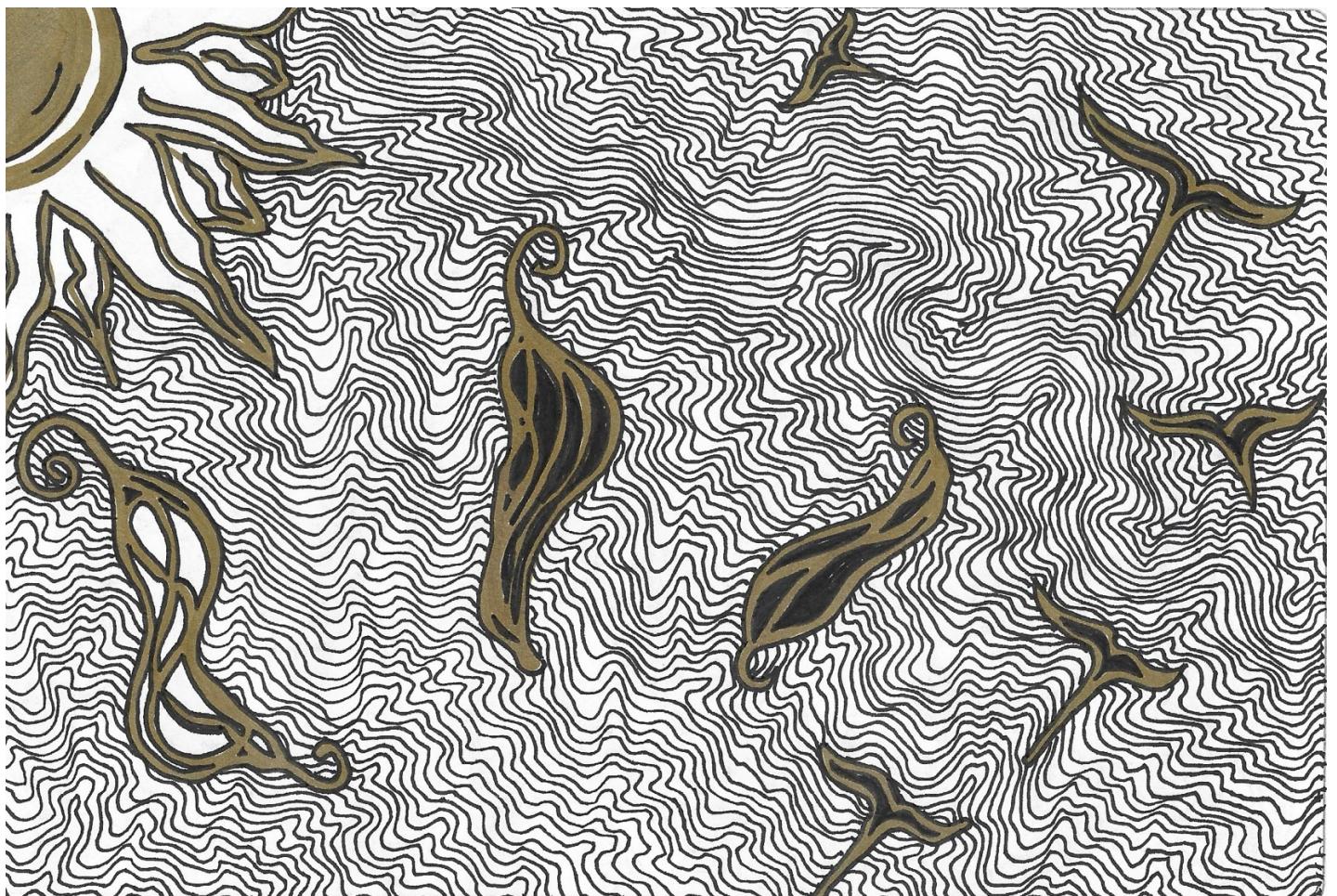
a morning's tea growing cold in the moonlight

of a lover's back, returning at dawn,

a half-strung lyre plucking at the thorns

of her last night's unattended symphony.

Somnia Aurea II: Autumn Vibes
by Lorraine Caputo



Lorraine Caputo's artwork and photography are in private collections on five continents and has been exhibited in the US, Ecuador and Peru. Her visual creations have also appeared in over 50 publications. Her poems and travel narratives also appear internationally, in over 500 journals and 24 chapbooks, including *Orinoco Plains* (dancing girl press, 2025). She has done over 200 literary readings, from Alaska to Patagonia. She is a Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize nominee. Ms. Caputo continues journeying south of the equator.

Somnia Aurea XVI: Golden Lunes
by Lorraine Caputo

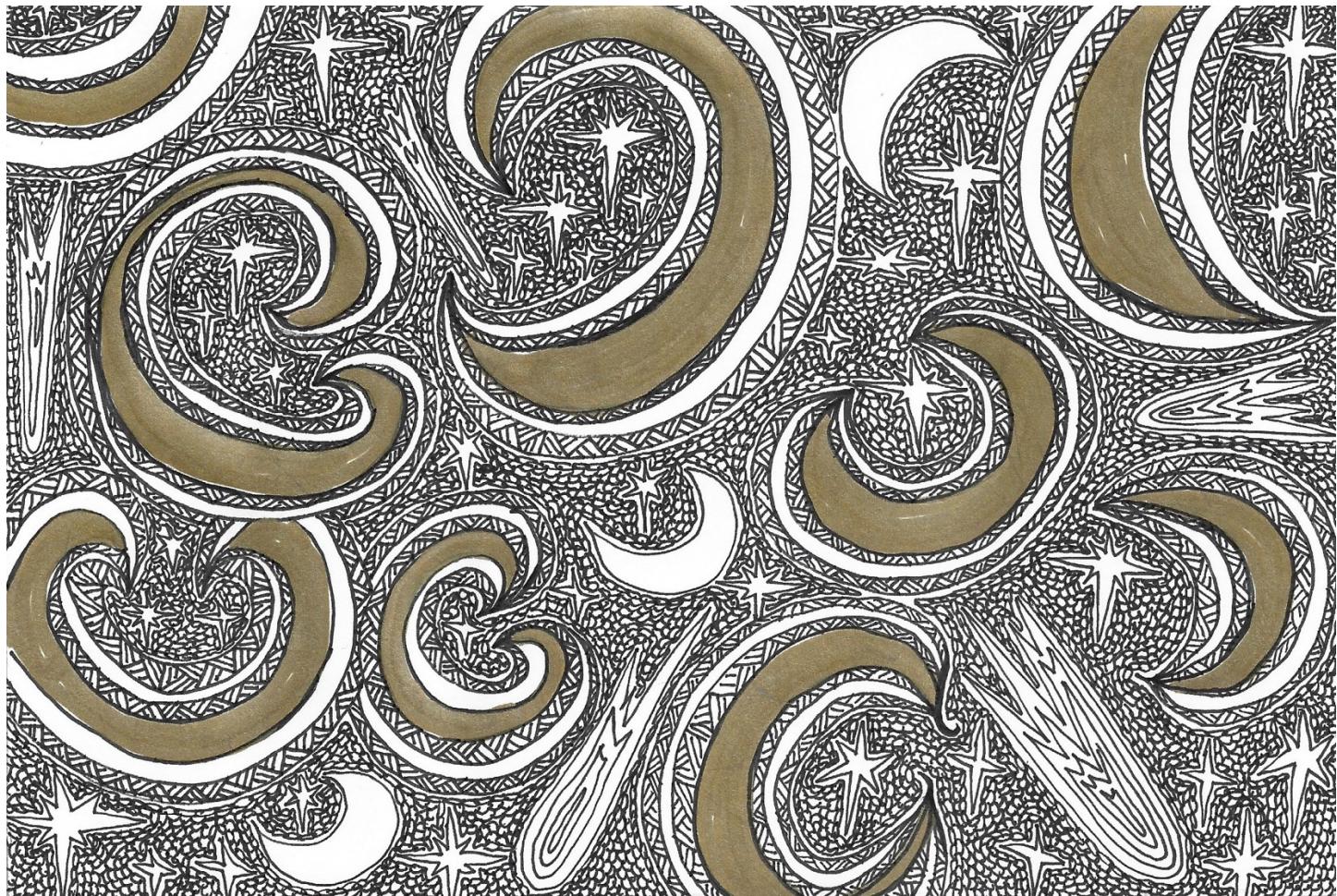




Photo by cottonbro studio: Pexels.com

Born Like This by Thomas W. Case

Poetry wasn't a choice.
It showed up at my door
like a small, rabid animal
I needed to nurture.

Like a scar,
like my eye color.

Before book sales,
before applause,
before anyone gave a damn.

I was jaded by color.
Sunsets weren't cute.
They were edible —
pink and orange,
soul food.

It burned my tongue,
made me breathe deep,
made me want to capture them
with words.

Pain had a smell —
lonely, bitter,
like stale beer,
familiar before it made sense.

The world rushed at me —
too loud,
too sharp,
too close.

Poetry was how I survived it.
Pen and paper,
faithful and warm.

I don't write for followers
or fame.
I write because
a blank page
was never an option.



Thomas W. Case is an American poet and author. He has many poems published in anthologies around the world, including Lyrical Iowa, Deft Poetry Review, and Order of the Pen to name a few. He has won several spoken word poetry competitions and his recently published book, Seedy Town Blues Collected Poems is available on Amazon.com.



Photo by Kushal rayamajhi: Pexels.com

In Winter's Depths by Thomas W. Case

In winter's depth,
I walked broken streets.
Empty pockets.
Head full of hissing demons.
Whiskey for warmth.
Neon nights for company.

Underneath the frost
and frozen hearts.
Underneath the loneliness
in shadowed rooms.
Something small, powerful—
a dim pulse, barely there, but consistent.
A heat without a name.

And these days?
Well, I'm out of that dead life,
those graveyard days.

Fairways full of miracles.
Cats chirping, fat as spring robins,
happy as I watch and write
lines that sing of a new life.

An invincible summer lives in me,
stubborn, potent.
December lingers forever,
but underneath it all—I'm on fire.
A want worth more than
all the treasure buried beneath the sea.



Photo by Adobe Firefly AI

Thank You by William Cass

Maurice had just entered a residential neighborhood for his first early-morning Uber pick-up, someone named Mabel. A couple minutes later, he saw a squat, frumpy-looking woman with a rolling suitcase standing at the curb of his destination address. She raised her hand in acknowledgement as he pulled up beside her. Before he could get out, she'd tossed her suitcase in back and climbed into the passenger seat beside him.

She said, "You're Maurice."

He nodded. "And you must be Mabel. Looks like you're heading to Memorial Hospital. Which entrance?"

"Main surgical admittance."

He glanced quickly into the rearview mirror at her suitcase. "You having a procedure done?"

"I am."

"What kind?"

"Donating a kidney."

He stiffened, but her blank expression remained unchanged. "No kidding," he said. "Family member?"

She shook her head. "Don't know who's getting it. Someone waiting on the donor list." Mabel looked down at her watch. "We better go. Almost time for check-in."

Maurice felt his eyebrows raise as he pulled away from the curb in the direction of the hospital. That early, there weren't many other vehicles out. They drove in silence until Maurice turned onto a main thoroughfare and said, "That's really something...I mean, donating an organ like that for someone you don't even know. You mind me asking why?"

Mabel pushed her glasses up on her nose, let a handful of seconds pass, then said, "It's kind of a long story."

"How about the short version?"

From the corner of his eye, he watched Mabel shrug, fold her hands in her lap, refold them, then say, "Well, many years ago, just after college, I almost died." She paused. "It was late at night, and I was driving alone on the freeway. Out of nowhere, a dog appeared in my path, and I swerved sharply to avoid hitting it. My car began spinning and ended up in the fast lane facing the wrong way with the engine dead."

"Jesus," Maurice muttered.

"Yeah, and I was basically in shock. Cars whistling by me blaring their horns. A semi actually clipped my front fender. Of course, I tried restarting my car but couldn't get it going again."

"So, what the hell did you do?"

Mabel waited another beat, staring straight ahead, then said, "Out of nowhere, an old, disheveled-looking man appeared, tapping on my window, which I managed to roll down. He said, 'Looks like you could use some help. Can you restart the engine?' I remember shaking my head, him saying, 'Mind if I try?' then me scooting over as he took my place. Headlights danced across his face and vehicles screamed past, but calmly and with no judgment, he shifted out of Drive into Park, got my car going again, swung around, then somehow managed to maneuver it through traffic—I have no idea how—and onto an offramp where he'd left his own car."

She swallowed and licked her lips before continuing. "He asked me if I was all right, and I think I nodded, still completely dazed. He asked if I needed him to follow me to wherever I was going, and I said, no. Finally, he gave my shoulder a quick squeeze, told me to take care, and then he was gone." Mabel's eyes took on a distant look. "His taillights had disappeared before I realized I hadn't even thanked him or asked his name." She paused again. "And that's been haunting me ever since. I could have, should have, been dead."

They drove in more silence as signs for the hospital began appearing until Maurice said, "Wow...so this is kind of your way of repaying."

"I guess." Mabel gave another shrug, then pointed. "There's the entrance for surgery."

Maurice eased into the turnaround in front of the entrance, hopped out, and scooted around the car. But by then, Mabel had already retrieved her suitcase and shut both doors. She looked up at him and said, "Thank you."

He nodded, resisted an impulse to fold her into a hug, and said, "Really hope everything goes okay. I wish you a speedy and complete recovery."

She gave a short nod with a hint of smile. Maurice watched Mabel pull her suitcase to the entrance and enter through its automatic doors. After they'd closed, he stood blinking for several moments before returning to his driver's seat. His cell phone pinged indicating a new ride request, but Maurice ignored it and just stared instead at the entrance's glass doors which reflected the rising sun and things unknown.



William Cass has had over 395 short stories appear in literary magazines and anthologies. He has been a nominee for Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net, as well as six Pushcart nominations. He has also won writing contests at Terrain.org and The Examined Life Journal. His three short story collections have all been published by Wising Up Press.



Photo by Natalia Marcelewicz: Unsplash.com

Trespassing by August Chaffin

That night we rolled down the short hills of the golf course,
after we trawled through the sewers: We broke into

the house you grew up in, burned down, ceiling
caving. I recall the insulation specifically, soft-toy

stuffing that spilled from the exposed support beams,
any minute threatening to collapse upon & kill us.

Your hand in my hand, you led me to your old bedroom,
where I cast my phone flashlight along the seams

between wall & floorboard, searching for a sparkle
of who you were in your youth. Where an outlet once was,

wires: Long-dead, stiff & dried out, veins pulled
out of a wrist, thrust into the world. I recall

your forearms specifically, the visible rivers silver
-blue & purple. I tugged & found nothing.

What are we looking for? I said, & you turned away,
dissatisfied & half-drunk. I thought you were angry.

I realized, not then but eventually, the house was your body entirely.
The sewers too. Allowing me into the unrestorable

vast of you. I apologize for furthering the property damage.
I apologize for asking such a silly question.

I apologize for my obliviousness. I see now you were locked out
of your own life & trying to show me how to break in.



August Chaffin (they/them) is a writer, educator, and performer based in Minneapolis. They are currently an undergraduate student at the University of Minnesota/Guthrie BFA Actor Training Program. August's work has been developed with Melancholics Anonymous; published in Ignatian Literary Magazine, Arboreal Literary Magazine, and Fork Apple Press.



Photo by Brett Sayles: Pexels.com

The Quiet Knowing **by Ivy Challis**

The sky touches the land differently here,
as if the palm of the mother is holding us up to the sun,
thawing our winter bones, cracking the clay around our spirits.

Willow trees reach down,
anointing us with soft water whispers
when we are so dry our tears cannot come.

I am alive in a new way here.
To be called by this place is no small thing,
you must listen,
you must come, no matter the cost.
To be beckoned by a quiet knowing is a gift.

But be prepared, there will be lessons.

I have been laid bare here.
Things were taken that I didn't even know were mine to lose.
I have howled in the darkest night
like a wolf among endless hills,
while Venus watched above,
blinking a memory of a woman
enveloped by warmth and water and bliss,
whose light cannot reach me now.

Desert sage wafts through pebbled arroyo paths,
and I can see the sky like never before.

I was also called here to receive love.
Earthly, human, imperfect love
through a man devoted to me like the apricot tree,
offering golden sweetness year after year,
no matter how cold the winter months.

