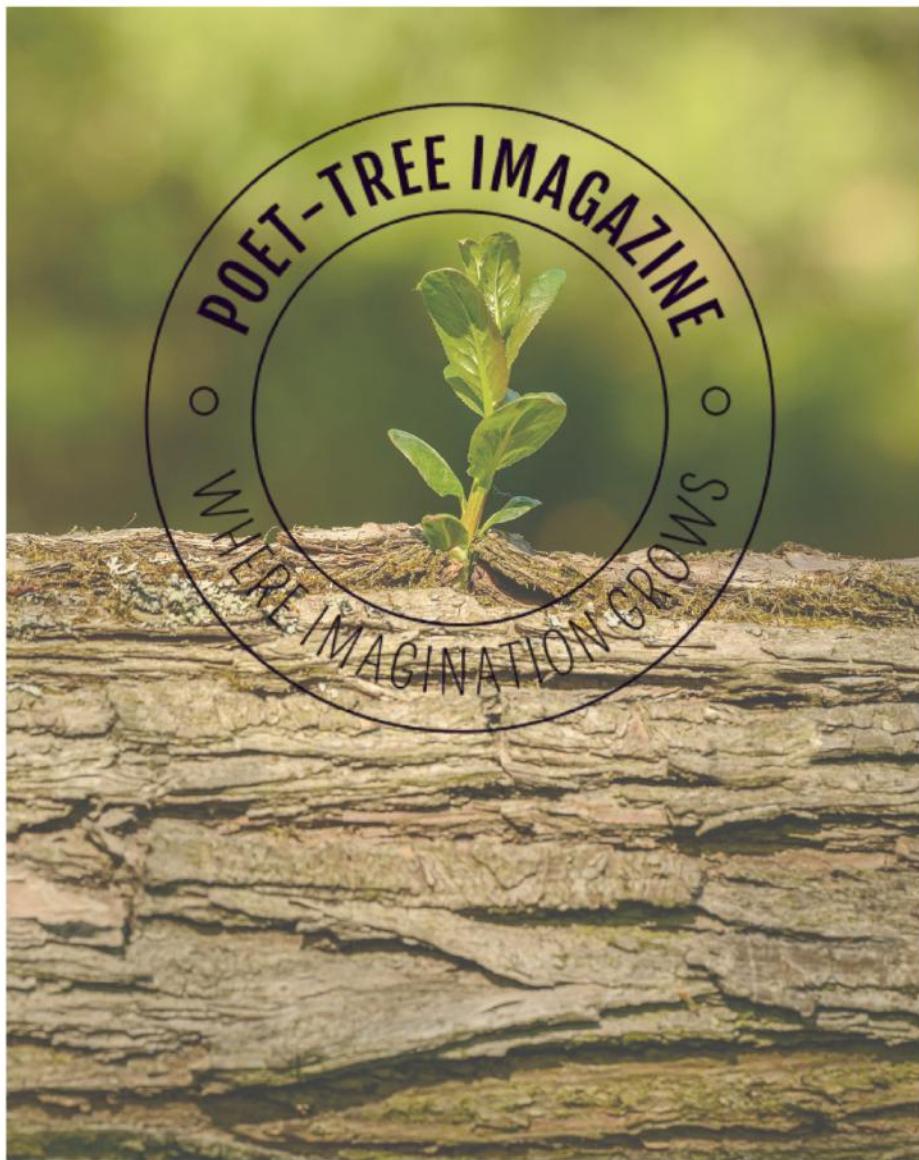


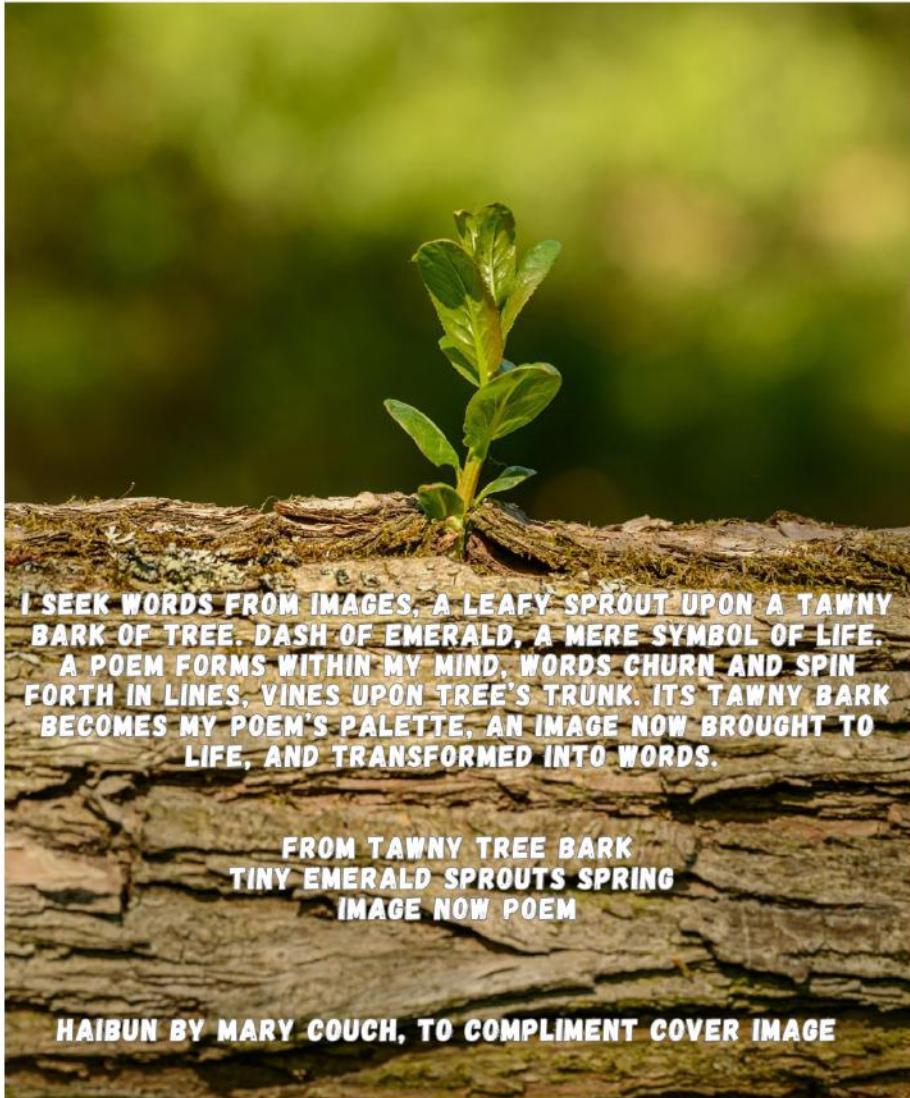
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I SEEK WORDS FROM IMAGES, A LEAFY SPROUT UPON A TAWNY
BARK OF TREE, DASH OF EMERALD, A MERE SYMBOL OF LIFE.
A POEM FORMS WITHIN MY MIND, WORDS CHURN AND SPIN
FORTH IN LINES, VINES UPON TREE'S TRUNK. ITS TAWNY BARK
BECOMES MY POEM'S PALETTE, AN IMAGE NOW BROUGHT TO
LIFE, AND TRANSFORMED INTO WORDS.

