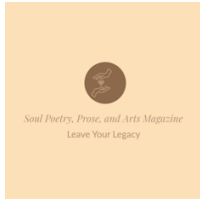




Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine Volume 2 Issue 2:
Summer 2026



Volume 2 Issue 2

Summer 2026

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Cover Art: "Edge of Blue" Sean Ewing

Arvilla Fee

Founder, Editor-in-Chief

Winners for Best Poetry, Prose & Art

Poetry

"Everything the Pencil Remembered"

David Anson Lee

Page 90

Prose

"Beverly Didn't Jump"

T.S. Carney

Page 25

Art

"Edge of Blue"

Sean Ewing

Page 47

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Contributors, Readers, and Community:

Summer time. Beach time. Break time. Always-have-something-to-read time! As you all (safely) soak up the sun's golden rays, I hope there is time for ice-cold drinks, picnics, and fireflies. Some of my fondest childhood memories come from playing outside in the heat of Indiana summers until the last speck of light left the sky. No A/C—just open windows, box fans, leafy trees and bare legs.

I am simply in awe of this summer issue. The individual talents of 76 authors and artists from India, the UK, China, Wales, Australia, the Netherlands, Canada, Nigeria, and all corners of the United States have created an incredible collection. I would like to give a special welcome to our Pathfinder Poets. It was such a joy to feature their work. When we see so many voices converging and melting together to form a work of art, it brings us hope for the future—a future that holds kindness, patience, and understanding for our fellow humans. May we all strive to keep seeking our commonalities.

I hope you all enjoy these 160+ pages of gorgeous images and words. I'm honored to be trusted with your precious works, and I will continue to work hard to support you and our readership in every way I can.

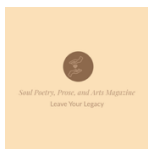
"Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart." ~ William Wordsworth

Yours truly,

Arvilla Fee

Founder, Editor-in-Chief

Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine



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Flood Tide **by Ed Ahern**

There are sorrows that abide
at the bottom of a flooded life.
Stirred up by unwanted tides,
there are sorrows that abide.
Despite being often denied
they remain painfully rife.
There are sorrows that abide
at the bottom of a flooded life.



Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had about 650 stories and poems published so far, and thirteen books. He works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories where he squats on the review board, and at Scribes Micro, where he's the idle figurehead.



Photo by Sergio Valentim: Pexels.com

Quick Time Rapids **by Ed Ahern**

A fast-flowing river is best heard
through absolute immersion.
Its rushing roar enveloping ears
and masking bankside distraction.

The stream is best encountered
by bracing against its flow
and sensing that just briefly
one can alter natural course

The legs adjust primordially
to the constant ever shifting
and begin to shuffle dance
to a rhythm not their own

But sooner than wanted
muscles tire, balance falters
cold and cramps set in
and the banks beckon.



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

Ordinary Force by Anne McPherson Arthurs

Cora made the appointment because her heart did something strange. And because Ian's heart had stopped.

For three days she had tried not to think of it so starkly. She called the sensation in her chest fluttering, pressure, stress, too much coffee, grief taking up residence inside her. But the truth was that every twinge, every ache and pain, every new uncomfortable awareness of her aging body now arrived with the same fear attached.

Ian would have made a joke about the elevator, slow-moving and creaky, the way it struggled to lift itself to the third floor. He would have said something about dying of old age between the first and second floors, then squeezed her hand until she laughed despite herself. Instead, Cora stood alone, watching the numbers blink upward, aware of her own pulse jumping in her throat.

The clinic, the same one she'd visited as a child, felt to Cora like stepping into her own past. Like a violation of the natural order, the place appeared untouched by the decades. The elevator deposited her neatly in the waiting area, where she recalled sitting beside her mother, waiting for hours and days and years for her name to be called. Though with a child's imperfect grasp of time, the wait had more likely been twenty minutes.

The lobby, too, was eerily familiar. A buzzing acre of fluorescent lights. A wide reception desk staffed by bent heads. Gray plastic couches, fake plants, a daytime talk show blaring from a large screen in the corner. The

place had all the charm of an airport terminal, its floor-to-ceiling windows commanding a view of Highway 13. A few children crashed plastic trucks together over stacks of well-thumbed magazines.

Cora waited with her purse on her lap, counting the reassuring beats in her chest.

The clock's thin red second hand swept dutifully around its face before a pretty nurse in scrubs announced Cora's name. Lost in a flood of remembrance, she missed being called until the second attempt.

The doctor was young, with dark brown eyes and the beginning of a beard. Cora couldn't guess his age. Anyone under forty might be twenty-two or thirty-eight. The crinkles around his eyes reminded her of her son, Ben. As a girl, doctors had reminded her of her father. Now they all reminded her of her son.

Ben didn't know she was here. He was far away and therefore easy to deceive.

Cora smiled in what she hoped was a friendly manner and said, "My son tried the beard thing once. He gave it up after about two weeks. Too itchy."

The doctor's lips flickered indulgently as he continued to stare down at his screen.

Oh, dear God, Cora thought. I've tipped over into becoming one of those sweet old ladies who tells her doctor he reminds her of her son. Or grandson. Someone who can be safely ignored.

Physically, she'd been feeling off for months, she explained. Often, she felt bloated, like she could be poked with a pin, and a gallon of water would drain out. She sweated at night, slept badly, and spent her days with brain fog that reminded her of COVID. But the heart palpitations three days earlier stopped her in place. She'd experienced fluttering in her chest from time to time, but this episode felt like an actual clutching, like her heart was beating too hard to be completely normal. Just short of alarming.

Since Ian died, every strange sensation prompted the same thought: This was how it started. This was how family disappeared.

She relayed all but this last thought to the young doctor, who seemed largely unconcerned. Or maybe he was always this calm.

"My father died of a heart attack seven years ago," she added with emphasis.

Her father's heart had failed in the ordinary way, after months of warning. Ian had offered no such courtesy.

"I understand why you might be concerned," he said without making eye contact. "But let's not panic. Your father was seventy-six. You're, what? Late fifties?"

A fraction of a pause.

"I'm fifty-four," she said with dignity.

"And who were you seeing before me?"

"A doctor up near Chicago. I grew up here. I just moved back."

She had come home not because she wanted to begin again, but because she could not think of anywhere else to go.

"Oh?" He looked up with interest for the first time. "That's not usually the direction people migrate around here. Why did you come back?"

"My husband died."

He paused, and Cora understood she had suddenly become delicate. She wondered if he was expecting her to cry. As the silence stretched, she blinked and realized tears had formed.

Damn it.

He glanced down and pressed something on his screen.

"Would you say you're basically satisfied with your life?"

Just like that, she had become a form. "Life was unsatisfactory for a while," she said. "But it's better now. It's been six months."

"Do you often get bored?"

"I quit my job to move down here, so there's not a lot happening at the moment. This is my big outing for the day." She smiled to show she was half joking, but he failed to notice.

"In the past month, have you lost interest or pleasure in things you usually like to do?"

"I haven't lost interest so much as I'm remembering what I used to enjoy."

"Have you felt sad, low, down, depressed, or hopeless?"

"I'm getting out of bed and showering again." She chuckled, hoping for a response. "That's progress, right?"

The doctor lifted his gaze and studied her seriously for a moment. She looked away and squirmed uncomfortably, realizing she'd preferred being ignored. He did not seem unkind, only inexperienced with women of a certain age.

"I'll have the nurse run a quick ECG and then I'll send you for some bloodwork. You're likely fine, but we'll do a couple of tests to put your mind at ease."

"My mind isn't what I'm worried about."

He gave her a pitying smile. She wasn't funny.

He took her blood pressure and listened to her lungs before stepping out.

A nurse appeared, closer to Cora's age, with a thick waist and the calm, practical air of someone who had seen every possible version of embarrassment. She smiled sympathetically as Cora unbuttoned her shirt.

"Just these little stickers," the nurse said, holding up a sheet of electrodes. "They're cold, but they don't hurt."

Cora nodded. She knew all about things that hurt. The nurse stuck the electrodes across Cora's skin with brisk, practiced hands. Cora had not been touched so intimately in months. She missed the easy brushing of

bodies in the night. The nurse's hands were impersonal, which somehow made contact easier to bear. Cora felt a light tingling from the electrodes, perhaps the gentlest thing her heart had experienced in a while.

The test was over quickly.

"Be right back," the nurse said before ducking out.

She returned with the doctor, who stayed just long enough to say, "Everything looks normal," before disappearing again.

Normal was both reassuring and insulting. Normal was not the same as an answer. She felt dismissed.

"I'm just concerned because my father had a heart attack," she explained to the nurse, as though she'd been the one dismissing her. "My heart has been feeling weird lately. And it's like I'm moving through a fog."

The nurse gently peeled the electrodes from Cora's skin.

"Sometimes the scary stuff announces itself loudly and sometimes it doesn't," she said. "But let me ask you something. These heart palpitations. Is your heart kind of racing for a few seconds and then stopping? Almost like it forgot to beat? Doesn't hurt, but feels weird?"

"Yes," Cora said, surprised by the accurate description.

"You get flushed out of nowhere, especially at night?"

"All the time."

"Brain fog?"

"Very much."

"You'll want to rule out AFib," the nurse said. "But my guess? Plain old perimenopause. You're at that age, I hate to tell you. Talk to your OBGYN. And don't let anyone convince you that you have to suffer through it. There are all kinds of helpful medications now."

Menopause. The word settled over her with ordinary force.

The nurse peeled the last electrode from Cora's side.

"Some women tell me they just stopped having a period one day and never noticed. I hate those women." She chuckled.

Cora, suddenly flooded with relief, found it almost funny. Her body had not been preparing to die—it had been preparing to become less relevant. She buttoned her shirt slowly. Not a heart attack. Not the same vanishing act that had taken Ian.

And then, beneath the relief, something smaller and meaner opened.

Ian had not been given a harmless answer. He'd not gone to a doctor, been encouraged to try supplements, or told he was fine. Ian had gone from husband to memory in the time it took his heart to fail, while Cora was handed instructions on how to live.

In the elevator, sinking toward the lobby, Cora pressed two fingers to her wrist. Her pulse was there, stubborn and strong. She closed her eyes, feeling her heart in her chest. She had come hoping to be told nothing was wrong and dreading the possibility that she would believe it.

That was the worst part.



Anne McPherson Arthurs grew up in Carbondale, Illinois, and earned a BA from Southern Illinois University and an MFA from Western Michigan University. After a hiatus spanning two decades, she began writing again during COVID. Her fiction has appeared in Ariel Chart, The Whitefish Review, Down in the Dirt Magazine, Embark Journal, October Hill Magazine, The Westchester Review and Peruse Lit. Her short story, "Piano Lessons," was nominated for the 2024 Best of the Net award. She lives with her husband and two children outside Chicago, where she reads and writes daily, usually with a dog at her feet.



Photo by cottonbro studio: Pexels.com

Contrapuntal by Veronica Ashenhurst

Memory thrums to wake me. A hospital—
intern and resident debating whether
my illness is real. “No,” claims one voice, “they don’t
teach that in medical school.” “Yes,” the other
asserts, “they do.” Doctors once called our bodies
neurasthenic—dolls with made-up aches, a fad,
topic of hallway discord. To hush the past,
I shift in bed, joints vexed, thumb on the playlist.
Now here’s Beethoven’s 5th, antiphony tucked
in the first movement—strings say *no*; winds say *yes*.
Limbs say *no*; heart says *yes*. At last, C major
floods my ear, horns and timpani parade in
red and gold. Solace. Volume amped, eyes shut, deaf
to the old voices—I hear only music.



Veronica Ashenhurst has published both poetry and articles on legal education. Her poems appear in Christian Century, The Healing Muse, West Trestle Review, and Wordgathering, among other journals. Her poetry has been nominated for Best New Poets and Best of the Net.



Photo by Wojciech Wyszowski: Pexels.com

That Time of False Hope by Veronica Ashenhurst

I tore the postcards he had sent from Greece.
Then desire snared me: I wrote to him again. He replied,
said treatment might come soon. You'll get well once science works its
marvels; research moves more quickly now. You'll
see Greece, he mused. We'll ferry to
Chios and stroll its mastic groves.
My ear mistook his gruff Greek consonants for love, but he

proposed an in-between—not-quite love—while
science mulled hypotheses. Doubtful yet seduced, I dreamed
I'd walk again, watch the mastic trees weep tears of resin,
its terpenes wafting balsam scent to sea.
Once, that scent steered sailing shipmen,
a sweet-warm beacon in the night.
Now, lost in illness, homebound, I yielded to not-quite love.

Yielding was *akrasía*, the ancients
would have said—a move against my better judgment. These legs,
after all, lurched when I stood. The friend and I had never
touched. We spoke through screens. Yet he named the world
anew: winds were *meltémia*;
farmers cut careful *kéntima*
in mastic bark to harvest sap. My halting Greek lit his

dark eyes. Still, almost-love riled me with its
tacit rules. I was to wait, not plead for postcards. Often,
I flirted with oblivion. My heart knocked, insurgent,
but science lagged through false starts and scant funds,
inched toward trial, error, more
trial, replication. Treatment
did not come. The friend invoked a god—pragmatism—then

he wished me strength and fled. I felt a hook—
the mastic farmers' *kentitíri*—slice the dreams I'd clutched,

while on Chios, wildfires roared. Pilots wrestled winds to drop
seawater on the blaze. Smoke choked the sun.

The trees knew burning soil would bake
their netlike roots. But in thick heat,
faces masked, farmers and firefighters worked hours on foot

for the trees to live. Here, far from flame, a fan clicked. Pins crept
along my bones. I heard the rustle of a ghost: desire—
that old, veiled unrest, still whispering of mastic groves in Greece.



Photo by Bushra Islam: Pexels.com

Hospital Birthday **by Veronica Ashenhurst**

Today, I am not that model
patient, drab-gowned, wheeled up and down
the runway of illness: gurney,

bowel bleed, ward. The look is
still grit with intravenous drip,
but my fitting's gone awry, line

infiltrated, fluid stinging.
Lift your arm dear, counsels the nurse,
for they want me buoyant, or just

discreet enough to gorge on grief
in secret. But blood's brass edge spoils
the air. Lament entreats. My hand

makes space, then, by the lunch tray, for
the breadth and salt-grey heave of loss,
while my roommate, ninety-four, turns

once and sleeps. Through the window screen,
bold winter sun arrives instead,
surprise lover with his force field

and photo flash. He warms my skin
with lavish heart, says you look well
today—stylish—even striking.

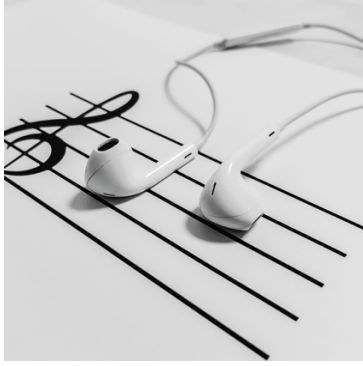


Photo by Jepoy Fabian: Pexels.com

Home Visit*

by Veronica Ashenhurst

Come in, by the little table, and thank you
for the hot tea and biscuit. How do I feel?
Fearful of more struggle. So much is effort—
to stand, prepare some food, even blood tests—while
the medical words—fatigue, malaise—somehow
deny this life estranged from life. Medicine
left us to self-manage misfortune—our low
prestige disease. On bitter days, my mind can't
grasp that practice of neglect and disbelief.
So, I can't speak to you of post-traumatic
growth, not yet. In bed, a world apart, the help
at hand is music—its abstract voice a good
love, rich tone in a darkened room, the patterns
of sound benign touch on long-forgotten skin.

* All the words in this found poem are drawn and rearranged from a medical journal article by C. Kingdon, D. Giotas, L. Nacul and E. Lacerda, "Health Care Responsibility and Compassion – Visiting the Housebound Patient Severely Affected by ME/CFS" *Healthcare* 2020, 8(3), 197; <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare8030197>



Photo by Pixabay: Pexels.com

Childless by Aron Bernstein

Sleep had three sons,
all gods of dreams,
and I would read you a bedtime story
if you had eyes to close.
No dusk to endure
when day never broke.

I would hand you heroes
if you had shelves for them to fall from,
if you could suffer
the violence of aspiring.

I would give you the Gordian Knot of my soul
to play with
if it were your duty to untangle it.

I would show you the labyrinth
if there were any way to go,
but, as you being all things at once,
are, at once
everywhere,
no choice will ever confine you.

And if it were a wellspring,
not drops from an icicle,
I would draw such love
as to never let you thirst.

So I've made your heart infallible—
it need never waste a beat.

And I've perfected your memory—
I've left you nothing to remember.
Besides, of hell's five rivers
you would drink first
from the Lethe.



Aron Bernstein is a Pacific Northwest poet and music teacher. Many of his pieces reflect themes of family dynamics, history, and the natural world. In his spare time you may catch him watching the night sky, hiking through the Desert Southwest, or helping his wife save the curtains from their beloved and determined cats.



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

Haiku by bibi

None know devotion
like a crow leaving trinkets
by the farm girl's door.



bibi is a poet whose roots are deeply grounded in her hometown—a small coal mining village in Manchester, England.



Photo by Ebru Akal: Pexels.com

Sunglasses, Lipstick, and Other Superpowers by T.S. Carney

Julie here again, diary.

I just got back from a comic convention. The man who took me thought he was irresistible—designer clothes, confidence inflated like a parade balloon. He told me to come dressed as “the sexiest person you know.”

Naturally, I said, “So me, then.”

He did not enjoy that answer.

He wanted a character from a comic or video game. I suggested Solid Snake—“because nothing is sexier than a man with twenty abs who shoots with democratic precision.” He didn’t laugh. So I tried, “Or Mario, because he can fix a leak and he has that blue-collar Mediterranean accent that suggests he actually listens.”

Shockingly, he also didn’t like that.

I didn’t dress up. And he wasn’t what I wanted anyway. What I did leave with was a mission: I would write a comic book.

For years, I thought comics were the bastard children of novels—poorly raised and resentful. I was wrong. They’re art. They’re structure. They’re worlds. And they’re the perfect place for my new alter ego.

Sabrina Koolidge.

Superhero name: Cool Girl.

Patron saint: Amy Elliott Dunne, scourge of complacent men.

Sabrina is forty-three, dangerous, and capable of fluttering the hearts of men from nineteen to ninety. She can step into a themed WWI restaurant or a bachelor’s bedroom and stop time simply by refusing to acknowledge it. Her backstory? She grew tired of men who would “dump on her chest and then ask for a beer.” Instead of murdering them, she chose a different path: micro-sabotage.

Sabrina doesn’t need a cape. Capes are for people who want to be seen. She prefers to be observed, not known. Her tools: oversized sunglasses, blood-red lipstick, and a ruthless lack of empathy.

Tonight, Sabrina attends a party.

She steps through the door and spots a man holding it open with that specific, unearned swagger—the same brand worn by the man who dragged her to the comic con. Sabrina slides on her shades, paints her lips Sanguine Crimson, and greets a woman she’s never met as if they shared a dorm bunk. While embracing the stranger, she delivers a precise heel strike to the door-holder’s shin. He collapses onto the steps like wet laundry.

Inside, Sabrina prowls like a shark in a sea of slow-moving seals.

"Hey, Cutie! Get me a beer!" someone bellows.

She grabs the lightest, weakest beer—something that tastes like carbonated disappointment—and lets it fall from her hand right in front of him.

"Oops," she whispers, watching foam soak his pretentious loafers.

He turns around, and Sabrina freezes.

He is hot. Stupidly hot. Impractically hot. A face that belongs on a Grecian coin or a cologne bottle that costs more than her monthly rent.

"I like your sunglasses," he says. His voice is velvet dipped in bourbon.

She removes them slowly, revealing eyes that have seen too many mid-shelf tragedies.

"Ah," she begins. "I'm Julie—"

I stop writing. I've slipped into the story. Again. I scratch out my own name until the paper thins.

Sabrina smiles. "I'm. . .Incognito."

He laughs softly. "You sound mysterious. Dangerous."

"Thank you."

"Are you a spy? A superhero?"

"No," she snaps, though she secretly enjoys it. When she leaves him behind, she forces herself not to look back.

"Michel is my arch-nemesis," Sabrina declares under her breath. "I have to be strong."

Her powers are evolving. No longer satisfied with kicks and spilled beer, she imagines new forms of petty social terrorism:

- Walking past a man and eating the best chip off his plate without breaking eye contact.
- Eating another man's specially crafted, highly-restrictive-diet burger mid-sentence as he brags about marathon times.
- Turning down the stereo precisely when the men at the party "really feel the beat," watching their air-guitar solos die in brutal silence.
- Stuffing a tray of finger foods into her clutch while discussing the socio-political implications of late-stage capitalism.

Sabrina scans the room for Michel, ready to unleash her upgrades.

But Michel is already watching. He steps forward, arms closing around her like a trap she knew was coming.

"You have a remarkable appetite for chaos," he murmurs, pinning her gently against a wall that smells like expensive plaster.

"It's not chaos," Sabrina hisses. "It's resource management."

"I think," Michel whispers, "that you're just Julie in a very expensive pair of shades."