Elemental mountains surge forward.
I blossom and wane.
A child blooms within me.
Time stands still as she grows effortlessly.
Love endures when my body cannot.



Ivy Challis is a poet living in Santa Fe with her husband and daughter. Her work explores nature, love, illness, and the divine through the lens of devotional femininity and motherhood. Influenced by the soul of the desert, she writes about reverence, beauty, and the sacred woven into ordinary life.

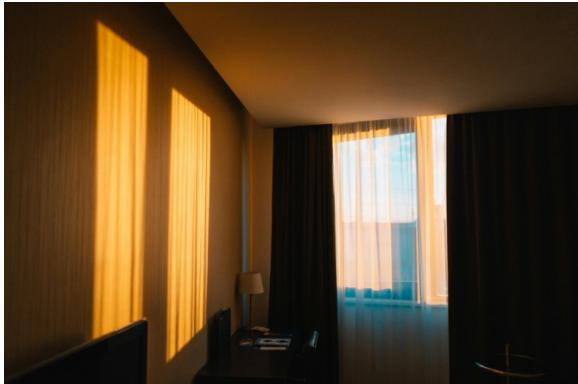


Photo by Lukas Rychvalsky: Pexels.com

First Night in Lebanon by Oleg Daugovish

As a seventies kid, I ate oatmeal with my dad before school every morning, as the radio delivered the same international news. More bombing in Lebanon; another artillery fire; warplanes gunned down.

“Will it stop one day?” I asked Dad. He shook his head.

Now, twenty-five years later, I stand clutching my suitcase in the Beirut airport, squinting at a crowd in the dim-lit terminal. Two hands above heads hold a sign with my name on it.

A short-haired fellow with a “World Vision Lebanon” badge, a USAID partner, answers my “Hello.”

“Welcome. You must be tired. Long flight, yes?”

“Yes, thank you for picking me up.” I decide to use simple sentences.

“I take you to hotel now and my colleague take you after breakfast tomorrow, ok?”

“Yes, that will work well.”

We step into the Mediterranean evening, and the familiar smell of the sea comforts my jetlagged brain.

As the dusty car dives into a maze of the city streets my comfort dispels. We zig-zag, climb up and speed down. I almost catch air as if on a rollercoaster. The sunset illuminates the view of a war zone. Broken houses stare with empty eyeholes for windows; their doorways are open like a mouth of the guy in the *Scream* painting. I keep mine shut. After a thrill ride, we stop at a tall white building that appears intact.

The race-car driver and I walk on the marbled floor through an empty foyer. A jingle of a bell brings a man in a black suit.

“May I see your passport?” He flattens it and presses down with a lid of a copy machine, as if making a panini sandwich. He scribbles something for a minute and hands me the key card.

“Your room is on floor four.” The man points to an elevator door in the corner.

The short-haired guy hands me a bag. "Materials for your orientation. Good night."

I wish both men the same and elevate myself to the fourth floor.

I sit down on a bed covered with a crimson blanket and click on a TV remote. I reach into the orientation bag and pull out a map.

Do they think I don't know geography because I arrived from the US?

A woman appears on the screen, camera moves back and forth between her dancing belly and singing face with heavy mascara. The song in Arabic seems never-ending. I look at the map and slide my finger from one Mediterranean country to another. Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt. I thought there was also Israel. Maybe I'm too tired even for reading maps.

I turn off the song on TV and lie down, but can't fall asleep. I know what can help me relax - yoga. I get down on the floor and rest in child's pose. Slow inhale.

Loud voices in the street break the still of the night.

I move to a down-dog.

A dry cough of machine gun fire rattles outside.

I hold a plank pose and step into a warrior one.

Several people are yelling and screaming.

I slither into a cobra, away from the window.

Long, competing rounds of rapid fire ensue.

I lie in a corpse pose.

It gets quiet and I can hear air moving through the back of my throat.

I wake up when a ray of sunlight sneaks through a window and lands on my face.

I'm glad it is not a grenade.

I venture downstairs in hope of breakfast and peace.

A bald man with mustache shows me to the table and brings a croissant and a bowl of fruit.

"Café?"

"Oui s'il vous plaît." I respond with a French phrase that I know.

His mustache stretches with a smile.

It looks like I'm the only guest in this hotel; I'm sure they want to keep me alive.

As I eat, a woman with chestnut-colored hair enters the room. She has a familiar badge of the World Vision.

“Bonjour!” sounds more like a question when she speaks.

“Bonjour, comment ça va?” I exhaust my French vocabulary.

“Parles français?” her voice warms.

“No, sorry.”

“I’m Dina, we are glad you were able to come. Is this your first time in Lebanon?”

I nod.

“We can go to the office after breakfast and discuss the project plan. Did you get good rest at night?”

“Well, yes, except for the shouting and gunfire outside.” I try to sound upbeat.

Dina lowers her eyebrows in confusion. Then, she talks in French to a man with mustache and laughs.

“There was a birthday celebration and a party; shooting guns in the air is a kind of local tradition.”

When Dina and I climb into the car, a different short-haired guy and a woman with black ponytail in the front seat say “Hello.” At every bump in the road, they glance at me to make sure I don’t catapult through the window. I want to ask why Israel isn’t on a map, but stay quiet. Maybe on a different day.



After completion of Ph.D. in 2001, Oleg Daugovish has been researching the delicate lives of California strawberries. He rushes to tell growers about his discoveries and documents them in peer-reviewed journals. Aside from writing about plants, Oleg completed a humorous 61,000-word memoir about growing up in Latvia during Soviet times and sixteen ten-minute stories of creative non-fiction he’d love to share.



Photo by Jude Infantini: Unsplash.com

Jaundice Baby **by Sukayna Davanzo**

Sunflowers but not their seeds. Sunsets, sunrises, *the sun*, some brands of suntan lotion. Bananas, vanilla cake, the inside of a mango. Melted butter, melted butter dripped over fried cauliflower, finished with a squeeze of lemon. Gold, hay, most corn, maybe wheat, pineapples. My favorite bottle of lemon-scented Lysol. The stereotypical rain coat. Bell peppers from our garden. Olive oil from Palestine. The heart of daisies, all of dandelions. Mustard, French fries, fairy lights, fire. Traffic lights but not cones; the popular brand of sticky notes. Saturn, Jupiter, stripes on Venus, streams of urine. Daffodils, bumblebees, wasps, the old taxis. Real New York license plates. The wallpaper from that one story. Rubber ducks, chicks, ducklings. A notebook, my childhood diary. The jersey of your baba's favorite soccer team. Cheddar cheese. Buttered popcorn. You.



Sukayna Davanzo (she/her) recently graduated from Oregon State University with an MFA in fiction. Her writing captures the love within her Arab American and Muslim community, especially in Southeast Michigan.



Photo by Tú Nguyễn: Pexels.com

Muses of the Moment by Orman Day

"I have my permanent muses and my muses of the moment."

– Karl Lagerfeld, photographer and fashion designer

Marilyn in New Orleans

On my twenty-second birthday in '68, while thumbing across America with my sisters Candy, 18, and Laurel, 20, we befriended Herman the Hippie, who took us to a Bourbon Street tavern where I started a conversation with a sad-looking young woman. Later we all slept in a warehouse loft.

Marilyn, did you find your boyfriend in the dark
when we held hands: I'm sorry I couldn't remember his name
when we kissed in the warehouse the night you left home
(it's not running away from home when you're twenty)
so why were you running so hard into the night
when I met you alone in the bar alone in the shadows.
You were aloof dragging on your chain of cigarettes
until I told you about the shadows in your face
and you were intrigued then because I was so right:
and it was fun when we went down to the river
and spun shells into the water and threw those sharp gray rocks
at the rat not four yards away, but then you had us walk
by a café to look for your boyfriend: did you have a fight?
But he wasn't there: did I hear you sigh?
And so we went to the warehouse where we shared
one blanket and a jagged breeze ripping through the cracks
in the wall to make me shiver when you didn't make me forget.
We were tired in the morning, so we slept in that friend's car
with the heat turned up high, but then when I was drowsy
with sleep, you said you were leaving for a while.
My sister said she saw you last in the grass
in a corner of the park in the shade or was it the shadow
of an elm tree. Are his eyes blue too?

Nancy on Catalina Island, California

In the summer of '68, I directed a YMCA camp, where she was the cabin leader.

I am glad now I did not lie I love you
to the easy girls I took to the Edgewood Drive-in
and those well-built chicks at those dances
who gave me their kisses in dark corners,
for when I said I love you I did not think
of the dark corners and the Edgewood Drive-in
but of you grinning proudly as you paddled that sailboat
away from me and of me whacking the softball whap
and of our sweet songs sung by the sea
and of our soft smiles that whisper about we.

Allison in Glendale, California

Dated her several times, but didn't have the confidence to ask for a kiss.

Allison, kiss the moon and me.
Wait, you've kissed the moon:
can't you see it's caught your kiss?
Allison, you've kissed the moon,
but why not me?

Camille in West Covina, California

Dated her several times.

I was wrong Camille when I said you were a green leaf
tight to the tree rustling in the wind for now I know
the wind was a whimper and the leaf a crushed brown
that crackles underfoot for you have ripped yourself
from the limb and fallen heavy like an acorn
to the ground where the green grass is crab
and the weeds and rocks are thick.

Cheri in the West Covina library

An unfulfilled daydream.

The girl, a sweet vine twined tightly around her smile,
pushed the library cart through the lines of bookshelves.
When I asked where's the poetry section, she did not know
(her books are only numbers), but then I saw her smile
so cream puff sweet and watched her rhythmic walk,
and knew with great reflection, I had found the poetry section.
When can I check you out?

Nora at a dance in West Covina

Never got up nerve to ask her out.

Nora, what are you thinking that makes your face
look like a slow song under soft lights
when there is a fast song and a burst of bright?

Linda at Santa Monica beach

A few weeks of imagined bliss and then she left me.

Maybe I knew I was kidding myself when we held hands
and I thought it was us holding the hands
and when we kissed on the sand by the sea, maybe I sensed
you were kissing another not me, but nonetheless,
I let myself be pulled into the waves, spinning from the surf
and skidding freely up the shore into your arms
which seemed as wide and warm as the very stars
that were our blanket as we kissed
and held hands on the sand by the sea.

A Widow and Her Five Little Girls in Illinois

While thumbing for a hundred days around America with my folk-singing partner Rich during the Hippie Era, we sang for our supper at a Decatur restaurant. A waitress invited us to sleep in the home she shared with relatives.

A house full of children is forgetting the death of their father:
all of them girls riding their sticks with plastic horse heads:
they dance with gray kittens all wrapped in their arms
like a coat: and why did he go and where is he now
aren't asked anymore: the floor is covered with dolls
and puzzles that are missing a piece: the girl who is ten
is learning guitar: what will she sing? The youngest is five,
she's crying again: someday she'll learn what tears are for,
smiles her mother: there are tears in her heart:
her husband is buried: a layer of snow is his wreath in winter:
flowers would wilt, but his bouquet is inside and warm.

Teresa in Virginia

My singing partner and I met two college coeds, one of whom I encouraged to visit a place from her past.

The home for unwed mothers was two stories high
and grass sloped to the sidewalk in front:
girls look out the windows trying to see their futures:
branches block their view: Teresa walked up the steps
she remembered from five years before
when she carried her bags in her trembling hands.
She had been fourteen and the father nineteen:
he worked at a gas station at night: she kept waiting
for him on the porch holding the locket he bought her
at the dime store: but he moved the day she told him.
When her baby was born, she gave him hugs
to last a lifetime: she knew she was only hurting herself.
She still loved the child's father until empty
she walked from the home by herself in the rain to the car
where her parents waited, forcing their shame into smiles.

Carlie in Africa

After an overland truck safari took us from Egypt to South Africa, an Aussie woman and I thumbed to the coast and back. When I parted to fly to Europe, I left this poem where she would find it. Decades later, I folded these lines into a larger poem published by Perceptions.

When we were at the equator line,
when the moon and sun shared the same sky,
did you know a plover bird flew across your face,
hesitating in the shadow of your lashes,
following the dip in the line of your lips,
taking a tear from your cheek in its beak to a cloud,
finally leaving its wings for you to wear
as a bow in your hair, giving you flight?

Nora in the Andes of Peru

A blind date with a Peruvian woman at a disco was lifeless until using a dictionary and inspired by intoxication, I wrote her a poem in Spanish, a language I often mangled when speaking it.

In the ruins of an earthquake, I found a woman
who writes poems in the clouds and dances in the shadows
of the mountains and who has a smile I want to kiss.

Nora was impressed, especially with my repetition of sounds and wrote a short poem for me. I responded.

Because I don't have a voice in Spanish,
the music of the flutes needs to sing in the darkness of the night.

Nora responded in words I translated with my dictionary and then I answered.

When the heart sings, there are no different languages.
The music of love is one with God's flute.

*I rhapsodized that a cold night requires hot kisses.
Back in my room, we touched lips until they burned with desire.*

Monica in Calafate, Argentina

In a place known for its glaciers, imagining a romance with her, I wrote a poem in my ungrammatical Spanish.

I carved the words "Armando y Monica" on a glacier
and some day in January a gigantic iceberg will fall
from the glacier and some day in March it will dissolve
and our names—in ice blue—will float to the rocky coast
and then a condor will lift our words to heaven
and some day in June fourteen drops of rain
—the letters of Armando y Monica—will fall from the clouds.

Gabriela in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina

She inspired poetical words in Spanish, but preferred my friend, a suave Italian.

We watched snowflakes slanting against the shiny street
and rain dancing in the breeze and during the cold built a fire
with the sparks of Sagittarius (you) and the air of Aquarius (me).
In the land of fire, we sent forth smoke high
into the clouds gray and heavy.
We are the fire in this land. We are Adam and Eve
in this paradise of serpentine rivers and lakes
reflecting the peaks snowy and jagged
climbing to the heavens of the gods. Fan our flame.
Dream about that day when we will stand at the edge
of the world again and make a fire of driftwood.
Dream during the night when the cold hisses in the branches
of the trees. Dream because I am a dreamer too.

Angelina in Vina del Mar, Chile

In a café one night in this coastal town, I wanted to write a poem and needed a muse, so I picked a pleasant-looking brunette waitress and addressed my words to her. I recounted how I walked through a breeze smoky with a fire, heard people speaking a language I spoke as a stammering fool and entered this house of music where she brought me red wine and candlelight to illuminate my darkness. I ended by calling her a poem itself. I gave it to her and hurried out the door to my hotel. When I saw her again, she admitted my words made her nervous because of their intensity. In my limited Spanish, I wrote a poem to explain my temporary problem.

Angelina, I lost my dictionary at the beach,
my friend of six months travel, so my poems
have to be in my heart this night.
Read my eyes and you will receive my words
sweet like honey.

We spent many hours together over a few days. She was devout in her faith and I could tell she was wary of a fleeting relationship with a passing stranger. Beyond the traditional kissing of cheeks, we didn't cling to each other in parting. When I was walking away from her apartment building, I turned back and looked up at her window. She was waving and her eyes looked as if they were holding back tears. I prayed she would find a good man who would adore her with words and actions for the rest of her life.

Debbie Annie in Laurel, Maryland

My vagabond days are over and while Nancy of Catalina Island and Carlie of South Africa will be young eternally, I'm nearly eighty and no longer seeking muses of the moment. I've found my forever muse and she knows how to soothe my disappointment at a painful literary rejection by frying me corn pancakes like Mom made me on lonely, dateless Saturday nights. And she knows not to ask me to take trash out to the dumpster when I'm typing paeans to my lost youth. And she can make me laugh by twitching her nose like a rabbit. And she can deliver tough love to keep me at the computer keyboard. And she understands why I need to sit on a bench with a pad and pen in liver-spotted hand while she walks the path at a park. And when a nightmare awakens me with a start, she opens her warm arms to comfort me.



Orman Day's prose and poetry have been published by numerous literary journals. Often he writes about his world travels with a pack on his back. He thumbed on six continents, bungee jumped off a New Zealand bridge, witnessed a sky burial (two corpses, hundreds of vultures) in Tibet, and spent a night in jail at Mardi Gras in New Orleans.



Photo by Leon Aschemann: Pexels.com

Sega the Magnificent is Dead! by Mark Fitzpatrick

News buzz this morning!