FROM TAWNY TREE BARK
TINY EMERALD SPROUTS SPRING
IMAGE NOW POEM

HAIBUN BY MARY COUCH, TO COMPLIMENT COVER IMAGE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 - PERRY ARMSTRONG
- 2 - WAYNE DOC BILES
- 3 - MICHAEL BROCKLEY
- 4 - MAUREEN BRUSTKERN
- 5 - FAITH CANRIGHT
- 6 - MARY COUCH
- 7 - BILL CUSHING
- 8 - KATHY CHAFFIN GERSTORFF
- 9 - MICHAEL GRUBE

- 10 - JOHANNA HAAS
- 11 - PETER KACZMARCZYK
- 12 - JL KATO
- 13 - MONA MEHAS
- 14 - JOANNE MELLIN
- 15 - KAELYNN MERCIER
- 16 - COURTENAY NOLD
- 17 - RUTH NOTT
- 18 - JOHN SHERMAN

- 19 - RITA S. SPALDING
- 20 - ADRIENNE STEVENSON
- 21 - CHRIS STOLLE
- 22 - MICHAEL E. "MAIK" STROSAHL
- 23 - KD TRUDGE
- 24 - HEATHER WINNER*

*DEDICATED TO MY DAUGHTER HEATHER WINNER

PERRY ARMSTRONG

Afternoon Delight

The cold wind blows on where my home once stood.
Where the cooking and baking were both so very good!
People came from miles around just to hear mom say,
“Come and get it” as the order of the day!
The cold and snow never kept anyone away.
So many card games people came to play!
I sure wish that people still played cards today!
Why can’t we get our friends to come and stay?
Cold snow everywhere across the open plain.
Sun came out to shine on us again!
Deer came out and looked at us and grinned
How do they know when the season for them did end?
Sitting at our table we see them plain as day.
A herd of deer just standing there and guns are put away!
Deer sure are smart to be crossing up the line.
When they know to cross at the deer crossing sign!
Clear and crisp is the air where once I called my home.
Where deer still live on the land where Indians used to roam!
Deer and grass will stand where that home of mine once stood!
Voices echo through the hills where that home of mine was good!

A Simple Winter’s Day

It’s a couple of hours and half-past noon
Writing here now, and none too soon!
Concepts inspired by the phases of the moon.
Birds outside, most are happily singing a similar tune!
A dove in tree, where we can hear him coo,
slipped away amid the snowflakes few!
Such a draft it made as up it flew.
Disruptive of the flakes, as it had to do!
Birdbath is full and the feeders are too.
Not a single bit do I see of a sky so blue!
White is the color of the skies above.
And covers our earth like a well-worn glove!
All about us, we see the love for life.
The squirrel outside fed today by my wife!
Our new member, joining a family of three.
Watching this squirrel with sort of a curious glee!
So soon we see the fat squirrel as it would flee.
These creatures sent for us to care, by Thee!
Still and waving that which hangs from the tree.
Are they simple, these things that are seen by me?
A bluebird settled down for a simple bite to eat.
And a sparrow flies in, a few friends he would meet!
One who didn’t make it down under a pine tree.
Maybe dinner for a stray cat, a stranger to me!
Simply, these are what might make up my day.
Entertainment conducted by our cat, once a stray!
The squirrel came back, sort of being fed like this chickadee.
One is staying awhile, but the bird is gone, as he is so quick to flee!

WAYNE DOC BILES

Choices

Choices, choices
Every life filled with Choices
Choices that have to be made
Rough one's Tough ones
Vile and Corrupt Ones
Very seldom their consequences weighed

Choices Choices
We have no more Choices
Our Choices have come to an end
Bold ones, Cold Ones
Lewd and Misconstrued ones.
Where Reality Stops and Eternity Begins

Choices Choices
He has the choices
Heaven or Hell is from what He has to choose
Big Ones Little ones
Past and Forgotten ones
Now Determine if We win or lose!

Little Angel

Hi, my name is Little Angel
for I am in Heaven now, you see.
My Mommy and Daddy didn't want me
They never gave me a chance to be

They weren't married to each other
so I became a huge small problem to bear
they found it easier to end my life
Try to go on like I was never there.

Well they had their chance to turn a wrong into
a right
Where they had once walked in darkness
They could have had me for their light.
A light that would have burned brightly
Brought them Joy and Peace through the years
now I'm only a haunting memory
that brings them sadness and tears.

Now I am in every child's face they see along the
way.
The Child they could have had
If they had just said no that day

Well, I've learned a lot since coming to Heaven
My Heavenly Father teaches me still
He says two wrongs never make a right
And Love doesn't know how to kill.

MICHAEL BROCKLEY

Blood Lines

I descend from man-child warriors who commandeered hounds in the Feud of the Stolen Red Hart. My grandmothers named animals: black leopards, the smallest gazelles, and the rodents that stand sentinel over underground warrens. My grandfathers escaped from terra cotta tombs. An early aunt lived many lives. As Esther, as Ruth, as Lilith. Her children sheltered her in red-and-white striped tents. They domesticated yellow foxes. One great uncle wandered the slaughter fields while trapped in the madness of nightmares. Another memorized the lamentations of killer whales. The Indiana uncle rode locomotive rails to the Oklahoma Nation in pursuit of the frolics and follies he came to know as love. My mother raised me in the shadow of Beowulf. She listened to the odysseys Irish banshees fed into her ears. On weekends, my father drove county roads to collect life insurance premiums paid for with buffalo-head nickels and Mercury dimes. Grievous songs crackled from his dashboard about returning home from prison. About strangers in the night. My father who always steered dark cars named after chiefs.