I stop writing again. Third time tonight I've slipped into her—or she's slipped into me.

I need coffee.

When I return to my apartment, there's a clown sitting on the front stoop. Full makeup. Slumped posture. Existential aura.

"Is the circus in town?" I ask.

He sighs. "I played Pagliacci at the local theatre..."
We look at each other.

If Sabrina Koolidge is my hidden mask, then
Pagliacci is his public one.

Some masks hide you.
Some reveal you.

Some you put on.

Some you can't take off.

I'm still deciding which kind Sabrina is. And which
kind I am.



T.S. Carney works as a professional educator and writer based in the New York area. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming from Maudlin House, Your Impossible Voice, Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine, and Eunoia Review.



Photo by Pavel Danilyuk: Pexels.com

Beverly Didn't Jump by T.S. Carney

It's Julie.

Pamela called and said that our meeting would be at her house.

"Bring your story. I want to hear more about Sabrina and her 'interests,'" she said.

When I arrived, the other women were there—and a man in his early twenties. He gave Pamela a drink and fed her a slice of pizza from the table. She pulled the cheese like it was—well, it gave all the signs they were "really good friends," and she didn't try to hide it.

"This is Donte. He's joining our group," Pamela said.

"I thought this was for women only!" Cheryl said, annoyed.

"We need one man to tell us women how to write men, yes?" Pamela said.

The comments died.

"And he's brilliant! Read your piece, honey," Pamela said.

Donte read:

"Beverley stood before the cliff. She had done this impossible thing—she helped her muse get a job at the ice cream shoppe. She was no longer needed. Her arc is complete. She never had to eat. Never farted. Never said anything negative. She gave herself to Donte because he answered the clinch question at the interview: 'Vanilla or Chocolate?' 'Strawberry! Always Strawberry!' Maybe it was the strawberry that hung from the interviewer's face, or a lucky guess. But Beverley knew she was no longer needed in this story and jumped..."

The room was silent.

Donte softly finished, "Perhaps another story will claim her."

More silence. Karen coughed. Margaret reached for a slice. Julie didn't move; she stared into the void.

Julie spoke. "How does it end?"

Donte blinked. "The story?"

"Yes," Julie said. "After."

"Oh," he said, smiling. "Well, Donte grows. He marries. He has children. A good life."

Pamela nodded appreciatively.

"And he names the last child Beverly," Donte continued. "To honor her."

"That's beautiful," Cheryl said.

"Of course," Donte added quickly, "the son before that is named after his dog."

Laughter rippled through the room. Pamela clapped once, delighted.

Julie smiled too. Slowly.

"Did Beverly write this story?" she asked.

"No," Donte said. "I did."

Julie tilted her head. "So a man pushed her off a cliff, lived a full life, named a child after her for closure, and called it tribute."

"If Beverly didn't jump," Donte said, suddenly firm, "then Donte couldn't grow. She was a needed sacrifice."

The storm was about to begin.

"How much more sacrifice did she need?" Julie said.

"She didn't eat. Didn't fart. Didn't complain. She loved him because he said 'Strawberry.' That's not a muse. That's a vending machine."

The room erupted in gasps. Pamela nearly fainted.

"It's just a metaphor!" Donte said. "I bet you don't even know what those are!"

"No," Julie said. "It's a eulogy. For a woman you invented to love you—and then discarded when she made you feel small."

Julie laughed. "Next week, I'll bring a story. It's called *Beverly Didn't Jump*. It starts with her stealing the ice cream shoppe and turning it into a feminist speakeasy."

Donte stood up. "Pamela! If this is how a strong male character is treated—!"

Then Donte stormed out.

"Don't leave!" Pamela shouted. "I'll jump for you!"

Julie took a slice and leaned back.

A Pyrrhic victory.



Photo by Juan J. Morales-Trejo: Pexels.com

Treating Tiny Crumbs by Karen Carter

the dreams I wake up from,
I don't want to remember.

the bad poetry I write,
because I defend against
writing the good
that may hurt,

the way I toss out
left-over bread
I do not eat
in time
because it molds

into matter
I wish I knew
how to produce,

the blueberry goat cheese
I did not
finish,
because I was saving it
for a party that
never came.

last week at work a colleague
gave me a little gold star,
I put on my identity
badge, because I had
no tech errors
on my written reports.

perhaps,
if I treat,
the unsettling moments,
I experience,
distasteful as they may feel,

and I not collect,
wish upon,
gold stars
to glow over
performance anxiety,

perhaps then,
these tiny crumbs,
once a garbage disposal,
mold, decay, and waste,

turn into compost,
where soil and cedar mulch
create a poetry garden,
when enriched,
anyone can eat from.



Karen Carter is a poet, writer, and educator and presently teaches high school English and Creative Writing. Her debut poetry collection, Deep Dive, is available through Querencia Press (2024). She lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Find her online at www.KarenCarterPoetry.com



Photo by Martin.que: Pexels.com

Last Night on Linda Mar by Caylie Chaiu

bury the sun and kiss your rays goodnight
before basking in this yellow dawn—

Friend, you recognized the bay like the back of your palm,
hands raised to gather the sky, serenade bathing our clothes in this blue hue. Its ribbons
fell in circles around your feet
like dandelions sitting themselves on the headwind. You said when they flew, first they
were carried, then grew wings, then grew strong enough to fly before finding home in
your curls, and nestled in one dusted polaroid.

I think of your family, the overpriced Pop Mart figurines on your desk,
the way your dog would pounce on my key-chained tote left a hole in the center I
refused to sew up
and I waited and waited. . .until the fixture grew large enough to rip the tote in two
tattered and unused. One side held the drawing of your dog and its keychains, the other
was my signature.

I think of the ocean, the way water dripped from your skin
closing the gaps between your body, filled with salt—
half ocean, half tear drops
a replica of this tidal buildup in my chest
rippling its surface into transparency—a body part human, part ocean, but only half full

The other half could be used to water a garden, pluck the fruits of our labor and watch
them blossom into something beautiful.

I remembered it like a painting, depiction of a mother weeding her plants from a
hawthorn tree

roots bumpy beneath her feet. And I watched you
from that distance, like a play illuminating its stage lights beneath my eyes

a window as canvas
your body playing mother, a Hollywood actress you dreamed about

and I, observer, painter. I wanted to tear that barrier between art and artist
so I plunged into that canvas but was only left swimming in more water.

So I called you.

Body curling in a cold sweat as my throat sputtered—

"I love you, there's nothing more I can say,"

for the sun could be buried, but you'd still find me
searching for light.

And you best believe I searched for hours, kneeled at the coast of Linda Mar Beach
Searched. . .until the sand parted to a polaroid of your face—

Buried mosaic

of all my yearning captured beneath one June sky. I etched
our names on the shore before the ocean carried it in its tides
said a prayer in my palm, felt the water beneath my fingertips.

I closed my eyes and swore.

I saw nothing but a lighthouse on the water.



Caylie Chaiu is a poet and dreamer from Daly City, California, where she currently attends Westmoor High School. She loves running and going on just about any side quest around her neighborhood.

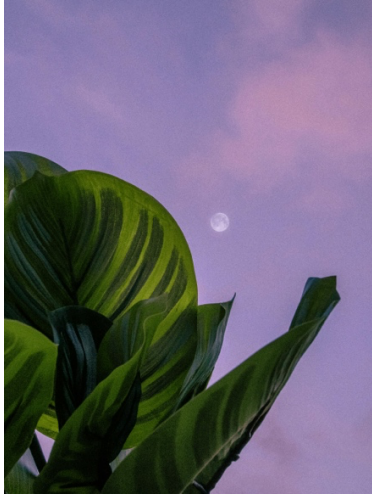


Photo by Lisa from Pexels: Pexels.com

Proof: A Contrapuntal by Lorelee Clark

vindication for the times I could not speak
vindication for leaf
vindication for road
vindication for the forgotten
vindication for us
vindication for dreams
vindication for hearts
vindication for moon
vindication for planet
vindication for song
vindication for be
vindication for attention
vindication for hope

tethered to source, spun like a leaf
fettered to tree, bulldozed at the side of the road
dirt packed, dreams forgotten
rites and rituals that carried us
we try to remember ancestor's dreams
tendrilled, budding in our hearts
fed electrical pulses from stars and moon
once a part of this planet
spinning and ordered like a song
composed as human life cannot be
ever-present trial of attention
fluctuating and full of hope
may we never despair so much we would not want vindication
like curious creatures, searching the trail of justice



Lorelee Clark has had two chapbooks and two books of poetry, the latest being Neolithic Imaginings: Mythical Explorations of the Unknown (Kelsay Press, 2026). Clark has been nominated for three 2026 Pushcart Prizes. She resides in Virginia; her website is sites.google.com/view/loraleeclark. Her Substack, which focuses on the process of creativity, is nosuchthingasfailure.substack.com.

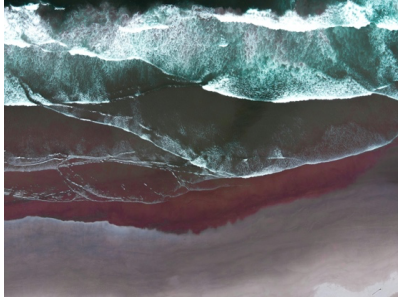


Photo by Jake Ganse: Pexels.com

Riptide by Lorelee Clark

Forgive the dead—
they know not what they did
unconsenting to go on the journey
that began as lungs exhaled,
never to inhale again.*

Forgive them their long silence,
missed holidays,
taking all their memories away,
never to be shared again:
the dive to the bottom of the lake,
the train ride into the mountains,
the delivery room, waiting
and waiting for the child to be born.

Forgive the woman for never waking up.
Forgive the man his dementia
from which he never recovered.
Forgive the weight of their souls
laden upon your breast, so sweet,
so heavy and permanent.

Forgive yourself days
erupting with longing and sadness—
you are simply caught in the current
of their absence, waves of love
unrequited for this moment.

They cross the divide with all
the dignity and care they had in life.
Forgive them
that they wait so long for you,
on the other side.

*Pixie Bruner "The Ritual Ouroboros of Loss," 2026

Summer Wishes
by Lorelee Clark





Photo by Kampus Production: Pexels.com

High School Reunions by Orman Day

We used to stroll
down memory lane,
now we shuffle,
stumbling over shadows,
shouting into cupped ears
deafened by the Stones,
squinting our eyes
to blur wrinkles and spots,
and yet with raspy throats
we still roar with laughter.



Orman Day has been published by such journals as Soul Poetry, Creative Nonfiction, Third Coast, Portland Review, Perceptions and Potomac Review. Now eighty, he feasts on travel memories collected during his vagabond days traveling the world with a pack on his back and very little money in his pocket.



Photo by Khoa Võ: Pexels.com

The Lost and Found Girl by Anju Devadas

She first stole rain.
Not the storm itself, only its shadow,
stitched into the ribs of a forgotten umbrella
sleeping in the Lost and Found.

The sky had opened its blue wound.
She had no shelter.
So she carried home
what nobody seemed to be missing.

The next morning, the umbrella stayed with her.
And something else stayed too
the strange sweetness of finding a thing
before it found its owner.

After that, she wandered the borders of abandonment.
A ribbon without a name.
A pencil bitten by another mouth.
A bracelet still warm with the memory of a wrist.

She gathered them
the way some children gather seashells,
believing that what the tide leaves behind
belongs to whoever kneels first.

At home, she laid her treasures like offerings.
Look what I found.
Not mine. Not anyone's, she thought,
because nobody had come looking.

Her mother's eyes did not become thunder.
She did not say, "Return it!"

Instead she asked, "What else is there?"
And so the room learned silence.

Perhaps poverty is not always hunger.
Sometimes it is the absence of a voice that says:
You deserve things without taking them.

Years later, the world found her back.
A hand on her shoulder.
A witness.
A name spoken aloud.

Suddenly every object she had carried
grew heavy with its history.
The bracelet became a missing wrist.
The pencil, a searching hand.
The umbrella, a child walking home through rain.

Shame arrived not as a punishment
but as a mirror.
And she stood before it, motionless.

A small stone
at the bottom of a deep lake,
watching the water distort her face.

The words thrown at her
did not bruise the skin.
They nested inside her ribs.

For days
she practiced disappearing
walking through corridors
as softly as dust,
folding herself into corners,
learning how guilt can make a body
smaller than its shadow.

But sometimes she still wonders
about all those lost things.

Whether they waited
to be reclaimed,
or whether they were lonely too,
hoping someone would choose them.

And somewhere,
inside the woman she became,

a little girl still wanders
the kingdom of the misplaced
searching not for umbrellas,
or bracelets,
or forgotten treasures
but for the moment
someone should have taken her hand
and returned her to herself.



Anju Devadas R D currently works as a Guest Faculty in the Department of English at Pondicherry University. A budding poet, her work has appeared in Madras Courier, Chakkar, The Wise Owl, Soul Poetry, Prose and Arts Magazine, LittCrit, Feminism In India, and other journals and magazines. Her creative and critical writing moves between the personal and the cultural, drawing on confessional and feminist traditions.



Photo by Elina Sazonova: Pexels.com

Young and Smart by Stephen Phillip Druce

Oh to be
young and smart,

like a
migrating baby
bird, our triumphs
will fade like
ocean waves that
dry out on
the rocks—

our blunders will
etch like fossils.



Stephen Philip Druce is a poet and comedy writer from Shrewsbury in the UK. He is published in the UK, the USA, India, Hungary, Ireland and South Africa. Stephen has also written for BBC Radio 4 Extra and London theatre plays.



Photo by Daniel Torobekov: Pexels.com

benediction by Tessara Dudley

the land is burning
summer fires burst and threaten
we recall when those fires were our flesh
subjugation repression concentration internment relocation
promises broken

are we not human ?

we watch with haunted eyes
we pray for our salvation

yet
in my dreams I work the land
leave the uncut corners for those who hunger
tithes for the poor
bring my first fruits to the temple
the sabbath year comes once more
and I welcome all at my table
to eat their fill
each of us made new
 now blessed



Tessara Dudley is a Black queer poet living in Salem, OR. Tessara has published poetry in Sun Star Review, Wordgathering, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, and Words Dance, and in anthologies published by Minerva Rising, Zoetic Press, Damaged Goods Press, and Wingless Dreamer. Their poetry book reviews have been featured in Mom Egg Review. Tessara's first poetry collection is Fallen/Forever Rising; they are currently working on their second poetry book, a collection of sapphic reimaginations of fairy tales, folklore, and myths. They can be found at tessaradudley.substack.com



Photo by Yihan Wang: Pexels.com

stardust **by Tessara Dudley**

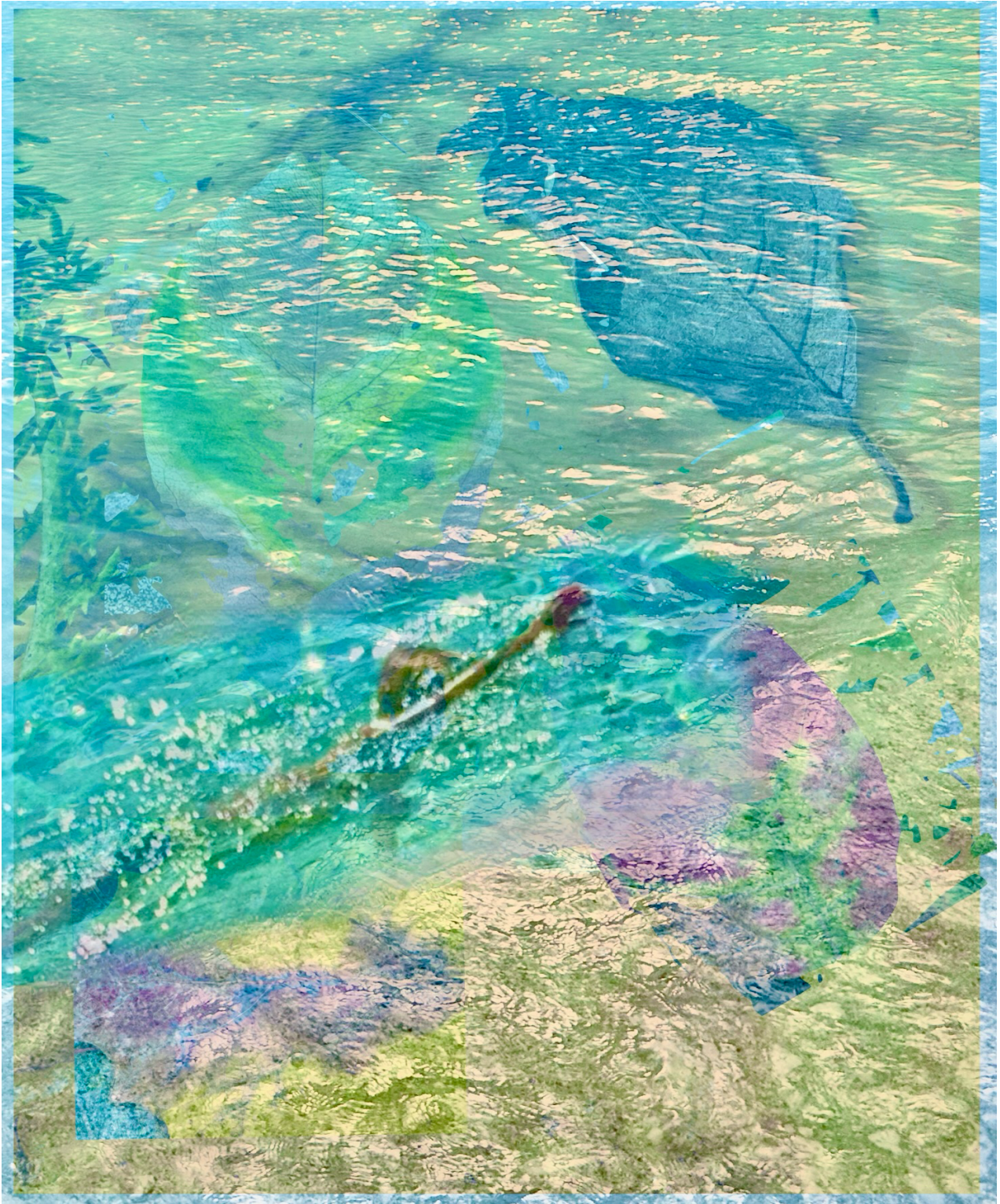
we are all stardust
the stuff of galaxies momentarily suspended
sloughing and regenerating and breathing in
and out
made from tiny bits of solar system
and other humans through space and time
all energy conserved
we are the children of planet formation
our parents titans in the skies
living and burning and dying and reborn
with each new baby's breath

Becoming
by Kelly DuMar



Kelly DuMar is a poet, playwright, photographer and workshop facilitator. She's author of four poetry collections, including jinx and heavenly calling, published by Lily Poetry Review Books. Her poems are published in Bellevue Literary Review, Tupelo Quarterly, Thrush and more. Her images have been featured on the cover of Josephine Quarterly, About Place, Synkronicit, Feral, Cool Beans Lit, Young Ravens Literary Review, Etymology, Confetti and Atlantic Northeast. Kelly produces the Featured Open Mic for the Journal of Expressive Writing. Her abstract photos celebrate the beauty of nature from the habitat of her home on the Charles River and her travels beyond.

