



*Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine*  
*Volume 1 Issue 4 Fall 2025*



Volume 1 Issue 4

Fall 2025

Copyright 2025

All rights reserved

Cover Art: "Autumn Dream" by Sean Ewing

Arvilla Fee

Founder, Editor

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Contributors, Readers, and Community:

I love everything about fall—the changing of the leaves, the colors, the crisp air, the way nature rearranges itself for the coming winter. There's something special about bonfires, being wrapped in sweaters, watching combines harvest crops from the fields. It's an end, but also a beginning. The beginning of a quieter season in which we can pause, reflect, slow down. I could not be more proud of the 78 wonderfully talented artists and writers from all over the world who have contributed their creations to this lovely collection. And while every piece might not fit a fall "theme" per se, they have merged together as beautifully as an entire forest of multi-colored trees.

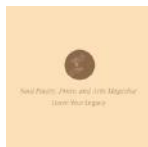
And as we reflect on change, let us remember that we, the poets, writers, artists, and musicians should continue to be beacons of light and love as the darker parts of the world swirl around us. While we may not be able to fix every problem, we can choose to influence our little spheres in the most positive ways: open doors, smile, lend helping hands, encourage others, and follow the golden rule. Let's always strive to let our creative works be reflections of goodness and hope.

I hope you all enjoy these 140+ pages of gorgeous images and words. I will continue to work hard to support your work and our readership in every way I can.

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

Yours truly,

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



EDITOR'S NOTE	3
THE SHAPES WE'RE IN BY ED AHERN	11
THE POEM I AM BY ED AHERN	12
HER EMERALD UNDERWORLD BY SAM ALBALA	13
RIPPLES BY SAM ALBALA	14
FRONT PORCH BY BRIAN MICHAEL BARBEITO	15
BIRD BY LAKE BY BRIAN MICHAEL BARBEITO	16
INCUBUS BY ROBERT BEVERIDGE	17
SLOW FORECAST BY ROBERT BEVERIDGE	18
HE BOUNDED UP THE SEA-SOAKED STEPS BY EMILY BLACK	19
THREE CHEERS FOR GOOD WORK BY MATTHEW TAYLOR BLAIS	20
THREADS BY MATTHEW TAYLOR BLAIS	21
I REMEMBER—A PARADELLE FOR THOMAS BY LITA MARIE BONCIOLINI	22
THE SECRETS OF THE WILLOWS BY LITA MARIE BONCIOLINI	23
HARVEST TIME BY MANDY FESSENDEN BRAUER	24
BLESSED BOUNTY BY MANDY FESSENDEN BRAUER	25
HAUNTED BY MANDY FESSENDEN BRAUER	26
WHAT'S IN FRONT OF ME BY CHARLIE BRICE	27
AUTUMN SOLACE BY MARC BRIMBLE	29
FROSTWORK BY RAYMOND BRUNELL	30
COME AUTUMN BY KEN E BUJOLD	32

MY SPANISH DREAM BY KEN E BUJOLD	33
IN THE AFTERMATH OF TROY BY KEN E BUJOLD	34
FIRE-Y SUNRISE BY WAYNE F. BURKE	35
SKELETONS DON'T SLEEP BY THOMAS W. CASE	36
MIDNIGHT KITCHEN BY XUN CHI	37
CLIFFSIDE ARTIST IN PELOPONNESE BY XUN CHI	38
HEAVY AS MEMORY BY BASKIN COOPER	39
PART OF THE LANDSCAPE BY BASKIN COOPER	40
A HAIGA BY BASKIN COOPER	41
THE LIVING ROOM BY CS CROWE	42
IN FATHER'S ABSENCE BY ED DAVIS	43
PAINTING MY PANORAMA BY ORMAN DAY	44
MIXED MEDIA MORNING BY WILLIAM DORESKEI	47
FOUNDATION BY SAMUEL JOHN DUFFY	48
WHAT THE HANDS HOLD BY SUSAN SANDSTROM ELLIS	49
TWO SPRINGS BY MICHAEL R. EVANS	50
AUTUMN DREAM BY SEAN EWING	51
EVENING FIRE BY SEAN EWING	52
NOT LIKE GRACE BY SEAN EWING	53
THRENODY FOR SUMMER BY SEAN EWING	54
SKYPING WITH MOM BY C.S. FUQUA	55

BANISHMENT BY DAVID LEE GARRISON	56
SUNNY YUMMIES BY KJ HANNAH GREENBERG	57
PORCH LIFE BY JOHN GREY	58
FAIRY TALES BY JOHN GREY	59
LONGING BY WILLIAM OGDEN HAYNES	60
THE PENNY BY WILLIAM OGDEN HAYNES	61
PRESENCE BY AUDREY HOWITT	62
LEAVINGS BY AUDREY HOWITT	63
POETRY'S WEB UNFOLDING BY AUDREY HOWITT	64
SEVERE THUNDERSTORM WARNING, OR: ON BEING TERMINAL IN MY TWENTIES BY LAURA INGRAM	65
ADAGIO FOR STRINGS BY MARC JANSSEN	67
THE WRECK OF SUNSET BY MARC JANSSEN	68
SINKING INTO HOT WATER BY BETH KEELEY	69
REFLECTIONS BY BETH KEELEY	70
THREE HAIKU BY JAMES KOWALCZYK	71
LITTLE ONE BY RIVER KOZHAR	72
A MOTH COMES TO DINNER BY LEILA KULPAS	73
LANGUE DE CHAT BY BETSY MARS	74
AT THE SPEED OF LIGHT BY BETSY MARS	75
ON THE LIP OF THE SKY BOWL BY BETSY MARS	76
GRAPE LEAF PETROGLYPH BY BETSY MARS	77

ELYSIUM BY BOB MCAFEE	78
FIREFLIES BY ANGELLE MCDUGALL	79
MY MOTHER IS A TIME MACHINE BY ANGELLE MCDUGALL	80
A MOMENT OF GUILT BY MACKENZIE MEEKER	81
NEVERMORE BY MACKENZIE MEEKER	82
THE LIGHT WILL COME AGAIN BY MACKENZIE MEEKER	83
THE PLANNER BY BELLA MELARDI	84
BRUISE BY BELLA MELARDI	85
N'AWLINS FLOOD BY MARLA DIAL MOORE	86
EARTH KNOWS HER OWN BY MARLA DIAL MOORE	88
ON AGING BY W. BARRETT MUNN	89
THE LAGOON BY PENNY NOLTE	90
GREEN TEA WITH DAD BY PENNY NOLTE	91
SONGS BURIED IN OUR MOUTH BY VICTOR OBUKATA	92
GENTLEMAN'S FARM, 1958 BY KATHY O'FALLON	93
WATER RISING BY MICHELLE ORTEGA	94
JOYFUL REFLECTION BY CM PICKARD	95
ONE DAY IN A YEAR BY LEEANN PICKRELL	96
WHAT LOVE IS BY LEEANN PICKRELL	97
STREET CAT BY SUSAN POLLET	98
PURE CALM BY SUSAN POLLET	99

EVENING STROLL AT WHAT FEELS LIKE THE END OF THE WORLD BY VIVIAN FAITH PRESCOTT	100
MADII—AN OVERGROWN PATH THAT LEAVES A TRACE WAITING TO BE UNCOVERED BY VIVIAN FAITH PRESCOTT	101
A POEM FOR CLOVIS BY SAMUEL PRESTRIDGE	102
DIMINISHING LIGHT BY PAUL RABINOWITZ	103
HOURLASS BY SAMBHU RAMACHANDRAN	104
THE ARTIST BY CAELAN ROBERTS	105
REPLACEMENT PARTS BY JUDITH ROSNER	107
SHOULDER SEASONS BY JUDITH ROSNER	108
PASSING GLANCE: RESTAURANT APRONS CINQUE TERRE, ITALY BY MICHAEL ROBERTS	109
PASSING GLANCE: SCARVES FOR SALE IN MADRID SPAIN BY MICHAEL ROBERTS	110
HEMINGWAY BY ELIZABETH ROSELL	111
NEVER LIKE THIS BY ELIZABETH ROSELL	112
STARS BY JUSTINE RUMMAGE	113
THE WORTHINESS OF A DAUGHTER BY JUSTINE RUMMAGE	114
ORANGE GLOW BY NICOLE SARA	115
SUNLIT LEAVES BY NICOLE SARA	116
COLORFUL FALL BY NICOLE SARA	117
THE POND AT STRAWBERRY INN BY JENNIFER SUSAN SMITH	118
TWO HAIKU BY JOSHUA ST. CLAIRE	119
READY TO BE CROPPED BY SARA STEGEN	120

THE GREEN RAVE BY SARA STEGEN	121
ODD GIRLS BY NAOMI STENBERG	122
I MET YOU ONLINE AND FLEW FROM SEATTLE TO FLORIDA FOR A DATE BY NAOMI STENBERG	123
IF HAPPINESS IS LIKE WATER BY SHAHRZAD TAAVONI	124
INCARNATION BY ROWAN TATE	125
APPALACHIAN LESSONS BY ROWAN TATE	126
MEDITATIONS ON THE PICKET LINE BY EVAN THURMAN	127
STREAM OF UNCONSCIOUSNESS BY KEN TOMARO	128
AFTER-DINNER DRINKS BY KEN TOMARO	129
DRESSED BEYOND NINE BY ANGELA TOWNSEND	130
RELIQUARIES BY ELENI TRAGANAS	132
THE ORCHARD AT DUSK BY VERONICA TUCKER	134
WHAT THE RIVER FORGETS BY VERONICA TUCKER	136
MOTHER TONGUE BY VERONICA TUCKER	137
THE THROAT THAT INHALED A WAR AND CALLED IT FATHER BY MUHAMMAD UBANDOMA	138
THE SUN SETS TWICE IN FALL BY MARGARET TAYLOR-ULIZIO	139
HIGHLIGHT OF HER DAY BY LORRI VENTURA	140
FELT HAT BY SEAN WANG	142
LAY ME GENTLY BY DIANE WEBSTER	143
AUTUMN IN THE PARK BY DIANE WEBSTER	144
THREE HAIKU BY AMBER WINTER	145

WAX TEARS BY HUINA ZHENG	146
ARTIST & AUTHOR INTERVIEWS	147
Artist Profile: Brian Michael Barbeito	148
Artist/Author Profile: Baskin Cooper	149
Author Profile: Orman Day	150
Author Profile: Mackenzie Meeker	152



Photo by Google DeepMind: Pexels.com

## The Shapes We're In by Ed Ahern

How did we ever decide that right angles  
are what define our parameters and shapes?  
We are after all bilateral knobby blobs  
that cycle through circular apertures  
and operate with stubby jointed digits

Yet once past igloo, yurt and teepee  
we went all cuboid on housing,  
and cars and the cut of clothes,  
and most beds, books and bread.  
We are trapped in ninety-degree layering.

And even things made nominally round  
are usually just fat straight lines  
like pens and panatelas and pasta,  
or bottles and bugles and bowling pins  
or spears and space ships and salami.

We have lost the art of the round  
and except for pills and plush pillows  
and discs like pancakes and plates  
are condemned to bang elbows  
against the sides of our boxes.



*Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had over 550 stories and poems published so far, and twelve books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories where he squats on the review board, and at Scribes Micro where he is the idle figurehead.*



*Photo by Muhammad Khawar Nazir: Pexels.com*

## **The Poem I Am by Ed Ahern**

No poet is as distilled as his poem,  
for he starts with a witch's brew  
of dissolved loves and soluble hates,  
of sour logic and sickly-sweet biases,  
leavened with too few herbs of truth.  
And from that frothing yellow foam  
he ladles out curds streaked with  
vague semblances of significance  
and on that pulpy mass sprinkles words.

Her Emerald Underworld  
by Sam Albala



Sam Albala is a writer based in Denver, Colorado. Their writing has appeared in Genre Arts, Stain'd Magazine, Boulder Weekly, BUST Magazine, Mental Floss, Sonic Boom, Gambling The Aisle, and numerous other venues.

Ripples  
by Sam Albala



Front Porch  
by Brian Michael Barbeito



*Brian Michael Barbeito is a Canadian photographer and poet. A work of landscape photography and prose poems, The Book of Love and Mourning, is forthcoming in autumn 2025.*

Bird by Lake  
by Brian Michael Barbeito





Photo by Nataliya Vaitkevich: Pexels.com

## Incubus by Robert Beveridge

A pat on the head  
and a loll of the tongue  
before you go back  
to your desk  
and play fetch  
with a pile of spreadsheets

if you do it well enough  
you'll get a bone  
before you head out the door  
for the day



*Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](https://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry on unceded Mingo land (Akron, OH). He published his first poem in a non-vanity/non-school publication in November 1988, and it's been all downhill since. Recent/upcoming appearances in Brief Wilderness, Castagnette, and The Broadkill Review, among others.*



*Photo by Alena Jarrett: Unsplash.com*

## **Slow Forecast by Robert Beveridge**

You wonder  
if it would be considered  
uncouth  
to practice the trombone  
on the Broad Street local.

You waggle the nub  
on your spit valve,  
stare at the nearest person  
with green eyes and freckles.



Photo by Nikita Korchagin: Pexels.com

## He Bounded up the Sea-Soaked Steps by Emily Black

My tears are salty as the sea. My lover has left.  
The tide recedes, gray on the sodden shore under  
a leaden sky. My thoughts wander wildly: passages  
from books mingle with scraps of words we'd just

spoken. We'd made love in an abandoned beach shack,  
the lonely shrieks of seagulls haunting the silent gaps  
between the rise and fall of tidal waves. He'd said he was  
breaking out—breaking out, I suppose, like the sea.

Moon's orbit will bring back the sea to its normal high,  
but what will bring him back...My orbit, I fear, is not so  
magnetic. I trudge up the same wet, stone steps and find  
a coffee shop, my thin dress damp with salt air.

His essence, a woodsy evergreen smell, lingers too.  
I shift quickly, inhaling the dark, smoky scent  
of coffee and lose myself in swirls of cream I create  
with my spoon—a work of art, a new canvas.



*Emily Black came to poetry writing late in life, but in her deepest heart she's always been a poet. In childhood she was alone a great deal and spent most days outside in nature. In adult life she was the second woman to graduate in Civil Engineering, University of Florida, and enjoyed a long career in this field and in the field of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Her work appears in numerous journals as well as having three books of poetry published: The Lemon Light of Morning, We Feed Dragons to the Moon, and Yellow Foxes Fall from the Sky.*



Photo by Alina Skazka: Pexels.com

### Three Cheers for Good Work by Matthew Taylor Blais

Spoon of my leisure  
have I earned you?  
Schubert died when he was thirty-one  
I will die when I am one hundred and thirty-one  
I will die when I am good and ready  
I look out while chest tightens  
presence as boa constrictor  
when the good light fades, my eyes will dim to meet it  
finally feeling rested a century from now

It is a fact that throughout human history  
the hardest thing is not to conquer  
or to be conquered  
the hardest thing is to be left alone

When all of consciousness  
comes down with a bad case of dementia  
grip tightly to the memory  
of sonorous applause



*Matthew Taylor Blais is a Canadian artist who has primarily made experimental movies. His work has had success screening around the world, including VIFF, TIFF, and the Berlinale. In 2022 he began writing poetry, and has recently given it his full attention. Matthew currently lives in Coquitlam with his wife and daughters. He has had criticism and poetry published on The Collidescope.*



Photo by Dom J. Pexels.com

## Threads by Matthew Taylor Blais

The fifth floor of my library has been closed for three years  
Today I discovered they had moved some of the books that  
I had been missing  
to the floor above  
Thirteen thousand of them wedged into the math section  
I stood for almost three hours reading Hardy  
reading Rilke  
reading Charles Olson  
reading new poets who have a spark but choose to write about the wrong things  
reading Neruda  
about his little tower  
reading Frank  
among others (always “among others”)  
but the death march of time is the great souring  
thinking of all I had to do that day  
although a day is not a day these days  
it’s mere hours, life measured in hours  
a few here or there, there is no day  
the minutes right in front of you  
can be squeezing or releasing  
we can find a relaxing in plucked notes and open sky  
in your daughter flying down a slide  
Notes float and spin off branches  
wood chips scatter like the aftermath of bullets that only miss  
Don’t let the fact that all this lasts seconds dislocate its potency  
we can keep like an echo  
we can look for it again  
time is marbles  
rolling off an oak table  
I just want my life to be  
the way arms rest on open car windows  
the sun warming glinting skin  
blonding delicate hairs  
blown back like yellow clover  
heralding in childhood time



Photo by Jonathan Borba: Pexels.com

## I Remember—A Parabelle for Thomas by Lita Marie Bonciolini

I remember the open smile of your eyes, green and mischievous at the corners,  
the little quirk of your upper lip, a teasing sarcasm always ready.

Of your smile, and of eyes always mischievous, green and open,  
The ready little sarcasm, your upper lip teasing at the corners, a quirk, I remember.

I remember your tall and elegant bearing, long of leg, broad shoulders,  
and how your perfect hand surrounding mine protectively like a bird.

Tall, long of leg and hand, how your broad shoulders surrounding,  
like an elegant bird, protectively bearing mine, perfect, I remember.

I remember the sweetness of your kisses, timbre of your laugh, tenderness of your heart,  
how I was so easily conquered by you, an Irish lad, when my eyes drank in your essence.

Your laugh of sweetness, when my heart was so conquered by you, how and when, so easily.  
I drank in your tenderness, of kisses, of your eyes, the timbre of your Irish lad essence, I remember.

Your open laugh, I remember, and the sarcasm teasing, the timbre of the quirk ready always.  
Your elegant essence, long of leg, the mischievous teasing of the kisses, I was so conquered.  
Your upper lip a perfect sweetness. I remember how the corners of your eyes surrounding mine.  
Your perfect smile my eyes drank in so easily. Your tenderness of hand, how like an Irish lad.  
The little green bird protectively on your shoulders, tall and bearing my heart, I remember.



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



*Photo by Melissa Jansen van Rensburg: Pexels.com*

## **The Secrets of the Willows** **by Lita Marie Bonciolini**

*After David Whyte – To Break a Promise*

The promises we made  
are not ours anymore.  
They went with the river,  
let go from the steeped banks.

You thought they'd be lost—  
a drowned word,  
a forgotten vow—  
but they found their own way.

They live in the bends,  
in the rush over stones,  
a bright glint of sunlight  
on the water's broken surface.