A Green Man Visitation

When I was a boy still learning how to wet the bed, the Green Man appeared in the hallway of my father's 3 a.m. house. It was the golden age of leftovers. Legos hadn't yet been discovered in the cranberry bogs of Minnesota. Decades later I wooed dark-haired women with turkey Manhattan dinners and movies like *The War of the Roses* and *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*. I fell in love with a dozen blacksmith daughters. One juggling double-fudge chocolate ice cream cones while squirming away from my bumble-thumbed Harlequin advances. Another accused me of masking her Barbie dolls with dinosaur heads. Mornings and evenings pivoted on a prehensile hinge, impatient for Rita Hayworth to toss back her hair while shouting *voila* or *abracadabra*. During one blue moon holiday, I abandoned fezzes, Zero bars, and Zorro. An atheist's Lenten penance. And quit buying tickets to trust-fall carnivals. On the same day, durian blizzards stalled over the Midwest. It must have been the February of diagrammed sentences. Leaning across the future, the Green Man assured me life might return to normal as soon as I won a demolition derby. But it was the year of Civil War beards and handlebar mustaches. A time when any man who shaved went to jail.

MAUREEN BRUSTKERN

Hovering

Butterflies, like mothers flutter and fuss, hover over; proudly glow over loved ones success, worry over unstable, weedy invaders, delight in new growth, fly high in elation, float serenely, alight peacefully when flowers bud in sync, careen wildly, weep inconsolably amid broken petals, shriveled blossoms, promises lost.

Butterflies, like mothers admonish and advise their blooms; aflutter with affection concerned warnings of high winds, toxic fertilizer. Implore flowers to stand straight, flaunt beautiful blossoms, spread enticing scents to careful cultivators, seek sunshine, drink greedily, shield others graciously from wind. Fresh promise.

I Can Be Misled by Butterflies

Into thinking I too am free my wide wings embrace loved ones, keep them safe

But security is not possible in this world of hate and lies gun money trumps safety

Flitting off impossible the world at war with itself raging testosterone and greed

Prosperity gospel mocking Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha saviors cocooned, abandoned,

Surely humanity can overcome, outwit, transform, save ourselves, our planet, our right to exist.

An Outing with My Granddaughter

In the butterfly house we flit and flutter from tree to tree chasing another blue butterfly here yellow there you try capturing them your arms reach high

Shiny sunshine-colored hair laughing claret lips so fair flowing, glowing beauty unbound oblivious to people or sound stunning you and butterflies too in this moment hope abounds.

Butterfly Tea

Two butterflies went out at noon the first alighting ordering tea one running late, flitting crazily unable to find her phone or keys or remember where they were meeting.

Butterfly brains in adult females an epidemic of Attention Deficit undiagnosed for years on end flitting, floating, fumbling for focus feigning a foothold, falling, fading, fearing failure.

FAITH CANRIGHT

A Song of Fire and Ice

She was born bearing a crown of flaming ringlets in a place of deep winter. Just a year later, she toddled behind my mother's casket. I was lost in my grief, and when she was four, she said she would take me to my mom's little wall so I could stop crying. Her description of a headstone eased my misery.

Often waitressing at a posh tearoom where she plated hot scones and dished up fresh zombie brains, she required her patrons to pay their carefully penciled meal tickets with brightly colored holographic credit cards that looked suspiciously like expired bus passes. Once she tried to sell my museum-purchased umbrella for a dollar; luckily, she was selling it to me.

She splashed cool pool to hot tub, back and forth, leaving crisscrossed bare footprints, so weensy, on the paved concrete deck. After all, the water was ever more enticing and exciting in the other basin. She fell "in like" at twelve and with a valiant heart pointed out the special silhouette. And when she turned sixteen, our pierced-ear excursion turned into an agonizing endeavor because—gasp! —she forgot to prepare a song!

Experiencing the world in brilliant and unusual ways, she expresses it in kind. She is a writer and an artist and a paramount delight, and that exquisite pocket naiad has been my heart since her birth in fire and ice.

time to ink
dragonfly and star
summer blaze

No Mercy

shocked once again
by trumpet shrieking
and warriors advancing
into my paranoid landscape -
post-traumatic stress disorder.

my pallor increases
as my blood drains
onto the sacrificial altar -
major depressive disability.

impaled on the pike of destiny
fated to be destroyed
by the invisible enemy -
intractable dysthymia.

"Just snap out of it!"
you are, oh, so helpful
and understanding
why didn't I think of that?

Psych Ward

Protected in a cocoon,
tightly wrapped beside the others,
we'll each burst out,
flutter away in myriad colors,
delighting in our freedom.

But only some
will remain in the wind.
Others will have their beauty
smudged by careless fingers.

And me, I'll be the one
with my wings pinned back,
just another dusty specimen
in a child's dead science project.

1854

Get thee behind me, Satan,
let the brown pelicans dive.
The lighthouse flames forever into hell
for heaven's sake.

MARY COUCH

Unwelcomed Guest

That wasn't there before on the sink
when I came to the kitchen for a drink.
There was just a saucer and coffee cup.
Now that is sitting there, what's up?

I need to step back and take a look.
Yes, it is still sitting on my book.
I want to shriek, or give a shout.
I need to do something to get it out.

I look around for a jar or coffee can,
but only see my old frying pan.
I back away from the sink, it jumps.
I run, trip on the carpet, lose my pumps.

It stares at me, then leaps to the floor,
I back up, it scurries to front door.
I throw door open, and let it out of my house
that tiny obnoxious terrifying mouse.

Kiss of Life

Once in a while, I would like a kiss
to keep my day from going amiss.
Sometimes, I need two or three,
other times, it takes more for me.

Sweet, light, and extremely fine,
kisses for me are quite sublime.
They make my day go much better
when dealing with the Irish setter.

If I start my morning with just one,
nothing stops me till the setting sun.
Kisses were made for me to enjoy,
and I love them more than any boy.

Nothing in this world can ever compete
with a **Hershey Kiss**, life's special treat.

It's Hard to be an Artist

I sat at the table, started to draw
when from out of nowhere, I saw a paw.
Little Miss Kitty grabbed hold of my brush,
and bounced off the table in a big rush.

I chased after her, she fled through the door.
I lost my balance, and slipped on the floor.
Returned to the table, sat with a sigh.
Suddenly, I felt a paw on my thigh.

Said, "I'm the artist," and took back my brush.
She jumped in the paint tray, showed me her
tush.
Then pranced across my canvas with each paw,
and the painting she made left me in awe.

Grandma's Clothesline

At Grandma's house, I'd play
with my dog, Little Jay.
In her backyard you'd find,
grass, flowers and clothesline.
On the rope she'd hang shirts,
pants, sheets, towels, and skirts.

In her yard I would play,
Dragon Quest every day.
The shirts now were my knights,
and sheets, Dragons of Lights
that flew upon the wind
while Little Jay would spin.

Between the poles their lair,
and my sword slashed the air.
"Save the damsel," I'd cry
then attack sheets now dry.
I miss those days of old,
and tales that clothesline told.