Autumn Swim
by Kelly DuMar



Cosmos
by Kelly DuMar

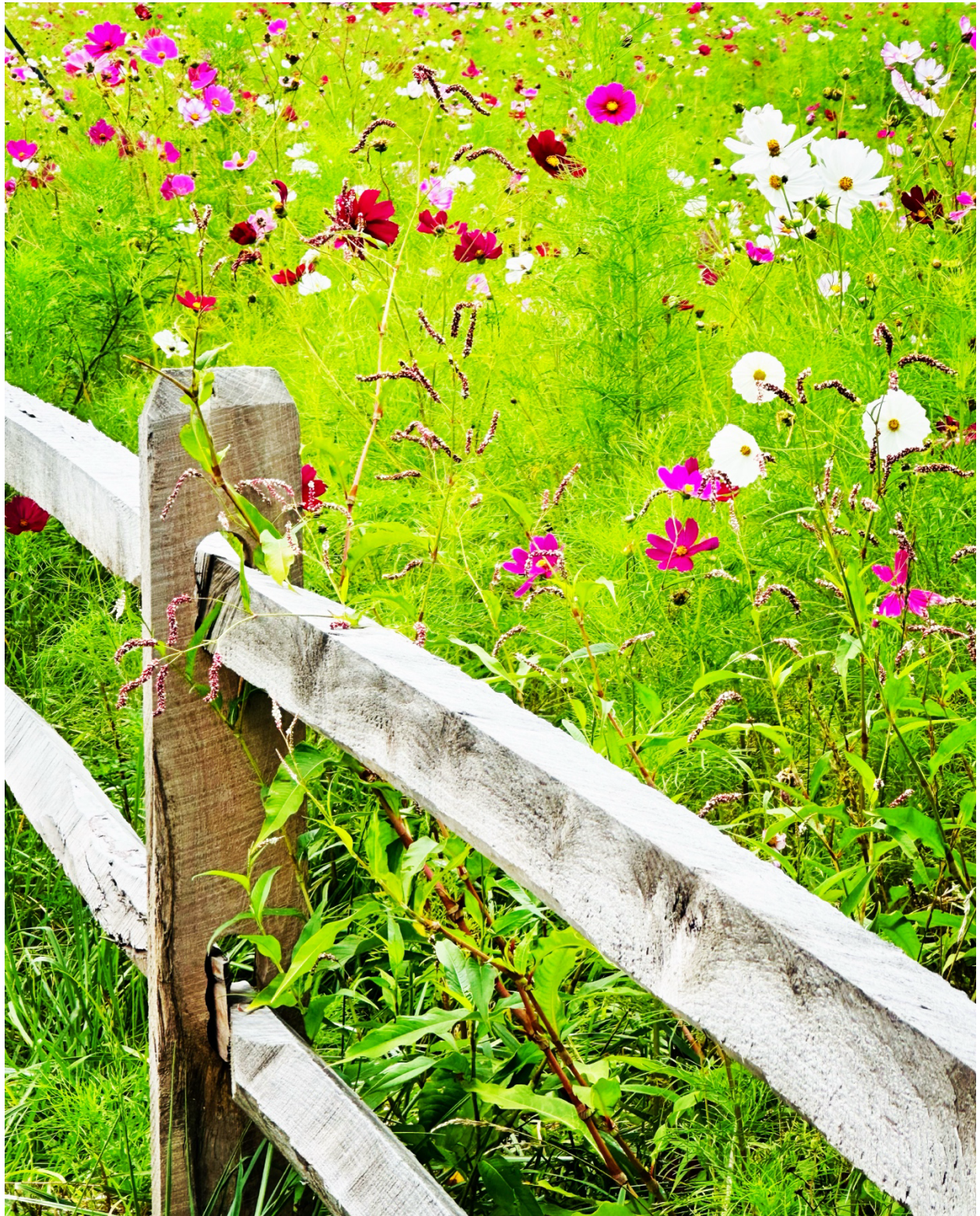




Photo by Shernon Hague: Pexels.com

Summer Rain by G.O. Elliott

We arrive, sleep deprived, eyes red and itchy. The flight was long, or exactly four full-length movies and two episodes of *Ninjago*. The kids, Eight and Eleven, were delirious with excitement and drunk from exhaustion. We drop our bags off at the hotel, traveling via cab thanks to Google translate and a credit card which pays in local currency. The sky looked different, according to Eight, but how? Just different. It's bigger! Or maybe smaller?

We walk to the restaurant at an uneven pace, looking up (the skyscrapers! the trees! the people!) and down (the phone/map—left, right, left, hurry and cross. Cross. I said CROSS NOW! Also, make sure you look the other way first here; it's weird, I know.). The door, dark, is wedged between an apartment entrance and. . .what exactly? some sort of office? Doesn't matter. We found it.

Eleven insists on getting the tasting menu, "because we're in Tokyo." He's in a rush—to grow, to experience life, to be viewed seriously—and he knows the tasting menu is not for children. Eight, with the big emotions but inversely spindly legs and arms, orders "regular food" then questions why the food does not arrive IMMEDIATELY. . .if only he had the energy to lift. . .his. . .head. . .from. . .the. . .table. The staff—professional; courteous; a bit leery of kids, perhaps—occasionally speak in hushed tones and glance our way. The smells—strong, warm, inviting—creep to us, a snake stalking its prey, before the server careens around the corner with our smorgasbord. Food reverently passed to us. We express our gratitude—to them, to being here, for this brief life. We breathe in, the food vanishes. Were we respectful? Unclear. Was it obvious we enjoyed it? Undoubtedly. Satiated, we saunter out. Sleepiness begins to return to the kids' eyes, arriving in waves like heavy summer rain.



G.O. Elliott is an emerging writer and artist based in Santa Barbara, CA, where he is the father to two boys and the spouse to a smarter and kinder soul than he. When not writing, he enjoys volunteering, going to the beach with his family, and eating tacos.



Photo by simon wang: Pexels.com

Inheritance by Susan Sandstrom Ellis

rain hits roof
runs to gutter
gathers itself
expands into drops
until they are balloons
hanging from the eaves

rain pulses
like hundreds of hearts
the shape of opals
on a grandmother's
necklace—
priceless

rainwater fills
the wooden barrel—
plunge your hands
scoop up jewels
give them to the clouds



Susan Sandstrom Ellis has written in many forms: journaling, poetry, songs, short stories, and a novel. When she is not writing, she enjoys gardening, singing, playing guitar, and hanging out with her family and kitty-cat, Trini. Her work has appeared in Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine, January House Literary Journal, Rough Diamond Poetry, ELLIE, and Blasphemous. She is currently working on a novella.



Photo by cottonbro studio: Pexels.com

Rain by Sean Ewing

I learned from rain, to mistrust what sounds clean.
The driveway shines black, under trash cans and brake dust.
A paper receipt drifting, then sticks to the curb.
In the garage, the smell of gas and oil.
The socket set waits, arranged like small verdicts.
You left the cup, by the sink with red on the rim.
I did not move it, for three full days.
Almost noble, which is how cowards bless delay.
Outside the gutter coughs, leaves into the dark.
A red maple drops, one hand after another.
The rain keeps saying, look.
I look at the cup, until the looking enters my chest.
You are not gone, from what I refuse to touch.

You are in the fork, against the white plate.
Not you alone, but the sound after I spoke.
The bills lie open, like ribs on the table.
One late notice waits, one envelope split at the throat.
I meant to apologize, before the words clotted.
Men build chapels, from tools left out too long.
A wrench on the counter, a drill by the chair.
Each one stands there, where speech should have stood.
The sink drips steadily, a surgeon tapping bone.
The rain keeps saying, look harder.
I stare at cracked tile, instead of your mouth.
Black water gathers, under the porch step.
Something below it, presses through old roots.

By evening the house, knows my breathing.
The cup remains there, red mark turned outward.
You are upstairs, or nowhere, or both.
The rain keeps saying, stay.
I turn on the water, and hold the cup.
Oil leaves my knuckles, old cuts sting awake.
The water clears, then keeps clearing.
The stain thins slowly, but will not leave.
A branch scrapes the window, once and stops.
The room listens, someone leaning close in silence.
I set the cup back, exactly where I found it.
Clean enough, to accuse me.
And wait for you, to drink from it again.



Sean Ewing is a poet and visual artist whose writing invites reflection, stillness, and deeper awareness of the world around us. His work blends vivid imagery with honest emotion, often drawing from nature to explore sorrow, beauty, and the quiet hope found in faith. Through poetry and art, he seeks to create space for contemplation, resilience, and connection beyond the surface of everyday life. His work has appeared in publications including Dulcet Literary Magazine, Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine, The Writers Journal, Black Fox Lit, The Gilded Weathervane and others.

Before the Tide
by Sean Ewing



Edge of Blue
by Sean Ewing



Garden by the Sea
by Sean Ewing





Photo by Nikolett Emmert: Pexels.com

Naming of Parts **by Dan Fitzgerald**

Wind passes over water
collecting the blue of sky,
the green of sea—
coloring the clouds
in shades of bruising.
Storms stir the air
rising to meet the damaged clouds,
releasing them in shattered shards
of white.



Dan Fitzgerald is an award winning poet. His work has appeared in many journals and anthologies. He lives quietly in Pontiac, Illinois tending to home and garden.



Photo by Anuj Yadav: Pexels.com

Promises by Nolcha Fox

I was going to visit what was left of my mother. Except I was driving the wrong way, following the birds flying low in the sky. Not just one kind of bird. All sorts of birds, flying crazy-like, almost bumping into each other.

He told me that birds could save my life. All I had to do was watch them.

And now I was breaking the speed limit. Breaking another promise to my mother.

And that man, when did I first see him?

~~

Mama and I were waiting for a train to another place to live. I was five years old. And bored with looking at all the men looking at Mama. I picked up a magazine and flipped through the pages, looking at the pictures. Some were beautiful pictures of birds, colors I'd never seen.

The next page showed a picture of a man holding a camera. His eyes were ice blue. His dirty blond hair fell below his shoulders, and he wore a floppy brown hat.

Mama swore. She grabbed the magazine from my hands and threw it in the wastebasket.

I cried.

She cupped my face in her hands. "Sweetie, I'm sorry. I promise I'll always love you and take care of you. Your father broke his promise and never came back. But I won't break mine."

~~

I wiped a tear from my cheek. I missed that mother.

It was twilight, and the tank was almost empty when I pulled into a gas station. I was exhausted, and I lost sight of the birds.

After the gas station attendant refueled my car, he directed me to a motel. "You should get an early start tomorrow morning," he said. "There's a hurricane warning. I'm leaving town as soon as my shift is over."

~~

I decided to visit my mother over a long holiday weekend. I stood in front of the window, next to the gate, waiting to board the plane.

I glanced at the man standing beside me. The blue eyes and dishwater-blond hair looked familiar.

He looked at me. "Do you remember me?"

A voice over the loudspeaker announced, "Flight 9023 is ready for boarding."

"That's my plane. I have to go," I said, backing away from him.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the window. "Don't get on that plane." He pinned me to the wall. "Believe me, your life depends on it."

People stared at me as they walked through the double doors to board the plane. I looked at a mirrored pillar and understood why. I was pressed against the wall. And I was alone.

The plane left without me. Another promise to my mother broken.

Before the plane was out of sight, it was engulfed in a fireball. The explosion rocked the building and shattered the windows. I was far enough away that the glass shards didn't reach me. People in the terminal screamed and ran.

"You're closer than you know to figuring everything out," the man said. He let me go and tipped his floppy hat as a goodbye. Before I could say anything, he disappeared into the crowd.

I heard on the news that the accident was caused by a bird strike.

~ ~

I remembered the first time I saw him in person. It was three years and five moves after I saw his picture in the magazine.

I woke up early that morning. Mama was in bed with a man she brought home from work, a different man from the night before.

Some of the men she brought home hit Mama. Sometimes they hit me. I didn't want to find out what this man might do.

I kicked a cockroach as I closed the door quietly behind me, and then smashed it with my heel. The September wind pushed me against the door. I wrapped my thin coat tightly around my body.

I headed toward the park. I had just enough change in my pocket to buy breakfast from the pretzel vendor.

I spotted a little pile of feathers just ahead. I squatted down and gently picked up the fluffball.

I cupped the bird in both hands, praying under my breath that I could find help for it. I saw a man standing under the trees, near a park bench. Birds of all sizes and colors milled around his feet, flew around his head, and perched on his shoulders.

He wore a black coat that reached his ankles, and a floppy brown hat that shaded his face.

He smiled at me as I walked closer. The birds were a sea of color parting at my feet. I offered up the broken bird. My hands barely reached his waist.

"Can you fix it?" I asked.

"It's still alive, so it's not too late." We sat down on the bench. He set the bird in a shoe box lined with an old flannel cloth.

"Looks like a broken wing." He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wrapped it around the bird's body.

"Do you think it will fly again?" I asked.

"I don't know." He looked at all the birds around us for a moment. "You know what these birds really are?"

I shook my head.

"They're promises people make to each other. The promises people keep."

I pointed to the bird in the box. "What about that one?"

He sighed. "That little one is a promise someone meant to keep but couldn't."

"Why couldn't someone keep a promise?"

"Oh, something got in the way that person didn't expect. An accident, maybe."

We watched one of the birds at his feet fly into the air.

"What about that bird?"

"That's a promise somebody broke."

The bird flew away, higher and higher, until we couldn't see it anymore.

The man looked at me and smiled. "Speaking of promises, shouldn't you get home?"

I gasped and ran all the way back to the apartment.

"You're late," Mama said, dabbing makeup on a bruise around her eye. "Where were you?"

"I found a bird with a broken wing," I said, "So I gave it to a man to fix."

Mama turned away from her mirror and scowled at me. "I told you never to talk to strangers!"

"You do," I said. "And you bring them home."

Mama slapped me across the cheek. Hard.

I touched my cheek. It was warm. But I wouldn't let her see me cry. I turned around and ran to my room.

Mama got up from her chair to follow me, but she tripped on her robe. Or maybe she was drunk. Or on drugs.

I left her on the floor, then knocked on apartment doors until someone answered and called the police.

~~

The last time I saw the birdman, I was 12 years old. I ran away from home. Again. This time it was for good.

I stood at the bus stop, my secret stash of money in my pocket, the money Mama hadn't found and blown on her latest addiction.

It was a cold, cloudy day, and I was wearing only a sweater. A man walked over to the bus stop and stood next to me. "When is the next bus coming?"

"About 15 or 20 minutes, I think." I pulled down my sleeve to hide the cigarette burns Mama left.

The man took off his black trench coat and put it around your shoulders. "Take it, you're shivering," he said.

I looked up to thank him and gasped. It was the birdman. He hadn't changed a bit since the last time you saw him. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

He looked up at the sky. "I'm going to teach you how birds can save your life."

I laughed. "Birds can't talk."

"No, but they can fly. If a big storm is coming, they'll fly away the day before, and they'll fly low."

I pointed to the birds on the bars around the bus stop. "But right now, they're just sitting. What does that mean?"

He laughed. "Rain. Should be happening pretty soon." He walked away, stopped, and turned around. "Remember, watch them."

~~

I visited Mama at the retirement home. "Hi, Mama."

"Do I look pretty?"

"Very pretty, Mama."

Mama hummed a tuneless tune. "Do you want to see my photo albums?" she finally said.

"Yes, I would."

She pointed to a shelf.

I chose an album and put it on the table in front of her.

She opened the album and sang to the pictures as she turned the pages. "This is me. Homecoming queen. Aren't I beautiful?"

"Yes, Mama." I took a yellowed newspaper clipping from the album and unfolded it. "What's this?"

It was dated the day I was born. It reported a car accident. And it showed a picture of the birdman.

"Mama, who is this?"

She looked at the newspaper clipping. "Oh, that's my husband." Mama hummed.

"Do you remember you promised that you'd always love me and take care of me?" I stood up. "You broke your promise, Mama. A long time ago. But he didn't."

Mama looked up at me, her eyes wide. She watched me walk past her, out to the balcony.

I stood on the rail and raised my arms. They turned into wings, and I flew away.



Nolcha Fox's poems have been curated in print and online journals. A best-selling author, her poetry books are available on Amazon and Dancing Girl Press. Nominated for Best Of The Net and Pushcart Prize multiple times. Editor of Chewers by Masticadores and LatinosUSA.



Photo by wr heustis: Pexels.com

On the Sound **by Gordon Jay Frost**

Around the shoals, inches deep.
It's cold, even in the bright times,
but clear and open to curious eyes.
Reach down, put in your hands.
Let the bracing touch of rocky water
caress you, wake you
from your indolence. There's a grey ridged shell
with a glimmer of aquamarine,
a scuttling tiny crab, darting black fish
smaller than a fingernail.
Even the sand is light and frothy.
Undulating in this little hollow,
a dance of tiny angels. You will be
tempted to take something back
from here, to pull from this living
treasure chest a simple souvenir
but resist, resist, and remember
that the shell is a home,
the rock a hiding place, every furrow
discovering everything itself
in its short cascade of time.
Watch and then lean back out,
footsteps withering in the sand,
your bag empty, your heart full.



Gordon Jay Frost studied at the Interlochen Arts Academy and the University of Michigan and worked in the literature program of the National Endowment for the Arts before embarking on a forty year career in philanthropy. His poems first appeared in Contact II, Metier, The Washington Dossier, and The Interlochen Review, and, more recently, in Westward Quarterly and the Maryland Literary Review. He resides in northern Virginia.



Photo by Ayşegül Aytören: Pexels.com

wisdom and virtue by Grace Fryberger

~homage to Gertrude Stein

a high kind roundness
kind again on all sides
where no sides abide but
seeps a quiet calm
a balm for bones
when surrender is added
infuses into the stomach
never lost in doubtful crevices
no. not that. but
on white, in clear white weather
atop kite voices outspoken
twined along a trellis of branches
descending from foraged canopies
into houses built of windows to the sea.



Grace Fryberger lives in Tucson, Arizona. Semi-retired, she is employed by the University of Arizona in the College of Medicine. Her poems have appeared in such journals as Unstrung, Ohio Poetry Review, Blue Guitar, Arizona State Poetry Society, Book of Matches, Parcham and the Medical Literary Journal for University of Virginia.



Photo by Taylen Lundequam: Pexels.com

Love Song like a Sonnet by Grace Fryberger

A lit arc of moonlight reflects
from under the ground fog adrift
volcanic stones steam
smooth rolling between
foam sighs against the seawall of cliffs

a tight heave of black wind blows in
a thrash of sea kelp lies dying
no buried nets hold
from sand's careless tow
a grip on the seawall of cliffs

aloft a storm petrel turns back
in the dark covered bay's retreat
the night heron seeks

a tremor beneath
in a song near the seawall of cliffs

a nest at the dry edge of reeds
knit of horsehair and willow down
a warbler this night
prepares for steep flight
straight up from the seawall of cliffs

a flash through the arc-light above
his slow-moving spiral descends
wings and tail out spread
he sings love to wed
she sparks by the seawall of cliffs

together they fly out past tides
to sail migrant airs unfettered
east to a young sun
wings beating as one
dawn splinters across wild red cliffs.



Photo by Manish Jangid: Pexels.com

walking in the pool by Grace Fryberger

have you felt it?
your blood astonished
by footfalls that sink
that float down with no pain
to listen among rivulets
to raise up, cast loose like
bright red shingles in a storm
your arms ever widening
in an emptied lightness
did you pull or push this feeling?
your angled gaze upward feeding
the light blue hem of the stars.



Photo by Shyamli Kashyap: Pexels.com

chrysalis by Ava Gordon

chrysalis
(*n.*)

1. a soft architecture of becoming; a silence that grows a body
2. the careful balance between hunger and wing
3. a coffin that refuses to stay a coffin

from *khrusos*, gold:

as in, the way the light finds you even while you are sealed
as in, something bright being made where no one can see it

usage:

she entered her chrysalis with a mouth full of endings
he called it hiding; it was not
they mistook stillness for surrender
but inside, a storm was learning how to breathe

synonyms: threshold, hush, almost

antonyms: arrival (though this is debated)

note:

the body unthreads itself here
liquefies its old certainties
keeps only what remembers how to fly

see also: metamorphosis, ache, patience



Ava Gordon is a student at Emerson College. She was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts, and spends her time writing poetry that examines the beauty (and pain) of the human experience.



Photo by Sebastiaan Stam: Pexels.com

gravitational pull **by Ava Gordon**

something tugs at me from the dark
lacking decorum, thrumming with the ache
of distance remembering its origin.

my hair lifts, a thousand silver threads
caught in the fingers of constellations.
the sky whispers in a language
older than my bones.

i am supposed to stay—
fold the laundry, water the plants,
be ordinary
but the horizon whispers like an open door,
and i feel myself unraveling
toward it.

every pulse says *go*.
every breath tastes of elsewhere.

the stars have found me again,
their pull a lovely mercy,
a promise that i was never meant
to stay earthbound forever.

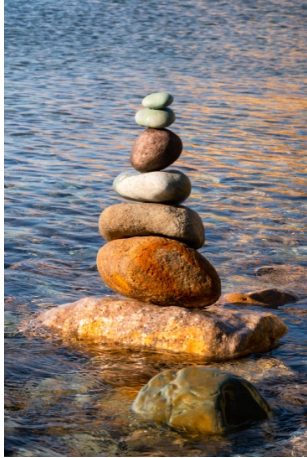


Photo by Emre Ayata: Pexels.com

Conquer by Janessa Graham

(After Mary Oliver's "How Would You Live Then?")

What if anxiety is just a dyed-in-wool truth teller prophesying
within your temple? What if depression is just a supplication
of your spirit's keeper? What if insecurity is just a friendly
microbe fermenting doubt into faith? What if jealousy is just
a want needing care? What if fear is just a friend wearing
caution wisely? What if anger is just a piper needing to be
paid? What if envy is just a desire self-entitled? What if hurt
is just a heart overdue for a break? What if pain is just a faithful
messenger proclaiming for heed? What if vulnerability is just
a strength espousing its weaknesses? What if sadness is just a
joy being reborn? What if a tear is just an eye exhaling to breathe?
What if loneliness is just a connection on sabbatical? What if
suffering is just April showers bringing May flowers? What if the
sword is just a finger needing to cease its pointing? What if the
shield is just a knee needing to bend? What if the gun is just a
bully running scared? What if a bullet is just a wound wailing?
What if war is just a pride afraid to love?



Janessa Graham is a Christian poet and writer from New York. Her work has appeared in Soul Poetry, Eileen Verbs Books, Tap into Poetry, and The Write Launch. She holds a Master of Arts in psychology and works as an Advanced CASAC counselor helping people who cope with substance use/co-occurring mental health disorders with seeking treatment. As a result, her work focuses on spirituality, faith, instilling hope, spreading love, promoting empathy, facilitating compassion, softening judgment, and giving a voice to those who've been marginalized and devalued.