A lighter story

sandwiched between pressing the nuclear button and narcotics,

some sad news to gladden the raincloud morning –

Sega the Magnificent is dead!

Old African lion, veteran of cages and circus rings,

All presence of ferocity and brutality

whose open jaw wouldn't clamp down decapitating the lion tamer;

whose paws never swiped at the boisterous barkers no matter how loud they got;

whose sandpaper tongue never licked the backs of ladies' legs as they stood in glittering skimpy outfits and beamed sensuality.

Sega, regent of the wild

with manicured claws and well-kempt mane, mane sometimes woven with ribbons or tinkling with bells;

costumes of Superman's cape worn while leaping through a hog's head of fire;

of ballerina tutus as the King of the Beasts stood on hind legs and made a circular shuffle

versatile, virtual chameleon,

consummate showman,

Sega had performed it all!

And then the travelling! How many times did he cover Europe?

As much as any rock star – Berlin, Paris, Rome, Madrid!

What labels he could have pasted on his steamer trunk –

Beijing, Tokyo, Sidney.

Sega had been locked and handled and hauled on so many trucks and trains and ships!

(But never the experiences of savannah and tall grasses, of bathing in rivers, leaping on tall tree limbs, feasting on the delicacies of gazelle and warthog.)

He spent his last days – lost,
wandering among well-placed trees and boulders with other lost lions,
viewed by crowds, curious and “oohing” and pointing, observers of Sega in his natural environment,

feeling he should propel himself up onto the highest boulder, sit up and roar thunderously or open his savage mouth for someone to stick their head or hand in.

Poor Sega! He would have chosen Tennyson for his epitaph:
“It profits not, an idle king.”



Mark Fitzpatrick graduated from Barrington College with a BA in Biblical Studies and minor in Literature. He has had numerous poems, stories, etc. published over the past 25 years in RATTLE, Parting Gifts, Oasis, The MacGuffin, Whiskey Island Review, The Small Pond Magazine of Literature, Oxford Review, Dramatic Shorts, Mosaic and others. His novel-in-verse was a finalist in the Tassy Walden Creative Writing for Young People contest in 2017. One of his plays appeared in Qu, and another play came in as a finalist in the Tennessee Williams One Act Play Contest.



Photo by Ismael Abdal Naby studio: Pexels.com

Anatomy of December **by May Garner**

I open the window
and the air steps in wearing my father's voice.

The house smells of cold iron and candle wax.
Everything I touch hums like an old wound.

In the mirror,
a girl shaped like unfinished grief,
a body still trying to remember what warmth means,
stares back.

There's a silence that rolls on my tongue of salt and pennies.
I call it prayer.
I call it winter.
I call it *home*.



May Garner is an author and poet residing in rural Ohio. She has been writing for nearly fifteen years and has been sharing her writing online for over a decade. She is the author of two poetry collections, Withered Rising (2023) and Melancholic Muse (2025). Her work has appeared in Querencia Press, Cozy Ink Press, Arcana Poetry Press, Livina Press, Speckled Trout Review, among others. Find her work on Instagram (@crimson.hands).



Photo by Sergey Guk: Pexels.com

Birchbone Winter by May Garner

Snow arrived early,
thick as another childhood
laid over my own.

Behind our house,
birch trees stood like bones.
I press my ear
to the frozen bark
to see if emptiness made a sound.

It did –
something between a heartbeat
and a door closing.

A sparrow died on the porch,
feathers dusted in frost
like sugar on a bruise.
I buried it in a shoebox
behind the shed
where my father kept
his rusty tools.

The earth hid it
with crimson stains.

Years later,
first snow still feels
a secret returning.

Not every burial
means goodbye.
Sometimes the world
just keeps something for you,
quietly,
until you're ready
to hear it breathing.



Photo by Brett Sayles: Pexels.com

Winter is Reckless Here by May Garner

Out here, winter does not soften.
It leaves ditches open,
roads glazed just enough to lie.
Fields stretch white and empty,
no landmark left to aim for.

Fence posts lean like they're tired of trying.
Barn roofs groan under the mound of snow.
Wind crosses the acres unchecked,
teaching everything how easily it can be taken.

Plows come late, if at all.
Tires learn the sound of sliding.
Every mile is a question,
how far help truly is,
how quickly the chill closes distance.

The trees don't shield anything.
They just watch.
Limbs brittle as old warnings,
ready to drop without reason.
No ceremony. No farewell. No apology.

Winter is *reckless* here.
It assumes you know better.
It punishes hesitation,
forgives nothing.
By morning, the land looks clean again,
as if it didn't spend the night
testing who would make it through.



Photo by Yan Krukau: Pexels.com

Navel by David Lee Garrison

That circle of skin
at the center of the body

sets each one of us apart,
a fleshy work of art

reminding us we are born
when a knife cuts the cord.

Belly button, birth scar,
umbilicus, mark

of mother's attachment,
rounded remnant

of the conduit which delivers
nourishment and is severed

in delivery. Bashful hero
hiding in a tiny hollow.



David Lee Garrison is an emeritus Wright State University Professor. His poetry has been published widely, read by Garrison Keillor on The Writer's Almanac, and featured by Ted Kooser in American Life in Poetry. Named Ohio Poet of the Year in 2014, his most recent book is Light in the River (Dos Madres).

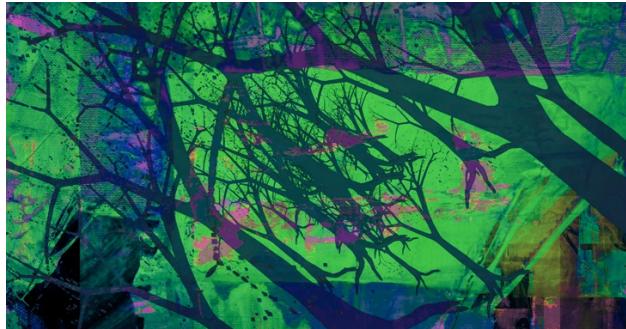


Photo by Steve Johnson: Pexels.com

Haiku **by Janet Lydia Gilchrist**

art is my self-care
curling up in a ball for winter
bare roots underground



Janet Lydia Gilchrist studies native plants wherever she goes. She relies on creativity in any medium, connections with family and friends, and green chile. Her work has been published in Weber: The Contemporary West, and Mes de Danza: Muestra Internacional de Danza Contemporánea.

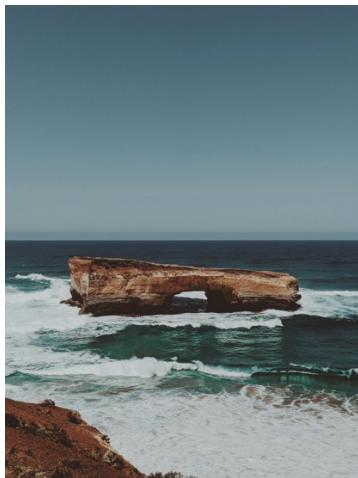


Photo by Valeria Miller: Pexels.com

Sounding by Janet Lydia Gilchrist

The Sound—
an arm of the sea,

the sound of that—
breaking the barrier;
sleeping soundly,
soundless;

sounding the depths
of age,
and sand,
and love—

sound investments,
sound blows.

Our family in a rowboat,
followed the tides,
children of sound bodies tumbled happily
onto the beach, undeveloped,
to swim in the Sound.

Sound waves, laughter and song,
memory, with a natural sound to it.

The sound of that—
an arm of the sea
tumbles happily
sound asleep.



Photo by Zayceva Tatiana: Pexels.com

Snow White's Tale by Sharon Goodier

Simple, innocent I came
knowing neither sin nor shame
Yet I became a mirror
for the witch's face
 place made for me
 always in my place.

No poisoned apple did I bite
but daily drank the toxin
 of love's rise and
 fall

After all was done and said
I lived as in a coffin dead

O how I longed to be
 awake

Where was the fabled one
to take away the poison
 with a kiss

She lay within



Sharon Goodier is a published poet originally from Toronto now living in a retirement residence in Cambridge, Ontario.



Photo by Matthias Cooper: Pexels.com

Music Room by John Grey

The music room
is un-played in your absence.
Sheets of notes and quavers
are stacked in boxes, on chairs.
But none will give up a song.
I can tap the keys of the piano
but if that instrument had a face
other than my reflection
and if varnished looks could kill.

There's your flute,
like a bone
only you can flesh out
into a body.
And that violin,
not a Strad,
but Mozart doesn't know that...
not when you play.
The cello droops,
with no knees to hug.
The guitar is strung out.
Even the timpani
could use a tap or two
but not from my stone hands.

Ah music,
you left without saying goodbye.



John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Shift, River And South and Flights. Latest books, Bittersweet, Subject Matters and Between Two Fires are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in Rush, Writer's Block and Trampoline.

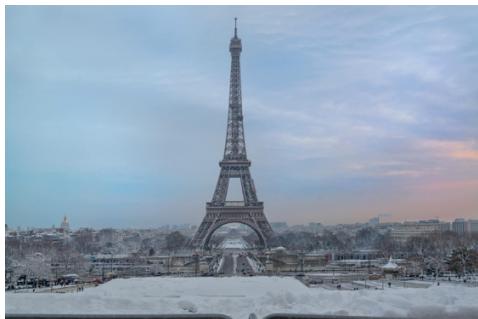


Photo by David Henry: Pexels.com

Snow In Paris by Robert Harlow

Because some people are sleeping,
it is snowing in Paris.

You can see it falling,
see it pause on a railing

bordering the best houses
on a boulevard nearby.

Put your hand out—
snow will rest there too.
So soft, its touch, so soft
a memory when you write

then mail a letter
to tell her what Paris is like

and will always remain
in the snow without her.
Snow on a railing,
snow in the hand.

Some things can only be said
from a great distance.

Days pass, the snow gone,
the letter received, opened, read,
held in her hands—the ones you miss—
asking if she still promises to return.



Robert Harlow finds himself snow-deep in the nether regions of New York State. His poems appear in Soul Poetry, Poetry Northwest, RHINO, and elsewhere. He is the author of Places Near and Far. And he has a cat who ignores him. Except at mealtimes.



Photo by David Bartus: Pexels.com

Snowing Still by Robert Harlow

This too is geography,
another moment of it,
although the snow obscures
most of the distinguishing features,
fabricating something new.
Landmarks erased and replaced
slowly as snow changes
from nearly vertical to horizontal
right into your eyes,
so it's easy to lose your way.
Which isn't necessarily a bad thing,
unless you are growing concerned
about finding your way home,
about those who wondered
why you'd go into the woods
knowing where and when
it would fall into this mutable world
now lit only by snow
incapable of erasing the darkness
but capable of silencing any and every name
someone might call out—
if only from somewhere they would.



Photo by Karen F: Pexels.com

The Wild

by Janet E. Irvin

I am ancient, patient, child of time, hiding,
biding the days, weeks, months, awaiting
an opening, a crack, a tremor, earth
my breeding ground, rebirth my motive.

Seed, seedling, furred and fury beast
of land, sea, and sky, I, the unnamed spark
from Eden's dust, sown first across the planet,
untamed and lacking nothing. I huddle below

the pavement, in the sunken streams of passing
storms. Furtive, unyielding, I slip my young ones
into hollow trees and backyard sheds, bury my seed
in strawberry beds, leave my discarded serpent skins

among the bean plants. I am old. I am myriad.
I am the invincible beauty, the synergy, the original
land undivided, by thorn, by paw, by wing, by claw,
by weed, wild, ripening anew.



Janet E. Irvin is an educator, poet, and the author of nine mystery/thriller novels under the name J.E. Irvin. Her poems have appeared in Hawaii Pacific Review, Creosote, The Raven's Perch, Sky Island Journal, Flying Island Journal, and Lothlorien Poetry Journal, as well as various anthologies. A member of the Greenville Poets, Sisters in Crime, and Buckeye Crime Writers, Irvin resides in southwest Ohio on the edge of a nature park, which serves as inspiration for her work.



Photo by Hanna Pad: Pexels.com

Statistics by Diana Johar

you told me to make micro-adjustments
so that life reverts to how it was
but how can we go back to before,
when the median was so beautiful?

now everything feels like
a fever dream in the aftermath

the distance between parallel lines is
 $d = |c_1 - c_2| / \sqrt{a^2 + b^2}$

i wonder if they taught you that in Statistics,
or how to calculate the probability of us
living happily ever after in another life.



Diana Johar is a Singapore-based writer whose work explores intimacy, grief, and the emotional afterlife of love. She is drawn to lyrical precision, quiet ruptures, and the ordinary textures of life— like having tau huay by the road side and sipping matcha over conversations.



Photo by Priscilla Du Preez: Pexels.com

Sepsis by Diana Johar

"I hope you feel better soon," you say —
after a speech listing all the ways
I was inadequate.

You said those same words once
when I tumbled down the steps
and tore my knee wide open.

Back then, you rushed for antiseptic cream,
afraid my wound might get infected.

Now I marvel at the irony—
how you've broken my heart
in a way that has sepsis
coursing through my veins.

And still, you tell me
to get better soon.



Photo by cottonbro studio: Pexels.com

Bartender by Marisha Kashyap

asked me if I wanted to hear today's special, *pinot grigio*
flown in from Italy, I hate wine the way it spills and stains everything
my words swimming in a glass
half full of your

name-immigrant family-corporate layoff
tiramisu-stained cupid's bow
I'm not looking for anything, glass half empty

bed at the edge of the stairs, *aren't you scared of sleep start?*
arms branching, purple veins
today's special spilled on my

clothes cracking like joints in the morning sun
I'm looking for...something

needs mopping...laughter swimming
in wine stems delta, our fingers intertwined

bodies at the edge of regret
cab's waiting outside



Marisha is a poet and applied scholar whose work explores intimacy, memory, and the body through minimalist language and image-driven metaphor. Their writing has appeared in academic and creative outlets. They are interested in tension, restraint, and what remains unsaid.



Photo by Paul Harrington: Pexels.com

Blackbirds by Linda Keemu

The alley flowers bend
within the crack of the street
and pierce the ordinary with miracle.

We play like children on the street.
One day, our lush will scatter—
like seeds of a dandelion, our laughter
will migrate,
soon gone with the wind.

Now we play, absolved,
like blackbirds in the morning
light against dawn.



Linda Keemu is a student with an Estonian and Finnish background, currently living in Finland. Her work has previously been published in Eunoia Review.



Photo by Maximilian Hofer: Unsplash.com

While the Radio Hums **by Linda Keemu**

The radio hums and hails, guilt-free,
tax-free, on the shelf.

A Christmas tree lies beside the
radio; the little chipper. Chunky
fat, round ornaments hang like oranges.

Light is dull, snow is bright.
The blackbirds play,
gamble with pumpkin seeds below the window.
Clicking of the plates, humming
of the oven. Crackling of the fire, leaping
of the birds, scattering
of the seeds.

The dog and I
observe and absorb everyone.
Only the sun
occasionally peeks in, briefly, like
loss;
it has no place here.



Photo by Alexas Fotos: Pexels.com

Church Mouse by Suzanne Kelly

We heard him first on the Feast of St. Nicholas,
a mouse, celibate we hoped, who made a monastic cell
in the insulation behind a kitchen wall.

While he quietly worshipped us as unseen gods,
providers of warmth and food and solitude,
we began to doubt his existence;

but soon there were scratched messages,
like Saxon runes in the cooling soy wax
of an extinguished Christmas candle.

I imagined the scurrying scribe as a Dominican,
a black-backed, white-bellied fan of Aquinas;
my husband saw a brown Franciscan field mouse.

We could have let such a scholar stay
for the winter to ponder the number
of dancing angels on a grain of sugar.

We might have shared our crumbs
and what we knew of life, but his theology
turned suddenly scatological. We had no choice.

A regular monk Luther on the pot, dropping evidence
of his angst in our silverware drawer. In the snapping trap
of a counter reformation, we excommunicated him.



Suzanne Kelly is the author of the novel, Stolen Child (Bottom Dog Press), and the winner of two individual artist grants from the Montgomery County Arts Council. She is a senior lecturer in law at Wright State University and a member of the Greenville Poets.



Photo by shijo mathew: Pexels.com

Christ's Beauty in Sacré-Coeur by Douglas J. Lanzo

In tribute to Paris' Sacré-Coeur, the Sacred Heart of Christ Basilica and site of the world's longest unbroken prayer chain

Climbing limestone steps with a calcite gleam,
I beheld a site as from a childhood dream of white gleaming domes topped by regal spires—
towering over hills, mounted horse and sire.