BILL CUSHING

A Haibun for Gunner's Mate Styles

Joe Styles never made it to high school, tilling his dad's land instead. Then, he heard—and headed—the call, ceding farm-calloused hands to the sea where he boarded tin cans for Korea, stayed until Vietnam. Immersed in munitions, he sits—a cigarette in one hand, in the other a broken-in ceramic mug at the ready and emblazoned with crossed cannons. He squints as if to contemplate tangents, azimuths, windage, elevation. Showing the steady skill to deliver the killing blow, he climbed the ranks to become Chief Styles. Comfortable in khakis but stiff in dress blues. He punctuated life with insight of his own: “Never trust a man whose wardrobe includes loafers but no socks.”

his eyes pierced a line
with sight more true than the times
he'd bleed saltwater

Fallen Mighty

Once her beauty could pry
others' eyes from a bride.

Then, she was forced to swallow
the pill of becoming human

as obligations, and her life
as a wife, tore down her facade,
stripping the illusion
of cosmetics to reveal

the person below the surface,
the one who was real.

Sub-Imayo: USS Tang, Pacific Theater*

Bubbles guide us through the seas,
hidden under waves:
death less than an inch away—
until battle's done.
We climb ladders to clean air,
and we've beaten back
enemy surface vessels—
our adversaries.

*During World War II, the USS Tang sank 33 enemy vessels to become the deadliest submarine in the Navy at that time. Ironically, the Tang was sunk by its own torpedo in the Taiwan Strait in 1944.

What's Left Behind Hurts Most

Someone thumbtacked the moon too low
as well as off kilter tonight,
glimmering off the hermitage
she chose, wishing for the luck of
Thecla. She detected the patterns
before they could coalesce and
bloom into a sadistic scenario.
Now, sitting outside the A&P,
huddled in a cardboard box
like so many kittens or puppies,
squat the children she offers to give away.

KATHY CHAFFIN GERSTORFF

Child of Spring

Children's laughter echoes
On a gentle breeze,
Carrying me back to
My childhood springs.

Winter's dark days
Trapped indoors
Until finally,
The sun shined
Long enough to melt
Frozen angel tears.

I step outside and feel
The kiss of God on my face,
Followed by a warm embrace.

Birds serenade me.
Butterflies dance around me.
Flowers smile at me.
Tree buds swell with pride.

We are all so happy
To be back to life.

Feeling forgiving earth
Beneath my feet.
I let out the toxic breath
Held in so long,
I thought I would suffocate.

Fresh air fills my lungs
As I pray for peace and love
For everyone.

I suddenly remember,
The child of spring
That nature nurtured
Still lives within me.

I see life is in perfect harmony.
Hope for a brighter tomorrow
Blooms in spring.

Wondering

Under a blushing sky,
I wonder why we are born,
Just to die.

Is it to hear a newborn baby's cry,
See God through a child's eyes.

Is it to feel a warm embrace,
Feather kisses upon our face.

Is it to make beautiful art, music, poetry,
Leave a legacy.

Is it to watch birds in flight,
Get a better view of starry nights.

Is it to go on grand adventures,
Make the world a better place.

Or is it to learn to love unconditionally,
Earn our wings,
Set our spirit free...

Catch and Release

We swim along
singing our soul-song,
oblivious to the hero's journey
that awaits us.
Suddenly caught
in the current
of life.
We live, laugh, cry,
love...
In a blink,
we are released
back to nature
and our next
grand adventure.

MICHAEL GRUBE

The Coffee's Stain

Coffee stains on a blank page tell more a story of moral pain than a letter to remember why we stay awake the brew in December is the season of flakes, so the drink is to keep us warm with memories to make. So don't break and bend to the will of the end because life is more than the emotional trend. And we tend to sway towards the easy way, being lifeless without friends is too common a thing especially when our instinct to think survivability and that's why we crave the drink that keeps us awake. For the ability to think not shrink to our turmoil of restless chains of the same pain; that's far too grave. So here in this world where we're forced to behave, we all become slaves to the coffee's stain. Its perfect circle, the same as the sun, the beautiful aroma that fills our lungs, to get us through til spring has sprung. In the same lungs in that beautiful season the flowers have given us a beautiful meaning. We step outside and then we breathe in, and finally we see that we're still breathing.

Darkness's Night Light

You may not know me, but I do know you I've seen the depths of dark consume many a poet, And many a room Many a thing has spelled certain doom I've touched every wall, every cranny and nook I've been the atlas upon which you've read your book And yet when days are bright and night is gone You steal my light before the dawn Oh please just once let me stay Let me see a face without dismay Let me know more of you Than what you hide in this room Let me see the bright display Of all the things illuminated by my face Yes I will stay and fight your night But I can't be the only thing this bright.

The Trees Are My Home

Let the gardens take me between their foliage and fractured light. Let me linger like morning dew in spring, Clinging to the trembling leaf, A quiet witness to the hours. And so, I am undone. The deciduous trees carve mercy into my soul, as though reckoning itself has opened somber eyes and craves to taste the reasons I hide today. Sepulcher, leave me where I may lay. Let the leaves cradle me in their whispered hymns, While the trees sway in the breeze, Bowing their heads to me in solidarity. Bear the burden of my silent screams; The hollow wind strikes me again, but mercy knows my name. So please, I plead, rise once more. Let its lament braid itself into the dusk. You cannot shake me from this sanctuary, The sacred ruin of earth and branch. You cannot take me, not when the roots themselves bind me fast, Not when I am wrapped in the breath of ancient things.

JOHANNA HAAS

Yes, I Put My Pants On

Yes, I put my pants on
just like anyone else.
I stand on my right leg and
put my left leg in first,
but the pants catch on my heel
or my knee
and I hop around on one foot
(my balance is bad)
and I fall backward
onto my bed
where I poke both legs
up and into the air
and put my other foot
into the pants-hole
to pull both legs
on at the same time.
Yes, I put my pants on the same way you do.

Pink Slippers

My new slippers are pink
and woolen and warm
insides lined with sheep shears
and rubber on the bottoms.
I can sneak around anywhere
in my new pink slippers
you can't hear me coming
or going or moving at all.
My toes are warm
and I have room to wiggle them
unlike in my old slippers
which were falling apart.
But I can't wear my new slippers
outside of the house
they are inside-only shoes
these new pink slippers of mine.

There's a Boot in the Dryer

There's a boot in the dryer
Flup – clup, flup – clump,
There's a boot in the dryer
Flup – clump
There's a bell in the dryer
Ding – chunk, ding – chunk
There's a bell in the dryer
Ding – chunk
There's a kitten in the dryer
Yeeeeowl, got her, she's safe
There was a kitten in the dryer
Now she's safe.

Jose Wants To Be an Outdoor Dog

Jose wants to be an outdoor dog
He's a pit bull, you know,
But he's shaped like a tater,
And he's sweet like cheap wine.