Photo by nastia: Pexels.com

Swamp by John Grey

It's a blot of stillness—
sundew, bladderwort, bald cypress—
broken only by a frog,
green as a bruise,
hopping between lily pads.
The low-slung air
is as thick as a widow's shawl.

There's so much surface,
baked green and brown.
And sporadic sounds,
a thump from below.
then the canopy's high-wire screech.
Even here, in the muck,
desire makes itself audible.

A gator impersonates driftwood
in a clot of pitcher plants.
A snake slithers down a narrow dry path,
its skin, dulled by algae.
No need to strike. The look alone is a warning.

This place is a fever dressed in foliage.
A landscape that apes affliction.
I've felt its tremor.
I've caught its chill.
It's in me now.



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



Photo by Nataliya Vaitkevich: Pexels.com

The Travel Bug by John Grey

Some part of me—
a sliver, a smudge—
is left behind
everywhere I go in the world.

Not through absent-mindedness
like socks left behind in hotel drawers,
or the coat slung over a chair in Prague
that may still be there for all I know.

But I brushed a monument in Warsaw,
and something flaked off.
I shook hands in Tangier, left a trace
on a stranger's palm.

So yes, I'm in Paris—a sip of espresso.
In Morocco, still fingering the leather.
What may be mere fragments
is still so much of me.

Even now,
I am part of Rio's humidity,
Spain's olive groves.
Boston after dark.

Here I may be singular.
But I'm plural where I've been.



Photo by Petr Ganaj: Pexels.com

Day-Drenched by David Hanlon

Before anyone else arrives,
a morning run to the nearby lake:
quiet as an unopened letter.

A lone heron
standing still as a bookshelf,
one leg folded in
like an earmarked page.

Three black ducklings
swimming close to their mother,
then slipping out of sight.

Later, night pulls
its squid ink cloak
over a day-drenched sky.



David Hanlon is a poet from Cardiff, Wales. His work has appeared in numerous journals and magazines, including Rust & Moth, Anthropocene, and trampset. His debut full-length collection, Dawn's Incision, was published by Icefloe Press. You can follow him on Twitter (@davidhanlon13) and Instagram (@hanlon6944).



Photo by Macro Photography: Pexels.com

Drift by David Hanlon

A tan mayfly,
segmented body,
wings laced fine,
emerges from water.

No mouth for appetite
or argument,
only the quiet motion
of life thinning.

Resting for hours
on a wall still damp with night,
a leaf caught
between air and earth,

stillness loosening
into lift.

And when it goes,
it does not rise
or escape—

flight unveils
surrender.

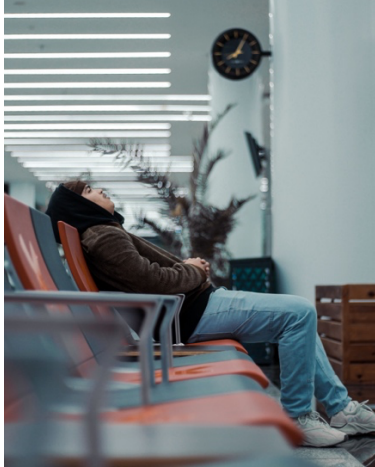


Photo by Simo Ben Rachide: Pexels.com

Brighter than Daylight by David Hanlon

I spent the night in A&E.
I listened to three Héctor Lavoe albums
through cheap headphones
tangled in my coat pocket,
trying to keep time from slipping its seams.

I read a book about a talking tiger
with damp pages and a cracked spine
because nothing felt solid enough
to hold
or distant enough
to step out of.

I watched people waiting—
some folded into chairs,
some pacing small invisible loops,
some staring at the wall
like it owed them answers.

Lights brighter than daylight
when my name was finally called.



Photo by Timur Zh: Pexels.com

Summer Summer by Robert Harlow

It's come and gone,
the longest day of the year,
the shortest night spinning
quickly forgotten shadows.
Still light into the evening.
The neighbors throwing baseballs
through the weather once again.
Someone down the street
turns a porch light on
but it's not needed for the rest of us
who believe our lawns
are sacred reminders, something
to be cherished, celebrated.
Shoeless, we praise them with our bare feet
because now we can
because it's summer
and that's what we're supposed to do.



Robert Harlow thinks a day is wasted if he doesn't fall in love with someone or something. Lately it's with a bear who frequently steals his bird feeders. Robert is retired now but doesn't remember from what.



Photo by Doci: Pexels.com

Journeys by Ruth Holzer

Her father taught her how to drive,
Sundays, on the empty streets
around Port Newark where giant cranes
loomed idle over the docks
and acres of cargo containers
lay waiting to be loaded
and sent on their journeys.

He told her not to jiggle the wheel,
to hold it steady and steer with confidence
as though she knows where she's going,
to brake gently, except of course,
for panic stops, and to step on the gas
in moderation, letting speedsters
keep their own appointments with fate.



Ruth Holzer is the author of ten chapbooks, most recently, On the Way to Man in Moon Passage (dancing girl press) and Float (Kelsay Books). Her poems have appeared in Blue Unicorn, California Quarterly, Freshwater, POEM, Slant and elsewhere.



Photo by adrian vieriu: Pexels.com

Song in Stone by Ruth Holzer

shaggy muskox
bear erect
narwhal with
his spiral tusk
sleek ringed seal

asleep on ice
hunter skilled
in killing them
the shaman beats
a drum of skin

out they come
from serpentine
stony versions
of themselves
hard artifacts

carved of gray
and moss-green
steatite, argillite
blue-flecked marble
out of ivory

horn and bone
shape in the hand
chant on the tongue
carried home
polished, sung

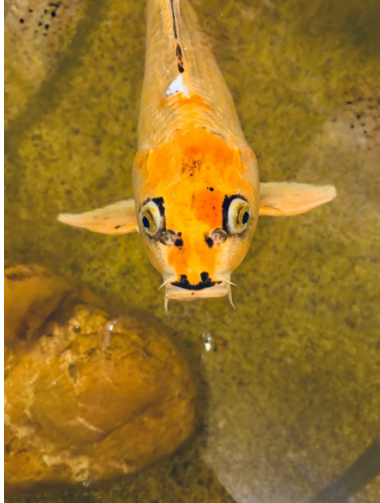


Photo by susana MaRo: Pexels.com

Cake, for— by Lori Howe

Nights, I poled the swamp to glimpse your tanned arm, white flash of your smile.
Years this way, small enough to remain invisible (don't wake the fish—they'll see us
with their strange eyes) my life one small room in a cold house, walls brailled
with secrets, horses fenced in a space too small to run.

Today, you have gone, and on your way out the door, you tore with you every curtain
and sheet, all the carpets and canopies—and every false wall trembled and dissolved
in your wake. (You, who only ever thought of cake and your own mouth.)

When I close my eyes, great neon cities blaze like waterfalls on a night map
of the world, and I am full again. I want to be kind. What rises like emeralds, though,
what reaches daylight after years below ground: this world is returned to me, green
and sparkling; the shape of your absence filled with birdsong, my irises full of golden
light. Wonders bloom in the simple act of not starving; a meadow at dusk, strewn
with flowers, insects singing in the blue hour, my hair tumbling down.
When I woke this holy morning, the fish had eaten your name.



Lori Howe is the Editor in Chief and co-founder of Gleam: Journal of the Cadrator, and co-creator of the poetic form, the cadrator. She is the author of two poetry collections, and editor, interdisciplinary, professor, and science enthusiast who holds an MFA in poetry and a PhD in research from the University of Wyoming, where she is a professor in the Honors College.



Photo by Lisa from Pexels: Pexels.com

Sunrise, Salt Lake City by Lori Howe

This morning I wake before first light to make coffee in my hotel room: grind beans, boil the kettle, pour gently over, a glad steam rising. This is Sunday, empty streets still lined in neon and pools of sodium vapor: a temporary, electric confetti at the wedding of darkness and light. Somewhere below me, *coyotes*, but here, where I sit with my feet on the windowsill, coffee in hand, birds begin rising from the trees, and I am the only human awake, confiding in pigeons and a handful of ducks flying arrow-straight for the water. A *snap*, and every light blinks out, in every direction, for miles. Around me, the room grows quiet.

Oh, my thistle heart. Why do you ask: "Did I leave the kettle on? Is it my fault?" Oh, spiked, urchin heart. I hate to see you this way, so sure no one could love you. A man walks the path by the river, his shadow a hulking guardian, close behind. Fleeting, I think of my own shadow. If it could speak, I hope it would be kind.

Slow down, my love. You are not late; this is not a race. Here, drink this water, have this nectarine, ripe and cold, just the way you like them. Look; the ducks have found the water—see how they glide in and land, the harmless vee of their wakes, how joyfully they greet each other, feathers tipped gold in the sun.



Photo by Zero Pamungkas: Pexels.com

Stages of Wound Care **by Lori Howe**

First, clean the wound gently, offering water and rosemary; cut the clothes you wore on the last night of that life like rings of a 6-pack. Second, apply medication as needed: pine needles in sunlight, a new book, concertinas laughing. Third: cover your anguish in honey; watch small birds alight in lilacs just outside your window, soft yellow feathers tipped gold in the sun. Four: secure your safety; it is fragile and drawn to wine and bearded men. More closures may be necessary to hold your soul in place. Repeat until you can finally cry: let your vitreous humor fill with ripe figs and melons, bleached stone walls along the world's oldest road leading down to the blue eye of the sea. Float.



Photo by K. Bro: Pexels.com

Common oysters, for Joseph by Lori Howe

I stop the car, stroll through tunnels of pear trees, branches spangled fresh with rain, jeweled with fruit. When I reach for a pear, its crimson skin is cool and wet, body full, still warm with June sun. I want so badly for this beauty to be enough, but of course, it isn't, cannot be. Even these quiet trees can tell: I haven't felt anything in two years; the pages of the calendar clean and empty as milk bottles left out for deposit. I don't know the way home.

The last man who said he loved me created a bespoke equation of thermodynamics: how much heat and force required to break me back into liquid clay, to pour a fresh, glimmering slip of a girl the color of peacocks, small and quiet enough to fit in his hand.

In this equation: I love you = I (could) love you, but < if you were someone else.

Joseph Fasano writes that our souls try to kill us because we haven't held the gaze of another human being for so long, we've forgotten the medicine of another's eyes¹.

Oh, my unlovely heart: burrowing snoutflower², barnacle child³, *Crassostrea*⁴ wife.

If I pried you open

with an oyster knife,

who would want you?

¹Reference is to the poem, "Instructions for Having a Soul," by Joseph Fasano. Published in The Dewdrop, 2/28/2026. <https://thedewdrop.org/2026/04/28/joseph-fasano-instructions-for-having-a-soul>

²The burrowing snoutflower, or *Osedax*, is a deep-water worm that feeds on the bones of dead whales and other sea creatures. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/aug/22/discovered-in-the-deep-the-worm-that-eats-bones-osedax>

³Barnacle child or barnacle baby is a term for babies who must be held constantly in order to feel safe. <https://austinmoms.com/2022/06/23/caring-for-a-barnacle-baby>

⁴*Crassostrea* is the order of common, edible oysters with tough, uneven shells found from Maine to Texas. <https://www.oysterrecovery.org/news/oyster-facts>



Photo by Juliana Stein: Pexels.com

Erosion by Charlotte Iannone

For fear of the future,
I am taking the dust of it
and collecting it into a snow globe

that I will carry in my purse.
The truth returns to me when I shake it
and, rapt, nose pressed to the glass,

I watch the pieces fall back into their places.
Each recollection will be an erosion,
a casting-off of the minutiae—the faces distorted,

the words forgotten, the players stumbling dumbly
from their marks—unless I trap the dust of it
into a snow globe

where we, like ice dancers,
skate circles around each other eternally.



Charlotte Iannone is an emerging writer whose work revolves around her upbringing on Long Island and the complicated nature of families. She just completed her first novel, a family epic centered around a real-life historical family that lived in East Williston, New York. At Bowdoin College, she was the Editor-in-Chief of The Bowdoin Review and Poet Laureate of the Peucinian Society. In her free time, she plays soccer competitively, reads classic novels, and serves her local community as a volunteer firefighter.



Photo by Min An: Pexels.com

Summer Reverie **by Janet E. Irvin**

Cat's on the table, slumming.
Bees in the laurel, humming.
Me in the lounger, counting.
TBR pile, mounting
like a tall stack of joy. . .
summertime. . .
and the reading is easy. . .



Janet E. Irvin is an educator, poet, and, writing as J.E. Irvin, the author of nine mystery/thriller novels. 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 Susanna Marsiglia: Pexels.com

Alba, at Dusk by Janet Irvin

I watch her, clad in the long-
sleeved white shirt she wears
as ward against the insects clamoring
to kiss her skin, to tattoo their marks
of affection, content to borrow just a sip
of her blood in exchange for their fealty.

In the morning, she nurtures the impatiens,
weeding, trimming, feeding, the marigolds,
balloon flowers, coreopsis and moonflower.
If she catches me by the vegetables, she plucks
a tomato or a pepper, maybe a handful of beans
holds them out with a bow.

*An offering she whispers to little elves
who mind their manners, not spying, oh no,
simply curious.* Then back to work dismissing
my attention like the fairy queen she is,
sturdy, strong, happiest among the flora
who dance to her merry magic tunes.

It is evening now. Alba's upright frame cants,
her tended beds overshadowed by time.
She stands staring into the growing dark,
a sentinel to mark all that was and is no more,
her mythic charms expended, bright glow
dimmed, fireflies sleeping in her silver hair.



Photo by Jonathan David: Pexels.com

Incantation **by Janet Irvin**

The morning brings an unexpected frost,
but my hands ache to turn the soil, to sow
the seeds that whisper their eagerness

to become. As they settle into the loamy earth,
I recite an ancient incantation, coaxing
life from last year's autumnal death.

Hoe. Weed. Sow. Heed
the ebb and flow of days until
the first small fist unfurls.

Then the sky pours, thunderous,
intent on bathing the fertile land
and the days stagger forward, drunk
on promises and sun.

I may not have Innisfree's nine
bean rows, but seven will do, and, look,
the spinach is already bolting.

Lettuce fills the salad bowl, while
the slimmest of shallot fingers stretch
upward. The peas breach, cling, stretch,

their viny tendrils clutching at the lattice,
setting blossoms, preaching the lesson
known to all who work the soil: patience.

Life weaves its magic in its own time
from the buried seed, the husk of blessing
that is the kernel, then the sprout, and finally
the tender stalk stretching shyly skyward,

opening its fledgling arms to catch
the light, wave to the sky, reminding us
that now, suddenly, after all the waiting,

it's summer.

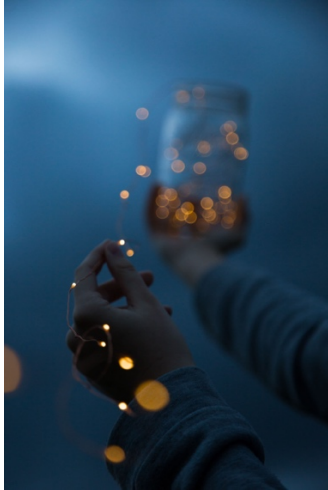


Photo by Ruvim: Pexels.com

What's started in sincerity ends this way by Precious Iyoriobhe

come the sunrise in its glory,
come the sunset for a black boy,
I'm my mother in many ways,
in how she measures every act
against the scale of honesty
in how she opens her mouth
and a thousand fireflies fill
her teeth with light
in how she's a warm hug
to the cold people that she loves
in how, her eyes have shown
as much mercy as the bible has
in how when you look at me
all you see are the constant
that everything I have become
is a little from what she has made me,
the bone of my existence—
pillar of the family I now have,
the loyalty of kneeling before God,
the songs I have held long enough
in my mouth, my life is a miracle,
a kind of sunshine at the door
of dark days.



Precious Iyoriobhe has taught literature for 15 years, deriving joy and fulfilment from helping little kids achieve their literary dreams. She writes stories, poems, and essays, while also being an ardent oral storyteller. A resident of Côte d'Ivoire, Precious is originally from Nigeria.



Photo by Nothing Ahead: Pexels.com

When the New Yorker Receives My Crappy Poem by Marc Janssen

When I send a poem to the New Yorker Magazine:

I picture a slush pile—
a huge mound of paper in a bare dank room
slips of paper, some wrinkled, most yellowed
cry in ignominy—
Occasionally the ghost of Paul Muldoon enters with
a pitchfork, he shovels heaping stacks,
the lucky ones, into an unquenchable furnace.
They are burned up and lost forever.
The rest are ignored.

Back at the basement bar:

a twentysomething with a blond bob and half shirt
flutters breath into the mic.
Her navel is nervous,
as the poem she reads
is something about a shark cage and
love and
anger
and disappointment in someone she had trusted.
It is a poem I have heard many times before,
with slightly different words.
It is true and real and passionate
and it goes on a little too long.

But at the New Yorker, Erica Jong recites a poem:

about death and disappointment
it has something about John Updike in it.
It is precise, measured and interesting
exhibiting a kind of clever cultured passion
holds its emotions at arm's length.
It is poem I have heard many times
with slightly different words,
and it goes on too long.

So another envelope arrives at the New Yorker:
another email into the enormous slush pile.
And why not? It is the New Yorker after all
not the West Coaster:
here on the packed sand somewhere outside Florence Oregon
the hard blue of the Pacific belly dances west
into a kind of eternity of the eye,
clicks waves like an unreliable hourglass;
and translucent sand fleas
pop like grasshoppers,
like jumping beans;
the swarms are a kind of song
of love and death and food—
with a random grace
silently in and out of a hollow crab back.
An earnestness of survival that I have heard before many times
that goes on too long.
But there is limited time in this amphipod life,
limited tides,
limited moons.

Maybe the slush pile is more like the beach:
where Muldoon walks
noting with amusement the hopping poets;
perhaps stepping on one inadvertently,
perhaps stooping down and peering
at an open muscle shell
then moving on.



What is there left to say about Marc Janssen, other than he should eat more vegetables? Maybe his verse can be found scattered around the world in places like Pinyon, Orbis, Pure Slush, Cirque Journal, Two Thirds North and Poetry Salzburg, also in his book November Reconsidered. Janssen coordinates the Salem Poetry Project—a weekly reading, the occasionally occurring Salem Poetry Festival and keeps getting nominated for Oregon Poet Laureate. For more information visit, marcjanssenpoet.com.

Monarch Caterpillar
by Susan Jero



Susan Jero is a photography enthusiast. She has long admired the beauty God put in the natural world and has often tried to capture that beauty in pictures. Only after completing home educating her children has she had time to learn photography more deeply. Most of her photos are taken either in her back yard or on hikes with her husband. Susan shoots with a Fujifilm X-T5.

Red-headed Woodpecker
by Susan Jero



Small Squirrel
by Susan Jero



Yellow Flower Yellow Jacket
by Susan Jero





Photo by Meruyert Gonulluj: Pexels.com

My Wife Has Rearranged My Closet by Mark Kessinger

Imported some of her into
the last bastion of me.
Did me a favor.

Moved the small shelf to where I had considered.
Organized, condensed and sparkled
everything
so it will be able to withstand
the next ten years or so
of my benign neglect.

Locked a robot sweeper inside
for hours, banging its head
into the walls
to grab from the carpet
every bit of hair, dust, bug, and lint
grown since we've moved in.
A geological remake!
A carbon footprint
faded.
A beach swept clean by a tide
of love and a gently turned back
while I'm away.

The in absentia, unilateral compromises,
that make great marriages,
somehow
appear.



Mark Kessinger was born in Huntington WV, attended college at Cleveland State University, lived in Oklahoma City and now resides in Houston TX. He is a two-year recipient of a creative writing scholarship from CSU, a founding member and president of the Houston Council of Writers, and former editor of Voices from Big Thicket. His poetry has appeared in many publications and four anthologies.

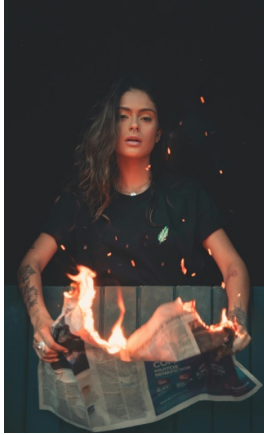


Photo by Class Art: Pexels.com

Fiddling While the World Burns by Mark LaMonda

The world is settling—

The old floors on the horizon are creaking
as the blazing sun ascends.

Branches snap,
pine cones explode,
drop and roll.

My car's tires melted to the driveway.

Sidewalks stretched with snakes,
writhing,
hissing.

My friend has posted fresh photos
beached whales
rotting
on the sand,

of brunch—eggs benedict, mimosas, croissants.

I love watching Mayberry RFD in the afternoon
shades pulled
drinking iced tea,

ignoring helicopters that fly too low
the blades sounding like Aunt Bea calling—

Opie, Opie, Opie.



*Mark LaMonda is an artist and writer who currently
lives in Santa Clarita California. His work has appeared
in Tough Poets Review, SoFloPoJo, Autumn Sky,
January House and is forthcoming in Shadow and Sax,
Still Here, and Blue Unicorn.*



Photo by Al25.Studio Studio: Pexels.com

The Gift **by Mark LaMonda**

Every gift ever given to the man
was going to be returned.

