

Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine

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Cover Art: “Fall Frost Kisses the Zinnia Goodbye” by Susan O’Haver Young

Arvilla Fee
Founder, Editor-in-Chief

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Contributors, Readers, and Community:

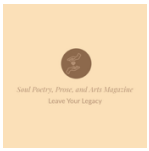
What a glorious time of year—especially in areas where leaves burst into color, the air gets cooler, and we see the first shimmers of frost. There is nothing cozier than bundling up in sweaters or flannel shirts, sipping hot drinks, and sitting in front of a fire. Here's to slowing down, taking deep breaths, and watching the beauty of change.

As always, I'm proud to present the incredible work by 80 wonderful artists and authors from all over the world. I welcome all of the new contributors and extend my gratitude for those who have trusted me with their work once again. I hope everyone enjoys these 145+ pages of gorgeous images and words. I'm so pleased to showcase your talents, and I will continue to work hard to support you and our readership in every way I can.

"Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life." ~Pablo Picasso

Yours truly,

Arvilla Fee
Founder, Editor-in-Chief
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Overtime Season
by Solape Adetutu Adeyemi

The office lights come on
before the sun bothers.

Someone microwaves party jollof
for breakfast.

Someone else slept
under the desk again.

Nobody mentions it.

The elevator is packed with people
holding coffee like it's a lifeline.

Meeting.

Meeting after the meeting.

Another meeting
to explain why the first meeting
changed nothing.

Outside,
the old woman selling buns
already knows every regular customer.

She asks,
"Working late again?"

Nobody says no.

Butterflies drift past the window
like they have nowhere important to be.

Lucky things.

The boss says,
"We're a family here."

Funny.

Real families
usually let you go home.

As a prolific literary voice, Solape Adetutu Adeyemi's work has appeared in over 50 esteemed global journals, anthologies, and news outlets, including The New York Times, The Guardian, London Grip Poetry Magazine, *the* Kalahari Review, *and* Indianapolis Review. *She has degrees in Microbiology and Environmental management. She loves cakes and her space.*



Photo by Tom Fisk: Pexels.com

The Baobab Doesn't Punch a Clock by Solape Adeyemi

By five, the kettle is already singing.

Mama has tied her wrapper,
lifted yesterday's basket,
and started walking before the sky
has decided how intense it wants to be.

The bus arrives full.

Someone still squeezes in.

The conductor shouts.
Nobody answers.
Everyone is saving their voice
for the job.

A man spends twelve hours
digging out stones that will cross oceans.

His wife spends twelve more
selling oranges beside a road
where everyone promises to stop tomorrow.

The radio keeps saying
the economy is growing.

Growing where?

Not in the landlord's mood.
Not in the price of rice.
Not in the school shoes
that suddenly don't fit the children anymore.

An old mechanic wipes grease
onto the same unwashed rag he's owned for years.

"You work hard," someone tells him.

He laughs.

"As if I have another job."

The baobab at the village square
has watched all this for centuries.

Nobody has ever asked
whether it's tired.

Sunset Near Broken Hill, Australia
by Ginette Aitchison



James and Ginette Aitchison are an Australian husband-and-wife photographer-writer team, scouring remote Australia for inspiring landscapes. Their work has appeared in many journals and poetry websites.



Photo by William Warby: Pexels.com

Myra
by Maragret R. Akchin

Anno domini 1943–Myra, almost twelve
when the escorts came.

When her parents, red-eyed, told her they were
going on vacation, *just for a little while*.

Myra does not think the black spider will hurt her.
She stands upright, peeling off her shoes;

Sylvia Plath thought shoes were her father. I think
shoes are the hopes she harbors, cast in

with everyone else's. Life will be death, she thinks,
and death will be life, and death is easier. But

she survives cold and fire and rain so she may be
remembered. A martyr fades. An icon is immortal.

She may be immortal in her country, the one
they tore her from—like Mary Janes from a foot.

Margaret R. Akchin is a Maryland-based writer. When not writing, she can be found drinking tea and devouring every book in her path. Currently, her obsession is nineteenth-century literature. Her poetry has appeared in Rivener Literary *and is forthcoming in* The Bokeh Review *and* Eterna Journal.



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The Things We Keep
by Ezgi Alıncı

There is a key in my drawer that opens nothing I own. I have tested this.

Not with every door in Istanbul, obviously, though there was a moment when the project seemed to be heading in that direction. It is a small silver key with a blue plastic cap, scratched around the edges, the sort of key that once had an extremely specific purpose and performed it without philosophical difficulty. Insert. Turn. Enter. Now it lies between two dead batteries and a cinema ticket from years ago, relieved of all professional responsibilities. I no longer remember the door. I cannot picture the lock. I do not know whether the building is still standing. Yet every few months, when I clean the drawer, I pick up the key, examine it, admit once again that it is useless, and put it back.

This is not efficient behavior.

The drawer contains other unemployed objects. A hotel key card whose hotel I could probably identify only by searching the name printed across it. A foreign coin worth too little to exchange and too much, apparently, to throw away. A cinema ticket with its ink fading into secrecy. A receipt from a café that has since closed. One earring without its partner. A museum sticker that has lost whatever adhesive ambition it once possessed. None of these things can still perform the task for which it was made. The ticket cannot admit me to the film. The card cannot open the room. The coin cannot buy anything where I live. The key has become particularly radical in its uselessness: it will not even tell me what it used to open.

And still I keep them.

I have begun to suspect that most autobiographies are written by people who know they are writing autobiographies, which gives them an unfair advantage. They can select the important events. They can arrange childhood before adulthood. They can remove the boring afternoons. They can make recurring themes appear intentional. My drawer has no such editorial discipline. It has been composing my life without consulting me, and its version is much stranger.

According to the drawer, my life consists of entrances.

A ticket into a cinema. A card into a hotel room. A coin from a country I entered and left. A key to a place I once had permission to open. Almost everything in there is evidence of access that has expired.

Perhaps that is why I cannot throw it away.

The cinema ticket is the easiest to understand. I remember the theatre more clearly than the film: the carpet, the cold air-conditioning, the person two rows ahead whose head briefly became part of every important scene. The ticket itself is almost blank now. Heat and time have been erasing it with bureaucratic patience. If I wanted to know the date, I could probably find it elsewhere. Search histories are better archivists than paper. Photographs have timestamps. Emails survive. Banks remember where we bought coffee five years ago with a level of devotion once expected only from family.

But the ticket has something the database does not.

It was there.

It sat in my pocket while I watched the film. I touched it before I knew which parts of that evening I would remember. It existed beside a version of me who had not yet experienced everything that came afterward. This gives old objects a peculiar authority. They know

us out of chronological order. The hotel card knew me before I knew how that trip would end. The coin was in my hand when a foreign city was still present tense. The receipt was printed before the café became a place I could say “used to be.”

Objects are terrible storytellers, but excellent witnesses.

They refuse to explain anything.

The foreign coin, for example, will not tell you whether I was happy in the country it came from. It will not tell you what I ate, whom I missed, whether I was lonely, whether it rained. It offers only a denomination, a year and the profile of someone important enough to have their face stamped into metal. Everything else has to be supplied by me, which is inconvenient because memory has never respected archival standards.

I remember useless things beautifully. I remember the sound of suitcase wheels on pavement. I remember a supermarket whose name I have forgotten. I remember standing in front of a shelf of milk and realizing I could not immediately tell which carton was ordinary milk, an experience that made adulthood feel temporarily fraudulent. I remember hotel curtains that failed completely at keeping out the morning. I remember coins accumulating in my coat pocket because I was too embarrassed to count them slowly at the register.

The important events are less cooperative.

This seems to be one of memory's private jokes: it loses speeches and keeps teaspoons.

Perhaps this is why objects become necessary. They do not restore the past; that would be too much to ask of a hotel card. They merely irritate memory into movement. Hold the coin and suddenly a train station returns. Touch the ticket and the cinema carpet reappears. Find the key and, even if the door remains missing, you remember the sensation of once having somewhere that required a key.

There is something almost comic about the faith we place in these objects. We behave as though throwing away the evidence might somehow damage the event. Logically, I know the trip will still have happened if the coin leaves my possession. The film does not become unwatched because the ticket goes into recycling. Nobody is going to arrive at my door and demand documentary proof that I once occupied Room 417.

Still, I hesitate.

I think the hesitation begins when an object's practical meaning dies and another meaning quietly takes its place.

At first, a hotel card means you may enter this room. Then checkout happens. Suddenly it means you were here.

A ticket begins as permission. Later it becomes evidence.

A coin begins as money. Later it becomes geography.

A key begins as access. Later it becomes a question.

This transformation is so gradual that we rarely notice it happening. One afternoon we empty our pockets after travelling and place a few things in a drawer because we are tired. Years later, we open that drawer looking for a charger and discover an archaeological site.

The archaeologist is also the civilization under investigation. This complicates the research. I once decided to clean the drawer properly. I approached it with the moral confidence people acquire before organizing things. Three piles: keep, throw away, uncertain. The batteries went immediately. An expired coupon followed. Several mystery cables survived because humanity has not yet developed the courage to throw away a cable without first discovering what it belongs to.

Then I reached the old objects.

The cinema ticket: keep.

The coin: keep.

The hotel card: keep.

The key: I held it for almost a minute.

There was no reasonable defense for it. Even sentimentality usually requires a memory, and I could not provide one. I tried to summon a door. Nothing. An apartment? A suitcase? A locker? Perhaps it had belonged to someone else. Perhaps I had kept it by mistake.

I placed it in the throw-away pile.

Then, while carrying the pile toward the bin, I took the key out and returned it to the drawer.

Apparently even my rubbish has an appeals process.

For several days afterward, I wondered why that particular object had won. Eventually I realized I had been asking the wrong question. I wanted the key to justify itself by telling me what it meant. But perhaps I had kept it precisely because its meaning was gone.

A remembered object confirms a story. A forgotten one confirms that there are parts of my own life I can no longer enter.

That is harder to throw away.

We like to imagine identity as something we carry inside us, safely stored and continuously available. Ask who I am and I can give you names, preferences, histories, perhaps a few carefully chosen anecdotes. But the drawer is less flattering. It suggests that a person is also made from things she has forgotten she remembers. Places without names. Evenings reduced to paper. Doors without buildings. Currencies from countries that have already returned to being shapes on a map.

Maybe this is why a perfectly organized life has always made me slightly suspicious. Where are the obsolete keys? Where is the ticket to something that ended eight years ago? Where is the small, ridiculous object that cannot be displayed because displaying it would require explaining it, and explaining it would reveal that you no longer know what it is?

The drawer is not a museum. Museums know what their objects are.

Mine is closer to a lost-property office where everything belongs to the same person.

There are newer things in it now. Another ticket. A folded paper wristband. A card from a restaurant. They do not look important yet. That may be the essential part. We almost never recognize an archive while we are building one. The objects arrive disguised as inconvenience: something to empty from a pocket, something too small to decide about, something we will deal with later.

Later is an excellent curator.

It removes usefulness first. Then context. Then names. It fades ink, closes businesses, changes currencies, demolishes buildings and occasionally leaves us holding a key with no surviving door.

I no longer try very hard to remember what mine opened.

The uncertainty has become part of it.

Tonight, if I pull the drawer too quickly, the loose coin will roll toward the back and strike the hotel card. The old cinema ticket will lift slightly in the movement of air. The key will remain where it always does, beneath a receipt whose ink is almost gone.

Nothing in there is valuable. Almost nothing works.

I close the drawer carefully anyway.

Inside, in the dark, a small silver key lies with its teeth pointed toward a door I can no longer find.



Ezgi Alınca is a writer from Istanbul, Türkiye, and the author of two books published in Türkiye. Her work moves between creative nonfiction, cinema, literature, art, memory, and the curious details of everyday life. She is especially interested in the unexpected connections that emerge when ordinary objects, places, and experiences are looked at a little longer.



Photo by Ahmad Basem: Pexels.com

Under a Persian Moon
by Kathleen Joy Anderson

I lie in the Persian moonlight, that same light that
my mother will see twelve hours from now,
halfway around the world. I think of how it would have
illuminated the sky in North Dakota so many years ago
when she was transported to my grandparents' farm:
no electricity, no running water, oil lamps and a
coal burning stove in the kitchen, buckets of water
to be carried indoors for drinking, washing,
cooking, bathing and chamber pots under the beds to be
emptied every morning in the outhouse at the end of the path.
Did she shed tears of longing for her own childhood home
full of music and dancing, noisy card games and laughter?
And indoor plumbing?

Now I, too, lie in unfamiliar surroundings, transported
by my husband to his homeland, meeting his family and
seeing his childhood home for the first time. The unaccustomed
food feels heavy in my body as I recall the shock of seeing a sheep
slaughtered in my honor as we came up the driveway.
My mind whirls over the incomprehensible language,
the dusty streets with open sewage ditches. The calls of
street vendors, and the braying of their donkeys remind me
just how far from home I have traveled.

The only privacy is in the squat toilet across the courtyard,
I have no way to converse with the caring people who are
overwhelming in their efforts to make me welcome, who bring me
bakery cream puffs for breakfast because I said I liked them, and sew
a chador for me, so my red hair won't invite stares when away from the house.

My mother-in-law, at first refusing to acknowledge me, the woman who has taken away her eldest son, is finally beginning to warm up to me, but it's probably a good thing that I can't understand the comments that she makes as the conversation swirls around me.

I want to love this place that has fascinated me for so long, as I know my mother learned to love the farm. I want to love my mother-in-law and learn from her, as my mother did with my grandmother. But right now this moon is the only thing that is truly familiar.



Kathleen Joy Anderson is a retired librarian who has traveled in Europe and Mexico and lived for a time in Iran. She now lives in Portland, Oregon where she sings in a Rock Voices choir and walks with her little dog, Ruthie She wrote some bad poetry as a child, some slightly better poems in college, then nothing for the next fifty years, and at age 70 she began to attend poetry workshops. In the past ten years she has had poems and flash nonfiction published in Persimmon Tree, Five Minutes, Oregon Humanities *and* 805 Lit.



Photo by Syed Qaarif Andrabi: Pexels.com

Walking During Twilight
by Marshall Barrows

soon this new breath of life will be over.
worlds overboil and their peaceful cool
comes and wrenches from out of the intrepid earths–
leaf layers carved in silhouettes from the sky,
that pretty balm inducing dull thought
full of sole-storied dirt patchworks that align the times,
        where each symbol diverts
and forks into another: our skewer-sigils
        that forebear the skin of age, now looking
over the rockroots
over the branch-darkened twilight
                (above the pebble path)
over the never-resting, rushing stream of water

Marshall Barrows is an American poet based in Sheffield, England. After graduating from Millersville University, he moved abroad, where he continues to read and write. His poetry lives at the confluence of movement and language, drawn to the tension between the natural world and urban life.

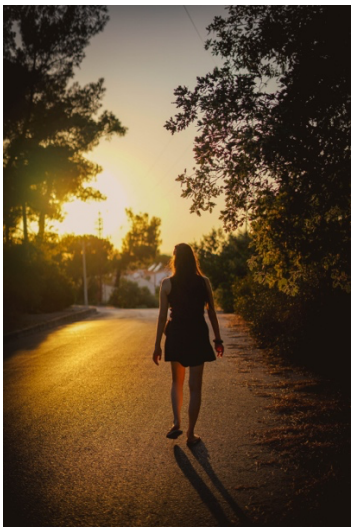


Photo by Thomas Ronveaux: Pexels.com

Absence Breaks
by RJ Bostwick

She sits in the splintered wooden chair, spackled with mustard paint and a lingering spilled pickle brine from a week earlier, not seeing his shadow behind her.

She climbs then descends the stairs until her knees creak worse than the hasty steps slapped together a hundred years ago, not hearing his voice in her mind.

She scrubs herself until she is bright pink and does not sing the songs he lulled her to sleep with on moonless nights.

She lies on the bed with a blanket that was once purple and does not dream of picnics in the gentle glow of early late afternoon.

She wakes for her sunrise walk and does not feel the kisses he gave her at every sidewalk corner.

She falls and does not feel him lying down with her as she goes cold.



RJ Bostwick has had short fiction published by 101 Words, Tales from the Menu, Quotidian Bagatelle, *and* Creepy Podcast. *Bostwick can be found on Bluesky: https://bsky.app/profile/rjbostwick.bsky.social*



Photo by Ann H: Pexels.com

Realness
by Marianne Brems

She's ready for bed.
No grandchildren around
to leave Legos or dolls about.
Her spouse asleep in the next room.

At seven decades,
they find that with arthritis,
stiff joints, night wakefulness,
both sleep better separately.

Shades drawn,
doors locked,
dishwasher started,
no dog to walk for over a year.

Sheets with high thread-count
pleasantly crisp against her skin,
more wrinkled from her weight
on the side where she sleeps.

But she's not alone.
She trusts her humanity
to a bear with synthetic fur,
stuffing like bunched seaweed,
a ribbon with red hearts
around his neck.

She pulls him close in the dark,
someone to talk to only without words
like a Velveteen Rabbit.
If people knew, they'd say
she's too old to believe in him.

But it's about contact with a *realness*
that stays close, soft, comfortable,
for as long as she likes.
It helps her sleep.

Marianne Brems is the author of the full-length poetry collections Within the Trifles *(2025) and* Stepping Stones *(2024) plus three chapbooks. Her poems have also appeared in journals including* Cider Press Review, Front Porch Review, Remington Review, *and* Lavender Review. *She lives, cycles, and swims in Northern California. Website: www.mariannebrems.com*

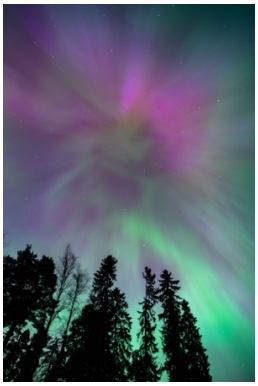


Photo by Tristan Pokornyi: Pexels.com

out of darkness
by Ingrid Bruck

the sun plays
great organ pipes
in northern skies
static energy
snaps/crackles/shakes
still night is black
solar flares
swirl&ripple
warriors march
with torches
flames erupt
in a fire storm
swords slash
blood sprays
neon reds&greens
sway& dance
fireworks cascade
in the milky way
Lapland's fire fox
flips his tail
in a snowdrift
we humans
so small
gaze up

Ingrid Bruck lives and writes in the Amish country that inhabits her poetry. A retired public library director, she writes short forms and poems, grows wildflowers and makes jam. She has one chapbook, Finding Stella Maris *(*Flutter Press*). Four nominations for Pushcart, two for Best of the Net. Current work appears in* Cantos *2026*, Verse-Virtual *and 2026* IWWG Anthology. *Poetry website: www.ingridbruck.com*



Photo by Ruxanda Scutelnic: Pexels.com

How Eight Girls Shared a Pear
by Lina Buividavičiūtė

(inspired by my own experience, the film We Live in Time
and the novels by E. M. Remarque)

I am fifteen. A pulmonary hospital, long
months of treatment. Rest hour, eight roommates
sharing a pear and talking about love. I talk too—
in my hands, holding my most precious Remarque novel. The dark
background of the world, black lungs, aggressive bacilli
of tuberculosis—but we share a pear and talk about
Ally McBeal, about MTV, about left-behind crushes
who are bound to forget us.
I tell stories of cities drowning in smoke, of
grand passions that heal. I speak of
Calvados and desire, of chemistry equations we
still learn to balance at the local school.
A Top Model contest takes place in the pulmonary ward,
and I am the host. During the breaks I recite
Rumi's poetry; the winner chosen is a girl with a completely
bald head. My new shoes are a bit too big,
but the purple glitter adds an irresistible charm.
We recover and write memory notes to one another:
You look like Ally, You look like Ally, You look like Ally—
And the pear is sweet, and Depeche music is sweet,
and the Calvados is sharp, and Remarque is the bitterest
potion of the pop genre, capable of breaking the rods of tuberculosis.

Lina Buividavičiūtė is a poet and literary critic. She is an author of three poetry books in Lithuanian. The poetry book, Dark Ages *will be published in Spain this year. Lina is a Pushcart prize nominee and two of her poems won Honorable mention at Writer's digest competitions.*



Photo by Dương Nhân: Pexels.com

Summer Saudade
by Lina Buividavičiūtė

It seems—everything is too little. The mists over the lake. The days when one wanted
to measure August in handfuls. The warmth that caresses every bone.
The blooming waters, the bog blueberries, the bodies bitten by a swarm of mosquitoes.