So he just wouldn't make it
As an outdoor dog today.
He needs to stay on the sofa
And get more cuddles from you.

Ice Fishing Cats

In which one of the great mysteries of the world
remains unanswered

Cats like to eat fish.
And cats like to fish fish.
I have had multiple cats
Who fished snacks
Out of my aquarium.
But can a cat ice fish?
I've never seen one.

All poems originally published on my SubStack
- <https://johannahaas.substack.com>

PETER KACZMARCZYK

Your Chorus

We all sang for you once
You keep us now each
Stored in your private chamber
When the mood strikes you
You take us out and wind our keys
Get us tuned to perfect harmony
Some of us high
Like castrato from another age
Some boom as a baritone
To shake the ground beneath you
Some you use to lift you up
Some you use to make yourself
Just a little crazy
In time though we fall out of key
No longer carrying the tune you need
And are retired again to our crystal shells
Our voices no longer desired
Our faces fading away

Afterthought

You kept me around
To dust off only when it suited you
To go to a party or an opening night
My CV looked good on your hip
My contacts valuable as names to drop
You'd have me speak to lift you up in the eyes
Of the artists and the donor class
Under the bright lights you would smile at me
As if it were love

Silent in the car
Except to say how marvelous it was
When the important people would turn and stare
Home again you would have me walk the dog
While you poured one last drink and changed
Put aside your dress and party face
Soon I would be closeted again
A pair of hands to clean the messes
A source of warmth beside you
But otherwise a bedroom afterthought

Good Enough For Me

I'm not alone
The music plays through the house
Almost loud enough to drown out
The purr of the cat
I'm not alone
I can create my own wind
I can harness the bad thoughts
Have dreams that are not made
To simply fade away
I'm not alone
I'm just myself taking a walk
Seeing the edges and the curves
That nature gives us
Can't it be enough?
I am alone
I can't hold onto love
I can't be good enough for you
I have to accept that I just need to be
Good enough for me

Emotional Pirate

I should have been happy just to care for you
Never wanted to find that I loved you
Yet I was drawn to need more
As you gave little glimpses
Slightly cracking the door
That led me deeply into
Your feelings and your stories

It took me too long to understand
You are an emotional pirate
You smile and twist and charm
Take what you need
Then push us out to sea
Left afloat lost stranded and alone

JL KATO

Shinobi

Ninjas walk among us, watching
every naked move we make.

They saw when we strolled, unclothed,
stopping to pick up cold, flat stones.
We flung them at the sleeping cranes,
held sacred for happiness and long life.

Recall the hour we taunted the homeless
huddled beneath the temple bridge.
We hurled rice balls soaked in sour wine,
fingers smelling of vinegar and dill.

Remember when we stole ashes from
an urn, then picked the unburnt bones?
While mourners shrieked, we danced
like demons in the lunar light.

Ninjas see and whisper among themselves,
demanding penalties of bamboo and blade.

Why I No Longer Take My Cat to the Art Museum

Unbeknown to me, in his portrait of *Mona Lisa*, Leonardo da Vinci's scientific mind created a portal, through which my cat dashes before I could grab his tail to pull him back as he hisses and yowls.

News of the escapade shoots throughout the feline universe, and before I know it, as fast as Tom chases Jerry, all sorts of cats invite themselves to check out the new cat lady. The Cheshire Cat argues with Mona Lisa on the proper way to smile. He unsuccessfully urges her to ditch the demure smile for a full frontal display of teeth.

Ms. Lisa can't resist reprising Sylvester's sibilance, the sloppy lisp of "Suffering succotash!" on her lips.

Garfield introduces her to the lasagna diet, making possible the flirtatious overtures from Rubens.

And now the conservators are charging me for the cost of brushing out Mona Lisa's new Hello Kitty bag.

But it doesn't end there. In *Nighthawks*, my furry friend steps over a diner's plate of eggs to order a tuna sandwich. His buddies batter the tops of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, leaving seedless, naked heads. *The Peaceable Kingdom* becomes a pissing ground when the Lion King swaggers in.

In two weeks, my cat will limp home, exhausted, but pleased. He will direct me to read Hemingway aloud, hoping to discover a path to his polydactyl cousins.

Instead, I will read
about Sandburg's metaphorical cat
stepping lightly as the fog.

Dance

Living is just a dance with death.
Even wallflowers get their turn.
Even I will see my dance card filled.

MONA MEHAS

Grandmother's Arms

They put my grandmother in a bottle because her hugs were too fierce. Her hugs sometimes spanned days and nights. I'd try to escape her grasp to catch the bus for school, but she held me closer, not wanting to let go. When she fell asleep, her grip loosened. Any child in her arms slithered away, but when her arms were empty, she jerked awake crying. Her cries were so loud she woke the neighbors for miles around. The town folk voted against grandmother's hugs and sentenced her to the bottle. The constable escorted her there himself, barely escaping a hug when he squeezed her in through the long, slender neck. Though it was decorative and well-furnished, she was lonely. She wailed all hours, calling children to her bottle. I led the way to the constable's office. We'd come up with a plan. If grandmother were allowed to visit with us, she wouldn't cry and disturb the community. We promised not to break her out. The constable had one condition. That is how my grandmother lost her loving arms. She closed her eyes and allowed the town doctor to remove them, the arms that had held me not so long before. With her arms gone, the loose sleeves wrapped around her chest, her hair grew extensions. Grandmother slipped through the bottle's neck, and I leaned against her, the straw-like hair brushing my shoulders, lulling me to sleep.

*This poem is on website:
<https://www.monamehas.net/blog/archives/2023-08>*

*On display August 2023 at Kokomo Artworks, Kokomo Indiana with art by Lisa Freeland (Royal Emerald of the Royal Bitches) Bottle Art.
<https://shorturl.at/vaVY5>*

Bring it Back*

You, in tight white pants, shirtless
on a stool next to Brian
and his 12-string acoustic
you sing of losing the love of your life
the audience joins you on the chorus
You, with your perfect overbite
how many octaves could you reach

I was on my way to work that morning
almost winter, snow-covered roads
radio played a Queen song
then the announcement
I had to pull over
couldn't drive for the tears
I'd lost you, love of my life

You live on the internet
and in my memory
I often cry watching the videos
You at the piano
or dancing on stage
I imagine myself in the front row
singing with you and the crowd
You will never know what it means to me

**Based on YouTube Queen video, Love of My Life, Rock Montreal 1981.
<https://shorturl.at/kcz79>*

Aging

my hips fail, more body aches
my gait has slowed to a crawl
rest does not improvement make
my hips fail, more body aches
don't know how much more I can take
using rollator, give it my all
my hips fail, more body aches
my gait has slowed to a crawl

JOANN MELLIN

Wife

When I was married,
I tried hard to be a wifey-wife
and cook for my first husband,
but Walter and I drank so much beer
that meals were a bit haphazard.
I do remember using a lot of Shake 'N Bake.