Below Joan of Arc, brandishing a sword, I could hear her cries— fighting for her Lord. As I neared arched doors, sounded from tall tower, resonating bells— pealing with great power.

As I stepped forward

entering the nave,
joining heads bowed down
hands folded, eyes grave,
the Spirit of God,
seemed to hover near,
as the risen Christ
from above appeared —
on mosaic tiles,
in triumphant pose,
His heart beating gold,
offering saints repose.

Gazing at windows stained by colored glass hues danced in sunlight as priests offered Mass. After Mass I rose and walked to the crypt, where a grieved mother held her Son in her grip. Touched, I knelt and prayed — that God's healing grace would save countless souls, by love, in this place.

When I rose to leave, I saw a nun in prayer, her face streaming tears that were hard to bear; then it dawned on me... this is Sacré-Coeur — where the heart of Christ makes our hearts beat pure.



Doug is an award-winning American author and poet whose debut novel *The Year of the Bear* was a 2023 Hawthorne Prize Finalist and Ames YA Book of the Year and whose novella *I Have Lived* was named American Book Fest 2024 Novella of the Year. 560 of Doug's poems have been published in 78 literary journals, 9 anthologies and 2 books in the U.S., Canada, Caribbean, England, Wales, Austria, Mauritius, India, Japan and Australia. He and his wife and twin sons reside in Chevy Chase, Maryland and enjoy nature, reading, basketball and snorkeling. His Author's website is located at www.douglaslanzo.com.



Photo by KoolShooters: Pexels.com

The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters

by Joseph Lee

The deaf man chased from his country
conjures scenes of anguish on the walls
of his home.

There's a culture festering,
breathing and expanding like dark mold
gripping the walls of a petri dish. Poetry
was once Masculinity. Men with great beards
would crack their hearts open like coconut flesh
and let poetry spill out. Modern men
spit on their graves. Vulnerability is a lost art,
an ember in the heart of men rubbed out by
their fathers. Shame is a ball of lead sitting
in America's stomach.

A drowning dog gazes up
at birds no longer in the sky. Saturn devours
his son above the kitchen table.



Joseph Lee is a college aged poet from the Chicago area. He's deeply interested in literature, art, and history, majoring in English and Psychology at Saint Norbert College.



Artwork by Sue Lee

Wings by Joseph Lee

\ /
mouse

I saw a dragging
two brown feathers behind
him. He scaled 200 feet of
scaffolding with tiny paws,
his own personal ascension,
and I, a bewildered apostle.
At the top, he tucked the
feathers in his armpits and
leapt like he believed he would
soar. My God, I believed it too.



Photo by Kirill Lazarev: Pexels.com

Spirit of the Season by Amy Lynn

The winters white glow, cheerful and bright,
glistening of the snow in the noon's sunlight.
Frost upon your nose as you walk the Towne Square,
a feeling of merriment lingers heavy in the air.

Lights of all colors don the storefronts,
puppies ready to be loved, even the small runt.
'Tis the Season for laughter and for joy,
have you been a good little girl or boy?

Smiles and chatter as you continue your stroll,
along the stone walk, the shop windows are full,
of baby dolls and Tonka trucks, ribbons galore,
oh, what shall we see next, what else is in store?

A passerby wishes you a wonderful holiday Season,
you go by the big lot with all the Christmas trees in.
The smell of pine and sap filling the cold air,
smiling and walking along without a care.

Around the lighted gazebo, kids running about,
a snowball fight commences, the teens begin to shout,
with peaceful excitement they dodge, and they duck,
off in the distance you catch a glimpse of a buck.

Now you make your way around the Towne Square,
you wander past the sleigh horses, each in a pair.
The snow begins to fall heavily upon your shoulders,
the temperature drops as the brisk wind gets colder.

Time to head home, you cross the snow covered
streets,
ready to taste some of your newly purchased treats.
You make your way into your warm and cozy abode,
the spirit of the season, in your heart you do hold.



Amy Lynn is a registered nurse at her local community mental health clinic in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. She is not a trained writer; however, she does love to write poetry. She writes from the heart and soul about her life experiences, observations, thoughts and feelings. She has one self-published book, My Life in Poetry, in which she unveiled herself and her vulnerabilities. She is currently working on writing her second book. She is a mother to one wonderful son and grandmother to a beautiful grandson. She aspires to help others in all that she does.



Photo by Taryn Elliott: Pexels.com

Defeating Regret by Glenn Marchand, Jr.

So driven, and more while dying, so hard to awaken. Days are late evenings, or periodical cadence—to keep excellence. So much an art, sophisticated wiles ... evergreen mud, a spirit filled with grout, we call it biblical mortar. At a nub, tragic darkness, wondering why God appointed us. So many ripples, one latch unbuckled, we are talking about sanity. Maybe upon a broken spell, such heat eaters, broad perspectives, puce prayers. A soul might flog self, russet wounds, wrung hostilities. Sweet and terrible horizons, each feeling unclear, reddish leaves, brown veins, bloody soil. As complained, in trying life's argument, frowning at it, disposed towards hankerings. By ardor we insist upon passion, to have loved incorrectly, left feeling a grudge; to grovel inside, low remedies, troubled to trust ever and again—listening to raspy nature, grackle wings, by dreaded release.



Glenn Marchand holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Mount Saint Mary's University, located in Los Angeles, California. Marchand is speaking to the human condition, love and religiosity, and the existential predicament. Marchand has publications with Academy of The Heart and Mind, Ginosko Literary Journal, Assisi: An Online Journal of Arts and Letters, Journal of Expressive writing, Bitter Melon Review, and others.



Photo by Alejandro De Roa: Pexels.com

One Carries Prose **by Glenn Marchand, Jr.**

In reaching for prose, one carries its nature. It has many values. I linger on that note, filled with wonder, noticing a glow by a cosmic smile. Walking forward. Troubled by stars. Collecting testimonies under a table. It never mattered more than when it mattered more. Sunbirds glisten. Songbirds are with melody. Such defacto regions—they claw at rationality. In telling, parts are in deliberation. A story to its charms. And so much I thought life was a game of pretend, so devasted by non-closure, in a distant sky, closure is a new beginning. Knowing when prose—was adhered to, so neatly, it must pay in joys. In noticing—reality comes with shifts of perception. What I desire, it desires conception. It was with reservation such ventilation; nevertheless, it matters to different degrees, and I would yen for what I see as a riddle. And people perished to cherish life, such souls are distinguished in prose.

No Regrets
by Betsy Mars



*Betsy Mars is a prize-winning poet, photographer, and an editor at Gyroscope Review. Her writing has been twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize and once for the Best of the Net. Her poetry is widely available online and in print. Her photos have appeared in various journals, and one was selected as a prompt for the Rattle Ekphrastic Challenge. Betsy has two published chapbooks, Alinea, and In the Muddle of the Night, co-authored with Alan Walowitz. Additionally, through her publishing venture (Kingly Street Press) she created two anthologies, Unsheathed: 24 Contemporary Poets Take Up the Knife and Floored. A full-length book, Rue Obscure, is forthcoming from Sheila-*Na*-Gig Editions in mid-2026.*

Left Out in the Cold
by Betsy Mars



Drømmen av strømmen
by Betsy Mars

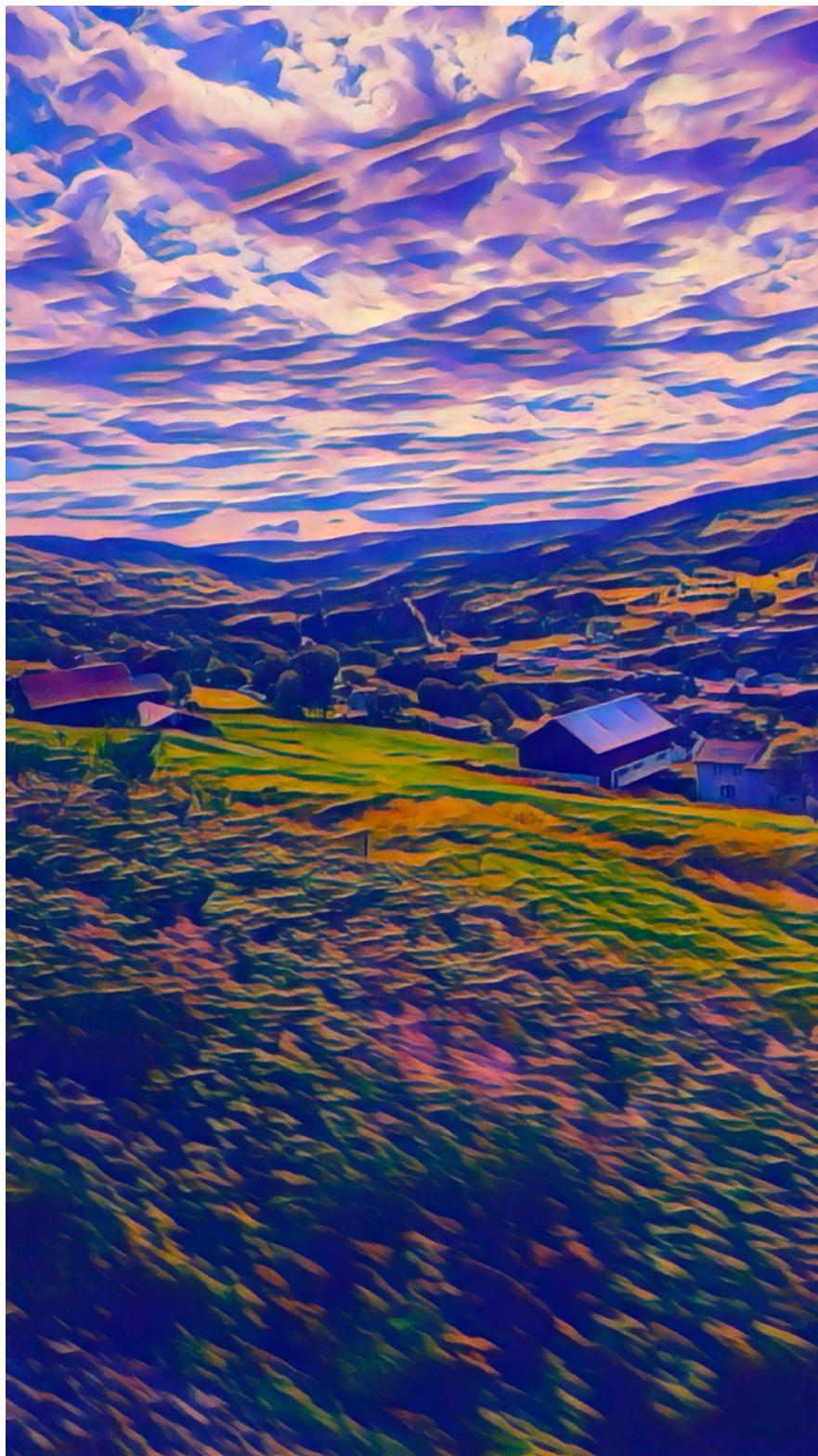




Photo by Adrian Monserrat: Pexels.com

Song from the Astral Plane by Bob McAfee

I haven't called it desire in years
so I need to define the word *desperation*.

Like all the keepsakes I lost in the fire,
sometimes I try to wrap my arms
around a single thought of you –

my mind is an ancient redwood, towering and empty.

Let me call my desperation a *galaxy of stars*,
each pinprick of light a moment in a lifetime.

Awakened in the night by a crackle
of memory—separated from your body
I am adrift in a rowboat, a bucket, a thimble.

In the dark I can hear your heart beat,
feel the curve of your hip,
smooth as the skin of a cello,

breathe you in and out by the lungful.

You are in the kitchen
caramelizing onions—the aroma
drawing me closer
until I am kissing the back of your neck – we

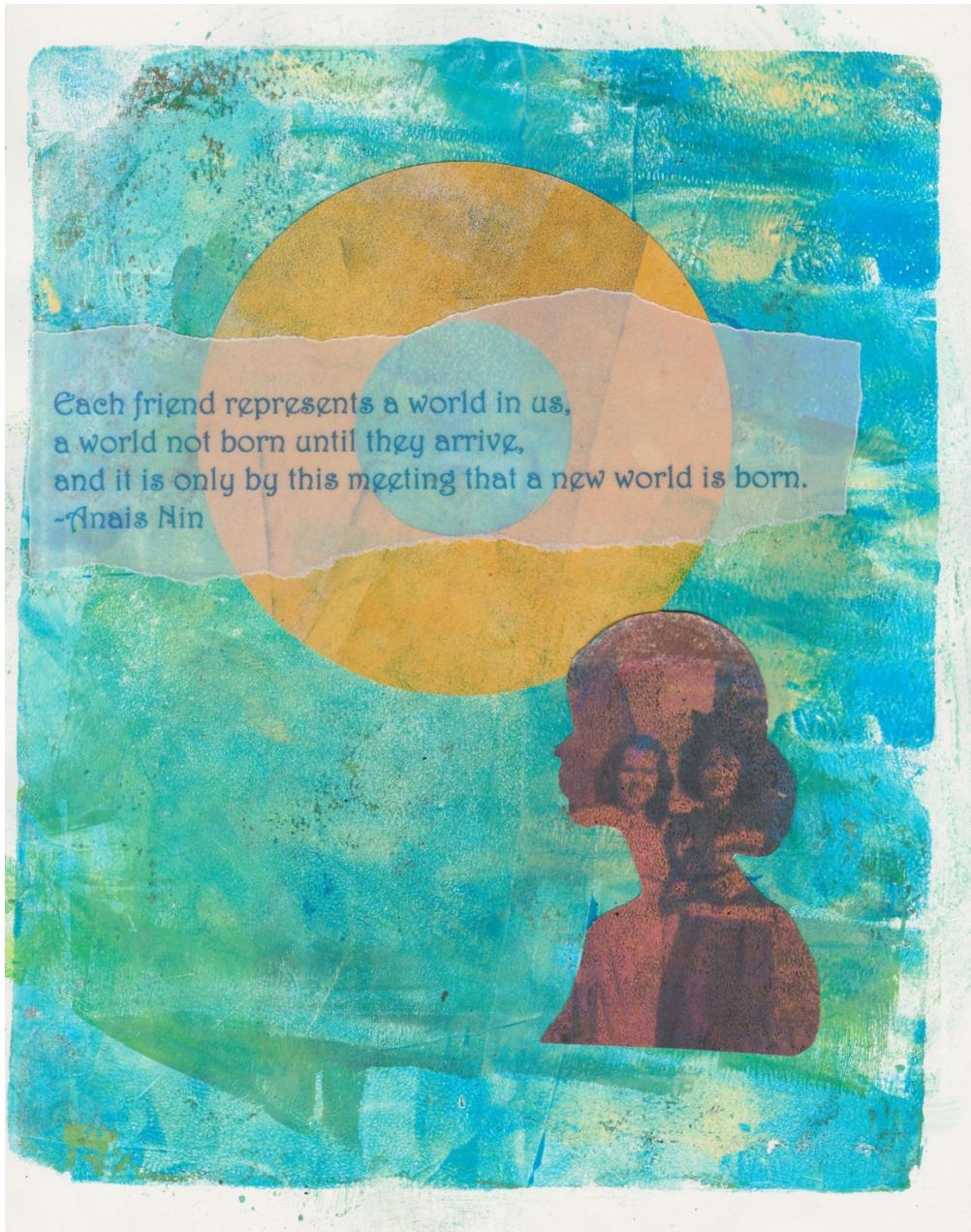
are dancing barefoot—you invite me into your small garden,
the one with a rabbit-proof fence and

the sweet smell of fallen stardust.



Bob McAfee is a retired software consultant who lives with his wife near Boston. He has written nine books of poetry, mostly on Love, Aging, and the Natural World. For the last several years he has hosted a Wednesday night Zoom poetry workshop. Since 2019, he has had 151 poems selected by 61 different publications. Two poems nominated for Best of the Net. His website, www.bobmcafee.com, contains links to all his published poetry.