It seems—everything is too little. The games of the King of Silence, the sweetness of berries,
the blueness woven into the pads of fingers. The stain of raspberries on lips.
The lightness of evening, about which my beloved poet wrote so beautifully.

It seems—everything is too little. Bread seasoned with the butter of kisses.
Ah, beloved Judith, how beautiful was that summer with a stoat!
Ah, pure tenderness, you were my only cloak, the south wind did not blow it away.

It seems—everything is too little. Conversations, *dolce far niente*, the cat
hunting sunbeams, time, poems—like water striders that glided
on surfaces, yet still told stories of the depths.

It seems—everything is too little. Read books and the romance of empty cinemas.
Not all pencils are sharpened yet, and not all pens are filled with ink.
Not all sorrows are fully loved yet, not all aches are smoothed away.

Do not speak to me of new beginnings and Indian summer, of ripe
pears and apples drying in the attic. Do not speak to me of the sourness
of quinces and autumn marmalades, of pots warming again on the September stove.

I am a summer *saudade*, I am the sad tenderness of a stoat, I am
a closing wound of warmth, I am a band-aid stuck onto the final night.

I am always full, I am always lacking, I am an old romantic and a young cynic,
I am, as long as I am, as long as there are beginnings and ends, as long as there is heady sorrow.



Photo by Toa Heftiba: Unsplash.com

Now That It's All Finally in the Past by Ken Bujold

When I shut my eyes, I hear the scent
of salt in the wind against
the bare skin
of our restive sighs

remembering how
you used to love
lying next to me
under the stars
listening to the squabbling
long-tailed macaques chattering
over the last unclaimed sea-almond

how I couldn't keep my stories straight,
steer a river without
sinking a star—

return your goodnight
without unwinding a day

How dawn tolls
for a woman left breathless,
fumbling about the bareness
of long-quit rooms

Lopping off an ear—a word
here and there—
no matter how earnest,
can't undo twenty years of reckoning,
wading through the silence
of one-hand clapping

waiting for someone to wake
before the irrevocable departing wave

When I shut my eyes I hear

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



Photo by Clarissa Schwarz: Pexels.com

Trick-or-Treat, Julie
by T.S. Carney

Julie left the office, and discovered something about herself as the smell of idle garbage hit her nose.

"I should embrace my inner child more," she thought, thinking back to the conversation she just had, "but what does that mean? I crave ice cream and a big bowl of House Special Fried Rice, but I hated those things as a kid—well, not the ice cream"

Julie walked into the ice cream shoppe, ordered herself some mint chocolate chip with crushed, frozen M&M's on top. The creamy, green dairy product slid down her face unapologetically in the hot, October sun. Julie heard from some people in the office that the cause for that heat was either: a) the sun got hotter or b) we got closer to the sun.

"Either way we're doomed!" the colleague said.

Julie took another lick in defiance of Mother Nature. And in midst of the M&M crashing on her phone like a boulder, the phone rang. Gaia—her cousin, Gaia Maya DeMaya (say that name five times fast) was on the line.

"Julie…yeah…um…so…Prometheus and I…well, it's Halloween…and I got this outfit…" Gaia said, hesitating on every phrase. "It's Halloween…and you…well, don't have kids…"

"Yeah. Sorry about that," Julie said, licking her ice cream cone.

"I need a babysitter—is what I'm saying," Gaia said, now without hesitation.

Julie thought for a moment. Gaia was out in the suburbs. Nice house. Nice food. And a no-limit credit card score.

"Sure. I'll go," Julie said, dropping the melted remains of the cone onto the ground.

Halloween was coming soon, and Julie needed a costume.

She thought back and remembered her Zorro outfit—her *Amelie*-inspired outfit where she *secretly* steals men's hearts. That outfit that expresses her *femininity with the danger of a rebel against oppression*. The perfect outfit for Halloween night.

When Halloween eventually came, she took the train arriving at Croton. On the train, the people leaving the city varied in their outfits. You had one who was dressed as an angel, but was *no* angel snuggled up with a bare-chested Cupid in a Pampers diaper. Then you had two guys in a Godzilla costume trying to get the number of "The Grudge Girl" or "The Ring Girl."

"How can she even see the guys to decide?" Julie thought.

But who was she to judge *anyone*. She was dressed like Zorro with the cape, the mask, and her epee (that she had in college when she fenced) without it being blunted. (How the MTA let her on the train with a lethal weapon she ignored).

As the stops continued the various Halloween cast of characters appeared; and some were very unique like the couple that were bonded by handcuffs.

"How cute! One's in pinstripes, and the other looks like a police officer," Julie commented to herself.

The Headless Horseman sat next to Julie.

“My eyes are here!” the Horseman said, as Julie looked down at the *Horseman’s chest,* pointing with his finger.

“Mine are here!” Julie said, redirecting *The Horseman* to look further up.

The train stopped at Croton, and Julie got off.

Gaia was standing there, Prometheus holding her hand. With them were *Adonis*, *Aphrodite*, *Andromeda,* and *Clytemnestra*; each one of them not dressed up, while Gaia had a car wheel around her head, and Prometheus had forty daggers all over his body.

“Hey, Julie,” Gaia said, trying to hug Julie, but the car wheel interfered.

“I’m guessing these are the von Trapp children without the lederhosen,” Julie said smirking.

Gaia laughed. “They’re not trapped, while you’re here!”

“These daggers are itchy…” Prometheus said, “Did you properly apply my anti-histamine cream?”

“Just like…” Gaia began.

“Maybe you should teach them to sing a song,” Julie responded.

“I’m not singing a song. I’m *impossible;* sometimes *obstinate*!” Adonis said, waving his Aryan hair in the wind.

“That’s a big word for a seven…” Julie started.

“Ten!” he interjected.

“Our birth mother and progenitor have let us know that you will babysit us,’ Andromeda said coolly, “I may be eight, but I don’t need a babysitter—I have Uncle Cormac, here.” Andromeda raised her personalized autographed copy of *Blood Meridian.*

At seven, Aphrodite, was already applying make-up, then turning and applying it to *Clytemnestra* (that out of all of them would be the face that would launch a thousand ships), the five-year-old.

“No, hello for me…” Julie said to the younger ones.

Aphrodite looked keenly at Julie “Foundation fixes wrinkles…” she said.

Clytemnestra opened her mouth to speak.

“Julie’s travelled a long way to get here…so…” Gaia said, and then everyone got into the Range Rover; Julie crushed in the middle.

“So, Gaia…you have an interesting costume…” Julie began.

“The theme was dead rulers…and nothing spells *elegance* and *grace* than Grace Kelly…” Gaia said, whipping in and out of traffic.

“And choosing Caesar was only a natural choice for me…I couldn’t think of anyone historical, or mythical, so I chose the movie,” Prometheus said.

“Now, Julie…” Gaia began, “Get out of the way!”

“What?!”

“This jerk in front of me!” Gaia said, then changing her demeanor, “So, Julie…we’ll drop you off and head to our party. You sit back and watch…whatever kids watch these days!”

“*Return to Camp Decapitation* is a fun one, or *The Fall From the Open Window* or as Mario Cappuccino calls it in his native Italian “Defenestrazione!” Adonis said.

“No scary movies!” Gaia yelled.

The kids let out a collective groan.

“We’re home!” Gaia said, “Everyone under forty-five get out!”

The group did (including Prometheus until he was told to stop).

Gaia and Prometheus drove away.

“So…who’s up for trick-or-treating?” Julie asked.

“We’re not allowed!” Adonis said, “Our parents say that it promotes bad values; better we just watch a zombie’s head explode into pieces.”

“Wait!” Julie said, smiling. “First off, trick-or-treating is much more fun than watching scary movies, reading scary books, and doing makeup. Think about it: you dress up, you go to people’s door, knock, say ‘trick-or-treat,’ and they bribe you with candy to leave, *and if they don’t* you get to get to play a trick on them; Trick-or-Treat! See!”

“That sounds boring! Where’s the head explosions?!” Adonis shouted, “Boom!”

Andromeda smiled. “It’s almost like that part in *Blood Meridian* when the Kid rides into town with the Glanton gang, and they’re so covered in dust and blood they look like something they’re pretending to be—and then everyone dies.”

“Yes…blood! Blood!” Adonis shouted.

“Blood is icky…and doesn’t go well with my color…” Aphrodite said.

Cly opened her mouth to speak.

“No! No blood,” Julie said, concerned. “First, we can improvise on the costumes: Adonis, you’re a yuppie. Andromeda, you’re a librarian. Aphrodite, you can be…”

“A fashionista!” Aphrodite said.

“How do guppies walk on land? Shouldn’t I have a tail? Or gills?” Adonis questioned.

“And why would I want to be ‘a librarian’?” Andromeda said, “because I like to read…”

Julie looked. “I just picked…”

“I read in books that Halloween is supposed to be *scary*, right?”

“Yes, well…”

“I want to be ‘the woman in the jakes,’” Andromeda said defiantly.

“Who?” Julie asked.

“From *Blood Meridian*—she’s dead in a latrine…” Andromeda said.

“Like a zombie. . .cool!” Adonis said.

“Let me apply the make-up!” Aphrodite said.

***

Finally, they reached the first house and rang the doorbell.

“Trick or Treat!” Julie yelled, demonstrating to the kids.

“Oh, what lovely costumes!” the woman of the house said.

“I’m a guppy!” Adonis said.

“I’m a corpse!” Andromeda said.

“I’m a fashionista! Here’s my Instagram!” Aphrodite said.

Cly opened her mouth to speak.

“Here’s your treat!” the woman said, handing the children treats then shutting the door. Each child opened their hand and saw a package of yogurt melts.

“You promised us candy!” the children wailed.

“Maybe the next one,” Julie insisted.

They moved to the next house. Same performance. Same lines.

Hands opened—raisins.

“Maybe the next house. I promise you; one of these houses *must* have candy!”

The third house looked impressive, so they approached and rang the doorbell.

The man of the house opened the door, paused and said, “What are you supposed to be?”
The children answered. Then he turned to Julie.

“And who are you supposed to be? Sarah, Plain and Tall?—I bet that outfit cost less than a black coffee?”

Julie retreated into her head. The mask was cut from a sleeping mask, the cape out an old fabric, and her sword (while real) was dull after years of not being used.

“Since I don’t know what you are, you don’t get a treat. Get out!” he said, slamming the door.

Julie and the children left the house and sat on the curb.

“Damn,” Adonis said.

“This is like the part in *Blood Meridian* when the Glaston Gang comes to a town, expects to get paid and. . .” Andromeda trailed off, pouting.

“I should’ve punched him in the crotch,” said Aphrodite.

“Is my costume *really* that bad?” Julie asked.

“No!” Aphrodite said, “Forget what I said about foundation. Your costume compliments your features.”

“Is that sword real?” Adonis said.

“It can give a paper cut. I used to fence,” Julie answered.

“Paper cuts hurt! But stabbing people with the blood coming out!” Adonis said, “Cool!”

Julie swiped tears from her face and rose.

“Well, since he didn’t give us the treat, now we get to trick!” she said.

“Awesome!” Andromeda said.

“Let me get the fake head inside my room. I’ll put it in a box, set the fuse, and red dye #5 will explode all over!” Adonis said then started running.

“Wait!” Aphrodite said, “I need to make sure it looks pretty.”

Cly looked up. This was her time to finally get a word in. She grabbed Julie’s cape. Cly opened her mouth. Her brain already had the answers to life’s problems. . .

“We’re going to get that guy good!” Andromeda said.

Cly’s mouth closed.

Adonis and Aphrodite came running back; Adonis holding the decapitated head like the Hope Diamond.

“Alright,” Adonis said. “We put the head on the stoop, ring the doorbell, light the fuse, and run. We have exactly six seconds then BOOM!”

Adonis ran to the door, sat the head down, and lit the fuse. The fuse burned. The door opened.

“I kick ass for Julieeee!” Adonis shouted.

BOOM! SPLAT!

Gooey goop coated the man like a murder victim in a horror movie; Julie and the kids ran.

They were panting when they reached their home, and Gaia and Prometheus were waiting.

“What did we say about leaving?!” Gaia shouted, “Fun is for adults *without* children.”

“Julie’s awesome!” Adonis said, “Can she come over for New Year’s or Fourth of July?”

“Maybe,” Gaia said. “Come on, Julie. You have a train to catch.”

Julie got to the car.

Gaia drove past the house that Julie had wrecked. Julie slunk down in her seat.

“That is why we *hate* Halloween! Some jerk-ass kids ruined the house of former CEO George Reichmarcks; and now we…” Gaia didn’t finish.

Julie silently applauded herself for having fun.

When she got on the train, she found “The Headless Horseman” again, his eyes square at her chest again.

“I could’ve used you earlier,” Julie said.

“Yeah?” the man said to her chest.

“Yes,” she said, “but you would find me weird *if* I told you.”

“Nothing is weird to me—I’m an exhibitionist on the other days of the week,” he responded.

“OK then. I babysat a bunch of kids tonight; we went trick-or-treating, and some guy wouldn’t give my kids candy. Anyway, we exploded a fake head, got red dye all over the guy’s face.” Julie paused looking at him. “Wouldn’t it have been funnier if we put the head on you, and it exploded all over him? That would teach him a lesson about calling me ‘Sarah: Plain and Tall.’”

“He was right about something, that guy,” Headless said.

“Yes?”

“You are tall.”



T.S. Carney is a special education teacher. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Good Men Project, Your Impossible Voice, Eunoia Review, Neon Origami, Discretionary Love, The Gotham Guillotine, tongue etc., Maudlin House, Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts, Once Upon a Crocodile, FLARE, Robot Butt, miniMAG, Philosophy Now, Philosophy and Literature, The Educator's Workroom, Mr. Beller's Neighborhood, Bridge Eight *and elsewhere.*

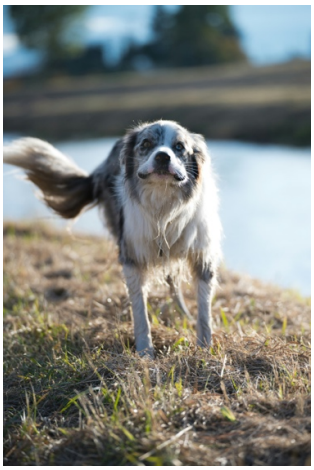


Photo by Michal Petráš: Unsplash.com

A Place to Lay Your Head
by William Cass

Father Pat stood at the rectory's living room window watching the Osborne boy finish shoveling his driveway. It was late evening. The boy had begun at his front step and worked his way down the driveway into the streetlamp's yellow cone of light at the curb. His breaths formed short vapor clouds. The boy was about eleven or twelve. His name was Jacob, and he also served the early Mass on Sundays. His father owned a flower shop up the street and ushered at church; his mother headed its Rosary Guild.

Father Pat came from a long line of taciturn Irishmen. He'd just turned seventy-five and had been the lone priest in that small, blue-collar parish for four years. Since finishing seminary in his mid-twenties, he'd been shuffled among a long, unglamorous series of remote, hospital, and prison assignments. He'd recently been forced into retirement and had a placement awaiting him in a senior clergy residence halfway across the country. He was leaving the next morning, his belongings already packed and stacked neatly in the foyer. Jacob was clearing the driveway for the new replacement priest who'd arrive the following evening, so he'd have access to the parish car in the garage.

Father Pat's three-legged dog – a stray he'd found poking around the garbage can in the alley the previous year – lurched to his side and nosed his leg. Father Pat reached down, scratched the mutt behind the ears and said, "Hey, Amigo."

They were the first words he'd spoken in two days. The dog whined softly and thumped his tail on the floorboards. Jacob made a last toss of snow into his accumulated pile, dragged the shovel up to the side of the garage, then approached the front of the rectory. Amigo labored after Father Pat into the foyer where he opened the front door to meet the boy. Jacob's eyes lit up, as they always did, when he saw the dog; he fell to his knees, cradled Amigo's head as his face was licked, laughed, and told him, "You're a good, old boy, aren't you, Amigo?"

"That 'old' part is right," Father Pat said.

Jacob gave the dog a rub on the head, straightened, glanced at the suitcases and pet carrier behind Father Pat and said, "Looks like you're all set to go."

Father Pat's eyes followed the boy's. He nodded.

"Shucks," Jacob said.

"Yeah, well."

The old priest shrugged. They looked at each other. Jacob wore a too-large knit cap, a padded coat with a tear under one armpit, and unbuckled boots; he was a slight boy with tender, saucer-like eyes. Father Pat ran his hand through his sparce gray hair and tried his best to fashion a small smile.

Jacob asked, "So you can take Amigo with you?"

Father Pat gave a single nod. "Complicated, though. Train will only allow trips with pets up to seven hours, so have to make several transfers."

"Shucks," the boy repeated.

Father Pat chuckled. "You ever have a dog, Jacob?"

"Nah. Been wanting one bad, though. My parents say maybe for Christmas."

Father Pat nodded some more and thought about Jacob playing with Amigo in the sacristy each Sunday morning before and after Mass. He thought about his upcoming journey and life ahead, then took Amigo's leash from a

peg on the wall, clicked it to the dog's collar, handed it to Jacob and said, "Here."

The boy's eyebrows knit as he looked from the leash handle to Father Pat. The old priest bent down, picked up Amigo's pet carrier, and set it in the boy's arms. "Everything he needs is in there," he said. "Two bowls, bag of food, squeaky toy."

Jacob's eyes widened. "I don't understand."

"He's better off with you," Father Pat said. "I'm not even sure I'd be allowed to keep him where I'm going." The dog squirmed in between Jacob's ankles, twisting the leash. Father Pat chuckled again. "Looks like Amigo agrees. You manage with all that stuff?"

"Sure."

The boy grinned, cradled the carrier under one arm, and unwound the leash. Very lightly behind him, it had begun to snow.

"Your parents be okay…him being lame and all?"

"You bet."

"Well, you best get him home and settled then."

Jacob's eyes moistened. "Thanks." He paused. "I'll miss you, Father."

"You, too, son."

The boy started down the walk with Amigo hobbling beside him, then stopped abruptly. He returned to the open doorway, fiddled in his coat pocket, and took out a wedge-shaped package wrapped in foil. "I almost forgot." He extended the package towards Father Pat. "My mom made these for your trip. Tollhouse cookies. They're good."

The old priest took the package from the boy. "Tell your mother I'm grateful. She's always been kind to me." He thought but didn't say: one of the few.

The boy gave another nod, then let Amigo lead him in his awkward gate down the shoveled driveway and up the street. Father Pat watched them go in the wisps of snow until they'd disappeared completely into the darkness before slowly closing the door. He stood very still in the foyer. The rectory was completely silent until a radiator kicked on in the living room, expelling a short hiss. A can of soup remained for dinner. That and the last bottle in the pantry with two fingers of whiskey. Afterwards, he'd get in bed and try to read until sleep overtook him. He didn't know what the future held--but of one thing he was certain—Amigo had a good place to lay his head.



William Cass has published over 400 short stories and won writing contests at Terrain.org, Cardinal Sins, *and* The Examined Life Journal. *He's been nominated once for Best of the Net, twice for Best Small Fictions, six times for the Pushcart Prize, and had three short story collections released by* Wising Up Press.

Memory
by David Chorlton



David Chorlton lives in Phoenix where he takes advice on writing and art from the desert. He painted this watercolor on a trip to Greece long, long ago and occasionally reflected in writing on his early European years when curiosity urged him to travel.



Artwork by David Chorlton

Memory
by David Chorlton

The two girls in their Sunday clothes
never looked up at the monasteries
as close to the sky as their builders could reach,
but skipped home from church
with scarves flapping loose from their shoulders
and their shoelaces undone. Who spoke first?
Did we ask directions, or did they want to know
who we were, out of place
on the lane with brightly colored doors
at every house? We chose a blue one. Perhaps red.
Or neither, but the sun
broke through a gap between the cliffs
to print our shadows on the ground. It was then
they laughed at us and stood in our path.
Pointing to the camera, one of them brushed
dust from her skirt and called for her sister
to pose. We had just been talking to an old man
with his goat on a rocky incline. Maybe it was
in the shade of a tree, maybe in the light
that had ripened his skin for years until
he ceased to care about his looks and wore
the same creased jacket with salt stains
beneath the arms. His teeth were bad. He spoke
with a lisp. Possibly he hardly spoke at all,
but was glad for a few minutes of company
as he leaned on his staff. The goat chewed
and ignored us. At least that is what I recall,
but there is no record to prove it, nothing
but the address scribbled down
on a scrap of lost paper
to tell us where to send the photograph
of the girls outside their house
and lights and darks changing places
in the negative from the instant
the shutter blinked.