And I did my best to be domestic
for the next one, John,
in spite of the booze and pills.
Sometimes I made beef stew —
I don't even like beef stew, but he did.
My specialty was spaghetti sauce —
I could polish off the wine that was left
after the few tablespoons that went into it.

I lucked out when I got sober
and married Don, my third.
He was on disability with a heart condition
couldn't work, but he loved to cook.
I worked and he cooked,
we were made for each other.
But he's gone now too, poor heart.

These days I keep it simple —
salad, a sandwich, or, like tonight,
a microwave egg on an English muffin.
No need now to pretend.
No one left to feed.

Charleston, SC, Navy Base

I remember a dirt pile —
we played King of the Mountain on it —
no one could touch me.
My friend's father took us to a swamp
and let us ride on a mule —
sticker burrs got on my socks.

We had a parakeet named Whiskey Tenor.
Mother listened to the radio while she ironed

I knew all the words to "Mr. Sandman, Bring
Me A Dream".

When I was sick
She read to me from "Misty of Chincoteague".
We drove the city to see the brick streets.
The Spanish Moss made things mysterious.

I lied to Daddy about stealing blackberries
my mouth was stained blue from them.
One day I tried to figure out which burner was
on
by placing my palm on each one — it hurt.
Daddy said I was all brains
and no common sense.

Our dog Patrick was lost for days —
I moped on the porch until he came home.
A Marine at the PX gave me a baby rabbit that
died.
The neighbor's dog killed our pet turtle.
The boy next door
shot a squirrel out of the Magnolia tree.

Our maid Lavinia took care of me.
She took me fun places on the bus —
I felt safe with her.
I made my First Communion in a white dress.
I had pigtails
until Mother gave me a permanent.

I've never gotten over it.

Heart of Stone

Rocks from Vermont rivers
line the sills of my porch,
rocks from the beach in New Hampshire.
Once I thought I was special,
believing in their stony little souls —
now I know I'm not the only one.
So many people
have their small rock armies.
We know, if you crack open a rock
you will break its heart of stone.

KAELYN MERCIER

Hungry Ghosts

I don't remember the first time hunger felt safer than fullness,
when silence at the dinner table became a weapon I wielded.
My stomach growling was the only voice I trusted—
a symphony of control in a world too chaotic to hold me.

It started as whispers, soft and convincing.
“Smaller,” they said, “be smaller. Take up less. Be less.”
And I listened like they were gospel.
Chased the high of shrinking,
found comfort in the ache of emptiness,
like it could hollow out the pain too.

But recovery—oh, recovery—
it sounds like a promise you're not sure you believe.
They tell me it's worth it,
but they don't tell me how heavy it feels to eat when every bite tastes like failure,
when the mirror whispers back lies,
and no one hears them but me.

I want to be free—God, I want to be free.
But how do you escape something that lives inside you,
that crawls into the cracks of your mind and convinces you it's the only thing keeping you alive?

They say, “One day at a time,”
but what about the days where the time stretches long,
when the guilt presses like a weight on my chest,
and I'm gasping for air between bites?
What about the nights when the shame sings me to sleep?

When I wonder if I'll ever be whole enough to feel anything but this war raging under my skin?

People see the surface:
the hollow cheeks, the numbers on the scale,
the calories counted like confessions.
But they don't see the ghosts I carry,
the ones I'm afraid will never leave.
Even when I'm eating,
even when I'm trying,
I feel them lurking, waiting,
telling me I'll never be enough,
or worse—too much.

I'm afraid of recovery,
afraid of the way it asks me to trust what I've spent years trying to destroy.
Afraid that I'll climb the mountain,
only to fall again,
spiraling into a darkness that knows my name too well.

But I'm also afraid of staying here,
in this purgatory,
where hunger feels like power
but eats me alive from the inside out.

So I keep walking this tightrope,
one trembling step after another,
hoping that maybe, just maybe,
I'll find the other side.
A place where food is fuel,
where mirrors are just glass,
and my worth is no longer weighed by the lies I've been fed.

Until then, I'll carry these ghosts,
not to honor them,
but to remember that I survived them.
And maybe, one day,
I'll learn to live again.

COURTENAY NOLD

Depths of My Mirror

When that closet lightbulb glared above, on the dark side of my mirror
Hair arose, bristled, on all available skin
Replacing all feeling with nothingness hidden behind my closet door

Leaving pain and unpredictability held within the daylight hours
Escaping screams of a demon woman as my grandmother came calling
The place I ran away to behind my closet door, never looking in the mirror

Escaping by flashlight to explore a dominion considered safe from cackled shrieks
Awaking revelations as a secret garden of comfort cried 'Hope'
I sought emotional shelter through discourse and imaginary depths

Until, in a moment of my silence, her demons broke my cradle of sweet consolation
Overhead the bulb once again glared with heat drawn to my huddled countenance
An unbearable feeling of being hunted crawled its way back...prickling shivers down my spine

Her face forged of hardship and heartlessness, well past the point of caring
She swung open my door and hot breath hit me hard; the mirror reflected jealousy and rage
No choice but to depart safety's cage, dwell again, and simply exist within a realm of nothingness

Blades of Insignificance

why can life be reduced to insignificance but sacrificial discoveries guide meaning and perception
falling by the wayside
toppling thoughts of imaginative wonder
a bridge between existences
steadily breaking understanding
with each unspoken word
footsteps crumble ahead as behind
relevancy and differences engage in battle
and puzzling realization disconnects within each mind's construct
inhabiting humanity daily but cheating death
with steps upon every crack and line
left out of life but still fighting
to gain a ticket for admittance
walking alongside quiet creek beds
earning cat-tail cuts on legs, arms, and face
raining down crimson beads between blades of insignificance

Glass

Thunder and lightning
Within a realm
Strolling too far
On solid glass
Avoiding cracks
Unnatural paths
Can be broken
Shattered pieces a cascade of stained glass
Swallowing me whole
Leaving behind no trace
But my red mitten frozen in time

RUTH NOTT

Exhausted!

Once upon a midnight dreary I became so very weary...typing keys and missing many, the words I typed were not like any I had ever seen before. Frustrated by my bumbling fingers, I closed my tablet and did not linger. Shuffling slippers on my feet, I found, at last, my night complete and headed for the bedroom door. Carefully kneeling by my bed, I cleared my thoughts and bowed my head. I said my prayers and doused the light and to myself I said "Goodnight!"