They are the secrets whispered  
by a gathering of willows,  
a hum of communion in deep waters.

They belong to the river now,  
you look for them in me,  
no longer clutched to my heart,  
pink petals slipped from my fingertips.



Photo by Marek Piwnicki: Pexels.com

## Harvest Time by Mandy Fessenden Brauer

It's almost twilight.

Not especially interesting clouds block the blue.  
It's been raining often during the last month.

The grey clouds and green trees, exquisite with  
a touch of sun a bit later, leave stark silhouettes.

The rice has just been harvested, leaving beige  
remains beside barely visible green pathways.

All over are fires, black smoldering piles of shafts  
cleansed of rice, sending out bright orange flames.

In the distance a woman feeds the infant pigs and  
nearby two families bathe and laugh in the river.

A few dogs announce their presence or perhaps  
their hunger, and an occasional rooster, crows.

A lone motorcycle churns by in the distance,  
a reminder of things man-made, mechanical.

Tiny bats scurry around searching for insects.  
Peace prevails in this small village.

Why can't it be like this everywhere?



*Dr Mandy Fessenden Brauer, an octogenarian clinical child psychologist, who's lived and worked in California, Palestine, Egypt, Armenia and Indonesia, writes bibliotherapy picture books to help children better understand themselves and their world. She writes poetry mainly for herself, delighting in throwing words into the air to see where they land. Her book of short stories, INSIDE THE HOUSE OF BLESSINGS: STORIES ABOUT EGYPT AND PALESTINE will be released in Malta at the end of 2025. She and her husband divide their time between Egypt and Indonesia.*



Photo by Pavel Danilyuk: Pexels.com

## **Blessed Bounty** **by Mandy Fessenden Brauer**

Trees bent over  
like prostrating monks  
to give us their fruit,  
ripened like mischievous children.

Fish jumped up  
from the briny deep  
to give us  
their slithery, twisting bodies

Plants welcomed  
scythes and hoes  
as we sliced off  
their nutritious bounty

And animals, like drugged hippies,

docilely sacrificed  
so, we could eat  
their precious flesh

like His precious body  
which we consume  
as if it were  
just bread and grape juice

Which it isn't,  
or maybe it is.

Who believes differently is  
free to indulge in whimsy  
and who doesn't,  
doubting Thomas that he may be,

is no different in the long run  
because what makes us  
different under the skin  
is where differences don't show.



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

## Haunted by Mandy Fessenden Brauer

I suppose you might have left it there yesterday  
on purpose, or maybe you didn't.  
Perhaps it flew from the plastic bag  
hanging on your motorbike or  
out the car window,  
unnoticed.

Still, it seemed odd to find an unopened,  
stamped and addressed envelope  
lying on the ground in a village market  
between the freshly butchered pork slabs  
dripping blood and stacks of sweet potatoes,  
sellers more concerned with shooing away  
flies than consummating sales.

I pick it up to feel the weight, not heavy but  
its thickness more than one sheet of paper,

then imagine it to be a carefully penned  
love message, no, it's a moving farewell,  
yet no dried tears are visible. But like always  
I switch the voice and think of bills unpaid  
or a nasty epistle to a former friend.

Psychological tests say, of course,  
an ethical person dismisses curiosity and  
posts the piece unopened.  
I debate what is inside and whether or not  
the contents are in a language I can read.  
The handwriting is beautiful, almost calligraphic,  
each letter small but perfectly formed.

Undeterred, I carefully place the envelope  
where I found it, leaving it for someone  
else to find. When I return from buying  
groceries it's gone, but I continue to be  
haunted by that message,  
never received.



Photo by Gustavo Fring: Pexels.com

## What's in Front of Me by Charlie Brice

*"Write what's in front of you."*

*~Emily Dickenson*

What's in front of me is the neighbor  
    kids' whiffle ball stuck under a massive  
clump of monkshood. They're probably  
    scared to retrieve it, not because every  
part of that plant is poisonous—something  
    I doubt they know—but because they think  
the old crank next door doesn't want errant  
    balls messing up his yard. They have  
no idea that sitting here looking at that ball  
    I can hear the plastic thud of the bat,  
feel the thrill in my chest as the ball clears  
    the fence, and the angelic weightlessness  
as the batter rounds the backyard bases.

They don't know that what I've got in front of me  
    is a useless back and joints so stiff I can't  
crawl under the wolfsbane to get the ball. They  
    don't know that my father and grandfather  
died at 54 of heart disease, and that sometimes  
    my heart tries to summersault inside my  
sternum, or that my wife is confined to a wheelchair  
    and I don't know how long I'll be able  
to push her along our misty paths. They  
    don't know what's in front of me.  
I'll call over there, invite those boys into my yard,  
    ask who hit the homer, tell them they  
are always welcome to come over—ask them  
    to show me what it's like to hit the ball.



*Charlie Brice won the 2020 Field Guide Poetry Magazine Poetry Contest and placed third in the 2021 Allen Ginsberg Poetry Prize. His ninth full-length poetry collection is Tragedy in the Arugula Aisle (Arroyo Seco Press, 2025). His poetry has been nominated for the Best of Net Anthology and the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in Atlanta Review, The Honest Ulsterman, Ibbetson Street, Chiron Review, The MacGuffin, and elsewhere.*



Photo by 3D Render: Pexels.com

## Autumn Solace by Marc Brimble

this evening moon  
in a pale sky

to feel winter's child  
to forget a red summer

tonight is filled with lemon  
and  
melancholy notes of peach

music  
the sweet Valencia flute  
I think of Arabia

can I squash all these things together  
like the people in a bazaar

and make

the sound of  
a single church bell?



*Marc lives in Spain, and when he's not drinking tea he's feeding the ducks. He sometimes teaches English.*



Photo by Eugene Golovesov: Pexels.com

## Frostwork by Raymond Brunell

Every morning, before sunlight crested the frozen ridge behind their house, Elara and Thomas woke to the window dreaming.

Frost unfurled across the glass—feathered lace, spun from breath and silence, creeping slow from corner to corner. They didn't speak—not yet—just lay tangled beneath heavy blankets, watching the ice tell its stories. Fingers drifting close, stretching out—not for each other, but for the cold pane.

Elara traced a spiral at the bottom left, where the chill pooled thickest. Her fingertip followed the curve, spiraling inward three times before splitting like a root. It smelled faintly of cinnamon—not sharp, not sweet, but warm, the way an oven smells after bread, years ago. Not a scent of now, but of a memory borrowed from a stranger.

Thomas drew a line upward, thin as a violin string. Where his nail skimmed the frost, a hum began—a wordless lullaby, trembling at the edges of hearing. He paused. The sound vanished. He moved again, tracing a curve like a cheekbone, and the melody swelled, unfinished, as if sung behind a closed door.

They never planned the shapes. The frost offered them.

Today, the lines converged. Swirls folded into one another—a forehead's edge, the hollow beneath a brow, the hint of closed eyes. Slowly, a child's face emerged in rime and silence, perfectly still. Their breath fogged the edges, threatening to erase it, so they breathed carefully, reverently.

Then, a voice.

Not loud. Not quite sound, more like being called in a half-dream. "Mama..." A pause. Then, softer: "Papa."

Elara stiffened. Thomas let out a shaky breath, as if struck gently in the chest.

No words passed between them. None had, not truly, for years—not about this. Just glances across doctor's offices, silences thick and raw, anniversaries marked by absence. Here, on the glass, they saw what never came to be—the daughter they only met in dreams.

And somehow, it felt sharper than the truth.

Tears gathered in Elara's eyes, shining but unshed. She reached—not quite touching the image, hovering. The name trembled on her tongue, unsaid since hope was buried beneath practicality. Now, she whispered it.

Lila.

Thomas flinched. That wasn't the name he'd carried quietly all this time. His mouth opened, just a breath—Sa...—a syllable lost in the cold, vanishing before it could cross the space between them.

He wiped his thumb across the glass, smudging the child's cheek.

The frost clung.

When he pulled back, fine crystals dusted his skin, glittering like powdered sugar or ground mica. Cold seeped into his thumb, not biting, but settling deep—a tenderness, a weight.

On his thumb, the frost thickened, darkened, rearranged.

It became a photograph.

Small, sepia at the edges, grainy as snowfall behind tears. Two adults on a porch swing, older than they were now, hair silvered, shoulders drawn close. Between them, a girl with Elara's nose and Thomas's chin, laughing at something just out of view. Behind her, an apple tree was heavy with fruit. A dog nuzzled her elbow. Summer draped over everything, warm and forgiving.

Elara gasped—not in fear, but in recognition. Somewhere in her marrow, she knew this life had almost been possible.

Her hand found Thomas's, fingers trembling, lingering over his knuckles as if she could warm him through the chill. The cold soaked into her bones, grief and tenderness braided tight. The photograph shimmered, fragile as a soap bubble at dawn.

Outside, the sky blushed rose-gold. Light crept up the wall toward the window.

They watched, powerless, as warmth arrived.

The image faded, melting into droplets that ran down the glass like quiet tears.

Dampness remained. And, for a moment, the scent of cinnamon—fading, then gone.

Thomas looked at Elara. For the first time in years, she met his gaze fully—not with apology, not with blame, but with something raw and open as a wound turned toward air.

Outside, the world remained frozen.

Inside, something subtle cracked, letting in a light neither could name.

Neither spoke.

But later, without agreement, they would rise, dry their hands on the sheets, and move into the day—the way people who carry ghosts do—changed, just a little.

As if loss could take root.

As if longing remembered how to breathe.



*Raymond Brunell writes literary speculative fiction where sound, memory, and sensory strangeness shape reality. His prose blends near-future shadows with magical realism, often centering neurodivergent perception as a lens for hidden truths. His work has appeared in journals and anthologies exploring the haunted, the lyrical, and the liminal.*



Photo by Inge Wallumrød: Pexels.com

## Come Autumn by Ken e Bujold

Come autumn, Aestas rising later and  
later each morning. As the river runs  
to a trickle, nearer and nearer  
to Saturn's bedrock, the dove and butcherbird  
dart and cower amidst the thinning cover  
of dogwoods. Along the banks  
I begin to make my ledger of leaves—  
the seasonal lovers that never returned.

Time and Death, Life's unflinching auditors,  
never miss a heart's faux pas.  
Every leaf has to be catalogued—  
the grim march of apples rusting,  
worms hollowing out an ungrateful eye—  
noted before the winter's disinfecting purge.  
Though I always remember to leave one page unfilled,  
blank for the coming spring I hold deep in my bones.



*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 Firefly Adobe AI*

## **My Spanish Dream by Ken e Bujold**

I am on a boat, in irons  
adrift the dunes of Crisium.  
A man with whiskers is at the helm.  
A black raven perched atop his left shoulder.  
Beyond this the darkness looms.

After some time, the dream flickers.  
A not-unfamiliar girl emerges from the darkness.  
The scent of her green dress  
the accusation of a question I left  
unanswered, roiling beneath us.

Eighty-eight poems dangling from a windmill—  
Love's undying verdict—  
that words were never enough.  
She needed hands that knew life, more than—  
half-formed clay feet knee-deep in an ink well.



*Photo by Firefly Adobe AI*

## **In the Aftermath of Troy by Ken e Bujold**

Imagine Odysseus staggering home,  
a censorious Penelope  
cold and expectant in the moonlight—  
Ithaca hush and still  
in anticipation of the gathering columns;  
the arithmetic of small debts  
needle and hum of twenty years' absence.  
I could name the ways memory unwinds:  
by receipt, by tat, by rust of habit—  
how every slight becomes an entry;  
the red weight of overdue sums tallied  
until there's nothing left to credit—  
though in truth they went on living in truce.  
Two beasts yoked to routine, hushed by the silence.



Photo by Paula Anne: Pexels.com

## Fire-y Sunrise by Wayne F. Burke

*(for Celia Black)*

Fuego!

6:30 a.m. A big shew by  
the sun before it hides—  
that coward—behind the  
clouds, and is swamped,  
like a dying ember. In  
September. Remember?  
In the rain.



*Wayne F. Burke's poetry has been widely published online and in print. He is author of 12 poetry collections—most recently WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BABY WAYNE? Hog Press, 2025. He lives in Vermont (USA).*



Photo by Tara Winstead: Pexels.com

## Skeletons Don't Sleep by Thomas W. Case

The skeletons  
of poems form  
when I lie down.  
Sleep calls;  
bones dance,  
want to grow skin.  
Lilacs bloom; I feel  
the inner thigh of eternity,  
soft and wet.

I can't rest.  
I have to jot down  
notes, or they turn  
to ashes and blow away.  
Or, they are buried deep  
in muddy slumber,  
impossible to dig up.

I sleep  
with notebook and pen.  
As I drift off,  
I whisper to the tortured  
bones,  
*don't cry, don't worry.*  
I'll bring you to life.



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



Photo by *laura iglesias: Pexels.com*

## Midnight Kitchen by Xun Chi

you stand against ivy blue tiles,  
apple sunk between teeth,  
on the countertop,  
that slice of red amber  
glazed with eerie gleam.



*Xun Chi (he/they) is a poet, playwright, and artist based in Beijing and Vancouver. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of *Ars Literica*, a student-run literary magazine. His poems will appear in *Full House Literary* and the *Literary Times Magazine*. Xun's work explores the tensions between desire, belonging, and queer identity.*



*Photo by Ashford Marx: Pexels.com*

### **Cliffside Artist in Peloponnese by Xun Chi**

I trace from twigs  
swept to frenzy,  
to fish slicing  
through washed gouache,  
just to find upon water  
seven flowers skiing.



Photo by Shovan Datta: Pexels.com

## Heavy as Memory by Baskin Cooper

the blue ridge leans above the farm  
quiet and larger than life  
a steady backdrop to the change  
that stirs in the valley below

I find the old well pump  
choked by weeds and vines  
its red paint nearly gone  
to bare iron dark as earth

the air hums with wires now  
a new house rising on the field  
steam shovels scrape where tree frogs  
once sang the woods alive

my father's hands on the handle  
the arc of water flashing cold  
I drank from cupped palms  
believing it would never end

I touch the rusted lever  
its silence heavy as memory  
faithful to a place and time  
that somehow slipped away



*Baskin Cooper is an award-winning poet, visual artist, and multidisciplinary creator based in Chatham County, North Carolina. His work spans poetry, songwriting, sculpture, screenwriting, and voice acting, weaving together visual, narrative, and musical elements. He holds a PhD in psychology and previously lived in Cork, Ireland, experiences that often shape his explorations of folklore, lyricism, and personal history. His poems have appeared in Verse-Virtual, ONE ART: A Journal of Poetry, Ink & Oak Lit, and others. His debut collection, The Space Between Branches, is currently seeking publication.*



Photo by Caleb Oquendo: Pexels.com

## Part of the Landscape by Baskin Cooper

they burst away at my steps  
water shuddering in their wake  
a scatter of wings in sunlight

I sit without moving  
unpack my sandwich  
as silence claims the air

a sparrow lands first  
head tilted toward my stillness  
others follow like cautious leaves

they edge back to the fountain  
wings catch the light  
throats flicking with song

I bite my peanut butter and jelly  
they decide I'm harmless  
just another part of the landscape

I finish my lunch slowly  
beside the chirps and splashes  
before I take flight

A Haiga  
by Baskin Cooper

*gentle rocking  
against the silent snowfall  
a tethered boat sleeps*





Photo by Kate Darmody: Unsplash.com

## The Living Room by CS Crowe

I want to start a weekday cult  
In my grandmother's front room  
Den. Antechamber. Vestibule. Votary.  
How one room can be all of these  
If the house is small enough  
This room where we come alive  
Like children opening their third eye  
For the first time at the age of five

I want to start a weekday cult  
Iconolatry in my grandmother's front room  
But instead of plants or paintings,  
Instead of coffee mugs, shot glasses, or  
*Little Moments* porcelain figurines,  
She collects nativity scenes—  
So my cult just goes all the way  
Back around to being Christianity again

I want to start a weekday cult  
But we moved my grandmother  
To an assisted living facility,  
And we sold the house to pay  
For the care none of us were willing  
To give her, a cult of iconoclasts  
Who would break any tradition  
For a chance to finally live our own lives



*CS Crowe is three crows in a trench coat that gained sentience after eating a magic bean. He spends his days writing stories on a stolen laptop and trading human teeth for peanuts. A poet and storyteller from the Southeastern United States, he believes stories and poems are about the journey, not the destination, and he loves those stories that wander in the wilderness for forty years before finding their way to the promised land.*



Photo by Vishal Saini: Pexels.com

## In Father's Absence by Ed Davis

Mrs. Byrne has been acting nervous all morning—dusting, although she did the whole house yesterday. With Father in Scotland for his Conan Doyle conference, it's just us. I'm lying on the divan in the sitting room reading when she asks me to go pick up the newspaper.

The *Times* delivery person always lands it on the sidewalk a few paces down Park Lane. I'm bending over when a woman appears from nowhere.

"Hello," she says, fluttering her fingers. It sounds like *halo*. A colorful scarf covers her head. Her skin is deep brown, and she has dark eyes, perfect white teeth and wears cat-eye glasses. Her cloth shoes are nearly rags.

"Hi," I reply, clutching the newspaper to my chest. I imagine Father shaking his head.

"Please accept this."

I don't want to take the package she's handing me, but her face and shoes won't let me say no. It's the size of a book, wrapped loosely in lavender paper. She must be one of his grateful international students at Loughborough.

But now she's glancing behind fearfully, as if someone might dash up and snatch her. When she faces me again, she looks infinitely sad. I clutch the package close, Father's *Times* between it and my heart.

"Thank you," I say. "I will give it to him."

"No, Asha, it is for you."

I freeze, mouth hanging open. *How does she know my middle name?* She's smiling but her eyes are still sad.

"Please accept, my dearest."

This is *so taboo*. She knows it, too. Stepping back two steps, three, she flutters her fingers again and speeds away. Turning the corner, she's gone. I trudge back up the three steps, newspaper and package clasped against my chest.

After laying the *Times* on the foyer table, I unwrap an ornate gold metal frame containing a black and white photograph of a young Indian woman holding a little girl on her lap. She must be the same woman I just met outside, only she's older now. Father had told me, when I was small, my mother had passed. I envision him, scowling on the other side of the door, but I don't care about his anger. I'm wondering where to hide this proof of my mother's visit. A shadow on the carpet makes me start. It's Mrs. Byrne.