Photo by Phan Cuong: Pexels.com

Outline
by Mickey J. Corrigan

Your image wavers
a ghostly reminder
of how solid you were
before caged in the suburbs
while the song birds outside
called for something more
such a disappearing sweetness
spun sugar on your tongue.

Trapped in old feathers
you feel yourself lessen
see-through skin, bones
slowly disappearing
until all that is left
is an outline
a white chalk trace
on an asphalt sidewalk

people walk past
in bright colors
taking up all
the shared space
'til there's nothing left
of you
but emptiness
and shadows

except for
a hidden power
in your silence
in your listening
to the sweet sound
of cardinals, blue jays
mocking birds reminding
you of
the option
of freedom.

Mickey J. Corrigan writes pulp fiction, literary crime, and psychological thrillers. Poems have appeared in literary journals and chapbooks. Her most recent novel is Lazy Palms*, a controversial look at life inside a euthanasia trailer park.*

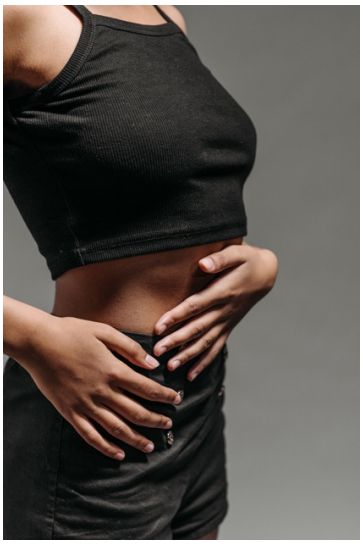


Photo by ROCKETMANN TEAM: Pexels.com

How to Measure An Absence
by c.b. costa

i will no longer measure my ribs by the amount

at which they protrude from my skin;

but by how cold, tiny and hollow i feel.

without your fingers tracing the indents of my side—

while your breath grazes the back of my neck

c.b. costa resides in the GTA suburbs with her partner and two cats. She has been carrying a journal for as long as she can remember. Cleo also loves to perform and has a background in competitive dance, acting and professional wrestling. She hopes to retire on a beach in Portugal. Partner and two cats intact.



Photo by Adobe Firefly AI

Tiptoeing on Blistered Feet by Orman Day

The worst part of my introduction to participatory journalism wasn't the popped and bandaged blisters on all my toes, and the balls and heels of my feet. They inflicted a barely tolerable pain as I walked eastward through Beverly Hills toward the end of our 50-mile hike in 1963. Excruciating, though, was the rubbing together of my chafed inner thighs. Tiptoeing on greatly bowed legs, I was mocked by bystanders whose scurrilous slanders scorched the sunburnt ears of my virginal 17-year-old self. Of course, so as not to face my adviser's censorious pencil, I left that part out of my report in the Glendale High *Explosion*.

"Hikers Survive 'Longest Day'" headlined my school's response to John F. Kennedy's clarion call about the need for physical fitness. The youthful President challenged sluggard Americans to climb out of their recliner chairs, push away TV trays laden with SweeTarts and Lemonheads, and trod 50 miles in less than 20 hours.

All of America seems to be on the move – hiking that is, and Glendale High students are no exception. On a shivering Saturday morning at 5 a.m., Feb. 23, about 30 eager, laughing students (including 10 girls) left for a 50-mile round-trip junket to Santa Monica; 18 hours later, 9 tired, weather-beaten, crippled hikers returned.

It was a good morning to try a 50-mile hike, if there is such a day. The first several miles seemed to go at a rapid pace with everyone walking quite fast and some even running. It went without incident until some "friends" of ours threw stolen newspapers at us, but we quickly retaliated with a bombardment of sandwiches and apples.

The first of what was later to become an endless trail of rest periods came in Hollywood. We parked our tired bodies on a nice, soft, green lawn. If there's a "meanest lady in the world," we met her. She's the one who turned on the sprinklers, ruining our rest period.

After ending the first half of our migration, the remaining 11 of us who decided to finish the trip were on our way again after an hour of basking in Santa Monica's sun and covering our blistered feet with mercurochrome and miles of adhesive tape.

We trudged onward, frequenting every drinking fountain between the beach and Glendale. At that point, we were resting almost more than we were walking. "When are we going to rest?" seemed to be the constant cry.

Two drop-outs, numerous blisters, and 28 grueling miles later, we limped our way back to Glendale—a tired, foot-swollen, but happy group. I practically tore my pant knees crawling the 15 yards to our car.

As I lay in my bed that night, a cry came from downstairs, "Ormie, don't forget! You have to walk to church tomorrow!" For a minute, I thought I was going to drown in the antiseptic and rubbing alcohol that covered my tired frame.

The next day I did walk to church. And a day later, as always, I walked several miles to school. I had a balance problem that while it didn't keep me from playing football and volleyball, made it impossible to ride a bike. Didn't own a car either.

So, I walked everywhere, often beside a friend pedaling a bike, discovering the truth of Friedrich Nietzsche's words, "All truly great thoughts are conceived while walking." And Hippocrates' dictum, "Walking is a man's best medicine."

Orman Day's prose and poetry have been published by numerous literary journals, such as Soul Poetry, ZYZZYVA, Creative Nonfiction, Potomac Review, Third Coast *and* Portland Review.



Photo by Dinuka Lankaloka: Unsplash.com

The New Car
by Ralph Dranow

I've just bought my first car,
a shiny, new, dark green Toyota Corolla,
a belated driver at age 59,
nervous hands fumbling with the ignition.
"Do you know how to drive?"
the young Asian guy at the dealer's asks,
concern tightening his sharp features.
"Yes, of course." But I'm still not sure.
I've been terrified of driving,
ever since college and the accident,
with my impatient father, the reluctant teacher,
attempting to teach me.
Four decades later, Mene, my kind, patient instructor,
has almost persuaded me I can climb the mountain.

My heart is a caged bird, desperate to escape,
as I maneuver the car through
Oakland's heavily trafficked streets
into hilly, upscale Piedmont.
But with few cars on the road there,
in mid-afternoon,
my breathing opens up, feasting on balmy air,
my body returning to me,
a free-flowing river.
I glide the car past palatial houses,
lush lawns, a banquet of trees,
captain of my brand-new, glistening car.
The sky goes on forever,
the sun smiling down on me,
as a I hum a tuneless melody.

Ralph Dranow works as an editor and poetry teacher. His most recent poetry collection is Jelaludin Rumi Comes to Oakland *(*Rose Press*, 2026). His website is https://www.ralphdranow.net.*



Photo by hello aesthe: Pexels.com

quickening
by Olga Dugan

(for Bubbles)

how beautiful to rarely see or care
where we and the natural world
begin then end, I have heard God's
voice beneath tall oaks lining
a pavement, angels' wings rustling
under leaves too close to corner-
house windows, I have been
awestruck with how this city's most
ragged places and most hardened
people are visited by a rose

once, after Mother and I, matching
blue flowered dresses, posed among
backyard floribundas, I watched
my father, a hard man, mechanic
city job foreman, move hands
from oven to counter to table, asking
God, Whose Hands hold earth's
deep places and heights of hills, *if
He knows and yet would still rebuild
a life strayed far from Him*

despite his question, Dad worked
tirelessly on our meal—turkey
wings roasted in chicken broth
cornbread, yams, mac and cheese
seasonings, flour, roux of fat
gatherings for gravy-smothered
rice, corn, greens—he boiled milk
butter, brown sugar, cream, vanilla
until the icing thickened, caramelizing
as he poured it over homemade cake

in this grace, he was a rose, perhaps
a *Drop Dead Red* pruned in winter
quickened come spring, constantly
flowering all summer and fall—
when he sat for a break, I couldn't
help placing a palm on his cheek
where clusters of petals suddenly
revealed a bloom he so rarely showed
and with a wind-calm in a voice
much older than my years, I replied
yes, Father, God would

Olga Dugan is a Cave Canem Fellow and educator from Philadelphia, PA. Nominated for Best of the Net and Pushcart prizes, her award-winning poems appear in many literary journals and anthologies including Amethyst, Spirit Fire Review, Reformed Journal, Relief, Ekstasis, Agape Review, The Windhover, Litmosphere, The Write Launch, Cathexis Northwest Press, Epistle Literary Magazine, One Art, *and* Poems from Pandemia.

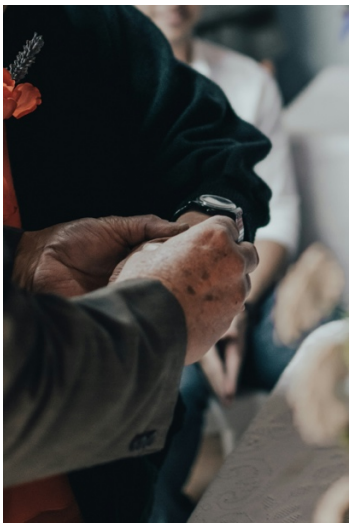


Photo by gaspar zaldo: Unsplash.com

Two Old Men Fumble with Their Wallets
by Russell Fee

Both sag in loose sweat suits: mismatched tops and bottoms, faded stains on the fronts, and threadbare cuffs. Neither wear socks. One sits in a wheelchair. The other grips a walker. They huddle close, each bent over, their heads almost touching. They mumble in low voices that sound like a scatter of gravel. It's difficult to tell if they are talking to each other or fussing to themselves as they work with bent stubs of fingers to separate the walls of their wallets and pinch at the few bills between. They both fail on the first, second, and even the third try. The young orderly, who has been standing behind the wheelchair, smiles and turns to go, but the old man with the walker lays a hand on his arm, and with a gentle nod, beckons him to stay a moment longer. The old man in the wheelchair holds up two weathered dollar bills and hands them to the orderly who thanks him and leaves. The old man with the walker sits down and continues to fumble with his wallet, but the old man in the wheelchair shakes his head and waves a hand for him to stop. They are silent for a moment, each catching his breath, as they settle into the hospital waiting room.

Russell Fee is the author of the multi-award-winning Sheriff Matt Callahan mystery series. His short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in such journals as The Galway Review, Short Beasts Literary Magazine, Five on the Fifth, Killer Nashville Magazine, Literally Stories, Short Circuit, Spaceports & Spidersilk, Sci Phi Journal, Hemingway Shorts, Star 82 Review, Winamop, Bright Flash Literary Review, *and* Spank the Carp. *To learn more about Russ and his work, please visit his website at outerislandpress.com.*



Photo by Matheus Bertelli: Pexels.com

Ruing
by Vern Fein

When you bump into people, you talk about things. Dead spouses come up. People often ask about my deceased wife—what she was like. I could write a book about her idiosyncrasies, flaws, faithfulness—all the beautiful and unusual things . . .wonderful wife, mother, friend—creative, loving, merciful, kind, irritating as hell at times.

But what I remember most—she "gassed" herself. Nothing terrible like Sylvia Plath sticking her head in the oven. Nope. My wife just made herself laugh a lot. She'd laugh about the silliest things! Things I didn't hear or know about. She'd laugh heartily, sometimes going into paroxysms. When we first married, I used to feel excluded. I couldn't see what was so funny.

How could anything be that hilarious? How could laughing become gasping, followed by words that sputtered out like water droplets from a near drowning? When she would try to explain what was so funny, I didn't get it. I just didn't get it. Sometimes I got a little miffed—grumpy even! But now, if I could look into her eyes one more time, I would laugh my head off.

A recent octogenarian, Vern Fein, has published over 300 poems and short prose pieces in over 100 different sites. A few are: Gyroscope Review, Young Raven's Review, Bindweed, *82 Review, River And South, Grey Sparrow Journal, *and* Rat's Ass Review . *His second poetry book*—REFLECTION ON DOTS—*was released late last year.*



Photo by Ofir Eliav: Pexels.com

Field Days
by Frank William Finney

I went with her
and we lay low,

among the stubble,
weeds, and scrub,

while tractors moaned
the minutes by.

The years dragged on
through calm and storm.

Through fog and hail.
Through sleet, and snow.

And I still miss
those long gone days

above those fragrant
fallow fields

when summer
used to sing.

Frank William Finney is a poet and former university lecturer from Massachusetts. He is the 2026 Winner of the HEART Poetry Award sponsored by South Carolina's Nostalgia Press. *His poems have appeared in numerous international journals and anthologies including* Constellations, Four Tulips, The Gilded Weathervane, *and* The Poetry Lighthouse. *He is the author of five collections of poetry, most recently* Preludes to Lethe *(*Kelsay Books, *2026). Find him online at frankwilliamfinney.net.*



Photo by Stéphane D.: Pexels.com

A Gift of Love
by Nolcha Fox

The wind is a lavish lover,
tossing rose petals into the pond.
The koi arise to kiss the skies,
and nibble at wind's offerings.

Nolcha Fox's poems and short stories 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. Nominated for Best Small Fictions. Editor of* Chewers by Masticadores, LatinosUSA, *and* Fine Lines.

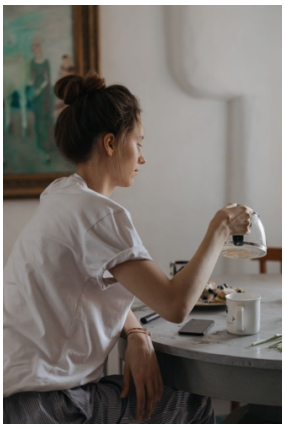


Photo by cottonbro studio: Pexels.com

Not About You
by Nolcha Fox

I don't think of you much anymore.

I don't hear your whisper
when I close the curtains,
the ones you said were
a god-awful puke green.

But you probably don't remember
since it wasn't about you.

I don't think of you much anymore.

I don't bury my nose
in the clothes you left behind.
You preferred a dirty dog aroma
and holes in your greyish socks.

But you probably don't remember
since it wasn't about you.

I don't think of you much anymore.

I don't keep chocolate chip
ice cream on the counter,
watching it melt until you came home
with red lipstick on your collar.

But you probably don't remember
since it wasn't about you.

And this poem—
it isn't about you.



Photo by John Sternberg: Pexels.com

Midnight Ceremony
by George Freek

As a freezing night arrives,
leaves die on their trees.
Blind things crawl
from underground holes,
where they escape the light.
For some, it will be
the final night of a brief life.
Nature demands it.
In a sky they're unable to see,
they're sent to eternity.
I drink wine for two.
My wife is no longer here.
I'll also become dust.
Nature says I must.
Will I be afraid,
when it's my time to die?
Like an actor in a dull play,
I'll put on my disguise,
and say my prayer.
They'll be ordinary lines,
and no one
will bother to care.

George Freek's poetry has appeared in numerous journals and reviews. His poem "Night Thoughts" was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize.



Photo by monicore: Pexels.com

In a Blue Garden
by George Freek

~After the Chinese Poet Tu Fu

I stare over empty flowerpots
at my decaying garden.
The roses are dead.
Hollyhocks no longer bloom.
It's cold climbing out of bed.
The day drags into the night.
Stars flicker then fade
like dead dreams, that
once served their purpose.
The moon I see is only a rock
and that's all it means.
I've lost my sense of place.
My life is one of ordinary habits,
as I move through them
like an unthinking machine.
I know nothing.
Time doesn't wait for me,
and it's getting very late.



Photo by Ray Bilcliff: Pexels.com

A Walk Along Deerfield Beach by James P. Goss

A ruffled soft aqua ocean
pulses rows of gentle waves toward land
clustered gray cumulus rolls overhead
mute flowers on the breeze
moving out to sea
A pale morning sun
slants through broken clouds
focusing spotlight rays
on blue-grey seafoam
pools of light to the east
soften the rising sun
Traveling north
a V-shaped squadron of pelicans
parallels the sand
casting fast grey shadows

On the brown and beige bricks
of the oceanfront sidewalk
the smells of life on land:
eggs cooking in beachfront café
musty stink of garbage
faint mist of car exhaust
Beneath scattered circles
of scavenging birds
people move hurriedly
talking to each other
gazing out to sea
Squirrels scamper beneath bar awnings
air spiced
with liquor and beer
Flickering images
on silent televisions
above empty tables and chairs
Idling delivery trucks
lawn mowers
leaf blowers

James P. Goss is the author of Pop Culture Florida and the Vinyl Lives *series about record stores and collectors. Goss's poems have appeared in* Blue Moon, Vita Brevis, Synchronized Chaos, October Hill, Metaworker *and others. He lives in South Florida with his family.*



Photo by Anete Lusina: Pexels.com

Echolalia Is
by Janessa Graham

~After Diana Chiang's "What Matisse Is After"

A tender lass
of unuttered sayings
screaming with silence
shouting out of a heart
in bars pleading,

air choked by lips drawn
in tight fawn of a tongue
tied sweetening bitter
sighs that hum but,[1]

sting like a bee
scorned in its hive,

afraid to breathe,
scanning its palate for danger

afraid to walk in the valley
of deep shadow fearing no harm

afraid to be—

free.



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.*

[1] Line 13 is adapted from a lyric in Jon Batiste's 2023 song entitled: "Butterfly."



Photo by Nurlan Tortbayev: Pexels.com

My Echolalia Speaks
by Janessa Graham

~Inspired by my mother

When my words repeat,
I'm saying: *Safety, I need a hug*.
When my words repeat,
I'm saying: *Sound, I need your voice*.
When my words repeat,
I'm saying: *Trust, I need your blessing*.
When my words repeat,
I'm saying: *Questions, I need your answers*.
When my words repeat,
I'm saying: *Time, I need your patience*.
When my words repeat,
I'm saying: *Attention, I need you to be still*.
When my words repeat,
I'm saying: *Thoughts, I need your peace*.
When my words repeat,
I'm saying: *Feelings, I need your rest*.
When my words repeat,
I'm saying: *Speech, I need your grasp*.
When my words repeat,
I'm saying: *Mind, I need your calm*.
When my words repeat,
I'm saying: *Heart, I need your courage*.
When my words repeat,
I'm saying: *Lips, I need your harmony*.
When my words repeat,
they deplete, but my lips still *echo*.



Photo by Simon S.: Pexels.com

Campers Await
by John Grey

The mountain is a sugar whorl of white snow today
and, for all its beauty, the avalanche risk is high.
No hiking, no jogging, on its smothered trails,
we are on watch but the thaw we seek is months away.
Yet, for all that blanketing, we know what's underneath,
for we've been there, when the weather allowed,
pitching tents, lighting fires, living off our backpacks and the land.
We've shared the woods, the thickets with everything
from raccoons to possums to foxes and even the occasional black bear.
We've braved every chill and wind squall, snakes sunning on rocks,
and a barred owl on a branch, fruitlessly warning us off.
We've caught fish and dipped our toes in every pond
and stream, stood under waterfalls of melting white stuff
for an adlibbed shower on our trembling pink skins. For now,
the house restrains our solitude. We cannot take it to the open air.
Sure, we enjoy the indoor comforts of woodstove, furniture.
telephones and music and television yet it's the wild,
uncomplicated, unfashionable, uncomfortable even, that we crave.
Somewhere, up there, our true nature prepares for us, in a quiet nook
that patiently awaits a man in jeans and lumberjack shirt
and a woman with a gift for knowing what the surrounding
plants, berries, choice mushrooms, can provide. It's a place
that has no use for humans. But, come spring, who's human anyhow?



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* Plainsongs*.*



Photo by Utpal Chatterjee: Pexels.com

The Song of the Mockingbird
by John Grey

It begins with fragments:
a trill of titmouse,
ambulance siren,
Sinatra leaking through cracked glass,
and the opening bars of Fur Elise.