He would rifle in a box, for the gift receipt,
before even looking at the gift.

I got very good at wrapping,
to make a show of the presentation.

The folding so sharp it sounded
like a perfect trumpet, warm and brilliant.

Bows, precision bows made with double-faced satin,
or high-quality silk.

Wrapping so magnificent, you are compelled to sniff it
as though it were meant to consume.

In the end, it would all be torn, and scattered on the floor.
The receipt safely tucked in his shirt pocket.

On his death bed
I pressed the back of his hand against my forehead.

I moved his ancient hand to my mouth
and gave him the final gift of forgiveness.

He gazed carefully around the room.
Darted his eyes over the bedcovers—

Clearly looking for a way this final gift could be returned.



Photo by Yevgen Buzuk: Pexels.com

My Father Went with the Village by Mark LaMonda

It takes a village.

My mother died
and they disappeared.

River
Lake
Pond
Drip
Steam

And Gone

I grew up on Chef Boyardee
with white bread and butter.

He did the best he could
is a crap phrase—
like every drunken idiot is doing the best they can.

What a beautiful world that must be.

They say it takes a village.

Mountains
Boulders
Cobbles
Sand

And Gone

He did the best he could.

The measure of where you end up
is often determined by what didn't happen.



Photo by Alexandre P. Junior: Pexels.com

Acts Shining Bright Through Flames by Douglas J. Lanzo

"Every rancher that we have called to send them hay has asked us to send it to their neighbor first." Volunteer aid organizer Sarah Cover following the devastating Nebraska wildfires this March.

In sandhills graced by prairie grass,
where herds of cattle graze,
coyotes yelped and mule deer fled
the fast-incoming haze.

As ranchers raced to drive cattle
to blowouts filled with sand,
raging winds, of hurricane strength,
fanned wildfires through their lands.

Apocalyptic walls of flame
scorched ranches, charring fields—
blinding the way of those battling
a blaze that would not yield.

Neighbors gathered from miles apart—
some firefighter trained—
to save the homes of ranchers there
from red engulfing flame. . .

Risking all, they preserved the home
of Mike Winz and his wife,
though eleven thousand acres
burned, ravaged by its strife.

A miracle of grace then swept
across their scorched black ranch,
devoid of grasses needed for
wounds of cattle to stanch.

Large tractor trailers drove all night
to bring them bales of hay
to feed their starving cattle herds
without expecting pay.

In fact the Winzes did not know
the names of most who came
who acted out of empathy,
and not for thanks or fame.

The hearts of ranchers impacted
by their state's largest fire
shone bright as ranchers transferred aid
to those whose plights were dire.



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. 589 of Doug's poems have been published in 79 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, hiking, basketball and snorkeling. His author's website is located at www.douglaslanzo.com.

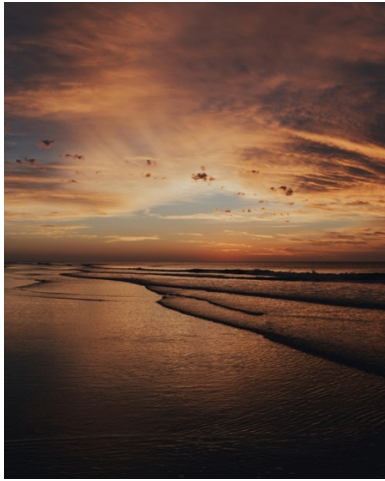


Photo by Gaspar Zaldo: Pexels.com

Breath of the Sea by Carol Lee

Take my hand, we'll lie in the sand and merge with the breath of the sea
Inhalation, exhalation and the sacred silence in between floating us to worlds we might've been.
Merging with the breath of the sea is the closest we'll ever be to The Nameless Holy One
who breathes life into everyone. . . undulating mystery, shimmering beneath a changing sea.
When caught in stormy weather and you can't keep it together, slip into this moment with me
and your troubled monkey mind will be gently left behind, and your spirit will freely soar
through the pink-hued swirling door of twilight, tunnel of celestial sight
beyond day and night, wrong and right, dark and light
in waves of memories, earthly fates are shown.
As the sun trades places with a waiting moon,
the numinous graces mere mortals room to glide in and out of realities
without constricting dualities
Oh, Holy Breath of the Sea, weaving us into who we're meant to be and long to be
beyond day and night, wrong and right, dark and light
Up from the mud of suffering, the lotus flower blooms!



Carol Lee lives and creates in a Chicago suburb on Lake Michigan. Regardless of whether through comedy, original songs, fiction or sculpture, she's rarely afraid to go against the norm. A reward for that attribute came after Tom Smothers saw her perform and decided that she should co-create her own TV show with his team of writers. Shortly after the suits deemed it too controversial to be commercial, Carol kissed-off Hollywood and met her future husband while they were exploring Mexico. Absorbing the grandeur of the lake every day and having family nearby are great sources of joy.



Photo by Giorgi Keshelashvili: Pexels.com

The Last Train Carries Ordinary Miracles by David Anson Lee

The evening train remembers every name.
Its windows gather all the borrowed light.
We leave as strangers, never quite the same.

The whistle folds the distance into flame;
the tracks keep singing long into the night.
The evening train remembers every name.

A child invents a kingdom in the rain,
an old man smiles beyond the reading light.
We leave as strangers, never quite the same.

The miles keep stitching field to town again;
the stars arrive before the city's sight.
The evening train remembers every name.

Some journeys end exactly where they began,
yet every heart returns with altered light.
We leave as strangers, never quite the same.

And when tomorrow calls us on again,
we carry one another out of sight.
The evening train remembers every name.
We leave as strangers, never quite the same.



David Anson Lee is a physician, philosopher, and poet born on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. His poetry has appeared in numerous literary journals and magazines, where it often explores memory, compassion, family, healing, and the quiet grace found in ordinary lives. He lives and writes in Texas.



Photo by cottonbro studio: Pexels.com

Everything the Pencil Remembered by David Anson Lee

The carpenter who framed our neighborhood
kept one pencil tucked behind his ear.

It had long ago surrendered
its yellow paint.
The eraser was gone.
The cedar showed through
like old bone.

One afternoon
I asked why he never bought another.

He turned the pencil in his fingers
before drawing
one quiet line
across a length of pine.

"New pencils know how to measure,"

he said.

"This one knows
where the windows belong."

He smiled,
almost embarrassed
by what he'd admitted.

All day
he lifted walls into place,
each board finding
the place it had been traveling toward.

The pencil grew shorter
with every house.

Years later,
when families filled those rooms
with birthday candles,
arguments,
Christmas mornings,
first steps,
last conversations,

I sometimes wondered
whether a little of the cedar
had remained inside the walls,

still marking
where the light
should enter.



Photo by Said: Pexels.com

The Man Who Walked Home in the Rain by David Anson Lee

Rain arrived
without warning:

one blue afternoon
becoming silver.

People scattered
toward buses,
cars,
doorways,
appointments.

Outside the library
an elderly woman
stood beneath the awning,
watching the street disappear
into water.

A young man
crossing the parking lot
paused.

Without ceremony
he placed his umbrella
into her hands.

"But what about you?"

she asked.

He shrugged.

"I live close."

Then he stepped back
into the rain
as though wet clothes
were nothing
compared to leaving
someone stranded.

She watched him go,
the umbrella trembling slightly
above her shoulder.

Long after he vanished,

she remained there,

looking at the place
where kindness
had just happened,

as if the weather itself
had briefly remembered
how people
are supposed to treat
one another.



Photo by Sabine Freiburger: Pexels.com

What My Mother Never Threw Away by David Anson Lee

My mother
saved buttons.

Coffee tins.
Glass jars.
Cookie boxes.

Each held
its own small galaxy.

Ivory buttons.
Pearl buttons.
Wooden buttons
smooth as creek stones.

Some still carried
frayed threads
like tiny veins.

If one disappeared
from a favorite shirt,

she never hurried.

She poured them slowly
across the kitchen table,

listening
to their soft music,

turning each one over
until her fingers paused.

Not the same button.

The right one.

Years later,
after she was gone,

I found one
inside her sewing basket:

a single blue button
wrapped in tissue paper.

I have no idea
what it belonged to.

Still,

I couldn't throw it away.



Photo by Jisun Han: Unsplash.com

He Won the Lottery Once by Christian Hanz Lozada

Brown Dad won the lottery, \$350,000.
20 years later, you just need to think it,
and he'll wave the check stub,
wrinkled and flaking, in your face
and say he gave each of us,
his four boys, \$10,000, but means to say
"I had another way to give them love."

Brown Dad won the lottery, once,
and in his wallet, along with that stub,
is a wad of this week's tickets
bought along a planned-luck route
of eye-rolling clerks and cluttered stores.

He can barely fold his wallet,
like he's rolling hope,
and every time he clams it shut
is him saying, "I regret not having
won more."



Christian Hanz Lozada's (he/him) near-accolades include two Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominations, runner up in the Blossom Contest for BIPOC writers, and almost dated Super Bowl halftime star Jessica Alba (if an initiated conversation counts). He wrote the poetry collection He's a Color, Until He's Not. His poetry has been published worldwide, including in Zocalo Public Square, Bamboo Ridge, and Emerson Review. Christian has featured at the Autry Museum and Beyond Baroque. He lives in San Pedro, CA and uses his MFA to teach his neighbors and their kids at Los Angeles Harbor College.

Anniversary
by Joe Martinez



Joe Martinez is a writer and painter in his hobby time and a medical professional when it's time for business.



Photo by PNW Production: Pexels.com

Miles and Years by Philip Matcovsky

Thought transports me back to my first love
hundreds of miles and thirty years away, a permanent love:
the rhythm of waves, the ocean's breath in and out.
I sit on a lawn chair by the maple tree in the yard
where each memory is a flash:
an effortless stroll but for my young footsteps
digging in the wet sand beside the shoreline
that's pushing and pulling; my spirit free in the briny mist
from sea swells landing and retreating.
My desire calls out.
A bluebird answers, flying in from the west,
a robin from the east, and other winged respondents
north and south to the maple tree:
sparrow and cardinal, dove and starling, owl and plover,
filling its branches in five minutes time.
A cacophony of bird noise emits through beaks
narrow and thick, curved and pointed, red and yellow.
The birdsong gradually tightens, finding harmony,
creating beachfront sounds, mimicking a rhythmic ocean-wave melody.
Behind closed eyes I see the sea breathing in sync with the bird choir.
I crave the water's salty exhale in my nose,
the life-and-death sulfurous odor,
the sour tang in my mouth.
My desire calls out . . .



Philip Matcovsky's writing is nominated for Best Small Fictions 2026. It features in DarkWinter Literary Magazine, Brilliant Flash Fiction, JAKE Magazine, Amethyst Review, Braided Way Magazine, Odyssey Magazine, and elsewhere. Philip is a lightworker and cosmic traveler based in New York. philipmatcovsky.com



Photo by SUKHEE LEE: Pexels.com

A Lecture on Sunburns by Aaron McGuffin

She asks me for a *five letter word*
for *loneliness*.

Taps her foot
on a sterile vinyl floor
of a cancer center.

I can no longer count
grains of sand, oyster shells, cockles, or whelks
on our family beach in Duck, North Carolina,

angles and speeds
at which the pairs of brown pelicans plunge-dive
into these Atlantic waters, oily mouths
ravaging a body of menhaden—all unmeasured.

Even through the storm
sea grass holds the dunes.

There will be twelve months
of treatments teeming with doctors.

But no bloom of jellyfish.

Winds will lift whitecaps of saline,
tails of white coats.

Melanoma
ends, perhaps, with low-tide drips
through purple tubing from plastic bags—
for me, not yet body length.

As we puzzle
in this open ward,
pharmacists teach
volume of distribution,
radiation oncologists describe
dosage of joules.

While I,
I, struggle to count
how one of us will ever find

Peace, I reply.
Peace.



Aaron McGuffin is a West Virginia poet, rural physician, and medical educator completing an MFA in poetry at West Virginia Wesleyan University. Living in the mountains of Appalachia, he writes poems rooted in family, memory, medicine, and place—seeking moments of wonder, grief, and redemption in everyday life. His work has appeared in *Intima*, *Pharos*, *Literary Hatchet*, *ContiguousLyt*, and *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, among others with work forthcoming in *Appalachian Journal*.

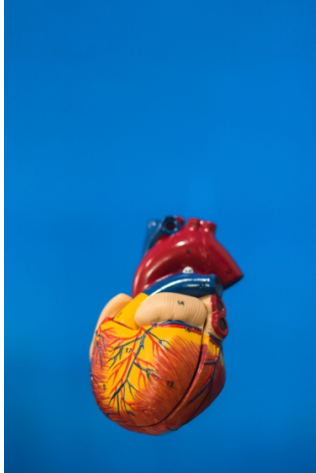


Photo by Yasser Hernandez: Pexels.com

While My Husband Is at the Cardiologist by Ann E. Michael

I sit on the porch and drink a beer
instead of making dinner.

Watch as three small cumulonimbus clouds
slowly pace the southern sky
and pear blossoms tell the bees
to get busy, pollen's ready.

He has a good heart, I tell myself,
though I know metaphor is not anatomy,
and our time among the daffodils
has always been limited.



Ann E. Michael lives in eastern Pennsylvania. Her latest poetry collection (2024) is Abundance/Diminishment. Her work has appeared in Ninth Letter, Shenandoah, Ekphrasis Review, and many others, as well as in numerous anthologies, six chapbooks, and two previous collections. She chronicles her writing, reading, and garden on a long-running blog at www.annemichael.blog



Photo by Selim Karadayi: Pexels.com

A Morton Salt Girl by Jean Voneman Mikhail

My umbrella seems to pose
a question worth asking:
*can a girl still feel safe while
walking alone at night?*

My umbrella stretches a thought bubble
overhead—not so much a wish that needs
blown away, but a need that shimmers
liked striped horizons in front of my eyes.
What is the hook, the caveat
we must remember—

there are monsters out there.
I train my gaze
below the silver snap fastener.
I sail a smile down the street.
At times, my umbrella has been
my sole companion, a friend
on rainy days when no girl
or man can be found
to accompany me home.
What good is a man anyway
when he offers his hand as a trap,
snares my heart in his ribs?
He might swoop his arm around me.
I might swoon, stutter my love
into his neck and wipe rain
from his collar bone, but the storm
will pass over us—will shudder
in its death throws. He'll be gone.
But my umbrella, my sweet umbrella,
is like a geranium bloom,
red with the promise of rain.



Jean Voneman Mikhail is a former librarian and College Composition Instructor who lives in Athens, Ohio. She has published in Sheila Na Gig Online, One Art, Gyroscope Review and other journals and anthologies. She was nominated for "Best of the Net," by Eucalyptus Lit in 2025.



Photo by Bayram Yalçın: Pexels.com

Morton Salt Girl's Grandmother by Jean Voneman Mikhail

I turn my thoughts inside-out
as I wander home alone
through darkness.
I can't even see my own
fingers when I spread them
over my face. My hands become
blotted out sun spots, shadowy
on the other side of the world.
I can't see my knuckles
but I know they are there.
I squeeze the malleable shadows
into a fist, clench the earth's
dimmer switch.

Sometimes, I flip my umbrella
upside down, turning a frown
into a smile,
and I catch a glimpse of rain drops
squirming away like silver minnows.
Tears wriggle their way
into my watercolor blues.
I cradle my umbrella's hook and limp
over the planks of the sidewalk.
I use my umbrella as a cane and pretend
I'm old enough to be a grandmother.

I *am* old enough to be a grandmother.
The skin pools under my eyes,
droops like a web of dewdrops.
I still feel like a child, though, whizzing
an umbrella around the crook of time.
My grandmother used to call her umbrella
a parasol which means *sun shield*,
and when she lived in Phoenix,
the cancer forced an extended smile
and gouged out one eye.
The doctor cut a jagged tunnel deep
until he reached the roof of her mouth.

Oh, Grandmother! I now search
the heavens.
The sky barrels forth evening blue.
The moon dangles its pale reflection
like fuzzy dice over Lake Erie,
tumbling with surf.
My mind tumbles, too—to the day
we flew you home to die in Cleveland
under our watch. You were out of time.
We shed salty tears for you, Grandmother,
you who collected pools of blood
in your feet at the end of your days.
You saw the burden of life.
It turned on a spit the split
fruit of your lip, the orange segments
you savored, with a little salt.

At your table, pink packets of saccharine
sat ready to rip. An angel food birthday cake
drizzled with lemon glaze, and a sprinkle
of coconut flakes curled on the tips.
Your arms, the color of yellow crayons,
snapped in half when you tried to hold me.
You scribbled your kiss on my cheek. Overhead,
spout-mouthed-stars poured forth their light.

Earth still hangs from your rearview mirror.
Your smile hitches a ride in my memories.
Your kiss is a glitch on my cheek.



Photo by Pedro Figueras: Pexels.com

Loose Lunacy by Mark J. Mitchell

After a red moon,
a mottled, shrinking face
whitens the early sky.
How long have you tried
to read the craters
as if they were signs,
pictures of beasts
that don't make homes
on this little blue planet?
Close the curtains,
go back to sleep. Let
the moon waste away.
It's not laughing at you.



Mark J. Mitchell has been a working poet for 50 years. His latest collection is Something To Be. A novel, A Book of Lost Songs, was recently published by Histria Books. He's fond of baseball, Louis Aragon, Dante, and his wife, activist Joan Juster. He lives in San Francisco where he points out pretty things.



Photo by Nothing Ahead: Pexels.com

Living the Dream by Winston Munn

I walked all night
until I found the morning
with its inchoate sun leaning
into the turn
like a bike rider on a planet
that's spinning
at a thousand miles per hour
while gravity hangs on
at a thousand and one.
I fear if I jump I may float away,
the bond between my wheels
and the planet gone, become
another asteroid that burns up
on entry into the shield
of breathable air that snugs up
overhead, and become
a shooting star.
I pause. I nod. My thin lips curl up.
I look up. And I jump.



Winston Munn is a graduate of The Institute of Children's Literature. His adult poetry, writing as W. Barrett Munn, has been selected for publication over 80 times in print journals and online, including New Verse News, Awakenings Review, Soul Poetry, Prose and Arts Magazine, Sequoia Speaks, 5-7-5 Haiku, and many more. He lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma.



Photo by Ela Haney: Pexels.com

Cheerios by Ella Newman

I dreamt last night of crying into a bowl of cereal. I cry into a bowl of cereal every night. Sometimes I sit there and think my cheerios are drowning, that they are gagging with salt water down their gullets, begging for a spoon that will lift them away to a world where the only ending is a kind of purpose. What is purpose but the crunching of broken bones? When I was fourteen, I watched you fall off your skateboard. You sat there on the concrete, dribbling blood, smiling at me with crooked teeth and I thought that maybe this was love. What I mean by this is that sometimes you cannot save yourself. What I mean by this is that we're doomed. Sometimes I imagine that the cheerios are screaming when I hear them crunch between my teeth. Sadist. You called me that when I bit my thumb and smudged it along your top lip. The taste of metal. Rust. I think you liked the idea because you gave it to me as a nickname on your phone. I wanted to tell you that I had nightmares of you trying to fly, stepping off the top of a crane, but you were afraid of heights, and I was afraid of scaring you with the vision. It was me at the top of the crane. Sometimes I imagine I am a crane. My spoon is a long string with a landing. I save people trapped under rubble. I save cheerios with salt water in their mouths. If we held each other for long enough, we could fly. When you finally stood up, bleeding lip, cracked teeth, you told me you knew you were going to fall and did anyway. I wondered if you were trying to breathe. Sometimes I forget that I haven't seen you in six years, bolt downstairs to pour myself a bowl of cheerios as though I could force myself to remember what you told me the day I almost drowned. That sometimes we are saved to save ourselves. That sometimes we are not saved at all.



Ella Newman (she/her) is a philosophy student from the east of England. She was a winner of the Trees Please Poetry Please competition run by Birmingham Tree people and was longlisted for the Hive Young Writer's competition. Her work can be found in Nowhere Girl Collective, The Artistry Magazine, The Poetry Lighthouse, Anemone Magazine, and Fish Girl Collective. She was on the University of Birmingham's UNISLAM team and competed in the 2026 online heat of Roundhouse Poetry Slam. She is the founder and editor-in-chief of Pressed Flower Review. You can find her on Instagram at @ellanewmanwrites.



Photo by Ruslan Cəfərzadə: Pexels.com

Window by Ella Newman

2am is the home of the thoughts that we do not want to feel. I think something in me might be broken. I think I broke it. I think I did it on purpose. When I was twelve I used to climb out of my brother's window and sit on the edge of the flat section of our house with bruised knees and scuffed palms, and imagine I was trying to fly. In my dreams, I am jumping out of a top-floor window, arms splayed wide. I think I might be smiling. Sometimes I can still feel the wind through my hair. The jolt in my stomach. When I wake in the middle of the night, sheets pasted to the skin of my shins, I dart outside to check that the moon is still in the sky. Sometimes I think I am the moon. Sometimes I think I am the sky. There were shells on the ceiling in the house where I grew up. I used to count them, to sit on the floor and trace each shape with my eyelids. I am at the bottom of the ocean. I've been drowning my whole life. When I close my eyes, I get this awful feeling that the Earth is transparent, and I can fall right through it. In silence, I can feel cold air against sensitive teeth. I can see the stars getting closer. What's the difference between freedom and inevitability? I'm a girl at a window afraid to go to sleep. I'm a girl at a window with one foot off the ledge.