"She found you."

I nod, not all that surprised. Mrs. Byrne's hands are now crossed at her waist. I've not only met one stranger today; another has lived with us since my mother "went away." Mrs. Byrne lets out a long sigh. I should be angry with her for tricking me, but I'm not. I've just gone from having no mother to having two.



*Ed Davis has immersed himself in writing since retiring from college teaching. Recently, he's been publishing flash fiction at venues such as Flash Fiction Magazine, Sky Island Journal, Every Day Fiction and Literally Stories. He walks daily within the bucolic village of Yellow Springs, Ohio, where he lives.*



Photo by Tom Fisk: Pexels.com

## Painting My Panorama by Orman Day

My impulsive decision to extract myself from a comfortable, sedentary life in California, and drop my slump-shouldered, paunchy, newly unemployed self into a canoe on the Mississippi River was first met with disbelief and laughter.

My sisters bluntly expressed fear: “You’d be a damn fool.” It’s not as if I was going to waterski in the Bermuda Triangle or push a squid with my beak across Antarctica in a penguin costume.

In 2002, I was fifty-six and living in Orange County, where I spent my days and nights writing public relations copy, a magazine column about homes, and prose and poetry for literary journals. At the university where I worked part-time, I exercised by walking across campus to a Krispy Kreme outlet for glazed doughnuts. The last time I had paddled a canoe, I was a gawky kid circling Tom Sawyer Island on Disneyland’s Rivers of America.

No, I didn’t have a death wish. I wasn’t suffering a mid-life crisis. Had I been training, perhaps in Newport Bay? No, I’d learn by doing and besides, Paige would captain our vessel.

Without her, none of this would have happened. She was thirty-one, elfin, dark-haired, a poet and college English instructor. One night in the common area of the flats where we lived, we got onto the subject of my incurable wanderlust. I said I’d accomplished all but one of my travel goals. I hopped freights because of Jack London and John Steinbeck, thumbed on six continents because of Jack Kerouac, camped through Africa because of Ernest Hemingway, and meandered through South America because of Che Guevara. Always I felt the lure of rivers: sleeping outdoors in a hammock aboard a steamboat churning westward on the Amazon from Belem to Manaus, riding up the Nile in a decrepit boat crowded with people and sheep, sitting and lying on a bunk bed on a boat purring west on China’s Pearl, bungee jumping from a bridge into New Zealand’s Kawarau.

But I had never canoed the Mississippi because it was not a voyage I could safely undertake by myself. My fascination with the Big Muddy arose from a children’s biography of Abraham Lincoln—who made our mutual February 12 birthday a holiday—and its drawing of Abe guiding a flatboat down a river.

A century after moving panoramas of the Mississippi attracted thousands of spectators, on the big and little screen, I watched Davy Crockett and Mike Fink battle pirates, Mickey Rooney as Huckleberry Finn rafting with a fugitive slave named Jim, and exuberant entertainers singing and dancing in "Showboat." Possibly because I needed glasses, I didn't notice the river shown on-screen often had neither a wave nor a ripple because it was a backdrop hanging at a nearby studio. Nonetheless, I was mesmerized.

After I told her about my unfulfilled goal, Paige said she had learned through Outward Bound how to paddle a canoe and thrive outdoors in the Boundary Waters of Minnesota. She also had a couple months free from teaching during the summer. Since she was burdened with student loans, I immediately offered to provision our trip. Not for a minute did I second-guess our decision, although she did.

In late July in St. Paul, I bought two single-person tents, a canoe, two bent-shaft paddles, a gas cooker, and other gear at an REI. Our clerk John and Paige felt instant chemistry. He and a friend dropped us and our canoe off at what they considered a perfect launch point. Later I learned they clucked their tongues at my initial incompetence and predicted our trip was doomed because I was a paddle dipper.

If I was a Boston street urchin in 1847, I would have saved the copper pennies I earned selling papers and running errands so I could answer the call of a handbill proclaiming, "Banvard's Mammoth Panorama of the Mississippi River...Three Miles of Canvas...1200 Miles." For the two hours of the moving panorama, I'd listen to stories, music and sound effects as riverscape and historical events scrolled across the auditorium's stage from one upright roller to another. The movement of unbroken scenery would give us landlocked viewers the illusion of traveling on the river. Those images would have left me with a hunger to test myself against the waves, squalls and whirlpools of the Mighty Mississippi.

John Banvard was one of several artists who sketched their way up and down the river in the 1840s and then returned to a studio to paint what he saw and imagined on miles of canvas. John Egan's panorama portrayed twenty-four scenes on canvas 7.5 feet by 348 feet. Unlike most panoramas, which were lost to decay, dismemberment or fire, a few of Egan's scenes have survived and been restored, including depictions of a squatter being chased by wolves, a Native America massacre of French colonists in 1729 in what is now Natchez, and Hernando de Soto's river burial after dying of a fever in 1542.

Drawn from his panorama, Henry Lewis' illustrations depict St. Louis before and during the fire of 1849, a keelboat at the Mississippi-Ohio junction in Illinois, and a dog dance performed by Native Americans in Minnesota.

And what of the two-month, 1,430-mile voyage that Paige and I took? What scenes could be painted for that panorama? Me paddling like a beast of burden through a cloud of mayflies between gulps from a water jug. Paige teaching me repeatedly how to erect a new-fangled tent that didn't require pegs and ropes. Me sleeping in a fetal position in a pool of rainwater. Me crawling out of our canoe because my legs are numb. Paige and me eating beef jerky burritos on a sandbar. Ravenous raccoons attacking the dirty dishes I was too tired to clean one night in the Trail of Tears state park in Missouri.

Giddy passengers filming Paige and me as we desperately try not to capsize in their riverboat's wake. Me scratching my gray beard while telling a Vicksburg reporter God protects fools like us. With fingers stiffened into claws, me finding it impossible to floss my teeth. Paige and me paddling past Louisiana's infamous Angola Prison, where the ghost of inmate Lead Belly picks at his 12-string guitar, stomps his foot and moans a blues song.

In St. Francisville, John and Paige leaving on a romantic road trip to New Orleans while I team with Juliette, an experienced canoeist found by my sister Laurel through the Internet. Me weeping when my canoe is stolen south of Baton Rouge. After Juliette's canoe skids to a halt at Audubon Park, ending my grueling days as Ol' Man River, me kissing the wet ground and sighing like I've never sighed before.



*Orman Day's prose and poetry have been published by such journals as Creative Nonfiction, ZYZZYVA, Third Coast, Portland Review, Los Angeles Review, and Potomac Review. Among his backpacking experiences: riding freight trains, witnessing a sky burial (two corpses, hundreds of vultures) in Tibet, bungee jumping off a New Zealand bridge, and paddling the Mississippi River for two months from St. Paul to New Orleans at age fifty-six. He has hitchhiked on six continents. Nearly eighty, he now considers himself a tourist instead of a traveler.*



Photo by David Music: Pexels.com

## Mixed Media Morning by William Doreski

Thanks to a cleansing night rain  
the day puts a clean handkerchief  
in its pocket, grinning like a fop.  
The clarity of untarnished sky  
urges us to walk by the river,

a refreshed wilderness of stones.  
Only a few miles from this village  
to that, steeples insulting us  
with their stiff upthrust gestures

too crude to encourage faith.

Halfway we spot figures rising  
from the mud, naked people  
churning like windmills. We fear  
their mysterious occurrence,  
their murky but fierce expressions.

They lack the frank sexuality  
of people who normally wear clothes.  
They suggest golems created  
to exact the sin of revenge.  
They must have drunk the night rain

and vowed to soil the morning  
to avenge their self-creation,  
of which we're equally guilty,  
being made of much the same mud  
and lacking conscience and mercy.



*William Doreski lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He has taught at several colleges and universities. His most recent book of poetry is Cloud Mountain (2024). He has published three critical studies, including Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in various journals.*



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

## Foundation by Samuel John Duffy

You want to move faster, as is your nature  
but now I ask you, faster towards what?  
is there something you don't have  
some mystery solved that would give you immense satisfaction  
a moral insight not yet discovered  
an invention that will set us free, and convince us that we have always lived in slavery?  
what did those illiterate fools of two thousand years ago know that I cannot correct?  
what did they discover that I am not two thousand years beyond?  
those are the arrogant questions that now pass through the lips of modern man.  
do you not realize that all you see is built on stone?  
now you think stone is out of fashion and would have it replaced with sand  
faster than you have made this suggestion, I must tell you  
that even if you convince us to rip up the stone and build in the sand,  
when we are gone, as will be our punishment for building that way  
those after us will build on stone



*Samuel John Duffy is a writer, currently based in Calgary, AB.*



Photo by Creative Vix: Pexels.com

## What the Hands Hold by Susan Sandstrom Ellis

Hands cupped, filled with river  
water. The hands separate—wings  
unfolding. Water poured over  
wrinkling daisies. But death  
is coming. Only a whisper away.  
The white petals shrivel and fold in like  
fingers clutching ashes. Daisy stems  
browning, then blackening, dark  
as a night sky where the moon  
never travels and God  
refuses to visit.



*Susan Sandstrom Ellis self-published her novel, St. Jane, in 2017. She has a Master's degree in Spiritual Traditions and Ethics as well as a Master of Divinity. Her studies showed her how the intersection of spirituality and pastoral care help people feel less alienated in an often alienating world. Writing poetry is one of the tools she uses to engage with others. She loves to write, garden, sing, play guitar, spend time with friends and family, and hang out with her husband and kitty, Trini, watching movies and TV.*



Photo by Kiril Gruev: Pexels.com

## Two Springs by Michael R. Evans

Freeway din, mercurial smog, and rich  
flowers mask the Angelino winter  
in an urban rebel's desert jungle  
courtyard, a melodic aviary.

Back east, lake-effect snow—diamonds glinted  
on white sheets laid like furniture covers  
over the earth's dormant mansion. Greyscale  
entropy in wet boots and salted roads.

Diamonds, too, have their season—one would hear  
the killdeer's rhythm. The last damp snowfall.  
A crocus made a well for itself, warmly  
reaching purple for the tree swallow song.

Ornithic symphony I had not known  
is eternal in the city of angels.



*Michael R. Evans is a poet and flash fiction writer who has lived in Upstate New York, Russia, New Hampshire, San Francisco, and now Los Angeles. He endures as a small woodland creature in a bespelled writing hollow online. He has authored an academic book and travel articles about Russia. His work has appeared in ONE ART, Wild Greens, and the Elysian Poetry and Art Exhibit at the Eclipse Center.*

**Autumn Dream**  
by Sean Ewing



Sean Ewing is a poet and visual artist who creates work that encourages you to slow down, reflect, and connect with something bigger. Using vibrant language and thoughtful depictions of nature, he explores beauty, acknowledges sorrow, and points to the hope found in faith. His art has been featured in publications such as Last Leaves Magazine, Dulcet Literary Magazine, Midnight Fawn Review, Barnstorm Review, The Courtship of Winds, Cypress Review, The Gilded Weathervane, and The Writers Journal.

Evening Fire  
by Sean Ewing





Photo by Wendy Wei: Pexels.com

## Not Like Grace by Sean Ewing

The sun drooped low in the sky today  
a blister cooling into a scab.  
August loosened her grip on the porch rail  
like the final breath  
a raspy sigh.

Tomatoes slump in their beds  
skins split open like grieving loss.  
The bees wander, glassy-eyed  
fooled again by the gospel of late bloom.

Even the wind stammers  
through the branches  
leaves waving farewell.

I slice the last peaches for jam  
watch their golden flesh soften in the pot  
each one surrendering

like summer closing its hands.

The jars sweat.  
We are all afraid  
of being forgotten on the counter.

The light forgets us earlier now.  
This twilight makes me feel strange.  
They look like I have never known  
a real home  
never truly arrived.  
Just always on the edge of unpacking.

There is a stillness  
in late August  
that feels like love  
leaving slowly.

And I know  
the snow will come  
not like grace  
but like consequence.



Photo by Enzo Renz: Pexels.com

## Threnody for Summer by Sean Ewing

The trees are surgeons  
stripping themselves bare  
each leaf a cauterized wound  
yellowing, curling like burnt paper prayers.

The air, it's got this taste of rust  
and I'm breathing deep in a buzz of bees  
their gold bodies scattered among  
the glorious bloom of asters.

The sun, once a tyrant of fire  
now pallid  
just an old lamp with a drowned wick.  
It drags itself across the sky  
dusk hanging off it like a broken wing.

What's left is just silence, mostly  
crows' their black bodies  
gnawing at the sky.

I lay down in this garden of dead roses.  
Their petals, brittle as old skin  
I sing to summer's shadow  
already sinking into the frost.

Oh, warmth, you were brief as a kiss  
limping off the horizon  
like a scolded child.  
I shiver in the chill  
of summer's corpse  
while leaves collapse  
like punctured lungs.



Photo by SHVETS production: Pexels.com

## Skyping with Mom by C.S. Fuqua

This miracle of video-phoning  
I could've done without,  
the image of her  
from memory  
some three years ago  
not playing well  
with the call my cousin  
set up, her face on the screen,  
snowy hair, sunken cheeks,  
camera-exaggerated nose,  
eyes that once cut people in half  
now dull and listless,  
housed in dark hollows,  
but not so blind to note,  
*You put on weight.*  
*Why's your hair so long?*



*C.S. Fuqua's published books include* Fatherhood, Structured Madness, White Trash & Southern ~ Collected Poems, Walking after Midnight ~ Collected Stories, Big Daddy's Fast-Past Gadget, Hush, Puppy! A Southern Fried Tale, and Native American Flute ~ A Comprehensive Guide ~ History & Craft, *among others.* *His work has appeared in publications such as* Year's Best Horror Stories XIX, XX and XXI, Pudding, Sin Fronteras/Writers Without Borders, Rattle, Otoliths, Pearl, Chiron Review, Christian Science Monitor, Slipstream, The Old Farmer's Almanac, The Writer, and Honolulu Magazine.



Photo by Alex Dadukin: Unsplash.com

## Banishment by David Lee Garrison

The shiny pumpkin,  
exiled  
from its place of honor  
on the front porch  
where it grinned  
the bounty of fall,  
lies broken open  
at the curbside  
under leafless trees,  
foreshadowing the dark  
scowl of winter.



*David Lee Garrison is a retired Wright State University Professor of Spanish and Portuguese. His poetry, prose, and translations have been published widely. His poems have been read by Garrison Keillor on The Writer's Almanac, and featured by Ted Kooser in his blog, American Life in Poetry. He won the Paul Laurence Dunbar Prize in 2009 and was named Ohio Poet of the Year in 2014. His most recent book is Light in the River (Dos Madres Press).*

Sunny Yummies  
by KJ Hannah Greenberg



*KJ Hannah Greenberg uses her trusty point-and-shoot camera to capture the order of G-d's universe, and Paint 3D to capture her personal chaos. Sometimes, it's insufficient for her to sate herself by applying verbal whimsy to pastures where gelatinous wildebeests roam or fey hedgehogs play. Hannah's self-illustrated poetry collections are: Miscellaneous Parlor Tricks (Seashell Books, 2024), Word Magpie (Audience Askew, 2024), Subrogation (Seashell Books, 2023), and One-Handed Pianist (Hekate Publishing, 2021). Her coffee table book is Real and Otherwise (Seashell Books, 2025).*



Photo by Brett Sayles: Pexels.com

## Porch Life by John Grey

It's twilight,  
the sky's dark above,  
stained copper  
at the western edge.  
and the porch is front row  
to the woodland's insect choir.

I uncork the wine.  
You fill two glasses.

We sip in shadow,  
as relaxed  
as two old hound dogs.

Nothing says pleasure  
so much as  
muted howls.



*John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in New World Writing, River And South and The Alembic. Latest books, Bittersweet, Subject Matters and Between Two Fires are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in Rush, White Wall Review and Flights.*



*Photo by TBD Tuyền: Pexels.com*

## **Fairy Tales by John Grey**

Come evening,  
a thousand tongues  
chatter in the trees:  
some voices low  
as forest floor mist,  
others light and airy  
like the canopy.

They talk of a knight errant  
or a tower-bound princess,  
of goblins and elves,  
dwarves and dragons,  
what they have seen  
mingled with  
all they can imagine.

Suddenly, the old oak  
blows its windy horn.  
It's time.  
A procession of tales  
slips eagerly beyond  
their woodland breeding ground,  
out into the bedtime world.



Photo by Iurii Laimin: Pexels.com

## Longing by William Ogden Haynes

There's an emptiness we experience as we get older, one that grows stronger with the years. It's made possible because we cling to memories while the world constantly changes. The Welsh call it "hiraeth." It's the awareness of missing something that's irretrievably lost. It's the feeling you have when you go to your family home and find it's been torn down, all your growing-up years reduced to a vacant lot. It's going to your favorite old tavern, only to find it's been sold, remodeled and renamed. It's going back to the neighborhood where you grew up, made friends, learned to ride a bike and now it's a slum. It's finding your old high school has been leveled and replaced. Now, these things are gone, and all you have left are memories. And it's not just the absence of physical things, it's the yearning for events and people, much more than just missing a place on a map. It's dinners with friends, birthday parties, and trips to the baseball park. It's relationships with people that can't be recaptured, because they've relocated or died.

When you're old, you cherish lost people, and places to which you can never return. You can talk about how it was, but people don't want to hear about the past. But fifty years hence, those same people who won't listen now, will grow nostalgic as they drive by their former homes and find strange people living there, the house repainted, and an addition tacked on. And then, they'll begin to reminisce about the past and lament the fact that the neighborhood is just not the same, the old days gone forever.



*William Ogden Haynes is a poet and author of short fiction from Alabama who was born in Michigan. He has published several collections of poetry and many of his poems and short stories have appeared in literary journals and anthologies.*  
<http://www.williamogdenhaynes.com>



Photo by Pixabay: Pexels.com

## The Penny by William Ogden Haynes

The penny ironically depicts the head of Abraham Lincoln, one of our most revered presidents, emblazoned on our coin of least worth. And given its small valuation, it has often gone unnoticed. Its fate was to be lost in the linty lining of pockets and forgotten in dark dresser drawers. Many rested in jars on kitchen counters to be traded in at the bank for currency in larger denominations. They were hidden in the depths of unused purses and swallowed by couch cushions. Pennies were not only spendable but became expendable. We threw them into fountains to make a wish and put them on railroad tracks to be crushed flat by a locomotive. Today, if you see a penny on the sidewalk, you just pass it by. If you get pennies in change, you just leave them on the counter. But it wasn't always that way. Once a penny had value. It bought a piece of candy, a child's glass marble or a postcard. Some flipped pennies in the air to settle bets or make decisions. They were saved by children in piggy banks to buy a toy.