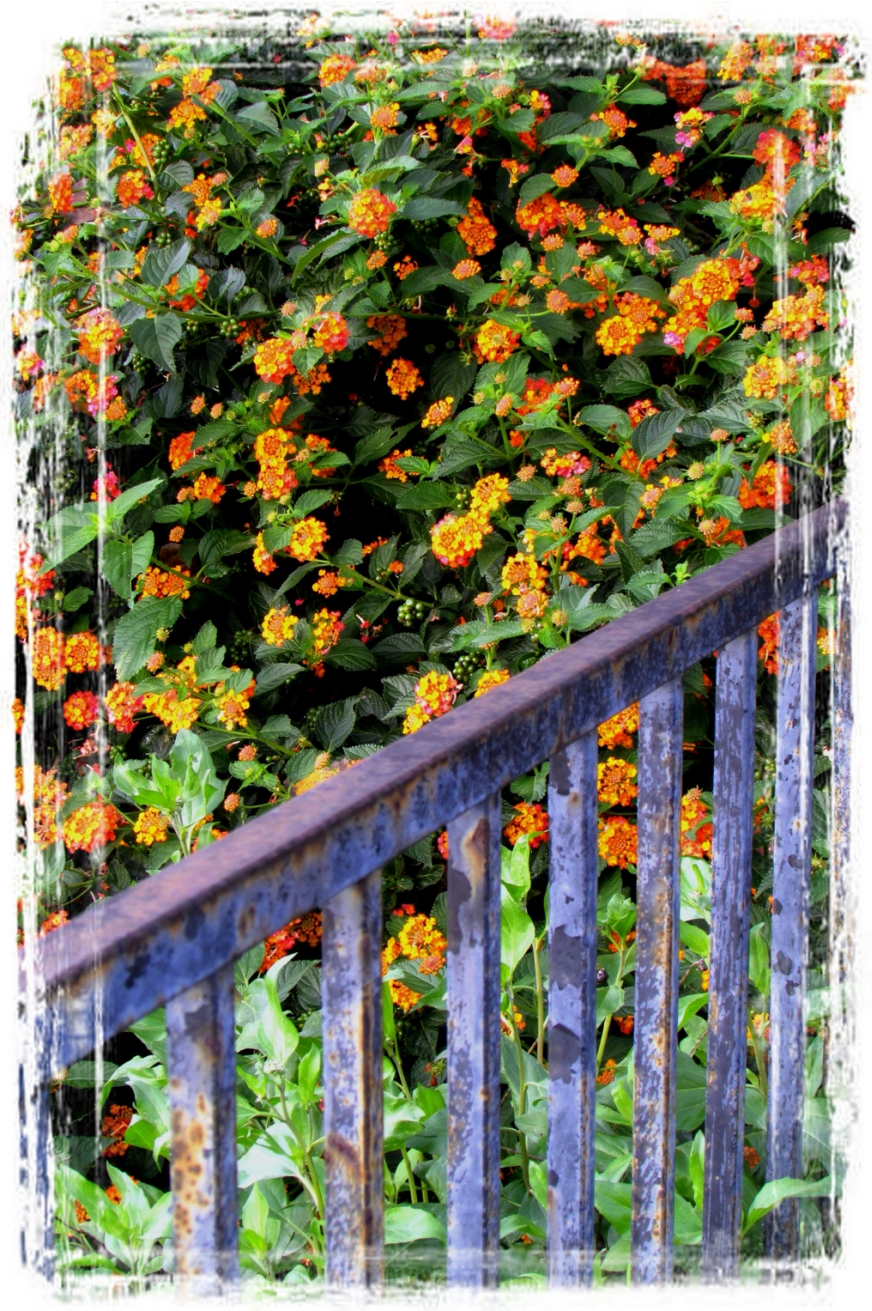
More than just a bird on the chimney,
it's the first sampler—
a thief of echoes,
a collector of ghosts.
Like me, it owns no melody,
only the courage to borrow,
and hope the mishmash
is unrecognizable to its source.

I rise, drink coffee,
kiss my wife on the cheek
as my father did my mother before me.
I shower for no reason
other than I always do.
I wear what my job demands.

Then, off I go into the world,
my whistle for company,
a mix of melodies
appropriated from everywhere.

I carry my song forward.
Not finished.
Maybe never finished.
But alive.

The Fence Disappears
by Kathleen Gunton



Kathleen Gunton is a poet/photographer who believes one art feeds another. Her images appear on the cover of Arts & Letters, Blood & Thunder, *and* Thema*—to name a few.*

Never Alone on the Lake
by Kathleen Gunton





Photo by Danie Franco: Unsplash.com

Footprints and Footnotes
by Jean Hackett

I wander the library's silent groves,
ancient tomes grown forgotten,
knowing if I search beneath crumpled leaves
I can find my way.

Footnotes leave footprints,
trace fossils
that expose
m e a n d e r I n g s

left behind
by long-gone laborers
who hacked away
at brambles
with pens and shovels

to construct paths that harmonized
with the master builders' visions.

Though pickaxed chapters
stuck to a narrative trail,

eyes, minds
strayed.

Side glances became S
I
D
E
NOTES:
coal mines collapsed
into miners' graves,

broken bells, crosses
where churches burned,

once sacred blue ponds
sprouting sulphur hydroxide.

S
I
D
E

NOTES: can turn into side streets,
useful detours
as signs marking major throughfares
send us in the wrong directions.



Jean Hackett lives and writes in San Antonio and the Texas Hill Country. Her recent work has appeared in journals Ocotillo Review, Windward Review, Yanaguana*, and* Mockingowl Press, *anthologies* Poured out from the Big Dipper, Formidable Women, Purifying Wind*, and* Yellow Flag. *Jean's chapbook* Masked/Unmuted *was published in March 2022*.



Photo by Johannes Plenio: Pexels.com

This Time, This Place
by Robert Harlow

Is it just me,
or are the trees on fire?
Colors bursting—
those luminous reds,
oranges, yellows. . .as if
they have spent their whole lives
this way. Green? How tedious!
I'm glad it's vacated the premises,
leaving no trace of itself behind.

But chlorophyl does has its place
in the evolution of things,
especially this day
when I cannot offer enough praise
(to whomever is in charge)
for nature's wardrobe change.
But I do have one request—
let the leaves stay—just as they are now. . .
forever October in my neck of the woods.

Robert Harlow resides in NY. He wishes he had better things to do than write poems. However, Kismet is a fickle playmate. He plans most of his day around thinking he should be listening rather than talking. He wonders why the sky isn't more famous and why his cat always seems to want more food. Soul Poetry. *Wow! The best of the best. He thanks his lucky stars that they're dumb enough to publish his poems. More than once as well.*



Photo by Eden FC: Pexels.com

With regards
by Terry Heath

my cotillion
was an empty room
I decline to dance at yours

do not worry
if the music is wasted
it was only rented



Terry Heath lives and writes on Puget Sound near Seattle. He has taught college English since 2010, edits Inkhorn Review, *and hosts the podcast* Life on Words.



Photo by Ashley Glazer: Pexels.com

Elote, for Aaron
by Lori A. Howe

Oh, this beguiling life…
I want to steam away the silk,
lavish it with crema and Cortijo cheese,
strew a confetti of tajin and cilantro,
squeeze a fan of lime like a lawn sprinkler
catching late afternoon sun,
open a crisp, ice-cold lager
and make a glorious mess,
devour every gorgeous bite

There is no time left,
no room in our coat sleeves
to carry what is bitter.
if we must carry something
let it be sunflowers
and a great platter of *elote;*
let us bank this sweet fire
in our bodies
to resist the coming dark.

Lori Howe is the co-creator of the poetic form, the cadralor, and serves as Editor in Chief of its flagship journal, Gleam. She lives in Laramie, Wyoming, where she is a professor in the Honors College at UW.



Photo by Alwin Johnson: Pexels.com

The Last Lullaby
by Elizabeth Hoyle

"Make sure there's ice cream," Liam demands, climbing on my recliner.

"And that there's nothing yellow!" Ava screeches from where she dangles on my chin-up bar between the living room doorposts. All of them have hated the color yellow since the accident. I can't blame them. I don't like it now either. Which still feels strange to admit after driving the school bus for so long.

"I hope they don't talk too long. These things can go on forever." Jackson is hiding under the table in my dining room. He always used to sit in the back of the bus and probably would have grown up to be a fantastic leader. From all my years working with kids, I've learned that some of the ones who hid a lot became adults people look at and look up to. Jackson would have been one of them for sure.

Emmie comes up to me as I sit to tie on my dress shoes, her purple stuffed rabbit in her arms. She's the youngest of all of them and, so far, the only one who wants to get close. "Will Mommy and Daddy both be there?"

I remember her mother coming on the bus one morning to explain why Emmie would only be riding every other week. Part of the custody arrangement that had just been decided. Emmie's mom could barely get the words out.

"I'm sure they will, honey." I get to my feet. "Let's go." She reaches up, out of instinct, for my hand. It kills me every time her little fingers go right through mine.

The drive to the school parking lot is one I could do in my sleep yet tonight I almost miss the turn, which causes a riot from the kids in the back seat. The stage for the memorial is all decked out fancy with huge, framed photos of each child and enormous bouquets of flowers in each of their favorite colors. Ava and Liam got into quite the argument one afternoon about which was better: orange or blue. As I slowed the bus to their stop, they asked me what I thought. I'd said I liked them both because of sunrise, which often has both colors and I usually had to get up before the sunrise to get the bus ready for them. Ava had blinked at me and said that her favorite was still blue while Liam had followed her off the bus with a wave and a smile. The sight of those bouquets and the little rabbit in front of Emmie's photo turns my stomach.

I shouldn't have come but I need to be here. They need to be there, too. It might help them more than it will hurt me. A piercing shriek of microphone feedback causes me to grit my teeth even harder.

"My apologies," Principal Mashoud says. "Please take your seats."

"Get closer," Liam urges when I make to sit in a back row chair.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I whisper.

"We know it is! Go!" Ava yells.

"Please," Emmie pleads.

"I can't," I say, grabbing the closest seat.

"Good evening, parents, students, teachers, and staff," Principal Mashoud says, his voice as tired as I feel. "We are gathered here tonight to remember the lives of four children, taken from us too soon. Let us begin with a moment of silence to collect our thoughts and to remember Ava, Liam, Emmie, and Jackson."

Most of the crowds bow their heads as though this were a church service. The principal makes a speech about how the kids each lit up the hallways of the school and how dark their absence has left the place. Their teachers come up and speak, one by one, about each child. Tissues are passed around, kids hug their parents, and the candles everyone holds flicker in the early evening breeze. I can't listen to any of it. The kids won't leave me alone, urging me to go up to the stage. It's not until it's the parents' turn to take the stage that they start shrieking. Jackson is yelling at me from my left side. He takes a few steps back, runs toward me as if he is trying to knock me over. He succeeds. There is gravel in my teeth from where I sprawl on the asphalt before I know what has happened.

"Are you okay?" The mother I had been sitting next to leans over to give me a hand but she withdraws it and her face grows steely when she recognizes me. Her husband leans forward to look around her at me.

"You've got a hell of a lot of nerve showing up here."

"Please, I don't want to cause any more trouble," I say, bringing my hand to my mouth and coming away with blood.

"You've caused enough heartache to last a lifetime! Get out of here!" The man's bellowing is louder than the children's shrieking. I get up to leave but suddenly the kids go quiet.

"PUSH!" Jackson yells and, two of them prod at each of my legs. I move forward, their strength somehow greater than mine. Step by staggering step, they take me up toward the stage. The gazes of the gathered are a stifling suit I've been forced to wear. The kids stop pushing me once I am at the foot of the stage. They remain behind me, somehow preventing me from trying to bolt.

"Mr. Arnshaw, I did not expect you to be here. You didn't respond to my invitation." Principal Mashoud is calm though I can see by his frequent glances at the parents that he isn't pleased with this turn of events. He gestures to the podium. "Would you care to say a few words?"

"Do we have to keep pushing you? My arms are tired!" Ava says. There is no refusing these kids.

On shaking legs, I take the stage. The microphone seems too close and too far away. My fingers hurt from how hard I'm gripping the podium. I glance behind me. The kids nod at me encouragingly.

"Good evening, everyone. My name is Sean Arnshaw. As some of you may know, I was driving bus 143 when the accident occurred. That truck sideswiped the bus before I could do anything. Ava had just finished telling me about the macaroni art project they were going to do in class the next day and Jackson and Emmie were working on her spelling words together. Liam was working on yet another paper airplane he was going to send to space." This is the first time I've spoken about the accident, and the words are spilling out of my mouth before I can stop them. "They were all ready to go home. It was my job to get them there and I didn't do it. The phrase 'I'm sorry' doesn't even come close to how sad and wretched and terrible I feel for living while they do not. They haunt me now and probably will all the rest of my life."

"No, we won't," Emmie says.

"That's why we made you come up here." Liam's smile is just as sunny as it was in life. "You can help us as much as we just helped you."

"How?" I ask, not caring that I am in front of hundreds of people and a microphone.

"How do you settle any kid down to sleep?" Ava asks.

I blink at them. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, we are." Jackson takes Emmie's hand while Ava loops her fingers through Liam's. "Tell our parents we love them. That's not going to change even though we have."

"I will." I face the crowd again. "Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in singing this lullaby, if you know it. It's one my parents sang to me, and I think the kids would have liked it, too." Principal Mashoud steps close to try to pull me away but I dig my heels in and begin singing as loudly as I can. "Sleep now, little one. It's time for

bed. Here's the blanket for your toes and a pillow for your head. Your dreams are waiting, dear little child. Follow them over rainbows to somewhere lovely and wild. No matter what or where you're led, I'll always be here to sing you to bed."

The old lullaby does the trick on the audience, quieting them. A few of the mothers join in as I finish the song and begin singing it again. More and more join in until the whole crowd is singing. The candles they hold flicker with their breaths. I see the kids leave out of the corner of my eye. Liam and Ava wave to their parents. I miss the moment of their fading away as if I've blinked, even though I haven't. One moment I still see them and the other I don't. Something like that is not for my mortal eyes to see, I guess. Jackson looks around, absorbing everything, before he is gone too. Only Emmie remains, her stuffed rabbit in her arms, peering into the crowd. I catch her eye and point. At the aisle end of the second row, her parents have their arms wrapped around each other, singing and staring at their daughter's photo as if nothing else in the world existed. Emmie smiles and goes to stand in front of it so once more she can look into her parents' eyes. She waves at me then turns again to look at them. Soon she is gone, too.

Principal Mashoud ushers me away from the microphone. I murmur a word of thanks and step off the stage, hoping to return to my seat at the back. But Emmie's mom stands, reaches for my hand, and steps aside so I can have her seat. Her ex-husband sits in the aisle, and she is next to him all through the rest of the memorial service. Before the end, as if we rehearsed it, we all sing the lullaby one last time.

Everyone extinguishes their candles and starts heading for their cars. I pass along the kids' messages to their parents then stop to look up at the fading orange and blue sunset. A shooting star streaks across the sky, vanishing where the colors are the brightest.

"Good night, kiddos. Sleep well," I whisper.



Elizabeth Hoyle is a writer and a librarian. She lives in Virginia with her husband. Self-Sung Lullabies*, her debut poetry chapbook, was published by* Alien Buddha Press*. Her writings can be found in various places all over the internet and in print. She doubts that there is such a thing as too many books. Feel free to connect with her at her website, elizabethhoyle.com, or on the website formerly known as Twitter or on Bluesky @ERHoyle.*



Photo by Ivan S: Pexels.com

For the things I cannot Name
by Ajirioghene Iyebutemeh

will the world forgive me,
because i have
learned to measure love
by what it can carry,
by the weight of rice
on a shoulder, the silence
of a man returning home
with less than he left with.
i have mistaken your hands
for maps, their creases
small roads leading
everywhere but rest.
forgive me,
for every time i called
your tiredness strength.
i did not know a hand
could become a country
and still have no place
to sleep.

Ajirioghene Iyebutemeh is a Nigerian interior designer and literary enthusiast who is as intentional as she is meticulous with her craft, be it a space or a poem. She is drawn to literature that feels intimate rather than performative; writings that can make something enormous out of something ordinary. She's working on her first book of poetry and presently writes from Nigeria.



Photo by Patrick: Pexels.com

Loose Ends
by F.D. Jackson

They put an end to you.
Drink coffee in the kitchen, tell stories,
appraise the old percolator, the dinted
blackberry cobbler pan, eye the fifties styled chest,
the hand carved bureau.

They rifle through your purse, find cash
to pay for flowers. But sprays of pink carnations won't do.
Leaving out a single flower would be anathema,
an affront to your egalitarian heart. I grab handfuls of
lilies, gladiolas, roses, orchids, and chrysanthemums.

They ransack your closet and find a lilac suit
to bury you in. Sleeves too short, fabric too thin;
you will be cold down there,
where the freezing rainwater reaches roots
of old oak trees. I search the house for the
afghan you crocheted in the seventies.
Wrap avocado, wheat, and burnt orange colors
around your legs, under your feet.

They want to leave your hair natural, slicked back
off your brow. I pay a hairdresser to blow out your hair,
paint your cheeks and lips pink. I know that you could be vain.

They have all left the house. I sit holding a glass of Moscato,
eating a chicken leg and crying. Hear rumbling thunder.
Sounds like God in the attic stumbling around in the dark,
running into your old dusty pink wingback chair,
afraid to come down and talk to me.



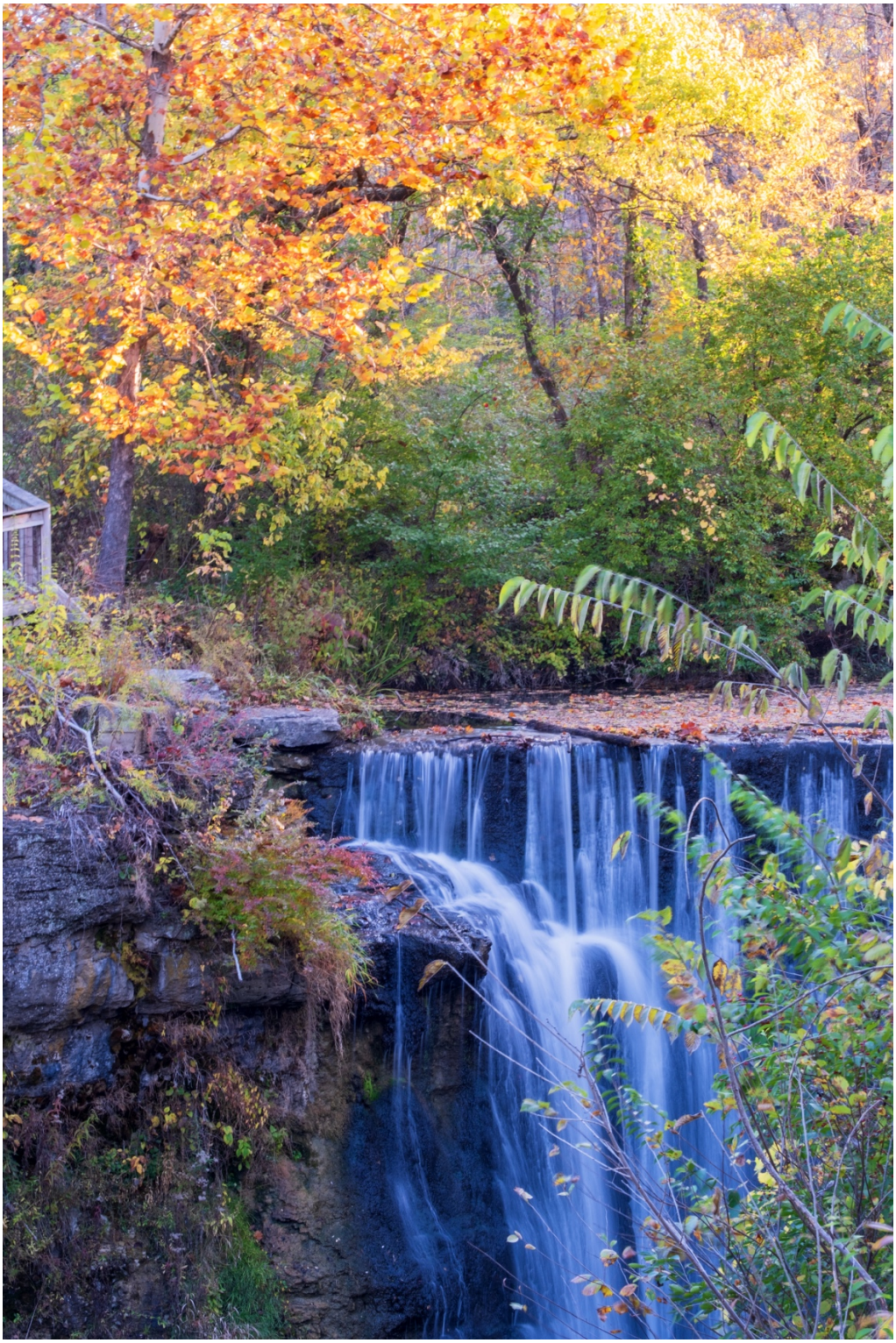
F. D. Jackson lives in the southeastern U. S., along with her husband and sundry furry family members. She writes about loss/grief and the restorative and transformative power of nature. When she is not reading or writing, she can be found wandering the Gulf Coast with a cold drink in her hand. F. D.'s works have appeared in Anti-Heroin Chic, Williwaw, FERAL, Third Wednesday, Eunoia Review, Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine, *as well as others.*

Drippy Oak Leaf
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.