Dawn

When light first breaks the darkness there's a time of contemplation and prayer; when feathers ruffle and fledglings peep; when nesting squirrels stretch and descend to begin a day of foraging and play; when the silence of the night gives way to the cacophony of the day; when your senses awaken to the touch of the sheets, the faint scent of jasmine on the breeze, the snoring of the dog at your feet; when your eyes beg for another moment of sleep and your tongue tries to moisten your lips as you frown at the taste of dawn.

Morning Has Broken

Curled and comfortable, not wanting to move, yet knowing it's time, the comfort of night gone as another day begins...my eyes open to darkness yet the morning has begun. My body aches to stretch long and leisurely, but I cannot, for, behind my thighs, a furry shape curls and at my feet another. I emerge, slowly but surely extricating myself from among my bedmates, grab my fresh clothes for the day, and ease my stiff and aging body into movement. Darkness has turned to shadows on the lawn. Morning has broken and soon sunlight will be streaming through the trees.

Tomorrow

Tomorrow isn't promised. We only have today to try to do the best we can in every single way. Begin today with prayer and tell Him your concerns, then truly believe and trust Him and accept His love in return. Today is most important. Be kind to all you meet. Share your love and faith so none need feel defeat. Don't think about tomorrow for today may be your last. Decide to live it well before its time has passed.

Celestial Farewell

As though the hand of God were wiping the wrinkles from our foreheads and the dust of a long day from our eyes, night descends in peaceful shades of pink and purple haze to kiss the day-weary sun adieu as it slips below the horizon.

JOHN SHERMAN

A Poem About Madrid Before I Ever Went*

madrid: images of orange and
brown and specks of black
dust over most things
old wood
women standing in doorways
one step up from the brick street
looking with wrinkles
at you the stranger
greeting you with a frown
more against the sun over your shoulder
than against you
then smiling as you smile
and say in your never before used tongue:
buenos dias

madrid: images of children
kicking a small ball
hitting it with a stick
posters of franco
and the new king
churches and church music
widows praying with widows

young men in shirts and slacks too small
a bit brown
moorish blood
curly hair
teeth set off by the darker face
talking to women with long black hair
snappy eyes and white blouses
sitting in the plaza
as the sun
makes everything about copy itself in
long black duplicates across the square

madrid: images of orange
and brown and specks of black

I wonder when I get there
if I shall have the same images
for my return

Fall Creek Parkway Indianapolis 1959**

I know just where she was on the northside
sidewalk
along fall creek parkway south of the marott

how often on today's downtown errands do I
glance
at the very spot on that walk
that I have designated where she was in full
stride
on her way to school
when a young white boy leaped across the aisle
to get to the open window of
our yellow bus that rushed into her life
and pushed on through heavy traffic
before she could hear our collective gasp
and our own words of anger at his unseemly act

as an adult I remember my childhood most
clearly
as quick moments of its intensities:

the back of the woman's head
the white blouse
the shoulders bent over an armful of books
the morning sun and gentle breeze

the perfect seconds before
the boy's sudden dash
the protruding face mouthing an unnecessary
the welcoming clear and sunny morning
despoiled

**A Poem About Madrid Before I Ever Went* was
published in *Xavier Review*
***Fall Creek Parkway Indianapolis 1959* was
published in *Flying Island Online*

RITA S. SPALDING

Tattoos

i mark myself with ink art
to tell my strange life story
to say how i always remember
the twists of where i came from

body art that subtly tells
who i am under the scratches
i hear my father's gravelly voice
see him buttoning my woolen coat

off to school with his words in my throat
they are now etched on my left calf
royal blue dragon shades my right calf
she becomes a whipping wind when i walk

she's beautiful and curved and tells how
i've overcome the death of my soul and
lived to sing my scars from the bowels of hell
she reminds me I can never be broken again

she reminds me that in darkness there is light
my body my fleshy ink art my whispering soul
a castle fortress for all the world to see
courage that settled its restless self

when there was nothing else left of me
my shoulders back and legs forward
pumping my story with each step
my signature written in ink art

Ghost Venom

why do I listen to voices of the past
tilted sideways in my head
lost deep in cold chasms
i thought they left when you closed the door

but there they were again last night
with doubt tied in red bundles
dashing the dreams of angels

grated words scraping like flint against kindle

shhh shhhh with your venom of long ago
today I choose instead listening to freedom
the kind that whispers like loosened ribbons
falling from hair that knows it is beautiful

Bewitched

In the witching hour I awake,
straddling my bed like the letter X.
I own it and wear it proudly,
yet wonder where you and why
you are not here, marking the spot.
That spot that belongs to gentle arms,
holding me like no other has before,
loving me like no other has before.

Written delicately, this fragment of who I am,
caught by hot comfort of a golden aura,
and your shining crown caught by longing ache,
matched perfectly breath by breath with my
own;
your scent lingers near, if only in thoughts.

In the darkness I feel your beautiful hands
holding wet taste in their hungry fingers.
Speaking silent words in my open mouth,
smoothing the sheets where I touch.

Where fingers should be resting in
the middle of the letter X, I reach.

ADRIENNE STEVENSON

Back in Old Country

My grandfather says
his family farmed fertile land
in the great plain that stretches
between Mother Russia and Europe
near Grodno. I ask him where that is.
He pulls a worn map from a drawer
Points out a spot with no name
Right about there, he says
I do not understand, but listen
for more tales of his life.

When I was a little older than you
he says, ruffling my hair, I left
that farm, crossed the ocean
that waved like our grain fields
and stormed like autumn rains
to this new land—they sent me
where they chose, to mining country
where life was hard—even harder
than working fields by hand.

My mother says not to believe
his nostalgic tales of the homeland.
His sister wrote a letter, telling
of their hardship, near starvation
after the cow died. Just think, she says,
what poverty he has endured.
And yet, I share my grandfather's dream
of distant lands and waving fields
of endless summers, snowy winters

of a place not much different
from the one I now remember
in my childhood. My grandfather died
not long after those tales were told,
believing to the last in a land
not torn by war or riven by tyrants
but soft, inviting, generous, fertile
—a vision growing more precious
than reality might ever be.

Paintoum

pain is a constant in our lives
there on Copenhagen's shore
the little mermaid walks on knives
in agony forevermore

there on Copenhagen's shore
where Viking ships set forth to raid
in agony forevermore, by sword
on shields their victims laid

where Viking ships set forth to raid
with many toasts of honey wine
on shields their sworded victims laid
now flowers blow in meadows fine

with many toasts of honey wine
hark! how the voices gladly sound
now flowers blow in meadows fine
come celebrate the fruitful ground

hark! how the voices gladly sound
around the laden board they meet
to celebrate the fruitful ground
measure a dance with willing feet

around the laden board they meet
parched by a thirst that will never quench
measure a dance with willing feet
never foresee the impending stench

parched by a thirst that will never quench
blinded by greed for unending meat
never foresee the impending stench
of broken bodies in the street

blinded by greed for unending meat
closing their eyes to unpleasant sight
of broken bodies in the street
cruel monsters rear ugly heads at night

closing their eyes to unpleasant sight
(the little mermaid still walks on knives)
cruel monsters rear ugly heads at night
pain is a constant in our lives

CHRISTOPHER STOLLE

After the Robbery (for my father)

I buckled your seatbelt
on your last ride home.