Friends
Catherine McGuire



Catherine McGuire is a retired art therapist, writer and artist with a deep concern for our planet's future. She spent ten years as therapist in secure facilities, until disabled by illness. She has five decades of published poetry, six poetry chapbooks, a full-length poetry book, *Elegy for the 21st Century* (FutureCycle Press), a SF novel, *Lifeline* and book of short stories, *The Dream Hunt and Other Tales* (Founders House Publishing). Find her at www.cathymcguire.com



Photo by David Kanigan: Pexels.com

Wintry Bouquet

Joan McNERNEY

This December
during wide nights
hemmed by blackness,
I remember roses.
Pink, yellow, red, violet
those satin blooms of June.

We must wait six months
before seeing blossoms,
touch their brightness
crush their scent
with fingertips.

Now there are only
ebony pools of winter's
heavy ink of darkness.

Dipping into memory of
my lips touching petals
tantalizing sweet buds.
My body longs for softness.

I glimpse brilliant faces of
flowers right before me as I
burrow beneath frosty blankets.
Bracing against that long, cold
nocturnal of wind and shadow.



Joan McNERNEY's poetry is published worldwide in over forty countries in numerous literary magazines. Four Best of the Net nominations have been awarded to her. Her books The Muse in Miniature, Love Poems for Michael I & II, At Work and Light & Shadows are all available at amazon.com



Photo by Ron Lach: Pexels.com

Present **by Joan McNerney**

You gave me five brown pods
to grow in my garden bed.

I put them in a glass jar
with my locket.

Five brown pods winding
through heaven.

Weaving night with winter
wishes for wisteria.

In a flower dress wandering
over perfumed fields

I sleepwalk searching
for my golden locket
and your embrace.



Photo by Madison Inouye: Pexels.com

Thundersnow by Bella Melardi

Winter confuses me. It's peaceful but restless. Snowfall arrives as a siren. She strips herself bare, shedding her frozen skin. Flakes of flesh disregarded. I press my boots into her body, grinding her into the earth. Yet ribs still rise where my feet don't fall. Light staining the path. I pass by a hollowed-out tree, an eye socket of the forest. Barren and void of any life. I run my hands along the bark, and it is warmer to the touch than I would have suspected.

Then, in front of me, appears a patch of scarlet snowfall. Lobster baked sleet. My stomach drops. I look around. Nothing is here. The cottage I am staying at is in the middle of nowhere. The world around is so soundless that you can hear yourself bleed. I wonder if blood gets lonely when it leaves the body. A baby bird vacating its nest. I wonder if it misses the rhythm and routine it once belonged to. Winter makes me forget where the world ends and I begin. My choices. My movements. My humanity. Leaves more of a mark.

That was when the sky started to rumble. I forgot about the blood and made a run for inside. I'm even more scared of thunder when I'm by myself. The loud commandingness of the rumble. Somehow, the loudest noises make me feel the loneliest. They take up so much space. I'm reminded of how small I am. The wind picks up, slicing through the air like butter. My breath starts to quicken, catching in my throat as I get to the cottage driveway.

By the time I reach the door, I don't know what is me and what is the storm. I sigh and slam the door. But something feels off. Inside the cottage, I hear nothing. Nothing at all.



Bella Melardi is a poet and author. She writes about the political and personal. She attends OCADU. You can find her on Instagram @poetluvs.



Photo by MART PRODUCTION: Pexels.com

Scar Tissue **by Bella Melardi**

I blame a lot on my dad. I hate the way he still haunts me through old, misshapen wounds—scars that itch and burn at the slightest touch. What makes it harder is that my relationship with him wasn't entirely bad. When I was sixteen, after a brutal fight with my mom, I called him in desperation, and he told me to come over.

On the ride to his place, I stared out the window at a sky patterned with hypertrophic scars. Its flesh was streaked with stains the colour of Fireball shots, as if the sharpness of the city's light had sliced it open. Behind the fleshy clouds, red tissue ran deep. The trees along the road looked balding and frail, elderly silhouettes reaching for something they had already lost.

When I finally arrived, I broke down. My dad said it hurt him to see me like that. Then he ushered me into his car, cranked Metallica through the speakers, and told me to scream. So I screamed. I hate admitting that it felt freeing. Noise surrounded me inside and out. Noise swallowed me like the mouth of a whale that held me between its baleen plates.

That's how memories with my dad always taste: like Fireball shots. Sweet at first, burning all the way down. So yes, I blame him. I hate the way he lingers in me. But what I blame him for most is moving away and starting a new family. How could he give me kindness and support until he decided I wasn't enough? Even if that kindness was tangled with mistreatment, I can't pretend it wasn't there.

Sometimes I think my skin is angry with him, too. It speaks in shades of red. My rosacea feels like a manifestation of buried rage. Red like marinara. Rose buds blossoming from my chin. A red wine nose. Spotting and rotting. Why is it so nuanced? My voice feels trapped behind an abyss of scar tissue. To speak, I have to quiet the wounds, but they always scream louder than I ever can.

I hate how dating my boyfriend has brought me closer to my dad in some ways, and farther from him in others. My boyfriend's sarcastic humour hits me like whiskey poured over old wounds. I love and hate the way it stings like home. I want to change that. I don't want his stings to feel more familiar than his hugs.



Photo by Madison Olling: Unsplash.com

Not The Same Old Thing by Kat Merrigan

“What kid doesn’t like winter?”

I sat quietly as my family lectured me for twenty minutes on the virtues of snow and ice. I listened and nodded when it seemed appropriate. After they’d sufficiently made their case, I was sent to my room to think about what we’d discussed and to pack for our trip. I walked past my brother and sister. I could see they were exchanging looks that said, “Are we sure she’s related to us?”

As I closed my bedroom door, I began to wonder the same thing. Why *didn’t* I like winter? Was it because, unlike my siblings, I didn’t excel at any winter sports? My brother had been playing hockey since he was nine. He was a natural on the ice. My sister took up skiing in middle school because she was bored one day. Seeing her swoosh down the slopes was a thing of beauty.

I tried skating once, rammed into no less than twelve people on the ice, and sprained my left ankle. Balance and agility were words never used when describing me, so on last year’s trip I thought it best to politely pass when my sister encouraged me to take a free ski lesson.

Mom ice skated competitively when she was younger. Dad played hockey and snowboarded. Winter sports were in our DNA, so was I missing that gene? Was that the root cause for my disliking winter?

No, I figured it had to stem from something more than mere embarrassment over a lack of athleticism. I never claimed or desired to be sporty. I love reading, writing, singing, and acting. These are my chosen pursuits. I’d much rather spend my time running lines than running laps. My family supports my choices as I do theirs. I go to their games, and they come to my shows.

So, it would seem my discontent wasn’t really with the sports of winter. Then what was it? Was it because it was often cold and dreary? Well, before I knew the name for it, I had seasonal affective disorder. If I don’t see the sun for days, I become kind of moody, and not in a good for stimulating creativity kind of way. The other kind where you’re just cranky and ill-tempered, snapping at people for no reason.

Ok, so the weather isn’t great all the time. But it’s not like I have to drive through blizzards or anything. And I don’t mind shoveling the white stuff when we do it as a family. Snow days are a real blessing. Any day off from school is a blessing.

I flopped down on my bed in frustration. I tried recalling if there was ever a time I *had* liked the season. My family hadn’t mentioned any, but maybe my current attitude had clouded their memories. I thought about it some more but came up with nothing.

I went into my closet, pulled out my suitcase, and started packing. The weather was supposed to be in the low thirties during our stay at the lodge, so thick, comfy layers were the smartest wardrobe choice. As I was putting my fifth pair of wool socks into my bag, it struck me.

I don’t hate winter. I hate going to the lodge!

Our family had been going there annually for over a decade. It was the same thing every single winter break. Weeks beforehand I’d hear about my friends’ plans to visit Florida or other warmer places. Meanwhile, my family wasn’t satisfied with how cold it already was, we needed to go somewhere even colder!

When I was younger, I didn’t mind it so much because my folks would take us tubing and sledding. As long as someone else was steering, I had fun. But once I got to the age where I would be in control, I politely passed. I

had dramatic visions of sledding directly into a tree or a family of four. No, thank you. I'll be in the lodge, by the fireplace, a mug of hot chocolate in my hand, and a good book in my lap.

My sister knocked on my door. "Can I come in?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"Listen, I know you don't like winter, but—"

"No, that's not true," I said in earnest. "I just realized it's not that I don't like winter. I don't really care one way or another. I don't like going to the lodge!" I smiled after making this proud declaration and waited for my sister to acknowledge my tremendous breakthrough. She had an unexpected response.

"What do you mean you don't like the lodge?" Her face was contorted as if her brain was actually in pain trying to process my absurd testimony.

"Well, it's just that we go there every year. It's always the same. I guess I'd just like to go somewhere...different...for a change," I uttered sheepishly. My boldness deflated by her stern gaze.

"Where would you rather we go?" she asked sharply.

"I don't know...maybe Florida?"

"Florida?! Are you kidding me?" She thought for a moment. "This is because you suck at sports, isn't it?"

"No," I snapped back defensively. It was a fact I wasn't athletically inclined; but when a loved one says you suck at it, well, that stings a bit.

My sister saw the hurt in my eyes and changed her tone. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. It's just...I can't understand why you hate the lodge so much?"

"I don't hate it. I'd just like to go somewhere new. Do something different for a change. Even though you love skiing, don't you ever get...I don't know...tired of going there every year?"

My sister sat down on the edge of my bed. I could tell she was choosing her words carefully. When she spoke,

there was a sweetness in her voice that I hadn't heard in a long time. "Sis, I'm going away to college next year. And you know our brother's already making plans to move out as soon as he can." She paused. "It's just that this might be the last time we're all on vacation together. The last time we get to take this trip as a family. Please think about that, ok?"

She was right. Everything was about to change. I hadn't even considered that until now. She gave me a hug, and as she was leaving, I glimpsed a tear in her eye.

I sat down at my desk and took out my journal. But for once I was at a loss for words. I busied myself with more packing while her voice echoed in my head "this might be the last time..." We were going to the same place to do the same things, but nothing was going to be the same.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized we *had* to go to the lodge, if only to have one more week of memories of us together. Sure, I'd spend most afternoons by the fire, while they braved the great outdoors, but we'd all catch up at mealtime. Swapping stories and sharing memories. Food and drink, laughter, and love. I'd be sure to take lots of pictures and videos this time.

As I closed my suitcase, I found myself actually looking forward to the long drive in the morning. I ran downstairs to make sure my parents planned to stop at the bakery a few miles from the resort. They *did* serve the best hot chocolate and donuts in the area. And, besides, we do it every year.



Kat Merrigan was born and raised in NY. She's a published author and actress who made her feature film debut in the independent movie Tried By Fire from Broadwil Films. Her work has appeared in Bunker Squirrel, Spillwords Press, The Gilded Weathervane, Bluebird's Scribe Review, Harrow House Journal, Soul, Poetry, Prose and Arts Magazine, Flights e-Journal and Instant Noodles. She has been featured in a Cloaked Press anthology, Calla Press, and Academy Of the Heart and Mind. She narrated one of her pieces for the Story Unlikely podcast. She hosts original content through IG: Kat Controversy and FB: Kathy Merry.



Photo by RDNE Stock project: Pexels.com

Boxing Day by Marla Dial Moore

It invariably follows Christmas—
this feeling of less-than-full,
not-quite-empty; the quiet
that follows celebration—a time
to inventory the situation.

Time to make room for something new:
Purge the closets, sweep the floor,
move beyond the greeting card
in the search for something more
than the mere notion of “good will.”

I’m sifting and sorting the things
that I own, filling boxes for donation:
Boxes of hope and party shoes,
misguided gifts, well-loved
denim blues, sweaters too warm

for these seasons. Boxes of regret
I wish I could empty: Clothes that once
served smaller versions of me; choices
not right for this maturing frame
but purchased in full, no take-backs.

I’m moving room by room
through this box I inhabit, searching
in corners dimly lit for things still fit
to keep. In the end, I’ll load the car,
find my way to some saints

or sisters of charity, someone
to accept what I have to offer,
to take what remains.



Marla Dial Moore is a recovering journalist who previously worked for The Associated Press and various news publications in Arizona and Texas. She is a 2025 Best of the Net nominee who has written poetry peripatetically for more than 20 years as a means of surviving global, local and personal news events. Her work has appeared in Merion West, The Metaworker; The Quasar Review; When the River Speaks; the San Antonio Review and other publications.



Photo by Julia Khalimova: Pexels.com

Shakshuka by Oumayma Oueghlani

My grandmother made shakshuka, a staple—
tomatoes and chili peppers cooked to softness.
Spicy. Honest.

I always mistook red peppers for tomatoes.
“Our garden is the only one that grows spicy tomatoes,”
I told her.

I grew up between early-morning mlawi dipped in olive oil
and stories told by a woman who never learned how to read.

I did.

My first word was tamar—dates.

I read while the dough rested.
I read while oil warmed in the pan.
Pages stacked.
Meals finished without me.

Somewhere along the way, I drifted—
from my grandmother,
from the shakshuka, from the heat of fresh mlawi on my hands.

She didn’t know what the books were arguing about, what the authors fiercely defended.
A world map stunned her—
Those vast distances,
how a finger could trace a line
all the way to my uncle’s life.

She didn't know many things.

But she knew the exact amount of salt for couscous,
how to stir pudding so it never clumps,
how to quiet a crying baby at dawn.
She knew which herb loosened a chest,
how to mend a torn sleeve,
how to eat with the same hands
that washed every newborn in our family.

She knew the peppers were never tomatoes.
She just never corrected me.

Still, every time I pass by, she makes shakshuka.



Oumayma Oueghlani, a Tunisian, writes from a small grey desk as she watches the lemon tree sway. She has been observing life for twenty years.

Billing
by Camellia Paul

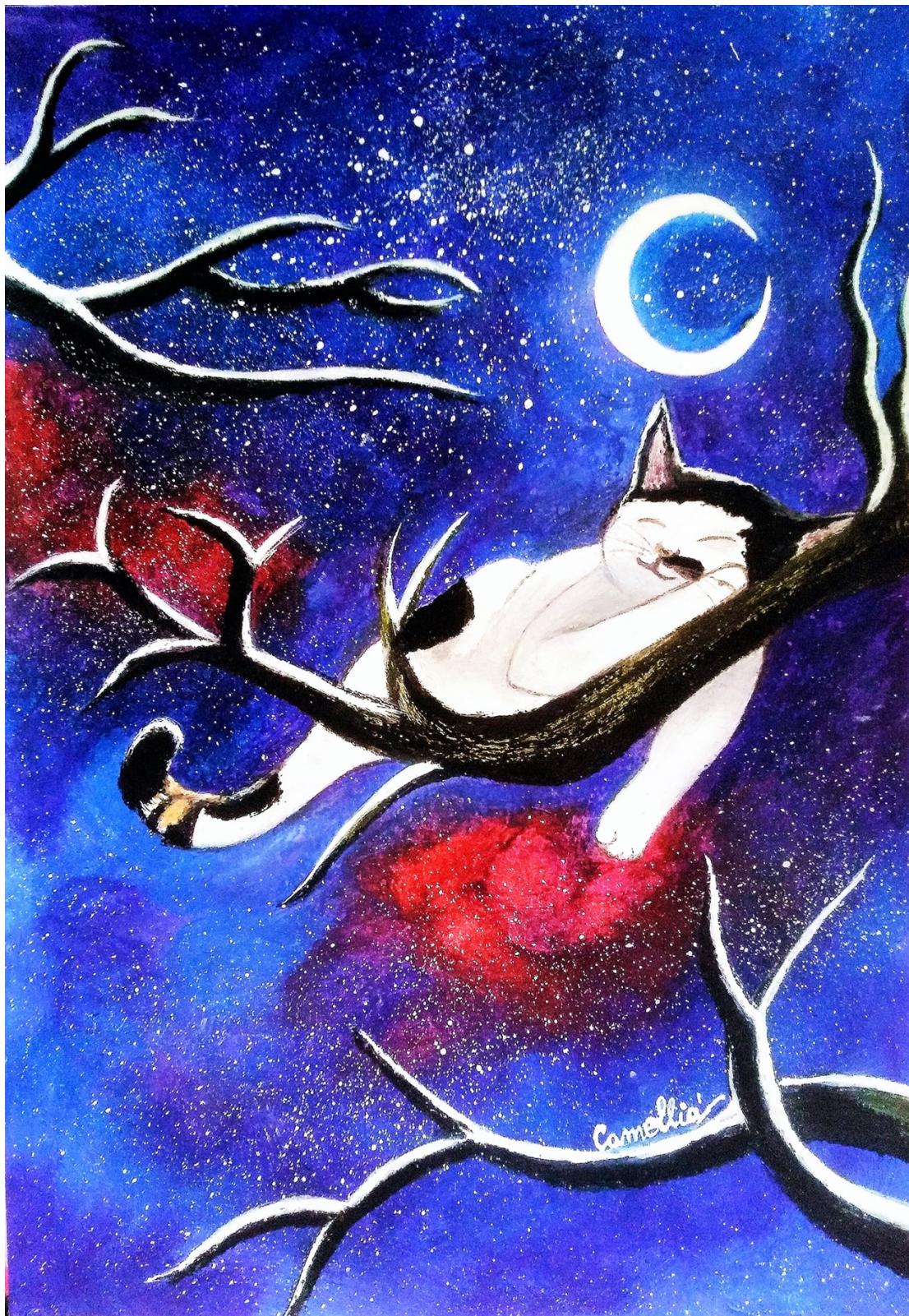


Camellia Paul is a graduate student of Comparative and World Literature at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. An alumna of Jadavpur University, India, she is also a member of the Association of Canadian Studies in Ireland. Camellia has presented award-winning research on “Bengal owlscapes” in an international conference at South Korea. She is also an award-winning visual artist with her poetry and art regularly appearing in magazines, anthologies, and journals such as The Fabulist, The Passionfruit Review, Solstitia, The Fantastic Other, Livewire, among others. Apart from being passionate about Nature, art, and owls, Camellia loves reading, listening to music, and exploring cultures. Contact email: paul40@illinois.edu

Miso and Ziti
by Camellia Paul



Moonlit Nap
by Camellia Paul



Windy City
by Camellia Paul





Photo by Erik Mclean: Pexels.com

Passings by Darrell Petska

Grandma's quilts, so dear to my heart,
passed down to me long years ago.
Who'll want them when I depart?