Cedarcliff Falls
by Susan Jero



Honeybee on Jewel Weed
by Susan Jero





Photo by Sami Abdullah: Pexels.com

The Full Table, Years Later
by Fauziyya Muhammad Kabir

years from now,
i hope the table is still too small.
i hope someone complains
that there are too many people.
i hope the plates overlap.
i hope somebody arrives late
and everybody makes room.
i hope there is too much food.
i hope someone steals meat
from another person's plate.
i hope there is music
coming from somewhere.
i hope we look at each other
with the same kind of mercy.

Fauziyya Muhammad Kabir is a UK-based Nigerian writer who describes her work as an exploration of ordinary life, warm but honest, tender but with a spine. She loves love, the kitchen, and Warsan Shire's Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head*. With music, she does Sade when feeling herself, Adele when she needs a good, unscheduled cry, and Maher Zain when feeling spiritual.*



Photo by Esma Özer: Pexels.com

Brushstrokes One Soul-Length Deep
by Douglas J. Lanzo

"I want to touch people with my art. I want them to say 'he feels deeply, he feels tenderly.'" — Vincent van Gogh

Stunned by the film, *Loving Vincent*,
each swirl of paint…magnificent!
colors vibrant, brushstrokes of life,
beauty of night, tranquil in strife;

Stars in the sky, burning like souls,
vibrant, aflame—divinely aglow…
emotion captured, in nature's grandeur,
creation emblazed in colors that stir.

Rejected by man, cast out with taunts,
poor and ill-fed, lonely and gaunt,
manic at times, deeply depressed,
his works exploded, never at rest.

Despite all his flaws, goodness shone through
after a blast among coal miner crews.
He went to work, bandaging wounds
with his own clothes, amid crumbled ruins.

He nursed to health, a Dutch prostitute,
who, while pregnant and ill, fell destitute.
The models he sought were broken and poor,
widows and weavers, and peasants, ignored.

He viewed thatched huts as "human nests,"
bestowing souls with warmth, care and rest.
Yet his only peace came from his brother,
who loved him deeply—like no other.

Impasto brush work, painting each frame
brightening each screen, with orange-purple flames—
searing my heart, touching my soul,
renewing my faith with the love he extolled.

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. 603 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 Jayanth Muppaneni: Pexels.com

Sturgeon
by Cricket Lesso

Dark, earthy moons of caviar
on a mother of pearl spoon
are not my taste.

I'd rather linger in the depths
of the river,
be in the presence
of sturgeon—

those ancient fish
endangered
because their salt-cured eggs
melt so delicately
on tongues.

I will anchor myself
to the riverbed, stay still,
ask nothing of them,
watch them emerge
from brown-green clouds of silt

simply magnificent,
simply living.

Cricket Lesso is a poet living in upstate New York. Her work has appeared in River & South Review, Skipping Stones, Highlights, *and* Ladybug, *among other publications.*

Peace New Mexico
by Cynthia Linville



Cynthia Linville's photographs have appeared in The People's Tribune, *The* Sacramento News & Review, Capital Public Radio's *website,* Cracker *(band) Official Facebook page,* WTF, *and* Medusa's Kitchen. *Visit her website at CynthiaLinville.com.*



Photo by wal_ 172619: Pexels.com

Here Comes the Sun
by Cynthia Linville

"I thought the most beautiful thing in the world must be shadow."
— Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

My shadow walks before me
taller
skinnier
leaning off to the side

Perhaps she is looking ahead
at the horizon, that mark between
what could have been and
what's to be

Perhaps she is trying
to lean back into the past,
find tiny pools
of reflection

Perhaps she's shielding me
from the harsh light
of things not meant to be
or missed opportunities

My shadow walks before me
taller
skinnier
leaning off to the side

Perhaps I should join her
stronger
wiser
seeking truth for myself.



Photo by Erik Mclean: Pexels.com

Voyage of the Bascart
by Ken Long

An abandoned shopping cart rolls off the sidewalk by a grocery store onto a mostly empty parking lot. Hidden behind a brick column, it was missed after the store closed by a wavy haired, bespectacled cart collector on his second—and last—day on the job.

It's a half hour before sundown on a Sunday in November. The wind roars as it pours into the plaza, while stone gray clouds glide by overhead. Brown, gnarled leaves skitter across the blacktop like mice—stopping, then lurching forward a few feet, changing direction every few seconds.

The runaway bascart zigs this way then that, a loose wheel wobbling. Two gulls scurry away from a runover bag of Doritos when it rattles near. In fits and starts, it makes its way across the pavement, finally picking up speed during a prolonged gust of wind as it heads toward the last remaining car in the lot, a rusting yellow Pontiac belonging to the store manager.

Ken Long has been writing poetry for a number of years, but only recently decided to seek publication. His work has appeared in The Bookends Review *and* The Avon Review. *Long also writes short fiction and is a photodigital artist whose work has been exhibited at a number of galleries.*



Photo by Irma Sjachlan: Pexels.com

Poem Without a Name
by Kevin MacAlan

~ In memory of Naoive Coggin's son, Cian Nugent,
a young student who drowned after getting into
difficulty in a rip current while swimming with friends
off Ardmore, in Co Waterford, Ireland, on April 28th, 2023.

I didn't know the boy.
The man, I suppose.
Past twenty-one, but only by weeks.
I knew the mam.
We shared poetry in a group,
mused by vicissitudes.

I have a son of my own,
lost to me at that age,
but he still leaves footprints,
disturbs the peace,
makes a mess, or art,
somewhere in the world.

I need to ask the mother
for her son's name.
Not to adorn this poem,
but to attune me clearly
to a particular silence
where there should be a noise.

Poetry Ireland's Introductions alumni Kevin MacAlan, lives in rural Waterford, has an MA in Creative Writing, and has contributed to numerous journals in the U.S., Ireland and the rest of Europe. He was longlisted for The National Poetry Competition, shortlisted for The Fish Poetry Prize (twice), and the Yeovil Literary Prize (twice) - winning a poetry prize in 2026.

Flew
by Kevin MacAlan



Kevin MacAlan has been a photographer for over fifty years. He has a Director's Certificate in Cinematography, has had work exhibited, and has contributed images to many journals including The Waxed Lemon, The Fish Barrel Review, The Belfast Review, *and* Mini Mag.



Photo by Shvili: Pexels.com

Sept. 10
by John P. McCurdy

I took a walk through the dew
Jacket in arm, to see what I knew

Through
Crimson cactus flowers
Leaning boldly
Squanched grass
Dampens my blue jeans

Beside
Water sparkling
Set on fire
By the morning
Quivering

Atop
Walls of earth
Letting my legs
Swing off
My airy outpost

Among
Corn spiders—grass hoppers
Snake grass—Coyote cubs
Lightfoot's land of Notion
My own Sea of Tranquility

Along
Kindly red trees
Rocky, unbalanced beds
Beaver dams and Indian trails
Felled birches swishing muddy water

Beneath
Lovely sound
Shrill swallows
Garbling Finches
A warbling pheasant chick

Satisfied
I turned home
Through groomed rows of beans
The only thing that hurt me
Was the barbed wire

John P. McCurdy is a journalist and writer from southwest Iowa. He has appeared in the Atlantic News Telegraph, Anita Tribune, *and* Adelaide Literary Magazine. *McCurdy currently works as the editor of the student literary magazine*, The Lance.

Shooting Stars
by Joseph A. Miller



Joseph A. Miller is an Associate Professor of Art at S.U.N.Y. Buffalo State University, where he has taught drawing and painting since 1997. Miller's work is in numerous public and private collections, and has been shown internationally in Finland, China, Poland and the Czech Republic, as well as across the United States, from Berkeley, California to Cambridge, Massachusetts.



Photo by MrP13: Pexels.com

Chubbs
by Jon Moray

Chauncey Chubbs, a janitor at Willisdale High School for the past thirty years, was working a dust mop, cleaning the gym floor after the basketball team just won the game that sent them to the state championship game. Each push of the mop was met with reminders of his age as his legs, hips, and arms made their toiling complaints known enough for the old man to wince to combat the aching discomforts.

The star player, Quincy Robbins, was the last one off the floor and noticed Chubbs struggling through his duties.

"Yo, Chubbs. Are you alright?" called Quincy, from about forty feet way.

Chubbs lifted a thumbs-up without losing sight of the floor. Quincy's mouth wrinkled, unconvinced by the old man's response, and headed toward the locker room.

Quincy went home and was greeted at the door with a celebratory hug by his mom, Gloria.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be there, son," she mouthed in his ear. Quincy whispered back his understanding that she had to work, as her income was the only support for them, aside from Quincy's part-time job.

"Mom, what's the story with Chubbs? Why doesn't he just retire?"

Gloria guided him to the dining room table by the hand and sat him down. "Not many townsfolk know this, but Chubbs was a high school basketball star at Willisdale thirty-five years ago," she said, her eyes focused toward the ceiling as if it were projecting the memory for her eyes. She went on to lament the basketball team was in the championship game and with one second to play, the team was down one point with Chubbs on the free throw line to attempt two shots. "He missed both shots, and the team lost the game."

Quincy rolled a napkin in his hand with his chin grazing his chest as he heard his mom's account on how Chubb's once promising future at that point of his life spiraled south to drugs, alcohol, and time in prison." His mom begged to get him a job at the school, and he has been there ever since," Gloria's voice cracked as she rubbed her son's hand.

Quincy and his teammates spent the next week practicing after school, and he made it a point to make idle chatter with Chubbs when he was tending to his janitorial duties.

The night of the big game, jitters swarmed Quincy's stomach as his mom tried her best to calm his nerves. A kiss to his forehead for good luck, and it was off to the school locker room to dress for Willisdale's biggest sports moment since the game Chubb's participated in.

The game was tight throughout, with neither team possessing more than a six-point lead. Chubbs popped in and out of the gym, mentally battling the torment of a nail-biting contest that recollected his painful memory. The game was still neck and neck up to the final minute. Chubbs mustered up enough nerves to sit beside Gloria for the outcome. The squeaking of sneakers served as a reminder that he would be busy tending to the floor afterward.

With Willisdale down one point with ten seconds to play, Quincy took an inbounds pass in the front court, passed to a teammate when he was double-teamed, and got it back with an open shot with one second to play. A slap on his wrist by the defender caused a foul and sent Quincy to the free throw line with a half-second left on the clock.

Chubbs' heart raced, sweat beaded his forehead, and he shot off his seat to the nearest exit. Gloria tried to stop him, but her reaction time was too late. Chubbs took refuge outside the gym, out of sight, but close enough to hear the crowd react to the upcoming free throws.

Seconds felt like an eternity until he heard the home crowd cheer. "He made the first one," Chubbs exhaled. He bit down on his bottom lip, and his curiosity got the best of him as he raced back inside to see Quincy sink the second free throw. Time expired on the opposing team's inbound pass, and the game was over.

Gloria dove into Chubbs' arms as tears filled their eyes, while Quincy was mobbed by teammates.

Streamers and confetti littered the maple hardwood floor as the marching band blared the school's song. The euphoria of victory was a blur to the old janitor, enough that he ignored the cleanup job that would ensue when the masses cleared.

The championship trophy was presented, the nets were cut down, and celebrations emanated as Chubbs took a seat, surveying the festive mess left all over the gym floor.

Gloria side-eyed her old friend and proclaimed, "You have the night off, Chubbs. The cleanup will be done by parents and students."

Quincy approached, hugged Gloria, and beamed a smile at Chubbs. "We did it. We are champions," Quincy mouthed and handed Chubbs a piece of a net that he cut down for his basketball friend.



Jon Moray has been writing short stories for over a decade, and his work has appeared in many online and print markets. When not working and being a devoted family man, he enjoys sports, music, the ocean, and SCI-FI/Fantasy media. Read more of his work at moraywrites.com.



Photo by Egor Kamelev: Pexels.com

When Japanese Beetles Are the Tree
by Winston Munn

Diseased—
a pine tree is battling
Pisa's tower

The doctor says the disease is progressive. What exactly does that mean? The progressive politician, standing in front of the camera, pledges a future that will be better if only we elect her. The way I see it, the only way that pledge can be true for me is if it holds a religious connotation that I don't want to hear.

redwood giants
destined to outlive me
again

What exactly is progress—improvement? What do you call it when something can't get better, when it gets worse incrementally? No one has succeeded in learning where this disease comes from, only where it leads.

in the tree line
one side of the mountain
still scarred

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 90 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 Sóc Năng Động: Pexels.com

Nursing Duties in August
by Winston Munn

Four legged comfort
jumps into my lap
and lays her head on my leg.
Our predawn ritual.

I'm transported back in time
to the 35-year-old woman
in the hospital bed,
eyes closed, crying softly.
The tumor in her brain
inoperable.

I can offer no comfort.
I can't quote Buddha by heart,
I can only sit with this stranger
and let her know she's not alone

with the entombment of her sorrow
in such a young crypt, and to deal
with echoes of those horrible words
she keeps hearing over and over.

I've read that Buddha lay down
between 2 sala trees as his life
was ending. His final words were,
"Make of yourself a light."

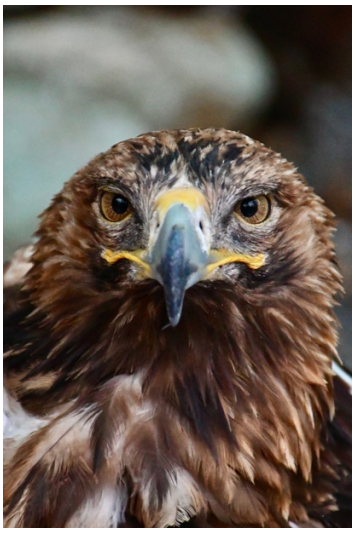


Photo by Hilal Diken: Pexels.com

While Coming Down Mt. Charleston
by Winston Munn

Rounding a corner,
almost down to desert flat land,
I'm startled
to see a pair of Golden Eagles
standing at the edge of the road.
I slow as I pass,
at eye level with these living bronzes
that don't even glance my way.
The subdued sun begins to set.
My shadow lengthens. By the time
I reach the desert floor, the eagles
have evaporated.



Photo by Vika Glitter: Pexels.com

There Once Was a Girl
by Kelly Murphy

There once was a girl
Who believed she was fire and deep throated flashes of flame, inhaling the red dancing conflagrations like the cure.
There once was a girl
Who believed she was Nature and Engraved herself into the branches of trees, where thin threads of slashes spelled out her name for generations to learn.
There once was a girl
Who believed she was Immortal and pirouetted on the ice, where her attenuated limbs became bruised and numb with effort, and the sky bleached blank in deference to her dervish.
And then there's me. I wake every morning with an itchy army marching in my chest, the soldiers trigger happy and ready to disperse, when what I wanted was a riot of flame, a calligrapher's elegance, a dancer's weightless flight. I sigh a prayer out in my exhale, and begin my day.

Kelly Murphy is a writer and editor based out of the Midwest. She lives happily with her husband Zach and too many books.



Photo by İrem Çevik: Pexels.com

Broken Things
by Don Narkevic

The wedding clock in the bedroom
neither chimes nor keeps time
brief as the flight of tossed rice
or the dance of a bridal gown.

The cracked lip of a teacup,
its perfect gold-rimmed smile
no longer fit for company, a blur
of lipstick the canon of betrayal.

The flaking fresco of the Virgin
the restoration botched, the flawless
left to cry for the pale moon.
This is our history.

Don Narkevic: Buckhannon, WV. Poetry appears in Garland, Hedge Apple, Discretionary Love, Pink Ochre Magazine, *and* Culture Cult.

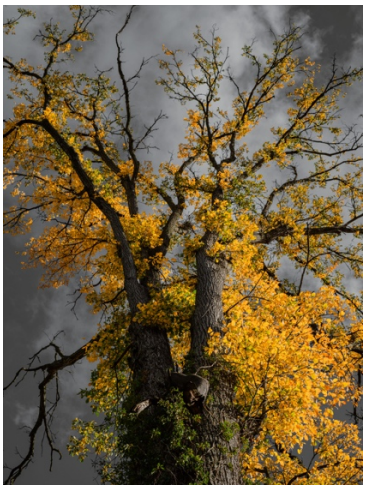


Photo by Egor Komarov: Pexels.com

Autumn Showers
by Devon Neal

For those of us without trees,
I wish it was more like a passing storm,
a swirl of winter-kissed wind

and a dark, heavy cloud
carrying a fluttering mosaic of autumn leaves
and leaving quilts of color on the back lawn.

I wouldn't even mind if it grew inclement—
slick waxy leaf skin slipping each tire's grip,
burying cars and street signs in patchwork paper,

stacking looseleaf chin-deep at your door.
Maybe then, in my bare, shadeless lawn,
I could enjoy each aspen's bronzing coin,

the candle-tails of the sugarberries, a walnut's
spotted tongue, a sycamore curled with leprosy,
the rusted sawblade of the chestnut oak.

Devon Neal (he/him) is a Kentucky-based poet whose work has appeared in many publications, including HAD, Stanchion, Stone Circle Review, Livina Press, *and* The Storms, *and has been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize. He currently lives in Bardstown, KY with his wife and three children.*



Photo by Anna Tarazevich: Pexels.com

Hardwood
by Devon Neal

Finally rid of the carpet, its quenchless tongue
soaking up sticky drink stains, milk furry
with dissolved cereal, each marker's exposed sinew,
the cat's wet midnight hacking. Every accident
savored and blooming into spores. Now we carry
the world in with our whitened foot calluses: razors
of grass, constellations of dirt, the dark confetti
of wind seed and bug leg. Once, at night, I thought I saw
a dry human ear curled by the backdoor threshold—
the leaf's deadened midrib like an empty vein.
This is not to complain; rather to mention the wind
in my chest at the sound of her light feet whispering
against the hardwood just outside the bedroom.



Photo by Fran Tobi Nagashi: Pexels.com

The Clockmaker of Oakhaven
by Kennedy Njehia

The copper gears of the Grand Regulator hummed a low, hypnotic B-flat, the same pitch it had maintained since the winter of 1888. Thomas bent over the movement with his jeweler's loupe pressed tight against his right eye. Through the glass, a single broken tooth on an escape wheel looked as massive as a millstone.

Outside his shop, the rain slicked the cobblestones of Oakhaven, reflecting the warm amber glow of gas lamps. It was past midnight. In a town where most people measured time by the sluggish rise and fall of the river tides, Thomas measured it in fractions of a micron.

His grandfather had taught him the cardinal rule of horology: A clock does not tell time; it honors it. Back then, Thomas had thought it was just sentimental nonsense meant to keep an exhausted apprentice scrubbing brass plates until midnight. Now, at sixty-two, with knuckles swollen like walnuts and eyes that watered at the sight of a hairspring, he understood. Every clock in his shop was a heartbeat. Left unattended, they slowed; forced too fast, they burned out.

The bell above the shop door chimed, a bright, metallic tinkle that felt jarring against the quiet tick-tock chorus of forty grandfather clocks.

A young woman stood in the threshold. She wore a heavy wool coat damp with rain and carried a small, velvet-wrapped bundle cradled against her chest like an infant. Water dripped from the brim of her cap onto the floorboards.

"We're closed," Thomas said gently, not looking up from his bench. "Though if it's a mainspring, leave it on the counter and come back Tuesday."

"It's not a mainspring," she said. Her voice was thin, reedy, like wind whistling through dry reeds. She stepped inside and unwrapped the velvet.

Resting in her palm was a pocket watch the size of a plum, forged from a dark, iridescent metal that looked like polished beetle shell. It had no winding crown. No hands, either. Just a smooth, concave face of smoked quartz that showed a swirling, milky nebula beneath the surface.

Thomas laid down his tweezers. He stood up, wiping his grease-stained hands on his apron, and walked to the counter. "Where did you find this?"

"My father's estate," she whispered, setting it down. The moment the metal touched the mahogany wood, the shop's forty ticking clocks stuttered. For three full seconds, the pendulum swings froze mid-air. The silence was absolute—heavy, vacuum-sealed, and deafening.