Photo by Adobe Firefly AI

The Good Leg **by Shelly Norris**

First time standing post-op, Terry,
my angel in navy blue scrubs,
buoys me by the canvas strap
she lassoed around my torso
in case I timber like a rotten elm
or swirl to the tile like a silk scarf.
Put all your weight on your good leg,

she instructs. The good leg's once
decayed cartilage hinge long since
replaced, now buckles and grinds
like stripping gears, its polyethylene
tibial and patella gaskets
stressed from doing the heavy lifting,
penance for its many years as the bad leg.



Shelly Norris is a Wyoming native. She now resides on the Montana Hi Line where she teaches Liberal Arts and Communications at Aaniiih Nakoda College on the Fort Belknap Reservation. Her first collection of poetry titled Hyperbola debuted February 2024 through Impspired Press. Her second collection titled Dry Lake was released November 2025 from Powder River Publications. She is currently collating two more collections tentatively titled Migrations and On My Hands and Knees.



Photo by Begüm Koca: Pexels.com

Extra-ordinary by K. Alma Peterson

There is no merely ordinary being
existing in the presence of light,

darkness, weather, gravity. There is
an elegance, a spiral of striving

that persists after objective death
of the useful body. Like an incandescent

filament the mind stays lit, circulating
in peripheries of cosmic activity

awaiting assignment to a continuance
of energetic force. There is randomness

at play in where the activated thread
of life will show—in a coral, a cobra,

a connoisseur of chocolate; willow tree,
armadillo, bleeding heart. Independent

of biology there will always be the rush
of wind, solar radiance and transference.



K. Alma Peterson is a poet and painter. She is a graduate of Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers. She has published two books of poetry with Blaze Vox Books: Was There No Interlude When Light Sprawled the Fen and The Last Place I Lived. Her recent chapbook Abscission was published by Finishing Line Press. She is a native Minnesotan, currently living in Florida.

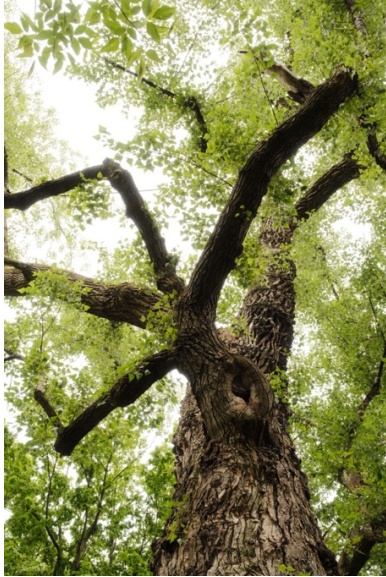


Photo by Kamil Jasiński: Pexels.com

Epistle to Earth **by K. Alma Peterson**

I crossed your mind-space
early in gray daylight, promised
rain. The tree that lost so much
of itself last year looks confident
no such thunderstorm will crack
its fury twice. Here, as you know,
chances for fall and befallen
abide unbidden. I am the oak
and it is me. My crown a scribble
made by breeze while its splendor
needs no upwind. Down again
my spirits try deep breathing in
a count that doesn't strain. Not
far from the fifth breath I stiffen
my efforts. You report my bed
will be overturned if I don't rise.
Expecting no exuberance or caring
in the least what sways me
you persuade me to persist.
Existence in all seasons: this is Summer.



"The Greenman" by Brent Skinner

The New Black? by Darrell Petska

It's green or die
for planet Earth:
me, the Green Man,
or cement gray.
But I must think
like a modern,
act with the times,
show I've got rizz,
promote myself
more than before.

You be my judge.
Might a slogan
gain me some cred?
"Green, the New Black!"
Would it catch on?
Get folks talking?
Make the papers
or TV news?
If not that, what?
Monogrammed caps?

I'm no ad man
so help me out.
If slogans aren't
your thing, write poems,
plant trees, demand
green space, not gray.
I'm preordained
to fight for green.
Beneath your skin,
you're green like me.



Darrell Petska, a retired university engineering editor and Wisconsin poet, collaborates with Brent Skinner, a Minnesota artist who also has an estate planning and probate law practice in Wisconsin. Skinner's passion is creating works of art. A serendipitous encounter reunited poet and artist after their lives diverged more than 50 years ago. The Ekphrastic Review, Feed the Holy, Collaborature, Fireflies' Light and other publications have featured their collaborations.



Photo by Anna Phillips

Musk Thistle by Anna Phillips

Purple nodding head
hunched over the freeway,
appealing to the winged vagrants,
insect kaleidoscope.
My nerves are thorny sparks,
many faceted,
sharply tingling at the slightest touch.
Spine, a stem,
turgid nettle-sting
ready to snap if the gale persists.
Blistering violet hues
taunt enchanted passersby.
Look, but don't touch,
please!
I beg you.
Invasive beauty,
destruction broadcast in
seed-pod explosions;
a genetic annihilation.



*Anna Phillips is an Ozarks-based writer and horror marketer with a passion for native ecology and permaculture. She lives her life surrounded by little feet and talons alike. Her debut chapbook, *Ethereal*, will be released summer of 2026.*



Photo by Masuma Rahaman: Pexels.com

Sparkling Tonic by Anna Phillips

Watercolor gomphrena
Rembrandt's new Athena
Do mediums change
or simply fade away?
Can we still live on?
Molded earth, painted clay
in my concrete jungle
you'll be lost, but alive
Maybe you'll forget
this strange passage of time
or perhaps you'd prefer
nostalgia tinted pink
faded dreams of your past
painted neon in sleep
If we could see something
beyond what's ahead
we'd comfort each-other,
"It's all in your head"
Perhaps it's all true
When you check your rearview
an imagined-real spectrum
of invisible hue
watercolor gomphrena
lilac-lidded reverie
Rembrandt's new Athena
shadows of epiphany
and life stretches on
an expanse, out of reach
violet-tinged evocation
lavender Palm Beach
If memory holds true
then I'll hold on to you
purple haze, future days
I will carry you through.



Photo by Athena Sandrini: Pexels.com

Echo **by Anna Phillips**

Old stone sounding-place,
circled by larks,
encroached on with curiosity.
Stoic as ever,
placid in the face
of rowdy juvenile guests
Etching their names in your lime.
Harbor my friends:
bats, birds, and brethren.
Keep out the harsh winds,
hold snowdrifts at bay.
If we can't be worthy,
at least we'll be grateful.
Soft, dusty ground—
loveliest hideaway.
Softened with age,
still firm, resolute.
Long-lived companion
of wizened and youth.
Many-textured precipice,
keep steady, hold tight.
Hollowed out like me,
yet encrusted in more than jade.



Photo by Magda Ehlers: Pexels.com

Driftwood **by Anna Phillips**

Weather-worn branches
bobbing or in the deep
vibrance stripped by the sun
an ultraviolet erasure.
All these neglected bits
spread to the inlets
gathered-up for reclamation
tightly-bound and still damp.
Anchored here, a driftwood raft,
made whole in your harbor.
Brought together piecemeal
from the ocean's farthest corners.
You sought me out in salty caves
diving deep below the surf
to salvage wreckage, nature-made,
so delicately curved.
Smooth resilience to the tide
laid bare, skin chipped away.
Repurposing my grooves and
interlocking our course.
These crashing waves, watery blades,
dragged me from shore to shore.
I live again, still on the mend,
we will set sail once more.



Photo by Jorge Urosa: Pexels.com

Small Talk by Susan L. Pollet

Small talk is not
always diminutive
Gaining common ground
by discussing another is
never minute when it
involves reputation

Little slights can be a
sleight of hand when they
deceive in even the tiniest way
Miniscule holes of hurt

What makes small talk small
is not that it is about nothing
at all but that it is sometimes
about what should not be discussed



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. Website susanpollet.com and [substack susanpollet.substack.com](http://substack.com/@susanpollet)

The Flowers Take Center Stage
by Susan L. Pollet



Tribute to Elton John
by Cristiane Ventre Porcini



Cristiane Ventre Porcini lives in Brazil. She enjoys drawing and writing and spending time with her daughter. Her drawing is a tribute to the singer, Elton John, technical mixed: pencil drawing and digitally painted background.



"Birds in the Setting Sun" artwork by the John RC Potter's god-daughter, Nisa Winter.

Departure by Death by John RC Potter

Like an open door
or a window without glass
or a well-trodden path
on a distance horizon:
departure by death



John RC Potter is an international educator from Canada who resides in Istanbul. He has experienced a revolution (Indonesia), air strikes (Israel), earthquakes (Turkey), boredom (UAE), and blinding snow blizzards (Canada), the last being the subject of his story, 'Snowbound in the House of God' (Memoirist). His poems, stories, essays, articles, and reviews have appeared in numerous magazines and journals. The author's poem, "Nie Wieder/Never Again," and his story, "Ruth's World," were Pushcart Prize nominees, and his poem, "Tomato Heart," was nominated for the Best of the Net Award. The author has a gay-themed children's picture book scheduled for publication. He is a member of the League of Canadian Poets and the Playwrights Guild of Canada. Recent Publications: The General Store at Four Corners: A Novella by Subtle Body Press (print) & "Clara Von Clapp's Secret Admirer" (online) in The Lemonwood Quarterly, Clara Von Clapp's Secret Admirer—The Lemonwood Quarterly. Website: <https://johnrcpotterauthor.com>



Photo by Islam Abruiev: Pexels.com

Jeremiad for One Who Drank Himself to Death by Samuel Prestridge

All travelers deserve where they get
for their efforts. If an assumption,
yours rated hot sand, a vast expanse
of hot sand, your dotty tracks contra-
indicating each next step, circling
back, sometimes, to keep the record straight,
verify your progress.

It's twitchy
doing such, each step a dry-mouthed vote
for pace, directionality, aims.

You'd have said you were making good time,
said it to ever distant mountains
chiming back a buzz saw's sympathy,
or the chipped horizon, poorly painted,
grating as though hammered into place.
You were deaf to all but your own voice.
I wish you'd have listened. You'd have heard
it, how even the sand was laughing.



Samuel Prestridge, a post-aspirational man, lives and works in Athens, Georgia. His book, A Dog's Job of Work, is available from Sligo Creek Publishing. His children concede that he is, within the elasticity of the term, an adequate father.



Photo by Esra Nur Kalay: Pexels.com

And Then There Was One by Nancy Machlis Rechtman

A jumble of old photo albums, notebooks, and shoe boxes filled with broken watches and pens tumbled out of my parents' closet onto the floor. I picked up one of the notebooks and flipped through the pages, finding half-finished poems, some drawings, and fractured thoughts jotted on the pages. I laid it down and began to look through one of the photo albums—some had color photos, the others were black and white. I held up several of the faded black and white photos to the light and realized they were pictures from my parents' wedding. They were so young. And happy. I didn't remember them smiling like that, ever. Why had I never seen these images before?

When I picked up one of the notebooks again, several pages slid out and I realized they were sketches, most likely done by my father since everything but the clothes was stacked on his side of the closet. There were sketches of places I didn't recognize until I got to the last few. One was the house where my father grew up. I remember visiting my grandparents there when I was little. It was out in the country and there was a small pond in the back. The sky went on forever and there were no other houses for miles, not like the tidy suburban neighborhood where I grew up with my parents and for a time, my sister. I had felt such comfort when we'd visit my grandparents. I had felt loved. Then I found a sketch of my sister from when she

was about 8. She was lying on the grass by the pond, with little ducklings surrounding her. She was laughing. That was before. That was where it had all ended.

And last, I pulled out the poems that were in the middle pages of the notebook. I recognized my father's handwriting. Not shaky and scrawling like it was in his later years. But strong and purposeful, coming from a father I barely remembered. My father wrote poetry? I started reading.

Susie Q

*The light falls on your beautiful face
As sweet as the honeysuckle surrounding you
Your eyes dance with delight
And the sunshine gently touches your hair
And you smile.
I never realized that if a head was turned
Just for a moment
The pull of the water could be stronger than a parent's
love
And soundlessly and wordlessly
Destroy us.*

It ended right there. But I'm not sure if he meant to end it there or it hurt too much for him to write more. There was another poem on the next page with a sketch at the top and I realized it was my mom, young and beautiful. I'm amazed that I recognized her since for most of my life I can only think of her drowning in sadness and regret.

Maggie May

*The stars once hung in the sky
Every time you spoke
Or laughed
I remember those days
And my heart hurts
Watching you disappear*

My mother's name was Margaret. I wanted more, but my dad had never finished this one either. I thumbed through the rest of the notebook. More sketches of my grandparents' house. Their sweet hound dogs and the old, grumpy cat who would hide every time we came. The bedroom me and Susie slept in

whenever we came to visit, with the big canopy bed we would share at night. Before.

I looked for more sketches and poems and wondered why there was nothing about me. I was the younger one though, so there had been more attention and time spent with Susie and of course my mom. Before everyone disappeared.

But then I noticed a crumpled piece of paper at the very back of the notebook. I opened it and tried to smooth it down. It was a partially completed sketch of a little girl. There was a tear frozen on her cheek. It was me. It had to be. And there were the first few lines of another poem.

Forgive Me

*Life hasn't been fair
You were just a little girl
When your world was annihilated
I did my best
I wish it could have been different
Forgive me*

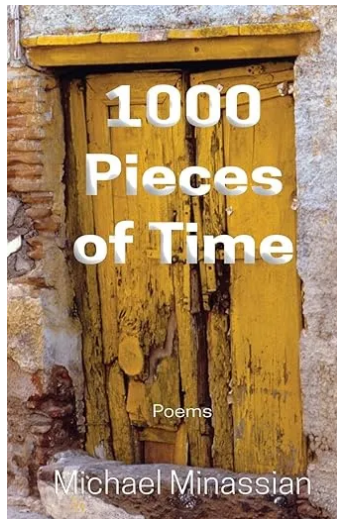
I started crying for real. It wasn't his fault. It wasn't anyone's fault. But my mother had always blamed him. She was so bitter like a withered apple. And after years of screaming and then silence, one day she just

disappeared. And then it was just me and my dad. And he tried, he really did. But he wasn't Superman. I don't know how anyone could survive what happened. Somehow, we did. But we were no longer whole. I also never knew about the pictures and sketches and poems. Only now that I was cleaning out our house did I find these remnants of his life that he had kept hidden all these years.

"I forgive you, Dad," I whispered, running my index finger across the picture. "It wasn't even your fault. But if it helps you find peace, I forgive you. I always have."



Nancy Machlis Rechtman has had poetry and short stories published in Feed the Holy, Writing In A Woman's Voice, Penstricken, Impspired, miniMAG, Young Ravens, Discretionary Love, Books & Pieces, 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>.



A Poet Plays the Accordion of Time: Review for *1,000 Pieces of Time* by Ed Ruzicka

In *1,000 Pieces of Time* Michael Minassian plays the accordion of history with great dexterity. The best of his poems have a giddy, dizzying rearrangement of the standard measures of time and place. This happens as early as the first poem, "Achilles in the Underground." The poet spies Achilleas riding with him on a subway car and watches this ancient soldier in a toga give his seat to "an old/ woman all in black / like the widows of Troy/ dressed like crows/ before they leapt/ off the wall." Throughout these poem's surreal and revelational scenes, Minassian's choices of detail are impeccable. He brings character after character close to us until we can hear them breathe. Whether it is Dante as a barkeep, Hamlet stabbed in Central Park or Emily Dickinson working at a Waffle House, Minassian frames each character so convincingly that the reader cannot help but accept that what never could be real is real. It's better than Disney. Rather than dragging the reader backwards down a wormhole to ancient Troy, Rome or jolly-old England, Minassian places beloved figures from the past into the grocery stores, kitchens and sea sides of present-day America. Somehow this trick of his vivifies the world around us.

In 119 pages of verse, *1,000 Pieces of Time* tears time and space apart. Then the poet carefully constructs scenes in the way that he prefers them to unfold. Many of these poems have an elliptic grace. Part of this grace is the way that Minassian cloaks his musical syllables in common speech so that they unfurl at a natural pace. Listen to these examples of last lines: "our hearts full,/ dense with time.," " a single photograph / her unmarked grave.," "stars shrugged / and his wife's shadow/ trailed behind," and " train whistle/ blowing in the distance/ as sharp as Custer's last cry."

In one sense, the subject of this work is the imagination itself. I could not put the volume down. It is a true pleasure to go back to these poems and find Shakespeare's Cordelia searching homeless centers for her blind father or Einstein using theories of relativity to measure the exact distance between the bases and home plate at Elysian Fields. Miracles like this breathe on countless pages. After a while you might start to imitate Minassian. I called up the image of my own beloved William Blake teaching an art class to children and stopping mid-sentence to chat with an angel. I am talking about delight. Minassian gives us an open doorway into the glowing phantasmagoria of the imagination and feeds us on the bread of possibility.

Don't get me wrong. Much of the magic of these poems is rooted in commonplace experiences. As when: "Last night I spoke to an old friend / three thousand miles away. . .moments frozen in time/ thawed by facing memories/ like old haunts boarded up/ other names scrawled on blank walls." Or when telling us about his own daughter he says: ". . .one

night/ you cried after finding a small/ patch of dried skin on your leg/ afraid you would soon be covered / in scales and feathers. . .” Yet throughout, Minassian finds ways to turn what is ordinary into dreamlike and revelational scenes. For example: “The night I drove/ to your house along the coast/. . .the sudden appearance/ of a riderless white horse/. . .its muffled hoof sounds/ matching my heart beats. . .” Or: “All the men wear hats/ & women smoke/ you with their eyes/ leading you down a trap/ only a bullet can cure.”

This is a mature work. Michael Minassian has been writing since he was a student at Dumont High School in New Jersey. Eventually he taught English for 30 years at Broward College in South Florida. He is a Contributing Editor for the on-line journal Verse-Virtual. His poetry chapbooks are: *Jack Pays a Visit* (2022), *Chuncheon Journal*, (2019), and *The Arboriculturist*, (2021). He has published a single chapbook of photography: *Around the Bend*, (2017). Minassian also has published three previous full-length books of poetry: *Time is Not a River* (2021), *Morning Calm* (2020), and *A Matter of Timing*, (2020). *A Matter of Timing* won the 2020 Poetry Society of Texas’ Catherine Case Lubbe Manuscript Contest. The poet now lives with his wife of 25 years, Sue, in Georgia. Learn more about the poet at his website, <https://michaelminassian.com>.

On the cover of *1,000 Pieces of Time* is the image of an ancient, wooden door. I have gone in and out of this door at least a dozen times. Enter it to discover a poet at the top of his game playing time as if it is an accordion only he can make sing.



Ed Ruzicka, is a poet who has published five full length volumes of poetry. He is also the founder and president of the Poetry Society of Louisiana.

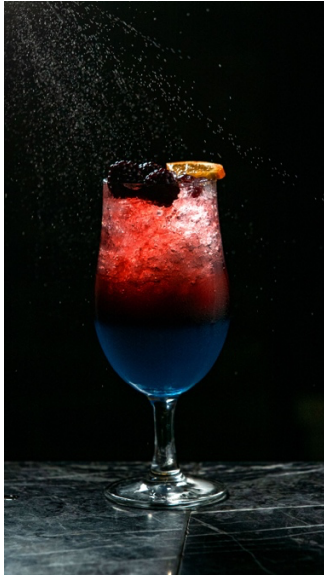


Photo by Mohamed Olwy: Pexels.com

Elixir by Calla Smith

For months, I had the same nightmare over and over. There wasn't anything I could do to make it stop. When I woke up shaking in the middle of the night, I tried drinking warm milk with honey and vanilla, journaling, reading, and eventually crying on the cold tile floor of my bathroom, but there was nothing for it. I could not get back to sleep, not after fleeing from the ghosts that haunted me.

My mother had just come to visit me in Buenos Aires, and I knew just the place I wanted to take her. It was a restaurant and bar that occupied an old mansion with a colonial patio. The food was good, the drinks were better, and it was somewhere I knew that my mother would be most at home, perched on her chair with a glass in her hand. She had always been the life of whatever party she happened to attend, and as I reached adulthood, I both loved that about her and envied it.

Perhaps that was part of what had brought me there, a universe away from my dusty one-road hometown in Colorado where the best you could ask for was a glass of something resembling red wine and French Fries

smothered in oil and parmesan cheese. I thought that if we went to that charming, sophisticated patio together, she would finally see just how far I had come in making my life there. But we never made it in the rush of too many things to do and too little time. Sure, we went plenty of other places: we ate ceviche at the Peruvian restaurant and sandwiches de lomito at the run-down coffee-shop in San Terno, but we never got somewhere where I could really show her my new-found identity as a city-dwelling foodie with an interest in mixology.