Each autumn she'd mine our Thrift Mart,
laying in fabric before first snow:
she knew her quilts could warm a heart.

Each bright find she'd snip apart
once wintry winds began to blow.
Who'll want them when I depart?

Her practiced eyes proceeded to chart
shape and color into column and row.
Grandma knew how to warm a heart.

By patch and pin she'd make her start.
By deft of hand her quilts would grow.
Who'll want them when I depart?

Grandma's quilts, beyond their art,
have helped me staunch time's flow.
I'm last in line: when I depart,
could they warm as well another's heart?



Darrell Petska is a retired university engineering editor and three-time Pushcart Prize nominee. His poetry appears in Verse-Virtual, San Antonio Review, 3rd Wednesday Magazine, Orchards Poetry Journal, and widely elsewhere (conservancies.wordpress.com). Father of five and grandfather of seven, he lives near Madison, Wisconsin, with his wife of more than 50 years.



Photo by Tim Gouw: Pexels.com

At the Arboretum by LeeAnn Pickrell

Still winter officially but the tulips and daffodils are blooming. I've brought my mother for high tea at the arboretum. The air is crisp, and I push her along the paths in the borrowed wheelchair toward the restaurant. We lose our way, which makes her nervous. I tell her gardens are for wandering. My mother doesn't like being pushed in a wheelchair. She doesn't like getting older. At tea we're surrounded by windows looking out on just waking flowerbeds. From across the table, I watch her spread clotted cream and lemon curd on her scone. Her fingernails are painted the color of pink apricot tulips. "The scone's a little dry," she says. "I like the sandwiches. The cucumber one. That's good." When we finish, she claims pushing her back to the car is too hard. She can just use her walker and walk. But I wheel her back, around the fountains still turned off for winter.

trumpeting its tune
a yellow daffodil



LeeAnn Pickrell's debut collection is Gathering the Pieces of Days from Unsolicited Press. Her work has appeared in a variety of online and print journals, including One Art, Unbroken, Atlanta Review, and Eclectica. Her chapbook Punctuated was published in 2024 by Bottlecap Press, and her book Tsunami is forthcoming in 2026, also from Unsolicited Press. She lives in Richmond, California, with her partner and two fabulous cats. See more at www.leeannpickrell.com.



Photo by Samuel Bryngelsson: Unsplash.com

February is a Collage of Hearts

by LeeAnn Pickrell

I open the envelope addressed to me
and pull out five hearts on a red string,

cut from pages of an illustrated book of occupations.
Some paint. Some build. My occupation is my heart.

During the night, as I slept, the tulips' pink petals fell.
Tonight I scatter them on the white duvet.

The trees have already blossomed, the tulip magnolias
opening to drink spring's early nectar. Then the cherry plums.

This is what I count on. I mark my life by dogwood winters,
years of plum trees and blackberry vines.

And by love, for it is love I love the most.
A carpenter's oak and walnut,

an artist's palette of words,
a mobile of hearts to hang beside my bed.

What is more courageous than a seed opening,
its single shoot tunneling up through the cold wet earth?



Photo by Eva Bronzini: Pexels.com

Uplifted by Carol Pohly

Who am I to tread upon hallowed ground
this frosted morning,
thinking I am here to uplift the shrubs
by shaking them free of their burden of snow?

Who am I to disturb the solemnity
of these prayerful figures
whose branches are posed in mid-motion –
a liturgical dance frozen in time?

Their softly robed limbs
bow to the ground as with folded hands
in a silence so pristine, even my breath
seems an invasion.

I will leave quietly so as not to add
another footprint to this glistening sanctuary.
They will not know it is I, instead,
who has been uplifted.



Carol Pohly is a published lyricist, co-author of a book of poetry and photography, and her poems have been published in anthologies such as Vita Brevis Press, Mock Turtle Zine, Rhyme and Rune, "Welcome Home" by Yellow Springs Home, Inc., Soul Poetry, Prose, and Arts Magazine, and "For A Better World" by Greater Cincinnati Poets.



Photo by Deivis Sandoval: Pexels.com

A Visit With Dr. Price (To the memory of Dr. Robert Price) by Carol Pohly

Thumbing through books that huddle on my shelf, wearing their warm sweaters of dust in the chill of winter, I come upon one that has slipped to the back, having been squeezed out by its weightier neighbors.

It is thin, with a textured blue cover, looking cold and unread. Upon opening it, I'm excited to see, it's by my favorite college professor – a book of poems I thought had been long since swept into the dustbin of history.

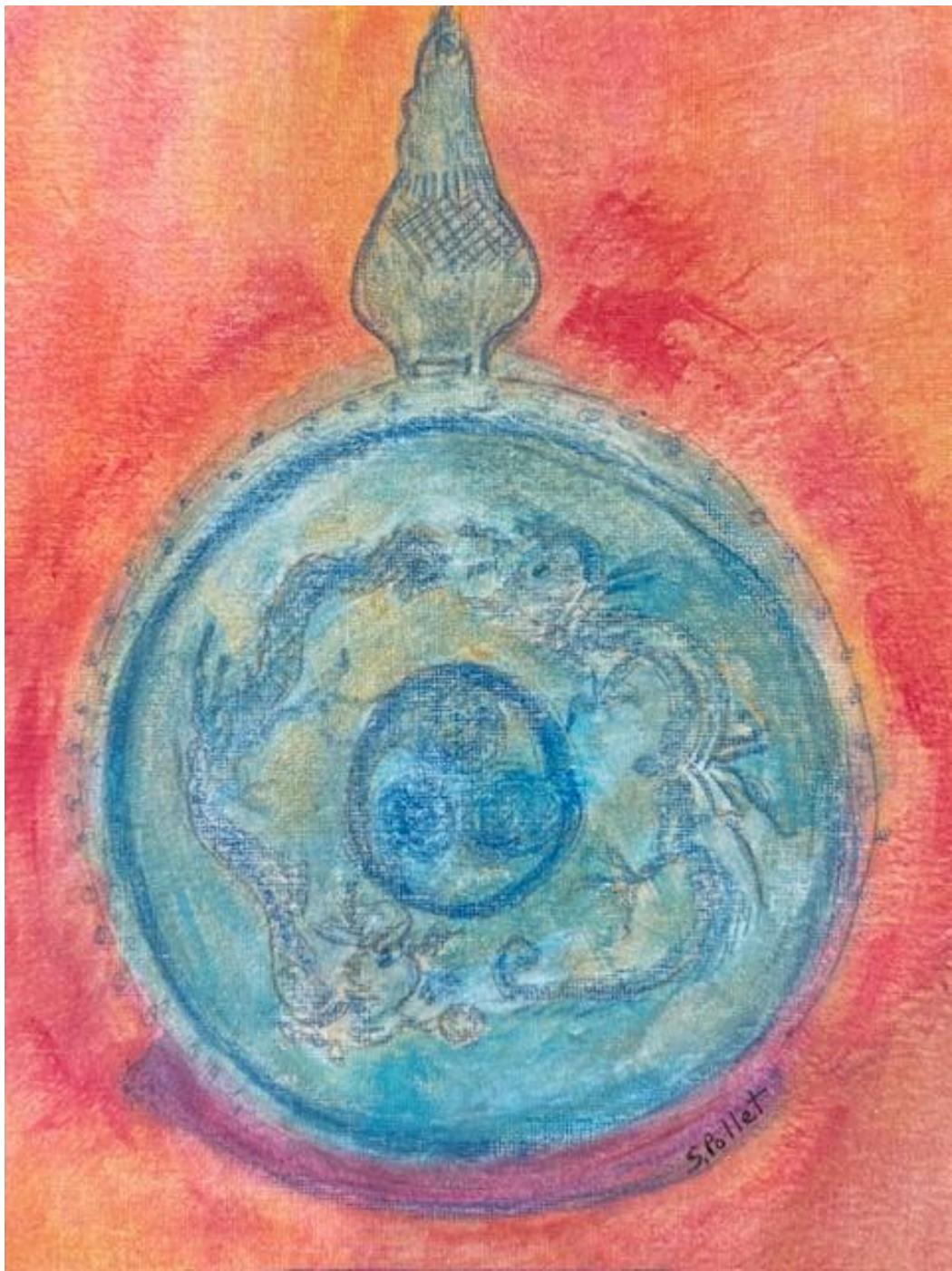
As I spoon through the pages, I pause to let each poem wrap me in its warmth like an afghan. It's as if Dr. Price has just arrived at my door, rung the bell, shaken snow from his boots, and asked to come in for a chat.

Here, in the comfort of my living room, he sits in his brown tweed blazer, neatly pressed trousers, white hair sloughed to the side, where we sip ginger tea, and with quiet grace, he shares his depth with me – in a way I did not perceive as a student.

I see how he writes the way he taught, uses skills we didn't comprehend, and I hear, once again, his encouraging voice, gentle as rain on a window, as he passes back papers in Towers Hall, thoughtfully garnished with handwritten notes.

Thanking him in my mind for a delightful afternoon, I bid him goodbye and walk him to the door. As he steps into the wintery white of the past, I slide his book back onto the shelf, this time pulling it forward, into a special place all its own.

Fire Breathers
by Susan L. Pollet



Susan L. Pollet is a visual artist and author whose works have appeared in multiple art shows and literary publications. She studied at the New York Art Students League, has been a member since 2018, and resides in NYC. For more information visit her website: susanpollet.com

Throwing Shade
by Susan L. Pollet





Photo by Quang Nguyen Vinh: Pexels.com

When the Fog Burns Off by Nancy Machlis Rechtman

Memories scatter like autumn leaves
around the room that once was hers,
filled with unwanted reminders of days gone by
like an abandoned mall—
a blue marble with gold flecks
slowly rolls across the floor
disappearing behind boxes of silk scarves
in the corner of the room—
surely someone will want the scarves
as they were once so coveted.

A knotted ball of confusion
pushes against her rib cage,
attempting to make contact
with the fragments strewn across the floor.

She wonders if any of this has ever mattered
and if she can afford to discover
who she had been and what everything
meant *before*.

She wishes she could plug up the holes
in the sieve that has overtaken her mind
and grasp one solid thought—
so much effort had once been spent
in the acquisition of things,
but now it's as though they'd never existed—
like fog
when the sun burns it away.



Nancy Machlis Rechtman has had poetry and short stories published in Your Daily Poem, Writing In A Woman's Voice, Grande Dame, Impspired, miniMAG, Young Ravens, Discretionary Love, and more. Nancy has had poetry, essays, and plays published in various anthologies. She wrote freelance Lifestyle stories for a local newspaper, and she was the copy editor for another paper. She has had several stories published in Highlights Magazine for Children, stories published in several other children's magazines, plus she has had several children's plays and musicals both produced and published. She writes a blog called Inanities at <https://nancywriteon.wordpress.com>.



Photo by Bailey Torres: Unsplash.com

Alert Alive by H. E. Ross

My first glimpses
beneath the mist
laying warmly
over this Haitian city

Sensual at every turn
balanced chaos
how easily I learn
to love anarchy

A fluid humanity
when eyes are open
to be alive
to worship the feeling

A ragged people
of soft edges
and latest fashion
filled with lingering action

Lovers stroke smiles
man lays rhum laden
kids make games
of bright colors everywhere

I learn to sweat
the cheer of life
and touch folk
be held in friendship

A black man welcomed
somewhere on earth
with doors open
no backward glance



H.E. Ross is a Black San Francisco single-handed sailor-writer who has cruised the Northern Caribbean, starting two sailing preservation organizations and published two magazines. His focus is on Black maritime sailing heritage and history. He lived in Haiti for over two years, and it was the love of his life. Ross has also sailed the Mediterranean, Baltic, North Sea and the Pacific. Ross is finishing a book on his time in Haiti. He lives with his partner and their two children in England.



Photo by Pixabay: Pexels.com

Miraculous Ripples

by Nicole Sara

I am the thought of a star
deeply sunk
into a cloud's rustling song,
roaming on meandering alleys of mist
through my heart,
tearing my seconds apart
with the murmur of an old tale,
suspended from the skies' blue
among seasons' steps, warm and cold
cruelly swept away
by time's rhythm and rhyme

You are the whisper of a sun ray
unlocking seconds like doors,
with hurried gestures
allowing the wings of my dreams
to take flight through the open windows,
freely cascading into the darkness,
flooding splendor
entwined with tears
and shadows,
miraculous ripples
all through my deep sighs

We are the mirror of an echo
traveling from afar,
as if having descended
from other worlds
into new colors of time,
slowly searching for our soul's shine
within deep waters of life,
of remembering
soothing away the pain of oblivion
from among galaxies
of sweet forgetfulness



Nicole Sara is a bilingual poet from Romania, who finds inspiration in the beauty and intelligence of everything around. Nicole self-published her debut collection of poems and original photographs, Rhyming Dreams, on Amazon in 2024, and she has recently published her second collection, The Blues and the Beautiful. Her work also appears in the literary magazine Spillwords Press, on the Masticadores platform, as well as in Tranquility: An Anthology of Haiku published by Literary Revelations and the 2025 edition of Sunflower Tanka Anthology - Dreams compiled by Robbie Cheadle and Colleen M. Chesebro. A nature enthusiast, Nicole loves exploring the outdoors and capturing images to share on her blogs and on photography sites. Connect with Nicole on her blog at starrysteps.wordpress.com and @nicoles.steps on Instagram.



Photo by Cottonbro Studio: Pexels.com

Entangled by Nicole Sara

As if from nowhere
silence finds its voice
and from yesterday's
murmurs leaves no choice

Hidden in plain sight
life's entangled ways
take us on a journey
mapped or gone astray

Stay the course, we must
let it all play out
tears, smiles, poise
trust or full of doubt

Sunsets drape our evenings
golden skies, our morns
summers' bed of roses
winters' crown of thorns

Tumbling from the heavens
days unfold our quest
flames from the abyss
burning of unrest

As if from above
through deep roots below
down from deep within
life begins to glow

Beyond Seasons
by Nicole Sara



Snowy Moments
by Nicole Sara



©Nicole Sara



Photo by Julia Volk: Pexels.com

As I Push Towards the Ninth Decade by Nolo Segundo

As I push towards
the ninth decade
I feel more vulnerable,
mostly to my haphazard
memory and the foibles
of an old body, but also
to the sudden, sharp
aching of my heart
as I see over and over
unending human stupidity...