Most pennies are worn and tarnished from the weight of history, countless fingerprints, damage from vending machines and grime accumulated from their lifetime journey. Today, most people don't use coins at all. We use cards for purchases and cash is only used in sixteen-percent of transactions. Now, the government has decided to stop minting new pennies. They found that it cost four cents to produce each penny. But while there will be no new pennies, the old ones will remain in circulation. And for some of us, they will be a nostalgic reminder of a simpler time when small things still mattered.



Photo by Jonathan Lusilva: Pexels.com

## Presence by Audrey Howitt

Every flower knows when it is time to die.  
They don't resist, their beauty brief.  
They seek the sun,

follow its passing  
from one horizon to the next,  
every sleep a tiny death;

close petals, hug pollen,  
for the next day and the next.  
Bees know this.

Hummingbirds too—  
they drink copiously to this,  
the world of now.

When you wake,  
turn your face to the sun,  
love everything—the first sip

of bitter coffee,  
sex with crepey skin,  
the man who lashes out at you

because he is afraid of his own skin—  
its color, its grace,  
his sex.

And when the sun sets,  
love your death.  
Let yourself fall fully—your

withered arms  
seed the path  
for others to follow.



*Audrey Howitt lives and writes poetry in the San Francisco Bay Area. When not writing, she sings opera and teaches voice. She is also a licensed attorney and licensed marriage and family therapist. Ms. Howitt has been published in: Academy of the Heart and Mind, Washington Square Review, Panoply, Hecate Magazine, Spillwords Press, Nymphs Poetry Journal, Muddy River Poetry Review, The Big Windows Review, The White Cresset Arts Journal, Total Eclipse Poetry and Prose, Chiaroscuro-Darkness and Light, dVerse Poets Anthology, With Painted Words, Algebra of Owls, and Lost Towers Publications.*



*Photo by Ivan Samkov: Pexels.com*

## **Leavings** by Audrey Howitt

I was told to let go in the face of uncertainty  
so I did.

Never once did the sky fall or the moon fill out forms with my name on them.  
But neither could I mop the kitchen floor or wash my clothes.

Too much dust in the air reminds me of the days when you sat there  
or here  
or anywhere.

Too little of me is left to catch all that dust.

Now I know the middle of the floor, its texture  
its ability to hold me,  
its certainty when I can't move left or right.



Photo by NastyaSensei: Pexels.com

## Poetry's Web Unfolding by Audrey Howitt

I like poems written by old men . . .breaking rules they once held so tightly . . . their rhythm loosened by an afternoon nap and sleep seeds that make it difficult to see the screens as they click-clack away.

I like poems written by old women who no longer have to hold onto self-images so thin they slip through fence slats . . .blue hairs laughing, comparing free verse while they splash a nip into their afternoon tea.

I like poems written by 20-somethings . . .high school still so fresh. . .where they learned about the poetry of dead white men but fell in love with Maya Angelou. Piercings and ink leach color into a world as they fingerpaint it into vibrancy.

I like poems written by children who find that the monsters under the bed aren't that scary. . .and who learn to be quiet inside themselves long enough to stretch their way toward the ants who inhabit the fig trees in their backyards.

I like poems written by women who patch themselves back together after divorce, and kids, and work, and all the noise. . .who find a friend when they look in the mirror.

I like poems written by men who hold their friends' hands when they are sad and who buy their kids ice cream even during winter. I like their honesty when they have no answers and their knowing when none are needed.

I like poems that unfold themselves into every corner of me, to the area right under my skin, making a tenderness of your lips and a heat that dries my sweat as your breath crosses my neck.



Photo by Klaus Nielsen: Pexels.com

## Severe Thunderstorm Warning, or: On Being Terminal in my Twenties by Laura Ingram

This hospital room, lit by lightning.  
This radio-static arrhythmia,  
this rounding doctor with his wrinkled white coat  
who cannot hear my heartbeat over the next thunderclap.  
I snatch his stethoscope, press the shining diaphragm to the window  
listen to the perfect pounding pulse  
rain against the plate glass.

Flash-floods ferry forward their soggy cures, soaking through my fevers.  
Lightning splits a tree in two below, across the street I face.  
A nurse rushes to set up a transfusion from the fire,  
as if I could still be transformed  
while my mother's car hydroplanes in the parking deck.  
Can it be called Phantom Pain, to know how long you have left?  
I cut the eyes out for my own ghost from spare linens.  
I own very little. There won't be an estate sale—  
A body is a bag to carry the collected treasure and twigs,  
the canary call that forges my heart from  
mortal trash.

My heart, too new to be an heirloom  
for anyone to inherit;  
my heart, maybe a trinket dish,  
or a cluster of seed pearls I thread between my fingers  
like a makeshift rosary, a thousand Our Fathers  
I have been counting for forgiveness as long as I can recall.  
Doubt has been prepared for me as a dowry.  
I marry the summer storm because  
I know no other way to make a hurricane my medicine.  
The eye is the bitter pill.

Faith has exhausted me. I, trembling,  
touch Christ's wounds just to feel warmth.  
Understand, he showed me the way  
to walk on all this floodwater  
to double back from death  
wearing the faint rainbow he wrapped my wreckage up with  
as a wedding gown.

This death, a lonesome waltz  
I don't want to stop dancing.  
This death, three steps, a party I can hear through the door, this laughter carrying over the grand foyer of hair strand and  
nimbostratus.  
This dance hall, echoing my emptiness. This hail hitting flattened grass, green as eternity, green like old glass, sea glass,  
mirror glass.  
I check my reflection in a puddle, stay a moment to see me standing there,  
so thin and still in the petrichor.  
Maybe this death is just a raincoat.  
There was never any need to worry myself over getting wet.



*Laura Ingram is a young poet and author who lives and writes in rural Virginia. Her poetry and prose have been featured in over one-hundred literary magazines and journals, among them Divot Lit, Juked, and Five on the Fifth. She has released six poetry collections; Mirabilis, Junior Citizen's Discount, Animal Sentinel, The Taffeta Parable, The Ghost Gospels, and The Solitude of the Female Preying Mantis. Laura is the former poetry editor of The Blue Mountain Review. She enjoys most books and all cats.*



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

## Adagio for Strings By Marc Janssen

Somewhere inside there is a candle.  
A deep shackled love,  
single word,  
moment of absolute perfection.  
In the quietest hours,  
trapped between desperation and matins  
the yearning covers like a descending sheet over a sterile bed—  
its wings spread wide.  
Arid hunger gnaws and rends.  
Eyes scan the horizon languishing, sightless.  
This whispered lament,  
this taut tragedy,  
this clutching plea,  
this aching song is resung, and resung, and resung  
until the act of singing is extinguished.

Very quietly.  
Not quite like a butterfly.  
The candle



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



*Photo by Mohamed Almari: Pexels.com*

## **The Wreck of Sunset** by Marc Janssen

All stories are tragedies if you look long enough,  
if you measure your stare for decades  
and trace the crescendoing paths people pursue.

Stories don't end with one dry Hallmark kiss when the landscape is filled with credits.  
Stories don't end with the final whistle and champagne.  
Stories don't end when the princess gives the medal and the brass section blares.

The grass keeps on growing, it's time for a shave,  
laundry, Grandpa's in the bathroom, dishes are playing Jenga on the kitchen counter.  
There is always another day, one more scene,  
a half step diminished  
and ritardando.

Until we fade into a hospital bed,  
a barroom floor,  
a graveside service.

But that is not the end of the story either—  
just a temporary emotional moment,  
a bridge across to a new plot,  
the sun rising across a new set.



Photo by cottonbro studio: Pexels.com

## Sinking Into Hot Water by Beth Keeley

I stream sandalwood oil into the hot water, filling the chipped bathtub in my cheap apartment. Traces of rosewood and earth surround me. The water rises, reaching the tub's edge. Steam fogs the mirror over the sink. I light the candle's short, charred wick, a candle you gave me for some reason or for no reason; I can't remember. Flicking off the lights with one hand and pushing the door closed with the other, I find refuge in the darkness, to succumb to thoughts of you, and step into the tub. Scalding water softly splashes, a slight shift in the stillness. When I was a little girl, my grandmother would ask me, "Sure you ain't fixin' to get yourself into no hot water?" I was. Escaping restraint to feel you, with me, I lean over to grip the sides of the tub and hold my breath as I kneel in the water and slide my body down the length of the tub. Water laps at the base of my neck, spilling over the edge. Golden rings of oil swirl around my breasts as I sigh and surrender to thoughts of you, wrapping around me.

Shortly, feelings became words. Chance encounters became long, lingering conversations. Fingers accidentally touched, and extended silences shared more than words. We kissed, made love, and shared life. Our future unfolded, disjointed. When what I wanted and what you didn't shaped space between us, you drifted and I detached. We let go.

I knew the water was hot.

It still burns.



*Beth Keeley is a writer and English professor based in North Carolina. Her work has appeared in Writing and Pedagogy and As You Were: The Military Review.*



*Photo by Motor TruckRun: Pexels.com*

## **Reflections by Beth Keeley**

*dedicated to Jay Hardee*

Of you  
in photographs . . .

a blur wearing an outdoor helmet,  
climbing  
a jagged mountain side;

a shadow leaning into a curve,  
racing  
a blue speed bike downhill;

a silhouette glowing in a golden haze  
presenting  
a full string of Rock Bass.

You will always be a college sophomore,  
racing your Jeep in the Appalachian Mountains,  
hunting on weekends, and  
camping in the sweet night air.

Futures distorted  
that dark July  
by a drunken bullet.  
Despite being younger, I've lived decades longer.

Graduating from backyard birthdays to college celebrations,  
we believed in a lifetime  
ahead. Your life  
was less,  
and I was left

with  
time



Photo by Lisa from Pexels: Pexels.com

### Three Haiku by James Kowalczyk

raindrops of wisdom  
water the revolution  
growing underground

\*

blinking gold diamonds  
undulate on tides beneath  
Brooklyn Bridge sunset

\*

autumn breeze through trees  
the whispers of violence  
turn leaves to darkness



*James Kowalczyk was born and raised in Brooklyn but now lives in Northern California with his wife and two daughters. He teaches English at the high school and college levels. His poetry and fiction has been published both online and in print.*



Photo by Sana Saidi: Unsplash.com

## Little One by River Kozhar

Two weeks had passed since the accident, and I was doing laundry. It was harder to stop than keep going, and muscle memory had taken over.

I put the clothes into the machine as if putting away hopes I should never have had. Hopes for a better life, and for a future where depression and loss no longer hung like a heavy fog, too thick for me to see more than a few feet in front of me and not wanting to.

“What about your little one?” the basement tenant asked casually, and suddenly the world stuttered around me, rattling like an earthquake in the perfect room of my *doing well*. “I haven’t seen her in a while.”

I remembered a child, with more life in her than me. I remembered a body, twisted in death. I remembered my sobs: loud and raw and broken.

“You haven’t heard?” I asked, giving him that one line to prepare, though maybe it was just me who needed it. My mouth was a half-smile as if it didn’t know what expression to take, caught between a quiet moment and despair like straddling the worlds of *Before* and *After*.

“Heard what?”

His words were like hurricane winds whistling at the cracks in my wall, but I didn’t know how to go from laundry to devastation, so with the tenant standing cheerfully in front of me, I was composed: shocked like a tree still standing after lightning sears to its core.

“She died,” I said, and all I could see was the light of my life lowered into the dirt.



*River Kozhar is a nonfiction penname (for privacy) of an author with 190+ published pieces of writing. Her nonfiction has been published in The Filling Station, SubTerrain, and Best Canadian Essays. She is a young (disabled) retiree, a painter, a gamer, a social justice activist, and a bubble tea fangirl. She lives in Ontario, Canada.*

*Website: <http://riverkozharauthor.wordpress.com/>*



Photo by Pixabay: Pexels.com

## A Moth Comes to Dinner by Leila Kulpas

A hot night in the Australian bush,  
and I'm with my family at the dinner table,  
when a moth twirls through the open window,  
lands on the tablecloth.

Eyes tiny red jewels, it unwinds a tongue  
like a watch spring,  
sips from droplets of tea on a saucer.

*It's thirsty*, says my sister,  
carefully dribbling milk into the saucer.

It drinks for some time, hesitates, turns,  
whirs up, and back out into the night,  
forever.



*Leila Kulpas has an Honors degree in English, a Medical degree and a Fellowship in Psychiatry. She is the author of a published memoir entitled Into the Eyes of Hungry: Growing up in the Wilds of Australia, her poetry has appeared on the Internet on the Pandora's Collective site, in ten literary Journals and five anthologies.*

Langue de Chat  
by Betsy Mars



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

At the Speed of Light  
by Betsy Mars



On the Lip of the Sky Bowl  
by Betsy Mars



Grape Leaf Petroglyph  
by Betsy Mars





Photo by Shann: Pexels.com

## Elysium by Bob McAfee

I live in a city beyond the clouds  
that cannot be reached by conventional routes,  
where the walls are made of helium,  
the streets are paved with tedium.  
There is no pain, no death or anguish,  
no enterprise to distinguish.  
There is big brother style surveillance.  
You must take a vow of silence.  
Sometimes I forget and whisper, "Rosebud"  
or sing naked in the bathtub.  
I only live by reminiscing  
about a past largely missing.  
It never rains without a wide morass  
and the green grass is neither green nor grass.

I ignore the imperfections.  
The sky is blue in all directions.  
I wait patiently for the day you make the trip  
arriving steerage via steampunk aership.

Until then I'm hanging loose  
in my cantilevered calaboose,  
a studio time-share condo  
just me and my cat, Orlando.  
It's really just a futon with a cat box.  
There is a rule disbarring any angry thoughts.  
I always wear my broadest smile  
even as my simmer turns to rile  
though I'm mad as I can be.  
Someone up here might now be watching me.



*Bob McAfee is a retired software consultant who lives with his wife near Boston. He has written nine books of poetry, mostly on Love, Aging, and the Natural World. For the last several years he has hosted a Wednesday night Zoom poetry workshop. Since 2019, he has had 123 poems selected by 48 different publications and two poems nominated for Best of the Net. His website, [www.bobmcafee.com](http://www.bobmcafee.com), contains links to all his published poetry.*



Photo by: Adobe free AI Generator

## Fireflies by Angelle McDougall

I don't want a hammock or a high-backed chair in a stuffy study with dust motes floating through sunbeams from the window. Don't bother with a suede sofa or wicker rocker or checkered blanket laid out on a golf green. Give me a four-poster bed hoisted high into a magnolia tree whose leaves create a canopy. Cover it with down pillows and a quilt made from ballgowns, treasure maps, and hot air balloons. Fill the branches with books—foxed fairytales with deckled edges, spines stitched like crossed bones, and weather-worn volumes of Verne. From the tallest limb hang a jar filled with fireflies so I can read at night.



*Angelle McDougall is neurodivergent, a dedicated world traveler, retired college instructor, mother of adult sons, graduate of The Writers Studio at Simon Fraser University, and loom-knitter. Angelle lives in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada and writes poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction. She also enjoys chronicling the fantastic adventures shared with her author husband.*



Photo by Sarah Ann: Pexels.com

## My Mother is a Time Machine by Angelle McDougall

Granite canner waits  
on the harvest gold stove.  
Counter groans from the weight  
of peaches in wooden crates.  
Bernardin jars sparkle  
shards of morning sunlight.  
Mom dons a faded apron  
berry-stained and frayed at the hem.

Seated at the kitchen table  
weathered paring knife in hand,  
I take a baseball-sized jewel,  
velvet skin pregnant with nectar  
and slice into the rose-orange fruit.  
Juice sluices down my arm  
and into the bowl in my lap.

Delicate floral fragrance  
fills the room makes mouth water.  
Dizzy with the sweet scent,  
I steal a piece.  
The flesh is firm, succulent  
releases peachy perfection.  
I am six years old again.  
It's canning season again.  
I'm with my mother again.



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

## A Moment Of Guilt by Mackenzie Meeker

I grab the janky knob,  
and turn the shower on.  
A daddy long-legs hides in the corner,  
I notice the creature too late,  
I have murdered him.

The day has been long, and  
I finally begin to cry.  
I have killed an innocent creature.  
How cruel of me to drown a little spider.

I hate myself, and  
the hot water does not  
melt that  
feeling of  
    guilt  
    away.



Mackenzie Meeker resides in Mentor, Ohio. Her works of poetry, such as *Iphigenia to King Agamemnon* and *A Wife's Duty to her Husband* (satirical poem), have appeared in the first edition of the *Lake Erie College Literary Magazine: Lake Erie Echoes*. She has won writing awards at Lake Erie College for her poem "Papa is There," her research paper "A Queen's Mourning," and her influence on the Victorian Era. Mackenzie is featured in issue 29 of the literary magazine *10 by 10* flash fiction for her work "Alarm Clock." Mackenzie's poems *The Reflection* and *Paradise* are featured in the 2025 Mentor Public Library Poetry Anthology. Mackenzie dedicates everything she writes to her grandpa, James Owens, who passed away in 2023.



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

## Nevermore by Mackenzie Meeker

When Poe lost his Lenore,  
he met the Raven,  
who uttered *nevermore*  
and kept the secrets of the afterlife.

I met the Raven on my nightly walk,  
when the summer heat clung to my skin.  
My heart began to skip  
as my eyes met the Raven.

The Raven was no longer alive.  
It coated the ground like an oil spill,  
wings splayed across the dark grass.  
The Raven had died on its back, alone.

Feathers glistened under the moonlight.  
I crouched down and uttered quietly,  
*nevermore, nevermore, nevermore.*  
The Raven looked serene and gentle,  
Its haunting eyes no longer open.

I rose and turned away,  
but a rustling made me stop.  
For a moment, I thought the Raven  
was faking death.  
Yet it remained beside the tree  
where it had died.

I walked on,  
and thought I heard the faint squawk  
of *nevermore.*  
I shook my head,  
and told myself,  
It was only the wind.