Then, with a crisp click, the nebula inside the pocket watch parted. Golden numerals bloomed beneath the quartz face, counting backward in silent, burning increments.

"It doesn't keep time," the woman said, her eyes welling with sudden tears. "It counts down to something. My father spent his last three years staring at it. He stopped eating. He stopped sleeping. He said when it reaches zero, the debt comes due."

"What debt?" Thomas asked, though a cold knot was already forming in his stomach. He remembered his grandfather's journals—the volumes locked in the bottom drawer, labeled in Latin: De Tempore Captivo. On the perils of clocks that did not measure the present, but borrowed from it.

"He never said," she replied. "He just said the Clockmaker in Oakhaven would know how to break the escapement before the hammer falls."

Thomas reached out with a trembling thumb and forefinger. He didn't touch the watch directly; he used a pair of insulated ivory-tipped pliers. The moment he lifted it, the air in the room grew twenty degrees colder. Frost feathered outward across the glass display case nearest to them.

"You shouldn't have brought this here," Thomas murmured.

"Can you stop it?"

He looked down at his own hands—scarred, calloused, marked by a lifetime of honest seconds that ticked away one by one, never returning, never cheating the ledger. To meddle with a device that hoarded borrowed time was to invite the whole weight of the universe's arrears crashing down at once.

Yet, looking at the terror in the girl's face, he felt the familiar, stubborn pulse of a craftsman facing an impossible puzzle.

"I can't stop it," Thomas said, his voice steadying. "A closed loop has to finish its rotation. If we block the gear, it shatters. If we let it run, it consumes you." He looked up, his gaze locking onto hers. "But we can redirect the strike."

He motioned her toward the workbench.

"Sit down," the old clockmaker said, reaching for his heaviest wrench and a bottle of refined oil. "We have exactly twelve minutes to teach this thief how to pay its own way."



Kennedy Njehia is a writer whose work explores fantasy, history, mystery. When not writing, they can be found reading by the coast, drinking tea, or exploring local bookshops.



Photo by Skyler Ewing: Pexels.com

Brief History of Beautiful Things
by Mary Ohanusi

the color will begin in winter,
frost as blue rivers ravaging
the earth, then warm in summer,
the way kind things glow with compassion,
then the days will be rolled up into days
and into weeks and into months and
into years and seasons upon seasons
the flesh will become autumn, crisp as
hands upon soft tissues of love,
then it will fade, like all things
eventually do, when given
the luxury of time.

Mary Ohanusi's work examines the spectrum of human emotions, from the supposedly mundane to the highly complicated. Her ultimate writing role model is Chinua Achebe, who she believes wrote mostly from quiet observation, but she also reveres writers like Niyi Osundare and Lenrie Peters. Mary is from Nigeria and currently writes from the UK.



Photo by Amar Saleem: Pexels.com

The Slow Passage of Time
by Kingsley Okafor

after the rain,
our bodies now smitten
by the cold and prejudice
is forced to fold itself.
we watch everyone pass our home
slow like the rain was a reminder
to inhale life more consciously.
is there any ache except time?
the inside of its skin thick
with intentions, all the things we've
wished for now brought before us.
is there a bigger jewel than time,
its slow passage touching the seams
of lives and almost putting an
end to them.

Kingsley Okafor is a writer whose work examines, among other things, the implications of identity, belonging, ambition, and migration as a Black person. He is a Nigerian who currently lives in and writes from the UK. His debut collection of poetry is titled The Slow Passage of Time.

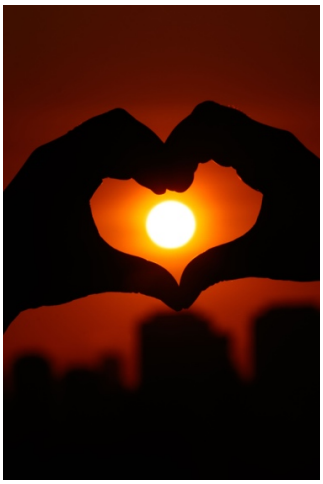


Photo by Taís Fotógrafa: Pexels.com

Love
by Kingsley Okafor

was our way of
cosplaying god.
holding a thing in our bosom
and wishing it well,
holding a broken bird
until its wings could fly
again
love was all the wrong things
we did to right the world,
all the small things we did
when we could've done nothing.



Photo by Mico Medel: Pexels.com

The Thing that Remains
by Kingsley Okafor

i was taught that a man must carry his name like a story,
so i carried my father's silence

and mistook the weight for my own.

learned to call responsibility a language of love,
to build toward heaven while asking what enough was enough.

there were cities i wanted, and roads i was frightened to take,
dreams i kept folded neatly for fear they would make me break.

but ambition is a strange fire; it warms and consumes the same,
and success can fill a room while leaving an empty name.

some nights i hear music and remember i was made to sing,
not only to calculate the measure of every measurable thing.

after rain, every street becomes honest beneath the light,
and i wonder if a life is not what we prove, but what feels right.



Photo by Marco Milanesi: Pexels.com

Shooting Star
by Sariya Okoye

Never had my wishes come true when blowing out candles
on my birthday or while wishing on all those shooting stars.

Maybe fate is the only way to fix matters of the heart.

Now I'm in a bar writing this down on a napkin

wondering if everything happens for a reason—what did this
all happen for?

Sleeping is getting harder, so I am up at four in the morning
outside, scrutinizing beauty in the sky, waiting for stars to fall.

Cause maybe not all of my life is predetermined,
and I am determined to get this one wish granted.

Can't tell you what I'm wishing for though,
or it may not come true, you know?

But who am I kidding,
I'm sure you already know.

Sariya Okoye resides in Tucson, Arizona. Her philosophy—informed by her experience as a black, Muslim-raised, neurodivergent, lesbian of Jewish heritage—is displayed in her writing. She has published a chapbook, From the Grave, *through* Bottlecap Press, *as well as a poem, "Jezebel," in* Superpresent Magazine.



Photo by Alexander Mass

Exile
by Wasiu Olanrewaju

home is not
a place anymore.
it is my mother's prayer,
a familiar song,
the smell of food
from another room,
a voice saying
come inside.

Wasiu Olanrewaju's work explores identity, love, struggle, and ambition. He enjoys art that is emotional and tells a strong story. Some of his strongest influences include Ben Okri, Warsan Shire, Kofi Awoonor, Chinua Achebe, and Maya Angelou. Wasiu is from Nigeria but presently writes from the United Kingdom.



Photo by Ylanite Koppens: Pexels.com

Notes on Sadness
by Monsuru Omosanya

before the body is punished
for the sins of desire,
the flesh, first blood
will be made a miracle of bones,
then the story will unfurl like
drizzle of rain, slow and certain
the way god moves mountains,
then the agony will be bare in salt
beside the wound, real and certain
the way god makes wild things,
then we will be blessed with pearls
one for every moment we were lost
at sea, small and precious the way
god makes beautiful things.

Monsuru Omosanya is a proud son of Ijebu in Nigeria, a poet and writer whose work is steeped in cultural representation. An ardent lover of music, Monsuru reveres Sola Owonubi and takes inspiration from his environment. Now based in the UK, he is presently working on his debut collection of poetry.



Photo by cottonbro studio: Pexels.com

Ghazal for the Things I Cannot Tell You
by Monsuru Omosanya

there are rooms inside my mouth where i still hide the truth,
even love has certain locked and windowless rooms for truth.

i have carried one secret through three cities and two winters,
everywhere i go, my body remembers how to make room for truth.

my mother taught me that silence can protect a family,
but nobody taught me what silence eventually does to truth.

the heart is an unreliable witness when frightened.
it will testify against itself just to make room for truth.

i have forgiven people who never apologized to me.
perhaps forgiveness is simply another name for making room for truth.

if i tell you everything, will you love me differently?
if i tell you nothing, will you still recognize the shape of truth?

there are things god already knows before my tongue discovers them.
so i kneel, and let prayer become the room where i release truth.



Photo by Adobe Firefly AI

Grief
by Avery Panepinto

I've met Grief before.
He wore a black suit tailored to fit a body
so thin and fragile that not even the wind
dared to blow his way.
On his arm, a black crepe.
In place of a necktie, Grief donned
a plain black cravat.
Grief wore a smile he'd painted himself—
void of warmth, yet still comforting.
His eyes were soft but worn.
Delicate skin rubbed raw by fingers
desperate to claw away
the endless stream of tears.

He held my hand as I wept,
his black enamel mourning band
digging into my palm, offering distant comfort.
His arms wrapped around my body
as I trembled at the altar of the church.
I felt his presence brush my shoulders
as I choked out the words of a poem,
a poem I had written in a daze minutes before.
Grief had been beside me, guiding my pen.

Grief was there when I needed him most.
He didn't announce himself; he just stood there
until I was ready to accept his company.
I have come to terms with the loss
of my grandmother and grandfather.
And now, I share Grief with you.
He won't push you to bear the weight
of loss on your own.
Grief shoulders some of the burden.
He will care for you until you are ready
to let him go.
Sometimes, he stays for a lifetime.

You can weep into his suit; he doesn't care.
You can hate him, punch him, scream at him.
He won't budge.
This is what he was made for.
He looks different for you—for me.
Grief never takes the same shape twice.
All you need to do is open your arms
and greet him—weeping, unashamed.

Avery Quinn Panepinto is a 17-year-old aspiring author from Los Angeles, California. Her work has appeared in the Kenyon Young Writers Anthology, Pillars of Salt, Velvet Orchards (FEMME FIGHT), Enola's Magazine, The Typewriter, *and one of her pieces, "Claws of Regret," will be featured as the focal point in an upcoming issue of* Beautiful Gardens Lit Mag. *She is a senior at The Archer School for Girls in Brentwood, California.*



Photo by Bejan Adrian: Pexels.com

Long After
by K. Alma Peterson

is when the way
we found our way out
of a wayward situation
came to light, alit on
a sprig of insight
unnoticed until now
hidden between seasons
or under cover of a leaf
unfurled once we saw
new intentions
where cross-purposes
had been irrefutable;
the blurring lens of time
narrowing all rifts
that swallowed blame.

K Alma Peterson is a native Minnesotan now living in Florida. She is a graduate of the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers. Her two full-length collections of poetry are published by Blaze Vox Books*, and her recent chapbook is a publication from* Finishing Line Press*. She is also a painter and mixed media artist.*

Moon Tree
by K. Alma Peterson



Live Oak Legend
by K. Alma Peterson



Central Park Bridge
by Susan L. Pollet



Susan L. Pollet is a visual artist and author whose works have appeared in many art shows and literary publications. Seven of her paintings were covers of seven different literary magazines, and in 2026, one was nominated for Best Of The Net. She studied at the New York Art Students League, has been a member since 2018, and resides in NYC. She is also a published author in multiple genres, including three children's books, which she both wrote and illustrated. She can be found at susanpollet.com and susanpollet.substack.com

Rainy Day View from a Train
by Susan L. Pollet



Bette Davis
by Cristiane Ventre Porcini



Cristiane Ventre Porcini lives in Brazil. She enjoys drawing and writing and spending time with her daughter. Her piece is a tribute to Bette Davis, pencil drawing.



Photo by Heriberto Jahir: Pexels.com

So says the adolescent
by Diane Prescott

That adolescent running through the night has
unopened hips
and in the center a
pulsating maze of light

Has thirteen years of to and fro and
worm pies and blue skies and
flickering eyes like a doe

She'll tell you to be careful and
she'll tell you it's easy
to remain small and beautiful

And her breath braids itself
with the morning and
her lungs grind against
her ribs like sand

So says the adolescent with the unopened hips and
So says the adolescent with the untwisted lips.



Diane Prescott is an American writer who focuses her work on poetry and short fiction. Though she's new to the literary publishing industry, Diane has been writing since first learned about telling a story.



Photo by Tomáš Malík: Pexels.com

Axchiks
by Diane Prescott

I.

What day was it, axchiks[2]*, that you became a woman?*

When did I build that nest between my hips;
what chipped these edges into my cheeks?

II.

Mother, I miss being a child.

They say children wish to grow older, like the fish who
wish to jump from the water, then die by the teeth of a bear.

Like the deer who seeks the river to drink,
whose blood ends up painting the sand
and spilling iron into the air.

What day was it, axchiks, that you became a woman?

III.

Womanhood comes over me as I learn how to be,
It lies in the flesh of my chest, pulling on my ribs like reins,
pouring that deer's blood into the roots of my veins.

Axchiks, the day you become a woman
will be the day you no longer hope for the green and
begin loving the smoking black tip of that fiery Redwood tree.

[2] "Axchiks" translates to "my girl" in Armenian. It is commonly used as a term of endearment.



Photo by Mitchell Luo: Pexels.com

Looking At a Leaf
by Joyce Ritchie

In spring
tiny, pointed, pale new green,
a constellation knitting a feathery lace coverlet

In summer
indistinguishable, a blurred mass
rendering a deep green pool of cool shade

In fall
Idiosyncratic—mottled green, burnished gold, crimson—
a final flourish—Damn the end!

Joyce Ritchie enjoyed a leadership career in the nonprofit arts, social services, and higher education; these days she's happiest wandering outside, viewing the world through a poet's lens: a plein air poet. A Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee, her poems appear in online and print journals; anthologies including The Nature of Our Times *(Poets for Science/Kent State Wick Poetry Center/2025) and* The Color Wheel *(Terrapin Press/2026); and chapbook collaborations with plein air painters.*



Photo by Ricardo Olvera: Pexels.com

The Monarchs
by Joyce Ritchie

after Du Fu

At this salt marsh treehouse
on a late-September morning,
I watch the Monarchs wake
to the sun, let go the loblolly pine,
open their wings to the wind,
their delicate bodies lifting
up, up, up against the blue, blue sky.

They dip and soar
in airborne *pas de deux*,
circle the pine tops, float down
to the succulent juniper berries
where they cluster, cling,
wings opening…closing…
tiny bright orange beacons.

Like me, guided on their journey
by the sun, they seek warmth,
sustenance for the long journey
through winter's bitter dark
to spring's regeneration.
Below me, dry marsh fronds
bend and rise with the breeze
in a rustling tide and I wonder,
when you return next year,
will I be here by the sea,
shoulders burning in the sun,
to greet you?

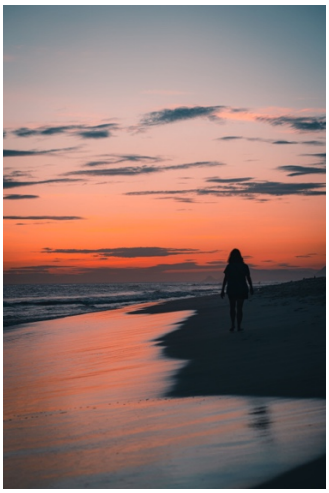


Photo by Andres Idda Bianchi: Pexels.com

for you
by Joyce Ritchie

In colors deepened by the suns of many days,
time's passing's marked by the horizon's changing hues.
Every step's an empty one along the way.

The key's to keep your balance in the waves
and wind and rain. Step gently through the blues
of shadows deepened by the suns of many days.

The horizon stretches out into the haze,
neither closer nor any farther in the view,
and every step's an empty one along the way.

Always forward, savor every phase!
A life well-lived finds always something new
in colors deepened by the suns of many days.

Carry on and keep a steady gaze.
Move deliberately along the path you choose,
and with colors borne of suns of many days,
fill every empty step along the way.



Photo by Ira Rosner

Up, Up, and Away
by Judith Rosner

My eyes tear with excitement this pre-dawn morning
as I await my first flight in a hot air balloon.
I watch with fellow flyers as a torch shoots
yellow-red fire into our balloon's mouth—
its green and white stripes swell with each blast.

Even with the aid of a ladder, I have difficulty
mounting the large wicker gondola where thirty anxious
passengers will find their unassigned spots to stand.
The only instruction from the pilot,
"Bend down and hold on when I say, 'landing.'"

Ropes are released and we float upward—
the only sounds the blasts of fuel, the clicks of cameras,
the open-mouthed no sound of awe.
We dip and rise over Cappadocia's Love Valley—
Turkey's region of towering phallic-like, volcanic
"fairy chimneys"—a natural wonder, a sculptural landscape.

We are not alone. Dozens of other balloons float
in the sky with us. We look like a birthday bouquet
whose bow has come undone, the rising sun
brightening our colors.
We land with precision—the thud both heard and felt—
a reminder that earth is where we belong.

Judith Rosner is the author of the poetry collection Paradigm Shift *(*Kelsay Books*, 2025) and her work appears in a number of literary journals including* Her Words*,* The City Key*,* The Jewish Literary Journal*,* The Naugatuck River Review*,* Soul Poetry, Prose, and Arts *and in print and online anthologies. She holds a Ph.D. in Sociology and retired first from a career as college professor, and then from her firm The Rosner Group, a training and consulting company that specialized in leadership development and executive coaching. She and her husband split their time between Sarasota, Florida and New York City.*



Photo by Ben Wicks: Unsplash.com

Death of Circus
by Tushar Sen

On Sundays
the joker paints his face again.
Not for floodlit tents
or drums rolling through wet midnight air—
but for children of the slum
sitting beside an open drain
with orange ice lollies in their hands.

He crushes limestone in a steel bowl
and spreads the white carefully
across his cheeks.
The red smile comes next.

By afternoon
he pulls a rickshaw through traffic
while buses cough black smoke
where circus cannons once thundered.

The old circus grounds are gone.
In their place stand
a petrol station, two glass towers,
and a local theatre
run by the former circus owner
where children now watch films about circuses
on summer afternoons.
Sometimes they clap at lions on the screen.

A few miles away
Sherkhan has stopped eating.

Once every month
the joker visits the zoo.
The zoo was funded
by a fossil fuel tycoon
his portrait hangs at the gate
larger than any animal inside.

Appu still remembers him.
Without command
the elephant lifts a log
and flips it neatly into the truck.
The body continuing
a profession long after applause
has died.

Balu rises slowly behind GREEN cage bars.
Once his fur shone black beneath circus lights.
Now he is dust-brown.
His bear hug stops midway.

Near the far enclosure
Sherkhan finally rises at sunset
and releases a roar so full of hunger
that traffic outside the zoo
falls silent for a moment.
The joker closes his eyes.
He remembers the fire rings,
whips cracking through darkness.

At the railway station
the hyacinth macaw now sits beside a tarot reader,
picking fortune cards for migrant workers,
beneath flickering platform lights.

Ashwa survives in a shelter home.
Rescued from the carriage shafts,
he stands chained among starving cattle
waiting for fodder.
Many a night he still jerks forward in sleep,
as though hearing distant circus drums.

The joker returns to the chawl after dark.
Moti, the old circus dog,
waits for him beside the stairs.
The children gather immediately.
'Show us the smile,' they shout.
So he smiles.
Wide. Red. Perfect.

And while they laugh
his tears slowly stretch the black beneath his eyes
downward,
until the darkness reaches
the painted corners of his mouth.
Moti rests his head quietly
on the joker's feet.
No one notices
when the grief joins the smile.



Tushar Sen pursues sustained creative and scholarly writing alongside his career in finance. He is the author of Pandora's Box*, a collection of short stories. In 2020, he wrote and produced a short film* Zulfi*, which screened internationally and received 22 laurels across 22 film festivals. His research papers have been published in the* Romanian Astronomical Journal *and* HRC Journal of Economy & Finance*. His poetry has appeared in* The Mathematical Intelligencer(Springer-Nature)*,* MENACE*,* Muse India*,* The Orchards Poetry Journal*,* The Deronda Review*,* Flora Fiction*,* New Verse Review*,* Writers Resist*,* Ecological Citizen*,* Varnish*,* Afrocritik*,* The Road Not Taken*,* Sortes*,* Lekh*,* Indian Review*,* 4LPH4NUM3R1C*,* SpecPo Verse*,* Infocalypse Arts & Literary Magazine*,* Open: Journal of Arts & Letters*,* The Gilded Weathervane*,* Quill of the Goddess*,* Twisted River Review*,* EgoPHobia*,* Well Read Mag*,* Rivenery Literary *and* Mocking Heart Review*.*



Photo by Ratnodip Saha: Unsplash.com

The Letter Box
by Tushar Sen

The letter box still hangs upon the post,
Though rust has eaten through the hinges now.
Inside, where letters once would softly land,
A sparrow built a home of twisted grass,
Of horsehair, twigs, and bits of faded twine.
But she is gone; the nest is empty now,
Abandoned to the shadows of the lane.
We stand before it with our glowing screens
And click its pictures, seeking our PIN codes,
To find the numbers hidden on its face.
Old letters seep through the rust-eaten holes;
We put them back and leave the box in place.
And pieces of myself are waiting still
By boxes at the old addresses here
For words of peace that never will be penned.
The search is done, the local zone is found,
Yet maps can never guide a broken heart,
Or fill the hollow where the bird once flew.