Nolo Segundo, pen name of retired teacher [America, Japan, Taiwan, Cambodia] L.J. Carber, 78, became a published poet in his 8th decade in over 240 literary journals in 21 countries and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, thrice for Best of the Net. Cyberwit.net has published 3 collections in softcover: THE ENORMITY OF EXISTENCE; OF ETHER AND EARTH; and SOUL SONGS. These titles reflect an awareness gained over 50 years ago when he had an NDE whilst nearly drowning in a Vermont river: that he has—is—a consciousness predating birth and surviving death, what poets since Plato have called the soul.



Photo by Wallace Chuck: Pexels.com

The Winter of My Soul by Nolo Segundo

The winter of my soul was in the spring called youth
when I danced and sang and played the fool,
when I could care for no one really, not even
for myself—
certainly not for the soul I could not see within,
nor could I see the souls of others. . .

That was the harshest winter, though snowless
and without a frigid air yet dead was the ground
I walked on, dead too was my heart as I moved
through the world like an orphan abandoned,

abandoned by hope and faith and love,
till Death itself smiled at me and called my name,
and I went to it because I could not see my soul.

But in that utter darkness where death hides,
hides like a coward,
and in that pain beyond pain that death brings
to those who seek it,
I, like the blind man to whom Christ gave sight,
suddenly knew again my soul, and as I called out
to God,
I began the hard long climb out of the pit towards
the eternal Light. . .

Now I have lived through 300 seasons as birth
and death dance in their turn, and time, which I once
rode like a prince his horse, now rides my back,
pushing me down bit by bit as the years pile up
like burnt logs that will never be lit again...
yet I am happy, not for old age with all its
myriad slights and insults, and not for that
unfinished part which I suppose is found in
every life, even the longest—no, my happiness
is simpler, sweeter now that my world has
shrunk, for my soul has grown and as it grows,
becomes ever more hungry for the food of
Heaven. . .

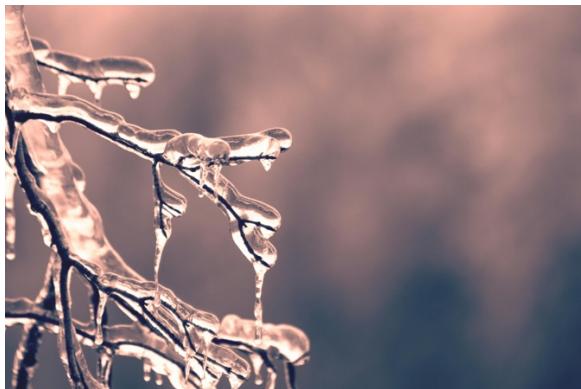


Photo by Dan Hamill: Pexels.com

December's Tale **by Nolo Segundo**

It is the turning month,
the time when life sleeps
and our dreams shiver. . .
when night grows
bolder, darker, colder,
and daylight seems so
weak, slight, bending.
But the air that rushes
into your lungs like a
horde of ice-dripped
savages sears souls
into fully awakening
from summer's trance,
and so we feel more
alive in December's
desolation than any
other time of the year.



Photo by Vitaly Gorbachev: Pexels.com

Dance by Betty Stanton

A dancer falling over herself,
Autumn tries
but cannot remember
the waltz, the heat,
a hand tethered in hers,
the ballroom tilting.

Windows unlatched,
Winter leaks in:
the pale grip,
the hush of cold lungs.
Her shoulder burns
where he will touch.

No partner interrupts.
Leaves buckle like glass,
flowers turn their faces to the wall.
The body in her arms
grows older each breath,
while she blooms.

Winter kneels,
presses her into the floorboards,
forces her to bow.
But Spring riots through
furious and sudden,
rips her from the pale hand,
spins her into the next beginning.



Betty Stanton (she/her) is a Pushcart nominated writer who lives and works in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in various journals and collections and has been included in various anthologies. She received her MFA from The University of Texas - El Paso and holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership. She is currently on the editorial board of Ivo Review. @fadingbetty.bsky.social

Bristol
by Dominik Slusarczyk



Dominik Slusarczyk is an artist who makes everything from music to painting. He was educated at The University of Nottingham where he got a degree in biochemistry. He has published poetry, fiction, and criticism. His fiction came 1st in The Cranked Anvil Short Story Competition, and his poetry won The Letter Review Prize for Poetry. His full-length poetry collection, Reaction is out now with Cyberwit.



Photo by Adem Erkoç: Pexels.com

Four Tanka by Joshua St. Claire

who planted
these red pines
along the hillcrest?
glacial erratics
and a siskin brood

*

around the tips
of the branches
of evening
starlings spinning
an accretion disk

*

deeper and deeper
into the geometry
of cirrus undulatus
not this wren
but all wrens

*

mise en abyme
across the altocumulus
a vulture
a vulture
a vulture



Joshua St. Claire is an accountant from a small town in Pennsylvania who works as a financial director for a non-profit. His haiku and related poetry have been published broadly including in Frogpond, Modern Haiku, The Heron's Nest, and Mayfly. He has received recognition in the following international contests/awards for his work in these forms: the Gerald Brady Memorial Senryu Award, the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival Haiku Invitational, the San Francisco International Award for Senryu, the Robert Speiss Memorial Award, the Touchstone Award for Individual Haiku, the British Haiku Society Award for Haiku, and the Trailblazer Award.



Photo by A. Soheil: Pexels.com

I hiss like a threatened swan by Sara Stegen

The Threatened Swan. Jan Asselijn, c. 1650, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

When fall arrives in summer
The garden greens shoot up
Aggressively – to the sky
The clouds are like angry swans
Lit up from behind.

When my feet turn cold
And the shoulders too
And I shake and shake
That is the moment
I think of you

When the early light hits
the kitchen's crème tiles
in liquid gold
The shadow maker
from behind the clouds arrives.

I hiss and flap
like the threatened swan by Asselijn
Even when you say
you've got my back
I feel like jumping out of my skin
to the tune of an angry country music violin.



Sara Stegen is a Dutch poet and non-fiction author who writes about land, family, nature, and neurodivergence. Home is a boulder-clay ridge in the northern Netherlands where her bike shed contains 8 bicycles and where she is working on a memoir about apples and autism and her first poetry collection.



Photo by cottonbro studio: Pexels.com

Start to Finish by Nancy Story

The new year is about to begin. We toast
its onset and the latter's passing. I wonder
if other creatures celebrate starts and finishes?
Do parrot fish have birthday and retirement parties
when one is hatched and another grows too old
to scrape algae from limestone reefs?.

Are the ocean tides at Tybee Island
conscious of their crests and crashes?
Do brown pelicans raise a wing to hatchlings
and serve them banquets on shells draped
with plankton? Do they honor their elders
living 25 years or older?

Do all beings hail the sweep of ages
in firsts and lasts?



Nancy Ciucevich Story's poetry expresses the beauty, wonder, and complex relationships of human beings with the natural world. Her poetry has recently appeared in North Dakota Quarterly, The Rockford Review, The Avalon Literary Review, Scribeworth, and previously in Gertrude, Hard Ground: Writing the Rockies, the black fly review, Kentucky Poetry Review, and others. She is currently working on a chapbook, Shadows on the Moon.



Photo by Vladimir Konoplev: Pexels.com

Buena Vista by Nancy Story

People who live in deserts have blank
eyes, sandy eyes that see forward
and backward at the same time for miles
and miles. They feel the present like a burning
sun; to squint directly into it, even for a moment,
could cause total blindness.

Mountain dwellers' eyes spot threshold
cave plants, green algae, fox-tail feather-moss,
hart's tongue ferns, and dog violets where other eyes
find only dimness and uninviting shadows
on limestone walls, missing the hermitage of algae.

Coastal folk dwell among reeds, water oak, clams,
and oyster beds, close to the shoreline. Their eyes
have tides; their gaze goes out to sea for hours,
then rushes back as if it half remembers
leaving something vital in the foam.

Lovers' eyes see blessed shapes, skin
that must be touched, the face the universe
depends upon for life, purest day, tropicalist
night, four arms rounding into one gold band,
sights that clear the sand from desert eyes, light
that leaves no space unglorified, hearts that turn
the tide, the moon's white oar, that hurls
the seawall flat against the shore.



Photo by Heber Vazquez: Pexels.com

Your Eyes by Michael Theroux

Not that I'm looking
(I haven't for ages
but there's this woman
who wears your eyes

This town is small
and everyone knows
everyone, everywhere
and nothing's missed

In one of those places
a store where I end up
there's this woman
and she ... well

She's had a long day
of too many fools
but it's a living
and she'll manage

Scanning the broccoli
into her register
she slowly looks up
with your eyes

She says cryptically
"I musta been asleep ..."
your eyes hadn't found me
until her head came up

She prices and bags
checks the eggs
fumbles the receipt
smiles with your eyes

On wobbly cart wheels
I exit to my own world
leaving her alone
to live with your eyes

Until my broccoli's gone
and I return with a cartful
to end up in line
at her Station #3

Once again, she'll nod
scan the veggies and bread
wish me well, and smile
with your eyes



Michael is entering the literary publication field in his seventh decade, following careers of field botanist, environmental health specialist, green energy developer and resource recovery web site editor. Michael now is shifting from decades of publishing scientific and technical environmental works, to placing his cache of creative writing - much more satisfying! He has now had 92 poems and short stories published. Some may be found in Cerasus, City Key, Wild Word, Ariel Chart, CafeLit, Midsummer Dreamhouse, and elsewhere; his novels, chapbooks and collections will find good homes, with persistence and time.



Photo by Karola G: Pexels.com

Utility Pole 3 5 6 7 2 by Mark Thompson

spring rain anointed your ground,

sun warmed your sprout.

mother trees sent,

tender messages of support.

first needles,

making peace with the wind.

now standing tall,

your core unblemished.

bathed in sunlight,

needles shimmering.

darkness nears,

and flocks gather round.

at daybreak,
a soft wind,
delivers a new smell —
chainsaw oil and pine sap.

kissed!

- aerosol spray paint, fluorescent red, **X C**
slashed!
- chainsaw blade, full chisel, skip tooth, carbide-tipped
stripped!
- high speed, ring debarker
anointed!
- creosote, meeting specifications AWPA P1
interred!

- depth of hole, 10% of pole length plus 2 feet
pierced!

- carriage bolt, hot dipped galvanized steel 1/2" x 12"
bound!

- cross member, treated pine, 4" x 4" x 10'
nailed!

- pole number 3 5 6 7 2



Mark Thompson has been married to Patty for 57 years, is a retired sales engineer, amateur musician, sculptor and very private poet. He was introduced to poetry by Mrs. Johnson, English Literature, in 1962. He's exploring the possibilities of collaborating - to create a better poem.



Photo by Ksenia Chernaya: Pexels.com

One More Hill by Mark Thompson

bitter cold,
six inches of snow,
nowhere to go,
two glasses of wine.

bundle up,
stagger out,
walk through the woods,
stop at the headstone.

brush off the snow,
breathe deep,
wonder why
I'm here

mumble some words—
apologies
regret
appreciation
sigh—then leave.

so close,
so still,
stop—lean against a tree,
rest—too long, too cold.

one more hill to climb,
before going home.



Photo by Laura Musikanski: Pexels.com

You Are Never Alone

by M. Benjamin Thorne

When the stars hang in the sky like a jury
passing down their silent judgment;
when you hear the nightingale's song
and it rings like a harbinger of heart injury;
remember the kiss of cool grass underfoot,
drunk on the predawn dew; recall the sweet
scent of blooms on the vine, opening just for you
for you are never alone. The earth always
greets you as a sister, as one of its verdant own.

When the calls of critics buzz in your ear
like a hornets' swarm ten-thousand strong,
and your mind screams in deaf agony,
replaying all the wrongs you think that you've done,
remember the collage of colors and clouds
the dusk assembles in the sky; recall the heat
of sun on the sand when you return from the sea,
for you are never alone. The sun always
greets you as a daughter, as one of its valiant own.

When you feel the pull of tides so strongly
it seems in an instant you'll get swept away;
when your heart says that it ought to be day
but wherever you look, all you see is dark;
remember the chorus playing at midnight,
the humming sounds of life; recall how light
dances on your skin during a nighttime swim;
for you are never alone. The moon always
greets you like a lover, as its vibrant own.



Nominated for the Pushcart and Best of the Net, M. Benjamin Thorne is an Associate Professor of Modern European History at Wingate University. Possessed of a lifelong love of history and poetry, he is interested in exploring the synergy between the two. His poems appear or are forthcoming in Thimble Lit Mag, Last Syllable Lit, Salvation South, Does It Have Pockets?, Pictura Journal, and Heimat Review. In 2025 his work was shortlisted for the Alpine Fellowship. He lives and sometimes sleeps in Charlotte, NC.



Photo by VIKTOR KONDRATIUK: Pexels.com

A Memory

by Lorri Ventura

I dressed up as First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy on Halloween in 1963. My mother made me a pillbox hat from a wooden cheese box, and sewed a two-piece pink outfit with fancy buttons.

To my dismay, I learned that shoe stores didn't offer pumps for five-year-olds, but I nonetheless felt Jackie-like as I trotted door-to-door wearing scuffed brown shoes, my hair waves held rigidly in place by generous amounts of heavily sugared water.

Seeking to emulate our First Lady's airy voice, I breathily whispered, "Trick or treat!" as smiling neighbors dropped candy into the oversized handbag I carried to complete my elegant presentation.

I remember how enamored people were with my choice of costume, unusual as I paraded through the streets with a horde of children dressed more conventionally, as Red Sox players, vampires, ghosts, and princesses.

Less than one month later, President Kennedy was assassinated. I stared at the horrible scene as it unfolded endlessly on the television screen, roaring like a tidal wave into our living room.

Even though our TV was black and white, I somehow knew immediately that the suit Mrs. Kennedy was wearing in Dallas that day was pink, just like my Halloween attire.

Shattered by the tragedy, I thereafter felt a peculiar connection to Jackie Kennedy, sprouting from the unfortunate coincidence of our similar wardrobe choices. For several years afterward, I refused to wear pink, as if the color were a catalyst for evil.

All Americans alive on that fateful day carry a memory of the moment they heard the news—where they were, what they were doing. Each mind's eye holds a snapshot image, perhaps of a little boy saluting his daddy's casket, or of a riderless horse with empty boots facing backwards in the stirrups, marking a world forever changed.

For me, it's a pink suit with a matching hat.

 Lorri Ventura is a retired special education administration living in Massachusetts. Her writing has been in numerous anthologies, and her debut poetry collection, *Shifting the Mind's Eye*, was published in 2024.



Photo by Nikolett Emmert: Pexels.com

Stacking Wood by Mark Walsh

The easy part was over: the dull chainsaw
reduced the quarter-ton bough to liftable
logs for the firepit. Packed with geometry
in the wheelbarrow, hauled to the far
corner of the yard, laid down
to form an ordered pile of three-up
and two-back, portions of oak clack
into place like drumsticks dropped in a sack.

The honesty of this work is a relief,
an afternoon's clean meditation. Mulling over
the duration for proper seasoning before the burn
offers measured freedom from the grueling quandary
of students with no money in store for textbooks.



Mark Walsh is an English professor at Massasoit Community College in Brockton, MA. He is also an assistant editor at Lily Poetry Review. His Chapbook, In The Garden of Fortune, was published by Lily Poetry Review Books in May of 2024. Song for the Flood, his collection of Fantasy stories, was recently published by Metaphysical Fox Press. Recent poetry publications include Nixes Mate Review, Tidings and The Potomac Review.



Photo by Arpan Parikh: Pexels.com

Last Seen in New York by Justine Wang

curled up against the chalky sink
at 3 in the morning and there's one light
for all four of us which we share
gratefully along with an open bottle
of New Amsterdam and
an exposed corner to change in
I've never felt so much freedom
wrapped in a hilariously small Airbnb
plunked in Lower Manhattan watching
my brother slowly reach for his girlfriend's
hand I've never seen him in this light it's really
making me tear up remember when
we barely spoke I say with a laugh I
think I've known you all my life every
single person here our feet are all
dancing on the same three tiles we could
press this ceramic together and become
one isn't that what people are supposed
to be I say isn't that what friends
eventually do to each other can we please
stay here I'm too tired to be
speaking this much but the room
holds us perfectly our jade
rings unwashed jeans and freshly
curated smiles I swear we'll
see each other really soon I say
searching my legs for
bruises forgetting it's already
been three years
since they went away



Justine Wang is a college freshman at Brown University studying Neuroscience. She was born in Seattle, Washington, and enjoys writing poetry and prose pieces. When not writing, she is busy in labs, reading a good book, or playing violin.