*Photo by Firefly Adobe AI*

## **The Light Will Come Again by Mackenzie Meeker**

I think about the forest,  
when the trees dare swallow me whole.  
My fingers caress ancient, rigid bodies  
that murmur stories of decay and resilience.

The green leaves swoop upwards,  
sideways, and downwards,  
like a bird navigating the sky.  
I bear no leaves,  
but my hair rises to the sky,  
swooping upwards, sideways, and downwards.

The tree's roots swell and curl  
around the forest floor.  
How unforgiving a tree can become,  
its roots soaking into the ground  
in a pattern of calculated chaos.

How nice it would be to rest against a tree  
and understand how to be a stoic creature,

one who plants their roots firmly into the ground  
and watches the fragile dirt break apart.

I could even grow roots of my own that  
extend toward plentiful self-discovery.  
The forcefield of green would break,  
and sunlight would pour in,  
my soul would dance,  
as the light sparkles on the forest floor.

Oh, what merriment this would bring  
a moment where the birds sing,  
the trees join together in a dance,  
the flowers squeak with excitement,  
and the bugs would buzz and buzz.

When the sunlight must depart  
and the forest goes dark,  
the trees sigh with grief.  
The birds let out a sagging melody.  
The flowers weakly fall to the dirt,  
and the bugs hum a sad tune.

I would sing my joyful tune.  
I would not bother to be sad, because  
the light will come again.



Photo by Polina: Pexels.com

## The Planner by Bella Melardi

I want an easy life. I want to have thick skin. Confidence is collagen. But how do I have thick skin when my whole life it's been punctured? Punctured to protect me. Punctured to resurrect me. Pictured to feel something. Punctured to not. Does going through hell mean you deserve to get to heaven? Would angels smile at the sight of my suffering?

I am never in the moment. I'm always planning. Planning for danger. Scanning sunburnt sidewalks for signs of rain. Always looking up and never forward. Eyes on the moon. Eyes on the sun. Those celestial sunken eyes dropping into the fleshy blue sky. I watch them fall. Waiting for them to hit me. Because if I don't plan I worry. On my phone. I check and I check I don't even know what I am checking.

My worry pulls you into a whirlpool of chaos. My mind becomes your wound. Your chains. Your blade. I drain you. Then I blame you. But guilt isn't accountability. Change is. I am not the blood on my hands. I need to learn how to stop shedding red.



Bella Melardi is a poet and author. She lives in Toronto and attends OCADU. She writes about the political and personal.



*Photo by Soleil Kant: Pexels.com*

## **Bruise** **by Bella Melardi**

When the sun leaves the sky and begins to rot. The deep blue begins to bruise like the flesh of a plum. A petunia. A field of blackberries. My skin is a nautical twilight tapestry. Flesh wrapped together by the absence of light. A jacket of swelling lesions. When you've lived so long in the dark. You believe sunlight will burn you. But after all this time, you've realized your bruises aren't healing because you keep making more.

You keep making more because it's easier than stopping. If I hate myself, do I mean something? More pain. More fires. My dad's absence becomes a dagger that I plunge into myself anytime I feel like I've forgotten the sound of his voice. He's a slogan. A hymn. A chant. A prayer I recite to protect myself from ever trusting someone again. He let me down before I ever learned to love. Was it worth it to spread my arms open and be wrapped in his emptiness? To be heartbroken, if only to feel loved for a minute.



*Photo by David Kouakou: Pexels.com*

## **N'Awlins Flood** **by Marla Dial Moore**

*Austin, Texas*  
*September 2005*

Kevin waits on the loading dock—  
sits high up by the door, the way  
I'd imagine he'd sat on a screened-in porch  
in times before, watching the world  
go by. He stays where his wheelchair's  
parked, grateful for dry socks,  
eyes never leaving the lines  
of bus headlights sliding  
through the swampy night:

They come from Belle Chasse,  
from Houma, from Metairie,  
originally, but tonight they're known  
as Superdome refugees,  
American IDPs in search  
of higher ground. They spill  
from the buses, one at a time—  
shattered with exhaustion, sixteen hours  
traveling, faces etched with anxiety

and the shock of realizing  
all that's been washed away.  
I'm waiting near the drop,  
offering packets of soap and shampoo,  
combs and moist towelettes—  
trying not to think, to recall  
or compare my life with theirs:  
That on the other side of the maelstrom,  
up-current of this destruction,

a home I loved too  
was floating away—  
beachside honeymoon,  
Jamaican paradise.  
It's much too soon for us all  
to consider rebuilding.  
This moment of survival  
sharpens the focus  
on bare necessities:

*Hot shower. Dry towel. Clean clothes.*

Suddenly, an older woman stands  
in front of me, thin and frail  
but seemingly revived.  
Most of the other women  
exiting the showers nearby  
are easily funneled toward the next stop  
in this emergency response—  
stumbling toward cots laid out in blocks  
inside the Convention Center—

but this silver-haired woman,  
dark and proud, has more urgent business:  
Now, she asks, squaring  
her shoulders, lifting her chin,  
*which way to the church-house?*



*Marla Dial Moore is a recovering journalist and longtime student of geopolitical affairs who lives in San Antonio, Texas. Her work has appeared in a variety of publications, including Merion West, The Metaworker, When the River Speaks, and others.*



*Photo AI generator*

## **Earth Knows Her Own by Marla Dial Moore**

The earth knows her own  
name, cares not what we call her,  
what lines are drawn  
upon her eternal, changeable face.  
She is alluvial, cloud-shadowed,  
solid and dreaming.

She stirs me into being—  
breath clothed in dust,  
whirlwind searching for home.  
Together, we are sighing and singing  
and I am learning to see  
the faces of her other dreams—

so like and unlike my own:  
landscapes carved from cumulus clouds  
and the finest spray of salt.  
I am forming attachments  
to the glimmer of gold,  
to the scent of saltpeter, of ash.

This earth is calling me  
back to herself—  
calling this blood,  
calling this love  
that knits me to her  
and is my undoing.



Photo by Pixabay: Pexels.com

## On Aging by W. Barrett Munn

Sometimes I stumble for no reason.  
That's how I burned my hand,  
balancing myself on a burner to stay upright.  
Sleep, at times, rushes in like a tsunami  
that's impossible to stop.  
I can still see at night, especially things  
that aren't there. That makes driving  
an adventure relegated to daylight hours.  
Purple is the primary color of much of me  
If I even touch a bush to prune it, my skin  
rips open and bleeds.  
I can spell out BAND AID in band aids  
that cover all my wounds.  
My teeth failed me some time ago. They sit  
in a glass of water at night and gloat.  
I would laugh if it weren't so damn funny.  
Growing old is a silly business.



*The poems of W. Barrett Munn have appeared in print and online in Awakenings Review, The New Verse News, Sequoia Speaks, Soul Poetry, Prose, & Arts Magazine, Book of Matches, Copperfield Review Quarterly, Haikuniverse, 5-7-5 Haiku Journal, and many others.*



Photo by Vector Neb: Pexels.com

## The Lagoon by Penny Nolte

My first memory of the place is being taught to swim. Puddling around with my little brothers, close to shore, wearing life jackets while dragging ourselves along. Finding handholds in the rocky bottom.

The swimming lesson involved my life jacket being removed and then my being set down a little further out in the water. I sank like a stone. Firm hands reached in and pulled me up. "Paddle," suggested Dad, "Doggie paddle." and he demonstrated. Still sputtering from the dunking, I tried and sank again. "Faster!" Dad said and made a big show of whirring his cupped hands through the water. It looked silly but it worked. Soon, I was paddling circles around my brothers, still bottom crawlers in life jackets.

Because two docks protected the lagoon, water between them froze smooth in winter. We would all troop down single file through the snow, carrying a shovel for Dad who would use it to clear off the lake. Then we'd strap two-bladed skates on over too-big winter boots and wobble around.

Our parents had real ice skates that laced up past their ankles and Dad skated beautifully, swinging his arms from side to side. Sometimes humming a tune. Often, we'd "dance" with him by standing on his skates to get spun around in circles until we were too dizzy to stand. Other times, we rode on his back. I don't remember skating with Mom, although she could because there are pictures.

Afterwards, we all drank from a shared thermos. And hot cocoa never tasted so good.



*Penny Nolte creates gentle narratives of family and place. Her newest work is found in Academy of the Heart and Mind, Floating Acorn Review, and Macramé Literary Journal, among others. Originally from upstate New York, Penny now calls the Green Mountains of Vermont home.*



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

## Green Tea with Dad by Penny Nolte

"How do you feel?"

"Oh, I'm great. My arthritis is gone, and I have plenty of time, now."

"I was so sorry not to be there, when..."

"Don't be, I never wanted to be 'viewed,' you do remember that?"

"Yes."

"Mom wasn't home that night, either, and she never would have sat still. She'd have been telling me I wasn't doing it right. There, it's good to see you laugh."

"Would you like some, tea? Do you still like green tea?"

"Sure thing, thanks. How are your brothers doing?"

"They're great! Working, they enjoy it. And I suppose you know about the cabin?"

"I've watched it go up, I thought maybe they'd finish a boat house, first."

"Mom sold the boat."

"Of course she did, she always worried about it. Well, the boys did a great thing there, for the kids."

"I think so, too. Do you get to do any art now?"

"I do a lot. You saw some of it in the frost on the ground this morning. And remember the way your tomatoes wound around the old rocking chair?"

"That was you! I thought it was out of the way. But those vines reached out. They covered it."

"Sure, it was me, and it wasn't easy, either. Think how hard everything is when your only tools are wishes."

"You know, sometimes, I wonder what the cat is looking at, when he stares at the ceiling like there's something there. Is that you?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes it's somebody else. Or another cat. But you'll see, it's not so bad. Just annoys me, we can't easily talk with each other. It's not like I have much to say, only that it's good to see you. You turned out fine."

"Thanks Dad, it means a lot to know you are ok."

"Me too."



Photo by Nestor Varela: Pexels.com

## Songs Buried in Our Mouth by Victor Obukata

Tonight my tongue is a curled question mark,  
And there is something breezing from mother's throat.  
She says to catch the wind, make it an inheritance.  
She weaves my hair into tales her Grandma never told  
And names me a semblance of her past:  
Even tulips can bloom on my lips.  
She says my mouth is able to hold every  
beauty a tongue can contrive,  
Tells me to sing all the lyrics to heaven when I can.  
The *demons* will never subdue me.  
She forgets to tell me what they look like,  
Mothers in my clan have their own demons grafted into them  
& the first thing they demand is the tulip,  
till they vassal our tongues into dirges.

Look, my family tree is an orchestra  
And everyone is hung to it like a bad song.



*Victor Obukata is a young Nigerian writer of Urhobo descent. He is a Christian and a lover of literature, currently in his sophomore year as an undergraduate of law. He writes more on identity, fate, and faith. He is a Best of the Net nominee. His works have appeared in various literary magazines such as AfterPast Review, Arts Lounge Magazine, Kalahari Review, African Writer Magazine, Afrocritik, the Beatnik Cowboy, and elsewhere. He was longlisted for the 2024 Spring annual poetry contest. He is a member of the Hilltop Creative Arts Foundation. You can connect with him on Facebook @ Victor E Obukata and Instagram @ Victor. E. Obukata.*



Photo by Alison Burrell: Pexels.com

## Gentleman's Farm, 1958 by Kathy O'Fallon

Softer in Westfield, on the sunroom's davenport  
where the earth pauses a little, while parents visit  
with their own, my foot starts the sofa swinging,  
its springs a cat-song lulling me in and out  
of the shadows. Kaleidoscopes of ice cubes,  
their blues and sparkles in a glass of lemonade,  
slip into my mouth and melt, a disappearing act  
I can disappear into, the world a fascinating question mark,

until summer's cut short by disease up the stairs  
steep as falling, and the strong men from an ambulance  
carry Grandpa on a stretcher down, and an aunt scolds  
my legs for shaking under the dining room table—  
witch of good manners—my hand crying to slap back.  
Why aren't we all screaming?! They're loading him  
into the mouth of a red-nosed face whining a siren,  
Grandpa's nightcap left behind—poor bald scalp—

and his girl of nine, cicadas lined up on the bark,  
apple trees barely with fruit—what do we do  
with the worms, Grandpa, will fruit turn bitter  
for what's lost? Springhouse and chicken coop,  
orchids and roses, the hothouse of light—  
heaven in a box—is that what it's like  
where you're going?



*O'Fallon's poems have been published in literary journals, magazines, and anthologies, such as RATTLE, Tupelo Press, MER, along with her fourth chapbook scheduled for release this fall. Listening for Tchaikovsky has been a finalist in several full-length book contests. She is a psychologist in Carlsbad, CA.*



Photo by Quang Nguyen Vinh: Pexels.com

## Water Rising by Michelle Ortega

my heart skips a beat  
slips between ribs 4 and 5  
skips down the sidewalk away  
from where I stand watching  
with that skipped beat four spoons  
of blood do not get pumped  
four spoons of blood back up  
into my throat on the verge  
of a scream but ribs 4 and 5 close  
and keep the scream a secret  
my heart skips into the woods  
at the end of the road  
as I stand watching until  
I only see leaves on trees rustling  
along a path along a river  
along a lazy river my heart  
skips a stone over the lazy river  
skips another stone  
another stone  
another stone  
until water rises  
from the weight of it all



Michelle Ortega's latest chapbook, *When you Ask Me, "Why Paris?"* (Finishing Line Press) was released in July 2025. She is a board member at Arts By The People where she creates and facilitates workshops for The Writing Lab, including the annual Ekphrastic Residency. [www.michelleortegawrites.com](http://www.michelleortegawrites.com)



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

## Joyful Reflection by CM Pickard

After "Young Woman Knitting" c1883  
by Berthe Morisot, The MET European Paintings

A canvas, captured with skill,  
swathed in thick layers of colour;  
rich greens mingling  
with pink and white strokes  
in an explosion of bright light,  
facial features obscured  
yet a scene is set of a gentlewoman,  
whose finery hints at a tranquil existence

I long to take that vacant seat; to share  
the parkland's blooms filtering  
through the canvas and follow  
the sunlight dancing along the pathway;  
to feel each brushstroke, infused  
with freedom's essence  
despite her stiff posture,  
and distance time's passage brings.

To escape, if only for a moment  
into that joyful reflection  
evading modern life.



CM Pickard is a self-proclaimed late bloomer, living in Melbourne, Australia. Her poetry was shortlisted in The Letter Review Prize for Poetry and SWWV's Kathryn Purnell Poetry Prize, appeared in The Poetry Lighthouse, Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine, The Raven Review, and elsewhere. (<https://cmpickardwrites.site/>)



Photo by Luke Gallegos: Unsplash.com

## One day in a year by LeeAnn Pickrell

Coffee and a walk down the road and over the dunes to the beach. Clumps of seaweed mark the high tide. The wind has shaped the sand, smooth and rippled like the waves of the creek flowing past. Last night a chorus of frogs and now, a few early frog risers to serenade us. The sun is shining after four rain-soaked days and nights. On the walk back along the creek's bank, the remains of a seagull, its feathers scattered. The trees on the dune's far side have been shaped by years of sea wind. This past week a friend came home from a day of work not feeling well and his heart ruptured. We could lose everything tomorrow or sooner. A crow swoops low, black wings outstretched. An egret watches at the creek's edge.



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



Photo by Miriam Alonso: Pexels.com

## What love is by LeeAnn Pickrell

*After A. R. Ammons, "The City Limits"*

When you consider what living with someone you love really entails,  
the sounds a body makes unbidden—the creaks of joints, the burps

and farts—the smells, pungent and unwashed, how  
different it is from what you imagined love would be.

When you consider the hours spent in bathrooms over a lifetime—  
in love stories people don't even use the bathroom—

that sooner or later, probably sooner, you leave the door  
open because what really is there to hide. You watch

each other grow older, your skin sagging in places it never  
sagged before, the spots sprinkled across legs and arms,

the damage a life does, the belly that won't flatten. When you  
consider that sometimes it's too much trouble to have sex—so

many pills and lubricants required—that you just let each other  
rest a little longer. When you consider that just making it home

alive to spend the evening together, doing nothing really,  
dinner, a show on TV you'll never remember,

when you consider that that is enough.

Street Cat  
By Susan Pollet



*Susan L. Pollet is a visual artist and author whose works have appeared in multiple art shows and literary publications. She studied at the New York Art Students League, has been a member since 2018, and resides in NYC.*

Pure Calm  
by Susan Pollet





Photo by Gu Bra: Pexels.com

## Evening Stroll at What Feels Like the End of the World by Vivian Faith Prescott

I walk through the tree realm  
wrapped in the violet shade of evening,  
as the Earth's sorrow closes its eyes  
as if to denounce us humans.

But really, we know this headlong  
toppling and cracking goes on all hours.  
We humans, or forests, either, do not stop  
tending to our own deaths.

I've found that the woods are alive  
like the fresh bear scat. Alive, like fungus  
resembling miniature cauliflowers dotting  
the old canoe-shaped log. It's mossy  
and moist in both the living and dying here.  
Leaves and needles braid the sky canopy

and beyond into the forest deep.  
The branches reach for me as if they  
want to touch me, to know who I am,  
tend to my weariness, forgive me for

our destruction, this neglect. Even in  
these cloud-filled hours, even as the  
light fades, my animal-sense heightens,

as if I am as ancient as the tree kin  
and they are calling me to the familiar  
perfume of their roots.



*Vivian Faith Prescott was born and raised in Wrangell, Kaachxana.áak'w, a small island in Southeastern Alaska. She writes and thrives at her fishcamp on the land of the Shtax'heen Kwáan. She's a member of the Pacific Sámi Searvi and a founding member of the first LGBTQIA+ group on the island. She's the author of a dozen books, including poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. She's also a co-founder and co-facilitator of two Alaskan writers' groups: Blue Canoe Writers and the Drumlin Poets.*



Photo by Masood Aslami: Pexels.com

***Madii*—An overgrown path that leaves a trace waiting to be uncovered  
by Vivian Faith Prescott**

At the edge of the muskeg, spruce trees  
root in solid soil and I'm ready to forage

for wisdom, where the Labrador tea  
is scattered and the lingonberry lessens.

My bicycle leans on its kickstand  
next to the road, seeming abandoned

but I have only abandoned fear and  
comfort, each sloughing off as I step

into the unknown. This old, forgotten  
and overgrown trail, is a relic

from hunters' past or perhaps generations  
of foragers. Now, my aging hands want

no more signposts in this lifeline left  
to follow—just go, head off, with no destination.