I should have said something,
but you wouldn't have responded.

Your parents, still alive then,
never came to visit you.

Your wife built your shrine
on a dresser she got in 1968.

When thieves ransacked the house,
my first instinct was to ensure
they hadn't kidnapped you.
But you were safe, quiet,
unloved in your black box.

Eclipsed

If the universe could replace
the darkness of hate
with the colors of love
enhancing and sharpening
a neglected palette
would we recognize their brilliance?

If the universe could untangle
the locked hearts
from the fears of rejection
making loneliness
an extinct species of pain
would we recognize their potential?

If the universe could reconstruct
broken molecules into stars
or sunbeams or nebulas
giving light to infinity
and beyond shadows
would we recognize their reflections?

Cabo Ruivo, Lisbon: December 8, 1941 (for Madeleine Lebeau)

Cranky black telephone shivers.
Rick hesitates, lifts the receiver.
Static tickles his ears, his lips.
Between clicks, the tapped signal,
he hears her demure accent,
the Norwegian lilt comforting.

Japan bombed the United States,
she says, and Victor's been arrested,
the perpetrators' names swallowed.
This never would have happened
if you'd gotten on the plane, she says.
More static stifles, then releases
her voice, relinquishing her tears.

Rick says, Ilsa, you can't love
a man you've left behind twice.
He unplugs the phone, his heart,
the piano keys begin cascading,
and he lets this time go bye.

MICHAEL E. “MAIK” STROSAHL

Oubaitori*

she matured early,
he came around late,
that girl grew up
to be a fine man

but at this moment,
gathered,
posed with smiles—
because everybody
smiles for a camera

in spite of pains,
through sobs and tears,
hiding away their
nagging fears and doubts

to capture
the entire famdamily:
intellectual botanists and
blooming idiots alike

a bouquet standing,
supporting as equals
a cherry from the blossom,
together with
the peach, the plum, an apricot

sharing stories,
laughing,
remembering
when the broken branch
lying in the box
wasn’t

*(Originally written for Poetry Warrior site
prompt, also appeared on Our Days Encounter
1/20/24)

Death of the Aerialist**

I dreamed of falling,
a drop of rain from an
empty sky

and it held me to the wire
from the early days
through those near-fearless—
gravity had no hold
beyond the taut line
held firm and steady,
calm as a leisure walk

I dreamed of falling
and saw my family rain,
a tragic storm of Wallendas

I cried,
tears tumbling to the circus floor

but what does not kill
must be conquered,
again, again,
the survivors rising
to honor those
who can fly no more

so we flew again,
and we were great

I kept dreaming of my fall,
defying it all these years,
yet when gravity finally
shook me loose
from San Juan’s air,
I could not help
scraping fingertips against the sky,
grasping for a cloud
to save this dreamer
from his end.

**Inspired by “The Last Man” Painted by Billy Charles Duvall. (Previously appeared on Moristotle & Company blogspot 5/19/21)

KD TRUDGE

Imperfectly Perfect

imperfectly balanced
she hangs gently on her axis
spinning slowly
while she rocks her roll

stars separated by darkness in between
darkness creates purpose for light
oceans give rise to land on both sides
valleys define the mountainside

death of winter brings rain and life
the heat of summer brings drought and strife
summer ends as fall begins
winter upon us spring beckons again

not too young not too old
not too hot not too cold
sun provides energy
while darkness rests her soul

earthquakes tornados
hurricanes volcanos
mother recalibrates as if by fate
never too early never too late

perfectly balanced
she hangs gently on her axis
spinning slowly
while she rocks her roll

Heaven Above

Stars are alone in the sky tonight.
The sound of silence feels just right.
One breaks free, a flash of light.
A moving twinkle paints the night.
Monet's brush, from heaven above.
These are the nights I truly love.

Campfire crackles, the smell of fire.

A peaceful moment, I'm warm and tired.
Crickets sing, the songs of night.
Early birds usher, morning's twilight.
Angel's breath, from heaven above.
These are the mornings I truly love.

Sun shines, daylight breaks.
Morning dew dissipates.
The smell of flowers in the air.
Butterfly's fluttering everywhere.
Bright white pillows, from heaven above.
These are the days I truly love.

Now

all endings
bring new beginnings
life happens now
never tomorrow or yesterday
live the moment
anything else an illusion
change is the perpetual
beat of your heart

HEATHER WINNER

A Single Moment

A moment in time can be shared with someone special.
A time you both remember a song that brought you joy.
Just a simple car ride.
Just an 80's song playing as high as you can blast it.
Singing at the top of your lungs 'Summer of 69'.
You can barely hear Brian Adams at this point. And it doesn't even matter who sees you at the stoplight.
In that moment you are experiencing pure joy. Just a single moment to look back on is sometimes all you need.
A place you felt the highest form of happiness. I will always have this moment that I shared with my mother.
We shared many moments...
But this one is one of my most treasured.

All in My Head

I wish it was that simple.
Just don't think about it.
Something so easy yet so impossible.
A lonely feeling and yet I am surrounded.
Alone with my thoughts is the loudest silence...that could ever be heard.
A physical pressure of sadness pushes down on me.
Its weight has begun to be too much to bear.
I never intended to be this way.
Life stacked itself against me over the years.
Maybe one day I will feel like myself again.
Until then it will be all in my head.

Pieces of Me

The start of being whole and innocent.
As time passes you see everything so differently.
A series of events throughout your life can hurt you in ways you never imagined.
Each one takes a piece of you.
Your innocence...
Your hope...
Your ability to trust...
Your ability to love entirely...
Your motivation...
Your mind...
And the people responsible could care less.
They move on with their lives, leaving you with another part gone.
It's another part less than the person you were before.
Losing so many pieces can take you down a dark road.
A road you feel you're traveling alone.
You hide your pain and push it deep inside.
Until one day it comes crashing back down.
All that pain, anger and sadness.
All you can do is let it out with streams of tears in your room where no one can see.
You question everything at that moment.
Will it matter?
Does anyone care?
I thought I was a fighter but it turns out I was a liar.
You reluctantly begin the next day again.
Not because you're scared.
Not because you care.
But because you want to see how the story will end.