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

Weighing

by Sean Wang

I set my grandfather's ring
on the steel tray. Red numbers rise.
The clerk taps the scale, the small click
settles the air we're in.

The old men say decide quickly,
luck won't wait; said like coin on tooth.
I came to see what stays. The digits steady;
it is my hand that shakes.

Waiting, I polish a thumbprint off the band
and think of home, how once I lowered a cup,
the teapot's glaze already crazed;
even careful, the lip gave,

bright pricks along my fingers.
I crouched and swept the grit
into the pan. The table took the scrape.
No lesson said, only lines

thin and red across the palm.
These hands will lift a child,
let him spell the gold letters
on the shop door; his fog blooms on the glass,

and then it clears. The clerk slides the ring back,
warm from her cloth. She rubs it once
on a square of blue. The dust she raises
turns and brightens to gold



Sean Wang is a Pushcart Prize and Best Small Fictions nominated poet and PhD candidate. His poems appear or are forthcoming in West Trade Review, ONE ART, wildscape. literary journal, among others. He can be found on Instagram at @sean_wang1997.



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

Window with Spring by Sean Wang

I look up, my coat open to the room.
Two faces ride the glass,
mine and the child's, forehead to the pane.

The latch is spring-thick.
I test it, metal answers,
a quiet click, the frame eases,
hinge-spring taking our weight,
a narrow seam turns bright.

A drawer rubs its wood.
First card, looped letters, a blot,
ink pooled to a dark oval,
its rim bright as wet bark,
paper threads lifting at the fold.

I kept this tucked, narrow,
the address worn to a soft ridge.
What stays is motion:
a cool hand on fever,
rain on lashes, chair legs scrape closer.

Years on, I lift the dust.
Sun cuts the table into squares.
A seed husk, a torn corner,
a loose red thread on a splinter,
after the move, the first opening.

Each spring the window pales.
Outside, the clay pot, a saucer
ringed with silt, leans into light.
One stem brings a small flower
up to the ledge and waits.

In the pane we tilt together;
we press closer, careful not to smear.
At the throat of the bloom,
a gold clock of pollen brightens,
the square of light moves toward it.



Photo by Villa Camera: Pexels.com

Downstream Scream by Diane Webster

I feel like a wedge of bark
blown onto a mountain stream
chasing gravity. I bang
into rocks that whoosh
me into white water
splashing me, bobbing me
over and through waves
in a seasick carnival ride
downhill. I speed into a curve
and am whipped
by a low-hanging limb.
I spin around,
no front or back. Another curve!

Oh, shit! A waterfall!
I speed over and fall, fall, fall.
Splat and am pummeled
beneath water until finally
forced out and up
to cascade farther down.

All I want, though,
is to float in a pool.
Feel the water lap against
my body like a rocking cradle.
Contemplate my shadow
on the rocks below.
Close my eyes against the sun
and feel its warmth
spread over my skin.



Diane Webster's work has appeared in North Dakota Quarterly, New English Review, Studio One and other literary magazines. She had micro-chaps published by Origami Poetry Press in 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025. She was a featured writer in Macrame Literary Journal and WestWard Quarterly. Her website is: www.dianewebster.com



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

The Ballad of Breaking Cars by Nathan Wofford

Movement I.

A simple journey turns to chaos
once the brass section decides to improvise. They screech
in fortissimo, the other sections startle and drop
their music. The violinists throw
their blocks of rosin to the ground, assumed
to be for shits and giggles, and the air is unbearable.

The glockenspiel chimes a high octave C,
then it rolls over to the baritones. Each note they play
sounds as if loose change is rattling
within the body of the instrument.

I stop the piece, frustrated. My dad chimes
in from the audience, "You might wanna check that."

Movement II.

The highway's tempo matches
that of an Allegro, so imagine my surprise
when the orchestra decides Andante seems to fit better.

I exaggerate my arm movement and hope
that a musician will notice, but they all zone out,
a couple of people falling asleep. The audience behind
me is furious and demands I pick up the pace.
Flustered, I call my dad.

He comes up on stage, reassures me the Earth
is still spinning. He invites a critic on stage.

"This orchestra sucks," says the critic
in a matter of fact voice.

I roll my eyes and watch him drag
my orchestra away. The audience glares
as they vacate the space. I'm alone with my dad.

Movement III.

During Vivaldi's most intense season,
I decide to give conducting a shot. Snowfall glares at me,
but sitting around with writer's block does not pay the bills.
I raise my metallic baton and cue
the percussion in. A drum roll begins,

a pattern in sixteenth notes:

One e and a two e and a three e and a four e and a :ll

My right hand signals the cellos
and the brass, but their chairs are empty.
The percussion then improvises a ritardando

and a new triplet rhythm:

One and a two and a three and a four and a :ll

I shake the baton harder and harder
hoping that some other instrument will play,
but the percussion comes to a grinding
halt. Tinnitus fills the space. My face seeks
refuge in my palms, the percussion players quietly
tiptoe away from the stage.

My score has so many scribbles
and symbols; I can hear Mozart groaning.
Desperation influences me to FaceTime
my dad, wondering if the piece is worth
salvaging. He groans at my sorry
state, "I'll be there in a bit," and hangs
up, leaving me alone in the winter air.



Nathan Wofford is a writer, musician, and teacher from Ohio. He graduated from Bowling Green State University with a degree in Creative Writing in May of 2024. He is currently unpublished, but is working hard to get his voice out there. Most of his writing tackles the unspoken truth of living in the current world through an almost vignette like approach.



Photo by Sara Puig Sanz: Pexels.com

Knowing a Different Blue

by Chris Wood

I came from hard work, where grandma's
thimble-pricked fingers scrambled eggs
before threading hems and stitching buttons.
Where grandpa washed away the daily grime
all the way to his elbows before dinner.

My father carried the tradition of service,
keeping people warm in winter, cool in summer.
I remember his dark blue work clothes,
the smell of metal when he crossed the threshold
and I rushed to welcome him home, wrapping
myself around his leg. His calloused hand
patted my brown hair while Mom peeled potatoes.

Today, my labor whispers in invoices
and leases, translating words into numbers,
building decimals and due dates beneath the surface
of bright storefronts. Each digit I pound
into the keyboard steadies a foundation.



Chris Wood is a poet and writer whose work explores memory, history, and identity through a lens rooted in faith, language, and place. She is the author of Yesterday Echoes, a poetry chapbook from Finishing Line Press, and author of Word Vignettes: Unraveling the History Behind Every Word. Her poems have appeared in Heart of Flesh, Salvation South, and numerous anthologies including Women Speak (2025). Learn more at <https://chriswoodwriter.com>.



Photo by Carolina Basi: Pexels.com

Where Water Goes by Huina Zheng

She was small and thin, carrying our baby sister on her back. She placed the last piece of candy into our brother's hand and whispered to me, "Be good, or Mom won't love us."

I knew what she meant. Mom always said, "Sons support you in old age; daughters are water you pour out." Each time my sister heard that, she bit her lip, scrubbed our clothes clean, washed the dishes until they shone, and cared for all of us before herself.

Over the years, I watched her give pieces of herself away like candy: leaving school in eighth grade to work and hand her wages home; running away three times, only to return because Dad had a stroke; giving birth at twenty, then again, pressing down her sobs as she hoped the next child might finally be a boy; paying for our brother's wedding; running a tiny clothing shop alone after her husband gambled everything away.

I thought she would always live like this, breaking herself apart to meet everyone else's needs.

Until that afternoon, when I was home and Mom snapped a clothes hanger across my niece's legs. "You're the older sister. How dare you fight your brother for toys!" My sister stepped in front of her child. Her arms trembled, but she didn't move back.

"She's my daughter," she said. "My beloved daughter."

Then she picked up her child and walked away. Each step was light but steady, like the sound she used to make peeling candy wrappers for us long ago, the sweetness always passing from her hands into ours. Fragile, yet edged with sweetness.

In that moment, I understood: daughters aren't water that vanishes when poured out. They simply flow toward the river that was theirs all along.



Huina Zheng holds an M.A. with Distinction in English Studies and works as a college essay coach. Her creative work has been published in Baltimore Review, Variant Literature, Midway Journal, and other literary journals. She has received multiple honors, including nominations for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, and Best Microfiction. She lives in Guangzhou, China with her family.

Author / Artist Profiles



Photo by Arvilla Fee: Mote Marine Aquarium Sarasota, Florida 2026



Author Profile: Ken e Bujold

1) How would you describe yourself and/or your work in three sentences or less?

I consider a writer to be a vessel of memory. Experience, whether personal or inherited, is the DNA of expression. Myths are timeless, today's stories waiting to be repurposed and retold.

2) Who has been your biggest supporter and/or inspiration?

My greatest supporter is my wife, Musica. My keenest critic, good friend and fellow poet, W.B. Munn. As for inspiration: the list is almost endless. The sea is full of poets. My favorites, to name a few: Lowell, Ashbery, Heaney and Merwin. As well, I must not omit the two literary lights of my university days: b.p. nichol and Michael Ondaatje.

3) Where is your favorite place to write or create your art?

While I can write almost anywhere, at any time of the day, my most productive time is usually early in the morning, before the sun rises, when the world is still and open to my thoughts.

4) If you look back at your writing or art when you first began creating, in what ways would you say you have grown or changed?

I have learned to trust my instincts. To accept that not every reader will find my words to their taste. That the key to writing honest poetry is being honest with yourself.

5) If you could choose any place in the world to write, draw, or paint for one day, where would you go?

The one place that is magical to me is my second home, my wife's native city, Singapore. That said, the oddity is that I seldom manage to write anything when there, but it never fails to revitalize the well of inspirations.

6) What advice would you give to anyone just starting a career as a writer or artist?

Read. Read everything. The more you do so, the more you learn the magic of language. And invest in dictionaries.

7) Are there any funny stories you'd like to share about your artistic journey?

Not so much funny as enlightening. I had some early success as a poet, then a long dry spell when career got in the way. When I returned to poetry, I found that writing is not so much about ambition, it's about survival. Setting your thoughts onto a page, the verbs you choose to prepare, are essential to a healthy life.



Artist Profile: Lorraine Caputo

1) How would you describe yourself and/or your work in three sentences or less?

I am an eternal wanderer—to destinations throughout the Americas. . .as well as within my Being. Much of my work—both literary and visual art—are influenced by the places I have been and the people I have met.

2) Who has been your biggest supporter and/or inspiration?

In the realm of literary writing, my inspiration has come from poets such as Daisy Zamora (of Nicaragua) and Pablo Neruda (Chile). Anthony Bourdain has been a “fellow traveler” (of sorts) in the genre of travel narratives. With art, the 20th century artists from both sides of the Atlantic have influenced me, especially Paul Klee. Indigenous art from around the world have also been an inspiration.

3) Where is your favorite place to write or create your art?

Wherever I am. . .neither knows any boundary.

4) If you look back at your writing or art when you first began creating, in what ways would you say you have grown or changed?

Uff! That is a difficult question as I began creating so many, many moons ago. . .and my earlier works no longer exist. I suppose one way is that the flow is more casual, more natural.

5) If you could choose any place in the world to write, draw, or paint for one day, where would you go?

Perhaps to one of my favorite hide-away spots on the Peruvian coast. . .or (if someone else is paying), a long-distance train ride through anyplace in Africa.

6) What advice would you give to anyone just starting a career as a writer or artist?

Don't worry about rejection. Your voice may not touch one journal or editor—but it will another. Just keep submitting.

7) Are there any funny stories you'd like to share about your artistic journey?

In the writing realm, there are many funny stories...and those I choose to share in my travel narratives. 😊



Author Profile: May Garner

1) How would you describe yourself and/or your work in three sentences or less?

I'm an author and poet from rural Ohio, whose work explores topics such as grief, childhood trauma, mental health, and generational ache. I write what lingers, what we continue to carry, and what refuses to stay buried.

2) Who has been your biggest supporter and/or inspiration?

My biggest supporter, by far, is my partner, Nathaniel. He is truly the reason why I do what I do and why I continue to share it. Before him, I didn't really push myself to publish my work, and now, with him by my side, I have two poetry collections published and 40+ literary publications. He offers me the most support, inspiration, and creative energy I could ask for.

3) Where is your favorite place to write or create your art?

I love creating outside, specifically on my front porch in my little sleepy corner of rural Ohio. I've been writing on the same front porch attached to the same stone house for over fifteen years now, and it's where my best work has been produced.

4) If you look back at your writing or art when you first began creating, in what ways would you say you have grown or changed?

I started out writing stories on Wattpad as a teenager, so to say I've grown feels like an understatement. I feel like I just genuinely understand so much more than I did when I started out, and that's a feeling that will continue to follow me as I continue to learn more. Writing, now, is much more than it was when it was just a blank Wattpad draft and a story that begged to be heard.

5) If you could choose any place in the world to write, draw, or paint for one day, where would you go?

Oh, I would LOVE to get to create art while visiting the Johnny Cash museum! He is one of my favorite artists, and I've been wanting to see his museum for years. It would be surreal to write poetry while surrounded by his legacy.

6) What advice would you give to anyone just starting a career as a writer or artist?

Write what you want. Write what you love. Write for yourself first. Nowadays, with so much space for comparison, it is so important to write what resonates with our own hearts. Keep holding onto your dreams. No dream is too big, and no dreamer, too small.

7) Are there any funny stories you'd like to share about your artistic journey?

I would say the story as to how I got into poetry is a bit funny. When I was sixteen, my best friend introduced me to my then-boyfriend, and she told him I was writer. Unfortunately, though, she told him I wrote poetry, to which I did not at the time. He started asking to read the poetry I wrote, and because I didn't want to admit that my friend had lied, I just started writing poetry... and now, it's my entire life. It's so funny how it worked out, because I honestly don't know if I would've picked up poetry at all if it hadn't been for that relationship.



Author Profile: Oumayma Oueghlani

1) How would you describe yourself and/or your work in three sentences or less?

Extremely stubborn. Highly personal. Intimate with restraint.

2) Who has been your biggest supporter and/or inspiration?

My lemon tree, rooted, reaching.

3) Where is your favorite place to write or create your art?

My small grey desk. I know my place around it—homey, intimate, ritualistic.

4) If you look back at your writing or art when you first began creating, in what ways would you say you have grown or changed?

Restraint, restraint, restraint. Trusting the reader, letting things be silent, letting things sink in.

5) If you could choose any place in the world to write, draw, or paint for one day, where would you go?

Antarctica. Writing in solitude as the cold takes over.
Writing about home in exile.

Author Profile: Nolo Segundo

1) How would you describe yourself and/or your work in three sentences or less?

Much of what I write seems to come from the awareness I gained over 50 years ago when I had an NDE whilst nearly drowning: that I have, I am a consciousness that existed before birth and will continue after my body dies—yes, an endless soul.

2) Who has been your biggest supporter and/or inspiration?

I don't know-- I don't understand how the poems 'come' to me, but they do, and I have learned if I don't soon write them down, I will lose them forever. Creation, at every level, is a mystery.

3) Where is your favorite place to write or create your art?

For the poems wherever they come to me [once it was at a Doctor's waiting room, so I wrote it on my I-phone]. But prose I write in my study.

4) If you look back at your writing or art when you first began creating, in what ways would you say you have grown or changed?

I feel grateful: how many get to write words that transcend time and space to enter another mind, another soul? Once I was on the phone with an insurance rep and he asked me what I was doing in retirement. When I told him I became a published poet and my pen name, he asked, 'Did you write the When I Leave You?-- my wife loves that poem!' THAT made my day!!!

5) If you could choose any place in the world to write, draw, or paint for one day, where would you go?

Anyplace that a great poem would come to me.

6) What advice would you give to anyone just starting a career as a writer or artist?

Seek your soul and beware of your ego, which is a liar and trickster and enemy of the soul.

7) Are there any funny stories you'd like to share about your artistic journey?

Well, what's funny is my previous careers as teacher, sales rep, financial planner all paid a whole lot more, ironically one might say; alas, we live in a culture that pays a fortune to someone who can throw a ball hard and fast but peanuts to those who create words that hint at the abounding mysteries of the Universe. But whoever said life was fair. . .



Photo by Gundula Vogel: Pexels.com

The End