Already, my old bones are creaking and  
bending like bull pine. One would never know

how old the tree is, or me either, though  
both of us are stiff and twisted, thin, scaly

and gray. We are windbent, following this  
wild trail without our cares, and with our years

caught like beard moss in our hair.

\*Madii: North Sami language



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

## A Poem for Clovis by Samuel Prestridge

On a straightaway, slowing for a turn,  
he heaved his burden ditchward. Defiance  
of the odds gave him a heft his friends spelled  
out with a cardboard cross that bent, wilted  
in the rain. Then, a peppermint wreath and  
Mylar balloons yearning toward traffic wash,  
ghosts of birthday parties, colored ribbons  
and banners against the blackened leaf fall,  
candles, blown out by the semis' rumble.

Finally, a five-by-five pressboard sign,  
blue, a Superman's logo at the heart,  
with "Clovis 4-ever" in gilt letters,  
as though he'd always be a rumbling noise,  
as though the ditch owed them all an echo—  
at least from the point the body landed.



*Samuel Prestridge, a post-aspirational man, published his first book, A Dog's Job of Work, in March. It is available from Sligo Creek Publishing. His children contend that he is, in the broadest sense, an adequate father.*



Photo by Tomáš Malík: Pexels.com

## Diminishing Light by Paul Rabinowitz

millions of light particles settle  
on the underside of your bicep  
the soft spot my palm touches  
where a small poke tattoo glistens  
a sun will always rise you said  
as you smile and roll close to me  
pressed heat not like a summer day  
but a crack in the dark earth  
when molten rises to the surface  
finds a way out blasting into the sky  
a violent dance within its plume  
ash particles collide and fragment  
billions of sparks flicker and twirl  
a black cloud overwhelms the sun  
two hikers walk the northern crest  
watching in silence unable to speak  
I search for your hand as we find shelter  
you tell me the sun will always shine  
but fires from the west rage with intensity

a deafening blast rolls through the hills  
void of color just black with white ash  
I turn away from the diminishing light  
plunge my face into the sweat-filled pillow  
the unbearable sound grows louder  
gasping for breath I shut off the alarm  
watch in silence as you brush your hair  
the intricate choreography of movement  
feel my lungs expand to their full extent  
the dark underside of your roots  
disrupted by light streaks of ash blond



*Paul Rabinowitz is a writer, photographer, and founder of ARTS By The People, and the author of six books. His work appears in The Sun Magazine, New World Writing, Arcturus-Chicago Review Of Books and elsewhere.*

*Rabinowitz's poems and fiction are the inspiration for 8 award-winning experimental films.*

*[www.paulrabinowitz.com](http://www.paulrabinowitz.com)*



Photo by Ron Lach: Pexels.com

## Hourglass by Sambhu Ramachandran

Yesterday a tear dropped from the sky  
amidst innumerable drops of rain;  
no one could know it was a tear  
for it was so well camouflaged.

It fell on my nose and rolled down  
to my cupid's bow and into my mouth.  
It tasted of salt, and when I looked up  
I saw your face among the clouds.

I realised then we were at either end  
of an hourglass—you above and I  
down here on earth, your different moods  
reaching me through the constricted neck.

When you run out of variations,  
I will invert the hourglass and drop  
my spring, summer, fall, and monsoon—  
one by one—into your outspread hands.



*Sambhu Ramachandran is a bilingual poet, translator, and academic from Kerala, India. He is currently working as Assistant Professor of English at N.S.S. College, Pandalam. His poems have been repeatedly anthologized in The Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English and have also appeared in journals like The Bombay Literary Magazine (TBLM), Wild Court, Madras Courier, The Alipore Post, Muse India, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Setu, and The Chakkar, among others.*



Photo by Felicity Tai: Pexels.com

## The Artist by Caelan Roberts

There's a woman in the warehouse. It's been retrofitted into a nightclub and is presently set up in the fashion of a concert hall. She has bruises on the underside of her jaw line, and her fingers are nimble, though their pads are cracked and calloused. She holds a violin, and with it she plays a song, some top 40 radio hit by a European band she's never heard of. The crowd is enraptured. They cheer in the terrible joy of recognition, and she feels their praise on her shoulders like the shawl of a false goddess. Still, she waves. She does not smile. She bows briefly, lifts her instrument, and begins another.

At a second-rate hotel, there lives a family of acrobats from Latvia. They have six children, ranging from ages 11 to 17. The hotel is set to be torn down in a year, and a sports stadium erected in its place. It's past time, the people say. It has long smelled of old cigarettes, mildew. The newer hotels have no smoking signs posted everywhere. The oldest of the circus children, a boy, stands atop a trapeze platform and surveys his audience. They number perhaps a dozen, maybe less. He does not count, and he smiles broadly and opens his arms as if he is jumping for the whole world. The MC, a clown whose minstrel makeup fails to hide his leathery skin, says something in English that the boy doesn't understand. All he knows is that it's his cue. He leaps.

A man on a stage. He holds a new guitar, and it sounds like shit. He was in a band once. A moderately successful indie rock outfit in the early aughts, known for their soaring, half-screamed choruses, and restrained—perhaps overly sincere—verses. He was the

principal songwriter and the main attraction to their shows. But now the rest of the band is gone (married, sober, dead) and he is stuck at a residency here, alone. About half of the seats are filled each weeknight, two-thirds on Fridays and Saturdays. He has solo records out, but the crowds do not want to hear them. He introduces each song in drunken slur, a foreign language, spoken hieroglyphics. His fans cheer half-heartedly, urging him with their applause to start the next track. He does, with a decisive strum of his guitar, and the room falls silent. He leans into the mic and begins to sing with the same clarity he had when he was twenty years old. Every word is crystal clear, pain-soaked English.

A street performer. He sits on the concrete baking in the sun and people pass on all sides of him, encircling him in a blur of human movement; cackling frat boys and posing half-naked women. Everyone looking for their next drink, the next roll of the dice. Quickly, expertly, he paints each of the passing faces he can make out, presents them like a gift to his subjects, only unhands them once paid. He sells few, keeps even fewer. Most of them he throws away at the end of the day.

The Latvian boy passes him every day on his runs. The painter must have drawn him a thousand times, memorized his features, the way his eyes dart back and forth like a wild animal, the way his lips are always drawn back in a way that only a mouth that knows only a foreign language would be. But he never does this as a performance. It is a private devotion in the kitchen of his home he shares with four other men, a meditation to remind him why he sits sweating in the street day after day. The painter loves the Latvian because he sees something of himself in him, some hunger.

The violinist has heard of the singer, though they have never met, and she has never heard him sing. She knows him from his name in the news: his visits to rehab, public meltdowns, various lawsuits. When she heard he would be residing in the same city as her, she had little interest, only briefly remembered what she had heard. When he came to her performance, she did not register that it was him, crying, several rows back.

He did not cry when he saw the woman perform out of some appreciation for the beauty of her music. Her

talent was undeniable, as was her dedication to engaging her audience. But he could feel nothing but disgust in hearing her play. He knew every song, of course. How could you not? They pervaded every shopping center and semi-fast food restaurant and hotel elevator in the city. They were little deaths creeping in through the ears, staying with you long after the song ended. He found them depthless, and he hated how much they reminded him of his own work in recent years. So, yes, he cried. But don't mistake it.

The acrobat boy had noticed the painter in the street before, had admired his work, how quickly he could conjure a new being from just a glance at another. But he had never stopped, primarily because he did not have the money to buy one of the pieces, and he knew that nothing in America was free. Still, he took the same route every morning on his runs, just to get another glimpse at the artwork, to see if he recognized any of the faces.

When he meets the violinist, she is also passing by the street painter. He runs into her and in his broken English tells her he's sorry, sorry. It's fine, she says, but she does not stop. She doesn't notice the painter, but he sees her, notices the bruises on her jaw, the long fingers.

The singer doesn't know it, but one of his band's later songs grew extremely popular in Eastern Europe, and when he visits the Latvian's hotel, the boy notices him instantly from the platform. After the show, he excitedly introduces himself the best he can. The singer is polite, but he doesn't understand anything the boy says until he utters the name of the song, then the band. The singer smiles. Yes. Yes. That was me. He

invites him to the show the following night, and the acrobat understands, and he understands the most important word: free.

After the show, the acrobat is invited backstage, but the singer is too drunk to speak, or to recognize the boy he met only the day before. The acrobat says nothing. Somehow it feels like a betrayal. He does not know the man, doesn't understand the words to his songs, but he was sure there was some connection between them, broken now.

The next day, the singer is on his way to get a coffee and a fix. His head is pounding; from too much alcohol the night before or not enough that morning, he does not know. He passes the painter, along with everyone else in the city, but he is the only one who stops. He sees one of the paintings, and he is enamored:

The face is not one that exists. The features are an amalgam—the eyes of one man, the mouth of another. The nose of a woman. It seems almost to stand up off the canvas, to look him in the eyes, and he understands. No. It's not a real face, but the life that it conjures is. It is the woman he saw play music she does not care for, but she knows her audience will love. It is the boy who doesn't speak English but knew who he was, or who he used to be. It is him. It is all of them, searching, and searching, forever.



*Caelan Roberts is originally from Utah, but recently relocated to Chicago where he works as a substitute teacher. In his free time, he enjoys skiing, playing with his dogs, and drinking beer.*



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

## Replacement Parts by Judith Rosner

Like roman ruins, pieces of façade  
from my pre-war apartment building  
lie in rubble on the scaffolding  
outside my bedroom window.

Workmen whose bright yellow T-shirts  
scream “Tie or Die” on their backs  
wrap ropes around each numbered piece  
and lower them to the sidewalk.

I’m told molds will be made of each piece  
to form fiberglass replacements—like the  
metal substitutes we humans have for  
weak joints and valves.

Many years from now, the bricks of my building  
may crumble around a façade that could last forever  
as our bodies may give way to our still-working,  
lifeless, replacement parts.



*Judith Rosner is the author of the poetry collection Paradigm Shift (Kelsay Books) and her work appears in a number of literary journals including HerWords, 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 Angela Roma: Pexels.com

## Shoulder Seasons by Judith Rosner

1.

I'm in my shoulder season—  
not the shoulder  
which when shrugged  
unfurls new leaves and  
nudges buds to bloom

but the other one—  
the shoulder that signals leaves  
to fall and chill to frost  
what plants remain  
with crystal icing

Like a leaf beginning to turn,  
I work hard to defy gravity.

2.

He's in his shoulder season too—  
the other shoulder—  
the one where sun shines  
and rain falls to bring in  
the fresh, the green, the new

No longer a child, not yet  
a teen, he's twixt the journey—  
limbs lengthening, face changing,  
hugs one minute, snarky  
retort the next

We're each finding our way  
to the coming season.

Passing Glance: Restaurant aprons Cinque Terre, Italy  
by Michael Roberts



*Michael C. Roberts is a retired pediatric psychologist. His photographs have appeared (or will appear) in The Canary, Burningword, The Storms, FERAL, Cholla Needles, Cantos, The Healing Muse, Cold Moon, Right Hand Pointing, Door is a Jar, Camas, Hindsight, Straylight, Thimble, Ponder, Closed Eye Open, Alchemy Spoon, 3rd Wednesday, The Right Words, Cardinal Sins, Human Obscura, Blue Mesa Review, The Word's Faire, and elsewhere. His book of photographs, Imaging the World with Plastic Cameras: Diana and Holga is available on amazon.com.*

Passing Glance: Scarves for sale in Madrid Spain  
by Michael Roberts





Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

## Hemingway by Elizabeth Rosell

*All you do is bleed.*

I loved when you said that.

Read all about you, about your life.

My conflicted feelings about you.

About your toxic masculinity.

But you were always unapologetic  
and I find I have to respect that.

Running with the bulls

and rutting like a bull.

All the women and drink and guns

feeling every inch, feeling every second of life  
and through it all you wrote.

And you wrote and you wrote.

Went to war, fell in love,

wanted to marry but were left alone.

so you wrote some more,

without sharing the truth of a broken heart.

Did you really live so fully

because you couldn't stand to feel

the truth in your mind and soul?

Was it easier just to bleed?



*Elizabeth Rosell lives in Northern Ontario, Canada, with her cat Belle. She has spent her life working in the non-profit field, inspired by her own mental health issues with borderline personality disorder. Elizabeth has been published in The Seat, Punk Monk, The Amphibian, and Yale's The Perch among others. When not writing, she spends her spare time crafting and baking. She can be found online at [www.ElizabethRosell.com](http://www.ElizabethRosell.com).*



Photo by Pixabay: Pexels.com

## Never Like This by Elizabeth Rosell

I go to the hospital  
I have been here many times before  
But not this day  
Not this time  
I walk into the entrance  
See the people milling around  
Some sitting on couches  
Never seen these people before  
Not this day, not this time.  
I walk past them,  
Catching snippets of their conversations  
"He's so young."  
"She was so beautiful"  
I walk past the gift shop  
Flowers in buckets out in the hall  
Never seen these flowers before  
Not this day, not this time  
Their sickly-sweet scent  
Overpowering  
The smell of disinfectant.  
Up in the elevator,  
Up, up

To the seventh floor  
Never been to this floor before  
Not this day, not this time  
Walking past the private rooms  
Each with floor to ceiling glass walls  
I look in at all the people  
Lying in beds with wires coming out  
Hear the beeping of machines  
Monitors to see if they are still alive  
To the end of the hall  
Never been to this room before  
Not this day, not this time.  
There she is.  
My mom.  
Dying.  
I open the sliding door  
The nurse turns to me, looks sympathetic  
"Not much longer now" she says and slips away  
They've been saying this for thirty-six hours now  
Waiting for mom to slip away  
Like the nurse leaving the room  
Quietly, peacefully, unobtrusively  
But what I see is mom's labored breathing  
Her struggle to keep going  
There will be no slipping away quietly  
It will be a fight, a swing at death  
Before she goes down  
I take her hand, bloated and wet  
Lean down, kiss her forehead  
"I love you" I whisper  
Gasps and sputters her only response  
Then, machines blaring  
A loud, constant alarm.  
She no longer exists.  
I've never felt this grief before.  
Not like this day, not like this time.



Photo by Pixabay: Pexels.com

## Stars by Justine Rummage

You remind me of the stars  
Beautiful to behold,  
untouchable by design.  
No matter how high I reach,  
I only grasp the air.



*Justine Rummage grew up in Albemarle, NC. She currently resides in Cullowhee, NC. She has been writing poetry since the age of 12, using it as a space for emotional expression and exploring her identity. Her work often reflects themes of connection, strong emotions, and resilience.*



Photo by Rafa Barros: Pexels.com

## The Worthiness of a Daughter by Justine Rummage

I never looked for my dad  
in the crowd at events  
reward days, volleyball games, or graduation.  
I figured if I set the bar low enough,  
then I couldn't be disappointed.  
And if I couldn't be disappointed,  
then I wouldn't have to feel any pain.  
The same concept shaped  
how I approached dating men.

Growing up, I heard my dad's comments.  
I gathered he only respected women  
when they had perfect bodies.  
So, I thought, maybe if I got in shape,  
he'd respect me too.  
Then I'd finally be worthy  
of a proud father.

I lost all this weight  
not only off my body,  
but also off my conscience.  
I learned treadmills and scales  
aren't enough to make him  
proud of his daughter.

So, I let him go.

Orange Glow  
by Nicole Sara



*Nicole Sara is a bilingual poet and photographer from Romania who finds inspiration in the sweet beauty and intelligence of everything around. Nicole published her debut collection of poems, Rhyming Dreams, in 2024 and her creative work also appears in the literary magazine SpillWords Press and in Tranquility: An Anthology of Haiku published by Literary Revelations PH. Her poems and photos are shared monthly on the Masticadores platforms. A nature enthusiast, Nicole loves exploring the outdoors and capturing images to share on her blogs and on photography sites. Connect with her on her blog at <https://starrysteps.wordpress.com/> and on Instagram @nicoles.steps*

Sunlit Leaves  
by Nicole Sara



Colorful Fall  
by Nicole Sara





Photo by R. Fera: Pexels.com

## The Pond at Strawberry Inn by Jennifer Susan Smith

*an Ekphrastic poem after John C. Mannone's photograph of a pond in Strawberry Plains, Tennessee*

Between rocky bank and Tennessee  
skyline, the pond ripples novellas  
in aquamarine; memoirs narrated  
at shore side, by seasonal tourists.

Private tales dwell within transverse  
waves, submitted to the blue basin  
understated linear arrangements,  
never sinking to murky depth.

Black tree branch overlooks words,  
natural arch encloses chapters

held gently at surface level, pages  
bookmarked eternal by water lilies.

The inn's new guest strolls downhill  
called by the pond to water's edge;  
pink journal clutched to her chest,  
November morning veiled in mist.

She reads in survivor's voice;  
rose scarf that once shielded  
tenderness of her bald head  
now drapes autumn's shawl.

Lavender rain traces her epilogue  
into the pond's golden rectangle.



*Jennifer Susan Smith, a retired speech-language pathologist, resides in Rock Spring, Georgia. Her writing appears in Appalachia Bare, Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine, Troublesome Rising Digital Anthology 2025 Collection and Sunflowers Rising: Poems for Peace Anthology, among others. Jennifer is chairman of Alpha Delta Kappa Pages and Pearls Book Club, and holds membership in Chattanooga Writers' Guild, Georgia Poetry Society, and Poetry Society of Tennessee. She obtained a Master of Science Degree in Communicative Disorders from University of Alabama, an Educational Specialist Degree in Curriculum/Instruction from Lincoln Memorial University, and a Creative Writing Certificate from Kennesaw State University.*



Photo by Tom Swinnen: Pexels.com

## Two Haiku by Joshua St. Claire

stitching together  
the universe  
pennywort stolons

\*

perched  
at world's end  
a willet



*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.*



Photo by Alex Rusin: Pexels.com

## Ready to be Cropped by Sara Stegen

August is the cruellest month.  
The memory of summer—  
nearly gone.  
Colder mornings cooler nights.  
The shorter days.  
The harvest moon nights.  
Summer wearing winter clothes.  
Fruit on trees and hedges.  
Crops on land  
ready to be cropped.  
To me it feels we're getting  
ready for the fallow season.  
I am so ready to be cropped.