Photo by Planet Volumes: Unsplash.com

The Hollow Bride
by Tushar Sen

They forced her hand—
it's the only story I can survive.

You don't swallow poison unless
you've decided to call it medicine.

I watch her teach herself to forget—
the heart revising its own history,
the eyes learning how to hold back
what wants to fall.

The dressing room is bolted from inside,
letters burning one by one.
Each word refusing to disappear,
rising instead like a ghost insisting on staying.

At some point she removes my photograph.
The nail we hammered together, stays.
She clears a space,
and the absence grows instead.

Still, I know I remained—
not as presence,
but as disturbance.

Someone mentions my name.
That's all it takes.
A smile, quickly assembled,
failing at the edges.

She leans into a friend—
not for comfort,
just to steady herself
against the moment.

Someone fixes her hair—
as if order can be restored from the outside.
As if a veil could hide collapse.

The ceremony draws close.

And now her face is visible again,
fully arranged for the world,
and therefore unable to hide.

That face—
the one that once drew eyes without trying—
carries something else.

Not absence,
not even sadness,
but a kind of stillness
people cannot name
and do not want to look at for long.

The grace that once lived there—
unquestioned, effortless—
withdrew quietly,
as if it, too, had somewhere else to be.

For months, perhaps,
nothing returns.

What becomes of me, I wonder—
is she carrying the burden,
or has she made peace with it?
The question keeps hope alive—

and me with it.



Photo by Ravi Sharma: Unsplash.com

The Village Schoolmaster by Tushar Sen

Every evening the schoolmaster
cycles home through wet village roads,
his chain clanking through the puddles.
One hand grips the handlebar;
the other traces numbers in the dark,
fingers twitching, solving equations
for absent children.

The bicycle headlight shimmers,
weak against the dense foliage.
Most nights he stops outside poor homes
to scatter free tuition beneath flickering bulbs
and clouds of mosquitoes.

He lives alone now.
Years ago his wife left a note:
she could not trade her comforts anymore.
A wealthy shawl merchant on Mall Road
now raises two plump children with her.

Yet his meals arrive warm
from the Buddhist monastery
where he teaches computers for free.
Anna Aunty still washes and irons his clothes—
her son became a doctor under his eye.

Every Sunday the fruit seller leaves
quiet baskets at his door;
his daughter just cleared the Bar
with the master's blessings.

At night he smokes in his dim room,
reading petitions filed against him
by the coaching mafia.
His pillow has stopped counting his tears.

Some say before he came here,
he calculated trajectories at a cosmodrome.
Nobody knows if it is true.

On Sundays he misses mass inadvertently,
sitting instead beside his boy's grave.
And sometimes, returning through the fog,
he mistakes passing schoolchildren
for his own son, walking ahead with a satchel.



Photo by Bibin Saju: Pexels.com

Carrion-Eaters
by Hibah Shabkhez

You think you know Autumn, you think you love it. You cannot understand why they call it The Fall, not even with the gold-shrouded leaves crackling beneath your feet, beautiful in theory, heart-breaking in practice; but then, you have not yet learnt to mourn one wilting leaf, one dying flower. . .Twenty years hence, at the witching hour, the way people getting off the bus raise their eyebrows as you run past them filming the blue-and-white sky will finally register, and mortify you into insomnia. But I would not have you walk past such clouds unheeding, not to fend off a hundred sleepless nights. You have a heart full of breathtakingly beautiful carrion-eaters, fluttering their golden wings within you, as you weave your way through this rainy river-city of earphone wearers, assigning imaginary names and faces to overheard words and snatches of song. Venerable and wraith-like as he never was while yet in life, Paris chokes on the dust of the city that bears his name, weeping for the wildflowers that once grew in its stead.

Hibah Shabkhez is a writer and photographer from Lahore, Pakistan. Her work has previously appeared in Arc Poetry, Meniscus, Thimble, Harpur Palate, Frogmore Papers, Potomac Review*, and a number of other literary magazines. Studying life, languages, and literature from a comparative perspective across linguistic and cultural boundaries holds a particular fascination for her.*



Photo by HamZa NOUASRIA: Pexels.com

Red Light
by Joe Spraga

Once loving without condition,
she smiled one last time
her windows glazed over
cold.

Stormy skies within widened eyes
she cried black rain
on dead desert sand
her deep fruitful waters warmed,
boiling hotter
now all that remains
is dry cracked clay.

Rusted scars for miles and hours
our playground is
mere memory
car keys dangle and slowly sway
longing for red to change to green

Joe Spraga was raised in the Detroit Metropolitan area. A former musician, he became legally disabled in 2015 due to health problems. He enjoys spending time with dogs, as should all "right-thinking people."



Photo by Phil Evenden: Pexels.com

Diner
by Joe Spraga

I went to the diner
to sit at the counter
and eat dinner.
There wasn't a counter anymore.

I sat alone in a booth made for 4 people
and slowly chewed
the best burnt ham
I had ever tasted.

Later that year,
I decided to go back to that diner
for another fine meal.
There wasn't a diner anymore.

I sat alone in an empty parking lot made for 40 cars
while I thought about the best burnt ham I couldn't have.



Photo by Ashley Christiano: Pexels.com

To My Kids' Bullies
by Joshua St. Claire

You klaxons of the emptiest bell. You blue of the blue octopus. You one and one and one is two. I'd love to say someday you'll regret it, but you're unable to understand that you are unable to understand. You'll just keep on keeping on and on and on—a cymbal whose toneless vibrations evaporate into the abyss.

broken tulips
the breaking of them

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.

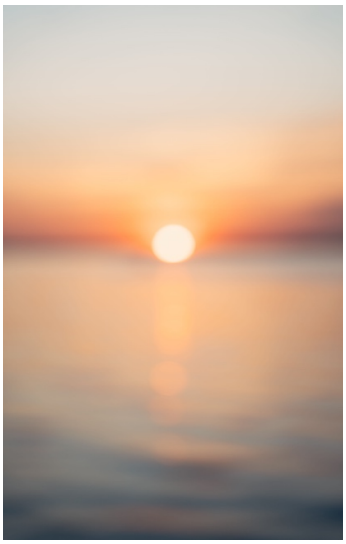


Photo by Yunus Tuğ: Pexels.com

Refusing to Erase
by Sara Stegen

This year
I am embracing
the last gasp of summer—

I refuse to let go
of the promise of light
the promise of warmth

I refuse to let go
of sunflowers and thunder
I refuse to put on pants.

I refuse to let go
of ice cream cones
of twilight swims in the lake

I refuse to let go
of bare feet
I refuse to let go of you

Sara Stegen is a Dutch poet and non-fiction author. She has published in Spelt, Ranchlands Review, The Broken Spine, Orbis, *and* The Brussels Review. *Sara has an MA in English Language & Literature from the University of Groningen. Home is a boulder-clay ridge in the northern Netherlands where her bike shed contains eight bicycles. Sara works for Hanze Research Centre Art & Society in Groningen and is working on her first poetry collection and memoir about autism.*



Photo by Jennifer Dridiger: Pexels.com

Naming Stars
by Exeter T. Stevens

In 1975, I was a precocious seven-year-old with a voracious appetite for reading and a deep shyness around crowds. I always stayed within Dad's protective reach.

That year, I was obsessed with space and knew every major star and constellation visible from Minnesota. Dad was an amateur astronomer, so you could say the stars aligned that summer.

Late one evening, Dad came into my room and said, "Let's go."

Dad loved mini-adventures. Sometimes we'd drive to Long Lake and fish. Other times, we'd travel to a reservation up north to see a powwow. Wherever we went, the two of us would gaze into the heavens and name the stars.

I fell asleep during the car ride. Dad shook me awake as we pulled into the gravel lot of North Star Amusement Park. I rubbed my eyes and looked around.

"There's nobody here."

"That's right. No crowds, just us."

A figure emerged from the shadows near a control booth and gave a knowing smile.

"And Hank," added Dad.

"Evenin', Tom."

"Evenin'. Thought we'd take a spin."

Hank gestured toward the Ferris wheel. "She's all yours."

We climbed into a gondola. The big wheel groaned to life, lifting us into the clear night sky. Hank stopped the ride when we reached the apex. The view above the deserted midway was magnificent.

"What do you see?" said Dad, gesturing north.

"The Big Dipper."

"No, son, that's the Great Wheelbarrow, like the one on Auntie's farm."

"Okay, Dad." I played along, enjoying his version of the night sky.

"What about those stars over there?"

"Cassiopeia."

"No, that's the Antler. The Sámi people of Finland said it belonged to a great elk. I like to imagine the stars were its tracks, and the northern lights were its breath."
"That's cool. How do you know that?"

"I read a book or two when I was young."

We sat in silence for a few moments before he gestured again.

"What about that one?"

"King Cepheus."

"Not a king. I see a square base with a triangle on top."

"Yeah?"

“That’s a house. It’s where your Nana Lena lives now.”

I’d heard many wonderful stories about my grandmother: her farm, her award-winning apple cobbler, and her gift for storytelling. Just like Dad.

“I wish I could have met her.”

“You did, but you were too small to remember.”

“Did she like me?”

“Of course. She loved you very much. I think she stayed here just long enough to see you before she passed on.”

I’ve never understood why older folks always said things like “passed on” or “went home.” They were always afraid to say “died,” as if the very word might somehow invoke the Grim Reaper to come take them away.

A breeze rocked the gondola gently and I snuggled closer to Dad. We spent the next hour pointing at and naming stars from the top of a Ferris wheel.

Last week, Dad joined Nana Lena in the Big House. I have a feeling he’s enjoying some of the best apple cobbler in the heavens.



Exeter T. Stevens resides in Central Wisconsin with his wife and rescue dog, Brownie. When not complaining about the long winters and short summers, he can be found in his office, drinking coffee and working on his first novel. His work has appeared in The Kinsman Quarterly’s Iridescence *2026 Anthology and* The Stygian Lepus*. His fiction was shortlisted for the CRAFT Award for Excellence.*

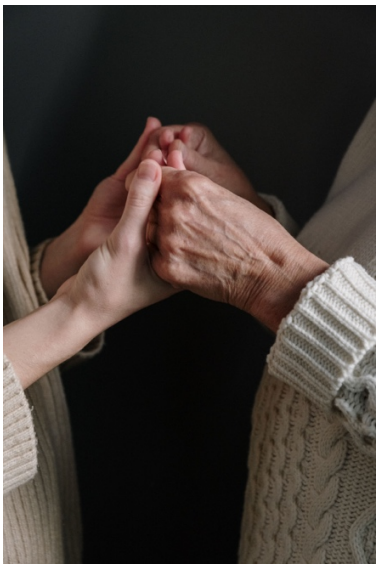


Photo by cottonbro studio: Pexels.com

Mother
by Racheal Strahlman

My mother calls me beautiful,
but she hates her hands.
How could I be beautiful
if her hands are unloved?

My daughter is beautiful.
I am beautiful. My mother,
beautiful.
Because once you are a daughter,
beauty is certain.
All mothers are daughters
fated to meet in a parking lot.

Daughters are mirrors
separated by cars in opposite seats.
They feed their babies
in different worlds, yet
it's the same...
Because this cannot be a worldly task.
Sustaining life is a cosmic jubilee.

It is a liturgy,
A ceremony shared only
between a mother, a daughter,
and her baby.
The sacred festivities tasted
in the quiet currents flowing between them.

A mother must love the endless echo of flesh,
the sacred extension of life.
Because if she does not,
how could she love me?
How could she love me
if her hands look just like mine?

If you, mother, cannot celebrate your beauty,
I cannot fathom mine.

Racheal Strahlman is a poet living in the Texas Hill Country with her husband and daughter. She moonlights as a policy analyst and enjoys connecting with wild fawns.



Photo by Sincerely Media: Unsplash.com

It's Dangerous to Go Alone! Take This
by Randy Streu

Fold me up, I'll
find a place
in your pocket or

maybe that bag
you carry with
your caffeinated drinks

books and medication
you sometimes forget when
I'm not around—

Take my love
and wear it down
inside somewhere only you know,

my fear, but try not
to hold it
too tight—

It's dangerous to go
alone

Randy Streu is a voice actor and poet with work appearing in Ropes Literary Journal, Serotonin, Third Wednesday, Cacti Fur, *and elsewhere. His first chapbook,* Whistling Through Purgatory, *is available through* Bottlecap Press. *He lives in Wisconsin with his family and assorted cats.*



Photo by Kimberly Alves: Pexels.com

Like Sand Through the Hourglass
by Randy Streu

Work sits
on my desktop
the clock won't
stop

but time and mind sit
adrift and jilted
my priorities tilted
to family

who needs me
there
needs to eat
needs the mortgage paid

needs time and rides
and to confide
to a present me
who tries to see them

through the mist
of missed connections
schedule corrections and sleep—
God,

grant me a second life



Photo by Melih Türkmenoğlu: Pexels.com

Running Out of Rides
by Randy Streu

I'm sitting in my car waiting for you to finish work so
I can drive you home and you can talk and I can
listen—

and I'm thinking about how I've watched you grow up
for twenty years, and you've watched me do the same,

and how, in this beaten-up old Hyundai, floor littered with
bottles and cups and napkins
(and the countless times you've asked me to clean it)
we were finally getting to know each other as
we are
as we are becoming,

and how soon—too soon!—you will start a new road—
one without me and without this rusty SUV
without telling me about your day and your life
and what you're reading or watching
or thinking,

and how I have so much left to say—
but so little time
to find the words!

Looking for a Quiet Place
by Edward Supranowicz



Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Lithuanian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in The North American Review, Streetlight, Another Chicago Magazine, Door Is A Jar, The Phoenix, Oddball Mag, *and* Red Coyote. *Edward is also a published poet who has had over 700 poems published and been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.*



Photo by Mikhail Nilov: Pexels.com

Off The Grid
by Wendy Van Camp

the trail wends
up the Santa Monicas
above the Pacific
where the chaparral
holds the warmth
of yesterday's sun
and the ocean stretches
into a pale horizon
another bend waits ahead
without promise or destination

along the climb
my phone falls silent
no vibration—or headline
nor calendar reminding me
where I should already be
the little bars in the corner disappear
and with them invisible threads
tying me to a thousand urgent voices

a red-tailed hawk
circles on an updraft
too distant to feel
as the breeze moves
through scrub oak
with the sound of
a whispered conversation
that has been going on
long before I arrived

no one is measuring my worth
by how quickly I respond
the mountain keeps no notifications
it asks only that I notice
as I linger at an overhang
where the ocean
glimmers beyond layers of blue ridges
the world below
continues without me
cars move along the coast highway
messages gather unseen
another alarm sounds somewhere
but none of it reaches this place

perhaps that is why
these moments feel so rare
we have learned
to carry the noise of the world
in our pockets
until silence itself
feels unfamiliar
we mistake
constant connection for belonging
forgetting the mind
was never meant to bloom
beneath an endless
rain of interruption
the mountain
offers no escape from life
only a quiet reminder
of how life once sounded
before we filled
every silence with noise



Wendy Van Camp writes science fiction, fantasy, and historical regency genre books, along with poetry and non-fiction essays. Her work appears in Indie Author Magazine, Verse-Virtual Poetry Journal, *and* San Diego Poetry Annual, *among many others. She has earned nominations for the Elgin Award and Pushcart Prize, as well as being a finalist for the Rhysling and Dwarf Star Awards. Van Camp was named Anaheim Poet Laureate during (2022-2024).*



Photo by Öykü Yıldız Yılmaz: Pexels.com

No Expiration
by Wendy Van Camp

a nonet poem

cloth covered canvas leans on the wall
unfinished and dusty it waits
for artist to find courage
younger self is unveiled
by exposed painting
a second chance
at old dream
lifting
brush



Photo by Mikita Yo: Unsplash.com

Hidden in Plain Sight
by Plamen Vasilev

Arthur Pendergast was a man of singular, almost invisible habits. For thirty years, he had operated “The Archivist,” a dusty, claustrophobic repair shop tucked into a narrow alleyway in the oldest district of London.

He didn’t fix watches or mend jewelry; Arthur specialized in the restoration of “lost histories.” If you had a scrap of paper burned in a fire, or a diary water-damaged by a sinking ship, Arthur could make the ink bleed back into legibility.

He was a thin, bird-like man with spectacles that magnified his eyes until they looked like twin moons. His shop smelled of parchment, leather bindings, and the sharp, metallic tang of chemical solvents.

One Tuesday, a woman entered the shop. She was striking in a way that felt deliberate—a sharp-cut obsidian coat, hair pulled back into a severe bun, and movements that suggested she was measuring the distance between every object. Her name, she stated, was Evelyn Lance. She carried a locked, heavy iron box.

"I am told you are the only one who can retrieve what is hidden in plain sight," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper.

Arthur adjusted his spectacles. "That is a poetic assessment of my trade, Miss Lance. What is the trouble?"

She placed the box on his workbench. It was cold to the touch. "My grandfather was a clockmaker for the Admiralty. He spent his final years obsessed with a particular cipher. He claimed he had encoded the location of a 'forgotten resonance'—a frequency that could stabilize structural integrity in failing materials. He believed that if you knew where to look, the world revealed its own blueprints."

Arthur chuckled, a dry, rasping sound. "Architectural alchemy. A tall order."

"It’s not alchemy, Mr. Pendergast. It’s mathematics. He hid the key inside this box, but the box is empty."

Arthur examined the container. It was beautifully crafted, lined with velvet, but indeed, it contained nothing but a faint indentation in the fabric where a small object had once rested.

"If the box is empty," Arthur said, "perhaps the object was stolen."

"No," Evelyn replied, her eyes narrowing. "He told me it was hidden in plain sight. I have taken it to museums, cryptographers, and magicians. Nobody can see it."

Arthur spent the next three days living on black coffee and the dim yellow light of his desk lamp. He examined the box under ultraviolet light, infrared, and even traditional magnifying lenses. He dusted it for latent oils and checked the weight-to-volume ratio. Nothing.

On the fourth day, his assistant, a young, scatterbrained boy named Leo who mostly swept floors and ran errands, walked by. Leo stopped, squinting at the empty box on the workbench.

"Why are you looking at that scrap of wire, Arthur?" Leo asked.

Arthur froze. "What wire, Leo?"

"The one bent into a loop inside the box. It’s resting right against the corner hinge. It’s been there since you opened it."

Arthur felt a chill climb his spine. He looked at the box again. He saw velvet. He saw an empty depression. He saw absolutely nothing else. "Leo, there is nothing in that box."

"Yes there is," Leo insisted, reaching in. "It's a tiny silver coil. Like a spring from a pen."

Leo's fingers closed on thin air, or so it seemed, but he pulled his hand back, and Arthur heard a faint *clink* of metal against metal.

When Leo opened his palm, a tiny, intricately coiled spring lay there. Arthur's heart hammered. He couldn't see the spring while it was in the box, but now that it was on the workbench, it was as clear as, well, anything else.

"How did you see that?" Arthur whispered.

"I don't know," Leo said, looking puzzled. "I just looked at the light. It was bending weirdly, like looking through a drop of water."

Evelyn Lance returned that evening. When Arthur presented the coil, her face went uncharacteristically pale. She didn't thank him. She took the coil, placed it into a small velvet pouch, and handed Arthur a thick envelope of cash.

"You have no idea what you've done," she said.

"I've done my job," Arthur replied, feeling a sudden, strange irritation. "What is that thing?"

Evelyn walked to the door, pausing with her hand on the latch. "It's not a key to a vault, Arthur. It's a lens. My grandfather wasn't an architect; he was a gatekeeper. That coil allows the human eye to perceive the 'seams' of reality—the places where the world is held together by, as he called it, the resonance."

She left without another word.

That night, Arthur couldn't sleep. The shop felt different. He turned on the lights, but they seemed dim. He looked at his walls—the books, the tools, the decades of accumulated clutter—and he felt a sudden, terrifying vertigo.

He didn't have the coil, but he had spent four days staring at the place where it had hidden. He leaned over his workbench and squinted, trying to recreate the "weird bending" of the light that Leo had described. He focused on the shadows in the corner of the room, near the ceiling.