The nightmares started the day that she left. As soon as I closed my eyes, I would find myself wandering the streets with her looking for it, but we could never find the door and just kept on walking as the night darkened, never reaching our destination. The sound of her high heels against the concrete rang in my ear for hours on end. There was something impossibly mournful about the sound, almost as though each click was a warning that some things could never be found again once you missed the first chance.

She would come back, I told myself. I started to make a list of all the places I would take her. Even though I knew it had been me that moved so far away, I couldn't admit, even to myself, how much I wanted her to see everything I had become here. I had arrived at nineteen, new to the world in a way I couldn't fathom. I didn't know anyone, and I didn't have a cent to my name, and I spent the first years hovering on the brink of hunger and the deadly hope that everything I wanted was almost in my grasp. Somehow, I made it. Even more surprising, I was beginning to learn how to thrive.

I was entranced by the night, enthralled by the need to get out on the streets where life happened. I had to escape the feeling that I should be with my family, not halfway across the world reinventing myself. Would I make up for all the time we had lost together in the prison-themed speakeasy? Or the restaurant under the flower shop? Even after she came and left I was obsessed by the idea that next time would be different. I heard her voice in the subway every morning, as though my longing would make her appear before my eyes. I needed one more chance to prove myself to her.

I needed to show her that moving away didn't mean I didn't love her.

But then my mother called one warm fall afternoon, and she had bad news. She would start treatment, but it was stage four colon cancer, and the doctors wouldn't say they were optimistic. Her voice trembled on the phone, but I knew she wouldn't let herself cry. She would keep that for later, as she always did, when no one could see or try to comfort her. I had never had that much control, and I only barely managed to make it to the end of the phone call before the sobs tearing at my chest filled my empty apartment.

The world I had worked so hard to create shattered. I couldn't stop thinking that I was so close. If only I could find a perfect drink, everything would work out, and she would be fine...but in the meantime, time kept passing, and I contented myself with going home to visit her. Every time we were together it was the same we always had been, sharing a glass of wine over dinner and watching detective shows while I told her about all the wonderful places I had gone as I searched for her signature drink. I longed to be able to take her away from the empty land and the brutal trips to the chemotherapy center. I wanted to make her be herself again, a queen commanding her court from behind a martini glass as she had in all her house parties through my childhood.

She shrunk in on herself, no matter how much she tried to pretend otherwise. She fought with every fiber of her being, but it wasn't enough. By the time I was planning what we all knew was my last visit, I wasn't even sure that I would make it on time. But she was stubborn and kept telling me she would see me again whenever my sister gave her the phone. She still hadn't lost that certain rebelliousness that had always flowed through her veins, and she asked me to bring her two bottles of gin that I knew she wouldn't be able to drink under the guise of giving them to the neighbor.

When I arrived, she wanted me to make her a drink I had been telling her about, a Pornstar Martini. I tried letting her down gently. We didn't have all the ingredients, I said, but she only countered that I could use Mexican soda and it would be fine. We both knew we were avoiding the real reason why I wouldn't make

her one last cocktail. She was on so many medications, so I said no even if she hated me for it, glaring at me like an angry child for the rest of the day. By the time I went to bed, I hated myself for it too.

In the days that followed, as I watched her become a shell of the vivacious woman she had been, I had nothing left to hold onto. Everything I had thought I had known bent and broke around me as I watched her search restlessly through her dresser drawers and unsteadily walk out to the storage shed as she looked for something she would never find. I could do nothing but watch as she slowly became unable to forming sentences, then walking, then speaking at all. When the end finally came, it was a relief, even if I knew that nothing would ever be the same again. I still felt I owed her something better than what I had been able to give, but there was no longer anything I could do about it. When I went back to Buenos Aires, I told myself that this time I was carrying a part of her with me, that somehow now she would be able to see what I couldn't show her before.

Now, I know I have found what I searched so long for. It stands on a forgotten corner of an avenue like so many other avenues, silently waiting for the curious to come in and peak into the dim windows. Beyond the thick curtains that keep ordinary daily life out, the lights are low, and the air is thick with a special kind of magic. Here, every drink is the perfect cocktail, and each sip brings you more under the spell. Anything is possible. I can even find myself at home again in a world without her.

Sometimes, when I slip into my stool, I almost expect to see her sitting there next to me. In my mind, she's perfectly put together as always, raising her glass to mine and sharing a meal. Together, we were ready to lose ourselves in all the life there was to be lived and memories to be made, as we had so many times before.



Calla Smith grew up in rural Colorado but now lives and writes in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She enjoys continuing to discover all the forgotten corners of the city she has come to call home and dreaming up new things to try. Her work can be found in The Madrid Review, Livina Press, Pulp, and more.



Photo by Marcus Aurelius: Pexels.com

In Forty Years by Ralph Spurgin

Maybe I'll call you
in forty years,
and we can smile
about what you just told me.

We can talk marriages,
share pictures
of our grandkids.
We can talk about our spouses
as if they were still with us.

We'll have coffee
at a small shop on a corner—
somewhere quiet.
We'll get a little misty-eyed
about the old times,
and the might-have-beens.

Maybe then...
we can smile
about what you told me today.

Maybe.



Ralph Spurgin is an American poet whose work explores the vivid architecture of human relationships, memory, and everyday truth. Known for accessible, narrative-driven verse packed with sharp imagery and deep emotional resonance, his poetry captures the quiet friction between connection and regret. His poems have previously appeared in literary journals including Poetry Pacific and Rough Diamond. He is currently compiling his multi-volume creative work, focusing on themes of the geometry of time and love. When not writing, Ralph serves in community leadership roles in Arizona.



Photo by Zaneta Rimskyte: Pexels.com

The Grand Bullfrog by Ralph Spurgin

On the day before yesteryear—
or was it the day after next week?
It isn't important when it happened.
What matters is what happened.
At least, it matters to me.

The road was one of those dusty backroads
with an equal distribution
of rocks and potholes.
I once laid claim to a pothole,
though it was of little consequence.

Once a summer, the County watering truck
tried to douse the dust.
It was largely ineffectual.
As I walked, dust rose over my feet
like miniature mushroom clouds
set off by atom-bomb boots
with every step.

The County's spray could have been better spent
on the local populace.
They seemed sorely in need of bathing.
I'm not sure if it was an abhorrence
of water or a filthiness fad
started by a passing bum.
If it was the latter, the bum—God rest him—

would be glad to know
they've been conforming ever since.
At one spot, a path led into the woods.
The entrance was overgrown with milkweed
where Monarchs marked their place.
The ground was decades of pine needles.
It felt cushiony beneath my step.
Fir trees provided a canopy.

A bird sang in the branches.
I've never taken up the study of birds,
though I thought about it once.
Whatever kind it was, he sang well.
If I knew where to write,
I would thank his superior
for the performance.

At the edge of the marsh,
I saw him—The Grand Bullfrog.
He sat on a lily pad.
Where else?
In fairytales they always sit on lily pads,
which lends credibility to both.

I could tell by his demeanor
he was the Grand One.
He sat, consciously ignoring all
but seeing everything.
The other giveaway was his shoes:
U.S. Ked sneakers
with orange shoelaces.
His goatee and golfing cap
gave him an air of distinction.

Eventually, I got his attention.
No mean feat—I had to stand on my heart
and hum "Melancholy Baby."

He demeaned himself to recognize me,
as any host is obligated to do.
I meant to consult him
On the art of freezing cucumbers.

He wanted to talk about ukuleles,
marshmallows, and argyle socks.
Not wanting to be pushy,
I played along.

During our talk, a Piper Cub
flew by at low altitude.
A frown passed over the Bullfrog's brow.
Suddenly, a whip-like tongue flashed
and pulled in the plane.
The roar of the engine faded
as it passed down his esophagus.

The pilot was likely surprised.
When he doesn't return, his wife
will think he ran off with that
hoochie-coo dancer from Missoula.

Just as I got around to cucumbers,
the Bullfrog claimed indigestion

from the airplane.
He blamed the fuel mixture.
He said he was going to take a Bromo
and lie down.

Boy, was I pissed!
I didn't care about his indigestion.
He shouldn't have eaten the plane anyway.
I was about to tell him off
when I remembered that tongue.
I made a gracious retreat.

When I got home, I wanted to kick the dog.
I didn't, but I felt like it.
And what about freezing my cucumbers?

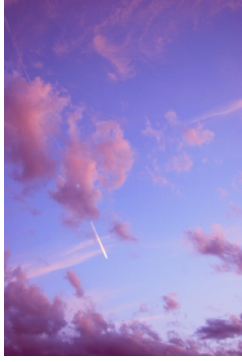


Photo by Mary Se: Pexels.com

Four Tanka by Joshua St. Claire

pink contrails igniting
in the lavender sky
the dusk moon
lights turn one-by-one
on blue mountain

Susquehanna whitecaps
the scent of honeysuckle
whipping the waves
to the shore of Harrisburg
to the end of the universe

the thrum of cicadas
purpling the cyan
scent of chestnut blossoms
jonimitchelling away
the last of the light

dame's rocket
in the shadow
of red pines
pulling manganese violet
through titanium white



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 Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine.



Photo by cottonbro studio: Pexels.com

The Sun Skirts by Sara Stegen

One day—it is there.
Spring turns into summer,
the sun skirts our days,
and we call 'Skirts Day.'

When all women unanimously
decide *it is time*
and covered-up winter legs
become white, bare legs
in need of sun.

And the day feels—
lighter.
First dibs on Skirts Day.
We call things a little different
'round here.



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 Vietnam Hidden Light: Pexels.com

Rituals for Losing Weight by Maggie Stetler

I. Body Embrace

Sit naked in front of a mirror. Feel the flesh on your belly, waist, thighs, and arms. Ask each part: Why do you cling to me? Weigh me down? Hide me? Listen to the answers and record them later. Hug yourself and count slowly until you reach the number of pounds you wish to weigh.

II. Water Ritual

Place an empty bowl before you on the floor. Meditate upon it for three minutes. Fill a pitcher with water and slowly empty the water into the bowl. Contemplate the bowl full of water, for three minutes. Then slowly empty the bowl of water back into the pitcher. Compose a prayer that begins with the word “empty,” ends with the word “full.”

III. Meditation on Food

Assemble on the kitchen table the foods you can't stop eating. Label a box of cookies with the words: *You may have all you want*. A chocolate cake with: *Love with a passion*. A bag of potato chips: *I want more and more*. Now remove the labels and put them aside. Throw away the bag of cookies, the chocolate cake, potato chips and tack the labels up on the wall. Meditate on those same words: *You may have all you want*. *Love with a passion*. *I want more and more*.



Maggie Stetler's poems appear in her book, under a wanton magnolia: poems, and online at Autumn Sky Poetry Daily; Buddhist Poetry Review; and Snapdragon: A Journal of Art and Healing. She is collected in WAVES: A confluence of Women's Voices and in Gathered: Contemporary Quaker Poets. A NYC transplant, she lives with her husband in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia.



Photo by RedWolf: Pexels.com

Song to My Newborn Body by Maggie Stetler

streams of red ribbon
articulate my plume

patterned legs
swirl a rune
'round my billowing body

bellling out
around its bending place

a tune, a bellow
a loon 'o loon
that laughs alive
my shy breasts

come peeping out
into my feet and hands

boldly on their way

and soon shall all the soul's body fly
on the whorl of the wind's red laughing ribbon



Photo by Kevser': Pexels.com

Garden Song by Nancy Story

I nearly wrote a poem today. I came close
but could not find a path to the end. Lines
were packed
too dense to push through, like rows
of garden lettuce bunched in heads
and leaves

of romaine, oakleaf, curly endive, little
gems, and spicy arugula, a peppery cousin
of broccoli.

I planted myself at the outdoor table
piling my plate with leafy greens, slices
of cucumbers,

organic heirlooms and black beauties
next to red and gold cherry tomatoes
that popped
in my mouth and dribbled down my chin.
I dabbed it with a napkin, crumpled it up
and tossed

it in the recycling bin along with an unfished
poem.



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 in North Dakota Quarterly, The Rockford Review, The Avalon Literary Review, Scribeworthy, 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.

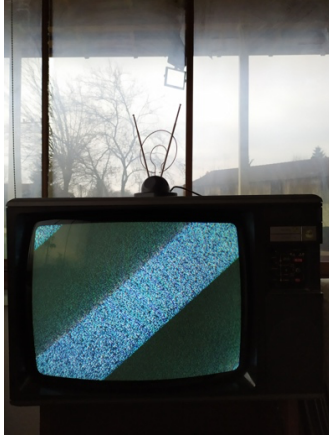


Photo by Talha Dursun Marko: Pexels.com

Stippled Screen by Sara Tejani

I can't help but
—scream into the static.

The television stains the room blue,
its dim light,
burning bloodshot eyes,
—air heavy
with stale beer.

I sit on the wood,
one palm pressed to the damp floor
beneath a leak
—no one bothered to fix.

the volume turned low,
still, its high-pitched whine,
burns my temples.

I scream all the things,
I've needed to say—
when my lungs were rooms
with all the windows nailed shut,
when every breath came back—
wearing someone else's silence.

Now my voice sputters
through the stippled screen,
breaks into black-and-white snow—

I say I was here.

So why,
does no one answer,
but the static?



Sara Tejani is a 14-year-old poet from Toronto, Canada. Her work has been featured in Cadence, Tap Into Poetry, Edition 28, and she was a finalist in Polar Expressions Annual Poetry Contest. She particularly loves to write about memories, life, and the quiet moments that shape who we become. When she isn't writing, she enjoys rowing along Toronto's waterfront.



Photo by Ron Lach: Pexels.com

The Measure of Life by E.C. Traganas

*'I'm not the sort to back away from a fight.
I don't believe in shrinking from anything.'*
— John Wayne

She knew she was shrinking.
In the mornings, the sun seemed
to be squinting lower in the horizon,
barely greeting her at eye level
afraid to shake her hand.
She would sip her tea and feel the
fragrant autumnal decoction
slipping right through the marrow
of her joints, spilling onto the linoleum
as through a sieve, then disappearing
into the basement catch-basin and
flowing softly down the River Lethe.

Her flesh, too, was flaking off into
her cereal bowl like powdery oat bran
and sifted husks of wheat. Then

her knees, bent and buckled
from trampling on so many vats
of musty grapes, seemed withered,
strangely truncated, the wine
now curdled and dotted with
stringy toughened muscat skins.

She examined her doughy hands
in the pungent morning sunlight
shielding her gritty eyes from
the acrid briny glare, fingers
breaking off in stale crostini rusks,

and thought

It was a good run while it lasted.
And now, how great it is to taste life
even in small apportioned sips and bites.



Author of the debut novel Twelfth House, and Shaded Pergola, a collection of haiku with original illustrations, Touchstone Award nominee E.C. Traganas has published in over a hundred literary magazines and anthologies. She has held over forty nationally-curated exhibitions of her artwork, is the founder/director of the New York City-based literary forum Woodside Writers, and editor of The Woodside Review. Her latest poetry collection, Towards the Flame, is forthcoming this season. Traganas enjoys a professional career as a Juilliard-trained concert pianist and composer, and her award-winning activities have amassed accolades from the international press. www.elenitraganas.com



Photo by Jay Brand: Pexels.com

The Art of Departure by E.C. Traganas

The mourning dove nests quietly
in a forgotten corner of my ledge
its fragile silver neck
arched and softly feathered
eyes two glistening seed pips
poised, unfolding into airy blooms

A shredded string, a peck
of straw, dried and desiccated bark
of willows, plum twigs, curled
and twining tendrils, matted tufts of hair

Day in, day out, I brush aside
the lace curtains, and there she rests
a patient, trusting knob of clay
anxious for creation's hand, a sculpture
to be pressed and carved and chiseled

I wait for the momentous hour
weeks fly by like scuttling clouds—and then
the silhouette is gone, now vanished!
promises all dashed—a single fraying strand
still clinging to the vacant nest, blown
this way and that, a flapping
banner, tinsel fading in a gust of wind



Photo by Felix Mittermeier: Pexels.com

Tata, Peggy, and Her Father **by Raymond Turco**

Tata's hair is reddish-brown,
tata is a homely mouse,
tata sticks her nose in books,
tata gives her Soviet flat
a fresh new look.

Tata is my sitter, my traveling guide
all over Prague—up and down,
and round and round.
On the buses, through the squares,
all along the metro lines.

She has a dog named Peggy
who has wooly chestnut fur
and slurps up tomato sauce
from saucers I serve her on the floor,
howling “Thank you very much, good sir!”

Tata's father is a portly smoker
of simple means and simpler manners.
He and Peggy stay up late at night,
to contemplate the *koláč* moon⁵
in worlds of ever-revolutions.

Come autumn,
he will pat the dog to reassure himself
that he's still there himself amidst the fog:
*Ano... ano... No jo.*⁶



Raymond Turco's debut chapbook, Rays of Light and Darkness, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2024. A New Jersey poet and playwright, he writes in English and Italian and is the author of nine stage plays. His poetry appears in The Rutherford Red Wheelbarrow and in other online and print publications. He serves as Director of Literature for the Cliffside Park Arts Association.

⁵ *koláč* (Czech): kolach; a sweet, doughy pastry with a fruit filling.

⁶ *Ano...* (Czech) : Yes... Yes... Oh yes...



Photo by Damir K.: Pexels.com

The Orloj of Prague by Raymond Turco

The trumpet sounds
as Death rings his bell,
the miser clutches his purse,
the angel heralds the victory
of Heaven over Hell.

The philosopher ponders,
the chronicler records,
the astronomer points out the calendar,
the places of the stars.

The dance is every hour, every day
from the façade of the Old Town Hall.
The Apostles make their procession
in sidereal time above.

The mechanical astrolabe, or so I am told,
has faltered post-restoration,
the Sun and Moon are blotted out.
The Italian hours are lost among the gold.

I pray, do not neglect this Clock,
do not concede to disaster and rot.
The ghost assents and gives way
to a special boy that is born
on the night before New Year's Day.



Photo by Enrique Pacudan: Pexels.com

Sandals **by Ramiro Valdes**

My sandals,
two sunken ships
with masts for ankles
beneath two towers

on a shore—me,
white socks
unraveling into
barnacles,

gnawing my bone
like plankton,
calcified into a
five-headed chalk

my toes harden
into crab limbs
walking backwards
in time



Ramiro Valdes is a poet from Miami. His work has been featured in several literary magazines.

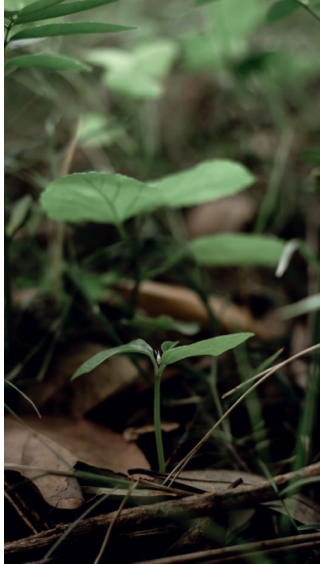


Photo by Prithvirajan C: Pexels.com

The Green Stick (For Leo Tolstoy) Michael Walker

The secret is written
on a little green stick
not far from here
not far from where
we all are buried.
A little green stick
holds the secret
I wrote it plainly there
an end to suffering
an end to death
an end
to eternal war...
It's all written
on a little green stick
in the brambles
past the crumbling house
spend five minutes looking each day
find it
if you dare...



Michael Walker is a writer living in Newark, Ohio. He is the author of two published novels: 7-22 and The Vampire Henry. He has also seen his stories and poems published in various magazines including Sky Island Journal, PIF, and The Adelaide Literary Review.



Photo by Phil Desforges: Pexels.com

Redundant Memories by Anthony Ward

I look to the chimney stacks and aerals
redundant memorials to the late afternoons now expired-
even the dishes are no longer turned southeast
but droop forlornly towards the ground
like neglected flowerheads navel gazing towards better times.

I watch a rusty dump truck roll slowly by
carrying the rubbled ruins of the old village store
where I used to buy sweets with dull copper change
back when a penny chew cost a penny

when the world was painted in washed-out watercolours
like a Geogia O' Keefe in liminal light
or a faded photograph in development stages-
rendering a digital acrylic of technicolor splendor
more artificial, far less authentic.



Anthony is inspired by the nature of the world and the expression of art as humanity decrees to discover itself. It is through these discoveries that he hopes to encapsulate some of this essence with complimentary words. He has recently been published in Jerry Jazz Musician, Flash Fiction North, Shot Glass Journal, and Highland Park Poetry, amongst others

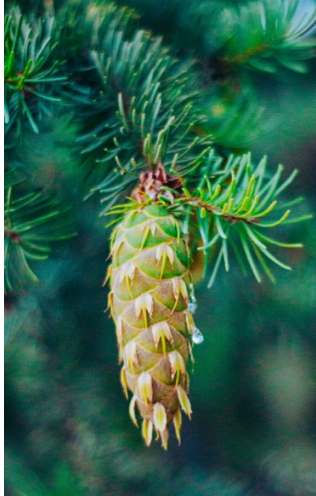


Photo by Brandon Avant: Pexels.com

Birth of a Pine Cone by Diane Webster

The pine cone hangs
like a chrysalis
from the evergreen
tree branch.
As it plumps
and bristles
its pregnancy
under the summer sun,
it finally releases
its offspring
to populate the forest
while swallowtail
butterflies
land on wildflower
to wildflower.