*Sara Stegen is a Dutch poet, equity advocate, and non-fiction author who writes about family, neurodivergence, and the landscape she lives in. Sara has an MA in English from the University of Groningen and is a 2022 Rural Writing Institute alumna. She has been published in The Brussels Review, Spelt, Ranchlands Review, The Broken Spine. Home is a boulder-clay ridge in the northern Netherlands where her bike shed contains eight bicycles. Sara works for Research Centre Art & Society, Hanze and is working on her first poetry collection and memoir about autism.*



*Photo by Min An: Pexels.com*

## **The Green Rave by Sara Stegen**

Some days  
the trees go mad  
in the garden  
pretend to be  
at a green rave.

Dance, I tell them  
before fall  
takes away  
your means—  
to wave.



Photo by George Milton: Pexels.com

## Odd Girls by Naomi Stenberg

Odd girls don't cluster. They don't hang out in groups in lunch rooms. They walk singly with a book open. At night they read under cover of a flashlight. They read all the time. Odd girls go off planet so easily. They live and even thrive in other worlds because they don't fit in this one. They are unbearably aware of their not fitting in. They wear loneliness like an uncomfortable coat, a coat they've worn since time began, or least since junior high began. Odd girls have nostalgia for when things were better, when they had friends, and the whole point of living was to see who could hit a baseball the farthest. They ran through fields and played Hide and Seek and did more seeking than hiding. They remember watching *Dark Shadows* at Donita's house or *The Friday Night Movie* at Sandy's. They circulated and were invited to parties and sleepovers. Odd girls remember the invitations best because there aren't any anymore. Odd girls love Emily Dickinson. *My life closed twice before it closed.* As much as they love Emily Dickinson, odd girls worry that they will become too much like her, grow old in pristine white dresses writing snippets of poetry on napkins. Odd girls worry about being forgotten like Emily's napkins once were. They don't want to be noticed and all they want is to be noticed. To have someone see them, really see them and wonder out loud...how they are.



*Naomi Stenberg (she/her) is queer, neurodivergent and thriving in Seattle. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Soul Poetry, Prose and Arts Magazine, Does It Have Pockets, Sky Island Journal, Oyster River Pages, the anthology, Teacakes and Tarot, and elsewhere. In her spare time, Naomi leaves life-affirming chalk drawings on sidewalks all over town, does improv, and plays apartment fetch with her dog.*



Photo by Mehmet Turgut Kirkgoz: Pexels.com

## I Met You Online and Flew from Seattle to Florida for a Date by Naomi Stenberg

I wanted you to love me.  
I arrived on your doorstep like a mail order bride,  
all my underthings stitched by my mother.

Was it my basic scent that put you off?  
The slightly snakelike thing I do with my tongue  
when I'm concentrating? My chipped tooth.

I lolled in provocative poses on your couch.  
You took out the recycling.

The one pass I made I fumbled  
like a quarterback with shaky hands.  
*Did you mean that to be romantic?* you asked.  
Yes, I said, embarrassed.  
You gave me that reflexive smile, more of a tic really,  
and spun away on your left heel.

Later when we went cycling,  
you saw a cardboard box and  
kicked it with your sandaled foot.  
Your hair flew around your head.  
You kicked the box so hard.  
I loved you for that.  
I loved you and would have  
lived with you like a nun  
craving your hummingbird hugs

and other small favors.



Photo by Ezra Phakathi: Pexels.com

## If Happiness is Like Water by Shahrzad Taavoni

I'd like to be:

air bubbles in the ocean  
zooming upward to the surface, bursting—  
giggling to commune with more oxygen.

water persevering, slivering  
finding cracks  
between doors.

steam perfectly laid  
upon a mirror  
scribbling  
I love you.

and ice atop the Alborz mountains  
preserving  
my sacred memories.



*Shahrzad Taavoni is a poet, artist, and licensed acupuncturist pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Baltimore. Her work explores healing, mythic consciousness, and spirituality, and has appeared in Soul Forte Journal, The Closed Eye Open, Persian Heritage Magazine, and California Quarterly. She creates immersive poetry light shows, blending her poems, voice, and sculpture, shown at Maryland Art Place, School 33, Subtle Rebellion, and the Baltimore Public Works Museum. Follow Shahrzad: Instagram: @shahrzadtaavoni; Facebook: facebook.com/shahrzadtaavoni*



Photo by Tobias Bjørkli: Pexels.com

## Incarnation by Rowan Tate

An unfinished feeling, he prays  
to something beautiful that doesn't  
have a name. He tells God he must  
learn to be five again, when time meant  
there was enough space to love someone, when  
the essence of life was in a spoon. He  
says God's name just to put more of him  
in the world, the possibility  
of being touched  
by something: maybe the place God is  
is in my fingers. He makes pasta, he  
draws a poem, he pulls her hair out of the  
shower drain. When someone asks  
he says God is so beautiful it doesn't matter  
whether he exists or not.



*Rowan Tate is a Romanian creative and curator of beauty. Her writing appears in the Stinging Fly, the Shore, Josephine Quarterly, and Meniscus Literary Journal, among others. She reads nonfiction nature books, the backs of shampoo bottles, and sometimes minds.*



Photo by Mark Stebnicki: Pexels.com

## Appalachian Lessons by Rowan Tate

Grandmother ridge,  
you offer me the gift of  
staying put. Your switchback roads,  
carving cursive through shale,  
and the time between  
gas stations are my psalm.

Kin leave, sometimes  
with a suitcase,  
sometimes with a song.  
For this, you prescribe  
mountain remedies:

Chew willow bark  
for the ache in your teeth.  
Render lard slow,  
it'll heal the burn.

Plant tomatoes  
after the last frost,  
but never before  
the dogwood blooms.

What's passed down  
won't always fit—  
still, mend it.  
Take the pickles  
they put in your hand,  
even if your mouth is full.



Photo by Markus Spiske: Pexels.com

## Meditations on the Picket Line by Evan Thurman

it is a great pleasure to let the  
mind and body fade into one  
as the foot drives the leg  
steers the torso turns the head  
in circles, to sort yesterday's  
soreness from today's aches,  
and to hear a mingled voice  
agree on something filling.

the circle will grow and shrink  
as the day does, and the loyal  
will see every person they began  
marching with swap in and out  
until they find themselves as  
the last plank on Theseus's ship.

the in and out of the circle

reminds me of breath, the  
lung filling and contracting,  
these days everything reminds  
me to breathe, to take in life  
deep-throated, to dream of  
the universe in its inception  
to live in its expansions, and  
to be aware that one day that  
it will all collapse, empires  
down and ruinous, and when  
that day comes all that was  
left of humanity will probably  
have been slowly swapped out  
piece by piece, because this  
is a universe of convenience.



*Evan Thurman is a poet from Brooklyn, New York. She is currently studying writing at Clark University. She has been previously published in Beacon Ink, Student Voices Magazine, and Flow Magazine.*



Photo by James Collington: Pexels.com

## Stream of Unconsciousness by Ken Tomaro

When you walk into a coffee shop and the pastry case is as small as a 10-gallon aquarium with only a gingerbread cookie, pumpkin scone and a muffin the size of a crab-apple that looks like it came from a girl named Little Debbie but they will be the first to assure you everything is hand/homemade And you ask where the cream is since it's not in your line of vision but on a tiny window ledge because in the planning stages of this shop they didn't take into account this simple item And the lights are much too bright for 6:45 in the morning and it starts filling up with 20-something girls with the same long blonde cut, & fuzzy sleeveless vests who apparently have all the time in the world to sit with their friends and coffee unlike the rest of us who have to push into work Stuck behind a car who's driver is either too short, too drunk or too old to be driving so you lay on the horn as they decide to dead stop as the light goes yellow And as you turn the corner the jug of windshield wiper fluid flatulates across the stiff plastic floormat in the back of your over-priced but mostly awesome new car and gives you a fright in the morning darkness And the coffee you haven't bought yet because you're about 20 minutes away from the shop leaves a chalky, fair-trade taste in the back of your throat all morning And when you finally get to the office there is an immediate chill on your bald head that permeates to your brain because these big, high-rise, downtown office buildings can't seem to regulate the temperature...suddenly in these few early morning moments it all makes the world a harshly uninhabitable place, just like your own tired mind. And all you wanted was to try something new.



Bestselling author Ken Tomaro is the self-proclaimed Poet Laureate of the Cleveland sewer system, whose work reflects everyday life with depression. His poetry has appeared in several online and print journals and explores the common themes we all experience. Sometimes blunt, often dark, but always grounded in reality.



*Photo by cottonbro studio: Pexels.com*

## **After-dinner drinks by Ken Tomaro**

I've salted my bones and simmered in the primordial soup. Choked on the sun for swallowing it whole.

There is another world on the other side of space and although I've struggled to see it, I know it is there.

And as I strain to see what others can't, a breeze hits my skin and it is neither hot, nor cold. It is just air. In the same way sometimes, you feel neither happy nor sad. You just are. Can you imagine that?



Photo by Ron Lach: Pexels.com

## Dressed Beyond Nine by Angela Townsend

Bury me in the dress with three-dimensional feathers. It was the only reasonable option for the Grand Opening of the cat shelter.

Women in puff-paint sweatshirts and men in suspenders sent wrinkled fives and checks emblazoned with Rowlf from *The Muppet Show*. They were stonemasons at our cuckoo cathedral. They built a sanctuary for broken beasts who could not thank them.

They put on reading glasses and wept up a fog. They hogtied their grief and gave. They dressed disabled cats in promises. They saw kings in ermine where sharper eyes saw dying ferals.

They would not let the cats die. Teenagers in McDonald's nametags and unsentimental men in wrinkle-resistant pants grimaced at ordinary grammar. They ground their erasers into every period. They coaxed commas on the final page. They pasted in looseleaf and started new sentences: "But love..."

They took a breath and came back for the next paragraph. They took distributions from their IRAs and cackled when I called them heroes. They put on waders and carried the last cats across the moat. They built the shelter.

They tore themselves to ribbons at the faintest bell of praise. Their giving was not a choice. Their heroes were the cats, shaggy zealots who outlived their own shrouds. The donors were naked sensibility, just doing what any decent person would do.

I was summoned to redress their modesty. My nametag said, "Development Director," but only because I couldn't find a marker to write "Beholder." I was beckoned to thank them. I was burdened to convince them they wore the full regalia of revolution. I was required to give the speech at the Grand Opening.

It would have been appropriate to wear a navy pantsuit in the shade of the shelter logo. Colleagues would come in blacks and blues, sedate but for cat pins with peridot eyes. My mother offered to buy me A-lines.

I would need strength beyond my words' thin arms. People who live in love do not own mirrors. They caterwaul that no one is unlovely, then invent arithmetic to exempt themselves.

They needed a woman turned Muppet, avian in a clearance gown. I needed power and light from feathers and whimsy. I would bear them on my pinions until we crashed the cloud cover. I would not let them leave their chairs until they knew the depth of their velvet. I would be as outrageous as their mercy, a winged confection commanding them to the looking glass. I became a spectacle so that they might have sight, if only for one evening.

They hugged me and thanked me for my gratitude. They deflected and turned red. They crawled across new floors in their best pants, rolling jingle balls at orphan kittens. They crammed their wings under their jackets.

We fluttered through the preposterous building, this squatter settlement in death's domain. The old men giggled, and the young women told ragged cats they were dreams. The puff paint sweatshirts shone like diamonds. I flapped. I dug graves for their sackcloth.

My feathers were as inappropriate as a blue ribbon on a cat who cannot run. I was as overdressed as the rumor that the last shall be first. I saw cats who should have died, taking life by force. I saw the hope of the world in cotton. I saw polyester archangels startle at the sight of their own faces.

By my calculation, I have six or seven more lives. But I will tell you now, so I won't forget: bury me in the pink dress with three-dimensional feathers.



*Angela Townsend works for a cat sanctuary, and her poet mother is her best friend. She is a five-time Pushcart Prize nominee, eleven-time Best of the Net nominee, and the 2024 winner of West Trade Review's 704 Prize for Flash Fiction. Her work appears or is forthcoming in Arts & Letters, Blackbird, Five Points, The Iowa Review, JMWW, Meridian, The Offing, Pleiades, SmokeLong Quarterly, trampset, Witness, and World Literature Today, among others.*



Photo: "September Windfall" by Eleni Traganas

## Reliquaries by Eleni Traganas

The season lies low; the backyard death rattle commences.  
September brings air dense with cloying sugar and musty rot.  
Overripe peaches fester in the grass like worm-riddled globes  
exposing their insides crawling with tunnels of decay.  
My gnarled, ancient peach tree bends deep in genuflection,  
sighing, groaning under the weight of its burden,  
osteoporotic back broken by age, releasing sticky fruit  
faster than my hands can gather. Swarms of wasps  
and flies arrive and hover to tipple on fermenting nectar.

*inside the peach  
a worm emerges  
drunk on honeyed mead*

I step gingerly, checking flesh, harvesting peaches  
still pulsing with sap. Indoors, the kitchen hums with fresh life—  
pots boil, Mason jars dance and clink in ritual sterilization,  
rising steam soaking with the scent of macerated fruit,  
citrus orange tart with lemon rinds.

My sharpened knife flashes in the afternoon light,  
working with precision to slice rot from meat;  
my wooden spurtle stirs the mashy pulp  
until it gleams like molten gold.  
The marmalade thickens slowly; huge boils erupt and plop  
on the cratered surface of my bubbling cauldron  
catching sunlight in amber whorls. Rows of glass jars  
line the counter glinting in the dazzling sun  
like strings of topaz jewels—each jar embalming life,  
proclaiming that not all is lost, even the bruised  
can be made whole again and reawakened.

Outdoors, the tree moans and succumbs to gravity,  
splitting and cracking, giving up its ghost,  
transforming sweetness into rot, spent carcass  
folding in its wood-engraved sarcophagus.  
I seal my treasure trove with care,  
preserving memory for yet another season.

*the taste of summer  
late sun enshrined and locked  
in golden glass*



*Author of the debut novel Twelfth House (Seaburn Classics), and Shaded Pergola (Tropaeum Press), a collection of haiku and short poetry featuring her original illustrations, Eleni Traganas has published in The San Antonio Review, The Brussels Review, Story Sanctum, The Society of Classical Poets, Amethyst Review and over a hundred other journals. She enjoys a professional career as a Juilliard-trained concert pianist & composer, has held over 40 national exhibitions of her artwork, is the founder/director of Woodside Writers, a NYC-based literary forum and Editor-in-Chief of The Woodside Review. [www.elenitraganas.com](http://www.elenitraganas.com)  
Shaded Pergola: Haiku & Other Short Poems <https://a.co/d/dt81bEh>*



*Photo by Елена Кузичкина: Pexels.com*

## **The Orchard at Dusk by Veronica Tucker**

The apple trees wear  
their last light like gold.  
Bees hum low,  
lazy with evening sweetness,  
while the grass holds  
a cool breath of earth.

I walk between rows,  
each step stirring  
the ghosts of seasons past.  
Here is where  
my father pulled a ladder  
to reach the highest fruit.  
Here is where  
my daughter tripped  
and laughed with both hands  
full of apples.

The orchard is never still.  
Even in its sleep  
it dreams of blossom,  
of the sharp scent of spring rain  
and the taste of sun  
ripening on its tongue.

I press an apple  
against my palm,  
feel its skin  
blush under my thumb.  
There are so many ways

to say thank you,  
to the trees,  
to the soil,  
to the hands that taught me  
to reach for what I love  
without crushing it.

The horizon softens  
as the first star  
pricks the sky,  
and I know  
tomorrow the branches  
will bend again,  
carrying more weight  
than I can name.



*Veronica Tucker is an emergency medicine and addiction medicine physician, writer, and lifelong New Englander. Her poetry often draws from the quiet intersections of medicine, motherhood, and the natural world. Her work has appeared in One Art, Red Eft Review, and redrosethorns, with additional publications forthcoming. Outside of writing, she enjoys running, travel, and life in central New Hampshire with her husband, three children, and two dogs, where the rhythms of home and nature continue to inspire her work.*



Photo by Henlynn: Pexels.com

## What the River Forgets by Veronica Tucker

The river does not know my name.  
It slides past moss-streaked stones  
with the patience of something  
that has buried too many secrets.

I step into the shallows,  
ankles shocked awake by the cold.  
Every pebble has a memory,  
every ripple, a story  
of what was lost upstream.

The wind bends the reeds  
into shapes like cursive letters,  
messages I cannot read.  
A fish flashes beneath my shadow  
and vanishes,  
taking with it  
a piece of my reflection.

I think of my father's hands,  
how they smelled of pine and iron  
when he lifted me  
to see the horizon.  
Back then, the sky  
was something I could pocket  
like a smooth stone,  
something I could hold  
until it warmed.

Now the sky is nothing but  
an aching stretch of white.  
I want to ask the river  
what it knows of grief,  
of names whispered  
long after they fade,  
but water never answers.

It only carries  
the weight we give it,  
down,  
down,  
until the bend swallows  
even the silence.



Photo by Gustavo Fring: Pexels.com

## Mother Tongue by Veronica Tucker

I learned language  
by listening to my mother hum  
while she folded towels.  
The vowels were not words,  
but they were warmer  
than any sentence.

She said love  
was something you had to show,  
like pulling the bread from the oven  
and brushing the flour  
from your fingertips,  
or setting the table  
even when no one is coming.

I have kept  
those small lessons close,  
how to slice fruit  
without bruising it,  
how to hang a shirt

so it will not remember  
the weight of water.

When my daughter asks  
where I learned to love her,  
I tell her about the songs  
without lyrics,  
about the patience it takes  
to hold something soft  
and not press too hard.

My mother's voice is quieter now,  
like a candle  
just before the wind finds it,  
but I still hear her  
in the clatter of plates,  
the whisper of clean sheets.

The language of love  
is never written.  
It lives in the mouth,  
in the hands,  
in the silence  
where you choose to stay.