At first, there was only darkness. Then, he shifted his head an inch to the left.

The air near the ceiling began to ripple, like heat rising off a highway. He saw a line—no, a zipper—of shimmering, golden light running vertically through the plaster of his wall. It connected to a hexagonal frame that he had never noticed before, even though it was painted the same dusty grey as the shop.

He reached out, his fingers trembling. As he touched the seam, his hand didn't hit plaster. It passed through the wall into a space that felt like static electricity.

He pulled his hand back, gasping. He looked around his shop again, truly looking this time. He saw the "seams" everywhere. They were in the floorboards, patterned like a map; they were in the edges of his bookshelves, holding the heavy volumes in place through sheer, impossible force.

He realized then why his shop was so quiet, why people often forgot the way to his alley, and why business was always just enough to keep him fed but never enough to make him famous.

He wasn't an archivist who fixed history. He was the janitor of a reality that was falling apart.

A week later, Leo came into the shop. He looked at Arthur, who was sitting very still, staring at the ceiling.

"Arthur?" Leo said. "The radiator is leaking. I can't find the seam to shut it off."

Arthur looked at the boy, then at the radiator, which was vibrating with a low, humming frequency. He stood up, his joints aching, and picked up a heavy screwdriver.

"Don't worry, Leo," Arthur said, his voice oddly calm. "I know how to stitch it."

He approached the radiator. He didn't see a leak; he saw a fraying thread of existence, a dark, pulsing hole in the fabric of the room. He realized that Evelyn Lance hadn't come for the coil to fix the world. She had come to retrieve the tool that allowed them to notice it was broken.

And as Arthur reached out to mend the tear, he realized with a final, sinking horror that the world wasn't held together by a beautiful, divine design. It was held together by tape, glue, and the desperate, invisible labor of people like him, hidden in plain sight, doing a job that the rest of the world wasn't meant to know existed.

He poked the screwdriver into the shimmer. The wall groaned, the light bent, and for a fleeting second, Arthur saw past the walls of the shop.

There was no London outside. There was only a vast, empty expanse of nothingness, and beyond that, an endless row of shelves, stretching into infinity, where someone—or something—was busy archivists of a different, much larger, and far more precarious reality.

Arthur turned back to Leo and smiled. "Everything is fine, Leo. Just keep sweeping."

He went back to work, stitching the universe together, one fraying, invisible thread at a time.



Plamen V. is an award-winning freelance writer/poet with published works online and in a dozen US and UK literary magazines. He has been writing since he was 10. He has won numerous writing contests and has received awards from different parts of the world.



Photo by Daria Biienko: Pexels.com

Old World Monkey
by Lorri Ventura

She huddles at the acacia tree's base,
shaking and grunting mournfully
as she curls protectively over a small object
filling her lap.

Our safari jeep nears,
and we see that the tiny treasure
the baboon clutches to her bosom
is the lifeless body of her just-born infant.
She repeatedly tries to prop up its head,
which flops backward at an unnatural angle.

A boar baboon darts in and out of the nearby bush,
reaching to pluck lice off the female's back
as a way to comfort and support his mate.

The grieving mother's soft whimpers
waft over the flat floodplains of Chobe National Park.
We see ourselves in this tragic tableau,
for who among us hasn't felt the pain and helplessness
that comes with a loved one's death?



Lorri Ventura is a retired special education administrator living in Massachusetts. She is the author of two full-length poetry collections: Shifting the Mind's Eye *(2024) and* Gently Shaking the World *(2026).*

First of the Month
by Tamizh Ponni VP



Tamizh Ponni VP is an ambivert and a stoic art buff who loves to express her skills through literature, visual arts and music. She is an educator and sees learning as a life-long process. Tamizh's articles, poems, stories and paintings have also been published in many anthologies, digital journals and educational blogs. Tamizh spends most of her free time painting, reading, writing articles, stories and poems, playing piano and watching documentaries/movies.

Missed Call
by Tamizh Ponni VP



When All Things Remain Unspoken
by Kaixuan Wang



Kaixuan Wang is a Shenzhen-based contemporary visual artist and painter working across painting, works on paper, and printmaking. Her practice uses the visible world as an entry point for examining attention, lived environments, and the relation between human presence and material conditions. Her website: https://kaixuanwang.art/. "When All Things Remain Unspoken," 2024, watercolor on paper, 84 × 112 cm



Photo by Pixabay: Pexels.com

Processing Words
by Anthony Ward

Things no longer stir the senses like they used to,
an old radio had an odor (unlike its digital progeny)
where you could smell dust waft out as the sound wept.
These word processors don't have a distinctive smell,
maybe, at first, with that brand new aroma,
but it doesn't linger like the odor of an antiquated typewriter—
like that musty dank part of the room,
with its inky ribbon marking its territory along the metal casing.
The dull "mff" of a keyboard sounds nothing like the percussive
clank-clank of keys as the carriage travels across the page,
like the sun following a winter's horizon,
before the bell rings with that ripcord sound as you begin another line,
stamping out your mistakes as your retread the words into pliable paper,
without the rigidity of spell checkers or automated advice.
Even while I'm typing this, AI is offering to rewrite it for me,
yanking my confidence back by the collar,
so that I don't know whether to trust my instinct or trust the lack of it.

Anthony loves the way words sound through silence. He is inspired by the nature of the world and the expression of art as humanity decrees to discover itself. He has recently been published in, Jerry Jazz Musician, Shot Glass Journal, Mad Swirl, *and* Dear Booze, *amongst others.*



Photo by Rosanne Westgate

A Clothesline
by Rosanne Jean Westgate

A timeline
baby socks and bonnets,
connected to the women
who have hung the laundry
for generations.
Meticulously
precision and organization,
a prayer on a cord
With two clothespins for each item.
nothing more,
nothing wasteful.
Sheets together whites and greys
blacks and the solid hues blues,
Sunday morning's finest.

A solitary quilt,
upheld by the wooden pole
lest it touch the ground.
A symbol of the love
which embraces them at night.
Dancing pants in the breeze
whispering conversations
the palette of gold, reds and orange,
the hills behind become the frame.

Rosanne Jean Westgate, Ph.D., was born in Brooklyn, NY and raised on Long Island, when there were more beaches and farms than shopping malls. She has been involved in education for over 50 years as a Director of Special Education, Principal, College Professor, and most importantly as a teacher. She has been an upstater since 2005 when she opened a small private practice in Cooperstown, and a blueberry farm in Garrattsville, NY. Loss and love are themes for most of her poetry, inspired by nature and rooted in the nostalgic.



Photo by Denis LEFEVRE: Pexels.com

The Raccoon
by Anne Whitehouse

Across the flooded path
in the gray December dusk,

I saw the raccoon
at the same time that it saw me.

Startled, we stopped, and stood utterly still,
each taking the measure of the other,

its clown face funny and sad,
a mask in the mist.

I let out a breath; it dissolved,
and I felt lightened at last

of workday pressures that count
each minute and make them all pay.

A space opened in my life,
and the animal stepped in,

alien, mysterious, yet inexpressibly close.
I felt the world calling to me,

place of my origin and my destiny,
my sister! and my soul's habitation.

The moment expanded and contracted;
the raccoon turned, and waddled away.

It was gone in a flash, like a vision
that leaves its spectral imprint on the mind.

Anne Whitehouse is the author of poetry collections: The Surveyor's Hand*,* Blessings and Curses*,* The Refrain, Meteor Shower, Outside from the Inside*, and* Steady*, as well as the art chapbooks,* Surrealist Muse *(about Leonora Carrington),* Escaping Lee Miller*,* Frida*,* Being Ruth Asawa*, and* Adrienne Fidelin Restored*. She is the author of a novel,* Fall Love*. Her poem, "Lady Bird," won the Nathan Perry DAR 2023 "Honoring American History" poetry contest. She has lectured about Longfellow and Poe at the Wadsworth Longfellow House in Portland, Maine, and Longfellow House Washington Headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*



Photo by Nicole Queiroz: Pexels.com

Black Box
by Anne Whitehouse

I put my psychic pain
in a box of black iron,
and then I saw myself
close the door on it.

The pain was contained
and mostly concealed
where it couldn't touch me,
but I could still see its angry flames
through the seams of the box,
where the sides joined at right angles.

A fire left untended will die out,
or it will become a destructive force,
consuming everything in its path.
Not every tended fire is nurturing,
but a nurturing fire must be tended.

As if it were still summer,
I walk barefooted
over the sun-warmed stones
that thread my plot of wetlands,
over the bridge spanning the stream,
around the shallow frog pond.
Purple and white asters are blooming.
A golden spiral of gnats
suspends over the water.

A net of nerves
weaves through my tissues,
fanning out from the eyes
to the optic nerve
in the center of my brain.

Behind the bridge of the nose.
On top of the pituitary gland.
In a line from the roof of the mouth,
where the hard palate turns soft.

Once I went to an exhibit of silence
at the Guggenheim Museum.
Five people at a time were given access
to a room of pure silence and darkness
that gradually lightened like a desert
landscape, vast and empty.

It took a while to adjust to the silence.
It was like the eye exercise
where you cup your hand
over your closed eye
and wait for the gray
to turn into velvety blackness.

I stood in a silence so deep
it seemed I could hear
my blood circulating in my veins.
I was just getting used to it
when my time was up.



Photo by Kunj Parekh: Unsplash.com

Tornadoes
by Holly Redell-Witte

“Mom, should we move out of the way because of the tornado?” The tornado was a street dirt-devil maybe a foot off the ground, picking up leaves and gum wrappers. To my child, not yet four years old, it must have seemed like danger. I was impressed that he knew the word tornado.

I remembered that things seemed different to a child, and the last thing I wanted to do was make him feel diminished because I laughed at his question.

‘No, sweetheart. This isn’t a tornado; it’s just the wind sweeping the sidewalk, making the air swirl. Don’t worry. We’re safe.”

How many times would I say that to my son over the years? How could I be sure that was true, that he didn’t have to worry, that he would be safe? It is a miracle to me that he was born healthy. What a job to keep them like that.
He’s had his monsters under the bed. If I had known how many tornadoes would blow through his life, I would have realized the words *don’t worry, we’re safe*, are not the words of a confident parent; they are an incantation and a prayer.

Holly Redell-Witte, a consummate New Yorker, now lives and writes in the Pacific Northwest. For many years, she wrote for newspapers and magazines on both coasts. A few years ago, she added fiction to the mix and has been published in several online journals and in two anthologies. A novel she workshopped at the Yale Writer's Workshop is currently making the rounds. Publishing would be great; writing is essential.

Monarch Butterfly: Intense Nectoring before Epic Flight
by Susan O'Haver Young



Susan O'Haver Young worked professionally as a photographer in LA for 25 years using a Nikon 35mm and a Hasselblad 4x5. Now, a lifetime later and retired, she loves taking photos with her digital Nikon. She finds creative pleasure in the language of flowers and turns a simple glance at nature into a quiet personal ritual. Susan and her husband live in the Columbus area to be closer to children and grandchildren in Miami and Toronto.

Mexican Sunflower: Coat of Crystals on Petals of Fire
by Susan O'Haver Young



Autumn Leaves of Gold before the Winds of Change
by Susan O'Haver Young



Zinnia: Beautiful Blooms up until the Final Farewell
by Susan O'Haver Young



First Frost Kisses the Zinnia Goodbye
by Susan O'Haver Young



Author & Artist Profiles

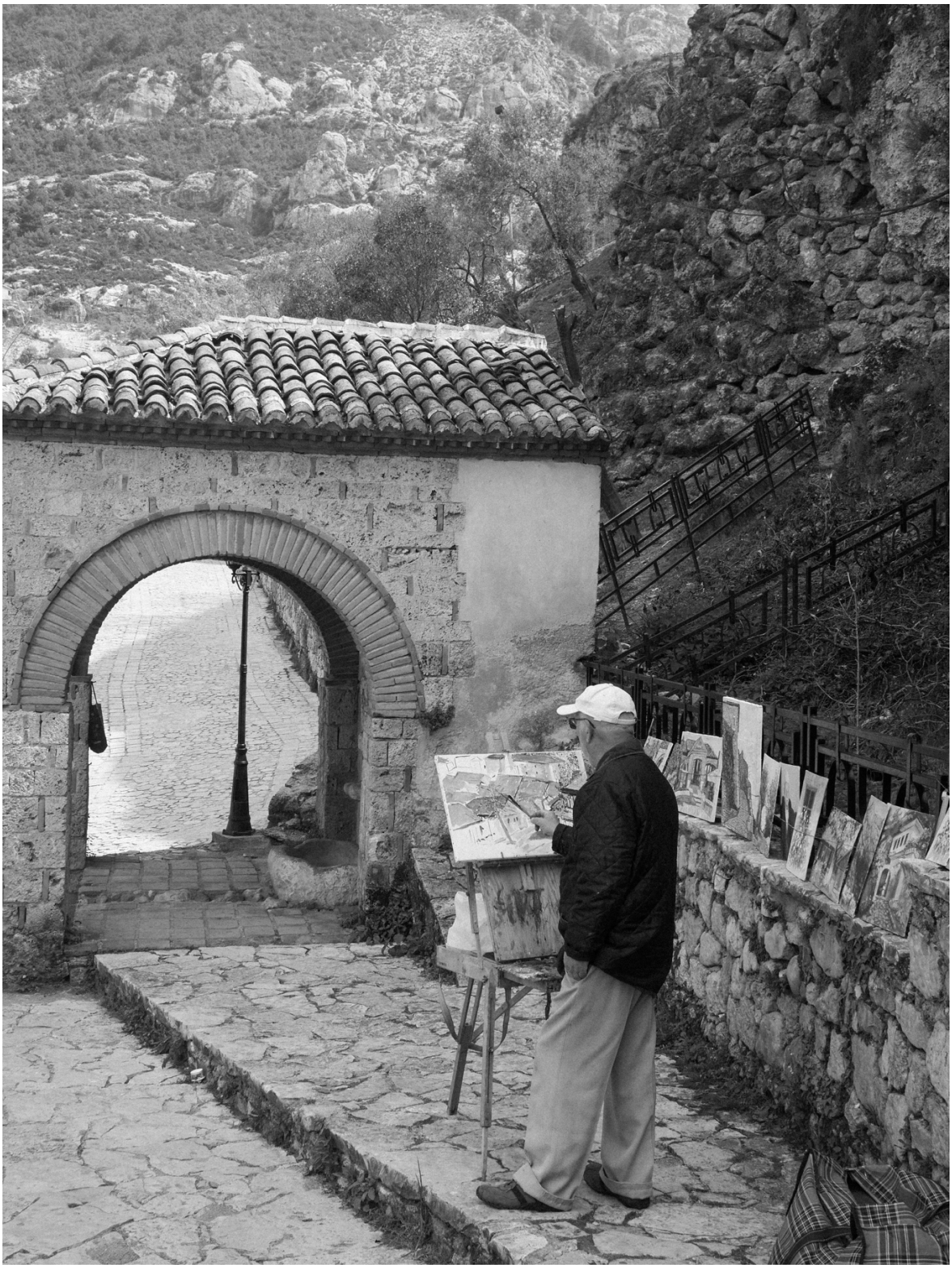


Photo by Joana: Pexels.com



Lina Buividavičiūtė: Author Profile

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

I have an insatiable hunger for life—I am chaotic, untamed, anxious, with burning eyes and a burning heart. My writing has evolved and continues to change, yet my work remains recognizable by its autobiographical motifs, themes inspired by existential philosophy, and rich intertextuality spanning film, music, and literature.

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

Life itself, people, personal experiences, and thought-provoking art are my main inspirations. My biggest supporter is my sixteen-year-old son, a professional climber, who is always the very first to see my published work. My husband, his father, is also a great support, often recognizing glimpses of himself within my texts.

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

My bedroom, in the comfort of my bed. 😊

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 felt a profound shift, especially while writing my third book in Lithuanian; I am turning away from the strictly personal "self" toward the Other, exploring collective experiences and shared traumas. I have become deeply interested not just in my own inner world, but in the world at large—what connects us and what still aches for so many in society. My poems are also growing lighter; I want to write about what brings joy, pleasant surprises, and wonder. In my third poetry collection, "Journeys," my current creative voice truly crystallizes: affirming life even in the darkest of times, and intertwining pain with light.

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

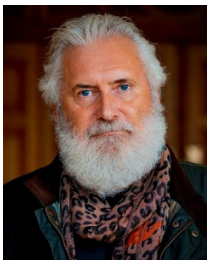
It would either be an exotic coast with the sound of the ocean, palm trees, and scorching sun, or a snow-covered cabin with a roaring fireplace.

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

Read Stephen King's book, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*.

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

I will simply say that writing and motherhood are the two greatest and most meaningful adventures of my life.



Kevin MacAlan: Author/Artist Profile

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

My work reflects my own difficulty in realizing that accepting help where it is needed is a sign of strength, not weakness.

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

Without doubt, my biggest supporter is my wife. I can't say she's been my greatest inspiration, because my relationship with art has always had something to do with working through the agony of loss or dysfunction. Vicky, my wife, is the cure for my woes, not the cause of them. She has an overinflated opinion of my ability, and simply trying to get close to her expectations has improved my work immensely. When I read to a roomful of people, I'm reading to her. If I frame an image, I frame it for her.

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

Anywhere private. I have a writing room at home in which my desk faces a wall. The curtains are actually sewn shut. A view would simply be distracting. I have a desk light, not a ceiling light, and I don't play music. I do have an armchair for when I'm writing longhand, but mostly it's the office chair and laptop for 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?

It's been a long journey. I recently unpacked a box of pieces I'd written thirty years ago, and although I saw some merit in them, it's as if they'd been written by someone else. But maybe the biggest difference, is I know how much the early "me" who wrote those pieces really cared what others thought of them. I used to crave approval. Obviously I still do to some extent. The very act of submitting is approval-seeking, but I'm much less bent out of shape by rejection. There's a hundred reasons why an editor might not find room for something offered, it does not devalue the offeror as an artist.

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

Málaga.

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

To quote Kurt Vonnegut, "The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable." Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, but don't rely on it for an income.

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

Obviously, I'm a tortured genius and haven't found anything humorous about the ordeals I've suffered. But there was one time a couple of years ago when I decided I would recite from memory rather than read at an event. My wife urged me to take cheat sheets onto stage as a backup, but I said I didn't need them, and if I did have them I'd use them, even though I could recite the three pieces perfectly. Within four lines I dried. I had nothing. Vicky couldn't even prompt me because I'd made her leave the cheat sheets behind. There was just me, a sea of expectant faces, and nothing in my head but Bowie lyrics. So I sang a chorus of "Fill Your Heart" and left to stunned silence.



Devon Neal: Author Profile

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

I find myself more and more writing from a place of gratefulness. I try to embrace the gift of life we have and slow down and observe the thing that we're lucky to experience. It can sound off-putting and preachy, but truthfully I have a hard time writing when I'm down or struggling with negative emotions, and while I'm able to write about them, it's often when I'm embracing the small things I'm grateful for.

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

It's gotta be my wife. I can't imagine life without her, and so many times I find her creeping into the edges of my poems, an observer if not an outright focus of what I'm writing.

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

My life is so chaotic. I'm sure everyone's is, but I work full-time with a one-hour commute, and I have three kids at home, the youngest just now 3. It's hard to find time to write, so I squeeze it in when I can: at stoplights, on lunch breaks, putting him down for bed at night, in the morning at breakfast. I wish I had a more established time where I could sit and create, but I don't right now. To answer the question, though, not really a favorite, consistent place I can think of.

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 felt like when I first started writing, especially when I was in school, I was writing for other people. I kept thinking about reading what I was writing aloud in front of people. Now that I'm years removed, I write what I want, realizing that maybe this particular piece may not ever be published, but it might be a personal favorite or a building block to something bigger.

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

Take me back to the mountains—there are so many mountain cabins near me in Kentucky, and I've had some good retreats there leading to some pieces I've loved. It sounds unimaginative, but I'd love to spend another day there.

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

Sort of what I said before: write for yourself. Don't try to write to impress a certain person or group. Write what you like and what you like to read. At the same time, read everything you can to learn what you like and don't like, as it will help refine your skills.

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

One of the first pieces I shared publicly was in school, when we were working on public readings and reading to the class. I wrote a seductive poem about eating a breakfast bar, and spent the rest of that class known as the foodie.

The End



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