Diane Webster lives in western Colorado. Her poetry has appeared in North Dakota Quarterly, New English Review, Studio One, Jimson Weed, and elsewhere. Her haiku/senryu have appeared in Pebbles, Kokako, Enchanted Garden Haiku. Five micro-chaps have been published by Origami Poetry Press. Diane has been nominated for Best of the Net and three times for a Pushcart. Diane retired in 2022 after 40 years in the newspaper industry. She was a featured writer in Macrame Literary Journal and WestWard Quarterly. Her website is: www.dianewebster.com

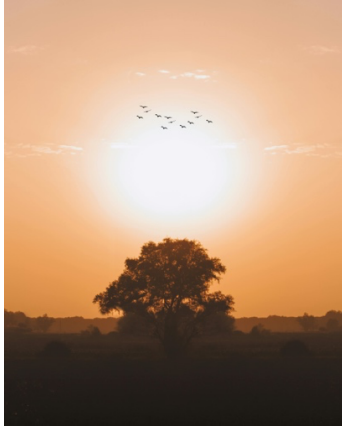


Photo by Ian Lavrinovich: Pexels.com

Tree Tosses **by Diane Webster**

A silhouetted tree
tosses a flock
of blackbirds
into the sky
like confetti
swirling
in wind currents,
celebrating
the sunrise.

Beach Night
by Renee Williams



Renee Williams received a Master of Arts and Sciences in English from Ohio University in 1991 and retired from teaching at Hocking College in 2019. Her poetry has been published in One Art, The New Verse News, Impspired, Amethyst Review, Silver Birch Press, Red Eft Review, Panoply, Highland Park Poetry, Impostor, Sein and Werden, Bards, Pudding, The Rye Whiskey Review, The Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Of Rust and Glass, Verse-Virtual, and The Muleskinner's Journal, among others. Her photography can be seen on billboards, promotional materials and calendars for the Corolla Wild Horse Fund. Her work has been published by Moss Piglet, Anti-Heroine Chic and New Feathers, as well.

Bear at Refuge
by Renee Williams



The Lone Wader
by Renee Williams



Shell Seekers
by Renee Williams



Sunset in the Rearview
by Renee Williams





Photo by Time Grocery: Pexels.com

What We Understand by Huina Zheng

Ahma cupped the stone mortar in both hands. I lifted the red kettle and poured in the hot water. Sunlight slanted through the doorway, dust drifting in the beam. We looked at each other and smiled. She turned the mortar twice and handed it to me. I splashed the water onto the concrete yard.

I knew the steps of making *lei cha* well, even though we had spent very little time together. Some summers lasted only a few days. Some summers, I didn't see her at all.

We put tea leaves, roasted peanuts, sesame seeds, ginger, and mint into the mortar. Ahma wrapped her hand around the pestle.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

The peanuts cracked beneath her hand. I held out my palm. She smiled and said something in Hakka. Probably good, or maybe your turn. I took the pestle from her and loosened my wrist.

Ahma poured the ground mixture into a large bowl. The moment the hot water hit it, the fragrance burst open. She narrowed her eyes and said, "Smells wonderful." That, I understood. In my clumsy Hakka, I repeated her words, even copying the way her eyebrows lifted. "Smells wonderful. Smells wonderful."

The wooden door creaked open. A middle-aged woman from the village stepped inside carrying a red plastic bag filled with lychees. When she smiled, a missing tooth showed. She spoke quickly, her words tumbling out one after another. In my halting Hakka, I managed to say that I couldn't speak Hakka. Her smile faltered for a moment before she turned to chat with Ahma.

Watching them, I realized that although Ahma spoke no Mandarin and understood no Cantonese, we had somehow always understood each other.



Huina Zheng either writes as an admission coach at work or writes for fun after work. She lives in Guangzhou, China, with her family.

Special Edition: Pathfinder Poets



Pathfinder Village is a community where people who have Down syndrome and other intellectual and developmental disabilities discover their own value and talents, and share these gifts with others. Here, residents are valued for their abilities and contributions. They are encouraged to choose friends, develop goals, and participate in the vibrant life of our entire region.

Pathfinder is a friendly, pristine, welcoming Village where residents become involved and find opportunities. Our roots go back to 1922, when two nurses opened the Otsego School in Edmeston, New York, to provide a caring and positive environment for children with Down syndrome.

Otsego Academy at Pathfinder Village offers creative, individualized options that improve preparation for employment for students with disabilities who have completed their high school education. At the same time, attending the Academy strengthens independent living and social thinking skills necessary for life success.



Photo by Tina Nord: Pexels.com

Birds by Caleb Bigsby

I love birds
I always watch the birds outside my window
but there are also birds from
The Lion king
The Croods
The Jungle Book
Fox and the Hound
Bambi
Angry Birds Movie and
Pocohontas
Birds are really nice
When I sleep with my toys
I hear birds chirping
I even listen to them to relax



Caleb is a multifaceted individual whose life is a vibrant blend of athletic discipline, creative expression, and an encyclopedic passion for cinema. Caleb has built a reputation for balancing high-energy physical pursuits with a rich, imaginative inner world. Caleb spends significant time in the gym. His commitment to weightlifting and bodybuilding demonstrates a high level of personal discipline and a drive to push his physical limits. Caleb possesses a unique and vivid imagination. He channels this creativity into poetry, using the written word to build worlds and express perspectives that are uniquely his own. Caleb is also a pre-eminent expert on the worlds of Disney and Pixar. Known for his incredible recall, he can discuss the intricate details of almost any film from these studios.



Photo by Masood Aslami: Pexels.com

Dogs **by Caleb Bigsby**

I love and miss my dogs
They are snuggly and brave
Very muscular and tough
They take long naps after
Long hikes and walks



Photo by Samuele Galiazzo: Pexels.com

Spring **By Caleb Bigsby**

Jumping in puddles
a season of coming alive,
bees are waking up and watching me
in a forest far away from me.
Jumping around and working out
I see Shrek kissing Chelsea Vanderzee and Queen Elsa.
They help me relax
from having to escape from the fire in my dreams.
I get up, look out the windows
and see wishing stars
hear crickets whistling
I feel calm.



Photo by Alena Darmel: Pexels.com

Pops and Whistles **By Caleb Bigsby**

Blowing up a balloon
as big as Shrek
bigger like Mr. Incredible
so big then pop.

Blowing up a balloon
as big as wrecking Relph,
let it go and it whistles
across the classroom at
Mrs. Rose



Photo by Matt Barnard: Pexels.com

Nature's Meadow by Emma Dodici

The sun dips low
Casting long shadows
As the leaves turn gold
I smell the crisp autumn air
A quiet meadow
Nature's beauty and
Carried on the breeze



Emma is a vibrant individual currently focused on carving out her own path by attending college. She is dedicated to fostering her independence and expanding her educational horizons, building a foundation for her future. Emma is a dedicated athlete who finds joy and discipline through the Special Olympics. While she has a history on the slopes as a skier, her current focus and passion lie in gymnastics. Family is at the heart of Emma's life. She maintains a close bond with her loved ones, frequently traveling home on weekends to reconnect. She currently works as a hostess at Texas Roadhouse. When she isn't working or studying, you can find her immersed in her various hobbies. She is an avid creator who expresses herself through poetry, photography, painting, drawing, blogging and various crafts. At home, she is frequently found in the company of her beloved dog, Snowball.



Photo by Marta Dzedyshko: Pexels.com

October **by Emma Dodici**

October is fun,
so many things to do.
I like to pick apples
and get warm apple cider.



Photo by Aaron J Hill: Pexels.com

Blue Jay **by Emma Dodici**

When I see a blue Jay
in the bright sky
I think of those I love
and they never go away
Sitting on the tree
I walk by every day
thinking that my loved ones will never go away
Sunflower hearts
bring joy and happiness
joy and hope
The blue Jay flies high
soaring with its wings



Photo by George Orta: Pexels.com

Emma loves Snowball **by Emma Dodici**

This is my dog
His name is Snowball
He is 6 years old
I got him from Ohio
He loves to lick my face
He follows my mom and dad everywhere
Snowball loves to eat carrots and blueberries



Photo by Janice Seelan: Pexels.com

My Inner Fire Rage by Tyler Hochwald

The sunset tells the end of everything
The dawn tells the beginning
During the sunset the sky turns orange
Like love is when it's old and false
During the dawn the sky turns pink and blue
Like love is when it's fresh and true
At sunset you get a glimpse of the moon and stars
And you know it's going to be okay!
At dawn you get a glimpse of the sun in a newform
And you know it's not over yet



Tyler is defined by his dedication to personal growth and his vibrant connection to his community. Tyler's life is anchored by a very large and close-knit family, a support system that has encouraged his many ambitions. At home, he is often found in the company of his "very cute" dog, Winnifred. Tyler is a natural athlete with a deep-seated passion for staying fit and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. His discipline is most evident in his martial arts background; he has achieved the impressive rank of 2nd Dan Black Belt in Taekwondo. Tyler also uses his experiences to create poetry, adding a creative dimension to his multifaceted personality. Whether he is in the classroom, at the bowling alley, or practicing his forms, Tyler approaches every challenge with the same spirit of determination and a commitment to living life to the fullest.



Photo by Noel Aph: Pexels.com

Beyond Love **by Tyler Hochwald**

Let's go beyond
the gaze of our eyes
Reached portals beyond galaxies of love
Travel through the iris and
Visit solar systems deep inside our love
Your planet brings the highest of tides
To match the energy above
Time to show the mortals what true love really does



Photo by Tom Fisk: Pexels.com

Under Harvest Moon **by Tyler Hochwald**

It is Autumn
The mystic moon villages,
On woodland harvest fields
The children go to sleep in their rooms,
Summer guests' celebration and
The songbirds sing away
Shows nature image as flowers and food
Time for supper in the country lanes
Falling leaves gracefully
Empty nests are left behind
Summer closes

The cold as the night
Red flame
Mysterious moon shimmering
Gentle wind
Spiritual the inner world



Photo by Ray Bilcliff: Pexels.com

Dawn Till Sunset **by Tyler Hochwald**

The sunset tells the end of everything
The dawn tells the beginning
During the sunset the sky turns orange
Like love is when it's old and false
During the dawn the sky turns pink and blue
Like love is when it's fresh and true
At sunset you get a glimpse of the moon and stars
And you know it's going to be okay!
At dawn you get a glimpse of the sun in a newform
And you know it's not over yet



Photo by Ylanite Koppens: Pexels.com

A love that I want by Kaiya Stafford

Is it the way he looks at me?
 The way he looks at me is a mix of a sense of wonder and that sparkle in his eyes
 I want someone to look at me like that
 I want a love just like that
 Is it the way he takes care of me?
 He would look at me with that look and give me a smile
 A smile that would warm up my heart
 He'll say that he would do anything for me
 I want a love that he puts all his effort in
 He celebrates the big successes
 He celebrates the little successes
 He buys me random gifts for no reason
 He listens to me when I have bad days
 He supports me no matter what the circumstance is
 He's happy for me even when I do things without him and he doesn't get upset about it
 He has my back no matter what
 He always has time for me and he reschedules activities to do with me
 He showers me with affection every day
 He showers me with compliments every day
 That is a love that I want
 Someone who treats me well
 Someone who wants to buy me the world
 And that is a love that I want



Kaiya has always been a person of remarkable focus and creativity. Her academic journey has been marked by significant achievements, reflecting a lifelong dedication to excellence. Kaiya continued to expand her horizons through higher education. She attended both Syracuse University and Dutchess Community College, gaining a diverse range of experiences. Kaiya's life is enriched by her family and her artistic passions. She has clear plans—she is a self-proclaimed future "cat mom." In her free time, Kaiya is a talented poet, using her gift for words to express her perspective on the world. She also possesses a truly unique photographic memory, a special talent that allows her to recall information with incredible detail. When she isn't writing, she is likely listening to her favorite music; a true fan of the Backstreet Boys, she achieved a major milestone in 2025 when she finally saw them perform in concert for the first time.



Photo by Roy Reyna: Pexels.com

Becoming my own superhero by Kaiya Stafford

Once upon a time there was an us
Back then we had something special
Where we spent time together every single day
Laughing at your stupid jokes
To having each other's backs no matter what
Until the day the relationship was turned into a lie
Staying true and honest to myself
I put my guard up and pushed you away
I had to because I had no choice
We both knew that our relationship was a lie
I hate the fact that I still care about you
I hate the fact that I still think about the positives
about us even though the whole "friendship" was a lie
You think that you didn't do anything to me
When you clearly reached out to be quoting that you were still into me
I'm not the one who's lying here
You are! And you know it!
Don't you remember you lied to my own partner at that time about me?
I remember clear as day
What did you say about me?
Oh! I remember
You claimed that I pushed you away from your friends
You claimed that I gave you weird stuff
You claimed that you were forced to sit with me when you clearly wanted to sit with me
So, who's the liar here? Hmmm?
It's you
Me and my current partner at that time weren't the ugliest couple in the whole universe
I'm so glad you think that way because I am here to tell you that me and my partner are the most gorgeous couple in the universe at that time

I hate to tell you that I disagree with you
You still think that you did nothing to me?
Well, you did and you honestly think that we didn't have a chance of being together?
Think again, who thought it was a good idea to get back together in the first place?
You
You think that I am messing with the wrong person here
I hate to break it to you I am not
I'm just trying to live my life
Once again, you still think you did nothing to me
I didn't give you a chance
because you put me on the spot for cheating on my current partner at that time
I couldn't see myself being a cheater
You honestly think that you don't care about his feelings?
I do! I care!
You say that you were upset with someone else
I don't believe you
I know you were upset with me
because when I didn't give you the answer that you wanted
you said whatever rolled your eyes at me
and then you said that I pissed you off and hung up on me
I don't care if you were upset with someone else
and especially I did not put words in your mouth
when it is the truth what you actually said to me
You knew what you said so why try to be the bigger person here
and say that I was wrong and you were right
Two wrongs never make a right
You harassed me and you knew it was wrong so why did you do it?
I will speak on the behalf of my fiancée at that time
He threatened you because he wanted to defend me
I don't care if you take it personally
You're right I hate to agree with you
He shouldn't have threatened you in the first place
I'm saying sorry on his behalf
You shouldn't say that you don't care about him becoming emotional
He knows what he did wrong
I really tried to tell him to stay out of it
I guess this is what good fiancée is supposed to do
to defend those they love
Everyone is entitled to their feelings
and people have a right to express their feelings in different ways
It isn't fair that you get to say that you don't care about his emotions
We are all human and we all have feelings
and ways to cope with it
For the record he is willing to take what you said about turning violent with him
and that he is scared of you
He will do anything to protect me
even his life because that is what love is he's sacrificing his life for me
I hate the fact that he's saying this so I'm trying talk his way out of this

You really think that you haven't done anything to me
and saying that you haven't spoken to me
Hello? Need I remind you
Thursday 9/5/2024 at 11:00am
You didn't give me space, and I was dumb enough to answer you back
Also, I don't think you did a good job at blocking me off of Facebook you know why?
I still have it that means I can enjoy watching videos and playing games
It's so frustrating speaking to you when I don't understand what words you're saying
You're a very complicated person
We both said that we hated each other so that's covered
You want to go there? Fine
I am so glad that you think your life is better than mine
My life is actually better than your life
You think that I am at a little program? That's cute
I am at a Down Syndrome community program
Where I meet cool people and do more in the community
You still think that I am still at a little program?
At the end of the year there is a Down Syndrome conference
anywhere in the United State of America
and we are going to be speaking in front of crowds of people
which by the way those people agreed with us
and I am going to change the world
You're going to be watching me succeed as I am watching you fall
I refuse to let you stand in my way
Sticks and stones may break my bones, but your words will never hurt me
I am my own superhero and I will rise
I will fight all obstacles, and I refuse to back down
I will fight because I am strong
Loved
Positive
Caring
Loyal
And courageous
As the days fly by fast, I am becoming my own superhero



Photo by Francesco Ungaro: Pexels.com

If I was a fish **by Kaiya Stafford**

If I was a fish every day would be an adventure
There are 3.5 trillion of me in the vast ocean
If I was a fish where would I swim to?
Everywhere! I would swim to underwater caves
Past the sea of jellyfish
Into the coral reefs
Don't forget the shipwrecks
If I was a fish I wouldn't have to worry about anything
Taxes
Rules
Even conflict
Just a single fish; alone
In the deep blue sea
In the peace and quiet
Maybe I'll go lay in the sand to exfoliate
Or maybe in the coral reefs to camouflage from predators trying to eat me
Maybe I'll be a mermaid
Mermaids are fish
White skin
Long flowy Hair
Angelic voice
People say that Atlantis doesn't exist
Maybe it does and because nobody has ever seen it
Who even knows?
All I do know is this is what I do If I were a fish



Photo by GEORGE DESIPRIS: Pexels.com

If I was an ocean **by Kaiya Stafford**

If I was an ocean I would be calm
A calm peaceful ocean
If I had something to say I would crash my waves just to get someone's attention
I am the home to Poseidon
The son of Cronus and the brother of Zeus
The sea kings have a curse over me
Where they can summon chaotic storms
Lighting and thunder
Waves like mountains
Voyages and overseas transportation happen on me
I help guide Moana to save her people
Even my favorite song by the Backstreet Boys was performed on the ocean
Even the Titanic sunk in me
Famous explorers have sailed on me
3.5 trillion fish live in me
If I was the ocean I would create tsunamis when I am overwhelmed

Author & Artist Profiles



Author Profile: T.S. Carney (Prose Winner)



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

I would describe myself as an existential satirist, a father, husband, teacher, and de-escalator. My work definitely fits my New York attitude.

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

Definitely Arvilla Fee has been my biggest supporter (since she published another one of my works), and an awesome editor. My inspiration comes from my experiences and books I like and don't like. Authors who inspired me are definitely Dostoevsky, Proust, Camus, and Ernst Junger (specifically his view on "The Anarch"). I find the Existentialists to be my main inspiration for my work, but I'm also someone who doesn't take himself too seriously. Like my favorite movie is "Vonya I Mir" (the 7-hour Soviet "War and Peace") but throw in "Over The Top" (Sylvester Stallone proving he's a good father by selling the truck he drove into his father-in-law's house then throwing it all into an arm wrestling contest) then I'm in!

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

I like to write my work at home when my son is napping, or on break at school when overwhelmed. Usually I'm next to a big cup of coffee which helps loosen my already thin filter.

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?

That's a difficult question to answer. For a lot of my writing, I throw in jokes that slide under the radar (most

of my stuff ends up being funny in some ways). I feel my growth has been less second-guessing and more diving in.

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

Another difficult question. The place that stands out would be how Proust described Balbec in *Within A Budding Grove*. In that book, I really could feel being at the beach, smelling the air, being young and with the people he was with. So, being there, then would be my place for a day.

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

Biggest advice: You will be rejected lots of times—I'm at 400 total rejections, and rejections suck. Suck big time. But, like in *King of the Hill* when Boomhauer was teaching Bobby the art of dating, throwing yourself out there is a must. Another bit of advice: try different avenues. I for one have my stories, essays, articles, and teacher column. The more avenues, the more accepts you get DO help. Sure...400 is a lot—my Submittable has three pages of rejections BUT I have 50 articles out, or planned to be published.

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

I have a strange sense of humor. Like I put a joke in one story that I was a "antidisestablishmentarianist" and the other character responded, "I'm a self-deprecating-tarianist" and the other character responded, "My boyfriend is a Buddhist, so it's hard." "Don't have a cow!" "Buddhist. Not Hinduist"

Author / Artist Profile: Sean Ewing (Art Winner)



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

I am a visual artist and poet inspired by the natural beauty found in light, water, changing seasons, and quiet, solitary places. My work explores where beauty, grief, memory, and faith meet, often considering what remains after loss and how hope can endure without diminishing pain. I hope each image invites the viewer to pause, reflect, and recognize something meaningful within both the created world and their own experience.

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

My wife has been my greatest supporter. She has encouraged me to keep creating, believed in my work during seasons when I questioned it, and given me the freedom to pursue art with honesty and purpose. Her steady presence, love, and confidence in me continue to shape both the artist I am and the work I create.

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

I have a home office where I write and create art. It provides a quiet space away from daily distractions, allowing me to focus fully on the work in front of me.

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 like I've matured my art in depth and complexity since my earlier work. My poetry is more nuanced in its use of language, imagery, and emotion. My visual art has moved more toward neo-impressionism with a focus on color, light, texture, and atmosphere. I allow each piece more freedom to find its own voice rather than trying to fit into a mold I create for it.

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

The Scottish highlands.

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

Keep creating, especially when you feel discouraged or doubt your abilities. Learn from writers and artists you admire, but do not become a copy of them; let their work inspire you while you develop a voice and style that are distinctly your own. Growth comes through patience, practice, and the willingness to keep creating even when the results do not yet match what you imagined.

The End



Photo by Arvilla Fee – Englewood Beach, Florida