Photo by Ahmed akacha: Pexels.com

## the throat that inhaled a war and called it father by Muhammad Ubandoma

i might die today while the wind forgets to write my name in its lung-script,  
while silence devours my shadow and doesn't even belch.  
no elegy. just absence wearing my mother's perfume.  
this is what happens when a body is killed by the uvula of war—  
a throat gone ballistic with history, each vowel detonating a lineage.  
my mother dissolves into mothlight— her body flickering  
like a wet match beneath the tongue of god.  
i watched her vanish into the liturgy of burnt sugar while the news called it  
“a necessary strike.” necessary like thunder in a child's eye.  
like baptism in napalm.  
my father became a postcard from the abyss.  
his promises dissolved into sand. he is both missing and mistaken.  
a man once launched a war from inside our mouths.  
we spoke missiles by accident. the alphabet got infected.  
even the prayers coughed blood. i held the sky like a broken rifle,  
aimed it at the future, and the future blinked.  
the season was dry enough to bruise god's knees.  
no one dug the graves. the sand simply opened like it remembered its appetite for children.  
my civic education teacher asked me this question before he runs into emptiness.  
do you know what it means to watch your rights melt into ash  
while songs composed for your joy become lullabies for your erasure?  
before i answered silence had lighten my face with a makeup of war.



*Muhammad M. Ubandoma is a Nigerian writer and poet whose work explores themes of identity, violence, and spiritual longing. His poems have appeared and forthcoming in esteemed literary journals such as Chestnuts Review, Brittle Paper, The April Centaur Network, Eunoia Review, Poetry Column, Kalahari Review, Afro Critic, Spillword Magazine, And many others. He tweets as Muhammad M Ubandoma on Instagram*



Photo by Rastislav Durica: Pexels.com

## The Sun Sets Twice in Fall by Margaret Taylor-Ulizio

The first time the sun  
lifts its light up  
off the ground  
leaving my world in the shadow  
of night, not yet realized as  
the warm blanket of light  
is pulled over the curve of the earth.  
Visible in the distance,  
the orange sky fades,  
taking the horizon with it.

But look up  
to where the sun still shines,  
not down to where it's gone.  
Its rays hit the treetops,  
whose colors burn like  
the fire of an autumnal parade,  
until the light no longer peaks  
among the high places,  
but descends again  
in someone else's world.

A gift in duplicate,  
it comes at a cost,  
twice the beauty,  
two times the loss.



Margaret Taylor-Ulizio is a writer from New Jersey. Her poetry is published in or forthcoming from Merion West, San Antonio Review, One Art, Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine among others.



*Photo by Firefly Adobe AI*

## **Highlight of Her Day by Lorri Ventura**

C-shaped, she hunches over her Formica kitchen table,  
alternately tracing the tabletop's "boomerang" pattern  
and idly drawing rings around her finds  
in a Word Search for Seniors book.

A Felix the Cat wall clock  
clicks rhythmically,  
swishing its tail and shifting its eyes  
as it notes time's glacial creep.

Hours pass, and then the front doorbell  
coughs out a feeble ding-dong.  
The old woman snaps to attention  
as if an internal switch has flipped.

With practiced moves, she pushes against the table  
and leverages herself to her feet.  
"Hold your horses! I'm coming!"  
She rasps, as the doorbell dings again.

With effort, she grabs her nearby walker.  
which she affectionately calls her "jalopy."  
It's bedecked with a wicker basket,  
an antediluvian bicycle horn,  
and tennis balls to prevent floor-scratching.

She's gasping for breath as she reaches the front door  
and tugs it several times before it reluctantly opens.  
She curses it for swelling in the humidity.

"Hello, honey, how are you?"  
booms a jolly woman, beaming on the porch

as she holds out a white lunch bag.  
“You’ve got a turkey sandwich today,  
with stuffing and cranberry sauce!”

The old woman’s face lights up,  
suddenly looking decades younger  
as she reaches for her meal.  
She peeks into the bag  
and squeals with delight as she takes inventory.  
Applesauce! Milk! And three Lorna Doone cookies!

Letting go of her walking aid,  
she welcomes the younger woman’s hug,  
lingering in her arms until the visitor  
gently extricates herself and says goodbye.  
“See you tomorrow!” The elderly woman calls out weakly,  
beaming as the departing guest turns back and waves.  
Carefully placing her gift into the basket,  
she pushes her backside against the uncooperative door  
until it finally closes.  
The woman inches back to her Formica furniture.  
She finishes every morsel and seems to caress  
the empty food containers as she drops them into a trash bin.

Sighing, she resumes boomerang-tracing and word-circling,  
grateful that a Meals on Wheels volunteer  
took a few minutes to acknowledge her existence  
in a neighborhood where everyone rushes past her home  
as if no one lives there.



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



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

## Felt Hat by Sean Wang

Grandfather chops again outside the door,  
a plate skids, breaks on the kitchen tile,  
two voices catch and spin on the rim.

He beckons me to the west corner,  
under the old pear that outlasted our tempers.  
The light is plain. We stand close.

He settles a heavy felt hat on my head,  
covers my ears. Mutton and dust, a room of cloth,  
the house-noise dimmed to seam and nap.

As if that smell could settle the kitchen weather,  
he takes my index finger, lays it to the board,  
guides me along the grain, slow as reading.

I can't make out his words;  
pops go soft inside the hat's dark.  
Our breath shows. The thought of snow comes near.

Then the wedge finds its line,  
the wood opens with a clean report,  
resin rises, almost sweet; the cloth  
seems to quiet the day, keep it warm.



*Sean Wang is a PhD student based in Australia. His poems appear or are forthcoming in West Trade Review, wildscape literary journal, Stone Poetry Quarterly, Pictura Journal, Soul Forte Journal, and O:JA&L (Broadside Series).*



Photo by Firefly Adobe AI

## Lay Me Gently by Diane Webster

Lay me in a boat  
gently upon water,  
push me as a Viking  
prepared for entrance  
to Valhalla with flames  
engulfing my being...

Smoke, ash, fire  
rise skyward  
until the boat succumbs,  
sinks, sizzles into water  
with only memory  
timbers floating  
like a message in a bottle  
on waves as black as night.



*Diane Webster's work has appeared in North Dakota Quarterly, New English Review, Studio One and other literary magazines. She had micro-chaps published by Origami Poetry Press in 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025. Diane has been nominated for Best of the Net and a Pushcart. She was a featured writer in Macrame Literary Journal and WestWard Quarterly. Her website is: [www.dianewebster.com](http://www.dianewebster.com)*



*Photo by Firefly Adobe AI*

## **Autumn in the Park by Diane Webster**

The elderly woman sits  
at a picnic table  
as cottonwood leaves  
spread pieces  
gently around her.

She touches, slides  
leaves like jigsaw puzzle  
pieces searching  
for the right fit.



Photo by Ilo Frey: Pexels.com

### Three Haiku by Amber Winter

how sweetly he carves  
our initials into the sugar maple  
yellow-bellied sapsucker

\*

white-crowned sparrow  
outside the stained glass window  
collection plate

\*

amber tears  
weeping willow  
sheds its leaves



*Amber Winter has worked as a cosmetologist, a fishmonger, a meat cutter, a bank teller, a reporting analyst, and a mom. Her poetry has been published in Frogpond, Kingfisher, Time Haiku, Blithe Spirit, and Soul Poetry, Prose & Art and has appeared in the Dwarf Stars Anthology.*



Photo by Hải Nguyễn: Pexels.com

## Wax Tears by Huina Zheng

"Parents hope their sons will become dragons, their daughters phoenixes." They say this is the gentlest wish a Chinese parent can hold. But once we enter school, we learn the truth: dragons must soar in the high-score clouds, phoenixes must perch atop the rankings.

Tie your hair to a beam so that sleep's nod would jolt you awake. Prick your thigh with an awl to stay alert. Old Chinese tales of students enduring pain and darkness just to keep studying. These are not legends, but survival guides. One more math problem solved. One more poem learned. One more English word memorized. We edge closer to "excellence." Summers carved apart by cram school. Dark circles deeper than a workbook's margin. A knuckle warped from years of gripping a pen. These are our pledges.

Sleep less, eat faster, focus harder, and we become the "model child."

Myopia worsens? But grades climb. Spines curve? But the college entrance cutoff stays straight. Anxiety suffocates? But high scores make adults beam.

Exercise? Friendship? Rest? Until gaokao ends, these don't belong in our vocabulary. To lag behind is a sin, low scores a disgrace, the last row of the classroom exile.

The candle burns, wax tears falling, its body shrinking, light pooling over a perfect test paper. But that light has never shone on us.



*Huina Zheng holds an M.A. with Distinction in English Studies and works as a college essay coach. Her stories have been published in Baltimore Review, Variant Literature, Midway Journal, and other reputed publications. Her work has been nominated thrice for both the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net. She resides in Guangzhou, China with her family.*

Artist & Author Interviews



*Photo by Arvilla Fee*



## Artist Profile: Brian Michael Barbeito

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

I would describe myself and my work as creative and spiritual. By exploring the natural world and memory itself through writing and photography, the spiritual journey and dimension is enhanced and enriched.

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

My wife Tara has been my biggest advocate. She has been a partner in the nature walking since the beginning and a great muse. When it comes to the actual art of making art, she is always there to speak with and often help with the technical side of formatting books. The work is dedicated to her on both a spiritual and practical level. Being a true creative, I have always struggled with the technical side of anything. And she's a Virgo, so her organized and pragmatic nature offsets my dream-like mystical temperament well.

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

I don't have one, as in by a meadow or in a cozy office. I can and do work in coffee shops, at home, while a passenger in a vehicle, at a dinner table, or basically anywhere and anytime.

**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?**

My photography has gotten a lot better. It was good and interesting enough, but now I feel through years of practice that I produce

better pictures. I know a lot more from the offset what will probably work when it comes to light, colour, angle, and things like that. Same for writing. I am more of an artist 'only' these days, in that I'm not that interested in much else. Prose poems and landscape/nature photography won. We are together forever now however it all plays out...

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

Maybe Southern Florida. Pompano Beach area. The place I grew up going to and remember well. In the building that is just there on the beach surrounded by palm fronds and that warm wind, and at the night there is the glow of colorful electric lights on the sands and cement benches, by the sound of the sea, and even the most stone-like soul would find itself softened and perhaps inspired by the atmosphere

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

To, as cliché as it sounds, believe in yourself. I wrote a story called IG7 (Indigo Gemini Seven), that I knew was unique and well done. Nobody was interested in it for a long time. But I didn't change it or lose heart. Then The University of Notre Dame accepted it in their literary magazine, The Notre Dame Review (and they have twenty-one editors), plus chose it to be the single and only on-line feature representing the magazine's 50th Anniversary Issue.

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

Sure. An editor wrote the editors under him and said that he wasn't going to publish me, that the writing piece was beautiful but that nothing happened in the story, and it wasn't what he was looking for. But he sent me the email instead by mistake. When he realized, he asked me if he could call me and did.



### Artist/Author Profile: Baskin Cooper

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

I'm a poet who writes at the intersection of memory, myth, and place. After a first draft, I look for the thread, the ironic or revealing angle that gives the poem its reason to exist. I want each piece to reflect something true about being human, something that lingers after the last line.

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

The late Michael Glaser, former Poet Laureate of Maryland, has been my greatest mentor and inspiration. He taught me that poetry lives in the quiet moment, in those still spaces where words can resonate beyond the page. His wisdom continues to remind me that reflecting in silence is often how a poem finds you.

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

The Blue Ridge Mountains. Time feels suspended there; the outside world falls away, leaving only the stillness of full life: the air, the trees, the ridge lifting against the sky. In that quiet world, it's easy to forget yourself and simply listen to what wants to be written.

- 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?**

Early on, I chased perfection, every poem over-polished until it lost its pulse. Now I trust silence and imperfection more. Honesty and restraint often reveal more than ornament ever could.

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

I'd return to the cliffs of São Miguel in the Azores, where the Atlantic feels endless and alive. The ocean's voice there has the cadence of an old poem, a good place to listen and write.

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

Write down every idea that comes to you, no matter how small or unfinished it seems. You'll be surprised, looking back, to find a phrase or image that makes you stop and think *oh wow!* From that spark, a poem can grow into something that truly matters.

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

Once, while studying in Cork, I accidentally left a notebook full of poems on campus. When I came back the next day, someone had written in bold marker on one page: "This is my favorite one." I still don't know who wrote it, but that very poem later became one of my first published pieces.



## Author Profile: Orman Day

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

At nearly eighty, I feast on my past. Driven by wanderlust, I spent years of my early life with a pack on my back, thumbing, freight hopping, having adventures. Now I have a mountain of scrawled notes from which to draw memoirs.

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

I'm lucky to have friends, family members and a resident muse who cheer every acceptance with attaboys and give me pep talks after rejections.

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

My office is full of what I call creative clutter, some of it scattered across my work table beside my computer where I work. Surprisingly, I can usually find whatever I need.

- 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?**

Ever since I started writing humorous pieces for the school newspaper and a church newsletter in junior high, I loved seeing my words in print and hearing compliments. In high school, I began writing the first of many unpublished serious novels and dreamed of winning the Nobel Prize for literature. The late playwright August Wilson—who was born less than a year before me—said we're promised the work, but not the reward. He did the

work, got the rewards, died early and is now on a forever stamp. I did the work and have not received the literary rewards I hoped for. Yet, I've received rewards in different areas. For instance, I won a motorboat dressed as a frog on Let's Make a Deal.

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

This is a hard choice because I've written in all sorts of places...Tibet, India, Tierra del Fuego. What comes to mind? I'm twenty-two and back in a boxcar crossing Texas sitting in the open doorway a long way from L.A. and its hobo jungle. I have a couple bucks in my pocket and haven't eaten since I bought Hostess Twinkies in El Paso. I have no idea where I'm going, but I'm elated to be immersed in absolute freedom. The train lurches, making it difficult to write in a straight line. Words spill onto the ragged paper on my lap...and I wave to smiling teenaged girls in cars idling at crossing lights.

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

Don't make excuses for not creating. For a year and a half, I was a railroad carpenter and had to report to the job at 7 a.m. During the carpool ride, I wrote a page of my new novel...which I typed during my half-hour lunch break after wolfing down my bologna sandwich. Do that long enough and you have a rough draft. I know any number of newspaper reporters who thought they could write a novel if they quit their jobs and lived at the beach. Of course, they blasted through their savings and talked out their books in bars and cafes without toiling at the keyboard. I find a structured day can help you do your work.

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

Humor has always been an intrinsic part of my life, writing and otherwise. My dad's brother

was a New Yorker cartoonist for several decades and as a kid, I pored over New Yorker cartoons at my grandma's house even though I didn't always understand them. Every other year he visited his family in Southern California from New York and brought filet mignons to barbecue and passed out dollar bills to us kids, who were given dime allowances when my parents could afford it. One year in elementary school, I spread my cartoons around Grandma Day's house just before his arrival. He didn't mention them and when he left, Mom—seeing I was crestfallen—suggested I become a journalist. I fell in love with the word, and my destiny was set. God knows what I would've become if she had said, "Why don't you become a proctologist." A word of advice: if you like to inject your writing with humor, not every editor will want it. Once, I received a short story reject that read, "I laughed all the way through this. Sorry."



### Author Profile: Mackenzie Meeker

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

My work is an extension of who I am—always honest, gritty, and fervent. I never stop myself from writing about human nature, the pain of nostalgia, and the loss of childhood. I embrace old memories, the growing pains of grief, and the nature all around me, from the trees to the little bugs that live in the dirt: all of these staples of human life have formed me into who I am today.

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

My grandpa, who was lovingly known as Papa by all his grandchildren. Papa had the best smile in the world. He had a gentle, loving, and humorous personality to match. When he passed in November 2023, I found myself consumed by grief and a kind of depression I had never experienced before. I had never written anything before Papa's passing, but my grief became both my menace and my catalyst to become the writer I am now. His death inspired me to write about the impact he had on my childhood, my adulthood, and the love I still hold for him. Papa will always be my inspiration because he lives on through my writing, and my nostalgia never lets me forget that. I hope to publish my chapbook about him someday, sharing how much he meant to me and the lasting impact he had on my life, even now.

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

I often find inspiration while running. During those moments, I observe people, reflect on nature, or dwell on thoughts that have been weighing on me. I begin composing poems in my head, and when I return home, I develop those ideas in a Google Doc. I also love walking at night and being surrounded by darkness; the moon and a cool (or warm) breeze inspire me to write. Sometimes I'll pull out my phone mid-walk to capture a poem as it comes to me.

Fun fact: My poem *Nevermore* was inspired by a dead crow I saw one night while walking around campus. It looked so peaceful and beautiful that I felt compelled to write about it.

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?**

When I look back on my early writing, the most significant change I've made is my willingness to abandon conventional and formal styles. I used to write primarily for academic assignments, which came with strict expectations about format and structure. Over time, I have learned to write freely and to let my ideas and emotions guide me rather than adhering to rigid forms. I constantly challenge myself to evolve, experimenting with fragmented structures, vivid imagery, metaphor, poetry, flash fiction, and short stories. As long as my fingers move and my mind remains clear, I will continue to grow as a writer.

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

I would choose Chicago, because that's where my best friend Paige lives. I only see her once a year, so spending a whole day with her writing, chatting, and simply being together would be incredible. Chicago consistently inspires me with its stunning architecture, diverse cultures, vibrant public spaces, and

walkable streets. If I could choose any place to write, it would be in Paige's apartment with her sweet cat Rhiannon, sipping butter pecan lattes, talking about writing, and listening to the sounds of cars honking and people laughing outside.

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

My main advice is to use rejection emails as fuel to keep going. I never let rejection emails make me feel dejected because it means my writing has another chance to be loved by a different editor/ magazine. It takes an incredible amount of effort to share your soul with strangers, who may not like your work. Rejection only makes the acceptance emails taste even sweeter and creates a great sense of achievement in getting a piece of writing published.

My advice is not to be scared to experiment with other forms of writing. I started writing prose poetry, but then transitioned to flash fiction, and later wrote a couple of short stories. If I hadn't experimented with a variety of writing forms, some of my ideas would

never have made it out of my Google Doc draft. My first publication was a flash fiction piece, which is not what I ever envisioned happening to me! So, experiment, experiment, experiment, you never know what you could potentially produce!

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

I'm not sure if this counts as funny, but when my professor, Dr. Amy Kesegich, first arrived at Lake Erie College, I was taking her Introduction to Critical Analysis class. She mentioned wanting to start a Creative Writing Club, and before long, the "club" consisted of just the two of us: Dr. K and me. We laughed about how small and simple it was back then. Fortunately, the story has a happy ending: today, Lake Erie College has a thriving Creative Writing Club full of talented members, and we even publish our own magazine, Lake Erie Echoes. What started as a casual idea has grown into one of the most meaningful and inspiring communities I've ever been part of.



*Photo by Arvilla Fee*

## Happy Fall